

The Use of Humor in English Public Speaking

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English public speaking skill is highly valued in foreign language education in China's universities. Courses are offered to improve students' English public speaking competence to meet the demand of the labor market and national development. This paper aims to explore English public speaking teaching strategies, focusing on developing students' sense of humor in public speaking.

Keywords: English public speaking teaching, humor, speakers, audience, speech delivery

Introduction

Cultivating top-notch international communication talents is now a prominent mission of foreign language education in higher education institutions in China. English public speaking, as a pivotal means of communication, is valued more and more in English language teaching and learning. As early as in the year 2016, College English Teaching Guide issued by the Ministry of Education made English public speaking a new objective of English teaching for Chinese college teachers. The Guide pointed out that students should "be able to deliver an academic presentation and participate in follow-up discussions in international conferences" (Chen & Florence, 2020, p. 574). As a matter of fact, English public speaking competence can greatly enhance one's social and professional development, therefore a skill worth crafting in English language classes. A good speech usually stands out in its powerful message, language, and delivery. And this paper will focus on one small but very crucial ingredient that constitutes an engaging speech: Humor.

In public speaking, humor, without doubt, is the most powerful weapon which can help the speaker win the audience's hearts and minds. Chris Anderson, head of TED, said "concentrating on a talk can be hard work, and humor is a wonderful way to bring the audience with you" (2018, p. 53). The best speeches usually make people laugh and then think. Researchers studied the Top 50 most popular TED talks and the Top 50 least popular TED talks and they found that "Popular talks incorporated humor an average of 12.92 times per 15 to 20 min, while unpopular talks only used humor for an average of 3.92 times" (Shoda & Yamanaka, 2021, 3.1.2). The statistics indicates the significance of humor in public presentations.

What Can Humor Do?

1. Humor breaks ice and helps create a warm, friendly, and dynamic vibe in which communication becomes easy. The brain loves humor. Humor lowers defenses, making your audience more receptive to your message (Carmine, 2014, p. 148). When speakers first start a talk, i.e., a communication, they and their audience are, most probably, complete strangers. Effective communication is hard if both the speakers and the listeners are tense and feel the invisible wall separating them. Humor brings laughter. After a good laugh, the chemical between the

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speakers and the audience will be changed, for the better. It puts the speaker at ease and also warms up the audience. They then feel connected like a community. Humor makes the speaker more likeable, approachable, and credible. Then, the audience are willing to listen and take seriously what the speaker is saying. Humor also makes the speaker more relaxed and confident, thus preparing him/her mentally for the delivery of the whole speech.

2. The aforementioned research finds that humor is more commonly set during the start or first parts of the presentation rather than in the middle or end (Shoda & Yamanaka, 2021, 4. discussion). The findings show that humor is usually used at the opening part of the speeches to grab the audience attention. As a matter of fact, humor should be present throughout the whole speech: from beginning to end. Humor is the biggest enemy of boredom. It is very important to hook audience attention so that they do not try to reach for their cellphones.

3. Humor helps the audience understand more easily and remember more because it increases interest and energy. Humor usually surprises the audience and gives them different perspective to look at things. Because of the laugh and wow, the audience may remember the message long after the speech.

How to Create Humor?

Aristotle once wrote, “The essence of humor is surprise”. It aligns with modern psychologists’ discovery: Humor results from the mismatch between expectation and reality. When the listeners are expecting something, to be more accurately, when the speaker leads the audience to assume one thing, then he/she gives them something else. It is the surprise, or the violated expectation that creates humor. For example,

1. In the 2005 Toastmasters World Championship of Public Speaking, Lance Miller opened his winning speech this way:

The ultimate question! That question that has plagued man since the dawn of time!
That question that each and every one of us must ask at some point in our life.
Do you validate?

He spoke the first three sentences solemnly, passionately and the audience expected him to pose the philosophical question about life and universe and then he paused and said, “Do you validate?” The twist caught the audience by surprise and they laughed.

2. In 2018, Ramona J. Smith became the first woman in 10 years to win the title of Toastmasters World Champion of Public Speaking. In her inspirational speech Still Standing, she said:

I married my soul mate. The love of my life. My best friend. And he was fine, too. We were married for eight long, beautiful, and amazing—months.

All her positive descriptions about her husband and her marriage build up your audience’s anticipation to believe her marriage last for eight years. But she said, after the pause, “months”.

How to Use Humor in the Speeches?

You do not have to tell a joke to be humorous, although telling appropriate jokes is a good way to have the desired humor. In fact, most speech experts will not recommend jokes, because the line between kidding and offending is very thin. It is not a safe technique. The last thing the speakers want to do is offend and alienate their audience. Then how to be humorous without telling jokes? Here are the options you can choose from:

Funny Anecdotes or Personal Stories

For example, one day, the one who was at the reception desk checking in for a conference. There was a long

line, so she/he waited. And when it was her/his turn, she handed the busy receptionist a form with her/his personal information on it. The young man took a look at her form and asked: “Mr. Li, what’s your surname (How do I address you)?” And she/he, perhaps preoccupied with something else, answered without thinking: “Huh? I don’t know!” Then, realizing what just happened, we looked at each other and laughed. An amusing personal story like this makes the audience laugh and humanizes the speaker at the same time.

Funny Quotes

It would be perfect if the speaker has a funny, and to-the-point quote to start the presentation. Another option to add humor is to use a cliché quote and twist it. By twisting a well-accepted saying, the speaker challenges the conventional wisdom and offers a fresh perspective on life. And the audience are compelled to think twice about what they believe.

When the speaker opens a speech by saying: Thomas Edison is believed to have said that a genius is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration, the audience are immediately bored and disappointed. But if the speaker moves on, saying: “But I say a genius writer is 10% inspiration, 15% perspiration, and 75% desperation”, the audience will be amused and immediately get the point.

Funny Pictures or Video

Funny pictures or video clips can help achieve the desired effect. A picture is worth a thousand words. Funny pictures immediately attract audience attention and make them laugh. If you can find funny pictures or videos relevant to your topic, do not hesitate to use them.

Use Humor With Discretion

Despite all the benefits of using humor in a speech, the speaker’s attempt to be funny and make people laugh may backfire. The tips you may need to bear in mind include:

1. Make the audience laugh, but do not laugh at them, especially when you tell jokes. Do not offend them. Remember that you are trying to be humorous instead of being sarcastic. The latter is the job of the stand-up comedians. So, you, as a speaker, try to steer clear of it. If you really want to laugh at someone, laugh at yourself.
2. Self-deprecating humor helps humanize you to your audience and shows that you do not place yourself above them, but try not to harm your credibility on the subject matter you are talking about. Be careful not to denigrate your qualifications or knowledge of your subject.
3. If you incorporate a joke in your speech, try to avoid controversial or sensitive topics such as race, religion, sexuality, and disabilities. Keep your humor tasteful. “Off-color humor or profanity might be appropriate in a comedy routine, but most listeners would find it offensive in a formal public speech” (Stephen, 2020, p. 225).
4. Be cautious about humor or jokes especially when you are addressing an audience from different cultural backgrounds since humor does not travel across cultures. It means the way people use and express humor is strongly influenced by their experiences, history, cultural norms, beliefs, attitudes, and values. What is funny in Chinese may not be funny in English. In fact, a lot of things we find humorous in our culture can be downright offensive in English culture and vice versa. As a result, what is meant to be humorous in one culture may turn out to sound inappropriate or even offensive in another culture. It is very likely that when you crack a joke to break the ice, to help release fear or anxiety, or to just show off your wit and great sense of humor, your great joke is met with a stunned silence—Your audience may probably not get it or even worse, they are offended.

Joe Wong, a China-born American comedian, is well known for his talk show in America, but his jokes are

really hard for us Chinese people to understand or laugh at. Joe Wong achieved huge success doing stand-up comedy in the US, but when he returned to China in 2008 for his first live gig in Beijing, he discovered that humor does not translate. People did not think his Chinese jokes were as funny as his English ones. What can be learned from this example is that when we try to be humorous, we need to make sure that our audience share our knowledge.

Deliver Your Humor

Your meticulously designed humorous lines may not achieve the desired effect if not delivered in a right way. The following tips can help your humorous opening achieve the maximum effect:

1. Try out your joke or punch line on a few people and observe their reaction. If it falls flat, make adjustments;
2. Use strategic pause before you deliver the punch line to heighten the anticipation. Pause again after the punch line for your audience to take in the humor and laugh;
3. If your humor falls flat, no one laughs, just move on;
4. If you use humor at the beginning, you would better make them laugh in the rest of your speech one more or two more times.

Conclusion

In public speaking, humor is a powerful tool for grabbing and holding audience attention, and building connection with the audience members. Humor also helps the audience understand and retain the messages the speaker intends to convey. That is why humor is more and more a necessary ingredient of a great speech. Given its value, teachers need to encourage students to incorporate humor in their speeches and help them create humor through appropriate jokes, funny quotations, and interesting anecdotes, helping students move forward on the path to be a good speaker.

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