

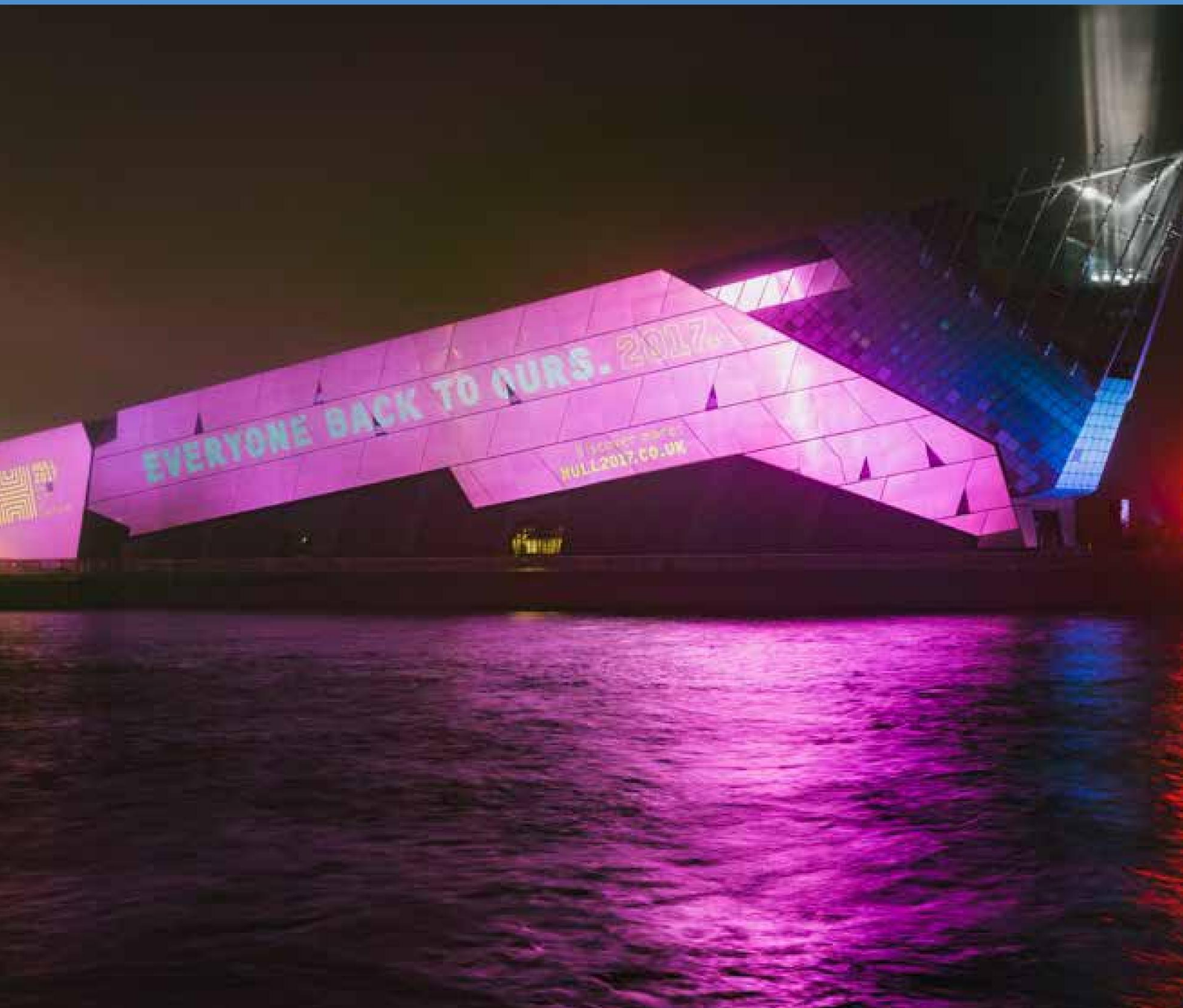


SOCIETY OF TEACHERS OF SPEECH & DRAMA

# WORD MATTERS

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# The Art of Thematic Group Speaking

Dr Peter Lee shares his three-year journey of literary and artistic development

It is safe enough to say that speech and drama in education help to develop language skills, as well as creativity and confidence in learners. If you have experience interacting with learners of speech and drama, you will probably be familiar with positive reflections from them telling how life-changing and memorable it was to prepare for an act. Yet, we have seen little from a school teacher's perspective on the professional growth that building up a speech programme for primary school children can bring. This article intends to fill the gap by summing up the author's own experience in crafting a Thematic Group Speaking performance for his serving school (boys, primary) for the past three years (2014-2016) entering an inter-school speech and drama contest in Hong Kong.

## What is "Thematic Group Speaking"?

"Thematic Group Speaking" is a group speech competition category from the Hong Kong Speech Festival organized by the Hong Kong Schools Music and Speech Association. It requires a group of performers (5-35 students) to perform a theme-based speech programme within 15 minutes with a variety of texts of, for instance, poetry, prose, drama, speech. The theme and pieces are their own choice. Performers are expected to link the performing pieces thoughtfully.

In fact, this kind of group speech act is not uncommon in other international speech festivals. For example, in the Bristol Festival of Music, Speech & Drama, there are Group Speaking classes for a

speech programme incorporating verse and/or prose within 10-15 minutes; in the Bedfordshire Festival of Music, Speech & Drama, there are classes of Themed Verse and Prose Reading where performers are required to read one piece of poem and one piece of prose on a theme of their own choice. Linkages between the pieces are expected.

## Forming a Theme

To prepare for a thematic programme of speech, the first challenge, which I believe stops many teachers from taking part, is to find a good theme – an umbrella concept which the texts for performance will be based on.

In theory, if you would like to have the theme of "animals", for instance, all you need to do is to find texts of different genres which are about animals. But in practice, it is often easier that you find a literary piece first, be it a poem, a prose excerpt, or a drama excerpt, which you "feel" connected to your imagination about how your thematic programme should look like. You can then use that piece as the skeleton of the act, followed by finding other texts that can go well with this piece in theme. And this has been my approach of forming a theme. So far, I have used the theme of "making up excuses", "friends-making", and "anti-war", with each of them inspired by a single piece at first. Yet, these themes were translated into different titles.

## The Missing Link – Plot or No Plot

The second challenge I faced at the start was whether I should simply link the different pieces like in a music concert – that is to say a few words to introduce the next piece to perform, or I should present the pieces in a coherent play so that the pieces merged together naturally in a plot.

This had to do with the regulations of the specific competition we were tackling more than the artistic requirement of the act. I worried that if the few pieces linked together as one whole play, the whole act would become a dramatic performance instead of a "Thematic Group Speaking" performance. At the very beginning, I had little idea about which path I should take. In the end, I chose to do it like a whole narration – that is, with a plot. Since the success of my first trial with this approach, my next two years followed suit and I turned the acts into stories. But to keep the performance separated from a full conventional drama, I have been keeping a flexible chorus standing at the back in different scenes to speak in unison and/or varied groups. The involvement of a plot does give one a more explicit context to make sense of the various texts presented.

In the following, I will walk you through my creative journey with the literatures adopted year by year. Links to the recorded performances are provided.

## Year 1 (2014): Happy Go Lucky "Don't Make Excuses!"

Cast: **10 boys (Primary 4-6)**

Characters: **Blenkinsopp, Teacher, another 8 students**

The first year trying out this format of performing arts gave me a strong feeling that playing safe was the key. Since it was a children's act, on and off stage, I thought it should be fun to perform and to watch. Regarding this, Gareth Owen's verse "Excuses, excuses" (McGough, 2002) came to me as this poem was full of humour and its dialogue style was fantastic for interactive effects for performers on stage. Therefore, I used this piece as the backbone of the entire act, and naturally, the protagonist of the verse Blenkinsopp, the boy who usually gives excuses, became a leading character in the whole thematic act.

The next item to consider was the context of the act. As mentioned, I decided to do it in a narrative style. So, with "Excuses, excuses" as the major part of the performance, it had to be a classroom interaction between the teacher and students. At this point, Steven Turner's poem "Why are you late for school?" (Turner, 2000) came as a good fit to the context too as it was an excuse-giving poem explaining why the narrator was late for school. This had to be in a child-and-teacher context too. So, I was glad to include this piece in the programme as well.

To create variety, I needed to look for texts other than poems. This part took me a while, especially when there was not any piece which popped up in my mind. Eventually, from the anthology of a speech and drama examination board came an excerpt from the novel "Through the looking glass" (Carroll, 2006). In the extract, Alice got on a bus but failed to show her ticket to the guard. Her explanation to the disappointed guard was regarded as excuses. That fit the "excuse" theme, though it offered no interaction in a

classroom context because the story was not about teachers and students. To solve this problem, I put this part as a classroom performance conducted by the teacher. So, the classroom context would function perfectly again.

Now, with two poems and an extract from fiction, a piece of drama would fill the concoction well. What is better than Shakespeare's work to this end, especially when I only had relatively modern pieces at that point? So, I went for "Romeo and Juliet" first. The approach was, I searched for "excuses" to fit in the act. If there were not any, I should go for another play instead. Fortunately, in Act II, Scene V, there was a nurse who was blamed by Juliet for making up excuses for her being unable to immediately deliver the news Juliet was waiting for so badly. I chose an excerpt from it and I used the original text to better keep the classical sense.

With the above four pieces as the major parts, all I needed then was the transitions. There were interactions between the teacher and his students, there were choruses done by the group of students, and there was a monologue from Blenkinsopp. All of these additional texts were written by me and I had a lot of fun doing it.

In the end, it became a story starting with Blenkinsopp making up excuses when being accused of his lacking punctuality, followed by the teacher teaching the class with a prose text and a drama excerpt, ended with Blenkinsopp being late again for which he made up his excuses again. The act was finally titled "Don't make excuses!". You may watch a recorded version here: <https://youtu.be/DEEcML4iL24>

## Year 2 (2015): A Message for All "I'm a Hero!"

Cast: **9 boys (Primary 5-6)**

Characters: **Max, Bob, Teacher, other children**

Learning from the success of the first year, in this second time, I tried to keep two things from the first trial: the humour and the school context.

The first piece confirmed in the act was part of a monologue from D M Larson's "Protecto (Kid Hero)" (Larson, 2014). In this monologue, the speaker talks of his desire of becoming a super hero so that he can stop a school bully. I took the idea from this point to develop the plot of the play. I decided that the story should be about a school hero and a school bully.

The challenge was, I had to either find different texts related to "becoming a super hero" or different texts that I could fit in the narration. I went for the latter. I knew that I needed something that could raise the spirit in the end like what happened the previous year. So, I went looking for something catchy and I found John Foster's "The Schoolkids' Rap" a very entertaining and fitting piece for this purpose, even though it was not related to heroes. At one point, I thought this poem should be read out in the end to give an impressive closure. After some consideration, it was used both at the earlier part and at the end – it was only that the first time was a "forced" performance conducted by the bully, Bob, whilst towards the end it was performed again heartily by everybody to celebrate



friendship. To perform the same piece twice is not a common practice in the Thematic Group Speaking competition. But doing it in different ways purposefully seemed to be adding something new; and I went for it.

Like the previous year, the teacher in the play had to do some teaching in order to carry out a performance based on a book. This time, I chose John Boyne's "The Boy in the Striped Pajamas" (Boyne, 2008), which was a WWII-based novel for a younger audience. I added a twist here that Bob the bully forgot to bring the book but Max the hero saved him by lending him his. The teacher directed the read-aloud session where Max and Bob played the major roles (and at some point they needed to hold hands too!). This offered a big contrast against their roles in the play as enemies and that created a nice chemistry.

Bob felt ashamed and wanted Max to forgive his misbehaviour in the past. Max responded by inviting him and the rest to do the "School Kids' Rap". This time was done with energy and glee. The play then ended with Max's monologue to echo with his opening monologue. It was only his closure that was newly written.

I wrote the transition lines again to bring the pieces together in a school context. The play ran logically as a whole but the risk was that the individual pieces did not fall into an explicitly identifiable theme, unlike last year's "excuses" theme. But I thought the "friends-making" message behind the story was good enough to justify and link. And the play was carried out as it was planned.

The performance was titled "I'm a Hero!". A recorded version is available here: [https://youtu.be/PiNYa\\_NMtmw](https://youtu.be/PiNYa_NMtmw)

### Year 3 (2016): A Taste of the Dark "In the Times of War"

Cast: 10 boys (Primary 4-6)

Characters: Time Traveller/Tim/Max, chorus, soldiers, refugee boys

In my third year of thematic endeavour, I was determined to try something different from the light-hearted themes I had for the previous two years. And this idea was partly due to my coming across John Foster's (2016) verse "All That They Want" on world inequality and refugees. This gave me a strong impression that children poetry need not be cheerful in nature, not to mention that I had experience adopting "The Boy in the Striped Pajamas" in my previous act.

Therefore, my third attempt with the thematic group was based on this poem. The poem implicitly describes the hardship of refugees escaping from war-torn countries. The following stanza gave me the strongest visual:

*All that he wanted was somewhere for his children  
Where they could grow up safe and free  
But what a terrible price he paid  
When the boat capsized and they drowned in the sea.*

I was visualizing the 3-year-old boy who washed ashore in Turkey in 2015 during his family's failed escape from Syria. The image

of his lifeless body lying on the sands face down with his bottom tilted up slightly became a haunting image that went viral on the Internet and that gained immediate global attention on how refugees ought to be treated. I was moved that Foster chose to write with this topic for the young readers and I found it meaningful to grow my thematic script around this war theme. This easily led to my visual arrangement of having one boy lying on the floor, in a similar posture of the deceased refugee mentioned, with the chorus standing around him in a semi-circle, reading aloud this poem as a gesture of mourning.

I thought that the imagery and the mood would be powerful with a scene like this, and that would give a memorable closure. Then, this time, I went more for the theme than the narration. I had to find other pieces with a similar background. I immediately had some pieces in my mind as coincidentally I was working and had worked with several war-themed pieces for other purposes. I had the famous radio speech of King George VI in September 1939 (Lang, 2011), Gervase Vernon's (2015) short story "The Day I First Wore a Yellow Star", and Ken Pickering's (2006) short play "A Young Refugee".

One way of linking them together was to follow my previous arrangement; that was to have a teacher teaching some of the pieces in a classroom context so that they could be dramatized convincingly and purposefully. Yet this time, I needed to go beyond that for the sake of artistic development. Knowing that the different chosen pieces belonged to different years in terms of the content (KGV's speech was in 30s, Vernon's story set in 40s, Pickering's play could happen anytime post WWII, and Foster's verse set probably in 2015), I saw relevance in creating a time-travelling story which could weave these pieces together – I then created the central character, the Time Traveller, who went through different time zones to experience the different hardships. To blend the Time Traveller into the various scenes, he automatically took up another role each time he entered a new scene, though his costume did not change. That added a futuristic as well as magical realism flavours to the play.

The story unfolded that the Time Traveller happened to land during a time of war no matter which button he pressed. This gave an impression that wars never stopped, though they were not necessary. He started listening to the radio with the King's speech, and then travelled to Paris as a friend of a Jew, to be bullied, followed by being a refugee 20 years later who lost his family. He ended up finding shelter in 2015, when he suddenly found himself on a beach and fell dead.

I initially ended the narration here. But to extend the magical tune, the lying boy woke up and the scene went back to the first one with the Time Traveller listening to the radio, the later part of the King's speech was performed. The play ended with the Time Traveller speaking solo the last line of the speech: May He bless and keep us all.

The performance was titled "In the Times of War". You may want to watch the recorded version here: [https://youtu.be/fl8VJN\\_dPYE](https://youtu.be/fl8VJN_dPYE)



### Concluding Remarks

I feel amazed and blessed that my team of boys enjoy the learning in the Thematic Speaking Group year after year and that I see my learning and professional growth in the process as well – from playing safe to taking risks.

The important thing in the training process in this particular performance category is that the trainer himself, who I assume responsible for putting together the script, has a lot of ownership of the performance. It is like having the playwright conduct the drama himself/herself. And in this category, the trainer is expected to be exceptionally highly engaged in the teaching and learning process as everything is of own choice, including the theme. Therefore, deciding to take part in this journey takes a lot of courage. I have had experience entering a solo speech and drama examination myself which required examinees to put together a speech programme linked by a theme of their own choice. I still remember enjoying so much personalizing my programme and felt proud to be able to justify my theme in front of the examiner. Knowing that I could transfer such an experience of mine to my group of young speech trainees gave me a lot of motivation to make it happen.

I strongly believe that every passionate language teacher should have an area of language arts which he/she can devote himself/herself into, be it poetry, story-writing, story-telling, stage performance or something else. It is only when one shows his/her "fire" in the subject being taught that his/her learners will be able to genuinely enjoy and benefit from the teaching and learning process. I am glad to have this opportunity to work with all my budding and sometimes ambitious actors to achieve collaboratively this meaningful project of Thematic Group Speaking for three years in a row. Results in the contests have become secondary to what we all have gained in the many magical voyages we have been through, literarily, and artistically.

I have to borrow Sam McCready's (see Little, 2016) words on his artistic life to wrap up my "thematic" journey so far: "It's an adventure and I feel terrific."

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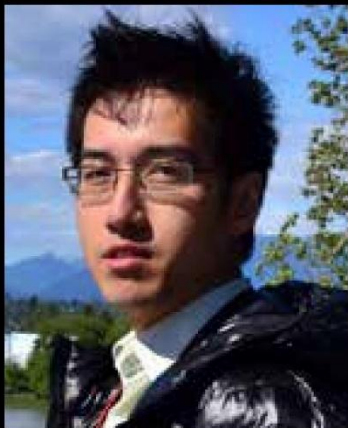
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More about him can be found at [ho-cheung.com](http://ho-cheung.com)

# About The Society of Teachers of Speech and Drama

Many of you who are members may not know much about your society apart from what you read in the newsletters. I have assembled the answers to a few questions about our organisation.

## Does the STSD have a President?

The President is writer, freelance lecturer, broadcaster, raconteur and former school inspector, Professor Gervase Phinn. In 2006 he became President of The School Library Association. Gervase likes to attend our events when his itinerary allows.

## What is the structure of the Society?

The Society is overseen by an executive and a council. There are also sub committees including one to organise conferences and one for publicity. The Society Chairperson is Paul Bench and the Secretary is Ann Jones. Penny Charteris is the membership Secretary, Keith Ball is treasurer and Andrew Shore, the newsletter editor.

There are also honorary patrons which include Polly Adams, Barbara Leigh- Hunt, Zoe Wanamaker and Sir Andrew Motion.

## How can I get more involved?

You can get more involved by

- attending the AGM which is in February each year
- attend area meetings
- visit the webpage and contribute to it
- join the Facebook page and post
- contribute articles to Word Matters
- attend professional development days
- attend the yearly conference (this August in Ambleside)

Facebook: The Society of Teachers of Speech and Drama

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[www.stsd.org.uk](http://www.stsd.org.uk)