# Assessing Oral Communication: Poster Presentations

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This paper describes a departure from traditional end of term testing for EFL learners in a Japanese University towards a more motivating, skills-based approach, in which students are required to design and give an oral presentation using a visual aid. Although the students referred to are Engineering majors, the format is suitable for students in a wide range of disciplines. An outline of the aims and procedure is followed by a discussion of issues connected with managing such activities in large classes, with particular focus on the difficulties of subjective grading. After detailing the assessment criteria, the paper concludes with an evaluation of the activity and suggestions for future refinements in both procedure and grading.

Foreign language oral proficiency is often assessed using information gap activities, where candidates demonstrate facility in the target language by successfully completing a task, or by question-response interaction with an interviewer. Examples of this latter method range from one-on-one interviews in which the interviewer both controls the interaction and grades the candidate, to formats like the Cambridge Main Suite exams, where two candidates interact chiefly with each other and are assessed against a strictly defined set of descriptors by two examiners, one of whom is completely uninvolved in the assessed activity. Regardless of the specific format, such assessment is more demanding than in objective tests (Fulcher, 1987, Upshur & Turner, 1995).

Brown (1993) outlines some of the problems inherent in assessing communicative language ability, and oral proficiency in particular. As he points out (p. 270-71), any kind of test can be an anxiety-inducing experience for the

learner, and any attempt to make classroom assessment intrinsically motivating should involve the following four principles: giving students advance preparation, face validity, authenticity, and washback (also referred to as backwash). Providing learners with sufficient advance preparation, as well as support in the shape of familiar format, will reduce anxiety and allow them to perform to the best of their abilities. In terms of face validity, clear instructions and unambiguous items let students know exactly what is being tested and thus help them to perceive the test as valid. Authenticity of both linguistic content and task type can help make a test more effective by providing a thematic context, while the effect of the test on subsequent learning, whether positive or negative, needs to be taken into account.

Traditional end of term "paper" tests at Japanese universities tend to meet students' expectations of formal assessment, based on their experiences in High School, thus satisfying the first two of the factors mentioned by Brown. They are, on the other hand, rarely in any way authentic and the potential exists for negative backwash in that too much class time can end up being spent on learning how to cope with the test format. With oral communication courses in Japanese Universities, many teachers rely on an interview format for assessment; however this can be time-consuming, especially with large groups, and it may be harder to justify grades (Lambert, 2003).

In this study, the decision to have learners design and give Oral Presentations was strongly influenced by considerations of authenticity and backwash. EAP courses for engineers frequently make use of this form of assessment, as highlighted in Koh's (1988) paper, which justifies the need for engineers to be able to present themselves well in oral communication, and outlines a modular programme of progressively more demanding tasks culminating in oral presentations. Similarly, Boyle (1996) describes a study in Brunei involving science majors using a Problem-Solution format and extensive language scaffolding in the shape of overt teaching of what he calls "clause relational expressions" and "lexical signals" (p. 120). As Underhill points out, this kind of activity is "an authentic and communicative activity both for professional and academic purposes" (p. 47). The open-ended nature of the tasks allows learners to use the language to create new utterances and is more holistic, involving the listeners or readers in genuine communication rather than just putting emphasis on correct encoding by the speaker or writer (Koh, p. 102). This method of assessment also has the advantage of allowing those who may normally do badly in paper tests to improve their performance.

The decision to have students present using posters was based on two main factors. Firstly, having a visual aid provided support for both the speakers and listeners during the activity, thus reducing stress. In addition, the process of designing and creating a poster gave a collaborative focus to the task, facilitating a group dynamic while also catering for different learning styles. Assessment took place in collaboration with the learners themselves, through an element of peer evaluation, and the posters were evaluated in this way.

## Class Profile and Procedure

In the first year in which poster presentations were used as a means of final assessment, two classes, each of 35 third year Japanese University students, took part in the final activity. There were 14 groups per class of two or three students per group, with levels ranging from Upper Elementary (around TOEIC 400, or TOEFL CBT 110, or IELTS 4.0) to Intermediate (around TOEIC 520, or TOEFL CBT 200, or IELTS 6.0). In these classes, all students were males enrolled on Engineering courses, and taking English as a credit course. Thus, an additional aim was to give students experience in a real life skill (presenting) likely to be of practical use in their future careers as engineers (Koh, 1988; Pudwill & Cullen, 2003). The teacher had no specific background in the students' field of study (see Bell, 1996 for a discussion of the desirability of this) however the presentations were not intended to be on technical topics. From previous experience of teaching engineers I would agree with Koh on the necessity of these students acquiring both linguistic and performative competence (p. 103-4), and so this was the focus of the activity. Following positive feedback from these student groups, the activity was subsequently extended to all first year classes, including male and female students across several non-engineering departments, partly as a means of coping with a vastly increased intake.

The activity was introduced midway through the second of the two terms, by which time the pedagogic approach and class procedure were familiar. Students were instructed to work in pairs in their own time to produce a 7-10 minute presentation on a subject of their choice with a written text and a poster illustrating/clarifying their talk. Students were initially provided with poster paper, however the number of pairs who wished to use Computer Aided Design programmes to make their posters meant that it was easier to have them provide

their own, as well as basic materials such as coloured or marker pens, tape, and scissors. Many pairs chose to supplement them with visuals or pictures from magazines, newspapers or the Internet. Using computer generated images proved especially effective when incorporated into the final poster as graphs or pie charts, in many cases giving a clear, professional look to the finished work.

Once topics and pairs had been confirmed, students were asked to exchange email addresses or mobile phone numbers to help coordinate research outside class. While it may seem intrusive to insist on this, it avoided potential breakdowns in communication. They then had three in-class sessions on presentation skills. Session 1 started with a critical look at examples of posters and video footage of presentations from the previous year using the assessment criteria, and also covered writing introductions and conclusions by providing the following "template" for students to complete with their own details,

### *Introduction*

"Good morning/ afternoon, my name is _____ (and I'm _____ ) and today we'd like to tell you about _____ . First we'll explain _____ , then we'll talk about _____ , and finally we'll look at _____ .

### *Conclusion*

"So, in conclusion, today we told you about _____ . First we explained _____ , then we talked about _____ , and finally we looked at _____ .

Session 2 dealt with using graphs and visual aids to describe trends, and Session 3 introduced language for making transitions, or "signposting expressions", and the concept of "chunking", or dividing a longer piece of discourse into smaller units, often lexical phrases. These were followed by a class given over to a "dress rehearsal" before the final assessed presentations. The three sessions also afforded a chance to monitor students' progress and deal with any problems or difficulties with the scripts as they arose.

King (2002) gives an in-depth account of the anxieties students may face when asked to present. Of these, the gap between students' written and oral performance was the most significant, given that it was a new activity, and so dealing with this early on was a priority. Taking into consideration the level of the students, it was assumed that the scripts they produced would either need a lot of revision/drafting and Teacher feedback to make them comprehensible, or

need to be simple enough to begin with for their intended audience to understand. During the drafting and writing stages students were found to be using language which they had a lot of trouble pronouncing or even understanding, let alone communicating to their listeners, and in the first year of the activity there was little choice but to deal with this group by group in class time. In subsequent years, showing video footage of good and bad presentations from the previous year, together with sample scripts, removed the need for so much teacher intervention or class time. Students were encouraged to simplify language and write with their audience in mind, and to be particularly careful when using dictionaries and translation software. A lot of their problems seemed to stem from writing initial drafts in L1 and then translating literally using these resources.

In groups with odd numbers there was also a concern that by having three students working together there might be a danger of one or two students doing the bulk of the work and ending up "carrying" the other(s). To a great extent peer pressure made sure that this didn't happen, and allowing the students to choose their own pairs generally meant that they were working in a cooperative group. Problems arose in situations where latecomers or absentees had either to be assigned to a pair or told to work alone, which involved the risk of too heavy a workload. Furmanovsky & Sheffner (1997) discuss the benefits of assigning roles (e.g. researcher, designer, organiser) to each group member, however simply asking students to indicate the "division of labour" on their scripts kept the activity student-centred, as well as being helpful for assessment purposes. Putting the onus on them to divide the workload fairly also demonstrated trust and confidence in their maturity on the part of the teacher.

Finally, given that the groups had produced a text, it would be tempting for them to simply read directly from it when presenting. The undesirability of this from a cultural standpoint (implying lack of confidence or disinterest in the audience) had to be clearly demonstrated to students. The need for eye contact was stressed using video footage during the first in-class session and in teacher feedback during dress rehearsal. The evaluation sheets (Appendix C) reinforced this by focusing students' attention on such areas as use of L1 and clarity of speech and much of the feedback from peers contained comments such as, "*more eye-contact*" or, "*look at us when you speak*".

**Managing the Presentations**

In this study, a typical class had forty students, resulting in twenty pairs, and the method used allowed for five pairs to be assessed during each session, with the remaining thirty students split into five audience groups of six, which moved around clockwise between presentations. Thus, the whole process required four class sessions. Setting up the classroom involved moving tables and desks to allow for audience groups to move freely between the presentations, and of course the classroom had to be returned to normal afterwards for the next teacher. Students were asked to arrive early to prepare the room and set up their presentations using board magnets, blutak and parcel tape before the session was due to start. Each pair had the chance to present five times, and during the activity each student in the audience groups had five on-the-spot mini assessment slips (Appendix C) to carry around and complete as they listened to the presentations. These were handed to the presenters after each turn, providing instant feedback. Some of the fourth and fifth presentations were recorded on video to help with grading and to provide material for use in future feedback or other evaluative sessions.

**Grading**

In consultation with the students themselves, it was decided that the presentations would count for 50% of the final term grade. After the activity the students' posters and scripts were collected in, together with the on-the-spot assessment slips, which gave an impression of which presentations had been best received and easiest for the other students to follow, and the teachers' notes. The video was also available to check and confirm teacher observations, given the need to justify grades. Assessing the visual element in particular seemed open to criticism on the grounds of subjectivity, making it necessary to have a well-defined set of criteria to refer to (Underhill, p. 95ff) and as a result a set of descriptors was drawn up (Appendix A). Pairs were given a final mark in each band on the teacher's grading sheet (Appendix B), adjusted up or down if necessary for individual students.

The five categories were chosen as a means of drawing attention to the presentation skills practised in class. To give extra weight to peer feedback, two out of the five, Interest and New Information, were assessed using the on-the-spot assessment slips. The remaining three criteria involved input from

the students themselves, as well as being marked from teacher observations and notes. The Visual grade was decided after taking in the posters and considering students' comments. A grade was then given based on how much work went into the poster, and whether or not it conveyed relevant information clearly enough and provided a focus and support for listening to the oral presentation. The Speech category covered both paralinguistic and linguistic features, which were evaluated from both student responses and teacher observations. Specifically, these were use of gesture, eye-contact, pronunciation, use of L1, and whether the students were speaking too quickly or slowly, or too softly for their audience. Having the students themselves involved in the grading of this category is particularly important as it helps to avoid the problems inherent in native-speaker assessment outlined by Fulcher (p. 288). Finally, the Script was assessed to judge the quality of the students' writing, focusing on the use of the language introduced in class, as well as length and coherence.

## Evaluation of the activity

The activity proved popular with the students themselves. End of term feedback was generally positive, with many learners saying how much they enjoyed it, despite expressing initial misgivings about the task. Some wanted more class time to spend on the posters and scripts. Typical comments were, "*presenting is very difficult, but to make poster is interesting*", "*I was glad we did the presentation, it was fun*", "*I needed more time for the poster presentation.*" Many students started work on their posters first before moving on to the text. This could have been because the visual element provided something more concrete to focus on and was therefore more reassuring. At the outset, showing videos and posters done by previous groups gives a clear picture of the standard the students are working towards, however it is important to stress that they should give equal emphasis to the written component and manage their time effectively.

Given that these students chose a figure of 50% of the final grade and were involved in the assessment process themselves, they required some degree of training in how to assess their peers. Incorporating practice in evaluating presentations using excerpts of the video (see Koh, p. 107) and using examples of previous groups' posters and text or a simplified version of Webster's (2002) checklist is therefore necessary. Working with more advanced learners, Webster

assessed performance using a handout focusing on three broad categories: Genre (the structure of the presentation – 10 marks); Language (including grammar and fluency – 9 marks) and Physical Features (both paralinguistic features such as gesture and eye-contact and the use of notes – 6 marks) in the form of a checklist. Students were given a copy of this handout during term and considerable in-class time was devoted to analysing the respective features. While this has the advantage of letting the learners know point-by-point exactly what is expected of them, it was felt that groups at a lower level, such as those described here, would find such a procedure too much to cope with. Using the mini on-the-spot assessment slips was much quicker and allowed the students to spend more time listening to the presentations. The slips were handed to the presenters on completion and, given the time available, this meant that if a pair gave their presentation five times and were assessed by the teacher only on the fourth and fifth time they would have had feedback from three audience groups, or 18 individual classmates, before assessment, thus giving them maximum opportunity to perform to the best of their ability. Having the listeners write their names on the assessment slips allowed the teacher to assess how active they had been as listeners, and one other important issue is that peer to peer evaluation helps get away from native-speaker centred assessment towards a more authentic style, given that these students are much more likely to present to non-native audiences in the future.

On a practical note, getting an assistant to film the presentations is preferable. It was impossible to concentrate on both filming the students and taking adequate notes. In future classes the video recordings can be used to point out or elicit good and bad examples, so it is desirable to have recordings of acceptable quality. One example of this was in cases where students used inappropriate chunking or made errors of form when using transitions language ("*So, inclusion …"). Finally, splitting the activity over four sessions owing to the class sizes actually proved beneficial in that the background noise from five groups speaking at once created a "safe" environment in which the presenting students didn't have to worry about being the focus of attention for a large group.

## Conclusion

This study has shown how poster presentations can provide a useful assessment of students' oral proficiency among learner groups in different fields of study, such as Engineering, Architecture or Accounting, by evaluating performance against a set of clearly defined criteria. Evaluation can include information from the students themselves as well as the teacher's own observations. The activity gives students sufficient advance preparation, and the level of support in terms of dress rehearsal and teacher/peer feedback ensures that it is seen as having face validity. Authenticity of both task-type and language is assured, and the potential should exist for positive backwash, as an oral skills-based form of assessment requires more class time to be spent on honing communication skills.

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# APPENDIX A

## Descriptors for Grading Posters

| Band | Visual | Interest | New Info | Speech | Script |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10-9 | A lot of work and imagination went into the poster's design. It is clear and eye-catching with relevant and appropriate use of graphs or tables to support or illustrate the text. | The topic appealed to the audience. All, or almost all, comments were favourable. | The presentation was well researched and managed to convey new information or find a new angle on a familiar topic. | Relevant and appropriate use of gesture, eye contact, and pronunciation in all contexts. Speech clear and easy to understand. Speed & volume appropriate to audience. No use of L1. | Consistent and appropriate use of target language for introducing, linking and concluding. Level of language is suitable for the audience. Errors in spelling and word formation may occur, but do not affect meaning. |
| 8-6 | The poster is relatively clear and easy to understand, however there may be isolated problems in this area, especially in terms of organisation or design. | The topic appealed to the audience. The majority of comments were favourable, although there were some unfavourable or neutral comments. | The audience picked up some new information from the presentation, although a limited amount. | Speech and paralinguistic features are generally adequate, however isolated problems may occur such as speaking too quickly or slowly, too softly etc. | Some use is made of the target language, however it may be inconsistent or wrongly applied. Errors in spelling and word formation sometimes affect meaning. The level of language may be unsuitable for the audience and the amount of material may be insufficient. |
| 5-1 | The poster is unclear in places and what information is presented may be little more than a visual equivalent of the written text. Student feedback may indicate that it is unappealing or difficult to understand. | The topic was unappealing and unfavourable comments predominated | The presentation has little new to offer. This may be due to the topic being too familiar or the amount of information insufficient. | Speech either unintelligible or monotone. Little or no eye contact. The presenter may rely entirely on the written text. | Little or no use of target language. There are stretches of text that cause severe strain for the reader, due to errors in spelling or word formation and grammar, or the level of language being unsuitable for the audience. The amount of material may be insufficient. |

## APPENDIX B

## Example of teacher's grading sheet

| Presenters | Topic | Visual | Interest | New Info | Speech | Script | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| T. Suzuki N. Honda | Classic cars | 8 | 7 | 6 | 8 7 | 9 8 | 38 36 |
| | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |

## APPENDIX C

## On-the-spot assessment slips

**Name:**                                                      **Student Number:**

1.  **What did you learn from this presentation?**

2.  **How much Japanese was used?**
a) none                         b) a little                              c) a lot

3.  **How easy was it to understand?**
a) very easy                    b) a little difficult       c) difficult

4.  **How would you rate the posters/visual aids?**
a) very good                    b) OK                                   c) poor

5.  **Any other comments?**


Note: photos of students' presentations can be viewed here.