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## PUBLIC SPEAKING-TREAT OR THREAT FOR ESL STUDENTS?<sup>122</sup>

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**Abstract:** *This paper is aimed at providing quick techniques that can be of service to second language learners of English to deliver presentations or speeches in front of a given audience. We have identified the need to know how to perform in public while working with our second year Law students or Local Police students at Ovidius University. All these learners are preparing for their future jobs which can, at times, involve giving presentations or speaking to peers, managers or clients. It is not the lack of capacity to express themselves in English with these students because they are quite proficient when it comes to vocabulary, grammar or pronunciation, but the lack of practice in delivering a speech in front of a crowd. As a consequence, our research investigates the stages and the means that are to be considered for a successful delivery. We are looking at both the preparation phase, prior to execution, and at the performance itself, together with inquiring into the type of audience, a presenter might face. All these aspects are supported by theory, but also by our own expertise as facilitators of language acquisition for second language learners of English. In other words, the below investigation might be regarded as a useful guidebook for learners engaged into speaking in public and for teachers who have to offer assistance to them, in this respect.*

**Keywords:** *ESL students, public speaking, body language, prepare, deliver, audience*

### INTRODUCTION

What is Public Speaking?

There are so many definitions for public speaking that it has become common practice to discuss about the concept without attempting to define it. Still, we consider it necessary to remind those involved in speech acts that we can simply explain it as social interaction : “the activity of speaking on a subject to a group of people” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/public-speaking>). It is typical of humans to interact through language, yet this is not a quality that we are born with, especially in formal contexts, but a skill that we can learn and improve in time. Special contexts that require formality seem to be more and more frequent in our lives and this is why we, as instructors, are faced with the moral obligation to assist our learners in getting ready for delivering speeches in their future jobs. They can start practicing the art of public speaking while still engaged in their studies, however the real challenge arises when having to speak in front of audiences for work-related purposes. So, to make matters easier, more approachable and less time-consuming, we have decided to dissect the main features of public speaking, together with some techniques and tips on how to prepare a successful speech before delivering it to a given audience and on how to overcome or keep our emotions under control, feelings triggered because of being the focus of attention, eventually, being judged by your listeners.

Along the same lines as drawn by us, other researchers, D. Crystal (2020), R. E. Axtell (1992), P.M. Lightbown and N. Spada (2006), G. Brown (1990), S. Thorbury and D. Slade (2006), have connected communicating through language with people being unique on this planet of ours. Speaking in public bestows us power given the fact that it is recognized as the attribute of strong leaders. Regardless of its importance in our existence, most people fear public speaking (statistically, it is worse than death- <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3647380/>) so it

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needs to be taught. There are no disputes with concern to public speaking being seen as a practical skill, mandatory for career trajectory and development or for civic engagement. In both our personal and professional lives, public speaking builds confidence, along with countless other benefits such as gaining authority over a group or in one's team, having promotion prospects at work (a high percentage of jobs today require public speaking abilities, without regard to work profiles, be it engineering or humanities), making our voices heard on social issues. Good communication skills are listed as top priority for many companies in seeking potential employees, thus, teachers must aid their students in this quest of expanding or refining their communicative competency.

Explaining it further, communication equals transaction and we all live in a transactional society, either when participating in discussions, presenting an offer, a product or a service that we might desire to sell or when militating for a charity cause or in democratic gatherings. We wrap our transactions in a code, which needs to be decoded by our audience, by the recipient at the other end of the communication channel. Having two parties pertaining to the communication process, we must consider the matter, the decoding act, from both angles. Selecting the right code to deliver your speech in, to a particular assembly that you need to know about in advance, imposes a different level of difficulty on the sender of the message. Nevertheless, the art of making the right choice can be absorbed in time, through trial and error, through constant practice.

In addition to that, speaking in public has been with us, humans, since the beginning of times, becoming a compulsory subject taught in school in Greek Antiquity, then adopted and improved by Roman rethors and turning into political statements in modern times. The art of public speaking bears the name of oratory which has been practiced by rulers for centuries as we can learn from the summarized history of it presented by Encyclopedia Britannica, from Plato, Aristotles, Cicero and Catholic Popes to political leaders such as Martin Luther King or to activists for justice and gender equality such as Malala Yousafzai: "the rationale and practice of persuasive public speaking" (<https://www.britannica.com/art/oratory-rhetoric>).

A similar definition is offered to readers by the authors of *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*: "rhetoric- (in classical oratory) the art of influencing the thought and conduct of one's hearers" (Webster's, 2001, p. 1229).

In other words, besides being a social act of negotiating meaning or conceptions, public speaking tackles persuasion targeted by a rational purpose. And this is what our law students or our local police students at Ovidius Univeristy of Constanta have to be aware of. They would eventually need to persuade groups of people that their point of view is legitimate which asks for thorough and persistent preparation in the art of holding a speech. Our task as teachers is to explain the mechanisms behind conceiving a presentation or a public speech of any sort, to train our ESL learners to be able to respond to the pressure of actually delivering the speech, to deal with possible questions or counterarguments articulated by the audience as opposition to those included in the speech in question. In addition to all the challenges that accompany the process of writing a speech, the delivery phase and the follow-up phase with questions, our students have to manage the shortcomings of being second language speakers of English. Thus, they might be frightened to take on such a role thinking of pronunciation issues, of vocabulary slips or the lack of ability to handle a public debate afterwards. Put differently, not only that our subjects must be well- prepared, in control of their emotions, but they also ought to be proficient (at least B1) in English to better deal with all demands targeted at them. Most of our students qualify for the prior description (their language skills improve in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of study), with remarkable benefits for those who are extroverts because the art of speaking in public can be learnt, but innate talents would always differentiate themselves from those less gifted to communicate with ease.

Apart from "psychological noises" (Scrieber, Hartranf, 2013, p.9) happening during a presentation, there are other obstacles such as physiological conditions (headache, flu), sound levels in a room or cultural differences (perceptions, views, mentalities, habits, customs). Both natural born talents and less gifted individuals have to, finally, prevail over all these deterrents.

## EXPOSITION

Some features of public speaking today

Discussing about successful public speaking, Arina Nikitina (2011) points to the fact that with the rise of the Internet, it has become accessible to the masses, being “one of the most powerful marketing, educational and brand promotion tools in any business” (Nikitina, 2011, p.12). There are five major elements which can be identified in most public speeches (probably, reminiscents of Cicero’s structural parts- invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery): answers to the following questions- who?, what?, whom?, medium?, effect?.

Additionally to these core questions to be addressed, there are three major styles in which a speech can be delivered: impromptu speech (spontaneous, unplanned, for colleagues at work, for one’s team to get updates on a project), manuscript speech (written and delivered word by word exactly, probably, in the case of less gifted speakers that rely heavily on their notes) and “extemporaneous speech which is the most commonly used type of speech that helps to establish emotional connections with the audience” (Nikitina, 2011, p.13).

While the structure of a presentation follows the traditional components of any given text that seeks to persuade the recipients of the message (introduction/hypothesis, body of the presentation, incorporating arguments and conclusion), one has to always consider that writing is more complex than speaking, the later being perceived at a different pace by the audience. The real challenge of a public speaker, then, consists in his ability to summarize the written version of his speech, to keep it precise, short and, at the same time, appealing to the public, while employing not only words, but also visuals (simple, not cluttered because they must be easy to be read), paralinguistic aids (tone, pitch, speed), body language that “forms part of a wider context of utterance in which what is said is interpreted” (Brown, 1990, p.112)

The manner in which one presents himself in front of a crowd completes the overall message of the speech. Your posture, your gestures and your body movements might create a barrier between you and your attendees at a speaking event or might, on the contrary, be translated into an open invitation to participate, to share ideas and thoughts. Your facial expressions function as a suprasegmental message to be decoded by those receiving it. It is then advisable to use eye-contact, together with smiling and showing openness to communicate with the public. Moreover, your voice tone should not be monotonous as it might become boring and difficult to follow. Gillian Brown (1990) identifies three major functions of intonation in English: to express attitudes, as a way of underlining syntactic structures, to convert it “to the speaker’s desire to signal to the listener how to treat information contained in the utterance” (Brown, 1990, p.89). Besides that, the pace of your speech should not be too fast, but alert enough to catch people’s attention while your pitch should balance highness and lowness. In order to achieve all that, you might try to use breathing exercises like in yoga practice. Pauses can operate well as ways of emphasising important ideas, as long as they are not too long.

There are three essential stages (three Ps) of a presentation or a public speaking event that Nikitina (2011) mentions and that we totally agree with: preparation, practice, performance. You can not have a successful presentation if do not prepare it well in advance, if you do not rehearse it, if you do not know some of the tricks you should master to deliver your speech efficiently.

Analyzing the discourse features of a conversation, two researchers, Thornbury and Slade (2006), take into consideration the way the interpretation of what is delivered unfolds: endophoric (what is said is connected to the text, internally), exophoric (the speech exceeds the limits of the words chosen and refers to external realities that can be interpreted in many forms) – “It is characteristic of spoken language that many of the references are exophoric, that is, their interpretation is context dependent” (Thornbury and Slade, 2006, p. 109). This is where mentalities, prior experience of the listeners might interfere with the speech delivered to them and this is why those speakers delivering the discourse need to be aware of who the participants are, what their expectations are, what motivates them to participate in the speaking event: “The production and

interpretation of spoken discourse is facilitated by reference both to the here-and –now of the immediate text and to the speakers’ shared knowledge” (Thornbury, Slade, 2006, p. 110). In other words, nothing drifts randomly as we have to constantly consider multiple layers of interpretation, internal to the text and external to it, based on biases, shaped by experience, cultural and religious belonging.

Reflecting on interpretation and its many facets, forces us to ponder the profile of the audience we ought to prepare for. Melody Templeton (2010) discusses in a very intelligible way about the myths surrounding presentations, starting from the idea that humans are “emotional beings” (Templeton, 2010, p.18) who need reassurance before staging a performance in front of a group. Performers need to research about their audience beforehand. Certain aspects are mandatory to be revealed to guarantee the success of your speech: the age range of listeners is to be looked at because younger listeners prefer to communicate through text while more mature ones choose oral communication, gender remarks are to be avoided as they might lead to offence, culture stands crucial in any context due to the fact that “we live in a global society and cultural sensitivity is absolutely necessary for speakers”(Templeton, 2010, p.30), occupations, expertise and jobs should also be considered as key features that shape the audience’s mentality and ability to receive messages (it could be that they understand professional jargon, abbreviations, company culture or market realities for a particular product or service), geographic location could play an essential role in the way people think, so it must be put on the speaker’s priority list when engaged into audience analysis (prior to even writing the speech down). All these aspects bear the name of softer data or psychographics and involve attitudes, values and interests.

Further more, when labelling listeners, there are two major categories, apart from gender, generation, culture and occupation: listeners that are already motivated to pay attention to a speech and listeners who were constrained to come to your talk as part of their job responsibilities or other duties.

In order to respond to your listeners’ expectations or to, eventually, stir interest in those that were forced to participate to the talk, speakers must ask themselves a series of questions such as “*Is my audience interested in my talk and why?*”, “*Was is their choice to attend my talk or were they compelled?*”, “*What might be their views on the topic presented to them?*”, “*Shall they agree or disagree?*”. So, one chief detail to mind is “customize your talk every time you give it” (Templeton, 2010, p. 34). Adapting your speech to the audience should not impact on personal style as “authenticity is the key to speaker success: know yourself, be yourself. Write your own speeches, tell your own stories, and use your own language and idioms” (Templeton, 2010, p.41). It is a good rule of thumb to relate to your audience through storytelling, fables, myths, popular films and last, but not least, your personal life.

Glossophobia- a deterrent or a motivator?

Humans have been known for their bravery, flexibility, power to take control of their actions, but also for their fragility and fearfulness, at times. Being under pressure of performing well, worrying about being judged and ridiculed, most people, when surveyed, state that they fear public speaking (some of them fear it even more than fearing spiders, heights or death). This terrible reaction in the event of delivering a speech carries the name of *glossophobia* which can be explained as follows: “fear of public speaking, in anticipation of speaking in public, a person with glossophobia can experience a dry mouth, weak voice and uncontrollable body shaking” (<https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/glossophobia#:~:text=glos%C2%B7%E2%80%8Bso%C2%B7%E2%80%8Bpho,voice%20and%20uncontrollable%20body%20shaking>).

In the light of the above, what are some methods people can employ to overcome their fear of public speaking? Could glossophobia be a deterrent or a motivator? We strongly believe that there are techniques we can use to turn an obstacle, namely fear of speaking in public, into a chance to better your communicative skills: “Every presentation is an opportunity to present yourself in the best possible light” (Templeton, 2010, p.19).

In order to benefit from the chance of addressing an issue to a group of listeners, one has to mentally prepare for it. Thinking positively about the event can only raise the chances of your success. Speech anxiety might also be fed by myths such as the innate capacity of some people to be great public speakers. This assumption is completely wrong because public speaking is a skill that you learn when necessary and it can improve in time through experience: "Confidence to stand in front of an audience does not arrive with us at birth" (Templeton, 2010, p. 23).

Another false belief is that fear can exclusively attract negativity while, on the contrary, it can be turned into energy and motivation as Arina Nikitina (2011) explains it, based on psychology studies: "Psychologists agree that some amount of fear heightens your awareness, improves your concentration, sharpens your thinking" (Nikitina, 2011, p.16).

When overwhelmed by fear, speakers could shift their focus on something else, on something real (because fear is imaginary) or they could visualize themselves delivering the talk, to ease or to release the pressure.

Given the above, we should not perceive fear (which is normal when faced with a challenge) as a deterrent, but as a motivator which can be transformed into good energy, strong will and motivation to deliver a remarkable speech.

## CONCLUSION

Our modern society requires us to perform different roles amongst which public speaking (regardless of our profession) retains a primary function. We, as educators, have the responsibility of helping our students to overcome fear and to show them certain techniques to deliver good public speeches. Our job becomes even more complicated when having to do that for ESL students whose first language is not English and who need to prepare even more for such events.

The unseen stages of a presentation or a public speech are as equally important as they require excellent organization, discourse structure, mental capacity to overcome the blockages, good language skills.

Besides some techniques already mentioned such as breathing, changing focus, visualising the layout of the room and your position in space, the best approach one can take is practice. As such, practice should be granted to ESL learners in the event of their future performance at work because public speaking should be a treat, not a threat for all students of English.

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