Theoretical Analysis, Classroom Practice, Opinion Essays

## The Problem of Presentations:
## An EAP Lecturer's Approach to Teaching Presentation Skills

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### Abstract

Presentations are often incorporated into higher education without any instruction on how to present, or the features by which presentations will be assessed. This lack of instruction risks disadvantaging many students judged by tacit criteria they may not meet, including English as an additional language students, first generation university students, and international and/or cross-disciplinary students coming from educational contexts with different presentation styles and values. This paper presents one lecturer's efforts to meet the needs of her students to develop presentation skills by focusing a significant portion of an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course on presentations over four years. The paper outlines the curricular design for this focus, which included multiple presentations in multiple formats and an explicit Teaching and Learning Cycle (Rothery, 1994). Further, it presents some of the concepts and approaches that are used to shape an intersemiotic awareness of presentations, including the grammar of bullet point form, image-language relations, how to talk about complex slides, presentation delivery strategies, and how to scaffold practising in class. Finally, it concludes with some challenges about the formal evaluation of such presentations. It offers both design and activity descriptions for interested teachers to consider incorporating, whether in EAP or in other courses.

### Introduction

Academic presentations are often incorporated into higher education assessment without instruction on how to present, or how the presentation is assessed. Indeed, in graduate degrees, presentation events form a type of quality control and hurdle task for research (Scott, 2022). Many students therefore risk being disadvantaged by tacit criteria, including English as an additional language students; first generation students who may be less familiar with professional and/or academic presentation styles; international students who may come from systems with different presentation styles and values; and mature age or retraining students coming from different disciplinary or professional backgrounds. In fact, an academic presentation is a complex interactive multimodal activity (Zhao et al., 2014) that instructors may struggle to fully deconstruct for students, especially when deeply embedded within a disciplinary field. Furthermore, there are many varieties of practices and principles underpinning what may be perceived as a good presentation as well as a multitude that may be considered bad in some fields, but not in others. A key challenge is ensuring that students are assessed on what they have been taught explicitly and not on conforming to an assessor's cultural or cultivated expectations.

Within the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), oral presentations form a common assessment and even hurdle task for progression (Palmour, 2023). In British Columbia, the ability to deliver presentations accompanied by images and text is part of expected EAP

course outcomes (British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer, 2022). Research in EAP has explored how presentation skills are developed (Bankowski, 2010) and how strategies are used by students (Chou, 2011), as well as assessment processes around presentations themselves (Palmour, 2023). Nevertheless, students continue to be nervous about presentations (Mumford, 2018), and there is much for the conscientious practitioner to explore.

This paper presents one lecturer's efforts to explicitly develop presentation skills in first year international science students in an EAP course. This paper summarizes the curricular design implemented, including multiple presentations and Teaching and Learning Cycles (TLC) (Rothery, 1994), and describes a number of useful approaches for dealing with the intersemiotic challenges of presentations, taking into consideration the complete presentation event including slide content and delivery, as well as classroom content and activities, and finally the assessment of presentations. As such, it aims to offer inspiration and strategies for other instructors for use in classes with different content, contexts, and cohorts.

## Teaching Context

The curriculum described in this paper is taught within an enriched first-year EAP program that includes two Academic English courses, a writing-focused course and a science language-focused course, over two 13-week semesters; this unit came in the second semester of the science language course. As the writing course was focused primarily on writing and research, the science language course could be focused on presentations. A need for instruction on presentations had been observed and supported anecdotally by students reporting a very wide range of previous experience with presenting; some students had never presented with slideshow software, while other students had presented in multiple formats in high school. The curriculum was intended, therefore, to provide both basic principles for students new to or nervous about presenting, as well as enhance the skills of experienced students and help them adapt to the requirements of academic presentations at a Canadian university. Furthermore, within this cohort program, students had multiple presentations, most significantly including a poster or slideshow presentation during a student research conference at the end of the 11-month program. The research conference provided a high visibility application to validate the focus of the semester.

**Table 1**

*Iterations of EAP Unit on Presentations Over Four Years*

| Year | Classes | Weeks | Presentation Topic | Presentations | Presenters |
|------|---------|-------|--------------------|---------------|------------|
| 2020 | 2 | 13 | Research paper students' choice | PechaKucha, poster, slideshow[a] | 1 |
| 2021 | 3 | 7 | Scientist of students' choice | PechaKucha[b], slideshow[b] | 1 |
| 2022 | 3 | 6 | Scientist students' choice drawing on texts by/about them | PechaKucha, slideshow | 1 |
| 2023 | 1 | 7 | Topic from students' science electives | PechaKucha, slideshow | 1 then 2–3 |

[a] Delivered online due to the advent of emergency remote teaching in March 2020
[b] Pre-recorded by students and uploaded due to remote teaching in 2020–2021 academic year

This paper describes the curriculum initially taught in early 2020 (January–April) and iterated over the following three years (see Table 1 above). The paper draws descriptions from various iterations as relevant. Ultimately, the fact that the design and approaches described below have been productively taught in both asynchronous and synchronous settings for in-person, pre-recorded, and live online presentations demonstrates their usefulness.

### Curricular Design to Develop Presentation Skills

A particular point of design in this curriculum was the choice to dedicate an extended period of time to presentations. While this is not possible in all contexts, it is hoped that outlining some of the pedagogical choices will demonstrate potential for selection. Two interrelated and overlapping choices behind the curricular design have been identified.

### Multiple Presentation Formats

The first choice was that each semester involved two to three presentations, allowing students to incorporate feedback and compare different formats while presenting on the same topics. Three presentation formats were included in the initial iteration and sequenced with increasing complexity. Two—an academic poster and an academic slideshow presentation—were selected as they would be used in the students' subsequent research conference. A third more informal style of presentation was added at the beginning to build up to the academic forms. These will each be described below with a summary of the key challenges and affordances.

#### *PechaKucha*

A PechaKucha is a type of informal presentation where a speech is delivered accompanied by a slideshow with only pictures (no text) and automatically timed progression. While the original format uses 20 slides for 20 seconds each (PechaKucha 20x20, 2021), for students and for time constraints, the format was adapted to nine slides for 20 seconds each (three minutes total). The PechaKucha served to be a highly effective presentation skill development activity as the format constraints meant that students had to carefully prepare and practice their presentation (see Metcalf et al. [2016] for further exploration of incorporating PechaKucha presentations). Furthermore, by limiting the semiotic modes in play, the instruction could be focused on images, speech, and presentation skills, without slide text or manual timing.

#### *Poster Presentation*

A poster is a common form of academic presentation, particularly for presenting work-in-progress at conferences. It includes a large printed poster, with text, images, and data representations (graphs, diagrams, figures, etc.). The text may be presented in bullet point form, or concise sentences and paragraphs; the poster tends to follow generic stages of research reports. As an event, a poster presentation involves presenters standing in front of posters while audience members circulate and talk to presenters when interested.

As a pedagogic activity, the posters were projected on large monitors, allowing last minute edits and avoiding printing costs. The poster required succinct and clearly formatted text.

Students needed to interest audience members with conversation and design, as well as respond to questions. As an instructor, I was able to scaffold students' presentations through 1:1 conversations, and students who were nervous in performing in front of the class were less nervous in individual settings.

### *Slideshow Presentation*

A slideshow is a common form of presentation within and beyond the academic sphere. It involves a slideshow controlled by the presenter with both text and images. The slides include headings and point form text, with paragraphs of full sentences typically not valued. The slide text can serve both as a prompt to the speaker and as a scaffold for the audience to follow the complexity of the content. Concluding the series of presentations with a slideshow presentation allowed students to appreciate both the complexity of the presentation and its comparative freedom in relation to the stricter format of the PechaKucha.

The three presentations therefore increased in formality and complexity in terms of semiotic modes involved in communication. Students could and did reuse content from one presentation to the next, but it invariably needed to be reframed and adapted. In recognition of the increasing complexity of the presentations, and also to increase the stakes as students developed skills, the presentations were allocated increasing marks. The repeated cycle of presentations allowed different features to be focused on in instruction and assessment.

### Teaching and Learning Cycle Sequencing

The second choice is potentially the most important. The course was designed to follow the Teaching and Learning Cycle (TLC) (Rothery, 1994), a strategy for literacy development in particular, involving staged removal of scaffolding (see Figure 1).

### Figure 1

*Teaching and Learning Cycle for Presentations*
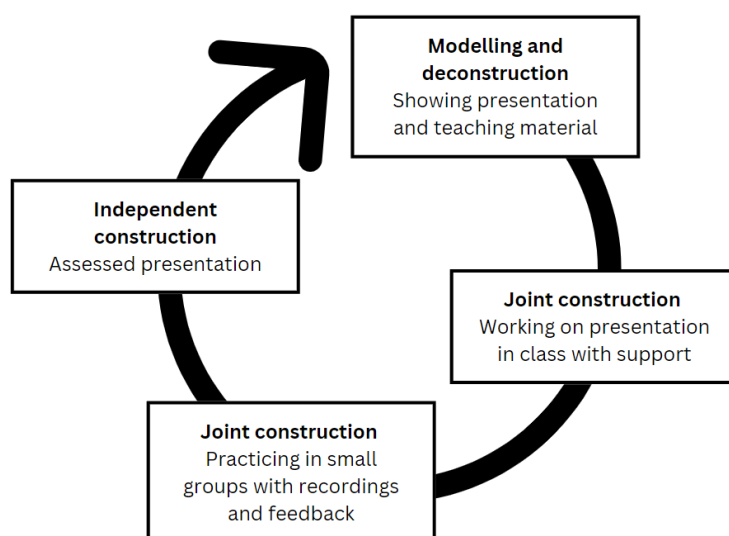
The TLC moves from modelling and deconstruction of a target text, to joint reconstruction between students or students and instructor, and concludes with independent construction by the student alone. In the science language course, each cycle takes 3–4 weeks (9–12 hours of class time), depending on scheduling constraints. In the first stage, the presentation style is demonstrated by a graduate teaching assistant, or with recordings of previous students' work, and particular features are taught with a focus on principles and procedures. Class time is then dedicated to working on presentations, with students receiving advice from instructor and peers. Most important was the third stage dedicated to practising, and various activities were created, ranging from peer review of slides or scripts, to phone-recorded practices where students presented to each other and reviewed their recordings. Finally, students completed the performance through delivering the presentation in class, whether in person or online.

The TLC was key to building skills in the students, through emphasizing the procedural knowledge behind creating presentation products as well as the practices and interactions required for delivery (see Martin, 2024 for fuller discussion). It also highlights the importance of firstly deconstructing the characteristics of a presentation format, and providing space and time to practise delivery before the final presentation.

## Useful Approaches for the Intersemiotic Challenges of Presentations

What is valued in academic presentations varies greatly by field and object of study. Some fields accept slides full of text while others spurn them. Some fields appreciate or require illustration through images, while others consider them superficial or incidental to meaningful communication (Zappa-Hollman, 2007). Nevertheless, there are a number of aspects of presentations that can be addressed in the classroom during the modelling and deconstruction stage, with appropriate acknowledgement of the diversity of standards of achievement. In this section, I briefly describe aspects of presentations I have chosen to focus on, and the approaches that I find useful, drawing on research, experience with presentations, and my ability as a linguist and educational researcher to analyze semiotic events. These therefore reflect my personal experiences and preferences, as well as the forms of my field. How they relate to either successful presentations by students in other classes, or successful communication more generally is still to be explored.
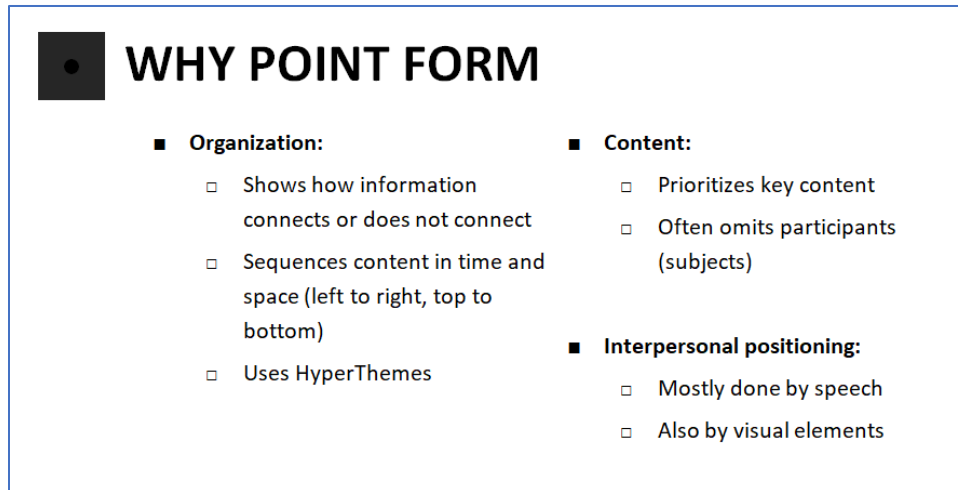
### Grammar of Bullet Point Form

Academic presentation slides make significant use of bullet points for visual language, yet many students are either unaware of the language conventions, or only have a tacit and partial knowledge. I suspect also the conventions are strongly yet implicitly influenced by the left-to-right, top-to-bottom language and page organization which may be different for students who speak languages that are written right-to-left, for example. Further, many skilled and strong presenters are unaware of the logic of bullet point form unless transgressed.

Grammatically, a bullet point often takes the form of either an extended noun group, or an abbreviated clause without a grammatical subject, or with the grammatical subject given by a heading or major point. Slide text is often relatively objective, with evaluative and subjective language conveyed by speech instead (Scott, 2022). Bullet points are also organized logically

and hierarchically through the use of indentations and sub-points, with groups of bullet points typically taking the same grammatical form (e.g., three sub-points as noun groups) to reinforce taxonomies conveyed through the nesting. The headings for each slide or for sections operate as a departure point for the whole slide, and all language can be understood as relating to it. Figure 2 both demonstrates and describes point form grammar[1].
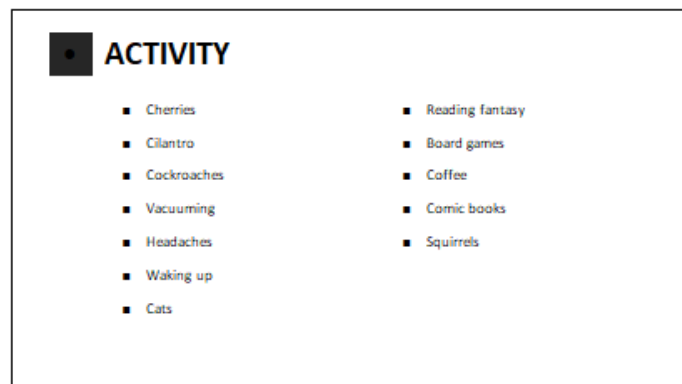
**Figure 2**

*Point Form Grammar Slide*



Classroom activities included taking a paragraph and summarizing it as bullet points, and taking a bulleted list of disparate things and asking students to group them in different ways (Figure 3). It is also valuable to draw attention to how explicit organization of bullet points helps the audience understand the presenter.
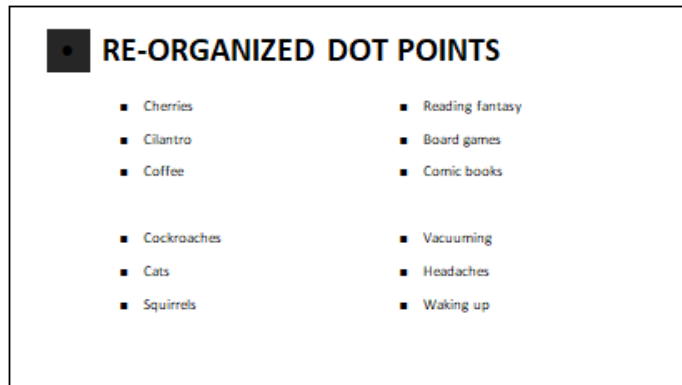
**Figure 3**

*Selected Sides of Point Form Activities*



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[1] *Point form* is used in these materials as it is a common term in Canada where they were used. *Bullet point form* is used elsewhere in this article to avoid confusion in other countries and dialects.

**RE-ORGANIZED DOT POINTS**

- Cherries
- Cilantro
- Coffee

- Cockroaches
- Cats
- Squirrels

- Reading fantasy
- Board games
- Comic books

- Vacuuming
- Headaches
- Waking up

**LABELLED & ORGANIZED**

Food:
- Cherries
- Cilantro
- Coffee

Animals
- Cockroaches
- Cats
- Squirrels

Hobbies
- Reading fantasy
- Board games
- Comic books

Chores
- Vacuuming
- Headaches
- Waking up

**Things I don't like**

Foods:
- Cherries
- Cilantro

Animals:
- Cats
- Cockroaches

Activities:
- Vacuuming
- Waking up

Problems:
- Headaches

**Image-Language Relations**

Depending on the field, images may be commonly used in presentations, strictly held to be illustrative, or dismissed as ornamental. Images have complex interactions with accompanying language. Drawing on Roehrich's (2016) framework of logical relations between images and language in textbooks, image choice can be presented in a number of ways, simplified here.

From elaborating logical relations (for example, such as), we can show how images can illustrate what is conveyed in language. The clearest application is when a presentation is on a topic, such as an animal, a technology, or a place, an image of this item accompanies the

description. While straightforward, it is a use of images that students repeatedly forget when immersed in projects.

From enhancing logical relations (where, when, why), we can show how images can provide additional details to language or language can provide contextual detail for the image. For example, when talking about an object, an image may provide the location, time, and effect of that object. This is particularly useful for explanations of processes or complex descriptions. Thus, within a scientific context, showing the methodology of an experiment might be more helpful than simply describing it; that is, showing how the experiment was conducted, and by what means.

From extending logical relations (and, but, then), we can show how images supplement or contrast language. One productive explanation I found of this was the way that gifs or memes are used—it is not that the image depicts the exact subject but rather that the image conveys a sentiment that extends what is being talked about. Similarly, we can add layers of information through images.

While this framework was somewhat productive by itself, its efficacy was enhanced in the second iteration of this course when logical grammatical relations in language had been a major focus in the first semester. This highlights how teaching about presentations can build on and integrate language- and writing-focused instruction for multimodal effects. Productive activities included taking a graduate teaching assistant's PechaKucha presentation, slide by slide, and mapping how the language related to the image. This particularly was useful in explaining visual metaphors the students hadn't understood (such as the use of a figure bending over backwards when the teaching assistant spoke about being flexible) or purposeful errors (such as displaying a technical microscopic image without explaining what it showed).

**Speech as Data Commentary of Slides**

One of the challenges of academic presentations in particular is increasing complexity in displaying data, images, or even text. A common problem occurs when students who have been working on a topic at length choose to display an image and do not explain it to the audience. To address this issue as well as give students a clear strategy, a concept from the parallel writing course was borrowed. In the writing course, students write Data Commentaries of graphs and tables involving three stages: indicative summary (summarizing what the graph depicts), highlighting statement (identifying noteworthy features of the graph), and explanation (explaining the causes or consequences of the noteworthy features). When showing a slide which in some way may challenge the audience's typical reading strategies, the presenter can deploy a similar genre structure: an indicative summary of what the slide shows, a highlighting statement pointing out key features (often while pointing through gestures or the mouse), and finally an explanation of the content.

A simple in-class strategy to illustrate this use of Data Commentaries is to use an image from the picture book *Where's Wally* (Waldo for North Americans) (Handford, 1987). The image purposefully includes a lot of interesting characters doing interesting things to distract the

audience. However, by following the stages, a presenter can quickly and efficiently direct the audience's attention to the relevant feature. For example:

- INDICATIVE SUMMARY: This picture shows a circus.
- HIGHLIGHTING STATEMENT: I will tell you a story about the green lady next to the lion in the top right corner.
- EXPLANATION: She is a key figure in the history of circuses as she advocated for hazard pay for those working with animals.

Giving students strategies for presenting complex slides works in tandem with strategies for decreasing the complexity in slides.

**Presentation Delivery Strategies**

There are two overlapping challenges for the responsible instructor evaluating presentations: fear of public speaking is widespread, and public speaking is often constructed as something requiring innate talent. My response is to try to breakdown the procedures and practices of presentation, such that anyone has the tools to talk about anything to any audience (see Martin, 2024). While this section draws on my personal experiences, and family lore of a line of public speakers and singers, I believe the valid point for teaching is that affecting these behaviours involves a physical component. That is, students need to physically try out speaking in different ways to understand their efficacy. One way I have summarised the features is through excessive use of alliteration, referred to as the seven Ps of presenting:

- Pitch—high or low
- Pace—fast or slow
- Pause—for effect
- Project—volume and direction
- Posture—shoulders back, chin up, open body language
- Peer—both eye contact and look at peers not just the teacher
- Practice—as preparation and as polish

The participation activity I use refers to the Goldilocks[2] zone: have students pair up and stand opposite each other and take turns talking to each other. Students speak too fast, too slow, just right; too loud, too soft, just right; too high, too low, just right; and finally curl forward, crossing their arms, chin on their chest and try to speak loudly, and then shoulders back, chin up, open arms. It is certainly ridiculous, but the student who is too afraid to speak up is invited to yell; the student who speaks really fast finds out how much to slow down; the nervous students curling in on themselves learn how extending their throats lets them speak louder. This activity therefore provides a shared vocabulary for giving feedback after the first presentation as students usually only have one or two issues to remember.

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[2] For multinational audiences, it is likely that the story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* needs to be told, or the astronomical concept of the Goldilocks zone for habitable planets.

**Practising**

Practice makes for a better presentation. One thing I have realized after several years of teaching presentations is that there are two types of practice: practice as part of preparation, and practising to polish. That is, a presenter practises while crafting the presentation to see if it works or if something is missing, and to find the flow. Once the presentation is complete, practising shifts to polishing transitions and refining delivery techniques like pronunciation, pausing, and gesture.

Creating opportunities for practising in the classroom can be a challenge. Scheduling specific lessons for practice was helpful but still faced two problems: students who came completely unprepared, and students who skipped the class on purpose. Nevertheless, it can be a lightbulb moment. I ask students to present to small groups, with one group member videoing the student practising on the presenter's phone, while the others made notes for feedback on relevant parameters (e.g., images, language, or delivery). An important point was to scaffold students to watch the recordings with a strategy I heard somewhere years ago. First, they watch it without sound, and so see themselves and any fidgets they may not be aware of. Then they listen to the recording without watching to hear how they speak and identify issues. If there is time, they watch the video with sound, and pause after every slide to consider the cohesion, although this step seems to have had less impact than it might. Finally, they watch and listen to the whole presentation.

The fun thing about first year students is that they often have never seen themselves present. They can be genuinely surprised to find out they unconsciously play with their hair, or swing their arm, or turn their back to their audience. Breaking this down as procedure rather than personal failing hopefully provides scope to change this practice.

**Final Thoughts and Open Questions**

A principle of my teaching—and undoubtedly of many others'—is that I try to never assess students on anything I haven't taught them. My goal therefore is to fairly assess them for the procedures and practices I have taught, and make explicit the valued features and common errors (see Martin, 2024). However, it has been challenging to generate an effective assessment process both in terms of the criteria given to students and the method of assessment. An issue with my early rubrics was that in an attempt to discourage certain fundamental mistakes, I found myself giving the majority of students full marks for simple targets. After engaging with a productive holistic assessment process (see Walton & Martin [2023] for a full discussion), I developed a hybrid rubric (see Appendix A), which retained the criteria of a rubric, but did not set the bands of achievement, allowing for description of achievement to be emergent from each class. I offer this rubric because these items tend to be tacit, and more importantly, I present the process of assessment and the logic behind the rubric.

This assessment practice strongly emphasizes form and delivery over specific content. Within the EAP classroom it can be productive to say, "Present on what you want; just present it well," although this risks providing too much scope (Mumford, 2018). At the same time, crossover with other courses can be powerful, especially when other expert assessors can participate. For this rubric to work, I have found it productive to record live presentations. This is

partly because I know I personally focus first on relatively superficial elements, such as errors in slide design or presentation delivery, and struggle to focus on the content. Further, as students typically present successively, it can be cognitively exhausting to evaluate completely in the moment. Recording allows live engagement with the presentation while reviewing details afterwards.

The rubric identifies four topics from class and describes a number of expected features. For example, for the PechaKucha assessment, the criteria are images, speech, delivery, and intermodal logic, while for the slideshow presentation the criteria are images & slide design, speech, slide text, and delivery, with values allocated to each element differently between the two presentation styles. Penalty marks were introduced for presentation format issues. For all presentations, running significantly short or long of the target time is penalized. In the PechaKucha, there are deductions for including text on the slides, and problems with timing and automation of slides. In the slideshow, using whole sentences or paragraphs on the slides, and not including references can each incur penalties. This use of penalties provides a productive moment to engage with students who have not followed instructions and made critical errors, while still evaluating what they have produced.

An open question remains about the efficacy of both presentation instruction and presentation knowledge and skills on student grades, and thus success. While there is some research in this area, the wide diversity of experiences and expectations requires context-based decision-making from a conscientious instructor. Anecdotally at least, I have received feedback from students that they were more confident and competent than their peers at the final conference, and from Science instructors that the quality of presentations when I taught a majority of the students had improved significantly from previous years. There are certainly more aspects of presentation that could be taught—my colleagues have found instruction on suprasegmental intonation patterns rather than pronunciation productive, which research has suggested to be potentially powerful (Pickering, 2004).

My advice for any instructors seeking to improve presentation instruction would be to consider how the Teaching and Learning Cycle could enhance content—by providing and deconstructing a model, or ensuring time to practice delivery. I would also suggest they choose one or two concepts to focus on based on issues they perceive in their students' presentations. The concepts I have written about are based on a combination of research and aspects that seem to be tacit for both students and instructors. Presentations are usually low stakes assessment events; nevertheless, a student who has confidence and skills to share their message and engage the audience is a powerful sight, and one worth working towards.

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**Appendix A**

**Hybrid Rubrics From PechaKucha and Slideshow Presentations**

**PechaKucha Rubric**

| Criteria | Specific Feedback | Pts |
|---|---|---|
| Images | | 10 |
|     High quality, clear, aesthetically pleasing, interesting and engaging, no watermarks or low resolution, no poor cropping. | | |
| Speech | | 10 |
|     Speech introduces topic clearly, uses informal and engaging language and manages technicality. | | |
| Delivery | | 10 |
|     Presenter engages audience effectively through pitch, volume, speed of speech, posture and eye contact. | | |
| Intermodal Logic | | 5 |
|     Images and language work well together creatively and logically. | | |
| PechaKucha Penalties | | (-3) |
|     Does not adhere to PechaKucha format: uses text on screen; runs long or shot; slide transition is not 20 seconds or automatic (max -3) | | |
| | Total: | 35 |

**Slideshow Rubric**

| Criteria | Specific Feedback | Pts |
|---|---|---|
| Images & Figures | | 5 |
|     At least two images are used. High quality, clear, informative, no watermarks or low resolution, no poor cropping. | | |
| Speech | | 10 |
|     Speech introduces topic clearly, uses spoken academic language and manages technicality, explains slides with a data commentary when necessary. | | |
| Delivery | | 10 |
|     Presenters engage audience effectively through pitch, volume, speed of speech, posture and eye contact. | | |
| Slide Text | | 10 |
|     Uses point form grammar, slide titles, hierarchical/taxonomical organization, avoids whole clauses. | | |

| Slideshow Penalties | (-3) |
|---|---|

Uses whole paragraphs or sentences on slides; presentation is
more than 15 seconds shorter, or more than 30 seconds longer
than target time; doesn't include images or APA referencing
(max -3)

| | Total: | 35 |
|---|---|---|