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Oral Presentations Reinvigorated— An Alternative Way to Conduct and Assess Student Presentations

Ian Brown & Robert Diem

Abstract

Traditionally class presentations involve the teacher assessing one student's presentation in front of the entire class. In large groups this method of evaluation can be very time consuming, and as a result, valuable class time that could be better spent on teaching and learning activities is reduced. This is especially problematic when a presentation component is inserted, sometimes haphazardly, into a larger curriculum where time constraints already exist. To make matters worse, the traditional presentation format forces students to play the part of the audience, which can be quite dull and uninspiring in cases where there are one too many unmotivated, mediocre presenters. In order to deal with these issues and to turn the presentation assessment process into a more productive and positive learning experience, the authors experimented with small groups of students doing simultaneous presentations in different parts of the classroom, where each group had two to four "audience" members and one presenter, and where students were given the responsibility to assess each other's presentations. In addition, each presenter had several opportunities to perform in front of different groups. As a result of this experiment, the amount of time it took to do presentations was cut in half, from two classes to one. Furthermore, the new format had educational benefits as well. Students were able to practice their presentations several times, and the peer-assessment format in small groups was very motivating for students. Moreover, judging by the overwhelmingly positive student feedback, not only the teachers, but also the students, saw this method as a positive way of conducting classroom presentations.

1. Introduction

Teaching presentation skills at the university level is seen as an important language skill activity. Amma (2000) in his conference presentation says that "presentation activities have recently been cast in EFL classrooms as an innovative means of developing students' skills in public speaking and hence promoting their motivation in English". Unfortunately, in an attempt to take advantage of this, a presentation skills component is sometimes inserted (or crammed) into another course that teaches different language skills (in the authors' case, for example, presentations are tacked on to an academic writing course). Needless to say, in this sort of "hybrid" course, it can be a waste of valuable

time to devote two classes out of a fourteen-class course to assess students' presentations, which are a relatively small part of the curriculum. In addition, this does not include time spent on setup and preparation, nor does it factor in how monotonous it can be for students to have to sit through two periods of back-to-back presentations. King (2002) talks about "group boredom" that can come about when students listen to too many prepared presentations in a row. Goering (2003) talks about two major problems she found with student presentations, one being that "the audience is not sufficiently engaged to learn from peers". Clearly a better way to conduct and assess presentations is needed, particularly in courses where presentations skills are not the focus.

An article by Martinez (2008) was the breakthrough that led to this paper and the method explained within. Martinez talks about the idea of applying a "speed dating" concept to presentations so that participants have a chance to repeat their presentations to a different audience within the same lesson. This was then combined with peer evaluation, already a widely used and accepted concept within language teaching and presentation assessment. The authors did a trial of their adapted method and the results were very positive.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Simultaneous Presentations in Groups

As already mentioned, Martinez, in her article on "speed dating", advocates simultaneous presentations in small groups that allow for the students to repeat their presentations with different audiences. In fact, depending on the amount of time and class size, students can repeat their presentations anywhere from three to five times. Martinez says about her method: "I modified this dating technique to make classroom presentations provide more practice with oral language." Nor (2002), in his paper on classroom grouping, mentions how dividing students into groups gives them more time to practice, which is a fundamental need in language learning. Therefore, using this method of assessing presentations would not only reduce the class time needed for the presenations from two lessons to one, but it would also provide a richer, more positive learning experience by allowing students to present several times.

In writing about her method of presentations, Martinez also said that she made this technique not only to provide more practice with oral language, but also to make them "less threatening for students." Indeed the traditional presentation format where presenters take turns speaking in front of he entire class can exacerbate stage fright. King (2002) mentions the need for a "comfortable and low-threat learning environment for successful language acquisition." She goes on to say, "Particularly for Asian students, oral presentations are a face-threatening activity." Thus any method that can reduce the students' nervousness would be a bonus to the heretofore mentioned benefits. McAulay (2002), describing his evaluation method of speaking in small groups, reports that one advantage is that students feel less threatened. The authors of this paper also felt that the small groups would indeed help students to relax more and this was ultimately reflected

in the trial students' feedback (see section 8).

Further, Nor talks about other benefits of small groups in the ESL classroom, such as giving the teacher an opportunity to get more personal with the students and enhancing class cohesiveness. Chi (2008) talks about small group discussion as having advantages in creating a friendly environment, motivating students to speak more, and allowing for a full range of communicative skills. These benefits were also observed by both the authors and the students in the trials of the simultaneous group method of presentations.

2.2 Peer Assessment

One major issue that needed to be addressed was how the teacher could effectively evaluate multiple ongoing presentations. Combining teacher assessment with student feedback seemed a promising solution. Sutton et al (2004), Wheater et al (2005) and Hughes (2004) mention the time saving aspect of peer evaluation. and it is a well-known fact that peer evaluation is used in numerous contexts in higher education in both language learning and in other fields of study (Otoshi & Heffernen 2008). Moreover, Wheater et al (2005) talk about the benefits of greater reflection by students and a better understanding of the requirements of the task from peer evaluation. Hughes (2004) agrees with this saying, "The students are aware before making the presentations as to the criteria on which they will be assessed." Clearly having the students assess their peers draws attention to the desired criteria, and does so in a very practical and realistic manner. Lim (2007) affirms this, saying peer assessment "can play a significant role in helping learners to monitor the learning process."

Orsmond (2004), in his book on self and peer assessment, mentions that it can encourage a deeper approach to learning rather than the surface approach that is fostered by teacher-only evaluation. Otoshi and Heffernen (2008) also see peer assessment being used in presentations as an alternative form of assessment that echoes with a student-centred approach where "students can take an active role in their own language learning." Peer assessment upends the traditional notion of the evaluation process by putting the onus on the students to be more involved in not only their own presentations, but the ones they are listening to, something often found lacking in the traditional teacher-centered approach. Kwok (2008), in her article on peer evaluation in seminar discussions, explores the differences between traditional assessment and the opportunities offered by peer assessment, proposing that peer evaluation increases attention to learner autonomy and "has made assessment more objective and multi-faceted." Otoshi and Heffernen report that teacher assessment is not always balanced and may be overly focused on particular areas such as form and accuracy, and that single rater practice can lead to reliability issues. Thus peer evaluation may provide a remedy for these issues.

In spite of the positive research mentioned above, the literature on peer evaluation points to a concern with the validity of the student assessment. Are students able to adequately assess their peers? No clear answers to this question emerge from this paper's references. However, there was agreement that increased training and familiarity in the

assessment process could lead to better peer assessment (Otoshi & Heffernen, Kwok, Wheater, Lim, Lie and Shimura). Lie (2003) in her article provides guidelines on how to implement effective peer assessment. Shimura (2006) conducted a wide study in peer assessment of oral presentations in Japan. Within EFL classes of different levels, she compared how accurately peer evaluation correlated with the teacher's marks and found some differences between the language levels. She concluded different levels require different evaluation forms, and that higher language proficiency does not guarantee better correlation with the teacher grading. Otoshi and Heffernen propose a balance between teacher and peer assessment and that "to enhance reliability they (oral presentations) should be evaluated by both teachers and students". In fact, this is exactly the assessment procedure this paper's authors used for their simultaneous group presentations.

Finally, Orsmond (p.11) talks about the value of peer assessment in university education. He says peer assessment "can be used to enthuse, enable and empower students within a variety of assessment methods. The evidence ... is theoretically strong." He goes on to say that with peer assessment "learning is more fully integrated with assessment and not just a by-product of it." Orsmond, Kwok and Lie talk about additional value in peer evaluation in promoting critical thinking and better preparing students for learning beyond university, whach are both natural desired outcomes for any university course.

3. Lesson Plan

3.1 Lesson Aims

In light of the various research and observations mentioned above, simultaneous presentations can provide several advantages to both instructor and students. First, it can build students' confidence and presentation skills in a single lesson by allowing each student to perform his or her presentation at least three times to small groups of classmates. Moreover, students will feel less pressure when they know their entire grade is not riding on a single presentation. Second, it can provide students with multiple opportunities to evaluate each other's presentations, while also providing the instructor with more than one chance to assess an individual's performance. Finally, course time restraints can be overcome by providing an easy 3-stage template (appendix A) to aid students in the planning of their presentations.

3.2 Lesson Outline

As noted earlier, the traditional way of classroom presentations is for each student to present separately in front of the entire group. However, because simultaneous presentations will be a new experience for students, it is important to explain one or two lessons prior to the day of presentations exactly what will be required, as well as the rational behind the method. In addition, students will need to prepare their presentations using the 3-stage presentation template (appendix A), either in class or as homework.

On the day of the presentations, the students are divided into groups of three or four, upon which the peer-assessment forms (appendix B) are distributed. Students then present

to their groups while the instructor walks around and evaluates the presenters using the teacher evaluation form (appendix C). After all students have presented to their groups, students can be mixed up again into new groups, and the cycle can be continued until each student has given his or her presentation at least three times in front of three different groups of peers.

3.3 Pre-Presentation Planning

One or two lessons before the presentation lesson, explain to the students that they will present separately to small groups of three to five students, not to the entire class. Also, inform them that they will do their presentation three or four times, and that to receive a high mark, the presenter should refrain from just reading the presentation or memorizing it verbatim. Make sure to highlight the fact that all of the group presenters will be speaking simultaneously, albeit in different parts of the classroom. Finally, mention that after all the students in each group have presented, new groups will be formed and each student will give his or her presentation again. It is also important for students to know that they will be assessed both by the teacher and by their group peers.

Perhaps more than anything, students need to know the rational for doing simultaneous presentations. As mentioned earlier, by presenting several times students get a chance to polish their skills. Furthermore, working in smaller groups may help reduce stage fright, with the added benefit that smaller groups are more intimate and thus make the audience more attentive to the presenter. The more students are made aware of the advantages of the simultaneous presentation format, the better they will connect the new experience with their learning.

Next, upon explaining the above, further familiarize students with simultaneous presentations by doing a short simulation. Conduct it by first dividing the students into groups of three or four. There are several ways to do this, but a fast and simple way is to number the students off randomly. For example, divide a class of 25 students by 4 (4 being the number of students you want in each group), which would roughly equal 6. Then, count off by 6, which will result in approximately 6 groups of 3 to 4 students. Next, give students five minutes to prepare a short thirty-second self-introduction. When they are finished, distribute three peer-assessment forms (appendix B) to each student. Then, have each group decide the order of presenters by playing 'rock, paper, scissors' or other suitable method.

Now instruct each student to do a short self-introduction in front of their group, and have other group members evaluate the speaker using the peer-assessment sheet. When every student has presented, collect the peer-assessment sheets, count off the students again, and put them into new groups. Repeat steps two and four, and then finish. This simulation should only take around ten to fifteen minutes start to finish, and it will be time well spent.

In addition to making sure students understand the expectations, allot time for students to prepare their presentations. In a course where the number of class periods

assigned to presentations is limited, or where students are at a lower level, providing a presentation-planning template as scaffolding (appendix A) is a sensible way to save time and prevent the students from feeling overwhelmed. Moreover, depending on time constraints, some, or all, of the presentation preparation can be assigned as homework.

3.4 Lesson Procedure

The structure of the lesson will mirror the simulation, except for three areas. First, since students will have hopefully already prepared and practiced their presentations beforehand, there should be no need to give them time to do so in their groups. Second, the total lesson time will vary depending on a), how long your students' presentations are, and b), how many times you want your students to conduct their presentations. Generally, you should repeat the above cycle until each student has given their presentation at least three times in front of three different groups of students.

The authors have found that a class of twenty-five students doing 2 - 3 minute presentations takes around sixty to ninety minutes, if each student does his or her presentation three to four times.

3.5 Assessment

The advantage of simultaneous presentations is that it reduces the number of lessons an instructor has to devote to presentations, and yet gives students more opportunities to practice and improve their public speaking skills. The challenge of using this method, however, is how to assess effectively when several students are presenting simultaneously.

The first strategy is to give the students a role in assessment (appendix B), so that marking is not completely teacher-centred. Of course, the weight peer-assessment plays in the overall presentation grade will vary depending on the instructor's own preferences. Diem, for example, uses peer-assessment as only additive. If, for example, a presenter has received overwhelmingly positive feedback from his or her peers, then Diem will increase his own mark for the student by one letter grade.

The second strategy concerns teacher assessment. Since each student will be presenting at least three times, the instructor should try to spread the evaluation (appendix C) out over all three of the student's presentations, focusing on different areas during each presentation. This is particularly important if more than 5 students are presenting simultaneously, as the instructor will have to move around the classroom quite a bit. During the first presentation, for example, the instructor can evaluate student preparedness and presentation length; the second presentation can be assessed according to delivery; finally, the third presentation can be marked by how relaxed and natural the speaker comes across and by the overall impression of the presentation.

4. Student Comments

Student feedback on this method of conducting presentations was overwhelmingly positive in a number of aspects. The weekly learner journals that the students regularly

complete in one author's class provided some insights into the students' views, which corresponded closely with the benefits hoped to be attained by this method. These benefits include the students feeling less nervous, the chance to repeat and improve the presentation, and appreciation of the more casual, personal nature of this method. In the written feedback from thirty-nine learner journals from two classes, there was only one student with negative comments.

Many students reported feeling less nervous with this method, as illustrated by the following comments: "Because I'm always under extreme tension in front of a lot of people this method was very nice. I didn't be under tension so much." ; "I get nervous and I can't speak well when I stand in front of everyone. However in this presentation I didn't get nervous very much." ; "I think this way was good because I seem to finish it without being tense too much." ; and "If I had given a speech in front of the classroom I would have be more nervous and my speech would be absurd".

Many students were also very positive about doing their presentations multiple times. One benefit was feeling more confident as they repeated the presentation: "More times I did, less nervous I felt." Another plus was that students felt and appreciated the merits of repeating the presentation and felt they improved. Moreover, students generally scored higher on their peer-assessment the more often they did their presentation: " I think it good we got to have got twice chance of speech because we got chance to improve. I actually made the most of first failure to second speech." ; "Today's system was great I could get many chance to give my presentation and communication better with little tension." ; "I can speak a better presentation by repeating it many times." ; "I think this method is good because I realized that my speech was getting better while speaking three time." ; "Second speech was a great improvement on first." ; and "The best thing about today's class was that I could give a better speech through six speeches I gave."

Another plus seen by many students was the more casual nature of this method. As well as helping to ease nervousness, students seemed able to concentrate and listen better to the presentations. Some students felt it was easier to ask questions and communicate in smaller groups: "I liked this system because there is atmosphere that allows us to make mistakes." ; "I think this method is good for me. I can talk about my topic and listen to classmates questions more easily." ; "I think this system was good because I could listen others' speeches well and it is easy for me to ask questions." ; "It is especially of merit that we can ask questions at once because of a short distance." ; "I think this system is very good because I can listen to their speech with enough time to evaluate." ; and "I could concentrate on other students' speech because the number of students was small."

The one student who gave negative feedback was particularly against this system for three reasons. First, he felt students should get used to the tension of giving presentations in front of the entire class; second, he felt peer assessment may not be fair and equitable; and finally, he wanted to hear the presentations of the entire class. These are all valid points and need to be addressed more in future research.

Finally, one student's comment seemed to mirror the authors' aims and hopes

regarding simultaneous presentations: “Very unusual lesson. I enjoyed it. Unlike those boring lessons of one presenting person when everybody is sleeping or only think about their own presentations this lesson was funny and enjoyable.”

5. Conclusion

The first trial of simultaneous group presentations was successful and exceeded the authors’ expectations. Further studies with more students need to be carried out with issues to be explored including fine tuning the peer evaluation forms and dealing with varying classroom layouts and seating arrangements. However, the initial trial shows that this method has great potential in reinvigorating oral presentations and give them a new life in the classroom with increased student motivation. The simultaneous group presentation method is certainly a more time efficient and educationally beneficial way of conducting presentations in large classes especially where presentations play only a minor role in a larger course.

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Appendix A - Presentation Preparation Template

Name _____ **Topic** _____

INTRODUCTION

Good morning/afternoon. Today I'd like to tell you about...

_____

O Question to audience (How many of you....? Please raise your hand.)
O Question to 1 or 2 people in audience (Taro, ...?) (CHOOSE ONE)
O Interesting story or joke. (I chose this topic because....)

_____

Well, today I'm going to talk about first,

_____,

second, _____

and third,

_____

BODY
Your points, facts, examples and information logically organized and fully explained.

CONCLUSION

Today I talked about _____,

and _____,

and finally, _____.

O Question to audience (CHOOSE ONE OR MORE)
O Recommendation
O Final statement

_____

_____

Thank you very much. Are there any questions?

Appendix B - Student Peer Evaluation Form

Presenter name: Presentation Topic

1 a. The introduction attracted my attention	☐ Yes	☐ No
1 b. The introduction previewed the content of the presentation	☐ Yes	☐ No
2 . The body contained detailed information	☐ Yes	☐ No
3 . The conclusion summarized the main points.	☐ Yes	☐ No
4 . The main points in the body were clear and logical.	☐ a lot	☐ a little
5 . The speaker used non-verbal language. (gestures. eye contact and movement)	☐ a lot	☐ a little
6 . The speaker's voice and pronunciation was clear and loud.	☐ very much	☐ a little
7 . I could understand the presentation.	☐ a lot	☐ a little
8 . I learned something new.	☐ a lot	☐ a little
9 . The presentation was interesting and enjoyable.	☐ a lot	☐ a little

Comments

10a. What was good about the presentation?

10b. What was bad about the presentation?

10c. Any other comments?

Appendix C - Teacher Evaluation Form

・First time viewing presentation

・Was the presentation well prepared and practiced?

1	2	3	4	5
Presentation read. Slow. Not smooth. Long gaps. Hard to understand.	Presentation was read. Fairly smooth, with some mistakes, pauses, etc.	Read, but very well done. Professional. Smooth -or- Memorized or palm cards, but slow with some mistakes	Memorized or used palm cards. Some hesitation, gaps, but mostly smooth.	Memorized or palm cards. Very smooth. Professional. Engaging.

・Second time viewing presentation

・Was the speaker's eye contact good?

1	2	3	4	5
Never saw your face.	Looked up sometimes (because you had to).	Looking up and down about half and half.	Mostly looked up. 75% of the time.	Checked notes occasionally, but overall, excellent eye contact.

・Were the speaker's gestures good?

1	2	3	4	5
Gestures often distracting - scratching head, fumbling,.	Gestures sometimes were distracting.	Gestures did not enhance nor hurt speech.	Gestures mostly enhanced presentation.	Excellent.

・Was the speaker's voice features good?

1	2	3	4	5
I can't hear you at all. Speaking not clear.	Sometimes I can't hear you.	I can hear you - as long as it's quiet in the room.	I can hear you well. Good voice.	Excellent.

・Was the speaker's pronunciation understandable?

1	2	3	4	5
I can't understand you at all.	Sometimes I can understand you.	I can understand most of what you say.	I can understand almost all of what you say.	Excellent.

・Third time presentation

・Did the speaker look comfortable?

1	2	3	4	5
Poor attitude.	Looks tense. Rigid.	Fairly relaxed. A little stiff.	Relaxed.	Very relaxed. Outgoing.

・What was the overall impression?

1	2	3	4	5
Boring and badly delivered.	Standard and boring.	Standard but some interesting points.	Interesting but delivery standard.	Very Interesting and above standard delivery.

Comments