Pecha Kucha: A format for (digital) final presentations

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Abstract

Pecha Kucha ist ein aus Japan stammendes Vortragsformat, bei dem 20 Slides für jeweils 20 Sekunden gezeigt werden, so dass die Redezeit exakt 6:40 beträgt. Es wird zunehmend auch in akademischen Lehrkontexten eingesetzt. Empirische Forschungen legen nahe, dass dieses Format klassischen PowerPoint-Präsentationen in einigen Aspekten überlegen ist und positive Lerneffekte mit sich bringt. Der Beitrag diskutiert auf der Grundlage eines Erfahrungsberichts zu einem linguistischen Projektseminar, in dem die digitalen Abschlusspräsentationen als Pecha Kucha gestaltet wurden, die Vor- und Nachteile dieses Formats. Weiterhin werden Möglichkeiten der Übertragung in analoge Settings diskutiert.

Pecha Kucha is a presentation format originating in Japan in which 20 slides are shown for 20 seconds each, making the speaking time exactly 6:40. It is increasingly being used in academic teaching contexts. Empirical research suggests that this format is superior to classic PowerPoint presentations in some aspects and can bring positive learning effects. The present article discusses the advantages and disadvantages of this format on the basis of a field report on a linguistics project seminar in which the digital final presentations were designed as Pecha Kucha. Furthermore, possibilities of transfer to analog settings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Presentations by students in courses are often frustrating for everyone involved. Frustrating for the presenters who, after an often tedious preparation phase with many frictional losses in the group work, have to expose themselves to the insufficiently explicit expectations of the lecturers; frustrating for the other students who get the possibly poorly prepared and poorly weighted material taught in this way and not through the more experienced lecturers; frustrating for the lecturers who often already know the content and therefore recognize above all the deficiencies in the sometimes too verbose, sometimes too cursory presentations. Especially in humanities seminars, which are often nothing more than a series of one-hour student presentations, the usual presentation formats hold a high potential for frustration.

Assuming that the complete abandonment of student presentations is not an alternative either, the presentation formats themselves must be reconsidered. That there is a need for this can be seen from the countless guides and advice books that lecturers publish on their homepages [1]. Instead of adding still another one to these guides, this paper presents Pecha Kucha, a presentation format that is characterized above all by an extremely strict time regime. In the summer semester of 2022, it was used very successfully in a linguistic project seminar on the topic of "Fan Cultures and Fan Communication".

In the following, I will first introduce the format and provide a research overview. I will then describe the design and structure of the project seminar in which the Pecha Kucha presentations were embedded and reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of the format. I will conclude with some reflections on whether and to what extent the format is bound to digital teaching contexts or can also be transferred to analogue face-to-face teaching.

2. What is Pecha Kucha?

Pecha Kucha is a presentation format originating from Japan, in which 20 slides (PowerPoint or similar) are shown for 20 seconds each and underlaid by the presenting person with oral presentation text, so that the speaking time is exactly 6:40 min. This is a complete description of the rules and regulations. How the slides scheduled in this way and the oral presentation are designed is not further regulated, although there are recommendations such as the KISS strategy (keep it short and simple).

Pecha Kucha is not the only lecture format that relies on the traditional rhetorical style principle of brevity [2]. Impulse speeches, lightning talks, or elevator pitches are also characterized by tight time limits and are therefore also often used in teaching contexts to prevent lectures from being too lengthy. Compared to these formats, however, Pecha Kucha is even stricter, since the internal timing of the individual slides also follows a clear rule.

Pecha Kucha is used in business, but also in educational contexts. Typically, several Pecha Kuchas are presented one after the other, and the classic format is the PechaKucha Night [3], which is now institutionalized worldwide. Comparable to science slams [4, 5], Pecha Kucha is thus often used for popularizing science communication that purposefully crosses the boundaries into entertainment. Beyond these social events, Pecha Kucha is also a frequently used format in academic teaching [6].

The potentials of Pecha Kucha in educational contexts are also addressed in research. Numerous research papers are dedicated to the possible applications in the context of foreign language teaching. Pecha Kucha seems to be helpful in developing public speaking skills in general [7] and can improve fluency in language learners [8]. Moreover, the strict and therefore guiding set of rules can reduce the fear of public speaking [9].

While research on language learning contexts is mainly interested in language production aspects, other studies focus more on reception and ask, for example, about comprehension and retention performance in Pecha Kucha compared to conventional PowerPoint presentations [10] as well as about different quality judgments. Measured against classical criteria for successful presentations such as clear presentation structure or eye contact, which are also mentioned in most guidelines, Pecha Kucha presentations perform better [11]. Even if there is no clear evidence that Pecha Kucha

presentations are therefore generally better suited than other presentation formats for understanding and retaining professional content [10], students and lecturers perceive them as more pleasant and more entertaining. [12].

To sum up, the research situation makes us confident that the format can at least be integrated into university teaching as a supplement. I will now show how this can be done in concrete terms.

3. About the design of the project seminar

The subject of the seminar, which was held entirely digitally, was fan cultures and fan communication in their entire breadth. Based on the observation that fan-typical practices always include linguistic-communicative aspects and that fans are characterized by a high semiotic productivity [13], fans are an excellent object of study in media linguistics [14], which can also be used to address other linguistic questions, such as language and identity, language and emotion, or language in social groupings.

The seminar was divided into three phases. Six plenary sessions at the beginning served to convey the most important theoretical and methodological basics from sociological as well as linguistic fan research. In the following six sessions, the students worked in small groups on their own research projects, the results of which they finally presented as Pecha Kuchas in the last session. The selection and design of the topics for the research projects was entirely up to the students, whose knowledge of the sometimes very specialized fan cultures and fan practices was thus activated. Many students were fans themselves and thus had profound insider knowledge [15] and privileged access to the empirical field.

In the first phase of the seminar, input videos provided in advance (Fig. 1), seminar readings and their discussion in the seminar, and group work for exemplary analyses of empirical material served to teach the material. The students were already divided into the groups in which they would later work on the projects and were asked to develop ideas for a possible research topic at an early stage.
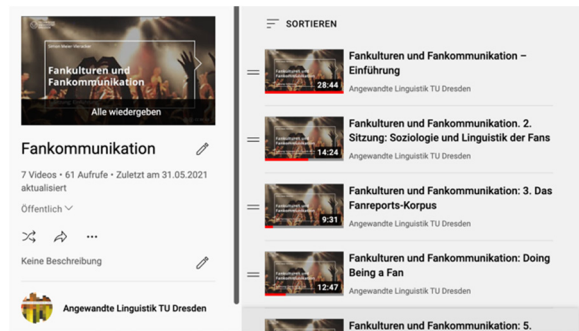

Fig. 1: *YouTube playlist with input videos*

In the second phase, the groups then worked independently on their projects. A collaborative Zotero library [16] was available as a bibliographic resource, in which extended research literature including full texts could be accessed. To structure the workflow in the project work, a Miro board was set up, i.e. a collaborative whiteboard platform on which a wide variety of media types (texts, images, videos, links) can be collected and visually structured. Milestones were defined on this board (such as formulation of the research question, evaluation of the research literature etc.), at which the groups were to file their interim results (Fig. 2).
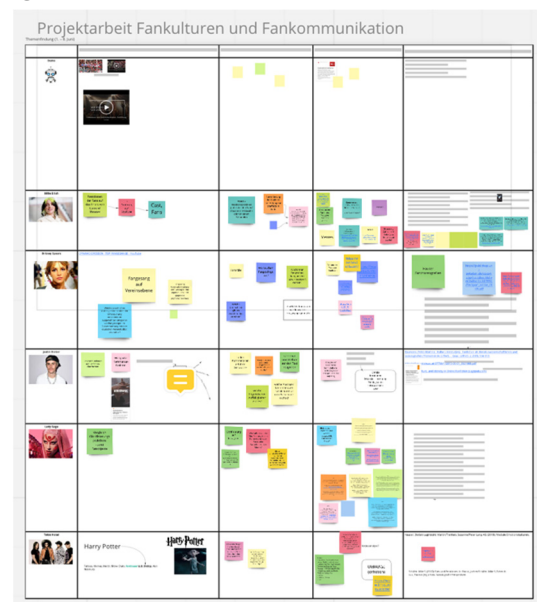

Fig. 2: Miro board

In this way, the groups working on their own could nevertheless follow the procedure and progress of the other groups. This progress documentation also served as a basis for the consultation meetings. During the meetings, I

was present in a virtual meeting room (wonder.me) and was available for shorter or longer consultations. In addition, the groups worked independently and also with internally distributed tasks in order to carry out the time-intensive research work efficiently. Finding topics and choosing appropriate research methods took some time, but finally the following research was conducted:

- Fan reactions to the series ending of Game of Thrones
- Fan chants in soccer stadiums
- Fan protests in soccer stadiums
- Communication of fans in the fanfiction scene
- Glorification practices in @instagram biographies.
- Fan mourning

Research methods ranged from questionnaire surveys to Internet linguistic text analysis and multimodal analysis.

Then, in the final session, the results from the research projects were presented as Pecha Kuchas. All groups submitted their 20-slide presentations in advance. The display duration was automatically timed at 20 seconds. Thus, the slides ran through in a videoconference at the specified pace and were accompanied by spoken text by the students with distributed roles. Between each presentation, about ten minutes were used for feedback and discussion. Overall, the presentations were of surprisingly good quality and were a very successful conclusion to the seminar. Even from the perspective of the students, who had initially expressed clear reservations about this format, it was judged as successful.

4. Pecha Kucha: advantages and disadvantages

As the final evaluation interview and the anonymous written evaluations revealed, the very strict Pecha Kucha format offers a number of advantages:

- The strict time regime and automatic run-through of the slides effectively prevents speaking time overruns, so that the available time slots are equally distributed. The same rules and therefore the same restrictions apply for everyone.
- Such a strict format as Pecha Kucha makes meticulous preparation inevitable, so that the presentations, the slides as well as the spoken text including the speaker changes, are consistently on a high technical level [11]. Slides that are too text-heavy, which according to empirical research results have a negative effect on the comprehension and retention performance of the audience [17], are avoided in favor of text-reduced and attractively illustrated slides. Superfluous and extensive metatextual information and group-internal coordination during the presentation must be reduced to a minimum in favor of a concise presentation of the project results [18].
- The total length of 6:40 min is pretty much the time span for which the audience can listen without distractions - even in a digital setting. The rather fast change of the slides additionally binds the attention.
- The time limit requires a dynamic, sometimes even artistic style of presentation with a certain spontaneity, which has its own entertainment value [12]. To put it casually: It's just fun.

However, these advantages are also countered by some disadvantages:

- The most serious objection is that the tight time frame requires a reduction of the information richness, as is known from popular science genres [19], which, however, can conflict with scientific quality standards. For the qualification goal of presenting scientific facts methodically and cleanly with the required complexity and depth of detail, Pecha Kucha is therefore hardly the right format. However, accompanying materials that are prepared in addition to the Pecha Kucha presentation can help. In our case, these were digital materials such as padlets or frames in the shared Miro board, where more in-depth information or empirical evidence could be read or the project results were summarized once again in an overview (Fig. 3).
- The format tends to favor students with a preference and talent for performance.

This can and should be countered by the fact that the presentations themselves are not graded, especially since they are group performances that sometimes involve very different workloads. In the seminar described here, individually written project documentation and reflections were submitted instead.

- Currently, Pecha Kucha is largely unknown among students. They therefore search the Internet for templates and suggestions and may find special rules such as the requirement of completely text-free slides. This can be remedied by communicating the rules early and clearly, preferably in written form.
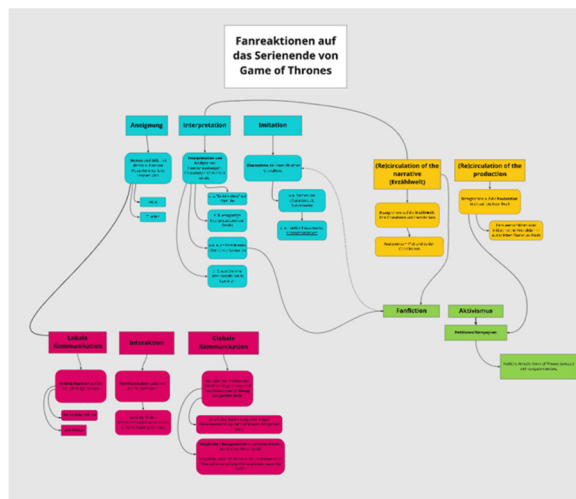

Fig. 3: Project result: A classification of fan reactions.

With the necessary supplementary workarounds and strategies, the advantages thus clearly outweigh the disadvantages and make the Pecha Kucha format appear superior to free formats, at least for the special setting of project presentations.

5. Open questions

The format was tested in a fully digital setting and was particularly convincing here. It should now be tested whether the format can also be used in analog settings in a similarly profitable way. In the digital setting, there is no loss of time due to the change of position at the lectern. The speaker changes can be precisely choreographed in advance and thus run particularly seamlessly. The focus of attention is therefore fully on the slides and the spoken text. Whether in a face-to-face event the physical presence of the speakers might introduce moments of distraction and jeopardize time management remains to be seen. It might also be possible to have the students pre-produce the presentations as videos, which are then watched together in the face-to-face event. However, this would mean that the live character, which is not insignificant for the overall experience, would be lost.

It also has to be be tested whether the format can be used in other, more knowledge transfer-oriented contexts. In the case of project presentations, the report character and the obvious structure (research question, methods, results, discussion) provide useful guidelines for the design of the presentations. If, on the other hand, theoretical concepts or detailed technical knowledge need to be conveyed, the selection and preparation of information is likely to be more challenging. Research also shows that Pecha Kucha presentations are not superior to other presentation formats for exam preparation purposes, i.e., they do not lead to better exam performance [18]. However, if one detaches oneself from such an outcome-oriented perspective, Pecha Kucha could at least be used as a supplement to other formats for knowledge transfer. The learning effects that go beyond pure technical knowledge, above all the acquisition of presentation skills, are also likely to come into play here.

6. Conclusion

The Pecha Kucha format proves to be a useful tool to be able to implement project presentations in classes in a concise, entertaining and at the same time demanding manner. The necessary reduction of the amount of information in the strict time frame is compensated in particular by the accurate preparation. The format is especially recommended for seminar contexts in which several projects have to be presented at once.

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