# TIPS THE TONGUE

# The Nonnative English Speaker's Guide to MASTERING PUBLIC SPEAKING

Deborah Grayson Riegel & Ellen Dowling



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## **Dedicated to:**

## *Michael, Jacob and Sophie, my favorite around-the-world traveling companions.*

DEBORAH GRAYSON RIEGEL

*Xzavier Weldon, my beloved grandson, wishing you a future filled with joy and applause.* 

Ellen Dowling

## Contents

A Message to Our Readersvii
Chapter 1: The Key Behaviors of (Almost) All Successful Presenters
Chapter 2: Overcoming Unique Challenges for Nonnative         English Speakers       11
<b>Chapter 3:</b> Design a Strong Structure to Drive Success
<b>Chapter 4:</b> Establish Rapport with Your Audience Despite Language and Cultural Barriers
<b>Chapter 5:</b> Use Simple, Specific Language to Make a Memorable Impact
<b>Chapter 6:</b> Use Gestures, Movement, and Facial Expressions to Engage Your Audience
Chapter 7: Speak Up to Be Heard83
Chapter 8: Partner with Your Audience
<b>Chapter 9:</b> Rehearse Repeatedly to Sound Spontaneous
Chapter 10: Respect Gender Roles
Chapter 11: Become Culturally Aware
Chapter 12: Master Questions and Answers with Ease and Confidence
<b>Afterword</b>
About the Authors
Works Referenced

ozens of books provide instruction in how to improve your presentation skills. After all, public speaking is on most people's top ten list of things to avoid (and for some people, it's on their top one list). But for a growing subset of global business professionals—those who need to present in English when English isn't their native language—the anxiety related to speaking in public is even more pronounced. Considering the language barriers they need to overcome, the cultural norms they need to learn, and the general challenges associated with public speaking, nonnative English speakers have it harder than most.

This book makes it easier.

*Tips of the Tongue: The Nonnative English Speaker's Guide to Mastering Public Speaking* is a practical, tactical, and supportive how-to book aimed at addressing the unique problems that nonnative English speakers experience when they attempt to deliver a presentation in public.

This isn't an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) book, nor is it an accent-modification book. It's also not a book on cross-cultural communications. It's a tool kit to help reduce anxiety and increase the confidence, competence, and cultural comfort of those who have to present in English when English isn't their first language.

Based on our collective five decades of experience with teaching presentation skills to leaders—with several of those decades

dedicated to working with nonnative English speaking leaders this book captures the tips, tools, and techniques we've shared with our clients across the globe.

If any of the following are the case, this book is for you:

- English is your second (or third or fourth) language.
- Your job (or volunteer role/hobby) requires you to make presentations frequently.
- You experience anxiety when speaking in public, and your worries are worsened by the extra burden of having to speak in English.
- You feel like your English is pretty good—until you have to make a presentation in front of an audience.
- You are particularly uncomfortable speaking in front of a Western audience.
- You are afraid that you'll say the wrong thing, gesture inappropriately, or bore the audience.
- You worry that your struggle to present in English will undermine the message you are trying to get across.

What if you're reading this and your first language *is* English? Keep reading. If you could use a refresher on how to structure your presentation, engage your audience, manage questions and answers (Q&A), and more, then you'll find a lot in here that's useful for you, too.

We, the authors, both speak only one primary language—English—

and so we commend, respect, and admire those of you who have added this complex tongue to your repertoire. We know we would have plenty to learn from you.

*Tips of the Tongue: The Nonnative English Speaker's Guide to Mastering Public Speaking* is what you can learn from us.

-Deborah Grayson Riegel and Ellen Dowling

## Chapter 1

## The Key Behaviors of (Almost) All Successful Presenters

### Be sincere, be brief, be seated. United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt

R oosevelt's recommendation is smart advice for any presenter, whether English is your first, second, third, or tenth language. The most successful presenters speak from their hearts, get to the point, and wrap it up before the audience gets bored or overwhelmed. Of course, this is usually easier said than done. Before we get into specific detail about how to make an effective presentation in English, we think it would be very helpful to review the common characteristics of effective presentations in general. Here are ten behaviors exhibited by the most successful presenters in *any* culture:

**1. They deliver a message with credibility and sincerity.** No matter what the actual topic is, most presentations are persuasive; the goal of the presentation is to convince the audience of the validity and value of what you are presenting to them. (Even if you are presenting an informational status report, you want your audience to believe that the details you are providing are both true and useful.)

Therefore, it is critical that the audience buys in to your main points.

**TIPS OF THE TONGUE** 

In no other media of communication is the person delivering the information as important as the message itself. If the audience does not believe in *you*, they're not going to believe in your ideas. A good example of this is a medical professional who hosts a TV show about new advances in medicine. Even though this doctor may be selling products that have no real medicinal value (and no scientific support to back up their health claims), if the doctor comes across to the audience as believable, credible, and sincere, people will line up to buy the product. The same holds true in reverse: If the doctor appears to be a quack or a phony, the audience will have nothing to do with what he or she is selling, even if the products are actually effective.

Never doubt that the messenger is equally as important as the message.

## If you want to get across an idea, wrap it up in a person. Nobel Peace Prize winner Ralph Bunche

**2. They speak in a way that is easy to understand.** It goes without saying that if the audience cannot understand you, they're not going to get much out of your presentation. If you speak too quietly and they can't hear you, or if you speak too loudly and hurt their ears, or if you speak too quickly and they can't keep up, or if you speak too slowly and they begin to doze off, you will be wasting everyone's time—and the opportunity to make an impact. There are many ways to improve your vocal skills and overcome the challenges posed by an accent unfamiliar to your audience's ears. However, it's not the audience's job to make sense of your presentation. It's yours.

#### The noblest pleasure is the joy of understanding. LEONARDO DA VINCI

**3.** They clearly explain the benefits of the presentation. Audience members need to know "what's in it for me?" if they attend your presentation. You need to know the answer to the question, "Why should my audience care about this?" And then you need to figure out a way to present the answer early in your presentation. You can only do this if you have done your homework and have tried to understand your audience's point of view. Ask yourself these questions: "Who are they? Why are they here? What do they already know about my subject? What will they want to learn?" In short, you need to understand your audience before you can know what will most appeal to them.

Pretend that every single person you meet has a sign around his or her neck that says, "Make me feel important." Not only will you succeed in sales, you will succeed in life. BUSINESSWOMAN MARY KAY ASH

**4. They adapt their own personal style to meet the needs of the audience.** Every culture has preferences for what makes successful communication. Some cultures prefer that speakers get to the point quickly, cite only the relevant facts, then sum up and close. Others prefer that speakers build up to a conclusion gradually, piece by piece, to allow listeners time to process the argument before being

confronted with the main point. Some like lots of stories to paint vivid pictures in their minds; others want just the facts and consider stories a waste of valuable time. Which kind of audience are you speaking to and how will you adjust your own personal preferences to meet their specific needs?

A personal style is like handwriting—it happens as the byproduct of our way of seeing things, enriched by the experiences of everything around us. ITALIAN DESIGNER MASSIMO VIGNELLI

**5.** They honor the given time limits. When asked to speak for a certain amount of time, an effective speaker takes great care not to go over the time limit, as this can be frustrating for audiences as well as discourteous to any other presenters who may be speaking next. In order to fit your presentation into a specific amount of time, you need to structure your talk very carefully, being aware of places where you might want to expand on a point or places where your audience might want to insert a comment or a question.

It becomes even trickier if the speaker before you greatly exceeded his or her time limit, cutting into your speaking time. If you insist on sticking with your pre-agreed-upon time, you run the risk of alienating your audience members, who know very well what time it is and how much time is left.

Take a tip from the playwright George Bernard Shaw, who once found himself to be the last speaker in an evening when the speakers before him had each gone significantly over their allotted time. When his turn came, Shaw stood up and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, the subject is not exhausted, but we are." And he sat back down.

Right time, right place, right people equals success. Wrong time, wrong place, wrong people equals most of the real human history. Sufi Author and Teacher Idries Shah, Reflections

**6.** They know how to use technology skillfully. If you're going to use PowerPoint, Keynote, or any other visual presentation program, you must learn how to use it seamlessly and effectively, and you must practice, practice, practice until you know the order of the slides backwards and forwards. Nothing looks more unprofessional than a presenter who clicks to the next slide, then is surprised to see what it is. Whether you're making a slide presentation, showing a video clip, playing music, speaking into a microphone or anything else with a power connection, you need to show mastery over the technology to support your credibility. Of course, even if you're taking a low-tech approach (such as writing on flip charts or a white board), you want to be mindful of using the tools skillfully, thoughtfully, and yes, legibly.

People who know what they're talking about don't need PowerPoint. Steve Jobs

**7.** They have a back-up plan in case things go wrong. Have you heard of Murphy's Law? It states, "Anything that can go wrong will

**TIPS OF THE TONGUE** 

go wrong." The wise presenter imagines many different scenarios where the presentation can fall apart: Your laptop decides to die during your presentation; the slide program you're using is not compatible with the provided system; your slides are unreadable due to the lighting in the room; there is a power outage; you can't find your notes; your audience is much larger (or much smaller) than you were anticipating; the decision-maker is late; there's construction going on outside—these are all situations that we have personally experienced and survived. If you can imagine something going wrong, rest assured that it has gone wrong before and probably will again. The solution: Prepare for the worst, hope for the best, and build enough rapport and trust with your audience that a glitch or two won't undermine your personal or professional credibility.

> Murphy was an optimist. An Experienced Presenter

8. They prepare thoroughly (without memorizing everything).

An excellent presenter does not memorize the presentation. For one thing, a presentation may last several hours or more, and who could possibly memorize a three-hour speech (unless you're playing the part of Hamlet)? For another, memorizing will result in your presentation sounding forced, phony, or like an insincere actor. And what if a bird flies by the window and disrupts your concentration? What if you need to change directions after an audience member asks a pointed question? Memorization gets in the way of interpersonal connection and flexibility. It also tends to cause more anxiety than it alleviates. Excellent presenters speak from notes that remind them of their main points and the sequence of those points. And they know their topic so well and have rehearsed their talk so thoroughly that the audience is often not aware that they are using notes at all.

Your goal is "rehearsed spontaneity." With enough practice, you can help your audience experience (as the great Russian acting teacher Konstantin Stanislavsky put it) "the illusion of the first time." And with enough preparation, you will be able to shift and adapt along the way.

#### The measure of intelligence is the ability to change. ALBERT EINSTEIN

**9. They engage the audience and avoid lecturing them.** To be an excellent presenter, you need to resist the urge to do *all* the talking. There are many ways to involve your audience in your presentation, from simple survey questions ("How many of you feel that you spend too much time on your mobile phone?"), to checks for understanding ("And that's what makes it so effective. What questions do you have?"), to telling stories, to using analogies and examples, to including pictures of members of your audience in your slide show. (Dr. Jonathan Dowling, Ellen's quantum physicist brother, uses this technique in his scientific presentations.)

Presenters who treat a speech like a one-way street risk losing the audience's engagement, involvement, and attention. Presenters who take a two-way-street approach to public speaking invite connection, trust, and buy-in.

## I hear, and I forget; I see, and I remember; I do and I understand. Снімеѕе Ркочекв

**10. They move purposefully.** There are two kinds of ineffective presenters: those who move too little and those who move too much. Move too little and your audience will grow tired and bored. Move too much and your audience will experience you as nervous and unfocused. The goal is to be somewhere in the middle, where your gestures punctuate your points and your movements make a statement.

The best presenters do not hide behind the podium, which then becomes a barrier between the presenter and the audience. They approach their audiences, encouraging them to join in the presentation; they also move close to their visual aids to illustrate their points.

"Proxemics" is a scientific term for how your position in the space can affect the dynamics of your communication with your audience. When you change the usual proxemics (you step out from behind the podium, for example), you immediately gain the audience's attention.

> *I move*, *therefore I am*. Japanese Writer Haruki Murakami, 1Q84

Now that we have reviewed the key characteristics of an excellent presenter in any culture, let's see what techniques will help you deal with the specific problems that come from making a presentation in your second (or third or fourth) language.