Performance, Presentations, and Rhetoric: Incorporating Rhetorical Theory into a Postgraduate Academic Communication Skills Course for EFL Learners

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Abstract

In this discussion of a recent course design at Duke Kunshan University, a Sino-American joint university located in Kunshan, China, rhetorical theory is used to facilitate the development of academic presentation skills in the context of an EFL Academic Communication Skills (ACS) course for postgraduate students. Specifically, audience awareness, the rhetorical situation, kairos, and visual design are used to help students develop fluency, confidence, and rhetorical effectiveness in academic presentations. The article begins with a discussion of the teaching context, a rationale for the innovations described, and an explication of the course content before expanding on how theories from the disciplines of rhetoric can be applied to academic presentations. In the end, the author argues that incorporating rhetorical theory into an ACS course is not a replacement for a language-centric approach to teaching presentation skills, but a necessary supplement that will help prepare postgraduate students for academic and professional careers.

Keywords: Course design; academic presentations; rhetorical situation; kairos; visual design

Statement of Teaching Context

Duke Kunshan University (DKU) is a Sino-American joint venture between Wuhan University in China and Duke University in the United States, located in Kunshan, China. All courses are taught in English. The student body of DKU's graduate programs consists mostly of Chinese students who spent their undergraduate education at a university in China. These programs are closely tied to their graduate program counterparts at Duke in that the graduate programs at DKU share thesis advisors with Duke and students will spend at least one semester on the Durham campus. What this has meant is that the requirements of the DKU graduate programs are closely tied to the Duke programs, including language and writing requirements. Following an assessment of incoming graduate students in terms

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of academic writing and oral English skills, students who do not test out are required to take an academic communication skills course and an academic writing course. In this brief article, I will discuss how our adaptations to the Academic Communication Skills course (ACS) apply theories of the rhetorical situation, kairos, and visual design to the task of building academic presentation skills and audience awareness at an English-medium joint-venture university.

Rationale for Innovation

Over the last two years, there have been three graduate programs whose students have enrolled in ACS: Medical Physics, Environmental Policy, and Global Health[1]. The Language and Culture Center (LCC) at DKU has been responsible for providing language and writing courses. Due to many factors, such as that the enrollment of these graduate programs has fluctuated from year to year, courses are capped at 12 students, and the LCC has limited resources to devote to these courses, it became necessary to design these courses to incorporate all of the programs such that students from different programs were enrolled in the same sections. Initially, this posed a challenge in that each one of these graduate programs has a distinctive mission and characteristics. Medical Physics is STEM centered, preparing students at both professional work in hospitals as well as requiring a research driven master's thesis. Global Health is technically a social science, however many of its students have backgrounds in medicine and/or biological sciences and further, are required to do a summer long field research project that typically takes them to countries around the world to work with various NGOs, universities, and research institutes on global health research initiatives. Environmental policy has a heavy emphasis on policy making where many of the central arguments of these policies are backed by economics and environmental science. Because the most prominent learning goals of ACS center around academic presentations, most of which are given in-class to an audience of fellow graduate students, how to adapt disciplinary specific knowledge for an audience outside of each discipline evolved to become one of the main questions that the course sought to address.

Furthermore, in terms of the need to develop communicative flexibility, though the goals and curriculum of each graduate program may seem quite different, what these programs have in common is an interdisciplinary focus, where to be successful, students must develop literacies in multiple disciplines and be prepared to address multiple audiences. Students in Medical Physics, for example, must be able to interface with medical doctors and literature while simultaneously developing expertise in concepts and applications of physics for the diagnosis and treatment of disease. Global Health and Environmental Policy share this split need to develop communication skills in both professional and academic settings and for varied audiences.

Finally, and in relation their course work at DKU, all three programs require frequent presentations on academic materials, including a thesis or Master's Project defense at the end of their second year. These presentations almost always involve the creation of Power Point slides.

Description of Innovation

The first iteration of ACS combined curriculum inherited from graduate communications instructors at Duke with curriculum adapted from Purdue University's Oral English Proficiency Program (OEPP), a teaching certificate program designed for International Teaching Assistants ("Course Goals and Objectives"). This iteration was based around three long and three short presentations, culminating in a twenty-minute conference-style presentation at a mini-conference open to the DKU community. The second iteration, based on feedback received from students and programs, as well as for pedagogical reasons that I will discuss below, reduced the length of presentations by building the curriculum around five skill-building short presentations (professional introductions; presenting charts, graphs and other visuals; presenting processes; presenting concepts; and an "imitation" short scene geared around developing prosody and emphasis) and one 15 minute conference-style presentation at a mini-conference open to the DKU community[2]. Additionally, students also work on question and answer procedures at the end of all presentations where they learn the habits of repeating back questions to the questioner in order to check for comprehension and reiterate the question for the audience.

In relation to pedagogy, the rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968) and "managerial" notions of audience (Muckelbauer, 2009) were essential for making these changes to curriculum. While contemporary scholars in the North American traditions of rhetoric and composition have long-running critiques of the concept of the rhetorical situation due to its essentialist renderings of audience and exigence (Biesecker, 1989) that neglect wider rhetorical ecologies (Edbauer, 2005), for students who have been conditioned to experience English as an academic subject rather than a communicative practice (Zhang & Kim, 2018), considering the needs of and directing communication towards an audience beyond instructors requires a shift away from English as an academic subject[3]. In the first iteration of the course, students were separated by discipline such that each graduate program had a separate section. While this is an ideal situation for disciplinary-based approaches such as English for Specific Purposes (ESP), notions of different audiences can remain abstract when these differences can only be imagined. In the second iteration, we mixed students from the different programs together such that they were presenting visuals and concepts for others who did not share the same disciplinary background. Definitions of terms, the purpose and application of concepts, and the central point of each presentation all needed to be elucidated clearly and students could not rely on obtuse disciplinary jargon or assumptions of previous knowledge. Extensive peer review as well as question and answer

procedures at the end of the presentations further enabled students to receive feedback on which parts of their presentations were unclear for their audience. Moreover, each presentation is recorded, and along with written and oral feedback from the instructor, students complete self-evaluation forms including transcriptions of a two-minute portion of their talk. Embedded in these notions of actively trying to reach an audience then is a process approach where continual feedback points the rhetor towards areas of improvement, each short presentation a "draft" towards the high-stakes public presentation that students make at the end of the course. This final conference-style presentation serves as both a final assessment of presentation skills as well as, for many of the students, their first opportunity to address an audience in English outside of the classroom on topics specific to their disciplines. The audience for these final presentations includes fellow graduate students, DKU staff and faculty interested in a given topic, and DKU undergraduate students. Making specific use of Bitzer's rhetorical situation then, students are encouraged to adapt their presentations for specific purposes and target specific audiences.

The repetitive and physically disciplining schedule of presentations throughout the semester, as well as the ample feedback in relation to audiences of classmates, draws from recent work in rhetoric on the concept of kairos; that is, the idea that instances of persuasion happen at "the right or opportune time to do something" (Kinneavy, 1986). The useful idea here is that presentations are a performance, and like any performance, practice is key because it enables the rhetor to embody habits that ease the cognitive load. Debra Hawhee (2002) writes about the role of habit building a la the sophist Isocrates, where "[Kairotic] response emerges out of repeated encounters with difference: different opponents, different subject matter, different times and places" (p.152). In the instance of ACS notions of a deliberation-based persuasion and "opponents" may not overtly apply. However, the idea that one trains their performance and attunement to an audience through trial and error is key to developing presentation skills, confidence, and consistency. Moreover, for EFL learners, academic presentations are not just about content, argument, or presentation conventions, but also about varied aspects of the English language such as grammar, word choice, fluency, and intelligibility. Thus, in addition to EFL/ESL based practices of providing students with idiomatic constructions of organizational language, common grammatical collocations for describing graphs and processes, and in-class exercises that explore rhetorical strategies such as using metaphors and examples to explain abstract concepts; repeated short-form presentations enable students to not only "learn" best practices, but to acquire these practices through a habit forming repetition that considers the clarity of argument as well as language. Kairos, in this instance, refers to habituating lexico-syntactic, rhetorical, and performative strategies such that the presenter's intended message can stay at the forefront of the presentation and such that a rhetor will be able to adapt on the fly and in adverse situations.

One example of how kairos can be applied to academic presentations in an EFL context is to encourage students to work from an outline rather than a memorized script. Typically, a large majority of the students in ACS will, in their initial short presentations, commit a speaking script to memory. While this is an understandable practice given their previous EFL classroom experiences and a generalized anxiety around the act of academic presentations (Kim, 2006; Kao & Craigie, 2018), the fact is that presentations memorized word-for-word are unengaging and inflexible. In relation to kairos and building embodied presentation habits, students are strongly encouraged to practice their presentations from a detailed outline rather than memorized script. Not only will this better prepare them for long form presentations at conferences or job talks where they need to be adaptable and responsive to audiences, but it takes the emphasis off grammatical accuracy in favor of argumentative clarity. Throughout the course, as students rely less on language focused scripts and more on varied practice strategies, a notable ease and confidence begins to develop for most students as the conventions, skills, and idiomatic language for academic presentations become more fluent. All said, kairos in this context is about deemphasizing "standard" language usage and correctness in favor of the idea that continual practice in conjunction with feedback is a sustainable long-term approach to communicative success.

Last, the course also spends time considering principles of visual design in relation to presentation slides, a consideration based in rhetorical notions of audience awareness. Drawing from CARP, a set of design principles (Williams, 2015) that has been adapted for composition contexts ("CARP Design Principles"; Purdue Online Writing Lab), ACS presents a heuristic for designing effective presentation slides and spends class time both understanding this framework as well as critiquing various sets of presentation slides. CARP is based on the idea that visual design can guide audience's attention and further, that there isn't one best way to design slides. Instead, considering the role of slides in a presentation can only be made when taking a holistic view of presentations; that is, that the purposes of a given slide and the main argumentative point of the presentation must be considered in conjunction with design. This approach stands in contrast to slides as exposition, which is typically what students have experienced in the context of their previous educational experiences since most of the presentations they have witnessed have been for the purposes of teaching rather than academic and/or argumentative presentations. Approaching the slides and their design as accessories to a presentation rather than the presentation itself is thus emphasized such that argumentative clarity, audience awareness, and comfort of the rhetor remain at the forefront of student strategies for academic presentations.

Conclusions and Reflections

The rhetorical situation, Kairos, and CARP design principles are rhetorical approaches and concepts that can be incorporated into courses usually seen as the province of language

learning. These ideas and methods are not a replacement for language-centric approaches for teaching presentation skills to English Language Learners (ELLs) but can be combined with a curriculum where language learning is subsumed to the purposes of persuading audiences in professional and academic contexts. For Chinese graduate students in an EFL context, many of whom have spent nearly two decades taking English courses, the primary challenge is not learning grammatical forms or idiomatic language, but developing fluency, confidence, and rhetorical effectiveness.

Upon reflection, there continues to be two primary challenges with this curriculum: the problem of real audiences and the problem of presenting authentic materials. For the first, even though students are presenting to people outside of their disciplines, their classmates still have much in common with them in the sense that they are fellow graduate students and usually on good terms. While the familiar environment enables students to experiment with various approaches and find a presentation "comfort zone" where they can safely build habits around the necessary linguistic and rhetorical gestures over the course of a semester, they still might be unprepared for the unpredictable types of audiences (and questions) that occur outside of the classroom. This is one reason why the final conference-style presentation open to the wider DKU community at the end of the semester is essential. Secondly, as first year post-graduates, some of the students do not have enough control of the discipline specific materials that they wish to present. To combat this potential issue we've been collaborating with professors from their disciplines to compile visuals, processes, and concepts that are core to these disciplines such that students who are not familiar with their disciplines can choose topics that they have encountered or will encounter in their other courses.

Endnotes

1. In addition to these programs, there are two other graduate programs at DKU: The Masters of Management Studies and the Masters of Electronic Computer Engineering. The former has their own curriculum that the LCC is not involved with and the latter is a new graduate program at the time of this writing. Therefore, I do not include them in this discussion.

2. ACS also spends time on discussion and listening skills as well as local-level writing and summary skills. For the purposes of this discussion, I only discuss the presentation component due to the specific rhetorical concepts discussed in this article.

3.Of course, considering audience is also novel for the typical L1 English undergraduate at universities outside of China. That said, a process approach to rhetoric and writing is more commonplace in US k-12 and higher-education contexts.

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