

# Using Virtual Portfolios to Improve Presentations in an EFL Setting

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## Abstract

This paper discusses using video sharing websites to create online virtual portfolios as a medium in which to engage English as a foreign language (EFL) students in authentic language use for the purpose of improving oral presentation skills through self-evaluation and peer review and interaction. Oral presentations are a common feature in EFL in east Asia, in which peer review is often employed as an effective method for increasing time spent in second language (L2) use as well as learner autonomy and motivation. This paper proposes the medium of video sharing websites as a way to better facilitate use of students' presentation video for means of feedback and evaluation, while simultaneously creating an online virtual portfolio of student performance and ability which will last beyond the course itself.

## Introduction

It is likely safe to assume that at this point most English as a foreign language (EFL) programs, especially those in east Asia, include courses on public speaking and giving presentations (Nakamura, 2002; Harrington & LeBeau, 2009). In the increasingly globalized world, presentations and the skills which accompany them play an important role in the business marketplace as well as academia. Furthermore, giving a presentation in a second language (L2) requires not only a different set of skills than typical oral communication, but also a grasp of the L2 culture (Cutrone, 2008). For all of these reasons, and perhaps more, giving oral presentations has become an important component of most EFL programs. Language learners need as many skill sets and as much cultural understanding of their L2 as possible in order to move toward becoming bilingual and bicultural. Oral presentation courses can be an effective method of helping to achieve this goal.

This is not an easy task in an EFL setting, however, as learners' exposure to and interaction in the L2 is inevitably limited. As any non-intensive class may only meet for a few hours a week, any time spent in- or outside of the classroom by students engaging in L2 use is extremely important. While this time may be spent on important activities such as memorizing new vocabulary, time spent engaging in authentic L2 use for communicative purposes is equally, if not more, important. Thus, structuring classes in such a way as to maximize student L2 use is paramount for instructors (Guardado & Shi, 2007); L2 input is valuable, but without practice using the L2, it

is difficult for learners to make much progress (Izumi, 2003; Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002).

In an oral presentation class, one method for increasing learners' L2 use is through peer review, the value of which has been well-documented (Guardado & Shi, 2007; Huang, 1995; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Lim, 2007; Nakamura, 2002; Otoshi & Heffernen, 2008; Wakui, 2006). If learners know they will be evaluated by their peers as well as the instructor, it " can be successful in motivating students to improve their presentations " (Nakamura, 2002, p. 215). Peer review, when performed orally in class, helps students to improve their speaking while providing opportunity for L2 interaction. Additionally, students not only receive valuable feedback, but also benefit from attention paid to metalinguistic areas (Lim, 2007; Otoshi & Heffernen, 2008). Engaging in peer review also helps the reviewer to recognize what may be lacking in his or her own presentations (Wakui, 2006). Independent, student-driven peer feedback also serves to increase learner autonomy (Guardado & Shi, 2007; Otoshi & Heffernen, 2008; Wakui, 2006) and can promote " intrinsic motivation and confidence in the language learner " (Finch in Otoshi & Heffernen, p. 69). Speakers giving oral presentations may find it difficult to objectively analyze their own performance, so feedback can play an important role in presentation classes.

That is not to say that self-evaluation should be overlooked. Students must be aware of their own proficiencies and errors in order to purposefully improve. Self-evaluating an oral performance after the fact can be problematic, however, and lends itself to greater subjectivity. A common way to enable students to better self-evaluate is for their performances to be videotaped (Tsutsui, 2004). When a performance is videotaped, a " real " product is created. Learners know that their performance is not a once-and-done deal, but will remain outside of the classroom for future viewing. This introduces additional accountability while also serving to help make students more aware of their own errors (Tsutsui). Recording performances also allows for increased objectivity from the presenter as well as teacher and peers, should the presentation be watched again after the initial performance.

Videotaped presentations allow for multiple viewings; instead of presentations which are performed once in class and then essentially forgotten, the same presentation can be viewed again for better peer reviewing and more objective self-evaluation. Additionally, through videotaping, much more focus can also be placed on body language and delivery skills by simply viewing a presentation without the sound. This may be particularly worthwhile in EFL contexts such as Japan, where normal cultural presentation styles differ greatly from more western ones (Cutrone, 2008; Otoshi & Heffernen, 2008). Likewise, the availability of videotaped presentations with which to critique their peers may aid EFL students in cultures such as Japan " where student-initiated classroom discussion is discouraged " (Guardado & Shi, 2007, p. 446). Since providing ample time for learner L2 use and interaction in an oral presentation class can prove to be difficult as instructors focus on the teaching of new content, delivery, and visual aid skills (Cutrone), even with communicative activities introduced wherever possible, one feasible solution is to increase time spent outside of class engaged in authentic L2 use. Thus, extra-classroom

L2 use can be achieved while also working to improve students' presentation skills.

For an oral presentation course, with the advantage of videotaped presentations, self-evaluation and peer review can be conducted outside of class. Not only does this make it easier for students to be more objective in evaluating their own presentations and reviewing their peers' presentations and open up an avenue for improved peer feedback in cultures that may resist direct peer feedback in class, it also increases learners' time spent engaged in L2 use for authentic purposes outside of class. As this is crucial in EFL contexts, multiple viewings of presentations will give learners additional exposure to L2 input as well as increased awareness of presentation skills.

Unfortunately, videotaping presentations introduces the logistical hurdle of how to get the videotaped performances to more than one student for evaluation and review. Dubbing videotapes can become expensive and inhibitive time-consuming rather quickly. Until recently, options have been rather limited for EFL students, but with increasingly digitalized methods of recording and the proliferation of the Internet, there are more alternatives than ever before (Thomas, 2009). Accordingly, there are now more options in how to deal with oral presentation courses. Video sharing websites, such as YouTube, can be utilized to increase student L2 use as well as enhance feedback and evaluation (Tsutsui, 2004). The argument could be made that using such sites may be an option which is only available until the next innovation comes along, but as it is safe to assume that the Internet is now an established part of 21st century life, it is probably safe to assume that video sharing websites have become a familiar development and quite normalized in their use in society (Pennington, 2004). Thus, instructors may turn to such sites in order to augment instruction and increase students' L2 use.

## **Video Sharing Websites**

There are many video sharing websites available today (List of, 2009); different sites may be more appropriate for different classes and situations. Most major video sharing websites, such as YouTube and Vimeo, share common characteristics which make them attractive for use in supplementing oral presentation courses. First, many of these sites are available free of charge. With an available Internet connection and the creation of a free account, instructors and students alike can participate and interact in a site's virtual medium. No additional software purchasing is necessary, and nothing need be installed or altered on users' own computers, whether personal or school property. Naturally, the websites are already set up and continue to be maintained by their owners and operators, so no expenses are incurred on the part of the institution or class. Second, using existing video sharing websites as opposed to sharing video on a school intranet is more efficient. Often, school networks are only accessible from on-campus workstations, but websites can be accessed anywhere with an Internet connection. Thus, both instructors and students are free to view and respond to videos from wherever is most productive. This also enables learners to continue accessing videos after they have finished the course or left the institution, which is one important facet of virtual portfolios.

This raises the question of privacy. Students, or even institutions, may not want recorded presentations broadcast to the entire world. This is easily solved by employing the privacy setting available on most video sharing websites. Whoever has administrative control over a certain video, be it instructor or student, is able to mark the video as private and only allow a chosen list of users to have access to it. Most importantly, however, is the built-in feedback and rating system with which sites such as YouTube are already equipped. Instead of viewing a video via a website and then writing down feedback on a physical piece of paper to be handed in or exchanged in class, as was the case with videotapes in the past, student and teacher can use the comment and rating sections of a video's page to provide online feedback - as seen in Figure 1.

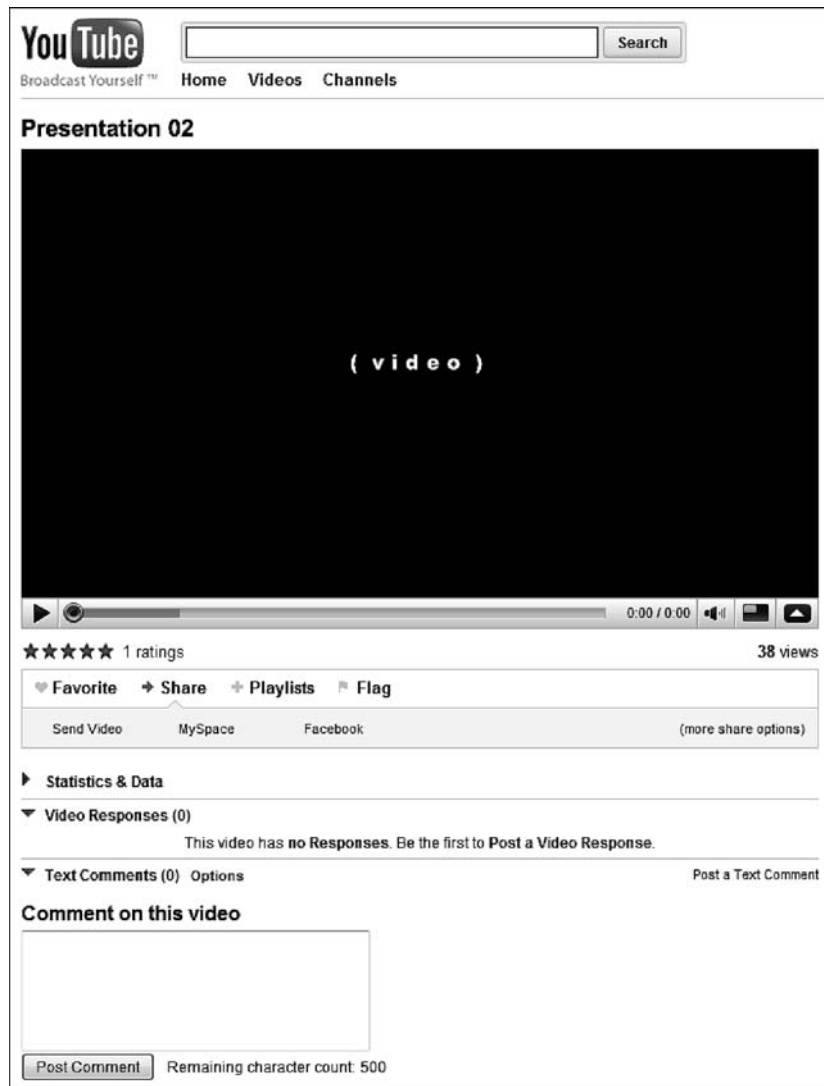


Figure 1: Screenshot of video and feedback area on YouTube

As a result, valuable class time can be spent on activities other than evaluation and feedback. Teacher and students can then access videos via the website after class in a low-pressure setting where it is possible for the video to be manipulated for increased comprehension, evaluation, and feedback. This can be particularly attractive to students who are hesitant to deliver direct feedback to their peers (Guardado & Shi, 2007). Also, if preferred, feedback and interaction can be provided anonymously via accounts on the video sharing website which do not divulge students' actual names. Regardless of whether feedback is provided anonymously, with online feedback, students "are released from much of the responsibility that a face-to-face encounter sometimes forces on them. They are not affected, for instance, by students with bad breath, or by students who make them uncomfortable in some vague way, or by students who are angry with a teacher" (Jordan-Henley & Maid in Guardado & Shi, p. 444). This more relaxed, out-of-class medium can free students from in-class awkwardness, especially in EFL cultures such as Japan (Guardado & Shi). Video sharing websites also seem to be well-suited for EFL students' peer review and interaction. Guardado and Shi report that, compared to synchronous feedback, asynchronous feedback includes less pressure and tends to be more serious (p. 445), which is less threatening and encourages student participation. Through the medium of sites such as YouTube, all interaction is inherently asynchronous, which is good news for EFL oral presentation classes. This allows reviewers to formulate responses and suggestions before submitting them for the presenter to see.

Furthermore, feedback given via a video sharing website is not restricted to written text typed in the comment area. As can be seen in Figure 1 above, the possibility exists for feedback to be provided in the form of a video reply. Instead of writing comments to be read by the presenter, students can record their own video responses. If a class is focusing on oral skills, employing video responses may be a way to engage student in extra-class L2 use that is not only for the authentic purpose of providing feedback to their peers, but also an extension of what has been covered in class. Because video responses are also asynchronous, students can edit or re-record their responses until they feel they have a satisfactory product. In that way, the peer review and feedback itself becomes structured L2 practice and could be used for course assessment if the instructor sees fit. As this is a novel medium, there may exist other methods which have not been mentioned by which video sharing websites can be applied.

## **Virtual Portfolios**

As a class progresses, then, and multiple presentations by the same student are uploaded, an online virtual portfolio is naturally created (Snyder-Parampil & Hensley, 2009). It is possible for instructors to upload all presentation videos, providing themselves with administrator rights to all students' presentations. However, in order to encourage autonomy and foster student participation and motivation (Otoshi & Heffernan, 2008), it may be beneficial for instructors to provide students with digital files of their presentation videos and have students upload and maintain their own videos. In this way, each student becomes principle owner of his or her own online virtual portfolio which includes all performances. The virtual portfolio becomes a record of stu-

dents' progress throughout the course as well as evidence of their language ability.

This portfolio can serve a number of purposes, both during the course and after. During the course, as students' presentations are uploaded, a progress record takes shape. For example, presentation two can be checked to see whether what was addressed in feedback for presentation one was improved, and so on for subsequent presentations. Also, at the end of the course, the presentations can be assessed collectively for overall improvement. When the first and final presentations are compared, students and teachers should be able to draw satisfaction from seeing in what ways the student has improved during the course. Once the class is completed, the virtual portfolio does not cease to be meaningful, either. The portfolio exists as a record of what the learner has accomplished in the L2 as well as evidence of language growth. The virtual portfolio can also be used as proof of L2 ability, should the need arise, perhaps as part of an application process. Thus, presentations become more than a way to improve language skills, which is important in-and-of itself, they serve as a lasting testimony of how the learner has progressed and what he or she is capable of.

An additional application of using video sharing websites to post recorded presentations may be beneficial as well. Instead of recording all student presentations in class and on the spot, instructors might want to consider using "perfect" presentations to empower learners and build confidence in their presentation abilities. Through extra-class recording and posting to the website, students could record their performance of a presentation as many times as they need in order to make it "perfect". Naturally, literal perfection is not the point, but the act of repeated performances for the purpose of recording what a learner feels to be his or her best would force the learner to self-evaluate immediately and correct his or her perceived errors. The benefit of making learners aware of their mistakes may be worth the time spent recording and uploading alone. However, every repetition of a performance is further time spent in authentic L2 use outside of class in what should be a relatively non-threatening situation (as opposed to speaking in front of a full audience in class). Students' self-confidence should also benefit from seeing their final product and realizing what they are capable of in terms of delivering a presentation in their L2.

## **Limitations**

There are, of course, potential drawbacks to the creation of online virtual portfolios. First and foremost, while the video sharing websites themselves are free, the hardware necessary for recording presentations is not. At minimum, a digital camcorder is required in order to record presentations, transfer them to a computer, and, from there, to upload them to the Internet. The use of DVD and mini-DVD camcorders may add the extra step of transferring video files from disc to computer, which requires special software in some cases, such as Easy DVD Rip (Home DVD Copy, 2009) or iMovie (Apple, 2009). A digital camcorder circumvents this step entirely, however.

Like any application of technology, additional time is required for transferring presentation videos to a computer and uploading them to the Internet. With a digital camcorder, this process can be accomplished rather quickly. Still, this may not be practical for classes of over 20 students. Unless, that is, students are given their own video files to upload themselves. Provided that students are properly trained in how to upload videos, the instructor can save time while allowing students to have a larger role in the course, which should serve to bolster learner autonomy.

Lastly, some websites, including YouTube, limit the number of users who can view a private video. Whoever uploads the video is responsible for adding class members to the list of those who can view the video once it has been marked as private. YouTube limits the number to 25, so if a class is larger than that, it may need to be divided into two groups for the purpose of online feedback.

## Conclusion

In sum, online virtual portfolios have the potential to supplement and enhance EFL oral presentation courses. Students are able to engage in self-evaluation and peer review outside of class, which saves valuable class time, in a less threatening asynchronous setting which allows them to more objectively evaluate performances and formulate responses before posting them via the website. All students' videos are kept in the same place and accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. This provides all the advantages of a videotaped presentation but with much more access and interaction possible between learners, greatly increasing the amount of authentic L2 input and exposure to presentation skills as well as feedback and evaluation. Websites such as YouTube and Vimeo are ideal for this sharing of virtual portfolios and come equipped with built-in feedback options at no cost. Learners are then able to view one another's videos as much as necessary to provide objective peer review in a low-pressure asynchronous format.

Much research needs to be carried out to determine the full benefits and applications this medium has to offer. Also, there most likely exist additional ideas not presented in or beyond the scope of this paper to which virtual portfolios are well-suited. It seems evident, though, that EFL instructors have at their disposal a powerful tool with which to empower L2 learners and improve oral presentation skills while increasing time spent in authentic L2 use.

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