

What do 1st year Japanese EFL students learn by preparing and presenting a group work oriented oral presentation?

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Abstract

This small-scale qualitative study aimed at identifying factors and the extent of their influence upon the learning experiences of first year Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) undergraduate students in a group work oriented oral presentation using English as the language of communication. Research findings were obtained from students through their participation in written self-reflection and a semi-structured focus group interview. This study found that informal self- and peer assessment influenced oral presentation learning experiences for participants. In relation to group work, participants identified the main influences of group work on their learning experiences resulting from: learning experiences in connection with other group members and other groups, the value of prior experiences of presenting; and teacher support. Additionally, participants felt that working in a group could provide support and reduced performance pressure; and that observing other student groups was beneficial to individual learning.

Keywords: deep learning, EFL, experiential learning, group work, oral presentations

Introduction

The general focus of this research was to explore the learning experiences of undergraduate EFL Japanese students in a group work oriented oral presentation using English. Specifically, this research aimed to: explore the validity of the intended learning outcomes (ILOs); and find out what, if any, unintended learning outcomes occurred. Subsequently, the researcher hoped that this study would assist in improving learning outcomes for the researcher's students in the future.

At the time of this study, the researcher was teaching a first year year-long General English Intensive Program unit at a private university in Japan. This unit combined the study of Business English and Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). The teacher-centered TOEIC program focused on English grammar and vocabulary development. The learner-centered Business English program introduced students to text-based and practice-based study of Business English Communication. This research was concerned with the Business English program and, in particular, the first of four presentation activities that students needed to perform in order to successfully complete this unit. The purpose of the Business English program was two-fold:

- to encourage fluency and the active use of English; and
- to provide language models that would be directly relevant to the students' real needs.

This teaching and learning activity (TLA) was experiential learning process oriented and research aimed to enhance this process. This would be evident through the phases of observation, participation, and reflection upon learning that take place during this 4 week long TLA, supported in conjunction with the research process. The research specifically aimed to explore:

1. what students learned from engaging in and reflecting upon their participation in this TLA;
2. to what extent students experienced surface or deep approaches to learning in this TLA; and
3. the benefits and difficulties that students perceived through their experiences as L2 learners in this small group oriented oral presentation project.

Limitations of this research included the absence of: teacher evaluation by teaching peers; student peer evaluation of TLA presentation performance; and formal assessment of student

participation and performance in this TLA. The unit coordinator structured the Product Presentation TLA in such a way that criteria-based assessment of student performance was not a priority. A limited form of post-activity norm-based assessment was implemented through 1 informal, one-on-one chat session between teacher and student about the strengths and weaknesses of that student's presentation performance. Students presented in front of an audience of sixty plus students and teachers. This TLA was aligned to the unit assessment through a pass or fail grading for each student based upon their attendance of class during the four week preparation period and their participation in the group presentation. The grading of the four presentations, that is, by a pass or fail grade, contributed in part to the "student participation" assessment component in the total unit assessment, providing an unofficial weighting of 4% to the 10% weighting of student participation in the final student grade at the end of this year-long unit. Ninety per cent of unit assessment was attributed to end-of-semester examinations. Individual and group participation were priorities of this TLA.

Professional Context

In this unit there were 8 class groups, each led by a Native English teacher. Both the Product Presentation and the research to be performed in this activity followed an experiential learning process over a four week period. Step-by-step procedural parts of this TLA, see Appendix 1, were designed to encourage students to construct their own knowledge with the assistance of structural learning support and teacher facilitation. This TLA encouraged individual and peer-management within each presentation group.

The intended learning outcomes (ILOs) were:

Students were expected to be able to:

demonstrate basic marketing principles in their presentation: 4Ps (Marketing Mix) - Product; Price; Place & Promotion (declarative knowledge);

1. demonstrate practical application of their individual in the group, i.e. Finance manager: responsible for pricing, profits, etc.; Chief Engineer: responsible for presenting the product design and function(s); and Marketing Manager: responsible for presenting promotion and place and target market (functioning knowledge);
2. invent a product (functioning knowledge) that is:
 - (a) technologically feasible (can actually be produced);
 - (b) financially viable (can be manufactured and sold at a realistic price); and
 - (c) marketable (people should want to buy it).

Interestingly, there were no ILOs for team work, presentation skills or development of English language skills. A key expectation of this research was that the findings would assist in the development of a better understanding of how effective the stated ILOs were in terms of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2007) and the significance of any emergent ILOs, that is, unintended learning outcomes, by seeking student opinions about their own learning development and learning perspectives from their participation in this activity. Additionally, this research explored the extent to which participants experienced higher-order learning skills, based on the SOLO taxonomy (Biggs et. al, 2007), moving through quantitative stages of learning where the amount of information learned in the preparation of the presentation increases; and transcends beyond quantitative learning into qualitative stages of learning where the information learned becomes integrated into a structural pattern through presentation preparation and performance.

As facilitators of student learning, teachers offered informal support and feedback to student groups during class product preparation sessions, particularly by way of them asking students to explain things, such as “How does this product work?”; “Where can I buy it?”; “Who do you think would like to buy this?”, etc. Class periods ended with groups debriefing the whole class on what they did on that given day by providing an oral summary of what they had achieved and any problems that they had with the preparation of the presentation. The student-centered debriefing sessions included opportunities for students to gain exposure to informal peer feedback and advice about group presentation ideas in the hope that these experiences could assist students in constructing knowledge and aid them in the development of their presentations. The impact of teacher facilitation on student learning experiences was also researched.

Teaching Philosophy

The Teaching Perspectives Inventory (TPI) (Pratt, 2009) provided an overview of the researcher's teaching perspectives. Through participation in the TPI, the researcher scored weakest in the Developmental perspective indicating that the ability to teach effectively by planning and conducting learning from the learner's point of view could be an area of teaching that needed to be improved upon. Through this study the researcher hoped to improve the teaching and learning outcomes in this class in terms of students' developmental cognitive learning, as described in Biggs' structure of the observed learning outcome (SOLO) taxonomy (Biggs & Tang, 2007) and improve the Developmental perspective of his teaching practice.

Through the selection of the Product Presentation activity and the use of pre-activity, mid-activity and post-activity data collection instruments the researcher attempted to gain insights into student perceptions of their own learning experiences in this TLA. Thus, the researcher displayed support for an experiential approach to EFL learning. In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), the experiential approach encourages learners to develop target language skills through the experience of working together on a specific task and the reflection phase requires learners to engage actively with their own past acquisition experiences and focus them on the future (Knutson, 2003). It was expected that this experiential approach of phases of reflection would assist both the teacher, that is, the researcher, and the students to understand what the learning outcomes were, intended or unintended, and how they related to learning in this unit, in future studies and in the world beyond the classroom.

Literature Review

In the area of student oral presentations, little academic research had taken place into student perceptions of learning from oral presentations at the time this research was conducted (Hounsell & McCune, 2003, Joughin, 2007). A study by Joughin (2007) recognized that literature on oral presentations is dominated by the teacher's perspective. Valuable insights can be gained by investigating the student's perspective on learning experiences of oral presentations. Results from a study of learning oral presentation skills by Haber and Lingard (2001) demonstrated that teacher and student perceptions of the purpose of oral presentations differed and this study concluded that students perceived their oral presentation performances as rigid and rule based storage activities, which contrasted greatly to teacher perceptions that presentations should be a flexible means of communication for constructing the details of a case into specific contexts. Hounsell and McCune (2003) noted that students perceived oral presentations as requiring either a focus on materials to be presented or on the process of the presentation. This research aimed to

learn how EFL students perceive their learning experience and what they think is the purpose of doing an oral presentation.

Another area of interest in this research was that of key influences on the student learning experiences of doing oral presentations in light of several major influences identified by Hounsell and McCune (2003) :

- prior experiences of presenting;
- teacher's guidance and support;
- students' experiences of giving presentations and managing post-talk questions, comments and discussion;
- teacher's feedback; and
- learning from other students' presentations.

The research aimed at exploring all of these influences and the extent to which these influences affect students' learning experiences of doing oral presentations.

While formal assessment was not a key factor in the oral presentation TLA that was the focus of this research, informal student self- and peer assessment influences through group work experiences was explored. Student self-assessment has been widely documented as yielding benefits of deeper learning which are connected with the act of learners themselves assessing. Smyth (2004) proffered that while self- and peer assessment can be embarrassing initially, it can increase student confidence levels in critical evaluation skills and motivate and help to shift the focus away from teacher to learner. This research aimed to learn to what extent informal self- and peer assessment influences oral presentation learning experiences for students.

Language anxiety can affect EFL learners when performing oral tasks. When EFL learners perform oral tasks, language anxiety issues arise as a result of communication apprehension, social evaluation, and competition among learners (Spratt, 1999; Hounsell & McCune, 2003; Cutrone, 2009). Cheng (2000) in a study of Hong Kong EFL students observed that these individuals were more receptive to listening to their classmates giving oral presentations than themselves giving individual or group oral presentations. Furthermore, this study noted that a common stereotype of Asian EFL students being passive learners and reticent to speak in class is not especially culturally driven but is derived from situation specific causes. Findings from this research aimed to explore to what extent language anxiety, performance anxiety and any situation specific causes influence the learning experiences of EFL students when performing an oral presentation.

Methodology

This study utilized the following instruments of data collection as shown in Table 1 and the aims of these instruments were as follows:

- The first one-minute pre-activity paper, as shown in Appendix 2, aimed to establish the range of presentation experience that each student had known previously in terms of language and setting and the learning expectations that each participant held for doing a presentation;
- The second one-minute mid-activity paper, as shown in Appendix 3, aimed to establish what participants had learned about presentations and what difficulties they had at the half-way mark of this activity; and
- The focus group post-activity interview, as shown in Appendix 4, aimed to elicit participant feedback on:

1. past and present presentation experiences, including individual learning, observing their peers presenting, and anxiety related issues;
2. the relevancy of doing an oral presentation in terms of its usefulness for other studies and work future; and
3. the extent of self-reflection that participants show upon completion of the presentation.

Table 1 (Data Collection)

Instrument	Collection period (Week/Day)	Details
1. One-minute Paper	<i>Pre-activity</i> Wk. 1 D. 1	* Three questions. * All 12 class members will be able to participate.
2. One-minute Paper	<i>Mid-activity</i> Wk. 2 D. 3	* As above.
3. Focus Group Interview	<i>Post-activity</i> Wk. 5 D. 1	* Six students will be selected to participate in the focus group.

Results & Discussion

Pre-activity minute paper

This one-minute paper was completed at the beginning of the first day of the first week by all twelve class students. From the results, all twelve participants indicated that they had experience in preparing and presenting an oral presentation in both individual and group settings using Japanese language. However, when asked about presenting in English, six of the twelve participants had presented individually and only two had presented in group settings. One open-ended question was asked in this pre-activity paper:

“What do you hope to learn from this product presentation? List 3 things.”

Most popularly chosen among the three things that participants hoped for were: improving English speaking (seven responses); and becoming more confident when talking in front of other people (four responses). Other commonly stated hopes given by three or more participants included: working well in my group; learning Business English; and being more confident about speaking in front of other people.

The pre-activity minute paper revealed that all participants had experienced making an oral presentation in Japanese. Significantly, the amount of experience decreased in the case of using English language and particularly then in a group setting. Hoping to speak better English was viewed importantly by participants. However, responses from the participants indicated a variety of practical considerations in relation to what lay before them over the next 4 weeks. Although not listed in this TLA’s ILOs, participant responses revealed the common desire or expectation to improve team work, improve English language skills, and reduce EFL related language anxiety.

Mid-activity minute paper

The mid-activity one-minute paper was completed on the third day of the second week, that is, the half-way mark of this TLA, by all twelve students. There were two open-ended questions asked of participants, the first question being:

“What have you learned so far in working on your presentation? List three things.”

The most commonly selected responses among participants included: perceiving themselves as doing better at preparing a presentation than they thought that they could (five responses); and feeling that presenting in English requires more effort than presenting in Japanese (four responses). Other common stated responses given by three or more participants included: working in a group can be helpful and interesting; and a lot can be learned from watching others. The second question was:

“Are there any difficulties that you are experiencing with your presentation?”

Although two participants answered that they had no problems, among the ten other participants the two most common responses selected by three or more participants were: language problems such as slow translation from Japanese into English; and the inventing part of the product presentation is difficult and students from two of the four groups made this point. Analysis of the mid-activity one-minute paper follows.

The mid-activity minute paper revealed that nearly half of all participants initially held low expectations for their performance in this TLA, at least to the half-way mark, yet by the half-way mark of this TLA they were performing better than they thought they would do. Additionally, one third of participants noted the difficulty of planning and preparing a presentation using English language only. Other responses indicated that participants had experienced group work as being interesting, useful and requiring patience and acceptance of other members. In comparison to the pre-activity paper, the findings of the mid-activity paper demonstrated a greater awareness and depth of analysis made by participants in consideration of their learning experiences in this TLA.

Post-activity focus group interview

The post-activity focus group interview was completed on the first day of the fifth week after all of the presentations were completed. Six participants were selected by the teacher, with at least one member from each of the presentation groups participating in this interview. Among the many comments made during this forty-five minute long focus group interview a considered selection was chosen to carefully reflect information shared by participants on this occasion.

In regard to past experiences of presenting, two participants responded:

“In junior-high school and high school in Japan, students can enter class or year group English speaking competitions.”

“In high school and at university we have to do presentations in Japanese.”

These comments supported pre-activity findings in which similar reflections were made by participants. Experience of presenting orally was not uncommon among this group of participants yet they had limited or no previous experience with presenting in English.

In regard to participants having any anxieties about giving a presentation and the subsequent Q&A audience-led discussion, two responses were:

“To be honest, I don’t like presentations. In a group I could manage my fear of the audience.

The audience members asked difficult questions and I hadn’t thought about those questions and that was difficult and a good learning experience for me.”

“Speaking in front of that big audience worried me but after finishing I felt good about my speaking.”

Participant responses indicated a sense of positivity and excitement about presenting in front of an audience. However, enough comments were made to show that participants were anxious about the audience-led Q&A and not as prepared as they would like to have been.

When asked about what they, the participants, learned from observing other presentations, two responses were:

“It is important to speak clearly and not be quiet (all teachers always say that) because the voice is important especially in that big classroom we used. Last week, I couldn’t hear some group members talking and I was bored.”

“Well, I learned a lot from other groups. One group presentation...one member was really nervous. But the other members just continued calmly and helped to answer questions and supported to her.”

Participant responses indicated sound post-activity reflection. Observing other groups was beneficial to individual learning.

In consideration of what participants learned by working with others on a presentation, two replies were:

“We can ask questions and share ideas in a group and I got some ideas that I couldn’t have thought of by myself.”

“The group work stopped a lot of pressure. If I was solo, I would be stressed (in this TLA).”

A preference for doing group presentation work rather than individual presentation work was a strong underlying message from the responses given. Participants indicated that they felt that working in a group was fun, supportive and reduced performance pressure.

When asked if presentation experience could help participants with their other studies or work future, one response was:

“In the office or company I will need to talk in Japanese and maybe English too. If I work or travel or meet a foreigner it is good for me. (All 5 other students agree with nodding heads).”

A connection was made here to experiential learning from performing presentations at high school and its usefulness in performing presentations now. All six participants indicated that presentation performances would either be of use in present or future studies, future workplace or life situations.

In relation to participant thoughts on the experiences that they had during the open discussions that took place in the class presentation, two responses were:

“At the beginning so many things were said and I couldn’t catch many ideas (that) everybody shared. But next time (at the next session) I knew some groups had the same problems. I could learn from them.”

“I had to think carefully when I listened to other groups at that time. It was the same (for me) as (when I was) an audience member on presentation day...catching the message.”

The open discussion sessions were received positively by these participants. They indicated that participants had gained from being involved in these sessions and that this forum of learning was a non-threatening way of sharing information and receiving feedback.

Lastly, when asked if they would like to change anything about the presentation that they performed, three participants commented:

“I think our group introduction was not lively. I want to change that. Maybe next time can be better...we were too quiet and there was no big bang... (excitement). Sometimes we can see product presentations on television marketing shows.”

“I was too nervous. Other people were maybe nervous. I would like to be calm and practice more.”

“It was my first time to present using English language. Maybe we learned a lot from this (subtle head nodding in agreement among the focus group). Next time I want to talk

again more in my group and check ideas more with our teacher.”

Sound self-reflection was demonstrated in responses given to this question by all focus group participants with all of them enthusiastically proffering changes that they would make if given a chance to redo their presentation.

Recommendations

Participants' responses explicitly revealed particular opinions on performing a group oral presentation and the learning experience involved in this process. The Japanese participants surveyed were inclined to comment about things carefully, often without rigorously critiquing either the TLA itself or their teacher's facilitation of it. Hence, the results of this research were tempered by local cultural influences of group harmony and the absence of open criticism and should be viewed in this context. Student interactions during both the class debriefing sessions and the two day long final presentation included the dual role for participants of: presenting and answering audience questions on one of the days; and being an audience member and asking other groups questions on the other day. Findings revealed learning outcomes at a relational level, in reference to the SOLO taxonomy (Biggs et al., 2007). That is to say, participants demonstrated knowledge by comparing and contrasting, explaining causes, analyzing, relating and applying information learned in both presentation preparations and final presentation performance. Also, evidence of reflection through improvising by way of group participants modeling other groups' work and improving presentation performance during practice sessions demonstrated an extended abstract level of understanding (Biggs et al., 2007), centered on powers of reflection. Increased knowledge and deepened understanding of this TLA among participants was reflected in the focus group comments. The process of formative feedback, in the form of the open discussion debriefing sessions could have been better expressed to the participants. These sessions were an important part of the experiential learning process in this TLA. Teacher-led facilitation of these sessions could have benefitted from informing participants that these discussions were important feedback opportunities to help them to reflect upon and improve their work. Also, at the beginning of the TLA, the teacher could have included information of stages of a basic experiential learning cycle, i.e. observe, practice, reflect, observe, practice and reflect, etc. Explicit teacher-led facilitation in these areas could have further stimulated deep learning and improved learning outcomes.

Constructive alignment between the ILOs deserved closer attention. Evidence suggested by participant responses in the pre-activity one-minute paper explored unstated ILOs for this TLA. These unstated ILOs could be viewed as being unintended learning outcomes that could be added to the ILOs in the future, i.e. improve team work and improve English language skills. When ILOs are clearly stated then they provide students with a fundamental base from which their learning can develop effectively. Well aligned ILOs provide students with clarity of what they need to learn to do, a key factor in developing student learning reflection. Future use of minute papers during this activity, perhaps consisting of one different question each week could be advantageous from the teacher's perspective of gaining further insights into their student learning outcomes and from the students' perspective of developing greater self-reflection skills.

Marked differences existed in the way oral presentations were perceived by the participants and their teacher in this TLA. In terms of teacher and student perspectives on oral presentations, Haber and Lingard's (2001) study, referred to earlier in the literature review, concluded that students and teachers perceived the purpose of an oral presentation differently and that while students perceived their presentation performances as rigid and rule based storage activities, teachers perceived that presentations should be a flexible means of communication for

constructing the details of a case into specific contexts. In this study, from a teacher's perspective, the researcher perceived this TLA to be a learning experience in which students would learn to construct their presentations pragmatically through trial and error and construct their knowledge with the possibility that mistakes could be made. However, from the students' perspective, most participants in the focus group interview commented on their concern about making mistakes during their presentations and this resulted in several participants conscientiously producing memorized spoken content on presentation days, in their attempt to avoid making mistakes. It could be recommended that the teacher discusses this point with students in the future in order to assist students to improve their learning outcomes by helping them to move their learning focus away from error correction and the fear of making mistakes to a learning focus where mistakes can happen and can be a positive part of the learning process of constructing and developing presentation skills. This could be achieved by way of a class brainstorming session early on in this TLA.

Key influences on student learning experiences of doing an oral presentation identified by Hounsell and McCune (2003) were paralleled by findings in this study. Participants conveyed their strongly favourable views on: group work; learning from both other group members and other groups; the value of prior experiences of presenting; and teacher support. Subsequently, these key influences would likely be significant factors in the success of learning outcomes that students were to experience in the following three future presentations required to be completed in this unit. It could be recommended that teachers strongly consider these factors when preparing and facilitating this TLA in the future.

The influence of informal self- and peer assessment on oral presentation learning experiences was reflected in the results of the focus group interview. Collaboration through small group study influenced many of the students in the way they positively received constructive advice from fellow group members during group work preparations and from the dialogues and information exchange that took place during the open discussion sessions. A cycle of positivity, constructivism and openness grew among participants throughout the four weeks and comments made in the final interview demonstrated improved evaluation skills among peers. Informal self- and peer assessment were advantageously received by students and strongly influential on their oral presentation learning experiences.

Language and performance anxieties were common among this body of participants. In the minute papers and the focus group interview they communicated anxiety concerns, either language or performance-based or both. Additionally, situation specific causes influenced participants' learning experiences, namely: audience participation in presentations; large audiences; and receptivity of the audience. A common stereotype of Asian EFL students being reticent to speak due to cultural reasons, as refuted by Cheng (2000), was also not shown to have any strength of validity from these research findings. Situational concerns raised by participants could be considered by the teacher for future presentation TLAs. Greater exposure to speaking in front of other people and more Q&A practice could be beneficial in assisting students to overcome anxieties and successfully manage a range of situational factors that influence their presentation learning outcomes in the future. Additionally, further research could be undertaken on the learning outcomes of the following three oral group presentations that were to be required to be completed in this unit. Such a longitudinal study could offer greater depth of analysis into this area of teaching and learning.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 (Product Presentation activity – 11 x 90 min. classes)

Week / Day	Activity Parts
Wk. 1 D. 1	Teachers' Product Presentation (incl. teacher-led Q & A session with audience) Brainstorming and discussion about good presentation skills and good group work
Wk. 1 D. 2	Solo mini-presentation using a Presentation Practice Layout (class handout)
Wk. 1 D. 3	Group product decisions using Company profile and Product profile worksheets (class handouts)
Wk. 2 D. 1	Writing a Press Release for each group's product
Wk. 2 D. 2	Writing Press Release questions (created by class groups for different class groups and to be used impromptu during the Q & A sessions on presentation days in Wk. 4)
Wk. 2 D. 3	Product Presentation preparation (original teacher-student class groups + debriefing session)
Wk. 3 D. 1	As above
Wk. 3 D. 2	Teacher class rotations – final preparation (teachers change classes and ask questions to the new class groups about the group products, etc.)
Wk. 4 D. 1	Product Presentations with student led audience Q & A
Wk. 4 D. 2	As above
Wk. 5 D. 1	Teacher-student presentation feedback session

Appendix 2 (Pre-activity One-minute paper)

Please indicate the language(s) and setting(s) you have presented in:

English language	individual	group
Japanese language	individual	group

What do you hope to learn from this product presentation?

List 3 things

1.

2.

3.

Appendix 3 (Mid-activity One-minute paper)

What have you learned so far in working on your presentation?

1.

2.

3.

Are there any difficulties that you are experiencing with your presentation?

Appendix 4 (Post-activity Focus group interview)

Focus Group Questions

Before we start, I would like to remind everyone here that there is no right or wrong answer in this discussion. The purpose of this group interview is to find out what you think. It is important to hear responses from everyone in the group so please share your opinions. Comments shared in this interview will be confidential and your real identities will be protected by the use of pseudonyms.

1. Can you tell us about your past experiences of presenting?
2. Can you tell us if you had any anxieties about giving a presentation and the subsequent Q & A audience-led discussion?
3. Can you tell us what you learned from observing other presentations?
4. Can you share with us what you learned by working with others on a presentation?
5. Can your presentation experience help you with your other studies or work future?
6. Can you share your thoughts on the experiences that you had during the open discussions that took place in the class presentation preparation sessions?
7. Is there anything you would like to have changed about the presentation that you did?

Ok, let's finish our group interview now. I want to thank you for your participation today!