

Slidecast Yourself. Online Student Presentations

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Abstract

Web 2.0 has boosted a new genre of online presentations, namely slidecasting, which can be described as podcasting by synchronizing PowerPoint and voice. It could be interesting to use this in language teaching classes, but limited research is available on its possible application in education. Its potential has already been demonstrated in Language for Specific Purposes classes, but it is unknown if this could be used in a foreign language teaching situation. This new presentation tool was introduced in our English business communication classes at University College Arteveldehogeschool (Ghent, Belgium). We had semi-structured interviews with 9 students, and confirmed our data with a quantitative questionnaire. The results indicate the feasibility of slidecasting and the importance of the social and emotional context for its success in educational settings. Moreover, the paper provides some guidelines for teachers who want to implement this into their classes. It also refers to some of the limitations of slidecasting.

1. Presentations in education: a twofold challenge

Although presentations via visual aids software have been embraced as the primary tool for students to communicate in educational settings [1], many colleges and universities fail "to include those skills in the general education curriculum" [2]. It is hard to find an available slot in today's strictly timed schedules to train presentation skills, and therefore less time is devoted to this specific aspect of language usage. Strangely enough, non-language related courses still ask students to present their research results orally on a fairly regular basis, which demonstrates the importance of good presentation skills.

Additionally, the 'traditional' presentational situation, which regards the speaker as 'the sage on the stage', is increasingly being challenged nowadays. Recently introduced communication technologies such as podcasts, blogs and social networking websites display the shift in power that can be discerned in the 'network society' [3]. Presentations are no longer confined to the relatively safe environment of the class- and boardroom, audiences want to interact with information given, and all newly developed social media (commonly referred to as Web 2.0) are designed to empower its user. Or at least to give them the illusion of it. Students should be prepared to confront this new situation. Perhaps therefore, presentations skills training should not be limited anymore to just how to deliver a PowerPoint presentation successfully.

2. Slidecasting

One of the possible ways to answer this twofold challenge is to introduce slidecasting into education, which can be described as podcasting by synchronizing PowerPoint (or any other visual aids software) and voice. Previously, this technology was limited to e-lectures and webinars, but since mid 2007 websites like SlideShare (www.slideshare.net) have made slidecasts accessible for everybody by enhancing the user-friendliness of the production process. The software needed to create such a



slidecast can be found on the average computer, and almost every type of file used as visual aids for a presentation is supported by the website.

By letting students present online and thus crossing the boundaries of the traditional classroom, it becomes feasible to incorporate presentations skills training into today's strictly timed curricula. Moreover, these websites typically display a YouTube-like interface, with all its familiar Web 2.0 features. The slidecast itself can also be forwarded, paused and stopped at any time. Users can comment on the slidecast, show appreciation for it by giving it the maximum score of 5 stars, befriend the producer of it, and share the slidecast with other media such as Facebook and Twitter. A slidecast can also be tagged with several keywords, and the producer of the slidecast can choose a category it belongs to. Consequently, the slidecast can be linked to a network of content-related siblings.

Web 2.0 based media, such as slidecasting, also thrive on the concept of identity. "Online social networking can also be empowering for the user, as the monitoring and registration facilitates new ways of constructing identity, meeting friends and colleagues as well as socializing with strangers." [4] In this respect, it is important to highlight the theory of rhetorician Kenneth Burke (1897-1993), which stressed the significance of identity and identification for the communication process and learning. [5] He claims that in order to be persuaded identification should first occur. This sheds a new light on how human relationships are constructed. It shows that the network relationships in social media can simultaneously be seen as communication, persuasion and identification. As a result, social media inevitably affect the students personally, which is an appealing idea, because learning theory emphasises the significance of personal involvement for student's success. [6]

More specifically, recent research conducted by us [7] suggests that slidecasting and its Web 2.0 environment can be a new attractive teaching tool. We asked students of an LSP (Language for Specific Purposes) course to produce a slidecast, and they acknowledge that producing a slidecast is relatively feasible. They also have the necessary facilitating conditions to complete this assignment. Yet, it is important to note that our findings indicate that the social and emotional context plays an important role in the success of slidecasting by students.

3. Introducing slidecasting in ESP classes

Slidecasting seemed to reap success in this LSP class, but it was still uncertain whether it could be effectively deployed in a foreign language teaching class or an ESP course (English for Specific Purposes). As mentioned above, latest research results suggest that this is possible, but perhaps there are additional items to take into regard. In an ESP course for instance, students mostly feel less comfortable having to give a presentation in a language that is not their native tongue, and this emotional context is a key factor for slidecasting.

Slidecasting was integrated into our English business communication classes at University College Arteveldehogeschool (Ghent, Belgium). 60 accountancy and tax students (2nd year of a bachelor training) were asked to create a slidecast in which they presented the quarterly earnings of the company producing their favorite product. This implied that they had to analyse authentic quarterly earnings (or sometimes annual) reports. We also provided them with some best practices, examples of slidecasting we considered to be exemplary, and an elaborate hands-on manual on how to produce a slidecast. They also had to post the internet link of their slidecast on a forum of the university college's online learning environment. On the one hand, basic guidelines concerning presentations were already discussed in the first year and not therefore not exhaustively covered by the course. On the other hand, the course puts a strong emphasis on oral exercises, and the slidecast served as the final assignment of the oral part of the course.

4. Researching the results of slidecasting in ESP classes

From the group of 60 students, 9 students were interviewed (3 male and 6 female, 15 minutes per interview). They were asked to comment on their experiences producing a slidecast. We had a set of standardized questions on presentation structure, slide design, and slidecasting's specific technical characteristics. These topics were chosen, because we thought that these items go deeper into the specific nature of slidecasts. We used the method of semi-structured interviews, which is a more flexible technique than structured interviews, as it allows new questions to be brought up during the interview. It is a more indirect way of identifying the students' feelings towards slidecasts.

In addition to these interviews, a quantitative questionnaire was sent to all students to confirm the qualitative data.

5. The results of slidecasting in ESP classes

5.1. Qualitative data

We collected several recurring answers after having interviewed the students. The reactions of the students from the ESP classes towards slidecasting were in line with those from the LSP classes. They all considered it to be relatively easy to do, had no negative attitude towards it, but they all thought it was rather "unnatural" to do. Moreover, according to the students, and also in our analysis, the presentation's slide design was not affected by the new presentation form. Yet the answers concerning the structuring of the slidecasts revealed some interesting information. We can group the students' statements into four categories:

- "I thought it was nothing more than logical to structurize the material in this way."
- "I just copied the structure of the annual report I used."
- "The structure of my slidecast is the same like all my other presentations. Presentations should look like this."
- "I imitated the structure of a colleague's slidecast."

All statements regarding this topic could be listed in one of these categories. Moreover, we can put these categories along two gradients: form to content, and create to copy.

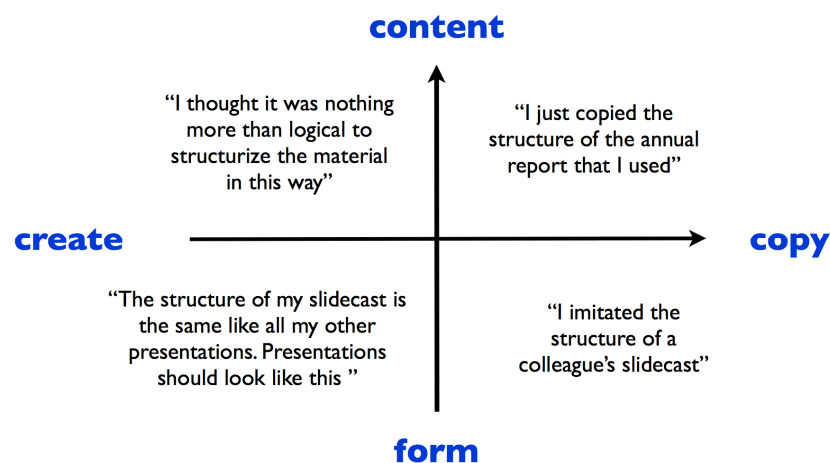


Fig.1 "How do students structure a slidecast?"

This is important data, because it shows what students focus on when producing a slidecast. It may also help teachers counter difficulties that might arise during the assignment.

First of all, a slidecast is strongly influenced by preconceived ideas of how a presentation should look like. One cannot expect that a presentation will considerably increase or decrease in quality due to being in the form of a slidecast. Statements from ‘create-form’ demonstrate this. Secondly, looking at the data from ‘copy-form’, one can discern that providing the students with best practices is essential. They need good examples to benchmark their own products. It also stressed the importance of the social and emotional context for slidecasting. Thirdly, the influence of the written sources cannot be underestimated. The background material clearly determines how students structure a presentation and therefore use language. It might be more important than often realized to teach students how to disseminate texts in order to understand how information is sometimes being constructed. Otherwise they are merely copying what the communication department of the company has chosen to disclose its stakeholders. Finally, making a presentation is also a cognitive process that requires much more than just language skills. It poses an intellectual challenge to most students, and is not only preparing a tool to communicate.

5.2. Quantitative data

With the quantitative questionnaire we wanted to check our findings, more specifically the practicality of the grid we had designed.

From the interviews we deduced 4 statements per category (so 16 in total) that could be regarded as typical. Students were asked to indicate how much they agreed with the statements on a 5-point Likert scale (5 = maximum). The statements were presented at random. 45 students completed the survey, but seven entries had to be removed from the final data, because they were incorrectly filed in.

Below you can find the results.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Content & copy	38	,50	4,00	2,3816	,89619
Form & copy	38	1,00	4,00	1,8158	,65162
Content & create	38	1,00	4,00	3,1184	,60888
Form & create	38	1,50	5,00	3,5132	,69250
Valid N (listwise)	38				

Fig. 2 “Which structurizing technique do students prefer when slidecasting?”

We were pleased with the results, because it confirmed our anecdotal evidence: preconceived ideas about presentations determine the final result in the strongest way. One has to do more than merely implementing a new ICT tool to change students’ attitude towards a certain communication form or strongly influence their communication skills. Secondly, the high score of ‘content & create’ argues that an ESP assignment mostly requires an intellectual effort in addition to an emphasis on language acquisition. Producing a low-quality slidecast can therefore be partly attributable to the knowledge-related part of the assignment.

6. Conclusion: limitations and implications

6.1. Multimedia naturalness theory

Slidecasting is a fascinating new presentation tool, but one has to be attentive to some of its limitations. Media naturalness theory predicts that it might be less appreciated by its users. [8] This theory explains that humans have only spent a relatively limited number of years with symbolic communication (art, writing, multimedia), and therefore we have not yet developed brains which are fit



for this purpose. We still prefer face-to-face communication to any other medium. New electronic media which do not incorporate the features of this face-to-face contact would receive less positive comments from its users. For instance, the use of e-mail leads to an increase in cognitive effort and communication ambiguity, compared to for instance video conferencing.

In this respect, students might like slidecasting, and find its production process feasible, but according to the multimedia naturalness theory, they will still attribute higher value to real-life presentations. The data from the interviews confirms this. This thinking is also in line with previous research results [7] which showed that for instance slidecasting will not find immediate access into the corporate world. For instance, a focus group of business professionals claimed that its lack of real-life interaction greatly diminishes its chances for success.

6.2. Implementation in education

Based upon the results from our small-sized research, the following items might be taken into account, when slidecasting is used in education:

- Focus on socializing. The social and emotional aspect of slidecasting (and of any other Web 2.0 tool) plays an important role in its success. Encourage this by asking your students to post the internet link to their slidecasts on a forum.
- Provide best practices. Students like to compare their product to certain standards.
- Work on student beliefs about presentations as they greatly influence the final product.
- Do not let students remove the slidecasts. It might be interesting to use these as a follow-up exercise, next year's best practice, or as evidence of a specific level of the Common European Framework they have reached.
- Do not regard slidecasting as an alternative to presentations. It might replace some stages in the training of presentation skills, but it cannot take the place of all of them.

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