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## **Improving Speech Skills for High School Students**

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### **A. Introduction**

It is widely believed that giving a speech is one of the most frightening activities for human being (Ryan and Pauley, 2000: 1). Further they state that up to 40% of the people think that they had better die compared to trying to do it do it. They don't realize that the ability to speak in public always plays an important factor in their lives regardless whatever the career they have. The ability of presenting or expressing ideas in every job is always closely related to the success gained by anyone in their lives.

Looking into the classroom, it is always found that speech class appears to be a frightening class for students. They seem to take the course because they have to take it as the requirement to graduate from the Department, not because they want to take it as part of the pleasant activity. They find the class more as a pressure than as a pleasure in their lives.

In Spoken English Activities (SEA) subject, it was usually found that the number of students who took part in Speech session was always much smaller compared to those of other sessions. Last year, there were only 6 students in speech session. Among them, only 2 students chose speech as their wish, while the other four went to the speech session because they did not have choice. Most sessions were full or crowded. In short, it can be stated that the students go to the public speaking class because they have to and not because they want to.

The experience of teaching public speaking class, not only at English Department of FBSS Universitas Negeri Padang but also at other private colleges or institutions, show some tendency that the students tend to be reluctant to take the opportunity to practice public speaking in front of the class. When they got the opportunity, they usually tried hard to say what they had to say quickly, expecting they could go back to their seat. It was very seldom to find that the students wanted to come to the front of the class to practice voluntarily. They always waited to be pointed.

When English department students at university still find the speech frightening, surely it will be more frightening for high school students. English department students are those who are selected and are mostly interested in studying English while high school students go to school not only to study English but also other subjects required by the curriculum. Therefore, the students at high school may find the speech is more frightening and scary. In fact, the ability of giving a speech will have much contribution towards the improvement of the students' pronunciation as well as other language skills.

This should be a good challenge for a teacher to have extra work to eliminate or at least to lessen that feeling from the students. The students should be helped unless they will always find the speech scary. This small paper is

intended to provide the teachers with some ideas to help the students in giving a speech. In turn, the students are expected to enjoy the speech.

#### **B. Common problems faced by the students in giving speech.**

There are many problems found by the students when they are asked to give a speech in front of the class. In this paper, two problems commonly faced by the students in giving a speech are discussed. First, the students have difficulties to find the materials to talk about in front of the class. Many students state that they usually find difficulties on what to say when they are given the opportunity to speak in front of the class. They often think that they have to go to the library to read books, articles, magazines, newspapers, and many other references since the beginning of the class. These ideas may create the image that the speaking in front of the class will be scary.

Second, many students feel nervous when they stand in front of the class to speak before their friends. They may think that other students is judging them on their ability to speak as well as their ability to think (Rozakis, 1999: 4). In addition, Lucas (1992: 10) also states that most concerns of the students in the public speaking (speech) class is stage fright (the feeling of nervousness). Some people who are good dealing with conversation outside the class may also find this problem when they are in front of the class. They have so many things in their minds that make them feel nervous. They are afraid if they make mistakes in their grammar, choice of words (vocabulary), pronunciation, and other language problems. They are afraid if their friends might tease them for every mistake they make. They also think that their friend keep looking for their weaknesses in speaking in front of the class.

The two problems are believed to be the main problems among those problems faced by the students when they are given the opportunity to give a speech in front of the class. They need to be solved because as part of speaking ability, the speech can help the students improve other skills too. The following section deals with some possibilities done by the teachers in their class.

#### **C. Helping the students improve their speech skills**

The teacher should realize that the ability of speak in front of the class is different from the ability to have conversation with friends or others outside the class. In giving a speech, the students struggle not only with the materials of the speech but also with the language problems they have. Therefore, the teacher should not ask them to talk about difficult topic in front of the class.

##### **1. Helping the students with the materials**

The best solution for helping the students with the problem is to assign the students to talk about something they know very much, namely, themselves. They certainly will not find this topic difficult because surely they know themselves well. At the initial stage, the students are not assigned to talks about scientific work. Dale and Wolf (2000: 5) suggest using the following questions answered by the students in the speech about themselves:



Self Introduction Speech Preparation Worksheet.	
What is your name?	
Where are you from?	
How long have you been in this city?	
Why did you come to this city?	
How many brothers or sisters do you have?	
Who do you live with?	
What are you studying here?	
What do you like to do in your free time?	
What hobbies or special interest do you have?	
What are your future plans or goals?	
How do you think you will benefit from this course?	

Taken from Dale and Wolf (2000: 5)

The teachers do not need to use all the questions above to be answered by their students. They can reduce, change, modify, and even add some more questions they think more relevant to their students. Of course the teachers know their class better than the writer of the questions.

Now let's turn to how do we want our students to answer the questions. Should they answer them simply like "my name is Nurlaili" and "I am from Batu Sangkar", and so on? The answer is No. In answering the questions, the students are encouraged to include unlimited details about their answers. For answering the questions about name, for example, they are encouraged to talk about their names supported by as many details as possible. For example, "my name is Nurlaili and you may call me Lili because my parents, my uncle, my neighbors, and my friends usually call me by that name. When I asked my mother about the meaning of the name, she said that my name is taken from Arabic where Nur means light and Laili means night. My mother added that they gave me that name because I was born at night. By giving that name, they also expect that I can be like a light that will be helpful for others in my life".

Questions number 2 can be answered as follows: "I from Bukittinggi. It is about 100 kilometers from Padang. It is well known as a city with many beautiful tourist objects. It has clean air and even they say it has the cleanest air in the world. It also has the zoo where you can see a lot of animals from various countries in the world. If the tourists go to West Sumatera, their visit will not be complete without visiting Bukittinggi". Then they are expected to continue answering the next questions following the model above.

One thing to keep in mind is that the students are helped to elaborate their answers. The students should not worry much because the teachers are always ready to help. When the students have problems with vocabulary, the

teachers are there to help. When the students have problems with grammar, the teachers are ready to help.

When the teachers think that the students have more competence in English, the teachers may assign the students to talk about other things that interest them. At this stage, they are no longer guided with questions. They are assigned to choose the topics that interest them. They are expected to find materials themselves. They may go to the library to read books, magazines, newspaper, or other references.

## 2. Helping the students control the feeling of nervousness

It cannot be denied that the feeling of nervousness is the main problems faced by every body, including the students, in giving a speech. The teacher and the students should not worry so much about that. They are not alone in this world.

Nervousness is something really normal, especially for beginners. It cannot be eliminated but it can be controlled. Rozakis (1999: 8) states that if the students were not a little nervous to give a speech, they may be not human. In addition, she writes the states that the poll conducted in America indicated that speaking in public was the number one fear among Americans and surprisingly, the fear for death is number six. This is a good motivating statement for our students at school where English is still as a foreign language.

There are some points that the teachers should ask the students to keep in mind to control the feeling of nervousness.

### a. Be well prepared

Many speakers are nervous because they do not prepare themselves sufficiently. Professional speakers take much time to prepare a good speech. If that is the case, the students should spend more time on preparing their speeches. One mistake often done by the speaker is that they are not well prepared in how they express their ideas but they only did preparation on what they want to say. Ryan and Pauley (2000: 2) states that the speakers often spend too much time on preparing what they will say but they do not spend enough time on how they will say it. When they are assigned to speak in front of the class, they tried to get ready with the materials and worked hard on memorizing their materials. They tried hard to remember every word, every line, every paragraph, and even the page number of the materials they have. On the other hand, they did not prepare well on how they should say the materials.

### b. The feeling of nervousness is natural.

The teachers try to tell the students that they should not worry much about the feeling of nervousness. They are regarded not normal if they do not have that feeling while giving the speech. Make sure that even the best speakers were nervous at first. Emerson in Ryan and Pauley (2000: 1) state that "all the great speakers were bad speakers at first".

c. Think positively

Lucas ( 1992: 12) suggest that the teachers are expected to help the students see themselves giving a strong and effective speech. Once they think they can do it, they usually can do it.

d. Concentrate on the message

The teachers are assigned to help the students to focus their mind on the message they are going to deliver. Ryan and Pauley (2000:3) states that the more the students think about the message, the less they focus on what the listeners think of them. In addition, Lucas ( 1992:12) encourages the speakers to think more on communicating with the audience rather than on worrying about the nervousness. Many speakers feel nervous because they try to think too much about themselves. Once they think about the subject matter, rather than themselves, their nervousness is controlled. Rozakis (1999: ) states that many speakers do not have self confidence because they think too much about themselves. She adds that they should say to themselves "I have a topic that I want to talk about with those kind of people sitting on those hard chairs." When they begin thinking about their subject more compared to themselves, the feeling of nervousness disappear.

e. Audiences are forgiving

The speakers should never think that the audiences are their enemies who always look for their mistakes. The speakers should always think the audiences are supportive and are happy to see their success. In addition,

f. Take a couple of deep breath before you start to speak.

This is found to be very useful to release the feeling of nervousness. It will help the students calm and relax.

g. Give speeches as often as possible

It is always true that practice makes perfect. Confidence in public speaking is built by having more experience. If there are some opportunities offered to give a speech, the students should never say "No." even if there are no offers, the students should ask for the chance.

These are some of the possible solutions to the problems faced by the students when they are assigned to give a speech in front of the class. It is expected that they will be useful for the teachers to improve the students' ability in English in general, and particularly in giving a speech.

#### D. Conclusion

Speech is found to be frightening because the students do not know what to say in front of the class and they feel nervous when they stand up in front of the class. They think that giving a speech is identical with presenting scientific work using statistics, lots of references, and lots of supporting data while they cannot do that. The teachers should let the students to give a speech based on what they know a lot, such as themselves. Then the teachers always try to help the students to



control the feeling of nervousness. These ideas are expected to help the students solve their problems in giving a speech.

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