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THE RELEVANCE OF JAPANESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS LEARNING ENGLISH PRESENTATION SKILLS[1]

ABSTRACT. Educators at the university level often predicate that learning how to deliver oral presentations in English is necessary for their students' success in academia, and ultimately, for future careers in various fields of employment. To determine the relevance of university students learning English presentation skills in a Japanese university (under the assumption that it is good for their future careers) a qualitative study was conducted with recent graduates. The first objective of this study involved ascertaining whether or not graduates are actually required to deliver English oral presentations as part of their vocational duties. The second objective involved determining which particular aspects of the presentation skill-sets they had learned in university were relevant. The findings hold direct implications for curriculum development in the ESP field, the teaching of oral presentation skills in Japan, and future research.

Keywords: ESP, English presentation skills.

1. Introduction

Developing English oral presentation skills is frequently an integral part of university curricula in the West and is important for determining the academic success of students (Adams, 2004; Campbell et al., 2001; De Grez et al., 2009; Pineda, 1999; Yang, 2010; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). A range of studies have also found that being able to present effectively is a highly desired skill-set for prospective employees to possess (Greenan et al., 1997; Stowe et al., 2011;

Webster, 2002). However, no known studies exist that have examined the potential distinctions between presenting in a university context and presenting in a vocational context, in Japan. Exploring distinctions between the two contexts is potentially important for current and future learners who will be expected to learn oral presentation skills at university and then transfer these to their future careers. Establishing possible distinctions between the two contexts will also enable educators to verify if graduates are indeed required to present in the vocational context and which potential skills are particularly relevant.

English education in Japan began to shift from the traditional focus on grammar, reading and writing, towards communicative skills in the late 1980s, in response to economic and political demands (Yamada, 2015). This educational shift was brought about largely by members of the business sector who desired an English education program geared to the developing vocational abilities of students (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999; Sugimoto, 2003; Yamada, 2015). In the 1990s, the emphasis placed on English education was greatly increased (Kubota, 2002). Communicative skills were recently further prioritized by The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2011) and have been stressed through several of their recently implemented policies (MEXT, 2013). This communicative push by MEXT in the 2013 Course of

Study for upper secondary language education, places an emphasis on oral communication (including oral presentations), which has often been neglected by Japanese educators and researchers. While an importance is usually placed on English proficiency, there are rarely any practical opportunities for Japanese learners of English to actually speak English (Yamada, 2015). As Li (2008) lamented, Japanese monologic oral production of English (oral presentations) has rarely been the focus of research or education.

This study first seeks to verify if recent university graduates are required to present in English as part of their vocational duties, and if they are expected to deliver informative or persuasive oral presentations. Lucas (2015) and Collins (2012) defined an informative presentation as one in which the purpose is to disseminate information and knowledge, while the purpose of a persuasive presentation is to obtain agreement and action from the listeners regarding a particular objective, and this study adheres to these definitions. The second objective of this study is to determine which presentation skills the participants remember learning in university and currently utilize. The overall objective for this study is to lay the groundwork for a more comprehensive study in the future which can explicitly ascertain the distinctions between oral presentations in university and in the business world.

2. Methodology

The methodology for this study utilized a qualitative inquiry research design (Creswell, 2013), but included a range of descriptive statistics. The study was initially inspired by a single initial research question: How do the requirements and requisite skill-sets for delivering an oral presentation in English differ between the university context and the business world context in Japan? From this original question, a more specific research question was developed for this particular preliminary study: Are the English presentation skills taught in Japanese universities, relevant to learners' careers? To address this question, an online survey was created and sent to recent university graduates now engaged in full-time employment. Table 1 provides a list of the six questions to which the participants in this study were asked to respond.

Table 1. Survey questions and response items

	Question
1	Have you delivered a presentation for your job/work? 1) Yes 2) No
2	How often do/did you present for your job/work? 1) Only once 2) 2-4 times 3) A few times a year 4) Frequently (once a month)

3	What language do/did you present in?
	1) Always English
	2) Always Japanese
	3) Both English and Japanese
	4) Mostly English but sometimes in Japanese
	5) Mostly Japanese but sometimes in English
	6) Another language
4	What kind of presentation do/did you mostly deliver for your job/work?
	1) Informative (giving information or explaining something)
	2) Persuasive (selling something or trying to persuade someone)
5	What presentation skills do you remember learning in university?
6	Do you think these presentation skills are/were helpful for your job/work?
	1) Yes, very much
	2) Yes
	3) Some of them were useful
	4) Not that much
	5) Not at all

The questions were posed in English, and the choice of responses for questions 1-4, and question 6, were also only provided in English, but given the simplicity of the language used, and the English ability of the participants, this was not considered to be problematic. Question 5 solicited open-ended responses and the participants were free to write either in English or in Japanese. All of them wrote in English. Participants responding "No" to question 1, could then skip the remaining questions. The 45 potential participants in this study were contacted by email or through Facebook Messenger. Each potential

participant was given a link to the survey and asked to complete it within a three-month period. Four participants did not reply or complete the survey, leaving the study with 41 participants in total (n=41). The responses were all anonymous to protect the participants' privacy and to promote more candid responses.

2.1. Participants

As the survey was conducted anonymously, there is no way of knowing which of the four participants did not respond. However, some general information can be provided on the background of the participants who did respond. They had all graduated from the same university in the six years prior to the study, they had all enrolled in an elective course on English presentation skills (taught by the researcher of this study), they were all Japanese nationals, and they were all currently employed. Most of the participants were female, most had been English majors at university, and the majority of the participants worked in Japan, although some worked abroad for international companies. Although none of the participants were paid for their time in this study, they were all acquainted with the researcher, meaning their responses could have been influenced to a certain degree. The sampling and selection process for

recruiting the participants can best be described purposive (Miles et al., 2014) and as adhering to a convenience approach (Creswell, 2013).

3. Findings

The findings in this study were derived from an analysis of the responses to the six questions, posed in the online survey. The raw, descriptive statistics compiled from responses to questions 1-4 and 6 form the first set of findings in this study. The second set of findings is derived from the responses to question 5 (open-ended responses). These responses were coded and sorted thematically, based on shared principles, values, and similarities (Saldaña, 2013). Grounded theorization (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was then used to analyze and interpret the coded responses, ultimately forming the second group of findings in this study.

The most significant finding in this study is perhaps also the simplest one. The responses to the first question are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Responses to question 1

Q1. Have you delivered a presentation for your job/work?
1) Yes – 73.17%   2) No – 26.83%

This finding indicates that the majority of participants in this study do present as part of their work requirements. This is somewhat surprising given that the participants in this study are all relatively new employees – the oldest participant in this study graduated from university six years ago and would be approximately 28 years old – yet they have been entrusted with the responsibility of representing their company and delivering presentations.

The next three questions in the survey sought to explore in more detail about what kinds of presentations the participants delivered and how often they presented. Table 3 provides an overview for the responses to question 2.

Table 3. Responses to question 2

Q2. How often do/did you present for your work/job?
1) Only once – 22.22%
2) 2-4 times – 27.78%
3) A few times a year – 19.44%
4) Frequently – 30.56%

The responses to question 2 were mixed. On the one hand, almost a third of the participants indicated that they presented frequently. On the other hand, almost a quarter of the participants replied that they had only presented once. The rest of the participants presented either 2-4 times, or a few times a year. What this reveals is that although most of the participants in this study had

presented as part of their work requirements, the frequency with which they presented varied considerably.

This study also sought to examine which language the participants presented in. As the participants were all Japanese nationals, with Japanese as their L1, and were, for the most part, employed and working in Japan, it was anticipated that presenting in Japanese would be the highest rated response. As English was the participants' L2, it was expected that some of them would present in English as well. Table 4 provides a summary of the responses for question 3.

Table 4. Responses to question 3

Q3. What language did you present in?
1) Always English – 8.11%
2) Always Japanese – 62.16%
3) Both English and Japanese – 18.92%
4) Mostly English, but sometimes in Japanese – 0.00%
5) Mostly Japanese, but sometimes in English – 10.81%
6) Another language – 0.00%

The responses were not radically different from what had been expected. The majority of participants presented in Japanese, with only about a quarter of the respondents ever presenting in English. Interestingly, none of the presenters had ever experienced presenting in a language other than Japanese. While many of the participants were English majors, there were seven participants who had

majored in another language at university (French, Spanish, and German), so it was a slightly unexpected that not even one of them had ever delivered a presentation in a language other than Japanese or English.

Alongside discovering the frequency or presentations and the language involved, this study additionally sought to explore what type of presentation the participants delivered. Although researchers have categorized many different kinds of presentations, for the purpose of simplicity, this study has focused on the two main categories: informative and persuasive. Table 5 provides an overview of the responses to question 4.

Table 5. Responses to question 4

Q4. What kind of presentation do/did you mostly deliver for your work/job?
Informative (giving information or explaining something) – 81.08% Persuasive (selling something or trying to persuade someone) – 18.92%

The results for question 4 are clear: the majority of the participants deliver informative presentations, although a few deliver persuasive presentations. This finding is somewhat unexpected given that many of the participants were employed in companies engaged in business transactions and it had been anticipated that sales duties would have comprised a significant portion of their duties.

At this stage of the study, it can be concluded that most of the participants do deliver oral presentations as part of their work requirements and the frequency with which they present varies between participants. These presentations are often in Japanese and are typically informative in nature.

The second set of findings reveals which particular presentation skills the participants remember learning in university, which skills they think are useful for their jobs, and how useful they think their presentation skills instruction in university was. Firstly, Table 6 provides a summary of the responses to question 6.

Table 6. Responses to question 6

Q6. Do you think these presentation skills are/were helpful for your work/job?
Yes, very much – 31.71%
Yes – 46.34%
Some of them were useful – 21.95%
Not that much – 0.00%
Not at all – 0.00%

The findings from question 6 clearly indicate that all the participants felt learning presentation skills in university had at least been somewhat useful for their current work. A possible caveat for this finding is that all the participants knew the researcher and had been instructed in a presentation skills class by him. It is therefore possible that the participants saw question 6 as an evaluation

of the researcher's course and felt obliged to rate it positively. However, the vast array of positive comments and responses to question 5, indicate that the participants did recall learning many different skills in the course and had used them in their work contexts, thereby suggesting that their responses to question 6 were sincere.

The final findings derive from the responses to question 5: What presentation skills do you remember learning in university? After coding and analyzing the responses from 37 participants (four participants who responded to the survey, did not actually respond to question 5), which varied in length from two words, to several paragraphs, three overall themes were drawn from the data. The first finding was that there was a wide range of responses from the participants. The 37 participants responding recalled more than 60 different presentation skills they had learned in university. From these skills, two themes were drawn out from the analysis procedures. Firstly, the majority of the skills the participants recalled were non-language related. The most prominent of these non-language skills was eye contact. The other finding was that the non-language related skills were mostly what can be labeled as 'transferable', meaning they were applicable in Japanese presentations as well as in English presentations. This is not surprising given that earlier findings had shown that

most of the participants in this study presented in Japanese. Utilizing skills they had learned in English presentation classes, in a Japanese context, showed the participants had adapted their skill-sets to meet the requirements of their current context. Within the more than 60 different presentation skills noted by the participants, there are seven skills that appeared frequently, and are therefore discussed in this paper. Two such skills can be considered delivery skills, three are related to structure, one is related to language, and one concerned the use of visuals.

Eye contact and pausing were the two delivery skills that featured prominently in the responses from the participants. Eye contact is a particularly intriguing skill, as it is very much culturally determined. English language instructors and western speech trainers often stipulate the importance of eye contact in presentations (Collins, 2012; Dowis, 2000; Lucas, 2015) in order to convey sincerity and to maintain the interest of the audience in the presentation, but the importance of eye contact is less established in Japanese culture. That ten participants recalled learning the importance of and how to make sweeping eye contact in presentations is a significant finding in this study. What is also notable is that the participants did not merely recall the importance of eye contact, but were explicit in mentioning 'sweeping eye contact', which is the

pattern of checking one's notes at the beginning of a point, then sweeping one's eye contact across the audience, pausing for approximately three seconds on each section, before moving to another section (Dowis, 2000).

The other delivery related skill recalled frequently by participants, was pausing. This is often a somewhat neglected skill, likely due to its simplicity and given that the skill requires the presenter to essentially do nothing for a short period of time. It is also demanding in the sense that the presenter needs a certain degree of confidence to be able to hold their position and absorb the attention of the audience. Five participants noted they remembered learning the skill.

Three other commonly mentioned skills in the participants' responses were classified as structural skills. These include signposting, the elements that comprise an introduction, and how to craft an effective attention getter in the beginning. Creating a clear structure that is easily accessible to the audience was one of the key points taught to students in the presentation skills course by this researcher, and many participants noted they remembered this and could use it for their work-related presentations, even if they were delivered in Japanese.

One such lesson given by the researcher on presentation structure involved the students learning the five key elements of an effective introduction

(greeting, self-introduction, statement of the main point, a guideline of the presentation, and an attention getter/hook). Five participants explicitly recalled all the elements comprising this '5-point introduction' with a further 13 participants further commenting on the 'attention getter' being something they vividly remembered learning. As one participant simply stated: "*The introduction should be something interesting to get people's attention.*" Another explained that the speaker should "*start with a question, start with what the audience will be surprised at*", while another participant explained how they remembered using a knock-down (stating a counter argument first and then refuting it) as an effective attention-getter: "*starting with a question, starting with a negative image and adding positive elements works well*". Another example given by a different participant was, "*to start a presentation with a catchy phrase like using questions.*" One participant actually recalled the example given in class: "*I remember you were talking about toilets have killed more people than sharks do.*" Providing guidelines in the introduction to the audience was another frequently recalled structural skill/technique, noted by five participants.

Finally, eight participants recalled the importance of signposting. This involved the use of phrases to signal to the audience that the speaker was

transitioning to another point or section in their presentation (e.g. "For my second point, I would like to discuss…"). As with the findings related to delivery skills, it is important to note that these structural skills are also transferable between English presentations and Japanese presentations, and are not strictly language specific techniques.

The only language related skill recalled frequently by the participants was tripling (sometimes known as the rule of three), which was mentioned by four participants, and which is subsumed by the larger skill category of repetition, also mentioned by four other participants. Tripling can be the use of a phrase consisting of three words (e.g. "Yes we can" – Barack Obama), the use of three points in a presentation to support an argument, the repetition of a point three times, or the use of three different adjectives together to increase the effect of a statement (e.g. "This cake is light, delicious, and non-fattening"). Tripling is perhaps language specific and may not be transferable to Japanese, but further research is needed to confirm this claim.

One other skill frequently recalled by the participants dealt with using visuals, or more precisely, how to avoid certain pitfalls when utilizing visuals such as PowerPoint slides (five participants). Specific recollections focused on 'consistency in the font size and type', as well as the warning not to 'talk to your

slides, and make the slides simple'. One participant actually stated they recalled learning a specific rule: "*10-20-30 rule for font size*", which was never actually taught in the researcher's course. As with the delivery and structural skills recalled by the participants, it is likely that many of the comments referring to visuals also apply in Japanese presentations.

Aside from these aforementioned seven skills, there were a multitude of other skills recalled by the participants, including 'machine-gunning', using contrasts, softening/emphasizing certain points, chunking, using inclusive pronouns (we, use, our, etc.), as well as several vague mentions of body language being important. Several participants also recalled specific instruction on how to anticipate and deal with difficult questions from the audience. In contrast, one participant simply responded *"Actually nothing"* when asked what they recalled. It can be speculated that the four participants who did not answer this question were perhaps also unable to recall any particular skills they had learnt in university.

4. Implications

For instructors of English presentation skills' classes in universities throughout Japan, there are several important implications that can be drawn

from this study. The most important is perhaps simply that many students in this study had to present as part of their work requirements, after graduating university. If confirmed by further research, this fact alone would necessitate the learning of presentation skills in university under the premise that it is a useful lifelong skill to learn. The other important finding from this study is that although most of the participants present as part of their job requirements, many do so in Japanese, and most deliver informative presentations. Therefore, the most relevant skills they seemed to have learned in university English presentation classes were ones that were easily transferable into Japanese language and Japanese vocational contexts.

Rather than prescribe general proclamations based on the findings of this solitary study, the researcher would like to propose two important questions for instructors of presentation skills or instructors who include presentations as part of their course requirements to ponder:

1. What are transferable presentation skills, and are we teaching

them to our students?

2. Are we overemphasizing content and language accuracy in

university presentations?

The first question deals with the finding that the participants in this study largely needed to be able to present in Japanese, and less so in English. If instructors are teaching students to present in English, they need to be aware of the non-language related skills, and need to be sure they are a key component in their courses, in order to adequately prepare students to present after they graduate from university. The transferable skills the participants had learned in university proved to be the ones they recalled the most readily, and are likely the ones the participants utilize most frequently.

The second question deals with the age-old dilemma of what the purpose of university education is for. Without delving too deeply into this contentious issue, the findings from this study would suggest that instructors who are more aware of preparing their students for post-graduation life, as well as challenging them to meet the requirements in academia, are the best placed to help their students in their working life. While English language educators might be more likely to place an emphasis on English accuracy, fluency, and the content of the presentation, these areas are not as prominent in the vocational context, based on the findings of this study. Therefore it is imperative that instructors not only teach students about delivering presentations in academia, that focus on appropriate content and involve accurate and appropriate use of English

language skills, but that they also teach students transferable skills, such as delivery skills and structural elements in presentations. This will enable their students to be prepared to succeed in academia and also in the vocational contexts they will face after graduation.

5. Conclusion

This study sought to determine the relevance of learning English oral presentation skills in university, from the perspectives of graduates who are now employed. Key conclusions to be drawn from this study include the findings that most graduates in this study do need to present as part of their work requirements, but that they most frequently present in Japanese and deliver informative presentations. As a result, they typically remembered learning transferable presentation skills, such as delivery skills and structural elements of presentations. The implication of this finding is that university instructors who are teaching their students English oral presentation skills, need to be more aware of these transferable skills, in addition to having their students focus on English language skills and the appropriate content of their presentations. A more balanced approach to teaching presentation skills will best serve Japanese university students in their current contexts and in their future.

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