

Fears of Formal Speech Presentation in English: Some Thoughts and Practical Solutions

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Abstract: There is no one who regularly speaks in public who was not once absolutely terrified. The usual teeth chattering, feet trembling happen every time we stand up to make a speech. For the non-native speakers this fear is responsible to aggravate their already shaky performance. There are a number of reasons behind the fear of formal speech presentation. The article will explore the reasons of this fear and suggest experimented solutions from the real class room situations.

When we talk of the English language, the four skills – reading, writing, speaking and listening – come to the mind. These skills are divided into productive and receptive skills. Writing and speaking skills fall into productive, and reading and listening into receptive. Though we treat speaking as a productive skill, we rarely see any productivity of it in practice. Speaking in public has always been feared by all speakers, irrespective of age and gender. Whenever we stand in front of the podium, the usual chill, nervousness, and dry throats, always remain our companions.

The rhetoric¹ was developed first by Aristotle in fourth century B.C. and earlier explored by Socrates, Plato and Sophists in classical Greece. Socrates taught the dialectical method, the question answer method in dialogue form and a philosophical debate. Aristotle used rhetoric as an art of persuasion, a tool for conducting practical debate. Aristotle's major contribution was to create a partnership of dialectic and rhetoric together for a system of persuasion based on knowledge instead of manipulation of emotion.

In our daily life we are always speaking by using rhetoric consciously or unconsciously. When we are doing it consciously, we have to stand in front of an audience and face them. Then the problem starts. Giving a prepared speech or extemporaneous speech requires rigorous research and practice. Many people fear making public speeches. Speech impediments, innate shyness and natural reticence can increase fear of speech or "glossophobia." Self employed people are sometimes put in the position of speaking in front of groups. There are many ways to channel and overcome a fear of public speaking. It is important to first understand how common this phobia is and also that there may be medical reasons behind the fear. Solutions include working with a public speaking organization and practising public speaking skills.

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Taking speech classes is a good solution but does not always solve the problem. It continues when we are less competent in the language. Speaking in English specially proves to be difficult for us non-native speakers. The reason behind this is lack of competence, lack of exposure to an English-speaking situation, lack of practice, pressure of fear and many other components. These problems, if identified by the speaker himself, will make things easier for him. This article will focus on the fear faced by the non-native speakers in giving formal speeches and also try to find a solution to it. I have used my experience as an English Language teacher to have a closer look at this problem.

In our country speaking is not a productive skill. It is because the curriculum places so much emphasis on the two other skills – writing and reading – that the other two are almost forgotten. The examination system of our country only tests writing skills most of the times and reading a little. Hence we haven't as a nation emerged as having a good speaking skill. There are several reasons behind it.

The first and the foremost problem of speaking in public is the stage fright. People fear speaking in front of a group or an audience because they feel that people are sitting there to judge. When we are a part of the audience, we always critically analyze what the speaker is saying rather than whether we need the knowledge that the speaker is imparting or the relevance of it to our lives. Whatever a speaker says is always filtered through the listener's frame of references – the sum of listener's knowledge, experience, goals, attitude, and values. The speaker also knows this and hence the fear. They are afraid of looking foolish in front of many of their peers and important people. They are afraid that their minds will go blank or that their incompetence in speaking skills will lower the opinion that others have of them. The fear of humiliation can destroy a person's ego and confidence.

Paul L. Witt, PhD, assistant professor of communication studies, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, conducted a study among 48 male and 48 female college students enrolled in a first semester public speaking class. The speakers underwent psychological tests before and after making a five-minute assigned presentation. To nobody's surprise, people who are anxious by nature – what psychologists call high-trait anxiety – had shown most of the nervous symptoms when speaking in public. What was surprising was the anxiety pattern. People with low-trait anxiety get nervous before speaking but begin to relax once they get started. People with high-trait anxiety, however, are anxious when they start speaking and get more anxious as they go on. He heard comments from some of the speakers that they were very nervous when they started but by the time they were finished it wasn't that bad. Some of them even wished they had more time. Witt calls the high-trait anxiety people the "sensitizers," and explains:

Sensitizers are those who really focus on the unpleasant indicators: 'Oh my

gosh, I have to make this speech. Oh my Lord, my hands are trembling.' And they focus on these things instead of taking a deep breath or becoming more focused. They are really into the experience but react in negative ways, whereas habituaters are really into the experience and react in a more accommodating way. (Witt 2006: 88-90).

Even when their speech is over, sensitizers don't relax. In fact, they become even more anxious.

In this context I would like to share my experience of public speaking classes. In a Public Speaking class at an undergrad program of Pharmacy, for example, where one hundred students of different batches were given to speak on "My Favorite Tourist Spot of Bangladesh," fifty percent students gave a general overview of the tourist spot, thirty percent spoke about the places they have visited, and only ten percent spoke of the places they liked most. But the other ten percent did not even speak. The same topic was given to thirty students of Microbiology, twenty students of Film and Media and twenty five students of Computer Science and Engineering (CSE). The performance was more or less the same. What was the reason of these unvarying performances? The answer reverts back to fear. These fifty percent students can be called sensitizers because out of fear they got nervous and were so afraid of making a fool of themselves that they did not closely look at the topic or even think about it. As a result they gave a general overview of the tourist spots. The common defensive attitude of the ten percent students of not speaking at all is taken when we feel threatened by embarrassment. But this defensive attitude of not speaking at all does not solve the problem. The speaker has to do something to overcome this fear of humiliation or nervousness. In a classroom situation, we do not have any lesson which requires presentation in front of the whole class. As the students are not used to giving speeches even in their mother tongue, they feel very uncomfortable doing so later in their lives. Taking speech classes or practising on their own, or with friends, and family can be the solution. There are other factors which are also connected with this problem which will be discussed later. The most important thing to remember is the speaker himself has to take the initiative instead of running away from the problem.

Again, the performance of the fifty percent was not good because they anticipate the stage fright so much that they did not even go through the topic or give the kind of attention that is needed. The common error that they fall into is generalizing the topic. Hence the focus is shifted, it widens into all directions. The result is the speaker is also lost at some point of his/her speech and cannot draw a conclusive end. S/He fumbles and stumbles and is completely confused. So we see fear again is responsible for the bad performance on stage. Then there is also another side of this stage fright. The speaker might be very knowledgeable about the topic, but because of this fear of audience s/he falters. Having

competence or knowledge of the topic can also act as a way of dealing with the stage fright. Because it enables us to go along even if we forget prepared lines. At the same time it gives the courage to deal with any kind of interference we might face during the presentation. Another way of dealing with this fright is to be very positive. The same students of Microbiology after repeated counseling became optimistic about their speeches, and they to some extent recovered from the stage phobia. The same happened with the students of Pharmacy, Computer Science and Engineering. After studying the performance of two hundred students of Pharmacy, Microbiology, CSE over the period of 2 years, I observed that initially all the students were afraid of giving speeches but twenty percent recovered to some extent after some time. But the eighty percent students had to be guided a lot in order to stay focused on the topic.

Now about the thirty percent's performance, who also make the error of not focusing completely on the topic. They, to some extent, correctly speak on the topic, but they cannot be fully successful for lack of ideas on the topic. Here again the nervousness is responsible. The same problem was observed with the other students also. In case of giving instant speeches, this is a recurrent problem. The speaker, because of being nervous, does not even read the topic carefully and thereby performs poorly. This nervousness becomes very much visible also during the speech and the audience's reaction further aggravates the matter and the result is disastrous all the way.

The solution is not to show nervousness. Speakers have to be a little bit of actor and hide his misgivings or pessimism. But again this was possible with only the ten or twenty percent of students who have only this stage phobia. So we need to look at the other more serious problem – language competence – which is connected with this stage fear.

As mentioned earlier, speaking skill is not treated as an important skill in the whole education system of our country. Though officially a foreign language, English is treated as a second language or lingua franca here but there are not enough ways of acquiring it. What we have not learned in 20 years, we want to learn it within few months by taking those spoken English courses. In acquiring a second language (L2), Hyltenstam (1992) found that around the age of 6 and 7 seems to be a cut-off point for bilinguals to achieve native-like proficiency. After that age, L2 learners could get near-native-like-ness but their language would, while consisting of very few actual errors, have enough errors that would set them apart from the L1(native language) group. The inability of some of the subjects to achieve native-like proficiency must be seen in relation to the *age of onset* (AO). "The age of 6 or 8 does seem to be an important period in distinguishing between near-native and native-like ultimate attainment... More specifically, it may be suggested that AO interacts with frequency and intensity of language use" (Hyltenstam 1992: 364). Later, Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson

(2003) modified their age cut-offs to argue that after childhood, in general, it becomes more and more difficult to acquire native-like-ness, but that there is no cut-off point in particular. But in our country we see that majority of our students, aged 6 to 7 years, do not have this exposure to English as most of the schools are still run in the traditional Bengali medium, with one English text which doesn't give them any sort of idea of the English Language let alone helping them to master it. So the ripe age when they could have gained native like proficiency, they are deprived of resources. Later, when they move to secondary level, they are only taught the writing skill which again is with very limited resources and practice material. When we talk about language proficiency, we have a general notion that it means knowing the rules of grammar. Valdés and Figueroa (1994) indicate that:

...what it means to know a language goes beyond simplistic views of good pronunciation, "correct" grammar, and even mastery of rules of politeness. Knowing a language and knowing how to use a language involve a mastery and control of a large number of interdependent components and elements that interact with one another and that are affected by the nature of the situation in which communication takes place. (34)

According to a study conducted in America by The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) defines English language proficiency in this way:

A fully English proficient student is able to use English to ask questions, to understand teachers, and read materials, to test ideas, and to challenge what is being asked in the classroom. Four language skills contribute to proficiency as follows:

1. *Reading* - the ability to comprehend and interpret text at the age and grade-appropriate level.
2. *Listening* - the ability to understand the language of the teacher and instruction, comprehend and extract information, and follow the instructional discourse through which teachers provide information.
3. *Writing* - the ability to produce written text with content and format fulfilling classroom assignments at the age and grade-appropriate level.
4. *Speaking* - the ability to use oral language appropriately and effectively in learning activities (such as peer tutoring, collaborative learning activities, and question/answer sessions) within the classroom and in social interactions within the school. (1992: 7)

The students of our country do not properly attain any of the above mentioned skill. Because they do not have proper instructors to attain the level of proficiency that is needed to excel in these skills. We are always saying that our students lack in all these skills, but in reality we are not doing anything to solve the problem. A total restructuring of the curriculum is mostly needed to do

something about the problem. Our English language classes instead of being writing oriented, should introduce speaking and listening skills. The language instructors of our country also need to go through changes. There is actually no formal training for them unless the concerned institutions take their own initiatives. We have to remember that these teachers also went through the same old language courses, so they do not have anything new to offer to their students. Now if the instructors are not trained in the skills that they will be teaching, learning will not be successful. We will hardly find any teacher in our secondary or higher secondary level who excels in all the four skills. The reason is again the same curriculum. So we see that the problem goes on in cyclical order. Those of us, who are taking courses like Public Speaking, we studied on our own to reach the level of proficiency to take the concerned course or courses. Even those people who are good English speakers, they practice on their own to excel on these four skills. That's why students who come from English medium schools, perform better in this sort of speaking courses as they are exposed more frequently to English.

If we had compulsory courses on speaking in our secondary or higher secondary level, then the problem would not have been so serious. My students often complain about this and I found them very eager to do the public speaking course. After doing the four months' course on Public Speaking, they become happy with their experience. I have often heard them appreciate the course which they think have made them more confident in speaking. We, as students also had the same sort of complaint. Lack of competence in the area of speaking results in poor grades. It is especially alarming when I give them topics to speak instantly. They would simply stare and would not utter a single word. Some of them would request me to allow them to speak in their native language. That means they can speak on those particular topics as they have the knowledge, but lack of competence in English is the barrier. They were interested in giving their speeches in Bangla, and once I allowed them to speak. To my surprise I found that they spoke excellently on those issues. They had some problems with organization. But then again, as I said earlier, our students are not used to giving any kind of presentation. We cannot expect excellence in that area. So we see that they have the ability or the knowledge on those particular topics, but incompetence in the English language is their main problem in not speaking. So if the matter is taken seriously and the initiative is taken to bring certain changes in our language curriculum, then this problem will be solved.

Taking only speech classes will not solve the problem, however. Those who want to improve on this skill have to take the initiative themselves. They have to utilize the knowledge that they get in their classrooms and practise. Practice, practice, and practice alone can make a person perfect in his skills. Our classroom needs to be practice-oriented rather than lecture-oriented. Students should be given speech topics, which they will be required to present in front of

the class. Firstly, they will learn to give presentation in their mother tongue. After that, when they are used to it, they will be able to do it in English. For example, twenty five Pharmacy students were divided into five groups. Each group was given a speech assignment and told to keep a record of how many times they practised. Three groups were told to present their speech within four days and the rest two groups were given seven days. The result was the groups which were given three days did better than the groups who got more time. The record showed on an average the 3-day deadline group practised three times everyday. On the other hand the other group practised four times on day one and did not practice at all for a day or two and then again they practised once before presenting the speech. So it is important that we practise consistently.

When we talk about practice, another barrier works here. The social barrier constitutes in the fact that a language which is non-native is always treated with a raised eyebrow. As a result people always feel shy to practise. They fear of getting shunned or ridiculed by their friends. The egotism works as a barrier here. But students who want to improve this skill should speak as much as possible. When counseling the weaker students of speech classes I have found out that most weak students suffer from this embarrassment and are not willing to speak in English for fear of being excommunicated by their peers. This attitude needs to be changed.

The receptive skill, i.e. listening, also needs to be improved. Listening is not much used in our classrooms. But it is an essential skill of English language. Listening aids like tapes and videos should be introduced at the tertiary level. The main hindrance here is that most of the listening aids that we get are through the British Council. The students find it difficult to understand as they are not used to the British accent. It would be more student-friendly if we can develop some materials of our own. Because if we want to improve on vocabulary, reading only will not help us, listening aids are also essential. And the students will receive the information more quickly as they will find the accent or the people, or the culture familiar. Television can be a resource also. In Public speaking classes I frequently use video taped speeches. The students pay extra attention when they are listening and seeing others presenting speech and they try to copy from those speeches. Sometimes I select programs from the English channels and tell them to watch and in the next class I give speech topics from there. It made the class interesting and also made them more active in the class. If we can develop the practice of watching the talk shows on BBC and CNN or TV channels like Fox History where well-edited documentaries derived from world famous historical archives are shown, or even the English news broadcasted in our Bangla TV channels, then also half the battle will be won. We have to understand that learning can happen anytime, with anything. And also we should develop the practice of listening to others and try to encourage them. We can even learn from others' speeches. Listening has always proved to be a good way of increasing

vocabulary. Reading also increases vocabulary power. In my speech classes each week, students have to give a speech based on reading a newspaper story or magazine article. These reading assignments help them to use new words in sentence construction and dramatization.

Another problem that the non-native speakers face is lack of skill in organization. Before giving a speech, if the presentation notes are not organized and outlined properly, the stage fright will come back. The audience will also have difficulty understanding the message. So careful planning of a presentation can give the speaker the kind of confidence that s/he needs. When we talk about planning, three things should be considered here –

1. Verbal Presentation:

- Deciding on objective of the speech – to entertain, persuade, or inform
- Analyzing audience: their number, level of knowledge, their expectations
- Contents: relevant and appropriate ideas, simple language, organizing main points in chronological, topical, problem-solution, or cause-effect order
- Reference: citing sources verbally

2. vocal presentation

- Volume: should be according to the size of the audience and the acoustics of the room
- Rate: speed of the delivery should be according to the mood, audience, and occasion
- Pause: to signal end of a point, to bring dramatic impact or to let the idea sink in
- Pitch or voice modulation: change of highness or lowness of the voice according to the meaning and emotional impact of the speech

3. Visual presentation

Personal Appearance: taking care of dress

- Bodily Action: avoidance of distracting mannerisms
- Gesture: spontaneous and appropriate to the occasion
- Eye Contact: establishing eye contact with the audience to understand their credibility, attention, and feedback

Multimedia, models, object, photograph, drawings, graphs, charts etc can be used as visual aids. But speakers have to remember that for this kind of presentation, preparation and practice are very important. If they are not familiar and comfortable with their visual aids, it should be avoided. So we see that planning and preparing beforehand make a speaker confident and ready to travel to the podium.

In public speaking classes we teach our students how to organize their materials and the above mentioned outlining helps the student to restructure their speech material. First the students are required to learn these theoretical issues and then they have to implement it in their speech presentation. And here again practice is important. Usually we have at least four practice sessions before students have to present speeches by themselves. Another thing to note here is that, instead of having the whole manuscript of the speech the students are allowed only to have one or two 3 X 5 cards having only the key points written there. The speaker then will not be dependent on the script, more interaction with the audience will happen, and it will make the speech spontaneous and fun too. The students feel more confident from the initial nervousness. They cannot give perfect speeches but the difference is noticeable. Beforehand they could not even speak relevantly or organize their thoughts but now they can at least present their ideas coherently.

To boost confidence during speech is to know that we will never be perfect. When speakers are preoccupied with the notion of achieving perfection, they lose focus on the content of their speech. But it has to be remembered that the audience is not looking for perfect speech, they prefer to walk away from there by knowing something, to get some knowledge or idea which they did not have before. In a large group, there will always be people who will find fault. The truth about public speaking is no matter how good a job a speaker does, someone is going to disapprove of either the speaker or the argument. That is just human nature. In a large group of people, there will always be a diversity of opinions, judgments, and reactions. Some will be positive, others will be negative. There is no rhyme or reason to it. Some people will sympathize, while others will criticize harshly. Some people will leave early because of an emergency. Some will fall asleep because they were up all night for some reason. Therefore, it is foolish and unrealistic to attempt to get everyone in the audience to think well of the speech. More importantly, it is the wrong type of attitude to take in the first place. The purpose of public speaking is not to get something (approval, fame, respect, sales, clients, etc.) from the audience. It is to give something useful to the audience. It is never possible to be absolutely error-free and to satisfy everybody. So having this preset idea eliminates the fear a lot.

A successful person, either in business or in profession, has the ability to communicate well in English. It is not simply being able to talk, but rather being able to get the desired message across. But when that purpose of speaking fails, we chastise ourselves. To recover from this we need to be open to learning. A combination of learning and practice can make us successful in speech communication. Speaking in English should be encouraged more and the learning centers should be more speakers-friendly. We should all take the efforts of doing it. Only then the barriers can be removed.

Notes

1. *Webster Dictionary* records the word rhetoric as having originated from the Middle English *rethorik*, from Anglo-French *rethorique*, from Latin *rhetorica*, from Greek *rhētorikē*.

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