

MULTILINGUAL SPEAKERS

Just as societies and cultures are always changing and evolving, so are languages. Words, phrases, and idioms go in and out of style, for example. In 2016, *Webster's Dictionary* added 1,000 new words to its online dictionary, including “humblebrag,” “binge-watch,” and “first world problem.” Language is also local: What do you call the grassy area between a sidewalk and street? Depending on which area of the United States that you live in, it might be a boulevard, parkway, berm, tree lawn, outlawn, banquette, or hellstrip.

Our point is that nobody owns English. Rather, as Suresh Canagarajah writes, **communication** transcends individual languages. Language competency is an ongoing, ever-widening process of learning how to communicate in diverse contexts and across various cultural codes and norms. Even when we speak in one “language,” we often use different dialects and registers in order to signal our sense of belonging in given groups and situations. Over a lifetime, we develop a personal dictionary to draw on whenever we encounter something new. We learn how to **code-switch** and **code-mesh** through language.

If you are an international student, or if English is your second—or third, fourth or fifth!—language, it can be extra challenging to navigate social and academic life in U.S. colleges and universities. Below are some tips and strategies for formal and informal speaking situations that you might encounter:

Formal speeches

At some point, you will be required to prepare and deliver a speech or presentation, perhaps for a class, or maybe as part of an interview. Our best advice is to practice often and early, practice **out loud**, and practice well!

How should I practice?

- In front of a mirror by yourself (to pay careful attention to your body language and gestures)
- With friends (to practice in front of groups, like you will do in class)
- On video (so you can watch it and see how clearly you are speaking)
- With a Speaking Center consultant (to organize and practice delivering a speech in a low-stakes environment with a peer tutor)

Why should I practice?

- Gain confidence in the material you are presenting
- Observe body language—over 50% of your meaning is conveyed through body language
- Observe vocal variety, volume, and pace—almost 40% of meaning is conveyed through voice
- Make sure you are following the assignment guidelines
- Identify your trouble-spots:
 - ⇒ Can you re-word or re-phrase certain ideas for clarity?
 - ⇒ Can you identify some synonyms for words that you have difficulty pronouncing?
 - ⇒ Can you use visual aids (PowerPoint, handouts, etc.) to display words and phrases that your audience might have difficulty understanding?

Speaking informally

Most speaking occasions are informal, such as talking with professors during office hours, collaborating with colleagues on a group project, contributing to class discussions, and talking casually in the elevator about the weather outside. While you can't prepare for every possible scenario, you can use informal speaking occasions as opportunities to expand your English language competencies.

The more we interact with others from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the more we expand our understanding and use of language in writing and speech.

The Southern Miss Speaking Center offers conversation groups for multilingual students, as well as one-to-one appointments during any stage of the speech preparation process. We happily work with students, staff, and faculty members from any discipline or department. Our website (<https://www.usm.edu/speaking-center>) has a wealth of information about topics like Speech Anxiety, Verbal and Nonverbal Delivery, Extemporaneous Speaking, Visual Aids, and much more.

Sources:

Suresh Canagarajah, *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2013).