

Issues Related to Teaching Oral Presentations in Japanese Universities

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Reference Data:

Miles, R. (2014). Issues related to teaching oral presentations in Japanese universities. In N. Sonda & A. Krause (Eds.), *JALT2013 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

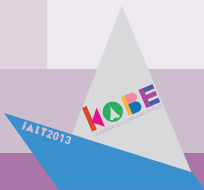
There are many factors teachers need to consider when assigning oral presentation tasks to a university English language class. In this paper I focus on some of the important issues relating to oral presentations in Japanese university classes, including the need for presentation skills; the relevance of assessing presentations in different courses; the ideal balance between content, delivery, and language; the importance of eye contact; differences between Japanese and international presenting styles; and the need for continuity between presentations. A sample of pertinent research findings is also presented, with the aim of stimulating teachers to reflect on and further learn about how they utilize oral presentations in their classrooms.

大学の英語授業でオーラルプレゼンテーションを行う時に講師が考慮すべき要素は多くある。この論文は日本の大学で行われる授業の中で、オーラルプレゼンテーションに関連する重要な項目を検証している。その項目には、プレゼンテーション能力の必要性、異なる授業でプレゼンテーションを評価する正当性、内容、伝達、言語の理想的なバランス、アイコンタクトの重要性、日本とその他の国のプレゼンテーションスタイルの相違やプレゼンテーション間の連続性の必要が含まれている。関連リサーチで示しているサンプルも提示する。その目的は、講師がどのようにして授業中にオーラルプレゼンテーションを役立たせるかについて内省し、更なる研究、学習をしていくことにある。

DELIVERING AN oral presentation is one of the more demanding tasks that university students face in their academic life, especially when required to deliver the presentation in their second language. In this paper, I will not attempt to prescribe a generic *can do list* for teachers, but will instead focus on several issues and questions relating to oral presentations in university English language classes. Important findings from the literature will be mentioned to highlight the issues, but readers will be left to draw their own conclusions regarding implications for their particular teaching contexts. The intended readers of this paper are English language teachers in the Japanese university context.

Importance of Presentation Skills

For teachers who are potentially going to teach oral presentation courses or who are going to have their students deliver oral presentations, the first question to consider is whether presentation skills are important or not. Oral presentations are arguably almost as prevalent as written reports, essays, and even paper tests in universities these days, which means that being



able to present is an important skill for many, if not all, university students. Indeed, students themselves have long recognized that being able to successfully deliver an oral presentation is one of the most important skills to learn in university (Hynes & Bhatia, 1996). This is a view also shared by educators in engineering departments (Bhattacharyya, Sivapalan, & Nordin, 2009; Freeman, 2003; Liow, 2008), science departments (Feklyunina & Grebenyuk, 2004), business departments (Pittenger, Miller, & Mott, 2004; Stowe, Schwartz, Parent, & Sendall, 2010), and various ESL departments (Ferris, 1998). The ability to present can determine whether or not a student succeeds academically, particularly in graduate-level classes and in second language courses. Rather surprisingly though, this form of discourse has not been significantly investigated (Li, 2008).

The necessity of being able to present is not just limited to the classroom. Employers in the business sector, in education, and in government often highlight oral communication skills, and in particular the ability to deliver effective presentations, as being the ability most sought after in potential recruits (Greenan, Humphreys, & McIlveen, 1997). Researchers, scientists, and academicians around the world also require presentation skills to be able to showcase their findings in a public forum. Being able to present certainly appears to be a necessary skill for university students to succeed in their academic and working lives, and therefore a skill they should be learning during their time at university.

Relevance of Assessing Presentations

As was briefly mentioned, students need to learn how to present effectively because oral presentations often comprise a substantial part of their grade. Important questions that teachers need to be aware of, though, are how these presentations are being assessed and whether the assessment criteria correlate to what is actually being taught in the classroom. For example, is

it fair to ask students in an English reading class to deliver an oral presentation, comprising a significant portion of their final grade, when they have spent the semester focusing on such reading skills as skimming, summarizing, and critiquing? The same question could be asked with regards to students in an oral communication class who have been learning conversation skills such as interrupting, arguing, paraphrasing, or clarifying. It is important to keep in mind that the skills needed to deliver a good oral presentation are different from reading or conversational skills. If presentation delivery skills have not been taught in a particular course, the relevancy of assessing and evaluating students on the delivery of their presentation is debatable.

There is another issue relating to the assessment of oral presentations that teachers also need to keep in mind. Despite the demanding nature of oral presentations, Liow (2008) found that teachers often evaluate them more leniently than written examinations. This is important as oral presentations are quite often used as a form of assessment and sometimes as final exams. Teachers need to be aware that if presentations form a substantial part of the assessment process in their courses, there is the possibility that their students' grades might be relatively high. There is an obvious need for teachers to establish a clear set of assessment criteria and to verify that students are aware of the criteria before delivering their presentations.

Balance Between Content, Delivery, and Language

When assessing oral presentations, it is also important to determine ahead of time what the balance between content, delivery, and language should be. The ideal balance will of course depend on the particular teacher and the purpose of the presentation. Generally though, instructors tend to prioritize content (Alshare & Hindi, 2004; Stowe et al., 2010) and students place

more emphasis on delivery (Soureshjani & Ghanbari, 2012) and organization (Alshare & Hindi, 2004). In one study, content was actually ranked by students as the third most important factor in determining the success of a presentation (Stowe et al., 2010). Although these studies were carried out in western universities and their applicability to English language classes in Japanese universities is certainly questionable, a study in a Japanese context in an English language-learning environment (Otoshi & Heffernan, 2008) further confirmed that students do not seem to consider content as the key to a good presentation. Voice quality and clarity (delivery) were rated as the most important, followed by correct English (language), and then the ability to interact with the audience.

What these studies all suggest is that students and teachers do not necessarily have the same beliefs about the balance between content, delivery, and language. Students and teachers should not automatically assume that the other has a similar set of priorities or focus when it comes to assessing class presentations. Teachers need to clarify what elements are to be assessed and students need to be sure that they have the correct balance between content, delivery, and language in their presentations.

The course goals can be a potential guide to discerning what the balance between content, delivery, and language should be. For example, if students are delivering a book report as a presentation in a reading class, perhaps the balance should be tilted more towards the content of the book they are presenting on. Conversely, if the course is an English language course, perhaps the focus should be more on the language used in the presentation. Students in a presentation skills class might be expected to construct a presentation for which they will be assessed more on the delivery skills they exhibit.

Importance of Eye Contact

In terms of delivery skills, conventional wisdom and research suggest that eye contact is an important element in oral communication as well as in oral presentations (Atkinson, 2004; Dowis, 2000; Stuart, 1992). However, the cross-cultural generalizability of this statement can be questioned. Certainly in western cultures, eye contact reinforces the idea that the speaker is trustworthy and worth listening to, but in Japan, strong eye contact that exceeds the cultural norm can potentially make the speaker seem rude, angry, unapproachable, or unpleasant (Akechi et al., 2013). Interestingly though, eye contact did not feature prominently as a factor influencing assessment in any of the studies mentioned earlier in this paper. In fact, Estrada, Patel, Talente, and Kraemer (2005), in a study that identified the important features of presentations, suggested that eye contact may not be as important as we think it is.

Following up on the idea of eye contact not being important, I gave a short informal questionnaire to sophomore students at a Japanese university. I asked the students what their freshmen English teachers had instructed them to focus on when delivering a presentation. From the total pool of responses, 50 responses were chosen at random. Interestingly, in 48 of these responses, the students replied that they had been told eye contact was important. Only three mentioned having been instructed to focus on the clarity of their voice, and only five recalled any instruction dealing with the content of the presentation. Although the findings of this survey are obviously limited (especially as the instructors were not queried), they suggest that the English freshmen teachers at this university stressed the importance of eye contact and that students were aware of this.

Cynically, it could be said that eye contact is often emphasized by teachers because of the relative ease of assessing it, when compared with the more ambiguous elements of delivery such as interaction with the audience. Another idea worth

further exploration is that eye contact is most noticeable when it is weak. From personal experience, I have noticed that teachers and classmates tend to comment more on weak eye contact than on good eye contact, perhaps because when eye contact is good, audiences are not overtly aware of it. As teachers, we need to keep a balanced perspective and remember that although eye contact is important, it is not the only delivery skill we should be assessing.

Differences Between Japanese and Western Presenting Styles

Cultural beliefs about eye contact are not the only differences between Japanese and western presenting styles. Some of these differences have recently manifested themselves in the burgeoning oral presentations' textbook market. Textbooks written by Japanese writers, which contain instructions mostly in Japanese, tend to primarily focus on language items such as set phrases that students can memorize and use in their presentations. In contrast to this, many English language presentation textbooks (in Japan) tend to focus on the structure of a presentation and how to utilize visuals (Anthony, Yamazaki, Turk, & Orr, 2006).

Another difference to be aware of is that L2 presenters, in general, tend to focus on the formal aspects of a presentation more than L1 presenters do (Zareva, 2009). Although a heavy reliance on formal language may distinguish Japanese presenters from their more informal western counterparts, the structure of their presentations and their approach to persuasiveness is also somewhat different. Elwood (2011) noted how Japanese speakers tend to prefer *backloading* an argument when trying to be persuasive. This means that examples are provided first, momentum is then slowly built up, and finally the key point is delivered at the end. In contrast to this, western-style presentations usually entail presenting the key point or theme at the

beginning and then backing it up with supporting information, called *frontloading* the argument. Japanese speakers also tend to favour what Elwood called *harmonization*, meaning the use of inducement, empathy, and position, to evoke persuasiveness, whereas western speakers tend to rely more on evidence and logical arguments.

Although use of these techniques is probably limited to advanced learners of English, it is worth keeping in mind that Japanese students may approach presenting from a Japanese perspective, and English teachers who are non-Japanese might anticipate a different approach. Once again, teachers need to clarify their expectations in advance so that students can prepare properly for their presentations.

Continuity Between Presentations

Building a sense of continuity between presentation tasks is another important aspect of teaching presentation skills. An example of building continuity between tasks can be found in English writing classes. Students usually go through a lengthy process of drafting and editing before completing an essay. They will then often be required to reflect on the process and the outcome, for the purpose of improving their writing on subsequent essays. Another example of building continuity between tasks can be found in oral communication classes, where conversations are often recorded. Students then transcribe, correct, and reflect on them, also for the purpose of improving particular conversation skills in future conversation tasks. Building continuity between tasks is an important part of language learning and indeed learning of any kind, but it is often neglected with presentations.

One way to build continuity between oral presentation tasks is to better utilize technology. I use a video camera to record individual presentations. Students are then required to watch

their presentations privately and to later submit a self-reflection paper. This paper, along with my own feedback, is then later distributed to the students, one class prior to their next presentation. When students can view themselves presenting, it can allow them to more accurately reflect on their performance. The aim is to keep the feedback and their own reflections fresh in their mind, while they are preparing the next presentation. By doing this multiple times over the course of a semester, students can then become more clearly aware of their strengths and weaknesses and can take measures to improve their presenting skills.

Receiving feedback on multiple occasions throughout the semester from teachers can also help students see learning how to present as a process, much like writing, and not just see it as a series of isolated tasks. Building a sense of continuity between the presentations that have been delivered and subsequent presentations can help students focus on specific areas within presenting and can be beneficial for generating improvements in those specific delivery and language skills.

Conclusion

Delivering an oral presentation is a challenging task for most university students in any situation, especially in a second language class. Although there is no easy method for learning to become a good speaker or for teaching someone how to be a good speaker, it is important that teachers consider some of the pertinent questions and issues discussed in this paper. Firstly, it is important to give students the opportunity to gain experience in delivering oral presentations. Teachers also need to clarify what they are looking for and how students will be assessed. This could include a checklist of items that need to be covered, or could be achieved by simply stating whether the focus of the presentation should primarily be on content, delivery, or

language. Specific techniques such as eye contact also need to be addressed, as well as any cultural differences in terms of expectations about constructing and delivering a presentation. Finally, it is important to build continuity into the process of delivering presentations so that students can learn from them and improve their subsequent presentations. It is important to remember, too, that there are no definitive answers to the questions posed in this paper, nor are the questions and issues posed here a comprehensive list of things to consider when thinking about oral presentations in language courses. What is most important, though, is to be aware of these issues.

Bio Data

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