



Creative Activities for Improving Students' Public Speaking Skills

by [Lisa Leopold](#)

A large-scale survey among U.S. college students, which replicated earlier studies among the general population, found that fear of public speaking was more common than the fear of death (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012). Those survey results are reflective of speeches delivered in one's first language, so imagine the fear nonnative-English-speaking students must experience when delivering a speech in their second, third, or fourth language. In fact, research shows that public speaking is extremely challenging for nonnative English speakers (Barrett & Liu, 2016), yet it is also essential for their success (Zhang & Ardasheva, 2019). Despite the importance of public speaking, most English for academic purposes (EAP) programs prioritize academic literacy over oratory skills (Bankowski, 2010). However, training in public speaking can yield enormous benefits. Not only does it improve students' oral English skills, but it also develops students' critical thinking and enhances their intercultural communication skills (Lucas, 2013).

The following activities are intended to hone students' verbal and nonverbal delivery skills for presentations. The activities were incorporated into a Professional Presentation Skills course for international graduate students at an advanced proficiency level, though they could easily be adapted for any intermediate or advanced EAP or English as a second language course in which students deliver presentations.

Improving Verbal Delivery Skills

Reducing Fillers

Excessive fillers (such as "um" or "ah") may reduce a speaker's credibility and distract the audience from the presenter's main message. By drawing students' conscious attention to their use of fillers, these activities are intended to reduce their frequency.

Game 1

In the first game, one student speaks in front of the class (about a topic of his or her choice or a given topic) for 1 minute. Every time the student uses a filler, the class claps their hands, and one student in the audience counts the total number of fillers the speaker used. The cycle is repeated until all students have delivered a 1-minute speech. The student who has used the fewest number of fillers wins the game.

Game 2

In the second game, the class is divided into two teams seated on opposite sides of the classroom. One student from each team stands in front of the opposing team to speak (simultaneously) about a topic the opposing team selects. As soon as either speaker uses a filler word, that student is “out,” and the other team wins a point. The game continues until all students have spoken, and the team with the highest score wins the game.

Improving Voice Projection

A powerful voice commands attention and is particularly important when speaking to a large audience. This activity is intended to help students project their voices when speaking in a large auditorium and is best conducted in a spacious venue or outside.

Students form two lines facing each other (no more than 12 inches apart). With the person directly across from them, students carry on a conversation about any topic (e.g., their coursework, their weekend plans), as they continue to step farther apart from their classmate. They must project their voices loudly to be heard by their partner over the other voices in the room.

Improving Intonation, Pausing, and Stress

How a speech is delivered—in a monotone or passionate way—may have a lasting impact on the audience’s retention of information. This activity is intended to help students improve intonation, pausing, and stress in presentations.

Part 1: Analyzing the Speech

As students follow along with a transcript, they watch short recorded versions of two speakers: one monotone and the other passionate. For the monotone speech, I have used 11:03–11:31 of Steve Jobs’ 2005 [commencement address](#) at Stanford University. For the passionate speech, I have used 27:47–28:05 of Cory Booker’s 2017 [commencement address](#) at the University of Pennsylvania. Students mark their transcripts for the intonation, pausing, and primary and contrasting stress they hear the speaker use. It is helpful to divide the class so that 1/3 of the students are focused on intonation, 1/3 on pausing, and 1/3 on stress. It is also helpful to allow them to listen to the speeches multiple times. The class debriefs afterwards on the lessons learned (e.g., where stress commonly falls, such as on contrasting words or on the last content word in a message unit, or where in a speaker’s delivery he typically pauses, such as at the end of a message unit).

Part 2: Delivering the Speech

All students in the class then receive excerpts from two different speech transcripts, which should be less than 1 minute when delivered orally. One speech excerpt is for themselves; the

other is for their partner. No student pair should be assigned the same speech excerpts as another pair.

Working individually, each student marks the two transcripts for places to pause, words to stress, and how to use intonation. Working in dyads, each student reads aloud one of the passages as the partner follows along with the transcript they have marked. The listener provides suggestions for improving vocal variety, such as, “Try stressing this word, or try pausing longer after this phrase.” After all students have practiced honing their delivery skills with the help of their peer coach, they sit in the front of the classroom with their backs facing the projector screen behind them. One student stands up, facing the audience and the projector screen and delivers their passage aloud to the others. They use the words projected on the screen in front of them (which the instructor has prepared on a slide deck) as a teleprompter for their script. After all students have delivered their passages, they vote for the “best” delivery (other than their own), and the student earning the most votes is awarded a prize.

Improving Nonverbal Delivery Skills

Improving Eye Contact

Many presenters have the tendency to divert their eyes up or down, away from the audience, when thinking of what to say next. This activity is intended to help presenters sustain continuous eye contact.

Working with a partner, one student speaks for 1.5 minutes about a topic chosen by their partner. The partner claps their hands anytime the speaker breaks eye contact by looking up, down, or away. Then, students switch roles as the presenter and audience member. When they have mastered sustaining eye contact for 1.5 minutes, the length of time can be gradually increased.

Improving Hand Gestures

Many presenters gesture spontaneously, without careful planning, which sometimes results in repetitive, nonpurposeful hand movements. This activity is intended to help students use meaningful hand gestures.

Standing in a circle, students take turns demonstrating how they would gesture for various speaking purposes, to

- emphasize a point,
- show contrast between ideas,
- indicate a division of points into categories,
- enumerate points,
- show receptiveness to the audience, and
- encourage the audience to participate.

Students discuss cultural variations and taboo gestures (e.g., with which finger they start counting or whether it is considered impolite to point to the audience).

As a variation of this activity, students play “gesturing charades,” whereby one student draws a card with an instruction, such as “enumerate points.” The student uses a nonverbal hand gesture to convey this meaning, and the class guesses the meaning the student is trying to convey.

Conclusion

The aforementioned activities are intended to help students polish their presentation skills. As an added benefit, the activities build camaraderie and trust, thereby mitigating students’ fears of public speaking.

Note: A version of this article first appeared in the December 2021 issue of [As We Speak](#), the newsletter for the TESOL International Association Speech, Pronunciation, and Listening Interest Section.

References

- Bankowski, E. (2010). Developing skills for effective academic presentations in EAP. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 22(2), 187–196.
- Barrett, N. E., & Liu, G. (2016). Global trends and research aims for English academic oral presentations: Changes, challenges, and opportunities for learning technology. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 1227–1271. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316628296>
- Dwyer, K. K., & Davidson, M. M. (2012). Is public speaking really more feared than death? *Communication Research Reports*, 29(2), 99–107. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2012.667772>
- Lucas, S. E. (2013). English public speaking and the cultivation of talents for Chinese college students. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 36(2), 163–182. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cjal-2013-0011>
- Zhang, X., & Ardasheva, Y. (2019). Sources of college EFL learners’ self-efficacy in the English public speaking domain. *English for Specific Purposes*, 53, 47–59. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2018.09.004>

Lisa Leopold specializes in teaching English for academic and professional purposes to international graduate students. Her research interests include pragmatics and public speaking pedagogy.