

# A Genre Approach to Oral Presentations

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## Introduction

Standing in front of a group and presenting a talk can be a daunting task for even the most confident of us, and even more so for language learners. What is the best way to approach oral presentations with Japanese university students? When sifting through my class's needs analysis results, it became obvious that many of my students may eventually be called on to give oral presentations. The target contexts include international research forums, conferences and post-graduate study abroad in English-medium institutions.

## Theoretical Framework

In an article by King on students at a Taiwanese University there appear to be several similar features. In particular, "oral presentations are a face-threatening activity" (p1), and "speech anxiety and limited presentation skills are the major problems that lead to learners' oral presentation failures" (King:2). Certainly having learners share their worries and concerns before tackling their oral presentations has proved a useful step, as has eliciting from the learners prior experience of presenting to a group.

When we use language, we employ particular genre, which are like pre-determined linguistic formulae for achieving an outcome. Therefore, learners need to be equipped with these formulae in order to communicate effectively, in this case in the context of an oral presentation. Taking the cue from Halliday's genre approach, analyzing generic staging of various texts (in this case the oral presentation genre) is an essential step in the so-called teaching-learning cycle (Hammond et al:17), consisting of four stages:

- Stage 1: Building knowledge of the field (learners discuss field, tenor and mode features of oral presentations)
- Stage 2: Modelling of the text (teacher gives model oral presentation to class), learners then analyse staging
- Stage 3: Joint construction of the text (learners work together on developing their talks)
- Stage 4: Independent construction of the text (learners give their presentation to the class)

Whilst not following this cycle to the letter, it certainly underpins most classroom activities I do with learners, and an understanding of Stage 2 (Modelling of the Text) is absolutely imperative.

## Procedure

Rather than devoting an entire semester to this genre, I instead include several steps throughout the semester to gradually develop skills for oral presentations, as a component of our negotiated syllabus. Following is an outline of the process and product of the oral presentations component of the Advanced English communication classes. I am indebted to my former workplace colleagues at the University of Western Sydney's language centre (SWIC) for the overall idea for the assessment grid and procedure for preparing students for oral presentations.

## Fluency Practice

During the semester, learners are given three minutes, then two minutes, then one minute to speak on any topic of their choosing. The learners are instructed to focus on fluency rather than grammatical accuracy. This requires overt explanation, as learners are generally not familiar with the differences between these two skills. After the initial three minutes with a partner, the pairs are rearranged and learners asked to speak about the same topic in two minutes, then with a new partner in one minute. The feedback from this preparatory activity is immediately positive ? all feel they really need and enjoy the opportunity to speak uninterrupted for a set period of time.

# Class Handout

The next focus is the staging of a typical oral presentation. This is achieved by giving learners a copy of the actual assessment handout (Appendix A) to be used for final grades. The length of the presentation depends on the level of the learners. The space to the right of the table is left blank on purpose for learners to jot down useful words and phrases to use in their talks, in line with the various stages in the oral presentation genre. This section of the procedure needs quite a deal of explanation and elicitation, so we spend most of one lesson going over the assessment sheet. Below are comments pertaining to each section as presented on the handout.

## Field, Tenor and Mode

Field (area of vocabulary to be used), tenor (register) and mode (oral versus written language) of oral presentations are identified. Some or all of the following activities can be done in class.

- Learners are asked to share experiences of prior oral presentations, how they felt, what they talked about and so on. This can be done as pair work, or if numbers permit as a general group discussion.
- Attention needs to be drawn to the differences between spoken and written language, and mention made of the habit some students have of pulling chunks of text from the internet or from books. How interesting is that for the audience? More advanced learners can have a mini-lesson on nominalization ? the fact that written text contains sentences with very long and complex nominal phrases acting as the subject, whereas spoken text does not. Learners are presented with a short task to convert a sentence such as the one below into a more "written" type of sentence:

Prime Minister Koizumi ANNOUNCED today that there will be a new tax on company waste. He HOPES it will encourage larger corporations to play a more responsible role in reducing waste products in this country.

The verbs announced and hopes are capitalized in order to show their position in the sentence, near the front, as is common with spoken text. Learners are then asked to use passives and also to make a larger noun phrase as subject of the sentence, and to finally combine the sentences into one. Their results should be something like this (with a little teacher help.):

In order to encourage larger corporations to play a more responsible role in reducing waste products in this country, a new tax on company waste was today ANNOUNCED by Prime Minister Koizumi.

- In order to illustrate how most spoken text is rather ungrammatical, learners can transcribe a simple transcription of someone speaking on the radio (or yourself if all else fails). Laborious, but worth it for making a point.

The remainder of the "language" and "physical features" sections of the handout can then be discussed, with examples and explanations where necessary.

- Learners should be made aware of the various features of pronunciation. By allowing learners to focus on smaller, more manageable segments of language, they feel there is more room for improvement rather than focusing on sound articulation alone, as is often their experience.
- Learners can also share their ideas about some memorable speeches ? because they were good or because they were bad! This often ties in with the "physical features" section of the handout.

## Modelling of the Text

The teacher can then present a model talk to the class. After asking the learners for gist and main ideas, the staging of the presentation is analyzed using the handout (see "genre" section).

- Each stage is discussed in pairs or as a whole group, and appropriate words and phrases written on the board.
- Lower level learners are given sample phrases to match each stage, for example:
  - State topic clearly--The topic of my presentation today is ...
  - Enumerate or signal each point-- Furthermore, in addition, in contrast

## Joint Construction

- In pairs learners can work on their oral presentations and peer check each other's outlines. I generally suggest learners choose a topic from their area of research, and they have to email me their proposed topics so I can check whether there is enough "meat" in them.
- Learners are discouraged from giving a narrative or report style presentation, but rather developing a talk with a few issues ? points for and against.
- The teacher can also be a participant in the joint construction stage, giving help and advice with edits and drafts where required.

## Individual Construction

- Presentations are given during class, timed, and points lost if too short or too long, so learners know to practice several times at home (in front of the mirror ideally).
- During the presentations, each student is asked to write a few comments on paper, and these are given to the speaker once their presentation is finished. Students seem to appreciate this peer feedback and read their comments voraciously.
- I also complete assessment sheets for each speaker and hand them all back to the class once everyone has presented.

## Conclusion

By analyzing oral presentations from a genre perspective, learners can grasp the basic scaffolding of this particular text type, and tailor it to their particular context. The activities mentioned in this discussion may of course be developed and expanded further, especially in the area of presentation tools, such as PowerPoint, overheads, or handouts. Those students aiming at longer talks should also practice question elicitation techniques for discussion time, and strategies to have questions rephrased should they not understand them.

With the experience of at least one oral presentation in English, learners can forge ahead in their English studies with more confidence, and the skills and strategies required to develop other similar presentations. In this era of increasing internationalization, opportunities for students to study or work abroad are growing steadily, and being able to speak to a group with confidence and ease is an essential skill.

## Appendix A

### 7-min. speeches: results and comments

NAME:	TOPIC:	RESULT: /25
<b>Genre (10 Points)</b>		
Introduction		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• State topic clearly</li><li>• Outline talk</li><li>• Define any difficult vocabulary</li></ul>		
Body		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Enumerate or signal each point</li><li>• Reiterate your topic</li><li>• Give examples and/or anecdotes</li><li>• Give statistical information if relevant</li></ul>		
Conclusion		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Restate your topic</li></ul>		

- Summarise your talk
- Give suggestions for future, recommendations for more research

### Language (9 Points)

- Grammatical accuracy
- Vocabulary
- Fluency
- Appropriate spoken language (ie: not written language)
- Pronunciation (rhythm, intonation, word stress, sentence stress, linking, sound articulation)

### Physical Features (6 Points)

- Eye contact
- Audience interaction
- Gestures
- Notes
- Stance

## Bibliography

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