

# Teaching Presentation

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## Abstract

Presentation is still a very widely used form in every field yet its potential as a means of communication is only rarely realized. This paper will consider the ways in which focusing on the audience can help learners produce presentations that are engaging and socially meaningful.

In a time when there are so many different means to communicate with an audience, the continuing popularity of presentation should perhaps be a cause of some surprise. When the communication potential of its form is fully realized, presentation can be a highly effective way of constructing understanding through dialogue with an audience. However presentation is not an easy form to use well. All too often an audience feels that its needs and even its existence have only been recognized at a formal level and that it has been subjected to the recitation of content which could more usefully exist as text in some other medium.

The challenge for anyone teaching presentation is to reclaim the form as a way to create a meaningful dialogue with an audience. A presentation class should be an opportunity for students to learn how to communicate skillfully with each other. If there is too much focus on the development and evaluation of the many skills necessary for presentation in isolation from the wider social purpose, a presentation class can easily be another example of learning as accurate transmission of content which has little real meaning for those involved.

One of the unwelcome results of a test driven education is to consign what takes place there to a world outside the realm of meaningful and relevant social communication. Education becomes just a means to reach limited goals. Students become used to working in close physical proximity to other students, but not with or for each other. Their work is produced for a teacher or examiner and not for their fellow students. Unless students are given direction to the contrary, entering a classroom seems to trigger in them a setting of the parameters of possibility to formal correctness without concern for social relevance. Students will tend to approach any task assigned them as something to be completed as efficiently as possible but with little real engagement. In a presentation class, clear signs that students are acting in this classroom mode can be seen when they suggest a topic about which they have very little interest and nothing new to say to their audience. Further signs are manifested when they deliver their presentation in a manner which shows no concern for their audience's need to understand or enjoy what they are saying. The presentation is delivered just for their teacher to be evaluated in terms of formal correctness. The other students are present in the same room but do not exist for the presenter as a partner in a dialogue.

Needless to say, the cause of this way of operating has nothing to do with their ability, motivation, or even nationality, and everything to do with their experience of an education system in which critical understanding and meaningful content are so rarely present. Fortunately, students are flexible and highly sensitive to the expectations of different contexts. Outside a formal classroom setting, students are quite able to produce presentations which are sensitive to their audience and provide new and relevant content. The atmosphere where students talk to their juniors about job seeking, making full use of their experiences and entering imaginatively into the minds of their audience to create a meaningful dialogue, is totally different from the average classroom. It is this atmosphere that needs to be brought into a classroom if presentations are to help students learn deeper communicative skills.

### **The audience as a big idea**

The most effective way to bring presentation back into the world of meaningful social experience is by a focus on the audience. At every stage of the presentation process, a teacher should strive to keep the audience at the center of students' consciousness. From the beginning when a teacher is setting the class, it should be made clear that the purpose of a course in presentation is for students to share ideas and experiences with their audience. The selection of interesting material and its presentation in an effective and enjoyable way is the responsibility of the students themselves. The class is for them and not for their teacher except in so far as the teacher is a member of the audience. Students need to be reminded of this because the tendency to switch back into formal mode is so strong. Being made aware of this idea of the audience will also help them understand the skills of structure and language they will need to make this experience enjoyable and memorable. Seeing the goal as communication between equals and not faultless performance will also help them to overcome any anxiety they may feel about speaking in public.

Finally, the audience is an important idea because this is where evaluation should lie. A presentation, even if it is delivered by learners, should always be seen as an act of communication for an audience and judged by how successful it was in engaging them. This is particularly important for students whose whole second language education has been distorted by a system that places formal accuracy above meaningful communication.

Focusing on the audience will benefit students regardless of their level of English proficiency. Skilled users of English in Japan often become so used to being praised for their fluency and formal English skills that they forget that outside the classroom it is content not formal accuracy or fluency which engages the audience. Students with less experience using English will also benefit from a focus on the audience since it will release them from the anxiety that they are going to be judged solely on their English skills. Some of the most memorable presentations will often be given by students who have the best communication skills but not necessarily the best English skills.

**Choice of topic**

Although students will have given presentations or speeches in the course of their school career, the choice of topic has usually been very limited and consideration of their audience other than those judging them has rarely been a major concern. The audience exists more as a collection of disinterested bystanders than as a vital part of the communication process. Producing work for an audience rather than for formal grading is a very new idea for students in the context of a classroom.

Making sure that they always ask the following basic questions will help them become more conscious of the needs of their audience: Do you think your audience is interested in this topic? Have you got something new to say about it? What would they like to know? Since presenters are part of the same class as their audience, they should use this great advantage to engage with them. If this stage is omitted, students will often return to the kind of stereotyped topics and content which they have been allowed to use before. Initially students often seem surprised that they are expected to have interesting content and that they can bring it into the classroom. More detailed conversation with their audience can show presenters what their audience knows or would like to know about the topic and these questions will help them create a presentation which is for their particular audience. If they can make use of what they have learnt from their audience by actually naming them during the presentation, this will create a completely different level of attention in the audience.

**Dialogue**

This preliminary work of talking to the audience is just the first stage of the creation of a dialogue between presenter and audience. This dialogue should be built into the script and continued during the delivery. At the end of the presentation, the audience should be encouraged to develop this dialogue more explicitly with questions and answers. Finally the audience should write down their impressions and comments. In this way, the presenter receives many opportunities to see how well they have succeeded in constructing a conversation with their audience and can use this feedback to improve their next presentation. The audience themselves will become a necessary part of a living dialogue rather than just physically present but emotionally uninvolved.

**Audience as listeners**

Even though many presentations will use some visual support, an audience is mainly dependent on listening for understanding. Whether this is a strength or weakness of the form will depend on the skill of the presenter. Most presenters seem to regard the oral delivery and aural reception as a weakness and will use slides packed with text, less to support their presentation than as the presentation itself which at once becomes redundant. It can be a strength if the presenter is able to use their imagination to take up the standpoint of the audience and make decisions about how much an audience can remember in this context and how to make this memorable. Presenters who use too much text are probably overestimating what is understood and retained even in an ideal reading environment, and an oral presentation which

engages the audience in dialogue may result in more rather than less understanding.

### **Audience and language**

Presentations exist as a script before they are delivered and many presentations will often be little more than a recitation of this script. If language is taken straight from a written context and delivered unaltered without any consideration of the context, then little understanding will result and presentation will become just a one-sided recitation. A style which is appropriate for a reading context will be far too dense lexically and ideationally for listeners to understand in real time. Presenters can help their audience by using familiar features of spoken style such as a more open structure, shorter thought units and more interpersonal reference. If it is necessary to use vocabulary which is likely to be difficult for the audience, this should be paraphrased simply or even glossed with translation. Such a style is not only easier to understand but has the important interpersonal message that the audience is being fully included in a dialogue.

### **Audience and delivery**

Even if the script is carefully written with consideration for the audience, if it is just read, the important resources for understanding constituted by intonation, stress and pausing will be lost. Presenters should practice their presentations from cue cards and not have their script in front of them because the temptation to read is overwhelming. The goal is a fluent but spontaneous delivery, as if the presenter is in conversation with the audience. In a good presentation, every member of the audience will feel that they have had a conversation with the presenter. This is demanding goal for students, and a teacher will need to negotiate some intermediate stage between reading and a more spontaneous delivery. Sometimes making presentations shorter will allow students to prepare better and deliver a presentation which is a more authentic piece of communication. However both a straight reading or memorized delivery of a script are undesirable and a teacher who silently allows either of these alternatives is depriving students of the chance to learn how to communicate.

### **Structure and the audience**

The presence of an audience determines not just the style of language but also how that language is organized. The rhetorical tradition of organizing material into a three part structure of introduction, body, and conclusion, clearly developed to help an audience remember and understand an oral delivery. Within each of these three main parts, further repetition using another three part structure of signposting, stating and summarizing will help the audience understand individual points. At all times during the presentation, the presenter needs to imagine how the audience is constructing its understanding of the ideas and guide it with clear transitions to follow the flow of the presentation. Presenters can even experiment by using gestures to mark transitions. Using structure purposefully is one of the most effective ways to keep the audience engaged actively as a partner in the presentation.

**Keeping the audience's attention**

In most areas of spoken communication, it is unusual for one person to have the right to monopolize the speaking turn for long periods. In conversation, holding the turn is always provisional and anyone who continued talking when their interlocutors were not interested would risk being labeled as boring or even of being expelled from the group. In presentation, speakers are under no such pressure and it is highly unusual for the audience to interrupt the presenter during the presentation. Unless the presenter is constantly trying to read the current state of their audience's attention, the monologic tendency of the form will prevail and the fragile attention of the audience will be lost. Students need to plan their presentations to counter this tendency and practice using unfilled pauses and varying the pace and intonation of their delivery. Asking the audience a question at intervals during the presentation and not just at the beginning will help to revive the audience's attention and break up the constant flow of sound. If a presenter moves from their static position, this will also provide some welcome stimulus. What is important is that the presenter is conscious of the need to keep the audience's attention.

Presenters also need to remember to make use of the skills of interpersonal communication which they use every day outside the classroom to read their audience's facial expressions and determine the state of its attention and how they need to address this. Although Japanese people are socialized not to express their emotions very demonstrably in certain public situations, they do show their interest and state of engagement. In addition, if students feel that what is taking place in a classroom is a part of their normal social communication, they will react just as spontaneously and indeed loudly as they do to each other outside the classroom. While an intense silence may be the sign of deep engagement, a completely silent and expressionless audience is usually a sign that there is very little communication taking place.

**Visual aids**

It may seem strange to leave to last a consideration of the use of visual aids since presentation is often defined by their use. A judicious use of a small amount of text or a few relevant images can contribute to an audience's understanding and enjoyment. However, more frequently, visual aids take the form of little more than pages of projected text and in imposing themselves as a barrier between audience and presenter prevent the creation of dialogue which should be the reason for choosing this form. Certainly at the early stages of learning presentation there are clear advantages in not using any visual aids. Indeed for the best presenters, using visual support for a presentation always remains a choice to be made only if the benefits to the audience are overwhelmingly persuasive.

**Conclusion**

Whether presentation is just another example of the often rather meaningless ritual of formal education or whether it is a richly satisfying social experience for the participants which will help them develop important life skills, depends to no small extent on the teacher. If the

teacher can convey expectations about the broader purpose of a class and support the creation of a certain kind of learning environment, then students have a chance of learning far more than just formal skills. Although it may be unreasonable to expect that all students will be able to produce really memorable presentations, it is certainly possible for them to produce memorable moments in which they will have experienced that intense joy of direct communication with an audience which is more often associated with the performing arts. To bring their life and their concerns into a classroom and to develop the skills to communicate these is not a minor achievement.