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Teacher Peter Lee tells us about Speech Festivals in his native Hong Kong

Creating an In-house Speech Festival - Speech Gala in a Hong Kong Primary School



I am not sure how truthful it was when two retired British school heads commented that “there isn’t anything like this in England” after watching a session of the *Speech Gala*, a school-based speech and drama contest, held earlier this year (Feb 2016) in my serving school in Hong Kong, where English is a

second language. But certainly, since the inaugural Speech Gala in 2011, we have been witnessing year after year the brightened faces of our children enjoying in the language and treating it as an art form on stage.

My last article for Word Matters states the importance of training individual pupils for speech performances (Lee, 2015); this time, I should introduce the platform school teachers could build on which budding performers could unleash their speech and drama talent and learn from one another.

A Brief History

Hong Kong has an old competition for speech and drama known as the Hong Kong Schools Speech Festival (organised by the Hong Kong Schools Music and Speech Association). This festival has been held for over 65 years and has been listed under The British and International Federation of Festivals for Music, Dance and Speech. My school is an active participant of this event which involves categories like verse-speaking, prose-reading and choral speaking.

As the Speech Festival is held every year between November and December, the school’s atmosphere for speech and drama is particularly rich in the first school term. However, I noticed that as the Festival comes to an end, it became hard to keep the poetic and dramatic environment in school – something had to be done for the second term as well. In 2011, in my capacity as the English Subject Head, I spoke to the consultant of my department at that time, Mr Simon Tham, who advised that a school-based event similar to the Festival should be created. Thus, a proposal was done over that Christmas and with the approval of the School Head and Mr Tham, we had our first in-house Speech Festival in the second term of 2011, which was titled “Speech Gala 2011”.

Rationales

If you have been teaching a language through drama yourself, you would probably have experienced the positive transformation to the learners in the process. As an ESL teacher in a primary school for over a decade, it is more than certain to me that stressing on the artistic and performance values of this target language makes learning a lot more fun, solid and vibrant than merely teaching the accurate usage of it for assessment purposes. As Kao and O’Neill (1998) have said, “Through drama, teacher and students together enter the world of increasingly authentic scenarios and creative dialogues.” This is particularly useful for the more reticent ones as sooner or later they will need to learn to speak in public.

Further to the benefits of learning English through drama (which naturally covers speech in general), Wessels (1987) has a comprehensive summary in that such learning leads to the acquisition of the language meaningfully and interactively; learners get to master the vocabulary, pronunciation and



prosodic features of the language contextually; and the confidence in learning the language could be improved. I especially agree with the last point above that students gain confidence in the process. Very often, students do not know how good they are until they step onto the stage and speak with full emotions. Once they get used to the culture of performing the language in front of people, a range of life quality will be learned efficiently as well, such as, as Boudreault (2010) puts it, self-acceptance and acceptance of others, responsibility, problem solving, pride in work, creativity and imagination. My team and I share the same vision that the subject of English ought to be learnt in a more lively and stage-based manner. And therefore, it did not take me a lot of effort to persuade and motivate my team to help build the first Speech Gala. And once the first event was smoothly held, the subsequent ones were a matter of fine-tuning and improvements.

Rules & Regulations

Speech Gala is a whole-school event, meaning that every student is eligible, and in fact we make it compulsory, to enter. For the latest categories, we have verse-speaking for Primary One and Two students; verse-speaking and prose-reading for Primary Three and Four students; and verse-speaking, duologue, and public speaking for Primary Five and Six students.

Teachers set the pieces, approved by the subject panelists beforehand. And during lessons, English

teachers teach them the pieces involved in all categories of their level. And in the case of public speaking, English teachers discuss with students according to the set topic and make it an assignment for the whole class to prepare the script.

Our regulations have it that all students must choose to enter at least one category. For the preliminary round, English teachers will turn the classroom into a contest stage and have each competitor perform in their selected category. The teacher will be the adjudicator and select a winner to be the finalist in the Grand Finals to be conducted in the hall some time later.

In the Grand Finals, we invite an external adjudicator who is an expert in the field of speech and drama performance and/or adjudication, together with the School Head in some cases, to adjudicate the event. Three sessions are held – Primary One and Two, Three and Four, Five and Six. In the end, each category in each level produces one winner, and at least one second and one third places plus the remaining merited performers. All finalists receive a certificate and the winners get book coupons also.

The detailed regulations and set pieces for each division are put together into a booklet of which the softcopy is sent to the relevant students and parents every year. The event has been operating more or less like this for the past six years in this school.

A Reflection – Six Years' Effort

It is often not easy to promote this endeavour to other schools as every time I present this project to visitors or an audience in the education field, they find that it involves too much work from the team and question if that is cost efficient for teaching and learning.

I certainly agree that the Speech Gala is not a one-size-for-all event that any school, primary or secondary, could simply duplicate. It takes a whole team with passion in speech and drama to make it happen. And you need to believe that learning the language through communicating with the audience on stage by means of verse-speaking, prose-reading etc could benefit both parties tremendously in order to make the event convincing and meaningful.

I personally am very fond of speech and drama, as a hobby and profession, and thus the team I recruit has more or less the same mindset. With our tradition of joining the Speech Festival every year, it became natural that we lengthen the atmosphere to the second term through the Speech Gala. And everybody could experience the transformation of students this brings.

The changes, though not showing numerically in students' report, are seen by the impressed adjudicators year after year. The adjudicator of Speech Gala 2012, Mr Simon Tham, commented, "I thoroughly enjoyed all the sessions and the standard of the presentations in all the categories left me pleasantly surprised and inspired to write comments... There was a carnival atmosphere throughout, with the boys¹ enjoying themselves and at times even joining in to recite the lines with their classmate on the stage..." Dr Gary Harfitt,

¹ The school concerned is a boys' school.



adjudicator of Speech Gala 2013, had a similar experience as he said, "I had such a good time and left feeling thoroughly uplifted by what I'd seen. The boys were just wonderful and I cannot praise them highly enough. They are so lucky to be in such a warm, supportive and enriching environment..." And for the most recent one, Speech Gala 2016, Ms Mary Ann Tear was left with this fond memory, "I had a marvelous time – it was not only the talent but the energy, enthusiasm, and commitment that I admired – down to a dedicated and caring staff team. Hopefully I will be back!"

All these positive notes point to the fact that it has been worth it creating such a whole-school in-house speech and drama event. While people praise the standard of performance in the Gala, my primary concern is the effort every English teacher puts in for encouraging and motivating students to love the literary materials and to love performing through this language. It is always the literary atmosphere that matters, particularly in the case of a second language when we do not often have the authentic linguistic environment outside school.

It takes time to create an event like the Gala and it certainly takes more time to shape it into its present state. I am thankful every year seeing the marvelous work from students, teachers, and adjudicators. It is another dimension of enjoyment from seeing students achieving an A Grade in test papers.

Concluding Remarks

This article reports a departmental endeavour in a Hong Kong primary school to create a school-wide and school-based event similar to the Speech Festival, known as the Speech Gala. With six years of experience, the event has developed and been refined in terms of operation, rules and regulations. While finalists are under spotlight during the Grand Finals in the school hall, more importantly, the teaching and learning in the classrooms are the main course – everybody gets the nutrition from the pieces selected carefully for each level.

The event has been reported yearly by the department magazine and I, in the capacity of the subject leader, have been presenting the event to various parties over the years. But this is the first time I bring this effort to an international audience in the professional field of speech and drama, through Word Matters. I am more than happy to let more people know about our work because the festive



and dramatic atmosphere of language learning, in this case, English, should be spread and every child in the world deserves to experience it. I am looking forward to hearing about more schools doing similar activities to celebrate speech and drama for our budding actors and stage performers, as well as future teachers and leaders.

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