

研究ノート

Judging English Speech Contests

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ABSTRACT

This essay will examine in detail the process and mechanics involved in judging English language speech contests. This writer will provide a step-by-step guide to the birth and conclusion of contests. Criteria used to decide contest winners will be explained. Subjective opinions as well as objective values combine to determine the rankings of speakers in speech contests.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout Japan there are numerous foreign language and Japanese language speech contests at the middle school, high school and post-high school levels. This writer believes that the majority are English language contests. The Japanese language contests are for non-Japanese who are studying or working in Japan. Nearly all of the English speech contestants are Japanese native speakers in the country's middle schools and high schools. (A few participants in middle school and high school contests are native speakers of languages other than Japanese and English.)

The sponsors or organizers of speech contests are both private and public groups, such as schools, boards of education, business and cultural societies and newspaper companies, etcetera. One type of contest

is the stand-alone, meaning that the winners do not advance onward and upward to the next stage or level. Stand-alone contest winners receive their awards or prizes (such as an overseas camping trip or homestay) in due fashion. The other type of contest is the tournament, whereby the winners at the local (district) level advance to the next level (e.g. the regional level) and culminate at the national level. This writer has been a judge at the stand-alone and the tournament contests. The stand-alone is usually a one-day event while the tournament can take a month or more from start to finish for the winning participants.

TIMETABLE

Since the speakers in English contests are mostly middle school and high school students, announcements regarding contests are made in April and May. Participants spend the rest of the spring and summer writing their speeches and practicing with either a Japanese English teacher or a foreign/native speaker of English. The actual contests always take place between mid-September and early December.

JUDGES

Nearly all contests utilize three judges. There will almost always be one Japanese English teacher/educator and one native speaker teacher/educator. In other words, the judging panel will consist of two Japanese nationals and one English native speaker, or two English native speakers and one Japanese national. Regarding the native speaker (of English) judge, he or she will almost always be of North American, British, Australian or New Zealand origin. This writer has never encountered an English speech contest judge from India, Kenya, South Africa or The Philippines (where English is a/the lingua franca).

Judges in middle school and high school contests are usually college teachers rather than high school teachers. In all likelihood, this absence of secondary school judges would preclude any “suspicions” of favoritism toward one school or another as well as hard feelings among those teachers whose students did not win any prizes. Judges may also come from the language schools, i.e. senmon gakko.

Potential judges are rarely if ever recruited via notices in the classified sections of the newspapers. New judges are recommended by current judges. There is no limit on how many years a judge can work in the same contest. This writer has been a judge at one contest for twenty years.

JUDGING CRITERIA

There are basically three categories comprising the evaluation of speeches: content; oral production/speaking; and delivery. Points are awarded for each category and in total will equal 100 points. Different speech contests will assign a ratio or weight to each category, such as 50-30-20, 40-30-30 or 30-40-30. A speech that is judged to be very excellent, content-wise, could be awarded up to 50 points or just 30 points, depending on the weight or importance that the contest organizers may assign to content.

In the category of content, interest, development and clarity are the sub-sets for the stand-alone contest that this writer is a judge. In the category of oral production, i.e. speaking ability, grammar, pronunciation, intonation and (stressed) rhythm are the sub-sets. In the category of delivery, mien and conviction are the sub-sets. Content is 30%, speaking ability is 40% and delivery is 30%.

For the tournament-style contest that this writer also participates in, content is 50% of the total score. Originality, e.g. choice of topic or idea and development or organization are sub-sets of content. In the category of oral production, clarity, e.g. pronunciation and enunciation, rhythm and intonation, and grammar are the sub-sets. Oral production is 30% of the total score. In the category of delivery, impressiveness (memorization, humor and confidence) and projection to the audience (eye contact and gesture) are the sub-sets. Delivery accounts for 20% of the total score.

Judges may meet beforehand to decide on a common standard for deciding the exact parameters that will determine an interesting speech topic from a less interesting one. The stand-alone speech contest that this writer is a judge, takes that issue away by announcing the contest topic each year. The tournament-style contest that this writer is a judge, allows students to talk about any topic. Obviously, judges at a no-set-topic contest will give more or fewer points to speeches based on their own idea of an interesting speech.

Regarding organization, this writer, in collaboration with his fellow judges in the stand-alone contest and the tournament contest, has already instructed high school teachers to tell the contest participants to divide their speeches into basically three parts: the introduction; the main body; and the conclusion. The introduction (as its name implies) prepares the audience for the topic by announcing the theme and telling the listeners why the speaker thinks the theme is important. The main body then follows with various points, opinions, observation and supporting data. The conclusion usually repeats the ideas or opinions of the speaker and perhaps a plan for the future. The speakers are told to allocate no more

than one minute for the introduction, three minutes for the main body and one minute for the conclusion. Nearly all speech contests have a time limit of five minutes.

Oral production/speaking, including pronunciation, intonation, (stressed) rhythm, accent and grammar, is self-explanatory. Although there are dozens of native speaker accents, native speaker judges and Japanese judges seem to be able to evaluate a particular speech contestant's oral proficiency. In other words, any three judges can easily separate the bad speaker from the good. What is somewhat difficult is to evaluate and agree upon the winner from the runner-up and the runner-up from the third place finisher and so on.

Delivery, including mien and projection (of one's voice to the audience) is sometimes allotted the fewest points, depending on the contest. This writer has already impressed upon contestants to maintain eye contact with the audience and have a facial expression that matches the mood of the point or issue being made in the speech. If the speaker is talking about a happy moment or issue, then he or she should smile, for example. Speakers must also be able to speak loudly and clearly enough to be heard by listeners in the back of the room. Speakers should never speak in a monotone voice and should never read their speeches. In other words, speakers must memorize all or most of the speech. Needless to say, eye contact is lost when the speaker merely reads the speech. Contestants have been cautioned to make sure they understand the meaning of the words that they utter since they tend to not display the correct facial expression and speaking speed when using unknown words. (Contestants' teachers are allowed to correct and edit speeches and may insert a word

that the contestant is not familiar with, resulting in the robotic delivery of the speech.) Contestants have been cautioned to minimize the use of wild gestures, such as excessive hand and arm motions, as these may distract from the speech's message.

Judges receive the written speeches about one or two weeks prior to the contest. This writer examines each speech and evaluates them for content, including organization, grammar, originality and so forth. Judges assume that the student will not deviate from the written text during the contest, therefore one-third of the evaluation (for content) can be done at the judge's leisure, leaving the evaluation of oral production/speaking and delivery for the actual contest period.

CONTESTANT BACKGROUND AND OTHER CONTEST RULES

Contestants are almost always restricted to contests held in their own municipalities and prefectures for the tournament-style preliminary contests. Of course, they must be middle school or high school students. The stand-alone contests, such as those sponsored by newspaper companies and business organizations, may have other rules as well.

The Lions Clubs of the Ogaki (Gifu-ken) area has a rule that does not allow Japanese returnee students to participate, since these returnees would have an unfair advantage over in-Japan-only students. These returnees usually have a fairly good to excellent command of English grammar. Their pronunciation, intonation and rhythm can sometimes be almost native-like. Returnees also tend to speak English with more confidence than in-Japan-only contestants. In the contest years preceding the returnee ban, this writer and the other judges began

to note the tendency of returnee contestants to win first and second prizes. On the other hand, the Lions Club does not prohibit contestants of mixed ancestry, e.g. Japanese-Brazilians and Japanese-Iranians, if those contestants have never lived abroad.

The Aichi-Handa area contest (a tournament-style contest) that this writer also judges, may also have a rule banning returnees, but there is no rule prohibiting non-Japanese contestants. Over the years, this writer has judged three or four contestants from countries including Sri Lanka, but never from the U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia or New Zealand.

The standard time limit for speeches is five minutes. Some contests may penalize speakers if they exceed the five-minute limit. The time-keeping is done by the contest organizers, not the judges. A certain amount of points could be deducted for every five or ten seconds beyond the five-minute limit. The penalty points are deducted from the total scores submitted by the judges.

TALLYING THE SCORES

The judging sheets are collected and each judge's score for a speaker is added together to come out with the raw total score for that speaker. The contestants are then ranked from highest total score to lowest. In addition, the judges' ranking for each speaker is also noted. Ideally all three judges' rankings for the number one, two and three contestants should be the same. In other words, each judge would independently give the highest marks to the same contestant, the second highest marks to the second best speaker, and so on. Obviously, in contests where the English proficiency of each speaker is clearly discernable, the three judges' scores will conveniently coincide. In the real

world, this will probably not be the case. About half the time, the three judges will disagree on the best speaker and the number two, three, four, five and even six speaker (assuming there are ten or more contestants). At the least, the judges will agree that the least proficient contestants are truly poor speakers. This writer has never encountered a time when one judge has scored any two or three contestants at the top while another judge has scored the same two or three contestants at the bottom (in a contest with ten or more speakers).

So, what happens when the three judges' scores for the top three or four contestants do not coincide neatly? For example, Judge A scores contestant Keiko as number one, Hiroshi as number two and Yumi as number three, while Judge B scores Yumi as number one, Hiroshi as number two, Takako as number three and Keiko as number four, and Judge C scores Takako as number one, Keiko as number two, Hiroshi as number three and XX as number four (with Yumi as number five). Well, since Hiroshi is ranked number two by two of the judges, he will become the second-place finisher, especially since the third judge ranked him in the top three or four. Moreover, he will probably have the second-highest total score of all ten or more contestants. Since Judges A and C ranked Keiko as number one or two, she will be declared the winner, especially if she has the highest total score of all ten or more contestants. Judge B's ranking of Keiko as number four will probably be ignored. Yumi will most likely receive the third-place award since she was ranked number one, three and five by the judges, and her total score would probably be either third or fourth highest. By the way, the maximum number of points that a contestant can receive is 300, assuming that each judge awards him/her

100 points. Usually, the top score each year is about 255-260 points, with the second- and third-highest scores being between 250 and 255 each. (The least proficient contestants get about 200 points total from the three judges.)

This writer cannot recall a contest in which a speaker who has scored no higher than number two on any of the three judges' tally sheet is awarded first place. First place has always gone to the contestant who was ranked number one by at least one judge. The same holds true for the numbers two and three speakers. More likely than not, the number two speaker was ranked number one by one judge, and the number three contestant was ranked number two by one judge.

In general, the top speakers, i.e. number one, two and three, will receive high scores in all three judging categories (content, speaking ability and delivery). This writer does recall a recent contest where a contestant did very well in speaking ability (forty percent of the total score) and delivery (thirty percent) but lost many points for content (thirty percent). The contest organizers had assigned a theme or topic for that year's contest. The contestant failed to adhere to the theme or topic, speaking instead about another topic. The loss of valuable points in the content category depressed her total score to the point where she could not even place in the top five ranking.

ANNOUNCEMENT OF WINNERS

In all contests, the winners are announced within an hour after the conclusion of the last speech. The winners are announced in ascending order, i.e. number five, number four, number three, number two and finally, number one. Actual tally (points) results are never revealed in

public. However, each contestant usually receives the three judges' tally sheets for his or her speech, so he/she will at least know how many points were awarded, and what comments were scribbled by the judge on the sheet while listening and evaluating the speaker.

There is never any "challenge" or protest of the judging results by a contestant or his/her high school teacher or coach, since it is understood by all that the judges' decision is final.

In the stand-alone contest, the prizes are also announced. For the Lions Clubs contests, the prizes have been overseas homestays and overseas youth camps (with teenagers from other countries). This writer does not know what prizes or awards are given to the final winner of the tournament-style contest, since this writer is a judge in a preliminary round rather than the final round. This writer is almost certain that there are no cash prizes awarded, but more likely the prize is a college scholarship and/or purchase coupons for educational materials.

In the contests that this writer has judged, the three judges are asked to make comments regarding the speeches. The three judges decide beforehand who will talk about content, speaking ability and delivery. The native Japanese judges usually make comments about speaking ability, including pronunciation and intonation, since Japanese teachers of English tend to have a very keen interest in these aspects of speech and language. Japanese judges will speak in Japanese to insure that the contestants fully understand how they can improve their speaking abilities. Non-Japanese judges will usually speak in English, being careful to speak fairly slowly and clearly. This writer, when talking to the contestants about content or delivery, will largely repeat what he had told the high school teachers

several months earlier during a pre-contest orientation meeting. (See Judging Criteria section.) Of course the judges will congratulate all the contestants and urge them to continue their English endeavors.

There is an official announcement to close the speech contest. There may be a group photograph taken of the judges and all the contestants. For contests that end by twelve noon, the contest organizers and judges may have lunch and chat informally. For contests that end in the late afternoon, such as the Lions contest, there will be a formal dinner and perhaps (but rarely) a brief discussion of the contest results.

Judges almost always receive a monetary remuneration, usually between ¥20,000 and ¥50,000, depending largely on the average number of contestants over the previous several years. For one of the contests that this writer has judged, the number of contestants has ranged from ten to thirteen over the past ten years. For the other contest, the number of contestants has been between twenty and thirty over the past twenty years. For contests with more than fifteen or so speakers, a fifteen-minute break in the middle of the contest is common. This writer is not aware of any contest in which the number has exceeded 35 or 40 contestants. No doubt, an excessive number of speakers would tire judges to a point where judging mistakes and diminished concentration may appear.

CONCLUSION

Foreign language contests are well-managed endeavors, especially with regards to judging criteria. The inherent subjectivity that exists when determining the first-place winner from the second- and third-place speakers, is minimized by the objective guidelines that judges, contestants and teachers and coaches abide by and adhere to. In other words,

everyone is “on the same page” .

An issue could be raised regarding the ratio or weight allotted to content versus oral production/speaking versus delivery. In one contest, content is 50% of the score, while in the other contest that this writer judges, content is only 30%. Differences involving interest or originality of a speech by the three judges could be magnified by the number of points awarded if content is 50% of the total score, compared to 30%. Different judges will have varying opinions regarding what topic is interesting or not interesting.

One area that is no longer a concern to this writer is the quality of the coaching that high school contestants receive while preparing for the contest. Whether the coach is a Japanese English teacher or a native English speaker/teacher, the student will get excellent help from the teacher/coach as far as oral production and grammar are concerned. These days, virtually all Japanese English teachers speak English fluently. This writer has met high school teachers who speak without any “Japanese” accent.

This writer always enjoys being a judge at high school English speech contests for a number of reasons. There is the opportunity to find out how well high school students in Japan can speak English, especially since many of them will become college students. There is the opportunity to know what topics and issues are of interest to teenagers, the knowledge of which may help college teachers plan future lessons. There is the opportunity to meet high school English teachers and learn of any concerns they may have regarding secondary school foreign language education.

Over the past twenty years, the oral production/speaking abilities of contestants at the stand-alone contest this writer has judged have improved noticeably. Even the less able speakers are better than the less fluent ones from the early 1990s. The judging criteria remain the same; the speakers have gotten better.

End. George H. Sawa. November 28, 2010.