

# Practical *PowerPoint* group projects for the EFL classroom

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*Using PowerPoint for student-created group projects can be motivating and enjoyable for both students and instructors while fostering a sense of student self-reliance and autonomy. After a brief review of the benefits of cooperative group work and scaffolding in second language learning, this paper highlights three different methods for using PowerPoint in a university classroom setting. The first method involves student construction of picture stories, the second describes making travel plans, and the third demonstrates guidelines for outside class group work on simple research projects, such as surveys of fellow students' opinions. Finally, the authors give examples of peer and instructor assessment forms and offer possible future directions for research and implementation of PowerPoint projects in second language classrooms.*

**M**icrosoft *PowerPoint* is well known as a popular presentation software program commonly used for business and academic purposes. However, language instructors can also utilize *PowerPoint* in language classrooms as an effective complement to, or as a substitute for traditional textbook teaching. *PowerPoint* group projects can give learners the opportunity to work together toward a common group goal while using their language skills creatively. This paper gives a brief overview of potential benefits of using *PowerPoint* in conjunction with group work in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom and describes three types of *PowerPoint* group projects used by the authors with their EFL learners in Japan.

## A constructivist theory of tasks

Many recent educational practices utilizing group work and convergent tasks have been strongly influenced by Soviet-Era psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who theorized that all learning takes place as a result of social interaction. While Piaget-influenced cognitive constructivism focused on mental processes which occur solely within the mind of the individual learner, social constructivism emphasizes the role of the social context and scaffolded learning (see Felix, 2005, for a more detailed explanation of the "two branches" of constructivism, and Weasenforth and Biesenbach-Lucas, 2002, for a history of constructivism and CALL). One of Vygotsky's most famous concepts is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is the limit to which someone can learn new information with the assistance of an "expert" such as a teacher or a fellow learner at the same level or slightly higher level of competence than the learner. The expert acts as a mediator between the student and the knowledge the student is trying to understand. This "collaborative dialogue" of scaffolded learning between the learner and the mediator, which enables the learner to reach the limit of his or her ZPD, emphasizes the process of learning, rather than the product (for a recent discussion of Vygotsky's ideas and SLA, see Lantolf, 2006).

Scaffolded learning in the EFL classroom most commonly occurs in cooperative group work. If individual roles, tasks, and evaluation criteria of group work are clearly defined, cooperative group work tasks not only increase the amount of mediated input but also encourage motivation, self-confidence, critical thinking, and autonomy (Dörnyei, 1997). Students can learn how to become "engaged in problem-solving and knowledge building" (Swain, 2000, p. 102); through the process of teaching and scaffolding each other, learners become more capable of clarifying their own knowledge by verbally communicating and monitoring their language use.

## PowerPoint group projects, tasks to do in class

*PowerPoint* group projects (PGP) can be considered identical to any other kind of scaffolding, cooperative group project, or tasks for students to do in the language classroom—except that the students are using a computer. In that sense, the strengths of task-based teaching may also hold true for using *PowerPoint* for group project work (for more on cooperative learning and CALL, see Johnson and Johnson, 1986; for more on scaffolding and CALL, see Yelland and Masters, 2007).<sup>1</sup>

Group projects using *PowerPoint* have five main benefits which will be described in detail below:

- They are student-centered
- They are process- rather than product-oriented
- They require the use of all four language skills, allowing students to exercise their multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983)
- They are motivating, enjoyable, and increase self-reliance and autonomy
- They provide students with real-world tasks that have value outside the language classroom.

### ***1. PGP are student-centered***

While doing PowerPoint group projects, the students control the process of learning, rather than the teacher. Students control the flow of the project, from start to finish, and have a great deal of choice concerning which language items they use in project creation. Moreover, PGP give cooperative, convergent group goals that require a group of students to work together for a common purpose.

Studies have suggested that divergent goals, such as individual test scores which force students to compete and compare grades against one another, may not be as efficient or motivating as convergent goals, in which students must work together to achieve the same result (for a review of task-based research, see Skehan, 2003). The cooperative nature of PowerPoint projects is thus motivating and provides a stimulating environment for students.

### ***P2. GP are process- rather than product-oriented***

As Kobayashi (2003) noted in a case study of three ESL students, by using PowerPoint to create a group presentation, "PowerPoint...seems to have served as a tool for establishing and sustaining a shared focus among the three students and made available their L2 production for joint inspection and contemplation" (Kobayashi, 2003, p. 356). Individually, students may be unable to solve language problems and may give up, but project work using PowerPoint encourages students to notice their language use and to scaffold from each other in a manner that is student-centered, self-directed, and motivating. This noticing and co-construction of knowledge develops over the period of time necessary to create group projects; thus, the process of learning is more important than the product.

### ***3. PGP require the use of all four language skills, allowing students to exercise their multiple intelligences***

In the process of creating a PowerPoint project, students must use the four basic language skills of writing, reading, speaking, and listening to achieve their goal. While exercising critical thinking skills to accomplish the task, students are at the same time provided opportunities to demonstrate their multiple intelligences (MI). Proposed by Howard Gardner in 1983, MI Theory theorizes that human intelligence is not a unilateral concept; instead, we possess at least eight different "intelligences," such as kinesthetic intelligence and spatial intelligence. As a software program designed to create eye-catching, visually-appealing presentations, PowerPoint provides an ideal venue in which students can utilize their various intelligences in a cooperative group setting. For example, one student who has higher linguistic intelligence can assist peers with grammar or lexicon choices, while another student who demonstrates higher spatial intelligence can assist the group with PowerPoint slide design and appearance. PowerPoint can also help instructors take into account the varying individual differences of learners' cognitive styles and personalities (Waite, Wheeler, & Bromfield, 2007).

### ***4. PGP are motivating and enjoyable***

Although CALL activities are generally perceived to motivate learners (Alm, 2006; Bourques, 2006), few studies have effectively demonstrated improved motivation among

CALL learners. The main reason may simply be that the definition of "motivation" is problematic; a seemingly endless series of motivational theories make it difficult for CALL practitioners to claim with any certainty what kind of motivation CALL activities stimulate in their learners. Does CALL create a desire to assimilate into the second language (L2) culture? ("Integrative motivation theory," Gardner, 1991) Or does completion of CALL activities create a sense of self-worth and autonomy? ("Self-determination theory," Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002) Or perhaps allowing students control in the CALL activity decision-making process encourages a sense of intrinsic motivation and desire to learn for the sake of learning ("Mastery goal orientation," Ames, 1992).

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to speculate on the motivational effectiveness of PowerPoint or CALL activities in general, our belief is that PGP, if evaluated on the basis of effort and task accomplishment, can provide the structure necessary to encourage a sense of success, mastery, and enjoyment for students. Ames (1992, p. 266) pointed out that, "a mastery goal is made salient when value is placed on the process of learning through emphasis on meaningful learning, self-referenced standards, and opportunities for self-directed learning." PGP seems an ideal choice in the CALL classroom based on these criteria: PGP are challenging for students, and as they slowly realize that they are achieving their goal, students gain confidence, self-esteem, autonomy, and improve their language skills and cognitive abilities.

### ***5. PGP provide students with real-world tasks that have value outside the language classroom***

Because PowerPoint is widely used in various kinds of businesses, PowerPoint projects encourage students to develop computer skills that have meaningful, real-world relevance outside the language classroom, giving the project a sense of authenticity (Chapelle, 2001). Rather than viewing CALL activities solely as a means of practicing English, PGP opens a window to the future and encourages students to develop computer literacy skills, as well as linguistic and communicative skills. For students who study abroad later, computer literacy is necessary to survive in an English-speaking environment. Furthermore, even students with low English proficiency can be assisted by PowerPoint in making persuasive presentations through the use of multimedia tools such as audio recordings and graphic representations. Relevance to future work opportunities is another factor to consider. Although perhaps they might use Japanese rather than English, many students might make PowerPoint presentations at their future workplace if they get a job in Japan.

### **The 10 steps to using PowerPoint in language classes**

Stoller (1997) recommends ten basic steps for determining the creation process and outcomes of project work. These steps can be easily applied to PowerPoint projects (Table 1). First, the students and the instructor should all agree on a theme for the project, after which they can then discuss what the outcome should be. It is important from the very beginning that the project be decided not solely by the instructor, but by all members of the language classroom. If input from the students involved is taken into consideration, rather than view the project as merely another assignment, students can come to see the project

as their personal creation. Thus, group projects whose impetus includes students' ideas can encourage students to have a vested interest in improving the group outcome.

**Table I. 10 steps in determining PowerPoint projects  
(adapted from Stoller, 1997)**

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Step 1	Students and instructor agree on a theme for the project
Step 2	Students and instructor determine the final outcome
Step 3	Instructor helps students structure the project
Step 4	Instructor prepare students for the language demands of Step 5
Step 5	Students gather information for the project
Step 6	Instructor prepares students for the language demands of Step 7
Step 7	Students compile and analyze information
Step 8	Instructor prepares students for the language demands of Step 9
Step 9	Students present the final project
Step 10	Students and instructor jointly evaluate the project

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Once the theme and ideal outcome have been decided, the next step is to provide a structure for the project. As Johnson and Johnson (1995) argue, cooperative skills within a group work framework do not appear “magically” when students are placed into groups: teachers must act as a guide by providing a structure for task goals, rewards, student roles, materials, and rules for group behavior as well as an expected time frame for project completion. In addition to an overall framework of project design and deadlines, the instructor’s role is to prepare students for the language demands of each subsequent step. For example, if students need to use the Internet to find photographs or information about a certain travel destination, the instructor can prepare a list of words students may need to know as they begin their search. At each intermediate step of the project—gathering information, compiling and analyzing information, and presenting the final project—students need to be prepared for the language demands of the subsequent step (also see Beglar and Hunt, 2002, for their description of a “12 week plan” for projects). Without adequate language preparation, students may resort to relying too much on their LI, especially if the project demands are linguistically complex.

After the project has been presented in class, the final step is evaluation. As we shall discuss below, this evaluation can take many forms.

### Project types

Because PowerPoint is capable of both audio and video embedding, there are a variety of presentation possibilities for learners of virtually any proficiency level. Three possible Power-

Point projects are performance projects such as picture stories, research projects such as creating a travel plan, and survey projects involving opinion polls.

### **Picture story projects**

Picture stories (known in Japanese as *kamishibai*) were extremely popular in the Edo Period (ca. 1600-1870) in Japan. Traveling performers would set up a stand in the middle of town and would tell a story while showing a series of illustrations on pieces of paper or wood. This type of storytelling can still occasionally be seen in samurai drama on Japanese television, and in Japanese kindergartens pupils enjoy watching *kamishibai* put on by their teachers. *Kamishibai* has also enjoyed popularity on public television in the US, where the technique was used to tell folk tales for children. Recently, many web pages about *kamishibai* have appeared, including one (<http://www.kamishibai.com/>) which promotes the use of *kamishibai* to teach children about Japanese culture, and another (<http://gretchenle.com/beowulf/teachguide.html>) to help sixth grade students understand Beowulf.

For lower English proficiency students, one or two full 90-minute classes may be necessary to explain the basics of the PowerPoint software and how to prepare the picture show manuscript for the presentation. During subsequent class meetings, students can create or retell a folk tale (such as "The Peach Boy" or "The Grateful Crane") first by making pictures in PowerPoint slides. Then after writing a basic dialog script in English with the help of fellow group members and the instructor, students can record their voices into the appropriate slides for later viewing by classmates. Many Japanese students are proficient at communicating through the use of drawings, video, and music. This kind of PowerPoint project allows artistically talented students to use their sense of design creatively to create a stimulating background and support for language production, while at the same time reducing presentation anxiety by using the audio recording feature of PowerPoint.

### **Travel plans or electronic brochures**

For travel plan PowerPoint group projects, students imagine that their group is preparing to visit a specific country, (for example, Australia), or a Japanese city (for example, Kyoto). After first deciding which group member is responsible for each topic, students research specific travel information such as transportation costs and routes, hotel accommodations, local attractions, popular food or cultural events. Each student creates a certain number of PowerPoint slides, writes information they have researched in point format, and illustrates the slides with photographs from the Internet. Students then work together to create a narrative to describe their imaginary journey. After the instructor checks the narrative for grammatical and lexical accuracy, students can then record their voices directly into individual PowerPoint slides as a "voice-over" for their presentation, or they can practice for a live presentation in front of other classmates.

### **Opinion survey projects**

While the research project and performance project described above may be created almost entirely in class, opinion survey projects might be an alternative for instructors of

higher level English proficiency students, or for instructors who don't have enough class time or who would like to use *PowerPoint* as a complement to text book material. First, instructors assign or allow students to choose groups of three or four. Next, students choose a research theme. This theme can be related to a topic from the course textbook, if one has been used. Students then write questionnaire items based on guidelines and tips on questionnaire creation provided by the instructor. Instructors may wish to check questionnaire items for grammatical and lexical accuracy, but should avoid interfering in the project creation in order to give students autonomy during question creation and *PowerPoint* presentation design.

Students tally answers to their questionnaires from a minimum number (for example, 20) of students outside the class, and then present their findings in class at the end of the semester. For assessment purposes, instructors may require each student in the group to talk for a minimum of two or three minutes, and each group might also be given a minimum or maximum amount of time. At the conclusion of each presentation, from each group of students watching the presentation one student can be requested to ask a question to the presenting group. This question and answer session can allow for more interaction, and thus collaborative dialogue, between presenters and student evaluators, as well as provide a more accurate representation of a real-life presentation in the business or academic world.

## Evaluation

There are many areas that can be evaluated in *PowerPoint* projects, but a primary area for assessment is oral production. In order to assess individual student speeches, Yamashiro and Johnson (1997) identified sub-areas of *voice control*, *body language*, *content*, and *effectiveness*, which were then further subdivided into 14 separate points:

- Voice control: Projection, pace, intonation, and diction
- Body language: Posture, eye contact, and gestures
- Content: Introduction, body, and conclusion
- Effectiveness: Topic, language use, vocabulary, and purpose

However, it may not appropriate to use all these fourteen points to evaluate a *PowerPoint*-based group presentation. This is particularly true if the amount of class time available for presentation evaluation is an important factor or if instructors wish their students to do peer evaluation: students may have difficulty understanding vocabulary such as "projection," "intonation," and "diction," and students in large classes may not have enough time to assess their peers. We felt that asking our students to focus on detailed points of their peers' language performance might take away the motivational impact of *PowerPoint* group projects and might detract from the enjoyment derived from the *PowerPoint* creation process. Thus, we ultimately derived two separate forms of evaluation, which are described below.

Outside of evaluative purposes, peer evaluation can be a very useful pedagogical tool for group project work. Even if instructors ultimately opt to minimize the importance of or even completely ignore peer evaluation results, simply asking students to do peer evaluation can have positive effects. First and foremost, it ensures that students will pay attention and listen to fellow classmates carefully. Additionally, the fact that students know their peers

will evaluate their project encourages them to work harder while preparing and performing the PowerPoint presentation. Peer evaluations also promote noticing, and combining a question and answer session with peer evaluations can change the student listening role from that of a passive observer to that of an interactive, participating listener.

In our classes, students evaluate their peers using a form created in Microsoft Word (Appendix: Figure 1). Each student has a copy of this form on his or her computer and types comments directly into the form just after the presentation itself finishes. To keep the evaluation format relatively simplified for ease of student use in assessing their peers, categories are phrased in the form of questions such as, "Did you understand the main points?" Evaluation can be done according to letter grades (e.g., "A" being the best and "D" being the worst), or through a numerical scale (e.g., "10" through "1"). Students also type individual personalized comments at the bottom of the form. The form is then sent by email electronically to peers in the class, providing immediate feedback.

At the same time students evaluate each other, the instructor uses a slightly different form, again in Microsoft Word (Appendix: Figure 2). We reduced Yamashiro and Johnson's rating scale by eliminating the points we felt superfluous or extraneous to judging PowerPoint presentations and combining others that seemed related. This resulted in a form for the instructor that uses two categories containing nine points, such as eye contact, voice, and body language. A final space at the bottom of the form includes comments on an individual student's performance. Similar to the peer evaluation forms, the instructor's form is sent by email to each student in class to give prompt feedback on the presentation (see Brown, 2004, for a review of different methods of performance- or task-based assessment).

## Potential problems

The most pressing problem concerning PowerPoint group project use in class is access to PowerPoint itself. Institutions may not have enough computers in one classroom, or they may have classrooms which are already reserved for other classes such as business and commerce. Lack of available class time may also be troublesome, particularly if the instructor is required to cover certain material. Both of these problems can be circumvented by requiring students to do most of the work outside normal class time. In such an event, it is probably still a good idea to give guidelines to students in the beginning and hand out printed examples of prior student project work to make sure students know what is expected of them.

On the other hand, too much direction defeats the purpose of PowerPoint project work. Students can enjoy the creative process of the project as much as the exploratory process of discovering what they can do with the program. Given time, patience, and a few strategic hints from the instructor, learners are quite capable of mastering PowerPoint in no time at all.

One problematic aspect of project work in general is what exactly to evaluate. It is probably unreasonable to expect all students to acquire a certain number of lexical or syntactical forms in the process of project creation. Oral presentations are somewhat easier to evaluate, and since it is for oral presentations that PowerPoint is designed, instructors may wish to focus almost entirely on oral production and presentation of PowerPoint projects



during evaluations. Peer evaluations can be somewhat unreliable, as students are generally unwilling to criticize their friends and classmates; however, as the main reasons of peer evaluation are primarily to improve motivation and promote noticing of language use, the issue of unreliability is largely irrelevant. Rather than focus on numerical grading of individual students compared to a hypothetical standard, instructors should focus on the use of *PowerPoint* projects as a motivational tool which not only helps students build social skills but also gives them hands-on experience with a program they may very well find themselves using in their future careers.

A crucial concern of *PowerPoint* project creation is the issue of copyright. Students who create travel brochures and travel plans tend to use only the Internet to gather photographs of their intended destinations. While some photographers, magazines, or newspapers may not mind their photographs being used for educational purposes, some do. It is highly unlikely that instructors and students will run into any problems copying pictures from the Internet,<sup>2</sup> but this is also an ideal time to instruct students about referencing and citation. An easy way to cite the source of a picture used in a student presentation is to have students copy the URL indicating the web page where they found the photograph. Students can either type this information directly beneath the photograph or make a separate slide listing this information. An alternate method is for the instructor him- or herself to provide students with photographs taken personally with a digital camera.

A final, pressing problem is the need to address overuse of translation software on the Internet. Once students discover a translation web site, they come to rely on it almost entirely for writing in English. Needless to say, this defeats the purpose of *PowerPoint* projects, and moreover, students often don't realize that the resulting translation is usually nearly incomprehensible. One way to prevent this is to students to type in certain English phrases and then to translate them into Japanese using the translation software. Students can clearly see the results are less than natural-sounding in their native language.

## Conclusion

We believe that *PowerPoint* group projects perfectly fit Warschauer's definition of "integrative CALL" for the 21<sup>st</sup> century: PGP use multimedia sources, are content-based, encourage social interaction and therefore socio-cognitive restructuring of knowledge, allow learner autonomy or agency, and provide authentic discourse to link classroom practice with real-world activities (Warschauer, 2004).

Though the students are the locus of control in PGP, instructors still need to serve as a guide, especially for students who are unfamiliar with using the Internet to search for content in English. Instructors may need to provide a list of helpful web sites to give students a starting point for their searches. Pre-teaching common English terms used with computer applications such as "open," "save," and "cut and paste" can help students use *PowerPoint* more efficiently. Instructors may also wish to explain the vocabulary items of the evaluation sheet before students evaluate their peers.

After an instructor has used *PowerPoint* group projects in a number of classes, creating a database of previous student projects can provide future students with even more scaffolding. However, instructors should be careful to ask permission from their students

before using student-created material as references for future classes. Instructors with the technological know-how can either upload previous projects to a web site for downloading, or make copies available on CD-ROM. Simply being able to see what other students in the past have created will give current students an idea of what is possible once they unleash their creative powers on the computer screen.

Both of the authors used *PowerPoint* Group Projects such as those mentioned in this paper in several of their English classes at the university level in Japan. We found that the use of *PowerPoint* presentation software was still new to many students, and we have had quite interesting feedback from students to *PowerPoint* group projects. Our students, many of whom are not accustomed to using computers, have appreciated improving both English language skills and computer skills, and have found the group project collaboration highly motivating. Several students told us that they enjoyed this approach because computer skills such as the ability to use Power Point would help them for their future jobs.

In fact, when a former student of one of the authors went job-hunting near the end of his senior year, he later reported that during a group job interview, applicants were asked if they had any *PowerPoint* experience. The graduate's hand went up, and after noticing that he was the only one in the room who raised his hand, he felt a sense of gratitude and appreciation for having learned this computer skill in a university English class. This episode serves as a reminder that as foreign language instructors we can help our students beyond simply the immediate classroom moment. It is our hope that this paper may provide a starting point for CALL instructors who value the importance of students discovering multiple uses for English and computers in their language classrooms.

## Notes

- 1 In this paper, we use the term "project" in the same sense that Stoller (1997) and Warschauer, Shetzer, and Meloni (2000) use the term, i.e., "project" connotes a common goal or product of a pair or group effort. In other words, one person does not a project make. Note that although recently "task" in EFL textbooks has come to mean "assignment," our use of "project" mirrors the original meaning of a "task" as described in Skehan's 2003 review article of task-based teaching (TBT).
- 2 Disney has proved to be inordinately aggressive about their copyright and have actually brought suit against U.S. elementary school teachers using Disney character stamps in their classrooms. (Note that we are also careful not to mention the character by name in this very document!) Instructors are advised to avoid Disney material at all costs.

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Appendix

Title of the presentation	京都	ベトナム	韓国	京都
1. Did the presenters clearly introduce the topic?	A	A	A	A
2. Did you understand the main points?	B	A	A	A
3. Did presenters clearly state the conclusion?	B	A	A	A
4. Was the presenter's voice	R	A	A	A

Figure 1. Sample electronic peer evaluation form

	Excellent (10 points)	Very Good (8 points)	Good (6 points)	Fair (4 points)
<b>ORGANIZATION</b>				
1. Introduction		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Body		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Conclusion		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>DELIVERY</b>				
4. Eye contact		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Poise		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Voice		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Language use		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Body Language		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Communicative Atmosphere		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Teacher's comment: Hmm, your voice got smaller and smaller during the presentation... Nice flow of the talk. I had hoped that you would practice pronunciation a little more.				

Figure 2. Sample electronic instructor evaluation form.