Designing EFL Presentation Curricula for Secondary Schools

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Robert J.S. Rowland

English education in Japan has traditionally lacked a focus on output. The main issue has been the lack of an inherent student need for it. In the years leading up to 2020 curriculum reform, the national conversation about English education has shifted from exclusively input focused education to a balance of all four-skills. University entrance exams, however, have not changed to reflect this change. The National Center for University Entrance Examinations had originally planned to incorporate proficiency tests from the private sector that emphasize output into the national entrance exam process from 2020. In late 2019, however, less than a year before the planned roll-out of the new entrance exam package, The Center announced a delay of their new testing program until 2024 (Nagata, 2019).

Looking towards the full implementation of this new testing program in 2024, English education at all levels, but particularly at the secondary level, is going to have to adapt curricula to build skills necessary for this change in expected educational results. However, there currently lacks a strong foundation of empirically sound, immediately applicable syllabi appropriate for a wide range of contexts. Furthermore, there is a dearth of papers providing actual advice for English teachers, specifically Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) on how to design and run a presentation syllabus. To this end, this paper outlines a short presentation curriculum designed to build output skills necessary for Japanese high school students. It starts with a conversation of principled presentation curriculum design, and continues by outlining a curriculum and materials designed with these founding principles.

Goals and Objectives

The first step in effective curriculum design is the establishment of an attainable goal for students that is assessable. J.D. Brown (1994) presented a framework for principled syllabus design that places a goal at the center of the design process. Brown emphasized that setting a goal can be a rather tricky matter. Too broad and it is undefined, unable to easily translate into classroom performance. If the goal is too specific, it takes away the opportunity for students to reach success in their own way. Defining expectations, while leaving room for learner autonomy in goal achievement, is essential for fostering and maintaining learner motivation (Dörnyei, 2001). For the purposes of this paper, we shall assume that we're designing a short module whose central purpose is to build skills for giving presentations. With that in mind, an effective goal might look something like this:

Students will be able to give a well-structured, logical presentation in English, using an effective visual aid.

This goal is neither too broad as to be unclear in purpose, nor too specific as to be unachievable in a variety of ways. This goal is applicable to both a variety of different educations contexts and students. With the main goal established, the next step is to decide what a student achieving this goal will look like. What observable behaviors will a student exhibit that indicate they have reached this goal? These behaviors, our student objectives, we will call SWBATs. SWBAT is short for Students Will Be Able To. To write useful SWBATs, we need to break our goal into different sections. Our main goal above, for instance, can be cleanly broken into three

different parts.

- *Prepare a well-structured and logical presentation*
- *Deliver a quality presentation by English speaking standards*
- *Create and use an effective visual aid.*

With our goal properly dissected into its distinct parts, we can now write objectives for each part. The following are a set of objectives defining behaviors appropriate to each part of our main goal:

Prepare a well-structured and logical presentation

- Students will be able to understand and apply knowledge of presentation structure
- SWBAT write logical English sentences
- SWBAT logically combine English sentences into a longer discourse

Deliver a quality presentation by English speaking standards

- SWBAT give a presentation with appropriate vocal elements
- SWBAT give a presentation with appropriate body language

Create and use an effective visual aid.

- SWBAT create a visual aid that enriches their presentation
- SWBAT use their visual aid to deliver their presentation effectively

With goals and objectives clearly defined, we can now move onto the next most important step in the design of a presentation curriculum: presentation topic selection.

Topic Selection

Topic selection is critical in the success of a presentation curriculum. In a perfect world, ALTs, and by extension all English teachers, would have full freedom to choose presentation topics for their students. In reality, however, presentations are usually one part of a larger curriculum, and the topic of the presentation is restrained by the scope of the greater education plan. Assuming, however, that teachers have full autonomy in topic choice, the topic must be selected after careful consideration of contextualization and cognitive demand.

Cummins (1984) suggested that there are two factors to determining the difficulty of a language learning task: contextualization and cognitive demand. Contextualization refers to the level of background knowledge, or context, a learner possesses regarding a topic prior to engaging in the language learning activity. If the topic of the task is familiar to the learner, it is considered context-embedded and allows the learner to allocate more mental resources to abstract language learning. An unfamiliar topic, or one which is context-reduced, on the other hand, will require more of the learners limited mental resources, rendering less available for language learning. Cognitive demand refers to the amount of mental resource required to perform a language act and is also measured on a scale from low to high. Answering a yes-no question about your daily life, for example, has low cognitive demand. On the other hand, comparing and contrasting two political systems has high cognitive demand. Figure 1 is a visual representation of how these factors interact to create task difficulty.

Difficulty of a task increases in each quadrant from I to IV. It is likely that secondary school students have had little experience giving presentations in school, even in their first language. It is therefore safe to assume that presentation structure and the language required to create cohesive discourse is unfamiliar to them, and thus cognitively demanding. For the purpose of the current presentation curriculum, topics should be as highly contextualized as possible while still being intellectually stimulating. Estaire and Zanon (1994) provided a useful reference for choosing topic task with their "theme generator," which was visualized clearly in Ellis (2003). This theme generator gives us specific suggestions for topics, and each numbered concentric circle roughly aligns with each numbered quadrant in Cummins model. Topics directly relevant to the students life in the first circle are likely to be cognitively undemanding and context-

I	II
Cognitively Undemanding + Context-Embedded	Cognitively Undemanding + Context-Reduced
III	IV
Cognitively Demanding + Context-Embedded	Cognitively Demanding + Context-Reduced

Figure 1. Cummin's Framework for Determining Cognitive Demand in Content Activities
(Modified from Cummins, 1984)

embedded. Conversely, topics relating to the world around us, or fantasy, are likely to be cognitively demanding and context-reduced.

One important goal of English education in Japan is to foster global-mindedness in students. As a result, taking them out of their comfort-zones and challenging them with topics in either the fourth or fifth circle is essential. They key to doing this is to provide plenty of scaffolding in the form of comprehensible context-input, and linguistic models. Juggling input and output in curriculum design is no easy task. Luckily, Nation (2007) provided an excellent model for well-balanced,

Figure 2. Estair and Zanon's Theme Generator
(Modified from Ellis, 2003)

principled language learning and curriculum development.

Principled language learning: The Four Strands

Paul Nation's (2007) Four Strands is a framework for how best to divide language learning effort to facilitate learning of the essential language skills as efficiently as possible. The Four Strands approach is incredibly versatile, and can be applied and adjusted to fit virtually any language learning situation.

Ideally, a curriculum should be designed from its beginning with the Four Strands as the central informing principle. English language teachers, specifically ALTs, don't always have the luxury of control over how language is taught in high school classrooms. It is therefore essential that we try to balance our curriculum as best we can within our means.

Each of the four strands represents 25% of the time a learner invests in studying a language. The first strand is Meaning Focused Input (MFI). MFI is input, either written or spoken, consumed in a way that encourages the learner to focus on the message in the input rather than on its grammar or
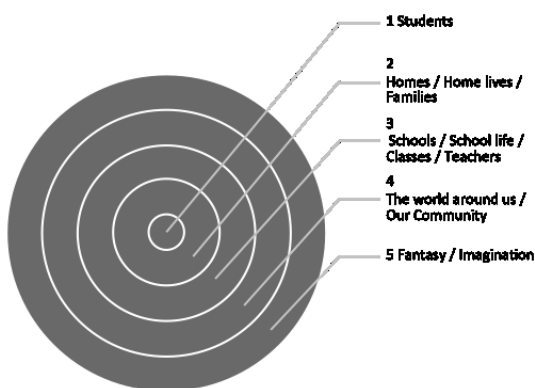
vocabulary. As much as possible, learners should not have to use dictionaries or grammar references to understand the message. Some appropriate meaning focused input activities are reading graded readers, listening to stories, watching media, and listening to conversations.

The second strand is Meaning Focused Output (MFO). MFO is output, either written or spoken, that encourages the learner to focus on delivering a message, without over burdening themselves with concern for accuracy. When engaged in MFO activities, learners can take their time developing a message slowly as long as they aren't spending that time digging for new vocabulary or trying to directly translate first language ideas they can't fully express in their second language. Appropriate meaning focused output activities include task-focused pair and group activities, journal writing, and prepared speaking activities.

Both of the meaning-focused strands are what are known as "top-down" skill building activities. Imagine a funnel with a narrow end on the bottom and wide end at the top. At the narrow end of language learning are the mechanics of a language, the building blocks which eventually combine to create a message. In English, bottom-up language building skills include knowledge of spelling and phonics, phrases and idioms, sentence structure, grammar, and syntax. These elements combine and stack, creating a richer and richer communicative tool, culminating in meaning, which is often greater than the sum of its individual parts. "Top-down" language learning, on the other hand, encourages concentration on the gist of a message, rather than on the individual elements that combine to create meaning. Communicative language teaching, or language classes that are message rather than grammar focused, are the ones that ALTs in Japan are typically most excited to teach. This is not to say, however, that there is no place for bottom-up language learning in the language classroom. Indeed, this kind of learning takes up a full 25% of the Four Strands approach.

The third of the Four Strands is Language Focused Learning (LFL). LFL is learning which is focused on language features and how those mechanics can be manipulated to create meaning. These activities can include learning from a language textbook, using a grammar reference book, consulting a dictionary, memorizing word cards, shadowing or
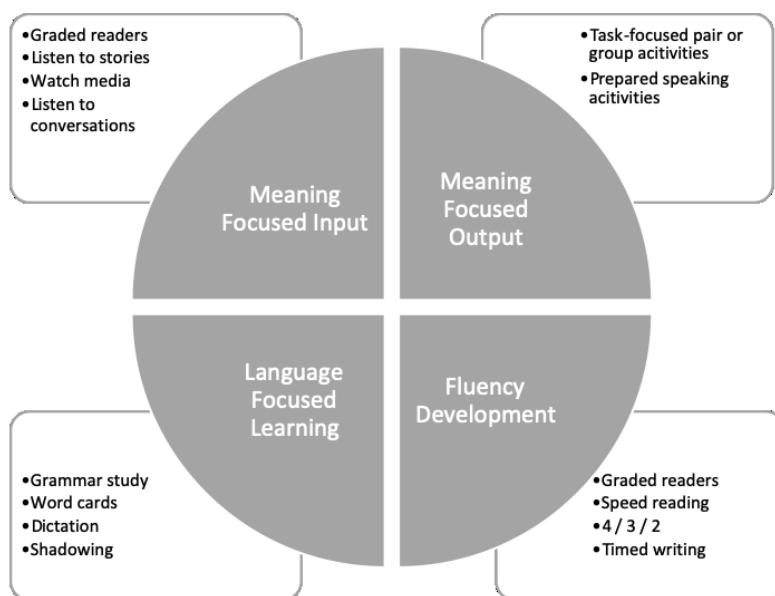

- Graded readers
- Listen to stories
- Watch media
- Listen to conversations

- Task-focused pair or group acitivities
- Prepared speaking acitivities

Meaning Focused Input

Meaning Focused Output

Language Focused Learning

Fluency Development

- Grammar study
- Word cards
- Dictation
- Shadowing

- Graded readers
- Speed reading
- 4 / 3 / 2
- Timed writing

Figure 3. The Four Strands Approach to Language Learning

dictation of pre-recorded material.

The fourth and final strand is Fluency Development (FD). FD is time spent making the best of the language skills that a learner already possesses. Activities in the FD strand foster skill to receive and produce language at a reasonable rate. Input and output fluency development activities require as little new or unfamiliar grammar and vocabulary as possible. In addition, there is some kind of time pressure applied to the learner to spur them into either processing or producing language at a rate just beyond what they are comfortable with. Some good fluency development activities include graded reader reading, repeated reading, speed reading, 4/3/2, and timed writing.

The Four Strands approach can be applied to helping students develop good presentations, but it requires a clear vision of where the students are going and how you intend to lead them there. In the next section, we will apply principles from the Four Strands to develop our presentation curriculum.

Applying the Four Strands to EFL Presentation Curriculum

Writing Presentations

Let's return to the goal and objectives outlined in the first section of the paper and see how the Four Strands can inform a curriculum based on them. Our first objectives were:

Well-structured and logical presentation

- Students will be able to understand and apply knowledge of presentation structure
- SWBAT write logical English sentences
- SWBAT logically combine English sentences into a longer discourse

There is a temptation to instruct students in specific grammar and vocabulary for achieving each of the above objectives. English curricula largely based in the Audiolingual or Behaviorist methodology, as exist in many Japanese secondary English classes, prescribe direct instruction and repetition of models containing the target-language necessary to successfully mime a presentation. This parroting, however useful for showing a specific example of how to achieve a desired outcome, does not encourage a variety of successful outcomes and thus robs students of their learner autonomy.

One way to avoid repetition and recitation is to utilize activities in the Meaning Focused Input strand. Provide your students with a clear model of an acceptable outcome while emphasizing that the example is but one way to reach the objectives. If available, show them a past example of other students giving a presentation. Make an effective visual aid and write your presentation with a clear, cohesive structure. Give your presentation with the type of vocal emphasis and body language use that expect. Use your visual aid effectively as you present. If possible, make this presentation available to the students to watch again, as often as they like. Give them an opportunity to study the behavior you are expecting them to exhibit. To encourage the students to focus on the meaning of your presentation, give them an active listening activity to complete as they listen. Ask simple, big picture questions about where information appeared in the greater presentation structure, the flow of the presentation, and the non-verbal communication skills used in delivery. Give students an opportunity to discuss their findings and assumptions with a group of classmates and encourage then to confirm not only the message of the presentation, but also the way that the presentation was delivered. The model presentation will give them a clear vision of the goal you are asking them to achieve and reduce the cognitive burden of the task.

Once students have seen and analyzed a strong example, it's time to have them start writing their presentations. The first phase of presentation development should engage the students in MFI and MFO to get them thinking about the larger flow of the presentation, brainstorming ideas, and consolidating their brainstorm into the skeleton of a logical discourse.

One presentation unit I have used in the past pitted groups against each other to compete for (fictional) funding to help someone in need. Using a real topic like this one is good for a number of reasons. First of all, the material is authentic and compelling. There is a human interest to it, which helps the students empathize and meaningfully engage with the task at a deeper, emotional level. On the theme generator, this topic is between a 4 and 5, distant from their daily experience, but with familiar elements.

There are many high-quality resources for authentic material, and the KIVA microlending website (Kiva. org) was the one I chose. KIVA is an online microlending platform which connects people willing to donate 25$ or more to people in need of a small sum to build or maintain a business. Generally, these businesses are in third-world or developing counties. I read through a handful of profiles of real people in need of a bit of money, and rewrote the language to simplify it for the students. All vocabulary and grammar was graded to a level appropriate for the students to understand with minimal use of a dictionary or grammatical reference. In addition, a note-taking sheet was also developed to help learners consolidate their understanding and create their presentation. This note-taking sheet, as well as all other materials for explained in this paper are available from the author upon request.

The note-taking sheet was designed with simple prompts to help students organize information from the modified input into a paragraph. The presentation takes the form of a 5-paragraph essay, that allows students to use writing conventions they may have learned in their English classes, such as cause and effect language. In addition to prompts that require students to parse information from the input, there were also prompts that encourage learners to think critically about the topic. For example, one paragraph of the presentation is dedicated to imagining how receiving the necessary donation would improve the candidate's life. This information is not included in the input, but with a proper understanding of details included in the candidate's profile about their living situation and need for the donation, students should be able to imagine the possibilities in the candidate's future.

After the students have engaged in MFI through a watching a high-quality presentation example and analyzing a donation candidate's profile, and MFO by consolidating their thoughts for their presentation, the students can turn to preparing their presentation scripts.

It is useful to give the students some Language Focused Learning guide to help them understand the linguistic and structural expectations of the output format. This guide can be in the form of a rubric that you will use to grade them with on their presentation. With my secondary school students, I often used a rubric like the one in Figure 4 to encourage construction of cohesive and coherent paragraphs, and ultimately, discourse.

This rubric encourages LFL. If time allows, it is useful to give students a good and bad example in writing and have them use the rubric to analyze the models. There is no necessity for the rubric to be in English. The product of the student output must be in English, of course, but during preparation, developing and understanding of the linguistic elements necessary for successful completion of the activity is the main goal. Thus, a Japanese rubric, or a hybrid of both English and Japanese would serve to introduce them to expectations in a non-threatening way. I have made a conscious choice not to penalize the students for grammatical or vocabulary mistakes. In this presentation unit, my goals were message focused, and a student can deliver an effective message without perfect grammar or vocabulary use.

Designing visual aids

Once the presentation script has been prepared, the students must prepare a visual aid for their

Format	Margin	Neatness	Indent				/3
Topic sentence	Topic	Comment	Connects				/3
Supporting sentences	Support 1		Support 2		Support 3		/6
Extra detail sentences	ok (1)	good (2)	ok (1)	good (2)	ok (1)	good (2)	/6
Signal language	1	2	3				/3
Concluding sentence	Signal	Topic	Comment				/3
Total							/ 24

Figure 4. Language Focused Learning Rubric for Paragraph Writing

presentation. Our objective related to creation and use of a visual aid was as follows:

Create and use an effective visual aid

 - SWBAT create a visual aid that enriches their presentation

Visual aid preparation has a tendency to quickly devolve into arts and crafts, with students focused on creative design rather than consideration of what makes an effective visual aid for a presentation. While there may be some students who don't perform particularly well in language classes and can develop a positive feeling about their experience with English from the opportunity to show and receive feedback on their artistic prowess, time spent on drawing and coloring isn't giving them much help with their language skills. To this end, it can be useful to give students a template for poster design. Often I will provide several different design templates to students to work with, and lightly insist that they not stray too far from the template in their design. Depending on the size of the classroom and the visual aide, I sometimes print the template of their choice directly onto their poster. Poster design templates should have clear demarcations for each section of the presentation, and limited space within which to work.

A clear design expectation allows students to focus on how to use the space they have been given to effectively communicate their message. As space is limited, students don't have the luxury of writing an excessive amount of information. Indeed, students would be best served by including simple pictures, or icons to help supplement their message. Of course, they would have already seen the effect of this simple design decision in the demonstration presentation given at the beginning of the module.

Presentation delivery

The remaining objectives are all related to the actual performance of the presentation.

Create and use an effective visual aid

 - SWBAT use their visual aid to deliver their presentation effectively

Deliver a quality presentation by English speaking standards

 - SWBAT give a presentation with appropriate vocal elements

 - SWBAT give a presentation with appropriate body language

It is important to set realistic expectations for presentation delivery. Typical Japanese classrooms set a different standard for the behavior of the ideal student than western language classrooms. In Japan, an ideal student is one who attentively listens to and quietly absorbs a lecturer's message. It is unrealistic to expect that students who have 9 to 12 years of education in this style will suddenly become effervescent salesmen by western

standards just because you've asked them to. The kind of practice required to be an effective public speaker in any language requires dedication and effort worthy of an entire course. Indeed many universities have entire programs dedicated to building this skill. Remember that yours is a language classroom, not a pulpit. Setting a realistic, achievable goal for the students' presentation manner is important to fostering a positive language learning experience.

Before the students begin practicing their delivery, show them your model presentation again. This time, give them a listening activity that focuses their attention on the behaviors you'd like them to exhibit in their presentations and may not include without prompting. A quality listening activity should be an objective checklist and contain a list of elements of presentation content, as well as for performance. These are your expectations, the behaviors that students exhibit if engaged in the activity according to the goal and objectives you've set. Every teacher has their own standard for the level of memorization expected of their students. In my classroom, everyone starts with full points for memory, and loses points as their memory wavers.

You may not have time in class to give a demonstration that encourages students to think deeply about all of the graded elements, but as much as possible, be a model of both good and bad behavior. Get the students to score you, and discuss their scores and reasons for them with other students. This conversation will help solidify expectations in the minds of your students. If you have the time and resources, recording the same presentation with various elements missing or poorly performed and making it available to students can help them better develop an image of what a good presenter looks like, so they are better able to model this expectation themselves.

Ideally, after scoring your model presentation, the students will understand what behaviors are necessary to fulfill the objectives you've set in your curriculum. With their scripts and visual aids ready and having confirmed expectation for delivery, it's time for the students to practice. Overly memorizing of the script can result in disaster if a nervous student forgets their lines and is unable to move on. To nip this kind of result in the bud, you can use an FD activity called 4/3/2.

The procedure for 4/3/2 is simple. First, set a timer for longer than the time limit you intend to allow for presentations. For example, if you are expecting a five-minute presentation, set the timer for six or seven minutes. Then, over the course of three or four practices, gradually reduce the amount of time students have to present. Eventually, you could drop the time limit to even less than they are allowed during the presentation session. As the students scramble to get through all of their information, they will start to streamline their English. By putting the focus of the practice on finishing within the time limit, rather than speaking every word they have prepared, you are encouraging the students to push through small mistakes and perhaps even improvise if they draw a blank.

The students have prepared carefully and are now ready to present. I highly recommend recording your presentations for three reasons. The first is so that you can be as critical of their presentations as you'd like to be through multiple reviews of a single performance. The second reason is to build a library of example student presentations to show as MFI in the future. The third and most important reason is that you want to set an example of how to be a good listener for the rest of the class. If you are crouched over a paper unengaged with the presenter, other students will take this as license to do so themselves. Become the model of an active listener you want your students to become.

Students have a tendency to tune out when other people are talking, teachers or peers. As such, it might be a good idea to give them some kind of active listening activity to encourage them to pay

attention. These activities should be very general, not requiring a tremendous amount of thought, and able to be filled out quickly between presentations. A simple three to five-point scale in several categories for quality of preparation, message, and delivery, with space to write a comment, is usually sufficient to encourage the listeners to concentrate on being a good audience. After each presentation, give students a moment to reflect on the presentation, and if time allows, encourage them to share their thoughts with the presenter. I usually include sheets like this as 5% of the final presentation grade, to encourage students to take them seriously. Depending on your students' attitudes, however, you may choose to forgo a listening sheet all together.

Summary

This paper presented a principled approach to effective EFL presentation curriculum design. The first step is to develop and communicate a clear set of academic expectations in the form of goals and objectives. Brown's (1994) guidelines are a fantastic place to start if you need guidance in goal and objective design. Then, be sure to choose topics for your students that minimize cognitive burden and maximize context. The more comfortable students are with the topic, the more energy they will be able to invest in language learning.

Once in the classroom, take a balanced approach to language teaching. Following Nation's (2007) Four Strands, give plenty of meaning focused input and encourage students to reflect upon it through meaning focused output. Provide no more grammatical or structural instruction than is absolutely necessary to help the students reach your goals. Encourage students to rely more on the ideas they have developed rather than the scripts they have written.

Don't let your students spend too much learning time on visual aid creation. Providing a template for students to follow when they are designing will keep them focused on how to create a visual aid that contributes to their message without overburdening them with the task of design. After all, for many students design and graphic art is as cognitively burdening as studying a foreign language.

Finally, encourage your students to be a good audience. Record their presentations so that you can listen to them live without the distraction of evaluation. Provide a model of excellent behavior and guide their listening efforts with some kind of active listening activity. Active listeners who engage with both the presenter and the contents of their presentation foster more dialogic and satisfying presentation experience for both the presenter and the audience.

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