Course Topic: Language Teaching and Technology

Course Instructor:

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Course Synopsis:

In this session, we're going to look at the use of PowerPoint as a teaching tool. PowerPoint is one of the most widely used – and misused – technologies in the language classroom. There is a common expression in circulation, 'Death by PowerPoint', and as the expression implies, PowerPoint often 'kills' the dynamics of the teaching and learning process. We're going to take a look at some dos and don'ts when it comes to using PowerPoint in the language classroom so that you don't subject your students to 'Death by PowerPoint'.

Course Agenda:

1. PowerPoint vs. the Whiteboard
2. Layout and Design
3. What Should Go on a Slide?
4. Tips for a Successful PowerPoint Presentation

1. PowerPoint vs. the Whiteboard

Before we jump in and look at PowerPoint as a language teaching tool, let's do a quick compare/contrast between PowerPoint and its non-technical counterpart, the whiteboard. Both tools are used to visually support what you are saying verbally in the classroom. Take a look at some of the pros and cons associated with using the whiteboard and PowerPoint as teaching tools.

The Whiteboard

Pros	Cons
👍 Put student answers on the board.	👎 It takes time to write on the board.
	👎 If your printing isn't clear enough, students can't read the information.
	👎 You have to turn your back to the class.

PowerPoint

Pros	Cons
👍 The font is easy to read.	👎 You lose the interactivity because you can't include student responses in the PowerPoint.
👍 You don't have to turn your back to the class.	
👍 It doesn't take time from the lesson to click through the PowerPoint.	

2. Layout and Design

The most important thing to keep in mind when it comes to using PowerPoint is to keep it simple. Just because you *can* do something with PowerPoint doesn't mean you *should* do it. You don't want your PowerPoint to overshadow what you're trying to accomplish as a teacher in the classroom.

Font Style

When selecting a font style, readability should be your top priority. The simple fonts are the easiest to read so try to avoid using cursive fonts, italics or any fonts with excessive embellishments. Any sans serif font style is a good choice, for example: Arial, Tahoma or Calibri.

The first image below illustrates a font that is difficult to read, particularly for those whose first language is not English. In contrast, the font used in the second image is simple, clean and easy to read.

Font Size

When it comes to font size, once again, your goal is readability. Many teachers try to cram a lot of text onto one slide, particularly if the information is all related. This requires the use of a smaller font size which often makes the text very difficult to read. A general rule of thumb is to make sure your font size is large enough to be clearly read from the back of the classroom.

The images below illustrate the contrast between a font size that is too small and a font size that is appropriate.
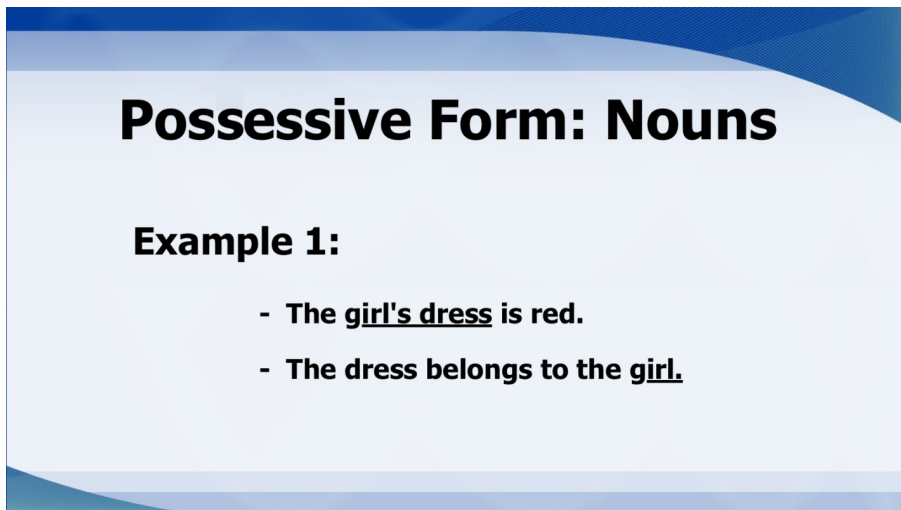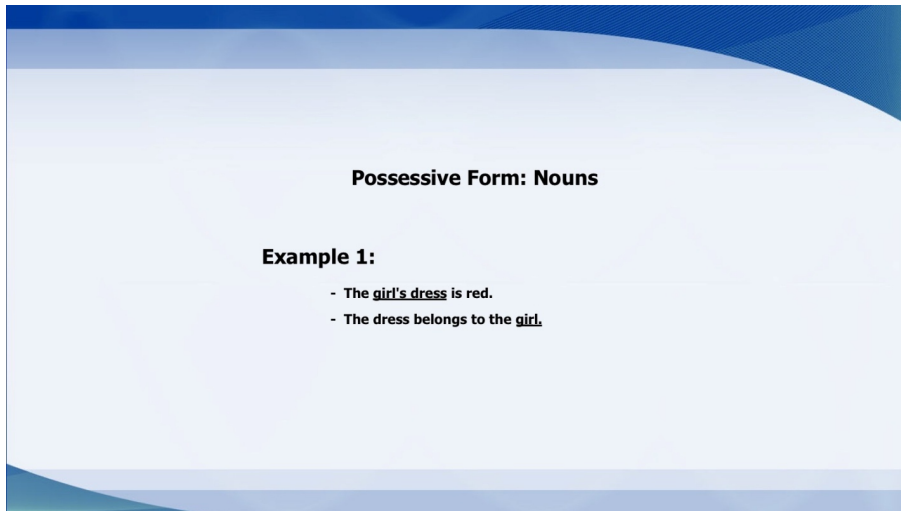
Font Colour

Readability is also important when it comes to selecting a font colour. The key factor here is a high level of contrast between the font colour and the background colour. The best colour combination, in terms of readability, is a black or dark font on a white or light coloured background.

You can see that in the first image below, the font colours are too light and too similar to the background colour, making it very difficult to read the text. In the second image, there is a good amount of contrast between the font colour and the background colour. This helps the text 'jump out', making it much easier to read.
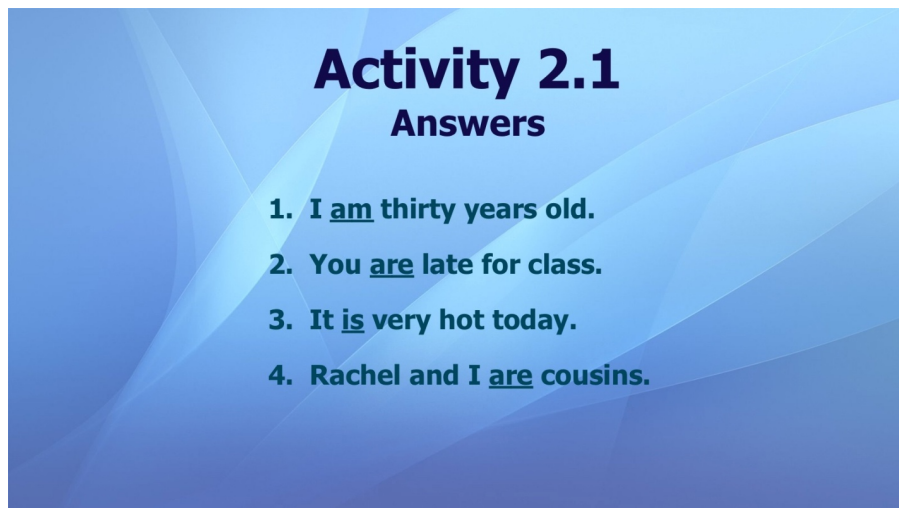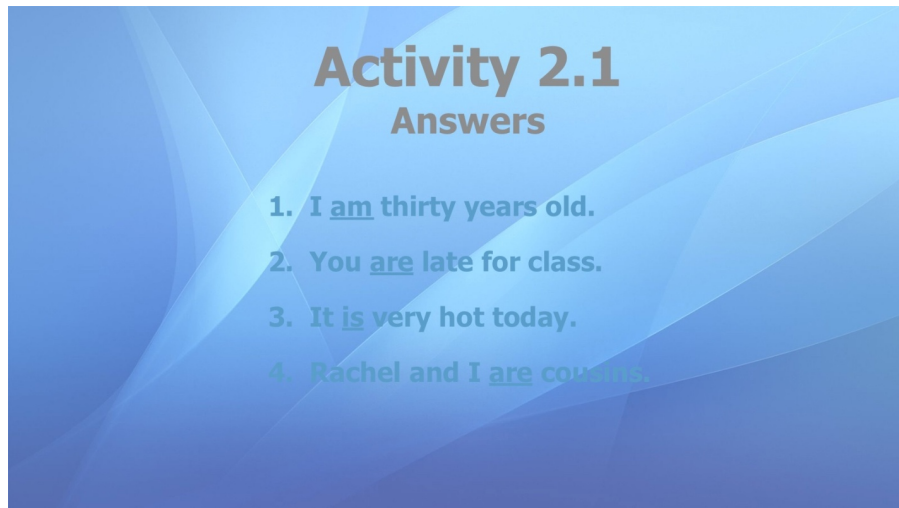
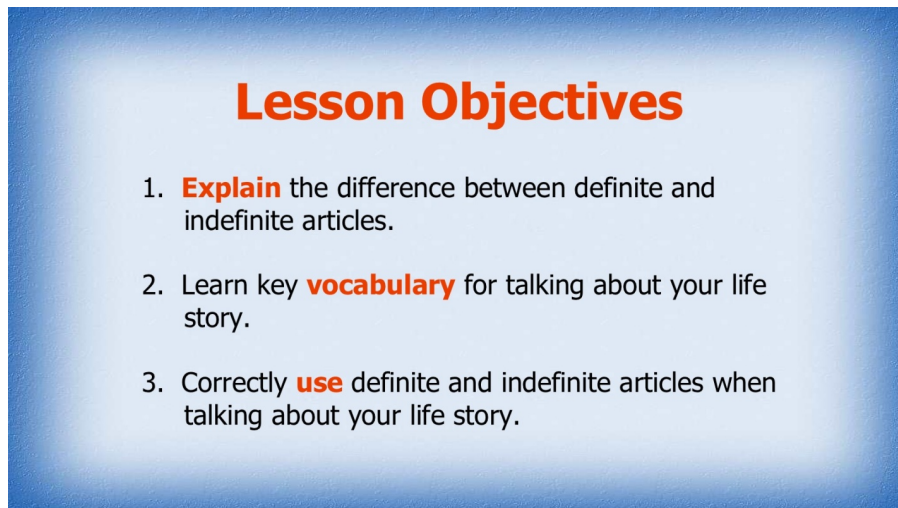There are some colour combinations that you want to avoid using. People that are colour-blind have a very hard time differentiating between red and green.   As a courtesy to students in your class who may be colour-blind, avoid using red and green colour combinations. This includes red fonts on green backgrounds and vice versa, as well as both red and green fonts on the same slide. Additionally, if you

are using multiple font colours to distinguish different words from one another, make sure the colours are not closely related.

Font colour is particularly useful when doing a sentence analysis. You can use a range of font colours to highlight the different parts of the sentence as you're analyzing it. For example, you can use one colour for your verb, another colour for your noun or your subject, another for your object, and so on.

The following image is an example of how to strategically use font colour in order to highlight certain words that you want students to focus on.


Background Colour

When selecting a background colour or image for your slides, your main objective, once again, is readability. There are many interesting slide backgrounds out there to choose from but they can often be distracting and make it more difficult to read the text. While it may sound boring, a white background with a black font is the most readable combination.

Take a look at the following images. The first image is an exaggerated example of how difficult it can be to read the text on a slide when the background is too busy. In contrast, the second image highlights how a clean and simple background makes it very easy to focus the eye on the text.
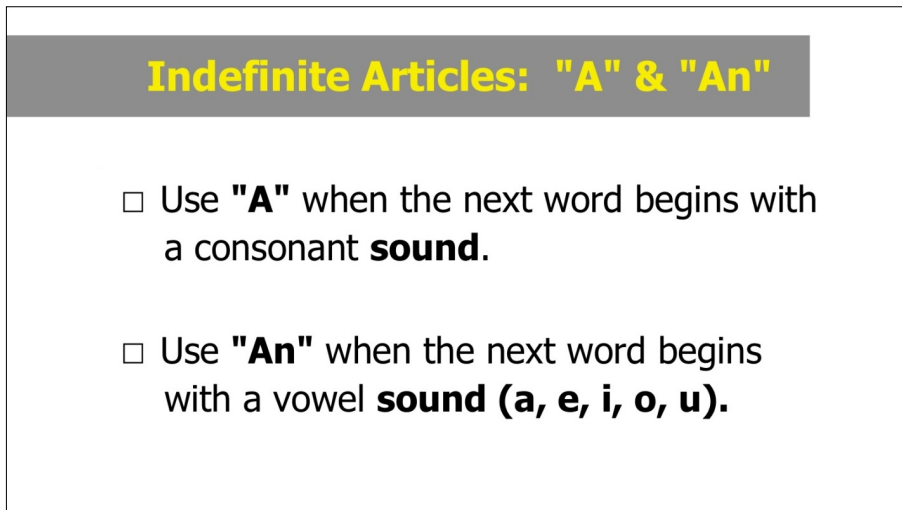
3. What Should Go on a Slide?

Graphics and Pictures

The next thing to think about is what you will put on your slides, aside from text. While using pictures, icons, borders, and so on can be aesthetically pleasing, very often it serves no teaching purpose and can affect the readability of your slides. The simpler your slides are, the more readable they will be. Graphics and pictures should be used sparingly to avoid cluttering up your slides.

There are times when you do want to use graphics and visuals in your PowerPoint presentations – when they serve a teaching purpose. For example, if you're teaching vocabulary words, have a PowerPoint deck with visual illustrations or photographs of each word. Another example is to put visuals from your flashcards onto your PowerPoint slides. You can also use visuals on your slides to give prompts to the whole class at once, rather than handing out a single copy to each student.

The following image highlights a good use of graphics on a PowerPoint slide. The cup of steaming coffee serves to visually represent the word *aroma* to help students remember the meaning of the word.

Animation

Animation is another feature of PowerPoint that can be fun and useful but make sure you don't include animation just because you can. Any animation you use in your PowerPoint slides should, once again, serve a teaching purpose. One situation where animation is appropriate is if you want your text to appear in a certain order. For example, you can bring part one up on the screen and talk about it, bring part two in and talk about it, etc. It also makes sense to use animation when you want to elicit things from the class. For example, you can bring a hint up on your slide, elicit what students know and then confirm it by having the next piece appear on the screen.

Amount of Text

If you recall, in Section 2 we talked about making sure your font size is large enough to be read from the back of the classroom. You also have to make judgment calls about how much text you will put on each slide. The general rule of thumb is to limit your text to no more than four lines per slide. While this does limit how much information you can fit on a slide, there is a reason for it. If you have too much text on a slide, it not only decreases readability but it is very likely that your students won't actually read the information at all. In order to keep your text to four lines per slide, make sure to include key points only.

The first image below is an example of a slide that is too text dense. It is not very readable and would be even less readable if you were standing at the back of a room. In contrast, the second image has only four lines of text on it, aside from the title. You can see that this slide is much more readable and it is easier to focus on the main points presented.

Slide Content

The next thing to think about is what you're going to put on your slides in terms of content. The biggest thing that you want to avoid doing is putting every word you're going to say up on your PowerPoint slides and then reading your slides to the class. Instead, include only the key points in order to highlight and visually reinforce information for your students. The following are some examples of content you might want to include on your slides.

- Vocabulary words with definitions and pictures
- Key grammar rules illustrated with animation and/or colour coding.
- Key points for pronunciation, such as sentence stress, word stress or intonation.
- Answers to completed tests or exercises.

Embedded Audio and Video

Embedding outside content is a great way to make use of some of the many tools available in PowerPoint. You can embed audio or video clips as well as links to webpages directly into your slides to make the transition from your slides to your audiovisual material seamless. You can also record audio within PowerPoint and assign it to a particular slide.

Appropriate Visual Material

There are a couple of final things to keep in mind with respect to your visual material. Make sure that all of your visuals are age appropriate as well as culturally appropriate. You also want to make sure that the quality of your photographs and graphics is high. Often, teachers will pull graphics from the internet that are low resolution to begin with and when they are projected up on a large screen, the resolution is gone altogether. So make sure you use high resolution graphics only.

4. Tips for a Successful PowerPoint Presentation

Here are a few more tips to keep in mind when you are using PowerPoint for language teaching purposes.

- ✓ Do a dry run of your PowerPoint presentation before class starts.
- ✓ Make sure your text is visible from the back of the classroom.
- ✓ Make sure your internet connection is working properly and make sure all of your embedded links direct you to the desired webpages.
- ✓ Always have a non-technical backup. Let's face it, technology can fail. You don't want your whole lesson to get derailed as a result of technical difficulties. Therefore, it is a good idea to have printed handouts in case you need them. Also, make sure you have other audio or video sources on hand in case your embedded content does not work.
- ✓ Don't move through your PowerPoint slides too quickly. Take the time to make sure your use of PowerPoint is interactive and encourages student participation.

For information on how to use the basic and advanced features of PowerPoint, check out these articles.

- PowerPoint 101: Everything you Need to Make a Basic Presentation
- Advanced PowerPoint: Learn More Advanced Techniques in PowerPoint
- PowerPoint for Windows Training

Thanks for participating!

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