Educational and Practical Research

Learner-led and Inclusive Approaches to Language Learning Through Group Presentations: Practitioner Reflections on an English Presentation Course

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to outline an English presentation course focusing on inclusivity. English presentation courses should address the problems of students who are too shy to speak in front of other people and students with learning difficulties. This kind of English presentation course should be an opportunity to integrate people with different talents and possibilities. Especially *Power Point* presentations, games as well as video- and poster creations are fun activities and facilitate inclusion. The author's experiences in research about dyslexia helped significantly in understanding the problems of people with learning difficulties and to create this course. The course outline and reflections may be useful for other teachers who are looking for a way to help their students regain confidence and a sense of fun in their English lessons.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to outline an English presentation course focusing on inclusivity. The main goal of my teaching is to improve students' oral language skills in English. Since it is always a formidable challenge for the students to express themselves orally in front of other people, I have considered what possibilities there are to take away the students' fear of making mistakes in pronunciation and of presenting in front of an audience. Other important goals of designing the course are the development of original content, the promotion of creativity and, above all, the integration of students with learning difficulties or other special needs. Inclusivity was a particular concern for me, as I have done a lot of research on dyslexia in recent years and also have family experience with these issues. These experiences are also the reason for me to reflect on teaching and learning methods conventionally used in Japan and to look for new ways to facilitate inclusive teaching practices in order to create a more equal learning environment for all.

In this paper, I will outline my course approach and discuss findings in the wider scientific context, and in doing so I, will refer especially to an article by Apple and Kikuchi that deals with the learning potential of using *Power Point* group projects in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom[1].

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2. Course outline

Since I teach at a university with a focus on "Medical Professions", I chose the book *Vital Signs* by Vivian Morooka and Terri Sugiura as a basis for the course[2]. *Vital Signs* is relatively simple in structure and deals with various situations in and around the hospital. Students can study independently with this book. I was able to see this during the pandemic, as at that time all courses were online for several weeks and students had to use the book independently for homework, which worked very well.

The course consists of 15 lectures of 90 minutes each. The concept of the course consists of three main parts. First, the teacher introduces the book and explains a range of different ways in which students could present the materials to the class. Second, groups of students choose a topic from the book to teach the other students, then create learning materials and prepare the presentation. Finally, students make the presentations and are evaluated by the other groups and by the teacher.

Table 1

Schedule of lessons: Lessons (90 minutes each)	Aim of the unit	Material
1. Lesson	A) Getting to know the students B) Presentation of the course objective of a group presentation C) Presentation of the book D) Grouping (different fields of study mixed in one group)	Book: "Vital Signs", Pre-Unit A, B, C: "Meet you teacher", "Meet your partner", "Meet your Group"
2. Lesson	A) Short introduction to the different possibilities of the presentation design B) Sample presentation by the teacher C) Choosing the lesson in the book on which to base the presentation	Book, *Power Point*, video (homemade or from a video from the Internet that fits the topic and questions about it), poster, card game or Bingo game with learning words
3. Lesson	Explanation of various presentation techniques, research techniques, group evaluation sheet, translation software, AI-assisted pronunciation aids and vocabulary learning software, etc.	Introduction and summary of various presentation techniques, *Power Point*, *DeepL*, *Teams*, Text to Speech software (*Word*, *Ondoku3*, *Microsoft Azure*), *Quizlet*, etc.
4. – 8. Lessons	Preparation of own presentation in group work with the support of the teacher	Book, *Power Point*, Internet, *DeepL*, posters, videos, homemade games, etc.
9. – 14. Lessons	Group presentation with evaluation by the teacher and the other groups presentation duration approx. 60 minutes with tolerated deviation of approx. 15 minutes	Book "Vital Signs", one evaluation sheet each for all groups watching
15. Lesson	Review of the course and self-evaluation of the group members with group evaluation sheet	Group evaluation sheet with percentages of each student's workload

In the first lesson, the focus is on getting to know the students and then dividing them into groups of four to five students. Furthermore, I explain the flow of the semester in broad terms and give a short presentation of the course objective and on how to use the textbook. In the second and third lesson, I give the students an overview of the ways in which they could make a one-hour group presentation in English. Furthermore, I make a sample presentation of the first lesson of the book "Vital Signs" myself. Then, the students make groups and choose the unit of the book they want to use as base for their presentations.

From the fourth to the eighth lessons, students have the opportunity to prepare their presentations with my assistance. The number of preparation lessons depends on the number of students in the class, since a group usually consists of three to five students (and there are only 15 sessions in total). The students can use *Power Point*, videos, posters and games to assist with learning new vocabulary from the chosen unit. The possibilities for students to present the chosen materials in an easily understandable way for their classmates are manifold and all group members can contribute their talents and thus contribute to the success of the presentation. The use of *Power Point* or posters makes the material easier to read and understand for students who are more visual learners and it gives the students the opportunity to make the learning materials bigger and access them after class to review the materials.

From the beginning of the project, each group has its own private group space in *Microsft Teams* (*Teams*) where they can share their ideas already in the preparation phase and upload their own presentation parts, videos, posters, etc. This allows for easier collaboration and since the project data is also always stored online, the students can continue to work on the project even if a member is sick. The reason for the use of *Teams* is that the group progress can be monitored and even if there are absences, the group can continue the work without disruption.

The presentations take place between the 9th and 14th lesson depending on the number of students. Especially in the field of health care and education English will become more and more important in the future. Therefore, students should also give all explanations in English during the presentation. Depending on the English level, however, there is also the possibility to repeat the explanations a second time in Japanese to avoid comprehension problems.

During the presentations the other groups take part in the group activities the presenters have designed and they will fill in an evaluation paper afterwards about their opinion of the presentation. The *Power Point* presentation itself typically consists of 10 to 20 slides and, in addition to the self-introduction of the group members, usually includes the listening exercises from the book with solutions, the questions for the listening exercise, the grammar part of the lesson, other exercises for the lesson, word lists, game instructions, homemade videos or videos from the Internet, which can be supplemented with questions or used further. The games students create for the end of the presentation, are mostly card or bingo word games, based on learning new words. At the end of the presentation, all the data is also uploaded in *Teams* by the students. Through this kind of diverse use of different technology, all senses are addressed, it is more multimodal and inclusion of all participants is more feasible.

There are no specific homework assignments during the semester, as completing the presentation requires work outside classtime, and so this becomes 'homework'. Some groups also make very time-consuming presentations, including recordings of videos or making card games for all other groups so additional homework would be yet another burden and therefore rather counterproductive.

In the last lesson, we do a review of the project and group members evaluate each other's performance during the project and the distribution of the workload in the group for a fair assessment. The students, who don't have a presentation on that day, get one evaluation sheet per group to evaluate the presenter group. They have a short time at the end to discuss and evaluate the presentation together. The assessment sheets will be collected at the end of the class. All presentations are video recorded, as it is useful to be able to review the video and discuss grading together if students ask about their grades. The video is also a help for me in case there is any ambiguity at the end when assigning grades.

Another important point for me was also to reduce the pressure of grades in order to promote a more creative approach to the project, and through a joint project, to rekindle the joy of language learning in the students, who may have had a negative relationship to English lessons in the past. Therefore, as a requirement for a minimum grade of 70 to 75 points, I made attendance in class and participation in the project a prerequisite. The more the students then get involved in the project - evident from the groups' self-evaluations - the more extra points they can get.

Table 2

List evaluation criteria	Rating scale for students		
- Overall impression	A+	Excellent	(90 - 100)
- Pronounciation	A	Very good	(80 - 89)
- Power Point presentation	B	Good	(70 - 79)
- Poster	C	Sufficient	(60 - 69)
- Video	D	Not sufficient	(<60)
- Games			

However, there are also point deductions for increased absences, as this interferes with the purpose of group work (because it has a negative impact on the cooperation). The limit for a sucessful course completion stipulated by the curriculum is five absences (90 minutes each), which corresponds to one third of the total course (15 units).

The evaluation of the previous presentations was mostly in the range of 75 to 95 points out of 100 reachable points. This corresponds to a mark between A+ and B, which takes away the pressure of the students failing the class and so also students with learning difficulties can enjoy the class without fear of bad marks.

3. Benefits and challenges of learner-led approaches to language learning

After the end of the course in February 2023, I took a closer look at the literature on the topic in preparation for this article and found articles that supported my intuitions of the benefits of designing learner-led courses. In particular, the article *Practical PowerPoint group projects for the EFL classroom* by Matthew Apple and Keita Kikuchi[1] perfectly articulated my feelings concerning the potential benefits of using *Power Point* presentations.

For me, changing the way I teach was a personal concern and I tried to empathize with the students to design a course that was fun, encouraged creativity, and gave everyone a chance to contribute their talents to a collaborative project. Putting myself in the students' shoes was also facilitated by the fact that I myself am currently studying again and writing my doctoral thesis on *Dyslexia and Communication* at the University of Vienna. Furthermore, as a parent of a child with learning difficulties, I can contribute my experience about the challenges of language teaching and learning and incorporate this into my course design by making them more *multimodal*. In linguistics, the term *multimodal* or *multimodality* refers to the parallel use of different sensory channels for the transmission of information. These different experiences - as a teacher, a student, a parent of a child with learning difficulties and a researcher about learning difficulties - made it possible for me to incorporate the diverse needs of students in a language learning class.

Table 3

Aims of the course
- Improved pronunciation in English
- Improving the integration of students with special needs
- Promoting collaboration in the classroom through group presentations
- Acquiring additional skills through the use of various presentation techniques and computer programs
- (Regaining) the joy of language learning
- Improved motivation and autonomy in language acquisition
- Reduction of grade pressure
- Student centered learning process/Learner-led teaching
- Use of multiple senses in learning

The first aim of this course is to develop oral communication skills. At the beginning of the course, there is often shyness among students to speak in front of the whole class, but this is usually short-lived. The freedom for students to manage their own presentation and lesson has a very positive effect on the result and in comparison, to a teacher-led approach, which I did in the two years before, the participation and eagerness of the students to speak has increased greatly. Whether the students learn more English through this method than in teacher-led classes with a final test at the end of the semester is not easy to determine, but since the goal of the course is to improve oral skills in English, I think that through this type of course all students have the opportunity to improve their pronunciation and speaking skills.

Students also learn many new skills - like using *Power Point*, video and poster design, and the use of AI assisted learning and translation software. Students learn to design a *Power Point* presentation in English and also to give their self-introduction in English at the beginning of the presentation. These skills will certainly be of use to them in their professional life, as the presentation of one's own ideas and work with *Power Point* is increasingly in demand in all areas, and spoken English is also becoming more and more important due to increasing globalization in Japan.

Table 4

Materials used by students during the 2022/23 academic year

- Thematic base - book "Vital Signs" by Vivian Mooroka and Terri Sugiura
- *Power Point* for creating presentations
- *DeepL* for translating and checking own translations
- *Word* (text generation, also as pronunciation with the read aloud function)
- *Ondoku 3*, *Microsoft Azure*: "Text to Speech" software (pronunciation)
- Own video and video subtitling with smartphone or PC
- Videos from the Internet as a basis for questions or games
- *Microsoft Teams* as a group platform
- Card games
- Quizlet
- Posters

In my opinion, the joint discussion and evaluation by each group also is a learning process as it helps groups to avoid possible mistakes and to include positive ideas in their own presentation based on their evaluation of previous presentations. However, it has to be said that the students who have their presentation at the end of the semester have a small advantage because they have actually more time to prepare and they have seen some other presentations before. On the other hand, the first presentation always is experienced as something new and novel and therefore the evaluations are sometimes better than towards the end of the semester, where the students have already seen a lot and may be more critical.

As mentioned previously, groups evaluate each other's performance at the end of the classes. In the last lesson of the course group members also evaluate each other based on the distribution of the workload among the individual group members during the project. I have found that the students are very fair in their evaluations. Only twice out of more than one hundred presentations have I had to exclude students' evaluations because I felt they were not suitable. In such cases the video recordings can be also helpful. In the end I agree with Apple and Kikuchi, who wrote about the problem of students' objectivity that:

> Peer evaluations can be somewhat unreliable, as students are generally unwilling to critize their friends and classmates; however, as the main reasons of peer evaluation are primarily to improve motivation and promote

noticing of language use, the issue of unreliability is largely irrelevant[1].

In Apple and Kikuchi's 2007 article, the following points were also mentioned in particular, which I think are also worth mentioning in my course. On the positive aspects of group evaluation:

> Outside of evaluative purposes, peer evaluation can be a very useful pedagogical tool for group work. Even if instructors ultimately opt to minimize the importance of or even completely ignore peer evaluation results, simply asking students to do peer evaluation can have positive effects. First and foremost, it ensures that students will pay attention and listen to fellow classmates carefully. Additionally, the fact that students know their peers will evaluate their project encourages them to work harder while preparing and performing the *PowerPoint* presentation… with peer evaluation can change the student listening role from that of a passive observer to that of an interactive, participating listener[1].

I think this statement is true when reflecting on my courses as well. The difference from Apple and Kikuchi's research is that in my course it is not only a *Power Point* presentation, but all students are involved through other activities such as games, videos and working in the book throughout the lecture as well.

In the course of the last year with more than 100 presentations (8 classes with 6 to 8 presentations per semester) I was able to get a very good overview of the students' skills and ideas and thus it was also possible to develop a fair assessment system. The evaluation by the students is included in the grades by taking it into consideration during my own assessment. This, in addition to participating in the group work or games of the presenting groups, is also a way to engage the students who are not presenting that day in the lesson and also to give responsibility for the success of each presentation to the entire class. The "*Positve Peer Pressure*" to participate in class and thereby support the presentation of the other students is, in my view, a positive mechanism to encourage class participation and involve all students. This means, students do not want to let down their group members or the members of the presenting group, so they take part actively and support their peers.

The second main goal of improving the integration of all students by designing the course as a presentation course with many different ways of expression is also supported by other research in this area, like Gardner's "*Theory of Mulitiple Intelligences*"[4]. Apple and Kikuchi were also referring to Gardner when they said,

> …he theorizes that human intelligence is not a unilateral concept; instead, we possess at least eight different "intelligences", such as kinesthetic intelligence and spatial intelligence. As a software program designed to create eye-catching, visually-appealing presentations, *PowerPoint* provides an ideal venue in which students can utilize their various intelligences in a cooperative group setting[1].

Waite et al. were also mentioned by Apple and Kikuchi when talking about the usage of Power Point in presentations:

> PowerPoint can also help instructors take into account a varying individual difference of learners' cognitive styles and personalities[1,5].

These two statements above resonate with my own experiences in the course, where I could observe that the preparation of the different activities for the presentations were distributed in the groups according to the specific talents of the members. Concerning the integration of students with learning difficulties or disabilities this is also very supportive because within this course-setting they can use their specific talents and creativity to contribute to the success of the project so they have a positive learning experience. As

mentioned previously, the multimodal materials the students create through diverse uses of technology creates multimodal and inclusive forms of learning. The students also do not have to worry about bad marks so they can enjoy the language classes without pressure.

The group work also promotes a sense of togetherness among the students and friendships are formed across the different disciplines, not only in class, but out of class. The joint teaching of very different disciplines in English is also very positive to highlight at this university, where prospective nurses, kindergarden teachers, medical technical assistants and other allied healthcare professionals are taught together. I took special care to mix students from different departments in the groups to avoid homogeneity of the groups. This allows a symbiosis of students' different talents to the design of their presentation depending on the field of study. This will be also of great value in their future careers as care services are supposed to work together as it gives them a chance to understand about other disciplines.

Another point worth mentioning is the importance of the role of the teacher. Apple and Kikuchi refer here to Johnson and Johnson who even then described the importance of appropriate guidance of students by the teacher as follows:

> …cooperative skills within a group work framework do no appear "magically" when students are placed into groups: teachers must act as a guide by providing a structure for task goals, rewards, student roles, materials, and rules for group behaviour as well as an expected time frame for project completion. In addition, to an overall framework of project design and deadlines, the instructor's role is to prepare students for the language demands of each subsequent step[13].

For my project this means supporting the students in the whole process of their presentation preparations and providing them with the necessary tools. Thinking about the current status of the project and offering help is vital for this approach. Making references to different presentations of other students, and highlighting previous timelines so that students do not exceed or underuse the time they are allotted for the final presentation is another form of support.

Throughout the course, I was continually impressed and surprised by the creativity of the students, especially in the area of the self-made videos with subtitles and the *Power Point* and poster presentations. The oral feedback by the students at the end of the semester was also very positive. However, the course was much more intensive compared to the previous courses in which I mostly followed the book, as I had to prepare a lot of additional materials related to questions such as, how do I make a *Power Point* presentation, what points do I need to consider in an oral presentation, and how can I improve my pronunciation by using text to speech software. Therefore, teachers must be ready to take on this extra workload if they want to use this type of pedagogic approach.

One of the most challenging aspects of teaching this type of course is getting that balance right between showing examples and giving students the freedom to express their creativity. It is important to ensure students understand that there are no limits to their creativity, so, what is presented to them in class are just suggestions. However, I have found that without concrete examples it is often difficult at first to communicate to the students what the goal of the lesson is and how the presentation could be structured. Nonetheless, we should also be mindful that showing too many possibilities in advance is detrimental to creativity, because it could lead to just copying other presentations. Teachers need to think hard about getting the right balance to enable student's autonomy and provide suitable support.

From my point of view, this project was a great success and I think the students enjoyed it the same way I did because every presentation was a new surprise, and the involvement of students was greater than before. Group presentations with the freedom of how to express themselves are a great way to include everybody and give everyone a place to show their specific talents, no matter what learning type they are or which level of English they have.

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