



# A VIDEO FESTIVAL UNDER THE PANDEMIC

## A Hong Kong Teacher's Experience

**Dr Peter Lee shares his thoughts and experience on preparing students for a new mode of the Hong Kong Schools Speech Festival**

### **Introduction**

Organized annually by the Hong Kong Schools Music and Speech Association and with over 70 years of history, the Hong Kong Schools Speech Festival is the oldest and a highly reputable speech and drama event for both English and Chinese languages for students in Hong Kong. Yet, the pandemic has given the Festival a huge challenge with the social distancing requirements and school suspensions. While many festivals in the UK have chosen to skip the year, the Association here in Hong Kong announced in August 2020 a pioneering Video Submission Mode for the Festival, which would start in three months. While all choral events were cancelled, all solo and duologue events were kept and participants were asked to submit prerecorded performances instead of doing them live. Like before, experienced adjudicators, many of whom I believe are members of The Society of Teachers of Speech & Drama, were recruited to comment on and score the performances. Just that this time they would do it by watching the videos.

It was indeed a new experience for teachers, parents and students. Many worried that the new format had disadvantages that outweighed the advantages while some still saw it as a valuable and unique learning opportunity. In this article, I will share with you my overall experience in this special Speech Festival as a Speech and Drama coach with examples and reflections from three of my trainees who claimed the top prizes in their respective groups.

### **My Initial Thoughts**

As expected, many of my colleagues and students didn't like the idea of submitting a video for the Speech Festival. However, when I came to think about it, whether or not a performance is done live or prerecorded should also be considered as a performance. That is why both theatres and cinemas have their fans and audiences. I understand that in the many decades of history of this Festival, all performers deliver their work in front of the adjudicator and the audience live. Yet, it doesn't mean that it requires fewer skills to do an impressive take in front of a camera. After all, many of the highly regarded acting awards are for movie actors, acknowledging their expertise on screen. Therefore, the Festival under the new mode was still a very worthy platform for our young actors to experience.

The bright side was, there wouldn't be performers forgetting lines during the contest because they could submit the best video for the contest and there wasn't a limit to the number of clips you make in the training process. But the downside was, this "advantage" applies to all competitors, making it not an advantage at all. Therefore, my job as a speech and drama coach was to elicit the best possible performance from my trainees, knowing firmly their opponents would also have their best work sent to the adjudicators. Confidence and charisma in front of a live audience would no longer be a strength – only the showing of the best speech and drama qualities in the video would matter.

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My assumption was, these videos I was going to make would reflect how well my trainees could do live, and they would be judged as if they did the performances live.

### My Approach

My approach was straightforward – to get them ready for the camera. I did believe that the training involved for the camera or the stage was the same because no special effect would be allowed in the Video Submission Mode. And this made a lot of sense. I had to help craft a performance meant for the stage despite that it had to be prerecorded. And I cared very little about equipment – I trusted that any ordinary mobile phone these days could do the job and if my trainees were well trained, the judges could tell; if a performer took advantage of the quality of filming equipment to upgrade their work, judges could tell too. So, the rawer the filming process the better. A mobile phone, a stand for the phone, a blackboard as the background, functional lights above – these are the set up I needed.

Concerning trainee selection, this time I was unprecedentedly generous and welcoming. I had never got as many as 23 events to train for in a single Speech Festival in my ten-odd years of teaching language arts (on top of my ordinary duties as a full-time English language teacher): a duologue, a solo prose reading, a solo prose speaking, a public speaking, and the rest were solo verse speaking. My students to train ranged from Primary Five (aged around 10) to Secondary Four (aged around 15). Some were more experienced than the others but I cared very little because this prerecorded mode suited all of them. While the experienced ones could simply do their sparkling speeches as expected, the shy people could also perform without the fear of

failing in front of a critical audience. Therefore, while I could, I gave them a chance. The training I offered was a mixture of physical face-to-face, video conferencing and sending cellphone videos. These are further explained in the selected cases to be introduced later in this essay.

With permission from my serving school and parents of my trainees, these children had the opportunity to be trained in person as they came to see me in school. During the period of training (around Oct and Nov 2020), my serving school was having a half-day mode with the afternoon basically off. Thus, there were rooms for these in-person trainings.

For some students, I started off the training by doing a video conferencing session with them, explaining the work and demonstrating to them my approach of performing the pieces. This usually ended by assigning them the task of recording their performance at home and sending it to me for comments.

Once I received their clips, I would give comments by typing, recording my voice and/or recording myself for whatever I needed to say to the performers. This went on back and forth for a few times to ensure that they were doing their preparation work seriously and effectively. To my surprise, I didn't end up doing a lot of trainings for each of them. My record told me that each of my trainees received six to seven training sessions from me, be it face-to-face (an hour in length), video conferencing (half an hour), or through sending me a clip for feedback (I still counted it as one session).

The video submission period was the last two weeks of November 2020. That was when the videos were done, either by having them filmed at school, or at home (probably by their mothers). In the following, I have chosen three cases from my training portfolio this time to discuss with you. Their works and thoughts are also shared for your reference.





### **Case 1 – Reagan (Aged 15, Secondary 4, Solo Verse Speaking)**

Reagan selected C Day Lewis’s “Walking Away” to perform. The main challenge was how it could be possible for me to get him to act like a somewhat dejected father seeing his son grow and walk away from him further and further. The narrator is highly reflective and I thought it involved a lot of subtle emotions when delivering the piece. Reagan would easily fit the character of the “son” being spoken to in this verse but acting like the “Dad” was a huge leap for the boy.

I spent five training sessions with him through electronic means and it was a painful process to put him into a dad’s shoes. The best I could do, along with my own demonstration, was to tell him to narrate the piece like a monologue, gloomy and defeated, as if after breaking up a relationship! In the end, he did it with the right approach, getting rid of the overly rhythmic and emotional style he used to do in verse speaking.

In the recording session, which involved the only episode of face-to-face training, the young gentleman found some of the phrases difficult to handle verbally while having to sustain the mood. Several attempts were made before we agreed that a good take was done. In the adjudicator’s report, he was praised for his flow of reflective mood throughout as channelled from his speech and face.

Reagan later reflected that although he preferred a live performance, a prerecorded mode had the

obvious advantages of bringing the best out of each competitor while eliminating stage fright. And yet, he acknowledged and understood the flaw. “Under the new mode, it is very easy for teachers or trainers or even their parents to give hints and show the poem behind the camera. This is indeed true as we can’t control it, but I think this is still acceptable as it is impossible to make the competition a perfect one under the pandemic,” he said. But concerning the training and practice processes, Reagan didn’t see a huge difference except that sometimes he couldn’t hear my instructions well during video conferencing with occasional network issues.

### **Case 2 – Calvin (Aged 12, Secondary 1, Solo Verse Speaking)**

Calvin was trained for Pie Corbett’s “A Poem to be Spoken Silently” for the Festival. The piece uses a range of scenarios to describe the beauty of silence. To me, the verse should be delivered in a slow pace with comfort and a lot of meaningful pauses to allow the audience to form pictures of the different scenes. Calvin had always had a great sense of articulation and expression, so it was not hard to make him understand how I would like the work to be spoken even though, like the previous case, we didn’t meet one another till the filming session.

Again, he had six practices with me, and only the last one, the filming session, involved face-to-face training. In the online trainings, I mainly commented on his use of body language, facial expression, clarity of certain phrases, and the addition or deletion of

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pauses. He improved according to my reviews and came to me for filming in the end. To my surprise, he was a lot less stable during the filming. Frequent errors occurred and several takes were done. I had a feeling that he was more relaxed and confident from the videos he sent me from home. Calvin had won in the Festival multiple times and I was curious why he would show me such level of instability in front of the camera. His immediate reply was because he knew he could do more takes. It was a striking comment to me as I thought the Video Submission Mode could only make it easier for the performers. I never thought it would in fact jeopardize the psychological support to the performance.

In the end, after filming for an hour and a half, Calvin was still not happy enough for the best take of the day. We agreed that he went home to film it again for the submission. And, as expected, he did a much more meticulous job at home with a lot more details and naturalness shown from his delivery. It was really a level higher than what he did with me and my camera.

As a reflection, Calvin stated that he was pleased with the Video Submission Mode although he preferred a live online performance using a video conferencing platform. He was happy with the clear instructions on the specific requirements of the videos set by the authority. He didn't find the practice process very different from before but thought that the competition was more intense because of the risen standard as everyone could submit their best shots. And another downside was that the results could not be announced right away – it took months for the Association to finalize the results and announce them.

His performance touched the adjudicator, who praised a lot on his pace, phrasing and use of pauses

to hold audience's attention.

### **Case 3 – Anson (Aged 15, Secondary 4, Solo Dramatic Performance)**

Anson's category didn't have a set piece and I selected a famous monologue from Peter Shaffer's play "Equus" (Act 1 Scene 13) for him. In the performance, Anson played Alan who admitted and explained his obsession with horses in front of a psychiatrist. The character's age is around 17, not far from Anson's, so I thought he could handle the role well.

Different from the other two cases introduced above, all my trainings with Anson were done face-to-face. The chosen scene lasted for 5 min and I considered it impractical to pinpoint at several spots and explain to him by writing an essay-length message, hoping he could follow precisely what I said. I found it a lot easier and more effective to pause him in person and make comments instantly. I didn't even try using video conferencing with him because in order to make it work efficiently, both of us would need to see each other's body language completely. Neither of us had the convenient set up at home to facilitate that. I in fact only used video conferencing when only the face would be required to be in the camera.

I had five training sessions with Anson (including the filming session). He only sent me clips he took at home after I had filmed his "official" performance because we thought he might produce an even better piece of work at home, which turned out to be untrue. Not that he didn't do well in the clips he sent me, his clips weren't done with the right lighting, they were partially blocked by a glass table, and the echoing wasn't helpful, among other undesirable things I noticed. Considering that the performance wasn't as short as a verse performance, it would be unwise to ask him to fix several things and film it again at home and redo it only for further feedback and further redoing. I decided to use the best one I took during his filming session with me. He swiftly agreed.

Actually, I have used this monologue before on another trainee years ago and the challenge was always the clarity of words, not the flow of emotion or the authenticity of acting. I felt that the same



problem happened to Anson as he couldn't fix all of the pronunciation issues in the end. The adjudicator did mention clarity as an issue to his work too but was happy for his compelling acting supported by body language, facial expression, pace, tone, and sense of meaning.

In a post-contest discussion, Anson also stated that a live contest would be much more desirable. However, he added, "The Video Submission Mode sure did alleviate my pressure as I no longer have to suffer from the stressful ambience." He also noticed that his practice focused more on "feeling the character" instead of "memorizing the script" like before, which turned out to be an equally valuable and significant learning experience.

### Concluding Remarks

The new mode of the Hong Kong Schools Speech Festival was not the same as the original one in many ways. But I understood that under the pandemic, a modified Festival for the sake of safety was still better than a complete cancellation. Many of my colleagues didn't get their wanted results from this Festival. Nonetheless, I personally found my set of results within the predicted range as if the children did the performance live. My trainees might have received from no place to the top prize in this remote Festival, yet from the adjudicators' words, I think their results fairly reflected their artistic merits, not the quality of the filming equipment. They were indeed judged as if they did it live, as I assumed initially.

I had a lot of joy polishing their work back and forth over the weeks as if they were doing a writing competition where all submissions must be in their best versions in the end. Certainly, a lot of the live qualities were lost in this new mode, but the learning process was not anything less significant or beneficial. All my trainees quoted in this report agreed with this, though they all preferred the

original version, and that was not a surprise.

Technology has its advantages and limitations. In the new normal, we, speech and drama educators, should make good use of the available tools to maximize children's chance to get performing experiences while we can. With this positive experience, I am planning to hold my upcoming school-based English Speech Festival (my school calls it "Speech Gala") using this new format. Perhaps in my next article here, I can tell you how it goes too.

### Literature Cited

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**Reagan's performance can be viewed here**



**Calvin's performance can be viewed here**



**Anson's performance can be viewed here**