9 Rotating poster presentations

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Abstract

Oral presentations are a common practice in foreign language classes, often used to assess students' speaking skills. Usually, the presentations are delivered by students in front of the class, often with PowerPoint slides or Prezi as support. However, frequently the audience does not engage with the presentation and thus, the benefits of this format are somewhat limited and imbalanced. In addition, the prospect for the student of spending several weeks just sitting and listening to others' presentations does not have a motivational effect. For these reasons, Rotating Poster Presentations (RPP), refurbished formats of oral presentations, were introduced in German and Spanish language classes at the University of Nottingham. Students created a poster as support for their presentation. The setup of the presentation was based on the idea of a fair, where students interact with the various presenters. This model led to very positive student feedback. Participants found it easier to present their topics, as small group interaction contributed to increased confidence. Besides, the audience was much more motivated to attend the classes and the interaction between presenters and audience gained in quality. Students found the poster presentations clearer and engaging. Moreover, the format of the fair, the creation of the poster, the need for exact time-management, the focus of autonomous and student-led work, as well as the tasks and the presentation, are transferable skills that go beyond the language classroom.

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1.   Introduction

Oral presentations are a common practice in language classes. The learning objectives are to focus on speaking and presentation skills and to support research in a certain area. Students need to prove that they can speak in a foreign language in front of an audience and that they are able to transmit ideas clearly. Ideally, they apply already learnt language skills and develop them further through independent study during the preparation process. Presentations are also a common format for assessing oral skills, and for this reason class time is generously used to hold students' presentations.

Setting the learning objectives for the audience seems, on the other hand, less straightforward. The attending students are expected to listen to the presentations and might pose a question to the speaker. Teachers would like them to learn something new about the topics, other presentation methods and even new words or structures. However, this is very hard to monitor without an assessment, a quiz or a thorough discussion engaging all the participants after the presentations – something that might not be possible due to time constraints. Besides, teachers would like their students to enjoy the presentations and have a more active role.

In reality, many teachers will also have observed that the audience does not always pay attention to the presentation and does not engage in a discussion afterwards. Furthermore, attendance rates during presentation weeks tend to drop as students lack motivation to come to class. When the whole presentation is summative, the listeners and fellow classmates are even more reluctant to ask a question by fear of placing the presenter into a difficult situation. Thus, one of the aims of this project was to foster more interaction during presentations.

2.   Rotating poster presentations

In academic conferences, poster presentations are a common way of sharing research. In oral presentations delivered by students in language classes, the visual support usually comes from software like PowerPoint or Prezi. However, these have disadvantages that are relevant to this project: particularly, the fact that only one presentation can take place at a time. After revising the concept of poster presentations to make it relevant for the foreign language classroom, this new model, called RPP, was introduced in four modules at the University of Nottingham: two German language modules at A2 level and two Spanish language modules at B1 level. In the German module, students delivered a presentation as part of their formative assessment. In the Spanish modules, the presentations counted towards the final grade.

The activity given to students incorporated many elements that Dörnyei (2014) names as crucial to increase learner motivation. In his discussion of motivational practices focusing on the individual learner level, Dörnyei (2014, p. 526) names "breaking the monotony of learning" and "making the learning task more interesting" as some of the key features to enhance motivation. The RPP posed a challenge, offered a tangible outcome, added a novelty element and linked personal interest with content. Other motivational practices such as "increasing the learner's self-confidence" can be applied to this model as students present the posters several times in front of small groups, which decreases the face-threatening environment.

Furthermore, the format and tasks posed fostered the development of various transferable skills.

2.1.   The format of the RPP

Students were given a series of topics and had to create a five-minute oral presentation about one of them. In addition to the presentation, they were required to create a poster to visually support their presentation.

The presentation itself followed a specific routine that is similar to that of a fair, where students walk around, listen to the various presentations being delivered at the same time and interact with the presenters. A typical setup for a Spanish B1 class with twelve students would be as follows:

- The tutor distributes the topics and the dates two to three weeks in advance. All presentations take place within four weeks, three students presenting each week.

- On presentation day, the tutor divides the audience into three groups.

- The three presenters hang their posters in different parts of the room as all of them address a different audience at the same time.

- The audience rotates around the room from presenter to presenter in order to listen to all the presentations.

- After each presentation, the listeners ask questions to the speakers for an additional five minutes.

- Then, they move on to the next speaker and a new cycle of presentations starts.

- The teacher rotates in the opposite direction, in order to join a different group of listeners.

Figure 1 shows a graphic explanation of this method.

Another possible setup would be to deliver all presentations in just one session of one hour. This was successfully used in the German A2 project, where students voted for their favourite poster at the end. This element of friendly "intragroup competition", also discussed by Dörnyei (2001, pp. 43-45), works towards building a cohesive group and promotes "intermember relationships", which in return increase motivation in language learning.

Figure 1.   The specific routine
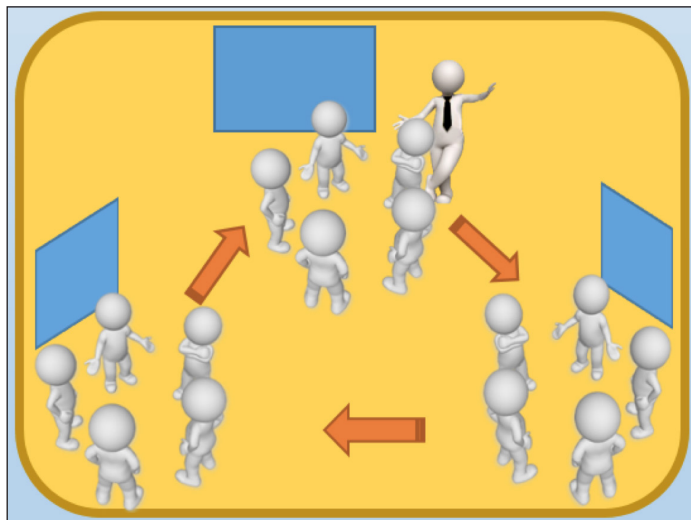
2.2.   The choice of topics

The topics in both modules were selected so that students would find them engaging and motivating: therefore, the focus was placed on creative and non-controversial topics. We judged that talking about contentious issues could impact negatively on the presenter's performance and the audience's attention as much as the other external affective factors that Martínez Baztán (2011) describes in his discussion of 'communicative stress': the factors that influence negatively a speech producing ambiguity or linguistic or pragmatic mistakes.

The students were expected to work in an innovative way, develop their ideas further and formulate them in their own words. They were required to defend their choices and persuade the audience – both important functions at A2 and B1 levels, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR).

Figure 2 shows sample topics for both levels.

Figure 2.   Sample topics for the B1 (left) and the A2 (right) modules

2.3.   The nature of the tasks

In the German A2 modules, the topics were aligned with the class content as the students' language repertoire was limited; in the Spanish B1 modules the topics were broader. From a methodical perspective, the RPP are largely based on a task-based approach. According to Nunan (2004), a task "involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language" (p. 4). A crucial element in his definition is that students' language knowledge is activated to express meaning. In both modules, students had to create a product and successfully present it to their audience, characteristics mentioned by Willis and Willis (2007) in their definition of tasks.

The way of presenting the products followed the same patterns in both projects. However, while in the A2 RPP, the students were given a task and had to prepare their posters in groups of two to three, in the B1 RPP, they worked individually due to the requirements of the assessment.

2.4.   Different ways of adapting
this model and assessment

The RPP model can be used as formative and summative assessment. The latter was chosen for the B1 Spanish modules, while in the A2 German modules students received formative feedback.

In assessed RPP, the order in which the tutor listens to the speakers must be discussed with the students beforehand. Alternatively, students can use the first round for practice instead of starting immediately with assessed presentations.

From the assessment perspective, the question and answer phase after the formal presentation is at least as interesting as the former. As the speaker and the audience interact in a more spontaneous way, the speaker will switch between planned and unplanned discourse, letting the tutor evaluate more accurately the real stage of the student's learning process (Ellis, 2004).

For non-assessed RPP, the group work proved popular with students. As Dooly (2008) recommends in the context of student's interaction, it fostered a sense of common achievement as the outcome could only be successful if everyone contributed to the task.

Depending on the module requirements or aims, students may be asked to work on different or identical topics. The former undoubtedly increases the interest of the audience, especially for topic-based presentations. However, we have also observed positive results on the latter when working with marketing and advertisement presentations, as this makes it easier to compare different degrees of performance.

3.   Conclusion

The benefits of introducing RPP in the foreign language classroom have been numerous.

The RPP model enhances motivation to come to class and speak. Students maintain interest and the whole class participates actively, providing students with the opportunity to practise asking questions. The movement around the classroom helps students maintain concentration. Working in small groups requires them to pay more attention and become attentive and active listeners – two concepts that are not always practised during presentations. For the

presenters, who often give their first presentation in the foreign language, these small groups reduce the affective filter as the context becomes less intimidating (Laine, 1988). The format of the RPP makes it easier to follow the presentations, while posters act as prompts for the presenters. Moreover, there is a fundamental change compared to the usual presentation in class: the presentations are repeated to different audiences, thus boosting the confidence and motivation of the students by practising it a number of times, and if necessary, students can make minor adjustments to each presentation. Besides, repetition can contribute to some improvement in fluency and accuracy, as described by Bygate (1996).

Another crucial aspect of the RPP model is the focus on autonomous learning: students have to work independently as the tutor can only stay with one group at a time. Hence, responsibility is shared and the class needs to work together to achieve a successful outcome. Exact time management is crucial, as groups need to swap after delivering their presentation and answering questions.

Overall, the advantages observed, as well as the very positive student feedback, have led us to introduce the model to more modules and develop it further. After evaluating the pilot project, we would like to add two aspects in the future: a session on how to formulate questions correctly, before the presentations are held; and a follow-up session to analyse common mistakes and very relevant questions.

The model has worked very well in the context of language teaching and there is still scope for further development, as the presentations will differ with any group or setting. The task-based approach, the room for creativity and student interaction, the need for cooperation and the final product led to higher learner motivation.

Finally, the development of skills like team-work, collaborative problem solving and decision making, communication in a foreign language, time-management, creating a research poster, or talking in front of an audience enhances the employability profile of the participating students.

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