Spot-on Speaking: 15 Pointers for Improving Voice Dexterity in the Classroom

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The ability to speak in front of others is an essential function of classroom instructors, who must often provide multiple presentations to their students on a weekly basis. Therefore, this white paper aims to provide readers with some straightforward suggestions for sharpening their speaking effectiveness in the classroom.

Granted, there are a myriad of vocal issues that an instructor might ultimately face. However, based upon my numerous visits to the university classroom each year, I most commonly witness instructors who have difficulties with pacing and projection. Thus, the primary focus of this white paper remains on these two issues while also offering some general strategies for speaking finesse.

Before proceeding, let me make a quick disclaimer: voice and speech work require persistence and patience. Considering that most of us have already been speaking for many years, if not decades, replacing old habits with new ones can sometimes be a lengthy endeavor. Yet, it can also be a very rewarding endeavor and I can assure you that your students will most certainly be appreciative of your efforts.

Pacing

It is imperative that instructors speak at a pace that is conducive to student learning. If an instructor speaks too fast, the students are likely to miss out on crucial information. On the other hand, if an instructor speaks too slowly, the students are likely to become disinterested and might disengage altogether.

Lynn K. Wells (2004) suggests that an optimal guideline for speakers is 140 to 175 words per minute. Thus, as an instructor, this is a reasonable range in which your students can follow along as well as comprehend what is being said. If it is helpful, consider making a short audio recording of yourself in order to determine if you are within Wells’ parameters. To do so, record yourself speaking for 15 seconds and then count the number of words during the playback. Multiply this number by four in order to calculate your average words per minute. If necessary, you may want to consider speeding up or slowing down in order to be within the suggested range.

Considering that we live in a very fast world and, as instructors, we have a lot of content to cover in only fourteen weeks in a semester, speaking too quickly seems to be a common problem. Here are some suggestions for refining your rate of speaking:

Pacing Pointers

1 – Pause Purposefully. Give yourself permission to pause while you are speaking. Pausing is particularly crucial because it gives your students the opportunity to actually process what they are hearing (“Presentation skills for teachers,” n.d.). In this way, rest assured that you will not
“lose” your students when you take several 5-10 second breaks during in-class proceedings. Additionally, pausing gives you a chance to think about where you are going to go next with the lesson.

**Tip** – Suzanne Guthrie (2010) suggests that instructors write the word “PAUSE” in their lecture notes in order to remind themselves when it is necessary to take a vocal break.

**Extra Tip** – As you introduce more pauses in your speech, be sure that you do not begin vocalizing these by adding any unnecessary sounds (e.g. “um,” “uh,” “ok,” or “you know”). This is common habit among speakers that can actually prove annoying and distracting to listeners (Teoh & Fidelis, 2005).

2 – **Notice the Note-Taking.** Most students would likely agree that an instructor should speak at a rate in which they can compose their notes. Therefore, assess and, perhaps, adjust your pacing by observing students’ note-taking efforts. If most of your students are still writing in their notebooks, consider pausing for a few moments. As the students begin to put down their pens and look up, this is your cue to continue speaking ("Presentations skills for teachers," n.d.).

3 – **Converse in the Classroom.** Consider re-structuring the way you navigate your lessons altogether. Instead of being a lecturer, strive to be more of a conversationalist with the content. Explore in-class material by employing questions and discussions rather than simply dispensing it to your students. By initiating more verbal exchanges with your students, you will be able to monitor your pacing more closely.

4 – **Become a Better Listener.** Similar to the previous suggestion, to speak effectively requires an individual to listen effectively. Thus, build your listening skills not only to determine how to reply to students’ questions or comments but simply to give yourself a respite from vocal activity. Additionally, by listening carefully to your students, you will be giving yourself an opportunity to breathe which can be helpful toward remaining relaxed (see below).

5 – **Pick up on the Pros.** Spend time listening to professional speakers including public officials, television journalists, radio hosts etc. Notice how they often demonstrate proper pacing in order to thoroughly communicate their message.

**Tip** – As an at-home exercise, practice one of your classroom lessons while reproducing the speech of one of these professional speakers. It may seem silly but experiencing the rhythm of another’s voice might aid in prodding you away from your own habitual rate of speech.

**Audibility & Projection**

Students naturally expect to be able to hear and understand their instructors. Yet, considering that the number of students and the size of the classroom might vary each semester, audibility sometimes becomes an issue.

In rare cases, some instructors may struggle with being too loud. However, when this occurs, it is likely that the students are going to send very clear non-verbal signals back to the
instructor. Two more common problems, on the other hand, are that students cannot hear their instructor or the instructor’s speech is simply incomprehensible. Here are some tips for improving your projection and audibility in the classroom:

**Audibility & Projection Pointers**

6 – **Breathing: Bring It!** Simply put, breathing fuels the voice. However, to speak as optimal as possible, a speaker needs to adopt Central-Deep breathing (often referred to as “abdominal breathing”) rather than Clavicular-Shoulder breathing (often referred to as “chest breathing”).

- **Clavicular-Shoulder breathing = BAD!** Clavicular-Shoulder breathing consists of inhalations that are quick and shallow that can, subsequently, cause tension along one’s vocal tract. To witness chest-breathing, notice the raising and lowering of an athlete’s shoulders following a big play.

- **Central-Deep breathing = GOOD!** Central-Deep Breathing allows an individual to take in a larger amount of oxygen and better manage the air flow which supports speech in a more relaxed way. During Central-Deep breathing, the abdomen enlarges and then shrinks with each breath (Mayer, 2004).

**Tip** – To prove that Central-Deep breathing really is most natural to human beings, notice your respiration when you wake up in the morning. You are likely to see the expansion and contraction around your belly as a result of the movement of the diaphragmatic muscle (which works with the lungs in the respiratory system).

7 – **Determine your Vocal Direction.** Start building your awareness of where you are actually sending your sound. If necessary, make changes to the directional path of your voice to ensure that it is in fact reaching the students. To do so, focus on specific points in the classroom to which you want your voice to travel altogether (Wells, 2003). Or, consider exercising more eye contact with your students in order to improve the direction of the sound waves. Similarly, try to avoid reading from your notes because it is likely that your voice will be traveling toward the floor (“Presentation skills for teachers,” n.d.).

8 – **Construct the Classroom.** If possible, consider changing the setup of your classroom in order to improve the audibility of your voice. For example, a more circular or even semi-circular pattern of desks may prove more beneficial than a traditional arrangement (“Acting and nonverbal communication techniques in the classroom,” n.d.). If you are teaching in a very large classroom, consider instructing your students to only sit in the first few rows or front half of it. By doing so, you will be decreasing the amount of space in which your voice has to travel.

9 – **Pinpoint your Positioning.** Similar to the previous suggestion, consider how you might improve your audibility by making adjustments to your location in the classroom that will decrease the amount of space between you and your students. There may be a better place for you to stand, sit, or even walk in order to ensure that the students can attend to what you are saying (Goulden, 1991).
10 – Focus on Physicalization. Consider using your body to enhance and enrich your projection. By employing reasonable gestures, you can better emphasize the content that you are covering (Teoh & Fidelis, 2005). For example, if you are trying to express the significance of a particular concept (big or small), use your hands to convey its size to your students. By employing more gestures while you teach, you are likely to be taking in larger breaths too!

Extra Pointers

11 – Perfect Your Posture. Practice effective posture whenever you are in front of your students. If you tend to slouch or stand in an imbalanced manner, you may be impeding your respiratory activity and putting extra tension on your vocal tract (Mester, 2005).

12 – Make the Content Captivating. Be passionate about what you are teaching! Mester and Tauber (n.d.) suggest that if an instructor is truly enthusiastic about what he or she is teaching, it will likely be reflected in his or her vocal energy. On the other hand, a lack of excitement for learning might result in a lack of vocal expression which may communicate disinterest to students.

If you would like to explore vocal variety (e.g. emphasizing operative words, the difference in inflection between statements and questions etc.) in greater detail, consider visiting:

“Acting and Nonverbal Communication Techniques in the Classroom”
http://faculty.academyart.edu/export/sites/faculty/assets/faculty/ActingxNVC.pdf

13 – Seek Students’ Support. Consider sharing with your students that you are trying to make improvements to your voice and speech, and encourage them to let you know whenever they are having difficult hearing or understanding you (“Presentation skills for teachers,” n.d.). Additionally, if English is your second language, tell your students how much you would appreciate their help if and when you mispronounce a word.

14 – Document Your Delivery. Consider inviting a friend or colleague to make a video-recording of you in the classroom. Some universities even have teaching centers that may provide this particular service (Nilson, 2010). Or, make a video recording by yourself by simply positioning a video camera at the back of the room prior to the start of class (Mester & Tauber, n.d.). Not only do many college libraries allow students to check out video cameras, many smart phones these days have recording software too.

Tip – One quick word of warning: avoid being too judgmental of the actual tone of your voice on the video-recording. Due to the way in which sound resonates within our skulls, your voice is likely to sound somewhat different than how you normally hear yourself.

15 – Pre-lesson Preparation. Spend a few minutes warming up your voice prior to entering the classroom. In your office or another secluded place, simply hum some musical scales and begin
to exercise your articulators a little – tongue, lips, and jaw. Also, spend a few minutes just breathing in order to collect yourself and put you at ease (Nilson, 2010).

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, making improvements to an individual’s voice and speech requires time and effort. Thus, be very patient because change is not likely to occur over night. Focus on making small steps of progress and through your persist attention to refining the way in which you speak, you can definitely strengthen your speaking prowess and the learning experiences you seek to provide.

References


