

TEACHING VERSE SPEAKING

- some practical ideas up to Grade 3

NB: While these suggestions are written with junior students in mind they can readily be used or adapted for older students as well.

Readiness:

Aim to get students to have fun with words - to enjoy the feel, taste and physicality of words and sounds.

The more physically and imaginatively the student is involved with the need to speak - then the more the voice is open, connected to the breath, energised through the use of the organs of articulation and the more resonant and responsive the range of the voice. Also, unless there are physiological problems, when we are physically and imaginatively involved in the need to speak the amount of breath required to power the voice tends to happen automatically.

1. Physical exploration of the sounds of words - onomatopoeic words that students can explore imaginatively and physically:
Choose three or four fun words to explore with student. e.g. smash, pop, kapow, drip, twist, splash, stretch. . .
Use hands to explore the movement as students say & feel the words.
Use full body movement to fully develop the sound and feel of the words.
Have students brainstorm several more 'sound' words and explore these too.

Extension: Explore Alistair Reid's fun poem:

Bugwords (to be said when grumpy)

Humbug
Bugbear
Bugaboo
Bugbane
Ladybug
Bogybug
B U G S E E D

In groups either choose 3 words or work on the whole poem to develop full physical movement to go with each word and present as a whole piece.

2. Various speech jingles/rhymes to develop dexterity in speaking.
 - a. Try speaking in slow motion (space talking) to feel where and how sounds are made.
 - b. Try each line or word on a higher pitch level; a lower pitch level; increasing rate; decreasing rate; increasing volume; decreasing volume.
 - c. In pairs clapping one word at a time across the room.
 - d. With a larger group in a circle clapping one word at a time around the circle.

Working on specific poems:

Initial

Learning Outcomes: Enjoyment, clarity, confidence, [understanding],
[imaginative involvement], memorised.

- Have student read poem aloud just to get the feel of it.
- Have students highlight key words or phrases that they enjoy - have fun exploring these physically and vocally.
- Underline words where meaning is not understood. Discuss meanings and/or have students check these in dictionary and write meaning beside the line in poem.
- Now have student read poem (or part of poem) aloud to really enjoy sounds and meaning. Try to focus feedback just on these aspects.
- If any actions arise naturally as students speak - that is fine and should be a natural extension of physical work done. If necessary these can be 'refined' at a later time.
- Focus on clarity: (whole poem or verse - depending on student & time in specific class). Use ideas as appropriate.
 - Speaking a phrase/verse/poem in slow motion (space talking) to feel where and how some tricky words/sounds are made.
 - Referring back and practising a previous speech jingle or exercise to help a specific sound.
 - Highlighting individual sounds to remind to use extra energy eg t's, d's, final consonants etc.
 - Have fun speaking poem as an animal or bird. eg lots of short sharp sounds then maybe choose a yappy dog; lots of long strong sounds - a lion. Maybe you want student to keep head up when speaking - choose a giraffe. Make this a fun exercise to help free imaginative responses, physically and vocally.
- Now reflect with group on aspects of clarity. Have students read poem (or part of poem) aloud. Focus feedback on specific aspect of clarity for each student.
- Finally reflect on physicality and sounds and imagination and clarity. Have each student read whole poem. (or choose section to suit time available)
- By now the poem, or at least sections of it, will be almost learnt by heart.

Grade 1

Learning outcomes: Enjoyment, clarity, confidence, understanding, [imaginative involvement,] memorised,

plus - suspensory pauses & shape of poem (form)

- Work on all the above ideas to develop imaginative responses and clarity.
- Focus on suspensory pauses:

**A suspensory pause comes at the end of an enjambed line of verse.
(At the end of a line of verse where there is no punctuation and the sense runs into the next line)**

It is used to develop and maintain the rhythmic flow of the verse.

When speaking:

- i) lengthen the last syllable of the line**
- ii) use a rising inflection to lead into the next line**
- iii) do not take a breath (this tends to break the phrasing).**

NB at senior grades in more complex verse an unobtrusive breath may be needed.

It may be useful to work 'off' your student's poem to teach suspensory pauses.

E.g. *The Vampire Duck*: by Brian Pattern.

There's a vampire duck waddling about,
You can hear its ghostly quack.
Keep away from the pond at midnight
Or the feathery fiend will attack.

Note the way that by stretching the sound and using a rising inflection on the final syllable of 'midnight' will add suspense and lead effectively into the 'or' and the action in the last line.

- Have students explore and have fun with the use of rising inflections and developing the suspense in the final two lines in this little verse. eg How long can you hold the suspense, including the lengthened syllable, the rising inflection - and your breath so you do not run out for last line?
- Then explore the suspensory line endings in the student's poem and how the sound helps the meaning and the rhythmic flow of the verse.
- Explore the shape of the poem:
 - Tell the story and find the climax
 - Explore ways of using voices to highlight this. Always emphasise an imaginative approach.
 - Where appropriate use different voices for different speakers in the poem.
- Reflect on aspects of shape and rhythm and have students speak and share their poems with class. Try to focus feedback on just shape and rhythm.
- Reflect on whole poem - imagination, clarity, line endings, rhythm - speak and share. Feedback on whole poem.

Grade 2

Learning outcomes: Enjoyment, clarity, understanding, imaginative involvement, memorised, suspensory pause & shape of poem (form)
plus - sense of spontaneity in sharing the mood and/or story of the poem with the audience

- Work on all the above ideas to develop
 - imaginative responses
 - clarity - of words and of understanding
 - suspensory pauses
 - shape
- Develop ideas for added spontaneity: find ideas appropriate for poems.
 - Improvise sections or ideas in poems.
 - Explore different points of view in poems.
e.g. *Strangeways* by Roger McGough: After some initial work on the poem for understanding, try speaking the poem as if different characters who might be involved - a gossipy neighbour, a grumpy neighbour, a TV or radio reporter, a grandson or granddaughter, a passer-by, a council worker, a daughter, a son. Have each one speak to different people for different reasons - e.g. neighbour to a policeman because there are so many people watching in the street: a grandson telling teacher at school for 'news'.
 - Divide poem up so that different students speak different parts of the poem as if adding fresh key ideas they have just thought about.
- Have student speak poem 'normally' but reflect with them that the words and ideas must sound as if they are speaking them for the very first time. Focus on this aspect for feedback.
- Develop and explore ways to share poem with audience.
 - Brainstorm with students what THEY like to hear when they are listening to someone share a poem (or a story): e.g. clarity, a pace that aids understanding, character voices for different people, looking at all the audience etc . . .
 - Imagine the audience as different groups of people and speak poem - your class at school, a group of Mums and Dads, teachers, blind people, slightly deaf people, imaginary characters that suit the poem . . .
- Have student speak poem and have student audience give feedback on specific parts of the poem where they felt included - and why.

Grade 3

Learning outcomes: Enjoyment, clarity, understanding, imaginative involvement, memorised, suspensory pause & shape of poem, sense of spontaneity in sharing poem In performance for the audience

plus - use of a pauses to develop the form of the poem.

- Work on all the above ideas to develop
 - imaginative responses
 - clarity - of words and of understanding
 - suspensory pauses
 - shape
 - spontaneity
 - sharing with the audience.

- Some ideas to deepen and extend work:
 - Walk and read poem out loud - changing direction firmly on EVERY punctuation mark.
 - Help students to reflect on how this aids understanding of ideas, phrasing and rhythms in the poem. Are there little short changes of thoughts? If so, what might this suggest? Are there longer more sustained ideas? If so, what might this suggest?
 - Explore use of alliteration, repetition of words or phrases, similes, metaphors or other simple poetic devices that may be apparent. Ensure this does not become just an academic exercise - keep it practical, physical, fun.
 - Explore inflection in speaking poems. In general - upward inflection on commas and at line endings where the sense is incomplete, only use downward inflections on full stops.
 - Explore key words to tell the story of a poem - can you isolate these and then 'tell' the story using just these words alone?
 - Explore endings of poems. Do students just stop speaking? Do voices and ideas fade away? Do they build ideas to a well defined ending? Do they hold the thought/idea until AFTER they have stopped speaking?

Quick thoughts on different kinds of poems

At all times have fun with poems as you explore and develop them BUT once you come to performance and sharing the poem then work to ensure that together you find and share the intention of the poet.

Metre and Rhythm:

In a poem with a strong metrical pattern, students new to poetry will often speak in a sing song nursery rhyme style. Work to AVOID this by focus on the words that convey the sense and the story line. Sidecoach - "Tell the story".

Free Verse:

This is characterised by having no set metrical pattern and the line lengths vary to convey the thoughts of the poet and the natural rhythms of our speech.

Eg. *Unfair*, Michael Rosen; *Shut your Mouth When You're Eating*, Michael Rosen; *The King's Breakfast*, A. A. Milne . . .

In speaking free verse In order to develop and maintain the rhythm:

- Each line should take approximately the same time to speak
- Suspensory pauses are doubly important, otherwise poem turns into prose

One way to help students understand free verse is to liken each line to a bar of music:

- Each bar (line) has exactly the same time frame
- The notes (words) are then arranged to fit that time with minims, crochets, quavers, rests etc to suit the meaning.
e.g. a longer line may consist of lots of quickly spoken words (quavers, demiquavers etc); a very short line may be just one word spoken slowly plus a pause (semi breve and a rest).
- Add the imaginative aspect to the above and the natural thought patterns of the poem/poet begin to emerge.

Lyrical Poems:

These convey the thoughts and feelings of the poet.

Generally these require a slightly slower pace, but need to convey the urgency of the poet's feelings or his/her passion for the ideas or the reflective nature of the ideas. These poems need attention to the imaginative content, which changes from moment to moment to give vocal variation and ensures they are not 'washed' with one emotion. Ideas are still built and shaped to the ending.

Narrative poems:

These tell a story. They need lots of vocal variation and imagination in shaping the story to its climax.

NB Many poems combine elements of lyric and narrative and also elements of metrical patterns and free verse!!!!!! Enjoy the challenge and the exploration.

To extend work with senior students:

Explore books such as, *The Actor and the Text*: by Cecily Berry. This is based mainly on her work with Shakespeare but some of the ideas used in the article above came from first working with seniors then adapting ideas for juniors.

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