

Examining the importance of student self-reflection in a presentation skills course

Anthony CRIPPS

Abstract

Presentation courses are becoming more prevalent at Japanese universities. This paper focuses on one small cohort of students (n=5) that took an elective presentation skills course at Nanzan University. The paper initially looks at some of the salient themes related to teaching presentation skills and then outlines the design of the course. The main focus of the paper is on the students' reflective comments on the course and how it affected their presentation skills. Finally, some example guidelines are offered for teachers who are teaching similar courses.

1 Introduction

Increasingly, many Japanese universities are offering English presentation skills as part of their curricula. This paper outlines a presentation skills course which has learner autonomy, peer feedback, self-reflection and self-correction at the core of its composition. After a brief overview of the key concepts which underpin the course, the design and its implementation are described. Student reaction to the course and their self-reflections are analysed and discussed. At the end of the paper the author provides some guidelines for those who teach presentation courses, or those who want to foster learner autonomy through self-reflection.

2 Background

The field of teaching presentations at university level in Japan is a growing one. This has coincided with an overlap of the vocational needs of students who are looking to take a series of transferable skills into the job market. As I have suggested in previous papers, presentation skills are valued by students, teachers and employers (Cripps, 2014; Cripps, Miles & Wilson, 2015). Teachers who want to foster learner autonomy should consider the design of their courses and classes carefully. Benson defines autonomy as the: "...capacity to take control over one's own learning" (2001, p. 2). There are of course much wider definitions of autonomy, however, I have chosen this definition to inform my research because it is specifically suitable to my educational setting.

Different teachers approach the teaching of presentation skills in various ways; some focus on language; some stress structure; and others pay attention to non-verbal communication. However, reflection, self-evaluation and peer feedback are also vital elements of a presentation skills course. Reflection has long been an essential component of teacher training and, I would argue, it is also a necessary part of any course (see Evans, 2002). Getting students to reflect upon what they have been taught and what they have discovered by participating in a class is a core element of any course that purports to foster learner autonomy. As each year passes, more Japanese companies are looking to hire people who can

adapt to changing economic conditions. Teaching transferable skills, such as presentation skills, will help equip students for the challenges that they face after graduation.

Impromptu presentations provide students with the opportunity to test their oral and non-verbal communication skills in a controlled and constructive environment. The importance of peer feedback has been recognised for many years (Auster & Wylie, 2006; Miles, 2014). Immediate and constructive peer feedback, combined with timely comments from the teacher, can make a positive impact on student growth (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Self-correction and self-assessment through reflection is a vital process which students need to acquire in order to make improvements in their presentation skills. By recognising our strengths and weaknesses we can further develop our skills.

3 Course design and data analysis

The design of my presentation skills course has already been discussed in detail in a previous paper (Cripps, 2014). In this paper I briefly focus on the overall structure of the course before discussing the changes I made for the autumn-winter 2015-2016 semester.

My presentation skills course is an elective course offered to students in the Department of British and American Studies at Nanzan University in Nagoya, Japan (see Appendix 1 for the syllabus). As an elective course only third- and fourth-year students can choose to register. Fifteen classes are scheduled over the course of a semester with formal group presentations being given in the sixth and seventh weeks, followed by formal individual presentations which start in the thirteenth week. The course aims to improve students' presentation skills by building on the communication skills that they have gained in other classes. To avoid any overlap, I conduct a needs analysis in the first class of the course which focusses on determining the exact needs of the students. The presentation skills course has three distinct foci; 1) preparing for presentations; 2) designing effective PowerPoint slides and; 3) delivery techniques.

The formal group presentation usually involves groups of four to five students who give a 'Pecha Kucha' presentation based on a chosen theme (see Cripps 2014 and Appendix 2 for more details). After the students have given their group presentation they are asked to reflect on and write down what they have learnt from giving their presentation (see Appendix 3). For the individual presentation each student has to give a five-minute presentation based on a theme that they decide (see Appendix 4).

For the course outlined in this paper I made some alterations based on some innovative ideas which were piloted during the spring-summer 2015 presentation skills course. The main refinements were; doubling the number of impromptu presentations for each class from three to six; videoing all the impromptu presentations to facilitate peer and teacher feedback and self-correction; providing time for immediate peer and teacher feedback after each impromptu presentation.

3.1 Class structure

Although no class is exactly the same, there are generally six distinct elements to each of my presentation skills classes:

1. Explanation of the class

The goals and flow of the class are explained to the students. This prepares the students for the class and helps them focus on the central theme.

2. Impromptu presentations

The students give short presentations in English on a particular topic (without any preparation) for two minutes. Usually these presentations are given in front of a partner. After each presentation the students are provided with immediate and constructive feedback by their partner and their teacher. After each person has given a presentation the pairs are changed and new presentation topics are assigned.

3. Tony's talk

Feedback is given to the students on their presentations. Practical techniques are explained and demonstrated by the teacher. Students have the opportunity to assign an impromptu presentation topic to the teacher who gives an example presentation followed by student feedback and reflection.

4. Focus on a key topic

These topics vary according to the focus of the class. For the preparation element of the course, for example, mini-lectures are given on specific components of a presentation such as; how to define your message; how to research your topic; how to construct your presentation. These mini-lectures allow time for discussion, questions, and reflection.

5. Group work

In each class students are expected to work together to improve their presentation skills. Once the groups have been decided for the first formal presentation the students cooperate with the same members to discuss, plan, research, and create their presentations. The teacher allows the students to explore the construction of their presentation in their own way and only offers advice when asked for by the students.

6. Reflection and assignments

At the end of each class both the students and the teacher reflect on what has been covered during the class. Assignments are allocated for homework as necessary. Typically, this takes one of three forms; 1) reading an article for the following week; 2) researching websites related to presentation skills; 3) preparing for their presentations.

3.2. Data analysis

Five students registered for my autumn-winter 2015-2016 presentation skills course. Three students were in their fourth-year and two were in their third-year of studies. Data was collected through self-evaluation papers (Appendix 5) which were administered at the end of the course and also the final reflective reports (see Appendix 6). The data was analysed based on emergent themes using grounded theory (Radnor, 2002). Pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper. The comments of the students used in this paper appear in their original form i.e. uncorrected.

4 Self-reflections

The number of students that register for the spring-summer semester is always the maximum allowed i.e. 25 students. However, due to timetable clashes and other conflicting demands, the number of students that register for the autumn-winter semester is usually significantly lower than the spring-summer semester. As noted above, for the autumn-winter 2015-2016 semester five students registered for the course. Having a small group of students provided me with an ideal environment to experiment with some improvements to the presentation skills course such as increasing the number of impromptu presentations and allowing more time for peer feedback and reflection. Throughout the course the students were encouraged to reflect on what they had experienced and learnt. At the end of the course the students completed a self-assessment form and submitted a final reflective report. Below the thoughts of the students are provided based on the major themes that emerged from the data.

4.1 Reflecting on individual weaknesses

The students were often self-critical in their written reflections and they wrote many comments on their presentation weaknesses. This is not necessarily a negative point as one of the keys to self-improvement is to know our weaknesses. One of the students, Eri, had spent time studying abroad and returned to Japan with a fairly high command of English. When reflecting on one of her presentation weak points she noted that: *“I couldn’t clarify the point I wanted an audience to focus on.”* Eri often found it difficult to communicate with the audience. This perhaps is indicative of her character as she is quite defensive and shies away from communicating with other students. She goes on to explain her feelings: *“When I ask for some questions to an audience, the atmosphere I create is not impressive. The reasons for saying this is I am scared of being asked, because I am not confident whether I can provide an exact answer or not.”*

Another student, Hannah, when reflecting on her first presentation, wrote about improvements that she needed to make: *“I have a lot to improve. We did not stick to a clear message. In other words, if I were the audience I could not have understood the main point of the presentation...I learned a presentation would be a failure unless we did not have a clear message.”* Hannah’s final report included many incisive comments. She came to understand her weak points when giving presentations and made a conscious effort to work on them:

“I spoke too fast, spoke in a small voice, and did not make eye-contact. It was challenging to reduce such habits. However, through this course I managed to lessen them gradually. I still have improvements but I understand these habits can be got rid of through practicing.”

4.2 Reflecting on improvements and skills acquired

Of course, the students did not only focus on negative aspects. In their reflective comments they identified key skills which they had developed. Arisa noted that: *“I improved at many points, such as eye-contact, having a clear message and simple slides.”* Similarly, Hannah highlighted the advantages of giving so many short, impromptu presentations throughout the course:

“I did a lot of short ad-lib presentations. It enforced my quick thinking and courage to speak in front of people. The more I gave presentations, the more I got used to give

presentations gradually. I worked hard to improve my presentations day by day thanks to this.”

All the students were grateful for the presentation ‘tips’ (their words not mine) that they received during the course. Despite the fact that the students had given many presentations at the University as part of other courses, they commented that they still needed further, specific instruction which targeted presentation skills. Eri summarises this feeling: *“Even though I have ever given many presentations through my university life, I had not had enough tips to make a good presentation before I took the course.”*

Hannah, Anna and Kyoko highlighted certain skills which they had learnt: *“In particular, I was impressive with techniques that I could use before starting presentations”* (Hannah). Anna noted the three main tips that she gleaned from the course: *“Not to memorize a script”, “making a key word and emphasizing it”* and *“making a good introduction.”* Kyoko stated that: *“Making a good atmosphere is really effective to bring people to hear and understand presentations.”* Below I have created a table based on the most popular ‘tips’ which the students mentioned.

Table 1: Useful ‘tips’ identified by the students

| | | | |
|---|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| Preparing the presentation environment | Creating a good rapport with the audience | Not relying on a presentation script | Emphasizing key words |
| Choosing the correct lighting | Wearing appropriate clothes | Making use of the whiteboard | Advice on what to do before a presentation |
| Using non-verbal communication | Speaking naturally and in a friendly way | Creating simple PowerPoint slides | Using the visual strengths of PowerPoint |
| Using effective key words and phrases to convey a message | How to ask interesting questions | How to answer difficult questions | Effective and persuasive delivery skills |

4.3 Self-satisfaction

The most gratifying theme that emerged from the data was that of ‘self-satisfaction’. The students seemed to derive an enormous amount of self-satisfaction and contentment with their effort and progress. Eri provides a succinct précis which encapsulates how the students felt: *“As a result of my hard work through the course, I could improve my presentation skills.”* I believe that student satisfaction with their development is a key indicator of the success or failure of a course.

Hannah, when writing about her final presentation, she said she tried her best: *“Since that presentation was the final one at Nanzan for me so I put everything that I had learned for four years. I enjoyed a lot because I was allowed to talk about what I really like: theatre and musical. This time, I spent time for setting my main point and message.”* She wrote that she was satisfied with her effort and that she gained a sense of fulfilment once her final presentation was over.

Initially, at the very beginning of the course, Kyoko was quite worried about her English language ability. She seemed in awe of her peers as many had studied English abroad. However, as the course proceeded, she began to relax and worried less about her comparative ability. Instead, she began to focus on what skills she could improve and what she was interested in. This was evident in her preparation for her final individual presentation: *“When preparing this presentation, I realized the most important thing is how much interest I have on my own topic. Sometimes I skipped my words, but I could have confidence rather than before. Totally, I can say I could enjoy these two presentations.”*

4.4 Reflection as a catalyst for constructive improvement

One of the key elements of this course was self-reflection as a catalyst for improvement. If someone fails to learn from their experiences they will often fail to grow as a person. Eri reflected on her first presentation and tried to make improvements:

“That is why the second one was better than the first one in terms of having a clear message, what is more I made my slides simple compared with that of the first one, which is another reason that second presentation was improved. Those improvements sprang from the weaknesses I had had in the first presentation.”

Using her perceived weaknesses to develop as a person is an essential skill that Eri can take with her after she has graduated. In fact, Eri’s individual presentation was polished, persuasive, and dynamic.

In her final report Hannah wrote that: *“I enjoyed writing my report. It is good for me to remember what I have learned.”* She also found satisfaction in giving her second presentation as it was a chance to build on the perceived weaknesses of the first presentation:

“I enjoyed the second presentation but I found some improvements. Though this course have finished, I would like to consider how to convey my message effectively and how to improve my talking in front of a lot of audience.”

At the start of the course it was clear that Hannah was one of the quietest students in the class. She chose her words and comments carefully and never seemed to engage in idle talk. She wants to be an English teacher and I felt that she needed to come out of her shell more and challenge herself. Unbeknownst to me, she had taken steps to do just that and challenge herself. In her final report Hannah stated that: *“Recently I had a chance to feel my progress.”* She gave a presentation on her graduation thesis at another university in Aichi prefecture and wrote about her reason for doing so: *“I thought it was a good chance to make use of what I had learned in this course.”* Hannah worked to create a rapport with the audience, foster a friendly atmosphere, and maintain eye contact:

“After finishing my presentation, I was talked to by some students and professors. They told me that they were impressed by my presentation, especially my attitude.”

According to their comments, I seemed to pay attentions to the audience whether they were following me or not. I was really happy to have given such comments.”

Kyoko also seemed to benefit from the opportunity to reflect on her first presentation building on the comments from her peers and her teacher: *“In the final presentation I put importance on these things I could not do in the first presentation.”* She appreciated the constructive input from the other students and used it to develop her skills:

“My presentation skills grew up than before taking this class. It is because we have done at least one presentation in the very class, then I could feel a little growth in the every class. After taking this course I could practice speaking. In addition, the other members lead to grow up my presentation skills. The reason is all the time we had chance to listen to their presentations, and think deeply to give some good advice.”

4.5 Positive course feedback

All the students provided positive course feedback at the end of the semester. These comments are self-explanatory and do not need analysis. However, as gratifying as these comments are, I will continue to refine and develop this course to make it stronger.

- *“This course was really useful. I could have confidence with my presentation skills.”*
- *“The course gave many useful tips about giving a good presentation.”*
- *“I think this course is the best one among what I take now. I did a lot of short presentations. That was effective for getting used to speak in front of the audience.”*
- *“This course gave me motivations for speaking.”*
- *“Since you let us space for active participation, I worked hard for gaining knowledge and putting them into practical activity. I enjoyed coming to this class and learning in a small group.”*
- *“My presentation skills have improved. I would like to improve my skills as an English teacher in the future. Thanks to this course, I did gain a lot of knowledge and did experience a lot of presentations. This course must be helpful for me for a long time.”*
- *“Now I remember so many things I gained in this class, that means I could enjoy and have interests throughout this course.”*

5 Guidelines

One major consideration to bear in mind when constructing any course is defining achievable goals. For presentation courses I believe that it is important to provide students with a set of practical skills that they can take away with them and use in other courses and when they enter the workforce. Examples of practical skills which could be taught are; working on set phrases; scaffolding key elements of a presentation; responding to questions; and non-verbal communication (see Dickenson, 2013).

In order to help teachers who would like to improve their course management and foster learner autonomy, I have created some general guidelines:

- Outline the clear goals of the course in the syllabus
- State the overall level of the course in the syllabus
- Conduct a needs analysis at the beginning of the course
- Explain the course clearly to the students in the first class and use a Q & A session to clarify any points which need clarification
- Give an outline of the course to the students which shows exactly what will be taught and when
- Build in an element of flexibility into the course which allows for necessary changes when circumstances dictate
- Negotiate the syllabus with the students throughout the course i.e. create an environment which allows the teacher to change the focus and encourages students to have input into the course
- Use informal, anonymous questionnaires throughout the course to monitor student satisfaction and allow them to suggest refinements
- Make learner autonomy, peer feedback, and self-reflection the core triumvirate of the course
- Provide immediate feedback (and possible correction) after the practice of each presentation or presentation skill
- Encourage students to keep a record of their thoughts and comments about the course which can be included in their final reports
- Administer a self-assessment paper at the end of the course which will be used to help students consider their effort, improvement, and grade
- At the end of the course explicitly highlight the key elements of the course which the students have worked on and give examples of areas where they have made improvements

Admittedly, these guidelines will not be relevant to every course but guidelines are always useful when carrying out course refinement.

6 Limitations and implications

This paper examined the construction of a presentation skills course and the thoughts of one small group of students. Obviously it would be erroneous to draw any direct parallels with the thoughts of this group of students and those of all Japanese university students who participate in similar courses. That being said, I have been teaching this particular course for eight semesters at Nanzan University and the general comments about the course, especially the positive feedback regarding the importance of peer feedback, self-reflection and self-correction, have been encouraging. For wider generalisations to be drawn I encourage other teachers to consider weaving in similar aspects of the design of this course into their own and then analysing the responses of their own students.

7 Conclusions

Teachers who give presentation courses at Japanese universities have to work within the short timespan of a typical 15-week semester. Understandably, this limits the practical progress that can be made. It is vital that a teacher focusses on key core elements of a course and that they do not try to ‘teach too much’ i.e. they should provide time for discussion and reflection.

The presentation skills course outlined in this paper was carefully designed to place the onus on the students. For this particular course, since the number of students was very small, it was a perfect opportunity for students to benefit from immediate feedback both from their teacher and their peers. End of course self-assessments, reflections, and final reports served to encourage the students to consider their development and what they had gained from the course, not only regarding presentation skills, but also transferable skills.

The comments provided by the students were considered, constructive, and illuminating. The main benefit that they seemed to gain from the course were increased self-confidence and a working knowledge of presentation skills which they can make use of in a corporate environment. The students appreciated the feedback provided by their peers and by their teacher. They also found the opportunity to reflect on and correct their presentations to be extremely valuable. In my experience few students actually enjoy giving presentations but this course, with its focus on learner autonomy, self-reflection, peer feedback and self-correction, provides an enjoyable and practical foundation upon which students can build.

Note

This is the third in a series of papers that I have written on presentation courses. Each one has focused on the conceptualisation, design, and implementation of a presentation skills course. I hope that those who have read these papers will be able to use them to develop and refine their own courses or courses at their institutions.

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Appendix 1

English Presentation Skills Course Syllabus

英語プレゼンテーション

【副題】

Developing presentation skills.

【授業概要】

This course will introduce students to effective presentation skills. Students will expand their knowledge through lectures, discussions and group work.

Students will be required to complete reading assignments, to demonstrate they have understood the lecture content and to give presentations in English.

Students will also be required to write a final report.

【到達目標】

By the end of this course students should be able to:

- understand the key concepts covered
- conduct detailed research
- give effective presentations

【授業計画】

1. Introduction
2. The art of presentations
3. The preparation stage 1
4. The preparation stage 2
5. Preparation
6. Presentations
7. Presentations
8. The design stage 1
9. The design stage 2

10. The delivery stage 1
11. The delivery stage 2
12. Preparation
13. Presentations
14. Presentations
15. Presentations and reflection

【授業時間外の学習 (準備学習等)】

Students will be expected to spend at least 3 hours per week studying outside of class in preparation for each lecture. Typically, a reading and/or task will be assigned for every week.

【評価方法】

20% Active participation

20% Presentation 1

20% Presentation 2

40% Report

【テキスト/参考文献】

Handouts will be provided.

【その他】

Students are expected to attend all classes.

Active participation is essential.

Students will be expected to read widely and take part in student-led discussions.

All students will be expected to speak only in English and to make a significant contribution to each class.

Appendix 2

Information – Presentation 1

The presentations will take place on the days written on your semester outline. Please read the following instructions carefully and ask me if you need any more information:

- The presentations will be made in small groups
- The presentation length will depend on the number of people in each group
- Each student will speak for **3 mins** (i.e. 9 slides @ 20 seconds per slide)
- The presentations will be made using the '**Pecha Kucha**' format
- The presentation theme is free for you to choose but it should be:
 - Interesting
 - Informative
 - Entertaining
 - Visual
- You can use either of the following applications – PowerPoint or Key Notes
- Please do **not** make handouts
- **YOU MUST NOT** read during your presentation
- Try and focus on the visual aspect of your presentation
- Limit the use of text
- There will be a Q & A session after each presentation (if there's enough time)
- Each group is responsible for organizing their own PC and AV leads

Assessment

- This presentation is worth 20% of your final grade. Half of this grade (i.e. 10%) will be decided by me and the other half will be decided by your peers
- The presentations will be recorded for assessment and research purposes

Notes

Group Presentation Reflection Paper

1. Did you prepare thoroughly for your presentation?

Give examples and comment on your presentation.

2. Did your group members work well together?

Give examples and comment on your group work.

3. What were the strengths and weaknesses of your presentation?

| Strengths | Weaknesses |
|-----------|------------|
| | |

4. If you had to give this presentation again what would you change?

Give examples and comment on possible ways to improve your presentation skills.

5. Give your honest opinion of the role you played in your group's presentation.

Appendix 4

Information – Presentation 2 – An Individual Presentation

The presentations will take place on the days written on your semester outline. Please read the following instructions **carefully** and ask me if you need any more information:

- These will be individual presentations
- The presentation length is **5 minutes – After 5 minutes I will tell you to stop!**
- Your presentation should be:
 - Interesting
 - Convincing
 - Visual
- Please use PowerPoint
- **YOU MUST NOT** read during your presentation
- Limit the use of text
- Include **at least one** graph or table and explain it
- There will be a **Q & A session** after each presentation
- You must use **only English – This includes your slides!**

Overview

1. I want you to give a presentation on **a subject of your choice**
2. Please make a dynamic and interesting presentation
3. The presentations will be recorded

Assessment

- This presentation is worth **20% of your final grade**. Half of this grade (i.e. 10%) will be decided by me and the other half will be decided by your peers
- The presentations will be recorded for assessment and research purposes

Assessment criteria

- PowerPoint Design
- Interesting
- Convincing
- Delivery (spoken)
- Delivery (gestures, eye contact, general body language etc.)

Notes

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

Presentation Skills Self-assessment Form

Name (in English): _____

Fill in this form as honestly as possible. Give yourself a mark for each section.

1. Attendance & participation **Score** ___/20

Did you attend the classes regularly? (Deduct 2 points for every class you missed and 1 point for every time you were late) Did you always use English in class? Did you always try your best?

2. Final report **Score** ___/40

What do you think your grade for your final report will be? Please explain your thinking.

3. Presentations 1 & 2 (20 per presentation) **Score** ___/40

Please comment on your first and second presentations.

4. Final assessment

Final self-assessed score ___/100

What do you think your final grade should be? Please explain why.

Final self-assessed grade (circle one) A+ A B C F

5. Please suggest some possible improvements to this course.

6. Any further comments?

Presentation Skills – Final Report Information

Each student has to submit an individual final report. The report is a written reflection (800 – 1000 words) of what you have gained from the course about giving effective presentations. You should consider the following:

1. What new information have you gained?
 2. Reflect on your work throughout the course
 3. Reflect on your two formal presentations
 4. Reflect on your presentation skills
- You should submit your final report (in a folder) to me in our last class (unless you present on the final day in which case the deadline is one week after our final class).
 - You should use Times New Roman size 12 and the text should be **double-spaced**. Please use **in-text citation** and **add a bibliography** where necessary. **Use APA format**. Make sure that your final report has a cover page which states:
 - ❖ Your name
 - ❖ Your student Id. number
 - ❖ Your e-mail address
 - ❖ The subject name (Presentation Skills)
 - ❖ The date of submission

Late submissions (unless in special circumstances) **will not** be accepted. Failure to submit your final report on time may seriously affect your grade for the course.

The final report is worth **40%** of your final grade so please make sure you put enough effort into it.

Please make sure that you have understood these instructions. If anything is unclear please check with me.

Notes