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Making Verbal Pauses Taboo®: Gaming to Improve Communication

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ABSTRACT
This activity contributes to the improvement of communication skills through application and enjoyment. The manuscript describes how a class can be divided into teams to test student’s communicative abilities by playing the Milton Bradley game Taboo®. With “buzzing,” timing and friendly competition speakers face-off at attempts to have their teammates guess words or phrases like “bowling alley” without saying “pins,” “shoes,” “spare,” “balls” or “strike.” This lively skill-building activity has been found to be an effective way to challenge the speaker to process what they are saying, reduce the use of verbal pauses, and use nonverbal pauses more effectively. Up to 30 players, fun (and learning) for all ages!

Effective communicators are prepared, practiced and effectively use words that are specific and concrete (Beebe, Beebe, & Ivy, 2007). A common misconception of novice speakers is the need to fill every minute of their presentation with sound. One of the most commonly used methods in filling speaking time is the use of verbal pauses. These verbal pauses come about when speakers are attempting to think of the next words to say. Therefore, there is a relationship between the lack of preparation and the use of verbal pauses. One of the most overlooked methods of preparation is that of practicing in front of an audience where the speaker is not completely relaxed. As such, the objective for this work is to provide instructors an innovative way to help students improve verbal communication by reducing the use of verbal pauses during speech delivery while ultimately stressing the importance of using silent (nonverbal) pauses. The activity described below offers an ungraded opportunity to speak in front an audience that increases learning concepts of concise communication through visual, auditory and kinesthetic means.

Rationale

This exercise allows the instructor to bring attention to, and help eliminate, the use of verbal pauses. Verbal pauses include but are not limited to, words and sounds such as, um, ah, uh, you know, and, okay, but, like, and so and can cause listeners to question the intellect and motives of the speaker (Lucas, 2009). These unnecessary, crutch-like, filler words are often used.
habitually and can detract from the speaker’s message and discredit their credibility (Haas & Smith, 2006; Jaffe, 2010; Lucas, 2009). Removing verbal pauses during speech delivery helps the speaker’s message become more concise and therefore more easily received by the audience.

Although not all speakers use these verbal pauses, many do, and based on classroom experience, many students use the terms obsessively. As noted by Jaffe (2010) these verbal fixtures are not beneficial to the speaker or listener due to the long-drawn-out nature caused by this additional verbiage, which serves as a hindrance to proper communication. It is important to note that most speakers are unaware of their reliance on verbal pauses during speech making. Using an ungraded, low-stakes activity to generate awareness sets the foundation for eliminating the use of verbal pauses from one’s diction.

Although effective listening is ultimately up to the receiver, the use of verbal pauses can tempt the listener to disregard the speaker’s message despite the quality of information presented (Haas & Smith, 2006); therefore, messages clearly presented give the listener less opportunity to miss, misinterpret or misunderstand the message. When there are fewer distractions for a listener to neglect the meaning of a message, the listener is less likely to fall into a listening pitfall that can be detrimental to the understanding of the message (Barker, Wahlers, & Watson, 2001). Instead of using verbal pauses, speakers should seek to use silent pauses to increase understanding in communication. In contrast to verbal pauses, a silent pause is when a speaker has a natural break in their verbal delivery that affords the listener the ability to assimilate the information presented. When used effectively, silent pauses allow a speaker to alert their audience to important information, punch lines, or to manage the overall rate of delivery (Haas & Smith, 2006). Using silent pauses also allows the speaker an opportunity to collect their thoughts without reducing their credibility though the use of verbal pauses. This activity is geared toward eliminating the distractive verbal pause and utilizing the silent pause.

Materials Needed

To complete this activity, the instructor must come prepared with Taboo®, or other such team-oriented word game. Taboo® costs about $24.99 if purchased new, but used versions have been found at EBay and Amazon online stores for as low as $.99. The official game Taboo® consists of a deck of 504 cards, card holder, 60-second timer, buzzer, and a score card. An alternative to buying the game as a teaching tool would be to create your own materials. To create a personalized version of the word game, one would need a thesaurus, note cards, stop watch (or clock with second hand), and paper for scoring. Due to the popularity of the game, most students will understand the rules of Taboo® but a quick review is helpful.

Approximate Time Required

The activity typically takes no longer than 40 minutes for a class size of approximately 25 to complete. Each student will have at least two opportunities to speak within this time period.
What to Do Before and During the Activity

Before the activity begins, it is essential the instructor explains to students what verbal and silent pauses are, as well as how and why the use of the verbal crutches affects communication. The authors have typically used this activity when covering speech delivery or after recognizing a need based on the number of verbal pauses used during introductory speech assignments. The concepts and rules of the game are also important for students to understand. To play the game, the instructor should divide the classroom into teams. Based on the author’s experiences, teams of roughly five members work best for this activity. The basic concept behind the game Taboo® is for an individual player from team “A” to have his/her teammates guess a word such as “scoop” without saying similar words which are identified on the game card, such as: “ice cream,” “reporter,” “cone,” “newspaper,” or “story.” If he/she does say one of the identified words, his/her monitor (someone from team “B”) uses the buzzer to indicate the mistake and team “A” loses a point. If his/her teammates guess the word, he/she continues on until his/her time runs out. To review directions or see a short clip of the game being played see: http://www.hasbro.com/search/_/Ntt-taboo?Ntk=All&Ntx=mode+matchallpartial

For this in-class activity, the game is played as outlined above (using the chalkboard/whiteboard for scoring), but the players are also “buzzed” and lose their turn if they use verbal pauses (e.g., um, ah, okay, like). If “buzzed” for using a verbal pause the guilty player looses all points for their team. It is important for the instructor to allot enough class time for each student to participate twice (play two full rounds). This is usually very obtainable as the first round typically goes quickly. Additionally, the instructor should relate the using of game cards to note cards or speaking notes during a speech. When switching from one game card/note card to the next, students have a heightened chance of using verbal pauses as they attempt to fill the space while their thinking of their next verbal move. A practice round is often helpful.

Once the lesson and rules have been delivered, divide the class into two teams. If there is an odd number of students ask one student to be the score and time keeper; otherwise the role of time and score keeper role is left to the instructor. To score during the game students must get their teammates to guess the word in play without using the Taboo words or a verbal pause. Participants have 60 seconds and can continue their turn for the allotted time as long as they do not use a verbal pause. If the presenter uses a verbal pause and is therefore “buzzed” during their time, all points, earned during the current turn and subsequent turns are lost, and it is the other team’s turn. If the student does not use a verbal pause during the allotted 60 seconds without being “buzzed” they earn one point per correct team guess. After playing one round it is also important for the instructor to pause game play for reflection. At this break it is common for scores to be very low or tied at zero as only a couple students generally play through their allotted time without using a verbal pause. After the first round of game play, the instructor should refer to the scoreboard, the overall scoring deficiency, and how many verbal pauses slip during the activity. Discuss with students how to avoid verbal pauses while promoting the use of
silent pauses. It is also beneficial to remind the class about listening challenges and the overall ineffectiveness of verbal pause use.

**What to Do After the Activity**

This exercise is a fun and effective way to demonstrate how frequently verbal pauses are used regardless of the situation. It is valuable for the instructor to challenge his/her students to avoid using verbal pauses in their everyday conversation, which will benefit them during speech making. Ultimately, it is imperative to remind students that this activity is not just to have fun, but also to learn better communication skills. After playing the game and generating awareness, challenge students to avoid the use of distractive verbal pauses in everyday conversation which will also help them reduce verbal pauses. In addition the aptitude to eliminate these verbal pauses will allow students to differentiate themselves from their peers who have not put forth the effort to effectively express themselves. After all, “of all the knowledge and skills [individuals] have, those concerning communication will prove the most important and the most useful” (DeVito, 2006, p. 2).

Suggested questions for discussion include: Was it easy for you to avoid verbal pauses? Was there a difference in your performance during the first round versus during the second? How is this activity similar to extemporaneous speaking? How have your experiences with impromptu speaking helped you with this activity? What will you do differently in your next speech based on this activity? Will you change how you communicate in everyday communication?

**Appraisal**

Students have received this activity positively, and frequently request to play again. They generally enjoy the activity but are shocked at how many verbal pauses they use when speaking. Their use of verbal pauses is both surprising and an eye-opening realization to the frequency of and their reliance on verbal pauses. By the end of the exercise, students usually catch themselves in the process of using verbal pauses and sit down before they are “buzzed” by the challenger. Students gain a heightened awareness to their use of verbal and silent pauses during this exercise and later, either at the end of the semester or in subsequent semesters, report that they continue to be alert to their use of pauses. The effectiveness of this activity has been demonstrated time and time again during the authors’ five years of use. For example, one of the authors previously had a student use 67 verbal pauses during a two-minute impromptu speech. After completing this assignment and continuing to practice at home for the remaining two months of the semester, the same student was able to deliver a two-minute impromptu speech with only 7 verbal pauses. Additionally, over the course of one semester, one author kept track of student (N = 56) verbal pause use. On average, over the course of this activity and four additional speeches, student verbal pause use was reduced by 39%. Though there is a low sample
size and these results cannot be generalized to the larger population, with the use of Taboo and practice, students are usually able to deliver an extemporaneous presentation with fewer than 10 verbal pauses.

Students who take what they learned from this game seriously show significant progress and improvements have been documented. Further, multiple positive comments are included every semester on the authors’ course reviews supporting that the students enjoyed the assignment and found it to be beneficial.

**Conclusion**

This activity was designed to help students improve their speaking ability, perceived intelligence and credibility by alleviating the use of verbal pauses. The activity also brings attention to silent pauses and listener perceptions, as well as offering students additional practice, with speaking notes, in front of an audience. Most important to the students, facilitating this activity in class provides an opportunity have fun while learning to become a better speaker.

**References**


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