Presentation Tips for Non-Native Speakers

The pressure was on for Thien Thanh Dang-Vu as he prepared to give his first scientific presentation. The venue -- the 2nd Conference of the Canadian Sleep Society in Quebec City, Canada, in 2004 -- was big, and he had never before been to an international conference. Dang-Vu had just earned a medical degree and started work on a neuroscience Ph.D. at the University of Liege in Belgium. His presentation on the functional neuroanatomy of human sleep was to be part of a symposium that would later be uploaded to the Internet.

"If you know your data ... and if you know the literature behind that very well, then this should be a good source of confidence." - Thanh Dang-Vu

Better Presentations

Throughout June, Science Careers is publishing a series of articles focused on improving the scientific presentation. This is the third and last article in that series. Our first piece profiled Leticia Britos Cavagnaro, a former biologist who co-founded a creative thinking company and isn't afraid to defy convention in scientific presentations. In the second, Sharon-Anne Holgate passed along tips from experts on dealing with presentation anxiety.

The kicker: the presentation was in English, but Dang-Vu, who was born in Vietnam and grew up in Belgium, spoke mainly French. "I was very ... nervous because it was my first presentation, and it was ... in English and with experts in the field" in attendance, he recalls.

In an international field like science, it's hardly a rare challenge. The official language of the most important events is typically English, but you could also be called upon to deliver your talk in a local language. One remedy, says Michael Alley, a presentation expert and an associate professor of engineering communication at Pennsylvania State University, University Park, is "to prepare significantly more." Another approach that is often successful is to allow yourself some leeway on the rules. Here are some more specific tips for presenting more effectively in a non-native language.

**Enrich your vocabulary.** You need to assess early in your scientific career which languages you will need to effectively do and present your research. If your research topic is specific to a country other than your own, then the local language may come in handy, but for nearly everyone, mastering English will also be a must. Whatever the language, the ways to improve are universal. "When people start a doctoral degree, if they feel their English is not very good, then first of all they should take English education in their home country but [also] ... spend some time, maybe the summer months or a semester, in an English-speaking laboratory," says Robert Anholt, William Neal Reynolds Professor of Biology and Genetics at North Carolina State University.
Improve your pronunciation. There is more to becoming fluent in a foreign language than mastering vocabulary and grammar. Improper pronunciation and intonation can be real communication breakers, says Ian Wilson, an associate professor at the Center for Language Research (http://clrweb.u-aizu.ac.jp/) at the University of Aizu in Fukushima, Japan, who studies experimental phonetics. He recommends that non-native speakers identify words that occur frequently in their research field and practice their pronunciation with a native listener. Expose yourself to English (and other languages) as much as you can and practice with a speech-recognition or acoustic-analysis program, Wilson advises.

Use visual support. Here’s one area where it’s okay for non-native speakers to defy the conventional wisdom. "If you’re not very confident in your spoken abilities," write it out on your PowerPoint slides so that "the audience can read it also," says William Rozycki, a professor studying linguistics and pedagogy at the Center for Language Research at the University of Aizu who sometimes collaborates with Wilson. Use audio files, video files, and graphs to help people understand, Wilson says. A "picture may be worth a thousand words in any language."

Anholt suggests helping the audience follow your talk by breaking it into segments using extra slides with specific questions and intermittent conclusions. Alley goes further, recommending what he calls an "assertion-evidence approach," in which you write a key statement at the top of your slides in place of the usual title. "If the audience didn’t understand a single thing that you said, … that statement at the top is what you want [them] to walk out of the door with for that part of the presentation," Alley says. Then, instead of the traditional bullet points, present your evidence visually using photos, timelines, flow diagrams, pie charts, or movies, Alley says. Such advice applies to everyone, he adds, but it is especially relevant to non-native speakers.

Prepare notes and rehearse. Native and non-native speakers alike can dampen their nervousness by preparing good notes that they can consult during their talk, Alley says. Dang-Vu wrote a complete script for his Quebec presentation in which he underlined the most important sentences. He didn't read it out, however. "It was more to reassure me that I had something that I could rely on in case I was short of words or something," he says. You could also write down just the few first sentences of your talk and read it, Anholt says, "but in a voice that doesn't sound like you read it, to get in[to] the presentation until the first slide comes up."

What you need most is practice. Take presentation courses and rehearse in front of a mirror, says Ph.D. student Olena Puzyeyeva, who enrolled at the University of Toronto (http://www.utoronto.ca/) in Canada after obtaining an M.D. in ophthalmology in her native Ukraine. Rehearse with your adviser, with your colleagues, and, whenever possible, with native speakers. Get "as much feedback as you can," Dang-Vu says. "Videotape yourself making a presentation from time to time so that you can see the problems and follow the progress," Puzyeyeva adds.

Speak slowly. On the day of presentation, you can help your audience adapt to your accent by speaking up and talking slowly, says Anholt, whose first language is Dutch. Pay particular attention to acronyms, pausing between letters so people don't think it's a word, Wilson says. You may feel that if you speak slower, your talk just won't fit in the allocated time. But when one of his Chinese Ph.D. students really slowed down in her Ph.D. defense, she found that "not only did the presentation improve, [but] the amount of data fit in very easily because she didn't spend such an excessive amount of words just blabbering along and delivering

http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2011_06_17/caredit.a1100056
points that didn't need to be delivered," Anholt says. Make sure you take time to breathe and pause between sentences, he adds.

**Get the audience on your side.** Engaging the audience is a challenge for any speaker, but non-native speakers may find this especially difficult, because making a joke or telling a personal anecdote -- the usual techniques for making an early connection -- are more difficult to pull off. "To break the ice, the speaker might acknowledge up front that the audience may have a problem with the accent and every now and then ask the audience, 'Is this clear?' or 'Would you like me to repeat that?' " in a conversational tone that will help engage the audience, Anholt says. "Normally, I do not encourage questions in the middle of a presentation because it breaks momentum," Anholt says. But if a non-native speaker "somehow acknowledges, as the presentation progresses, that the audience may have a problem understanding him, it kind of creates a bond," he says.

**Ask for help.** Even if you're well prepared, you may find right in the middle of your presentation that all of a sudden you can't think of the word, Alley says. If this happens, "instead of just standing there, ... I would say the word [in English] and maybe look at a colleague who would say the word in German," says Alley, a native English speaker who sometimes gives talks in German.

Even if you're quite fluent in the language of presentation, you may also have trouble understanding the questions at the end as people may use words you don't know or have an accent, too. In such a situation, "look at somebody who is a native speaker whom you understand, and say, ... 'Could you please help me with that question?" Alley says.

**Let the science speak.** Once you're up there giving your presentation, focus on your science rather than your linguistic limitations, Anholt says. "If you know your data ... and if you know the literature behind that very well, then this should be a good source of confidence," says Dang-Vu, who is now doing a postdoc at the University of Montreal's Center for Advanced Research in Sleep Medicine (http://www.ceams-carsm.ca/en/index.html) in Canada. It will get easier with time and practice, Dang-Vu says. Anholt adds, "The audience will be quite forgiving if they know that the speaker is enthusiastic about his work and is making an effort at communication."

**Where to look for more tips**


Michael Alley's Web site on Rethinking the Design of Presentation Slides: The Assertion-Evidence Structure (http://writing.engr.psu.edu/slides.html)


The movie *The King's Speech* ([http://www.kingsspeech.com/](http://www.kingsspeech.com/))

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