Delivering a high-stakes business presentation is challenging for anyone. But when English is not your native language, it is much harder.

There are many reasons why. You may be thinking in two languages at once. You may be anxious about grammar and pronunciation. You may worry about the speed with which you talk, or the way you gesture.

At Speechworks, we work with managers from all over the world. With our help, non-native speakers deliver powerful and persuasive presentations.

How do they do it? Instead of trying to be perfect, they focus on connecting with their listeners. And they make sure their message is clearly understood.

If you are a non-native speaker, we can help you too. Follow these five fundamentals to deliver a clear message that connects with your listeners.

Fundamental #1: Make Three Points and State Them Clearly.

The biggest mistake most non-native speakers make is to try to say too much. Spoken communication is great for getting across a few core ideas—not dozens of ideas! Keep your message simple. Then your listeners can follow along, even if they miss a word or two because of your accent.

Ask yourself: What are the most important ideas I want my audience to remember? Choose just three points. You can always have sub-points, or use Q&A to help you get additional ideas across.

Have you ever struggled to come up with the exact English word you need to express an idea?
Fundamental #1 continued:
Make Three Points

in your head? When this happens in the middle of a presentation, it can throw you off track. It can also confuse your listener.

So here’s a suggestion: When you write out your three points, state each key message in just 5-6 words. Then stick with those same 5-6 words each time you mention your point. Use the same words when you preview your points, when you start to explain each point in detail, and when you recap your points at the end.

Example:
Imagine that you are the VP of a retail chain addressing your store managers. You would begin your presentation by saying:

“We are losing out to our competitors. In fact, our market share has dropped from 30% to 25%. We can win that market share back if we follow these three strategies:
• Train our associates to be experts,
• Treat our customers like royalty, and
• Increase sales of high-margin products.
Now I'd like to discuss each of our strategies in more detail. First, we need to train our associates to be experts.”

Selecting just three points and repeating them word for word throughout the presentation will help you stay on track. More importantly, it will also help your listeners remember your message.

Fundamental #2:
Use Great Eye Contact.

Eye contact “rules” vary by culture. In many Asian countries, a child shows respect for his elders by not looking directly into their eyes. In the United States, parents tell their children to look adults in the eye. Both examples speak to the importance of the eyes in human interaction.

Having great eye contact is critical in business presentations. The goal of a speaker is to connect with the listener, and connection begins with eye contact. Eye contact builds the trust that builds the relationship. You can’t be a great speaker without it.

I have worked with many non-native speakers who struggle to make eye contact. Sometimes it’s because of cultural norms. But most of the time, it’s because they don’t know what good eye contact looks like.

Here’s what good eye contact is NOT: it’s not glancing around the room quickly, trying to speak to everyone at once. It’s also not locking in your eyes on just one friendly face in the audience. It’s certainly not looking at a person’s forehead.
Fundamental #2 continued: 
Use Great Eye Contact.

Instead, good eye contact is having a short, intimate conversation with one person at a time, looking directly into their eyes. You need to hold that eye contact through a thought. As you do so, lean in toward the person, as if the two of you were “magnetized.” Then randomly move on and find the eyes of someone else in the audience.

We recommend holding the eye contact 4-5 seconds, long enough to see that person respond. They might nod or smile or look confused.

Remember: “Les yeux sont le miroir de l’âme.” (The eyes are the mirror of the soul.) Use yours to connect with your listeners.

Fundamental #3: 
Slow Down, Enunciate and Pause.

Non-native speakers often ask, “What can I do about my accent?” The short answer is this: Slow down, enunciate and pause.

Don’t worry too much about your accent. Today, our work settings are like the United Nations – everybody has an accent! But you don’t want yours to prevent your listeners from comprehending your message.

That’s why we recommend you slow down and speak deliberately, especially during the first few sentences of your presentation. Give your listener time to “tune in” to your accent.

When I watch a movie where the speakers have heavy British accents, I always strain to understand the first few minutes of dialogue. The actors are speaking English, but I still miss a word here and there. Fifteen minutes into the movie, I understand every word. My brain just needed time to adjust; your listeners need time to acclimate as well.

The second key is to enunciate clearly. When you practice, open your mouth wide and exercise your jaw muscles. Practice saying, “How now brown cow?” You should be able to feel your mouth making that large “O” sound.

For non-native speakers, many English words are difficult to pronounce. So ask colleagues to listen to your presentation and tell you which words they did not clearly understand. Then practice pronouncing those words correctly, over and over, until they roll off your tongue.

Finally, learn to pause. Comedians know that timing is critical; they always pause before the punch line. You should too!

Many of you speak very rapidly in your native tongue. When you attempt that same rate of speech in English, your brain is working twice as fast and your mouth may have difficulty keeping up. As a result, you may trip over your words or slur them together.

Pausing allows you to take a breath and collect your thoughts. It also makes you look more confident.
Fundamental #3 continued:
Slow Down, Enunciate and Pause.

One of my MBA students moved from India to America six years ago. He learned the King's English in India, and he speaks with a slight accent. He's an engaging, high-energy speaker. But when he gets deep into the content of his message, he speeds up so much that you can't always distinguish one word from another. I told him to slow down, enunciate and pause! He tried it, and became a more effective speaker.

Fundamental #4:
Show Your Passion.

Passion translates well in any language.

Last fall, my husband and I toured an olive oil mill in Tuscany. Our guide had a strong Italian accent. Her English was halting, yet we were mesmerized by her message. She had a beautiful smile, and great enthusiasm. She used elaborate gestures to describe how the olives are pressed. As she talked, her voice lifted and fell, and her face was animated as she described the intricacies of the production process. When she had something important to say, she paused first. She was very persuasive.

You can be the same way. If people see that passion in your face and hear it in your voice, they will forgive a few language-related mistakes. Conversely, if you deliver a grammatically perfect presentation but are boring, your presentation will fall flat.

So how can you show your passion when you speak?

Start with your voice. “Play” your voice like an instrument: use it to create different moods. Speak rapidly to convey excitement. Change the tone or speed or volume to convey anger or frustration. Slow down and pause when you want a thought to sink in.

Second, let your listeners see the passion on your face. When I coach people who need to add facial energy, I tell them to exaggerate – lift their eyebrows really high, and then take them down again. I tell them to smile until I can see their teeth. Sometimes they resist, but when they watch their video and see how good it looks, they become believers.

Finally, move around and make big, firm gestures. Several years ago, researchers at the University of Alberta studied the hand gestures of bilingual children. They found that gesturing helped the children with memory recall. Gesturing can help you remember your words too!

Use your voice, your face and your body to let your passion show!
Fundamental #5: Practice Out Loud, Again and Again.

For non-native speakers, nothing is as important as practice.

Recently, I was helping managers from a large global company rehearse team presentations. At the break, I met a bright young woman from China. She said she wasn’t a team “presenter” because her English wasn’t good enough. “You speak very well,” I said. She replied, “My English is good when I am talking to you because I feel at ease. But when I stand up in front of people, I get very nervous. Then my English is not good.”

That’s the problem for all of us. We get nervous when it’s “show time.” Practice enables us to triumph when the nerves set in.

Remember how you learned English in the first place? You spent years listening to words and sentences being spoken out loud. You repeated the words out loud. You worked on the pronunciations out loud. You responded to questions out loud. The language only took root in your brain after hours and hours of repetitive practice out loud.

The same principle applies to business presentations. If you want to be great, you have to practice out loud. The first few times you rehearse, the words don’t come out the way you intended. But as you continue to rehearse, the presentation starts to sound smooth and fluid. That makes you more confident and less nervous.

How should you rehearse? Practice the presentation start to finish, over and over, like a play. Then practice the beginning even more, until you know it cold. When your nerves kick in at the beginning of the presentation, you’ll be ready.

Conclusion

As a non-native speaker, you can be a very effective communicator. Remember, you don’t have to be perfect. By following these five fundamentals, you will deliver a clear message that connects with your listeners.
About Us

Nancy has been coaching executives at Speechworks for nine years. She teaches Business Communication in the Georgia Tech Evening MBA program. During her former career with BellSouth, she was a sales skills instructor and wrote speeches for C-level executives. She has also worked as a performance consultant, teaching workshops and developing training programs to improve job performance. She can be reached at 404-266-0888 or nvason@speechworks.net.

Over the last 26 years, Speechworks has been working with leaders across the country, helping them learn how to connect with audiences and get results. Our two-day workshops are mandatory training for many of our clients' managers and executive teams. We also conduct special custom programs aimed specifically at coaching business leaders in how to speak in a way that impacts audiences and get results. If you're interested in learning more, call us at 404-266-0888 or check out our website at www.speechworks.net.

© 2012, Speechworks/Asher Communications, Inc.