

## Using guest lectures and micro-presentations to teach oral presentation skills

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### Abstract

This paper describes an approach to teaching oral presentation skills using guest lectures as a model for novice presenters. It also explains how to use micro-presentations in an oral presentation skills program as a way of practicing target structures and giving students maximum opportunity to improve their listening and speaking skills.

**Key words** : oral presentation skills, spoken academic discourse

### Introduction

For science students at undergraduate and graduate level, as well as for scientists at research institutes, universities and private companies, the need to comprehend and deliver oral presentations in English is fast becoming an essential skill. The reason for this can be traced to the rapid increase in the number of international conferences taking place around the world and the increasingly important role that such events play in communication between members of a particular discourse community. This is particularly true for the medical profession. Webber 2005 informs us that,

In the medical profession, besides reading, the ability to follow oral communication of research is also very important because international conferences are an essential part of the communication network within the scientific discourse community.

It is interesting to note that at the same time as the rapid increase in the importance of oral presentations, there has been considerable interest in spoken academic discourse which is now reported as being a field in its own right (Fortanet 2004). This development has meant that research into what actually happens in oral and also poster presentations has produced results that are of use to course designers, textbook writers and teachers involved in teaching presentation skills programs. In this context, however, it should be remembered that research on spoken academic discourse still lags behind its written counterpart (Crawford Camiciottoli 2004). This can be explained by the added prestige traditionally afforded to reading and writing. Additionally, there are practical reasons for the neglect of spoken academic discourse, notably

the fact that accessing and transcribing spoken data is a complex, expensive and time-consuming activity that not all researchers in the field can readily undertake for a number of practical reasons.

Another significant development is the recent rapid increase in the number of programs that focus on the teaching of presentation skills. At most universities, institutes and private companies, such programs are offered to assist research staff and students to improve their skills, and thus more effectively disseminate their research data. Also, the number of textbooks aimed at teaching presentation skills has risen rapidly over the past few years. It is likely, however, that teachers of presentations skills will not be completely satisfied with commercially available textbooks. This is mainly because they are of a general nature and do not match specifically the fields and needs of their students. The result is that teachers feel the need to supplement their classes with materials and activities that will more effectively help their students improve their presentation skills. The approach and activities described in this paper grew out of the author's own quest for better teaching materials and an improved curriculum.

### Guest lectures

The teaching activities described in this paper require access to scientific oral presentations given by experienced presenters who are either native or non-native speakers. For most institutions, such as universities and research institutes, a good source of such presentations is guest lectures. It is becoming increasingly common, particularly in the light of increased globalization of research communities, for special lectures to be given on a fairly regular basis by visiting researchers and others invited to speak on a particular topic for the benefit of staff and students. Very often such events are only publicized within the departments involved and, while not being actively discouraged, visits by members of staff from other departments are something of a rarity. This is a reflection of the lack of communication between departments. It is also very rare for English departments in such institutions to have anything to do with guest lectures. For the most part, English classes are conducted in isolation from science departments and although there is a great potential for cooperation and improved course design, this is very largely overlooked.

At Nihon University School of Dentistry, a casual glance at the many bulletin boards dotted around campus reveals that on average there are in excess of ten guest lectures a year on campus on a variety of scientific topics that are open to anyone. In 2005, for the first time, the English Department at NUSD approached a number of science departments involved in hosting guest lectures with a view to getting permission to attend and record electronically those lectures. Department heads and individual presenters were very generous with their time and also supportive. Permission to record presentations was granted by individual presenters and in most cases a lasting relationship with the members of the departments concerned was started.

## How can guest lectures be used in an oral presentation skills program?

As I have already pointed out, textbooks that are meant to develop presentation skills are too general to be of much use and do not match the needs of students in science programs. They are predominantly aimed at teaching the genre of the business presentation which has structure and norms that are somewhat different from those of the scientific oral presentation. Guest lectures, however, in the field of the students in the program offer several advantages and can be readily used to supplement existing materials. Firstly, the subject matter is familiar to the students, representing information from a community they are keen to join. Secondly, such lectures offer good examples of the norms of the discourse community that students wish to join and, accordingly, can be used as a model. Thirdly, the fact that they are 'live' and given by outside experts significantly increases their impact, making them a kind of benchmark against which students can measure their ability to comprehend academic scientific presentations.

One problem often encountered in Japan when teaching presentation skills is that students lack good listening skills. This is the result of the focus in high schools here on reading and writing skills at the expense of oral/aural skills. Poor listening skills represent a significant barrier to people who want to become members of a discourse community and actively exchange information with people in the same field, either by giving or attending oral or poster presentations. An effective presentation skills program has to address this problem.

Let's consider how using guest lectures can help students to improve their listening skills. It is probable that most students who simply attend a guest lecture will have listening problems arising from unknown vocabulary and expressions, as well as the speed at which the presentation is delivered. The volume of material, and the question and answer session after the presentation will also present significant problems. All of the above will pose significant barriers to communication. The key to overcoming these problems is to take a recording of the lecture and make this available to students for further study both in class and outside. This can be achieved by using a simple IC recorder or basic tape recorder to record the presentation. With this method quite good quality recordings can be obtained that can be transferred onto a computer and then to CD's ready for distribution to students. In this way, each student can have a personal copy of the lecture that can be used to improve listening skills either in class or at home. Teachers can assign students to transcribe particular parts of the presentation, say for example, the introduction, a complete section from the main body, the language used to introduce a visual, or what is said in the conclusion section of the presentation. Students can compare their transcriptions with others in the group, and finally should be encouraged to check them against a copy provided by the teacher. The next step is to highlight useful sentences that students can use in their own presentations. For the most part, sentences that students focus on are those that indicate organization within the presentation. This text structuring aspect of scientific presentations is known as metadiscourse. The function of

metadiscourse is to guide the audience through a speech event by helping them create a mental map. In other words, presenters inform their audience of what is about to come and how this connects to what has been said and will be said. Here are some examples of sentences used in the organization of an introduction.

This is a transcribed introduction from a guest lecture given in the Department of Pharmacology. Students focused on words and phrases that helped in the organization of the presentation and which they wanted to use in their own presentations. Verbs are in italics, rhetorical questions in bold and sequencers in parentheses.

Today, *I'd like to talk about* a new concept which might be very helpful in the future for treating Parkinson's disease. *I'm going to divide* my talk *into* five main parts. (In the first part), *I'd like to say* something *about* Parkinson's disease itself. **What is the disease? How is it caused?** And, **how do we treat it today?** (In the second part), *I'm going to explain* the concept of atypical Parkinson compounds. And then *I'll go on to* (the third part) to *discuss* the effects of a prototype. (In part four), *I'll consider* the best model of Parkinson's disease. (In the last part), *I want to focus on* possible sites of action in the brain. Okay, let me *start with* Parkinson's disease.

I have already considered the problems that Japanese novice presenters have in listening to spoken English. These can be tackled by using the techniques introduced above. Another related problem is lack of speaking ability. Again, this stems from the focus in high schools in Japan, which is almost never on spoken English. Students in presentation skills programs will sometimes try to compensate for their lack of ability in speaking by simply memorizing their presentations. In graduate school in Japan, this appears to be a common strategy. Given the difficulty of the task and the lack of adequate training, it is quite understandable that students should fall back on memorization. Adoption of such a strategy means, however, that students work from which is essentially a written text, developing a very rigid presentation style that is formal and resembles more closely a written paper than an oral presentation. This is a style that does not readily conform to what is generally seen at international conferences, where experienced presenters speak from notes or extemporaneously.

### Using micro-presentations to develop speaking skills and provide ample opportunity for practice

The question is how can we overcome the problem of poor speaking skills and over-reliance on a script? One option is the use of micro-presentations. What are micro-presentations? Basically, they are short presentations or parts of presentations of between 3 to 10 minutes in length done in groups of two to four students. Students are divided into groups of the above

numbers and assigned to an area of the lecture room for their micro-presentations. If students can have access to a whiteboard, or even poster paper that can be pinned to the wall in that area, this will encourage them to illustrate their micro-presentations with examples of actual data, experimental setups and so on. Students can be assigned to give micro-presentations that involve for example the introduction, a single section, graphic or conclusion from a presentation they are working on or have given in the past. Let's look at an example of how students might practice introducing a graphic. I know from my own experience of watching presentations that most novice Japanese presenters have a single rather dull way of introducing graphics, generally taught in graduate school, which is as follows: **This slide shows + explanation of data/main point.** There is nothing wrong with this sentence and it is commonly found in presentations, but the problem is that students overuse it and have no other ways of introducing a graphic. This makes for a very repetitive presentation which also does not reflect what actually happens in real presentations. Data that I have collected from various guest lectures suggests that it is becoming increasingly common to introduce at least some graphics in a presentation in a three stage system which works like this. In stage one, the presenter introduces the general topic of the slide, and this is done just prior to the slide appearing on the screen. This is formulated by the following sentence. **I'm going to show you a slide with some data from our most recent experiment.** The intention here is to signal to the audience the theme of the slide and the type of information to come. The second stage of the system is quite simple and uses the word 'here' to introduce relevant information in the slide. For example: **Here, we have temperature plotted against time.** Or, **Here, we have rates of heart disease in relation to occupation and age.** In the third stage, the presenter focuses on the important information in the slide using phrases such as, **I'd like to stress that + (main point)** or **I'd like to draw your attention to + (main point).**

In micro-presentations, students can prepare a set of graphics representing data from their research and practice presenting them with the kind of language used above. Such graphics can be simply drawn on a whiteboard or on poster paper. There is no need to make use of power point in this kind of activity. After explaining their graphics, the presenter should be ready to take questions from the other members of the micro-presentation group. After the Q and A session is over, the members of the group change roles and a new presenter stands up and presents his or her graphics in the same way. This continues until everyone in the group has had a turn. Meanwhile the teacher is circulating and monitoring the micro-presentations that are taking place simultaneously in the room. It is important for the teacher to take notes on things like pronunciation, grammar problems and general presentation techniques. From time to time it will be necessary to correct students, and to introduce new language as and when necessary. The teacher can then close the micro-presentations and ask students to return to their seats. Following that, in a teacher-fronted session lasting between 10 and 20 minutes, advice and feedback can be given to the group as a whole, based on what the teacher has observed. This

can cover both the weak and strong points of the micro-presentations that have been given. The same micro-presentation procedure can be followed in subsequent classes to give students as much practice as possible. Teachers will continually have to remind students to incorporate the target structures derived from the recorded guest lectures into their micro-presentations and ultimately into their full scientific presentations of 15 to 20 minutes which they will practice in class before they give them at an international conference.

## Conclusion

The increased need to present data in English in international settings has resulted in more demand for presentation skills courses that help novice members of the discourse community work towards becoming fully-fledged members of that community who can contribute to it, as well as benefit from it. This paper has illustrated how using guest lectures can offer an alternative to traditional course books and increase student motivation, interest and also progress. The recorded presentations, transcriptions and handouts highlighting target structures derived from the guest lectures represent a model of language and techniques for students to use in class in micro-presentations and also in their future presentations at international conferences. Using guest lectures also provides an important opportunity to create meaningful links between science departments in the university and the English department. This raises the profile of the English department, and better communication between departments with seemingly very different goals means that improved presentation skills programs can be planned and implemented involving members of both the science and English departments.

The frequent use of micro-presentations allows students the time and space to practice the target language and specific parts of their presentations, such as introductions, moving between sections, conclusions and so on. It also gives the opportunity to practice handling the Q and A session, and allows the teacher to give feedback to students either as they practice or immediately after their presentation. This approach means that in each class students can get at least 10 to 15 minutes speaking time and ample opportunity to ask and answer questions. The above suggests that micro-presentations are a very powerful tool that can be used to good effect in presentation skills programs.

Finally, for teachers interested in spoken academic discourse, and more specifically metadiscourse, the above approach to presentations represents an opportunity to conduct research in what is still a relatively under-researched field. At the same time, increased knowledge of what actually happens in presentations will help teachers to assist students in their quest to improve their presentation skills.

Another application of the above approach would be to investigate what happens in poster sessions. Recording interactions at a real poster presentation would make it possible to generalize about the kind of language and techniques used. These would be useful in the teaching of poster presentation skills programs by providing a possible model for both teachers

and novice presenters.

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