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Research Article

Expanding University EFL Learners' Conversations with a Familiar Audience

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Abstract

This study investigates university EFL learners' perceptions of and interactions with a familiar audience during their presentations and follow-up conversations in the context informed by communicative approaches to language teaching. The research seeks to gain insights into the lexicogrammatical resources used by students to expand a dialogic space. To allow for a more individualized approach to student understandings of their audience, a qualitative design was employed. Grounded in appraisal theory, the thematic and lexicogrammatical analysis of six first-year university students' presentations, subsequent conversations and semi-structured interviews revealed the student tendency to view and realize the presentations as monogloss and the conversations as predominantly heterogloss. The student preference for certain formulaic expressions as lexicogrammatical engagement resources hindered the full comprehension of their conversation expansion choices. The study concludes with recommendations for further refinement of the communicative-teaching informed syllabi and provides suggestions for future research.

本研究は、コミュニカティブ・アプローチに基づく言語教育の文脈において、大学のEFL学習者がプレゼンテーションおよびその後の会話で、なじみのある聴衆に対して抱く認識と関わり方を調査します。対話的空間を広げるために学生が使用する語彙文法的リソースについての洞察を得ることを目的とし、質的デザインを採用しました。評価理論に基づき、6人の大学1年生のプレゼンテーション、会話、および半構造化インタビューを分析した結果、学生がプレゼンテーションを単声的に、会話を主に多声的に捉える傾向が明らかになりました。特定の定型表現を好む傾向が、会話の拡張選択の完全な理解を妨げていることが示されました。本研究は、シラバスのさらなる改良と今後の研究への示唆を提供します。

In academia, presenting to an audience is an essential skill, and participating in post-presentation conversations, or Q&A sessions, has been receiving increased value too. However, it is not always clear who Japanese university EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners envision their audience to be, when preparing and delivering presentations. It is even less obvious whether the presentations are crafted and delivered with the aim of having subsequent extended conversations.

In EFL classrooms, often the said audience is a teacher awarding a grade without much engagement on the student-presenter part or the other students present (in the current study the terms "learner" and "student" are used interchangeably). Such behavior would contradict the call for communicative approaches in the classroom, as well as real-world scenarios (e.g. presenting and conversing at a conference). Additionally, presenting in front of an audience exclusive of any interaction with them somewhat undermines the importance of both production and reception skills highlighted by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) even at the lowest language levels (Council of Europe, 2020). This gap calls for more attention to investigating EFL learners' understandings of the role of the audience in presentations and conversations, their actual linguistic behavior and the development of appropriate communicative teaching strategies to enhance learner audience awareness.

This study commences a longitudinal research project aimed to bridge the gap. The purpose of the study is to investigate EFL learner engagement in presentations and post-presentation conversations with a familiar audience in a communicative-teaching informed environment and to identify lexicogrammatical resources that allow for extended conversations in English in small groups of university students in Japan. To highlight student familiarity with the research procedure recreating their class conditions, the terms "(follow-up) conversations" and "(follow-up) interactions" are used interchangeably.

The objectives of the study are to explore learner understandings of their audience pre-task (preparations for presentations and conversations) and during-task (presentations and follow-up conversations) and to establish the similarities and/or discrepancies between the identified learner understandings and the actual learner behavior. To be more specific, we seek to answer the following research questions: Who do EFL learners envisage as their target audience when preparing for presentations? How do these student assumptions manifest in presentations and follow-up conversations?

The significance of this study lies in aiming to provide valuable insights into the EFL learner communication dynamics. By identifying the potential alignment or mismatch in learner understandings of their positioning and the meanings' negotiation actualized in specific utterances, the research contributes to the development of language teaching methodologies at the tertiary level. The findings will be of assistance to language educators seeking to develop student in-class participation skills, and for this development to extend to more general communication skills

Literature Review

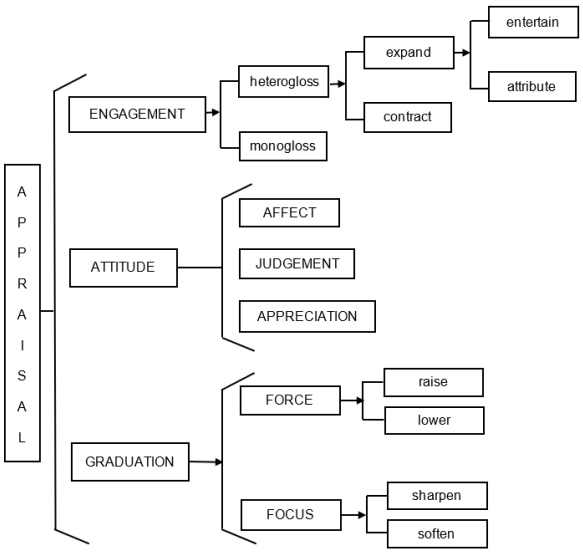
Student spoken communication in English has received ample attention in research literature. Among existing communicative approaches, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has proven to be effective in emphasizing interaction and meaningful language use. Ellis (2006) divides a TBLT-informed class structure into three phases: pre-task, during-task, and post-task. Only the during-task phase is obligatory. According to Long (2014), one of the TBLT principles is to "promote cooperative collaborative learning" (p. 7). East (2024) echoing Jackson (2022) highlights that the use of tasks in the learner-centered TBLT pedagogy enables "student choice; authentic language use; and engagement with issues" (p. 7). Therefore, exploring the choices EFL learners make in communications with their peers (e.g. lexicogrammatical choices) would be of great importance. This discovery could assist the EFL teachers in further syllabus development as well.

Despite the large influence of TBLT on teaching practice, up until now undergraduate classroom presentations seem to have been mostly perceived as monologic, which was observed by Ducasse (2023). In his research of the undergraduate classroom presentations, Gray (2021) also acknowledges that the essential for presentations move of closing remarks is the "concluding the monologue" (p. 6) and the question-and-answer move is optional. However, it is precisely the question-and-answer section of the presentations that was found to be dialogic. Its optionality and the predominantly monologically-perceived undergraduate classroom presentations render the role of the audience passive and, thus, does not promote collaborative learning.

Upon entering tertiary education, Japanese students generally feel uncomfortable communicating in English with their new peers. This could be due to their reluctance to converse with strangers, which Ohashi's (2021) study participant acknowledged to be common among the Japanese people. However, such aversion to speaking in English may also be tied to EFL students' previous experiences learning English, which are typically grammar-translation-focused. Grant (2014) discovered that "students reported that they look forward to starting new [sic] with university classes by getting away from their prior grammar-focused pedagogy" (p. 6). Despite this, subsequent class observations in Grant's (2014) showed that many students often were not willing to converse in English with their peers. Additionally, Freiermuth and Ito (2020) found that, besides previous learning experiences, in certain cases student personality and, perhaps even more interestingly, "their perspective on interacting in the target language" (p. 7) may have a noticeable effect on how such interactions unfold. This claim should be, however, supported by more evidence from within and outside the language classroom.

Figure 1

Overview of Appraisal Framework



Note. The framework is summarized from *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*, by J. R. Martin and P. R. R. White, 2005, Palgrave Macmillan. Copyright 2005 by J. R. Martin and P. R. R. White.

To our knowledge, undergraduate presentations in Japan (monologic vs dialogic) and their influence on the follow-up conversations have been undeservedly given scant attention. Of some interest is also the mastery of Japanese EFL students to engage their partners in such conversations. To investigate this engagement, the study follows

Martin and White's (2005) appraisal theory, informed by dialogism and heteroglossia, that outlines engagement as "those meanings which in various ways construe for the text a heteroglossic backdrop of prior utterances, alternative viewpoints and anticipated responses" (p. 97) and understands it as one of the three main categories within appraisal theory (Figure 1).

The individual systems of appraisal framework have been utilized to explore both written (Mills et al., 2020; Sun & Crosthwaite, 2022) and spoken communication (Lee, 2020; Ngo & Unsworth, 2015). Since this study is interested in the heteroglossic (i.e. dialogic) approach to student presentations and subsequent conversations, particularly in expanding the latter, the finding of whether student presentations and conversations are dialogically expansive would lead to valuable insights. Provided students choose to use certain lexicogrammatical features to engage their partners, the conversations would last longer as the dialogic space is expanded. It is expected that learners at the CEFR A2-B1 levels, common in first-year university EFL classrooms in Japan, would opt for more formulaic phrases. Yeldham (2020) suggested that the relative ease of such formulaic language processing assisted lower-level listening. Conversely, it is possible that students would shut down or otherwise restrain the conversation by either delivering a monoglossic (i.e. monologic) message and/or by contracting a dialogic space. One of the factors that may influence the amount of space allowed for communication is thought to be the interlocutors' (i.e. the presenter and the audience's) unfamiliarity. To reduce such influence reported by researchers (Namkung and Kim, 2024; Saito et al., 2019), it is proposed that this investigation should focus on the audience familiar to the conversation partners.

In summary, research indicates that even with the rise in the popularity of TBLT as the pedagogical approach in EFL classrooms, classroom undergraduate presentations and presentation-based conversations are still acted out as mostly monoglossic, or monologic, experiences. The appraisal framework employed in this study allows for the investigation of such classroom interactions, with a focus on the lexicogrammatical resources chosen by students to engage their communication partners in extended conversations.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative approach to explore how Japanese first-year university students engage their presentation audience in subsequent conversations about the content of their presentations. The use of qualitative instruments often allows greater flexibility with emerging categories and adoption of the emic perspective to data interpretation (Mackey & Gass, 2022). The data collection was conducted at the end of a two-semester EFL course. The first semester of the course primarily focused on developing student conversations, while the second semester introduced presentations delivered in front of a small familiar audience. The methodology is comprised of three subsections: participants, data collection, and data analysis.

Participants

Six CEFR A2-B1 level first-year university students from two EFL classes. Each class was taught by one of the teacher-researchers (i.e. the authors of this paper), invited to participate in this research. They were divided into two groups of three members, to recreate their class conditions (e.g. small-group time-limited presentations and conversations, self-selection during turn-taking, etc). This was also done to ensure that all students in each of the two groups were familiar with one another and the general procedure. To protect student privacy, each student-participant was assigned a pseudonym and is referred to throughout this study using the corresponding pseudonym. The teacher-researchers are named Teacher A or Teacher B.

Data Collection

The data was collected during two rounds of teacher-observed student presentations, conversations and follow-up semi-structured interviews with one of the teacher-researchers. The participants provided their informed consent to participate in this study, which was carried out in accordance with the university regulations.

Student Presentations and Follow-up Conversations

Each group of students met twice for about 15 minutes, resulting in four meetings in total. The meetings set-up was informed by the TBLT approach previously utilized by both teachers in their classes. At the pre-task stage, before each meeting, students were given class standard notes' templates, which they were instructed to use to prepare for presentations, following the procedure employed by the EFL course they had taken shortly before the meetings. The topic choice was limited to one of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To avoid extensive topic familiarity, the participants were prompted to choose the SDG they had not presented in class.

To ensure the meetings resembled class (during-task phase), the time interval between them was kept to 3-4 days. During the meetings, students delivered their presentations (ending in a question directed at the audience with the next speaker self-selecting to talk about the question), took notes and had conversations based on the presentations and their notes' content. Although the sequence had slight variations, depending on how a teacher-researcher in charge had delivered their class, the overall procedure was familiar to the students. The teacher-researchers who observed the presentations and conversations also took notes on how the student communication unfolded, although

the role of teachers' notes at this stage of research is insignificant. All student communication during the meetings was audio-recorded and stored securely. As the post-task phase is not in this study's focus, the researchers opted to avoid advising students to reflect on the first meeting's process and outcomes. Therefore, any such reflection performed by the participants was of their own will.

Semi-structured Interviews

After each meeting, a semi-structured interview with each participant was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of their approach to engaging their group members in conversations pertaining to the content of their presentations and to compare teacher observations with student perceptions. As far as it was possible, each teacher-researcher aimed to interview a student who was previously enrolled in the other teacher's class. Overall, the data was obtained from 12 English-medium interviews of approximately 30 minutes each.

Data Analysis

The data from the meetings' recordings and the follow-up semi-structured interviews were explored using a multi-step thematic analysis. The subsequent coding and categorization of the data was performed to identify any lexicogrammatical patterns demonstrated in Martin and White's (2005) appraisal framework that would allow for the expansion of heteroglossic episodes. It followed the process outlined in Saldaña (2015). The use of Quirkos software package ensured that the data was appropriately and easily visualized for the analysis.

The results of this study not only allow for better understanding of the EFL student interactions in presentations and conversations. Since the participants had been enrolled in the teacher-researchers' classes, the results may also shed light on the effectiveness of the teaching approaches utilized in the first-year university EFL classes relative to expanding student conversations and potentially outline the areas of the syllabus development. The findings are presented in two sections, each answering one of the research questions posited earlier.

Results

The results of the thematic and lexicogrammatical engagement analysis of the presentations and conversations and the follow-up interviews' transcripts suggested limited discrepancies between student pre-task understandings and actual realizations of their presentation and conversation moves. Both at the pre-task and during-task stage the students seemed to have viewed and performed their presentations as a single-voiced monogloss, which shifted towards a combination of the monogloss and increasingly the heterogloss instances during conversations.

Students' Target Audience at the Pre-task Stage

During the semi-structured interviews, the students were asked to elaborate on the audience for which they prepared their presentations. The lexicogrammatical choices students made to talk about their preparations are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Students' Audience Focus in the Pre-Task Phase

Audience Theme	No. of Times Mentioned
Me	13
Team members	4
Listeners	3
Everyone	3
Teachers	1

It can be clearly seen that overwhelmingly the main audience of the presentation notes that the students had prepared for the meetings during the pre-task phase were the authors of those notes. In 13 instances out of 24 in total, the interviewees acknowledged that the *I* was more important than the other students. This can be best illustrated by a student acknowledging that "I prepared these notes for me the most. When I watch this sheet, I can talk and... When I watch this, I can talk my idea".

Team members, *Listeners* and *Everyone* received roughly equal attention from the students, albeit this attention was rather limited, predominantly focusing on "the words" rather than shared presentation ideas, as stated by a student later: "Preparation note, the word I wrote, the word is I think most important word I wrote. This is for listeners. Most for preparation note is for me, the most, but next is listeners".

Interestingly, and perhaps thankfully, *Teachers* were mentioned only once during the interviews with regards

to the student preparations' audience. The context in which teachers were referred to was not to receive a grade because it had been understood that there would be no grade at the end of this research, but to assist with teachers' research.

Students' Audience Focus at the During-task Stage

The further interview data partially supports the students' overwhelming focus on themselves when preparing for presentations (Table 2).

Table 2

Students' Audience Focus in the During-Task Phase

Audience Theme	No. of Times Mentioned
Presentations	
My interests	8
Team members	5
Teachers	3
Audience	2
Listeners	1
My notes	1
Conversations	
Team members	11
Listeners	2
My notes	1

The data from Table 2 highlights that the presenting student themselves remained the focus of that student's presentation. However, having proceeded to the conversations, the students shifted their attention towards the other side, hence the dominating *Team members* or the *Listeners*.

Teachers emerged as unintentional (or perhaps, intentional) audience during at least one student's, Kaname's, presentation (Excerpt 1):

Excerpt 1

> I thought you and Teacher, Teacher A, can understand my information, but I thought it will be difficult for them [other students] to understand in details because they need to explain their opinions too. So it is difficult to focus on my opinion.

Again though, the focus was on this student's information and their desire to transmit *my information*, whereas the teachers were seemingly perceived as those who, unlike other students presenting later, were able to receive such information. The teachers did not present and did not participate in conversations, and so they were construed as being able to fully concentrate on this student's message but were not expected to noticeably react to it, or converse about it.

The transcripts of student presentations and conversations were also analyzed for the *entertain* subcategory of engagement, as being more internally than externally informed, to establish whether the students were indeed offering the other participants the floor to self-nominate, thus expanding their conversations (Table 3).

Table 3

Student-Used Resources of Entertain Category of Engagement

Lexicogrammatical Group Representative	No. of Times Used
Modal Auxiliaries	
can	17
should	6
must	2
may	2
might	1
could	1

Lexicogrammatical Group Representative	No. of Times Used
Modal Adjuncts	
maybe	1
usually	1
Modal Attributes	
it's likely	1
In my view Group	
in my opinion	1
Mental Verbs	
I think	25
Evidence/Appearance-based Postulations	
it seems, apparently, etc.	0

The analysis revealed that the students mostly tapped into their knowledge of modal auxiliaries, with can prevailing, and mental verbs represented by *I think* (Table 3). The former dominated in presentations and then semi-structured interviews with the teachers, while the latter was mostly observed in student-led conversations and follow-up teacher-led interviews. In addition, there were no episodes of evidence-based postulations.

Discussion

The results of the current study highlight little mismatch in the student perception and performance of presentations as predominantly monoglossic, or monologic, endeavors. Although the general presentation guidelines offered choice among specific SDGs, each student was free to choose what information to include in the topic (i.e. whether to focus mostly on their interests within the suggested topics or consider the audiences' interests too). This finding is consistent with Gray's (2021) and Ducasse's (2023) observations. It appears that in the pre-task phase, the presentation notes were crafted with solely the notes author's interests in mind (within the topics suggested). During the presentations, the audience was mostly perceived as a passive receiver of the information that is in the orbit of the current speaker's interests. The speakers in the study sought to convey prepared information to either other students or the teachers present, with little to no regard as to whether the audience is interested in conversing about the content of the presentation. Such an approach was chosen by the students even though they had been made aware that the presentations would be followed by conversations, and, unlike in Gray's (2021) research, although partially in line with Ellis's (2006) TBLT methodological suggestions, the post-presentation conversation move was obligatory in this study.

Unlike the presentation move, conversations elicited more heteroglossic (i.e. dialogic) episodes, in agreement with the pre-task students' perceptions of their post-presentation conversations and with Gray's (2021) findings. Although the speaker's voice did entertain some dialogic alternatives, such entertainment was mostly realized using a formulaic "I think". This finding corroborates the observations in Yeldham (2020) who concluded that the ease of processing stimulates the better comprehensibility of such expressions. However, it should be further investigated whether the students used low intensity modals such as "can" and the mental verb phrase "I think" to convey uncertainty, or modesty, or to express a stance and authority in conversations. Japanese EFL students may be reluctant to openly express their opinions if their conversation partners' opinions were delivered authoritatively, and thus the conversation space may be narrowed.

Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for the university EFL learners' communicative engagement and TBLT research, as well as for the EFL teachers in general and the educators who follow the TBLT approach in particular. As it was discovered, the implementation of TBLT may not uniformly result in an anticipated significant expansion of the dialogic space in student communication. This discovery to a certain extent contradicts Long's (2014) assertion that TBLT stimulates cooperative learning, as this cooperation might be absent at certain stages of the task. The engagement with issues proposed by East (2024) may potentially not be as strong as previously thought due to the student choice to project only their voice at the presentation stage. Reinforced by previous experiences, the EFL students seem to create mostly monoglossic environments during their presentations and to perceive and realize them and the follow-up conversations as separate, loosely connected contexts. The single-voice authoritative delivery of the information during the presentation as taken-for-granted has the potential to severely restrict the dialogic opportunities. Therefore, at the task-set-up stage students should be more explicitly advised to give space to dialogically alternative positions and voices and to utilize a wider range of dialogically expanding lexicogrammatical resources. It may also be necessary to ensure that the course syllabus endorses such allowances.

Limitations

This study is not without its limitations. First, the predominantly qualitative nature of the exploration might have led to some research biases. In addition, the inclusion of the question prompt might have signaled to the audience that this section requires heightened attention, and so the former sections of the presentation might have been deemed less important. Next, the study explored student interactions with a familiar audience only, which might have contributed to the higher frequency of heteroglossic episodes during conversations. The small sample size also calls for caution when interpreting the results. The analyzed lexicogrammatical units themselves were too viewed mostly separately from the longer utterances, restricting the depth of the results' interpretation. Finally, the investigation of the engagement category of the appraisal framework, and more specifically its more internally subjective "entertain" subcategory, left out other language resources represented by the more externally driven "attribute" subcategory, as well as by the categories of "attitude" and "graduation".

To address the limitations, future research may choose to strengthen the methodology by comparing the results of the qualitative investigations with the data collected via such instruments as questionnaires, which would help to verify the results (Mackey & Gass, 2022), and by increasing the student sample size. Exploration of the presentation structure's role in them being perceived and performed in monoglossic or heteroglossic contexts could also be advised. Future research can also consider looking into other appraisal systems. The inclusion of other types of lexicogrammatical resources would assist in understanding how the strength and the focus of the internal and external voices entertained by a speaker expand the conversation floor for dialogue. Finally, as Ohashi's (2021) findings pointed out, some Japanese are not good at conversing with strangers in principle. Therefore, future research may also choose to corroborate the current findings by exploring the primarily monoglossic or heteroglossic foci of EFL student interactions with an unfamiliar audience.

Conclusion

This study explored the EFL learner engagement in presentations and subsequent conversations and the lexicogrammatical ways chosen by the first-year university EFL learners in Japan to expand their post-presentation conversations with a familiar audience of their peers in the TBLT-informed environment. The findings revealed similarities between the student perceptions of their audience in the pre-task and during-task phases and their realization. A shift from highly monoglossic to mainly heteroglossic communicative environments was observed between the presentation move and the conversation move. Consistent with previous research, the use of mostly formulaic lexicogrammatical instances of engagement was identified.

The implications of this study are of significance for both EFL researchers and educators, particularly in TBLT-informed pedagogy. It was observed that a student as one of the main conversation interlocutors may opt for establishing their own single-voice driven presentation and conversation contexts, which in turn may lead to restricted dialogic spaces.

The study has several limitations, including a potential research bias due to its primarily qualitative nature, the separation of single- and multiword expressions from the contexts of the longer utterances, and the research focus on mostly internally subjective appraisal resources, as well as the structure of student presentations, the inclusion of a familiar audience only, and the small sample size.

Future research can consider supplementing the qualitative design with quantitative instruments, ensuring a more well-rounded approach. It may also be beneficial to investigate other appraisal systems in the context of interlocutors' longer utterances for deeper understanding. Additionally, both researchers and educators could explore the communicative benefits allowed by adjusting the TBLT-driven syllabus and the structure of undergraduate EFL learners' presentations towards offering more dialogic opportunities for the familiar and unfamiliar larger audiences to entertain, such as peer-to-peer feedback sessions or role-play activities.

In conclusion, although university EFL learners' lexicogrammatical realizations of presentation-supported conversations arguably illustrate the monogloss-heterogloss divide between their presentations and conversations even in the communicative-pedagogy informed conditions, the potential for expanding the learners' conversations does indeed exist. Addressing the limitations of this study and expanding its findings, future research would contribute to deeper understandings of student conversations and audience awareness, further enhancing their in-class and out-of-class communication skills. This could facilitate students' real-world interactions by preparing them to be more open to dialogues in their further studies and professional situations.

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