English presentation tips for the students of animal psychology

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Abstract As you prepare an English presentation, your main focus should be on getting your message across to the audience effectively. Even if you do not have native-like proficiency in English, there are many other ways to make your presentation appealing. These include learning and practicing pronunciation of keywords, adopting spoken language rather than written language for your speech, increasing the readability of your slides by reducing the amount of words on them, developing a relationship with the audience, and providing variation to keep the audience attentive. It should also be noted that language and presentation style have changed over the years and will continue to change.

Key words: English presentation, speech, conference

The thought of giving a talk in English could be daunting to some non-native speakers of English. However, they may not realise that “good” presentations do not require native-like proficiency in English. The key to a successful presentation actually lies in the overall communication between the presenter and the audience. The following are among the tips that I have compiled based on my experience of witnessing Japanese students in animal psychology struggle to prepare and deliver their presentations. In following them, however, do bear in mind that there is no manual for a perfect presentation — what is effective depends on the audience, the topic, and other various factors.

When they speak English in front of a large audience, Japanese students may feel concerned or embarrassed about their pronunciation. They should be reassured to hear that, Japanese accented English is rated high on status traits, such as intelligence and education background (Watanabe, 2008). Thus, efforts should be directed not towards being able to speak like a native speaker, but towards getting the message across to the audience. If you are not confident with your pronunciation, decide on the keywords of your talk and prioritise practicing them. Today, there are many online resources that provide auditory samples for example pronunciation of words. As you search through the internet, you may find that certain rules that you learned in Japanese high schools are outdated. For example, although some students are still taught to pronounce “wh” in what and when as /hw/, it is more commonly pronounced as /w/ without the “h” by a majority of English speakers around the world. If you find yourself struggling to pronounce certain words, you can also decide not to pronounce them at all. Many words, but not keywords, can often be replaced by other expressions.

Level of formality in speech depends on the context but highly formal style is not expected for conference. In fact, by using typical spoken language rather than textbook language, you can create a friendly atmo-
In spoken language, compared with written language, generally involves shorter and simpler sentences, repetition of main points, greater variation in pitch and speed, and use of pauses. All these features make it easy for presenters to articulate, and for listeners to comprehend the speech. Minor grammatical mistakes are usually considered acceptable. Although speeches can be relatively informal, language style used on presentation slides should be academic. This means that you should avoid contracted words (e.g., didn’t, till) unless you intentionally aim at special effects. At the same time, there is no need to use overly complicated words or sentence structure to “look impressive”. At least in the field of psychology and related fields, use of first person pronouns and active voice is recommended today (American Psychological Association, 2009).

Perhaps, you are already familiar from experience that it is difficult to follow a presenter’s speech while trying to read lines of small text on projected slides. Therefore, limiting the amount of words on each slide is important for effective presentation (see the example in Figure 1). To do so, you have to decide which points are critical in conveying your message. This usually means omitting extra information that you do not refer to in your speech (with the exception of statistical analysis, apparatus specifications, etc.). You can also reduce the number of words on slides if you realise that not all statements need to be complete sentences. Slides are commonly organised with bullet points that list words or phrases rather than sentences. If you are not confident with your English grammar, especially with the usage of articles such as “a” and “the”, you may be relieved that these words can be omitted from slides in many cases.

Skilled presenters aim to develop a relationship with the audience. One way to do this is to interact with the audience directly by asking questions or encouraging them to raise their hand (e.g., “Who has heard of the term X?”). Once they feel involved, they are more likely to show interest and pay attention to the talk. It is also important for the presenter to be aware of the responses from the audience during the talk. For example, you may adjust the length of a pause while waiting for their response to a question, or you may decide to provide additional explanation on difficult points when you observe frowned faces. Presentations should be flexible to a certain degree to allow for such improvised adjustments.

Keeping your audience attentive is among the most difficult issues of presentation. A possible approach is to provide variation in both slides and speech. Occasional encounter
with figures and illustrations may be appealing and informative, as suggested by the English idiom “a picture is worth a thousand words”. Particularly for researchers in animal psychology, use of video clips can be even more effective when explaining the procedure or example behaviours. It may be said that “a video is worth a thousand pictures”.

There are numerous books, in both Japanese and English, on how to give English presentations. When you choose them, make sure you check the publication dates. Language, recommended style, and technology have always been changing. Techniques that were effective 20 years ago with overhead projectors may not be suited for the present day context. Attending conferences yourself and listening to others’ presentations is another obvious way to improve your own.

In summary, a speech with minor grammatical errors and slides with incomplete sentences on them can still result in a “good” presentation. The most important tip in designing your presentation is to consider how to make the time worthwhile for both you and the audience.

References
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