
Front-Loading and Back-Loading Arguments in English Oral Presentations

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Abstract

Studies on the rhetoric used in public speeches date back to ancient Greece. Such studies have typically either focused on the language employed by the speaker, the credibility of the speaker, the delivery style of the speaker, or how the speaker structured their argument. An analysis of the argumentative structure of English oral presentations delivered by freshmen and sophomore students at a university in Japan is the focus of this preliminary study. In particular, this study analyzes whether presenters front-loaded their argument (first stated their thesis statement explicitly in the introduction section of their presentation) or whether they back-loaded their argument (first stated their thesis statement explicitly in the conclusion), and if this affected the perceived clarity of the presentation. An analysis of 40 English oral presentations delivered by Japanese university students reveals that almost all of the participants front-loaded their arguments, but that there were subtle differences regarding how they set up their thesis statement in the introduction section, depending on whether the participants were novice speakers or more experienced speakers. This preliminary study has implications for language instructors teaching English for academic purposes (EAP), as well as for researchers studying rhetoric and oral presentations.

Keywords: EAP, Oral presentations, Rhetoric

1 Introduction

Studies on contrastive rhetoric have shown that cultural influences frequently determine the structure of academic essay writing (Honna, 1989; Kaplan, 1966), yet few studies have been able to ascertain whether this claim also holds true for academic oral presentations or for other forms of spoken language (Sakurada,

2018). The research that has been conducted has shown cultural expectations predicate that Japanese speakers typically back-load their argument when speaking in Japanese (Elwood, 2011; Okabe, 1983). However, does presenting in English (L2) require Japanese speakers to adapt the structural alignment of their argument and the placement of the thesis statement? This is important to know as previous studies have identified parallels between front- and back-loading and what is known in psychology as the ‘primacy effect’ and ‘recency effect’ (Haugtvedt & Wegener, 1994) and suggest that front-loading or back-loading arguments in oral presentations can influence the persuasive impact of the argument.

Sakurada (2017) specifically examined the different ways American and Japanese speakers convey the main ideas (thesis statement) in public speaking, and found that American speakers typically reveal the thesis statement at the beginning of a speech, while Japanese typically reveal it at the end. Furthermore, American speakers often utilize techniques such as rhetorical questions to elicit ‘yes’ and ‘no’ responses and other language strategies to emphasize certainty (along with the use of words such as “fact” and “evidence”). Sakurada (2017) also shows that Japanese speakers tend to rely on repetition of words presented earlier and use contrasts, to build up consensus before revealing their goal to the audience. Japanese speakers also rely on what Sakurada (2017) calls ‘episodes’ – essentially anecdotes and examples – to help the audience speculate as to what the thesis statement is likely to be. Her initial study (2017) was supported by a further study (Sakurada, 2018), which reveals similar findings from a comparative analysis of TED Talks delivered by American and Japanese presenters. Her study shows that Japanese speakers deliver speeches, by emphasizing common ground and rapport with the audience and attempt to be seen as a ‘partner’, while American speakers frequently adopt the ‘leader’ role and attempt to deliver information that makes them seem more accurate and correct in their beliefs (Sakurada, 2018).

2 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach to collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data, because it was best suited for addressing the research objectives. The first objective was to verify whether the Japanese university students in this study adhere to Japanese cultural expectations when delivering

a presentation, as Sakurada's research suggests (2017; 2018), or whether they adjust their structural approach when presenting in English and front-load their argument. The second objective was to compare novice presenters (students likely without any previous instruction at university on structuring an English presentation) with relatively more experienced presenters (students with at least a year of being instructed at university on how to deliver English presentations). The third objective was to explore how these potential differences in structuring arguments and the placing of the thesis statement (front-loading and back-loading) affected the overall clarity of the presentation from the instructor's perspective and from the researcher's perspective.

Participants

The participants in this study (n=40) were all drawn from the same university in Japan, but can be categorized into two distinct groups. Group 1 (henceforth known as G1) was comprised of 20 first-year students drawn from two different classes (10 randomly selected from each class). Group 2 (henceforth known as G2) was comprised of 20 second-year students, also drawn from two different classes (10 randomly selected from each class). The participants in each group were comprised of students from two different classes in order to increase maximum variance and to minimize the affects of a particular teacher or group of students skewing potential findings. The students were all Japanese nationals, aged between 18–20 years old, and enrolled in university English communication classes. The participants were predominantly female as is the case with English language classes at this university. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants' relevant background information for easy reference.

Table 1. Participants

Group	Participants	Age range	Gender
1	20	18–19	17 females 3 males
2	20	19–21	16 females 4 males

The participants and instructors all consented verbally to being a part of the research on condition that their identities remained anonymous. The presentations the students delivered were all part of the course requirements.

Data collection instruments

The primary instruments used to collect data in this study were classroom observations and field notes. This was done as unobtrusively as possible, but it is accepted that the researcher's presence may have impacted on the presenters. The presentations were delivered individually and in front of the whole class or in front of groups of students. The researcher was situated in the audience and made field notes (memos) on the presentations, which were then verified and adjusted when necessary after consultation with the respective class instructors. Each presenter decided the specific topic for their presentation, but had to abide by the instructors' guidelines (e.g. regarding time stipulations, use of visuals, referencing styles, and question and answer protocol). The G1 presenters delivered presentations on either a specific culture they had researched about, or on a particular person whom they admired. This presentation was the first presentation the G1 participants had delivered in university and informal consultations with a sample of these participants revealed that it was also the first presentation in English many of them had ever delivered. The G2 presenters were required to present on a specific crime (e.g. recent statistics, issues related to whether the rate had increased or decreased recently, and to propose a potential solution). These students had presented frequently in their first year of studies and had received varying degrees of basic presentation skills instruction, depending on their previous instructors. The presentations delivered by both groups of participants can be classified as informative because the presenters were disseminating information and knowledge, instead of attempting to be persuasive and fostering agreement or prompting action from the audience (see Dowis, 2000; Lucas, 2015).

Research questions

The research focused on addressing two core research questions:

1. Do the Japanese university students in this study front-load or back-load their presentations when presenting in English?
2. Does front-loading or back-loading a presentation affect the clarity of the

presentation?

To more specifically answer these two core questions, data were collected to address three sub-research questions regarding each presentation that was observed:

1. When does the presenter first explicitly state their main point (i.e. thesis statement)?
2. Is the presentation front-loaded or back-loaded?
3. How clear was the presentation (rated by the researcher and the instructor).

The researcher also compiled additional reflective notes both during and after the presentations, on related matters, to help establish potential relationships between answers to all the research questions.

Once the presentations had all been observed, the analysis of the data collected followed a simple set of coding procedures, based on the principle of thematic coding (see Saldaña, 2012). This consisted of ‘structural coding’, to code the presentations as either front-loaded, back-loaded, or neither, depending on when/if the thesis statement was uttered in the introduction section of the presentation, closing section, or not at all. Finally, the presentations were coded by ‘evaluation coding’, with a code pertaining to whether the presentation was ‘very clear’, ‘clear’, ‘somewhat clear’, or ‘not very clear’. These ratings were assigned by the researcher and the instructor while observing the presentations and were discussed after the class – whereby a final rating was agreed upon. Both forms of coding are defined in Table 2 according to definitions from Saldaña (2012, p. 263–267).

Structural coding helped to address the first two sub-research questions, while

Table 2. Coding technique definitions

Structural coding	“Applies a content-based or conceptual phrase to a segment of data that relates to a specific research questions to both code and categorize the data”
Evaluation coding	“Application of (primarily) non-quantitative codes to qualitative data that assign judgments about merit, worth, or significance”

evaluation coding addressed the third sub-research question. An analysis of the findings from these two procedures was then conducted to address the two core research question of this study. This analysis was done through a process of grounded theorization (see Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and the process was repeated twice to strengthen intra-coder reliability. Emerging salient themes determined the findings.

3 Findings

There are three significant findings resulting from the analysis of the data in this preliminary study. The first is that almost all the participants in both G1 and G2 front-loaded their presentations. In G1 17/20 participants front-loaded their arguments, while 18/20 in G2 front-loaded their argument. Of the remaining five participants, three neither front-loaded nor back-loaded their argument, but instead, failed to make their main point or thesis statement clear at any point during their presentation. Only two participants first uttered their thesis statement either just before or in the conclusion section. This finding is quite surprising given that back-loading an argument in essays or presentations, is supposedly the ‘normal’ rhetorical structuring pattern for Japanese students.

The second significant finding was that for the presenters who front-loaded their argument, there were subtle differences in how they set up their thesis statements. Almost all of the G1 participants began their presentations by greeting the audience, and then immediately stated their thesis statement or main point. In contrast, many of the G2 participants – as one might expect – exhibited greater poise and experience and although they also stated their thesis statement early in the introduction section, they usually attempted to connect with the audience through an attention-getter/hook, or the relaying of an anecdote or related background information, before stating their thesis statement. This mirrors the finding by Sakurada finding (2017), discussed in the introduction section of this paper.

The third significant finding related to the clarity of the presentations. The researcher and the instructors were generally in agreement with regards to rating the clarity of the presentations. Those presenters, who were rated as ‘not very clear’, either explicitly stated their thesis statement late in the presentation in the

conclusion section (back-loading) or did not state it all. For those presenters who were rated as ‘very clear’, the biggest factor determining their clarity – according to the researcher and the respective instructor - appears to have been the presence of a guideline and signposting in the presentation, not front-loading or back-loading. All the participants who were rated as having delivered ‘very clear’ presentations included explicit guidelines, usually right after the thesis statement was presented. They then further strengthened the clarity of their presentation by using signposting for each subsequent point (e.g. “my second point is...” or “The second reason why I believe that...”). Those presenters who explicitly stated their thesis statement in the introduction, but who did not have a guideline, or who did not use signposting, were mostly rated as ‘clear’ or ‘somewhat clear’, but never ‘very clear’.

4 Discussion

The first important finding in this study to discuss is that the vast majority of presenters front-loaded their presentations. This finding goes against what previous studies have found (see Elwood, 2011; Okabe, 1983; Sakurada, 2017 & 2018). Two intriguing questions can be posed, with respect to this finding: 1. Why did the vast majority of students front-load their presentations? and 2. What affect (if any) did front-loading have on the perceived clarity of their presentations? The answer to the second question seems to be that front-loading had somewhat of an affect in this study. Those who back-loaded their arguments were all perceived as ‘not very clear’, although this was a very small sample size (two participants). Those participants who front-loaded their arguments though, were not always perceived as being ‘very clear’. Other factors, such as having a guideline and signposting, were perceived to be more responsible by the respective instructors and the researcher for determining the clarity of the presentation. Thus, it can be said that while front-loading seems to be related to clarity in a presentation in this study, it is likely not the main factor or the only factor. Unfortunately, the fact that only two participants back-loaded their presentations means it is difficult to draw conclusions about whether back-loading actually undermines the clarity of a presentation (both participants were rated ‘not very clear’), or whether it was simply a case of two presenters who were generally not very clear.

The first question – regarding why the vast majority of presenters front-loaded their arguments – cannot be answered definitively by this study. It is considered likely that G2 (the more experienced presenters) had been instructed to do so by their English teachers in university (largely comprised of western instructors), and this had been anticipated at the commencement of the study. The surprising finding was that the vast majority of the novice presenters (G1) making their first presentation in university also front-loaded their arguments. It is possible that some of them had received training in high school, but this is considered unlikely as Japanese high schools have traditionally placed less importance on oral communication, and tend to favor exam preparation tasks (e.g. reading, grammar, and vocabulary related tasks) in English classes (Sergeant, 2009). What is considered more likely is that linguistic limitations meant G1 participants lacked the sophisticated language skills or the experience and poise to be able to craft a more subtle argumentative structure and back-load their message effectively, or to even gradually introduce their thesis statement after developing rapport with the audience.

5 Implications

In terms of specific implications that can be drawn from this preliminary study, there are two. Firstly, there are implications for educators in universities. Educators should be aware of cultural differences when teaching students how to structure arguments and place thesis statements. They should also be aware of whether students have received prior instruction to align their structure with typical English language presentation styles or not. In this study, almost all the students used the more western style of front-loading their presentations, but other research discussed in the introduction section, suggests this study's finding is more of an outlier.

Implications can also be drawn from this study for future research. As the students in this study almost all front-loaded their presentations, unlike participants in previously cited research, it needs to be established whether this was a 'one-off' finding, or whether a new generation of students in Japan are now being trained before university to front-load their arguments in oral presentations. Further research is also necessary to explore whether back-loading makes presentations

less clear, as there were only two such presentations in this study, meaning it is difficult to draw conclusions either way. It would also be interesting to expand the study outside of the Japanese context and to include audiences from different cultural backgrounds and to analyze how they perceive front-loading and back-loading in oral presentations.

6 Conclusion

The participants in this study did not appear to follow the traditional Japanese rhetorical structuring pattern of back-loading their oral presentations. As to why they almost all front-loaded the message in their presentations, experience presenting in English does not appear to be a factor as even novice presenters adopted the Western style, without having been instructed at university to do so. The more experienced speakers were able to more naturally introduce their thesis statements, but still did so early in the introduction sections of the presentations. While almost all the presenters front-loaded their presentations, the key factor determining whether or not the presentations were clear, actually appears to have been the presence of a guideline and/or the use of signposting. Future research is needed to establish whether the findings in this study are indicative of a new trend in which Japanese university students now tend to deliver front-loaded oral presentations in English.

Acknowledgements

This study was conducted with the support of a Nanzan University Pache Research Subsidy (1-A-2) for the 2019 academic year.

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