

Challenging Students With a New Presentation Style

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新しいプレゼンテーション・スタイルで学生に挑戦する

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Abstract :

PowerPoint presentations are an effective classroom activity for developing students' language, communication, and technology skills. However, some students may already have considerable experience with PowerPoint presentations, perhaps resulting in decreased task motivation and diminished academic returns. Brain research shows that students can benefit most from novel and difficult learning tasks that stimulate curiosity and reward the brain for rising to meet the challenge. This article will discuss the implementation of a new presentation style aimed to ensure that even students accustomed to PowerPoint would feel adequately challenged. Data collected from surveys reveal students' views on the importance of presentation skills and the perceived usefulness of this new presentation style.

要旨：パワーポイント・プレゼンテーションは学生の言語能力、コミュニケーション能力、技術的能力向上のための効果的な授業活動である。しかし、すでにパワーポイントでの発表経験を持つ学生にとっては、学習意欲の低下や学習効果の減少につながるかもしれない。脳研究によれば、学生は好奇心を刺激して課題に取り組むことで気分を高揚させ、脳内報酬を得られる新しくチャレンジングな学習活動から、より良い効果を得ることができる。本論文は、パワーポイント・プレゼンテーションに慣れている学生でさえも十分にやりがいがあると感じる新しいプレゼンテーション・スタイルの実践を論じるものである。学生への調査を通して、プレゼンテーション・スキルの重要性に関する学生の見解やこの新しいプレゼンテーション・スタイルの有効性を明らかにする。

Key words : Presentations, Motivation, Brain

Background

As English-language courses at Japanese universities have shifted more to student-centered and communicative-based approaches to learning, PowerPoint and other types of student presentations have become increasingly common. One valuable aspect of PowerPoint presentations is the potential to engage all four basic language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Apple & Kikuchi, 2007). Additionally, PowerPoint presentations can have real-world relevance for students by helping to develop essential computer skills (Chapelle, 2001 as cited in Apple and Kikuchi,

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2007) and improve oral communication, which is vital for professional success in our globalized world (Zivkovic, 2014). Moreover, presentations can lead to higher levels of motivation, as students can gain confidence, self-esteem, and autonomy (Brooks & Wilson, 2014).

Preparing and delivering a PowerPoint presentation successfully can be challenging for students, especially for those with little or no presentation experience. However, some students may already be confident and well-versed in PowerPoint presentations, particularly in high-level departments such as the School of International Studies. Would those students feel sufficiently challenged by a PowerPoint presentation, or respond with a “been there, done that” attitude? Perhaps repeating the same presentation format that students have successfully managed a number of times before could result in students feeling a lack of achievement. On the contrary, if students are pushed out of their comfort zones and challenged to overcome new and more formidable tasks, they can likely gain more confidence and possibly experience higher levels of motivation.

In analyzing the role of emotions on learning, Davis, Smith, and Leflore (2008) state, “By triggering the release of endorphins that reward the brain for meeting challenges, the emotions can optimize the learning experience, prepare the learner for novel learning experiences and can contribute to the growth of a larger, more complex, healthier brain.” Furthermore, “The brain requires novelty or anomaly to awaken curiosity and present a challenge. A stimulating environment...and variety can keep the positive neurotransmitters flowing and enhance the learning experience.” (Davis et al., 2008). According to Lackney (2007), the brain “learns best when confronted with a balance between stress and comfort: high challenge and low threat. While too much stress can inhibit the brain’s neurotransmitters, not enough stress can result in the brain not alert enough to profit from the experience” (Davis et al., 2008). Therefore, students may benefit most from classroom activities that sufficiently challenge them in new and unconventional ways, but also provide a comfortable learning environment in which students are not overwhelmed by fear of making mistakes or losing face in front of peers.

Coin Flip Presentation

The course Academic English in the School of International Studies focuses heavily on academic reading and writing skills. In this course, the students were asked to select a research topic from five choices provided by the teacher, including topics such as media bias, corporate culture, and sexual discrimination at the workplace and in society. After researching about their topics, students wrote a research paper, followed by a PowerPoint presentation at the end of the semester. The presentations took place in the computer room in a format similar to poster style presentations in which a number of students simultaneously give presentations to a small group of classmates at different locations in the classroom.

When assigning the PowerPoint presentations to students, the teacher informed them that they would give their presentations three consecutive times, each time to different audience members, and that the presentations would take place over two class meetings, with approximately half the students presenting on each day. The students were further informed that immediately preceding each of their three presentations, the teacher would flip a coin to determine the following presentation specifications: If the coin landed on heads, students would have to give a 4-minute PowerPoint presentation. If the coin landed on tails, the teacher would flip the coin again, and if the coin landed

on heads, students would have to give a 3-minute shortened-version of their presentation using the same prepared PowerPoint. If the coin landed on tails, students would have to give a 3-minute shortened-version of their presentation without PowerPoint. In all three scenarios, students were forbidden to use any notes during their presentations.

Although the random coin flip determined which of the three presentation types students would do for each of their three presentations, the teacher informed students that if the coin flip resulted in the same presentation style for all three of their presentations, the teacher would keep flipping the coin until one of the other styles was chosen for their third presentation, thus ensuring that all students would have to perform at least two of the three presentation types. In addition, the teacher later informed students on the day of presentations that even if the 3-minute presentation without PowerPoint (tails-tails) was selected more than once for the same set of students, the teacher would flip the coin again to ensure that students would use PowerPoint for at least two of their three presentations.

Purpose

This presentation style was designed to ensure that all students in the class, especially those with prior PowerPoint presentation experience, would feel sufficiently challenged. A further aim was to compel students to make judicious decisions regarding which information from their 4-minute presentation to omit when giving the shortened 3-minute version, as well as consider the necessity of explaining contents differently when having to present without PowerPoint. Lastly, it was hoped that students would gain confidence and possibly feel more prepared for any eventualities that they could encounter outside of the classroom, such as being asked to shorten a presentation due to time constraints, or having to present without PowerPoint due to technology failure.

Participants and Method

This study involved 51 students from two A-level classes of the course Academic English. 51 students participated in the presentations and 48 students (3 students were absent) completed a post-presentation survey, created on Google Forms, on the final class of the semester. The survey had 12 multiple choice questions as well as follow-up short-answer questions for students to explain their answers. The survey questioned students about the coin flip presentation, as well as their prior experience with presentations and general views on the importance of presentation skills. Of the 48 students who participated in the survey, 11 were first-year, 18 were second-year, 14 were third-year, and 5 were fourth-year students.

Survey Results and Analysis

Students were asked : How many PowerPoint presentations have you done in your life before this one? A large majority of students answered more than three (Figure 1). There were only 2 students, a first year-student and a third-year student, who had never done a PowerPoint presentation, in spite of there being 11 first-year students in the spring semester course. This suggests that most first-year students presumably had experience giving PowerPoint presentations in other spring semester courses or in high school.

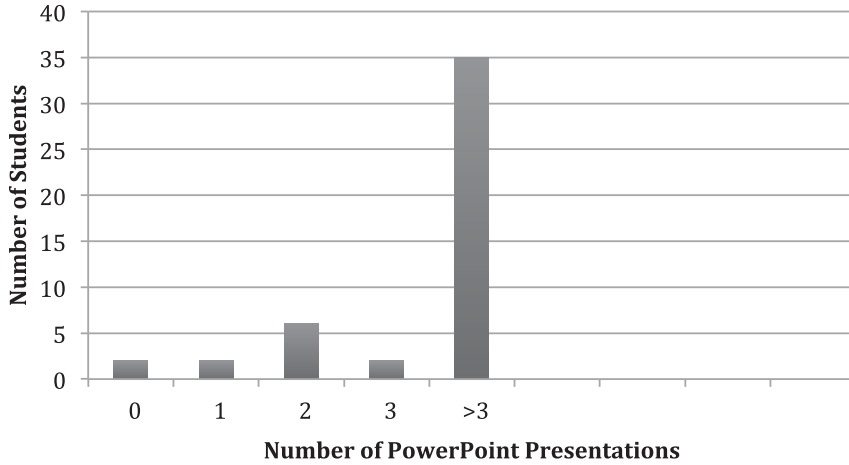


Figure 1

Students were asked : Do you think presentation skills are important? Every student answered affirmatively that presentation skills are either “definitely” important or “probably” important (Figure 2). These results suggest that the students perceive presentation skills to be important for their academic careers, future careers, or both.

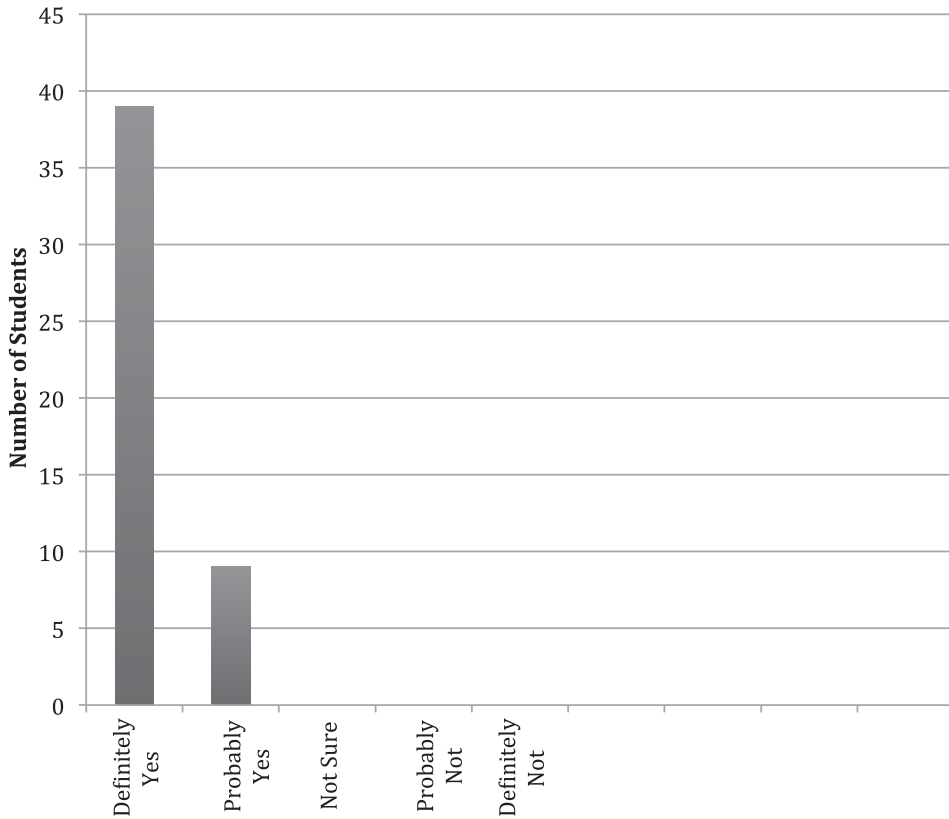


Figure 2

Students were asked to explain their reasons for their answers to the above question. Notable comments from students include :

- “Because if you are good at presenting something, that means you are good at explaining something. That is needed when we start to work.”
- “It is needed to express ideas or opinions more clearly.”
- “I think that I have a lot of situations of doing presentation in work place.”
- “Maybe we will do presentation during job. Also presentation skill links to speaking skill even in daily life.”
- “Because in work places you have to state your opinion and say it in a limited amount of time so it was great practice being able to share my ideas in front of people.”
- “In many workfield, there are opportunities to express your opinions in front of people, and some presentation skills can be used in that situations.”
- “If we introduce something to others, we have to make our presentation attractive because if the presentation isn’t interesting, audience doesn’t understand and be interested in.”
- “Sharing idea is very important skill and presentation is one way to do it.”

Students were asked : Do you think that experiencing this coin flip presentation style was a useful experience for you? A large majority of students perceived the activity to be a useful experience for them, with no students answering that it was not a useful experience (Figure 3). However, it is notable that there were more students who perceived it as “probably” useful rather than “definitely” useful.

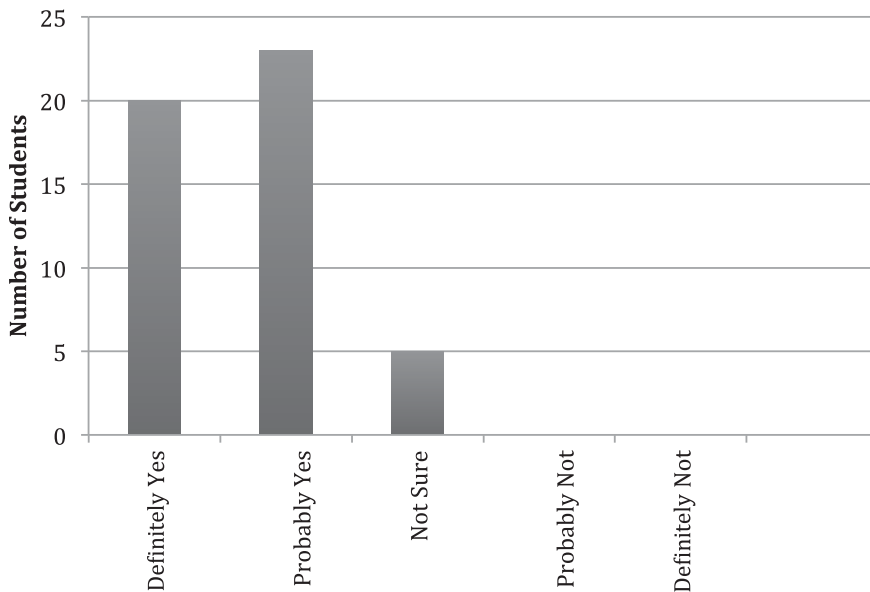


Figure 3

Notable positive comments from students include :

- “We have no chance to do the presentation like this in other class.”
- “We had to prepare 3 style presentations, but if we didn’t understand the topic well, probably we couldn’t do that. So, I think it was useful experience to search and try to understand our topic deeply.”
- “I have never done that kind of style presentation. This gave me a thrill which was exciting.”
- “In real situation, sometimes we have to be flexible to various things.”
- “This was a great practice when I have to summarise something efficiently.”
- “This presentation can train you to become a human resource that can suit any situation.”
- “The usual way of a presentation in classes is to use a pp and talk with a script. So the style like coin flip presentation was really new for me, and it was a good experience.”
- “It is very meaningful for us to choose which information is more important when we leave out information to make shorter.”
- “I can not expect which style that I give a presentation, so I have to prepare well in the coin flip style. It is good practice to give a presentation in the future.”
- “Because it was challenging but also good experience before working in a company.”

Notable negative comments from students include :

- “I think it’s too short, however it is important to have skill to summarize.”
- “I wanna use my slide, so I want you to eliminate “no slide 3 minutes” style.”
- “I think it is useful to improve our skill, but that took a lot of time to prepare and I didn’t have enough to prepare for that, so my presentation was not satisfying for me.”

Students were asked : Do you think this coin flip presentation style motivated you to spend more time preparing for your presentation than you would have done had the presentation just been a regular PowerPoint presentation with the same time limit each time? A large majority of students answered affirmatively that it compelled them to spend more time preparing for it than would have been the case for a typical PowerPoint presentation (Figure 4).

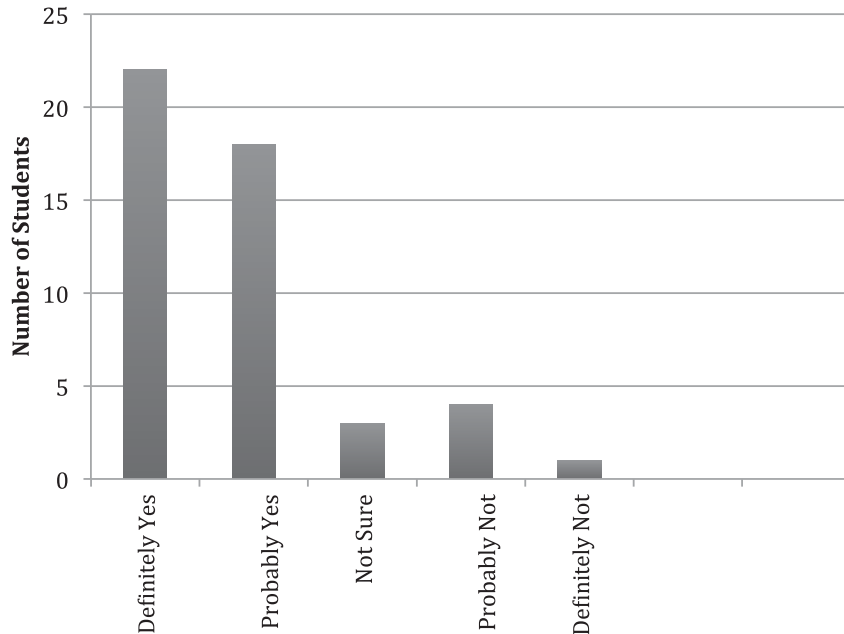


Figure 4

Notable positive and neutral comments from students include :

- “Usually I don’t prepare so much, however, I have to make a presentation suited for each 3 style. I spent more time to prepare.”
- “Because we had to do without notes, I spend much time to prepare.”
- “I made efforts for not memorizing my script but understanding. It was the toughest in my life.”
- “I had to consider deeply what to say or cut about my presentation, so I could consider what is the most important part in my presentation.”
- “Because it’s scary not knowing which one you would get so I felt like I had to prepare for each and every one of them.”
- “To do many kind of presentation was interesting and motivated me to practice.”
- “Actually when I was 1st and 2nd year I did not prepare for presentations and it is good for me to learn how to prepare.”
- “Actually, it was difficult to shorten my presentation so I thought I might fail which was frightening.”

Negative comments from students include :

- “There was no point of making a detailed scripts for this presentation so took less time than other presentations.”
- “This task was too tough for me to be motivated. I wanted you to consider about our busy schedule.”

Students were asked : In the future, if you were ever in a situation where you had to make a presentation but were suddenly asked to shorten the length because there wasn't enough time or had to do it without a PowerPoint because the technology failed, do you now feel more confident in your ability to adapt to such a situation after having experienced this coin flip presentation style? A large majority of students answered in the affirmative (Figure 5). However, it is notable that more students answered “probably” rather than “definitely”.

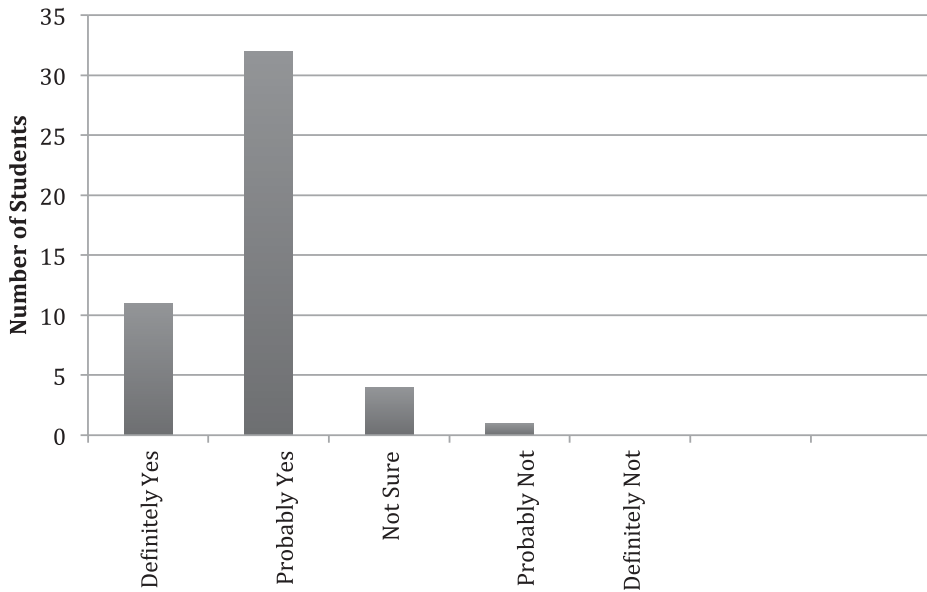
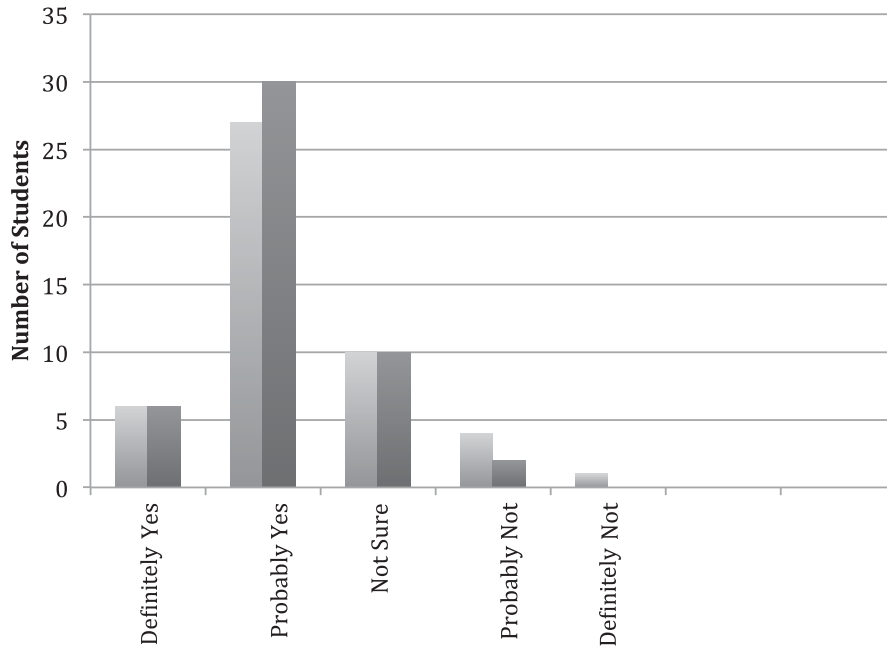


Figure 5

Students were asked : In general, do you enjoy giving presentations? Followed by the question : Did you enjoy doing this coin flip presentation style? The results were quite similar, with a slight preference for the coin flip presentation style in terms of level of enjoyment (Figure 6). The left bar represents presentations in general and the right represents the coin flip presentation. The data indicates that most of the students enjoy presentations. Moreover, even though this style of presentation was likely challenging for many students, it did not seem to diminish their perceived level of enjoyment, and even slightly heightened the level of enjoyment for some of them. Furthermore, the 4 students who answered “probably not” when asked if they enjoy presentations in general all answered that they “probably” enjoyed the coin flip presentation. However, there were a few students who answered that they “probably” enjoy presentations in general but were “not sure” if they enjoyed the coin flip presentation.



Presentations in General/Coin Flip Presentation

Figure 6

Students were asked : Do you recommend that the teacher use the coin flip presentation style again with the students in next year’s Academic English class? A large majority of students answered affirmatively that the teacher should “probably” or “definitely” assign it in next year’s class, with no students answering that the teacher should not use it (Figure 7).

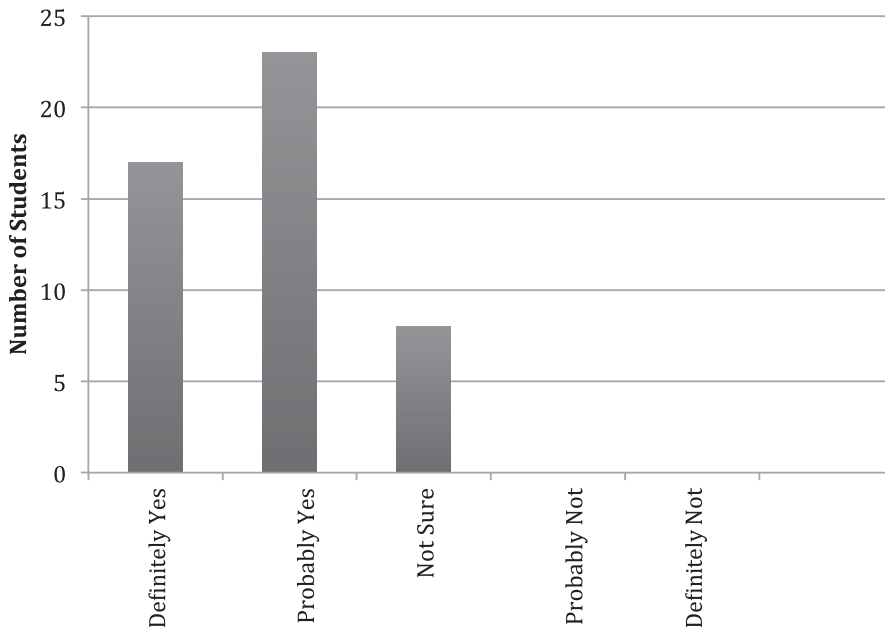


Figure 7

Notable positive comments from students include :

- “Because it is really important to increase an ability to act flexibly according to circumstances.”
- “That will be a great opportunity to improve presentation skills.”
- “Students would get bored if you do the normal presentation style.”
- “It is fun at the same time it is practical.”
- “It is useful for our future.”
- “I think this presentation style helped me to learn how to adjust in a few seconds, so I think the next year students should do this too.”
- “It was tough but students enjoyed and overcame it.”
- “It motivates the students to practice their presentation.”
- “I never had this kind of presentation style, so it was very interesting.”
- “It is more challenging than normal one so it can make students skills improve.”

Notable negative comments from students include :

- “Because I’m not sure whether this experience cultivate me or not. I think experiencing unexpected occasions might be useful in some way. However, this was actually not “unexpected” thanks to be told in advance. Also, as I said above, 3-4 minutes presentation and its contents were too easy for English V as well as the prospective of acquiring “academic” English.”
- “I don’t want to change the time and style each times.”

- “I don’t really like presentations in general so either way is fine.”

Students were asked : If the teacher uses this coin flip presentation style again in next year’s class, is there anything you think the teacher should do differently? Notable comments from students include :

- “Yes. Teacher doesn’t have to flip the coin but just let students experience all three presentation styles in random order. The aim of this activity is telling student that we have to prepare for every circumstances because unexpected problem might happen. So students must prepare for all of those styles and be given the chance to show they have done what they had to do.”
- “No, because I liked how he only let the “tails. Tails” happen once which was less stressful.”
- “I recommend that adding 4 minutes without slides presentation.”
- “I wanted to see some examples of good presentations before I start worrying on my presentation.”
- “Yes, 3 minutes and 4 minutes presentation are not so different, so 3 minutes and 5 minutes presentation is more tough but meaningful, because we have to change dramatically.”
- “Put the timer on the screen”.
- “For students, it is a little troublesome, but it need to do presentation flexibly.”
- “I felt like 3 minutes was pretty short.”

Conclusion

The limited scope of this study makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions, as its focus was to ascertain students’ perceptions and opinions regarding the effectiveness of the coin flip presentation, as well as students’ views of and experiences with presentations in general. Among other insights, it seems clear that many students view presentation skills as important for their academic or future careers, and that this activity was a positive experience for most of them, as a large majority rated it positively and recommended the teacher to assign it again in next year’s class. Perhaps one main takeaway from this study could be for instructors to feel emboldened to challenge their students with activities that push them out of their comfort zones. This activity was likely more difficult than presentation styles the students were accustomed to, yet they performed well and mostly viewed it as a positive and useful experience.

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