

The importance of speaking clearly

I attended the Singapore Monologue Slam recently that featured some 60 aspiring actors vying for the Thespis trophy with a 75-second soliloquy. The acting talent aside, it was immediately obvious to me that some local contestants did not speak as well as native English speakers. More succinctly, some of the local contestants did not announce their words clearly, making their monologue at times incomprehensible while others were in fact taxing on the audience. Some people consider eloquence as a nice-to-have. Well, not so if we are in the business of speaking or presenting. We need to not only be understood, we must also capture our audience's attention and it starts with speaking clearly. The good news is that speaking clearly is a skill all of us can master if we had the right coaching.

Compose our thoughts before we speak

We need not utter meticulously constructed sentences, accompanied by big words, to be remembered. In the movie Ghost, all it took Patrick Swayze's character was a simple "ditto" to iconise the entire movie. If we wish our audience to remember us, the first rule is to compose our thoughts. In other words, plan what we wish to say that would deliver the greatest impact on our audience and then plan how we wish to say it. The better our grammar and vocabulary, the easier this task becomes.

Practise, practise, practise

I am certain the contestants at the Monologue Slam practised their lines many times and probably in the presence of their own critics. The most successful speakers are not the ones who simply deliver a script verbatim, no matter how accurately; they are the ones who tell a great story from the heart. The most successful speakers internalise not just the script but the message itself, so that they come across believable. To achieve this, we must understand the purpose of the script, breathe life into it and then earnestly practise delivering it, preferably in front of someone whose opinion we trust.

Speak as if we are on stage

Shakespeare was spot-on when he said all of us are merely players (actors). Impressions count for a lot especially when we face someone for the first time. As stage players go, the best actors are the ones who can most convincingly deliver their lines when on stage and draw the audience into their message. Imagine this : if we were shortlisted for a job and our chances of being hired hinge on how we present ourselves in front of a panel of senior management, how do we ensure we make the right impression? If every shortlisted candidate has the same qualifications, and the final verdict comes down to how well we spoke, we had better make sure ours is a winning monologue.

Strengthen our grammar and vocabulary; learn phonetics

When it comes to producing powerful scripts, having strong grammar and a vast vocabulary is key. Start by reading widely and using newly learned words in our own writing. And one of the surest ways to speaking clearly is to learn phonetics. It is only by understanding how English vowels and consonants ought to sound that we get a better appreciation of how to adjust our own speech patterns, since, as non-native English speakers, we have different ethnic influences. If we do not pay enough attention to how we annunciate our words, then "diseased" could sound like "deceased" and "beach" like "bitch".

Do not be happy with believing that as non-native speakers of English, we can be excused for not speaking clearly, so long as our audience understands the gist of our message. Believe, instead, that this is a skill that can be learned if we are willing to learn it.