

# Public Speaking in EFL Settings: The Issue of Overcoming Fears\*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article aims at sharing several facts dealing with the art of public speaking. It is addressed to undergraduate students, particularly, to those learners who are acquiring a foreign language and have experienced speaking limitations. Through the paper, they will find a series of practical recommendations suggesting how to handle some psychological factors such as fears and negative emotions when talking to an audience. Likewise, readers will be aware of the necessary knowledge public talk involves in order to achieve a successful oral performance.

This information might be helpful to improve not only students' social skills and spoken communication in presentations and lectures, but also it can become useful in foreign language classrooms during the socialization of projects, oral reports, or just when interacting in the different class discussions. The recommendations are based on some authors' discussions and on personal reflections about the issue. I consider this data as a valuable contribution for many people who face up this difficulty and want to succeed in this field.

**Key words:** public speaking, psychological factors, fears and emotions control, self-knowledge, topic and public knowledge, positive attitude, self-awareness, and self-esteem.

## **RESUMEN**

El propósito de este artículo es compartir varios hechos relacionadas con el arte de hablar en público. Está dirigido a estudiantes universitarios, particularmente a aquellos que están adquiriendo una lengua extranjera y han experimentado limitaciones al hablar. A través del artículo, ellos encontrarán una serie de recomendaciones prácticas que sugieren cómo manejar algunos factores psicológicos tales como temores y emociones negativas al dirigirse a una audiencia. Igualmente, los lectores se concientiarán sobre el conocimiento requerido al hablar en público, para lograr un desempeño oral exitoso.

Esta información podría ser útil para mejorar en los estudiantes no sólo su competencia social y su comunicación verbal en presentaciones y conferencias, sino que también puede ser útil en sus clases de lengua durante la socialización de proyectos, reportes orales o sólo al interactuar en las diferentes discusiones de clase. Estos consejos se basan en discusiones de diferentes autores y en reflexiones personales sobre el tema. Considero que esta información puede ser un aporte valioso para muchas personas que afrontan esta dificultad y quieren tener éxito en este campo.

**Palabras clave:** hablar en público, factores psicológicos, control de miedos y emociones, auto-conocimiento, conocimiento del tema y del público, actitud positiva, autoconciencia y autoestima.

## **BACKGROUND**

Some months ago, I had the opportunity to attend an interesting conference entitled "How to overcome your fears." The presenters were on the one hand, the famous journalist J. Mario Valencia and on the other hand, the clinic psychologist Lucia Nader. During the lecture what called my attention the most was the fact that according to the studies conducted by Valencia & Nader (2008), and also by other researchers such as Edwards (1998, 2008), Rogers (1981), Kleinmann (1977), Scovel (1978), and Bailey (1980), nowadays talking in public has become one of the biggest fears of people due to the high influence of psychological factors this practice involves. Even though this concern should not be generalized, maybe, the researchers are right.

Therefore, if you are scared of speaking in public and interacting orally with other people in academic or daily situations, you could be certainly having ego problems and serious drawbacks in your social life, too. Probably, your self-esteem and self-confidence as well as the image you have got of yourself as a speaker might be affected. So, watch out! You could be starting losing power, feeling frustrated, and becoming an invisible and passive person. Why? This is because of the lack of communicative and argumentative skills, and also because we need to learn how to have fears and emotions under control.

On the other hand, through my teaching experience, I have noticed that when most foreign language students have to interact in front of the class, they feel extremely anxious, can become highly stressed and almost sick because it is very difficult for them to control their nerves; this fact undoubtedly affects their oral performance and the outcomes are very often catastrophic. Bearing these concerns in mind, the purpose of the current article is to share some advice and recommendations which can become useful tips to follow when students have to socialize work projects, research proposals, oral reports, or even during any other public speaking circumstances; all the more reason, since they have to communicate ideas in the foreign language they are acquiring.

So, the tips will be introduced in the following lines through seven steps dealing with knowledge of yourself, knowledge of the topic and listeners, voice tone, look, and body language. In addition, they are focused on fears and anxiety management, the way people can make communication more effective; and finally, on the fact of being yourself based on self-knowledge, good self-esteem, and self-awareness. The article closes with some conclusions.

## **1. KNOW YOURSELF**

You will not achieve any goal in regard to the improvement of public speaking if you do not firstly know yourself and are aware not only of your communicative limitations, but also of all the human qualities and other strengths, potentials and discursive capacities you can have. Most of the time, you do not value or recognize your infinite inner skills since you do not know that you have them; you usually have a very poor or negative perception about yourself and your personal abilities. So, discover your talents and profit them.

Moreover, on occasions some students are used to having a negative attitude and instead of thinking about success, they just think about defeat and this is not healthy. For this reason, you must program yourself positively and assume a personal, mental, emotional, as well as instinctive attitude, and even keep a spiritual equilibrium. Actually, a positive mental attitude always works, try it.

## **2. KNOW THE TOPIC**

Preparing in advance the subject to talk is a crucial factor to succeed. It is necessary to be acquainted and prepare the information you will talk about in deep. If you have enough data, this will make you more confident and assertive in the case of possible questions from the public. For this reason, it is needed that you responsibly prepare your presentation and make a summary with the most relevant core points of your exposition as a guide to follow during the performance. It also works wonders to prepare a high-quality introduction of the subject matter since this is essential to attract the public's attention, as well as an excellent closing in order to successfully conclude your dissertation.

In our context students often feel so insecure that they take slips of paper and they do not use them to check, but to read from them. That is a problem since they become very anxious and because of this tension, they read badly and make mistakes showing uncertainty, lack of management of the topic, and lack of preparation, too. Furthermore, what is expected from them in oral presentations is the spontaneous use of the English language and not they turn the dissertation into a boring reading exercise.

### **3. KNOW YOUR PUBLIC**

It is really vital to know in advance who you are going to address, since it is not a good idea to underestimate or overestimate the public's knowledge. Start from the point that your listeners are interested in listening to you and they will want to learn something from you. Consequently, always introduce yourself and tell your public what the presentation will be about; it is to say, the central thesis and its usefulness. Here, it is advisable to get relaxed and not to think about the amount of listeners you have to face up to. Also, do not pay attention to individual faces, expressions, or particular attitudes from your public; they might not have anything to do with your presentation, but with personal or particular situations. Think of whom you are and also value what you are doing and saying.

Regarding the public, the Toastmaster International Association (1998, 2008) holds that it is also a good idea to greet some of the audience members as they arrive because it is easier to speak to a group of friends than to strangers. So, be friendly and polite without exaggerating.

In EFL settings, when students talk for an audience they seem to be more concerned about people's criticism since they feel the audience might be more competent than them in using the language, projecting, in this way, insecurity and lack of confidence on them and on what they know. Most of the time, these fears do not have foundation. So relax, trust yourself, be natural, and go ahead.

### **4. BE CAREFUL WITH YOUR VOICE, LOOK, AND BODY**

While talking, your voice, look, and body are key tools to communicate not only ideas, but also your character, mood, confidence, or insecurity. Every word you say must be felt and stressed correctly in order for your speech to have a lived meaning. You must use all these resources wisely and correctly; furthermore, you should be careful with intonation, volume of your voice, and diction; all the more reason, if you are using another language different from the native one. Thus, check your pronunciation, grammatical correctness, and keep a normal speed; neither too quickly nor too slowly.

Be careful with the way you are breathing; this is a relevant factor since the volume of your voice depends on proper breathing; besides, do not strive your throat, but strengthen your lungs capacity. Your diction must be clear and correct; pronounce and articulate words moving appropriately your mouth, lips, and tongue. Improve your breathing by exercising at home, reading aloud, moving your lips and tongue continuously, opening and closing your mouth in order to articulate each word correctly and so to accomplish a better expression.

Another important aspect is your look. Look at your listeners and walk your sight across them quietly and gradually. If you avoid looking at the public, they can think you are afraid of them, you feel unconfident or likely you are not really interested in establishing a good communication with them. This is lethal because it instantly annuls the efficiency of the message. Now, if looking at your public' eyes certainly becomes uncomfortable for you, just look at their forehead since this causes the same sensation and you will feel more assertive. Furthermore, if the amount of listeners does not allow you to give individual looks, give global and regular looks.

Additionally, take into account that your image, attitude, and body language play a decisive role in communication. Regarding non-verbal language, Malamah-Thomas (1987) claims that about twenty percent of communication is verbal; this means that eighty percent is non-verbal. This is the reason why people actually speak more through their body language (gestures and facial expressions, postures, hands movement, glances, and physical attitudes) than through their speech in itself. Furthermore, the first impression your audience receives is the one you project through your external image and indeed, this should be positive. So, bear in mind that the way you speak and address themes has a considerable importance, occasionally, more than what you are speaking about (e.g. when you have achieved to capture your audience's attention on account of the good accent and fluid speech you are using when speaking in the foreign language). Thus, you must project a positive and assertive image to help you accomplish the desirable outcomes you have set. Do not forget that your attitude should project sincerity, energy, and conviction.

The manners you express through the movement of your arms and hands undoubtedly comprise the main accessories of gesticulation in rhetoric. These manners as well as your face expressions must be spontaneous and natural. This is why words must be accompanied with those gestures that better express your feelings and emotions. They must never be neither mechanic nor artificial. Moreover, avoid conscious or unconscious tics such as eating your nails, scratch your head or other parts of your body, fasten your belt, touch your face, ear or nose, fix your pants, or tie all the time. Also, control other movements as playing with a pencil, knocking on the table or any other actions that can distract your public.

In our field, body language is very important since many of us can make use of it to compensate for the lack of verbal proficiency in the foreign language or to explain some vocabulary that could become unknown for our listeners. It is relevant to understand we will always have these limitations, but we can profit other elements in our communicative competence to overcome them. Thus, it is helpful that we use our body to mimicry and make us understand in a better way by the audience.

Regarding your hands, it is prudent to keep them busy; maybe, holding the pointer, a piece of paper, or the microphone, even though the best recommendation is to move them as in a usual talk. However, look out! Never put them into your pockets. Your hands more than any other part of your body reflect your attitude since they have got their own language not only in order to stress what you are saying, but also to express your emotional mood.

## **5. KEEP FEAR AND ANXIETY UNDER CONTROL**

Many people, according to Valencia & Nader (2008), Edwards (1998, 2008), and Rogers (1981), are conscious that excessive and irrational fear of talking in public can hurt them and can become negative aspects. The result is blushing, difficulty to breathe and speak, voice and/or hands trembling, nausea, urgent need to go to the bathroom, among others. All these feelings and sensations are the outcome of what is called anxiety.

In regard to anxiety in EFL/ESL classrooms Brown (2002:151) states that even though this personality factor is associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry it plays an important affective role in second language acquisition because anxiety is intricately intertwined with self-esteem, inhibition and risk-taking. According to Brown, anxiety can be experienced at various levels and can be managed positively or negatively depending on the person who experiences it. This is why it is necessary to learn how to handle and re-direct it in English classrooms. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by nerves, let us profit from them to speak faster, to show a more dynamic attitude, and become risk-takers.

Other researchers such as Kleinmann (1977, in Allwright & Bailey, 1980) and Scovel (1978, in Allwright and Bailey, 1980) agree with Brown by claiming that despite of the unpleasant associations people may have with anxiety, this is not necessarily a bad thing in itself. They point out that there are two types of anxiety "debilitating" and "facilitating" (also called "helpful" or "facilitative anxiety"). "Facilitating" anxiety can become a positive factor and help students do better than they might otherwise. This means that instead of thinking about removing anxiety people must optimize the sources of facilitating anxiety by minimizing the sources of debilitating anxiety so that learners can work with what is called "relaxed concentration." In the same discussion, Bailey (1980) also asserts that anxiety can be taken as a matter of competitiveness and that a little nervous tension is good at the moment of speaking in a foreign or in a second language.

In the current discussion, the feeling of nervousness before giving a public speech might often be a sign of facilitative anxiety and produce personal satisfaction. A symptom of just enough tension to get the job done can offer benefits and is one of the keys to success.

Valencia & Nader (2008) state that the panic of speaking in public is an evidence of a high fright to be judged or humiliated by addressees. These authors hold that fear is the result of a universal anxiety to act because of the trepidation to reach an ashamed situation in front of others who have power. These researchers consider that dread is a primary emotion characterized by uncomfortable and unpleasant sensations because of the perception of a real or supposed and a present or future danger. They consider that facing people or groups of people has become one of the most frequent fears due to the belief that speakers, their rhetoric skills, and their capacity to transmit a message will be evaluated by the audience. This might make the speaker feel powerless and experience a huge anxiety that sometimes can become scenic panic which might lead the lecturer or speaker to be finally bad evaluated as a student, as a professional, or the worst, as a person.

This is in fact a factor that makes students in our EFL classes more anxious since when they present oral reports, they are actually being evaluated. This reality might affect their performance if they are not aware of taking the exercise as an enriching experience that will allow them grow professionally as well as at a personal level during the acquisition of the foreign language process.

The first strategy to learn how to overcome this type of fear is to be aware of the specific situations which provoke that anxiety in you, which are the negative reflections and irrational food you give your brain, and how your body reacts in front of this. The most common traumatic situations are, for instance, giving a talk or a lecture, offering a simple presentation in a classroom, asking questions to a teacher or lecturer, expressing your own viewpoints even in front of known people, telling personal or family anecdotes in a friendly meeting, recognizing you do not know something, hesitating about any particular topic, showing disagreement, giving personal perceptions about something, making compliments or positive or negative critiques, and so forth. All these situations can lead to irrational ideas and repetitive negative attitudes such as "I get in panic", "I paralyze myself", "I'm unable to do it", "my hands sweat", "my voice's always shaking", "I forget everything", "I always lose coherence", "I feel guilty", "what time is this going to finish?", among others.

In this order of ideas, being conscious of the situations in which anxiety is activated, analyzing the irrational food you use to feed your mind, avoiding all emotional and negative body reactions is certainly effective, since you can become aware of them and can have them under control. Be critical, transform those irrational thoughts into more logical ideas, assume a better attitude, and reflect on the idea that communicative skills are not inherited or genetically received, but learned and these can be improved.



While speaking, do not give yourself mental beatings and self-assess negatively. Do not think your voice is horrible, that others cannot listen to you, or that you speak too stridently. On the contrary, think that your listeners are not your enemies, but they are interested in the subject matter you are talking about, independently of your voice or your fears. Think that you are able to successfully communicate ideas in the foreign language you are acquiring; so, if you really want to succeed, you could achieve your goals and thus will be; other speakers have accomplished their objective very well so you will be also able to achieve your purpose with some training and devotion.

Never blame yourself "If I were different I surely do much better." It is better to think "I am I and I respect myself, I accept myself, and I love myself with my weaknesses and my strengths" or "I am starting liking myself." Consequently, be careful with your emotional instability. Do not look at these opportunities as negative or dark events because that is not an objective perception of them. For example, when saying "When I speak I am seasick, it is as it was not me, I dissimulate, but I feel dizzy." It is much better to learn to know your body and handle it. Thus, be aware of your corporality and calm down. Be positive and conscious that you are not the only one who is learning how to overcome fears when giving a talk. Just, feel proud of you since you are a risk taker, you are in a process and you will succeed.

Additionally, do not generalize your failures with thoughts as "every time I speak I am a real disaster" or "it is better to keep silent if I do not want to do it badly as always", "each time I have to speak in public I do it worst", or "all the time I do it badly this really does not go with me." Conversely, think that you can strengthen your desire to face up those situations; the more you speak in public, the more success you will accomplish. If you do not make the decision now, the more you delay your anxiety, each time the situation will be more difficult; so face it up right now. What you need is self-determination, decision making, and action taking. Moreover, you can reflect on the fact that if you have been able to face up the present speaking situation, you will be able to do it easily in other opportunities since you are more conscious now. It is not a good idea to avoid responsibilities, but to face them up. If you feel discomfort, do not worry; through time, you will learn to overcome this feeling.

Another advice, when practicing your discourse do not be obsessive with your physiological or psychosomatic reactions; it is completely normal to get nervous and most of the time, even others do not notice it. In contrast, be aware of your breathing and make it natural; breath, relax, focus on the topic; imagine you are looking at your public, smile, take a breath, and relax again. Control the desire of getting away from challenging discursive

situations. Better breath deeply, take your time, do it slowly and calmly, and try to enjoy it. Also, avoid making dangerous and destructive comparisons such as "he speaks better than I do, he is very skillful, and I am a disaster" or "If I could be like him." It is a good idea to think and repeat mentally "I am special and unique. I can discover in myself a lot of potentials and amazing talents. I can learn from others who communicate very well."

Finally, as a reflection, think that even though many learners prefer writing to speaking and are conscious of their linguistic limitation, some of them just do nothing to solve the problem; conversely, you will take immediate action. Regarding this not coherent attitude, Edwards (1998, 2008) states that some people are scared of giving a talk and prefer to write, since it is easier to hide behind the armor of a written paper where they have had plenty of time to work through than simply to talk. Do you agree?

## **6. MAKE YOUR COMMUNICATION MORE EFFECTIVE**

When communicating, speakers must take into account the purposive, functional, and perlocutionary character of language (Brown, 2002). Thus, oral language must transmit the speaker's intentions, convey language functions, and the effects desired on hearers. Therefore, language must be expressive and accurate; you must use words in an idoneous and concrete way. Speaking in public is not to tack a pile of affected words or speak as declaiming a renaissance poem. On the contrary, your speech should be clear and natural in order to positively influence others, your listeners. Therefore, show assertiveness and avoid clichés (comments that are very often made and are therefore not original and not interesting) because they create a negative effect in the audience. Clichés are dangerous signals of a lack of preparation and show that the theme is not known in deep. As you are using a foreign language, be more careful with grammatical correctness, pronounce in the best way, use correct intonation, be punctual, and be yourself. Use your own words; never try to recite information you have memorized from pieces of texts or remarkable authors' words. If so, paraphrase or quote.

## **7. BE YOURSELF**

The main secret of public speaking is just being always you, even though you have got some limitations. It is easier behaving as you usually are than pretending to be a different person. Being natural, genuine, and spontaneous have become key tools to catch on audience's attention and achieve your communicative purposes. Without any doubt, you will give the best impression to your audience if during the speech you get to transmit an image of sincerity. It is to say, that being you at the time of speaking in public transmits a sincere, honest, natural, spontaneous, and positive image which will bring you close to the public.

Another relevant aspect is being likeable and kind with your listeners. Being likeable is something that you have or not and only depends on you. Bear in mind that your audience expects you to be a pleasant not an arrogant person because they forgive everything, but never antipathy and boredom. Hence, avoid being too serious and cold and never leave humor aside. This last one is another important strategy to get the public's mind. This does not mean that you have to become a clown. Certain humor touch during your presentation might work wonders and could make your speech more agreeable and help to capture audience attention more easily.

In summary, you must be natural, but first of all, you must trust and feel well with yourself. This is why the best suggestion is to have clear what you are going to say and to feel comfortable with yourself and with the image you can project. This recommendation can become very simple if you are just you and value all what you are! So, avoid imitating other speakers, and go ahead!

## **CONCLUSIONS**

It can be concluded that giving a talk in a foreign language can become a great challenge which deserves the entire lecturers' attention, preparation, and patience. This oral practice can become highly rewarding for students due to the challenge this action can enclose in itself. Furthermore, because of the implications this practice can have for their ego with regard to important psychological aspects such as affectivity, feelings, self-esteem, self-confidence, risk-taking, solving-problem skills, social relationships, self-reflection, attitude, and personal, professional, and integral growth.

The first step the foreign language learner must follow to succeed in public speaking is to become aware that anxiety is a natural and even beneficial psychological factor; therefore, s/he needs to overcome fears and keep negative emotions under control at the moment of speaking in front of a public or when giving an oral report in his/her English classroom.

Secondly, knowledge is another relevant aspect; knowledge not only refers to know about a topic; knowledge also means that the speaker should know, and understand himself/herself with all his/her talents and limitations, accept himself/herself, be self-confident and become a risk-taker. S/he should perfectly know the topic and the audience. Furthermore, the speaker must be aware of the seriousness and commitment that speaking in another language requires. So, our learners must practice the speech in advance, organize, plan, visit the setting, and prepare the necessary aids and equipment. S/he should check the use of the foreign language, grammar, tone of voice, fluency, pronunciation, and intonation.

The third aspect is that the learner must be original and always assume a positive attitude, encourage him/herself, raise his/her self-motivation or willingness to communicate in a foreign language, and, also be natural and spontaneous. To finish, the student should always project assertiveness, management of the topic, control his/her inhibitions, use a little of humor, and of course put his/her personal touch.

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