

# Oral presentations for English proficiency purposes

Richard Miles  
Nanzan University, Japan

## ABSTRACT

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Oral presentations are becoming a more important part of language teaching, especially in the university environment. Often the purpose of these classes is to prepare students for business presentations that they will likely be expected to carry out after graduating and getting jobs. The focus of the class is often on the specific language for presentation, the use of visuals and organisation. This focus is usually determined by the teacher. Nevertheless, in this day of student-centered teaching approaches, it is important to also know what students actually want out of a presentation class and if we as teachers are meeting these objectives in our courses and with the textbooks we are using. Evidence from this case study suggests that students overwhelmingly view presentation classes as an opportunity to improve their English ability rather than actually learn how to give presentations. An analysis also showed that some textbooks are often concerned with non-English skills such as organizing thoughts, visuals and body language. This paper concludes that teachers need to be more aware of possible language purposes driving students to take presentation classes, and to choose more appropriate textbooks accordingly.

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**KEYWORDS:** *presentations, purpose, oral proficiency*

## Introduction

The research for this paper came about as the result of a needs analysis survey which was conducted at the beginning of a new elective course on giving presentations in English. The original intent was to see if there were any common objectives that students had so that the course could be better designed in the future. The qualitative results showed that the students had very clear purposes for taking the course. Essentially, students were focused on improving their oral communication and saw studying how to give presentations as a way to make such improvements.

## Background

There has not been much research on needs analysis on presentation classes. Most research has focused on what constitutes a good presentation or on language output, such as pretask planning and the positive effects it can have on accuracy (Yuan & Ellis, 2003) as well as the positive influence rehearsed output can have (Menim, 2003).

Few researchers have actually looked at the role or purpose of presentations in the language classroom. Those who have done so sometimes questioned the necessity of presentations, stating how much time they take up and how they can produce apathy and even poor behaviour from the rest of the class (Ross, 2007) or produce excessively passive audiences who are doing little but sitting in class, and only half listening (Pineda, 1999). It has also been argued that by doing oral presentations and increasing student anxiety levels, we as teachers are actually contradicting the important aspects of language acquisition (King, 2002).

In terms of how presentations have been taught, Halliday's genre approach has often been used as the basis for teaching presentation courses (Webster, 2002). This involves teaching genre specific language and other context specific items. The problem with such an approach is that, the teacher has to assume that the students have a common purpose in enrolling in the class, which is usually either for future business conferences or academic forums.

Sazdovska (2007) analysed the way presentations are taught by looking at some of the textbooks provided. She also discovered that there seems to be an abundance of books dealing with business presentations and books that deal with the technological aspects of presenting, but these overlook the basic language aspects of presentations and other rudimentary skills.

Indeed, with many employers placing a high degree of importance on communication skills and the ability to give formal presentations (Pittenger, Miller, & Mott, 2004), many teachers and their institutions may assume that their courses should be focused on attaining this goal. While teaching students the formalities, technological aspects and structural features of presentations in the business world will undoubtedly help many students, it does not necessarily mean that this is the main purpose or goal for students attending a presentation class.

When students themselves were asked about what constitutes a good presentation, they rated criteria such as clarity of speech, correct language and audience appeal as the main factors (Otoshi & Heffernen, 2008). If this is what students deem to be the key criteria for good presentations, perhaps then, learning these, constitutes their purpose for taking a presentation course? The problem then for teachers is to find some kind of balance between the differing purposes that students, institutions and the teachers themselves have.

Cheung (2008) actually looked at presentations in a similar way as this paper will do, but labelled it a macro versus micro distinction. Essentially, the distinction was made between the language elements of a presentation (micro) and the structural elements (macro), with both seen as vital elements. Without getting too involved in the issues of what makes a good presentation, this paper will try to assess what students see as their purpose for taking an English presentation elective course. By clarifying their purpose, we as teachers can modify our courses to meet these specific needs and be more aware of the possible contradicting purposes which schools, students and teachers have for presentations in the classroom. With a clearer purpose established, we as teachers should then be able to better analyse and clarify what constitutes a "good presentation".

## Research survey

A survey was done on the first day of the oral presentation class, which asked students what their purpose for taking this course was. Thirteen options were listed, and students gave a score of 1–5 (1 = not at all, and 5 = completely) about how strongly they agreed with the purpose listed. The score sheets were anonymous. Table 1 is a summary of the results with the average score next to the stated purpose or reason.

## Findings

### Survey

There are two findings of note from this simple survey. Firstly, and not unexpectedly, there are many different purposes which motivated students to take this course. None of the options was completely rejected. The biggest finding of note is the similarity or grouping of their replies. The top six replies all relate to general oral communication skills (improving their English and speaking, gaining confidence in speaking and challenging themselves to speak more). The more traditional presentation skills such as using PowerPoint, and the intangible skills teachers always claim come from doing presentations (getting job skills, working better in groups, organizing your thoughts better and learning presentations phrases—usually limited to signposting) were all ranked lower and fell into the bottom half of the results.

The above results suggest that for these subjects, who were all Japanese university students, ranging in proficiency level from high to intermediate, and coming from a variety of different academic departments, the purpose of doing a presentation course was to focus on language improvement most of all.

**Table 1**

Student responses (ranked in order of strongest agreement)

Purpose or reason	Agreement
1. to improve my speaking	4.57
2. to improve my English	4.28
3. to talk better in front of people	4.21
4. to learn how to disagree/debate	4.07
5. to speak more confidently	4.00
6. to challenge myself	3.92
7. to learn presentation language	3.85
8. to get useful job skills	3.50
9. to improve my organizing skills	3.42
10. out of interest	3.21
11. to improve my group work skills	3.00
12. to get a credit	2.78
13. to learn PowerPoint	2.71

Presentations for them were essentially another mode for communicating their ideas and to use their speaking skills. Not surprisingly, students did not place much emphasis on the intangible skills that result from practicing presentations, such as group work or organizing their ideas. These are hard to measure and do not necessarily have to come from a presentation class.

The more formal aspects, which deal with the structure of presentations (PowerPoint, presentation language, and job-getting skills) also received rather low ratings, suggesting that students were not actually so much interested in learning how to do presentations, as they were in learning how to communicate their ideas in an informal manner. This seemed to be true, regardless of the proficiency level of the students.

It would seem then that the purpose of taking the oral presentation course for most if not all the students was to focus on language improvement. This was further confirmed by comments on the post course evaluation forms.

### *Teachers' views*

The next question then is, are we as teachers aware of this student goal, and are we meeting their needs? In a related question, do the current available textbooks also meet the students' purpose?

To find out the answers to the above questions, the same survey administered to the students was given to eight English teachers at the same university who teach a range of courses and who also use presentations. No distinction was made between using presentations in oral communication classes, reading classes or any other classes, in an effort to get as wide a look at the issue as possible. The results are surprising in that they show that, overall, English language teachers seem to have the same purpose as students. The results are presented in Table 2. For clarity's sake the wording was changed slightly in some of the statements

**Table 2**

Teacher responses (ranked in order of strongest agreement)

Purpose or reason	Agreement
1. to improve their speaking	4.50
2. to improve their English	4.12
3. to increase their confidence	4.12
4. to make them better in front of people	4.12
5. to challenge them	3.62
6. to improve their organizing skills	3.62
7. to give them useful job skills	3.37
8. to teach them presentation language	3.12
9. to improve group work skills	3.12
10. to give them a grade	3.00
11. to teach how to disagree/debate	2.87
12. out of interest	2.12
13. to teach PowerPoint	2.00

compared with the student survey.

Once again there seems to be a clear distinction between the language-related purposes, which are ranked at the top, and the other more traditional presentation skills which were again ranked near the bottom.

### *Definitions of categories*

At this time it is necessary to define exactly what is meant by language purposes as opposed to simple presentation skills. Presentation skills can be defined as those which are limited in use to presentations only and not transferable to oral communication or conversation. From this definition, we can conclude that PowerPoint skills would be defined as a presentation skill as they are not normally used in conversation.

Other intangible skills such as working in groups and improving organizational skills might not be limited to presentation skills, but they are also not considered as truly language skills although this is debatable.

We can define language skills or purposes as those which are not limited to presentations, but which can also be used in regular conversation. The two answers most related to language skills (improving their speaking, and improving their English) were ranked first and second in both surveys respectably. What this shows is that both students and teachers seem to see the purpose or focus of oral presentations in terms of language improvement, not as a means to actually learn how to present in English. This is especially important when one considers that this course was pitched to students as a course where they could learn how to present in English. On the syllabus (which was published beforehand), it was stressed that English would not be the primary focus of the course.

### *Textbook analysis*

If this is the overwhelming reason for students to take the course, then the teacher and the textbook should try and meet this purpose. Naturally, textbooks all have varying purposes and objectives, but, to what extent do some of the textbooks available match the purpose of students taking a presentation class, with the hope of improving their English skills? To find out, an analysis was done of the contents of the most widely available/used texts on the market right now. Here is a list of the texts to be analysed:

*Dynamic Presentations* (2007). Michael Hood, Pearson & Longman.

*Basic Parts of Speech* (2007). Paul Moritoshi, Thomson.

*Present Yourself* (2002). Steven Gershon, Cambridge.

*Presenting in English* (2002). Mark Powell, Thomson & Heinle.

*Speaking of Speech* (2009). David Harrington & Charles LeBeau, MacMillan.

There are other books available in the market, but the above are the ones that will be analysed for the purpose of this paper. In order to try and analyse these books, a system was devised which is far from perfect but it allows a comparison to be made which can show which texts better serve the language improvement purpose desired by students in this class. Any language features which were not

specific to presentations, and which could be used in normal conversation, were classified as non-presentation specific language features. These included such items as grammar exercises, pronunciation exercises, and most importantly, conversation strategies (word stressing, linking, and strategies such as repetition, chunking, paraphrasing, etc.). A few strategies such as signposting were deemed to be presentation specific, as they are rare in conversations. Of course, it was realized that this classification was not absolute and there are plenty of grey areas which could be debated, but it was done for the purpose of analyzing the big picture and seeing if textbooks do indeed cater to language development or if they are exclusively devoted to presentation structure and organization.

The results are presented below along with comments. It was felt that a simple grading or numerical system for scoring certain evaluations was not really sufficient so comments were included instead. These are not quantitative, but perhaps more representative and paint a truer picture of the textbooks.

A wide range of different features are clearly included in textbooks dealing with presentations. Some are focused on business objectives, while others focus on the structure of presentations. These are certainly useful in a wide range of areas, such as helping students structure a presentation logically, or teaching them how to incorporate business graphs and diagrams to better illustrate their points.

### *Final analysis*

The key finding of this paper is that students taking presentation classes might not be solely interested in learning how to present. They may be interested

**Table 3**  
Textbook analysis

Textbook	Units	Language features	Portion of unit used for language features	Non presentation specific language features
<i>Present Yourself 2</i> (Cambridge)	6	Yes	Each unit is comprised of 6 parts, one of which is language-oriented	1 page out of 11, with just a few simple points
<i>Presenting in English</i> (Thomson & Heinle)	7	Yes	About 4.5 units out of 7 are language focused	Many conversation strategies, vocabulary and pronunciation exercises
<i>Basic Parts of Speech</i> (Thomson)	20	No	None	None
<i>Speaking of Speech</i> (MacMillan)	8	Not specifically	1 out of 8 units deals with non-specific language	One unit focuses on voice inflection
<i>Dynamic Presentations</i> (Pearson & Longman)	18	Yes	Each unit has 6 parts, 3 dealing with non-specific language features	Lots of pronunciation tips/practice and some conversation strategies

in more than how to organize presentations, how to organize the content, how to signpost different sections and how to make smooth and natural transitions between their points. It is important to keep in mind that many students taking an elective class on how to present may be doing so, not to further their presenting skills, but to improve their conversational skills. Some of the students taking the course had returned from overseas and were keen on taking any English class they could, as a way of maintaining their conversational proficiency. Others were simply interested in learning English but were not in the English department so this course was one of a few limited options available to them if they were interested to take an English class.

If this is the case, then it is important to choose wisely when selecting a course book. The opposite may also be true in some contexts, where students may solely be interested in learning specific presentations skills. Whichever purpose motivates the students, teachers need to be aware of and to be careful to ensure that their class activities and textbook reflect the needs of the students.

In this particular study, students clearly wanted to focus on improving their language skills through learning how to present. As a result, "Presenting in English" was chosen as the text as it contained more emphasis on language skills, skills which can be transferred to everyday conversation and are not purely limited to presentation-making.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion then, it seems there are different purposes which might motivate students to take an English oral presentation class. While these purposes might well include the obvious, learning how to present, they may also include more language oriented purposes. Many students who have spent years studying English may simply wish to keep up their conversational skills and see a presenting course as another way to do this. Teachers need to be aware of this possibility and be more careful when selecting course books. The demands of the school curriculum also need to be considered, although in this study as the course was completely new, the instructor was given complete control as to the design of the course. Further research will be needed to see if, as is suspected, many university students in Japan, see presentation classes as an extension of their oral communication classes. If this is the case, then perhaps it can be said that there should be a new purpose or focus for these classes and their accompanying textbooks.

## **CORRESPONDENCE**

Any correspondence should be directed to Richard Miles, Nanzan University, Japan (rmiles@nanzan-u.ac.jp).

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