

On the Use of PowerPoint in the EFL Classroom

By Jonathan Pierrel

PPTs in Most EFL Classrooms in China

I was quite surprised when I arrived in China two years ago to see that most of the teachers used PowerPoint presentations (PPTs) in the classroom on a daily basis. At the beginning of this semester, I was reminded of that fact when our Director congratulated us for making it through the previous semester which had involved a significant curriculum change. To convey this achievement, he mentioned that “many PPTs had been created”. Shortly after, a colleague who joined the level I had been working in asked me if I could share my PPTs from last semester with her to have a better understanding of what was expected. I am all in favor of sharing resources among colleagues, but I was not of much help that time because, contrary to the majority of teachers in my department, I use PPTs quite infrequently – that is, only when I deem it useful. Having a PPT for each classroom was mandatory until the new Director decided otherwise two years ago. Although this is no longer a requirement in my department, its effects are still felt.

I believe that such scenarios are not isolated in China. Strong efforts to introduce computers and projectors in classrooms started around 1999. Among the 375 higher-education institutions that Cai and Wu (2003) surveyed across China, 70% of them already had computers and projectors in their classrooms

in 2001. More than 10 years later, it would be reasonable to assume that this figure would be much higher. Once the classrooms have been equipped, teachers are often told by the administration to use the technology that has been put at their disposal (Selber, 2004). Unfortunately, such rapid proliferation of computer equipment in the classroom rarely correlates with sufficient teacher training to instruct teachers on how to use the technology effectively for teaching (ibid). This situation may often translate in practice to teachers feeling that they should use a PPT document for instruction. This article will argue that teachers should not blindly accept such a drastic teaching delivery paradigm change. We need to consciously make the decision to use or not to use PPTs by considering the implications that come with it.

The Effects of PPTs

There is no denying that PowerPoint can be an effective tool to deliver information, but using it is not anodyne. Hill Arford, Lubitow and Smollin (2012) and Khoury and Mattar (2012), among others, provide constructive literature reviews on the use of PPTs in higher education. The positive effects that are mentioned by these authors and others include:

- It can save time in the classroom (instead of

- writing by hand on the board);
- Students generally respond to PPTs positively:
 - PPTs provide structure to the lessons;
 - The materials are often clearer;
 - Students may see the class as more entertaining;
 - Students find it easier to take notes, which improves their confidence.
- Teachers also tend to feel more confident;
- It is easy to keep PPT files, update them, and use them again later;
- It can reduce printing costs.

These advantages certainly lead to the fact that PPTs are widely used in the classroom, but we should not forget to consider their disadvantages:

- Students tend to become more “passive”:
 - They are more likely to skip classes or pay less attention in class if they know they can simply get the content later with the PPT;
 - They are reluctant to take notes since they know they can get the files later on.
- Classes are perceived as too “pre-planned”:
 - Teachers are less likely to be spontaneous;
 - Students may consider such classes boring if there is little interaction.
- The information may become oversimplified and lack breadth, depth and complexity;
- There is less interaction between the teacher and the students:
 - Students are less likely to interrupt the teacher if they have the feeling that their comment may disrupt the flow of the class;
 - Students can feel sleepier if the lights are dimmed;
 - It is difficult to adapt or change the content of a PPT during class to take into consideration the students’ participation, since to make changes one has to edit the presentation mode, edit the text, and then return to the presentation mode.

It is also worth noting that the literature does not suggest that using PPTs in the classroom improves students’ retention, nor does it improve students’ scores. Levasseur and Sawyer (2006) point out that there is “no significant change in learning outcomes when instructors augment their lectures with computer-generated slides” (p. 111). Even more interestingly, Amare (2006) conducted a study which she concludes by saying that: “while most students say they preferred PowerPoint, performance scores were higher in the sections with the traditional lecture format” (p. 297). It is important to note that those studies were not carried out in an EFL context, and that even for content courses using PPTs may lead to potential issues. So what are the implications in language classes where we try to develop students’ linguistic skills?

Are PPTs beneficial in an EFL classroom?

Going through the list of advantages given above, it is obvious to see how using PPTs can be useful in the EFL classroom, especially with lower-level students who might have more difficulties understanding oral English. However, I believe that there is a danger of overusing PPTs in the classroom and that conscious use of PPTs would benefit students.

Among the disadvantages listed above, the deterioration of interaction becomes a major factor in an EFL context. Language classes should engage the students and foster interaction. According to Ellis (1999), interaction facilitates language acquisition. Interaction consciously or unconsciously “sets the scene for potential learning” (Ellis, 1999, p. 4). However, PPTs may be counter-productive in that regard. If they are not designed appropriately, PPTs tend to lead to a unidirectional form of interaction: from teachers to students. When students offer answers or suggestions that might not have been considered by the teacher when planning the lesson, these answers may appear to the student as inappropriate if they are not mentioned on the screen. Furthermore, with a pre-planned structure constrained by the nature of PPTs, it is difficult to adapt the content of the presented information accordingly. Consequently, teachers need to be increasingly conscious when designing their

PPTs so that it empowers them to generate constructive interaction with the students.

Additionally, always providing written information and instruction also encourages the students to rely on what is written on the screen instead of paying attention to what is being said. The students can quickly develop the habit of relying on visual information to “survive” the classroom experience of communicating in a foreign language. However, once they leave the classroom, they will most probably not be able to rely on a PPT slide behind the speaker’s head.

If we are not careful, using PPTs in EFL classrooms can lead to negative consequences. However, certain strategies can help us minimize some of those potential issues and make the use of PPTs more effective.

Tips

Here are a few tips that can help you use PPTs more effectively:

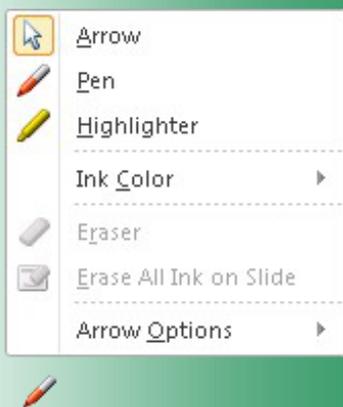
- Use a black font with a white background: the contrast is usually strong enough to keep visual clarity when there is abundant light in the classroom. That way, you will be able to draw the curtains open to benefit from natural light or use the lights without dimming them, which may prevent drowsiness.
- Appropriately use the “animation” features so that not all the text appears on the slide at the same time. This will help you to maintain some interaction with the students by asking them what they think is coming next. It also helps them stay focused when there is not too much text displayed at the same time.

- Use the built-in functions “Pen”, or “Highlighter” to annotate slides during your presentation to account for spontaneous ideas and to incorporate the feedback from your audience. (These functions are available if you hover your mouse over the lower left-hand corner of the screen in the full-screen presentation mode – see Figure 1). Or even better, ask your school to invest in a touch screen and an electronic pen to be able to write or draw by hand on the slides.
- Use a remote control to be able to keep your presentation running without having to be physically confined to the space next to the computer. This will give you back your “ability to use proximity-based management strategies” (Giles & Baggett, 2008-2009, p. 49).
- Use the shortcuts “B” or “W” to turn the screen black or white respectively when the information that is projected on the screen no longer matches with what you are saying.
- Project a word document instead. You can start from an empty page or one with some text written on it beforehand. But projecting a word document instead of a PPT will enable you to bring back the interaction between you and your students in the classroom. Provided that you can type fast enough, you can write what the students say and have other students analyze what was suggested by their peers (whether it is for grammar or content). It will also give you back your liberty to choose at that moment what you want to be written on the screen. You do not have to follow the order of a pre-planned PPT.

Conclusion

Using PPTs provides practical advantages that all users benefit from, whether it is to save time, bring structure to the lessons, or boost teachers’ confidence. That said, to become smart users – as opposed to being used by technology – we should consciously reflect on how we use PPTs in our classrooms. The tips listed above can be used as guiding signs in deciding how to effectively use PPTs in the classroom. That said, not using such tools can also become more attractive. Next time you

Figure 1.



plan to use a PPT, ask yourself if you could do without it to bring back or enhance the interaction between you and your students.

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