

“Dance” Your Exam. A Glimpse into Our Students Oral Presentations

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Abstract.

Oral answers, stand-up presentations and oral BAC exams - these are often the Achilles' heel of our students. Overcrowded classrooms, far too many written tests in contrast to the oral ones and not enough time during the lesson in order to analyze and check the students' oral tasks. Activities that support public presentations seem to be still a pipe dream. But are they? These thoughts provoke reflections and analysis on how to help student's performances in public spaces using creativity, the Internet, official school celebrations and psychological workshops therefore preparing them for the BAC oral exam. The final result? Many positive emotions and A grades at the last oral exams.

Key words: creativity; exams; public; students'; presentations

1. A few words about authenticity

One of the best Polish writers of the twentieth century, Witold Gombrowicz, also nominated for the Nobel Prize, perceived our life as a continuous game, which became the basis of his "form" philosophy. Gombrowicz said that every day we play the role without exception and it is not possible to achieve authenticity in life. We take on different masks depending on the situation and the people around our lives, who by influencing and provoking us to behave in a certain way, form and create our environment according to our needs. Although many researchers have questioned this philosophy and thought that human authenticity really exists, this philosophy certainly deserves to be remembered in an initial conversation with students about oral presentations in public spaces. The next step would be to talk about how to distance yourself from the situation in which the students will speak, and then bring students closer to explain how the internal, often subtle, psychological and sociological mechanisms and conditions that accompany this situation work.

However, I associate myself with the philosophy of "form" created by Witold Gombrowicz according to which if authenticity (i.e. in this context our personality, which manifests itself through individual character traits, identity and mentality) in a person really exists, then in an extremely stressful situation, which for ninety-nine percent of people who speak in public this is, one cannot escape from his or her authenticity and therefore from one's personality. This is especially true of young people - teenagers, who are deprived of many years of life experience in public speaking. The issue of authenticity is, in my opinion, one of the most important, if not the most important, component of a public speech but I will come back again to it during this article.

2. Types of oral presentations at school

Is it easy for students to develop public speaking skills nowadays? After all, they can use the phone and the Internet, recording messages or uploading videos on the web as main protagonists. But in a school that could provide a basis for the student to be able to make a logical oral statement, adapted to the context, first of all classroom assignments, homework, tests or final exams are in written form. It is easier for a teacher to lead and then correct them, especially if the group of students is large. Undoubtedly, however, our modern world is increasingly moving away from writing communication, while oral communication is playing an even more important role, which is why we absolutely cannot forget that it is also present during the lesson.

Oral presentations at school because of their function, as well as the effect planned by the supervisor (public speaker), were divided into statements of a substantive and occasional nature. For me, a substantive statement is one in which we convey knowledge of the world

from a given topic and how we say it, how wrapping substantial knowledge should, at least in theory, be of secondary importance. I will definitely include here an independent statement on a certain topic and an interview with the examiners during the BAC oral exam, the student's oral answer in the classroom, the presentation on a specific topic, but also "lighter" tasks, i.e. directed more at playing with words and talking, like a student book or film review published on a vlog or a short journalistic reportage with a microphone in hand from an imaginary place of the event. Oral forms of speech deserve separate mention, during which we focus on other people and expect their outspoken interaction throughout the whole task. It is a discussion and another one: a very interesting task, because it is also very difficult for students: a simultaneous translation in class from one language to another.

An occasional claim is the argument whose rules are different from the substantive claim, although, of course, they also have contact points. However, the occasional statement aims to create a solemn and majestic atmosphere during a specific event with the participation of the public, which can celebrate, for example, somebody's birthday or a wedding toast. The occasional speech is undoubtedly such an important element of the event as a beautiful tablecloth or precious tableware; the food and drinks, the elegance shown through suits and dresses of the invited guests or the type of musicians playing. In an occasional discourse, the way of speaking will play the main role and will largely influence the content of the speech. At school, let's take a closer look at, for example, at birthdays, name days or high school graduation ceremonies.

Of course, statements of a substantial and occasional nature have, as I have already noted, tangential points: if, for example, the answer to the BAC oral exam will be full of specific dates and events but given in an extremely chaotic and illogical way, the student probably won't pass the BAC exam. On the other hand, occasional statements also require knowledge. After all, we often find references to specific events from the past or quotes from important authorities for young people: philosophers, scientists or psychologists. Nonetheless, the division into a substantial or solemn (occasional) expression exists because the recipients of both types of expressions will be different, which means that their expectations will also be unlike. During the preparation of each type of statement, students must use slightly dissimilar tools to achieve the desired effect so that their communication can be considered effective.

Later in my article I will focus on the discussion of three, in my opinion of the most useful and the most important for the future of our students' statements in front of the public. It will be a serious statement like a BAC oral exam, as well as slightly lighter ones like a vlog review and a short journalistic reportage.

3. Oral BAC exam in a multicultural environment

Let's return now to the question of authenticity: how can we transform the authenticity of one's personality into a resource when students think they are a walking Pandora's box and nature has deprived them even of the slightest trace of rhetorical talents? I started a workshop with students from the last classes on preparation for the final oral exams (BAC exams) with this issue. Together with the students we considered what one's image is. Whether they should be natural during the oral exam or pretend to be someone else. How the first impression works, how non-verbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, clothes or accessories influence to what degree which we are perceived by other people in an official situation.

Often students don't see their merits until their classmates say them out loud. A behaviour interpreted by others as an advantage for them seems to be almost a disadvantage, for example when they discover that they are not intrusive but that they are extraordinary people who organize events and get in touch with ease. They are not shy but have a deep personality, they are gentle and subtle. They do not conflict when they disagree with parents' views on their future university choice, but they are independent and brave enough to pursue their dreams. An important part of preparing for the oral exams, therefore, is to build self-esteem and demonstrate that each student is a valuable person.

The next step of the seminar is to watch an excerpt from the legendary 1980s film "Flashdance" directed by Adrian Lyne¹. This fragment presents an examination situation in which the main character, a girl, has to perform a dance in front of the commission. It is a material that brilliantly shows the most important elements of the classic oral exam, clearly demonstrating the emotions of graduates-to-be and individual examiners. Therefore, before looking at the clip, it is worth asking the students to notice the emotions that the girl feels during the exam (fear, doubt, hope, courage), as well as the emotions of the individual members of the exam committee. After seeing and discussing it, the students understand the protagonist's feelings very well, but are usually surprised by the conclusions drawn from observing the examiner's behaviour. It turns out that examiners generally have a positive attitude towards students and even encourage them because they want the performance to be successful. Their irritation, boredom and fatigue are largely unrelated to the girl's dance itself. It could be a disappointment for the level of the previous candidates who didn't like the examiners, cigarette smoke, bad relationship among colleagues, a simple cold, a tiring journey to get there or some family problems. If the student understands it and therefore shows even a small dose of empathy, he or she will feel more confident. Introspection that allows you to maintain authenticity and empathy are two important elements not only during the BAC oral exam, but in general during every public appearance.

¹Flashdance - Final Dance / What A Feeling (1983) Available:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VzALZjoIx0g> (an access: 05.08.2020)

As for the dancing girl, she is totally afraid and stressed at first. Immediately at the beginning of the dance she makes a mistake and falls, but paradoxically her fall is a decisive moment that will determine the final success. In a stressful situation, the girl does not give up, but gets up and faces the music: starts dancing again. And this is the real key to success: even when you fail at something, keep fighting to the end.

The main topic of the next meeting with students is an intercultural communication: similarities and differences between graduates and examiners due to cultural differences, the roles assigned to the student and examiner in different countries and cultures. I'm Polish, but when I started working as a Polish lecturer at the University of Genoa in Italy a dozen years ago, I couldn't get used to the fact that students wore casual clothes during oral exams. In Poland this would be unthinkable: both for oral and written exams, university students are dressed elegantly as for an interview at work. I was also surprised that the oral exams are open to the public: when the student answers other students, friends and even family can listen to them.

The European School of Varese, where I am currently working, is an international institution, both our students and teachers come from all the countries of the European Union. During the BAC oral exam, the commission is made up of a teacher of the subject and an external examiner. So if a Swedish student is passing an English math exam, he will answer a commission consisting of, let's say, an English, Canadian or Australian teacher and an external examiner who is, for example, Irish. A Czech student who has chosen French for his oral test can expect a French examiner and a Belgian examiner to be present. We also remember that Italy, which is their place of residence, is a wider context for our students. It happens that for instance a Swedish and a Czech student have never lived in Sweden or in the Czech Republic and have spent their entire lives in Italy. We can only imagine how complicated the interpretation of examiners' behaviour during the oral examination may be for some students because of the different mentality. Therefore, it is very important that students understand that misunderstandings among people with different cultural backgrounds are possible. What to do with this problem? It is certainly worth following the conclusions of Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions, which analyzes the relationships between members of different cultures on the basis of elements such as Power Distance Index, Individualism versus Collectivism, Masculinity versus Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance Index, Long Term Orientation versus Short Term Normative Orientation and Indulgence versus Restraint². Students may also be encouraged to raise the topic of intercultural differences with the subject teacher and to pay attention to the facts during the oral exam, rather than to the gestures or facial expressions that can bring them off-road.

²Hofstede insights. National Culture. Available: <https://hi.hofstede-insights.com/national-culture> (an access: 05.08.2020)

4. Playing with creativity: vlog review and short journalistic reports

Both the review published on the vlog, for example on the youtube channel, and the oral reportage report are unofficial forms, and thus in principle much light hearted and undoubtedly have a lesser impact on the future plans of our students', future plans compared to the last oral examination. Let us remember however, these are the small specks that make up the complete experience by helping students do well in future official oral exams and not only at school, but also at university or in their professional life as adults. Note that in both these forms, we will not get away from authenticity or empathy: before completing the activity, we need a deep reflection both on our preferences and on the type of recipients to whom the students will prepare the review.

For example, a written review of a favourite book, film or theatre show has been present in the classroom for years, so it's not a new thing at school. But such a review recorded and posted on a vlog is completely different! This form of speaking in front of an audience is less stressful and much more fun than official oral exams, of course. Less stressful, because it is prepared in advance and if something goes wrong, students can always cancel and re-record, knowing that the public will only watch and listen to the final result. The vlog review is even better because in front of the camera students usually talk about texts they like a lot, and an interesting and pleasant discussion about students' performance in the classroom after seeing all the videos can give teenagers a lot of information about themselves. And it doesn't matter if the reviews are actually posted on the Internet or they only remain on the phone screens.

Usually, before students do their homework, we talk about what elements are necessary and crucial for a successful vlog review. In this form of expression, not only the text itself counts, but also the place where the recording will be made, props special effects like the thunder of an approaching storm, the student's dog that runs in the background or an apple consumed during the discussion climax. Of paramount importance it's also the way of speaking and student's facial expressions. The second step in preparing the business is to look at other reviews together on the Internet and discuss whether or not they are successful and why. The end result is usually electrifying - hugely positive. Teenagers are extremely creative not only when it comes to speaking, but also about their surroundings, clothes, props, etc.

While the vlog review is aimed rather at older teens who are able to record their performance on their own, the short journalistic reportage is aimed at the younger ones. Interpreting a journalist with a microphone in hand, when you can also create a situation that will be reported, really brings a lot of joy and fun to everyone, including the teacher, when looking at the final result of the assignment. My students love to invent stories and do it more willingly when nothing special happens outside their homes. The report was therefore a brilliant idea for online lessons in the spring of 2020, when the pandemic was hitting hard Italy. What

events did my students report then? Beans growth stages, a competition for young chefs preparing pizza doughs, an imaginary football game or one of the adventures of Robin Hood team. A coloured pen, a leek or a carrot served as a microphone. Some students memorized all their performances, others used the prompter, in the midst of manual notes, which they cleverly placed right behind the computer screen during online lessons. The result of those performances was surprising and the students' emotional approach to their tasks made their grades increase.

5. Summary

It is worth realizing that activities based on students' oral statements today are a key factor and perhaps even more important than written ones. After the experiences of the last difficult months in Italy, much is said about the need for a direct teacher-student interaction and among students during online lessons. This interaction should not be added to written exercises only. I am absolutely convinced that the undertaking aimed at improving public speaking skills should obtain high school status as activities that will undoubtedly serve our students' future.

So what does the title of this article really mean: "dance" your exam? Well, make sure that your oral activity – an exam successful not only because you have a lot of knowledge of the subject, but also through authenticity, to which I will add mental recovery skills and empathy. This means, firstly - awareness of your strengths, secondly - do not give up if something goes wrong, and thirdly - the will to understand other people, who often come from different cultures. In my opinion these are, besides an excellent preparation of course, the most important skills needed in public speaking.

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