

Beyond the Classroom: The Benefits of the Hallway Presentation

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Abstract for Beyond the Classroom

This paper focuses on a different approach to student presentations. Traditionally, when performing a role-play or skit, students have stood in the front of the classroom. This puts the students under significant pressure and the resulting performances often lack fluidity and enthusiasm. In this essay, the author explores the potential merits of having the students perform in the hallways outside the classroom. He discusses the advantages (and disadvantages) of doing so. He also elicits information from students concerning their impressions of the performances in the different locations. The author concludes that although the in-class presentations have certain advantages, there are several benefits from having performances done outside the classroom as well.

Keywords: stress-free environment, timing logistics, willingness to volunteer, natural setting, peer-evaluation

More than ever, English teachers, especially native speakers, in Japanese universities are being called upon to facilitate communicative language learning. Student fluency is stressed over perfect grammar and student interaction encouraged rather than rote lecturing. As such, teachers rely more and more upon role-plays or skits in the classroom. These have become important tools to stimulate interaction among the students. The traditional role-play presentation consists of a student pair (or small group) performing in front of the classroom. When successful, these role-plays can effectively increase student interaction as well as foster more student confidence in his/her abilities. The challenge, of course, is to make these role-plays successful, which is no easy task. Consider, for example, the following scenario. The teacher assigns his students, in pairs, a role-play task and allots ample time for the students to prepare for their performances. He is encouraged by the interaction taking place among the students as they prepare. Finally, when he believes they have had sufficient time to prepare, he decides it is time for the performances to be heard. He does not wish to make any of the shyer students uncomfortable, opting instead to ask for volunteers.

The silence that ensues lingers on seemingly indefinitely. In the increasingly uncomfortable moments that follow, the teacher reluctantly decides to call upon a pair to come up to the front of the room and perform. The two students assigned the task recite their lines dispiritedly (gazing at the ceiling or floor nearly the entire duration) and return to their desks in the wake of forced and tepid applause. The presentations that follow differ little from this initial performance, and the class period comes to an end before the teacher has heard presentations from each small group.

The above is admittedly a (nearly) worst-case scenario. It is, however, enough of an unfortunate reality at times to give pause. Why students are often reluctant to speak has been the subject of numerous articles. All too often, teachers cite “the nail that stands out” stereotype. The basic argument is that the Japanese are a homogenous people, and prefer to not call attention to themselves. This, unfortunately, is vastly overstated and an argument that many serious scholars of Japan disregarded years ago.¹ Besides, as McVeigh (2001) points out, the student who mumbles his way through a presentation, or chooses to remain silent when asked to answer a question stands out every bit as much as the active student. In addition, there are numerous students whom, acting as the class clowns, are more than willing to call attention to themselves when speaking in their mother tongue, but suddenly become silent when asked to speak English.

Shyness is a factor as well.² Many students are simply afraid to speak in front of groups of people. However, that still leaves the aforementioned jokers who are certainly not shy but reluctant to speak English. I think much of the discomfort boils down to a combination of factors. First, and almost stunning in its simplicity, English as a foreign language is difficult and the majority of Japanese students are not particularly good at it. In addition, at most universities, students are not taking general English classes voluntarily; rather, they are fulfilling their language requirement. Therefore, putting the students in a public forum -- the front of the classroom -- to perform in a language they do not much like and are not skillful at provides the ingredients to failure and can lead to the scenario described in the opening paragraph.

If the teacher wishes to continue with student presentations, but the traditional means has such potential to cause so many difficulties, what other options does he have? Although I do employ the in-class presentation on occasion, and often find it of great value, I have found success with taking the students into the hallway outside the classroom. The general proceeding is as follows: Around one hour into the 90-minute class, students in pairs (or small groups of three) prepare a presentation based on the theme of the day's lesson. This role-play is usually about a minute or two in length and students are expected to memorize their roles. Once students feel they are prepared, they and I leave the classroom, and the pair makes its presentation in the hallway, the

audience consisting only of myself. Upon completing the presentation satisfactorily, I make some corrections (minimal) as well as suggest means of how they could improve next time. The students are then given the option of repeating the performance. I also require that they then write the conversation³ and hand it in. Upon completion, they are allowed to leave.⁴

Observations of the Hallway Role-Plays

Overall, I find that the student presentations in the hallway are conducted in a freer atmosphere to those done in the classroom. The students appear much more relaxed throughout and the presentations indicate this. In particular, there are fewer instances of “freezing”, students suddenly forgetting their dialogue and not being able to recall it. This is often a problem with the classroom presentations and can be particularly humiliating for the students. They either face the embarrassment of being prompted, either by the teacher or their partner, in front of the class, or they are instructed to sit down, knowing that they have, in effect, failed.⁵ Additionally, for those who continue after being prompted, there are several students who are in such a state of panic that they find themselves unable to remember the remainder of the dialogue. In the hallways, with only the teacher present, the students appear more relaxed and less prone to forgetting their lines. Of course, some students have problems at times, but are almost always able to reestablish self-control after being prompted initially.

The above point is important for several reasons, not the least of which is timing logistics. If the students are able to deliver their performances without pauses, enough time remains in the lesson for all the pairs to perform. One complication that can arise from the classroom presentations concerns time constraints. General English classes usually meet one day a week. Assuming the class has about 40 students,⁶ and the teacher would like to hear a presentation from each pair, that would make for 20 performances. As mentioned above, I usually have the students begin in the last half hour of the class. If the pair in the front of the class is extremely nervous, the resulting numerous pauses take up valuable time, making it difficult or even impossible for all the students to speak. Aware of these time difficulties, many teachers assign limited numbers of presentations, for example, six, per week. However, because the general English classes meet so infrequently, putting such a limit on the number of presentations stifles opportunities for student interaction. Over the course of the semester, it is possible that a student may perform only once or twice. On the other hand, the students in the hallway are relaxed enough to speak with fewer pauses, leaving enough time for all the students to perform. In fact, after feedback from the teacher, there is often enough time for the students to repeat their conversation, if they so desire.⁷ If the teacher utilizes the hallway option six or seven times during the semester, there would appear

to be a large increase in the amount of student interaction.

Most important, I find that the quality of the hallway presentations is often superior to those done in the classroom. They seem to flow much more smoothly. Students appear more willing to take risks, trying to use language they are not completely familiar or comfortable with. There are fewer of the awkward pauses that occur so often in the classroom due to stage fright. In addition, students are more comfortable with using gestures, speak with greater intonation, and find maintaining eye contact easier. The students are more willing to assume the roles they are playing (for example, if in the role-play situation calls for the students to argue, they raise their voices and try to appear generally angry). Overall, without the eyes of their peers upon them, the students appear to perform more as if they are in a natural setting.

Limitations

There is criticism of the hallways presentations, which I will discuss in the next section. It should be mentioned here, however, that there are, of course, potential drawbacks to taking the students outside the classroom. As I mentioned earlier, my student numbers per class range from about 25 to 45. Although I have almost always been able to hear presentations from each pair during the lesson, occasionally I find the class running a few minutes over time.⁸ Teachers with much larger classes may be hard-pressed to find the time for presentations from every pair of students.⁹

Noise level in the hallway is another factor. My students are usually aware that there are other classes being conducted around them (with many of the classroom doors open, especially in the summer months) and try to keep their volume at an acceptable level. However, at times the more exuberant students need to be cautioned to lower their voices somewhat. Although this is a problem that many teachers would like to have, and it is gratifying that students can become so caught up in their roles, the teacher runs the risk of annoying his or her peers. Conversely, if another teacher let his students out of class early, the accompanying noise in the hallway makes it a challenge for both students and teachers to hear.¹⁰ However, despite this problem and the one mentioned above, I find the advantages of taking the students outside outweigh the disadvantages. I am also fortunate that the administration at my university is indulgent about taking students from the classroom. It is possible that other universities, deeming it untraditional, may frown at the practice or even disallow it.

Criticism of the Hallway Presentations

There is criticism about taking students outside of the classroom. First and foremost, there is the belief that if the teacher is outside the classroom for nearly one-third of the period, he is wasting time that could be better-spent introducing new material or reinforcing what has been taught up to that point. However, if the goal of the class is communicative learning, the teacher's presence does not necessarily need to be felt every moment of the period. Long and Porter (1985) suggest, in fact, that if half the class was spent doing group work, individual practice time would increase by nearly five times.¹¹

Another argument is based on the idea that by leaving the classroom, the teacher cedes control of the class. Left unsupervised, the students will do nothing, or, even worse, cause mischief, creating a chaotic situation in the classroom. I believe this argument is unfounded. One could make a counter argument stating that leaving the classroom imparts upon the students a sense of responsibility to tackle the task at hand. The teacher is showing trust in the students and they, in turn, respond by putting in the effort required to do a successful presentation. For those teachers who are (often understandably) suspicious of the validity of this seemingly intimate level of teacher-student cooperation, I should mention that I do not simply disappear for the final thirty minutes. I return to the classroom after each presentation. Students who have questions have the opportunity to ask them, and potential troublemakers do not have much time to get started. In addition, students understood that they are expected to give presentations during class; i.e., they may not leave until they have finished one in a satisfactory manner. It is in their best interests that they take these performances seriously, and prepare accordingly.

The criticism that I feel has the most merit concerns peer-evaluation. Although students seem to appreciate the low-key cognitive feedback they received from me, it can be argued that peer feedback is a crucial aspect to communicative learning.¹² That is missing if the student performs in front of only the teacher. When I first commenced with the hallways presentations, one reason I did so was because I had assumed that students were not concerned with peer-evaluation; indeed, that they wished to avoid it as much as possible. I believed that many would feel that practicing with classmates was fine, but being critiqued by them something entirely different. Toward the end of the semester, I distributed questionnaires to the students, eliciting their opinions about oral presentations. I found myself surprised, somewhat, by some of their thoughts concerning peer-evaluation. In the following section, I will breakdown the questionnaire and suggest reasons for some of the results.

Questionnaire Feedback

The questionnaires (please see Figure1)¹³ concerning oral presentations were distributed to students in the first (IB) and second-year (II/IIIB)¹⁴ general English classes. I received completed forms from 102 first-year English students and 111 second-year students (It should be noted that, of the latter, sixteen students were English majors. Their answers, however, differed little from those of the other students). In response to the third question, all of the students had given oral presentations before, in front of the class or in the hallway.¹⁵

I was interested in the pressure that students felt when giving oral presentations and the answers to the fourth question confirmed what may have been obvious. Among the IB students, 41 indicated that they felt a great deal of stress when making presentations and 46 felt some stress. All told, 87 out of 102, over 85%, felt significant stress. The figures for the IIIB students were slightly lower: 31 felt a lot of stress, and 43 felt some stress; total 74 out of 111, or about 67%. The latter figure, while still high, should be of some comfort to teachers. It is likely that while in high school, students did not, or would rarely, give oral presentations. As such, doing so for the first time in university could certainly cause them to feel pressure. By the time they were second-year students, however, it appears that at least some of them had become more used to the idea.

When asked what caused them to worry most (question 5), there were a variety of answers, but the most common concerned speaking in front of others. Many students wrote “皆の前で話すこと” (“speaking in front of everybody”) or “人前に立つこと” (“standing in front of people”). Others wrote that they were simply afraid of making mistakes anywhere or in front of the teacher, but the prevailing opinion appeared to be that speaking in front of the other students caused the most concern.

When asked where they felt they could perform best, with the least amount of pressure (question 6), 65 of the IB students answered the hallway, while only 3 indicated the front of the classroom (33 students felt there was no significant difference wherever they performed). As for the IIIB students, 76 felt most comfortable in the hallway and 6 were most relaxed in the classroom (31 did not feel any major differences). When asked to explain their choices, the most common answer was along the lines of “人が少ないから” (“there are not many people”).

Question 8 was concerned with students' willingness to volunteer to make an in class performance. Only 32 out of the 102 students in IB (31%) said they would, while the percentage for the IIIB students was only slightly higher (37 out of 111, or 33%). When asked to explain their reasons, the majority of students wrote “恥ずかしい” (roughly translated as “I am shy” or “I am

Figure1

Questionnaire about Oral Presentations

Please take a few minutes to answer the following questions.

- 1 . What is your field of study?
 Humanities Jurisprudence Sociology/Computer Science
 Commerce Economics
- 2 . Which English class did you study this year?
 English IB English II/IIIB
- 3 . Have you given an oral presentation before?
 Yes, in front of the class Yes, in the hallway (only instructor present)
 Yes, in a recording studio No
- 4 . Please indicate the amount of stress you feel when doing an oral presentation.
 A lot of stress Some stress A little stress No stress
- 5 . Please explain what you most worry about.
- 6 . When giving a presentation, in which situation do you feel you can the best job, with the least amount of stress?
 In front of the class In the hallway
 In a recording studio About the same amount for each
- 7 . Please explain your choice.
- 8 . If your instructor asked for volunteers to make a presentation in front of the class, would you volunteer?
 Yes No
- 9 . If you answered "no", please explain your answer.
10. Which presentation do you feel is most beneficial to your study of English?
 In front of the class In the hallway
 In a recording studio About the same amount for each
11. Please explain your answer.

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

ashamed”) or “緊張するから” (“because I feel pressure”). Others specifically mentioned that performing in front of their peers was the reason. One student wrote “みんなの前だと失敗を気にしてしまう” (“I’m afraid of failing in front of everybody”). Another added “みんなの前だと、なぜか少しはずかしくなるし、見られていると意識してしまうので、緊張する” (“for some reason, if I am in front of everybody I become shy, and because I am aware that I am being watched, I feel stress”).

Up to this point, there were no significant differences in the answers given by the IB and IIIB students. Question 10, asking which type of presentation students felt was most beneficial for their study of English, indicated a difference of opinion. Interestingly despite the fact that they were more relaxed in the hallway, 44 of the IIIB students felt that the in-class presentation was of greater value. Only 26 believed that the hallway presentations were more beneficial (32 indicated that they did not believe there was much difference among the options). This differed from the IB students, 34 of whom felt the hallway presentations were most valuable, 33 wrote that the in-class presentations had the most benefits, and 32 felt no significant differences. In their explanations, those students favoring the in-class presentations indicated that peer-evaluation was of great importance. One student wrote, and his opinion was similar to that of many, “みんなの前だと緊張するけど、聞いていた人に悪い所や良い所を指導してもらえるので良いと思う” (“although I am nervous being in front of everybody, because I can receive guidance concerning good and bad points [of the presentation], I think [the in-class presentation] is good”). Those who found the hallway presentations more beneficial cited the lack of a large number of viewers as the main reason.

Interpreting the Feedback

It would appear, based on the answers to the final two questions, the students, in particular the IIIB students, may not share the high opinion I do about the value of the hallway presentations. However, that does not mean the hallway presentations lack merit. It is important to note that the percentage of IB students who preferred the hallway presentations was significantly higher than that of the IIIB students. One reason for this may stem from their high school experience. As mentioned earlier, it is likely that most of the IB students had no experience with oral presentations of any kind before entering university. The IIIB students, on the other hand, had at least one year of university experience and probably did classroom presentations the previous year¹⁶ and were more comfortable with them as a result. Additionally, although it may sound simplistic, the fact that the hallway performances did seem easier may have resulted in some students believing that the more difficult task of performing in the classroom was more beneficial (the theory that if something is easy, it cannot be entirely useful).

Furthermore, at the risk of appearing elitist, as teachers, we should know better than the students what is useful for them in order to facilitate their learning process'; Based on my research, there does appear to be evidence that the hallway presentation is a valuable means of improving student interaction and promoting communicative learning. However, it seems the students put more value on peer-evaluation than I had imagined, and this should not be ignored. It would be advisable not to do hallway presentations exclusively, but to rather find some sort of balance between those and the in class presentations.

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to provide teachers who advocate communicative learning but have been frustrated with the traditional in-class presentations with a viable alternative. Although not without limitations, taking the students into the hallway -- at least on an occasional basis -- can provide the means for greater student participation. It provides more of a stress free environment than those performed in front of the classroom, which can result in greater student confidence and increased creativity. Having observed both types of presentations, I have been impressed with how much more fluent and imaginative the students are when they are in the hallway.

As the questionnaire indicates, however, it is important to incorporate both types of presentations into the class. The teacher must endeavor not to "overdo" the hallway presentation or else the students will eventually view it as a predictable routine. Once that occurs, class stagnation will follow shortly after. Furthermore, the students obviously believe that the in-class presentations have value. Although the main purpose of the essay was to extol the virtue of taking the students out of the classroom, it is important not to disregard the values of the traditional presentation.

- 1 For an interesting account of how many stereotypes about Japan were born, the reader may wish to read Carol Gluck's (1987) *Japan's Modern Myths*.
- 2 See Doyon (2000) for an explanation about shyness in the classroom.
- 3 I do not allow the students to write anything while they are preparing for the role-play. I have found that this has resulted in a more natural, flowing conversation. I ask that they write it after the presentation so that they have feedback to turn to later.
- 4 This means, of course, that the first few groups often leave upward to twenty minutes before the class is scheduled to end. However, it has fortuitously worked out that the group that is first to perform one week is often one of the last to do so the following week.
- 5 One may posit that having students read from a prepared script would alleviate this problem. However, I feel that reading does not facilitate communicative learning. The students' delivery is often done in a monotone and eye contact is almost non-existent. In addition, holding the paper containing the script hinders the potential for gestures, an important aspect of communication.
- 6 My general English classes this year at Sapporo Gakuin University (SGU) range from about 25 to 45 students.

- 7 Admittedly, most students did not choose to take advantage of this option. Over the course of the year, it occurred perhaps four or five times. However, that it occurred at all is encouraging.
- 8 Not so much, however, that students run the danger of being late for their next class.
- 9 One possibility would be for the teacher to assign small groups of four, rather than pairs. That, however, limits the amount of time each student has to interact.
- 10 The ideal situation would be to find a nearby empty classroom. Those, however, are usually few and far between.
- 11 That figure seems rather high, but it does make sense that active learning enhances better communication skills than passive (listening to a teacher lecture) learning.
- 12 See Bossaer (2001) for an interesting assessment of student peer and self-evaluation.
- 13 The questionnaire the students received was in Japanese. Figure 1 is the English translation.
- 14 At SGU, students in the second-year English course are considered IIB students the first semester. If they receive satisfactory marks, they then progress to the IIIB course second semester. For the remainder of this essay, I will label them as IIIB students.
- 15 In retrospect, this was not a particularly useful question. I had all my students doing in-class and hallway presentations, so of course they would all answer yes to the question. Perhaps it would have been more useful to have distributed the questionnaire at the beginning of the academic year, or modify the question to explore if the students had done presentations before taking my class. Note: at least one teacher at SGU has students do presentations in a recording studio, which is the reason for the inclusion of this option.
- 16 Almost all of the SGU native English language teachers have the students make presentations. To my knowledge, however, they did not conduct hallway presentations the previous year.

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