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Making a Place for PowerPoint in EFL Classrooms

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It often seems that language teaching and particularly foreign language teaching is the poor “red-headed step-brother” within the academic community and literature. This is certainly true in the case of using presentation tools like PowerPoint (PPT) and Keynote in EFL classrooms. While PPT has been justifiably both lauded and at times derided in business and in many streams of tertiary education (Doumont, 2005; Flamm, 2008; Gabriel, 2008; Johnson & Sharp, 2005; Tufte, 2003), publications on the use of PPT in EFL classrooms have been largely neglected. In aiming to fill this gap, this paper firstly discusses several criticisms of PPT’s use in education. It then provides several counter arguments against these criticisms and attempts to justify the use of PPT in EFL classrooms by suggesting a simple pedagogy for its use. Finally, this article provides readers with examples of how PPT can be used to create fast-paced, dynamic lessons, which provide more time for class activities and improved student attentiveness without increasing teachers’ workloads.

The Case Against PowerPoint

There are several arguments against the use, or rather misuse, of PPT in the classroom. The first is that an over-reliance on PPT presentations tends to create passive students who assume no responsibility in determining the direction and outcome of a lesson (Johnson & Sharp, 2005). This occurs primarily because some teachers assume that students are “blank slates” ready to be filled, as well as the fact that many teachers are unwilling or unable to deviate from their pre-determined course to engage in authentic interaction with students (Flamm, 2008; Johnson & Sharp, 2005). The problem of passivity is not exclusively the domain of students either. Voss (2004) points

out that students “feel ignored” when instructors are passive users of PPT, users who focus on their presentation tool rather than using it as a means to engage their audience.

A second argument against the use of PPT is provided by Murphy (2006) and Tufte (2003) who warn of the harmful effects that “sequentiality” has on audience comprehension when the audience is not allowed to see the ‘big picture’ because the presenter controls access to the content. From a more practical standpoint, teachers also voice concerns over the amount of time required to prepare a PPT lesson (Li & Walsh, 2010, pp. 112-113). While this list is far from exhaustive, it serves to show that PPT, while widely used, is not always readily accepted as a viable teaching tool within the academic community.

Using PowerPoint Effectively

Combating Student Passivity and Avoiding “Sequentiality”

Proponents of PPT often begin their rebuttal by reminding users that it is merely a tool for instruction, and that the users must carry the burden of blame for the above criticisms (Flamm, 2008). Gabriel (2008, p. 266) points out that criticisms of PPT are often directed at examples of poor use, compared to an “ideal lecture situation” without PPT. At the same time, the traditional lecture style itself has come under attack for its ineffectiveness (Berret, 2012). The common thread from these two counter-arguments is that teachers must become skillful, rather than abusive users of PPT, to ensure that neither students nor teachers become merely passive receptacles or presenters of information.

The criticism that PPT lessons treat students as “blank slates” can be addressed by using PPT as a tool to facilitate participation and discussion. For example, in Figure 1 review questions of a previous lesson are presented on a slide as a cloze exercise. Students must provide the missing words and then conduct a conversation. In another example, showing students a photo (Figure 2), and giving them the responsibility to discuss in pairs “What is happening?”

and “Who’s in the picture?” is a great way to provide context for a lesson. Vocabulary can also be elicited from this slide by asking students to think of five nouns, verbs, or adjectives; or by assigning them to find words that start with A, B, C, etc. In a third example, warm-up questions are drilled by the teacher. However, each question is displayed only after students have attempted to repeat the question. The use of animation/transitions (Figure 3) ensures students focus their attention on listening to the sounds spoken by the teacher, but rewards students with the opportunity to check the accuracy of their listening immediately after repeating. Each example uses PPT to ensure students are actively contributing and participating in the lesson.



Figure 1. A cloze exercise is presented on a PPT slide to review material from a previous lesson.

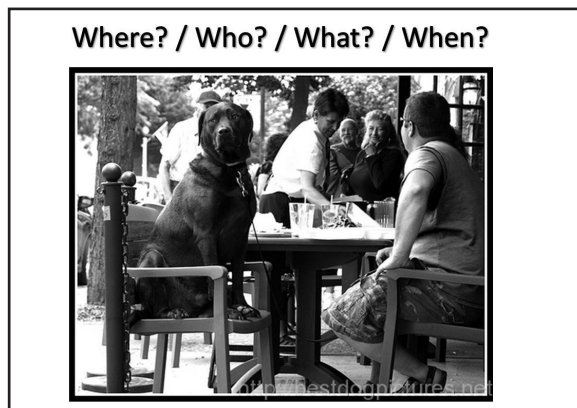


Figure 2. A photo can be used to present context for a lesson and build vocabulary.

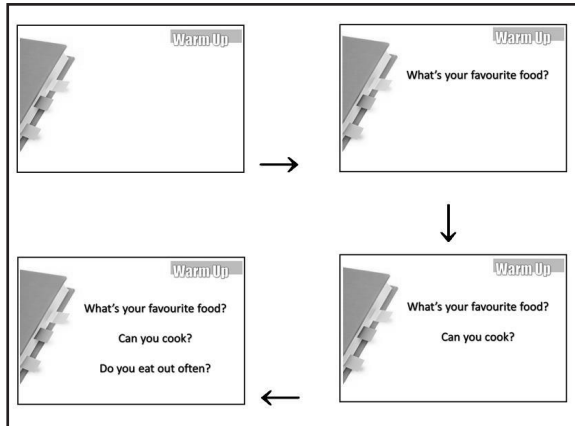


Figure 3. Animation is used to present each question individually, after it has been drilled by the instructor.

The criticism that PPT lessons are sequential and lack student input can be addressed by avoiding the rigidity of prepared slides. Hunter (2007) point out that this can be achieved by using an open MS Word file (with the font adjusted to an appropriate size) which is cycled to (by pressing ALT + TAB) and used in place of a whiteboard to include input from students. For example, a teacher could complete a listening task by eliciting sections of the listening script from the students. This way the teacher can maintain eye contact with students and better assist them in the process of reconstruction, rather than turning his or her back on them and blocking their view while writing sentences on the board. Not only is typing faster than writing on the board, but typed words are more legible. Additionally, having multiple PPT files open simultaneously, allows teachers to easily change the order in which a class is presented (Hunter, 2007).

However, being *able* to incorporate technology this way does not mean that teachers *have to* incorporate it. My preference is to introduce grammar on the whiteboard, as it is easier to draw arrows and underline. Using PPT to present other aspects of the lesson, such as vocabulary, useful expressions, and warm up questions, means I have more space available on the whiteboard for grammar and other activities. Choosing the most suitable way to present

information is about understanding and matching the content of the lesson to the needs and mood of the class. Likewise, teachers should not feel compelled to show all of their PPT slides. Slides that do not fit with the flow of the lesson can be skipped. Important tangents need to be addressed when they are created by students, and so, as always, one must teach in the moment.

Time Returns and Pace

On a more practical level, a very important concern to address is that of preparation time. While the first set of PPT lesson slides may be time consuming to produce, once a template has been created, teachers need only copy from their original file and change the content slightly while preparing subsequent weekly lesson plans. Furthermore, if teaching the same lesson the following year, teachers may only need to make minor revisions to the lesson plan, because all of their hard work will have been saved in the file.

More importantly, however, the extra planning time teachers allocate to PPT is rewarded by time gained in their class. Teachers will have more time to monitor student progress, adapt their lesson, and provide feedback because, with the push of a button, several sentences can appear instantly. Likewise, students are rarely left waiting and watching the teacher write something on the board. Teachers using PPT can also maintain a better pace in their classroom, which leads to more focused, attentive, on-task students, thereby leading to improved learning outcomes.

General Rules for PowerPoint

To be effective, PPT must be used properly in EFL classrooms and therefore requires a pedagogical framework. While providing a comprehensive pedagogy for PPT is beyond the scope of this paper, the following points can play an important role in informing and determining that pedagogy.

First, teachers must examine the aims and organization of an EFL classroom and differentiate them from a typical university lecture. Thus, rather than focusing on the dissemination of information, like most lectures do (Berrett, 2012), current trends in EFL pedagogy call for student-centered

lesson plans, with student-student interaction forming the core of the lesson (Jones, 2007; Ogawa & Wilkinson, 1997; Ward, Wade, & Dowling, 2008, pp.13-14). Consequently, in EFL lessons PPT should be called upon sparingly and used in short bursts, with only the same frequency that EFL teachers would use more traditional forms of audio-visual aids, such as blackboards and CD players.

In keeping with Flamm's (2008) aphorism that "less is more", which is probably the most pertinent advice EFL instructors need follow when using PPT, an entire oral communication class can be managed with only six PPT slides, such as in the following example:

- (1) Review previous class topic with several question prompts.
- (2) Introduce a new topic with a thematic picture.
- (3) Present and drill warm-up questions.
- (4) Model language through an embedded video clip.
- (5) Elicit additional vocabulary on the topic with additional pictures.
- (6) Assign homework.

With these six slides, as little as 5-10 minutes of PPT time during a 90-minute class would be more than sufficient.

Ideas and Hints

Before finishing, I would like to offer a few helpful hints, as well as a list of rules to help eager teachers get started. For teachers who have never used PPT, the best way to begin is with just a few slides, and a simple textbox. No animations/transitions, special formatting, or knowledge about graphic design is required. Try PPT for just one class, and expand from there.

Instructions and classroom language. Use PPT to display useful expressions such as language for checking answers or teaching vocabulary. I have found students very willing to use prompts such as, "What's number 1?" and "Do you agree?" when made available (Figure 4). With repetition, this language becomes second nature. Additionally, students who are off-task can be brought quickly back to attention by blacking out the screen (pressing 'B' key). Suddenly the focus in the room shifts from the screen to the teacher.

Students who were copying rather than listening, have nothing to copy, and students who were chatting off topic find themselves surrounded by silence. You will have their attention.

Also, use pictures to reinforce verbal instructions, because pictures lower students' cognitive load and translate meaning directly (Healy, 2011). For example, a difficult task such as explaining a syllabus can be simplified into less than a minute explanation and can be received with a high level of understanding without the use of any L1 by simply adding a few diagrams and animations.

Vocab

**sour / bitter / sweet / a fruit
/ a vegetable / savory**

What's number ___?
I think ___ is ___. Do you agree?
I agree / I disagree? / I'm not sure

- 1) coffee**
- 2) a lemon**
- 3) cake**
- 4) steak**
- 5) lettuce**
- 6) an apple**

Figure 4. Prevent students from slipping into L1 by presenting classroom language for different activities.

Making textbooks and grammar interactive. If you can project your slides onto a whiteboard, you can scan a page from your book, add it to a slide and project your slide directly onto the whiteboard. Have students come to the whiteboard and fill their answers in directly onto the projected image. This allows students to interact with the textbook directly, and it provides them with a clear image of the correct answer. You can also do grammar work on the board the same way, by projecting sentences onto the board and then having students make changes with white board markers.

Vocabulary. Use PPT to display images of key vocabulary, elicit the vocabulary from students, and finally, display the words on the screen. Alternatively, display vocabulary and then add a list of meanings or cloze sentences. Have students work in pairs to match the vocabulary items to the list. In both cases, students can quickly and actively achieve a high level of comprehension, without dictionaries and without any verbal explanation.

Listening. Project a word cloud (<http://www.wordle.net>) of a listening text and use it as a pre-listening task where students guess what they'll be listening to (Hockly, 2010). Next, during the listening activity, improve student comprehension by using several pictures that match themes or vocabulary in the listening script.

Follow up a dictation exercise by flashing the dictated sentence on the board. Display the sentence only for an instant, and then have students discuss and correct their answers.

General Guidelines

The following list of points guides teachers clear of trouble when using PPT.

- Think big! Use large size fonts (minimum 32). If your text won't fit on one slide at that size, use two or more slides, but do not squeeze!
- Leave the lights on! Dimming only the blackboard lights is normally sufficient.
- Have a printed thumbnail version of your presentation, alongside your lesson plan notes. Knowing what slide comes next ensures smooth transitions and delivery. It also enables you to accurately skip several slides, or present your slides out of order with relative ease. Additionally, after class, invite any interested students to view and take notes of your lesson slides.
- Buy a remote control device which does not require line of sight. Interacting with students is difficult when you are chained to your computer, especially in large rooms where the video connection is in the corner. With a remote control device, you are able to roam the

classroom, answer questions, monitor student activity, all while providing or hiding the information on your slides. It is the best purchase I have made in the last four years!

- Do not overuse PPT. Some things, such as explaining verb conjugations, or marking aspects of phonetics are best done on a whiteboard. Think about the task at hand, the flow of your lesson, and how to best engage the students in your class before performing each task.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope that by opening this discussion on PPT, teachers who have been putting off experimenting with PPT will now feel motivated to try integrating it into their classroom. Furthermore, I hope that teachers who have already incorporated this technology will continue to innovate and discuss the development of its use in EFL. In closing, as PPT continues to redefine the nature of presentation in EFL classrooms, and in all of academia, it is incumbent upon teachers to always strive to be active users of PPT by ensuring that it enhances, rather than detracts from the goals of the classroom.

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Suggested Readings

<http://www.garrreynolds.com/Presentation/prep.html>

<http://www.presentationzen.com/>

<http://www.slideshare.net/jessedee/you-suck-at-powerpoint>

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