
UNIT 14 ORAL PRESENTATION SKILLS AND PUBLIC SPEAKING – 1

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14.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will understand that

- effective public speaking depends on effective delivery and effective content,
- effective delivery involves management of the voice, conveying emotions through tone, volume and rate of speech,
- there are ways to improve our delivery and voice through practice,
- a good speech depends on preparation of content as well delivery,
- there are some well-known themes or areas from which we can draw upon for the content of our speech, and

This unit must be read along with the following one, which has some illustrative examples and further exercises to develop your ability to speak well in public.

14.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we shall discuss the oral communication skills involved in public speaking. We learn to speak well in public by listening again and again to many people speaking in public. Listening to others speaking gives us a variety of models. We can evaluate these models, and choose from them for us to imitate or to approximate to.

Whether we make a speech or listen to a speech, we need think about both what is said and how it is said. In this unit we shall first look at how to speak well –

how to manage our nervousness, our voice, our posture – and then take a look at what to say. In the next unit we shall also consider how to say what we want to say, in good language.

14.2 STYLE AND SUBSTANCE IN PUBLIC SPEAKING

We can think of a variety of different kinds of skills to master in order to speak well in public. This basket of skills is what we can call oral communication skills at a formal level or at an advanced level. We must pay attention in our speech to both

- the content, and
- the delivery.

Emotions and thoughts are some of the common elements of the content of our speech. The art of speaking well at an emotional moment such as a send-off or a welcome lies in striking the right balance between various emotions. Finding the right kind of praise (praise that appears to be sincere rather than an attempt at flattery, for example), or the right kind of criticism, is a challenge that requires careful thought. Again, if we want to persuade someone to our point of view, or to inform them about a new product, organization or phenomenon, we have to think carefully beforehand about the content that we wish to convey.

But it is not enough to think about the content of public speaking only in terms of emotion or thought. That is, the substance of our speech is not only its emotions and ideas. We have also to think of the words to choose to express our thought well. We can think of this as the language content of our speech. We can also think of it as style in language. Our language style depends on our control over the vocabulary of a language, our command of its idiomaticity or turns of phrase, and our style of sentence construction. We shall return to language content in the next unit.

Turning now to the delivery or how the speech is spoken, we shall discuss in this unit

- articulation or speaking skills in general.

Even the best content or language in a speech, if it is delivered in such a way as to be inaudible or monotonous, is lost on the audience. On the other hand, the best delivery or articulation will fail to hold the listener if (s)he finds the emotion and thought unappealing. It is the confluence of style and substance, content and delivery, that characterizes the good speaker.

Recall that we have already discussed in the previous block

- language-specific articulatory or speech skills.

You might want to revise some of those points here before you proceed.

14.2.1 Delivery: The Aesthetics of Speech

Let us first consider the aesthetics of speech, or the qualities that make our speech appealing, no matter what language we speak. The elements of aesthetic speech include

- breath control

- posture
- voice control: pitch, volume and rate
- articulatory clarity
- ability to convey nuances and emphases, using the voice: irony, wit, quotation, etc.

We now consider each of these in turn.

14.2.1.1 Breath Control

Our breath powers our voice. Air from the lungs makes our vocal cords vibrate to produce our voice. While we speak, we cannot breathe in; we exhale. How long we can speak for without pausing for breath, or how loud we can speak, are symptoms of our control over our breath. Any breathing exercises you do for reasons other than public speaking (such as your health) will also have an effect on your speech!

Becoming aware of our breath as we speak helps us to plan our rate of speech, to plan where we pause, and to plan how loudly or softly we can speak. More importantly, breathing right as we speak has a great calming effect on our nerves. As beginners in speaking in front of an audience, you have probably experienced sweaty palms and shaking knees, and perhaps you have burst out into speech without even hearing yourself, leave alone others listening to you. The best way to control this panic is to learn to control your breathing. When you step out in front of an audience, take a moment to get a couple of breaths right: slow yourself down. Let the audience register your presence in their mind. Then when you start to speak, you will have enough breath to do so, and the audience will have had the time to settle down to listen to you as you speak.

The first “public speech” I ever made wasn’t strictly a speech, but a message. We were on a school bus, out on an excursion. Our math teacher, a termagant, singled me out from one of the seats at the back of the bus and sent a message through me to the driver.

I had never opened my mouth in class before. Terrified, I made my way to behind the driver, shouted the message out at the back of his head (I don’t remember what the message was), and ran back to my seat. I still vividly remember the math teacher’s succinct comment: “Idiot!”

Here is a speaking exercise to help you develop control over your breath. Speak these sentences out aloud. Speak rhythmically, catching your breath if necessary at the pauses indicated by slashes (/). Add your own phrases to the story, to make it longer and longer.

Activity

The house that Jack built

This is the house / that Jack built.

This is the cheese / that lived in the house / that Jack built.

This is the rat / that ate the cheese / that lived in the house / that Jack built.

This is the cat / that killed the rat / that ate the cheese / that lived in the house / that Jack built.

This is the dog / that chased the cat / that killed the rat / that ate the cheese / that lived in the house / that Jack built. ...

14.2.1.2 Posture

Posture, or how you stand or sit while you speak, is important not only for how it looks to the listener, but for how your breath powers your voice. If you slouch, or cramp yourself, your lungs do not fill out with air, and you have less breath to speak with.

Stand or sit relaxed but tall. That is, do not “stand to attention”, with hands held rigid at your sides, and with all your muscles – including your throat muscles – tense. Relax – breathe! – but do not stand lazily, to one side or on one foot. Stand comfortably on both feet; let your hands remain, with palms open, at your sides; or if you prefer, clasp your fingers together loosely in front. Let your shoulders be open. If you bring your hands tightly together in front of your abdomen and clasp your elbows tight with your palms, your shoulders will close up, your diaphragm will tense, and breathing will become less easy and natural.

Many of us sit very badly in our chairs, letting the chair support our entire weight. Slumping in the chair will not allow you to use your voice effectively. Crossing one foot over the other so as to bring an ankle over the knee will again affect the diaphragm badly. The diaphragm is the muscle in the abdomen, below the lungs, that allows the lungs to expand or contract. Constricting the abdomen will constrict the diaphragm. Sit as you would stand, with both feet comfortably on the ground; with your arms relaxed on the armrests of your chair, or loosely resting in your lap, with fingers intertwined if you like. It helps to intertwine your fingers, to keep your fingers from drumming or tapping nervously or impatiently as you speak or listen! Keep your back straight, but not rigid.

You can easily understand that control over breath and posture is not attained in a day. These are reflections of our habitual behaviour. Try to develop good breathing habits and good posture by paying attention to these aspects everyday, at a special exercise period of the day to begin with, until they become second nature to you.

Activity

Watch your body language when you answer the telephone. Do you nervously twiddle with the telephone wire (if there is one)? Do you laze back in the chair? Where do you hold the receiver in respect to your mouth and nose?

Monitor your behaviour when you answer calls from

- a friend whom you want to speak to
- a telemarketeer that you don't want to speak to, and
- an older person whom you respect,

to see if there are any differences in your posture.

When you answer the telephone, your voice is all you have to convey your personality. The mind knows this, and your body language conveys your attitude unconsciously through the voice. So this is a useful exercise in monitoring yourself. If you like, you can find a partner with whom you can pair up to monitor each other's telephone voices.

14.2.1.3 Voice Control: Pitch, Volume and Rate

Do you know what the range of a good singing voice is? At least two octaves, or 14 notes! On the other hand, robotic speech or artificial speech is characterized by

its flat, monotonic delivery. And some of you must have listened with amusement or irritation to certain automated railway announcements (for example) where some words appear to jump out at you because of their unexpected pitch contour! “**Train** number – **Three, THREE, one, zero** – has **just** arrived on – **Platform** number **ONE!**”

Most of us are lucky if we can differentiate three pitches, or three to five notes, in our talk. We need to control pitch to convey feeling – surprise, anger, sorrow, and so on. If we are reading out a dramatic dialogue, we need to differentiate the speakers using pitch and other variations.

Most public speakers – including radio or television broadcasters – spend some time discovering the ideal pitch for them, or how to pitch their voice. Try reading the previous sentence out in as high a pitch as possible. (Remember that a high pitch does not mean an extra loud voice, although some effect of pitch on loudness is unavoidable.) Next, read it out in as low a pitch as possible. Both these pitches will probably feel strained, uncomfortable and artificial to your ears. Now pitch your voice somewhere in between, and see if you feel comfortable. Do this until you settle on a normal, natural speaking voice for yourself that sounds good. If you start speaking at this pitch, you should be able to raise your pitch a little to convey anger, surprise or a quotation; and to drop your pitch to convey fear, sorrow or wonder.

Many broadcasters pitch their voice a little lower when they speak into a microphone. Wherever possible, speak into a microphone for practice, and listen to yourself. You may need to adjust your voice to the microphone. Remember to take some time to position the microphone correctly, not too near to catch your breath, but not so out of alignment with your mouth that it does not catch your voice.

Do you know what a “stage whisper” is? It’s supposed to be a whisper – but it has to be spoken in such a way as to be heard by the audience! Ordinarily, when we whisper, we use only breath, and no voice at all. For a stage whisper, you might have to drop your voice in pitch and loudness to convey the idea of a whisper, but keep enough voice for what you say to be heard by everyone!

How loudly we talk depends on where we are and to whom we speak. Teachers sometimes turn to the blackboard as they talk, if they have to write something on it. They unconsciously compensate for turning their face and voice away from the audience by speaking a little more loudly and clearly. The exercises below will help you develop sensitivity to these factors. Remember that it is as irritating for an audience if you speak too softly as it is if you speak too loudly. It is perhaps better to be softer than necessary than to be louder than necessary, because people can ask you to speak up (speak louder), but they cannot ask you to turn down the volume of your voice without sounding rude. But they cannot repeatedly ask you to speak louder without sounding rude, either, or go on asking you to repeat what you said by saying “I’m sorry, what did you say?” or “Pardon?”

And as for rate, it is a common complaint about Indians that we speak too fast! Many accent trainers or accent neutralizers begin by simply asking speakers to slow down. Lengthening out the vowels, by singing them, for example, can do this.

In the previous block we got some idea about speaking to a rhythm: about words that were given their full sound value and words (such as *and*) that were spoken with very short vowels, with sounds omitted, and so on. Our speech must have a rhythm to it that allows the listener to get at the sense without too much trouble.

Radio and television broadcasters have been known to use the “three words a second” rule in speaking. For example, the previous sentence, which has 17 words, should take between 5 and 6 seconds for you to speak out. This is also a good

thumb rule for you to decide how long your speech should be. Perhaps you have been given 2 minutes to make a welcome speech, or to introduce someone. How much can you say? At three words a second, you can speak 180 words a minute, or around 350 words in two minutes.

Activity

The number of words in these paragraphs below, taken from the text above, totals up to just below 300. Use a stopwatch, or a watch with a second hand, and with the help of a friend see how long you take to speak these words out loud in a convincing way. You should take a little over a minute and a half.

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Activity

1. *A pitch exercise: Speak this sentence out in such a way that it is true:*

higher.

and

higher

and

higher

I can make my voice go

2. *A pitch exercise: Speak this sentence out in such a way that it is true:*

I can make my voice go

lower

and

lower

and

lower.

3. *This is a volume control exercise.* Recite 'The house that Jack built' while moving backwards from your listener. Now recite it while moving forwards towards your listener. If possible, place a tape recorder near the listener and listen to yourself later. Notice how you adjust how loud you speak according to how far you are from the listener.

Now do this same exercise after placing a row of chairs along a wall of your room. Ask your listener to move from one end of the room to the other, as you speak. Direct your voice at each of his positions. Then turn away from the listener and speak. Observe the changes you make in your voice.

4. *To control your rate of speaking, use a stopwatch.* Recite the longest line from 'The house that Jack built', and time it in seconds. Then try to speak the same sentence out using two or three more seconds. Don't stop in between the words: try to lengthen the words out, by 'singing' the vowels.
5. *Another way to control your rate of speech and your speech rhythm* is to clap your hands to a gentle rhythm while you speak the following columns of words. Each of these columns has only one stressed syllable, but the number of syllables increases in each column. So if you want to keep to the beat, you will have to speak the syllables in the third column at a faster rate than those in the first column, or the second.

'sat	'Saturn	'Saturday
'bet	'better	'betterment
'old	'older	'older than
'room	'roomy	'roomier

6. *Now speak these phrases out that get larger and larger, and in the end speak the sentence:*

my 'cat	my 'pet 'cat	my 'naughty little 'pet 'cat
'foot 'caught	got its 'foot 'caught	got its 'left 'foot 'caught
in the 'kettle	in the 'hot 'kettle	in the 'hot 'tea 'kettle

My 'naughty little 'pet 'cat got its 'left 'foot 'caught in the 'hot 'tea 'kettle.

This sentence is also a good exercise for articulating your t's and f's clearly.

14.2.1.4 Articulatory Clarity or Good Enunciation

Articulatory clarity or good enunciation is to use your tongue, lips and jaw so correctly so that sounds are pronounced clearly and precisely. Just as we must attend to the way we sit or stand when we speak, we must also attend to the muscular activity of our mouth and face, in order to speak well. Some common problems are

- speaking through clenched teeth
- speaking with the hand or palm in front of the mouth, masking it
- failing to open the mouth enough to make sounds like the *a* in *father*;
- failing to round the lips to make the long *u* sound in *fool* or *youth*;

- failing to spread the lips as in a smile to make the long *i* sound in *feel*;
- swallowing sounds, especially in a cluster of consonants.

Open your mouth wide in a yawn, then smile broadly, then purse your lips to whistle, before you attempt the next activity. Do this exercise every time you practice your speaking.

Activity

Speak the words below as clearly as you can, paying attention to the consonant "clusters" or sounds such as /sk, skt, ktk, kt, fl/, and so on.

ask · asked (/askt/) arctic fact flock flying fox bleak picture tactics
export extinct

Find other words with the kinds of clusters of sounds in the examples above, and practice speaking them.

14.2.1.5 Conveying Nuances and Emphases, Using the Voice

Once you have gained control over the elements of your articulation and voice described above, you will find yourself appreciating these elements in the good speakers whom you listen to on the radio or television, in the cinema, or at functions. Learn to listen for voice control in accomplished speakers, and note how they convey meaning through the voice. Start by imitating them. Soon you will find your own insights develop about how you should speak.

We shall provide some practice passages for conveying nuances and emotions in the next unit.

14.2.2 Content: in Emotion and Thought

In your everyday academic and professional life so far you must have heard people speak

- to introduce a guest or a speaker at a function;
- to thank a guest or a speaker at a function;
- to felicitate a guest or a speaker at a function.

Try and recollect such instances, and jot down what was said, and how it was said. If you cannot really remember any such speeches, look out for them now. Take a small notebook along with you and make notes such as suggested above on these speeches. Then think again and write down your comments. What did you like about what was said or how it was said? What did you dislike about it – how would you have done it differently? This process will get you started on your preparation for speaking in public. Speaking well presupposes the ability to listen critically and appreciatively.

We shall return in a later block to the great speeches that the world remembers, made on occasions of national or international importance. In this unit and the next we shall look at ordinary things said well on social and familial occasions. We have mentioned some joyous occasions above. Other such joyous occasions would be

- to raise a toast to a bride and a groom at a wedding;
- to thank your hosts after a formal reception accorded to your delegation;
- to launch a book, a scheme for some kind of public welfare, a club, and so on.

We also have to make speeches at less than joyous occasions, such as

- when someone retires;
- when someone leaves an organization; or
- when someone passes away.

These speeches are difficult to make, where one has to strike the right balance between a variety of emotions: for example, sorrow at the loss, but comfort for the bereaved family, in case of death; or, when a colleague leaves for a better job or for further study, regret for the loss of a valued colleague, tempered with hope and joy for the person who moves on to better things.

14.2.2.1 Prepare Your Speech

You may find it difficult to believe, but some of the most spontaneous speeches you hear have been carefully prepared! The trick is to prepare well, and then “forget” your preparation – don’t stick slavishly to your script.

That’s right, a script. You should write down your speech if you know you have to make one. As you get better you can simply jot down points and phrases. But at the beginning, you should write down your speech, read it out, memorize it, practice it – and then deliver it in an apparently spontaneous way.

If you intend to speak often in public, you should have a notebook in which you collect “quotable quotes” – sayings, anecdotes, jokes and so on that may come in useful in your speech. (You find such items in the Sunday newsmagazines and other popular journals, for instance.) Here is an example. What kind of speech would you use it in?

A true friend remembers your birthday but not your age.

This quote might come in useful at a birthday function for a slightly older person – or even, as a joke, for a 21st birthday party!

Finally, keep your speech short. (Writing a speech down well in advance and reading it by yourself a day or two later is a good way to see what you can leave out of the speech, for maximum impact.) Three or five minutes will be enough to say what you have to say. You will need to rehearse to make sure that you keep to time. In presentations and speeches – less is often more. Rehearse your speech out loud at least four times. One of these should be in front of an audience – a member of the family or a friend. If you can put in the rehearsal time, your speech will get much better. You will also have the chance to fine tune it.

14.2.2.2 Some Common Themes and Ideas

Take some time to get to know the person, the object or the organization you are to speak about. Collect all the facts, the opinions, and the anecdotes first; then think about which ones will work for you on this occasion. Select the best ones for your purpose.

Here is a list of themes that can come in useful in your preparation.

Life history – a short summary of someone’s life, or the life of an organization or product. Life histories can be fascinating if they reveal a side to a person, thing or organization that is not commonly known. They must be used judiciously. Remember that you are not writing an autobiography. Don’t stay too long with a

side to a person that they consider private – such as their religious beliefs, or their charity work, or the fact that their beginnings were humble or very different from where they are now. The intent in using anecdotes from their life is not to embarrass them, but to reveal, in a fleeting and pleasant way, the person behind the persona you all know.

Tribute – this brings out some of the highlights or achievements in somebody’s life. This is the form adopted in many obituaries in the newspaper.

Shared memories – this is a personal insight into the memories that you shared with the person, thing or organization. These are often very touching and are one of the easiest to do.

Poem or reading – there are plenty of examples of these: quotations from the scriptures, or from well-known works in literature, selected for their appropriateness and universality. Many sites on the Internet provide examples of these.

Legacy – this focuses on the achievements, on what someone has left after them – children, changed lives, completed projects.

√ **Check Your Progress**

Which of the themes above would you consider most suitable for finding points for a speech on each of the occasions below? What reasons would you give for your choice?

1. to introduce a guest or a speaker at a function;

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2. to thank a guest or a speaker at a function;

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3. to felicitate a guest or a speaker at a function.

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4. to raise a toast to a bride and a groom at a wedding;

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5. to thank your hosts after a formal reception accorded to your delegation;

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.....

6. to launch a book, a scheme for some kind of public welfare, a club, and so on.

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7. when someone retires; when someone leaves an organization; or when someone passes away.

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14.3 LET US SUM UP

1. To develop oral communication skills at a formal level or at an advanced level, we must pay attention to both
 - the content, and
 - the delivery of our speech.
2. The qualities that make our speech appealing, no matter what language we speak, are the elements of aesthetic speech. The elements of aesthetic speech include
 - breath control
 - posture
 - voice control: pitch, volume and rate
 - articulatory clarity
 - ability to convey nuances and emphases, using the voice: irony, wit, quotation, etc.
3. Even the most apparently spontaneous speeches have been carefully prepared! As a beginner, you should write down your speech, read it out, memorize it, practice it – and then deliver it in an apparently spontaneous way.
4. You should have a notebook in which you collect “quotable quotes” – sayings, anecdotes, jokes and so on that may come in useful in your speech.
5. Keep your speech short.
6. A set of themes that can come in useful in your preparation is the following:
Life history; Tribute; Shared memories; Poem or reading; Legacy.

14.4 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Life history, tribute, and shared memories, in that order. The life history would tell us why this particular guest was chosen for this function, as would the tribute. The shared memories, if any, would personalize the occasion, and make the guest feel welcome.
2. Legacy, and perhaps tribute, in that order. The legacy could be based on the guest's contribution to that function – his or her words of encouragement, advice, or wisdom, or his or her directions for the future. This could be linked to the guest's public stature in general.
3. Any or all of the five– life history, tribute, shared memory, legacy, and a poem or reading, may be appropriate. If there are a number of speakers, it is better to avoid repetition, so it is good that there are a variety of themes to choose from!
4. Shared memories and a poem or reading may be the most appropriate. If the bride and groom are young, there won't be much of a life history, except perhaps to humorously allude to some incidents from their childhood and adolescence, or their early acquaintance! The focus should be on the future, and on your good wishes for this.
5. If it is a farewell reception, this might take the shape of shared memories – the way you were received and looked after, what you enjoyed doing together – and a small tribute. Or, if it is a welcome reception, a simple thank you with some shades of a tribute and the legacy of the host might be appropriate, to look forward to the rest of the interaction. These are fairly short speeches!
6. Here the life history, the shared memories and the hoped-for legacy would predominate. Why or how was the book (etc.) thought of? How easy or difficult or enjoyable was it to bring it to the launch pad? What does the book (etc.) hope to achieve?
7. These are all a form of tribute, but it is important to get the tone right. A retirement is not the end of life, and leaving an organization is often for better pastures! So a judicious mixture of legacy, shared memories, life history, and a poem or reading is called for.

A speech when someone passes away should focus on the person's life, not on the event of death or on a note of gloom, unless the circumstances are unusual enough to warrant this. A retirement speech should avoid references to perceived failures or rewards not obtained. It is important not to let bitterness show through.