

## Using poster presentations in English language classes

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### Abstract

This paper looks at how poster presentations can be used in English language classes where students have scientific backgrounds and a need for English in their future careers. The development of English language programs that include poster presentations is considered and the results of a poster presentation experiment with second year dental students are reported.

**Key words** : poster presentations, English language teaching, English for Specific Purposes, content courses, language of poster presentations

### Introduction

There is little doubt that changes in English language teaching (ELT) in Japan in recent years have been profound and widespread. Wherever we look we can see change in ELT in Japan from primary to tertiary level. The Ministry of Education is now committed to introducing English in primary schools, and middle as well as high school curriculums have been revised to include greater emphasis on communicative skills. The effect of the Assistant English Teacher (AET) program is being felt at university level, as freshmen enter with higher levels of communicative ability in English. Even entrance examinations at universities are now beginning to show signs of change. The focus is less on discrete items of grammar and grammar-translation, and test makers are striving to produce questions that reflect the communicative focus now becoming prevalent in high schools. Some universities have instituted listening sections in their entrance examinations and gradually more colleges and universities are expected to adopt this approach. In addition to this, the numbers of students entering Japanese universities with a good command of English after living abroad for several years is increasing, and this trend is expected to accelerate.

### English classes at university level in Japan

Given the above changes in ELT in Japan, how are teachers at university level responding? In a previous paper, Langham (1994), I have outlined how large numbers of teachers face difficulties in deciding what kind of course to adopt. Do they adopt the English conversation type approach, which in Japanese is known as *eikaiwa* and features so highly in the consciousness of learners of English in Japan? Alternatively, do they adopt a content course or an ESP

type approach, particularly with students majoring in technical and scientific subjects? Many decisions of this type taken by hard-pressed teachers depend very largely on available texts. Japan is a very large and lucrative market for ELT publishers, and the number of textbooks aimed specifically at the Japanese market increases year by year. The quality of such textbooks has improved to a large extent and the majority of teachers at university level involved in undergraduate ELT classes adopt one of these textbooks. There are, however, a number of drawbacks to using traditional ELT textbooks, as I pointed out in a previous paper, Langham (1993). The fact is that modern textbooks that claim to be based upon current findings in the fields of Applied Linguistics and language teaching are sadly lacking in appropriate content. According to Cook (1983) the typical textbook involves 'imaginary characters in situations that are alien to our students'. Prodomou (1988) goes so far as to suggest that,

“The speech acts or functions in most textbooks are based on situations in which most of our students will never have to function.”

Many current methodologies have the underlying basic psycholinguistic principle that language learning needs to be affective-based; in other words, it should be relevant to students' needs, motivation and learning style. The content of the average textbook does not, in the opinion of this author, fulfill these requirements. This explains the problems that teachers have in choosing what to teach and how to teach it. It also creates considerable problems for teachers who wish to adopt content or ESP courses.

### Alternatives to textbooks

Let me discuss here two of several alternatives to textbooks that seem to me to be appropriate to some ELT situations in Japanese colleges and universities. First, content courses. These are courses that involve the use of subject matter that may be derived from a number of different sources, including themes chosen by student interest or need, or academic course material that students are studying elsewhere in the curriculum. Such courses match the aims of communicative language teaching and engage the learner in a way that many textbooks do not. Second, there are English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. In previous papers, Langham (2001/2003), I attempted to make the case for such courses at Japanese universities. I outlined the rapid implementation of ESP courses in Japanese universities, as charted by Orr (1998) and also Anthony (1998). Examples of such courses in action have been reported by Dias (1998) and Nagano (1998). Two surveys of student preferences were carried out by the present author with dental students as subjects. It was found that second year students tended to prefer general English courses, while fourth year students showed a definite preference for ESP courses with students making comments such as these. 'I enjoyed the dental topics. Sometimes they linked up with lectures given by other Japanese professors'. Another student added, 'Information about dentistry in the US and UK was also useful for me'.

## Teaching a content course for second year students

Over the past several years, the author has been faced with teaching a group of second year students specializing in dentistry at a university in Japan. The group consisted of about thirty students in a class, and met once a week for fifty minutes over one semester of approximately 15 classes. The above problem of what kind of approach to adopt was a very real one and one that faces large numbers of teachers at university level in Japan. The students could be broadly categorized as having a good command of English grammar, fairly extensive vocabulary and reasonable listening skills. As stated above, I found most of the textbooks available to be too trivial to meet the level and needs of such students, so I opted for an oral/aural approach based on semi-scientific topics derived from CNN or BBC news and current affairs programs, such as Earth File, Science and Technology, Click Online and so on. Modified articles from the Japan Times, the Daily Yomiuri, the Economist and Nature were also used as a base for class topics (please see Appendix 1 for full list of class topics). All materials were teacher generated and usually consisted of a two-page handout with vocabulary exercises, listening comprehension questions and discussion topics. It should be pointed out for educators considering adopting this kind of approach that the selection and production of suitable teaching materials remains one of the most challenging, as well as time consuming, aspects of this type of program. The above programs were taught over a number of years with what can probably be regarded as reasonable levels of success. Evaluation sheets distributed to students at the end of each semester indicated relatively high levels of student satisfaction. Evaluation of student performance over the duration of the course was based on short vocabulary tests and writing assignments associated with the topics studied. Students were allowed to choose one topic from those studied in the semester that interested them, do some further research work outside the classroom on the topic, and then write one page as part of a final examination. Testing listening, however, was a problem that could not be overcome in final exam conditions, as these involved 130 candidates in a large auditorium with poor acoustics. From the teacher's point of view, there were, in addition, other kinds of problems that arose during the course and which needed to be addressed. As I have indicated, content was chosen, modified and then created into course material by the teacher alone. Students had no input concerning the content of the class and, although there was never any outright criticism, this was a continual teacher concern. Was there a way in which students could be involved in input that would allow the syllabus to be written and published several weeks before the program began? Another problem was that the discussion part of the class seldom seemed to go well. At best, students discussed the topic in pairs. There was rarely interaction above the pair level. At worst, some students opted out of this part of the class, although it should be noted that these students had completed the vocabulary and listening sections without displaying similar behavior. As a way of checking that discussion had actually taken place, the teacher called on particular students to comment

on the topic in question. Usually, students' comments were only a few sentences long and often reiterated comments made by the previous speaker. The author's frustration with this aspect of the program prompted a consideration of ways of improving student output in the discussion part of classes.

### The poster experiment

In order to address some of the problems outlined above, particularly that of students' reticence in speaking, I decided to have students prepare and present posters. Currently, research work presented in poster form is increasing, as many teachers attending conferences will attest to. Additionally, students in Japan are accustomed to producing large, colorful poster type visuals for school and university festivals. In fact, posters created by students to help explain a theme, topic or project of their choice are one of the most effective teaching tools for teachers who teach classes focusing on content. Here are just a few of the advantages of this kind of approach.

Students work together gathering source material in cooperative group situations

Students have to speak in English and are motivated to do so since the topic is of their own choosing

Students get valuable practice in fielding questions from visitors to their poster

Students get valuable practice in answering questions and giving further information

Students are forced by limitation of space to clearly focus on a small number of main points

The teacher can take a backseat on the day of the presentation allowing communication to take place unhindered, but can assist in the preparation process as much or as little as required

The teacher has time to monitor the performance of the students in the poster session, allotting a grade if so required and giving feedback and advice.

### How the process works

To ensure that the students know what a poster presentation involves and what is expected of them, the first topic of the semester was converted to a poster presentation given by the teacher. In this case, the topic was 'Foods with Medical Benefits'. Students readily came to the front of the class, forming a group around the poster. The teacher went through the main points of the poster slowly with repetition. Students were then required to complete a check sheet so that the teacher could gauge to what degree they had understood the contents of the poster. Following that, students were asked to form groups and start working on possible poster presentation topics. The vast majority of students chose to work in groups of three, although there were two groups of six students and one student who preferred to work alone. No guidance was given as to the choice of the topic although as can be seen from the list of poster topics (please see appendix 2, List of Poster Presentation Topics) most were semi-scientific in nature and three were related directly to dentistry. As students worked on their topics, the

teacher provided them with the language they would need for actually presenting their work (see appendix 3, English for Poster Presentations). A small amount of class time was allotted to this each week, although it should be remembered that the rest of the units in the program were taught according to the syllabus. This meant that poster content and creation of the poster was largely done outside the class, as supplementary work by the students. The teacher provided poster size paper for the groups. A poster presentation day was decided on and this fell towards the end of the course. The teacher had intended several groups to post their work and then have other students move around the room looking at the posters and asking questions, in the same way as at an academic conference. This format was attempted in the first class but soon abandoned, since there was too much noise and confusion with some students not taking part. This kind of problem was probably due to the fact that students were not familiar with the norms of poster presentations as they occur at academic conferences. It may also have been due to the students expecting a presentation style involving one group at the front presenting their work with other members of the group being the audience. In view of the constraints detailed above, this was actually the approach that the teacher adopted. It worked reasonably well since students seemed to have had experience of doing this presentation style in Japanese in other subjects at university. While the presenters explained their work, the rest of the group listened attentively and asked questions at the end. There were, however, some problems associated with this kind of approach. Firstly, presenters tended to read from scripts that they had sometimes derived from other sources almost word for word. Hence, there was no one to one interaction. Additionally, the poster was only presented one time and there was none of the repetition that one would expect with groups of the audience moving around the room from one poster to the next. Another difficulty was that in the above presentational style, the teacher had a much more central role than would be ideally expected.

Posters were generally of a high quality and most students worked hard. Only one group of four students failed to produce any work at all. Grading the students' work was more difficult than anticipated, as the teacher had to make some quite quick grading decisions in the period between one group finishing and the next group starting. Notes on the merits and demerits of each presentation were made and posters graded on a score from 0 to 10. The average for all posters was 6.9. Marks from the poster presentation were then added to class work marks and term-end examinations. Clearly, further work on refining the process of the presentations will reap rewards in terms of effectiveness and quality.

## Conclusion

English language classes at universities in Japan are becoming more communicative in focus, and the benefits of adopting content courses and ESP type approaches are increasingly apparent to educators. The poster presentation experiment detailed in this paper can be judged to have been successful, although students' previous educational experience of presentations

should not be overlooked. Teachers considering adopting poster presentations as an approach in their classes need to carefully consider the logistics of doing so. In the experience of this writer, poster presentations are a very potent tool to be used in classes where the emphasis is on communication and presenting scientific information. In this case, the poster was just a single part of a program based on semi-scientific topics presented in an oral/aural way. Basing an entire program on poster presentations might prove to be too demanding for students in the early years of any program, however as a goal in later years and certainly at graduate level, such a program has almost limitless potential.

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#### Appendix 1

##### List of class topics

- 1 . Foods with medical benefits
- 2 . Easy to use email systems
- 3 . Survey shows pets provide peace of mind
- 4 . Dentist cures severe case of tusk ache
- 5 . Majority of Japanese claim to be stressed
- 6 . Pollution limits broken many times
- 7 . New car powered by sunlight
- 8 . Cell treatment stops teeth from falling out
- 9 . Researchers create new drugs from tobacco
10. Families switch off TV to surf Internet

11. Have you ever called an ambulance?
12. Pupils teach parents computer skills
13. What is economy class syndrome?
14. Can brushing cause problems?

## Appendix 2

### List of Poster Presentation Topics

Smoking

EURO 2004

Athlete's foot

AIDS

Soya bean milk

Alcohol

Plastic surgery

Hay fever

Wireless communication

Traffic accidents

The causes of the declining birthrate in Japan

History of Tokyo Disneyland

Hybrid cars

Let's go on a *nigari* diet

Sunburn

Color therapy

Aromatherapy

What celebrity signatures say

The Iraq problem

Hair loss

Xylitol

Artificial sweeteners

Ipod

AIBO

Dental paste

Rice

Convenience stores

The history of bowling

Pandas

Koalas

Chinese noodles

## Comedy programs on Japanese TV

About Hiroki Goto

### Appendix 3

#### English for Poster Presentations

- 1 . Making contact/greeting someone  
Hi, how are you doing?  
Good morning, are you interested in (topic)?  
I have some handouts here.
- 2 . Giving an idea of the topic  
This is about (topic)  
We did a study on (topic)
- 3 . Finding out about your visitors  
Are you familiar with \_\_\_\_\_?
- 4 . Giving an outline of the research  
This is about...  
We investigated/compared...
- 5 . Inviting questions  
If you have any questions, please interrupt/stop me.
- 6 . Stating objectives  
We wanted to investigate/compare...  
The aim was to find out about...
- 7 . Giving an overview  
Just to give you the main points.  
Basically,...  
In general terms,...
- 8 . Referring to graphics  
Okay, so this figure shows...  
As you can see from the chart,...
- 9 . Summarizing the results/giving mini summaries as you go  
The main points of this study are these. Firstly, secondly,...  
What we found was that...
10. Skipping  
I won't go into details on that point.  
I'll skip that.
11. Moving forward  
I'll tell you about that later.  
I'll mention that later.



12. Moving on.

The next thing I want to tell you about is...

12. Moving back

As I already told you/mentioned.

13. Closing

That covers everything, I think.

I hope you found that interesting.

14. Questions

Do you have any questions/comments?

I hope that's clear.

15. Dealing with problems.

I'm sorry, I can't answer that.

16. Correcting someone/guiding your visitors

Actually, we found that...

In fact, our results show that...

17. Welcoming newcomers to the poster

Hi. Welcome. We're talking about...

18. Thanking someone

Thanks for your interest.

Thank you.

19. Giving/getting contact details

By the way, if you want to get in contact, this is my email address. I'd be pleased to hear from you.