

## IMPROVING CLASSROOM SPEAKING SKILLS

*Khalilova Olima Akhatovna*

*A senior lecturer of Foreign languages department*

*Karshi engineering economic institute*

**Annotation:** *The purpose of this article is to present a framework within which an instructor can evaluate his or her speaking voice and to suggest exercises that may help in overcoming common speech weaknesses. The aim here is not to give professors the expressive merely to describe what ordinary teachers can do to improve their speech in the classroom.*

**Key words:** *Sensitivity, speech qualities, Voice Improvement Exercises, Voice projection, Recording and Analyzing;*

## УЛУЧШЕНИЕ НАВЫКОВ ГОВОРИ В КЛАССЕ

*Халилова Олима Ахатовна*

*старший преподаватель кафедры иностранных языков*

*Каршинский инженерно-экономический институт*

**Аннотация:** *Цель этой статьи — представить основу, в рамках которой инструктор может оценить свой голос, и предложить упражнения, которые могут помочь в преодолении общих речевых недостатков. Цель здесь не в том, чтобы дать преподавателям возможность просто описать, что обычные учителя могут сделать, чтобы улучшить свою речь в классе.*

**Ключевые слова:** *чувствительность, речевые качества, голосовые упражнения, проекция голоса, запись и анализ;*

College professors can be effective classroom teachers in spite of physical handicaps. Most could continue to teach from a wheel chair or even after losing sight or hearing. However, unless a teacher had students who could understand signing, it would be almost impossible to continue teaching after losing his or her voice. Yet

almost all instructors take their speech for granted. Unless they have a significant speech problem such as stuttering or speaking too softly to be heard, few college teachers evaluate the effectiveness of their speaking voices or actively work to improve them.

**Increasing Sensitivity to Others' Speech.** The first step in improving one's own speaking voice is to pay serious attention to the ways others use their voices in group settings. [1, 67] Notice the variety of others' speech. Some people speak slowly and deliberately and others with speed and impetuosity; some speak softly, others with loud projection. Still others present great variety and change between these extremes. The tone of speech probably varies most, from deeply resonant to high or shrill. Tune, the musical quality resulting from patterns of rising and falling tones, also varies. You will find that voices and speech styles are almost as unique as appearances. You are also likely to notice how certain speech habits distract you from the ideas being presented. [2, 137]

Some speakers habitually begin sentences with meaningless vocalizations such as "uh," "well", or "okay," as if their vocal cords could not begin to vibrate without a warm-up. Speakers are often unaware of how much their speech is interrupted by such unnecessary sounds. When observing one novice college teacher I was so struck by her habit of beginning sentences with "okay" that I made an informal count over the remainder of a fifty-minute class. In discussing her lecture afterwards I commented on her use of "okay." She agreed that she said it a lot, estimating that she had used the word "about ten times" during her talk. The actual count was over seventy-five!

Other speech qualities also distract listeners. For example, some instructors speak in such low tones or with such poor articulation that listeners become fatigued from the effort needed to understand what is being said. At the other extreme, rapid speech or speech delivered in staccato bursts also can be tiring to the hearer, especially if no breaks occur. Anything about vocal delivery that takes the listener's attention away from the content of the speaker's remarks will distract from the overall effectiveness of the communication.

Probably you have noticed that some speakers' voices are easier and more enjoyable to listen to than others. From the first few phrases, some voices capture the ear and produce a warm glow of anticipated pleasure, while others create almost a dread of what is to come. [3, 164]

What voice qualities contribute to these markedly different effects? Foremost among these is pitch. The degree to which the voice varies in pitch is critical to engaging speaking. A voice ranging melodically- between high and low tones is much more likely to keep listeners' attention than a monotonous voice that merely uses one or two notes. The way a speaker uses inflection, giving more emphasis to some words than to others, also contributes to audience interest. Speech with little or no emphasis is unlikely to engage and maintain someone's attention. Even something as subtle as the timing of a speaker's breathing can contribute to the overall quality of the speaking voice. Silent or barely audible inhalations occurring at the ends of major phrases are less likely to interrupt the flow of ideas than noisy inhalations stuck in the middle of important sentences. Ironically, some political speakers seem especially prone to break up their speeches with unnecessary pauses.

Though more difficult to pin down than other characteristics, the degree to which speech sounds relaxed or tense contributes significantly to its overall effect on listeners. When speakers have relaxed or flowing style, when their speech seems to come easily, we say they are fluent. Hesitant or jerky speech causes the listener to share the speaker's tension, discomfort, or lack of confidence. Noticing how differences in others' speech affect you is the first step in improving your own speaking voice. It does not matter how systematically you note speech qualities. Simply paying attention to them as you sit in meetings or lectures will increase your sensitivity as effectively as taking detailed notes on what you hear. Let your personal preference dictate your choice of method. There is, unfortunately, no choice about the next step to take in improving your speaking voice you must listen to a tape recording of yourself talking.

Recording and Analyzing Your Speech. Speech teachers agree that a detailed analysis of a tape recording is an essential step deciding how one's voice can be

improved. Audio only taping is preferable, because videotaping introduces visual distractions. The following method is adapted from those advocated by speech authorities and refined based on my experience with graduate student instructors. I recommend that you make two tape recordings of your voice, in the following way.

Ask a friend to help you in making the first tape, set up your tape recorder in a small or moderate-size room. Facing your friend, begin a conversation by stating your name, your age, and where you were born. Then pick some topic those interests you—a recent movie or book you liked or hated, for example—and for four or five minutes tell your friend how you feel about it. Instruct your companion beforehand to ask short questions or respond briefly to what you say if he or she wishes, especially if you stop talking. The objective of this exercise is to record yourself talking in a natural, conversational style for a few minutes.

Within a few days (or immediately afterwards, if you wish), move your recording equipment to a classroom seating between twenty and fifty students. Place this recording on the same tape immediately following the informal conversation so that both will be together when you analyze them. Bring a friend along as an audience and have him or her sit in the middle of the front row with instructions to remain quiet during this recording. Select a topic from your subject area and give a short lecture of five to ten minutes' duration, standing up.

Do not listen to either of your recordings right away. A few days after the second recording has been completed, set aside an hour for your analysis. The following steps may be useful in structuring your assessment of the recordings.

- ✓ Listen to each recording without stopping to take notes.
- ✓ Afterward, note your initial reactions to hearing yourself speak. What are your feelings (puzzled, ashamed, pessimistic, defensive, critical)? Try not to let your initial reactions, whatever they may be, discourage you.
- ✓ Listen to the first recording a second time, jotting on a piece of paper the words that seem to best describe your voice.
- ✓ Rewind the tape and listen to the conversation segment for a third time Using the Speech Assessment Rating Form (Exhibit 1 at the end of the chapter), rate

you speech along each of the eight dimensions. Do not be too concerned about selecting a particular number on the scale, but note where in general you believe your voice fell on each dimension.

- ✓ Within twenty-four hours, rate the lecture segment using the same procedure.
- ✓ Consider differences between your speech in the two situations. Was it more relaxed and natural when in the informal setting? Did your speech become tighter and more highly pitched when you were lecturing? Was it louder and more precisely articulated when you lectured? In which setting were you more fluent, more enthusiastic? Any differences you note will help you decide how you to improve.

The next step is to determine how your speech could be improved. There are several ways to do this. The best method is to take the tapes and rating forms to a speech coach or experienced speaker for review and critique. You might also work with another instructor who is interested in improving his or her speech and take turns speaking and listening. Each person can rate the other's voice as well as his or her own, and the two of you can compare notes.

Regardless of what other people listen to your recordings, you must make the final decision about what, if anything, in your speech needs improvement. It is important to note that no single voice quality (other than distracting speech habits, perhaps) will determine listeners' interest when you speak. Rather, the overall speaker whose voice is sometimes loud, sometimes soft, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, sometimes sharp and crisp, and sometimes mellow and melodic is more likely to keep an audience's attention than one whose voice has any one quality for too long.

In addition, remember that the impact of your speech on your audience may have as much to do with what you are feeling when you speak as with the technical qualities of your voice. If you are enthusiastic and eager to tell your audience what you know, they are more likely to be enthusiastic about hearing it. If you are enthusiastic and eager to tell your audience what you know, they are more likely to be enthusiastic about hearing it. If you are fascinated about the topic at hand, they are likely to have their curiosity aroused, too. In addition to selecting specific speech

characteristics to change, it is wise to attempt to experience what you wish your students to feel and trust your speech to model it for them.

The following section discusses a number of common speech weaknesses that can be improved. For best results with serious problems such as stuttering or extreme stage fright, you should consider consultation with a speech therapist.

However, the self improvement techniques that follow are helpful remedies for the most common minor weaknesses observed in the speech of college teachers.

*Voice Improvement Exercises:* Though you may not be fully aware of how often you use unessential words or phrases, it is relatively easy to increase awareness of their use and to eliminate them from your formal speech. Ask someone in the audience, such as a friendly and trusted student, to count your uses of certain words for a few days and report at the end of each class. The resulting information can help you gain control over this distracting habit.

Most college teachers speak too quietly. Developing a speaking voice that is strong and energetic enough to be easily heard and understood by student in the back rows is essential. Speaking loudly enough is especially important at the beginning of a class when the students have not yet settled down and become caught up in your ideas.

Projection refers to the combination of volume and energy that makes the voice carry well to the back of a room or auditorium. As any singer or actor knows, speaking with projection is more than simply speaking loudly. The following exercise can both illustrate voice projection and, when repeated on several occasions in increasingly large rooms, provide a technique for increasing it.

Position yourself and a companion in the middle of a room about the same size as the ones in which you typically teach. Standing only a few feet from one another, take turns reading several lines from a book speak your lines expressively, opening your mouth wide and saying them with vigor and conviction. Notice the sound of your own voice as it reverberates around the room and compare it mentally with that of your partner as he or she speaks to you. Each of you should then take two or three steps backwards and repeat the procedure. Even though you are now farther away,

continue to speak directly to your friend as if it were critically important the he or she hear and understand what you are saying.

Repeat this process until the two of you are standing against opposite walls. During this exercise you probably noticed the need to take much bigger breaths when you spoke as you moved farther away from your partner. You may have also noticed that you needed to open your mouth considerably wider to project your voice over a greater distance. You may have become aware of a tightening in your throat as you were required to speak over a larger distance. If this was the case, your voice quality and comfort probably decreased as well.

A well-projected voice requires a sufficient volume of air to generate the vocalization and still have a reserve to support the sound. You must fill your lungs with more air than you need because lungs are much less efficient balloons when they are only partly inflated. To fill your lungs fully, inhale from your abdomen rather than your chest. Your "stomach", not your chest, should rise when you take a deep breath. (This is far easier to do if your posture is good-spine straight, shoulders back). Singers and wind players learn "belly breathing" early in their careers.

Voice projection is aided by opening the mouth wide enough to allow the sound to escape easily. Singers know well the importance of opening their mouths to deliver a relaxed-sounding voice with high volume. The key to opening the mouth wide while keeping the throat (and therefore the sound) relaxed is to lower the jaw as far as possible rather than stretching the cheeks sideways. Making a wide, exaggerated smile ruins voice quality by creating tension in the mouth and throat. To illustrate how far your jaw will hinge downward comfortably, yawn several times. That is the type of mouth opening to use when you are trying to fill up a room with the sound of your voice. Except when speaking in very large halls, it will not be necessary to project to your maximum potential, but developing such power makes it unlikely that your voice will ever be underpowered in less demanding classroom settings. [4, 85-88]

No matter how well you project your voice, there are situations in which other factors will work against your being heard. Power to project your voice is especially

important in poorly designed classrooms with poor acoustics. Because bodies and clothing absorb sound and thus reduce distorting reverberation, a room full of people will have better acoustics than an empty one. Avoid classrooms with especially poor acoustics if possible, and schedule your classes in rooms only as large as the number of students enrolled; decline the option of a larger but half-filled room.

It is almost impossible to be heard in some teaching situations. For example, on one of those first few lovely days of spring, students may persuade you to let the class meet outside. With no walls or ceilings to reflect your voice, it will be practically impossible for students spread out on the grass to hear you—even assuming that they are looking in your direction and not watching the passing campus scene. Giving in to earnest requests to hold class outside is a poor idea for a number of reasons, but the near impossibility of being heard is foremost among them.

To increase your voice projection, there is no substitute for practicing in actual classrooms. Begin in small rooms and gradually work your way up to the largest ones at your school. Bring along a friend or two to sit in the back row if possible; they can tell you how well your voice is carrying to where they are sitting. Whether you are alone or accompanied, the key to projection is speaking directly to a real or imagined person sitting in the back row. Some college teachers have learned to do this in actual classes by picking one or two students in the rear and pretending that they are speaking only to them.

Learning to speak with sufficient projection is relatively easy if practiced with commitment, but a few college instructors who had used these exercises still had difficulty in making themselves heard. Discussions revealed that the source of their difficulty was an underlying inhibition about speaking loudly. When the first tried the exercises, they were quite uncomfortable about speaking with such vigor and volume. The origin of this anxiety' about hearing themselves speak with volume may have been excessive demands from parents and elementary school teachers that they speak softly. Do not be concerned if your voice sounds different or displeasing to you as you begin to project more. Such a reaction may simply reflect long-standing conditioning to speak softly, even in front of groups. Luckily, such (for a college



teacher) maladaptive conditioning can be modified with practice. Next to speaking too softly, poor articulation is the most common speech problem observed in college teachers. Speaking crisply and clearly takes considerably more effort than speaking conversationally. Speaking before others, especially as the size of the group and the necessary-projection increases, requires proportionately more distinct and energetic articulation. [5, 885]

Well-articulated speech results primarily from the way the speaker sounds consonants, especially those that begin and end but primarily the result from lip movements to some degree, but primarily the result from the way the tongue touches the roof of the mouth and the back of the teeth. You can demonstrate for yourself how much activity occurs in your mouth when words are well articulated. Read any short passage out loud, slowly and with deliberate pronunciation of even syllable. Notice how much your lips and tongue must move to make all the consonant sounds. The consonants that precede and follow open-mouth vowel sounds make possible the large number of sounds human beings can make.

Increased attention to forming consonants and to speaking more deliberately in front of groups is probably all you will need to overcome poor articulation habits. However, some instructors have also found it useful to practice saying tongue twisters that focus on different consonant sounds such as "p," "t", "s", "ch", and "ing". More than anything, a college teacher must make the conscious decision to speak as distinctly as possible.

Anyone can learn to speak with sufficient projection and articulation, but tonal quality is more difficult to improve. Voice quality is largely the result of the physical properties of the throat, mouth, sinus cavities, facial bone structure, and chest, none of which can be changed easily. There are, however, certain unpleasant and distracting voice qualities that college teachers can and should reduce or eliminate.

The first of these is stridency, speaking with a hard, metallic (usually loud and shrill) tone. This voice quality typically results from trying to speak loudly without breathing deeply. The attempt to gain volume in this way constricts the throat and produces the strident sound. Breathing deeply to achieve projection will usually help

to produce a more relaxed, less strident tone. An additional voice exercise to reduce stridency is to yawn a few times and then make an "ah" sound for ten seconds or so, letting your voice gradually fall in pitch to produce a long, sliding sound. Stridency comes from tension in the vocal apparatus, and this tension will disappear when you learn how to produce volume while maintaining relaxation. [6, 206]

Excessive nasality or twangy quality results from directing too much sound through the nose. It is normal to send sound in this direction when we make "mmm" or "nnn" sounds, but doing so with other sounds, especially open vowel sounds, produces a result that is unpleasant to hear. Practice making long vowel sounds through the mouth rather than the nose to eliminate this problem.

Winter colds or excessive strain can give the voice a hoarse, breathy sound. College teachers should know a few stage tricks for speaking well in spite of a cold. Singer and actors learn to spot the beginnings of a sore throat and to avoid speaking or singing any more than they must at such times. It is also common practice for them to gargle with a mild soda and salt solution or to suck a lemon just before performing. This can reduce unpleasant voice tone and provide relief for an hour or so.

Though a masterful lecturer results from far more than an engaging speaking voice, the skill with which a college teacher uses this oral bridge to his or her students will strongly influence the effectiveness of the presentation. The visual dimension of a presentation. Though of less importance than the spoken dimension, is another essential element in mastery of the classroom as a dramatic arena.

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