

Practical Approaches to Reducing the Reliance on Scripts Among English Presentation Students

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Abstract

English Presentation was introduced as a new course at Rikkyo University in the fall of 2020 as a required course for all first-year students. The course aims to teach students the essential elements of giving a good presentation while also providing them opportunities to develop their English speaking skills. In the two previous years where I have taught English Presentation, I have noticed that students come to rely very heavily on scripts, which can cause various problems. Once this reliance on scripts develops, it becomes very difficult to supplant it. To address this issue, I took steps to eliminate my students' reliance on scripts from the outset of the fall 2022 semester. These included utilizing routine activities to reinforce understanding of presentation structure, preparatory discussions to generate ideas, and practice giving presentations without any preparation. Furthermore, I discussed some of the benefits of reducing reliance on scripts on the overall quality of student presentations.

Keywords: English presentations, class routines, discussions, practice

Introduction

When English Presentation was first introduced at Rikkyo University, it had the aim of teaching first-year students the three basic components of giving a presentation: structural organization, physical techniques, and the use of proper visual aids. Structural organization refers to the formatting of a presentation, such as ways to create a proper introduction and conclusion, elements to be included in the main body of the presentation, and the use of words and expressions to facilitate the transition from one section to another. Physical techniques encompass the use of posture and gestures, ways to maintain eye contact, and ways to correctly emphasize words. Lastly, the use of visual aids involved creating and explaining slides well. An aspect of the organization component includes creating outlines and note cards to use during a presentation so as not to read from a script. However, when English Presentation first began in the fall 2020 semester, it was entirely online due to measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The online nature of the course made it difficult for teachers to ensure students were not reading from scripts, as they could simply have their presentations on the screens in front of them as they spoke into their video cameras during online lessons. The fall 2021 semester began online as well, and while the number of COVID-19 cases in Tokyo eventually declined enough to allow for the return to teaching classes on campus, students had already become accustomed to relying on scripts during their presentations after several weeks of classes online. Once students develop the habit of relying on scripts, it is hard to wean them off it, even when they know it will negatively affect their grades. My previous experience teaching English Presentation has taught me that students, regardless of their English ability, are compelled to either write scripts for their presentations, and this reliance on scripts creates numerous problems for students.

Among students with lower English ability, script writing often leads to script reading, with students sometimes holding a written script up in front of their faces, even though this results in penalized scores on graded presentations for students. Having a script causes students to want to use

it, and reading from a script is not the same as giving a presentation and goes against the stated goals of the course. For students with higher English proficiency, scripts are often memorized, and what results is a carefully rehearsed speech and not the type of presentation that the course aims to help students develop proficiency in. In the beginning of the semester, when presentations are only a minute to two minutes long, students who make the effort are able to memorize their pre-written scripts well enough and perform them in front of others, but it is just a mere performance and not a presentation. Occasionally, students who stumble in their memorization are unable to continue without reattempting the same sentence again to find their place. However, as the course progresses and students are expected to give longer presentations, they begin to encounter problems using this approach, as it becomes increasingly difficult to memorize longer and longer scripts. At the same time, because they had reliably used this approach previously, it is not a strategy students abandon easily, despite the fact that it typically does not work. Therefore, regardless of English ability, the goals of English Presentation are often not met due to how students approach the course, placing more emphasis on simply completing the presentations rather than acquiring the skills to do presentations well. Toland et al. (2016) called presentations by English learners a “glorified reading or memorization exercise of text-heavy slides that fails to meet the intended objective of developing the learners’ presentation skills.” I believe part of this problem comes from the reliance on writing scripts, and so to overcome these issues, I tried to reduce my students’ reliance on scripts for the fall 2022 semester.

Reducing Script Reliance

I used several strategies from the outset of the fall 2022 semester with my English Presentation classes to help my students create presentations without first creating a script. Some of the approaches I used included creating routine activities to reiterate and reinforce the cumulative understanding of how to organize a presentation, utilizing discussions to develop ideas prior to the planning stage, and asking students to give impromptu presentations.

Utilizing Routines

Habits and routines are important for the flow of a class throughout a semester. They help establish student expectations and familiarize them with activities that they can expect to do on a regular basis for each lesson. Class routines can save time, allowing teachers more time for instruction and creating a more organized and cooperative classroom environment (Colvin & Lazar, 1995). I used class routines to establish precedent with regard to course expectations and also foster the creation of positive habits and facilitate the internalization of presentation structure and skills. In order to establish effective routines that reinforce a proper presentation structure, it is important to teach students how to create a presentation from the outset. If this is done, then students can begin creating presentations with a proper introduction, body, and conclusion from the very first lesson, instead of fumbling with how to organize a presentation for a few lessons and the teacher later needing to correct any misconceptions. Proper structure and format was one of the first things I taught the students, deviating slightly from the order elements are introduced in the Ready to Present textbook. I did this so that students develop the habit of creating presentations with a proper introduction, body, and conclusion from the beginning, as previous years’ experience of teaching this course have taught me that it becomes difficult to correct bad presentation organization habits once

they develop. Having students create well-organized presentations has reduced the amount of aimless sentences students had used in previous years I when taught the course, whereby students do not really have a main point to organize their presentations around, and so just keep adding sentences with no coherency or direction to their presentations until they have enough to reach the required time limit. To achieve this, I first spent more time teaching students how to brainstorm ideas and build a presentation from only the notes created through brainstorming by organizing them into sequential talking points. As a class, I did a few examples together with my students in the earlier lessons, showing how to narrow down their own suggestions during the brainstorming portion to choose a main idea, create an introduction around this idea, and then build the body of their presentation using their ideas before finishing with a conclusion. As I did these demonstrations, I carefully explained the essential components of an effective introduction and conclusion, thereafter asked students to offer ideas for these elements, such as a greeting, an attention grabber (quote, question, or fact), a topic sentence, and so on. Once students knew how to create and organize a presentation, I had them regularly use this approach of brainstorming ideas to use to build a presentation outline in each class. The time to prepare was kept short and deliberately insufficient for writing a full script, but enough to complete an outline and self-check it. I then asked students to give these quickly made presentations to a partner, practicing the cumulative total of presentation skills we had learned as a class each time. This routine of creating and giving a presentation every class likely helped students internalize the structure of a presentation, including the essential elements of an introduction and conclusion, and this allowed for them to create increasingly complex presentations without the need of writing a script. Creating these routines early in the semester helped students build strong habits regarding the amount of effort they would require, internalize the methodology for structuring a presentation early, and learn and practice essential skills for giving presentations.

Discussions as Preparation

To facilitate the brainstorming stage of presentation preparation, I had students discuss questions related to the theme of the upcoming presentation with their group members. For example, if I wanted students to make a presentation about an interesting personal story from which they learned a valuable lesson, I had them first ask each other in small groups a series of questions related to various experiences they may have had. These types of warm-up activities can help students build familiarity with the subject matter of a presentation and give students time to work out what they want to say and how they want to say it in English. Castillo (2007) also found that speaking in small groups like this promoted English oral production, as students found it enjoyable and spent more time speaking during class. The goal of these discussions was to give students the opportunity to develop ideas and the means of explaining them in English prior to giving a presentation on a related topic. Furthermore, as students are not given time to write completed scripts and can only create outlines, having a prior opportunity to get ideas from group members and practice explaining the desired content can allow students to feel more comfortable during their actual presentations, as they are not talking about anything for the first time. Pre-task activities like this increase confidence and reduce cognitive load for language students as they are not needing to think of vocabulary or content for the first time when the actual task begins (Tonkin, et al., 2019), making the actual target task, in this case a small presentation, much easier. Speaking activities like these done in preparation give students enough time to make answers and lower the amount of thinking that is required to be done

in the moment (Chin, 2015).

Impromptu Presentations

The final method I used to reduce my students' reliance on scripts during their presentations was to have them give short presentations about a single slide that I had prepared. Slightly similar to the PechaKucha presentations suggested by Paxton and Truxal (2019), I made slides with a single picture and the topic written above it and then randomly called on students to come to the front of the class and give a presentation on the topic of each slide. I selected topics the students would be very familiar with, such as famous sightseeing spots around Tokyo or popular chain restaurants. Students needed to present on these slides without any preparation for forty seconds, slowly increasing the time in subsequent classes.

This activity perhaps helped increase students' confidence and demonstrated that they could give a presentation without first creating a script. By routinely creating quick presentations in earlier classes, students understood how to build an introduction, body, and conclusion easily and were able to organize these impromptu presentations properly even though they had not been given time to prepare anything. This shows that they had internalized the structure of a presentation and the essential elements of each segment. I used these quick unprepared presentations to help students see that they could give a presentation on anything, as long as they knew it well, so it would be important for their future presentations to be familiar with their topics.

Benefits

Encouraging students to create their presentations without first writing a script first has had several benefits. By only creating presentation outlines in place of writing full scripts, the preparation time students spend to create their presentations is significantly reduced. In the previous semesters when I taught the course, students would waste a lot of class time slowly writing their scripts in class, and need to be constantly reminded to stay on task. When assigned as homework, many students would simply just not write the script, even when told it would affect their grade. This often caused problems in lesson planning because some students would complete their scripts in the time allotted while others would not, so rehearsal groups could not properly be formed since students within the same class would be at different stages of completion. By focusing on making outlines and not giving time to write scripts, this was less of a problem, and students could be ready to practice much more quickly. Now, the time students previously spent in class writing their own scripts and having classmates check them is now better used for practicing their presentations and the use of presentation skills we have learned, such as employing gestures and emphasizing key words. This has resulted in a meaningful improvement in the quality of presentations because the time spent making scripts is instead used for meaningful practice and getting feedback from classmates. Furthermore, since students lack scripts to rely on, they are not reading from a page or screen during their presentations, or being mentally distracted trying to recall something they had previously written. As a consequence, presenters are making eye contact a lot more. Pestano (2020) had noted that getting students to maintain eye contact properly during presentations was difficult, even when forbidding notes or other aids. This could have been the case because even without a script or notes to look at, students are trying excessively to recall their planned presentations and stick to the scripts they had written, but by not having a script, this problem can be significantly

reduced. I also noticed that my students were using gestures a lot more and speaking more emotively since they are not looking at a script, so their presentation delivery has become more expressive. Lastly, they are interacting with the audience more, asking and answering questions. Since students are not writing full scripts, they are also not translating words into English too difficult for their peers to understand, and this has led to presentations that are easier to follow for their classmates.

Another benefit of not writing scripts is a reduction in academic dishonesty. In previous years when I have taught English Presentation, there were always various ways academic dishonesty, to varying degrees, seemed to occur. There were two types of academic dishonesty that I have frequently encountered in the prior semesters when I have taught English Presentation, both of which occur during the script-writing phase of presentation preparation. The first is using translation software to convert something they had written in Japanese into English. This was often easily recognizable, as students would be reading from a script that contained English words that were both unknown to them and odd choices for the context, as well as alternating pronouns and even overly poor English syntax – all problems that frequently occur when translating from Japanese to English. The second form of common academic dishonesty I have noticed when teaching the course before is directly copying something word-for-word into their script without referencing it or even trying to pass it off as something they themselves had written. For example, I once had a student make a presentation on some recent piece of news, where the contents were copied in their entirety from an English news article. One reason academic dishonesty may take place is that students may not be aware of what constitutes academic dishonesty in some cases or may pay little heed to the explanations of academic dishonesty given at the beginning of the English Presentation course or in the syllabus. At the same time, academic dishonesty may happen because students lack the language skills and technical writing skills to avoid it (Teeter, 2015). However, in focusing more on creating presentations without writing scripts in the fall 2022 semester, these problems have been much less frequent. In fact, they typically only occur when students have used a script and have been, for example, very lazy about proofreading something produced through translation software, resulting in a presentation where a student may switch pronouns mid-sentence. Creating less reliance on scripts seems to therefore be an effective method of preventing academic dishonesty, whether unintentional or otherwise, since by only using outlines and point-form notes, students are not able to copy text from somewhere else.

Conclusion

The methods I used to reduce students' reliance on scripts seem to have been effective, but it would be interesting to do a formal study on their effectiveness. Ultimately, the goal was not to reduce students' use of scripts, because there is nothing inherently wrong with them, but rather reduce the negative effects scripts have on student presentations. These included poor eye contact, reading, trouble breaking the habit of memorization and the later problems this causes, poor use of presentation skills, and academic dishonesty. It would therefore be interesting to examine the extent to which class routines, pre-task activities, and impromptu presentations like those discussed in this paper can reduce these problems. These approaches were employed in an effort to better achieve the course objectives by placing the emphasis of the course on the delivery of an effective presentation more than the contents of a presentation, as students may inherently believe that the content is the most important aspect, and therefore having a carefully written script with impressive words and a lot of information is essential. Downplaying this and instead stressing how the presentation is given

may not be enough to alter student behavior, so it is important to create activities and structure the class in such a way that students are able to succeed in employing the presentation skills they learn.

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