

Poster presentations speak for themselves

Keywords

task based learning, poster presentation, conducting surveys, data analysis

Poster presentations are a task based activity in which students develop a research topic, ask questions, gather and analyze data, and present it to their peers. This paper provides a chronological explanation of how a poster presentation project was implemented into a university class of English majors over a six-week span. Included are suggestions for organization, pitfalls to avoid, hints at which areas need special emphasis, and recommendations about how to gather useful feedback.

ポスター発表は、学習者が研究テーマを設定し、疑問に思ったことを調べ、データを集めて分析し、それをクラスメートに発表するというタスク中心教授法 (TBLT) のアクティビティの1つである。本論では、英語専攻の大学生向け授業における、6週間にわたるポスター発表課題の実践例を時系列に説明する。さらに、構成方法への提言や失敗しないための注意点、特に重点を置くべきこと、役立つフィードバックの集め方についても提案する。

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Designing a poster involves students in a “hands-on, problem focused activity which encourages relation of knowledge to a specific question of interest and stimulates demonstration of comprehension” (Bracher, Cantrell, & Wilkie, 1998, p. 552). When considering a joint presentation activity for two university classes of sophomore English majors, a poster presentation seemed a natural fit. Each class was comprised of 10 students; of the 20 students, 12 were Chinese. Classes met twice weekly. The goal was to combine listening, speaking, and presentation skills while students developed personalized topics and collected research data. The research included selecting a topic, making a questionnaire comprised of 10 questions, surveying at least 20 people, summarizing the data, and drawing some conclusions. Students would then present the results of their research in front of an audience of peers without the pressure of memorizing a speech, or using crib notes. While providing a description of the procedure, this paper focuses more on the problems encountered and how they were dealt with.

Benefits of poster presentations and literature review

A task-based assignment such as a poster presentation forces students to use the target language for real-life situations. This communication stresses message conveyance over linguistic accuracy (Ellis, 2003). People learn language not by making the language the object of study, but rather, “experiencing it as a medium of communication” (Long & Robinson, 1998, p. 18) in the context of “real operating conditions” (Johnson, 1988, p. 94). Vujakovic (1995) notes that posters allow for independent learning and for students to develop both research and creative abilities. Students must develop

a sense of information prioritization (Lane, 2001) and decide what to emphasize and which information to eliminate. Poster presentations necessitate strategic planning, which helps to enhance fluency and complexity. Ellis (2003) cites several studies that show that strategic planning results in greater fluency.

One important benefit is that students can do their presentation more than once, leading to improvement through repetition. Bygate (1996), for example, believes that task repetition has beneficial effects on learner performance. Furthermore, with the use of posters, audience members can preview and review key concepts from the presentation. Choosing their own topics helps students increase their interest, reduce anxiety, and increase their ability to develop autonomy and self-direction (Benson, 2001; Ford, 1999). Posters are technologically simple, which eliminates the potential for technical glitches that can plague some types of presentations.

Lane (2001) notes that presenters find poster presentations less daunting and formal than conventional speeches, while allowing for a smoother two-way transfer of information. Compared to prepared speeches, the immediate focus of attention is on the display rather than the presenter. Ford (1999) observed that learners tend to become "unduly preoccupied with trying to memorize individual speeches" (p. 41). This is avoided in poster presentations since the poster serves as a speaking prompt.

In a comparative survey done by Lane (2001), teachers and students showed a preference for poster presentations over standard presentations. Students rated the poster presentations higher for "communication with audience," "not reading," "modifying the presentation while giving it," and "general enjoyment." The widest gap was in "ability to understand each others' presentation," with posters rating 3.91 on a 5-point Likert scale, while standard presentations rated 3.21 (p. 894), demonstrating that poster presentations were more easily understood than standard presentations.

Procedure

This section describes how we implemented our investigation. Throughout we have included student comments on the various stages of the

project drawn from student reflective essays written at the end of the poster presentation activity.

Introduction to charts and graphs

After discussing the results of an independent survey topic, students were asked to draw a graph illustrating the answers. This served as a preliminary means of judging students' knowledge of charts and graphs. In the next class, the student charts and graphs were displayed to show the variety of possibilities, including a vertical bar chart, horizontal bar chart, pie chart, and full bar graph. Students made legible, accurate, and descriptive explanations, revealing that no remediation was necessary.

Week One: Introduction and deciding topics

Students were given a handout outlining the project (See Appendix). Teachers explained the assignment and timetable in detail, providing many examples of the do's and don'ts of collecting, classifying, and explaining research. Students were expected to choose a topic from a list provided to them or generate their own idea. No two people were allowed to choose the same topic. Students struggled to make interesting and appropriate questions that would yield data that could be evaluated and presented. As one student noted, "*Making questions is most important and difficult. It takes much time.*"

Students were then asked to write ten questions for the following week.

Week Two: Gathering data

Remediation was necessary at this point. Students wrote questions, but they did not have enough variety or depth. For example, concerning the topic of sports, some flawed questions included: "Which do you prefer, baseball or soccer? Do you like baseball? Do you know what Japan's national sport is?" Examples such as these showed an over-reliance on yes/no questions. The instructors collected the questions and corrected grammar points, offering suggestions for improvement and ways to add variety. While the instructors were working with the questions, students were given a worksheet with sample questions, and asked to improve them.

After this initial attempt at producing questions, students were provided with a worksheet with space for 10 questions, including two yes/no (or true/false), three multiple choice, three open-ended, plus two more of any type.

Some students were intimidated by this project, with one saying, *“At first I didn’t want to do this project, but once I started to research, I enjoyed this.”* Others took initiative and expanded their questions and made worksheets to facilitate easier data collection. A few students added demographic information including age, job and other personal information. This allowed for better classification and provided a more useful and detailed data pool. Another simple problem that arose was that students did not leave themselves enough room to write responses to their questions. The more thorough students had one question sheet for each respondent. Once students understood the necessity of taking thorough notes, they allowed more space for answers or used one questionnaire paper for each respondent.

For homework students were instructed to interview a total of at least twenty people and bring their data the following week.

Week Three: Consolidating data and drawing conclusions

Students again discussed their research findings and provided feedback on their results and data. Next, time was allotted for each group of three or four students to produce a sample graph, chart, or table representing one question for each student. They were also instructed not to use the same format more than once (e.g., bar graph or pie chart). This requirement reinforced the importance of choosing a variety of techniques to represent data as well as making students think about selecting the most appropriate method to make their data understandable. Students were asked to explain what they learned from their data and what conclusions they could draw. For future poster presentation activities, this activity could be enhanced by requiring students to complete a worksheet with a title, two charts or graphs, and three sentences or more about what they learned from their research.

After students completed the worksheet they were given a blank poster paper (80 cm x 200 cm)

and instructed to prepare their final posters and practice their presentations for homework.

Week Four: Finishing touches and practicing

The entire period was used to add finishing touches, get final advice from the teacher, and, in a worst-case scenario, remediate. Some of the slower students realized they didn’t have enough data to draw conclusions and added questions and asked some of their classmates for answers.

Students were told that posters should “invite” questions, and spur audience interest. As a final preparation activity, Akister and Kim (1998) require presenters to display their poster, but respond only to questions, rather than give a monologue. Although we did not proceed in this manner, the idea that the poster should have a stand-alone quality that invites questions is a worthwhile point to emphasize. In another awareness-building activity, Ford (1999) requires students to cover up key information on their posters in a pre-presentation task while the viewers guessed the missing information. This can also be carried out in the final presentation. Ducker (2011) suggests students practice by speaking to a partner across the room, who must make notes on the presentation. Because half of the class is talking at the same time, the partners must communicate clearly, using language, eye contact, and gestures to overcome the noise.

For the students, the most important part of this lesson was practicing their presentations. As one said, *“After I presented, I thought, if only I had one more day to practice, I could do better.”* Bygate (1996) opines that rehearsal may afford learners the extra processing space they need “to integrate the competing demands of fluency, accuracy, and complexity.” Ellis (2003) notes that rehearsal improves the performance of a task in addition to adding linguistic accuracy and complexity. Yule, Powers, and McDonald (1992) concluded that rehearsals helped speakers to adapt their output to their listeners’ needs. One student mentioned the importance of relating to the audience, *“Its not a simple presentation, its training to teach the audience what was most important. We have to change it to be understandable.”*

Week Five: Presentation day!

Presentations were given over two class periods. Two adjoining classrooms were used in order to facilitate easy access and allow some distance between presenters to prevent voice overlap. Two presentations were run simultaneously in each room. There were a total of 20 students and instructors available as audience members, who were asked to spread out equally at one of the four presentation locations. When a presenter was finished, audience members were strongly encouraged to ask questions. Alternatively, students could be required to ask a certain number of questions. Each student presented twice, which allowed people to watch more presentations and provided a second chance for the presenters to improve their performance. As one student shared, *"I'm really glad to watch others' presentations. It made a fresh class atmosphere."*

Audience members were each given a simple feedback sheet with space for comments about "good points," "bad points," and "how the presentation could be improved". The audience member's name was recorded in the upper left corner. After the instructors evaluated the quality of the feedback, they cut off the writer's name and divided the now anonymous feedback forms to return to the presenters. One student opined, *"The presentation was a nice way to let students show their own ideas and skill."* Another student wrote, *"I enjoyed the feedback from my classmates."*

Three rounds (12 presenters) could take place in the allotted time for one class period, so with two class periods for presentations, 24 presentations in total were given. Unfortunately, there were wide variations in the length of presentations. One problem was that all presenters had to wait until the longest presentation was finished before moving on. Since it is difficult to stop a student in the middle of a presentation even if it has gone overtime, the authors began using a timer. After five minutes, we allowed the timer to beep long enough to remind presenters to move on to the conclusion and wrap things up.

Week Six: Review and reflection

In the beginning of class, the teachers did their own poster presentation summarizing the student poster presentations. Finally, students

reflected on the project in a 10 minute timed writing exercise. Students wrote their feelings about the project, including what was useful, what they enjoyed, and whether the project helped their English. Comments from the feedback are contained throughout this paper.

Addressing challenges to facilitate improvement

A few key areas present special challenges for students. One potential problem is that students are generally not skilled at editing their own work or eliminating unnecessary or unimportant information. In future poster presentations, students will be given a worksheet with possible survey questions (using student-generated samples). Students will be asked to improve the sentences in order to enhance data collection. An important corollary is that students may modify or adapt questions as needed. Teachers can encourage or at least make students aware of this possibility.

A second problem is that students may not be aware of the different styles of questions available to them, nor realize the utility of asking follow-up questions. Ideally, students will learn and practice these skills in their work on their poster presentation. A worksheet, on which all students must develop open-ended, multiple choice, true-false, and yes-no styles of questions, in addition to an in-class review of the student responses, should lead students toward an awareness of the most appropriate types of questions.

A final point worthy of re-emphasis is that it was important to ensure students summarized their findings and explained what they discovered from their research. Without this step, the project would have remained unfinished and inconclusive. One student expressed frustration with this problem, *"Although many interesting topics were presented, I was disappointed a little because some students didn't analyze their data."*

Conclusion

Despite the amount of time required for preparing this course and for the students to prepare their presentations, student performance and feedback demonstrates this was a popular, useful

project. Teachers observed a high level of interest and participation. When one of the presentations continued after class time was officially over, not one student attempted to leave early. Another benefit was that the project allowed students to work at their own level, which provided a special challenge to the most ambitious students, while setting a bar of competency to the less motivated students.

Voting for awards for various “best” categories, such as best poster, most energetic delivery, best overall presentation, most humorous and others is a nice way to wrap up the project. We would highly recommend that teachers seeking a worthwhile project consider poster presentations. As our student put it, “I think this project was significant for me. I hope to do it again.” Another said “I liked this project. We can train our thinking, analysis, and presentation abilities.”

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Appendix

Collecting, classifying and explaining research

After choosing a topic, you will write ten questions about this topic, and ask at least 20 people these questions. Write down their answers. Make a chart, graph, or illustration explaining your results. You will do a poster presentation explaining the results of the survey, analyze the results, explain what you have learned, and draw some conclusions.

Your poster presentation will include the most interesting, useful, and informative material. You might not use everything you have collected—just the “good stuff”.

Possible topics

- foreign travel
- television
- Internet use
- movies
- music
- eating out
- sleeping hours
- part-time job
- cell phone
- reading
- favorite foods
- breakfast
- study
- dinner
- lunch
- improving Japanese government
- superstitions
- the supernatural
- anime
- sports
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- jobs
- animals
- Okinawa
- athletes
- admired people
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