

3 Tips for presenting in English when you are not a Native Speaker

by Deborah Grayson Riegel

As a coach and international business school instructor, I have worked with hundreds of current and future leaders who are accomplished, bright, and capable — and who quickly lose their confidence and competence when making business presentations. For a subset of these leaders — those who need to present in English when it isn't their native language — the stakes and the stress can feel even higher. Meanwhile, the need for leaders to be able to present in English is growing at a rapid pace. [According to Harvard Business School Associate Professor Tsedal Neely](#), author of *The Language of Global Success*, “English is required for global collaboration and global work.”

Nevertheless, being compelled to speak in your nonnative language can lead to feelings of frustration, pressure, and insecurity. As Neely reports, “When nonnative speakers are forced to communicate in English, they can feel that their worth to the company has been diminished, regardless of their fluency level.” Add to that the burden of making formal business presentations in front of superiors, decision-makers, and key stakeholders in your nonnative language, and the anxiety is significantly greater.

While researching our book, [Tips of the Tongue: The Nonnative English Speaker's Guide to Mastering Public Speaking](#), my co-author Dr. Ellen Dowling and I interviewed many leaders in this situation, and asked them to share their experiences.

YOU AND YOUR TEAM SERIES

Public Speaking

•

Assessment: What's Feeding Your Fear of Public Speaking?

- Nancy Duarte and Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic

6 Ways to Look More Confident During a Presentation

- Kasia Wezowski

How to Land Your First Paid Speaking Gig

- Dorie Clark

One leader whose primary and secondary languages are Hebrew and Spanish, but who presents primarily in English, admitted that she felt “self-conscious” about her “weird and funny accent” that seemed to get heavier the more nervous she felt. She also shared that she felt less capable of spontaneity — and less smart — when she presented in

English. A Chinese leader shared, “When I can’t find the word I need, I grasp the easiest word instead. So a disaster would be like saying ‘you guys’ at a formal conference.” And a Korean leader was even more concerned: “I think one will be good at delivering what they’ve prepared, but if the presentation goes beyond this scope, the situation can turn your brain to mush, and it becomes a disaster.”

Of course, even native English speakers often anticipate disaster when making presentations (including those of us who have been public speakers for decades). But for nonnative speakers, the anticipatory and situational anxiety associated with their unique challenges — being understandable, choosing the right words, speaking spontaneously — can be overwhelming. Moreover, if these concerns interfere with your willingness or ability to make business presentations, the impact can be career limiting.

Here are three strategies nonnative English speakers can employ to help them feel more confident before, during, and after a presentation:

Spend significantly more time practicing your delivery than perfecting your deck. When we asked our clients to share with us the proportion of time spent planning, designing, and perfecting their PowerPoint slides compared to practicing speaking the presentation aloud, most of them admitted that they spent *almost no time doing the latter*. While this is often a problem for native speakers too, for nonnative English speakers, rehearsal and repetition are especially crucial steps in preparing for a successful presentation. The goal here is [“overlearning”](#) your presentation — pushing on with practice even when it seems like you’ve done enough. This will help your presentation to become embedded in your long-term memory and therefore less susceptible to the effects of stress. It will also help you speak spontaneously, if you can trust that your core content is safely stored (and able to be retrieved) from your long-term memory.

Don’t agonize about your accent, but do slow your speaking speed. Everyone has an accent of some sort, including native English speakers. (I’m a native New Yorker, and our accent is infamous worldwide.) Even people who live in different parts of one country can be identified by their accents. Your accent can be a problem for your listeners, however, if they have difficulty understanding you. An unfamiliar accent is particularly problematic in the first minute or two of your presentation when your audience must initially strain to understand you. According to their research in [Frontiers in Human Neuroscience](#), authors Kristin J. Van Engen and Jonathan E. Peelle say that audiences who are listening to accented speech of any kind experience “reductions in intelligibility, comprehensibility, and processing speed — the same effects caused by hearing loss or background noise.” By slowing down your speaking pace, you help your audience to better manage the barriers to really hearing and understanding you. Choose your opening words deliberately and pronounce them carefully, being sure to articulate your words, not just rush through them. As your presentation continues, the problem becomes less acute as the audience will slowly develop an ear for your accent and find it easier to understand what you are saying.

Pause early and often. Pausing in your presentation serves two benefits — first, to help your audience comprehend your message, and second, to give you a break. Van Engen and Peelle found that understanding accented speech requires listeners to draw on additional cognitive resources, not only to understand and remember what has been said but also to manage other information or tasks while listening to accented speech. When you pause, you give your listeners an opportunity to rest from drawing upon their cognitive resources, and to absorb what you're saying. But your pause is also an opportunity for you — you get to remember or consider what you want to say next, check your notes, read cues from the audience, or even take a sip of water. You can also use a pause to build rapport with your audience by checking with them about your pace and pronunciation by saying something like, “*Let me pause for a moment here. I know that I am making complete sense to myself in [Spanish/French/Japanese/Hindi/your native language]. How am I doing in English?*” Not only will you likely get some immediate positive and supportive feedback from your audience, but you will also be able to take a break, breathe, and gather your thoughts.

For both native and nonnative English speakers, perfection is overrated. But with some extra attention, effort, and commitment, nonnative English speakers can present with confidence, competence, and cultural comfort.

[Deborah Grayson Riegel](#) is a principal at [The Boda Group](#), a leadership and team development firm. She also teaches management communication at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business.
