Helping Students Achieve More in Presentation Contests

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Abstract

MEXT guidelines (MEXT, 2014) prescribe that pre-tertiary level English educators administer high-level linguistic activities such as presentation contests within their curricula, which may lead to a transformation of the teaching of oral presentations at the tertiary level. The rise of large-scale domestic presentation contests therefore offers a genuine 'proving ground' for students to pit themselves (and their skills) against peers in a nationally-recognized forum. Here, the researchers discuss data from 161 entries to a national English presentation contest that were received from a wide demographic of students and institutions across Japan. Participant entry videos were used as the means to assess the entrants' presentation skills and overall quality of application. Although weaknesses were observed in the participants' linguistic skills, applications were more commonly let down by content, poor professionalism, and an inability to follow given instructions. The authors discuss implications for supporting students in future applications to large-scale presentation competitions.

文部科学省の学習指導要領では中等英語教育に携わる教育者によるプレゼンテーションコンテスト等の高度な言語活動の実施が指示されており、高等教育における口頭発表の教育方法の変化が求められる事が考えられる。この現状を考慮する

と、大規模な英語プレゼンテーションコンテストは公開討論の場で学生同士が技術を駆使しながら切磋琢磨し合える恰好の場となる。
この論文では全国学生英語プレゼンテーションコンテストに提出された 161 の応募ビデオデータを元に議論する。そのビデオは一次審査段階で口頭発表技術と発表の全体的な質を審査する為に使用された。結果として主に、プレゼンテーションの内容、プロフェッショナリズムの問題、テクノロジー使用の際の欠点、応募に関する指示に従っていないという事が大きな問題だという事が分かった。データ分析の結果は、今後の高等教育での口頭発表の指導、また、国内規模で行われる大会にどのような支援が可能かについて関連づけて言及する。

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) have, since the beginning of the decade, been pushing for an increase in the use of presentations as a method of improving the communicative abilities of pre-tertiary students: “classes must be shifted from lecture style toward student-centered language activities by employing such educational forms as speeches, *presentations*, [emphasis added] debates and discussions” (Commission on the Development of Foreign Language Proficiency, 2011, p. 3).

Given the increased prominence of oral presentations in official literature, the need to investigate the presentation skills of Japanese pre-tertiary and tertiary level students is acute. One way in which the overall picture of such skills may be evaluated is through large-scale domestic presentation competitions, which draw participants from across Japan and from a diverse range of backgrounds.

An example of this is The All Japan Student English Presentation Contest, a nationwide English presentation competition open to non-native English speaking students (tertiary level) in Japan. The contest consists of three rounds of evaluation. Applicants are initially assessed in a preliminary video judging round (Round 1), and

successful applicants are invited to make a full presentation in Tokyo (Round 2). The 10 best presentations from the second round move to the final (Round 3), with the winner receiving more than ¥1,000,000 in prizes. Applicants may choose to present individually or as a group of two or three members.

Within this exploratory paper, we discuss video data collected from 161 applicants to The All Japan Student English Presentation Contest in 2016. The focus of the analysis was on identifying and quantifying weaknesses in the applicant entries. The researchers discuss the implications of these results to support applicants wishing to enter such competitions in future. It will be argued that focus should be placed upon content rather than paralinguistic skills for those intending to enter the national competition in question.

Literature Review

The Teaching of Presentations in the Japanese Context

Few studies have been conducted on English presentations in the Japanese English education context. Most of the available papers simply introduce how educators might incorporate English presentations into their existing curricula (e.g., Sato 2006; Yubune 2005); however, limited data suggests that the teaching of presentations is not yet widespread. Kawachi (2012) surveyed 72 university freshman students to understand their experiences of learning and giving presentations. Of the participants, only 33% stated that they had ever given a presentation in English. Moreover, only four of the 72 students reported having given an English presentation prior to entering university. Lastly, all but one of the participants expressed that learning English presentation skills at university is important. Although limited in scope, this data may indicate that large numbers of Japanese university students have never given an English presentation

during secondary education. It also implies that students see presentation skills as valuable.

Challenges for Students in Presentation Contests

English presentations remain a difficult undertaking for students, both cognitively and affectively. Simultaneously expressing opinions and complex ideas is a challenging task, and this is heightened by students' linguistic limitations (Zappa-Hollman, 2007). Moreover, speaking activities, particularly those which involve performance in front of others, are highly face-threatening, and result in frequent experiences of language anxiety, particularly in the Japanese context (Burden, 2004; Williams & Andrade, 2008).

The teaching of oral presentations also requires a large amount of work by the educator to mitigate the issues above. It is important to facilitate tasks in an adaptive manner, for example by providing scaffolding to learners to support the linguistic challenges of the task (Brooks & Wilson, 2014). Furthermore, instructors should carefully consider the topics that they ask students to present on, since poorly thought-out choices can mean that student presentations fail to connect with audiences (Meloni & Thompson, 1980). Finally, the teaching of oral presentations can require a considerable amount of work both in and out-of-class (Zappa-Hollman, 2007); consequently, schools need to allocate appropriate time for preparation to these events.

The complex nature of preparing for presentation contests, and the limited literature on presentations in the Japanese context suggest there will be both a variety and a considerable number of problem-areas for Japanese students. The identification of such weaknesses provides an important service, helping support educators and students who wish to enter presentation contests in the future. In pursuit of this goal, the following research question is addressed in this paper. *What weaknesses can be*

observed in the applications to a national English presentation contest from Japanese EFL students?

Method

Research Data

Video data was analyzed from 163 entries to The All Japan Student English Presentation Contest 2016. These videos represented all of the entries to the individual presenter strand of the competition. Submissions were received as a four-minute video through an official online application system from across Japan. In each video, the participants outlined the proposed presentation they would deliver if selected to advance in the competition, and their rationale. The presenters were informed that they would be assessed both on their proposed content as well as the presentation skills they exhibited. Two videos were removed from the analysis since the entrants had failed to meet the minimum requirements for submission, leaving 161 videos which were subsequently assessed for this study.

Applicants chose one of three themes for their videos. The themes can be summarized as follows: (1) to propose a tour plan for a rural location in Japan that would appeal to foreign tourists, (2) to introduce Japanese disaster prevention technology that could be implemented abroad, and (3) to promote a Japanese technology that could be modified to appeal to a foreign market.

Procedure

The researchers conducted a content analysis (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011) on the research data. Initially, each video was assigned at random and reviewed independently by three out of the four researchers. The researchers noted any observed weaknesses in the videos in the form of written comments. Following this initial stage,

the researchers identified the emerging trends in the observed weaknesses and agreed upon an initial coding system.

A second data analysis then took place, with the researchers' written comments regarding observed weaknesses reviewed in pairs and coded. Over multiple readings the coding system was refined. Following coding, the instances of each observed weakness were counted and tabulated as a percentage of the total number of videos reviewed. The final coding categories and results can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Distribution of issues (as tagged by the researchers) across the four major categories, given as a percentage of all video submissions reviewed.

	n	Percentage of all videos
Verbal communication		
Pronunciation	32	19.88%
Grammar	8	4.97%
Lack of enthusiasm	19	11.8%
Reading	24	14.91%
Casual register	3	1.86%
Non-verbal communication		
Unnatural body language	25	15.53%
Nervousness	3	1.86%
Content		
Fails to follow theme	64	39.75%
Content is weak	54	33.54%
Content is unoriginal	36	22.36%
Lack of detail	70	43.48%
Poor video quality		
Poor choice of venue	6	3.73%
Poor camera work	9	5.59%
Poor audio	13	8.07%
Dark	7	4.35%
Other	2	

Results and Discussion

While most presentation instruction in Japanese high schools tends not to veer far from the more performative elements such as maintaining eye contact, gesturing, and elocution (Browne & Wada, 1998; Eno, 2008), the findings in this study show that these traditional objectives were less problematic than content-related matters. This is exemplified by the fact that 43% of the videos reviewed were weakened by insufficient detail, which commonly took the form of a lack of specific research on the participant's topic (e.g., "*recently the malaria is spreading all over the world"* - video 56), a lack of clarity as to how their ideas worked in practice (e.g., "*The tour plan will brighten up the area"* - video 23), or cultural and economic generalizations (e.g., "*in countries where people believe in Buddhism, they pay more respect to living things"* - video 4). In addition, 40% of the videos were identified as not fully meeting or addressing the instructions of the chosen theme. Such issues were commonly a result of applicants failing to fully understand the secondary requirements of the topic. For example, participants rarely identified target markets for their ideas, despite being requested to do so in the contest instructions.

Amongst the verbal communication issues, weak pronunciation, primarily in the form of poor application of suprasegmental phonological features, impaired 20% of the videos. Such an issue is unsurprising given Japan's tempestuous history with katakana English (Martin, 2004) and the notable differences in intonation and stress patterns between English and Japanese (Ballhatchet & Kaiser, 2003); yet, this remains a significant obstacle for Japanese learners with regard to their presentation skills. The reading of scripts was also identified as hampering the success of 15% of applications, indicating that a significant proportion of entrants remain unconfident in their use of spoken language on the presentation stage, or that applicants have not found the time to familiarize themselves with their scripts. Furthermore, a lack of enthusiasm was

identified in 12% of all videos, and while hard to define, was interpreted by the researchers to refer to a lack of energy on behalf of the presenter. Though the researchers consider it ourselves to be a verbal issue, such a weakness may straddle the border between verbal and nonverbal communication. In relation to this, body language was identified as a significant weakness in 15% of participants, and such problems were often noted to be the use of overly-exaggerated gestures, or an over-reliance on symbolic gestures that lent an air of artifice to the presentation (e.g., expressing large numbers on fingers, or excessive throwing out of the hands to the perceived audience to express an emotional peak). It is unclear why such gestures were so common among the entrants; however, again the researchers feel that it is important to attend to this area during presentation instruction.

The quality of video production was also evaluated, registering significant problems that warrant addressing, albeit minor ones vis-à-vis the other categories. It was observed that 8% of the videos suffered from poor audio, and 6% from poor camera work. These tended to be videos with low audio quality or poor lighting. Often, the choice of venue was identified as a weakness, with some applicants choosing to record their videos in karaoke rooms or in restaurants: locations which only accentuated the issues and offered a poor first impression. While relevant to the overall success of applications for the presentation contest in question here, it may be the case that video production is not seen as a pressing concern for many instructors who teach presentation skills. Be that as it may, it is the opinion of the researchers that the proliferation of visual media and increased use of video as a format for the submission, distribution, and archiving of presentations necessitates a general awareness of both the constraints and affordances that producing for the camera entails.

Implications

Here the authors offer advice to educators wishing to support their students to enter The All Japan Student English Presentation Contest in the future.

Issues with content were by far the biggest weakness observed in the data and it is clear that entrants need to give more attention to the content to be presented rather than focus their efforts on performative aspects. Put simply, entrants should remind themselves that they are entering a *presentation* contest, not a *presenting* contest. Some of the more significant issues with content were also some of the most avoidable: guidance on content can be found on promotional materials such as the competition website. Furthermore, potential applicants should identify areas in which they can explain their ideas in more detail. Educators may be able to support students in this regard, by identifying generalizations in their work, and by helping them to find suitable sources from which to research their topic.

The identified weaknesses of pronunciation and reading skills are perhaps not mutually exclusive, and it may be true that if learners are helped to move away from scripted presentations, then they can be supported in using more authentic suprasegmental pronunciation. It has been suggested that such issues begin at the writing stage since reading is a failure to adapt writing for speech (King, 2002), with memorization a particularly salient issue that may imply a lack of confidence in the ability to communicate naturally (Lambert, 2008). Issues with reading are further compounded by the use of dictionaries and translation software which results in students being unable to grasp their own presentations (Lambert, 2008). A solution to these issues may be to train learners to mind map their ideas which will then be directly translated into speech, rather than writing formal compositions, which while perhaps more grammatically accurate or poetic on the page, do not translate well to performance. Furthermore, limiting students' use of dictionaries to, for example, three

new words in a five-minute presentation or encouraging learners to transfer difficult vocabulary to their visual aids may move learners away from scripted notes.

Body language can also be addressed in the oral presentation classroom. One way in which educators can support learners is by asking them to focus on simple gestures, such as by teaching them to use beat gestures rather than symbolic gestures (e.g., Thornbury, 2013). Furthermore, the internet provides a variety of materials (e.g., the TED.com website) from which to provide models of authentic body language. Students could be asked to watch and analyze such materials for the kinds of gestures used and body language displayed. Learners may also video record their own presentation, and calculate their instances of different types of gesture (beat, symbolic, indexical, etc.) which could later be compared to the body language of a presenter they admire.

The observed lack of enthusiasm could be dealt with by attempting to address the source(s) of the problem. One area of suitable investigation is in the use of reappraisal as a tool for promoting positive emotions in performance events. Brooks (2014) has conducted promising work in this area, showing that self-talk (e.g., a student saying to themselves "I am excited" before a presentation) can be used to increase positive emotions when completing public speaking tasks, and as a consequence, increase the positive evaluations of how their public speaking is received.

Video quality issues may also be addressed in the classroom. Potential applicants should be advised to think carefully about the manner in which they apply for the competition. The *how* of the application is as important as the *what*. Recording devices should be mounted on a stable platform rather than held in the hand, and the video recorded in a well-lit, quiet, indoor location. It is also highly beneficial to review the recording before submission.

In order to ensure that the quality of video applications meets the minimum requirements and that common mistakes are avoided, the researchers have produced a

checklist for entrants. Applicants are encouraged to utilize this tool before submission (see Appendix).

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is its lack of generalizability beyond the scope of the presentation contest within which the data was collected. While there may be many pertinent implications for all large-scale presentation contests, as well as the teaching of presentation skills in language classrooms, confirming this is outside the remit of this paper.

Conclusion

By offering a platform for meaningful, externally assessed presentations in front of large audiences, presentation competitions such as The All Japan Student Presentation Contest are in a position to support and augment the teaching of presentation skills in Japan, skills that MEXT is actively seeking. Through such contests, researchers and educators are also able to identify common limitations on a cross section of the Japanese university student body. Within this study, such observed limitations pertained most commonly to the content of the presentations: weaknesses in the details, the research and the application of the presenters' ideas to the questions being asked. While such issues may often be glossed over in classroom work in favor of performance skills, there remains a need for attention to such details when considering presentation competitions of this scale. In addition to content issues, identified weaknesses at the linguistic level pertaining to pronunciation and reading from scripts remain issues that can be addressed in the classroom. On a paralinguistic level, it was the over-the-top use of symbolic gestures that was most detrimental to applicants' chances of success. Finally, on a pragmatic level, first impressions should be

considered important, and potential applicants to The All Japan Student English Presentation Contest should spend time ensuring the manner in which they apply provides a positive impact.

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Appendix

Success criteria for The Annual All Japan Student English Presentation Contest participants

My presentation entry will have a maximum chance of success when...

Content		
C1	My content addresses all aspects of the theme.	Y / N
C2	I have included facts, statistics, or examples to strengthen my ideas.	Y / N
C3	My idea is new.	Y / N
C4	I have included some specific details of my idea.	Y / N

Verbal Communication		
V1	My pronunciation is clear.	Y / N
V2	I have asked someone to review the grammar in my script.	Y / N
V3	My voice has energy and varied intonation.	Y / N
V4	I have not read from my script.	Y / N
V5	My voice does not show nervousness.	Y / N

Nonverbal Communication		
NV1	I do not stand still in the video. I do not have too many wild gestures.	Y / N
NV2	I do not look nervous in the video.	Y / N

Video Quality		
V1	I have chosen an appropriate venue for recording the video.	Y / N
V2	The recording camera is stable.	Y / N
V3	I can hear what is being said in the video clearly.	Y / N
V4	The video is well-lit.	Y / N