

PUBLIC SPEAKING: IT CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN ESL STUDENTS

Hairuzila Idrus

Universiti Teknologi Petronas Tronoh, Perak

Suzana Meor Abdul Aziz

Pusat Bahasa UiTM, Shah Alam

ABSTRACT

In the past and also now, very often we hear complaints about the reticence of Asian ESL (English as a Second Language) students. Teachers handling oral sessions say the students only listen and are shy to participate because they are not comfortable or lack the confidence to use English in class. In her study on the behaviours of ESL learners in Malaysia, Bahiyah (1992) noted that the students felt insecure about their level of English and feared that their mistakes would make their classmates or teacher laugh at or look down on them.

The aim of this article is to find out if having the skills in public speaking can bring benefits to the students in terms of becoming more comfortable and confident in speaking before an audience in English. This article also discusses the findings of a survey among the students at the Centre for Preparatory Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA who took the basic public speaking class. The findings showed the benefits and how lessons and skills taught helped students feel more confident in using English and thus dispelling some common misconceptions normally associated with ESL public speaking. The findings are based on students' perceptions of what they have learned or gained after taking the course.

Introduction

Many people who can converse easily in all kinds of everyday situations become frightened at the idea of standing up before a group to make a speech. Many people admit that speaking before a group is among their greatest fears. However, the need for effective public speaking will almost certainly touch us sometime in our life. When it does, we want to be ready. But even if we never give another speech in our lives, we have still much to gain from studying public speaking. This is what teachers of public speaking want the students to see. The speech class will give training in speaking, listening,

critical thinking, organizing ideas and presenting oneself skilfully. This training is invaluable for every type of communication.

Many Malaysian English teachers have noted that the “fear” of public speaking is very obvious. The students prefer to be passive in the classroom and would rather listen and take notes than ask questions even though they may not understand the lesson. The students are very reticent when it comes to communicating or expressing their thoughts and ideas before a group of people. This is especially so if they have to use English. When studying the behaviours of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in Malaysia, Bahiyah (1992) found out that the students behave this way due to shyness or in Bahasa Melayu “malu”, meaning that they are nervous and afraid that their friends will laugh at them. This kind of behaviour will not bring any benefit to the students. Therefore, something must be done to help them change their behaviour into something positive if teachers want to produce students who can communicate well in English. After having taught a basic public speaking course called *Fundamentals of Speech Communication* for some years, the writers wanted to see if learning the basic skills of public speaking would help ESL students overcome their fears of speaking before a group of people and to improve their communication skills. The main aim of this article therefore, is to discover if having these skills can bring benefits to the students in terms of becoming more comfortable and confident when speaking before an audience in English.

The Course and Its Context

The course this article is based on is called *Fundamentals of Speech Communication*. This course is compulsory for all students pursuing degree courses at the Centre for Preparatory Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia (UiTM). In this three-credit hour course, each student is required to do at least three speeches – one informative speech and two persuasive speeches. The general goal of the course is to enable the students to become more confident and effective participants in public communication. Upon completion of the course, the students should be able to understand the principles of effective communication; discuss ideas, express opinions and respond to the ideas of others; organize and present informative and persuasive speeches; and analyse and evaluate the speeches of others. The main assignments in this course are three graded speeches to be presented to the class. Students must also come up with the speech outlines. The course also includes two quizzes, a mid-term and a final exam, which will test students on the fundamentals learned throughout the course. (For course outline, see Appendix 1).

Methodology

A survey questionnaire was distributed to sixty randomly selected students in the programme. Forty-three (43) respondents were majoring in Information Systems Management (ISM) while seventeen (17) were majoring in Accounting, Finance and Marketing. Respondents were equally divided on the basis of gender. They were selected based on the following criteria:

- are pursuing degree courses.
- have already completed the basic public speaking course.

The survey questionnaires used consist of fixed-alternative questions, open-ended questions, scale questions and lists of choices (see Appendix 2). Responses to the questionnaire form the basis for this paper.

Results of Study

Data from the survey questionnaire administered to sixty students showed that 80% of them had problems in communication in public before they took the course, while 20% said they did not have any problems. Out of the 80% who had problems, 55% said they had overcome these problems after taking the course (see Table 1).

Table 1
Percentage of respondents' attitude towards public speaking before and after taking the course.

	Before (%)	After (%)
Hate the very thought of speaking in public	37	10
Avoid having to speak to a group	30	7
Avoid asking questions when in a group	13	3
Feel embarrassed speaking in a group	32	12
Find difficulty to say what you wanted in a group	50	13
Have no problems when speaking in public	20	55

88% of the respondents indicated that they are more confident to speak before a group after taking the course. Only 12% still do not have confidence. All sixty respondents find the skills that they learned in the course very useful and 78% said they would recommend the course to other students.

The respondents have also improved on several things like speaking skills (75%), listening skills (69%), speech delivery (66%), confidence in using English (63%), critical thinking (57%), ethical values (57%), handling nervousness (50%) and being audience-centred (49%). Refer to Table 2 for details.

Table 2
Respondents' perceptions of what they have gained after taking the course

	SA%	A%	NA/D%	D%	SD%
I have improved on my listening skills	35	33	30	-	2
I have improved on my speaking skills	22	53	17	8	-
I can overcome my nervousness when speaking in public	13	42	37	8	-
I have improved on my critical thinking skills	8	48	32	12	-
I have improved on my ethical values	12	45	38	3	2
I have improved on my speech delivery techniques	13	53	27	7	-
I have become more confident to use English	17	47	27	9	-
I am more organized in my work	11	43	38	8	-
I am more successful in persuading people	10	30	50	10	-
I have become more audience-centered	12	37	41	10	-

- * SA Strongly Agree
- * A Agree
- * NA/D Neither Agree nor Disagree
- * D Disagree
- * SD Strongly Disagree

The respondents admitted having some problems while taking the course, like not being creative enough to come up with good speeches, could not find a good topic, did not know how to prepare the outline and being too nervous when delivering their speeches (see Table 3 for details). The students faced these problems because that was their first time taking a public speaking course and some of them did not take the course seriously. For example, they were taught how to write a good outline, samples were given and in fact, there is one chapter in the textbook on writing a good outline. If they did not read the chapter, they would not know how to write a good outline. As for not being creative and not being able to come up with good topics, the writers strongly believe the students need to do a lot of reading to gain knowledge and gather information. Also, they must watch carefully how their friends deliver their speeches, especially the good ones, so that they can get ideas on what they should do in order to come up with good speeches. Some of the students also had problems of not having enough time to prepare a good speech. The students were actually given enough time, around two weeks, to prepare for their speeches. Thus, this problem is due to poor time management. The writers feel this finding explains the reason why only 55% of the students claimed they could overcome the problem in public speaking after taking the course. Had these students taken the course seriously, the writers feel the percentage would have been higher.

Table 3
Problems the respondents faced while taking the course.

Problems	Percentage %
Could not find a good topic	53
No time to prepare a good topic	43
Not creative enough to come up with a good speech	62
Did not like to listen to other students' speeches	15
Did not like to evaluate other students' speeches	15
Not confident to give a good speech	33
Did not know how to prepare a good outline	43
Class was boring	23
Too nervous when delivering speeches	33

Discussion

From the survey it was discovered that the course does bring many benefits to the students. The following will be a discussion of the five main benefits, which are: improving speaking skills, gaining confidence, improving listening skills, improving speech delivery, and handling nervousness.

i) Improving speaking skills

In the basic public speaking course, students are made aware of the fact that there are many similarities between public speaking and daily conversation. Most people already possess communication skills, which they use in daily conversation, that are the most important skills needed for public speaking. The skills are organizing ideas logically, tailoring messages to the audience, telling stories for maximum impact and adapting to feedback from the listener.

However, both types of communication are not identical. In the course students learn that public speaking is more highly structured than daily conversation which requires more detailed preparation. Public speaking also requires more formal language where students learn not to use slang, jargon and bad grammar. Also, public speaking has a different method of delivery where students need to adjust their voices to be heard clearly by all the audience. They should assume a more erect posture and should avoid distracting mannerisms and verbal habits.

With study and practice, students will be able to master these differences and expand their conversational skills into speechmaking. The speech class will provide the opportunity for study and practice and help the students improve their speaking ability.

ii) Gaining confidence

It is evident that in general the students do feel more confident to speak before a group after taking the basic public speaking course. Lucas (1998:15) noted that over the years “thousands of students have developed confidence in their speechmaking abilities”. In the speech class, students learn ways to produce and present speeches effectively. They are taught the do’s and don’ts in public speaking. With the knowledge that they have, the students should feel well equipped to perform the task. Besides the theory, they are also given the opportunity to practise what they have learned, where they need to present at least three speeches. This would give them enough practice to develop confidence. As the confidence of the speaker grows, he will be better able to stand before other people and tell them what he thinks, feels and knows – and to make the audience think, feel and know those same things. Confidence nurtures itself, meaning that if the speaker did well in the earlier speech, he will be much more confident the next time. And as the speaker becomes a more confident public speaker, his oral fluency will also improve. According to Ford and Wolvin (1993), a confident public speaker will likely become more confident in other areas of life as well. This is because he can use the knowledge from the course to deal with people since the knowledge and skills are also applicable in everyday life.

iii) Improving listening skills

Nichols (1957) calls listening “a lost art”, since people usually grasp 50% of what they hear and after two days they can only remember half of that or 25% of the original message. People spend more time listening than doing any other communicative activity – more than reading, more than writing, more even than speaking. Many people think that in a public speaking course, students only learn how to speak. But not many are aware that this course can also teach students how to become better listeners. The art of listening can be helpful in almost every part of our lives. Wolvin and Coakley (1991:153) indicate that “listening is so important that in one survey by American Fortune on 500 companies, almost 60% of the respondents said they provide some kind of listening training for their employees”. So, if the students have good listening skills, this will definitely help them in their careers.

Speech class gives a perfect chance to work on listening skills. In the basic public speaking course the students learn the importance of listening well. As speakers, listening well is important as a way to get the most from ideas and information from television, radio, conversations and lectures. As listeners, students can improve their own speech by learning things that seem to work. They can try them out and also learn to avoid what does not work. Listening well can also enhance critical thinking skills as they are closely allied, training in listening is also training in how to think. In the course, two types of listening are emphasized, comprehensive listening and critical listening. Comprehensive listening is listening to understand the message of a speaker and the critical thinking skills applied here are summarizing information, recalling facts, and distinguishing main points from minor points. Critical listening is listening to evaluate a message for purposes of accepting or rejecting it and the critical thinking skills that are important here are separating fact from opinion, spotting weaknesses in reasoning and judging the soundness of evidence.

iv) Improving speech delivery

The impact of a speech is strongly affected by how the speech is delivered. Delivery is very important in any public speaking situation. Even a mediocre speech will be more effective if it is presented well, whereas a wonderfully written speech can be ruined by poor delivery. A speaker cannot make a good speech without having something to say. But having something to say is not enough. The speaker must also know “how” to say it.

In a basic public speaking course, the students learn how to deliver a speech effectively. A primary factor in delivery is the speaker’s voice. To use the voice effectively, a speaker should work on controlling the volume, pitch, rate, pauses, vocal variety, pronunciation, articulation and dialect. The second vital factor in delivery is non-verbal communication.

Posture, personal appearance, facial expression, body movement, posture and eye contact, all affect the way listeners respond to speakers. A speaker can also learn to control gestures and body movements so that he enhances the message rather than distract from it. If the students know how to deliver their speeches effectively, they should be able to apply the skills whenever they have to do an oral presentation or present a speech. Most importantly they learn to talk with the audience and not to read to the audience, which most ESL students tend to do when they have to do oral presentations in English.

v) Handling nervousness

Most people are afraid to do public speaking because they are nervous. Actually people are nervous because they are facing something new and unknown. But once they become accustomed to the situation, it is no longer threatening. In the course, the students also learn why people may feel afraid and nervous when speaking in public, why their hands shake and knees quiver, why their voices go up an octave, why there are butterflies in their stomachs, why their breathing rate changes and they tend to perspire more. According to Beebe and Beebe (1997), it is actually because the person's brain is signalling to the body to help the person with a different task. The physical changes caused by anxiety improve his energy level, and this enables him to function better than he might otherwise. The heightened state of readiness can actually help him speak better. If the students can understand these phenomena, they should not take nervousness as a threat or an obstacle to public speaking. It is perfectly normal to be nervous. Students also learn how to transform a negative force into positive nervousness – a zesty, enthusiastic, lively feeling with a slight edge to it. It is still nervousness, but it feels different. “You are no longer victimized by it; instead, you're vitalized by it. You're in control of it” (Snyder, 1983:113). With the knowledge that they have, students should know what to do every time they feel nervous when speaking before an audience.

The limitation of this study is that it is only based on students' perceptions and a study has yet to be conducted to measure the effectiveness of the course.

Suggestions

A basic public speaking course can bring benefits to the students in numerous ways, especially in building students' oral fluency and self-confidence. Therefore, the writers suggest that higher institutions of learning offer this course to their students. Some might say that the students are only confident when presenting their speeches in class since they are already familiar with the audience, which is their classmates but not when presenting to a different audience or in a different situation. This is true since they will face something new and of course they will feel nervous. But at least they have the knowledge and know what they should do to overcome nervousness or whatever prob-

lems they face on speaking before an audience. This is better than not having the knowledge at all. Several studies have shown that communication skills, including public speaking, are among the most prized assets job recruiters look for when hiring college graduates (Curtis, Winsor and Stephens, 1989). Regardless of the profession, one will almost surely need the art of public speaking. As mentioned earlier, the need for effective public speaking will touch us sometime in our lives. And a tertiary education is to prepare the students for their future. This course can help to contribute to that.

Misconceptions

One of the common misconceptions normally associated with ESL public speaking is that the command of English of ESL learners is not that good and thus they cannot deliver a good speech. But if they have all the skills and most importantly the confidence, they should be able to deliver a good speech, even as good as those of native speakers. Another misconception is that not many people are willing to do it even in their native language because they are too nervous, what more in a second language. But with the knowledge that the students have gained from the course and the skills that they have learned, they should be able to handle nervousness.

Conclusion

This study is on students' perceptions of what they have gained and learned after taking the basic public speaking class. The findings are based on the responses from the survey questionnaire given to 60 respondents who had taken the course earlier. It is found that the students gained several benefits but the main benefits discussed in this paper are improving speaking skills, gaining confidence, improving listening and critical thinking skills, improving speech delivery and handling nervousness. The respondents indicated that even though they did not like the idea of speaking in public, the majority of them mentioned that what they liked most about the course was that they were given the opportunity to deliver their own speeches. This further supports the notion that once students had the experience of giving a speech and knew they could do it, they would like the idea after all. They did not like the idea earlier because they were afraid to try something new, afraid of being laughed at if they made mistakes and afraid of making fools of themselves because they were too nervous.

After taking the course, they found out that this anxiety could be overcome. And to go through this "fear" is worth it since it can be turned into something beneficial to them, like being more adept communicators and being better listeners and thinkers. The objective of the article is to find out if having public speaking skills can help the students become more confident to communicate in English and from the study the writers found

that having the skills can help the ESL students if they take the course seriously. From the positive feedback received from the respondents, there is a possibility that other ESL students at tertiary level can enjoy the same benefits if the course is offered at their universities or colleges. Hence, having the skills of public speaking can make a difference in the students' lives. Perhaps further studies could be done to measure the effectiveness of this course for ESL students.

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APPENDIX 1

Fundamentals of Speech Communication - Course Outline

Class Meeting	Topic - Activity
1	Course Overview
2	Basic Principles of Speech Communication
3	Ethics and Public Speaking
4	Introductory Speeches
5	Speaking to Inform
6	Choosing Topics and Purposes
7	Analyzing the Audience
8	Organizing the Body of the Speech
9	Introductions and Conclusions
10	Outlining the Speech
11	Quiz # 1
12	Delivering the Speech
13	Using Visual Aids
14	Informative Speeches
15	Informative Speeches
16	Midterm Exam
17	Introduction to Persuasive Speaking
18	Gathering Materials
19	Using Supporting Materials
20	Methods of Persuasion
21	Methods of Persuasion
22	Analysis of Persuasive Speeches
23	Quiz # 2
24	Listening to Speeches
25	Persuasive Speeches # 1
26	Persuasive Speeches # 1
27	Using Language Effectively
28	Using Language Effectively
29	Persuasive Speeches # 2
30	Persuasive Speeches # 2
31	Summary and Review of Final Exam
32	Summary and Review of Final Exam

APPENDIX 2

Survey : Public Speaking

Dear students,

We are conducting a survey on the benefits of a public speaking course (PCO 110: Fundamentals of Speech Communication). We would really appreciate it if you could spare some time to answer the following questions. Your cooperation will be highly appreciated.

Gender

Male

Female

Major: _____

1. **Before** taking the public speaking course, did you: (you may tick more than one)

hate the very thought of speaking in public?

avoid having to speak to a group?

avoid asking questions when you were in a group?

feel embarrassed speaking in a group?

find difficulty to say what you wanted to in a group?

have no problem in speaking in public?

Others, please specify: _____

2. **After** taking the course, do you still feel the same way?

Yes

No

a) If your answer is Yes, state which one(s) do you still feel the same way about

3. Do you find public speaking skills very useful?

Yes No

4. Do you think you are more confident to speak up after taking the public speaking course?

Yes No

5. The following questions are about the things that you have improved on after taking the public speaking course. Referring to the scale given, please circle the number that matches your opinion on the statement.

1 Strongly agree 2 Agree 3 Neither agree nor disagree 4 Disagree 5 Strongly disagree

After taking the course:

I have improved on my listening skills	1	2	3	4	5
I have improved on my speaking skills	1	2	3	4	5
I can overcome nervousness when speaking in public	1	2	3	4	5
I have improved on my critical thinking skills	1	2	3	4	5
I have improved on my ethical values	1	2	3	4	5
I have improved on my speech delivery techniques	1	2	3	4	5
I have become more confident to use English	1	2	3	4	5
I am more organized in my work	1	2	3	4	5
I am more successful in persuading people	1	2	3	4	5
I have become more audience-centred	1	2	3	4	5

6. What was/were your problem(s) when you were taking the public speaking course?
(You may tick more than one)

- Couldn't find a good topic
- No time to prepare a good speech
- Not creative enough to come up with a good speech
- Didn't like to listen to other students' speeches
- Didn't like to evaluate other students' speeches
- Not confident to give a speech
- Didn't know how to prepare a good outline

Class was boring

Too nervous when delivering my speeches

7. Name one thing that you liked most about the course.

8. Name one thing that you disliked the most about the course.

9. Would you recommend the course to other students? Tick the appropriate box.

Yes

Possibly yes

Maybe

Not so sure

No

Thank you for your time.

Hairuzila Idrus & Suzana Meor Abdul Aziz