



The Prominence of Rhetoric in Japanese University English Oral Communication Courses

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Abstract

Due to a rapidly globalizing world, there has been a recent resurgence in the demand for university graduates entering the workforce who understand and utilize spoken English rhetorical strategies and techniques. These rhetorical skills are necessary in a wide range of fields (e.g., advertising, communication, international relations, politics, psychology, etc.), yet rhetoric rarely features in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) or ESL (English as a Second Language) curriculums. With the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan emphasizing the need for English education to specifically foster the development of oral communication skills through the Global Human Resources (GHR) project (2018), there is a definite need for integrating instruction on English rhetorical strategies and techniques into the curricula of higher education. However, explicit rhetorical instruction in EFL and ESL curriculums in Japan almost exclusively focuses on written genres, such as essay writing. The core research question framing this exploratory study is: How prominent is instruction on rhetoric in Japanese university English oral communication courses? This qualitative study firstly examines if rhetoric-based instruction is addressed in a sample of English language oral communication textbooks, before documenting the language learning experiences of ten Japanese university students. An amalgamation of the data reveals a dearth of explicit rhetoric-based instruction in Japanese university English language oral communication courses. The implications of this finding are discussed, and suggestions are then proffered on how to better equip Japanese university graduates with practical English language rhetorical tools so that they may play a more active role in the globalizing world.

Keywords: EFL, higher education, oral communication, rhetoric

1. Introduction

A universal definition of ‘rhetoric’ has eluded scholars across a range of academic disciplines for more than 2,500 years. However, for the purposes of situating the research, this study utilizes an amalgamation of existing definitions and defines rhetoric simply, as the use of communication and language for persuasive purposes. The definition encompasses the holistic macro approaches to persuading, such as the overall tone of the message being imparted (e.g.,

positive or negative framing), and the micro approaches to persuasion through linguistic manipulation of language, such as the intentional use of certain pronouns (e.g., inclusive language) (see Miles, 2021). This micro approach to manipulating language (phrases and words) for persuasive purposes relies on what is known as a rhetorical technique (RT). The macro and micro approaches to analyzing rhetoric to some extent parallel the age-old debate over the importance of content versus language in persuasive communication.

Rhetoric has arguably never been as important as it is today. Technology and globalization have connected people worldwide, necessitating the learning, understanding, and utilization of effective communication skills, in order to succeed in a host of avenues (e.g., business, international relations, and the dissemination of scientific research). With English being the de facto lingua franca of global communication, awareness of English rhetorical approaches and techniques is crucial. This is true for written forms of communication and for oral communication. One recent study, by Lim and Mali (2021), demonstrated the positive benefits for students of incorporating rhetoric into English language business lecture courses in South Korea, however, more work is needed first to ascertain how prominent rhetoric instruction is in higher education these days and also how beneficial it is.

Being a developed country and a member of the G7, Japan is also the world's third-biggest economy, meaning its graduates are expected to play an integral role in world affairs. To date, the Japanese government has attempted to “foster global *jinzai*, i.e., global human resources (GHR), and revitalize the higher education system. Yet, the concept of GHR remains vague and disconnected” (Hofmeyr, 2021, p. 62). Although Japan needs graduates who are rhetorically literate in English, studies on rhetoric in Japan have almost exclusively analyzed written genres. Frequently, this involves a comparative analysis between native speakers and non-native speakers in university English academic writing courses (see Hinkel, 2002), documenting rhetorical transfer from L1 (first language) to L2 (second language) when writing (see Wei, Zhang, & Zhang, 2020), and how learners perceive rhetorical differences between their L1 and English as being one of the greatest obstacles to improving their writing skills (see Ma, 2020). Other genres in which forms of rhetorical analysis have been explored in the Japanese context include transnational identity (see Nonoka, 2020), the text of Japanese university job advertisements (see Muller & Skeates, 2022), and textual analysis of how Japanese prime ministers express foreign policy (see Liu, 2022). However, there have been few studies exploring how (or if) the rhetorical features of spoken English appear in the Japanese context (Miles, 2022) and no known studies investigating if rhetoric is taught to Japanese university students in English language oral communication courses.

2. Methodology

The research design of this study is qualitative in nature and integrates findings from an analysis of English language presentation-skill textbooks along with findings from interviews with ten third-year Japanese university students. The first objective is to establish what textbook resources are available for instructors who may be teaching English presentation skills courses or public speaking courses and wish to incorporate elements of rhetoric. The second objective is to investigate what kind of rhetoric-related instruction university students may have experienced in their language learning history. The core research question framing this study is: How prominent is rhetoric in the Japanese university education English language course setting?

In the first phase of this study, a list of commonly used presentation-skills-related textbooks was compiled by searching the online syllabi of first-year English oral communication courses at a selection of Japanese universities. These universities were drawn from a geographical

range across the country and represented an even balance of private and public universities. The syllabi from first- and second-year English courses are all publicly available and a list of the prescribed textbooks for the courses was compiled. This list was cross-referenced and modified by checking the top-ranked selling “English presentation skills” textbooks online (Amazon Japan and Rakuten). Presentation skills-related textbooks were chosen above generic oral communication textbooks as they were considered the most likely to feature rhetoric, given that the original platform for rhetoric was public speaking. Oral communication courses almost always feature a form of public discourse in their assessment criteria, so presentation skills can be considered representative of some of the oral communication course objectives listed by many of the universities in Japan. The following list (Table 1) by no means represents a comprehensive list of all the presentation skills textbooks used in Japanese universities but instead, can be considered indicative of some of the more commonly used books.

Table 1: *Analyzed textbooks*

Title	Author (Publisher)
<i>Dynamic Presentations</i>	Mark Powell (Cambridge University Press)
<i>English for Presentations</i>	Marion Grussendorf (Oxford University Press)
<i>Giving Academic Presentations (2nd Edition)</i>	Susan M. Reinhart (University of Michigan Press)
<i>Passport to Academic Presentations</i>	Douglas Bell (Garnet Education)
<i>Presentations</i>	Anne Laws (Summertown Publishing)
<i>Present Yourself 2 (2nd ed.)</i>	Steven Gershon (Cambridge University Press)
<i>Presentations in English</i>	Erica J. Williams (Macmillan)
<i>Speaking of Speech (Premium Edition)</i>	Charles LeBeau (Macmillan)
<i>The Way to Effective Speaking</i>	Kate Elwood (Nan'un-do)
<i>Writing for Presentations in English</i>	Yoshihito Sugita & Richard R. Caraker (Nan'un-do)

The framework for analysis involved three steps. Firstly, a search for the term, ‘rhetoric’, was conducted to see if it was referred to explicitly in the textbooks. Secondly, the textbooks were analyzed for anything related to instruction on message framing (macro rhetoric approaches). This involved coding all forms of instruction or materials (explicit or implicit) in the textbooks related to the following self-explanatory framing dichotomies (for specific examples of these framing dichotomies see Aki et al., 2011; Miles, 2021; Okeefe & Jensen, 2008):

positive framing vs. negative framing (attribute framing)

reward framing vs. punishment framing

future focus framing vs. past reflection framing

taking action framing vs. stopping action framing (goal framing)

loss framing vs. gain framing

back-loading messages vs. front-loading messages

Finally, the textbooks were analyzed for explicit or implicit references to rhetorical techniques (RTs). These RTs were drawn from (but not limited to) Rowland’s list of twelve language strategy categories (2019) and from Powell’s groundbreaking textbook on presentation skills (2011). The use of Powell’s textbook to guide the analysis of all the textbooks in the study

meant that it was not included in the final analysis (see above list), despite being used at several Japanese universities. Table 2 provides a selection of the RTs that were identified in the textbooks, and glossed definitions of those outlined by Rowland (2019) and Powell (2011).

Table 2: Definitions of rhetorical techniques identified in the textbook analysis phase

Rhetorical technique	Definition
anecdote	a personal story told to attract the attention of the audience and to build personal connections
antithesis	two contrasting terms or ideas are used to emphasize a point
inclusive language	the use of pronouns (we, us, our) to establish solidarity between the speaker and the audience
repetition	uttering a word, term, phrase, or idea, more than once, to increase the impact of a message
rhetorical question	a question posed to provoke thought, instead of soliciting an answer
signposting	phrases used to indicate the structure of a presentation or speech
tricolon (tripling)	any phrase, term, word, or idea that is uttered in a pattern of three to emphasize the speaker's message

The second phase of the study collected data from a group of ten third-year Japanese university students. The students were all drawn from a seminar class taught by the researcher, which focused on communication studies with a segment of the course dedicated to rhetoric. As part of their early coursework, the students were asked a series of questions pertaining to their experience learning about rhetoric and their views on the importance and effectiveness of rhetoric as a whole and of certain rhetorical techniques (see Appendix 1 for a full list of the questions posed). Ethical approval for the use of human participants in this phase of the study was obtained from the host institution (22-086). The students were asked the questions orally and responded individually after discussing the questions in small groups. Notes were made by the instructor (researcher) and an audio recording of the class discussion was also made (mp3) after gaining verbal consent from the participants. A transcription of the recording was then made by the researcher in the form of a Word document.

The framework for analyzing the transcript of the group discussion and the researcher's notes was thematic coding, both categorically and phenomenologically, as defined by Saldaña (2021). This approach allowed the researcher to identify and code explicit and implicit responses from the participants.

Finally, the findings from both phases (the textbook analysis and the student interviews) were integrated to help address the core research question in this study. Theories were drawn out by analyzing the data in a cyclical manner and by refining theories as they related to the research question in this study.

3. Results

The results from Phase 1 (analysis of the textbooks) are presented in Table 3. They reveal that rhetoric is featured as part of English language presentation skills instruction in many of the textbooks. Each textbook is listed with a reference number (e.g., B1 for Book 1 in the list) so that discussion later in this paper may more easily refer the reader to the book in question. A brief synopsis of the specific forms of rhetoric that were identified in each of the textbooks is

also listed (rhetorical techniques, message framing, the term rhetoric, and other related instruction).

Table 3: Textbook analysis

Title & Author (Publisher)	Summary of featured rhetoric
B1. <i>Dynamic Presentations</i> Mark Powell (Cambridge University Press)	frequent instruction on rhetorical techniques (antithesis, repetition, rhetorical questions, and tricolon), and a brief mention of the term, rhetoric
B2. <i>English for Presentations</i> Marion Grussendorf (Oxford University Press)	structuring (signposting), rhetorical questions, visuals, and supporting language for answering questions, but no specific mention of rhetoric
B3. <i>Giving Academic Presentations (2nd Edition)</i> Susan M. Reinhart (University of Michigan Press)	lots of language support and a late chapter on simple structuring techniques, but no real mention of specific RTs or the term, 'rhetoric'
B4. <i>Passport to Academic Presentations</i> Douglas Bell (Garnet Education)	one unit focused on rhetorical techniques (repetition, rhetorical questions, and tricolons), and short unit on persuading, no specific mention of the term, 'rhetoric'
B5. <i>Presentations</i> Anne Laws (Summertown Publishing)	using words for clarity (signposts) and to generate interest and audience engagement (rhetorical questions) but no specific mention of rhetoric or RTs
B6. <i>Present Yourself 2</i> (2 nd ed.) Steven Gershon (Cambridge University Press)	heavy focus on delivery techniques, informative language and structural tips (describing, providing and summarizing information) – no specific mention of the term 'rhetoric'
B7. <i>Presentations in English</i> Erica J. Williams (Macmillan)	structuring (signposting), front-loading advice, grammatical features of presentation language, and rhetorical techniques taught (anecdotes, antithesis, repetition, rhetorical questions, tricolons), but the term, 'rhetoric', is not discussed
B8. <i>Speaking of Speech (Premium Edition)</i> Charles LeBeau (Macmillan)	delivery techniques and supportive language instruction feature prominently, but no focus on rhetoric or RTs
B9. <i>The Way to Effective Speaking</i> Kate Elwood (Nan'un-do)	topics to use for message framing, using anecdotes, building interest through specific RTs (anecdotes, inclusive language, visual imagery), but no specific mention of, 'rhetoric'
B10. <i>Writing for Presentations in English</i> Yoshihito Sugita & Richard R. Caraker (Nan'un-do)	structure and practical language focus – no focus on rhetoric or RTs

From the analysis in Phase 1, there are several noteworthy findings. Firstly, while featured in many of the textbooks, rhetorical instruction is primarily carried out implicitly and at the micro level. The term 'rhetoric' is not actually mentioned in any of the textbooks, aside from B1 (only briefly mentioned), nor is there any specific instruction or discussion about the term and its history in any of the textbooks. Secondly, the textbook analysis also revealed an almost complete dearth of reference to message framing or any kind of macro approach for utilizing rhetoric. Only B9 contained relevant material implicitly related to message framing (a brief discussion on topics that are suitable for certain kinds of message framing). This is disconcerting as rhetoric has long been considered a staple of public discourse, regardless of one's view on whether it serves to enhance or detract from the audience's understanding of the issue at stake.

The textbook analysis did yield some positive findings, in terms of identifying specific rhetorical techniques which were covered, although most were simple language techniques. For example, rhetorical questions, signposts, and repetition were covered in eight of the ten textbooks analyzed in this study (signposting featured in seven, rhetorical questions featured in

five, and repetition featured in three). Only two textbooks (B8 and B9) did not address any of these three techniques. Signposting serves a structural purpose and should be prevalent in all forms of presentations – informative and persuasive – so it is not unexpected to find it included in the majority of the textbooks in this study. Other RTs that were featured in more than one textbook were tricolons (B1, B4, and B7), antithesis (B1 and B7), and anecdotes (B7 and B10).

Results from Phase 2 of the study largely mirrored the findings from Phase 1. Responding to questions in Section 1 (see Appendix 1), the ten participants who were interviewed all replied that they were largely unfamiliar with the exact meaning of the term, ‘rhetoric’, other than a superficial awareness of its definition, related to using language to achieve strategic purposes. Furthermore, most participants exhibited no awareness of the term’s history or its significance and responded they had never learned about rhetoric in their studies to date (Section 4). All the participants noted that they had never been instructed on message framing, although they could understand the general concept of the technique after it was briefly explained to them. The participants all indicated they had not utilized any specific message-framing approaches in public speaking contexts when responding to questions in Section 2.

While none of the participants were familiar with the term, ‘rhetorical techniques’ (Section 1, question 4), three participants were aware of the similar and more generic term, ‘language techniques’. When presented with examples of the techniques, they recalled that they had taken a class on speech analysis taught by the researcher, which focused specifically on rhetorical techniques used in famous speeches. Often, they recalled the simpler name used in the class (e.g., ‘contrast’ instead of antithesis, or ‘tripling’ instead of tricolon).

With limited knowledge of rhetoric and rhetorical techniques, it is not surprising that the participants had no strong or detailed opinions when responding to the question prompts in Section 3. All the participants believed that rhetoric was important to learn and that it likely influenced the receivers of the message being imparted, but none could elaborate any further as to how or why the receivers were likely to be influenced.

In conclusion, the results from Phase 1 parallel the findings from Phase 2 and reinforce the notion that there is a dearth of explicit instruction on rhetoric, especially message framing and other macro approaches explored in this study. A limited range of rhetorical techniques are covered in many of the presentation textbooks used by English language oral communication course instructors, but the participants in this study were mostly unaware of their significance and simply saw them as English language techniques limited to university classroom presentation contexts.

4. Discussion

The discussion of the results begins with an answer to the core research question in this study (How prominent is rhetoric in the Japanese university education English language course setting?). The underlying answer is that although rhetorical techniques are featured in many of the English language presentation skills textbooks analyzed in this study, specific reference to the term ‘rhetoric’ is not prominent in any of the textbooks, nor is there any mention of macro rhetorical approaches, such as message framing. Similar findings were drawn from the interviews with the ten participants in this study.

Overall, the findings from this study, albeit a limited one, signify that rhetoric is covered only implicitly in the primary English language presentation skills textbooks used in Japanese university oral communication courses. This should be seen as problematic as rhetoric has long been a key component of public discourse. There are several potential reasons for this finding.

One likely explanation for the lack of explicit rhetoric instruction in the textbooks examined in this study is the perception that Japanese university students generally only take compulsory English language courses in their first year of studies and that for non-English majors, the level of proficiency is low and has even been declining in recent years, dropping to 80th out of 112 countries, as assessed by the Swiss international education company, EF Education First (nippon.com, 2022). Another possible explanation is that Japanese public speaking is traditionally seen as being informative, instead of persuasive. This could mean that the perspective of Japanese public speaking objectives is permeating into the perspectives of English public speaking objectives. Informative public speaking relies primarily on structural techniques which serve to enhance the clarity of the speech and the transmission of the information. Without the objective to persuade an audience, the necessity for employing rhetorical skills is low. Finally, Japanese English education has long been focused on grammatical proficiency, largely for test-taking purposes. The curricular focus tends to be on the micro elements of language proficiency (grammatical accuracy) and less on the macro-communicative aspects (Tominaga, 2023), such as message framing. Less attention is devoted to developing communicative oral skills, despite recent edicts from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2018).

Further inhibiting the incorporation of rhetoric into English oral communication courses is likely the misconception that rhetoric is complicated and difficult for learners of English to utilize. However, as evidenced by the fact that most of the textbooks in this study contained instructions and examples of rhetorical techniques, learning about rhetoric is not beyond the capabilities of most L2 learners, even if not explicitly explained. The language and vocabulary used in most rhetorical techniques are typically simple. Examples drawn from several famous speeches throughout history, certainly attest to this notion. Table 4 depicts a selection of well-known RTs to help illustrate this point.

Table 4: Examples of the simplicity in well-known rhetorical techniques

Speaker	Rhetorical technique
Sojourner Truth (1851)	“Ain’t I a woman?” (rhetorical question)
Sir Winston Churchill (1940)	“We shall fight...” (tricolon & repetition)
John F. Kennedy (1961)	“Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country” (antithesis)
Martin Luther King (1963)	“I have a dream” (repetition)
Greta Thunberg (2019)	“How dare you?” (rhetorical question and tricolon)

The examples above contain very powerful and effective usage of well-known rhetorical techniques. Yet they are also composed of very simplistic language. The vocabulary in the above examples is covered by junior and high school English education in Japan (with the likely exception of the ungrammatical example of “ain’t”). Admittedly, the grammar in such famous phrases presents a slightly more difficult challenge to learners, due to its unorthodox structure and deviation from the standard sentence pattern that most L2 students learn in the early days of their English language studies in Japan (subject-verb-object). Nevertheless, comprehending and even utilizing this kind of construction should be within the linguistic range of the average Japanese university student enrolled in an English language oral communication course. Intertwining a focus on explicit rhetoric instruction with instruction on other presentation skills, such as delivery skills (eye contact, gestures, and voice projection) would be logical and easy to do. Ideally, macro approaches such as framing would feature early in the curriculum or textbook, while students are shaping their initial ideas. The

micro-rhetorical techniques could be featured later on after the message and content have already been formulated and the persuasive push needs to be sharpened.

This study provides only a small sample of the picture in Japanese universities, so further work is required to expand the scope of inquiry and to more accurately determine whether spoken rhetoric is a feature of university English language oral communication courses and in presentation skills practice. It should also be considered that although rhetoric is not explicitly taught in commonly used textbooks, firm conclusions about rhetoric not being taught at all in these classes cannot be drawn. Rhetoric is such an ingrained feature of any form of oral discourse that it can be considered likely that many instructors are implicitly exhibiting the rhetorical features of language as they are teaching and that these techniques are being at least partially absorbed and then modelled by students.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how prominently rhetoric features in Japanese university English language oral communication course instruction. Through a series of interviews with ten current Japanese university students and by analyzing ten textbooks commonly used by English language instructors teaching oral presentation skills classes at Japanese universities, it was discovered that there is a current dearth of explicit instruction related to rhetoric. Although some micro-rhetorical techniques were featured in many of the textbooks examined in this study, they were rarely taught in an explicit manner and were frequently introduced simply as a means of improving the clarity and structure of the speech or presentation being made. From a macro perspective, the term rhetoric, its history, and its significance were not a core focus of any of the books analyzed. The student participants in Phase 2 were also largely unaware of the concept of rhetoric, although several demonstrated latent knowledge of rhetorical techniques, largely due to previous instruction from the researcher. With the Japanese government placing increasing importance on university students developing English oral communication skills in order to compete with other developed countries in a rapidly globalizing world, rhetoric needs to become more of a focal point in the curricula of Japanese universities, particularly in English language oral communication classes.

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Appendix 1.

Student Questions

Section 1: Questions pertaining to the interviewee's background knowledge of rhetoric.

1. How would you define the term, "rhetoric"?
2. What do you know about the research field of rhetoric?
3. Do you know what message framing is? Can you give some examples of it?
4. What rhetorical language techniques do you know?

Section 2: Questions pertaining to the interviewee's usage of rhetoric.

1. What message-framing approaches have you ever used for class presentations?
2. What rhetorical language techniques have you used for class presentations?
3. Why did you choose these approaches and techniques?
4. Were they successful? Why or why not?
5. Were there any approaches or techniques you considered, but did not use? Why?

Section 3: Questions pertaining to the interviewee's beliefs about the effectiveness of rhetorical techniques and approaches.

1. Which technique or approaches do you think are the most effective for activists to use? Why?
2. Which techniques or approaches do you think are the least effective for activists to use? Why?
3. Can you give some examples of an effective use of rhetoric by activists? How about an ineffective use of rhetoric?

Section 4: Questions pertaining to the interviewee's pedagogical experiences or recommendations.

1. Have you learned about rhetoric in university? In which classes? What specifically did you learn?
2. Do you think it is important for students to learn about rhetoric? Why or why not?