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Poster Presentations in an Introductory Linguistics

Course: Designing Meaningful Assignments for

Pre-service Teachers

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As junior faculty in our first tenure-track teaching positions at Central Michigan University, we were each assigned to teach a section of a survey course called ENG 175: The Nature of Language. An introductory language and linguistics course, it moves at a fast pace through a variety of topics: animal and human communication, language variation and change, lexicon, semantics, phonetics, phonology, syntax, regional and social dialects, nonverbal communication, language stereotypes and bias, creoles, prescriptivism versus descriptivism, first and second language acquisition, the history of English,

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writing systems, language planning, and bilingual education. The course, which satisfies both general education and teacher preparation requirements, provides a "taste of linguistics" to a diverse group of students. Because enrollments can be as high as fifty students per section, we strive to ensure that the class is meaningful. In particular, we want students to feel that they are more than simply a face in the crowd or required to learn masses of unrelated facts.

One major dilemma we faced early on was the university program writing requirement at our institution. As previously indicated, ENG 175 satisfies a general education requirement, so the master syllabus showcased three short papers as required assignments for every student. One of the assignments was a highly complex research project called the language description paper: "Each student will be assigned a language to investigate, and write a paper providing information about where it is spoken, who speaks it, where it came from and what it's related to, what kinds of social or political significance being a native speaker of it has, what kind(s) of writing system it uses (if any), and what types of literature are available in it."

Despite its obvious benefits, this research project struck us as an open invitation to plagiarism. First of all, the assignment was incredibly complex, so students would be working under duress. More specifically, students were required to research their assigned languages by consulting grammars and other sources, and then they were expected to describe basic phonological and syntactic features of their assigned language, additionally providing a sociolinguistic summary of the culture(s) in which the language is in use. As a result, we reasoned, many of the online sources, such as Ethnologue (www.ethnologue.com), would make cut-and-paste writing very tempting, especially when students could not be expected to have strong mastery of the kinds of materials they were expected to read and digest for the paper. After a semester or two, we decided that we wanted to retain the premise of the original assignment but dramatically change the genre. After much discussion, we decided to convert the writing assignment into a poster presentation.

A Rationale for Converting a Paper Assignment into a Poster Assignment

Replacing the writing assignment made good sense on three levels. First and most obviously, poster sessions are common at professional conferences across many academic disciplines. Typically, a poster session consists of multiple researchers preparing and displaying posters that convey the substance of their work in a visual format that can include photographs, maps, tables, figures, graphs, and text. During the poster session, the presenters stand near their posters to discuss their work with interested members of the

audience (Denzine 1999). Because of their interactive format, poster sessions can make greater participation possible for all members of the class. Adapting the poster session format as an assignment for this class was a practical way to address some of the problems we faced.

Equally important, we believed that the poster presentation would be rigorous. It would demand that students research their assigned languages as thoroughly as possible (just as they had for the traditional paper assignment) and present their findings in a format that was concise, accessible, and visually appealing. In other words, students would still need to describe the structure, pronunciation, and cultural context of a lesser-known language in a well-documented way. Best of all, the new version of the assignment still preserves its writing-intensive nature by requiring strict adherence to citation conventions and by directing the students to summarize and paraphrase the materials that they consult into short captions and notes. In addition, they must be able to present the information orally and answer questions "on the fly."

Finally, the poster presentation was supported in scholarship. Though we discovered that very little has been said about the use of poster presentations in teacher education, we found a number of interesting studies in other disciplines. In an environmental science classroom, for example, students and faculty tended to assess the quality of student posters similarly, assigning the same ranking to the quality of the research and visual presentation. Further, students who tended to do poorly on essays and other written work got high scores on the poster presentation assignment, demonstrating that multiple kinds of writing venues may be beneficial to student performance (Billington 1997). Additionally, the assignment format has been used with success in nursing (Bracher et al. 1998), introductory psychology (Crowley-Long et al. 1997; Katz 2003; Marek et al. 2002), public health (O'Neil 2001), and science courses (Sisak 1997). The format has also been used to teach research skills (Rosenberg and Blount 1988; Henderson and Buising 2000).

A study of the motivational impact of poster assignments found that students who had participated in an open poster session attended by faculty, friends, and family were more likely to present their research at scientific conferences. These students also reported that they preferred the poster session over other forms of oral presentation because they found the format less stressful than other forms of oral presentation (Johnson and Green 2007). Students who have experienced poster sessions express a greater interest in research and make better connections between theory and practice (McMillan et al. 2007). Poster sessions in class offer students a chance to present their research interactively. They also require self-reflection, self-monitoring, and practice (Denzine 1999; Keely 2004).

The Poster Assignment

Over several semesters, we have ironed out problems with the poster assignment and have designed a number of documents to communicate the goals to the students, organize class time on poster session days, and convey information about project evaluation.

Assignment Guidelines

We start by assigning students to work in groups of two or three on an assigned language. Despite the value in allowing students to choose their own topics, we have opted to assign languages because we want students to research less commonly known languages (Welsh, Turkish, Waripiri, Urdu, Navajo, Sanskrit, or Finnish) or less commonly taught languages (Arabic, Pashto, or Swahili). By assigning languages, we strategically ensure that the class will collectively cover an array of possible syntactic structures, some interesting phonetic features, some examples of dead or dying languages, and some non-Western scripts. In addition, as figure 1 shows, we set students up for success by providing detailed questions and requiring students to answer all of them. This approach helps to ensure that the posters will be sufficiently rich in information.

Because most students come with no prior knowledge of or experience in preparing a poster, we provide detailed instructions for formatting, organization, layout, and choice of materials (see figure 2). We also provide a peer rubric that establishes criteria (see figure 3) and display a number of sample posters as models. The models all demonstrate an important stipulation: documentation of all sources cited must be attached to the back side of the poster as a standard list of works cited.

A few days before the poster session, each team submits five to ten interesting facts they have learned about their assigned language, and we use these facts to create the questions for the scavenger hunt (see figures 2 and 4). The purpose for the scavenger hunt is to help focus students' attention on important information about languages that well-educated people can be expected to know and to encourage students to interact with each other during the poster session.

Figure 1. Language description project

Language Description Poster Session Assignment
<p>At some point during the semester, you and two or three classmates received a random language to work on. You and your partners will prepare a poster presentation on this language, and we will spend class time perusing your exhibits to learn about different languages from all over the world. Your goal is to prepare a well-organized, visually pleasing poster that presents some interesting information about your language. There will be a scavenger-hunt activity for you to complete as you look around at the different posters during the exhibit.</p>
<p>Speaker Information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where is your language (“X”) spoken? • How many speakers of “X” are there currently?
<p>Language Contact Information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are speakers of “X” in daily contact with speakers of other languages? • Do speakers of “X” typically speak other languages besides the one you are investigating? • Where is your “X” speaker likely to live? What are her or his likely socioeconomic circumstances (e.g., housing, clothing, food, medical care, education)? • Will he or she speak “X” as a first or second language? What other languages is he or she likely to speak? • What kind of social, cultural, or political significance can be attached to speaking “X” (natively or nonnatively)? Is there stigma or prestige associated with being a speaker of “X”? Does your speaker only use this language in certain social settings (e.g., school, shopping) but not in others (e.g., home)? • Who studies “X” as a foreign or second language? Why do they study it?
<p>Historical Information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What other language(s) is “X” related to? • What is known about the history of “X” and how has it developed?
<p>Structural Information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the general word order in sentences in “X”? • What kinds of sounds does “X” use? • How does “X” form words?

Figure 1. Language description project (continued)

<p>Interesting Facts about Your Language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of writing system does “X” have, if any? • Is “X” in danger of extinction? • Is “X” an official language of a country? • How do you say “hello” and “goodbye” in “X”? • How do you count in “X”? Name colors? • How does your language mark family relationships, like “son of” or “mother-in-law”? • Give examples of borrowings from other languages that surface in “X.” For example, does it have words borrowed from English? • What kind of writing system (if any) does your “X” speaker use? • What types of literature are available in “X”? Does your speaker have access to them?

Figure 2. Directions for research and poster formatting

<p>Doing the Research, Creating the Poster, and Preparing for the Session</p> <p>This is mainly a library research project. A list of sources is available on the class website. Please make use of them and consult a reference librarian at Park Library if you aren’t finding enough materials. You will need to include footnotes and a list of references, which you will attach to the back of your poster (use any format you want — MLA, APA, etc.). Take care to avoid plagiarizing your sources, and if you have questions about plagiarism, come talk to me about them or ask in class.</p> <p>If you are fortunate enough to know someone who speaks your target language, you may use them as a source, as long as you properly credit them. Collect any images or recordings that you find as well (pictures, maps, language data, examples of the writing system used) and also credit these sources. For instance, if your assigned language has a non-Western script, include copies of the writing. If you find pictures of speakers, add some copies to your poster. A world or regional map showing the areas in which “X” is spoken will also be useful. You are not required to find all of these items, since some may not be available in your language. But you need to find enough to put together a visually pleasing poster.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(continued)</p>
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Figure 2. Directions for research and poster formatting (continued)

<p>1. By Friday, September 23, e-mail me three questions about “X” to be included in the scavenger hunt. The answers to the questions should be available in your poster and/or handout. Focus on questions that highlight unique features of “X.” Examples: “Name an Indo-European language that has eight vowels.” “What are some English words borrowed from Urdu-Hindi?”</p> <p>2. Prepare a poster (24" x 24" or larger) presenting important and interesting details from your research on “X.” Your poster should include title banner, text, images, photos, maps, textiles, and anything else that illustrates the language you have researched. On the due date, bring your poster to class. We will spend the class period viewing and scoring the posters. Be prepared to make a short, one- to two-minute explanation of your poster and teach a few basic words in “X.” Your poster will be scored by class members (see figure 3).</p> <p>3. Prepare a one-page (no longer!) handout to give to each person who visits your poster. This handout should summarize the information on your poster, providing a quick reference for later use in class. Make sure that the names of all members of your group are on the handout.</p>
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Figure 3. Sample poster presentation peer scoring sheet

<p>Peer Evaluation Rubric (4-point scale)</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does the poster conform to size guidelines? (24" x 24" or larger) and include a title banner? 2. Does the poster provide sufficient informative graphics, maps, or photos with the presentation? 3. Is the poster clearly organized? 4. Do the presenters seem well prepared to explain their language?

Figure 4. Scavenger hunt

<p>Directions: Find the languages that fit the descriptions below</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Spoken in the British Isles (<i>Welsh</i>) 2. A Native American language (<i>Navajo</i>) 3. A member of the Uralic language family (<i>Finnish</i>) 4. A member of the Altaic language family (<i>Turkish</i>) 5. Has click consonants (<i>Xhosa</i>) 6. An agglutinating language (<i>Swahili</i>) 7. Language of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam (<i>Hmong</i>) 8. Language of Iraq (<i>Arabic</i>) 9. A language of Australia (<i>Warlpiri</i>) 10. The national language of China (<i>Mandarin</i>) 11. Language of Afghanistan (<i>Pashto</i>) 12. Uses an ideographic writing system (<i>Mandarin or Japanese</i>) 13. Closest living relative of Old Norse (<i>Icelandic</i>) 14. Uses both Roman and Cyrillic scripts (<i>Bosnian</i>) 15. Also called “La Lingvo Internacia” (<i>Esperanto</i>) 16. Has only 1,000 mother-tongue speakers (<i>Hawaiian</i>) 17. Subject-object-verb pattern (<i>Japanese, Quechua, Turkish, or Warlpiri</i>) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 18. Uses Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji writing systems (<i>Japanese</i>) 19. Nearly extinct (<i>Klamath-Mono</i>) 20. Called <i>Diné</i> by mother-tongue speakers (<i>Navajo</i>) 21. National language of Brazil (<i>Portuguese</i>) 22. A language of Peru (<i>Quechua</i>) 23. Spoken by formerly nomadic hunter-gatherers (<i>Warlpiri</i>) 24. Niger-Congo language (<i>Swahili, Xhosa</i>) 25. Spoken in a region that has recently experienced civil war (<i>Arabic, Pashto, Bosnian, Serbian</i>) 26. A member of the Italic language family, closely related to French and Italian (<i>Romanian</i>) 27. Spoken by refugees living in the United States (<i>Hmong</i>) 28. Sizeable population of speakers living in Michigan (<i>Arabic</i>) 29. Formerly dying, now experiencing vigorous revival (<i>Welsh, or Hawaiian</i>) 30. A tonal language (<i>Mandarin or Hmong</i>) 31. Has only five vowels and seven consonants (<i>Hawaiian</i>)
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Poster Session Day

On the day of poster presentations, we divide the class into two groups. During the first half of class (approximately twenty-five minutes), students in group 1 stand by their posters and give one- to two-minute explanations about their work to the students in group 2, who then visit as many of the posters as possible. Group 2 students also complete the previously mentioned peer evaluation rubrics and scavenger hunt sheets. Students who answer the most questions correctly win small prizes, such as candy bars and CMU logo pens. Adding a competitive game helps to motivate students to read the posters carefully and to ask questions of the presenters. After twenty-five minutes, the groups switch places, with group 2 students explaining their posters and group 1 students circulating among the posters with peer assessment forms and scavenger hunt sheets.

At the end of the poster session, we collect all the posters and handouts, as well as the peer evaluations, and take everything home for the final evaluation. Despite a wide range of grades, student feedback regarding the poster sessions has been largely positive. In fact, many report in their end-of-semester surveys that the poster presentation session was one of the highlights of the entire course.

Final Words

In conclusion, we offer some tips for planning poster presentations that we have compiled from our experience and some useful Internet resources for information on designing and preparing effective posters. Finally, we provide some sample posters from our classes (figures 5-7).

Things to Remember When Preparing Poster Session Assignments

1. Poster presenters must prepare a one- to two-minute "guided tour" of their poster to give to interested members of the audience.
2. Requiring poster presenters to prepare a handout to give to audience members can be productive, especially if students will be able to use the information from the handouts in subsequent assignments.
3. Giving audience members an assignment such as evaluating a number of posters or completing a scavenger hunt will help to keep less motivated students on task.
4. Stress that the highest standards for citation and academic integrity still hold in the development of posters.
5. Be sure to save some of the best posters and ask their creators for permission to use them as examples in future classes.

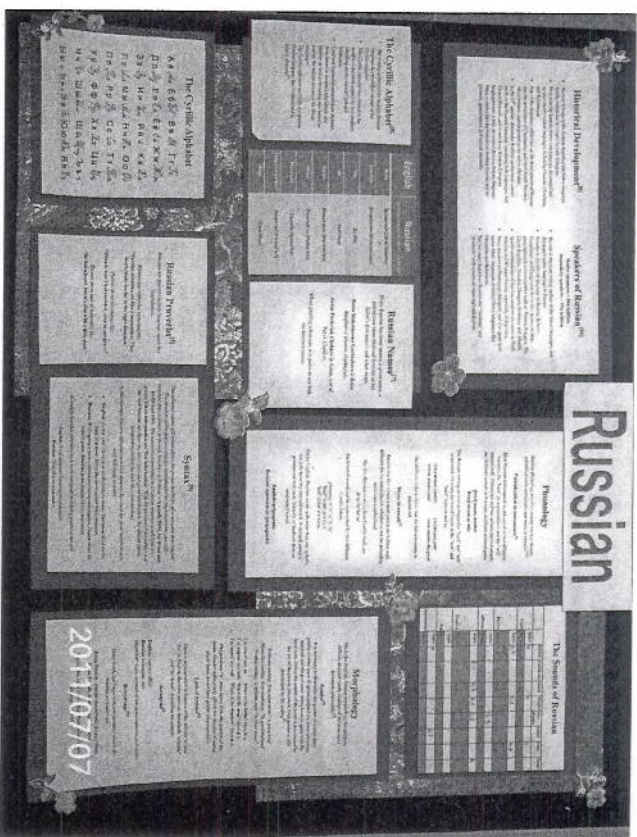


Figure 5. Example of student work: Russian

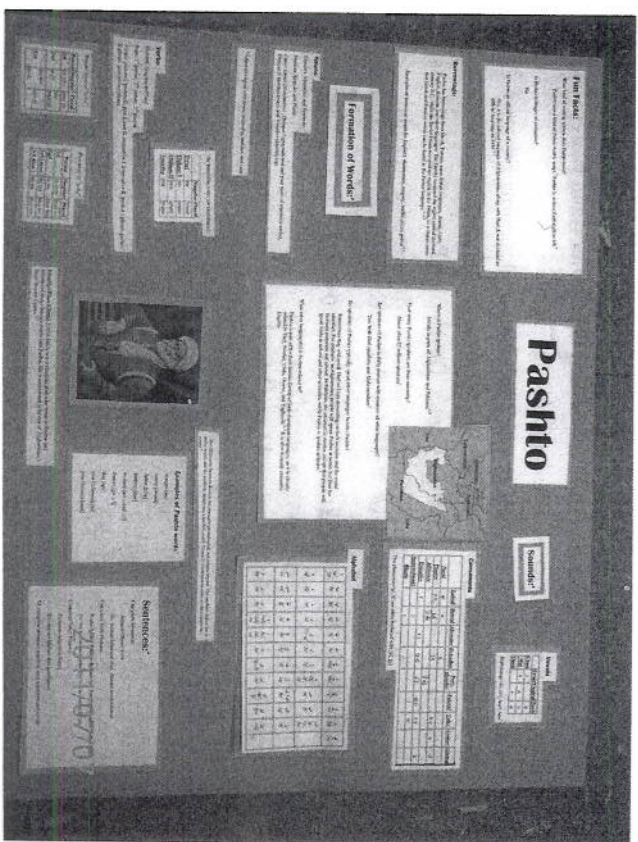


Figure 6. Example of student work: Pashto

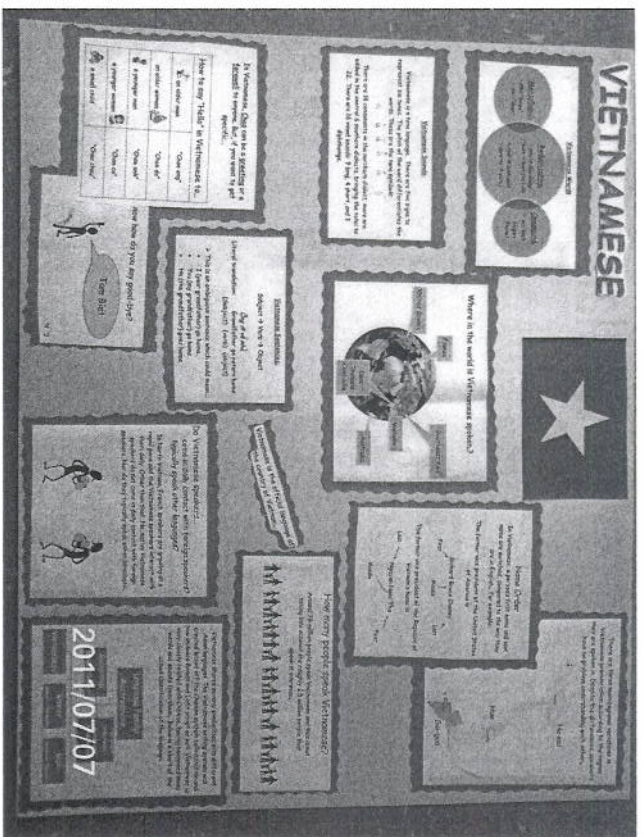


Figure 7. Example of student work: Vietnamese

Online Resources for Designing Posters

- Cain Project in Engineering and Professional Communication, Poster Design Guide, www.owl.net/~cainproj/designing.html
- University of Buffalo Libraries, Poster Presentation: Designing Effective Posters, <http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/asl/guides/bio/posters.html>
- George Mason University Writing Center, Developing Poster Presentations in the Social Sciences, <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/resources-template.php?id=52>
- Colorado State University, Writing Guide: Poster Sessions, <http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/speaking/poster/index.cfm>
- George Hess, Kathryn Tosney, and Leon Liegel, Creating Effective Poster Presentations, www.ncsu.edu/project/posters

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Computer Surveillance in the Classroom; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Panopticon

Tara Robbins Fee

When I first graduated from college, I lived across the street from the defunct Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. The building's design, revolutionary for its time and modeled on Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, featured corridors extending out from a central point, like a wagon wheel, with security walls marking its perimeter. As the Eastern State Penitentiary (2011) tells it, when the institution opened in 1829, prison reformists argued that the structure would induce remorse by maximizing space for honest work and