

Preparing Students for Presenting Abroad

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(2016年12月22日受理)

The recent move toward globalization of universities in Japan has forced those universities to think of new ways of internationalizing their campuses. One common way of doing this is to promote study abroad programs for their students. As a result, new courses have been developed to help these students prepare for their academic time abroad, writing reports and giving presentations in English, often in a format that is very different from what they would normally do in their home country. This paper will share data on the results of one such class, which utilized a type of learning cycle to assist students in improving their English presentation skills.

Key words: Study Abroad, Presentations, Learning Cycle

Introduction

After the introduction of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Technology's (MEXT) "Super Global University Initiative," universities across Japan have begun their own projects and devised plans designed to show the rest of the country that they are working to become "Global" in their own way. One way that some universities pursue is the introduction of study abroad programs, in the hope that students will reach out internationally to promote their university. Unfortunately, it has been found that often students participating in these study abroad programs "are not always linguistically and culturally prepared to optimize their learning opportunities at the foreign site" (Goldoni, 2015, p. 1). It has been suggested by Goldoni (2015) that differences in learning experiences abroad may be due to three factors: how learners choose to use their time abroad; how capable they are of networking and creating their own social networks; how they interact with the community and how they "interpret the local practices and the various socio-cultural manifestations" (p. 3). In creating a class to prepare students for presenting in an academic

context abroad, it was this third point that the researchers felt would benefit the participants the most. It was a need to prepare the participants to present according to international practices that led the researchers to look at instruction through a learning cycle.

Learning Cycle and Presentation Skills

There has been much research done concerning experiential learning and what is known as Kolb's Learning Cycle (Chan, 2012; Moon, 2005; Smith & Knapp, 2011; Stokes-Eley, 2007), and this cycle has been described in a number of ways. The general idea, however, can be understood by examining Kolb's (1984) explanation of his Learning Theory itself: "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." Learning cycles continue from this idea in stating that this process does not end upon transformation of the experience, but is continuous. Kolb's model involves a four stage cycle involving a concrete experience, a reflective observation, an abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In other words it "requires the learner to experience, reflect, think and act in a cyclic process in response to the learning

situation and what is learnt” (Chan, 2012). All stages of this process are important for the whole, but for this study, the researchers focused particularly on the reflection, mostly because it seemed to be the least focused on in other classes the participants had taken when learning how to present (according to answers received from the questionnaire that will be described below).

Feedback and Practice

In other research on the use of learning cycles, it has been stated that “an important stage of Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory is reflection” (Stokes-Eley, 2007). It is this reflection period that allows the students to really explore what they are learning and to see whether or not they actually are learning the content. The current study used in-class feedback and practice to facilitate this reflection stage. According to Callender, Franco-Watkins, and Roberts (2016), the use of feedback “may be critical to improving performance and judgements” (p. 217), has been shown to help improve overconfidence (and from the same line of logic, under-confidence) when paired with incentives, and assists students in recognizing their own level of ability. However, the type of feedback provided is also an important item to consider, as general feedback is less effective than feedback that is both adaptive and addresses specific features required for the completion of the task. Further, it has been found that automatic feedback can guide student comprehension performance (Llorens, Vidal-Abarca, & Ceridan, 2016). With this in mind, the researchers decided to provide immediate feedback for student presentations with as much specific detail as possible.

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed to explore how students perceived the effectiveness of instruction in English presentation skills using a model similar to Kolb’s learning cycle. First, in what ways do the participants perceive their presentation

skills improving after the completion of the course? Second, how do the participants perceive the effectiveness of presenting in a group versus the effectiveness of presenting individually? Third, how did the use of the instructional model help students in improving their English presentation skills, particularly in relation to the inclusion of feedback and practice?

Method

Design

The study was performed over the course of a 15 week class, meeting twice a week for an hour and a half, which was designed to prepare students participating in a study abroad program for giving presentations and writing reports in their second language, English. The students were required to give 6 presentations, once every two weeks, on a subject related to each unit topic. Student presentations began as group presentations and gradually moved toward individual presentations, as is depicted in Figure 1 below. Students were taught presentation skills using learning cycle similar to Kolb’s Learning Cycle, in which students were asked to present (concrete experience), listen to feedback (reflective observation), practice (abstract conceptualization), and present again (active experimentation) using what they had learned.

At the end of the course, students were given a questionnaire to investigate student perceptions of their improvement in presenting in English, student analysis of the different types of presentation groupings performed during the course, and student opinions on the inclusion of feedback and practice for each presentation given during the course. The questionnaire was designed to give both qualitative and quantitative data, including 17 Likert scale items ranging from 1 to 6 (“strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”), 3 supplementary questions for participant background information concerning English presentations and feedback, and 2 open ended questions. The questionnaire was given in

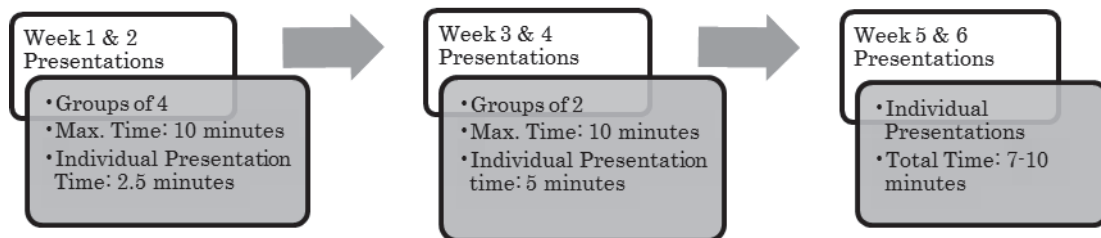


Figure 1. Format for student presentations.

English, tailored to fit the high proficiency levels of the participants. Participants were informed that the questionnaire was completely voluntary, confidential, and in no way would impact their grades in the course itself.

Participants

Participants for the study were limited by the number of students admitted by the study abroad program at a university in Hiroshima prefecture. The questionnaire was given to students at the end of their final class and those who chose to participate returned the completed form to the researchers that day. Names and student ID numbers were not collected. The questionnaire was given to a total of 8 students, all of whom returned the form, producing a total response rate of 100% ($n = 8$).

Of the 8 respondents, 4 were male and 4 were female. The respondents were in either their second ($n = 3$) or third year ($n = 5$) of schooling in their respective undergraduate programs. Student participation in the study abroad program was completely voluntary, so the students were actively participant during class time. Acceptance to the study abroad program required students to submit their most recent English proficiency scores, and most participants submitted TOEIC scores ranging from 580 to 680, with one individual submitting a TOEIC score of 725. This means that all students had a high English proficiency.

Results and Discussion

As stated above, responses were collected from a total of 8 students (a respondent rate of 100%).

The following section explores participant responses in relation to the three research questions: in what ways do the participants perceive their presentation skills improving after the completion of the course; how do the participants perceive the effectiveness of presenting in a group versus the effectiveness of presenting individually; how did the use of the instructional model help students in improving their English presentation skills, particularly in relation to the inclusion of feedback and practice?

Participant Perception of Presentation Skill Improvement

Data for this research question were collected from five Likert items as listed in Table 1 below. These items were developed to show how the participants of the class perceived their improvement in terms of giving presentations after the eight-week course. In respect to their general ability to present in English, all participants agreed that they did perceive improvement, with most participants (62.5%) agreeing strongly with this statement. The majority of the participants felt that they were prepared to present abroad, again with the majority strongly agreeing (50%).

Relating to participant perceptions of specific presentation skills, all students felt more confidence in their ability to make PowerPoint presentations (50% strongly agreeing) and in their ability to use academic skills (such as the use of within slide citations, referring to sources, explaining charts and graphs, establishing a problem, presenting in a logical order, drawing appropriate conclusions, and

closing the presentation) after taking the class. The majority of students felt more confidence in their oral presentation skills (87.5%), including improvement in their voice

(volume/tone/rhythm), eye contact, body language, reading/speaking, and transitioning/opening/closing statements.

Table 1.

Participant Presentation Improvements (N = 8)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Slightly agree	Slightly disagree
a) My ability to present in English has improved as a result of this course.	5 (62.5%)	3 (37.5%)	-	-
b) I am prepared to give presentations in English abroad.	4 (50%)	2 (25%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)
c) After this class, I am confident in my ability to make a PowerPoint presentation.	4 (50%)	1 (12.5%)	3 (37.5%)	-
d) After this class, I am confident in my oral presentation abilities.	-	4 (50%)	3 (37.5%)	1 (12.5%)
e) After this class, I am confident in my ability to use academic skills in my presentations.	1 (12.5%)	5 (62.5%)	2 (25%)	-

Table 2.

Participant Presentation Styles (N = 8)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Slightly agree	Slightly disagree	Disagree
a) Presenting as a group was a good learning experience.	4 (50%)	2 (25%)	2 (25%)	-	-
b) Presenting as a group was easy to organize.	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)	3 (37.5%)	2 (25%)	1 (12.5%)
c) Presenting as a group was fair in terms of the amount of work the group members completed.	2 (25%)	2 (25%)	3 (37.5%)	1 (12.5%)	-
d) Presenting as a group was a good way to transition into individual presentations.	2 (25%)	3 (37.5%)	3 (37.5%)	-	-
e) Presenting as a group more would have been good.	1 (12.5%)	3 (37.5%)	3 (37.5%)	1 (12.5%)	-
f) Moving from presentations with large groups gradually into individual presentations helped me to get used to longer presentation times.	4 (50%)	2 (25%)	2 (25%)	-	-

Group versus Individual Presentations

Data for this research question were collected from both responses to Likert items and short answer responses to the open-ended question regarding the use of group presentations in the class. The Likert items listed in Table 2 show how participants responded in regards to presenting in groups and whether they felt this group work assisted their own individual presentation ability. Participants were given the opportunity to supplement these responses with further details in the open-ended response.

The data taken from Table 2 shows not only that participants felt that group presentations were beneficial, but that they also helped to prepare the students for their individual presentations. As directly concerning presenting in groups, 50% of the students strongly agreed that presenting as a group was a good learning experience, 87.5% of the students felt that presenting as a group was fair in terms of the amount of work, and 87.5% of the students felt that they would have benefitted from presenting in groups even more. As for how the group presentations helped with transition to individual presentations, all participants agreed that this was a good way to not only prepare them for individual presentations, but to also get them accustomed to longer presentation times (50% strongly agreeing).

One item did produce a majority of negative responses, and to explore the reason behind this, the researchers can turn to the open-ended responses. When asked whether they agree with the statement that presenting

as a group was easy to organize, 37.5% of the participants responded that they did not believe it was easy. Participant responses to the qualitative question explain these data in more detail. One respondent explained that “it was difficult for us to get together outside of class time...everyone’s department is different, so there’s nothing we can do about it.”

Feedback and Practice

The final research question explored how the participants felt the inclusion of feedback and practice in the instructional cycle helped their eventual final presentations. The data once again came from responses to Likert type items and open-ended qualitative responses. In terms of feedback, all participants agreed that the feedback was easy to understand (50% strongly agreeing, 50% agreeing), was easy to incorporate into their following presentations (62.5% strongly agreeing), and that it was fair (62.5% strongly agreeing).

In response to questions about the inclusion of practice in the instructional cycle, all participants agreed that the practice helped them to prepare for their second presentation (75% strongly agreeing), and that the practice helped in improving their presentation skills overall (50% strongly agreeing). As is reflected in the open-ended item asking for participant views of the feedback and practice, there was a slight disagreement (25%) with the statement that the practice time was adequate. Participant responses were, “I want more time (especially individual presentations).”

Table 3.

Participant Views of Use of Feedback and Practice (N = 8)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Slightly agree	Slightly disagree
a) The feedback was easy to understand.	4 (50%)	4 (50%)	-	-
b) The feedback was easy to incorporate into my next presentation.	5 (62.5%)	3 (37.5%)	-	-
c) The feedback was fair.	5 (62.5%)	2 (25%)	1 (12.5%)	-
d) The practice helped my next presentation.	6 (75%)	2 (25%)	-	-
e) The practice time was adequate.	3 (37.5%)	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)	2 (25%)
f) The practice helped my presentation skills grow.	4 (50%)	3 (37.5%)	1 (12.5%)	-

Limitations and Implications

There are a few limitations to the current study, the foremost of which involving the amount of data collected. This questionnaire was given only to those students who participated in the study abroad preparation class and were actively involved in the learning cycle developed to improve their presentation skills. As the class size was restricted by the department that created this program, the data was also restricted to only 8 respondents. It would benefit the data pool and further iterations of this study to gather at least ten times this number of responses. The second limitation is that this questionnaire was only given to students at one university in Japan, and as such does not necessarily represent what may be appropriate for all students at all universities. The final limitation is that the study only explores student reactions to their experience in the class itself. This research would benefit greatly from a further survey given after the participant study abroad experience, to see if they felt this type of preparation truly helped them during their time abroad.

As the current data suggests, many students felt that the time spent preparing to present abroad was worthwhile, and the type of

instruction they received helped them to improve their presentation skills. The inclusion of feedback and practice before beginning the presentation cycle anew was also received affirmatively, suggesting that such courses should strongly consider including these parts of the learning cycle in their instruction. Further, a gradual move from presenting in groups to individual presentations may help these students to become accustomed to longer presentation times and the idea of presenting individually itself.

Conclusions

This paper investigated the results of a class designed to prepare students going on a study abroad program for presenting in English, utilizing a type of learning cycle for instruction. In order to do this, three research questions were developed and questionnaire data was analyzed in relation to them. The first question explored how the participants perceived their presentation skills improving after the completion of the course. It was determined that, overall, students felt that the presentation course and the method of instruction used both prepared them to give presentations abroad and improved specific

presentation skills (oral skills, use of academic skills, and creation of presentation visuals). The second question looked at how participants perceived the effectiveness of presenting in a group versus the effectiveness of presenting individually. The responses indicated that students felt that presenting in groups was more preferable, but did a good job of preparing them for individual presentations and improving the length of their presentations. Finally, the study explored how the use of the learning cycle model helped students in improving their English presentation skills, particularly in relation to the inclusion of feedback and practice (the reflection stage). The responses indicated that students felt feedback was not only easy to understand, but also that it helped them to practice for their following presentations. These responses indicate positive support for the use of a learning cycle for teaching students to present abroad.

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