

# Speech Contests

Getting ready for a speech or recitation contest can be very stressful, but knowing what to look for before the actual event can help smooth the way. Here, a contest organizer, a judge, and a coach give you their advice.

## Holding Contests

By Jon Garcia

If your school is planning to start a speech contest or a recitation contest, here are some ideas that may help you get started on the structure.

The junior high school I teach at annually holds a second-year speech contest where students each write their own one-and-a-half to two-minute speech on a topic decided by the Japanese teachers of the English department. Last year the topic was "My Likes".

The contest is presented to students by their Japanese teachers in their English grammar classes and students will usually first write their speeches in Japanese and then translate them to English on their own. Once students finish writing their speeches, their Japanese teachers and/or their native English-speaking teachers check the speeches.

Once the editing has been finished, students of course will begin the practice process on their own. At this point, the communication between the Japanese and native English-speaking teachers needs to be stepped up so that preparations for the speech contest day are made. As the speech contest draws near all students should be given a day in the native English-speaking teacher's class so that they may work on the delivery of his or her speech, delivery which includes style, pronunciation, intonation and gestures.

The Japanese teachers choose the winners for each contest and then the grade-wide contest is held. The judges

at our school are the native English-speaking teachers.

For the third-year students, the contest is a recital of parts of famous speeches and/or dramatic readings, which are cut down to two minutes. The Japanese teachers allow the students to choose which ones to do. The speeches and dramatic readings that we use include, but are not limited to, Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream," "The Gettysburg Address," and "The Wizard of Oz."

Students practice their recitations with their Japanese English teachers AND their native English-speaking teachers before the contest, just as the second-year students do, and once again the native English-speaking teachers are the judges for the recitations.

Personally, I think the third-year students should be writing their own speeches and the second-years should do the recitals, but that's just me. Third-year students are more advanced in their ability and should be able to write a speech more easily.

The process is pretty straightforward and the only thing that could be problematic is the amount of help teachers give to their students in regards to how much editing should be done. My personal view is that, just as an editor helps her or his writer clean up a manuscript, as teachers we should also ensure that students are using grammar and vocabulary correctly in their speeches. If a teacher feels it's necessary to edit a speech, she or he must do her or his best to see that the student's 'voice' is not changed.

Both contests are a lot of fun and it is so cool to see students get excited and ask for help with their speeches.

I hope this short overview of two types of presentation contests will help you

with your school's planning. If I can be of further help feel free to contact me.

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## Judging Contests: Be on the Same Page

By Peter Lutes

Whether you are organizing a contest, judging a contest, or coaching a contestant, having clear criteria and guidelines to work from that is the same for both contestants and judges is the best recipe for success.

Oddly enough, there seems to be a great deal of confusion over what constitutes a recitation. Normally, a recitation is the reciting or speaking aloud of a memorized passage where the contestants are judged only on the spoken performance. Judges should not be looking at the speakers, but I have judged some contests where the recitation includes scoring for body language and the use of gestures. I have no issue with these modified recitations, but often contestants are put at a disadvantage if they have prepared for a standard recitation and they are being judged on the effective use of gestures. However, if the contestants have chosen a recitation piece on their own, the degree of difficulty of the text is also a factor.

For speech contests, contestants are usually required to present original material and are judged on the material and the delivery, or spoken performance. However, in speech contests as in recitations, students and their teachers are often confused as to what constitutes gestures or body language. Too often, I have seen mime performances in the name of gestures. A speech



*Adding Gestures for Emphasis*

should be accentuated by gestures, not be overborne by them.

Also too often, criteria such as intonation, pronunciation, stress, accent, and articulation, are cited without a clear understanding first by the organizers, and then by the coaches and contest-

ants, of what they mean in terms of judging a particular contest. Often the contest outline and the interpretation of the criteria are left up to the judges, either as a group or individually, and so it is a tragedy when a contestant puts so much effort into preparing in a way that will ensure he or she will not win. I

have had the misfortune of watching one contestant sing a recitation as her embarrassment increased. What had seemed like a clever gimmick was clearly inappropriate as she only realized during her recitation

In evaluating speeches, I look at originality, interest, word choice, grammar, tone, coherence, and theme. Questions I like to consider are: Have I heard this speech yet today? Am I bored? Is the student purposely avoiding difficult words? Is the diction appropriate for the topic? What is this speech about?

Though I think that content is somewhat important, it is a speech contest, not an essay-writing contest, so the emphasis should fall on delivery. For delivery, I am primarily concerned with the speaker's ability to deliver the message. Could I understand the speech? From there, I look at things such as speed, volume, stress, pronunciation, and so on. When thinking about pronunciation, rather than looking for 'native speaker pronunciation', I look more to whether the pronunciation was a barrier to communicating the message or not. Some other factors that I consider are: posture; body language; use of gestures; eye contact with the audience; and confidence at the podium. In both speech and recitation contests, time and memorization are often cited in the rules but perhaps not on the judging sheets.

Another piece of advice for contestants is to choose or write something challenging that I have not heard before. Reciting a famous speech, for example, usually involves the contestants mimicking the author rather than making it their own, and this is tough to judge. Don't try to tackle something that is unnecessarily daunting.

Also, I prefer a cool and confident speaker to an overemotional and over-gesturing one. Remember that the judging begins as you approach the podium, not when the speaking begins. Walk confidently, with good posture, and you will give a good first impression. Before

speaking, scan the audience while establishing eye contact, look directly at the judges, and smile. After finishing, say thank you and make eye contact with the judges again.

For judges, I advise you to judge the speeches independently rather than comparatively. For example, focus on what a '7' is for gestures, rather than thinking that the last speech was a '7' and the current one is slightly better, so you'll give it a '7.5'.

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### Helping Your Students Prepare

By Sharon Abe

For each contest, find out:

1. Date, time, and place: Make a list, and let the students decide which contests to enter. Enter as many as you like, but beware of overlapping dates. Some contests may involve different dates for each step in an elimination-type contest.

2. Date and format of application: Read the information carefully! You usually have to send in a cassette, but my

daughter applied for one contest by e-mail. The notification of acceptance is often many weeks later.

3. Scoring criteria: These are usually included in the information for application; if not, try to find out from past coaches or contestants, or past judging sheets if available, so you can work specifically on those points. Usually included are: pronunciation; gestures; time; content; and topic. Find out if notes are allowed at the podium, but don't depend on them: learn your part! Keep to the time limit; some contests eliminate or severely penalize contestants who go over the limit.

4. Type of contest: Is the contest a one-time event, or is it an elimination contest? Does the contest involve Q&A? If so, be sure to spend time questioning your students not only about the content of their speeches, but also their feelings and thoughts about the speech.

5. Past speeches or recitations, and which were winners: Some contests provide their own story to be memo-



*Practice makes perfect*

rized, while others allow the students to choose. When choosing a topic or piece for recitation, I think a student should not copy what everyone else has been doing; it's hard to make it unique. Instead, go for similar lightness or seriousness, but the student should choose a topic entirely suitable and enjoyable for that student. I've seen very good speakers completely fail at a contest where the contest-chosen piece was boring or not to the contestants' liking.

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My daughter chose "Swimmy" to recite against heavyweight pieces, and because she loved the story so much it showed in her delivery—and helped her win!

6. Topic: If it is a speech contest, the theme or topic may be decided by the contest organizers, but within the range of the topic or theme are many possibilities. For example, if the topic were "The Teacher I Liked Best," you wouldn't necessarily have to write about a school teacher; it could be someone in your life that you learned something from about yourself, others, or life in general. I offer the same advice for choosing speeches as for recitations, but I add that the student should know about or be interested in the topic. It makes it easier to remember.

7. Podium, microphone, and room size: If a podium is to be used during the contest, it is necessary to practice with one to get the right feel for it. Podiums should not be used to hide behind or lean upon. Even if a podium is to be

used, make sure your students practice keeping their hands and bodies still; no one likes a fidget. Your students need to practice with a microphone to be able to moderate their voices; there is no need for shouting or whispering with one. If there is no microphone, your students need to moderate their voices to fit the size of the room they will be in.

Next comes the writing. Depending on the ability of the student, I recommend getting the student to write as much in English as possible first, as this makes learning the speech much easier. Help out with grammar and spelling, but let the student tell the story. Have the student read the finished piece several times and then time it. With more practice, the time will improve, but cassette entries must still be within the time limit. It is always better to be under time than overtime during practice, so there is no need to rush through it.

Practice does make perfect! Start practicing before you are accepted into a contest to get everything right.

Schedule practice time as often as possible. I don't even think about gestures until a few days before the event; too much practicing makes them look practiced instead of natural. Let the student tell you what feels right. Fewer gestures are better than more. My daughter used perhaps three gestures through the whole "Swimmy" recitation, while some others looked like they were in aerobics class. Demand eye contact from your student during practice. Remind her or him that the audience is not in the corners of the room, out the window, or on the ceiling or floor.

Finally, don't overwork or overextend your student. Trust your student's desire to do it well, and always praise them no matter the outcome.

*Sharon Abe is a past speech champion and now helps others prepare for contests at her school, ABCDEnglish, and elsewhere. She can be reached at sharon-a@m3.cty-ne.jp.*



*Hard work pays off*