

There are many among us who are overawed by the prospect of having to face an audience. The sheer thought of having to physically stand up, let alone say anything, can be very daunting. Yet, there are some among us who literally shine, holding forth in private company and in public.

I would like to suggest that somewhere between these two extremes lies a potentially good public speaker. To be a good public speaker, one must not only have the verve, the courage and the fluency of the latter, but also a certain modicum of fear. To have this 'fear', or 'butterflies in the stomach', as it were, is not so much a negative trait as an indication of an awareness of and a sensitivity to audience reaction, whose impression of the stature of a speaker cannot be dismissed. Overriding confidence in a speaker can, in fact, be more obnoxious than awe-inspiring.

Having said that, I would like to make some observations on what it takes to be a good public speaker, more from my experience as a teacher of oral communication than as a public speaker of any great merit. Hence, you will notice that these observations are based on (classroom) rules of thumb, intuition and hunches.

In general, there are a lot of parallels between public speaking and teaching. Public speaking involves an orchestration of skills to be found in communication, drama and psychology. The competent public speaker, like the able teacher, is at one time or other a composer, artist or craftsman, performer or actor, and psychologist, all rolled into one.

As for teaching speaking skills, in general, and public speaking, in particular, these skills cannot be taught in accordance with prescribed or dogmatic rules, because they cannot be learnt or acquired as a regime of rules. While it is possible to set up certain linguistic criteria for evaluating or assessing speaking skills, it may not be possible to do the same for public speak-

ing because of the complexity of the skills involved. However, public speaking ability can be acquired by, firstly, developing the speaking skills through preparation and practice and, secondly, by developing a feel for the audience.

'Reading' the audience or 'knowing' the audience can be a defying task but worth the effort, for its value cannot be overemphasized. We may not have the same degree of success in reading our audience as a social psychologist would, but we must persevere. Knowing the audience has a direct bearing on the kind of appeal that a speaker makes to the audience, the manner of delivery, stance, choice of language and enunciation. Control over these factors reflects the competence of an able public speaker, which can be further enhanced by an appropriate manner or presence and, of course, personality. But as we are all persons first and public speakers second, we should not make too much of the latter. History has shown us, ironically, that some of the world's best orators suffered from speech defects — Demosthenes the ancient Greek orator and Winston Churchill, the best English example so far, to name two famous examples — hardly the kind of credentials one would expect of people who proved to be two of the greatest orators the world has ever known.

Perhaps one of the first questions a public speaker must consider is who his audience is which will, in turn, direct him to what he is going to say and, lastly, of course, to how he is going to say it, not only from the verbal but also from the non-verbal point of view. In other words, to put it somewhat flippantly, the speaker must address himself squarely to the 'Who', the 'What' and the 'How' of public speaking.

If by 'Who' we mean the audience, then the speaker must be aware of a number of specific and general variables that affect a prepared speech and the audience's reaction to it. The specific variables are the attitudes inherent in the audience, knowledge of the subject matter

at hand, the composition of the audience by age and gender and number, the size of the audience, and whether or not there has been any exposure to a previous speaker or speakers.

Attitude:

It helps in speech preparation if the possible attitude of the audience can be anticipated or uncovered. The favoured elements of the subject matter can then be dealt with and the less favoured either discarded or glossed over. Ethics should be maintained always. Sentiments of the wrong sort should not be played up or prejudices cashed in to persuade. If anything, use persuasion to change attitudes for the better.

Knowledge:

If your audience already has a specialized knowledge of the subject matter, do not give a simplified explanation. On the other hand, if you are speaking to laymen it is imperative to use the KISS principle, that is, keep it short and simple. If you 'bore' your audience, they stop listening and when they stop listening you have stopped communicating.

Gender:

As for gender, the general observation seems to be quite chauvinistic. Apparently, many speakers believe that a male audience is more receptive to logical and factual content while a female audience is more receptive to emotional content. It is a relief to know that the same speakers also believe that a female audience is more humanistic in their attitude, more responsive to humour and more receptive to ideals.

Age:

As for age, it has been observed that different approaches have to be used for youthful and mature audiences. Generally, youth is idealistic and age sceptical. So if the audience is a mixed bag of youthful males and females and mature to elderly males and females, speak generally and not particularly on issues. If there is any specific reference to any one of these groups, try to maintain eye contact with them for the duration of that reference. Then revert to the audience as a whole. Psychologically speaking, the other groups feel 'left out' at that point of specific reference.

Size:

Audience size can sometimes be an inhibiting factor even for more experienced speakers. Generally, small groups allow for intimacy while larger groups do not. So play up detailed information with a small group but generalize and spare the details for the larger group, though not the repetition.

Previous Speakers:

Lastly, assess for yourself the impact that a previous speaker has made on the audience by judging the audience's reaction. Play it by ear. Do not try to outdo the talents of a previous speaker — you probably do not possess additional talents. If a speaker has mesmerized the audience, well and good. Take stock of it and refer to it in passing by way of introduction or by praising the speaker. Your modesty will endear you to your audience, which is half the battle won. Even if the previous speakers weren't brilliant, they would have provided, as it were, the stage setting and by alluding to their subject matter it not only puts you on a good footing with the previous speakers and the audience in general but also allows for new ideas that you introduce to be linked more effectively.

Whatever the speaker's feel for his audience, and no matter how he reads it (partially or completely), the audience must be approached with a sense of respect, and responsibility. The cardinal sin of public speaking is to underestimate or insult the intelligence of the audience. Just as a good teacher should never presume too much, so too shouldn't a good public speaker. This pitfall should always be avoided because it antagonizes the audience and alienates them from the speaker. There must be many among us who remember listening to such a speaker and crying mentally at the attitude towards the audience. Never talk down to an audience by being patronizing, and never talk over their heads either. If the subject is too esoteric it will not hold the attention of the audience, and one will feel a great unease descending which will slowly but surely affect the speaker psychologically. If you are able to sense any unease, try to rectify it at once and save the day for yourself. Once the audience has stopped listening, then the speaker has stopped communicating.

Another sin in public speaking is to speak for longer than the time allowed. Besides being rude to the next speaker and the audience, if it is Question and Answer time it is also an indication of a lack of self discipline. A good public speaker, like a good teacher, must also be a good manager of time. It is the responsibility of a speaker to ensure that the next speaker has the time and the chance to say his piece. How a speaker treats the audience from the point of view of the attitude towards them and the other speakers, the subject matter and with regard to time, are also a reflection of personality which does not go unnoticed and adds to or diminishes from the full stature of the speaker.

As for the 'What' of public speaking, do not take any short cuts unless it is to the library. You have a moral and social responsibility as a speaker to know what you are going to say. Do what you want but know what you want to say. Research if you must. It is surely a measure of your ability or enthusiasm or attitude that you have been asked to speak so don't shirk that social responsibility. Remember, also, that your credibility depends more on what you say than on how you say it. Be entertaining by all means but be clear in your message, even if you are only going to make a toast.

Now we arrive at the 'How' of public speaking. Factors to consider seriously at this point are enunciation and voice production, which are tied to an effective use of voice, diction and choice of words and fluency. No amount of speech preparation will help if the manner of delivery is poor. Fluency, incidentally, must not be confused for a torrent of words. It is careful, selective control over words and phrases, taking into consideration variation in pace, emphasis, pitch and pauses. But there is no room for stops and starts and fillers of any sort. In fact, it is best to swallow a 'hm' or an 'err' and pass it off as a pause rather than say it.

What I've attempted to do so far is to provide some insights into public speaking drawn mainly from my experience as a language teacher. Learning to speak in public should not be viewed as too formidable a task. Although public speaking involves a complex interleaving of skills, these skills can all be mastered over a period of time with careful preparation of material for speeches, practice in the speaking skills and through observation of other speakers.

The gift of the gab is yours to nab if you can keep tab of the gags!