My View

Towards a Merit-Based Award System for Speech Contests

Matthew Shannon
Saitama JALT; Saitama City Board of Education
mailmatt@gmail.com
www.matthewshannon.net

It is a struggle to enjoy the municipal speech contests which my school is a part of. I know

that only seven candidates of any competition will have their work recognized in the form of a certificate and award ceremony, regardless of effort invested, while the rest are left to wonder what more they could have done. As everyone knows that the judging varies from year to year, and region to region, there's very little comfort for our students, teachers, and extended English community that those who worked hardest for their laurels did in fact earn them. Considering that the role of these speech contests is to foster and develop the English skills and expressions that are unfortunately missing from many schools, it seems a very poor model to follow for the future. I would like to suggest we instead look towards the pedagogy associated with badges, training certificates, and other merit-based systems.

A Lack of Clarity and Consistency

The current public school system which students and teachers are familiar with provides few rules, an empty rubric that lacks detail on what is meant by "composition" or "delivery," and no supporting documents to recommend best-practices for participants,

coaches, or judges. It does, however take, pains to state who may or may not participate based on ethnicity—and I do mean, "may not participate"—students with parents from English-speaking countries are simply banned from participation in their third year. I cannot speak to the origin of this document, but the effect upon first-time coaches and administration is not one of awe and inspiration with the program. The effect upon eighth-timers like myself is appropriately morose.

There are two fields of competition which may be entered in the national speech contest. The first, Recitation, requires students to recite a passage of their choosing from their English textbook. First-year students may participate with a partner from their school, while second-year students must perform alone. The second category, Composition, asks students from the second- or third-year of junior high school to create an original speech. There is no differentiation between second- or third-year participants in this category. Here is the entirety of the information relayed to the majority of judges for both formats of the speech contest:

Pronunciation		50%
Delivery		50%
Time Limit	3:00	

Figure 1. Recitation Competition Scoring Chart

Pronunciation		30%
Delivery		30%
Composition		40%
Time Limit	5:00	

Figure 2. Composition Competition Scoring Chart

While I am hopeful that other regions expound upon this scoring guide, neither I nor my teaching staff have seen evidence to support the hope. There seems to be little institutional memory that the previous year was spent with two or more judges sitting at a table asking "what does composition mean?" or at least little agency to address these continued problems.

For those unfamiliar with the speech contest, here are actual issues associated with the current scoring system:

-What manner of deduction should be associated with a deviation from native-English pronunciation? 1 point each? a sliding scale?

-Is the pronounced *tone* of their utterances scored under pronunciation, or under delivery?

-How should one score a student with a systematic speech error (or impediment)? Is a speech with systematic *th-* pronunciation to be scored higher or lower than a speech with fewer overall errors, but a greater variety of errors?

-Is there any allowance for students with non-native accents of words, but otherwise accurate pronunciations? Is the word "ceremony" rendered as "serimo-ni" to be scored as equal to or greater/less than a non-accented pronunciation error?

-What is an appropriate gesture? (Last year we gave that kid top marks who gestured kicking a soccer ball around, but what should we give this year's fisherman and ballet dancer?)

-What am I supposed to do with "composition"? How should I grade this boring, grammatically correct speech, versus this compelling but poorly formatted and rendered speech? Can I deduct points from the seven speeches this year titled *My Dream* for not considering their audience?

As a result of a lack of a specific rubric, there is no consistency in scoring habits over time, little faith that there is consistent scoring by region, and accordingly there is no opportunity for students or teachers to apply the rubric at any point in their training. Furthermore, despite having multiple judges, there is rarely any critical feedback able to be afforded to the student or their coaches regarding their speech. In cases of speeches judged by both Japanese nationals and native English speakers, this lack of clarity creates a gulf rather than an understanding—many, many times I have seen judges from these groups arrive at very different interpretations of the day's performances, with an opportunity for improved understanding between them often defaulting into "well, that's okay I guess, but I really disagree with you." The effects of the system's ambiguity are profound, with maybe the only positive thing being that finding and "training" judges is no headache for speech contest organizers. This ambiguity is unacceptable.

Few Winners

While it is clear that the criteria for judging winners is in need of restructuring, it must also be seen how few winners the system produces. Generally, participants may advance to the next round of competition if they are part of the top seven of their competition level; this means seven individual students or student pairs for first year recitation, seven students for second-year recitation, and seven second- and third-year students for the original composition contest. These seven winners come from an already small (and non-uniform) sample of the total student body. Each school can only send up to five participants, whether they are a school of 200 or a school of 1100. Consider that in the B-Block competition of my city, which draws from Urawa, Omiya, Kita, and Minami wards of Saitama (with respective populations of 150,408; 109,681; 140,528; 175,794 ("さいたま市", 2014)) for the composition category, exactly seven students are going to be awarded any sort of official recognition for their efforts in creating and executing an original L2 speech in front of peers and strangers, an undertaking which easily takes upwards of 20 hours of time outside of their regular duties as a student.

This lack of total opportunities for a student's work to be recognized, combined with a general lack of satisfaction in the scoring process, lead to very few winners indeed.

Effects on Training/The Tremendously Bad Effects on Training

As it is simply the case that the greatest factor of a student's success in the speech contest is if a judge "likes it," very few of the teaching staff are interested in throwing their full weight behind the effort of training—it is impossible for any of them to "teach for the test" in this case. This uninterested relation with the program is easily seen in stark contrast to the levels of involvement for every other sports or competition-based club or event. This once again puts an English-related activity into that special category of irregular, unfamiliar, and incomprehensible activity.

Ironically, the absence of a clear rubric increases the demand for direct instruction from coaches (English teachers and Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs)). As stated earlier, as teachers are structurally unable to determine how best to coach their students towards success (and are unable to see a likely return on their investment of time), it is often the case that the yoke of speech contest training will fall on ALTs, individuals who are rarely if ever specially trained, interested, or compensated for their involvement. It is entirely possible for an ALT to train students counter to the preferences of the judges, just as it is possible for them to "do a good job."

There are further opportunities for bad habits. Currently, students are asked to "write their own speech," which might mean students compose their speech in English, that they may produce a rough draft in Japanese and conference with teachers until they arrive at a translation together, or the all-too-common "translation" by teacher, in which a perfectly and fantastically arrived-at version of the student's original is produced by virtue of an ALT or English teacher. Even the second option tends to lean in favor of a glut of teacher corrections, with some edification on general meaning provided by the student. In most cases, you will find no culture of self-correction develop—the lack of a clear rubric or guideline does nothing to help, while even the most basic, critical rubric can help a teacher ask, "Have you checked your speech manuscript?" As self-corrected errors are found to be some of the least likely to be repeated (Riddell, 2001, p. 152), we should actively pursue such natural opportunities to foster and develop the skills and attitudes inherent in self-editing and awareness. As the system stands now, these teacher translations help support a system of thinking that says, "Japanese students aren't good at English."

Towards Merit-Based Achievement

The simplest way to think of how we might better promote skills, train students, and recognize their achievements is by thinking of scouting organizations and merit badges. Such organizations also look to promote a set of skills, attitudes, and relationships between young learners and an established field. Additionally, they also attempt to do so across a spectrum of ability, incomes, and awareness of the topic, and do so in a way that not only recognizes an individual's merit, but do so without being at the expense of others' recognition. The system is comprised of an achievement-based rubric, a method to check that rubric (in the form of an adult supervisor-teacher), and an award showing completion of the rubric. In scope and application, we can borrow this model for our own use, satisfying our need for a rubric, resolving the issue of a culture of poor training, and recognize students far in excess of seven individuals per category per competition per year.

Here is a proposal for five core skills interpreted through this model that aim to improve English attitudes and abilities with specific attention paid to composition, performance, and relationships. (See Figure 3) They are modeled after can-do statements which are becoming the preferred form of assessment under MEXT. This rubric's values and tasks are based on many conversations with other judges, English teachers, and students, but are by no means comprehensive.

Composition

1	Student can create a speech utilizing an opening, body, and ending format.
2	Student can assess their own composition for proper capitalization, punctuation, and formatting.
3	Student can request help in editing their speech from an English educator or speaker.
4	Student can correct their composition based on suggestions or advice from their editor.
5	Student can produce a speech which can be said to inform, persuade, or amuse.
6	Student can compose a speech reflective of their interests, experiences, opinions, or future.

Non-Verbal Delivery

1	Student can utilize gestures which are not explicit/literal in execution.
2	Student can deliver a speech with regular frequency of gestures.
3	Student can utilize gestures which are brief in duration.
4	Student can present themselves with proper posture and an absence of idle shifting of weight, movement of hands, or nodding.
5	Student can present with an expression natural and appropriate to their content.

Vocal Delivery

1	Student can project their voice so as to be clearly understood by a listener 25m away.
2	Student can recover from an error in delivery (mispronunciation, forgetting a line, etc.) without self-remarks
3	Student can utilize intonation at the word and sentence level to appropriately reflect content.
4	Student can utilize speed of delivery to appropriately reflect content.
5	Student can practice to the extent that their rehearsals are free of delivery errors.

Pronunciation	
1	Student can assess their own performance through recording of their own speeches.
2	Student can deliver pronunciation with accurate long and short vowel sounds.
3	Student can accurately produce Th, B, P, V, and F sounds.
4	Student can accurately produce L and R sounds.
5	Student can improve their pronunciation of specific words with the assistance of a coach or teacher.
6	Student can utilize phonological training (to include tongue/mouth/teeth diagrams) to improve their pronunciation

Figure 3. Proposed Rubric for Five Core Speech Skills

There are immediate points to be addressed in this proposal—should language as simple as "Th, B, P, V, and F sounds" be used when phonetically accurate terms and characters exist to best represent this? In developing this paper and list, it was clear that the forms most widely understood are the most likely to be of benefit. It is the case that, given the current culture surrounding speech contests, a teacher may not invest the time to understand what a nasal plosive is, and how to improve upon its pronunciation. However, there is no confusion when "L and R sounds" are referenced. As such, this list was crafted simply in attempt to reflect language that is the most practical, rather than language that is the most accurate.

Additionally, this list does not make recommendations on how to assess speeches in competition by points—it's still the case that we have not arrived at a decision for which is more harmful, a systematic Th- error, or several unrelated errors, but it does divide the criteria into smaller portions, and I would advise that one failure in an element of one checklist not weigh so heavily as to invalidate other areas of positive assessment within the same list.

Further points of contention are the choice to break "delivery" into verbal and non-verbal components, the choice to be decidedly less than comprehensive in pronunciation issues, and the demand to ask students to record their own speeches. These are worthwhile conversations to have, but smaller points than the scope of this paper.

Application of the Rubric/Can-Do List

For the majority of the list, participants can reliably determine whether or not they have indeed met the abilities set forth by the assessment. In all cases, the can-do list

assessments should be checked and verified by the student's English teacher or coach, providing both guidance for the teacher, and a context for a functional relationship between two people regarding the common language of English. Upon successful completion of this rubric, as verified by their English teacher, it should be sufficient for speech contest administrators or school officials to present a certificate or award signifying the student's competence and labors towards English and self-improvement, suitable for recognition before their peers at opening ceremonies or other school meetings.

Such a system would finally recognize the efforts of tens of thousands of young students, help develop relationships in English and with English, and would foster the skills of self-awareness, performance, editing, and phonological improvement that the current system aims to improve, but fails to achieve.

Conclusion

As the adoption of this system would require little extra more than several meetings to adopt a set rubric, photocopies and web hosting to make that rubric available to students and teachers, and time and paper for all those additional awards, it seems that this is a fair price to pay for the likely benefits.

For judges and administrators of speech contests, adopting a merit-based achievement system would be a first step to resolving the issues of an inability to "teach for the test," consistency between schools and different years, and issues on how to interpret that grand soccer gesture from a few years ago.

It is the hope of this author that the adoption of merit-based assessment systems leads to an escalation in quality, which in turn would drive further discussions on just what to do with all these high-performing students.

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