

Training Elementary Students for Public Speaking

BY CAROLYN S. KEARBEEY

How often have you seen an adult get up in church, hands shaking, knees rattling, and voice breaking? The audience often becomes so concerned with the speaker's lack of composure that the actual message is lost. How often have you strained to hear someone whose fear of the microphone forces the sound engineer to turn up the volume until the system screeches and you miss the entire message due to immense pain in your ears?

Are teachers responsible for these situations? Let us look at research in language arts of the past half-century for the answer.

In 1951, Charles Van Riper wrote about public speaking, "No other skill has so powerful an influence in determining whether we will succeed or fail. It is hard to understand why we have neglected so vital a subject as the teaching of talking."¹

Yet oral training has not become a priority, because more than 30 years after Van Ripen, Betty Coody, and David Nelson wrote in their language arts textbook, "Oral language instruction is a vital component of a sequential program of language instruction. . . . It has not received the attention it merits."² Coody and Nelson went on to suggest that the objectives of oral training should include word articulation to convey meaning, fluent expression, logical organiza-

tion, and efficient language use.³

Another textbook author, Shane Templeton, recommends that students be made aware not only of the message their words convey, but also the message of their body language. He suggests that the students be taught how to use support materials in their oral presentations. Templeton points out the importance of children having confidence in themselves and showing it by establishing eye contact with their audience.⁴

During my years of teaching the elementary grades, I developed a plan to prepare my students for any public speaking they would have to do, from getting up in front of a secondary or college class to speaking to a church family. I found that the following steps worked well with children even as young as 6 or 7 years old.

STEP ONE - Cooperative Learning Groups

Cooperative learning groups are a good place to begin. But before any projects can be assigned to cooperative learning groups, members must be taught to communicate with one another. Have students practice group discussion exercises over and over. Train them to listen to one another's ideas, and to allow every person in the group to express an opinion. For shy children, this first step is less painful since they have to

talk to only four or five of their peers, who are required to listen to what they have to say without criticism. If a group includes a very shy child, you can assign the child to a cooperative group with one or two close friends.

Be sure to prepare the children to work cooperatively, and monitor their progress.

STEP TWO - Puppets

Puppets can advance language skills in a number of ways. Again, the shy child will have the chance to speak without embarrassment since his or her face will not be seen. Because children's voices often cannot be heard from behind a puppet stage, this is a good time to introduce the use of the microphone. Teach them how close to put their mouths to the instrument in order to be heard and understood (too far away, you cannot be heard; too close, you cannot be understood). If the microphone must be handed back and forth, they must learn to handle it without making unnecessary noise. They must also learn to study and practice their lines until they can read them smoothly and with expression. If the students make their own puppets and write their own plays, this

experience will have even more meaning for them.

STEP THREE - Choral Reading

This step brings the students out in front of their audience, while providing the security of being part of a group. Now along with practicing the words and expression, they must practice saying the lines together. I always begin with a poem written for one group, then move into poems that break into two, three, or more groups, and finally use poems that include solo sections. There are books of poems written especially for choral reading, but you may wish to use poetry from other sources as well. Charles Temple and Jean Wallace Gillet suggest using poems that repeat verses, action words that can be acted out while reciting, sound-effect words that suggest marching feet or blowing winds, or alternative verses that can be used in a dialogue between groups.⁵

STEP FOUR - Readers Theatre

At this point, the students must speak clearly and loudly on their own, but can still

have a script from which to read. Because all of the action takes place in the performers' voices, the students must practice carefully to articulate with feeling. If the group is small, they can use one or two microphones; but for larger groups, it is best to simply teach them to begin to speak out loudly without yelling. You may wish to begin with a professionally written Readers Theater play. (See Melvin Campbell's article on Readers Theatre in the Summer 1993 issue.) Later, you can move on to plays written by cooperative groups or by the whole class.

STEP FIVE - Short Oral Book Reports

By this point I have taught my students to do book reports that include some kind of support material—a picture the child has drawn, a letter written to the author, a poster of the book, a time line of the action in the book, et cetera. Once a month, I required them to get up in front of the class to present these reports and the support material. I set up a microphone at the front of the class to continue training in its use.

In 1977, John Savage described speech as a "temporal activity. It passes from the

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mouth of the language user and is gone, so most of the evaluation of oral language activities has to be done on the spot, while speaking experiences are in progress.⁷⁶ Technology has made this statement obsolete. By Step Five, for every oral language lesson in process, I record the entire presentation on video camera.

The student does the final evaluation on his or her own performance. The VCR and monitor are set up in one corner of the class. Each student watches *only* his or her section of the tape and writes down three positive statements about what he sees and one thing he would change about his presentation. When the child's section of the video is finished, he presses "Pause" and informs the next student that it is his or her turn. This way the students are able to decide what areas need work and what they should emphasize in their next presentation.

STEP SIX - Longer Reports in Costume

This step is the culmination of a study unit. I have used it with books in general, having students dress as a book character. This works particularly well for biographies, when students represent the person they researched; and for career education, when students dress for and describe the career they studied. The presentations are 1 to 15 minutes long and must include two or more support materials. In some cases, my students used a chalkboard or a computer attached to an overhead projector to demonstrate a point. The presenters can use note cards to help with their speech, but they are discouraged from reading it word for word. Eye contact with the audience is important. The presentations take place in an auditorium with a microphone and an audience, which may include parents, friends, administrators, and other classes. Naturally, this is video-taped and critiquing continues as in Step Five.

STEP SEVEN - Dramatic Presentations

At this point, the students lose the security of having their words before them and must begin to memorize their presentations. As with the Readers Theatre, the teacher may begin with professionally written work and move to student-written work. Students discover the freedom to move about the stage when they are not held to a piece of paper. The presentations themselves can be small enough to serve for school chapel or large enough to invite parents and friends to an evening program.

From this point you are limited only by

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the imagination of your class. My students put together their own mini-movies using re-enactments of current events as well as imaginative plays. They became accustomed to not only the microphone and audience, but also the video camera. Although they regarded it with suspicion at first, they eventually enjoyed being taped, and asked for copies of everything to take home and show to their families.

Evaluation

At some point you will want to evaluate the oral presentations. I would not suggest doing this until the students feel fairly comfortable in front of the class. When you feel it is time to provide external feedback, you may wish to compile a criterion list that you and your students can use to evaluate the performance. Figure 1 shows one list that works well.

Figure 1

GUIDELINE FOR ORAL EVALUATION

4 - Excellent 3 - Good 2 - Needs some work 1 - Concentrate hard on this area

- a. Organization of thoughts
- b. Clear explanation
- c. Clear speech
- d. Voice volume
- e. Spoke at correct speed
- f. Avoid "uh," "er," "aye," "you know," and other repetitions
- g. Different sentence patterns
- h. Voice inflection
- i. Body language
- j. Support materials

Some teachers may feel that going through all of these steps will take too much time. Keep in mind that public speaking skills are vital, since we are training future leaders of both the church and the nation. If you look at each content-area subject, you will find many ways to incorporate these steps as part of various subjects:

- Try using cooperative groups in every subject area.
- In math, students can discuss a difficult word or logic problem.
- For science, they can perform hands-on experiments and discuss the results.
- Puppets can be used to act out a scene from a history book.
- Students can re-enact a story from a basal reader.
- Choral readings can be used to teach a poetry unit in language or to explain a lesson in science. I have even seen a choral reading about the planets of the solar system!
- Readers Theatre can be used to explain a difficult math method (long division, for example) or to dramatize a historical event.
- Reports can be assigned on topics chosen by students or on topics relating to a subject being studied in class. One month all of my students had to read nonfiction books

about the ocean and its creatures because we were beginning an oceanography unit in science.

- Big reports can be based on a specific subject area, such as careers.
- Dramas can be acted out using an event from the Bible or a major discovery in science or math.

These types of activities will enhance learning in content subjects and teach the art of public speaking.

When should you teach these skills? At every level. First graders may not be prepared to make 15-minute reports, but they can be taught to talk to one another in cooperative groups, to work with puppets, and to do primary-level choral reading. I have used the full seven steps with fourth grade and up. The steps can be modified for the primary grades, depending on the class and their previous training.

If you have students in your classroom for more than one year, the opportunities are truly endless. I had the pleasure of using these steps on one group whom I taught in both fifth and sixth grades. At the end of the second year, we had an incredible graduation that was videotaped by a number of people. Over and over I heard people speak of their

astonishment at the ease and poise the students displayed as they each spoke on different subjects during the program. As I sent these young people away from our small school to continue their education, I knew they took with them a lifelong skill that would play an important part in their futures. ☞

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3. Ibid.
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5. Charles Temple and Jean Wallace Gillet, *Language Arts: Learning Processes and Teaching Practices* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1989), p. 91.
6. John F. Savage, *Effective Communication: Language Arts Instruction in the Elementary School* (Chicago: SRA, 1977), p. 176.

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