

Speech as Effective Communication

'Speech' is a form of human communication and it is also claimed to be the most efficient form of communication. Evidence from Horowitz and Newman's research supports this view. Horowitz and Newman had forty subjects speak and write for two minutes on two topics after thinking about the topic for thirty seconds. Twenty subjects wrote first and spoke second; twenty spoke first and wrote second. The same procedure was repeated in a second experiment except the subjects were allowed to write for four, eight, or twelve minutes (it takes longer to write than to speak the same number of words). The results showed that spoken communication produced significantly more ideas and subordinate ideas than written communication even when the time limit for writing was extended to twelve minutes. This shows that speaking is more efficient and effective than writing. Now let's look at the word 'communication'. Communication is viewed as the process of sending and receiving messages to achieve understanding. The expression 'say what you mean and mean what you say' is exactly what communication means. Once a German scholar, Thomas Mann, defined communication as 'civilization itself'. He is right because without communication human beings would be isolated and unable to send and receive ideas.

Human beings use various means of communication. The two major ones are verbal communication and non-verbal communication. What we are interested in here is verbal communication because we believe that human beings communicate best through speaking. When communication takes place through speech, it is known as 'speech communication'.

Why Speech Communication is Important

From the teacher's point of view, speech communication is a very important part of learning and teaching. Students could not learn if they were not allowed to listen and speak or to ask questions. Teachers also could not teach if they were not allowed to speak. Thus, both teaching and learning require speech-communication skills.

Speech communication is also vital and essential to one's future. How successful a person is in

his future career depends on how well he succeeds in communicating. Studies conducted by an American company revealed that seventy per cent of the workers who lost their jobs lost them because they failed to communicate clearly, not because they did not have the technical knowledge to perform their work. In another study, over a thousand people from different professions were asked to evaluate the importance of training in speech communication for themselves. Seventy-five per cent of the group responded that the skill of speaking was important and essential to their work. Ninety per cent of the executives who were interviewed also acknowledged that speech training was important to them. Most professional people, e.g. attorneys, the clergy, doctors, nurses, teachers, etc. use speech extensively in their work. Undoubtedly, developing skills in speaking is important in anyone's life. It helps one to achieve success in almost any career.

Speech is especially important in decision making. Many of our daily activities involve speaking with other people. Our speaking skill may determine the success or failure of our activities. Skill in speaking enables us to persuade others to share our views and also to reach the decisions that we favour. As we may know from history, the people who had the greatest impact on other people's lives were those skilled in speaking. People like Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Winston Churchill were all effective speakers noted for their powerful and persuasive speeches.

With all these facts in mind, the value of having a speech course for language teachers is quite clear, for this type of course will provide teachers with opportunities to practise oral communication in a variety of speaking situations and eventually will make teachers effective speakers.

Characteristics of Spoken Language

Once a person has decided to communicate with someone else through speech, the next step is to choose the right kind of language (it can be words, clauses or sentences). Someone once said: 'Words are the garments with which speakers clothe their ideas. Choosing effective language for a speech is like choosing the right clothes for a special

occasion.' Once John F. Kennedy referred to Churchill's speeches during World War II, saying: 'Churchill mobilized the English language and sent it into battle.' Kennedy was right. Churchill's words did more than dozens of planes or ships.

Speeches are made of ideas expressed in spoken language which are skilfully and carefully selected. The type of spoken language involves several qualities which make it different from written language. The following are some of the main differences between spoken language and written language. Being aware of these differences, which also characterize spoken language, helps one become an effective speaker.

1. *Spoken language should be clear, brief and simple.*

A good writer is not necessarily a good speaker. As stated by a scholar, 'Writing and speaking are as little alike as stone and water'. Of course, the difference is clear since written language exists on paper but a speech exists in utterance. If you take an audience's point of view, the difference between writing and speaking is the difference between reading and listening. You have to keep in mind that listeners have no chance to set their own pace but have to keep up with the speaker. Thus, effective language for speaking must be immediately clear to the listener. That is why clarity always ranks as the most important quality of spoken language. In order to evoke the mind of the listener, clarity calls for short sentences and simple words. Spoken sentences need to be shorter and simpler than written ones, for long sentences make the listener fail to understand or to follow. Simple words, considered a sign of clear language, are often those that are among the ordinary vocabulary of your particular audience attending your particular speech. Remember that only language that is simple and direct can make an impact on your audience.

2. *Spoken language should be concrete and less abstract.*

Spoken language must not only be clear, short and simple but also concrete and not abstract. That is, it is the kind of language that lets the listener 'see' the idea as well as understand it. The clearer the mental picture perceived by the listener, the more concrete language you use. The more abstract the word, the vaguer the referent, and also the greater chance of misunderstanding. Therefore, words that are abstract should be avoided since such words are an obstacle to clarity.

Compare the following two sentences. The second one gives you a concrete picture of the ideas expressed. You will notice that you cannot 'see' those ideas when you use the word 'nervous'.

- a. Ahmad seemed nervous, but firm.
- b. Ahmad was shaking, but his jaw was tightly set.

3. *Spoken language should be specific.*

Exactness in word choice is one way of achieving clarity of meaning. If the words chosen do not mean what you intend, it is difficult for the intended meaning to be evoked in the mind of the listener. The more concrete the speech is, the more specific are the words that are chosen. Consider this paragraph from a student's speech:

"Cigarette smoke contains *many harmful substances* including known cancer agents. These substances affect *many parts* of the respiratory system. *Elements* in cigarette smoke *affect* the cilia — the small waving hairs lining the bronchial tubes — which are responsible for clearing the respiratory system of *foreign matter*. Moreover, *things* found in cigarette smoke are deposited in *many parts of the body*, where they accumulate."

You will notice that the words and phrases in italic are not specific. They are vague and too general. The paragraph looks much better by replacing the italicized vague expressions with more concrete and specific words as shown below:

"Cigarette smoke contains *gases, uncondensed vapours, and liquid particulates*, including the *chemical benzo(a)pyrene, the deadliest known cancer agent. Carbon monoxide, formaldehyde and hydrogen cyanide*, found in cigarette smoke, *paralyze* the cilia — the small waving hairs lining the bronchial tubes — which are responsible for clearing the respiratory system of *bacteria and particulates*. Moreover, *particles* found in cigarette smoke are deposited in the *larynx, carina, major bronchi, smaller bronchi, bronchioles, and pulmonary tissues*, where they accumulate."

4. *Spoken language makes greater use of repetition.*

The language of speech tends to be more repetitious than the language of writing. Repetition ensures that the listener does not miss or forget the intended message. In fact, repetition is an effective device for highlighting important points. Good speakers make use of repetition by stating the same idea several times using the same word. The following passage from a speech made by

Winston Churchill during World War II illustrates this quality:

'We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches. We shall fight on the landing grounds. We shall fight in the fields and in the streets, and we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender.'

If we attempt to shorten Churchill's speech by eliminating those repetitious words and by re-combining sentences into short phrases, it may look like this:

'We shall defend our island — at whatever cost — by fighting on the beaches and the landing grounds, in the fields, streets, and hills. But we shall never surrender.'

However, you can see the speech has lost its wonderful exhortative quality which results from the repetition.

5. *Spoken language should try to achieve economy by avoiding unnecessary words.*

Economy in language means to express one's meaning in the most effective way, regardless of the number of words that you use. In speaking, particularly public speaking, being economical means not wasting words, especially words which are not necessary or which add nothing to the meaning of the sentence. Good speakers should be more concerned with the effectiveness of the words used than the number of words. The examples below show both uneconomical and economical sentences:

Uneconomical: Regarding the situation in the flooded area in Kota Baru, we must make a concerted effort to aid the local residents.

Economical: We must try to aid the residents in the flooded area in Kota Baru.

Uneconomical: A period of sunny weather set in and remained for a whole week in Kuala Lumpur.

Economical: We had sunshine for a whole week in Kuala Lumpur.

6. *Spoken language tends to be more colloquial than written language.*

Language in print usually demands the utmost in grammar and formality but language in speech can give way to informality and colloquialism. In

fact, speakers who insist on being excessively grammatical and formal mostly end up being rigid and pedantic. The following is a brief excerpt from a famous speech made by Sojourner Truth, an American abolitionist:

'The man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages or over puddles, or gives me the best place — and ain't I a woman?'

I could work as much and eat as much as a man — when I could get it — and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman?'

You can see that part of the intensity of the speech is derived from its colloquial phrasing 'Ain't I a woman?' If the speaker used the formal and correct phrasing like 'Aren't I a woman?' or 'Am I not a woman?' there would be a lack of force and impact which was found in the original.

You have seen that speaking is different, as a forms of expression, from writing. As I have mentioned earlier, a good writer is not necessarily a good speaker nor a good speaker necessarily a good writer. Nor will the techniques that work for writing successfully transfer to speaking. How can one speak effectively? The answer is not easy. Speaking effectively is not an easy skill. It is a skill that has to be developed through training and constant practice. By pointing out some of the main characteristics of spoken language, which are quite different from language in writing, I hope that these may help the student recognize the importance of the skill of speech communication if one wants to be an effective and successful speaker.

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