Presenting in English: How to give successful presentations

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Recent years have seen an increase in the number of EAP textbooks from publishers, particularly dealing with oral presentations. The importance and pervasiveness of presentations, certainly in Western higher education domains has been widely documented (Zappa-Hollman, 2007), but unfortunately for those seeking textbooks that go beyond structuring and organizing a presentation, there is a glaring gap in the market. Presenting in English was originally published in 1996 and has been updated this year, although not significantly altered, besides replacing the cassette tapes with CDs and sprucing up the layout. What distinguishes it from the glut of how to presentation books, is the extensive focus on voice, rhetorical devices and persuasive language, in the middle sections of the book.

The book is essentially comprised of seven sections. The first two deal with successful openings and how to utilize visuals, although without any technical advice or the provision of online resources. Sections 3-6 are the heart of the text and focus primarily on language and voice. The last section deals with handling questions from the audience. Answers for all the tasks are in the back and students can use the CDs to practice on their own. Although the textbook is divided into seven sections, there is no real continuity to the sections or the techniques themselves. Some may see this as a flaw, but I felt it gave me the freedom to pick and choose freely and design my own course around several points a week. The text certainly suits university students, particularly either English majors, or high-level students either returning from, or intending to study abroad.

The real strength of this book is its relatively unique focus on language, voice, and rhetoric. The importance of rhetorical devices in presentations has been detailed back to the ancient Greeks (Atkinson, 2005), but the language difficulties experienced by non native English speakers is seldom addressed in textbooks (Anthony et al, 2006). With an abundance of techniques and rhetorical devices to improve the delivery of a presentation, higher-level students can be pushed beyond giving informative presentations, and attempt more persuasive presentations. Some examples of the techniques provided include knock-downs, rhetorical questions, and machine-gunning; techniques most university students or even relatively experienced presenters are unlikely to have encountered before. While techniques such as knock-downs might be difficult for many students, machine-gunning is relatively simple to understand and incorporate and gives students of all levels the chance to see tangible differences in the effectiveness of their presentations. Indeed the range in difficulty between the techniques works well and will keep more proficient students interested while still giving weaker students an opportunity to improve. Students also seem to particularly enjoy the chance to play with the language, that these techniques afford them, which is borne out by the enthusiasm they seem to show when using them in their presentations.

A couple of criticisms I have are that there is a heavy focus on business English, which can be irrelevant for non-business majors. Another possible complaint teachers and students might have is that there is just too much material in the book, and that one needs a yearlong course to cover it all. Not that this is a problem necessarily but some of my students did mention the fact we were not able to cover some techniques due to time restraints. However, the vast majority of comments were very positive, noting the usefulness of techniques they had seldom come across. The book also does not provide anything in the way of topics or presentation practice guidelines, relating to Japan or otherwise, leaving this responsibility for teachers and students. I saw this as a positive point as it left it open for me to choose relevant topics and challenges for my particular students, and to turn the focus away from the business perspective the book is overly concerned with.

Despite these few issues, I would not hesitate to recommend Presenting in English for use in university presentation courses, providing they are not basic introductory level classes. The relatively unique focus on rhetorical language and other techniques makes it a very rich book from where students can begin to understand the nuances and skills that will serve to make them more effective and persuasive speakers. The updated version makes it more visually appealing to students and the CDs are certainly more convenient for teachers and students to utilize.
Presenting in English teaches students how to become successful presenters at conferences or meetings. The course is designed for all students who need to use their English in front of audiences of any size. The author, himself a very effective presenter, has organised all the skills, language, and techniques needed to present in public with confidence. The course includes extensive practice activities and is accompanied by two audio CDs. This course has an Answer Key and is designed to be used by students alone or in class. Presenting in English has several unique features which make it excep...