

# ENCOURAGING AD-LIB SPEAKING THROUGH SCREENSHOT SLIDE PRESENTATIONS IN A FIRST-YEAR EFL CLASS

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines a screenshot-based presentation activity designed to reduce script dependence and promote spontaneous speaking among first-year EFL students at a Japanese university. The task requires learners to capture and sequence images from a short film with little or no dialogue and narrate the story without written support. Drawing on three years of classroom implementation, the paper outlines the activity's rationale, iterative refinements, and observed learner responses across differing proficiency levels and stages of the semester. Classroom observations suggest that visual prompts can help students sustain several minutes of ad-lib speech, increase audience engagement, and bolster confidence in real-time language production, though limited vocabulary and early-semester anxiety may constrain fluency. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for instructional use, variations for different teaching contexts, and considerations for future iteration, highlighting the task's potential as a low-prep, high-impact tool for supporting more natural spoken English in university settings.*

## DISCLOSURE

Portions of this text were revised with the assistance of OpenAI ChatGPT, used for language editing and grammar refinement. All content was reviewed and approved by the author.

## INTRODUCTION

A recurring challenge in my first-year communicative English classes at Kanda University of International Studies is students' overreliance on memorized scripts and direct translations when giving presentations. Although learners often invest considerable effort in preparing content for presentations, many continue to rely on scripted language they have not

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internalized and do not feel confident pronouncing. Cutrone (2009) states that communication apprehension is the most common form of language anxiety found in EFL contexts in Japan, and that anxious language learners are less likely to take risks, and produce more matter-of-fact language than a relaxed student. This would help explain the reliance on memorization of scripts for presentations. Unfortunately, due to this reliance, a majority of the English teachers interviewed in a study by Oanh and Hien (2006) thought that, in memorized speeches, students sound like they are reading or reciting rather than speaking, and make the audience inattentive. This tendency may undermine authentic engagement; both speaker and audience can become disconnected from the message, and the natural, dynamic delivery essential to effective presentations is lost.

As an attempt to address this issue, I created a presentation activity to promote spontaneous, or “ad-lib,” speaking. After trialing a range of approaches, including flashcard prompts and limited note-scanning, an image-based storytelling format emerged as both effective and engaging. In this task, students select a short film from a list, capture dozens of screenshots, and use these visuals to reconstruct and narrate the story without a script. Since slides contain no text, learners must rely on real-time language production, supported only by visual prompts. Through deliberate group creation, the unfamiliarity of each story to the audience also seems to contribute to their genuine curiosity and attentiveness during the presentations. Over the course of several minutes, students demonstrate that they are capable of delivering extended spoken narratives without pre-written material, developing confidence, fluency, and audience awareness in the process.

The following sections describe how this presentation activity is structured and examine its perceived impact on student motivation, spoken fluency, and self-assurance. Drawing on classroom implementation across three academic years, the paper illustrates how presentation tasks can be adapted to prioritize communication over accuracy, supporting more natural language use in university settings.

## **ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION AND DEVELOPMENT**

### **Overview**

The activity requires students to use Google Slides to compile a sequence of screenshots from a short film. Students will watch the film one time, taking screenshots arbitrarily during the viewing. These images serve as the only visual support for an unscripted oral presentation. In practice, the technical process is straightforward. Students are generally familiar with capturing screenshots on phones or laptops, and they are able to

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arrange them into slides with minimal assistance. In essence, this is a picture-prompt speaking task, a format shown to work in other settings (see Karya et al., 2022). Once all students have completed their slides, groups of five to six are formed, with each member presenting a different film. Presentations are conducted in small groups to ensure that, with a little teacher intervention where necessary, each story is unfamiliar to the audience and receives focused attention.

### **Rationale**

The screenshots serve as memory cues for the students, acting as visual anchors that help the presenter keep the storyline in mind. Using images activates both visual and verbal processing, which helps students explain the story without relying on on-slide text (Clark & Paivio, 1991; Mayer, 2009). In practice, the picture-prompt format keeps attention on the message rather than the slide and has worked well in speaking classes elsewhere (see Karya et al., 2022). Removing text also lowers the temptation to read word-for-word; duplicating speech as text adds unnecessary load and can flatten delivery (Kalyuga et al., 1999; Mayer, 2009). Small groups matter, too: students are generally more willing to talk to peers than in whole-class settings, which supports ad-lib talk and peer interaction (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Cao & Philp, 2006). Within that setting, brief, low-stakes improvisation can help confidence build; as learners feel safer, they take more risks and their speech becomes more fluent and varied—even when they hit bumps (Zondag, 2024).

Notably, keep preparation light on purpose. Studies show that when students have less time to plan beforehand, they assemble more language as they speak and the talk feels more spontaneous; giving them more time during the talk mainly helps accuracy because they can pause, monitor, and self-correct (Ellis & Yuan, 2004; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). In this activity, the aim is the former, as the goal here is to improve confidence in spontaneous speaking. This task sits in meaning-focused output and fluency development, which Nation (2007) argues should receive equal time alongside input and form-focused work.

### **Iterations and Refinements**

This presentation format has evolved over the past three years through iterative classroom use. Early attempts to foster spontaneous speech included giving students brief, factual texts to present while monitoring eye contact. These efforts met with mixed success, as many learners continued to rely heavily on reading. A subsequent variation involved having students summarize a film using flashcards, but this too, yielded limited gains in delivery confidence.

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The shift to using screenshots marked a turning point. As the format was refined, students were encouraged to include a greater number of images, as they seemed to result in longer and more structured retellings, agreeing with other similar studies using picture-based storytelling (see Karya et al., 2022). The increase in visual support helped presenters stay on track and made it easier to sustain several minutes of ad-lib speaking. Another key adjustment was the reduction of formal preparation time. While students were encouraged to review their slides and become familiar with the story, the absence of written scripts ensured that presentations remained spontaneous. These changes have helped the activity function as a focused and effective tool for developing real-time language production.

## **IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS**

### **Lesson Structure**

Each class session at Kanda University of International Studies runs for 90 minutes, which generally allows the screenshot presentation activity to be completed within a single lesson. However, dividing the task across two sessions often leads to a more natural flow—for instance, allocating time in the first session for students to collect and organize their screenshots, followed by presentations in the next lesson. Given that the course includes 60 sessions per semester, there is ample flexibility to structure the activity without compromising other content.

### **Technical Support and Preparation**

Most students are familiar with taking screenshots and compiling slides using Google Slides, whether on their phones or laptops. When support is needed, for example, with optimizing image capture or arranging slides, brief guidance is typically sufficient. The technological demands of the task are minimal.

Preparation time is capped and scripts are not allowed, with the intention to keep planning minimal and push real-time speech (Ellis & Yuan, 2004). Students are encouraged to review the story in advance to become familiar with its flow, but practice runs are not scheduled. As the short films used are all nonverbal (without dialogue), learners must rely entirely on their own English to narrate the story in real time, further reinforcing the need for flexible language use.

### **Additional Considerations**

A curated list of nonverbal short films is made available to students via Google Classroom. Students may also select their own film, though most choose from the provided list. All films have a duration of less than eight

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minutes. Typically, up to three students may choose the same film. In future iterations, restricting this to one or two may allow for increased variation and potential for a second round of presentations in newly formed groups. This would support repeated fluency practice and sustained engagement by exposing students to a wider range of content.

## **OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS**

### **Classroom Implementation Over Time**

Over the past three years, this screenshot presentation activity has been used across multiple sections of first-year English communication courses. In the initial two years, the activity was introduced in the second semester, once students had built some rapport and gained presentation experience. At that stage, most students engaged with confidence, and many exceeded expectations by delivering structured, expressive presentations with natural delivery. In my classes, audience engagement appeared strong, judging by the observation of clear attention to the speaker and no off-task behaviors. Structuring groups so each member brings unique content creates an information gap that motivates careful listening and interaction (Pica et al, 2006; Slavin, 1991).

In its most recent implementation, the activity was introduced earlier in the semester. While the structure remained consistent, student responses differed. Many learners approached the task with greater hesitation, particularly those at lower proficiency levels. Challenges included long pauses during speech and difficulty retrieving necessary vocabulary. More fluent students showed stronger delivery, though even lower confidence speakers completed the task with support from their peers. Despite the higher anxiety, students still met the core targets: they delivered unscripted narrations using their screenshots, sustained several minutes of continuous speech, and covered the full story arc using the slides.

Going forward, it may be more productive to schedule the activity slightly later in the semester, once students have had the opportunity to build familiarity with both their peers and basic presentation strategies. Integrating scaffolding steps—such as informal vocabulary preparation or low-stakes rehearsal—could also enhance learner readiness.

### **Language Use and Fluency**

In line with the goals of the activity, student language use has generally remained simple and comprehensible. The task encourages learners to rely on familiar vocabulary and sentence patterns, prioritizing clarity and fluency over grammatical accuracy. While some students were observed experiencing moments of struggle, likely due to a lack of vocabulary, many were able to produce functional substitutes in those moments and

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continue presenting. Providing students with time to preview their stories and prepare a short list of useful vocabulary could support more fluent delivery in future iterations.

Although formal practice is not part of the task, some students appeared to gain confidence as they moved through their presentation. Fluency development was not systematically tracked, but anecdotal observations suggest that students often became more relaxed and expressive once the presentation was underway. Pedagogically, this is a meaning-focused output activity (Nation, 2007) with a fluency emphasis which is consistent with the communicative aims of the course.

### **Challenges Encountered**

In earlier implementations, challenges were largely procedural—for example, time spent choosing a film or occasional attempts to use pre-written text. These issues were manageable and had minimal effect on outcomes. However, introducing the task earlier in the semester revealed a more foundational challenge: many students were not yet accustomed to speaking spontaneously in English. The combination of unfamiliar format, limited rehearsal, and early timing likely amplified performance anxiety. The hesitancy observed, especially considering rehearsal was minimal, is also explainable through communication apprehension and fear of social evaluation, both widely documented among Japanese EFL learners (Cutrone, 2009).

Vocabulary seemed to emerge as the most consistent obstacle. While students understood the structure and goals of the task, their ability to convey the story was often limited by gaps in lexical knowledge. Introducing a light-touch rehearsal or vocabulary planning phase may help reduce hesitation while maintaining the unscripted nature of the activity. Notably, despite these difficulties, student commitment was high, and even those who struggled completed the task, often with peer encouragement.

### **Reflections and Takeaways**

Although direct quotations from student reflections could not be included due to consent limitations, general patterns were evident across written feedback and classroom observations. Many students expressed dissatisfaction with their own performance, yet simultaneously praised the work of their classmates. This dynamic may reflect a common self-critical bias, especially when students are working outside their comfort zone. The frequent pattern of students rating their own performance lower than their peers' aligns with cross-cultural work showing that Japanese self-evaluation skews more self-critical and modest than North American norms (Heine et al., 1999). Highlighting this pattern of self-criticism in

future debriefs could help normalize the learning curve associated with public speaking and spontaneous communication.

Overall, the activity seems to offer a valuable platform for students to engage in authentic communication. It creates conditions in which learners must rely on their own linguistic resources, navigate gaps, and speak with intention. Taken together, classroom observations suggest that this format appears to help students rely less on written scripts and can support confidence in speaking from visual cues, especially when accompanied by light preparation and familiarization and, where feasible, a second delivery to a fresh audience (Bygate, 2001; Dawadi, 2019; Kalyuga et al, 1999; Mayer, 2009; Nation, 2007; Zondag, 2024).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR APPLICATION**

### **Practical Tips**

Successful implementation of this activity begins with careful selection of short films. Ideally, these should be under seven minutes in length and contain no spoken dialogue. Curating the list in advance enables the teacher to filter out stories that are overly complex or abstract, ensuring the material is both accessible and engaging. Films may be labeled by tone or genre (e.g., “Moving Story 1,” “Funny Story 2”) to preserve a sense of mystery and avoid spoilers.

Providing clear and detailed instructions enhances the impact of the activity. Students are advised to select different films from one another and to avoid previewing their classmates’ choices. While the effects of presenting familiar stories to peers have not been tested in this format, it is assumed that unfamiliarity enhances audience attentiveness. Having all students present the same story, by contrast, could lead to unproductive comparisons and should likely be avoided.

The amount of preparation needed varies according to learners’ confidence and prior experience with English presentations. For higher-level or experienced students, the task can proceed directly after slide assembly. For others, a rehearsal—either at home or with peers who selected the same film—may help reduce anxiety and provide a useful stepping stone before presenting to a new audience.

### **Suitability Across Contexts**

This activity is highly adaptable and has potential value in a variety of instructional contexts. For lower-proficiency students (CEFR A1–A2), it can be effective when paired with simplified films and pre-taught vocabulary. While some learners may struggle with spontaneous language

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production, the visual cues and supportive group setting provide scaffolding that makes the task manageable.

Fluent students also benefit, particularly if they are accustomed to using scripts. The ad-lib format encourages more natural pacing, greater flexibility in delivery, and stronger engagement with the audience—skills that are relevant even at advanced levels.

In larger classes, the small-group presentation format makes the task logistically feasible. By offering a sufficient number of films to avoid repetition within groups, and optionally holding a second round of presentations, instructors can ensure variety and sustained attention.

In online or hybrid learning environments, the activity is viable in theory if breakout room functionality is available. However, technical constraints may reduce its effectiveness—for instance, students using tablets or phones may be unable to share slides while showing their facial expressions, which limits opportunities for monitoring delivery and ensuring spontaneity. In-person settings are therefore recommended where possible.

### **Potential Variations**

Students have typically been given the option to select their own film, and although most tend to choose from the curated list, a small number have opted for original choices. In such cases where the students are personally invested in the content, they may feel more engaged in the process. Several students have even delivered effective presentations with films not included on the curated list, including those originally excluded for pacing or complexity reasons.

While vocabulary has not been emphasized in earlier iterations of this activity, there is potential to support learners further by providing a brief list of keywords associated with each film. Alternatively, students who select the same film could collaborate to create such a list before presenting to separate groups.

Although group presentations are theoretically possible using this format, they have not yet been trialed and may not offer additional benefits over the individual version. However, one variation under consideration involves asking students to reconstruct a story they have not seen using a peer's slide deck. This could reduce the preparation burden while increasing opportunities for creativity and improvisation. A second round of presentations has a strong pedagogical rationale: task repetition reliably frees up processing for delivery, resulting in measurable fluency gains and often richer language (Bygate, 2001; Dawadi, 2019).

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The activity has evolved through small but purposeful revisions, and its core structure, visual prompts supporting spontaneous speech, remains consistent. Its adaptability and low technical burden potentially make it a practical and pedagogically rich tool across many contexts.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Key Takeaways**

Across many EFL classrooms, a substantial proportion of students struggle to deliver presentations with natural fluency and audience connection, often due to script dependence and reading from slides or phones. Memorized delivery is frequently perceived as recitation rather than speech (Oanh & Hien, 2006), and redundancy between displayed text and spoken words can flatten delivery (Kalyuga et al., 1999; Mayer, 2009). These pressures are compounded, in some contexts, by well-documented speaking anxiety (Cutrone, 2009). While some students possess stronger presentation instincts, a large proportion face difficulty delivering content in a natural and confident manner.

The screenshot presentation activity was designed to offer a focused opportunity to develop authentic delivery skills. By speaking without scripts and using their own words, students seem to begin to discover that fluent, confident presentation is possible—even without perfect grammar or vocabulary. For many, this shift supports greater engagement and aims to reduce future anxiety about public speaking.

Visual prompts play a central role in the activity's success. The images act as memory triggers that guide the presenter through the story's structure, enabling them to draw upon internalized language resources. This mirrors the presentation rhythm common in academic and professional settings: referencing a visual, recalling a message, and delivering it clearly to an audience. While the task is framed differently from traditional presentations, the skills it develops are widely transferable.

### **Looking Ahead**

This activity will continue to be used in future courses unless all students demonstrate confident and natural delivery from the outset. Its perceived benefits are not limited to second-language contexts; many of the challenges addressed—over-reliance on memorization, disengagement from the audience, and presentation anxiety—are perhaps equally relevant in a student's first language.

Two refinements are currently under consideration. The first is the addition of peer evaluation. While previously avoided to keep the focus on spontaneous delivery, structured peer feedback may offer motivational benefits, especially in cases where students undervalue their own performance. The second is cross-group sharing: allowing students to present their story again to a new audience. A second round with a fresh audience is likely to add fluency gains, and allow students the chance to continue to experiment with different and sometimes more complex language, because repeating a task frees up processing for delivery (Bygate, 2001; Dawadi, 2019). From my own class observations, I would argue that lower-proficiency students may particularly benefit from a second chance to present in a supportive setting. The task is readily adaptable across proficiency levels and course goals; Appendices A–B support straightforward replication. Colleagues adapting the activity in other contexts may surface variations that further improve fluency and confidence.

Although no formal assessment or data collection is planned, ongoing observation will inform further adaptations. The activity functions best as a developmental tool—providing students with a scaffolded, low-pressure space to explore the demands of real-time presentation.

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## APPENDIX A

### Sample Student Instructions with Suggested Film List shared in a Google Classroom Post

Today we'll practice telling a story in English without any script! Let's practice speaking naturally and using our own English.

First, please choose a film. You can choose a film which isn't on this list too!

For the presentation, ~2-4 minutes is good, but use as much time as you need to tell the story. Use as many slides as you want (but probably around 30-40 is normal). Don't read a script. If needed, you can make a small vocabulary list for important words from your story.

Scary story - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqE9w8irEf8> (a little difficult)

Dark story - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRLmzQH-Hd4>

Sad story - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqBApUxVUd8>

Romantic story - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZi0pwdKNHl>

Interesting story - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38y\\_1EWIE9I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38y_1EWIE9I)

Comedy story - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-TQOE1y68c>

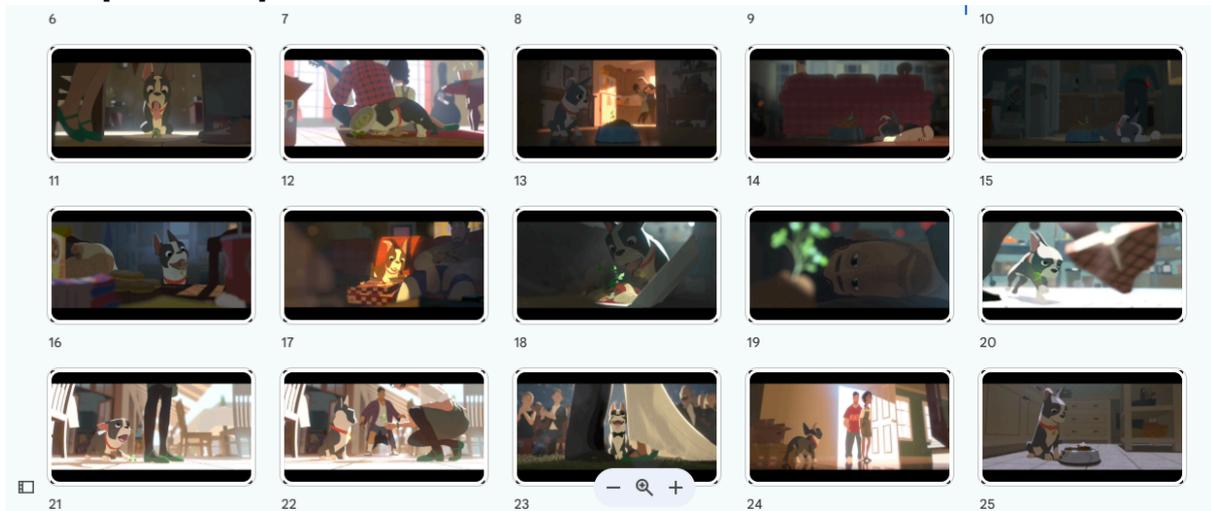
Moving story (animals) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XA0bB79oGc>

Another moving story (animals) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07d2dXHYb94>

Very moving story - <https://vimeo.com/255698341>

## APPENDIX B

### Excerpt of Prepared Presentation Slides



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