Scaffolding Oral Presentation Instruction to Improve Communicative Competence
across Differing Student Levels and Disciplines

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Abstract

This paper shares strategies for adapting oral presentation course instruction to meet the diverging needs of EFL students from differing student levels and areas of study. With increasing globalization, it is increasingly important for students to acquire oral presentation skills. For students to meet the demands of their future academic and professional roles, they must be taught to give effective oral presentations (Živković, 2014). As such, instructors have the responsibility to meet the diverse needs of their students when integrating oral presentations into their courses. Effective course structure and appropriate scaffolding of oral presentation assignments are imperative to course success (Wilson & Brooks, 2014).

Instructors must adapt classroom activities to student language ability to improve student motivation and performance (Wilkinson, 2012). Additionally, presentation assessment impacts the quality of student group discussions and interactions, and should be considered when designing classroom activities (Sundrarajun & Kiely, 2010).

In addition to research, the authors pull from their combined experience of teaching and creating materials at the undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels to meet the needs of students from diverse areas of study, including Chemistry, Business, Engineering, and Liberal Arts. Despite the divergence in the fields and levels of study, the language goals and skills acquired through academic presentations converge to provide students with the oral communication skills necessary to be successful in a globalized community. Though the method of teaching oral presentation skills diverge, the communicative benefits are similar. This paper should help instructors to meet their students' varied communicative goals.

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1. Introduction

With increasing globalization, oral communication skills have become more important than ever. Živković (2014) wrote that students require plenty of practice sharing their ideas to develop oral communication skills and achieve their professional goals, "Students need a lot of opportunity to practice language in situations which encourage them to communicate their needs, ideas and opinions. With globalization graduates need to be proficient in oral communication skills in order to function effectively in the professional setting" (p. 468). Well-rounded English communication programs need to address the increased demand for oral communication skills by providing students with increased opportunities to improve their oral communication skills.

An oral communications program should offer students a safe and supportive environment where mistakes are not seen in a negative light, but rather as the learning opportunities they present. Students need an opportunity to make mistakes and learn because they not only need these skills to make formal and informal academic presentations, but they will need to be able to perform similarly in the professional setting, where the stakes are are raised. Živković (2014) addressed these future demands, as well: "Communication skills are required by students (future specialists) whether they are expected to give presentations at conferences, symposia or other meetings." (p. 469). Despite the divergence in the language needs of students across academic disciplines, students gain practical skills that will help them achieve their present and future goals. The oral communication skills developed through oral presentations provide the immediate benefit of smoother communication within the classroom as well as the long term value of preparing students for their future professional careers.

Presentations give English language students plenty of opportunities to use their second language in real ways that will benefit them in academia and in their professions. As Wilson and Brooks (2014) explained, "Presentations require students to use their L2 in a natural way because they are required to use English to understand the topics they are presenting and communicate this understanding to others. This is closer to real language use and gives students an opportunity to develop research and critical thinking skills, as well as linguistic and communicative skills" (p. 513). In addition to developing their ability to give oral presentations, this convergence of skills enables students to enhance their overall communicative competence and confidence in expressing themselves in English. When students present their ideas to peers, it affords them an opportunity to see if they have successfully communicated their ideas. At the same time, it gives audience members an opportunity to practice critical listening skills during the presentation and test their comprehension by providing feedback to the presenter. As Otoshi and Heffernen (2008) noted, having students evaluate their peers not only helps the presenter to understand where improvements can be made, but also helps the audience members learn to notice what works well and what does not work well. This knowledge can then be applied to their own presentations.

2. The need for scaffolding

Including oral presentations in a course can be daunting for students. Due to everything that goes into giving an oral presentation, students can be overwhelmed with the research and communication skills necessary for a successful presentation (King, 2002). One way to alleviate this is to scaffold a presentation course so students gain confidence as they build their presentation skills until they are able to successfully present on their own. As Wilson and Brooks (2014) explained, "If not properly scaffolded, many problems can occur throughout the presentation…In the worst-case scenario this can lead to a group of students who end up disliking oral presentations, and an instructor who believes that students gain nothing from giving oral presentations" (p. 514). Incorporating presentation structure, using presentation language, utilizing eye contact, integrating gestures, creating visual aids, and learning various other skills can inundate students and discourage them when giving presentations. This can result in students disliking presentations and failing to gain the benefits presentation skills can provide. As Wilson and Brooks (2014) noted, it's essential to break down the instruction of the presentation process into manageable steps so students understand they are expected to build on each stage of the presentation process. A properly scaffolded presentation course will give students guidance in preparing, organizing and delivering oral presentations and provide students with lifelong skills that will benefit students in all of their classes as well as their future careers (King, 2002).

3. Liberal arts course

The first author's Oral Presentations course is a mandatory course in the Liberal Arts curriculum. It is a two-semester course for first year students. Each semester consists of fifteen class meetings held once a week for 90 minutes over a fifteen week period. Each section of the course has an enrollment of around twenty students, enrolled with the same instructor for both semesters. While it is a mandatory course for all Liberal Arts students, the Liberal Arts major is highly competitive and student motivation for language acquisition is quite high from the start, but they have very little prior experience or confidence in making presentations in front of an audience.

The first semester is designed to introduce presentation skills and give each student an opportunity to practice and present on a new topic every other week, for a total of seven two- to three-minute presentations per student. The second semester is designed to build on presentation skills, integrating visual aids and slideshow technology for the first half of the term and then developing interactive responsiveness through debate presentations. During the second semester, each student makes three distinct three- to five-minute technology-enhanced presentations, participates in two ten-minute, one-on-one debate presentations, and participates in one twenty-five minute team debate presentation. All assignments are evaluated by the instructor and feedback for improvement is provided. While it is helpful to know where a course is headed, this section will focus on the scaffolding of instruction during the first semester of the course.

3.1 Scaffolding assignments and assessment

Assignments are scaffolded to develop one skill at a time and build up to complete presentations. For the first two presentations, students prepare outside of class by brainstorming, organizing, and writing out their presentations. Please see Appendix 1 for a sample assignment. Students are generally very apprehensive to present at first, so the main goal is to instill a sense of confidence. At the beginning of class, students practice their presentations by rotating among the audience members and making their presentations. After practicing in this way, students are able to receive feedback from their partners and make adjustments to their presentations. By doing this repeatedly, students build fluency and confidence in their presentation topic before making their presentations in front of the whole class.

3.1.1 Weeks 1 through 5

The first two presentations of the first semester are designed to develop student confidence by getting students to speak in front of the class. At this point, the only things being evaluated are organization and delivery of the presentation, so students are allowed to read their presentations to the class directly from their notes. This allows some of the more confident students to begin integrating the other presentation skills into their presentations without the additional worry of it counting towards their grades. By explaining that students are free to experiment in this way without fear of negative consequences, more seem willing to try new things. At the same time, students who are fearful of speaking in front of the class are able to simply read from their notes and experience being the center of attention.

Each student makes two presentations that are evaluated in this way. Giving students two opportunities to speak in front of the class without requiring them to integrate additional presentation skills into their presentations allows them to see what others do and try it themselves. Often those who were unsure about looking up from their notes or incorporating gestures see other students experimenting for the first presentation and try experimenting with these for the second presentation.

After the first two presentations, most of the students have gained more confidence speaking in front of the class. Additionally, since a third of the semester has already been completed, students have become more comfortable and trusting of each other. When students get to know one another and realize that the classroom is a safe place where experimentation and mistakes are welcome, they start to take even more chances, becoming more creative with their presentations.

3.1.2 Weeks 6 through 9

For the third and fourth presentations of the first semester, students prepare before class by brainstorming, organizing, and outlining their presentations (see Appendix 2 for sample assignment). No longer are they allowed to write out and read their presentations. Instead, they are to outline their points and support, using important words and phrases to

help guide them through difficult parts of the presentation. Students are expected to keep eye contact with the audience for the majority of the presentation, reading from their outlines for no more than one third of the presentation. While this can be difficult for some students to achieve during the third presentation, with some students still relying too heavily on their outlines, many experience success and those in the audience are encouraged by these successes and try even harder for the fourth presentation. A few of the more daring students have even put down their outlines by this point to free up their hands and begin experimenting with gesturing.

3.1.3 Weeks 10 through 13

For the fifth and sixth presentations of the first semester, students also prepare before class by brainstorming, organizing, and outlining their presentations. However, they are no longer allowed to present with their outlines. Instead, they are given a single note card on which to write key words, phrases, or statistics, so that they do not need to rely on their memories for everything. Students are expected to keep eye contact with the audience throughout the presentation, with only a few furtive glances at their notecards. The small size of the notecard makes it difficult for students to write whole sentences, discouraging them from reading. For many of the students, the notecard provides a sense of security that they do not need to commit the whole presentation to memory. This helps prevent robotic recitations of memorized material. Additionally, it encourages students to incorporate vocabulary that they may not have risked had they not had the note card for reassurance.

In addition to more extensive eye contact, students are expected to integrate body language and hand gestures into their presentations by this point, so students are being evaluated on organization, delivery, eye contact and body language. The small size of the notecard frees up their hands for more effective gesturing than is possible when they are holding an outline. Some of the students even forego the notecard altogether, further encouraging others not to heavily rely on their notecards. Students are also encouraged to move freely about the classroom as they present, rather than remaining near the front of the classroom. Many of the students still lack the confidence to interact with the audience in this way, but some of them do attempt to do so during the fifth presentation, which encourages others to attempt it during the sixth presentation.

3.1.4 Weeks 14 and 15

For the last presentation of the semester, students are evaluated on organization, delivery, eye contact and body language. They are not permitted notes of any kind and they are expected to interact with the audience, moving freely about the classroom as they present. While some of the students still hesitate to do this during the final presentation and others do so awkwardly, some have gotten to the point where they are interacting with the audience and exuding a great deal of confidence. This is good practice for when students begin to integrate slideshow technology into their presentations during the second semester, as walking freely among the audience members allows students to view the slides without it being overly apparent to the audience.

3.2 Engaging audience

Some instructors take issue with assigning presentations because a significant amount of class time is devoted to a single student presenting in front of the class (Wilson & Brooks, 2014). To make sure that class time is well spent, it is important to keep everyone engaged in the learning process. While it is important for students to receive instructor feedback, giving and receiving peer feedback can be even more instructive for student learners, as it provides audience reviewers and presenters opportunities for improvement (Otoshi & Heffernan, 2008). For peer feedback to be most effective, students must feel secure to be upfront with criticism. To this end, the first author assigns audience reviewers an identification number so they can remain anonymous but reviews can be matched to reviewers should a problem arise with the type of feedback provided. In addition to being anonymous, reviews must be specific to be helpful. Students are asked to provide specific points of praise to encourage the presenter and specific suggestions for improvement so the presenter has something to focus on for future presentations.

4. Science course

The second author's Oral Presentation course is a voluntary course for engineering and chemistry students in a Master's or Doctoral program. It is an eight week course meeting once a week with each class being 90 minutes in length. There are generally between eight to 12 students in a class with all of the students having presentation experience in their L1, Japanese. The linguistic range of the students is varied since the composition of the classes is not based on language ability.

While many of the students have some experience in presenting in their L1, the expectations of a presentation, particularly regarding sufficient eye-contact and body language, are different than what an English-speaking presenter faces (Lustig and Koester, 2003). All of the students are scheduled to give English presentations on their current research within three months of enrolling in the class. For the entire course, the students are working on an English presentation of their current research, to be given in front of professors at their university as well as the other students in their laboratory. Additionally, most of the students will be giving the same presentation at an international conference or symposium shortly after completion of the course. Unlike humanities students, the science students are clearly motivated by their desire to hone their presentation skills for the betterment of their careers beyond the classroom. They understand that they need to explain their data and research in a comprehensible and logical manner and take these oral presentation courses to prepare themselves for their futures. As Živković (2014) explained, "Every professional is involved in some aspects of communication which usually involve gathering, analyzing, and distributing scientific and/or technical information efficiently and accurately for specific audiences" (p. 472).

All of the students participating in the course come to the first class with their newly made English scripts and slides, which they've translated from Japanese. The scaffolding of instruction is based on working within what the students have already produced in order

for the students to have ownership of their own work while adjusting how the message is presented when translated into English. Students practice their presentations every week and are provided with instructor and peer feedback for their improvement. The presentations are between ten to fifteen minutes in duration.

4.1 Scaffolding presentation instruction

The course is scaffolded to develop the skills of the spoken, physical, and visual messages that are necessary for successful presentations. Teaching the skills in this order gives the students manageable steps for each of the eight classes so that, in each class, they are focusing on improving one specific skill, before moving on to the next one. Since the students have already researched and translated their research into English, there is no instruction provided on the tasks of brainstorming, research, or organization. After receiving instruction and practice with the skill being taught in each class, students present, first to a partner, and then to a small group. Having the opportunity to present in each class allows the students to gain confidence in the presentation skill and get comfortable with presenting their research in English.

4.1.1 Spoken message, Weeks 1-4

The first four weeks of the course focus on the spoken message. This familiarizes students with presentation language as well as allow them to become comfortable with presenting their own research in English. The students arrive for the first class with their English presentation script and the early part of the course is spent on taking the student's translations and finding ways to make them sound more natural. Since most of their scripts are their own translations along with online translation websites, the language usually comes across as unwieldy and can be very challenging to understand.

Since the body of the presentation comprises the bulk of the presentation, the first class focuses on adjusting the language and adding transitions. The first part of the first class deals with transitions and sequencers. The students listen to two sample presentations. The first lacks transitions and sequencers, while the second contains these elements. By listening to both presentations, the students understand the importance of how these keywords help an audience follow the different parts of a presentation. The students are then given the listening transcript of the second presentation and circle or highlight all of the transitions and sequencers. The students spend the next few minutes working with a partner to think of other transitions and sequencers that can be used in a presentation. As a class, a list is compiled of applicable transitions and sequencers, and students are then given a printed sample of a short presentation that is missing transitions and sequencers and told to fill-in the blanks with the appropriate words. Once students have grasped the significance of transitions and sequencers, they are told to go through their own presentation scripts and add these words and phrases where they are appropriate. Upon completion, the students pair off and read their presentation scripts to each other. Since the focus is exclusively on language, eye contact is not necessary at this stage and students are allowed to read directly from their scripts. The students who are listening to their partners are told to list every transition and sequencer that they hear. After both partners have read

their presentations to each other, they check their lists with the presentation scripts to confirm the target language. The final stage in this first class has students breaking into groups of three or four and performing the same tasks.

At the end of the first class, the students turn in their presentation scripts so the instructor can read through them to look for language that sounds unnatural. Upon receiving their scripts back at the start of the second class, students find their scripts highlighted in places where they need to adjust their phrasing. The focus here is not to point out grammatical errors, but to make the language more natural and accessible to audiences. Because these students are researching distinctive aspects within their own fields of study, it is essential to try to make the language comprehensible to a general audience. While technical language often cannot be simplified, the overall message can be made easier for the audience to understand.

Classes two through three echo the skills and pattern of the first class, with class two focusing on simplifying the language and adding transitions and sequencers to the introduction, and class three doing the same for the conclusion. Once the phrases have been introduced and sample exercises have been completed, the students will once again read their presentations to a partner, followed by doing the same thing in a small group. By the end of class three, the students will have read their presentations six times, half of which have been in pair work, and the other three to small groups.

With the language of the presentations established, the focus of class four emphasizes how to deliver a presentation, particularly through voice inflection. The three skills that are highlighted are pausing, stretching, and emphasizing key words. After a brief description of the three different skills, the students are shown a couple of videos of newscasters demonstrating these skills as they deliver the news effectively. The students are then given scripts of the newscasts and told to mark the words where the newscasters paused, stretched, or emphasized key words. After completing this task, there is a discussion about what kinds of words involve voice inflection and students usually notice that numbers, negative words, descriptive words, and comparison words are most often subjected to voice inflection. The students read through the newscast scripts and practice the different voice inflection skills. Just as with the transitions and sequencers, the students then go back to their presentation scripts and circle or highlight the numbers, negative words, descriptive words, and comparison words and then make a note of whether they will pause, stretch, or emphasize the selected words. As this skill takes longer to introduce and practice, the students will usually only have enough time to read through their presentation, with transitions, sequencers, and voice inflection, one time with a partner, but are encouraged to practice more at home.

4.1.2 Physical message, Weeks 5-6

Weeks five and six involve teaching students the importance of the physical message, which includes the use of eye contact and gestures. The purpose for having the physical message come after scaffolding the spoken message is because, at this stage, the students, having had the chance to go through the presentations at least seven times in class, should

be more comfortable with their presentation script, and are beginning to become less reliant on reading directly from their scripts. This familiarity naturally has students looking up at the audience at various intervals and is the opportune time to instruct students about the proper way to make eye contact while giving a presentation. While most students are aware that this is necessary, most students either continually look at only one section of the audience or bob their heads up and down between reading their scripts without really making eye contact with anyone. To get students into the habit of looking at various members of the audience and actually making eye contact, the presentation format within the class is adjusted.

Rather than presenting in pairs as they did in the first four weeks, the students begin to present to the entire class for the last four weeks. Having had the opportunity to present to nearly everyone during their pair presentations, the students have already spoken and listened to nearly all of the presentations by the time they present to the entire class. In week five, peer response is used to help student practice eye contact correctly. Each audience member is given a form (see Appendix 2) to evaluate how well the presenter made eye contact with them. The audience members are asked to mark their location in the classroom and tally the number of times the presenter made eye contact with them. In addition to keeping the presenter accountable for making eye contact with as many students as possible, it also makes the audience members responsible for listening to their classmates. The peer response forms are anonymous to allow students to freely critique their peers.

The final activity in week five is self-evaluation. From weeks five to eight, all of the student's presentations are recorded. The students are given a video copy of their presentation and are asked to watch and assess how they did on the skill being taught in class. For example, in week five they watch the video and evaluate how well they used eye contact during their presentation. Having the students watch and evaluate their own presentations is significant for the students because it allows them to take more responsibility for their learning and enables them to see how audience members view their presentation.

In week six, the physical message shifts to incorporating gestures into a presentation. Using their own presentation scripts, students go back and find the parts where they indicated they used voice inflection. Just as numbers, negative words, descriptive words, and comparison words are places to use voice inflection, the same holds true for using gestures. Students are put into pairs to think of different gestures they can use while using voice inflection. After a few minutes of brainstorming different gestures, there is a class discussion where students describe some of the gestures that they use for various words in their presentation. Once students have their gestures, each student presents to the entire class. Peer response is once again used, but this time, half of the class is checking for eye contact, and the other half of the students are checking for gestures. The student's homework is again to watch their presentation and reflect on their use of gestures.

4.1.3 Visual message, Weeks 7-8

The final two weeks of the course focus on the visual message. This is the final stage of scaffolding because it is usually the easiest for students to fix. Since the students have already given a presentation on their research in Japanese and were told, prior to the start of the course, to have a slideshow ready in English, all of their visual aids have already been made. Through the first six weeks of the course, the students have not presented with all of their visual aids since the focus has been on the spoken and physical message. The only time that the students use the visual aids during the first six weeks is when they have a visual aid that shows graphs, charts, videos, or any other visual data. Though they have used their visual aids during their presentations, they have not received feedback or comments on them prior to weeks seven and eight.

The problem with most presentations involving science students is that they have an abundance of data that they want to share but the slides are too difficult to follow. This is usually due to having too much text on a slide, using fonts and backgrounds that make it difficult for audience members to follow, having too much visual information on one slide, or having all three of these errors. Since the students have much of their presentation memorized, at this stage, they immediately realize that their slides have too much text and find this easy to correct. Changing fonts and backgrounds is also easy to adjust by having students in the back of the class raise their hands if they are unable to see information due to a font that is too small or a color too similar to the slide background. The final problem of having too much visual information on one slide typically involves a slide with two or three graphs or charts when there should only be one, or one large graph or chart which has too much information on it and would be better served by dividing it into two graphs or charts. This is more difficult to fix due to the field-specific nature of the student's presentations and classmates as well as the teacher unable to give adequate advice about how the data should be split up. Generally, students are asked to keep their original charts and graphs and make alternatives that would make their data easier to follow for a non-specialist. In the end, the student selects the graph or chart to be included in the presentation, but in most cases the student chooses the alternative charts and graphs or a slightly simplified version of the original data. For the final two weeks, the students are once again given peer response forms as well as self-evaluation forms.

5. Conclusions

The authors discerned more points of convergence than divergence in their approaches to scaffolding presentation instruction for differing student levels and disciplines. The authors both begin with organization and delivery when teaching about the spoken message and save teaching about visuals until last. Both authors address eye contact and body language after organization and delivery and work to fully engage the student audience, such that students are actively listening and participating in presentation evaluation. While there are many similarities in the authors' approaches to scaffolding oral presentation instruction, the diversity of student level and discipline necessitates differences, as well.

The main points of divergence are in the emphasis of instruction as the authors adapt to meet differing student needs and motivations. While the first author's undergraduate humanities students need more time building confidence to speak in front of an audience and their beginning knowledge about the content of their presentations is limited, their motivation for acquiring English language skills is quite high from the start, so additional time is required to build confidence in themselves as presenters and in their ability to explain the content of their presentations. This diverges from the second author's graduate science students, who have previous experience making presentations in their L1 and begin the course with a great deal of content knowledge about their presentation topics, but are less motivated to acquire English language skills. This necessitates less confidence building and more focused fine-tuning of language elements so that the content of the presentations is more accessible to a general audience.

As the authors noted more similarities than differences in their approaches to scaffolding oral presentation instruction for differing student levels and disciplines, they are currently discussing and researching how they integrate presentation skill instruction into their other (non-oral presentation) undergraduate courses. Their next paper will address how the authors adapt course materials to integrate presentation skills into their general English courses. The authors hope their next paper will have an even wider application for instructors of general English language courses and that it helps others more effectively utilize presentations as a powerful tool for English language instruction.

First author's biodata

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Appendix 1
Topic: Myself

Briefly, write down everything you can think of about the topic.

Write one thing that represents you. This could be an important idea or item.
_____
_____
_____

Write three points about the thing or idea.
1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

In one sentence, connect the topic to the three points. _____
_____

Give details and explain about the three points.
1. _____
_____
_____

2. _____
_____
_____

3. _____
_____
_____

Write a 2-3 minute speech that combines these ideas.

Introduction (introduce your topic and show how it is connected to your points).

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Main Point 1 (give details and explain about the first point).

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Main Point 2 (give details and explain about the second point).

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Main Point 3 (give details and explain about the third point).

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Conclusion (show how your topic is connected to your points; emphasize why it's important).

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Appendix 2

Presenter's Name _____

Eye Contact Checker
Shade the area where you were sitting.

	Presenter		

How many times did the presenter make eye contact with you?

Introduction	Body	Conclusion	Total

Comment