

Pecha Kucha: How to Improve Students' Presentation Skills

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Abstract

Giving a presentation can often be one of the more challenging tasks asked of our students and even the most confident of speakers can sometimes give a presentation which lacks clarity and focus. Add to this the additional challenge of presenting in a language other than their mother tongue and some students may well begin to feel overwhelmed. This can lead to a tendency to over prepare, with students adopting a number of strategies such as making detailed notes which can ultimately distract them when they present, learning (parts of) their presentation by heart, and ultimately focusing almost completely on the content of their presentation as they try to include as much information as possible. Presentation delivery often comes as an afterthought with little consideration being given to pace and timing. Recent research has suggested that by using the Pecha Kucha presentation format with students, many of these issues can be addressed. Introducing students to this format on EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses helps to raise their awareness of the importance of timing, delivery and visual aids when giving a presentation. In addition, it can help to build confidence, particularly with non-native speakers of English preparing to present in another language. It would also appear to be a more engaging style of presentation for the audience. This presentation will begin with a Pecha Kucha outlining some of the experiences of both staff and students on pre-sessional EAP courses who have adopted this presentation approach at a UK university.

Keywords: pecha kucha, visual, communication, presentation

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Introduction

Pecha Kucha, or the art of giving a concise presentation, (Klein & Dytham, 2015) is the name given to a unique presentation style which was introduced in 2003 by Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham, two Danish designers based in Tokyo at that time. They wished to breathe life into the rather long-winded, time-consuming presentations which were common in the design world and as a result they came up with a much shorter, more dynamic style which helped to make presentations more engaging and more memorable. Pecha Kucha presentations are sometimes referred to as 20 x 20 presentations because they follow a strict format of 20 images with 20 seconds for each slide, so that the presentation will take exactly 6 minutes and 40 seconds. The slides are visual rather than text-based and are set to proceed automatically, making it impossible for the presenter to over-run and removing the pressure on the presenter of deciding when to move to the next slide. Over the last few years, the technique has become more widespread and the fields of business and education in particular are taking advantage of this increasingly popular delivery style.

When international students come to the UK they are faced with many challenges before they are accepted into the academic community in which they wish to study. They must cope with not only language skills but also academic skills in order to be successful in their chosen discipline and as such, many overseas students follow courses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) before commencing their university studies. Such courses typically entail learning and practising techniques for reading academic texts, analysing different genres, researching, planning and writing academic essays and employing critical thinking skills. They must also be able to participate in seminars and discussions in English and collaborate with their peers to give group presentations as well as individual presentations. All this is done in a foreign language. Presenting in particular is often considered to be stressful even in one's own native language, but when the task requires the presentation to be given in a foreign language, this anxiety is magnified.

Drawbacks of Traditional Presentation Classes

On many EAP courses, the presentation skills component will often include input and discussion in class around such questions as what makes a good presentation? *What is the best way to prepare for a presentation? How should a presentation be structured?* and *What kind of information should be included?* Students seem to be aware of the fact that they need a clear introduction, body and conclusion, they know that they will be graded on such criteria as language, content and structure, yet still it is a challenge for them to be able to turn this knowledge of techniques and grading criteria into practical knowhow by producing a presentation which reflects their true ability. One of the reasons why this may be so is that students often attribute a greater weighting to the content of a presentation than to the actual delivery of the presentation and allocate their preparation time accordingly. That is, as students learn in other classes about how to research academic articles, the importance of academic style and the use of topic-specific vocabulary, they wish to gather as much information as possible in the belief that the more data and information they have, the better the presentation will be. Less thought is given to such issues as selection of key information or pronunciation practice of the topic-specific vocabulary they so desperately wish to incorporate. Therefore, students' presentation slides often have a tendency towards

information overload. As a result, final presentations may be deeply researched but poorly constructed, minimally practised and difficult for the audience to follow. Even when students have been given a time limit, their presentations often run over their allotted time, which is extremely problematic for grading purposes as teachers have a tight schedule to follow if they are to watch and grade students fairly. Problems with timing can lead to a situation where one student who has met the timing requirement feels dissatisfied if other students are allowed to over-run and appear to have been given an advantage of more time, while those whose presentations are cut short by teachers are left feeling penalized because they were not allowed to finish. By using a Pecha Kucha presentation format, many of these issues can be addressed and the very process of producing a Pecha Kucha will in fact focus on the skills students wish to hone, such as time management.

Making Presentation Practice Interesting

One way of approaching this is to integrate presentations into other classes, so the aim is not simply to give a stand-alone presentation, but to create a task where the presentation is part of this task. In this way students can practise other key skills such as researching, collaborating with others and selecting material. Several recent articles have focused on the use of Pecha Kucha with business students in particular. Levin and Peterson (2013) used the format with MBA marketing students and observed that "...students like being exposed to a tool they can use in other settings" (p. 61). Anderson and Williams (2012) found that when they introduced this format into their business classes, "...students and professors...responded positively to this presentation style" (p. 5). This would suggest that such an approach to giving a presentation is extremely beneficial both for the presenters and the audience.

With this in mind, the Pecha Kucha format was introduced on an EAP course for international business students to help them address some of the issues mentioned above such as timing and lack of practice. As Shiobara (2015) notes, "...the presenter is forced to consider their words very carefully to fit into a 20 second slot and they need to practice carefully" (p. 575). This is particularly true for non-native speakers of English who may hesitate while searching for a particular word or who may not have checked the pronunciation of a key word beforehand which could have disastrous consequences and lead to misunderstanding for the audience. The task involved students working together in pairs to prepare an *elevator pitch* style of presentation focussing on the visual element and would require the presenters to feel confident and competent if the pitch was to be successful. Students were first introduced to the format of a popular TV programme which invites would-be entrepreneurs to present an idea briefly in the hope of gaining financial backing for their business plan from a successful business person, but not before they have been questioned on it. Students watched some examples of pitches in order to understand the concept of the task, and this also allowed for some language input as they listened carefully to the sales talk of the presenter and the subsequent questions to be fielded. Next, students worked together on their idea and made their slides. They were given a generous deadline for preparation because engaging with the subject matter, thinking critically about what should be included and why and being creative enough to produce suitable visuals requires time. An additional time limit was added purely for the practice stage so as to ensure students did not skip this. They were told to focus on their delivery, and not to memorise their presentation word for word, but to become familiar enough with the

language and vocabulary they wanted to use so as to reduce the possibility of long pauses and hesitations in what essentially is meant to be a fast-paced, dynamic sales pitch. In order to achieve this, they had to be selective in terms of what they said and how much they could say while keeping within the strict time limit. The resulting presentations were more engaging than standard 'data and text-only' slide presentations and the time limit helped to ensure that speakers maintained their pace – a key factor of a successful business pitch. Anecdotal evidence from students at the time indicated that the exercise had made them more aware of the importance of the practice stage, while teachers felt that the format had helped students to produce a more 'polished' performance and noted that the audience appeared to be much more engaged and attentive, as demonstrated by the number of questions they wished to ask at the end of the presentation.

Conclusion

By restricting presentations to their traditional format of a random number of slides packed with data and text, we are in fact missing an opportunity to simplify, clarify and smooth the communication process, and as Klentzin, Paladino, Johnston and Devine (2010) claim that we need "...creative solutions based on sound pedagogical theory" (p. 159) in order to address this issue. By shifting more emphasis on to the visual element of a presentation, students are no longer simply reliant on oral and written input for comprehension. This is something that Lehtonen (2011) argues when he says that "...written and oral communication might not always be sufficient..." (p. 467) and that this use of the visual element in order to aid comprehension is crucial for knowledge transfer. For teachers it is worth bearing in mind that while Pecha Kucha presentations are certainly brief they should not underestimate the time required to prepare the visuals and then to practise. On a final note, it is also worth remembering that 'a picture is worth a thousand words'.

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