The Use of Note Cards in English Presentation Classes

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研究ノート

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Abstract

The purpose of this brief paper is to analyze the use of note cards in giving presentations and look at how they can be used more effectively in an English Presentation class taught at a Japanese university. Although most textbooks about presentations do not cover note cards explicitly, the author argues that using note cards can help students' language ability as well as improving planning and delivery skills. However, for students to give good presentations using note cards, they need explicit instruction as well as sufficient preparation and practice time in class.

Keywords: English presentation, note cards

1. Introduction

Note cards are a tool commonly used by presenters. When preparing for a speech or presentation, presenters have to decide whether to use notes, in the form of cards or electronic notes, read from a script or present without notes. Whilst the latter is often regarded as the ideal way to deliver a presentation, it requires a significant amount of preparation time to fully memorize a script. Reading from a script is the easiest for the presenter but can lead to poor delivery due to reduced eye contact with the audience and a monotonous tone of voice. Note cards allow for a slightly lesser degree of preparation than memorization, and a back-up in the event that nerves affect the ability to recall the memorized speech. Therefore, for Japanese L2 learners presenting in English, using note cards would seem a better strategy than reading or full memorization. However, the use of note cards rarely features in textbooks focusing on English Presentation at university level. This paper will cover how note cards were used in the author's own presentation course and to discuss whether Japanese students should be encouraged to make and use

them for their English-language presentations.

2. English Presentation courses at Koeki University

There are two English Presentation (EP) courses at Koeki University – EP I and EP II. They are elective classes for 2nd- to 4th-year students and are taught as quarterly classes with thirteen 105-minute lessons each. Students must pass EP I before taking EP II. For 2018, there were 28 participants for each course of whom 25 attended both courses. The majority of participants were on the International Liberal Arts Course; as well as EP I and II these students took a number of other EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses such as Academic Writing and Intensive TOEIC.

3. Course materials

This course was taught using a textbook, *Present Yourself 2* (Gershon, 2015a)*.* The textbook features an introductory unit and six main units which focus on different topics, such as talking about famous people and presenting survey data. English language input is provided by the thematic content and by the words and phrases specifically related to aspects of presentations, such as openers and closers or invitations for audience questions. Each unit also covers presentation skills such as posture, eye contact, visual aids and the use of note cards. Accompanying the textbook were online videos both demonstrating and analyzing presentation techniques. The course materials were supplemented by handouts from the teacher aimed at scaffolding the content; some TED talks were also shown during the class as examples of real presentations. The textbook was used for both EP I and EP II classes in the 2018 academic year; the introductory unit and Units 1 and 2 were covered for EP I and Units 3 and 4 were completed in EP II.

4. Textbook coverage of note cards

The use of note cards is a feature of the *Present Yourself 2* textbook. Making effective note cards is a key presentation technique in the first unit. Note card tips, such as "Highlight all key numbers by underlining or coloring them" (p. 43) are given in every unit. Furthermore, presenters in the demonstration videos are usually seen referring to

note cards or tablets. The textbook justification for using note cards is partly due to the difficulty of memorizing a full presentation in a foreign language and also because if students use a script instead, they tend to read large parts of it without looking up, which can lead to a monotonous intonation and affects the interaction with the audience (Gershon, 2015b, p. xiii). This leads to the question of how other textbooks treat the subject of note cards, and if, indeed, the use of note cards is beneficial for students learning how to present.

In order to ascertain whether the use of note cards is covered in other textbooks, an analysis was done of three textbooks which focus on presentations and are aimed at university students studying English as a foreign or second language. The textbooks examined were as follows:

Dynamic Presentations (2007) by M. Hood (Kinseido)

English Presentations Today (2018) by C. Pond (Nan'un-do)

Ready to Present (2019) by H. Bartelen & M. Kostiuk (Cengage Learning)

The analysis showed that in only one of the textbooks reviewed were note cards explicitly mentioned (and then only once). Each textbook differed in its approach to preparation, from asking students to prepare outlines (Dynamic Presentations) to providing space for students to write out a full script (Ready to Present). *Dynamic Presentations* encourages outlining; the notes in the teacher's manual suggest that higher level students should be able to present just from the outline whereas lower-level students may need to write a script, memorize it and use the outline notes as a back-up when they present. In *English Presentations Today* there are Presentation Templates in the Appendix which encourage students to write their speeches in three sections: Introduction, Body and Conclusion. Each of these sections contains further sub-sections and could be used to write an outline or a full script. On the other hand, *Ready to Present* directs students to write a full script or detailed notes for their presentation in the spaces at the end of each unit. These scripts can then be used for the presentation, using the model described as "Read, Look up, Present." However, this textbook does also include a guide to using notes which gives examples of how to make note cards (pp. 84-5).

5. Discussion

In discussing the use of note cards, one should perhaps address two questions: (1) Are note cards useful tools for presenting? (2) Should the use of note cards be incorporated into a presentation course for Japanese university students?

As regards the first question, the use of note cards over scripts is often encouraged as a tool to help presenters. Chris Anderson, the curator of TED talks, recommends that presenters memorize their speech but says "if you don't have time to learn a speech thoroughly … , don't try. Go with bullet points on note cards" (Anderson, 2013, p. 8). For TED talks, reading approaches, that is, reading from a script or a teleprompter, are forbidden as they distance the presenter from the audience (Anderson, 2013, p. 7). Some university websites in the UK also recommend the use of notes when presenting. The University of Leicester suggests, "Find a way of making notes to support your presentation style. The most common form of note making is to use index cards. These can be read at a glance. Use them as visual prompts to guide you through your presentation" (University of Leicester, n.d.). The University of Worcester's guide to making oral presentations advises, "It may help you to condense your notes onto presentation cards, summarising the key topics from each section. You can then use them as prompts to guide you through your presentation." (University of Worcester, 2016).

These are all guidelines for native speakers, but is there justification for asking Japanese students of English to use them? There are two approaches to take when using note cards. One is to ask the students to present from notes without writing a script first. This is the approach taken in the integrated-skills textbook, *Stretch 2* (Stempleski, 2014), and is perhaps more suitable for advanced learners as it requires a high degree of oral productive ability. The other approach is to ask the students to write a complete script, synthesize the information into key points and then make note cards for these key points. This removes the necessity for students to completely memorize their speech thus reducing preparation time. The benefits of using cards as opposed to a script when presenting are the greater fluency of speech and interaction with the audience, the increased capacity to use hands to make gestures and the removal of the temptation to obscure the presenter's face with their paper (in the author's experience this is a common

problem with students when they have a large piece of paper from which they read). The further benefit is that the process of making the note cards facilitates awareness of the structure of their speech. Therefore, one can argue that using note cards can help improve language awareness as well as delivery.

6. Results

In the author's classes, the students learned how to make effective note cards by following the textbook advice, were provided with card during the lessons, and were encouraged – but not compelled – to use note cards in all of the presentations they gave in class. The results were mixed. The majority of the students used note cards or notes on their smartphones while they presented but some students were unable to resist reading from a script. The author observed that note cards were used more effectively (in terms of better eye contact with the audience and more natural intonation of speech) in the absence of visual aids. When the students presented using slides, there was a greater tendency to read either from a script or from the information on the slides themselves.

7. Implications for Future Classes

To improve the use of note cards in future classes the author is considering the following. First, to ask students to submit copies of their note cards or computerized notes on completion of their assessed presentations, of which there are three per course. It is hoped that this will lead the students to memorize their speeches more, if they will receive less marks for writing too much on their cards, and may even encourage some to present without writing a full script first. Second, to increase the amount of class time dedicated to presentation practice. On reflection the author considers that by simplifying parts of the textbook for lower-ability learners and providing more templates for presentation scripts, less classroom time would need to be devoted to understanding the textbook content and so the amount of presentation time could be increased.

8. Conclusion

In order to give good presentations, students need to prepare what they are going to

say and practice how to say it. The practice of preparing note cards makes students synthesize the information in their speech. This can add an extra step in class compared to a writing, reading and memorization approach, but the use of note cards during the presentations will aid delivery and reduce anxiety. The author's experiences showed, however, that some students are reluctant to give a presentation without the safety net of a full script so more time needs to be devoted to rehearsing so that students can become more confident when they present in front of others.

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