

# A Pedagogical Justification for Teaching Presentation Skills in English Language Classes

## 大学英語教育におけるプレゼンテーション能力養成の教育学的意義

Diarmuid MacAnthony (大学教育開発センター特命講師)

Gerardine McCROHAN (大学教育開発センター講師)

### Background

The second year Communicative English classes are general education classes that focus on productive English, and the course is divided into two themes: Speaking and Writing. These Communicative English classes are taught by both native English speakers and Japanese teachers of English and are available to all second year students. At present there are fifty classes offered in both the first and second semester and on average there are about 25 students per class. During the academic year the speaking themed course (CEIII) is taught in the first semester and the writing themed course (CEIV) is taught in the second semester.

This paper is divided into two sections: the first describes the rationale behind teaching presentation skills in the CEIII classes, and the second describes the individual skills students learn, and the benefits of these skills in advancing students' overall English proficiency.

### Speaking Theme – Why teach presentation skills?

Traditionally conversation/oral communication classes have focused on functional situations such as shopping, going to a restaurant, buying tickets etc. During their 6 years of English instruction at junior and senior high school, students have been repeatedly exposed to such activities and by the time they reach university level have become bored and unmotivated by such constant repetition. This was one of the main reasons behind the decision to teach presentation skills in communicative English classes. Another consideration is that over the years, presentations in various forms have become increasingly important in both academic and non-academic circles. While presentations are frequently done in one's native language, globalization has increasingly required individuals to present to a wide range of nationalities, who more often than not, speak a wide range of languages. As English is the customary language of choice for presenting in most of these international exchanges, it would seem prudent to instruct any future university graduates in the making of effective presentations in English as a marketable employment skill useful in their post-graduation job hunt. This fact alone is perhaps ample justification for the introduction of a course based on making effective presentations, but to the EFL student there are far more benefits to be gained.

Among the many advantages of oral presentations are: bridging the gap between language study and language use; using the four language skills in a naturally integrated way; helping students to collect, inquire, organize and construct information; enhancing team work; helping students become active and autonomous learners. (King, 2002:402)

The new Speaking-themed CEIII course centers on English as a speech act. Students receive instruction on how to prepare and deliver presentations in English, and practice their presentation skills in pairs and/or groups before presenting in front of the class. Instruction and practice focus on three aspects of presentations: the verbal message (pronunciation, intonation), the non-verbal message (eye contact, posture, gestures, visual aids) and the rhetorical message such as speech building strategies (organization, logic, support).

Non-verbal and verbal aspects of a presentation are taught as a series of skills and once these skills are introduced, students practice them through pair and group work. Students are guided through the process as they prepare their presentations, and have ample opportunity to practice with a partner or partners before each performance.

These activities help create a student-centered classroom. They are designed to give students as many opportunities to use English as possible. The teacher's main role is to introduce and explain new concepts and to direct activities. Thus, students are given more control and autonomy over their own learning. In any learner-centered type course, encouraging autonomy on the students' part is of the utmost importance. Making a presentation is an ideal way to promote this autonomy. The student will be making the presentation alone or in small groups and this detail alone requires a certain degree of independence in their use of English, one that they have probably not experienced before. If the choice of topic, the research, and the preparation become the sole responsibility of the student, then the benefits of autonomy can be maximized. The student can take complete control of his or her own presentation, and this fact could be a great confidence builder, not only in their English ability, but also in their overall development as students.

During the course students are exposed to a wide range of language as they learn to give a variety of presentations, and also as they focus on the different sections of the presentation act. Students may also observe similar presentations on video before practicing themselves. Observing and doing similar tasks allows the learner to concentrate more on planned discourse during the actual completion of the task (Ellis, 1997), such that less time is spent wondering what the task (presentation) requirements are or how the task may need to be structured. As a result, attention can be directed to the micro-activity of the detail of the language that is being used. This increases the fluency and accuracy of the language used by students (McCrohan, 2000).

While students are practicing in pairs and small groups, in addition to their mid- and final presentations, they review and evaluate each other's work as they create presentations. Peer review is especially useful when the underlying focus of a class is learner-centered. First and foremost, peer assessment can allow for numerous benefits especially in terms of the promotion of autonomy in the learning process. Students are taking on some of the responsibility that traditionally was seen as the teacher's role and "peer assessment is considered an important activity to develop students' learning and to facilitate autonomy among learners." (Otoshi, 2008:65). Some other benefits that peer-evaluation may contribute include: Observing other students' presentations can be a useful aid

in the preparation for one's own presentation. "By taking part in peer evaluation activities, learners gain a firm knowledge of the form and process of what makes an effective oral presentation." (Otoshi, 2008:75) Through observing and accessing the work of others, students may be able to avoid certain common errors, technical difficulties, things that simply don't work, and various other pitfalls may be avoided through the scrutiny of others. Conversely, positive aspects of other's presentations may also be added to one's own. The observer stands to procure many useful ideas and thoughts that may be utilized in his or her own presentation. Additionally, students may be more inclined to listen to advice from peers since they will go, or have gone through, the process themselves. As such, this may provide more practical or useful advice —advice that perhaps a teacher may overlook having been desensitized from having observed copious numbers of presentations over the years.

The following are some of the specific skills and strategies students can acquire, and how these skills/strategies will help improve their English speaking abilities.

### **1. The Verbal-message (Speaking skills)**

The presentation itself can also be a very useful tool in the improvement of an individual student's speaking skills. The student must speak in front of a group of people without interruption and with a certain degree of confidence. This requires practice, and an ability to express oneself verbally in a clear and concise manner—an often neglected obligation in the Japanese school system. Expressing oneself with clarity and with fluency will greatly help in a student's development as an English speaker.

In addition the presentation can also help to strengthen a student's pronunciation abilities. Not only will repeated practicing help improve a student's skills in this area, but also the scrutiny that presenting in front of a group allows will be of great benefit. Problem areas will be promptly highlighted by virtue of the fact that if any listener is unable to comprehend any part of the presentation it can be brought to the presenter's attention during practice sessions in groups, or in the class as a whole. Basically it allows for a room full of listeners who can help point out areas that are in need of improvement, and also furnish valuable advice. Special emphasis may also be put on both intonation and rhythm in a particular class or group that shows weaknesses in this area.

### **2. The Non-verbal message**

An important part of the non-verbal message includes such things as cultural norms including eye contact, gestures, and posture. These areas are frequently problematic when an ill-prepared student (as many Japanese student's are in this area) are required to present in front of an international audience. Introducing the proper norms in these areas would greatly benefit any Japanese student regardless of the audience whether foreign or domestic.

An often overlooked area is the normal design style for presentation slides in the English-speaking world. The preferred slide-design in English is simple, clear and easy to understand. In contrast, Japanese presentations usually focus on the inclusion of all information, not just the relevant points. Often the slides will have fully developed sentences and the presenter will frequently read from these slides – an inappropriate use and design in an English medium presentation. Presenting can be a useful and practical tool in highlighting to the students potential problem areas in relation to these unfamiliar cultural norms.

### 3. The Rhetorical Message

In speech building strategies students are encouraged to focus on content. Students learn how to generate ideas, find and organize information, and develop and support their ideas. Speech building strategies range from developing a simple outline to creating and using visual aids.

#### *a. Basic writing skills*

First and foremost, students are encouraged to develop their presentation script in much the same manner as an academic essay. In other words, they will need a well-developed introduction, body and conclusion. Within each of these sections students are encouraged to use appropriate sentence structure and academic vocabulary therefore increasing their grammatical knowledge and fluency as well as expanding their vocabulary.

In order to have a well-developed presentation, students will need to become familiar with resources for doing research in English, both traditional library-based research and online resources. Researching unfamiliar topics will require students to learn new vocabulary and should also help develop other useful skills by introducing the student to, and create interest in, foreign publications via the internet, books and magazines.

#### *b. Referencing and Formatting Appropriately*

Since students are expected to research their topic, they need to become familiar with the accepted norms of referencing and formatting. From experience while teaching at Kagawa University, one important area most students lack is the ability to appropriately reference and format any written documents. Requiring students to submit a written report upon completion of their presentation can help students understand the appropriate referencing and formatting of an academic paper. Students learn the importance of having an appropriate introduction, body and conclusion in both written and oral submissions. The importance of having a properly cited paper is something that should be emphasized for use in all subjects, as any transgressions may be severely punished, and adequately instructing the students on the accepted norms in referencing will give an advantage to the students in all future academic activities.

Teaching presentations skills in English gives students the opportunity to participate in a student centered classroom while at the same time developing individual presentation skills such as speech writing, public speaking, and computer literacy.

The student centered classroom will give students autonomy over their own learning which will give them a feeling of accomplishment in English. The confidence building that occurs as a result of the student's use of English may in actual fact be carried over to other areas of learning, leading to an overall benefit to the student beyond simply areas related to language learning. Moreover, it is highly motivating as it has furnished the students with a new and valuable skill that could benefit them for many years in the future. Additionally, by asking students to write their own speeches on both personal and academic topics, students become aware of the mechanics and standard format of speech in English. These topics will help them develop their research skills which will also be of great benefit to them as they continue their education. Furthermore, speaking in public will help students focus on basic communication skills in order to get their message across in a way that is suitable to the intended audience. In order for their audience to understand them they need to develop their pronunciation,

intonation, and rhythm, all areas that our students have not had much previous practice in. For that reason, a course focusing on giving presentations in English is of enormous pedagogical benefit to the students' overall English and consequently their overall career development.

### References

- Ellis, R. (1987). Interlanguage variability in narrative discourse. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 2, 12-20.
- King, J. (2002). Preparing EFL Learners for Oral Presentations. *Dong Hwa Journal of Humanistic Studies*, 4, 401-418.
- McCrohan, G. (2000). How Public Performances influences students' fluency and accuracy during the presentation phase of the TBL cycle. Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Birmingham.
- Otoshi, J. & Heffernen, N. (2008). Factors Predicting Effective Oral Presentations in EFL Classrooms. *The Asian EFL Journal*, 10(1), 65-78.