

Discussing Voice & Speaking and Interpretation in Verse Speaking

Some approaches to teaching and understanding voice and verse speaking that I have found useful:

In Grade 8 Module One, Section 2 candidates are asked to 'be prepared to discuss:

- i) the works of their writer, their styles and literary periods
- ii) interpretation of your poems
- iii) voice and speaking in relation to your poetry speaking.'

Under i) candidates need to have explored the works of the poets and the broad social and historical aspects of the literary periods to which the poems belong. This helps the candidate in understanding something of context of the poem and to form ideas and to justify their view of the poet's intention in the poem – their interpretation.

In ii) and iii), the focus of this article, it is important to know that this is not intended to be a highly academic exercise, but one where students share ideas on how they arrived at their own interpretation and ways in which they are able to use their voice to best share the poet's intention.

The Learning Outcomes cover:

- ii) Contrasting aspects of the styles of each poem.

Discussion on the different approaches needed to speak each form or style of verse

including the use of metre, rhyme and rhythm.

- iii) Aspects of vocal techniques in poetry speaking.

Range: adjustments to meet the needs of the poem or the performance space,

articulation, modulation, vocal energy.

While it is important to understand the separate aspects of style and interpretation in verse speaking as well as the vocal techniques used in the

speaking of poetry, these two may well be worked in tandem in the preparation of speaking the poem and in the rehearsal.

Some work can be done on paper with notation and in research and analysis of the content and interpretation but frequently it is only in the 'speaking aloud', that aspects of poet's intention are fully explored and realised.

Because it is often very difficult to separate the 'speaking' of a poem from the 'interpretation' of a poem these two aspects are also sometimes taken together in discussion in an exam room.

Let's explore this through W.B Yeat's beautiful, but brief 8-lined lyric:

AEDH WISHES FOR THE CLOTHS OF HEAVEN

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,	1
Enwrought with golden and silver light,	2
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths	3
Of night and light and the half light,	4
I would spread the cloths under your feet:	5
But, I, being poor, have only my dreams;	6
I have spread my dreams under your feet;	7
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.	8

You might then work with your students, to **gradually build up** either a mind map or, perhaps, a chart similar to the one below:

The form & interpretation	Voice & speaking techniques
<p>Lyric – General techniques</p> <p>i) Song like quality</p>	<p>i) Fully resonant vocal range to portray poet's ideas.</p> <p>Understanding of the rhythmic flow and how this is used to develop and shape the structure of the ideas.</p> <p>Ability to use pause and suspensory pause with sensitivity to enhance the rhythmic structure.</p>
<p>ii) Urgency of feeling</p>	<p>ii) Good breath control to support and energise the varying length of ideas that support the structure of the verse.</p>
<p>iii) Inner excitement and intensity of feeling</p>	<p>iii) The ability to be in-the-moment of speaking and coin the need for just these words to convey ideas and images.</p> <p>In addition to resonance and range flexibility of consonants is also needed.</p>
<p>iv) No dramatic effects – words are the poet's voice</p>	<p>iv) Understanding of the use of dynamics of words and the substance of vowels and consonants to fully realise the poet's word choices and images.</p>

<p><u>Some</u> examples of SPECIFIC aspects of interpretation for this poem.</p>	<p>Some examples of SPECIFIC voice and speaking techniques that might be used.</p>
<p>i) Song like quality</p> <p>This is iambic quatrameter the metric breaks alter the stress patterns in speaking</p>	<p>i) Fully resonant voice to enhance the images</p> <p>Using the metre</p> <p>eg extra syllable at the beginning of line 5 places the stress on the 'I'.</p> <p>The additional light beat on 'and' in line 2 enhances the dynamic and the lightness.</p>
<p>ii) Urgency of feeling.</p> <p>Note the structure is just one sentence - that the rhythmic flow of the first idea is begun in line 1 and completed in line 5.</p> <p>The 'But' in line 6 changes the direction of the ideas, with key information in line 7 ending in a final gentle instruction in line 8.</p>	<p>ii)</p> <p>The key words 'Had I..', 'But..' need to be explored in order to give just the right balance of information and description to 'tell the story' and lead rhythmically, simply and urgently to the final line.</p> <p>Breath needs to be very specific to each idea and to ensure there is support for energy and impact to be conveyed in the final line.</p>
<p>iii) Inner excitement and intensity of feeling.</p> <p>Each of the descriptive words or phrases in lines 1 – 4 are entirely different and require a different mental image behind them.</p> <p>Some meanings may need to be checked to ensure absolute accuracy and understanding.</p>	<p>iii) Being in-the-moment</p> <p>As each part of the image is developed in the mind and spoken, as for the very first time, the speaker's excitement at discovering just the right words builds and the full image is shared with the audience. When the imagination is fully working both the energy in the words and the modulation of the voice within the ideas is fully realised and not imposed.</p>

<p>iv) No dramatic effects – words are the poet’s voice.</p> <p>Fully analyse & explore all rhetorical and poetic devices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Onomatopoeia * Repetition of words to create rhymes at ends of lines: cloths, light, feet, dreams. * Repetition of ‘dreams’, ‘tread’ and ‘spread’ and the internal rhyming of ‘tread’ and ‘spread’ 	<p>iv) Dynamics of words</p> <p>Explore and utilise the substance of the vowels and consonants that make up the onomatopoeic words such as ‘enwrought’.</p> <p>Explore variations of way line endings are spoken and the effect of the rising inflection and suspensory pause on the ‘cloths’ at the end line 4.</p> <p>Explore the different values and stresses on these repeated words and how they shift from line to line as the ideas are brought to a conclusion.</p>
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The above is only a sampling of vocal techniques that may arise from exploring the interpretation and speaking of Yeat’s lyrical poem. As you can see it is difficult to separate interpretation from the vocal techniques as they so often go hand in hand.

What becomes evident is that many of the vocal and speaking techniques are aspects that you and your students will have already explored as they developed skills through the grades both in verse speaking and for dramatic work and in delivering talks. In talking about voice and speaking techniques in relation to their poetry speaking they are, in fact, discussing what they are already putting into practise.

Remember in working towards an examination there is no one **correct** way of speaking poetry; the aim is for the candidate to research and prepare sincerely and be able to **justify** points of view given.

Finally, do have a look at Glenn Colquhoun's poem *A set of instructions to be used when reading a poem* from his book 'An Explanation of Poetry to my Father'.

If we, as teachers, are able to have this sort of fun with our students when working on speaking verse aloud, what wonderful speaking we might achieve. The final line expresses just what I would like to be able to say to my students after they have worked on their poem . . . **"Now the poem belongs to you."**

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