

Promoting Posters

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This poster session introduced teachers to the potentials of the poster presentation format for two main purposes: student language development and teacher professional development. The poster included the preliminary results of surveys given to students and their teachers; these generally support the use of poster presentations over standard presentations in the classroom. Also included in the display are explanations for graphic design and examples of student work and some articles written about the topic, either related to use with students in second language or first language college classes, or to use by teachers at professional conferences. A handout summarized the ideas and included a short bibliography. This article highlights main points captured in the poster design and points gleaned from interactions with other poster presenters in my role as *Poster Session Manager* of PAC3 at JALT2001.

Poster sessions, which are a common feature of many professional conferences, differ from other standard presentation formats in a number of ways. These differences make them a refreshing break from the usual 'talking heads' sort of presentation and a promising format for classroom activities. In a previous article (Lane, 2001) I have reported that presenters

find them less daunting and formal. This allows for a smoother two-way transfer of information. Presenters also seemed to reach more people and have more rewarding interactions with their audience. One essential difference is that the immediate focus of attention is on the display rather than on the presenter. Typically the presenter is engaged in a conversation about his display rather than delivering an uncomfortable monologue. This dialogue is partly controlled by his interlocutors and their questions.

The result at conferences is often an increase in collaboration and information exchange. For this reason, poster sessions appear to be gaining popularity among circles of conference goers and conference presenters.

As a conference goer I have been attracted to good poster sessions for years. It occurred to me that what works well with professionals at conferences might also work well with my students. Coincidentally, many of my colleagues quietly were doing the same. This provided an opportunity to conduct a limited survey comparing the attitudes of students to poster presentations versus conventional in class speeches. The result in the classroom seems to be greater language use that is more negotiated. Students show a preference for poster sessions, and teachers show a very strong preference for poster sessions.

The purpose of this essay is to contrast the value of poster presenting against regular presentation training in

the EFL classroom. Additionally, it is to promote poster presentations as a professional activity worthy of the attention of presenters, conference organizers, academic institutions, and the editors of selected conference papers.

Students sharing posters

“Presentations” and “public speech” are familiar aspects of English language classroom environments. It seems to be a response to the need for students to develop speaking competence and self-confidence. Poster sessions are extensions of the same intent, influenced by the popularity of poster sessions at professional conferences. They are an alternative to the standard presentation format (which may include posters among other visual aids) that seems to offer classroom improvements.

At any one time a number of students is presenting to a group of from three to six other students. As students in the audience move from one poster to the next, each presenter’s audience necessarily changes, too. He is obliged to give information repeatedly, in each case likely modifying and honing his delivery and language as it occurs to him how to improve his delivery.

Movement of the students in the audience can be controlled by the teacher using a rotational approach. After spending 10 minutes in front of a poster the teacher calls time and groups of students move clockwise to the next display. However, I find that a better

approach is to give a fixed total duration within which to see all the displays. This simulates more closely the environment of professional conferences. As the audience changes constantly presenters and viewers cannot rely on a rehearsed script. After all, people will come and go in the middle of any monologue. Presenters need to monitor audience, respond to queries and also ask members of the audience questions to elicit more active participation.

In comparison to a formal presentation, the communication is ideally much more recursive. The educational value is not so much the development of presentation skills as it is the development of discussion management skills. I feel being able to think on one's feet and manage a conversation is a more frequently needed skill than delivering a monologue, whether in class or in the wider world.

On the other hand, some of the basic principles of formal language are being learned. As this photo of a student's poster indicates, the student is demonstrating



her attention to information hierarchies. First, the topic is clearly stated: this is a self-introduction. After that, main topics follow in clockwise order: most basic facts, information about family, goals for the future, hobbies, and volleyball. Subtopics are arrayed around these. What strikes me about this is that the progression of main topics corresponds to a sense of information

prioritization. The most essential information is presented first. Also, she has recognized that she can present the information better by grouping it.

“Reading” and “Watching Movies” are not branches of their own, but are organized within the category of “Hobbies”.

On the other hand, it is obvious that “Volleyball” is more important than other pastimes, and so has

been given its own branch. This exception, then, is meaningful.

It is also noteworthy that the poster design more or less follows the basic principles of good graphic design:

1. Contrast is used to establish hierarchy and dynamism. One form of contrast is the use of

- colors, but the use of different letter sizes (at least three) is the most striking and informative.
2. Proximity is used to isolate related information from other information, creating clearly distinguishable categories. More white space would achieve this end better.
 3. Repetition complements the contrast. It provides integration and fosters confidence that items that are different, whether it is different by size, placement, or color, are intentionally different for a reason. For example, the uniformly large letters for main topics informs us that this is a correct interpretation of the use of large letters. It is used consistently. At the same time, we can be fairly sure that the use of colors for these topics (top left and right yellow, bottom left and right blue, and center bottom green) is mostly there for visual balance.
 4. Alignment is the application of repetition applied to edges of images and the poster. In a freehand drawing the student has done a fairly good job of keeping lists in straight lines and a sense of order.

Discounting some important differences, there are striking similarities between designing a good poster and good written composition. Selecting information, clarifying its priority and position in the hierarchy, emphasizing certain points, and creating the extensions

to integrate it into a whole are basic aspects of serious planned language activities whether they are written reports or poster presentations.

Evaluation

Poster presentations have other purposes beyond giving students a classroom activity to perform for language development. Indeed, the time required to research, prepare, and conduct a poster session would be daunting without an evaluative component. A key to doing this effectively is to develop standards or procedures that are unique to the activity and fair. If you evaluate students according to the criteria of a standard speech, you will elicit standard speeches instead of typical poster sessions. According to the criteria of good poster sessions, part of the evaluation ought to consist of how well the presenter is able to stimulate interest and discussion, and how well he is able to respond to the questions of other students. In large part this is influenced in the design of the poster. A clear poster with carefully selected and organized information will convey information and pique interest much better than a hastily rendered one. However, these are language classes, not art classes. Care should be given not to penalize a student on the basis of an absence of raw artistic ability.

Ford (1999) describes the use of posters in EFL classrooms as a preliminary step to delivering a standard presentation. It is preparation for evaluation. Ford

encourages a sense of mystery to activate authentic interaction through student queries; he has students omit a key piece of information: the name of the topic country. In this way he distinguishes the poster session from the final, evaluated, presentation.

Akister and Kim (1998) describe the use of student poster presentations as an alternative evaluation procedure to a written assignment in NS social work education. To prevent students from preparing an oral monologue they explain that posters must “stand on their own” and that the students are expected to respond only to questions. Both studies report very positive student response, and it is clear that the author-teachers themselves are poster proponents. An interesting aspect is the unanimity on the value of keeping poster sessions spontaneous and interactive, either through:

1. presenting a mystery that the audience must guess about,
2. putting the presenter into the role of an artist at his showing, responding only to remarks and questions
3. or, as in my case, introducing the authentic conference randomness of people coming and going unpredictably.

Without some device students are apt to go directly into a lengthy spiel that may discourage their audience from asking questions or commenting. To allow

this would be to fail to take advantage of the unique opportunities inherent in the poster presentation format.

Having a peer audience invites peer evaluation. This is doubly true when the goal of the activity is improvement through repetition. Naturally, the teacher can only attend to one presenter at a time, and since poster presentations evolve as the presenter gains more experience, a student who gives a lackluster account at the beginning of the presentation period may be much improved after only 10 minutes. By enlisting the students into the evaluation process the teacher can assure an ongoing evaluation. It also provides a context for active student listening. It demonstrates that the teacher expects them to be a critical audience, and the fate of their classmates hangs in the balance. Of course, a policy on how to weigh the student evaluations in determining grades is the prerogative of teachers.

For peer evaluations I find it helpful to distribute index cards on which the students in the audience can prepare four or more columns. At the very least I ask them to write the following information in these columns:

1. the presenters' names in the first column,
2. an evaluation of the poster next to each name,
3. an evaluation of each presenter's skill in presenting the information, and
4. the grade the presenter should receive.

Students are encouraged to evaluate posters according to how easy they are to understand, how focused they are—meaning they avoid irrelevant information—and how much important information they contain. They are informed to evaluate presenters according to body language—whether they face the audience and maintain eye contact—how well they hold the audience’s attention, and how well they give explanations and answer questions.

Survey of teachers and students

Both Ford and Akister & Kim report anecdotal and subjective evidence of positive responses to poster sessions. I set out also to gather more objective information about student and teacher responses to poster presentation practice compared to standard presentation practice. Sixty-five surveys were distributed to Japanese first-year students in five classes at an English medium college in Japan. The five classes were chosen because the teachers had used poster presentation practice as a class activity. As well, practically all the students in the college have had some experience giving standard presentations, as well. Some of the students were given the survey in content classes (team taught by content specialists and English teachers) and some in their regular English class.

Additionally four teachers completed parallel surveys about student performance and behaviors. I declined

to include my own responses as teacher to ensure better objectivity. The effort was to compile a student and teacher response to their comparative attitudes to standard and poster presentation practice.

Originally six classes and six teachers were surveyed. When two teachers’ surveys came back, however, it was clear that they were not using the poster presentation format envisioned herein. They were having students give stand up class presentations using posters as visual aids, and could offer no perspective on the value of having smaller audiences with more casual commentary and greater student-student interaction. As a result, although they used the description “poster sessions”, their comments could not be used for comparison. In addition I decided to omit the data of the class they co-taught. It was not clear that the students could comment accurately as a result of potential confusion. Another problem with data collection is that some students were in two classes in which poster sessions were being tried, with the result being that they had responded to the survey more than once. Generally, though, I feel the survey reflects the feelings of students who have had experience with standard class presentations and experience with some kind of poster session format.

Students and teachers were advised to rate their agreement to statements on a five point scale from 1) strongly disagree to 5) strongly agree. The statements were affirmative comments. The subjects were asked to

rate the statements separately for poster presentations and standard presentations. The following list is the statements made to students (Appendix A is the restatements made to teachers):

1. I give presentations in class.
2. I can understand and appreciate other people's presentations.
3. I ask presenters some questions.
4. I learn a lot of English words preparing for a presentation.
5. I feel I can talk about a topic more freely after giving a presentation.
6. Presenting helps me learn practical classroom speaking skills.
7. I do *not* read from a paper while I am presenting.
8. I can communicate well with my audience when giving the presentation.
9. I learn how to modify my presentation and make points clearer while giving a presentation.
10. After presenting I can *write* on the topic more clearly.
11. I like presentations as a classroom and grading activity.

The following graphs summarize the findings.

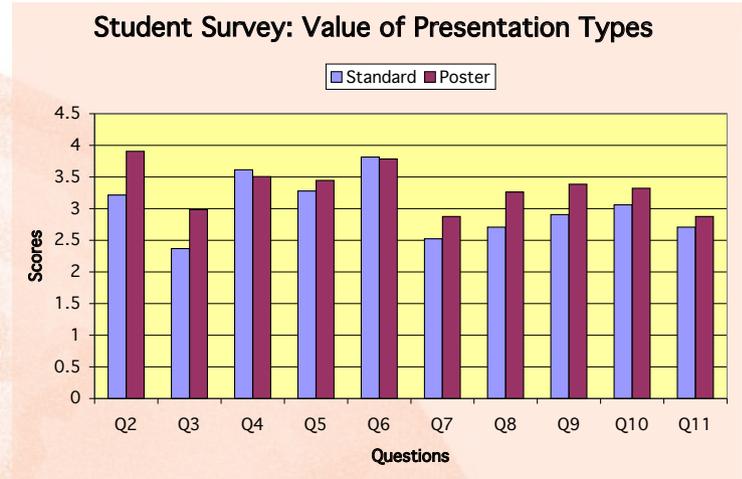


Figure 1: *Student Survey Results*

In almost every instance poster presentations were rated superior to standard presentations. Perhaps the most significant advantage reported by students is comprehension and interaction. Students rated as 3.21 their ability to understand each other's standard presentations, but a whole 3.91 that they could understand one another's poster presentations. Regarding their likelihood to ask questions, they rated as nearly 3 their likelihood to ask questions; in standard presentations they rated themselves merely 2.36. Replies to questions 8, (I can communicate well with

my audience when giving the presentation), 9. (I learn how to modify my presentation and make points clearer while giving a presentation), and 10 (After presenting I can *write* on the topic more clearly) reveal that students doing posters were more likely to feel they had made themselves understood and had learned better control over their discourse, though the weak response for question 5 (I feel I can talk about a topic more freely after giving a presentation.) casts a shadow of doubt on this.

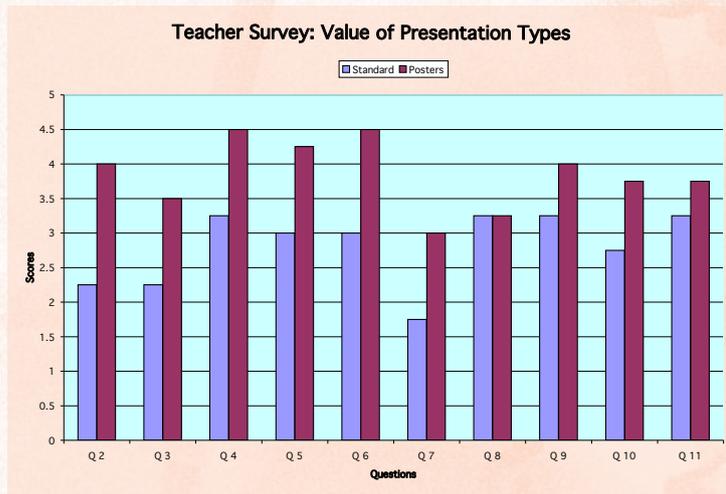


Figure 2: Teacher Survey Results

Teachers reacted with much clearer enthusiasm for poster presentations. There were areas of teacher-

student disagreement, as well. For instance, teachers were much more likely to feel students were learning valuable vocabulary (question 4) while doing posters and learning practical communications skills (question 6). Students seem to think that unless they are struggling to use difficult vocabulary in scripts they are not really learning. Perhaps students have internalized the mantra of quantitative rigor, which seems to permeate Japanese secondary education. Likewise, the students discounted the practicality of the more social presentation style in favor of the more formal one. Perhaps students overrate the opportunities they will be called upon to be public speakers, and underrate the difficulties they encounter daily understanding and being understood in more their more frequent casual encounters.

Despite this lack of complete teacher-student unanimity, overall poster presentations were clearly favored by both groups.

Teachers Sharing Posters

Poster presentations at PAC3 at JALT2001 in November 2001 were very successful. First, conference organizers provided a spacious, neat, and well trafficked area for the displays. Second, each presenter was given ample space: 240 cm horizontal and 180 cm vertical. Third, most of the presenters either had poster presentation experience, or had received some guidance about design. In fact, the sophistication and creativity of many of the displays

were surprising. One of the very rewarding advantages of poster presenting stands out: creative new ideas and collaborations inevitably fly like sparks. Let me review some of these:

1. One presenter, Howard Higa, had a particularly attractive poster. It turns out that its design was the result of a classroom project. He was representing his students. My students were also intrigued when I asked them for samples of their posters to carry to conference, but he had tapped the enthusiasm of his students better than I.
2. Poster presenters want to be invited to publish papers in conference proceedings. A problem is the complexity of representing the visual ideas embodied in the posters in the traditional format. Perhaps one day the switch to CD ROM publishing, which is done for economic reasons, will benefit poster presenters because CDs can hold consider numbers of image files, and the like. This suggestion eventually was picked up, very quickly, for application in this very journal.
3. By virtue of coming together to present at the conference poster presenters have the opportunity to meet one another and perhaps coalesce into a sort of special interest group. As such they can assist each other and new presenters with ideas for creating effective posters, support each other's publishing efforts, and generally work

to promote the integrity, quality, and equity of poster presentations at professional conferences. As a demonstration of this, it was quickly decided that poster presenters should comprise a team for the purpose of peer mentoring one another's manuscripts before submission to this journal's referee committee.

4. Some of the best displays were interactive. For example, one presenter, Clara Birnbaum, had a nicely bound homemade notebook in which viewers were invited to write comments. This had several of us wondering about a "graffiti poster" presentation. The left side of the display would introduce a topic--perhaps an important question--to stimulate responses that participants could write on a blank poster on a panel on the right side of the display. The write up would include the audience comments.

The success of poster sessions at PAC3 at JALT2001 is evidence of their potential to develop into an increasingly rich point for future professional discourse in our profession. Since 2000, when a first concerted attempt was made to raise the attractiveness and profile of poster sessions, JALT conferences have experienced more than a quadrupling in terms of numbers and giant leaps in terms of quality. Comments like these were common in the weeks following the conference:

The posters at PAC3 JALT were much better (than previous JALT conferences). . . The venue was central near the main speaker hall and happily there was ample space to comfortably situate all of the posters for each session. Presenters seemed to be organized and presentations were of much higher quality and they stayed around to talk about their work with participants. Very nice (Stewart, 2001).

The next extension of this is the effort to have poster presenters well represented, for the first time ever, in JALT's selective post-conference publication, and to explore ways to distinguish this contribution. Each improvement hastens the day when a presenter can consider the merits of presenting by poster over a standard format according to the inherent strengths and weaknesses of each format and personal preference rather than to the arbitrary values assigned by performance review committees or future employers.

Conclusion

There is a lot of room for promoting posters, as their potential is only recently getting attention. Still a lot needs to be said about their use in the ESL/EFL classroom. Besides Ford (1999), there is relatively little, but, as was demonstrated by my survey, it is a format that teachers are beginning to play with and

adapt, with good results. There is very good reason to suppose that more and more teachers will come to perceive that the poster format better responds to real world and classroom needs. At the same time, we need to develop a clearer description of what poster presentations are and what distinguishes them from other stand-up presentations. Experience needs to be written into helpful guidelines also for other teachers. The suggestions above—incorporate a mystery, allow students to respond to queries only, keep students moving randomly from poster to poster—likely developed from a common frustration in the experience of teachers: a tendency for student presenters to engage a standard presentation monologue. Teachers informed to expect this in advance could make use of a strategy to forestall the problem, and have more success from the beginning.

The very positive results for poster presenters at PAC3 at JALT2001 are also an indication of more untapped potential. Poster presenters, many of whose proposals for a standard presentation were originally turned down, expressed enthusiasm for the opportunity and an interest in promoting posters themselves. Poster presenters, whether that was their original intent, tend to become poster proponents. Furthermore, recent success shows that poster presenters will enthusiastically respond to a call for papers which specifically targets them and provides resources to help them resolve the difficulty

of merging their creative efforts into standard journal format. In the past they have usually hesitated to heed that call. The response, if the quality merits, is likely to further encourage journal editors to explore the

implications and potential of new electronic formats, and influence the form of professional discourse in years to come.

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