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Effectiveness of Presentation Exchange with Diverse Audiences beyond Classrooms

Abstract

We do not always get to choose our audience for a formal presentation; the composition of participants and environment is different in every single case. Speakers ought to learn the importance of adjusting and adapting their presentation and communication skills to unexpected and unfamiliar contexts. In order to promote intercultural understandings in a globalized society, practitioners need to be prepared to adapt their method of presentation. Hence it is important that tertiary-level English presentation classes foster bilateral and multilateral negotiation skills, confidence, and active attitudes toward intercultural communication. These objectives are also in line with the MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) Course of Study, 2019 Highschool curriculum guidelines (2018) to enhance global human resource skills. In this study, a presentation exchange assignment was conducted between Japanese (n=39) and international students (n=29) from different departments at a university in the Kanto region to analyze transformative learning processes to learn how these students validated understandings of English presentation skills. The results demonstrated that the exchange encouraged many students to understand, reflect and learn about the importance of improving their presentation and communication skills for diverse audiences.

[Keywords] *Audience diversity, Intercultural communication, Awareness and reflection, Transformative learning.*

Context

“Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.”
-Benjamin Franklin-

The goal of teaching oral communication skills in higher education is to prepare students to become effective human resources and responsible citizens for the society (Dunbar et al. 2006). In order to meet the demands of the global work environment, higher education institutions will need to structure their curriculum content and bring them in line with current societal needs, attract and retain students, and help students progress toward graduation with certain skills well developed (Dunbar et al. 2006). Among those skills, one critically important skill is the ability to communicate across cultures and disciplines to

overcome the gap of knowledge and understandings we all share.

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been intent on getting young Japanese students to acquire communicative ability in English in order to educate them as human resources for global development (Yoshida, 2013). In 2012, a Japanese government committee produced a document to define the concept of global human resources including the following factors:

- Factor 1. Linguistic and communication skills
- Factor 2. Self-direction and positiveness, a spirit for challenge, cooperativeness and flexibility, a sense of responsibility and mission
- Factor 3. Understanding of other cultures and a sense of identity as a Japanese (Cabinet Office, 2012, p.8).

Factor 1 further defines the following five levels of English communication skills necessary to equip students with the following levels of communication skills:

- Level 1. Communication skills for travel abroad
- Level 2. Communication skills for daily interactions abroad
- Level 3. Communication skills for business conversation and completion of paperwork
- Level 4. Linguistic skills for bilateral negotiations
- Level 5. Linguistic skills for multilateral negotiations (Cabinet Office, 2012, p.8)

Levels 1 to 3 are considered to be relatively easy to acquire. Levels 4 and 5 require the ability to use English for purposes of negotiation, which Japanese have been considered particularly weak in (Yoshida, 2013). To tackle this critical situation, MEXT published “Five proposals and specific measures for developing proficiency in English for international communication” providing concrete proposals and plans to improve the English ability of young Japanese learners (MEXT 2011). Here, MEXT defines the capability of smooth communication with people of different countries and cultures using a foreign language as a tool. MEXT determines the capability of smooth communication as hinging on having a “confident and active attitude toward communication with people of different countries and culture as well as an accurate understanding of partner’s thoughts and intentions based on his/her cultural/social background, logical and reasoned explanations of one’s own views, and convincing partners in course of debates and discussions” (MEXT’s, 2011, 2018).

There is an urgent need for university English presentation skills classes to facilitate bilateral and multilateral negotiation skills, confidence, active attitudes toward communication with people from different countries and cultures to meet the MEXT’s criteria and promote global human resources skills. Through having culturally diverse and unknown audiences other than classmates, transformative learning incorporating profound reflections and active communication skills will be enhanced. This process will provoke learners to prepare real-life intercultural presentations and discussion skills that match MEXT’s goals and current societal needs.

Transformative learning theory

There are three main constructs that are central to transformative learning theory in practice: critical reflection, dialogue, and experience (Mezirow, 1991). The theory claims that it is important to talk with others and learn about new perspectives for learners to receive validation of their ideas and practices before taking further actions (Mezirow, 1997). This means not only receiving ideas in lectures, but also that experiencing living practice and having new perspectives is necessary to prepare actual skills (Baumgartner, 2001 cited by Hoggan et al. 2009). Mezirow (2006) defined the transformative learning processes as follows:

- a. Recognition that an alternative way of understanding may provide new insights into a problem.
- b. Context awareness of the sources, nature, and consequences of an established belief.
- c. Critical reflection of established beliefs supporting epistemic assumptions.
- d. Validation of a new belief through an empirical test of the truth of its claims, when feasible, or by a broad-based, continuing, discursive assessment of its justification to arrive at a tentative best judgement.
- e. Coping with anxiety over the consequences of taking action.
- f. Taking reflective action on the validated belief (Mezirow, 2006).

Hereby this paper proposes university English presentation courses incorporate diverse audiences in order to enable learners to facilitate skills necessary to work in their future global workplaces.

Methodology

Course objectives and participants

A presentation exchange project was conducted as a course assignment between 60 Japanese and 39 international students during the fall semester of 2019 in a university in the Kanto region. The 60 Japanese students were a mixture of students from humanities and science majors, while the 39 international students were from science majors. Both groups of students shared the same course objectives:

- Explain your topic to a non-Japanese audience in a way that they can fully understand.
- Provide accurate and constructive feedback for improvement.
- Adapt presentation style based on feedback given.
- Actively participate in discussion topics which are unrelated to yours.

Presentation exchange worksheets, reflective essays, and anonymous post-course surveys were collected from 39 (65%) Japanese and 29 (74%) international students to study the effectiveness of this project. Permission to use students' worksheet answers, reflective essay comments, and post-survey answers were received in advance. This research did not impact students' course evaluations.

Presentation exchange goals

This assignment was intended to be an authentic presentation experience. Students who delivered a presentation did not personally know their audience and thus is typical of a real-life situation.

Presentation exchange procedure

1. Presentation topics were chosen by students, either based on their written review papers in the spring semester (for international students only) or research papers selected by students.
2. Prior to the exchange, presentation partners* were selected by students based on weekly schedules submitted in advance. Students contacted each other to arrange a suitable time to meet on campus.
3. When having the exchange, students introduced each other first, then practiced presentations, and later had discussions.
4. Audience students marked the comprehension rate of the presentation content and described the reasons for the rating, strengths, and suggestions for improvement.

*Each international student had one or two Japanese presentation partners.

Reflective essay and post-course survey

After completing the presentation exchange, each student prepared a reflective essay to express his/her psychological transformation experienced from this experience. In order to assist students to prepare essays, Oxbridge Essays (2020) was provided as a guideline.

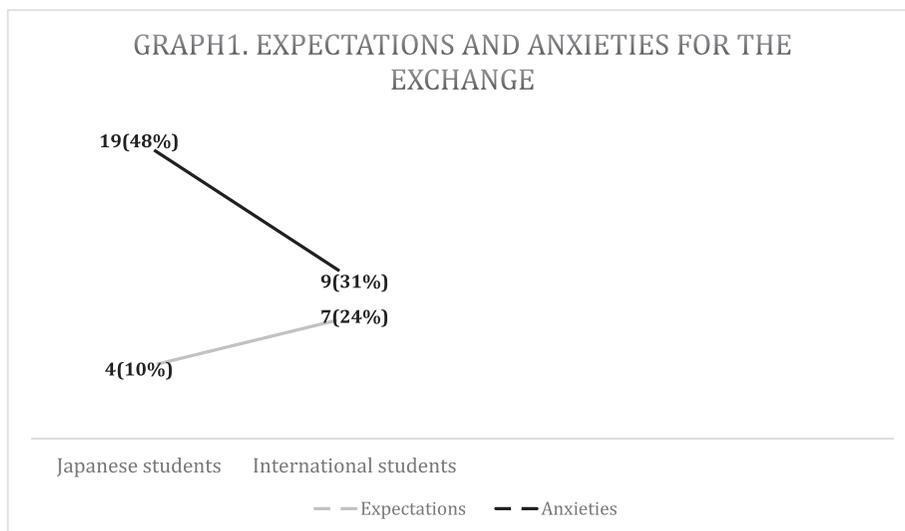
The psychological transformation was measured using Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2006 cited by Dirkx et al. 2006).

Here are its percepts:

1. Expectations of having the exchange
2. Anxieties before exchange
3. Challenges and efforts before and during exchange
4. Learning outcomes from presentation exchange
5. Awareness from face-to-face feedback
6. Reflection and desire to change after practice
7. Benefits of presentation exchange beyond programs
8. Difficulties faced in this assignment

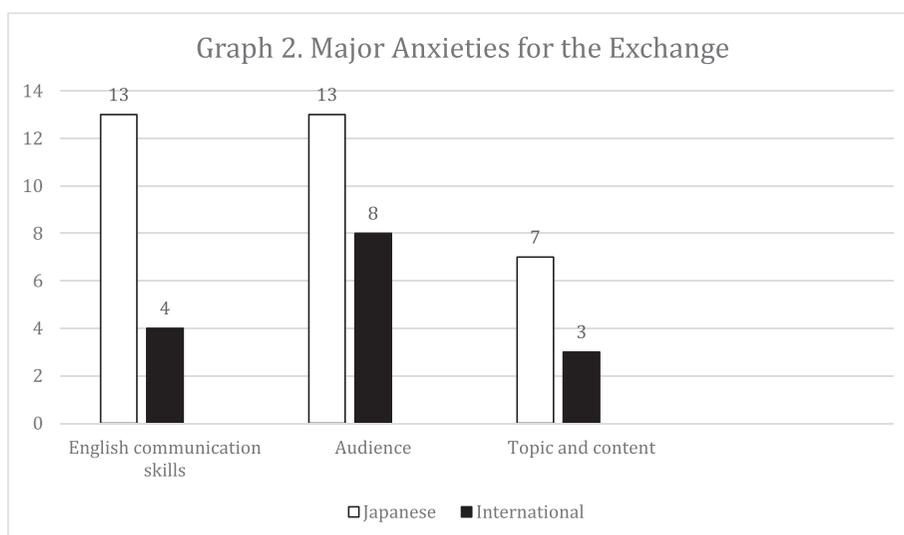
Finally, an anonymous post-course survey was conducted to better understand which assignments were useful for students to improve their presentation skills.

Results and Discussion



(Based on the number of students J:39/I:29)

Graph 1 shows the number of students from both groups who expressed expectations and anxieties before the exchange. Nineteen out of 39 Japanese students (referred to as J students hereafter) expressed anxieties (48%) and 4 J students (10%) had expectations before this assignment. Anxieties were slightly higher (9 students: 31% of International students referred as I students hereafter) than expectations (7 students: 24% of I students) amongst international students.



(Based on comments provided in reflective essays T=27)

According to Graph 2, three key anxieties were indicated based on English communication skills, audience, and topic and content. According to the result, 33% (13 out of 39 students) of Japanese students were worried about their English communication skills as well as presenting to individuals whom they did not know. Twenty-seven percent (8 out of 29 students) of international students also felt apprehension about presenting in front of unknown audiences. Here are some sample comments given in the original forms by students:

J No.17: 'English communication skills'

- Before we did it, I was concerned about doing it. I had never done a presentation in front of foreigners and I wasn't confident in speaking English in front of them.

J No.7: 'Audience'

- I was so afraid because the partner was a person I never talked with, and whose mother language is different from mine.

J No.9: 'Audience'

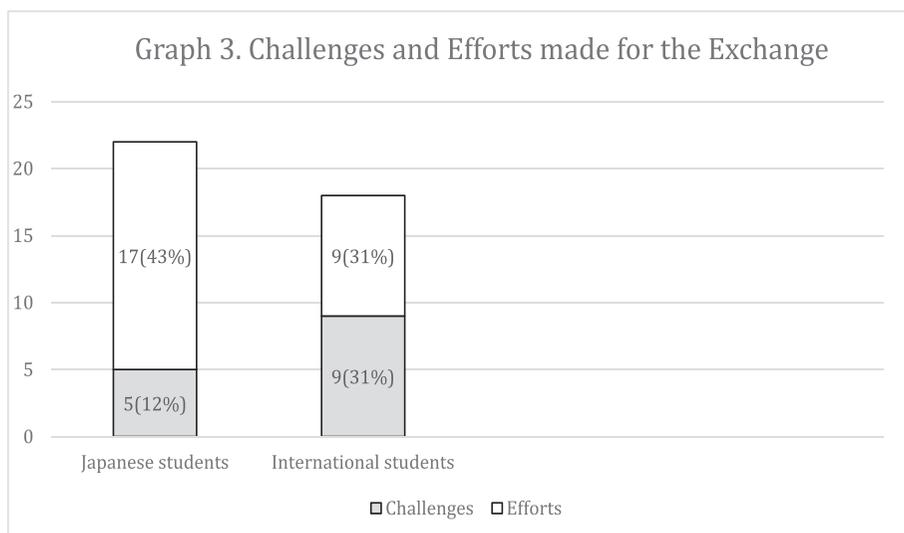
- I was very nervous to speak in front of the international student that was good at English. And my practice presentation was not enough. In short, I was not confident to do a presentation. Furthermore, I was anxious to do my presentation in front of people other than my classmates.

I No.24: 'Audience'

- Before the meeting, I was feeling both excited and nervous at the same time, because I only used to give a presentation among my classmates, but this time it is more like giving a presentation to the people that I have never met before which made me feel more pressure this time.

J No.18: 'Topic and content'

- I do not have much knowledge of science, biology and agriculture. I was worry if I could understand the contents of his presentation.



(Based on comments provided in reflective essays T=40)

Given the fact that both expectations and anxieties were marked relatively high, Graph 3 shows how students coped with anxieties by taking actions (Mezirow, 2006). As shown above, 43% of Japanese students put in extra effort for the exchange. This result demonstrates that many Japanese students prepared for their presentations to cope with anxiety through preparation and practice. About a third of international students also felt they faced challenges to overcome their presentations.

Table 1. Major challenges felt for the exchange

	Japanese students	International students
Audience	3	7
English skills	0	3
Topic and content	2	5

(Based on comments provided in reflective essays T=20)

Table 1 shows three major challenges felt for the exchange. Seven international students described the challenge of having a Japanese audience. Having diverse unrelated audiences to practice their presentation provided students an opportunity to validate new beliefs and discover their own truths. Students were able to self-evaluate their tentative judgment of actual performances, whether effective or not. Science and engineering students moderately used technical terms in the area they study. Those students needed to practice in order to modify their topics and content considering their diverse audiences. Here are some sample comments given in the original forms by students:

I No.22: 'Audience'

- At first glance, the exchange presentation could be a challenge since the language barrier and differences in majors and cultures might come into place.

I No.24: 'Topic and content'

- It was a challenge as I had to give a presentation in front of people I first met and listened to their presentations which are totally different topics from my study major.

Table 2. Major efforts made for the exchange

	Japanese students	International students
Preparation/ performance	16	8

(Based on comments provided in reflective essays T=40 J:22/I:18)

Table 2 shows major efforts made for the exchange. It shows that many Japanese students made additional efforts for their preparation and performance to be effective. Not knowing the audience's backgrounds could have made students put additional efforts into adjusting their content and performances. It is essential that presentation practices are done with actual audiences. Here are

some sample comments given in the original forms by students:

J No.12: 'Preparation/ performance'

- I was worried that my presentation partners majoring in natural science would be interested and understand the content. That's why I decided to bring up a familiar example in the introductory part of presentation so that they could be interested in my presentation. I also tried to keep the content order simple and easy to understand by referring to the paper I used.

I No.6: 'Preparation/ performance'

- I knew I had to go in with a calm demeanor to try and ease any nervousness they would have from interacting with a foreigner about critiquing their work in English.

Table 3. Major learning outcomes from the exchange

	Japanese students	International students
English communication	8	3
Passion and knowledge	7	4
Presentation skills	40	18
Discussion skills	9	1
Others	12	8

(Based on comments provided in reflective essays T=110 J:76/I:34)

Table 3 shows four major learning outcomes found from the presentation exchange. A total of 58 comments (52%) were written about presentation skills as their major learning outcomes. Many Japanese students learned about other essential factors such as English communication, passion and knowledge, and discussion skills from this opportunity. This result supports Mezirow's (2006) transformative learning process of validating a new belief by an empirical test of the truth of its claims. Through practicing presentations with unknown and diverse international audiences, the majority of students were able to learn about practical English presentation and discussion skills. Here are some sample comments given in the original forms by students:

J No.5: 'Presentation skills'

- Even when I make a presentation, not the usual talking, I want to achieve two-way communication. Through that, both the speaker and listeners can enjoy communication.

J No.19: 'Presentation skills'

- The importance of objectivity. I made my presentation on the assumption that every listener already knows, "this is obvious to many people." Therefore, I did not think of the need for the explanations about the terms or concepts. This assumption may hinder listeners' sound understanding.

J No.18: 'Presentation skills'

- His presentation was very clear and understandable. And he asked me if I could understand his presentation during his speech. Thanks to his consideration, I could ask questions immediately when I could not understand,

and I became more interested in agriculture, biology and science.

I No. 2: 'Presentation skills'

- I was surprised because his slides were entirely different from mine, in that they were much simpler and easier to understand.

I No.4: 'Presentation skills'

- His presentation style, where he focused on not saying too much, but having enough pause before moving onto next concept. Also these pauses helped the audience to take time to focus on the figure, or the slide to pick up necessary information. This especially came to me, since I talked and proceeded with my slides fast, that my group mates weren't really able to grab the content I was conveying.

Table 4. Major awareness from face-to-face feedback

	Japanese students	International students
Presentation content	9	1
Slides	6	2
Delivery	4	0
Performance	8	0
Feedback advice and praise	5	2

(Based on comments provided in reflective essays T=37 J:32/I:5)

Major awareness from face-to-face feedback was collected in five different categories as shown in Table 4. The result proves that the feedback process could provide a) Recognition that an alternative way of understanding may provide new insights into a problem, and b) Context awareness of the sources, nature, and consequences of an established belief (Mezirow, 2006) to many Japanese students. International students did not seem to have received much awareness of their work because they may already have daily interactions and feedback with diverse audience classmates in practice presentations. Here are some sample comments given in the original forms by students:

J No.1: 'Presentation content'

- He thought my opinion was too obscure. He told me to think about my own opinion in a firm tone. I was shocked by the little harsh words, but at that moment I realized a very important thing when performing presentations.

J No.23: 'Presentation content'

- She started her presentation with an introduction that gave me a time to get used to her English and to have an interest in her topic. I realized that starting a presentation with an introduction has two benefits. One is giving interest in presentations for the audience and the other is giving times to identify the way to listen to the presentation.

J No.13: 'Slides'

- He advised me to make more clear slides. For example, he said my letter was too small for the audience to see.

J No.20: 'Performance'

- He pointed out that there are few numbers of eye contact and gesture. I should cope with this weak point by repeating practice with my friends.

J No.6: 'Feedback praise'

- It is important to practice presentations with people who are completely unknown. If you practice with a stranger, I was able to praise and point out without thinking. Of course, if you practice with a very trusted friend, you can say a lot. However, I felt speaking to someone who meet first time sometimes is very good experience.

Table 5. Major Reflection from the exchange

	Japanese students	International students
Communication skills	10	4
Adjustment to audience	5	6
Content	1	5
Performance	3	7

(Based on comments provided in reflective essays T=60 J:32/I:28)

Finally, four types of major reflections were collected to explore the third criteria, c) Critical reflection of the established belief's supporting epistemic assumptions in Mezirow's (2006) transformative learning processes. As shown in Table 5, 10 Japanese students felt very strongly about the necessity of improving their communication skills. Adjustment to audience, content, and performance were also rated highly by international students. The result demonstrates that both students went through profound reflections about presentation practice with diverse audiences. Here are some sample comments given in the original forms of students:

J No.7: 'Communication skills'

- We realize that if we can read English well or if we have studied English on paper for a long time, we need extra experience of meeting and talking with many foreigners. This is because our speaking skill will be better when we speak to others in person. In my presentation, our mother language is different, so we tried to understand each other, ask many questions. What is more, we don't know each other well, we ask a question with no hesitation because we never feel ashamed.
Maybe I never feel ashamed of making a foreign friend because of this experience.

J No.11: 'Communication skills'

- Why could we understand each other in spite that we have not good English conversation skills? I think this is because we tried hard to understand what the other person wants to say and tried to inform what we want to say. From this, I noticed that the most important things when we communicate with foreign people is the willingness to talk with. Of course, language skills are important too when communicate, but we don't need advanced language skills. In contrast, strong willingness is absolute condition.

J No.30: 'Communication skills'

- The most surprising thing about the presentation exchange with international students is that grammar is not very important. Sticking to grammar is stupid. Gestures and eye contact are important. The passion to convey your thoughts is important. Talking to people from different countries is crucial to a peaceful world.

J No.34: 'Communication skills'

- I think the biggest thing we can obtain from this exchange presentation experience is "confident". I already did presentation to foreign country student, so I am very confident now and I don't get nervous or anxious as I was before in the spring term in this year. I became confident to speak in English with foreign people.

I No.1: 'Adjustment to audience/ Content'

- I have realized that it is important to choose the content that fits the audience in order to engage them, or make sure to explain any specific terms that might be challenging for a common audience.

I No. 2: 'Adjustment to audience/ Performance'

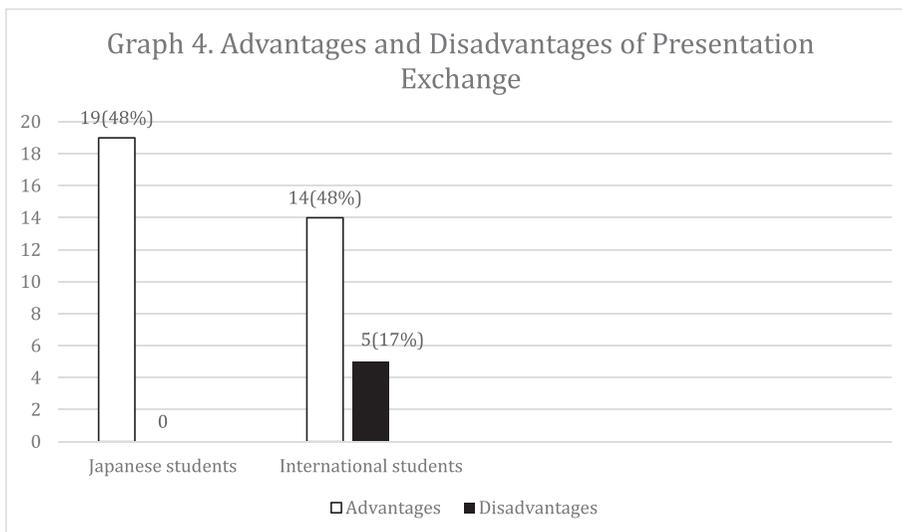
- My grade years in United States, since the audience was a class learning the same concepts in the same classroom, and generally spoke English as their native tongue, utilizing simply the vocabulary I came up with was a common occurrence. In the real world however, this method of presentation is not the best. As scientists, when presenting your own research, you must design the content order and list by yourself, and must keep in mind the global audience as well as the sheer number of them which your presentation style will easily leave a mark on.

I No.4: 'Communication skills'

- When it comes to teaching or giving a speech, knowing much cannot be the equal to being a good teacher or a presenter. Also, being native to the language is not equal to giving a good performance. I consider the most important factor is to think the whole process as a communication even though you would be the only one talking. Therefore, choice of content, usage of vocabularies, appropriate expression and speaking speed is basically required.

I No.5: 'Performance'

- In reality, preparing and performing a presentation in that environment was actually exciting, however, also more challenging than what I thought. However, those challenges I had gone through during the presentation, helped me to improve my performance skills, communication skills as well as coping skills with unexpected circumstances.



(Based on comments provided in reflective essays T=33 J:19/I:14)

Finally, to understand both the advantages and disadvantages of this assignment, students' opinions were collected in Graph 4. A significant number of both groups found the exchange assignment useful for improving presentation skills. Many Japanese students expressed confidence in the activity. Five international students mentioned difficulties in coordinating a meeting time (4 /I students) and the gap of English proficiency with their Japanese audience (1/ I student). Here are some sample comments given in the original forms of students:

J No.7

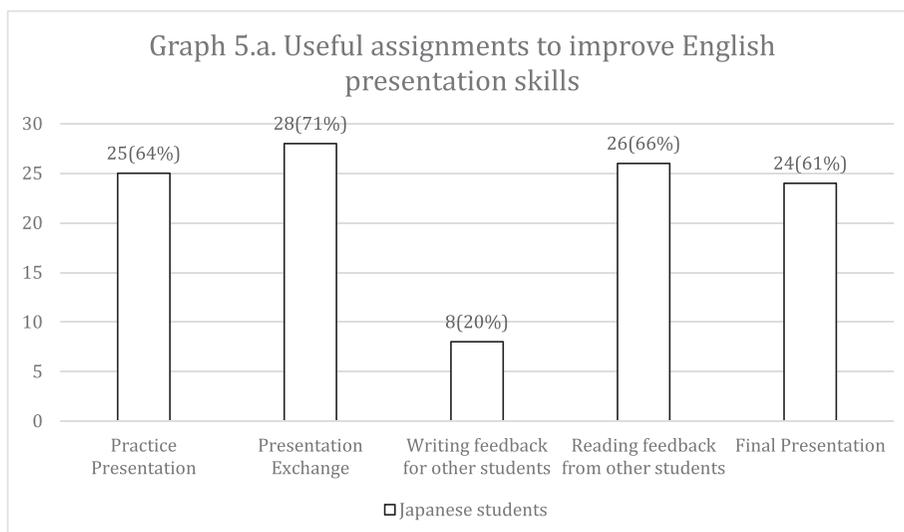
- I felt this experience was very important one for me intuitively after the presentation was over. After this presentation, I gain many kinds of confidence. For example, I got the confidence in talking to somebody I have never met, continuing to talk whether my English is understood by others or not, and listening and asking to a foreigner while we are sitting in front of each other in a small space.

I No.9

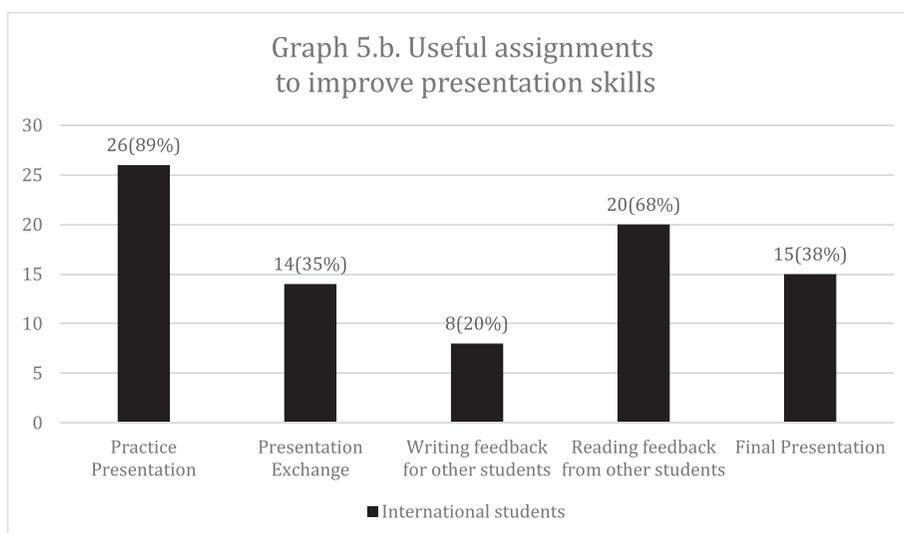
- The exchange with Japanese students was really helpful to have a first feedback, opinion, and exchange about our presentations, skills and to meet new students and learn and discover other majors, culture, and places.

Useful assignments to improve presentation skills

A multiple choice post-course survey was conducted to understand how students valued each assignment to realize their English presentation skills.



(Based on the number of students J:39)



(Based on the number of students I:29)

As can be seen from graphs 5a and 5b, more than 70% of Japanese students valued presentation exchange as compared to international students (35%). The result implies that Japanese students prefer to have more interactions with non-Japanese members to practice their presentation skills. International students valued practice presentation the most (89%). This result explains that practice presentation with their classmates itself already reflects an authentic presentation environment with diverse members; thus presentation exchange with Japanese students did not necessarily provide new challenges for all of them. Regarding the feedback processes, reading feedback from other students

was valued highly by both groups (J:66%/I:68%). Although this activity was performed among students, most students seem to have valued objective opinions on their performances.

Conclusion

This study investigated the effectiveness of intercultural presentation exchange using transformative learning processes to see positive outcomes that learners experienced. The result demonstrated that the majority of Japanese students could make extra efforts to overcome preconceived challenges they felt in the exchange. The majority of both Japanese and international learners could also learn about ways to improve presentations from the exchange. Another result showed that the majority of both learners preferred to have peer feedback from their audiences as they could learn to improve their presentation skills. As for Japanese students, practicing presentations with audiences they are not personally familiar with may provide more learning opportunities to improve presentation skills. English presentation skills courses must be done within mixed student groups to facilitate more intercultural understandings and productive feedback processes for learners. The process will further prepare learners to become real global human resources.

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