Moving EFL Presentation Courses Online†

—Addressing issues in the transition to online presentations—

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Moving an EFL presentation course from the physical classroom to the online classroom requires a number of adjustments. A key consideration is the view of the presentation space itself. The present article considers two approaches: attempting to recreate the physical presentation space in the online environment (the RPPS approach), and treating the presentation space as a unique online presentation space (the UOPS approach). This choice affects various aspects of the course such as the teaching of non-verbal communication, the adjustment of rubrics, and the preparation of equipment. Additional consideration is given to reducing presenter anxiety. This article may be helpful to EFL presentation instructors in making the transition to an online presentation environment.

Keywords: presentation, EFL, online teaching, online learning, RPPS, UOPS

1. Introduction

The present article examines EFL presentation courses in the context of a shift from the physical classroom to the online classroom. Many resources exist to assist in making a smooth transition to online teaching and learning (e.g., Bloomberg, 2020), but few focus on EFL presentation courses specifically. As a result of the COVID-19 coronavirus global pandemic, presentations are more likely than ever to be held online. In what ways does this shift affect the presentations themselves? How should instructors adjust their EFL presentation courses to put students in the best position to succeed online? This article examines points to consider in handling online presentations in an EFL presentation course.

One of the first points to decide is how to view the presentation space. Two approaches are considered in this article: recreating the physical presentation space in the online environment (RPPS) and treating it as a unique online presentation space (UOPS). Each approach is explained in Section 2.1. The purpose of this paper is not to recommend one approach over the other but to examine how the choice of approach affects elements such as course planning, teaching style, assessment, and necessary facilities and equipment.

2. Adapting EFL presentation courses to the online environment

2.1. Presentation space: physical vs. online

As stated above, the present article considers two approaches to the online presentation space, RPPS and UOPS. The RPPS approach attempts to capture the feel of presenting in person. One can picture it as if someone has brought a camera[1] into the classroom or presentation hall to film the presenter. The camera is placed far enough from the presenter to allow them to use analog visual aids like dry-erase boards and flip charts. If a projector and screen are available to the student, this approach can also capture slides or other visual aids. The presenter will most likely have ample space to gesture and move around the presentation space. The benefit of this approach is that it allows the instructor to use their own battle-tested methodology from the physical classroom with the fewest changes to course content. Be aware, however, that this approach may require a larger investment in equipment which could be prohibitive to some students, as explained in Section 2.5.

In contrast, the UOPS approach attempts to make direct use of the technology and thus has a more digital feel. Although this approach can take various forms depending on the ICT or LMS[2] used, a common example is as follows: The presenter presents while sitting at their desk. They show slides, websites, documents, or other visual aids by sharing their computer screen. The camera is relatively close, showing perhaps the face, neck, and shoulders. This gives the audience a clear view of the presenter's face but leaves little space on screen for gestures. A key difference from RPPS is that while

displaying visual aids on the screen, the presenter's face may be reduced to a small picture-in-picture box in the corner—or not shown at all. The result is that the impact of non-verbal communication is either greatly reduced, or concentrated in facial expressions. Adopting the UOPS approach has a number of implications for teaching which are discussed in the sections below. Two arguments in support of UOPS are, first, that it is relatively simple to implement, and second, that it is likely to continue to be used in the future.

2.2. Non-verbal communication

EFL presentation courses and texts tend to place emphasis on non-verbal communication (e.g., Harrington and LeBeau, 2008). Non-verbal cues communicated through posture, gestures, facial expressions, and overall appearance of confidence have a strong influence on how the presenter's message is received. Nervous habits, such as playing with one's hair or shifting from foot to foot can distract the audience from the main message of the presentation. Even worse, they can undermine the audience's trust and confidence in the presenter. How are these non-verbal elements affected when making a presentation online?

Camera placement directly impacts—or limits—the audience's view of the presenter. The impression will be different depending on distance and angle. A presenter using the built-in camera on their computer or tablet may discover that with the camera so close, the gestures they have spent so long practicing do not even appear on screen.

Particularly if adopting the UOPS approach explained in the previous section, students need to develop an awareness of camera constraints and the view from the audience's perspective. Instructors with prior experience teaching online may have met students whose camera displays only their hair, their neck, or half of their face. In an online presentation, failing to consider camera positioning can hurt the connection between presenter and audience.

Camera awareness can be raised through short activities in class. As with many things in life, seeing for oneself makes a strong impact. One way to practice camera awareness in class is to have students record a 20-second presentation multiple times, testing a different camera angle and distance each time. They then watch the videos with classmates and ask for feedback about how the different camera set-ups made them feel. The presentation course does not need to become a course in broadcasting, but raising camera awareness in this way will help the presenters to connect with their audience.

A related issue to consider is the weight placed on non-verbal communication in presentation rubrics. In the UOPS approach, where the presenter displays visual aids by sharing their screen, their face may be relegated to a small picture-in-picture window. This affects the impact of the non-verbal elements. Depending on software settings, the presenter's face could be completely hidden, removing non-verbal elements entirely. The instructor is encouraged to test these features in advance and adjust the weight of non-verbal elements in the rubric accordingly.

2.3. Visual aids

As with in-person presentations, students preparing online presentations need to train their awareness of how visual elements appear to the audience (e.g., Schwabish, 2017). Online presentations introduce an additional variable: the range of devices used by the audience members to watch the presentation. Does the presenter know whether audience members are watching, for example, on 27-inch monitors or 5.5-inch smartphone screens? Letters and images which seem appropriate on one could be too small on the other. Having students watch an example presentation first on a larger screen and then on a smaller screen can raise their awareness of appropriate element size.

One minor but easily overlooked issue in the UOPS approach is that the picture-in-picture view of the presenter's face can cover up key information on visual aids. Even if the audience members are able to move the picture and access the information, they might not realize that there is obscured information to be accessed. This is particularly true in the EFL environment, where audience members are already devoting so many mental resources to understanding the spoken message. Presenters should consider obscured information when designing their visual aids and advise the audience during the presentation as needed.

2.4. Learning the software

It goes without saying that presenters should invest time in learning the software that they plan to present with. Few things are more frustrating for an audience than watching a presenter fumble about with technology. As presentation courses move online, this practice becomes increasingly important and should include training with ICT or LMS[2] software used to share screen, voice, and camera with the audience. Insufficient presenter preparation on the technical side can have a range of costs. A light cost might be a

momentary loss of flow in the presentation. However, if the issue is clearly due to poor preparation by the presenter, it can lead to resentment from the audience for wasted time. Once such an adversarial relationship is established, it becomes difficult for the presenter to recover.

Some of the most common technical stumbling blocks can be avoided by practicing the following three points. They are particularly important when taking the UOPS approach.

- Sharing the appropriate screen or program and sound: It is frustrating to finish a presentation, only to discover that the slides you thought you were speaking over were never even displayed. Practice with screen sharing can also help presenters avoid inadvertently displaying sensitive information.
- Adjusting audio input and output source: Managing input will help to select the correct microphone. Managing output can move sound into the presenter's ear- or headphones and prevent voices from feeding back into the microphone.
- Managing multiple windows: It is common to have a number of windows open simultaneously. Smoothly switching between them keeps the presentation flowing and reduces anxiety and frustration. Modern operating systems have functionality such as hot keys which, once learned, help users manage windows with ease.

Another point to consider is language support for technical issues in the EFL context. Practicing prepared expressions about technology can enable presenters to confirm that on-screen information is displaying correctly to the audience and to handle technical difficulties without panicking.

Many students are anxious about using technology in their presentations. Spending class time on practicing with the software and giving them the language to confirm what the audience sees and handle technical issues will put students in a better position to present to their ability.

2.5.　Equipment & facilities

Equipment can strongly influence how a presentation is perceived. Even the best prepared presentation will make a poor impression if the microphone garbles the presenter's voice. Below are a number of points to consider for both the RPPS and UOPS approaches.

- Microphone: The quality of the audio experienced by the audience is directly influenced by the presenter's choice of microphone. Even a simple headset will generally offer a noticeable improvement in clarity over a computer's built-in microphone. Budget permitting, a student may wish to purchase a microphone which offers control of the directions from which sound is received. This enables them to reduce surrounding noise, resulting in a clearer presentation.
- Earphones or headphones: In the RPPS approach, presenters should consider wireless devices or devices with long cords if their computer will be set at a distance.
- Camera: If the student is using the internal camera of their computer or phone, then presenting at a distance in the RPPS approach may make it difficult to reach the keyboard to change slides or visual aids. They may need to purchase a remote control which allows them to change slides at a distance. Presenters who desire more control over the audience's viewpoint should consider purchasing an external camera and arm to hold it.
- Projector and screen: These are typically unnecessary in a UOPS approach but could be critical in RPPS, depending on the goals and implementation of the course.[3]
- Environment: It would be ideal for all students to have access to a quiet room in which they can project their voice without disturbing neighbors, roommates, or family members. The instructor must accept the reality that students live in a wide range of situations and that securing such a space might not be possible.[3]
- Costs: Necessary equipment and approximate costs should be made clear before registration.

2.6.　Technical failures and honesty

The previous sections focused on the presenter's technical preparation, but what happens when the technology itself fails? Presentation courses in the physical classroom tend to take a degree of technological failure into consideration. For example, students are taught that it is good practice for a presenter to prepare backup copies of presentation slides and files on separate devices or media in case their primary device fails. The instructor might provide a backup computer in case the presenter's own machine has issues. However, moving the course online requires us to consider additional issues.

First, the more pieces of technology introduced to a situation, the more possible points of failure. Cameras can break, microphones can have poor connections, and phones and laptops can experience sudden crashes or updates.

Students may not be able to afford backup equipment.

The second issue is honesty. Although most students act in good faith, the distance involved in online presentations means that a student can more easily fake a technical malfunction to avoid a presentation. This is a situation in which an ounce of prevention—in the form of clear scaffolding and building student confidence during the course—may be worth a pound of cure. Nevertheless, if a student decides to fake a technical malfunction, there is little the instructor can do to catch them out.

It is more important than ever that the instructor consider these issues in advance to implement a fair policy.

2.7. Presenter anxiety

EFL students often experience presentation anxiety connected with presentation skills, language mastery, lack of preparation, and other factors. With online presentations, new anxieties emerge based on technical skills and equipment. It is hoped that the suggestions in earlier sections combined with regular practice will help alleviate some of this anxiety. However, how about students whose anxiety goes beyond typical levels and is so strong as to be debilitating?

For students with debilitating anxiety, online presentations may be a boon. Indeed, it is possible to turn off the audience members' microphones and cameras so that the presenter does not see them at all. With slides taking up most of the screen space, it is easy for the presenter to feel that they are alone in the room. Not having to see the reactions of the audience offers a new option that could reduce anxiety for some presenters. For particularly anxious presenters, this feature of online presentations could be the difference between being silent and being heard.[3]

3. Conclusion

This paper has examined the transition of EFL presentation courses from the physical classroom to the online classroom. At the time of writing, the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic has pushed education online in many parts of the world. Although it may be tempting to view this shift as a temporary measure, the reality is that online courses and online presentations will likely remain an important part of the new 'normal'. Presentation courses need to teach skills for online presentations as well as in-person presentations.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1) The term camera refers to any video camera that could be used to show the presenter in an online presentation.
2) The technology used to connect the students online is referred to here as Information and Communication Technology (ICT) or Learning Management System (LMS).
3) Advances in video recording and file sharing technology have created another option: pre-recorded presentations. Full treatment of the pros and cons of such an approach goes beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning here that pre-recorded presentations would provide flexibility for presenters to find quiet environments, access equipment on campus or at community centers, overcome anxiety, and avoid the technical failures that could disrupt a live presentation.

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SUMMARY

EFL プレゼンテーション授業を対面からオンラインへ移行する際, 様々な考慮点がある. 本稿では通常のプレゼンテーション環境を再現する RPPS 方式と再現しない UOPS 方式を取り上げ, 非言語的コミュニケーションの指導, ルーブリックの作成, 情報機器の準備等への影響を探る.

キーワード: プレゼンテーション, EFL, オンライン授業, オンライン学習, RPPS, UOPS

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