

Nonverbal Communication Skills for an EFL Public Speaking Course for  
Japanese University Students

Abstract

Many Japanese students said great speakers are those who use steady eye contact and a loud voice, and show confidence. However, many Japanese university students get nervous giving a speech in front of people. It is even worse if they have to give a speech in English. When feeling nervous, they may forget to make eye contact, may speak too softly, and may seem hesitant. Our previous research has found that Japanese speakers and English speakers use different styles of nonverbal communication. If Japanese students want to give an effective speech in English, they have to learn the nonverbal communication style common to speakers of the English language. This study examines the effects of an ELF public speaking course on the nonverbal communication of Japanese students who are learning English.

This public speaking course is one of the required courses for second year students in a private university in Japan. The goal of this public speaking course in English is (1) to develop Japanese students' confidence in their ability to make speeches in English in a variety of situations; (2) to further develop student' skills required for an effective speech in English; (3) to give students the opportunity to make various types of speeches; and (4) to teach students to give a constructive speech so that audiences can understand.

Participants were Japanese students at a private university in Japan. Classes were held twice a week for 90 minutes each. Students (n=43) were enrolled in a 15-week public speaking course. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 23. Approximately 80% of them were 19 and 20 years old. Their age did not vary much because most Japanese adults do not go back to school later in life. The participants took a mandatory speech class in the English program which is taught intensively in Japan.

The students are assigned the textbook and practice their speeches in pairs, in small groups, and in large groups in class. The students in this study were given a topic for each speech. Students gave four speeches during the semester.

Each student's speech was recorded to an IC recorder and copied to the student's USB right after the speech. Each student's speech was videotaped for about 40 seconds and put in the university class website. This way, students were able to see and hear their speeches. The instructor gave comments individually after each speech. Classmates listened to and evaluated each other's speech. Their evaluation included praise and constructive advice.

Students had to finish and turn in the evaluation form within a week. Students evaluated their own speeches based on evaluations by their peers and by their instructor, and by their own sense of how effectively they spoke. Each student had to listen to his/her speech and write it down, word for word. Then, each student corrected his/her own grammar, structure, and speech content. All the students' speeches were videotaped and uploaded to the university class website. Students were given a URL to access the website and could watch it on or off campus. They watched and analyzed their own speeches.

In the report assignment, students analyzed their own speech based on writing down what they said, watching the videotape, and considering comments from the instructor and from their peers. In their analyses, students noted praise and constructive advice and goals for their next speech. Students turned in the reports a week after their speech.

Quantitative research methodology was used to conduct and analyze this research. The survey was administered to the participants in the spring of 2012. The research surveys were conducted twice a semester, once during the first class and once during the last class. The students were asked various questions concerning the public speaking course they had just taken. There were four answer choices for each survey question. The responses were coded for statistical purposes with numerical values.

The survey results showed significant correlations by the end of the course between students' improvement in gestures and in eye contact while talking to audiences, and their decreased feeling of nervousness in English speech-making. Students felt that information given in class lectures and feedback from the instructor after each speech did help them feel less nervous by the end of the course. Japanese ELF university students were less nervous about making a speech after learning English language nonverbal communication skills, and they were more confident in their English speaking ability overall by the end of this class.