

Using Presentation Software to Enhance Language Learning

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In this paper we report on two uses of presentation software in our EFL courses: one as a tool for oral reporting and the other as a writing tool. In both cases students use the four language skills actively. They read source materials, discuss their ideas with their peers and teacher, write them and then share their writing with others. In both uses, students function as "doers and creators" and as such are motivated to invest time and energy into their tasks.

Computer applications are now being used in many school disciplines and changing teaching methodologies throughout the curriculum. We have been using computers in our EFL courses for many years and have employed a variety of computer applications and methodologies. We agree with Murphy-Judy (1997) that "the readers whom foreign language education produces now...should not be trained in defunct literacy practices, but rather should be prepared to function in this new world...Literacy, today, is increasingly electronic and telecommunicational."

Many presentation software applications are in use. In the Division of Foreign Languages at Tel Aviv University, we use Microsoft PowerPoint. PowerPoint is a computer tool for creating on-screen multimedia presentations or overhead transparencies. The program helps prepare an outline, slides, speaker's notes and handouts for the audience. Even though this tool was developed for business presentations, we have found it to be very useful in the language classroom.

In this paper we report on two uses of PowerPoint that we have applied in the classroom: one as a presentation tool in an innovative skill integration task, and the other as a novel writing tool. In both cases students can use language actively for speaking, reading, writing and listening.

After observing hundreds of tertiary level EFL students using PowerPoint, we feel this tool allows students to experience a world of real language opportunity. First, students read source materials. Then, they articulate and crystallize their ideas through interaction with their peers and teacher. Finally, they write them on computer slides and share their writing with others. From our observations we learned that students derive great satisfaction from this task and take pride in their creations. With the promise of having something attractive for themselves and to show others, students are motivated to invest time and energy into the quality of their English tasks.

Software-enhanced Oral Presentations in Language Classes

Even though the main focus of our courses is on the comprehension of authentic academic texts, students are required to do oral presentations. In the past, we did not specify a uniform presentation methodology. We did recommend speaking to the audience rather than reading from paper. Most students chose to use index cards or notes for consultation while speaking, without visuals for the audience, while some used overhead transparencies or other visuals along with their notes. Presentation software seemed to us a modern alternative to previous presentation modes. We decided to require use of presentation software for students' oral presentations, since we felt this would enhance the language learning that takes place in the process of preparation and presentation. In this paper we report on the use of this innovative tool. We have not attempted an empirical comparison of the two modes.

Both in the past with oral presentations and now with computer presentations, students were informed in advance of the criteria by which their presentations would be evaluated. Typical criteria (relevant for both modes) include organization and coherence, synthesis

and personal contribution, quality of introduction and conclusion, reflection of comprehension.

Language learning seems to occur most effectively when students have opportunities to use language for real purposes. Purposeful activities help bridge the gap between the artificial classroom setting and the real world. The process of preparing and giving oral presentations is such a purposeful activity in that it entails finding information, reflecting upon that information, interpreting it and creating something new. The process culminates in the sharing of the created product with others, which serves as a springboard for meaningful interaction.

Comparison with Purely Oral Presentations

It is not within the scope of this paper to compare use of presentation software with more traditional presentation aids, since in the past, most of our students chose to do purely oral presentations. After using PowerPoint with students for two years, we have found a number of differences both in process and in product between computer presentations and purely oral presentations. In the first place, there is a very important motivational factor when using presentation software. Students can choose the background and foreground colors, texture, design, layout, font and graphics for each slide thereby personalizing their presentations. The lengthy involvement in the integration of content and form adds value to the experiential language learning process. These observations are consistent with the results reported by Phinney (1996) on a study that she and Khouri conducted in 1992. In this study, students were given a choice of doing an electronic final paper or a "traditional paper." The results showed that students who did the electronic paper enjoyed it very much, spent more time on the project than the others, and seemed to be more involved in their product.

Secondly, when students have to write something that their audience not only hears, but sees, they are much more committed to the quality of their work - both content and form. The spoken word is ephemeral; the written word remains. As a result, students revise their presentations, and it seems this revision and recycling process enhances language learning.

Thirdly, in purely oral presentations, even if the teacher gives organization guidelines, students can easily digress and drift. Because of the limited writing area in each slide, students have to condense the information and limit their lists to salient points. When giving the presentation they expand on them orally. In addition, the screen by screen progression in a slide show induces students to impose organization on their presentations.

In the fourth place, there is a clear difference between the preparation of a purely oral presentation and the production of computer slides. The computer presentation, in which students may include graphics, sound, and even video in addition to textual material is something tangible, a true production of their own.

Finally, students using the computer for their presentations say that it gives them a new way of communicating ideas and expressing themselves. We have observed that students produce in accordance with their learning preferences. For example, some students make very minimal computer presentations and expand on them considerably in their talks. Other students spend a great deal of time and effort decorating their slides and speak less. The flexibility of the medium of presentation allows different types of learners to express themselves in ways they feel comfortable with.

An additional difference is related to the class as an audience. Due to the fact that the listeners can more easily follow their peers' presentations and react to them, there is a better utilization of classroom time.

Activation of all Four Language Skills

In today's global village, listening, speaking and writing skills in English are essential for communication. As a result, even though our courses focus on reading, we consciously introduce tasks that activate all four language skills. "The fact that the learner will eventually use the knowledge gained only for reading is largely irrelevant. What is of most concern is how the learner can learn that knowledge most effectively. If the effectiveness of the process can be enriched by the use of other skills, then that is what should be done." (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) The use of presentation software in a friendly, non-threatening classroom atmosphere encourages use of all four language skills.

- **Reading** - In our courses, students first read a number of academic articles on a topic of their choice, knowing that they will have to present their conclusions in class. They analyze the articles critically, compare and contrast the ideas presented, synthesize and evaluate. Finally, they select highlights for inclusion in their presentations. This process is comparable to the process students go through when reading in order to write a paper. In both cases, reading for the purpose of transmitting

information requires clarification of ideas and expression of those ideas in such a way that others will understand.

- **Writing** - When composing slides, students have to condense the information they have gathered so as to present only the main points. In this type of 'minimalistic' writing, key concepts and words have to be retained, while the 'chaff' is discarded. This information reduction process is in itself a difficult but very profitable language task. While writing a minimal list of points on the screen, students can organize a suitable sequence for the points and divide the points into slides. At the same time, students need to take into consideration slide layout. A slide cannot be too cluttered, the size of the font has to be large enough, and the location of the elements on the screen has to be balanced. All this forces students to re-read, re-evaluate and re-write what they have written again and again.

Writing for presenting differs from writing a paper. From our observation, commitment seems to be greater when the final product is to be shown on a large screen and read by a number of readers. This type of situation is similar to that described by Murphy-Judy (1997) when referring to web-chats in which proper usage and spelling are all the more "real" since they no longer "involve just a finicky teacher with a red pen." In addition to commitment, task authenticity has to be considered. Presenting with slides is probably a more authentic task than writing a paper to be read only by the teacher, since academic writing in the real world assumes multiple readers.

- **Speaking** - The material that students have read, organized and summarized now has to be presented orally so as to convey a clear message to an audience of peers. Just as they would in a purely oral presentation, students have to 'rehearse' the pronunciation of difficult words, time themselves, and make sure that they have all the English lexicon needed for their speech. The added value of computer presentations is that the repeated revisions of their slides (to be seen by all of their peers) give students extensive exposure to the content of their 'talk', helping them remember what they want to say and giving them more self-confidence. Many students have had no experience speaking in front of an audience in their native language. The computer mode seems to minimize their tension and feeling of insecurity when having to speak in English.
- **Listening** -The class now listens to the oral presentation. Listening to a non-native speaker is not easy, and visual elements facilitate comprehension. We give the listeners a task requiring them to write down three new facts that they learned about the subject and one question to ask the speaker at the end of the presentation. When listening for a purpose, the listening is focused and thus perhaps easier.

In a sense, we could call the student's task of preparing and giving a computer presentation an "accordion task", as it involves extensive reading, information reduction for screen writing, and information expansion for the purpose of presenting orally. In this use of presentation software, the role of the computer is that of a tool. The student functions as a researcher, developer and presenter, while the whole class functions as an audience in an academic lecture. The teacher functions as a facilitator, teaching students how to use the tool, guiding them in the choice of topic, providing guidelines for preparing and giving the presentations, selecting and explaining the criteria for evaluating the presentations, guiding students in the process of preparation, and helping them with revision. The teacher also evaluates the presentations and gives a grade.

We believe that presentation software combined with integrated content based tasks provide opportunities for meaningful communication in the classroom. We have observed real involvement and language use resulting from focus on content rather than on language. While creating esthetic presentations in English, students use the language productively and enjoyably. In short, we have found that this process of turning input into comprehensible output is a total language learning experience.

Students' Attitudes

At the end of the semester we administered an attitude questionnaire to find out how students in advanced ESAP (English for Special Academic Purposes) courses felt about working with the presentation software. Table 1 presents the results of the questionnaire.

Table 1: Results of Student Attitude Questionnaire (N = 67)

%Agree	%Disagree	Questionnaire item
84	16	helped me organize my presentation
80	20	allowed me to easily change and revise my work
79	21	helped me focus on main points

78	22	helped me create something of my own
70	30	was a challenge
70	30	gave me a new way of communicating ideas
69	31	will be useful to me in the future
68	32	was fun
68	32	made it easy to integrate ideas from different sources
65	35	was worth the time and effort
64	36	helped me understand my classmates' presentations
61	39	helped me make connections between ideas
58	42	was motivating
52	48	helped me improve my English

The results showed that most students felt the use of the presentation software was worthwhile. A large majority felt that it helped them organize the information and focus on main points, skills that are particularly important when reading and presenting in a foreign language. The lower agreement to "helped me improve my English" may reflect the more general feeling among students in ESAP courses that focus on content does not necessarily improve their language skills.

At the end of the questionnaire, there was room left for comments. Not all students wrote comments, but from those that did, we learned that some preferred this presentation project to a written assignment. Others said that preparing a presentation was fun and interesting and were glad to have learned a new tool. One student even said that the lesson where she learned how to use the software was the most enjoyable English lesson she had ever had. Some students, however, raised problems. One student said that when you don't know how to use the program, the task is too difficult. Some students felt that the time spent trying to learn this new tool would have been better spent working on the content of the presentation.

Based on the results of the student questionnaire, we decided to continue using PowerPoint for oral presentations, but to offer reluctant students the option to use regular overhead transparencies or handouts instead.

Presentation Software for Guided Writing: An Innovative Application for an Existing Tool

In the ultimate stage of the reading process, the reader connects the new information to his/her existing cognitive structures. Chamot & O'Malley (1987) claim that relating new information to previous information is one of the most powerful learning strategies, and that writing forces the learner to do this.

Accordingly, in recent years we have included some writing tasks in our reading courses for two main reasons. Firstly, when students have to write about what they read, they need to interact more intensively with the written text, thus having to process the text in greater depth. According to Zamel (1992), many people presume that reading is what makes it possible for us to write, and they don't consider writing a means for understanding the text. Zamel claims that one can find one's reactions and responses to text by reflecting on them through w. Hansen (1987, cited in Zamel, 1992) says that writing needs to be recognized as "the foundation of reading" and the "most basic way to learn about reading". "Given the interdependence of reading and writing, the implication is that these two language processes cannot be separated" (Zamel, 1992).

In the second place, English being the language of international communication, it seems that writing skills in English should be fostered in any EFL classroom regardless of the focus of the course. The increasing written communication with other countries made possible by the use of electronic means strengthens the need for writing skills.

This past year we experimented with the use of PowerPoint for guided writing. Here we do not refer to guided writing as a step toward oral presentations, but as an activity aimed at improving writing skills in the lower levels. The writing lesson is developed on the computer by preparing a number of pre-set screens, adding graphics (or leaving space for the students to add their own graphics), guidelines, tips and examples for the writing to be done on each screen. Students write and then print out their work.

PowerPoint has two ways of creating an outline:

1. Outline templates according to type of writing or presentation the user wishes to do - e.g. recommending a strategy, reporting

progress, overview of a project, preparing a personal home page, generic, or teacher-inserted outline. The automatic outline helps the student get started by providing ideas and a possible organization. The student is free to follow, modify or ignore the suggested outline. This mode sensitizes students to the importance of hierarchical organization in writing.

2. Students can open a new PowerPoint file and create their own outline. We felt that the flexible and motivating nature of PowerPoint would allow different styles of writers to use it productively. Some writers prefer preparing a formal outline in the preparation stage. This allows them to organize their ideas before beginning to write. Both outlining modes mentioned above are suitable for these students. Since PowerPoint has a "slide sorter" that allows a number of screens to be seen simultaneously and re-ordered after all the slides have been prepared, the student need not adhere to the outline.

Other writers prefer the free style of putting their ideas into writing and then imposing some kind of structural organization on them. A student quoted in Zamel's research (1982) asked, "How can I write an outline when my ideas are flying back and forth?" PowerPoint slides can be treated as modules, each of which contains a specific point or idea. These modules can be used by the free-style writer as note cards that can easily be shuffled around and ordered in the slide sorter.

Comparison to Writing with a Word Processor

The following generalizations apply to an instructional situation in which the writers are learning how to write and can benefit from the structure, guidance and 'protective environment' of presentation software. Proficient writers, on the other hand, may feel more comfortable with a 'blank page' on screen.

Writing with a word processor and writing with presentation software have several advantages over writing by hand. With both kinds of programs, the writing process constitutes a "continuous spiral" (Phinney, 1996) of writing, revising and editing. Much has been written about the importance of revision in the process of writing. "...revision should become the main component of writing instruction" (Zamel, 1982). When using computers to write, on-line revision is easy, and the file can be saved for further revision. Students can easily move information from one place to another for the purpose of re-organization. Both with word processors and with presentation software the student has the possibility of using a spellchecker, which can prove particularly helpful to foreign language learners. Liou (1993) found that "the spelling checker is indeed a very sophisticated and powerful ESL writing tool." With both systems, students can view more than one window at a time, and thus compare versions, imitate a model and even cut and paste from one window to another. In addition, at any stage in the writing process students can easily print out a legible copy of their work for themselves, their peers or their teacher.

Certain characteristics of PowerPoint make it even more suitable than a word processor for learning how to write at the lower levels of EFL. The tool is easy to learn and use. The environment is friendly, attractive and contained: the student sees one slide at a time (i.e. limited writing space). All of these features make using the program a non-threatening experience. The effect of working in such a secure, contained writing space could be referred to as the "womb effect." PowerPoint is structured in nature: each screen can be devoted to a different aim or general point. To inspire the students, the teacher can add specific graphics, which remain in place and do not move around as they write. In addition, the students' writing task is easier when writing tips and guidelines are available in the exact place where they need them.

We must stress the importance of easily producing an esthetic piece of writing even at very low levels of language proficiency. The printed page, even without much writing on it, looks like a finished product. Students can print out two or three sentences on one slide, which may have a frame, background decoration, and an illustrative picture, thus filling up the space. The appearance of this printed page in itself can boost the beginning writer's self-confidence.

The implementation of PowerPoint for writing in our reading courses has proven to be very positive. "Just as reading provides 'comprehensible input' for writing, writing can contribute comprehensible input for reading" (Zamel, 1992). Grabe & Kaplan (1996) mention the issue of writing instruction in content-based courses at the tertiary level in which writing is taught as a means to interact with the material and with other students. We found this to be true in our first experience. Students interacted intensively with the text, with their peers in a pre-writing discussion, and with their partners, while writing in pairs. Class discussion preceding writing helps students become familiar with the necessary vocabulary and helps them begin to shape their own ideas on the topic. Zamel (1982) reports that all of the students who participated in her study talked about the importance of classroom discussion related to a particular topic and how these discussions helped them delineate their ideas.

Just as in the first use discussed, in this novel use of PowerPoint for guided writing, the role of the computer is that of a tool. The

student functions as writer and editor, developer and presenter. The class can function as peer reviewers and learn in the process. In this unique educational setup, the teacher functions as a provider of real-time feedback and as a sounding board, guiding students as they think and write. When students finally print out their work, the teacher provides additional formative evaluation to be used when revising.

The use of presentation software for guided writing was first tried out this year. Both students and teachers in the lower level classes felt that the experience was positive. One student, for example, said that for the first time in his life, he too would be able to show his family "something nice in English." On the other hand, the experience in two advanced classes in which we tried this out was quite different. In these classes, students were more proficient and had more to say in English, and they felt frustrated by the "contained environment" of the slides as opposed to the "blank page of the word processor."

Methodological Tips and Conclusion

It is important to point out that both uses of PowerPoint described in this paper, the student functions as a "doer and creator." The student actively makes decisions and implements them as he pleases. The feedback he gets is from his peers and teacher - human reactions rather than "machine reactions."

Both uses - student presentations and guided writing - can be implemented individually or in pairs. We allow students to choose the work mode they prefer, and have found that most students choose to work in pairs. By working with partners, students learn to think through their ideas together. They do this by brainstorming and discussing the ideas they have read until they arrive at agreed-upon conclusions. "Students can produce meaning from a text by working together in pairs or small groups. Team reading in a lab setting holds great potential for encouraging reading as a social production of meaning with the added benefit of promoting oral expression in the target language" (Murphy-Judy, 1997). Writing in pairs also has advantages, "Writing is both a social and a personal process... writers should be encouraged to interact with other writers" (Phinney, 1996).

In the working world, team work and presentation skills are seen as essential. "Collaboration and team effort are the norm rather than the exception." (Phinney, 1996) In the classroom, collaborative techniques have a positive effect on social integration and on the negotiation of meaning, which in turn positively affect learning. The product of a team effort "is always greater than that which any single student could produce" (Phinney, 1996). By allowing students to work in pairs or small groups, we turn the classroom into a laboratory in which students can prepare for the real world.

In this paper we reported on our experience in a tertiary education context. We think that similar techniques are possible at all levels. EFL/ESL teachers may wish to investigate the use of presentation software for skill integration at other levels.

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