

A Structured Approach to Public Speaking for Children

Supporting children in the skills of public speaking and providing them with regular opportunities to practise will positively impact on the quality of their relationships and communication skills and enhance their engagement with the curriculum. These skills will also help them to prepare for oral examinations in post-primary school and job interviews in the future.

The ability to express and communicate ideas, knowledge and feelings in a way that others will be receptive to is empowering, fulfilling and rewarding.

Developing the skills of public speaking can support a number of the learning outcomes in the across all three elements in the Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile—**Communicating, Understanding and Exploring and using.**

LEARNING OUTCOMES

COMMUNICATING

- Engagement, listening and attention
- Social conventions and awareness of others

UNDERSTANDING

- Sentence structure and grammar
- Acquisition and use of oral vocabulary
- Demonstration of understanding

EXPLORING AND USING

- Requests and questions
- Categorisation
- Retelling and elaborating
- Playful and creative use of language
- Information giving, explanation and justification
- Description, prediction and reflection

Public speaking is a skill and like any skill, it is developed and mastery achieved through practice. It is said that if you can speak well, you can influence and if

you can influence, you can change lives: your own and others. As Ralph Waldo Emerson pointed out, “all great speakers were bad speakers first”.

Speaking and listening skills are inextricably linked. Speakers need listeners and speakers develop their speaking skills by being good listeners first. The way students acquire their oral skills is through listening, evaluating and then speaking, in that order.

Mercer & Mannion (2018) advise that “presentational oracy skills need to be taught explicitly, and not just as an implicit part of a more general attempt to improve pupils’ emotional sensitivity and social confidence” (p. 22)

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How to begin

Many schools provide 'Drop Everything and Read' time, and 'Free Writing' time, what about 'Free Speaking' time? When do children get a chance to say whatever they want, speak what's on their mind, uninterrupted and without judgment? Freedom of speech is a democratic right but to get comfortable speaking, we must practise. A safe, supportive environment will help to reassure children in their role as speakers. Focus intentionally on creating a safe, supportive environment in which skills can be learned, practised and perfected. This can be done by:



- (a) pre-teaching good listening habits. What does good listening look like? Prompt students to self-check until they can do so independently. Am I facing the speaker? Am I making eye contact? Am I quiet? Am I focusing? Is my body language respectful, e.g., two feet on the ground? With children in infant classes, we check for 'listening feet', 'listening hands on our laps' and 'listening lips' (i.e. lips together).
- (b) agreeing on / clarifying rules for 'Listening' 'Evaluating' and 'Speaking'. In the same way that we co-create rules through a 'drama contract' for drama lessons to ensure a safe, supportive learning environment, it is equally important to engage in a similar process before requiring children to stand up and speak in public. Speaking in public is potentially a very vulnerable experience and requires a lot of courage. It is not just our performance that we are putting before an audience but also the content of a speech that we have created and that means something special to us. We are sharing a part of ourselves.
- (c) Depending on the class level, discuss the range of occasions on which people speak in public. These may include, but are not limited to, awards ceremonies, family celebrations, sporting events, weddings, meetings, interviews, working on television and as part of different jobs.

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The following are examples that can be adapted to suit teachers' individual classrooms.

Rules for the Listener

1. Sit comfortably, straight and showing respect to the speaker
2. Open your mind and heart (get ready to look, listen and feel the presentation)
3. Visualise what the speaker is saying
4. Relax and enjoy
5. Give positive feedback to the speaker with your body language, e.g., nod, smile

Rules for the Evaluator

1. Feedback is about the speech / presentation and not about the speaker as a person
2. Give 2/3 pieces of positive feedback
3. Tell the speaker how the speech made you feel
4. Tell the speaker what you liked most and will remember about the presentation
5. Offer one recommendation/one piece of constructive criticism that would make the presentation even better, in your opinion.

Rules for the Speaker

1. Be prepared (confident that you have put time and effort into your presentation)
2. Present with confidence through your words and actions (remember you have something important to say that only you can say, nobody else can tell your story)
3. Look around at your audience and smile
4. Take a deep breath and begin
5. Relax and enjoy.



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What might a typical lesson look like?

- Warm up voices by making letter sounds such as ‘c’, ‘w’, ‘sh’, ‘v’, ‘m’. Take the opportunity to remind children that we warm up before other physical activities and that it’s also important to warm up our voices. Singers and actors warm up their voices.
- Warm up our ears and our voices through activities such as, Chinese Whispers, barrier games such as Describe and Draw, and additional language games to develop attention span and memory techniques.
- In pairs, students speak freely on any topic of their choice, e.g., what they like most about school, what they had for breakfast. Pictures on the white-board could be used as prompts. One child speaks uninterrupted for 20-30 seconds, then the other child speaks for the same length of time.

• Topics or Instant Speech session.

These can be funny, fictitious but always, free. Use a box with a variety of topics in it which can be taken from the curriculum and can be strategically and cleverly added to depending on the time of year, events, issues and opportunities that arise organically in the classroom. The teacher can begin by picking a topic and speaking on it for 30 seconds. A useful format for an instant speech may be:

For example:

Key message: Dancing is the greatest form of exercise in the world.

3 reasons/points: Everybody who has legs, arms, a body can dance. Dancing raises your heart rate almost without you knowing it. We can dance individually or in a group.

Repeat key message: For all of these reasons, dance is most definitely the greatest form of exercise in the world.

Instant Speeches

What is your key message?

(3 reasons/points pertaining to your key message)

Repeat key message

“And that is why ...”

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

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Typical lesson structure

Teachers decide what topic all children will present on and how long each presentation should be (e.g., 1-2 or 2-3 minutes). Explicit teaching could be done on one, two or three of the skills of effective public speaking. These include but are not limited to: eye contact, hand gestures, body language, pause, use of visual aids, appropriate language, voice and vocal variety.

From now, the method of instruction follows the Gradual Release of Responsibility method: **model, share, guide, apply.**

The gradual release of responsibility model or GRR model is a particular style of teaching which is a structured method of pedagogy framed around a process devolving responsibility in an incremental, scaffolded way within the learning process from the teacher to the eventual independence of the learner. (Pearson and Gallagher 1983)

I. Teacher introduces the focus of this day's presentation/speech. Should some teaching and demonstration of this skill be necessary, this is a good time to do it.

2. The teacher then introduces the theme/title of the speech/presentation. Following the 'Gradual Release of Responsibility Model':
 - a. The teacher models a presentation (and perhaps exaggerates the particular skills that are currently being focused on.) He/she invites and guides the children to give positive and constructive feedback, e.g., What worked well? What might make the presentation even better?
 - b. Children share ideas as a whole class using mindmaps or other planning techniques. This can be done as a whole class activity.
 - c. Children are guided individually or in small groups to plan and put their own presentations together using ideas from the whole class brainstorm. Some children may prefer to write out their whole speech. For others, key words and phrases may suffice and for others still, they may prefer to use pictures as prompts.
 - d. Children apply what they have learned and composed by practising in front of a group of their peers and/or the whole class.

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Some children may be ready to present in front of the class by the end of one lesson. Others may need more time to prepare for a presentation. The teacher, in consultation with the children will be the best judge of this. Not all children have to present in front of the whole class from the outset. Children can present in front of audiences of varying sizes and contexts, e.g., small group, class, whole school. This will depend on the child's needs, stage of readiness and the topic being presented.

After each presentation, an opportunity is given for children to give and receive feedback orally. Three pieces of 'positive feedback' can be invited from the audience and/or alternatively, children can write/record their feedback on an evaluation sheet for the speaker.

Public speaking activities do not need to be confined to discrete oral language lessons. These can be very easily and meaningfully integrated with other areas of the curriculum. In addition to learning and practising a very worthwhile skill for life, children “develop their empathetic capabilities and social confidence, as well as their thinking and reasoning skills” (Mercer and Mannion, 2018, p.230).

References

Mercer and Manion (2018). Oracy across the Welsh curriculum: A research-based review: key principles and recommendations for teachers. University of Cambridge

Pearson, P.D., & Gallagher, M.C. (1983). The instruction of reading comprehension. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 8(3), 317–344