CHAPTER 2:
WHAT ESL STUDENTS FIND MOST DIFFICULT ABOUT THE BASIC
COMMUNICATION COURSE

As mentioned above, the basic communication course can pose a challenge, even for native speakers of English. The fear of speaking in front of others, or communication apprehension, is one reason for this difficulty (McCroskey, 1980). The topic of communication apprehension will be covered in detail in the next section. But for now, it is important to know that communication apprehension affects many people, including native speakers of English, and that it exists in varying degrees among individuals. Communication apprehension becomes a bigger problem for ESL students especially, as novelty, or newness of the situation, is one factor that makes communication apprehension worse (Daly & McCroskey, 1984). As a result many students, especially ESL students, put off taking the basic communication course for as long as possible, because they know they will be required to speak publicly in this course. Not only are ESL students putting off taking the basic communication course, but they also often drop the course after initially being enrolled. At one university where I taught, over 50% of ESL students dropped the basic communication course after being enrolled in it (Yook, 1998). Granted, many of these students did join another section and successfully completed it, some added and dropped a number of times before they were able to finally succeed in finding a class comfortable enough for them to stay enrolled in it. Such large numbers of ESL students having problems adjusting to the basic communication course were shocking to many instructors with whom I shared this information provided by the university including me. It made us realize what a huge problem the basic communication course can pose for ESL students. My previous research in this area suggests that there are two main causes for the difficulties ESL students have in the basic communication course: linguistic and cultural (Yook & Seiler, 1990).

Language Difficulties in the Basic Communication Course

Almost every ESL student I interviewed mentioned that his or her biggest difficulty in the basic communication course was related to language. Although they had completed the TOEFL exam and additional English placement exams, for many ESL students these were still not enough to ensure smooth linguistic performance in a basic communication course. Often ESL students, and especially among them international
students who come for the main purpose of furthering their education, have underlying competence in English but are lacking in their performance of the English language. The distinction between competence and performance was first suggested by linguist Noam Chomsky (1966) who distinguished between an underlying competence or knowledge of grammatical, phonetic (pronunciation), and other rules, from the ability to use the language, or to perform it adeptly. One example comes to mind. A couple of summers ago I had the opportunity to teach a course in Paris. The students who accompanied me from the U.S. for this course had varying levels of experience with the French language. However, one student, who had taken French in high school and college and who had some mastery of the rules of the language, stated that she was very frustrated and disappointed with herself that she could not even buy a lunch ticket without linguistic problems! Likewise, in your own countries, many of you may have learned English predominantly from textbooks in your classes, but perhaps may not have had much chance to practice English in a conversational manner. Because of this lack of opportunity to perform everyday use of spoken English, you may have difficulty understanding, processing, and responding to spontaneous everyday speech with native speakers of English, although you know the linguistic rules quite competently.

Many ESL students mentioned their difficulties in listening and in capturing the sender’s ideas, but more often they mentioned that they were worried about being understood because of their accented English. Lack of fluency due to having to translate a thought from one’s native language to English is another major problem, according to ESL students. They fear that because of these linguistic difficulties, they were being judged by their peer American classmates and by their instructor unfairly, in terms of competence. In other words, they felt that their performance in English was causing negative judgements about their competence in the English language, as well as negative judgements about their academic and personal competence in general. Research supports their views: People tend to make stereotypical judgements about accented (foreign, or even any non-standard speech), so that a non-standard speaker is regarded as somehow deficient (Labov, 1970), and is negatively evaluated in general. As we see above, lack of linguistic skills, which is certainly not the fault of the ESL student, is a major problem faced by them. However, research also recommends certain strategies that have been found to help ESL students overcome this challenge. Specific suggestions will follow in the FAQ’s section.
Cultural Barriers in the Basic Communication Course

In addition to the linguistic challenge facing ESL students in the basic communication course, there is also a cultural factor that needs to be considered. Many students come from cultures where speaking is not part of their emphasized and expected roles in the classroom context. Their traditional role as students is to receive the information presented to them by the teacher. In fact, some of you may have experiences that indicate an opposite cultural expectation to that of the U.S.; in your cultures talking by the student may be indirectly or even directly discouraged. Talking in class, even asking questions of the instructor or teacher, may be seen as a challenge to the face and authority of the person teaching. Those of you who have similar cultural experiences probably come from high Power Distance cultures, where there is a difference between those who have power, and those who don’t, and where that difference is accepted as a fact of life (Hofstede, 1984). As a result of your cultural expectations, you may feel uncomfortable with the new and unexpected role of being the speaker in a classroom setting.

This cultural difference due to Power Distance may be made worse by the fact that most ESL students do not have any previous experience with public speaking. Public speaking may be seen by these students as something a social leader, i.e. religious leader or politician, does (Yook & Seiler, 1990). As a result, you may not know how to present a speech in a classroom setting. For example, you may not know the expected format of the speech, and how to organize it. Whether to address the audience as “My dear classmates” or to simply begin speaking in a more informal manner is also a point ESL students often wonder about.

Plagiarism

As a result of these linguistic, cultural, and possibly other factors as well, some ESL students try to plagiarize (copy) the speech of friends who have taken the course before (Yook & Seiler, 1990). They get speech topics, outlines, and often research done by other students who previously have taken the course. This is a huge mistake, as contrary to popular belief, instructors often do remember previous speeches, and even talk among themselves about classes, including speeches and topics. Plagiarism is considered a serious offence in the U.S. It can lead to very serious consequences, such as having to face an academic honor council to fight for the right to stay enrolled in the university. There are serious consequences to plagiarism, so avoid copying others’ work and instead go to your instructor if you feel you need extra help.
The Basic Communication Course and Cultural Identity: A Matter of Choice

One thing to remember is that in the basic communication course you will be taught skills that add to your repertoire, or range, of communication skills. Your own culture may prescribe other skills that are somewhat different from, or that may even conflict directly with, the skills learned in the basic communication course. You need not feel as if you have to make a choice between the two cultural ways of communication. You do not have to substitute one set of culturally valued skills for another. The new communication skills are most useful when they are seen as an extension, rather than a replacement, to your existing set of communication skills repertoire. The larger the repertoire of communication skills you have, the more apt you will be to be a competent communicator in various intercultural contexts.

One student once told me “I deliberately choose not to adopt U.S. communication patterns because I will be returning to my home country right after graduation.” She was worried that the patterns she learned here would impede her interactions when she returned home. That is her choice, and it made good sense to her at the time. But by at least knowing and hopefully practicing these newly acquired skills, she would be able to broaden her repertoire of communication skills. Who is to say for sure that she will never need to use them in the future, at least as a reference for understanding intercultural interactions better? In the global society that we live in now, some sort of contact with U.S. cultural patterns is inevitable.

By acquiring the skills taught to you in the basic communication course, you have the power to make a choice. However, you must realize that because choices have consequences, there is a consequence following the choice of not speaking in the manner expected in the U.S. classroom. For example, by choosing a more formal “My dear classmates” manner of speech opening statement, it may cause discomfort for your audience who is not used to such formal styles of address for informal classroom speeches. Although you may very well choose not to apply the communication skills learned in the basic communication course to interactions in your home country, as you are expected to show your competence in these skills to pass the course, the wise choice is to adapt to the expectations of the course and instructor. Although such issues as accented speech are those most instructors understand to be difficult for ESL students, the reality is that you need to fulfill the course requirements to get a passing grade for the course.

Your choice will depend on your personal goals for the future. Do you plan to stay in the U.S., or will you return to your home country? Depending on your answer to this question, the benefits you get from the basic communication skills you acquire in this class will definitely be rewarding. The skills will allow you to interact competently in this culture in a way that the American culture values. To take a specific example, if you are hired by, or eventually begin your own business in the U.S., the interaction and public
Speaking skills learned in a basic communication course will definitely be a plus to your career. It will help you to interact competently in the U.S. environment. Additionally, more immediately, other classes you enroll in may require some sort of public speaking, so the basic communication course will help you in your academics in general as well.

But what if your goals are to return to your home country, you may ask. In that case also, the skills you can acquire from a successful basic course experience can definitely benefit you as well. In this age of globalization, where interaction among cultures is a given, knowing the expectations of the U.S. culture, and having the chance to practice and perform the skills you acquire is an opportunity you should take advantage of. Even if your global interactions do not directly include the U.S., knowing the cultural expectations of this commercial giant will not hurt you, as many of the people you interact with will be familiar with and will most probably expect and value U.S. communication practices. Furthermore, knowledge about the practice with American cultural patterns of speaking is more likely to translate more easily into competence and performance in other languages and cultures too. In other words, the intercultural skills learned in the basic communication skills will be translatable to other language skills and cultural performance as well.

So the key then is to understand what is expected of you in a basic communication course, and to develop strategies based on that knowledge for a successful academic experience in the basic course. Let’s talk about some specific topics that are most difficult for ESL students in the next section, such as accent management, pronunciation, listening, public speaking, communication apprehension, among other topics, and what to do about them specifically.

**Accent Management**

One of the topics ESL students are most concerned about regarding their language use is the topic of accent management. Many students worry about whether their instructor and native-speaking classmates will be able to understand what they are saying in English. Besides for comprehension, accented speech is a problem for ESL students because they often feel stripped of their real identities and capabilities when trying to express their ideas in English, because their accents may be different from native speakers' fluent English. As one student stated, "I would rather give a speech in my language for one hour than five minutes in English" (Yook, 1997). However, if you spent your teen years in your home country’s schools and began to learn English as a foreign language in middle school, the fact remains that your accent will not be likely to sound exactly like native speakers’ standard English.

Before going any further, it may be wise to define some related words here, and to briefly discuss them. There are many definitions of the word accent. The definition of accent that relates most closely to ESL student issues is "a characteristic pronunciation
determined by the phonetic habits of the speaker’s native language carried over to his/her use of another language” (Morris, 1975, p. 7). Certainly a strong accent can interfere with comprehension, as ESL students have rightly been concerned about. However, recently there has been a shift in thinking about the topic of accented speech and accent management.

Traditionally, those concerned with ESL students have in the past focused in accent reduction, that is, on how to make ESL students’ speech as close to standard English as possible. There has been a bias against foreign accentedness (Albreksten, Henricksen & Faerch, 1980; Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, & Fillenbaum, 1960). However, three research trends are slowly changing that kind of thinking. Scholars of ESL matters are beginning to see accented speech as part of reality, rather than something to get rid of. In other words, accented speech is more accepted as a fact of life and less as something negative.

One reason for this vein of thought is that factors such as age of learning a second language are important determinants of whether one will have an accent in the second language or not, according to the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) (Lenneberg, 1967). According to linguists such as Long (1990), if learning of the second language begins by age six, chances are there will be no defining accent in the second language. However, if learning begins after twelve, there will probably be a foreign accent in the second language. If one begins between the ages of six and twelve, Long found that there are variable results. Although there are differences between individuals, that finding about age as a determinant of accent in second language acquisition seems to hold true from scientific tests of language learning and accent patterns. Similarly, Patkowski (1990) found that if one immigrates before the age of fifteen, there is dramatically less foreign accent in the language acquired through immigration.

So, what do these studies mean to you? They suggest that if English is your second language, chances are that then you will most likely have accented speech in English, no matter how much you try to avoid having it. Furthermore, accent is one of the most difficult to change among adult second language learners. So accented speech is a reality for ESL students, and linguists and teachers of ESL students are becoming more aware and accepting of this reality.

Another new trend in language learning is that some language experts are beginning to see a need to move away from an “English only” ideology, where only standard English is considered acceptable, and seeing a need to move into an “Englishes” ideology, where several variations of English are accepted (Perez-Leroux & Glass, 2000). There is a more tolerant view of English variations that reflect different language influences, including Ebonics (African-American English language use), or Pidgin English (combinations of English with other languages, for example, Japanese and English used in Hawaii) as well as accented speech. This is a new trend that not all ESL scholars and linguists currently support. However, some linguists are slowly moving
away from viewing accented speech negatively. This new view makes sense, as not everyone can easily reduce his or her accents, as mentioned earlier.

A third recent vein of research such as the study by Munro & Derwig (1999) shows that accented speech is not necessarily a problem in intelligibility (or whether or not one is understandable). These scholars state that, although there have been some scholars who have since long ago stated that language learners need no more than a comfortably intelligible pronunciation, that is, that some degree of accent in speech does not necessarily interfere with communication. However, there is still an attitude of intolerance for foreign accents. Foreign accents have even been treated as a pathology, or as some malfunction needing treatment, and the focus has been on getting rid of the accent. However, the former view, that we need not eradicate (get rid of) accent totally to be able to communicate our message is now more supported by scholars and their recent work. Munro & Derwig state that their experiment shows that accented speech does not necessarily interfere with comprehension, although it may take some more effort to comprehend. They cite Albrechsten, Henriksen, & Faerch (1980) in stating that while scholars have wondered which specific factor interferes with comprehension of ESL speakers the most among such factors as grammar, phonology, intonation, and hesitation, they conclude that it is not necessarily one or the other, but rather a matter of the frequency of these factors as interferences with comprehension that affect comprehension of ESL speakers the most.

So, what do these three research trends in ESL studies mean for you? Their message is that although a heavy accent, or one that creates too much confusion for the listener can be problematic, there is no need to attempt to get rid of an accent completely, when speaking English as a second language. Especially when thought of in the context of language as a factor related to identity, as discussed earlier, accent is a reflection of one’s culture and heritage, and should not necessarily be seen in a negative light. That does not mean that you should be complacent (put your mind at rest) about your accented speech, even if the accent is extremely difficult to understand. Rather, the first step is to identify if your accent is strong enough to create problems in understanding by native speakers of English, and to take action to reduce your accent if it is a problematic barrier for comprehension. Specific strategies will be suggested for accent management in the Frequently asked Questions section in Chapter 3.
Pronunciation

The former topic of accent is related, but different from the term “pronunciation”. Pronunciation is defined as “the act or manner of articulating speech” (Morris, 1975, p. 1047). Closely related is the term phonology, or the study of speech sounds. The point about pronunciation and phonology is that you should realize that the sounds themselves, as well as the rules for creating those sounds are different from language to language, so the rules that apply to creating sounds in your home language may not apply in the English language. For example, in the Korean language, the rules for creating the sound “l” varies from the English rules for creating that sound. Based on its position in the sentence and its combination with other phonemes, an “r” sound can turn into an “l” or “n” sound.

To take another example, this time of pronunciation difficulties created by phonemes that do not exist in native languages but that do exist in English. ESL students have informed me that in some Asian languages there is no equivalent of the “d” and “g” sounds in English. Such differences in phonological rules have to be recognized and learned, or perhaps unlearned, in order for your pronunciation to be comprehensible to native speakers of English. So, to tie in this idea with that above related to accent, remember that you need not totally change or get rid of your particular accent, but you need to identify the specific pronunciation problems you have by identifying differences in phonological rules, so that you learn to make the sounds that do not exist in your language as well as learning not to apply some phonological rules that do exist in your native language that do not apply to the English language. All this is said with a view to increasing comprehension, not with the goal of creating perfectly standard English speakers of ESL students. As mentioned earlier, accent and pronunciation is an indication of cultural identity, and should not be viewed as something necessarily to get rid of.

Listening in the Basic Communication Course

Listening is a necessary skill for ESL students to be successful in the basic communication course as an ESL student. The type of difficulty in listening encountered by ESL students will depend on whether you are a first generation immigrant ESL student, or whether you are here on a student visa. Although there will be exceptions to any rule including this one, those who are immigrant offspring will probably have had some chances for conversations with native speakers of English, probably more so than international students here on student visas. By the mere fact that you have immigrated here and have lived here with your family for some time, you will tend to have more chances for interpersonal conversations. So immigrant offspring will tend to have more BICS, or Basic Interpersonal Conversation Skills, than the average international student.
does. On the other hand, international students will tend to have more CALPS, or Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Skills. This means that most international students’ mastery of the English language would have been acquired through English textbooks, rather than through everyday conversations, or events. These differences in the process of acquiring the English language will impact your listening comprehension differently.

Flowerdew (1994) states that there is a difference between comprehension gained from reading and listening to texts and language as it is spoken and performed. In most foreign educational systems teaching English as a second language, although some English teachers emphasize spoken English, much of the learning is still done through the reading of texts in English. So you may find that although you are proficient in reading comprehension, listening comprehension is still difficult for you. Those of you on student visas will probably find that this is your main cause for difficulties in listening to spoken English.

In fact, Mason (1994) found that even a score of 600 or above on the TOEFL does not assure comprehension of a lecture. In textual reading, there is more flexibility in terms of time. The reader can go back and reread parts of the text to assist comprehension. However, listening involves real-time processing, where you will have to stay focused on the speaker at the time of speech in order to understand the message (Flowerdew, 1994). Additionally, some grammatical, phonological, or lexical (vocabulary) rules that were visible during textual reading may become blurred and difficult to pinpoint during listening. For example, according to Rost (1994), ESL students had difficulty in understanding the words “in-group bias” and they understood them to be such various things as in group vias/group vice/group decides/group by decide/in group best/group base/group boast/non-group bias. By viewing the text, they would have been better able to correctly grasp the meaning.

For those of you who are immigrant offspring who have been residing in the U.S. for some time, the differences between conversational and academic listening may be your biggest cause for difficulty. Although you may already have some experience listening to conversations, academic listening is different from conversational listening in a number of ways (Flowerdew, 1994). First, in a lecture, listeners need to apply their existing background knowledge of the topic for it to make sense to them, whereas in conversations the knowledge required is more of a general nature. Second, in academic listening there is a strong need to be able to distinguish between relevant information and less important information such as jokes or asides (something said that is not quite as strongly related to the topic as the main topic discussed). This is probably more important for academic listening than conversational English, because there is less opportunity for feedback and questioning for clarification, which is the third difference between academic and conversational listening. Fourth, academic lectures are generally
assumed to be on the topic discussed, and there are less indirect implied meanings than in conversational listening.

**Strategies for Improving Listening Comprehension**

So, what can you do to improve your listening comprehension in the basic communication course? There are several strategies that ESL scholars suggest in their research. Among them are self-monitoring, questioning, building a lexical basis, acquiring more background knowledge on the topic, and effective note-taking (Rost, 1994). To explain each of the above more fully, first you need to monitor yourself as to how well you are doing as a listener. This may involve borrowing lecture notes from two or three other native speakers of English in your class, and comparing your notes with theirs. You will then need to ask, “How much have I been able to understand?” as reflected in the percentage of your notes that corresponds to the ideas contained in the notes of the other students.

Another strategy is to ask questions for clarification. I know that for some of you, asking for clarification can be a difficult thing to do, especially for those of you who come from high Power Distance cultures, as mentioned earlier (Hofstede, 1984). Studies by other scholars and me show that ESL students in general hesitate to ask questions of the instructor (Mason, 1994; Yook & Albert, 1998). However, it is important to realize that instructors in the U.S. generally do not mind if students ask questions, and that rather it can also be seen as a positive sign of interest in learning, something all instructors want to encourage. Specific words or jokes that you may not have understood fully can be clarified to enhance comprehension. Even if you choose to wait until class is over to speak to the instructor in private, it is recommended that you ask questions to clarify for accurate listening.

A third strategy is to build up a lexical base for comprehension. You need to have a sufficient vocabulary base to be able to understand the message sent. So compiling a list of key words as you do the listening will assist you in academic discussions or lectures on related topics.

Related to the above is the strategy of concentrated study of reading materials, or doing additional readings whenever necessary on the topic (Mason, 1994). This is a strategy some graduate ESL students found to help them in their classes. By knowing more about the subject matter, they could follow the lectures more easily. Of course by concentrated reading, you would have a larger vocabulary base from which you could listen and comprehend more easily.

Lastly, effective note taking is an important skill for ESL students in the basic communication course. Note taking involves five steps, according to James (1977). You need to first decode the message, or receive the words and/or actions. Secondly, you need to comprehend, or understand what it means. Third, you should identify the main
points. Fourth, decide when to record them and fifth, write quickly and clearly. It is not easy to do this well, when you are listening in a second language. The key will be on focusing your concentration on the message and in knowing the key terms involved so that you will be able to identify them quickly. Listening comprehension is an important skill, and even though you try very hard, full listening comprehension will not happen overnight. However, with more experience in U.S. classrooms, and more practice with the strategies mentioned above, the process can be quickened and better communication can be reached more readily.

**Presenting a Speech in the Basic Communication Course**

Presenting a speech may be also among one of the greatest difficulties ESL students have to overcome in the basic communication course. The reasons for your difficulties have already been discussed at the beginning of this guide; they are linguistic and cultural factors. In addition to these two topics, I’d like to discuss three other related topics, that of rhetorical style, organization of ideas, and topic choice, in order to better prepare you for the speaking experience. In discussing these five topics, I will also present specific strategies that communication studies, linguistics, and ESL scholars including me have found to be useful.

First of all, though, I think it will be useful to discuss the topic of communication competence to provide a framework for understanding these topics and strategies more clearly. According to Canale and Swain (1980), there are three distinct underlying abilities in communication competence: 1) grammatical competence, which includes phonology, lexicon, etc., 2) sociolinguistic competence, which includes appropriate discourse rules and sociocultural rules, and 3) strategic competence, which comprises various verbal and nonverbal communication strategies which are employed to compensate for deficiencies in grammatical and sociolinguistic competence or to accommodate the difficulties of the situation. In order to compensate for the other two competencies, grammatical and sociolinguistic, which are not easily controlled for, it is then useful to employ strategic competence to increase your overall communication competence. Therefore, strategies that have been found to be useful for ESL students will be discussed, along with the topics of language, cultural knowledge, rhetorical styles, organization, and topic choice, when presenting speeches in English.

**Strategies for Overcoming Linguistic Difficulties in Presenting Speeches**
First, linguistic difficulties have been already discussed as a major issue for ESL students in the basic communication course. Such problems as comprehensibility and fluency, as well as accented speech have already been discussed. To compensate for these difficulties, scholars suggest such strategies as 1) focusing on key issues rather than on specific words, 2) using simpler words and synonyms, or circumlocution (getting the message across indirectly, rather than directly if necessary to get the message across) 3) gesturing to help get the message across, 4) getting feedback from peers and/or your instructor, and 5) thorough practice.

The first two strategies will help you become more fluent in English. Gesturing will help you to get the message across nonverbally to help complement the communication process. Some ESL students mentioned that gesturing is difficult for them, because it is considered rude in their own cultures (Yook & Seiler, 1990). However, it is an additional channel through which you can relay the message, in addition to the verbal one.

Getting feedback from peers or from an instructor is useful because it can first help you identify aspects of your pronunciation that hinder understanding that you may need to work on, and second, it can help allay (put to rest) some unreasonable fears you may have about your intelligibility (ability to be understood). Try to talk to at least two or three friends who are native speakers of English for their comments on how well they can understand your English, as well as comments from your instructor whenever possible. A polite request from ESL students to get some feedback on how they can be understood and what aspects of their English they seem to need most assistance with would be welcomed by most instructors. If you feel uncomfortable with this request, for whatever reason, peer feedback should still be helpful in assisting you in identifying and improving your linguistic skills in English.

The last strategy is to practice, practice, and practice. All students need to practice thoroughly before presenting a speech, but for ESL students, practice becomes all the more necessary. Practice in front of the mirror by yourself a number of times first, and then in front of peers. Practicing will maximize your fluency because you will already know the key words you need for your speech. You will also be much more confident when you are sure of what you are going to say, and how you will say it.

Many ESL students have also told me that they memorize their speech because of their linguistic difficulty of being able to think of the right word in spontaneous speech. With lots of practice based on your outline, and a review of your key ideas and words, you will not need to memorize large parts of your speech. Besides, most instructors require a conversational and spontaneous style of speaking, based on outlines called extemporaneous delivery, rather than a memorized speech. Memorized speeches can look and sound too “unnatural” and inflexible. By following these five strategies; focusing on key ideas, selecting simpler words, gesturing, getting feedback, and practicing extensively, you will be able to overcome your linguistic difficulties. But that
is not all. You also have a barrier such as a lack of cultural knowledge about public speaking to consider.

**Lack of Cultural Knowledge about Public Speaking**

Many ESL students, as mentioned earlier, do not have a clear idea of what is expected of a classroom speech. Especially if you have spent the majority of your formative years (years spent in school) in your home country, you may not have had any experiences of this nature before. Your role of speaking in the classroom may go against your cultural rules for who traditionally speaks and who listens in the classroom context in your culture. In addition, you may not know what format is expected for a speech. Do you begin a speech with a formal greeting and expression of gratitude for the opportunity to speak, or do you begin with a joke or story? Do you end with a formal expression of gratitude, or with a question and answer session at the conclusion of your speech? These questions may arise as you are preparing to give a required speech in a basic communication course.

**Strategies for Overcoming Difficulties in Public Speaking Due to Lack of Cultural Knowledge**

All of these questions and concerns are understandable, and ones that can be dealt with by using effective strategies. Because you do not have any or much prior experience of giving a speech, it is necessary to acquire the information you need by other means. First, you can ask your instructor for clarification about what is expected in your speech assignment. Elicit their help by explaining to them that you have very little speaking experience even in your own language in your home culture, and that you would like to clarify some details of the requirements of the speech to be able to do your best. Most instructors will be more than willing to help you. A second thing you can do is to ask your instructor for a sample student speech on video, so that you can have a better idea of a student speech that you can model your speech after. Be sure to ask for a sample student speech, rather than a politician’s speech, for example, as student speeches are somewhat different from other kinds of speeches by other social leaders.

One aspect of the speaking assignment that is among the most difficult for ESL students is the question and answer session that often accompanies speeches. The reason for this, of course, is that ESL students find it difficult to listen and comprehend the question. It is also difficult to compose a response in English, all of which have to be done almost immediately. A strategy you can use is that if you find out that you will have a question and answer session at the end of your speech, you can prepare by making a list of key ideas and words, so that you can express yourself more effectively. You can also predict what questions your peers might ask (Cohen, 1998). During the question and
answer session, if you have difficulty understanding the question, remember that it is alright to ask for clarification about what you are being asked; even native speakers ask for clarification and it should be even more understandable that ESL students may need more clarification.

Finally, when you sign up to give your speech, try to avoid being the first to give your speech. Having an opportunity to observe other peer native speakers give their speeches will help you to understand even more clearly what is expected of you in your speaking assignment. You may even identify some things your native English-speaking peers are doing unknowingly, that go against what your instructor has suggested you to do!

Differences in Rhetorical Styles

Another important topic is that of rhetorical style differences among cultures. Rhetorical style is the way one communicates in order to persuade others. Rhetorical style is affected by our cultural ways of thinking. Some cultures have a very direct style of getting their messages across (U.S., and other western European cultures in general), while others prefer a more indirect style (most Asian cultures, for example). According to linguists such as Kaplan (1998), some cultures (Semitic) prefer a style that circles around the main point until the central meaning is reached, whereas other cultures (Arabic) go to a less related topic, then come back to the main topic, and continue this pattern until the conclusion is reached. Speeches in Japan and in the U.S. are dramatically different in rhetorical style. A Japanese speaker will continue for a while to speak about the traditional banalities (usual, expected topics) until he/she gets near the end, where the speaker will say “however...”. Everyone in the audience needs to pay attention to the speaker at that point, as the really important message will follow. In a U.S. speech, the speaker will get directly to the main points, then you can rest easy for the rest of the speech. This is of course an exaggeration about rhetorical style differences, but one that points to the differences in getting to the main idea directly (western style) vs. slowly, working around the issues to get to the central point. Being aware of these rhetorical style differences can help you to identify your own culture’s typical rhetorical style, and to adapt to the expected rhetorical style in the U.S., for the purposes of this class.

Clear Organization

Closely related to this topic of rhetorical style is that of organizing your ideas effectively. You will learn about the importance of organizing your ideas clearly from your basic communication course textbook, as all students preparing to give a speech will need to acquire the skills of effective organization. However, organization is especially important for ESL students when preparing to give a speech.

Clear organization can also be an effective compensatory strategy to outbalance your linguistic difficulties. By presenting a clear organization of what your main ideas are, and in what order they will be presented, your audience will need to rely less heavily
on your specific words, because the overall argument you are making will already be somewhat structured in their minds. Scholars suggest that when speaking to audiences who come from a different culture, speakers need to use such strategies as reviewing your main points, repeating important points, summarizing, as well as structuring the presentation clearly (Lynch, 1994).

When structuring the speech, the rhetorical style you tend to use in your culture should be something to keep in mind. Remember that there is an expected structure of a speech, with an introduction, body, and conclusion that need to be included. The introduction leads into your topic with a brief summary of your main points to be covered. There also needs to be a body, where the main argument is made, and a conclusion, where you summarize what you said in the body of your speech and let the audience know that you are about to conclude. The rhetorical style you use in the body of your speech should be direct and clear, despite what your traditional rhetorical style tends to be. To help you achieve clarity in your organization, an outline is very useful in structuring your ideas into a meaningful pattern.

Outlining Your Speech

An outline gives you a visual summary of what your speech will contain. It should contain at least three Roman numerals, as shown below:

I. Introduction
II. Body
III. Conclusion

The introduction should contain a preview (brief listing) of your main points as well as a statement of credibility and statement of purpose. Although other contents need to be included in an introduction, these three seem especially crucial for an ESL student, as they help provide the structure of your speech that your audience will need for better comprehension. It also provides a statement that will support you as a speaker (credibility or believability as a speaker). Your credibility is essential to build up before your audience of native speakers of English, to outbalance the perceptions that may result from your language difficulties. As mentioned above, there is a tendency to view those with nonstandard English accents somewhat negatively. In order to enhance your credibility, you can use such strategies as telling the audience what background knowledge you have on the topic, including the knowledge acquired from research and personal experience. That is also why selecting a topic that you can be regarded as an expert on is of particular importance to ESL students.

Topic Selection

As mentioned above, it is a good idea to select a topic for your speech that you have some knowledge about and possibly some experience with. Topics related to your home culture in some way is therefore a wise choice, as it is something that you can have
an advantage over the audience in, something that you can know more than your audience about. One instructor suggested this as a strategy that could help ESL students specifically. If you don’t necessarily want to talk about a topic related to your home culture, a topic that you have particular expertise in (one in which you are an expert or something you know much about) will be a good choice too. Knowing your subject matter will also help you with questions from the audience, as your background knowledge of your topic can compensate for some linguistic difficulties. As one instructor put it, having credibility, the willingness to work hard, and preparedness (in terms of planning, researching, outlining, and practicing thoroughly) are the keys to a successful speech by an ESL student.

Relaxation and Visualization as Strategies for Successful ESL Speeches

Finally, relaxation and visualization (seeing in your imagination) need to be discussed. These strategies will help any speaker, even the native speaker of English, present his/her speech (Cohen, 1998). If one is too tense, then the audience will sense that and you risk losing your credibility. Therefore, you need to take a deep breath, relax your muscles, and visualize before the speech that you are going to present your speech successfully. Try to close your eyes and actually visualize your audience listening attentively and learning something worthwhile from your speech. Relaxation and visualization are strategies that can help you reduce your apprehension about presenting your speech. This apprehension about presenting speeches is one type of communication apprehension.

Communication Apprehension

McCroskey defines communication apprehension as the real or anticipated fear of communication with others (1980). As novelty, or something that is new and uncertain, is one factor that can trigger communication apprehension, ESL students are likely to be apprehensive about public speaking in the basic communication course. As mentioned earlier, many ESL students find that being asked to speak in a classroom setting is a new experience. Being in the U.S., where your environment presents novel aspects to you every day could make matters worse. Finally, not knowing what a speech is, or how to present a speech effectively, and other uncertainties arising from inexperience with presenting speeches in your own culture, can also add to the problem. One ESL student told me “I would rather give a speech in my language for one hour rather than give a speech for five minutes in English”. Such is the apprehension that you and many other ESL students may feel about presenting a speech in English.

One thing to remember when dealing with communication apprehension is to realize that it is completely normal for ESL students to feel apprehensive about communicating. Not only are you speaking in a different and new environment, you are also expected to speak competently in your second language, English! This may seem
like an insurmountable situation (one in which we can’t overcome the barriers), but there are strategies you can use to overcome this problem. Some of the suggestions will be ones you are already familiar with, but as they are useful and important, it will not hurt to review them here. First, visualizing that you are giving a successful speech and seeing them listening attentively in your mind can reduce communication apprehension. You are building a positive expectation about your assignment and your performance. You can also use relaxation. Take a deep breath and relax your muscles. Once you learn to distinguish the difference in the sensation in your muscles between when you are tense and when you are relaxed, relaxing will become easier for you.

Third, you can find out more about the speech assignment; time limits, purpose, when and if an outline is due, etc. This will help you to feel more in control because you have already imagined the speech and planned it in your mind, and you know more about what to expect. Fourth, practice until you feel comfortable with your speaking skills. Practicing your speech will help you to feel more confident because you will have rehearsed using the key words, and you will feel more in control because you know what to say and how to say it. But presenting speeches is not the only thing required for successful speaking in the basic communication course.

Now that we’ve talked about the topic of presenting speeches, I’d like to cover some general strategies for succeeding in other aspects of the classroom, such as talking with your instructor when you have any questions or problems, effective small group communication, interviewing, and interpersonal communication. All of these are important topics that can affect your success in the basic communication course, in addition to the public speaking aspect we have covered so far.

**Strategies for Succeeding in Other Aspects of the Basic Communication Course**

My research indicates that some cultures that are high in Power Distance, or those cultures that respect power and status differences, discourage communication initiated by the student to the instructor (Yook & Albert, 1998). Many students from Asian countries, high power distance cultures in general, feel uncomfortable when communicating with the professor. When Korean students were asked whether they would talk to their instructor about a grade that had been miscalculated by the professor, they responded that they would not, even if it meant receiving a lower grade for the course. U.S. students responded in exactly the opposite manner; they would definitely speak to the instructor in that case.

When asked whether they would talk to the instructor if they were having problems with the class such as with small group work, again Korean students tended to say no they would not, while U.S. students responded that they would. This response is not unexpected, as Korea is a high Power Distance culture. However, one new lesson we can derive from this study is that U.S. students would negotiate various classroom-related
matters with their instructors, and their instructors expect this to happen. Students from other cultures, especially those from high Power Distance cultures, would not. This reluctance to question or approach the instructor probably arises from a concern about preserving and respecting the face of the instructor too, in addition to the Power Distance difference. ESL students may want to “save face” for the instructor, by not mentioning the instructor’s calculation mistakes, or their incompetency in managing aspects of the classroom competently.

Please remember, though, that this is a U.S. classroom, and questions and negotiation of meanings and other kinds of student/teacher communication are not only expected, but also desired. There certainly is a difference between challenging the instructor’s authority and asking in a polite manner to clarify statements they made, or even requesting them to do something for you such as recalculating grades. That is what most U.S. instructors expect and enjoy doing. So do try to seek their help for your success in the basic communication course.

Small Group Communication

Besides for talking to instructors about various issues related to the basic communication course, another difficulty ESL students have is related to small group communication. A small group is a group of people, usually between three and twenty, where people have a common goal. In the past many ESL students reported to me the difficulty of working in small groups with American peers. This is a difficult situation, as you can expect to have at least one or two experiences communicating in small groups in the basic communication course. The ESL students who talked to me mentioned that they felt as if it were especially difficult to “jump into” the small group conversations because the American students were talking among themselves, giving little chance to the ESL students for them to enter the conversation. Once the ESL student did manage to jump into the conversation, it was difficult to express themselves in English. Moreover, even when they were able to express themselves, some didn’t even feel that their American peers appreciated their comments.

Much of this is due to linguistic difficulties. Although some American students lack the ability to empathize (feel the same feelings) with ESL students, other American students are very kind and understanding. ESL students have told me, for example, that their American peers in small groups encouraged ESL students and even said that they were proud of and respected the ESL students for speaking up in their small group and for making progress in English. There are different personalities involved in these groups, so it will be difficult to say whether you will have a pleasant, or unfortunate experience in small groups. One thing to remember, though, is that talking assertively is regarded positively in the U.S. culture, so whenever you can it is useful to try to keep trying to join the small group conversations.

However, competent communication in small groups is not easy for an ESL student. Timing your entry into the conversations will be difficult because of differences
in nonverbal and verbal turn-taking cues. Turn-taking cues are signs that one will begin or stop talking in a conversation. Recognizing a culture’s turn-taking cues takes much experience and time within that culture to acquire. But do not let that difficulty deter you. The more practice you have, the easier it will become to recognize and adapt to the cues and turn-taking conventions of the U.S. culture.

Interviewing

Interviewing can be another topic that is covered in the basic communication course. The most important for students from a different culture to understand about interviewing in the U.S. is that the interview is very different in both approach and content in different cultures. The view of the interview in the U.S. is that of a structured question/answer session, with an introduction, body, and conclusion. Rapport-building, or getting to know the other person and setting a good climate for further conversation, is set at the beginning, with the purpose of the interview and the interview process ideally being clarified in the introduction of the interview. The goals of an interview can range from getting information for a speech, to performance evaluation interviews in the workplace, to employment interviews. In the conclusion of an interview, a personal relationship-oriented talk is encouraged, with information about upcoming decisions and about who to reach for further information, etc. being disseminated in the closing.

These U.S. cultural expectations for interviewing may differ widely from expectations about interviews in Asian and collectivistic cultures, for example. As mentioned earlier, interviewing and even speaking to elders in those cultures tend to be approached with caution, if at all. Also, in employment interviews, cultures that place importance on collectivistic goals and harmony, rather than individualism, will often have interviews simply to confirm a candidate that has already been chosen by superiors through their connections to family and friends. So the purpose of the interview itself will be very different from that of U.S. employment interviews. Also important to remember, is that in Thai and Korcan cultures, for example, some questions that are considered taboo, or even illegal in the U.S., such as that of religion, personal background, and marital status are routinely asked.

Interpersonal Communication in the Basic Communication Course

Another content area that will be covered in most basic communication courses is the area of interpersonal communication. What is notable and important for students from different cultural backgrounds to be aware of, is the fact that most of these theories on interpersonal communication were tested and established by studies on students from the mainstream North U.S. culture. Therefore, there are a number of studies that we should ask the following question about: Does that theory of interpersonal communication apply to me and my cultural experience? For example, two theories about interpersonal communication stand out in my mind as dramatically different in terms of how different cultures would approach communication; self-disclosure and conflict. In the U.S. culture, self-disclosure is advocated as a way of developing relationships. Scholars state
that the more we disclose information about ourselves that others are not likely to know, the more a relationship will develop. In many collectivistic cultures, however, self-disclosure about negative things brings shame to the person, family, and groups that they identify with, and so it is not valued at all to self-disclose negative things about themselves indiscriminately. There would be very few people to whom this self-disclosure would be considered appropriate, and in general self-disclosure is less valued than in individualistic cultures, such as the U.S.

When discussing conflict, another important topic in the basic course, again the prescribed and valued conflict management styles can vary drastically from what your cultural norms prescribe. In the U.S., among conflict management styles of avoiding, accommodating, compromising, collaborating, and competing, the less assertive and more passive conflict management styles are seen negatively in the U.S. culture (Kilmann & Thomas, 1977). However, in some cultures that place importance on harmony and social relationships, passive management styles are seen more positively. Besides these two glaring differences in theories of interpersonal communication that you will find during your experience in the basic communication course, you will undoubtedly find other theories that are not valid for your culture. Keep asking questions about the validity of the various interpersonal theories, and talk to your professor if you have questions about them. Another suggestion would be to research that cultural difference, and if it fits your academic goals, to write a paper about it. Cultural differences should be investigated much more than it is at present. If you can help to bring some insight to this important topic, then the field of communication will be enriched by your input!

General Participation in the Classroom

Related to this topic is a discussion of general participation in the classroom. Although speaking up in class, and asking questions may not come naturally for you, these behaviors are necessary for you to become an active member of the class. You may not be called on to participate too often in the classroom in large lecture classes, for example, but in the basic communication course, because it is a course based on the concept of communication, communicating actively will be expected.

One instructor told me during a private conversation, after I informed her that I was doing research to help ESL students in the basic communication course, that she was so glad someone was doing something about it. She mentioned that she was frustrated that the ESL students in her class did not participate at all, thus threatening to affect their grades negatively. Participation is expected in U.S. classrooms in general, and in the basic communication course in particular, so attempt to participate. By participating in general class discussions, you may gain the confidence necessary in speaking publicly to give a great speech, and that confidence will hopefully carry over to other classes as well. If there is a particular difficulty restraining you from participating fully, such as listening comprehension difficulties, or barriers in peer relationships, or feelings about your
accented speech for example, let your instructor know early in the semester. Don’t wait until it is too late for the instructor to be of any help to you. In the next section, you will encounter some questions that are frequently asked by ESL students enrolled in the basic communication course. Reading through the questions and answers will assist you in better understanding what is expected of you in the basic course.