# No More Zzz's: Audience Engagement During Oral Presentations

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Watching student speeches can be exhausting for both EFL students and teachers, if speeches are not properly set up with audience goals and tasks to keep students engaged. In this paper I present a way to engage a classroom audience and create student confidence, the Audience Involvement Approach to Teaching Public Speaking (Maher, 2015). Through this approach, students become more participatory and involved in the speech-giving process. The approach includes, first, modeling and videos on how to give proper oral presentations. During the speeches, audience members are given a role with specific tasks. Examples of roles include *uh-oh expert, eye contact guru*, and *facial expressions observer*. As students focus on the modeling and then give impromptu presentations focusing on minor tasks, they become involved and engaged in the speech-giving process, as well as improve their techniques for giving oral presentations.

聞き手としての目標や課題が的確にセットアップされていない場合、クラスメートや生徒の演説への興味がなくなったり、内容に集中できなくなることは時々ある。本論文は上手な聞き方の練習を通じて、生徒がより積極的なプレゼンの聞き手、発表者になる方法を説明する。本論文はAudience Involvement Approach to Teaching Public Speaking (Maher, 2015)と名付けられた新しい方法を中心に、聞き手の立場から始め、演説のスキルを高めるアプローチである。たとえば、生徒がプレゼンのお手本を見る時に「Uh-oh専門家」、「アイコンタクトの第一人者」、「表情のオブザーバー」、等のタスクや役割が与えられる。他人の演説に反応を示し、興味を持ち、目を止める事で自分のプレゼンテーションのテクニックが磨かれる事に繋がる。

**T**HE PURPOSE of this paper is to demonstrate a method of involving the audience, increasing their confidence and giving them a reason to be involved in watching their peers give oral presentations or student speeches. The inspiration for this method came from teaching public speaking and observing the boredom of other students when watching their peers present. Over time, I developed classroom techniques to interest the audience and implemented them into the semester coursework. Much of this was immediately transferable to other classroom situations that had an oral presentation or public speaking component.

I taught public speaking predominately at the university level in three countries—Japan, South Korea, and China. In all situations, the university courses were for one semester, and regardless whether the public speaking component was only a small component of the overall course or continued over an entire semester, these skills could be effectively taught in a very short time period. In fact, I condensed teaching the skills involved in the method into one week, so as to get some written feedback about this method from students.

I call this method the Audience Involvement Approach to Teaching Public Speaking (Maher, 2015). First I will give some theoretical justification for an audience involvement approach and then give some basic guidelines for any teacher interested in this type of approach. One of the main intentions is to supply many practical activities and ways to involve the students in every capacity, including focusing on video modeling, building vocabulary, exercising confidence building, and practicing audience roles. All are designed to engage the students in collaboration with each other and give them a purpose to watch each other present. Additionally, the method improves the classroom atmosphere and assists the students in acquiring language, while giving them solid speech-giving skills.

## A Theoretical Justification for the Audience Involvement Approach

The theoretical justification for this approach is rooted in neuroscience and neurolinguistic studies, particularly selective attention and awareness in the L2. Robinson, Mackey, Gass, and Schmidt (2012) link these by stressing the effects of performance tasks that demand attention and concentration on language learning. Many of the tasks in this paper focus on the students' actively being engaged in this process. As their selective attention is devoted to vocabulary or listening to model videos while metacognitively thinking about how to express their observations of their peers' speeches, they can acquire language without being consciously aware of it.

Wakui (2006) discussed the importance of learning through repeated discussions on self-assessments as well as peer-assessments. He went on to say that assessing the presentations skills of others benefited the development of students' own presentation skills. The method of involving the audience with each other's work described in this paper has this impact. Kano (2011) discussed the peer learning process in presentations—how they learn what works well by focusing on others and what to avoid in presenting, while at the same time seeing different speaking styles.

This approach to public speaking includes some confidence building exercises. King (2002) noted that some skills are prerequisite, to build student confidence prior to presenting. Ideally, teachers want to give students as much interactive positive engagement in the learning process and with each other as possible, to improve classroom dynamics (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). The more students work together—giving feedback, collaborating, and interacting with each other—the better it is for learning and ultimately acquiring language. These confidence-building exercises are included for engagement and team-building, prior to presenting.

## The Basic Tenets to Set Up Your Classroom for Audience Involved Oral Presenting
### Tenet #1 – The Teacher as the Facilitator

According to Harmer (2007), the teacher should be a facilitator. He or she should be someone who fosters learning through the use of group work and pair work. The teacher's role is that of a mentor or guide, giving the audience members specific things to examine, a purpose for watching other students' speeches, and a focus that can improve their own speeches.

Involving the audience is particularly useful, as typically student audiences become disengaged while watching student speeches due to little interaction between the speaker and the listeners (Silver, 2011). Audience involvement can be an effective way to induce the student audience to focus on the speaker, as well as to increase student awareness of the presentation skills needed and expected.

Many of these speech-giving skills, including focused tasks on such things as delivery, inflection, voice, gestures, and eye contact, can be taught over several lessons. Once students have completed these lessons, they can apply the principles to their own speeches or critically observe other students' speeches and give oral feedback. According to King (2002), this creates a more supportive environ-

ment, increases cooperation among students, and develops higher interaction skills as well.

## Tenet #2 – The Five Foundational Pre-Speech Rules

Before students begin preparing their own and observing other students' speeches, they should be provided these five foundational pre-speech rules. Maher (2015) defined these rules as

1. No reading notes or papers in front of the audience,
2. No using PowerPoint,
3. Modeling proper speech-giving techniques through video or examples,
4. Kinetically involving the audience in speech-oriented exercises, and
5. Assigning "speech roles" to individual audience members to watch for while observing other students speak.

The purpose of these basic rules is to have the students attentive, engage them in an interesting way to watch others present, help them give each other useful feedback, and help them improve their own speech-giving techniques.

## Tenet #3- Recycling Vocabulary

To increase language acquisition, it is essential to recycle vocabulary (Nation, 2009). If students examine videos on public speaking and the teacher actively teaches the vocabulary students need, the students can later express themselves more effectively to other peers when they do peer reviews. Figure 1 shows an example of vocabulary that can be pretaught. It is not an exhaustive list, and teachers are encouraged to add extensively to it, depending on the focused task.

| Posture | Vocal pause | Barrier | Unprepared |
|---|---|---|---|
| Eye contact | Eye engagement | Facial expressions | Straight spine |
| Staring | Fidgeting | Stuttering | Distractions |
| Inquire | Confidence | Lacking confidence | Stance |
| Swaying | Scan | Interact with | Conclusion |

Figure 1. Examples of vocabulary words to preteach for speeches.

## Tenet #4 – Collaboration with Peers

Vygotsky (1930s/1978) introduced the theory of the Zone of Proximal Development or ZPD. This theory essentially holds that a person can know more about something with some help than he or she can acquire alone. Khaliliaqdam (2014) connected scaffolding in language communicative activities to ZPD, in order to develop learners' L2, and found a very strong connection between scaffolding within ZPD and second language acquisition.

Essentially, in this approach, students may not know all of the answers themselves, but through working with others they might learn more than they would if they had worked on something alone. As students examine each other's speeches, they give feedback and help their peers develop their skills to a higher degree. In this way, they can increase their confidence and skills as well as become more autonomous and capable learners (see Hisatsune, 2012, for other examples). Students might be initially reluctant to criticize peers, but in research done by Anderson, Matheson, and Sudo (2002), it was much easier for students if they were focused on fixed criteria. Having specific criteria gives students tasks to do and tells them what to watch for during speeches; therefore they are able to evaluate better and give better feedback.

## Demonstration Videos to Model Proper Speech-Giving

In order to help students examine and learn the proper skills to give a speech, I have them focus on very specific tasks through watching videos of models. Ideally, they watch the video and then try to convey the meaning of the same speech to their peers, while using the skills they learned.

Demonstration videos can be very useful to show students the skills they need to practice. There is a collection of free videos on Youtube created by Paul Rigney in 2008. I recommend these videos because he speaks slowly, the videos are short, and each video is focused on a specific narrow task. Students gain more from these shorter, focused videos than from longer and more complicated videos. Figure 2 shows Rigney in one of the videos. It shows how simple and nondistracting the presentation is. Figure 3 lists the topics that he discusses and the URLs of the videos.



Figure 2. Paul Rigney in a video modeling techniques for giving speeches.

How to control nerves when speaking in public
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EoKGff7aQLY)
How to have a good opening in a speech
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytjxC3B5wGl)
How to have good eye contact when speaking in public
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogmQk8m3RDk)
How to organize your speech with good structure
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGEzWk0-0po)
How to stops saying ums and ahhs when you speak
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYyrn_f_IJ4)
How to close a speech
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1kQQq2bugU)
How to use humor when public speaking
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eHxdy3cOdbA)
How to your voice dynamically [sic]
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ip_XPS1Kwkw)
It's OK to make mistakes
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tp1gMvZt4ow)
The importance of opening your mouth when you speak
(from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LloSzJHDqhM)
What to do with your hands when you are public speaking
(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZl_V232dDw)

Figure 3. Topics for modeling speech techniques.

One effective way to teach the videos is for students to study each video and then try to reproduce the speech they watched to a small group of students. Through this method, they pay more attention to each lesson, and they immediately get a chance to apply the skills learned in an impromptu speech.

In my classroom, I generally set students up in groups of four and I assign each student a number from 1 to 4. I then randomly choose a number and all students with that number must stand up and give

the speech, or as accurate a reproduction as they can, to the other three members of their group. Next, I call out a second number, and sometimes a third number, and those students give the same speech to the others. The intention is that the knowledge will be better internalized through this watch, copy, and verbalize method. Ultimately, they help each other learn the skill through trying to remember, repeat, and deliver the speech to their peers. Lastly, some students will be called up to the front of the classroom to demonstrate in front of all students.

## Confidence Building Exercises

Confidence-building exercises are designed as other mini-activities to supplement the videos. They give repetition to the models and create more confidence and interaction among peers. Dale and Wolf (2006) discussed confidence-building techniques for students to improve their oral presentations. The exercises that follow are based on this book; however, I have expanded on it through classroom practice and improvisation.

### Walk of the Matador

The "Walk of the Matador" is an exercise in confidently walking to the front of the classroom and giving a speech with good posture and a straight spine. It is a good activity to start the process. For this task, members must first think of a proverb or saying that they are willing to tell the class. Each member of the audience walks to the front of the class with perfect posture, and then, addressing the audience with eye contact, states clearly and loudly the proverb or saying. The audience cheers upon hearing it, and the presenters confidently walk back to their chairs and sit down, as the next person stands up to repeat the process.

### Eye Contact—One Mississippi, Two Mississippi

This exercise involves practice looking at the audience. A student confidently walks to the front of the class, looks one person in the eye, and says, "One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi." The speaker then repeats it to a second person, then to a third person. The word Mississippi is used as it is a conventional word to demonstrate that a full second has passed by the time a person finishes saying the word. However, any word or phrase can be used. The purpose is to make enough eye contact long enough to engage an audience member. The intention is for students to used to looking other in the eye while in front of the classroom. They must do this with three, or even four, others before they can sit down again. Another version of this eye contact game is as they look at individuals in the audience, the recipients must acknowledge receipt by raising one hand, as they are being spoken to.

### Eye Contact—Look Your Partner in the Eye

In this exercise, students sit down directly across from a partner. They can talk about anything, but they cannot look away from their partner's face. Generally, they only do this for a few minutes, but afterwards they reflect on how they felt about this exercise. Commonly, they admit to feeling awkward. However, they also stress how they felt strongly that they were being listened to. They felt more engaged and recognized the importance of eye contact as a way to demand attention and create interest.

### Nonverbal Communication

This involves both stance and facial expressions. What messages do we give by the way we look and how we stand? This activity involves vocabulary building and learning how to recognize a *poor stance*, a *fidgety hand*, and other types of nonverbal communication. I show a PowerPoint slide with pictures of facial expressions, or a combi-

nation of facial expressions and body stances (see example slide in Figure 4), and a list of meanings for these expressions. For example, there might be a picture of a timid person with a shy body stance. Students match the pictures with the vocabulary. Then I discuss some of the vocabulary as key points—for example, *don't stare* at the teacher during your presentation; make *eye contact* with members of the audience; make sure you *practice* at least several days before your presentation, so you aren't unprepared,

Once familiar with the photo images and vocabulary, students practice these facial expressions or stances, as their partners call out the vocabulary items. This is to reinforce vocabulary so students can describe what they liked or disliked later when they observe each other giving speeches. Additionally, students practice bad body language as a way to demonstrate the vocabulary, so they can later practice the opposite with good body language.



Figure 4. Example PowerPoint slide for matching vocabulary and pictures.

## Gestures

For this, I created a list of words or phrases for students to try to convey only by using their hands, (see Figure 5 for list). The receiver looks at the list and tries to guess which one their partner is trying to convey. The purpose is to convey the power of gestures as well as to use a lighter, more enjoyable activity to foster interpersonal relationships.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| I'm full. | Wait a minute. | Come here! | That's enough. |
| You are crazy! | You are right! | No way! | I'm hungry. |
| Great job! | I don't know? | Give me that. | Move, please |
| Pay attention! | Stop! | See you later. | Come on in. |
| Go away. | Don't do that! | Can you hear me? | Look at me. |

Figure 5. List of expressions for students to convey using only their hands.

## Audience Roles

Audience roles are also addressed. These focus on many of these skills that were learned in the video modeling and the confidence-building exercises. For both classroom impromptu speeches and their actual speeches, audience members are assigned roles to perform while observing and then to give feedback about to the speech giver (Maher, 2015). As students have already studied the vocabulary, modeled and mimicked videos, and practiced confidence-building exercises, they have learned various aspects that they can observe and comment on. Each role includes a form for the student to fill out for feedback, which is later given to the speech giver. (See Appendix for sample forms.)

## Purpose of the Roles

The purpose of the roles is for giving feedback and peer review on all aspects of a student's speech. The observers take notes during the speech and may share important insights in the larger post-speech discussion, or they can give their feedback forms directly to the presenter, who can later examine the forms privately.

Generally, the teacher should act as a facilitator to teach how to give feedback and what to look for. As students become familiar with recognizing and counting vocal pauses, for example, they become more attuned to them and are able to assess them in presentations. Table 1 is a list of possible audience roles and what students carrying out the role should comment on.

## Table 1. Audience Roles

| Role | Purpose |
|------|---------|
| Uh-oh expert | To count the vocal pauses. How often did they hear the *uhs*, *ahs*, *hmms*, and so forth. What was the most common vocal pause sound? How many did they hear? |
| Eye contact guru | To count how many times the speaker makes eye contact with the observer. Where did the speaker usually look while presenting? |
| Facial expression observer | To record the most common facial expressions the speaker used. Demonstrate them to the speaker. Drawings may be more memorable for the speaker as well. |
| Timekeeper | To record how long the speaker spoke. Was it too short, or too long? Record the exact time. Additionally, if the speech is timed, make the speaker aware of time left at various stages. This role involves having color-coded cards with the time left on them. |
| Handy person | To observe the speaker's hands. How did the speakers use their hands? Drawings may be memorable as well for the speaker. |
| Hook judge | To assess the quality of the hook and the introduction. Was the introduction effective? Was it memorable? Did it introduce the topic effectively? Was it engaging for the audience? |
| Stance watcher | To observe the stance of the speaker. How do the speakers stand and what is the span of their legs? Drawings or demonstration afterwards may be useful. Additionally, how was the posture and was there any swaying or anything distracting? Explain. |
| Audience connector | To rate how well the speaker connects with the audience. Overall, did the audience seem engaged? Why or why not? How could this be improved? What was effective? This role is not as concrete as others, but might involve commenting on the atmosphere the speech giver created through smiles, words, and interaction with the audience. |
| Voice wizard | To note how the voice was used throughout the speech. Was the speaker loud enough? Did the voice have variation? Did the speaker sometimes speed up, or slow down, or increase volume? Was the voice varied enough? Was it engaging to the audience? |
| Words commentator | To monitor the speaker's choice of words. How were the choices? What words caught the audience's attention? What words were used that didn't seem to work? |
| Grammarian | To evaluate the overall grammar. How was it? What were some grammar mistakes? |
| Conclusion concluder | To comment on the effectiveness of the conclusion. How was it? Did it end with final thoughts on the topic that might resonate with the audience? |

## Student Feedback

I have had students give feedback in two ways. First, I have distributed half sheets of paper with a role and purpose to all of the audience members. Second, I have elicited some of the answers in front of the classroom, to monitor and discuss their observations and explain what they should be observing. Ultimately, through extensive practice, students get to know what to comment on to the speech giver, and all speech givers ultimately get all of the feedback. However, I examine the written feedback for the first few class sessions to see how much they are recording and observing.

## Thoughts From Students

I handed out a survey to see what the students thought of this approach. Due to time constraints and the nature of my assigned teaching tasks, I had only enough time to use these activities over three 90-minute class periods. Despite this, I found it was sufficient to give students a taste of this approach and to get feedback from them. I taught 87 students in four classes, doing the same activities with each class, and gave them a short survey at the end.

I categorized two open-end questions by analyzing the students' answers, finding similarities, and putting them into like-minded groups. This was based on Dörnyei's (2007) Grounded Theory, which is a way to categorize open-ended responses. I also included a *no comment/no response* on the graphs, to account for cases when the students didn't write any answer to a question. Figure 6 is a composite of what students liked about this method. Figure 7 shows what they did not like.
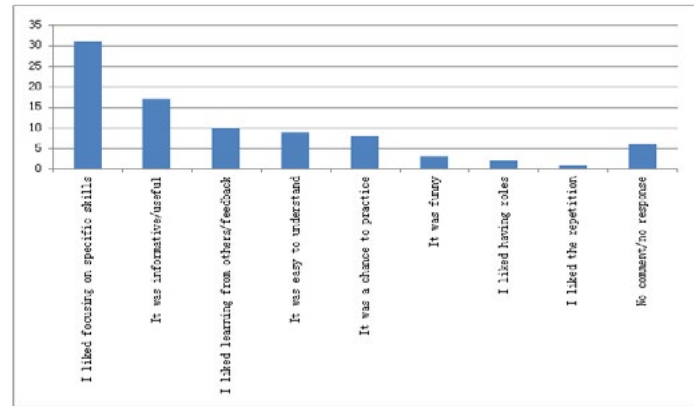


Figure 6. What students liked about the *Audience Involvement Approach to Teaching Public Speaking* (*N* = 87).
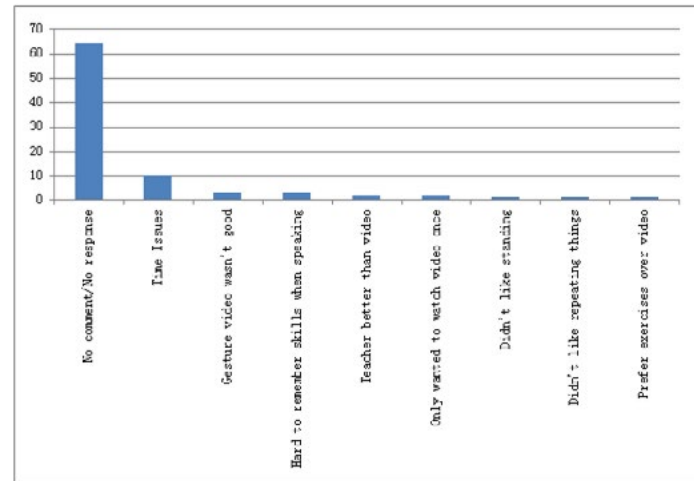


Figure 7. What students did not like about the *Audience Involvement Approach to Teaching Public Speaking* (*N* = 87).

## Discussion

In the survey, students wrote significantly more positives then negatives. Additionally, as I collected the survey, several students told me how much they liked this method. The most significant negative was the time issue. I had to rush students through the process, and they would have preferred to spend more time on it.

## Conclusion

Students can be engaged to become more involved in all aspects of the speech-giving process. Giving speeches does not need to be a tedious task for peers and teachers to endure, but can be set up in such a way that students become a collaborative unit who assist and help each other collectively. Through roles, videos, vocabulary building, and task-focused activities, students can increase their speech-giving awareness and develop their own abilities and that of their peers.

Educators who find that listening to students' oral presentations is a long, tedious task may want to consider implementing these suggestions in their own classrooms. The focused tasks and the peer review were very successful with students.

## Bio Data

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## Appendix

### *Sample Forms for Students With Roles to Fill Out About Speeches They Observe*

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### *Uh-Oh Expert*

Count the number of times they made VOCAL PAUSES: _____

What was the most common sound?

How can the speaker stop doing this?

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### *Facial Expression Observer*

What were the TOP TWO facial expressions you observed most? (You can draw these faces, if you'd like):

What was the most unique facial expression? (               )

How were their facial expressions with the speech? Fit in well? Awkward? Describe

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### *Eye Contact Guru*

How often did the speaker look at you? _____

Where were you sitting (approximately)?

Why do you think the speaker looked at you a lot or didn't look at you much?

Any advice/suggestions/comments to the speaker?

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### *Handy Person*

What were the TOP TWO things the person did with their hands?

1)_____

2) _____

What was the most effective hand gesture?

How did their hand gestures fit with the speech? Fit in well? Were the hands awkward? Was there anything distracting? Describe...