**EFFECTIVE PUBLIC SPEAKING SKILLS:**

**A CASE STUDY OF OBAMA’S ENGAGING PUBLIC SPEAKING STRATEGIES**

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***ABSTRACT:*** *Public speaking is more difficult than personal communication, because the speaker has to face a bigger audience. This can have impacts on the delivery of the public speaker, the audience’s message reception and comprehension. One of the challenges in public speaking is to engage and maintain audience attention. Whereas some speaker sseem to have the knack of engaging their audience, the average speakers may need to learn this skill. One possible way of learning and developing this skill is to turn to an authentic source, i.e. to examine how real life famous people engage their audience in real life public speaking situation. This paper looked at the strategies that President Barrack Obama used in engaging his audience when he spoke to young people at YSEALI event in Malaysia on 27 April 2014. Explicitly, the researchers analysed the strategies which appeared to have been used by Obama to engage his audience at the event. To obtain an answer to this research question, the researchers watched and examined the event recorded live on Youtube video and also analysed Obama’s fully transcribed speech that was published by the local mainstream newspaper, The New Straits Times, a day after the event. Obama appeared to have resorted to the following strategies to engage his audience: the use of rhetorical questions; the use of local (Bahasa Melayu) words; the use of quotations from famous individuals; the use of common grounds to capitalize on the similarities between America and South East Asia; the use of humour; the use of charming or pleasing words to please the audience; the use of speech rhythm, and finally by adopting an honest approach when he talked about his past.*

**Keywords:** public speaking; public speaking challenges; engaging strategies; audience reactions; authentic sources

**INTRODUCTION**

## Public speaking is one activity that is common to many people. It is an activity that is common to working people and also students. Because working people must succeed in their jobs and students must succeed in their studies, it is therefore important that public speaking is properly delivered. To working individuals, especially the benefits of public speaking can be immediately seen.

**THE BENEFITS OF GOOD PUBLIC SPEAKING SKILLS**

People who are good at public speaking may reap many benefits. Some of these benefits include admiration and respect, job promotion potential and leadership position. Because public speaking involves risks, for example, panic attack, errors and mistakes of various kinds, people who are willing to take these risks may therefore be seen as courageous and hence are accorded admiration and respect, especially when they always succeed in public speaking. Carlson[1]states that “it takes courage just to get up and talk in front of people”. Good public speaking skills can also contribute to candidates’ job promotion if they have also fulfilled other qualities at work. Robar [2] notes; “Business leaders have said that more people climb the ladder of success by talking than any other way”.Carlson [1] further says; “What makes a good speaker also makes a very promotable individual”. Also, people who are good at public speaking may result in them being appointed to leadership position, as people generally are aware of the notion that a good public speaker may possess leadership qualities. Sun [3] maintains; “Research indicates that public-speaking skills offer important career benefits. Good communication skills aid in job searches and in promotion to leadership positions”.

**PUBLIC SPEAKING CHALLENGES**

Public speaking looks easy when we see experts doing it, but it is not as easy especially to novices. We may recall when we had to do them ourselves, where we found that they were not that easy after all, and we may have our own share of disappointments, as we did not achieve the standard that we had aimed at. We enjoy listening to good public speeches, but detest bad ones because we do not want our time wasted. Many people are fearful of public speaking, and it is one of the most dreaded activities to many people. Unless we are heads of states, organisations or companies when speaking in public is something that we do every day, for most people, however, it is an activity that we do not always do. Having to stand before a large crowd who has at times high expectations to hear what we have to say, and being aware that we may not be able to fulfill their expectations, or worse, that we may be making a fool of ourselves in front of so many people can be a nerve wrecking experience to most. There are many challenges in public speaking, especially if we are novice speakers.

One of the challenges is the mediocre results of our speeches. Possibly because of the fear of negative audience reaction while speaking in public, some speakers choose to play it safe by avoiding risky communication strategies in public speaking like jokes, wit and stories, for fear that they may not be well received or enjoyed by their audience. As a result, speeches can be rendered plain and ordinary perhaps resulting in the possible failure in putting the message across effectively. Igoe [4] observes:

Over the years as a professional speaker and a public speaking coach, I have seen many speakers assume that mediocre public speaking is okay because they do get some limited results. Mediocre is never okay!...Mediocre speaking massacres the message, bores the audience, and deflates the speaker’s image….Extraordinary public speaker, one who drives your message home – with passion and heart, engages your audience and evokes change within them.

## Another challenge is to maintain audience attention because listeners’ attention can be notoriously short and hard to engage. Some audience even wishes to be entertained during a public speaking situation. Others may have very high expectations, because public speakers are often seen as experts or authorities in their field. Turk [5] writes:

Everyone has to be a listener sometimes; at lectures, presentations, meetings…, we spend a lot of times listening to others talking. …We are often bored, irritated even embarrased as listeners; rarely are we captivated or filled with new enthusiasm for a topic and with respect for the speaker.

Turk’s [5] quote above is echoed by Gill (Chapter 2) [6]:

I have been to myriad dinners, luncheons and other events and suffered through hundreds of speeches. Most are dull, boring and much too long. They are oblivious to basics concerning audiences…

There may be consequences if one does not do well in public speaking. A person who does not speak well in public may be looked down upon. As people can have high expectations of public speakers, a speaker who speaks poorly may be easily dismissed as someone who is uninteresting or lacking in character. They may easily lose respect from others. If they represent a company or an organisation,they may damage their companies or organisation’s name, as they may be seen to be lacking in communication skills.

## The above, i.e. mediocrity and difficulties in engaging audience attention are but two examples of the shortfalls in public speaking. To overcome mediocrity and to engage audience attention, we can learn from model speakers in action, or in other words, by exploiting authentic materials to optimise instruction. Authentic materials are powerful learning resources because they do not have artificial learning variables that may affect learning. According to McIlvenny*,et al.*[7],“Studies of public speaking, specifically political oratory, have shown that …one can improve one’s performance by studying what actually happens in a performance by a good speaker”.

This paper takes the view that in public speaking instruction, the model speaker must be someone who can greatly inspire learners so that the interest factor is fully exploited. The authentic model for public speaking instruction that this paper has chosen is the President of the United States of America, Mr. Barack Obama. As a former lawyer, seasoned presidential campaigner, a victorious debator who had debated against other reputed presidential candidates live on television shown globally, the credentials of Obama as a public speaker cannot be questioned. Obama is a phenomenal, charismatic individual because he overcame the odds against him to become the first ever black president of the USA, and hence he is perhaps the best person for our model public speaker. His charisma is evident by the raving celebrity status that people the world over accorded him wherever he goes.

This paper will analyse the live public speech which was delivered by Obama in Malaysia on 27 April 2014. Obama arrived in Malaysia on his four nation tour of Asia.He was in Malaysia from 26 to 28 April 2014. On 27 April 2014, Obama attended the *Young South East Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI\*)*[8]program where he met young leaders from South East Asian countries at Universiti Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The main target group for his public speech was the 103 youths representing *YSEALI*, and there were about 300 other participants who were also present at the event. Because President Obama is an American whose values, worldview and perception could be different from this part of the world, i.e. South East Asia (SEA), it therefore arouses our curiosity on how he could deliver a speech that would be well received by a group of what appears to be his rather difficult audience; young people, i.e. late adolescents from across SEA where English is not their native language. Whereas Obama usually addressed and spoke to heads of states and older adults, the public speaking program at *YSEALI* could, from one angle, be seen as quite a challenge to him. Never doubting his public speaking capability, it would therefore be interesting to see how he would overcome these perceived odds against him at the public speaking event. He had to speak to roughly two groups of people, the adolescents and adults. But after watching the Youtube video and analysing the full transcript of his speech published on the daily national mainstream English newspaper,*The New Straits Times*, it was found that Obama was his usual self, in his form and he impressed the audience who appeared to have enjoyed his speech.

**RESEARCH PURPOSE**

Given that attracting and maintaining the audience attention and interest are essential requirements for successful public speaking, this paper attempted to examine some of the perceived strategies used by Obama in achieving these aims. Hopefully, the instructional aim of this paper is to share with readers some of the perceived strategies used by Obama to engage the audience when delivering his speech at the *YSEALI* event on 27 April 2014. Obviously, it may not be possible for the average speakers to reach Obama’s level of performance in public speaking, but with the completion of this paper, it is hoped that readers may gain some insights and learn a thing or two on how to engage their audience in public speaking.

**RESEARCH QUESTION**

What were some of the perceived public speaking strategies that Obama used to engage his audience?

**METHOD**

To identify the strategies used by Obama in engaging his audience, this paper analysed his speech which appeared in both the Youtube video [9] and also the Malaysian mainstream English language newspaper, *The New Straits Times (NST)*[19]. The video on Youtube enabled the researchers to study and examine Obama’s live speech delivery. Together with the question and answer session that came after the main speech, Obama spoke to his audience for 1 hour and 20 minutes. Besides providing the researchers with real life data of the speech, the Youtube video also shows the participation and reaction of the audience to his speech, an important indicator to examine whether or not the audience was engaged with Obama’s speech.

Finally, the researchers were also aided by a full transcription of the speech that appeared in the *New Straits Times* newspaper (dated 27 April 2014) [10], which was a report that came a day after the event. The full transcript of the speech enabled the researchers to cross-check and identify what appeared to be the engaging strategies used by Obama in the speech. These strategies found were manually tagged with the different labels (such as *humour, common ground, charming words, quotation, speech rhythm,* etc.), and their frequency was counted. Using the computer’s word count tool and eliminating words uttered by the moderator and the participants who asked questions after his main speech, Obama uttered 9,793 words throughout the 1 hour 20 minutes of the entire speech, which was roughly 163 words per minute. To gauge the audience’s reactions to the speech, the *NST’s* speech transcript that has the words *applause* and *laughter* marked by the newspaper were counted. These words were enclosed within brackets in the newspaper, and they appeared at the end of Obama’s sentences which were accompanied by such reactions from the audience. In other words, the *NST* newspaper not only recorded, but it also precisely indicated where the applause and laughters were in Obama’s speech. This method was also used by Guerini et al. [11] who looked at applause as indicators of persuasive expressions in public speaking. Two sentences marked by these words are shown below as examples from the newspaper:

*That’s why, over the past few years, Prime Minister (Datuk Seri) Najib (Razak) and I have worked to broaden and deepen the relationship between our two countries in the same spirit of berkerja sama (a local word which means cooperation) that I think so many of you embody. (Applause)*

*Last year, after the Boston Marathon was attacked, she taught her students all about her hometown – its history and its culture.  She taught them a phrase that’s popular in Boston – “wicked awesome.”  So that was part of the English curriculum. (Laughter)*

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

After eliminating the ones at the beginning and that at the end of his speech, as these are routine, courtesy applauses given to speakers, there are altogether 27 applauses and 18 laughters from the audience throughout Obama’s speech. Besides the laughters and applauses, smiles and cheers seen and heard on Youtube can also be indicators of Obama’s audience reactions to his speech. All these indicators together suggest that the audience were engaged and they enjoyed Obama’s speech. The following reports and discusses the perceived engaging strategies Obama used.

The first strategy used by Obama to engage his audience was by asking them questions. During the speech, Obama posed questions to the audience, but he did not seek answers from them. These are called rhetorical questions. Hornby (2000: 1010) [12] defines rhetorical questions as those “asked only to make a statement or to produce an effect rather than to get an answer”. According to Schopenhauer ([1972](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/383421#rf36) as cited in Ahluwalia and Burnkrant [13], the use of rhetorical questions “…in persuasion settings dates back to at least the 1800s, when they were regarded as a tactic of successful debating” .Gleason [14] maintains that carefully worded rhetorical questions can “pique the interest of listeners”. It was clear from the Youtube video that Obama posed these questions to the audience not because he wanted answers from them, but apparently because he wanted them to focus their attention to the topics he raised, to get them to think about them and to arouse their interest in the topics. Also, questions posed to the audience may have the effect that they were directly spoken to. Altogether, there were five (5) rhetorical questions posed by Obama to the audience during the speech. Two examples are shown below:

*… So before I answer your questions, I just want to answer that one question – why Asia is so important to America, and why Southeast Asia has been a particular focus, and finally, why I believe that young people like you have to be the ones who lead us forward.*

*From the outside, you look – why are they arguing? They’re both Irish. They speak the same language. It seems as if they’d have nothing to argue about.*

Obama also sprinkled his speech with local words, Bahasa Melayu or the Malay language, his second engaging strategy. When the world’s most powerful man speak the audience’s native language, this may have a thrilling effect to the audience. According to Kim [15], “bilinguals code switch or code mix because they have reasons and motivations to do so.” Because people in Malaysia, Indonesia and other regions in South East Asia speak Malay, Obama’s use of the Malay language was not incidental. There may be reasons that motivated the use of this language in his speech. Obama might have learned the Malay language while growing up in Indonesia when his late mother worked there as a Peace Corps member. Because of his close familiarity with Indonesia (in which Malay is the official language), the words were not only correctly used but very clearly pronounced by him. Judging from the audience response, they seemed to have enjoyed the local words’ usage, because they laughed and smiled when some of the words were uttered. In linguistics this is either called code-switching or code-mixing (Myers-Scotton, 1997 as cited in Bassiouney,) [16]. Gumperz, as cited in Bassiouney, 2009) [16] discusses the role of code-switching as a means of creating solidarity. Grosjean [17] says that code-switching or mixing can also be used for a variety of reasons, one is specifying the addressee, i.e. switching to the usual language of a particular person in a group will show that one is addressing that person. Gumperz (1982, as cited in Muthusamy, n.d.: 2-3) [18] lists several reasons for the use of code switching/mixing; among these are, “to capture attention, to emphasize a point, to communicate more effectively, to identify with a particular group, to close the status gap and to establish goodwill and support”. Because people in Malaysia, Indonesia and other countries in South East Asia speak Malay, one possible reason for Obama’s code mix or code switch could have been to establish solidarity with these people. The eight (8) Bahasa Melayu words below were uttered by Obama during his speech:

*Selamat petang (good afternoon), bekerjasama (co-operation), kampung (village), batik (clothes with colourful floral designs or patterns worn mostly by people in Malaysia and Indonesia), Malaysia boleh (Malaysia can, a slogan), apa khabar? (how are you?), baik (fine), terima kasih banyak (thank you very much).*

Obama also used quotes in his speech, his third strategy. In the words of Sandelowski [19] “quotes are used to…evoke emotion and provoke response.” Quotes may stir the emotion and influence listeners as they are often uttered by famous, charismatic, well respected people. They may also impress the audience as they are often beautifully worded and structured. In his speech, Obama quoted the late Kennedy, the former American President, and he also quoted a verse from the Bible (Luke, 6:31) [20]:

Robert Kennedy once said, “It is a revolutionary world that we live in, and thus it is young people who must take the lead.”

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Obama also made use of humour in his speech, his fourth strategy. The value of humour in public speaking can be seen from a quote by Gruner [21]who says, “A modicum of apt relevant humour in informative discourse will probably produce a more favourable audience reaction toward the speaker”. Because of her dominant superpower status, many nations on the globe, arguably, still expect America and her presidents to play the leading role in tackling many of the world’s problems. As American presidents do not come to South East Asia often, a public speaking situation in which the charismatic Obama speaks can be tense for the audience due to the awe and respect which they may have towards him. But Obama appeared to have diffused the tension which was evident from the spontaneous smiles, cheers and applause he received during the speech. Judging from these applauses, cheers and the smiles from the audience, they seemed to have enjoyed his speech. Gruner (1967b, 1970, as cited in Gruner, [21] experimented the impact of humour in an informative speech in which one has humour and the other no humour added. Gruner’s research subjects were asked to rate speakers on their authoritativeness (expertise) and character (trustworthiness and likeability). Gruner’sresearch found that the humorous speeches produced no change in authoritativeness, but they significantly enhanced the speakers’ ratings in terms of their character. Obama used this strategy six (6) times during his speech. Two humourous expressions underlined are shown below:

## ***MODERATOR:*** *Mr President, thank you very much.  We have a question from our friend in Singapore.  He asks, what is the legacy you wish to leave behind?*

**PRESIDENT OBAMA:** I’ve still two and a half years left as President, so I hope he’s not rushing me.

**PRESIDENT OBAMA:** I'm trying to figure out which generation I am. (Laughter.) You got Baby Boomers, then Gen X, and then there’s a Gen Y – we're on Y?  Is that Z, are they here yet, or – that's next?

## Obama also made use of speech rhythm in his delivery, his fifth strategy. In speeches, according to Griffin [22], speakers do make use of language for pleasing rhythm. Parallelism, repetition, alliteration and antithesis are four ways to emphasise ideas with rhythm [22]. Griffin says that “speakers often combine repetition with parallelism to reinforce messages rhythmically and ensure that their words stay with us long after a speech is over” (2012: 217) [22]. In the *YSEALI* speech, Obama used both repetition and parallelism for a pleasing rhythm. The phrase *I’ve seen* and *we want* below are repeated, and they are almost always positioned at the beginning of his sentences, and they followed one another. The two (2) cases of repetition combined with parallelism underlined are shown below.

And I’ve seen the hope and the energy and the optimism of your generation wherever I travel, from Rangoon to Jakarta to here in KL. I’ve seen the desire for conflict resolution through diplomacy and not war. I've seen the desire for prosperity through entrepreneurship, not corruption or cronyism. I’ve seen a longing for harmony not by holding down one segment of society but by upholding the rights of every human being, regardless of what they look like or who they love or how they pray. And so you give me hope.

So that’s part of what we’re starting here today.  And before I take your questions, let me just close by sharing with you the future that I want to work for in this region, about where we want America’s rebalance in the Asia-Pacific to lead, about the work we can do together. I believe that together we can make the Asia-Pacific more secure.  America has the strongest military in the world, but we don’t seek conflict; we seek to keep the peace.  We want a future where disputes are resolved peacefully and where bigger nations don’t bully smaller nations. All nations are equal in the eyes of international law.  We want to deepen our cooperation with other nations on issues like counterterrorism and piracy, but also humanitarian aid and disaster relief – which will help us respond quickly to catastrophes like the tsunami in Japan, or the typhoon in the Philippines.  We want to do that together. Together, we want to make the Asia-Pacific more prosperous, with more commerce and shared innovation and entrepreneurship. And we want to see broader and more inclusive development and prosperity.

## Also connected to rhythm, is alliteration which Obama made use of in his speech too. Alliteration is a repetition of initial consonant sounds. According to Griffin (2012: 217) [22], “alliteration can be used to emphasise an idea, and when sparingly used it can give a rhythm to your words that audiences find engaging and easy to remember”. Obama used this once (1) in his speech:

Now, this world has its share of threats and challenges, and that’s usually what makes the news. We know that progress can always be reversed, and that positive change is achieved not through passion alone, but through patient and persistent effort.

Next, appealing or charming words were also used when addressing the audience who were mostly young adolescent students, his sixth strategy. When the world’s most powerful man used these charming words to address and describe the audience, they may be thrilled and feel good of themselves, which may result in a more heightened eagerness among the audience to participate in the communicative event. Altogether Obama used this strategy seven (7) times in his speech. Two underlined examples are shown below:

## *It is wonderful to see all these outstanding young people here…*

**PRESIDENT OBAMA:** A couple more questions – all right, because I just want to make sure that I’m being fair here.  All right, it’s a guy’s turn.  Let’s see – all right, how about this guy, because I like his hair cut, the guy with the spiky hair right there. (Applause.)

## Obama also made use of the common ground between America and Asia, between America and South East Asia and between America and Malaysia, his seventh strategy. In this paper, *common ground* is referred to as the common issues shared between the peoples of America and the peoples of the South East Asian region and also the ties that Obama has with this region. Kline [23] says that the chances of speakers to succeed in public speaking are greater if they are able to build rapport with their audience, among others, by exhibiting similarities between themselves and their listeners. Obama used this strategy sixteen (16) times throughout his speech. Two expressions are shown below:

I’ve only been in Malaysia for a day, but I’ve already picked up a new phrase:  Malaysia boleh. (Applause.)  Malaysia can do it.  Now, I have to say, we have a similar saying in America:  Yes, we can.

I lived in Indonesia as a boy.My sister, Maya, was born in Jakarta. She’s married to a man whose parents were born here – my brother-in-law’s father in Sandakan, and his mom in Kudat. (Applause.) And my mother spent years working in the villages of South East Asia, helping women buy sewing machines or gain an education so that they could better earn a living.

The eighth and the final strategy that might have made Obama’s speech engaging is the honest attitude he adopted when delivering his speech. This strategy was used twice (2) in his speech, when Obama talked about his student life and his relationship with his late mother. Continuing the quote by Kline [23], the writer further remarked that speakers have better chances of success in communication if they are able to build rapport with their audience through their honesty and straightforwardness. In a speaker of the stature of Obama, more often than not, the audience might be more inclined to hear about his successes in his family relationship and his student life, but they might never have expected to hear about some of his disappointments and regrets he had when he was a student and also in the way he treated his mother when she was ill with cancer. These regrets and disappointments might have made his speech more realistic which could have surprised the audience. Hill and Baron [24] cited Luft’s (1969) Johari Window’s concept of interpersonal communication.The Johari Window’s communication model maintains that when information or aspects of oneself unknown to other people are made known to them, communication can be made most effective. Hill and Baron [24] conducted an experimental study on interpersonal openness and communication effectiveness. Their findings suggest that increased openness can have an impact in communication effectiveness. Obama’s honesty can be seen in the expressions below:

**When I was in high school – so, for those of you who are studying under a different system, when I was 15, 16, 17, before I went to the university – I wasn’t always the best student. Sometimes I was enjoying life too much. No, part of it I was rebelling, which is natural for young people that age. I didn’t know my father, and so my family life was complicated. So I didn’t always focus on my studies, and that probably carried over into the first two years of university.**

The specific thing is I regret not having spent more time with my mother. Because she died early – she got cancer right around when she was my age, actually, she was just a year older than I am now – she died.  It happened very fast, in about six months.  And I realised that – there was a stretch of time from when I was, let’s say, 20 until I was 30 where I was so busy with my own life that I didn’t always reach out and communicate with her and ask her how she was doing and tell her about things. I realised that I didn’t – every single day, or at least more often, just spend time with her and find out what she was thinking and what she was doing, because she had been such an important part of my life.

**CONCLUSION**

As can be seen in the earlier part of this paper, an effective public speaking is fraught with challenges. To successfully engage the audience can be one of the challenges in public speaking. Public speakers need to use strategies that work to engage their audience, otherwise their message may fail to reach their audience There are many ways to learn these strategies, for example from textbooks and public speaking classes. But we can also learn by observing successful real life speakers speaking to a real audience. This paper analyses the strategies used by President Obama when he spoke to young people at the *YSEALI* event held in Malaysia on 27 April 2014. The Youtube video and the transcribed speech in the newspaper report suggest that President Obama delivered an effective speech to his audience on that day. The audience body language and reactions suggest that Obama’s speech appeared to have been well received and enjoyed by the audience possibly because of his fame and charisma, but also not least because of the strategies he used in the speech too. These strategies include the rhetorical questions he posed to the audience, the use of Malay or local words, the use of famed quotes, the use of humour, the use of speech rhythm, the use of charming words to please the audience and the exploitation of common grounds between America and this region. Finally,Obama’s honesty when relating to the audience his past regrets and disappointments in his relationship with his mother, father and his life as a student may have surprised the audience and may also have made his speech more realistic and human. Obviously, public speaking strategies may differ depending on differing circumstances, but nevertheless, these strategies can be useful guides, especially to novice speakers speaking in a variety of situations.

\*Launched in 2013 by U.S. President Barack Obama, the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) consists of bright young leaders aged 18-35 years from Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma, Philippines, Laos, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. These young leaders have innovative ideas for tackling what they have identified as their generation’s greatest challenges in the ASEAN region: economic development, environmental protection, education, and civic engagement. Every day, they come up with creative solutions — like using beneficial microbes to clean rivers or creating job opportunities by selling products made from water lilies. The United States is partnering with these extraordinary young men and women by providing training and funding to up-and-coming community leaders and social entrepreneurs.

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