

Strategies for Improving Eye Contact During EFL Presentations by Japanese University Students

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Introduction

OVER THE LAST SEVERAL YEARS, AFTER WATCHING NUMEROUS group and single presentations done by Japanese university students at different universities, something very clear has stood out. Most of the students had one commonality while giving their presentations and that was, to varying degrees, a lack of eye contact. This lack of eye contact could not only be seen by speakers, but by audience members, as well. Different measures were taken to try and improve eye contact by the speakers: making eye contact performance a high percentage of the overall presentation grade, disallowing notes with full sentences, not allowing smartphones to be used for reading notes and other courses of action. While these measures had a positive effect, the eye contact that was hoped for never materialized. Recent school years have ended with the feeling of failure that the writer had let students down by not being able to teach them how to make optimal eye contact during presentations. More disappointing than that, an opportunity was squandered to show those young people, who are the future of Japan, how important eye contact is to success in life in a multitude of situations. This paper will focus on practical strategies for improving eye contact for student-based presentations for Japanese university students. Of all the skills required to give an ideal presentation, eye contact was chosen for this paper because more than pronunciation, gestures, voice skills, and other presentation skills, eye contact allows students to build self-confidence and form better relationships in life. Ellsberg (2010, p.ii) states, "If you can imagine an area

of life that is important to you and that involves relating to other humans face to face, then eye contact is a crucial part of it.” This paper will serve as a precursor to strategies that will be implemented in the 2020-2021 school year for presentation classes or classes that include presentations on the syllabi. Six strategies will be undertaken to ameliorate eye contact by speakers during presentations.

Background

Nishiyama (2000, p.14) writes, “There is a bit of a culture clash between Japanese and Americans in interpretation of eye contact. In the dominant white-American culture, sustained direct eye contact usually means interest, honesty, sincerity and positive attitude. In Japanese culture, however, direct eye contact means aggression, rudeness, insistence of equality and even belligerence.” This seems to be somewhat of an extreme opinion in some regards, but in general, eye contact is more natural for Westerners than it is for Japanese. As a result, the use of positive eye contact for this context is already hindered for many students due to following the norms of nonverbal communication in Japan. According to Gamble and Gamble (2017, p. 175), “Just as they limit their eye contact, the Japanese—particularly women, because they do not wish to appear forward—also tend to restrict their smiles...” It is extremely important raise students’ awareness of eye contact by doing in-class activities that will lead to better use of eye contact in real presentations. Brooks and Wilson (2014, p. 205) make the point that “...if students are not taught the skills that they lack, they will not be able to present effectively.” It is not enough to tell students repeatedly that eye contact is necessary for a meaningful presentation. In any type of performance that happens in front of an audience, whether it be public speaking, the arts, or sports, basic skills need to be constantly practiced in order to gain experience, make progress and prepare for the actual performance.

Another reason for insufficient eye contact is, to varying degrees, the lack of proper preparation for presentations both by students. Students arriving at class several minutes before the class start time on presentation days to prepare has become a far too familiar

sight. Since the public speaking being done by the students is not in their native language, it is extremely important that students have a rigid schedule for presentation preparation laid out by the teacher. There are too many attributes of public speaking that need to be planned for by students, and teachers alike, to leave preparation until the last minute. Remembering what they want to say in English, preparing images and videos, rehearsal, pronunciation practice and technology usage are among the burdens for student presentations. All of these put stress on students and lead to poor eye contact during presentations. Krashen (1981, p. 29) claims, that "...there appears to be a consistent relationship between various forms of anxiety and language proficiency in all situations, formal and informal. Anxiety level may thus be a very potent influence on the affective filter." The affective filter that Krashen mentions can become a powerful barrier for students trying to remember English lines for a presentation. With an ample amount of preparation time, the anxiety that comes with giving presentations can be eased. Furthermore, presentations are how these students are assessed for their final grade and the washback should include activities that prepare them for successful presentations. Bown and Abeywickrama (2010, p.38) include six points for how assessment provides beneficial washback. The final one is that, "it provides conditions for peak performance by the learner." The washback for this context needs to include activities that will provide students with an adequate way to prepare for public speaking.

Implementation

The activities and strategies for this paper will be implemented mainly in a presentation class with two sections of 2nd year students at an all-female university. Over the course of 30 lessons throughout the school year, all of the in-class activities will be done in support groups of four or five students. In his book about successful organizations and their culture, while discussing successful groups, Coyle (2018, p.25) states, "When I visited these groups, I noticed a distinct pattern of interaction. The pattern was located not in the big things but in the little moments of social connection. I made a list: close

physical proximity, often in circles, profuse amounts of eye contact, everyone talks to everyone, lots of questions, active listening, laughter.” The goal of these support groups is to reach a level of trust through team building in which students can help each other get better at eye contact and other presentation skills.

First Strategy: In-Class Activity (Emotion Post-its)

This activity can be done in the support groups or with the whole class. The teacher introduces a list of emotions on the board and goes over the meanings. The students repeat the words to practice how to pronounce them. Next, each student is given a post-it note and writes one word on it. They must not show anyone what word they have written. The next step is for the students to stick the post-it note on another student’s forehead. The student receiving the post-it should not be able to see it. Lastly, the students meet with one partner at a time and, with their eyes only, try to convey the emotion on their partner’s forehead through eye contact. The partner should try to figure out what emotion she or he has on their forehead. In order to prevent the activity from ending quickly, a timer of one or two minutes can be set and the students would need to keep changing partners until the timer is up. Students would not be able to talk until the timer ends. This point needs to be explained clearly. After the timer sounds, the students can check what emotion they have on their post-it note.

The purpose of this activity is for the students to become aware that emotions can be seen through the eyes. This can be beneficial not only for speakers but also for audience members when they listen to a presentation. Gamble and Gamble (2019, p.41) write, “With eye contact, changes in pupil size and eye movements, our eyes both take in and send messages....” This is not only an important point for giving presentations in English, but more importantly for life in general.

Second Strategy: In-class Activity (Pull my Eyes)

In this activity a student stands and makes a short presentation in front of the support group. To ensure that eye contact is being made, a string is tied around the waist of the student. That string will have three clips on it. Each clip will have its own string connected to it. The listeners should sit in triangle formation (one student directly in front and the other two students on the left and the right) around the speaker while holding the other end of one of the three strings connected to the clips. As the speaker presents, the listeners can pull on the string if the speaker is not making enough eye contact with that person to signal to the speaker that he or she needs to look more at the person who pulled the string. One challenge of this activity is to make sure that the listeners pull the string only when necessary and to make them realize that one of the primary purposes of this activity is to be an active listener and not to focus on only pulling the string.

The goal of this activity is to let the students practice moving their heads while making eye contact. On numerous occasions, nervous students try their best to make eye contact but only stare at a classmate that they have an amicable relationship with. Students need to practice turning their heads while presenting. Even as teachers, this can be a challenge for some of us.

Since this activity can be done on a regular basis, students can track their eye contact performance throughout the year. A tracking sheet can be filled out by the listeners after the speaker is finished talking or after a question and answer session. Goh and Burns (2012, p. 273) write, “Peer assessment makes use of students as assessors of each other’s performances...enabling students to get a more rounded picture of their achievements.” As more and more feedback is given throughout the year, students can gauge improvement, or lack of it, from April through January.

Third Strategy: In-class Activity (Wordless Presentations)

This activity involves two parts. The first, showing model presentations using talks in which the presenters are deaf and use sign language to communicate. There are several

TED Talks with deaf presenters that can be easily accessed. Presenters with this disability maximize their eye contact and display great examples of how eye contact should be made during presentations. Jeffrey and Austen (2005, p. 27) claim that, “eye contact is crucial in the delivery and receipt of sign language.” The video can be played once without the sound and then again with the interpreter’s voice. After the first time the video is played, students can be asked questions to see if they could comprehend the content and take part in a discussion about the speaker’s nonverbal communication to raise awareness.

The second part of this activity involves the students making a short presentation about a place that they have traveled to. They may use photos, magazines and other visuals, except for written and spoken word or electronic devices to give their presentations. The listeners would have to answer a series of questions prepared by the teacher. The students would have to include the answers to the questions in their presentations. As the theme would be the same for all of the students, they would all have the same questions to answer. This activity is very structured to make it easier for the students to focus on nonverbal communication skills more so than thinking of a topic, making questions and other points. “If, however, learners have sufficient prior knowledge about the topic, the load may be eased a little, as they need to pay attention only how to formulate and articulate their ideas” (Goh and Burns, 2012, p. 42). In this case, they can pay more attention to preparing for their nonverbal communication.

Fourth Activity: Weekend Conversation Retelling

This activity is done with the support groups and then with the class as a whole. The students in the support group should discuss what they did over the past weekend with a partner. They would be allowed to take notes of what they hear from their partner. After the initial conversation they would be given some time to put their notes in order and remember the information about their partner’s weekend. For the next phase, all of the students would be put into groups of four with students, who are not in their support

group, and explain what they heard from their original conversation partner without using any notes. As in activity two, the listeners would be seated in a triangular formation and there would be a focus on maintaining eye contact with the listeners.

In this activity the students would talk about another student's weekend in order to make it more difficult to recall information while trying to make quality eye contact.

The purpose of this activity is to show students that remembering information without using any notes can be a difficult task. Preparation for public speaking takes time and students should be reminded of that after this activity. Ideally, this activity could be done every other class in a rotation with activity two (Pull my Eyes). The listeners would also give feedback on the speaker's eye contact which could be recorded on the same tracking sheet as the one used in activity two.

Fifth Strategy: Goal Setting

At the beginning of the course a questionnaire will be given to students to gauge their feelings about making eye contact during English presentations. The purpose of this survey will be for the teacher to take pro-active measures to find out what students will need the most help to improve their eye contact. It will also serve as a way to investigate how much experience these students have with presentations done in English. Wilson and Dobson (2008, p. 106) write, "Only a small percentage of people have specific, well-defined goals. And people who most frequently reach their goals are those who write them down and develop the plans to reach them." There needs to be self-monitoring done throughout the school year by the students to ensure that they are progressing with their goals pertaining to eye contact skills. Journaling is one method of self-monitoring that can be used for students to record their progress with their skills. Wiggins (2011, P. 13) writes, "Your journal also provides you with the knowledge you need to not make the same mistakes over and over again." By journaling with brief entries after each presentation or at the end of each class, the hope is that students can realize how they

need to improve in certain areas. Journals can also be collected and graded by the instructor.

Sixth Strategy – Recorded Presentations and Presentation Preparation Class

This strategy relates to student preparation. The students will be required to make a recording of the first two minutes of their presentations while looking at three printed faces taped to the wall. This recording will be viewed by the teacher in the class a week before the presentation days. There will be one-on-one teacher-student consultations in order for the teacher to give written feedback about the recording. This recording will be on the rubric and will count as a substantial portion of the students' scores. The reason why only the recording will only need to be two minutes long is because the teacher will have to meet all of the students in the class which may range from 24-28 students. The three faces on the wall will serve as audience members in the center, on the right and on the left. Some books advise presenters to practice in front of a mirror, but looking at faces on the wall is more realistic than a mirror. The students will have to make eye contact with all three printed faces while speaking. During the teacher-student meetings, the other students in the class would be able to prepare content for their presentations or work on remembering what they will speak about. The teacher feedback should be written by the teacher so that students have something to refer to while preparing for the following week's presentation. The one-on-one meeting time could also be used as time to go over pronunciation of difficult words in scripts. This strategy forces students to be partially prepared for presentations a week before the actual performance. In attempting to raise metacognitive awareness, Goh and Burns (2012, p. 245) state, "Planning strategies enable learners to set learning objectives and consider the means by which these objectives can be achieved." This class is dedicating almost a full class period to preparation, but the students will be able to see the value of that if presentations are successful.

Future Directions

Student surveys will be conducted in future research on this topic in order to better understand how much of an impact these strategies have on student performance. The long-term goal is to determine the best strategies that can be used for improving eye contact for EFL presentations for Japanese university students. Challenges for implementing these strategies include implementing activities for the other presentation skills as well as creating more strategies for improving nonverbal communication with a focus on eye contact.

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