

## Transforming Courses Through Presentation Skills

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Including presentations in courses seems to improve student motivation, foster positive group dynamics, and encourage learner autonomy. When adapting course design and materials to integrate presentation skills there is much for instructors to consider. This paper shares strategies for integrating presentation skills into general English courses for EFL students in Japan. After reflecting on the literature, the authors describe how they employ round robin and small group presentations to empower students to become more autonomous communicators in English. Following this, they provide suggestions for implementing different presentation formats to address the needs of classes of all sizes. This paper should help instructors apply best practices to integrate presentation skills into courses and meet course objectives while addressing the varied communicative goals of their students.

この論文では、プレゼンテーションスキルをEFLの一般英語コースに用いるための方略について述べる。学生が授業でプレゼンテーションを行うことで、モチベーションを向上させ、グループダイナミクスを積極的に促進し、自律性を高めることができる。プレゼンテーションスキルの指導に適したコースデザインや教材の選定には、講師の熟慮が必要となる。参考となる文献を紹介した後、ラウンドロビンと小グループのプレゼンテーションを用いて、学生がより自律的な英語コミュニケーターとなるためにはどうすべきかを説明する。そして、異なるクラスサイズに対応できる様々なプレゼンテーション形式の指導法を提案する。この論文は、学生に多様な目的を持ったコミュニケーションに取り組みながら、講師がプレゼンテーションスキルを授業に取り入れ授業目標を達成するための最適な方法を適用する一助となるだろう。

Incorporating oral presentations into courses provides multiple benefits for EFL students. Oral presentations develop English speaking skills, foster learner autonomy, and accommodate students' individual differences and multiple intelligences (Munby, 2011). Oral presentation skills provide students with short-term and long-term benefits. Zivković (2014) and Zappa-Hollman (2007) argued for the development of oral presentation skills to help students achieve their future academic and professional goals. In this paper, we will explain how language courses for EFL students are enriched by including oral presentations.

The learning environment helps determine the success of oral presentations in a course, and an effective integration of oral presentations helps students acquire valuable skills and experiences. Students are often apprehensive about giving presentations, so establishing a safe and comfortable learning environment is essential. Aspects of a comfortable learning environment that are supported by good group dynamics are open communication, a clear purpose, and high levels of inclusion, acceptance, support, and trust (Johnson & Johnson, 2003). Despite the daunting prospect of giving a presentation in front of classmates, positive group dynamics can alleviate some of the stress that typically accompanies presenting. Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) emphasized the impact of good group dynamics within a classroom: "In a 'good' group, the L2 classroom can turn out to be such a pleasant and inspiring environment that the time spent there is a constant source of success and satisfaction for teachers and learners alike" (p. 3).

Another factor is the instructor's role. Instructors should strive to facilitate learning by creating a supportive learning atmosphere that develops cooperative learning skills (King, 2002). Instructors facilitating rather than leading lessons makes the classroom more student centered and allows students to become more autonomous in their learning. Students should assume control of the content, information gathering, and communicative output of their presentation assignments. The instructor can assist with beginning the assignment but presenting and communicative development are dependent on the students becoming more autonomous.

Teachers can encourage more autonomous learning by being aware of the three basic principles of learner autonomy: learner empowerment, learner reflection, and appropriate target language use (Little, 2004). As target language is highly course and instructor specific, it is not addressed in this paper. Presentation assignments promote learner empowerment by making students responsible for selecting and researching topics, determining what to say about it, and teaching their audience about the topic. Providing students with opportunities to practice and use English in authentic ways not only helps students improve their communication skills, but having students teach something to their peers also helps students find authentic meaning in the communication process (Wilson & Brooks, 2014). The success of presentation assignments hinges on the students effectively performing each of these tasks.

Additionally, having students reflect on their own performance as well as the performances of their peers helps to facilitate autonomy among learners (Otoshi & Heffernen, 2008). Of the three elements of autonomous learning, the authors emphasize self-reflection in their courses because when students understand that they are the best judges of their learning potential, they are likely to take more control over their learning. Likewise, peer-reflection allows students to understand how their performance is viewed by classmates and holds presenters more accountable for the content and delivery of their messages. Peer-review activities can help foster intrinsic motivation and confidence, and self-reflection helps students reconsider their own performances (Cheng & Warren, 2005; Duke & Sanchez, 1994; Finch, 2003). Reflection on presentations is, therefore, a key component of developing autonomous learners.

Presentation format is also important to consider. Presentations involving posters, smartphones, or tablets can be made to individuals, small groups, or the entire class. By choosing to incorporate oral presentations in a course, the authors are not focusing on presentation form but on providing an enriching communicative activity between students that develops both their communication and autonomous learning skills.

Varying presentation type to accommodate different learning styles helps maximize the value of presentations in a course. Presentation assignments can be academic presentations, poster presentations, or technology-enhanced presentations that use mobile technology such as tablets or smartphones. Reid's (1995) study of visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile learning claimed that Japanese students did not identify with a single learning style, though they are considered to be nonauditory in their learning style. By using different types of presentations in a course, the likelihood of appealing to different learning styles increases. As learning styles tend to fall on multiple, intersecting continua (Oxford, 2001) where all people possess some ability with each style, it is vital to provide

various ways for students to experience success. Class size, classroom management, and student capability must also be considered when teachers decide which presentation format to utilize.

### General English Courses

Both authors teach 1st-year and 2nd-year students enrolled at a private university located in central Japan. Each author teaches at least one section of students who are liberal arts majors and at least three sections of students who are majoring in a language other than English, such as French, Chinese, or Japanese. Although none of the students are English majors, all 1st-year students at the university must enroll in a standardized general English course that meets twice a week for 90 minutes over two 15-week semesters. This is a content and language integrated learning course that implements a communicative approach to develop student proficiency in the four skills of English language.

Second-year students who are majoring in a language must enroll in two English communication courses, one that focuses on discussion of topics in English and another that focuses on delivering presentations about those topics. These courses each meet once a week for 90 minutes over two 15-week semesters. The students majoring in French and Chinese have the same instructor for both courses, but those majoring in Japanese have a different instructor for their presentations course. Student English proficiency levels vary greatly across and within majors, but the majority of students are highly motivated to learn. Class numbers are small, ranging between 8 and 21 students per class, in all but the Japanese major, in which scheduling conflicts necessitate that the topic discussion courses be combined into two larger sections of 34 students. Students are predominately female, with the majority of classes consisting of at least two thirds female students.

### Liberal Arts Students

Like other 1st-year students at the university, 1st-year liberal arts majors must enroll in a general English course that meets for two 90-minute periods a week with the same instructor over two 15-week semesters. The students majoring in liberal arts tend to be highly motivated and highly proficient in English with most students at the intermediate B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) and some at the B2 level. At the B1 level, students have the ability to explain themselves in a simple manner on familiar topics; students who are at the B2 level are able to express themselves on a wider range of topics in ways that could be understood by native speakers. The rigorous curriculum of the liberal arts program puts very high demands on stu-

dent time and energy, so they are not as consistent at thoroughly completing homework tasks for their general English courses as are students from the language programs.

### Language Students

Students from the French, Chinese, and Japanese departments also tend to be highly motivated language learners, but they are also less proficient in English than students from the liberal arts department. This could be partially due to the higher level of English proficiency required of students entering the liberal arts program. Additionally, it could be due to the students' interest in learning a language other than English. The general CEFR level of the students is A2, though some are at the B1 level. Whatever the causes of lower English proficiency, the language curriculum does not place as high a demand on student time and energy as the liberal arts program, so these students tend to be more diligent at thoroughly completing homework tasks for their general English courses than are students enrolled in the liberal arts program.

### Practice and Group Dynamics

A key factor that benefits group dynamics is a joint hardship that all members have or will experience. Helping members learn how to overcome this hardship tends to lead to acceptance within the group (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2013). Some may consider a presentation assignment to pose such a hardship. King (2002) discussed the apprehension students often feel about presentations: "The delivery of an oral presentation is a source of extreme anxiety. . . . Particularly for Asian students, oral presentations are a face-threatening activity" (para. 4). Having to give a presentation represents an opportunity for students to support each other as they overcome their trepidation of having to speak in front of a group.

Audience composition should be considered to alleviate student anxiety and concerns. Giving a presentation in front of the entire class can be intimidating to even native speakers of English, so smaller, simultaneous presentations can decrease student anxiety to a certain extent. The authors have found that round robin presentations and small group presentations help students feel more comfortable by creating smaller audiences. This also tends to create an intimate support system that can bolster student confidence and help them learn to communicate more effectively.

This paper is centered on the inclusion of presentations within courses rather than an actual presentation course, so it is focused on presentations given by the liberal arts and language students in which the goal is to explain content rather than to exhibit tradi-

tional presentation skills such as eye contact, body language, and presentation phrases. Bankowski (2010) noted the importance of students having enough knowledge about their topics to be able to give successful presentations, so these courses previously covered the topics and the presentations served as a review. This is important because the presentations did not require significant amounts of additional research, and as the students were already familiar with the topics, the task of preparing presentations centered on delivering the content to others. Furthermore, the presentations generally served as a review activity to prepare students for the upcoming examination. The combined hardships of giving a presentation and preparing for an examination create an environment where students focus on common goals that help promote the trust necessary to build group dynamics (Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010). There are a number of activities that instructors can introduce in their courses to foster positive group dynamics that can lead to successful presentations.

### Round Robin Presentations

Classroom management concerns, group dynamics, and instructional objectives all play roles in deciding which presentation style to use in class. There are differences in how a round robin activity is implemented, particularly among diverse content areas and student levels (DelliCarpini, 2006). For example, not only do EFL students take an average of 30% more time than native English speakers when preparing for presentations, but making presentations in English causes them a great deal more anxiety than doing so in their native language (Zappa-Hollman, 2007, p. 470). Round robin presentations can help to alleviate these concerns by providing much needed repetition of key ideas and phrases. When students are no longer worrying as much about *what* they are trying to say, they can begin to focus on *how* they are saying it.

Both authors find a round robin style is an effective way to alleviate student reticence and anxiety over presenting in English. Classes can be split into two even groups, so that each student has a partner from the opposite group. One group forms the outer edge of a circle and the other group forms the inner edge of the circle. Students face one another and take turns presenting to their partners for the allotted time (usually 2 to 4 minutes). After both students have had a chance to present and serve as audience, the inner circle of students rotates once, in either direction, creating new partner pairs. Either circle of students can rotate, but the authors have found that some classrooms lend themselves better to a rotating inner circle of students. If there is an uneven number of students, one student will have a short break while others present. Alternatively, the instructor may serve as an audience member with each rotation of the circle, so that the odd-numbered

student only needs to take a break as an audience member. This rotation can continue for as many repetitions the instructor deems necessary to help students gain confidence and proficiency at expressing their ideas in English. After students begin feeling comfortable (sometimes as many as seven or eight rotations are necessary), students can be split into small groups to gain practice giving their presentations to a larger audience.

### **Small Group Presentations**

Although round robin presentations help reduce anxiety and improve student fluency on the topic, small group presentations are better for helping students practice other aspects of presenting, such as posture, gestures, eye contact, and voice level. An effort should be made to ensure that the members of each small group are getting a chance to listen to new presentations. This helps maintain student engagement in the activity. For example, if a class of 20 students has completed a round robin presentation activity, small groups can be made by splitting each circle of 10 students into two groups of five students. This ensures that each new group will hear new presentations.

Small group presentations are not as intimidating for students as presenting to the entire class, so they make a good bridge for building student confidence and proficiency in their presentations. Additionally, they allow audience members to benefit from the content being presented, whether as a review of course material before an exam or sharing independent research that enriches the unit and personalizes it for students. In either case, it is beneficial to have the audience members in each group take notes on the presentations, as they can serve multiple purposes such as notes to study for an exam, additional material for their own class projects, and a guide for their self-reflections.

### **Presentation Formats**

Similar to presentation style, presentation format must be considered when incorporating presentations into a course. There are many ways students demonstrate their intelligence, and multiple intelligence (MI) has been defined as an important way to address individual differences within a language classroom (Schmidt-Fajlik, 2004). Some learners may excel at speaking, some may have a special talent for creating visual aids, and others may be skilled with technology, so using multiple presentation formats may help a variety of learners excel. Although they can be challenging, presentation assignments allow students to practice research skills, develop speaking skills in English, and show their creativity (Munby, 2011).

Likewise, having a visual aid can lessen the burden on presenters. Visual aids have a powerful effect on the audience, keeping audience members interested and illustrating main ideas (King, 2002). Though traditional presentations using PowerPoint or Keynote slides can be time consuming, presentations can use simple visual aids that can be very effective in various formats. Both authors have used poster presentations, review cards, iPads, and iPhones in their courses to provide students with multiple outlets to demonstrate their knowledge to their peers.

### **Posters**

Poster presentations can reduce the amount of stress that students typically feel when giving a presentation (Lambert, 2008). Rather than worrying about preparing PowerPoint or Keynote slides, presenters can draw, print, or photocopy pictures or graphs for their posters. Poster presentations also allow students to showcase their creativity and cater to different learning styles; they are particularly good for students who struggle with English but are gifted in preparing visual aids (Wilson & Brooks, 2014).

Traditional poster sessions involve the presenter standing in front of a poster and answering questions as audience members circulate, but this can be modified to better meet student needs within an EFL context. In a 90-minute class, factors such as time constraints, unfamiliarity with the format, reticence to begin a conversation, and a tendency for students to gather around some students' posters more than others make modification of the traditional poster session essential.

Instead, when posters are done as a round robin presentation, students stand in front of their posters and speak to the student in front of them for an allotted time, typically between 2 to 4 minutes, depending on class size and English ability. The presenters are instructed to limit the amount of text they use so the posters consist primarily of pictures or drawings. The presenters have information on a separate paper for reference but are instructed to have 2- to 4-minute conversations with their partners and not to primarily read from their notes. The audience members are given a handout to write three key points for each poster they view, and they are responsible for initiating the information exchange by asking the presenter about the poster. Questions such as "Can you tell me about this picture?," "What does this picture mean?," or "Why did you choose to draw this?" are conversation starters that the audience members can use to gather information from the presenters. Because the presenters do not know which questions will be asked, they must prepare adequately beforehand and cannot simply read from their notes.

The use of this format is more conversational for both the presenter and audience than a typical academic presentation, but it still requires presenters to explain their topic in an easily understandable way. Because English proficiency levels vary within classes, being able to describe information in a clear, understandable way to peers is a skill that is developed through this format. Additionally, Wilson and Brooks (2014) noted, “Poster presentations allowed students to give their presentation multiple times and also allowed for a type of interaction between the audience and presenter that was not possible with more structured academic presentations” (p. 515). This helps to reinforce the presenter’s knowledge of the topic because of the need to explain the same information in different ways to various audience members.

### **Index Cards**

Due to factors such as small classrooms and large class sizes, poster presentations are not always feasible. As a smaller-scale alternative, the authors have used index cards as both review presentations and conversation cards. Though cards of any size can be used, the authors typically use cards that measure 12.5 centimeters by 17.5 centimeters. Index cards are lighter than posters and give more flexibility when deciding how students will present.

On the front of the card, the presenter either draws, prints, or photocopies three pictures. On the back, the presenter writes three sentences that explain the pictures, three comprehension questions to ask audience members, and three discussion questions based on the topic. The presenter is not allowed to use any notes other than what is on the back of the card. Other variations of this format can include students writing vocabulary words they would like to use, statistics or data they would like to present, or any other information that supports the goals of the presentation.

Depending on class size, index card presentations can be made in small groups or in a round robin. If done in small groups, the groups should be no bigger than four people because the small size of the index cards makes it difficult for a larger audience to see the pictures. In a small group or round robin, the procedure can be done either similarly to the poster sessions, with the audience asking questions about the pictures, or with the presenter explaining the three pictures and then asking the three comprehension questions and three discussion questions to the audience. As this is a smaller scale version of the poster presentation format, the benefits of catering to different learning styles and presenting multiple times to reinforce content and fluency are also the same.

### **Smartphone and Tablet Presentations**

When integrating technology use into the classroom, it is important to be aware of how the technology is being used with regards to the learning activity. As Stockwell and Hubbard (2013) wrote, “One of the greatest challenges with mobile learning is to ensure that tasks are suited to the affordances of the devices used” (p. 3). Both authors use technology in the classroom in specific and targeted ways to increase student engagement and limit opportunities for distraction. One means of increasing student involvement in a communication activity is to personalize the assignment. For example, in the general English course for 1st-year students, the authors taught a unit on disabilities that dealt with physical access concerns for people with physical impairments that affect their ability to walk freely, such as the need for a wheelchair, crutches, or cane. Students were tasked with photographing three places (either on or off campus) that pose an access problem for people with physical impairments and bringing the photos to class on their mobile devices.

Students took photos of a wide variety of physical environments including train stations that have no elevators or ramps, elevators that are too small to accommodate a person in a wheelchair, classrooms with fixed desks that are positioned too narrowly to allow a person in a wheelchair to pass, and even a very long stairway and steep slope that would be nearly insurmountable for someone who is trying to move around campus in a wheelchair or on crutches.

In class, small groups of three to five students shared presentations that included where they had taken the photographs, what access problems the physical environments could create for people with physical impairments, and how the students thought it would be best to address these access problems to better meet the needs of people with physical impairments.

Because both authors teach their 1st-year general English courses in small classrooms with no more than 20 students and the students are highly motivated language learners, it was relatively easy for both authors to observe the activity and ensure that the students remained on task, using their mobile devices only as visual aids to complete the activity. A larger classroom, more students, or less motivated language learners may necessitate a different approach that puts the technology in the control of the instructor (such as uploading the photos to the school server) or that eliminates the technology altogether (such as asking the students to print out the photographs and bring them to class). Given the teaching environment and the student body the authors have, they decided on including mobile devices to increase motivation and enhance the learning process (Leis, Cooke, & Tohei, 2014).

Because technology use in the classroom can potentially distract students from learning (Gaudreau, Miranda, & Gareau, 2014; Hall, 2016; Sana, Weston, & Cepeda, 2013), instructors need to consider if the affordances the technology offers outweigh its potential disadvantages. The physical classroom environment and student maturity level are also considerations, as placement and potential misuse of technology can lead to increased opportunities for distraction.

### Conclusion

Both authors have found that integrating presentation skills into courses can help students improve their English communication skills and become more autonomous language learners, thereby helping to prepare them for their future academic and professional goals. Both authors find aspects of presentations helpful in motivating student learning by personalizing student assignments and increasing student investment in the learning process. They use round robin and small group presentations to improve group dynamics and student confidence. They also use different presentation formats—including posters, conversation cards, and mobile technology presentations—to adapt to the needs of differing class sizes, student maturity level, and multiple intelligences.

By suggesting various approaches to presentation skills instruction within general English courses, the authors hope they have provided others with viable options for use in their own courses. The authors have had a great deal of success in adapting presentation skills instruction to fit the framework of their general English courses. They also feel that presentation skills instruction has helped their students to become more active communicators in the language classroom and reduced their fear of giving oral presentations in English.

### Bio Data

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