From *Chinmoku* to *Pera Pera*: Teaching Presentation Skills at University in Japan

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Abstract: In this article, we examine the teaching of presentation skills at university in Japan. The purpose of this paper is to assess the benefits of and issues related to teaching presentation skills in Japan, as well as to offer several teaching suggestions. The process of preparing a presentation offers students of English as a foreign language ample opportunity to collaborate in English and use English in a meaningful manner, thus satisfying the theoretical underpinnings of second language acquisition and being consistent with the communicative approach to language teaching. Teaching presentation skills at university in Japan, however, presents some unique challenges. Therefore, certain cultural considerations need addressing. This paper presents an overview of teaching presentation skills, raises important cultural considerations, and presents several teaching suggestions.

Keywords: *EFL, teaching presentation skills, silence in the classroom*

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the benefits and challenges of teaching presentation skills at university in Japan. Several teaching suggestions are also included. This paper is presented in several parts. Firstly, we will introduce presentation skills and discuss the theoretical underpinnings of teaching presentation skills in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context. Secondly, the benefits and challenges of teaching presentation skills are discussed. Thirdly, challenges related to teaching presentation skills at university in Japan are considered. Finally, several teaching suggestions are proposed.

Presentation Skills

What, then, are "presentation skills"? For most people, "body language, posture, and a clear voice" probably come to mind. To some extent, they would be quite right! Essentially, when you teach presentation skills within the EFL context, you are teaching speaking. The obvious difference is that, in most presentations, there is less dialogue and, for the most part, the presenter is doing most of the speaking. Presentation skills, however, can incorporate so much more. Presentation skills consist of macro and micro skills: macro skills being things such as the structure of a presentation and skills

required to collect information for content; and micro skills including specific language and paralinguistic skills such as body language. Correct use of voice, rhetorical devices and persuasive language can all be introduced. Furthermore, soft skills such as teamwork, decision making, and leadership skills can also be fostered within the presentation skills class. Even within the EFL context where English language acquisition takes priority, presentation skills classes offer an opportunity for students to learn many new skills beyond just language.

Having established that presentation skills encompass a broad spectrum of competencies, how do we approach the challenge of teaching presentation skills in the EFL context? A typical approach is to focus on content, delivery, and visual aids as separate categories of skills, and this approach is frequently adopted in many EFL textbooks on presentations (e.g., Harrington & LeBeau, 2008). Obviously, content, delivery, and visual aids are all important; however, teachers will place different emphasis on different skills based on their own beliefs as to what makes a good presentation. In a study by Cripps, Miles and Wilson (2015), they compared the approaches taken to teaching presentations by three lecturers at the same university in Japan. All three teachers took a different approach to teaching presentation skills. One teacher focused on teaching language and delivery skills, one teacher focused on delivery skills and content, and one teacher focused on presentation design and structure. On the other hand, Baker and Thompson (2004) assert that the most important element of a presentation is the message itself. They argue that placing too much emphasis on what the messenger does causes presenters to focus on peripheral behaviour, thereby increasing the presenter's feeling of insecurity.

Clearly then, with the subjective nature of teaching presentation skills, students may have very different experiences in their presentation skills class depending on the particular areas of focus emphasized by their teacher. For example, one teacher may believe that students should work from a script, where another teacher may not. Evidently, it appears that reaching any consensus on the best way to teach presentation skills would be next to impossible. This is not necessarily a problem, providing that teachers clearly explain to students their assessment criteria. Let's now consider the theoretical background to presentation skills.

Theoretical Background

One of the theoretical underpinnings for the communicative approach to language teaching is the socio-cultural theory of language acquisition (Vygotsky, 1978). In socio-cultural theory, one of the most important factors in second language (L2) acquisition is that learners are able to use the language that they are learning in meaningful activities. Therefore, students need the opportunity to interact with other students in their second language (L2). This line of thinking is further supported by Activity theory, also attributed to Vygotsky, which highlights the importance of the role of peer collaboration

for second language learning.

Today in the field of EFL, there is an emphasis on making classrooms more communicative and more student-centred. Al-Issa (2010) notes that EFL teachers strive to make their classes more communicatively dynamic by encouraging students to use language creatively, purposefully and interactively.

Presentations, then, are consistent with the communicative approach to language teaching in that they require students to use language creatively and engage with other students in the classroom. The process of preparing for presentations provides students with ample opportunity to interact with other students, particularly in the case of group presentations.

Thus, it is clear that teaching presentation skills in an EFL context is well supported by second language acquisition theories, particularly if sufficient time is allocated to group work and there are sufficient opportunities for collaboration in English. The next section provides an overview of the benefits of teaching presentation skills for both the EFL learner and teacher alike.

Benefits of Teaching Presentation Skills

There are several obvious advantages to teaching presentations. Brooks and Wilson (2014) identify five major benefits of teaching presentation skills, they: 1. are learner-centred; 2. require the use of all four language skills; 3. provide students with realistic language tasks; 4. have value outside the language classroom; and 5. improve students' motivation. In addition to the benefits identified by Brooks and Wilson (2014), we would add the benefits of promoting diversity in the classroom and varied assessment opportunities. Let's consider each of these benefits in turn.

Presentations are a learner-centred activity which require students to take initiative in preparing for their presentation. Benson (2001) defines learner autonomy as "the capacity to take control over one's own learning" (p. 2). Indeed, by empowering students to take ownership of their work, presentations provide a great way to help students develop as autonomous learners. Whereas some students may have been closely guided by teachers in the past, presentation classes require more independent learning. For many students, this will be a radical departure from their previous educational experience, and students may need to be coaxed and encouraged to collect information independently. As students evolve into independent learners, they may also improve in motivation and self-confidence.

Presentations are a great way for students to practice using language. Although presentation skills may focus on speaking skills, preparing for a presentation will

inevitably also involve listening, reading and writing, thereby using all four language skills. Furthermore, students will also often engage with other students in collaborative tasks, particularly in the case of group presentations.

Similarly, presentations provide students with realistic language tasks. That is, presentations require students to use English in an authentic manner. Whereas other EFL classes may focus on grammar and language drills, presenting in English means that students need to use English to communicate a message, and not just to practice grammatical patterns or learn new vocabulary.

Presentation skills have value outside the language classroom. The ability to deliver an effective presentation is an important skill which will help students to become better communicators. Good communication skills are highly valued in the workforce. Presentation skills are also desirable for students who wish to pursue academic careers. You could argue, therefore, that teaching presentation skills goes beyond teaching language and is teaching a life skill.

Classes on presentation skills can improve students' motivation. Most students find the process of giving presentations meaningful and enjoyable. Learners are more productive when engaging in activities that they enjoy. Moreover, it is a great way for students to develop confidence in working with the language.

Furthermore, we concur with Munby (2011) when he notes that presentations provide an opportunity for teachers to recognise the diversity of abilities in different learners. Some students may perform better in presentations than writing tasks, and therefore presentations provide an opportunity to recognise this diversity in the classroom. They also allow students with different skill sets to participate in a challenging task; and similarly, students can share their unique experiences. This is particularly true when there are students from diverse cultural backgrounds in the class, as is becoming increasingly more common at Japanese universities.

Finally, presentations offer many opportunities for assessment, including teacher-, peer-, and self-assessment. Teachers can choose to assess their students based on criteria such as delivery, content, creativity, professionalism or any number of other possible options. Providing that students are sufficiently aware of the criteria that are being assessed, this flexibility in assessment criteria is a valuable tool for teachers wanting to emphasize certain skills at certain times throughout a course. Peer-assessment is also a valuable addition to the presentation class. It provides the audience with something to do while watching a presentation and gives the students the responsibility of assessing their peers. Peer-assessment can be used as a form of feedback but can also constitute part of the presenter's grade. For example, peer-evaluations could constitute fifty-percent of the presenter's grade.

Issues Related to Teaching Presentation Skills

While teaching presentation skills clearly offers a number of advantages for students and teachers, there are also a number of potential problems which, if ignored, can disrupt the classroom. Students may be nervous about giving a presentation or could be lacking in confidence. Students can get bored while watching other students present. Problems can also arise due to logistical issues. We will consider each of these potential issues in turn.

Giving a presentation in a foreign language can be very intimidating. Even for native speakers, public speaking is continually acknowledged as one of the most common fears. A lack of English language skills, a student's cultural and educational background, and a shy demeanour, may all cause students to feel nervous. Some students may be scared of losing face or being embarrassed in front of their peers, particularly if they are from a culture where speaking out isn't encouraged. A student's educational background may mean that the student has limited experience in presenting and may feel uncomfortable with the prospect of presenting. Different personalities may mean that some students are shy and feel nervous speaking in front of others.

Another problem is that, often, students in the audience will not be engaged by another student's presentation and may be bored and uninterested. Chiu (2004), on her experience of teaching presentations, notes that, usually, "presenters stumbled through their long and formally written presentation speeches, while the rest of the class would try hard to stay awake" (para. 1). This can happen because presenters choose topics that are inappropriate or uninteresting, and because some students may tend to read their presentations without connecting with their audience. It is perhaps an unrealistic expectation to expect all students to keep their fellow classmates enthralled throughout their entire presentation. On the other hand, that is no easy task for anyone, even when the presenter is communicating in their native language.

There are also a number of logistical problems with using presentations in the classroom. Presentations are very time-consuming, particularly in classes with large numbers. Transitioning from one presenter to the next requires time for students to get organised and prepare visual aids. If students have failed to rehearse, technical difficulties can also arise which may cause delays as well as stress and frustration for students. Moreover, some classrooms might lack facilities or may not be conducive to presentations. These potential problems, although minor, can transform an otherwise lively, interactive learning environment into a stilted, boring, and slow-moving class. The good news is that, with sufficient forethought on the part of the teacher, many of these problems can be averted.

Let's now turn our attention to some unique aspects about teaching presentation skills in Japan.

Teaching Presentation Skills in Japan

In the EFL university classroom in Japan, the educational and cultural background of students frequently manifests itself as silence and passivity. It would be easy to interpret this silence and passivity as an indication of apathy and a lack of motivation, and in some cases that may be a legitimate interpretation. However, the effect of culture and educational background on learner behaviour in the classroom should not be underestimated. As teachers, we need to be sensitive to the needs of our students and awareness of our students' cultural and educational backgrounds can help us to prepare and overcome challenges that may arise.

English was first introduced to middle schools in Japan as an elective subject in 1947. The initial emphasis was on listening and speaking skills, and writing and reading were treated as secondary skills. However, as Gottlieb (2005) notes:

> Despite the emphasis on listening and speaking in the 1947 Course of Study, Japanese proficiency in spoken English has been historically poor, given that extensive classroom practice time based on written multi-choice tests is required for the university entrance examinations, resulting in a focus on reading and writing (pp. 31-32).

Efforts are being made to make English language education in Japan more communicative, and a number of initiatives have emerged to raise proficiency in spoken English. For example, in 2011 English was made compulsory in Japanese elementary schools. Whether these efforts help more people to acquire fluency in English, frequently referred to as being *pera-pera* (fluent) in Japanese, remains to be seen. Until recently at least, the main emphasis in teaching English has tended to be on vocabulary and grammar drills. As a result of this emphasis, many Japanese students have had little experience using spoken English. Moreover, due to the nature of the Japanese education system, presentations are rarely conducted in schools and Japanese classrooms tend to be teacher-centred.

Cultural background may also influence learner behaviour in the classroom. King (2013) notes that "it is undeniable that cultural differences patently do exist, and, in conjunction with other variables do affect learner behaviour" (p. 326). As a high-context culture, the communication style in Japan tends to be characterised by a heavy reliance on implicit communication and silence (*chinmoku*). This is in stark contrast to Western culture where much more value is placed on speaking out. Yamada, Kelm, and Victor (2017) liken the difference in Western and Japanese communication styles to the difference in the movies, *The Magnificent Seven*, and the original Japanese movie which it is based on, *The Seven Samurai*. Yamada et al. (2017) aptly note that, while the Japanese movie contains silent attacks by swordsmen, in the Western interpretation of the movie, *The Magnificent Seven*, "talk precedes every confrontation" (p. 100).

There is no denying that the tendency for students to remain silent in the classroom is problematic for teachers, particularly when teaching subjects that require active participation such as in presentation skills classes. Remaining silent in the classroom could be the result of a shy demeanour or a lack of confidence in language ability. However, teachers should be aware that, if students are reticent about speaking in English, this may also be a result of cultural and educational background influencing their behaviour. How the teacher chooses to deal with this may be a matter of personal choice.

While teaching presentation skills at university in Japan can be challenging, with the use of targeted activities and teacher strategies, the potential for success in the class is much greater. In the next section, we provide a number of teaching suggestions.

Suggestions for Teaching Presentation Skills at University in Japan

The suggestions listed here are separated into three sections depending on what stage in the teaching process they would most likely be used: prior to (preparing), during (presenting), or after (evaluating) the presentation.

1. Preparing

Nervousness: Nervousness, although probably neglected by most teachers, is an issue that can be addressed in the classroom. Teachers can discuss the issue of nervousness with the class. Firstly, it is acceptable to reassure students that it is natural to be nervous. This reassurance alone will help to put some students' minds at ease. Most people are nervous because they want their presentation to go well. Teachers can reassure students that some nerves may even help them to rise to the occasion and perform better than if they were not nervous at all. Teachers can liken nerves before a presentation to nerves experienced by professional musicians or athletes before a performance. Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004) suggest a combination of relaxation techniques and positive thinking. Music can also be implemented as a means to help students relax. We can also teach students that being nervous is often the result of a lack of preparation. Dealing with nervousness is not only a useful skill within the context of public speaking but is a useful life skill that can help students to deal with high stress situations.

Model Presentations: Showing students recordings of good presentations can provide students with a model and inspire students. Baker and Thompson (2004) recommend showing a 30-45 second clip of a former student's presentation and asking students to comment on the likability of the presenter. For example, students may identify factors such as gestures and facial expressions that make the presenter likeable or not. Identifying these factors can then help students to improve their own likeability by emulating and or avoiding certain behaviour.

Research Skills: Presentation skills classes provide teachers with the perfect opportunity to instill in students the importance of doing thorough research. Students should be encouraged to read widely on the topic they are presenting on and to use proper referencing in their presentations. Students should be advised on the rules of plagiarism and how to reference any content they use in their presentations, including correctly referencing images used in PowerPoint slides.

Technology: Presentation skills classes provide students with an opportunity to become proficient with technology. Students should be taught the value of doing a "tech check" prior to their presentation. Technical difficulties on the day of a presentation can cause frustration for students, as well as using up valuable class time. Many technical problems can be avoided by doing a quick rehearsal in the classroom prior to the actual presentation, thus avoiding any added stress to students on the day.

Activities: Various "ice-breaker"-type group activities are a great addition to the presentation skills class. These types of activities help students to develop rapport and gain confidence speaking in front of their peers.

A simple ice-breaking activity named "The Learning Circle" (Truxal, 2016), when done in a light-hearted manner, can be an effective way to foster group cohesion right from the first class. The teacher assembles seven to eight students in groups, each in a circle, and begins the activity by asking the student to their immediate left to say their name and where they are from. The instructor then repeats the student's name and hometown as well as their own name and hometown. The teacher then gestures for the student on his/her right to continue in the same manner. If the student begins to say their own name, indicate that they need to start with the first student. In addition, if the student says, "Her name is Maki. She is from Chiba", the teacher instructs the student just to say, "Name, hometown." Each student continues until the last student has had his/her go. If anyone has trouble remembering any information, either the teacher or other students help out. At the end, it is good to give a short round of applause. Usually the activity is done two more times with different information. For the second time, the student who was the last to go the first time starts the activity. For the third time, have two students do "rock, paper, scissors" and have the winning student start the activity.

2. Presenting
Group Presentations: Doing group presentations is a way for teachers to provide students with a low-threat learning environment. Students will feel more comfortable when presenting as a group. Thus, in the early stages of teaching presentations, group presentations are a good way to ease students into presenting and help them to build in confidence. Furthermore, group presentations provide students with the opportunity for group-collaboration in English, which is particularly useful for advanced level students.

PechaKucha Presentations: Incorporating PechaKucha presentations into the

presention class can be fun and challenging for students. PechaKucha are presentations where you show 20 images for 20 seconds each. The images advance automatically while the presenter talks along with the images. One of the advantages of these types of presentations is that they are visual and fast paced and therefore they keep the audience engaged.

3. Evaluating

Peer-evaluation: As previously noted, peer-evaluation can aid in the management of presentation classes by giving students something to do while watching other presenters. Girard, Pinar and Trapp (2011) note that peer-evaluations can also be beneficial for students conducting the peer-evaluations (the non-presenters), because they can more actively participate in the learning experience rather than just being passive observers. However, peer-evaluation can also provide valuable feedback to students. Otoshi and Heffernen (2008) found that the process of peer-evaluation is one that students enjoy doing and perceive as worthwhile. Furthermore, the responsibility of being a peer-evaluator can be further emphasized by attributing part of the presenter's marks to peer-evaluation. Peer-evaluation sheets can be designed to emphasize various criteria.

Teacher Evaluation: Dörnyei (1994) identifies two types of feedback: firstly, informational feedback, which comments on competence; secondly, controlling feedback, which judges performance against external standards. We concur with Dörnyei that, of the two types of feedback, informational feedback should be dominant. Although error-correction may be necessary, teacher praise should take priority, as it can play a significant role in helping students to become confident presenters. Presenting in front of a group of people requires a great deal of courage, and students should be acknowledged when they complete a presentation, regardless of any flaws that may exist.

Self-reflection: Self-reflection allows students to cogitate on their performance and can serve as a catalyst for further improvement. By clearly determining what did and did not go well in their presentation, students can set goals for future presentations.

Video Recording: Although classes with a large number of students may present logistical problems in video recording, when possible, video recording is one of the best ways for students to reflect on their presentation. Many people hate to listen and watch themselves on video. Nevertheless, the ability to see and critique your own presentation is an invaluable tool.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the aim of this paper was to explore the benefits and issues of teaching presentation skills at university in Japan as well as to offer some teaching suggestions.

We established that presentation skills incorporate a wide array of skills and that presentations are consistent with the theoretical underpinnings of second language acquisition. From a language learning and teaching perspective, many of the benefits acquired from learning presentation skills come from preparing the presentation through collaborative work and interaction between students. The suggestions in this paper, therefore, are designed to reflect the importance of preparing the presentation and are designed to encourage student interaction. It is hoped that the suggestions in this paper, although not exhaustive, will provide teachers with some ideas to trial in their own presentation classes.

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