

Improving Dramatic Speaking Skills for the Class Play

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Citation: Everett, L. (2026). Improving dramatic speaking skills for the class play. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 27(10).
<http://doi.org/10.26209/ijea27n10>

Abstract

Elementary school students' ability and confidence in dramatic speech within the context of a theatrical play performance is varied and will depend on the level of attention given to speech development. This action research investigated an issue identified in teacher practice associated with the quality of Grade 5/6 students' speech when rehearsing and performing the annual class play. The purpose of the study was to improve skills and delivery while also expanding confidence. An intervention was designed and delivered during the regular play rehearsal period, involving speech exercises, modelling, and coaching. Using qualitative action research methods, data was gathered via pre- and post- student questionnaire, teacher interview, observation, and reflective journaling. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis of content and artefacts. Findings indicate that a targeted whole class program of speech exercises in conjunction with group and individual vocal coaching have a positive impact on students' dramatic speech and confidence.

Introduction

Research has demonstrated that oral language skills are vital for student success in academic learning as well as in the social and emotional aspects of children's lives (Dobinson & Dockrell, 2021). Despite this, a considerable number of children fail to achieve adequate levels of proficiency in relation to speaking and listening, and there is an increasing number of children needing additional support in language learning (Fitch, 2023; Dobinson & Dockrell, 2021; Reilly, et al., 2016). Drama has long been shown to contribute positively to oral language skills and competence in educational settings (Winston 2015; Stinson 2015; Kempe & Holroyd 2004; O'Toole 1991). The annual class play is one aspect of drama pedagogy where students can develop their ability in speaking and listening. Student skill and confidence with dramatic speaking in this context is dependent on multiple considerations, but the level of attention given to developing proficiency is a key contributing factor. While there is an abundance of research on the use of drama and performance to improve speaking in TESOL contexts, there is little research focusing on skill development in speech within the context of the class play in a regular classroom situation. The present action research aims to fill this gap and contribute to the existing body of literature focusing on drama and oral language skill development. It uses action research methods to address a problem of practice relating to low student competence and confidence in dramatic speech when rehearsing and performing class plays. The participants in this study were students in a Grade 5/6 class at a Waldorf primary school in New South Wales, Australia. The study examined the impact of implementing a program of speech activities as part of the play rehearsal process with the aim of improving students' confidence and skills in dramatic speaking. The following questions were addressed in the study:

What happens to the quality of students' speech and their perceived confidence levels when a program of speech activities based on a Waldorf approach to Speech and Drama is implemented during the rehearsal period for a class play?

Can a program of speech activities based on a Waldorf approach to Speech and Drama improve the quality of students' speech and perceived confidence levels within the context of a class play?

The speech program was designed using Rudolf Steiner's phenomenological approach to Speech and Drama. Tiered provision of skill development and support was employed, involving a range of activities targeting whole class, small group, and individual students. The study explored the effectiveness of this speech program and the impact on students' speech proficiency and confidence. The purpose of the study was to determine if this targeted program of directed and sustained speech exercises, modelling, and coaching strategies could increase students' skill and confidence levels.

Literature Review

Drama has been defined as ‘the art form of the spoken word and of gesture and the body’ (O’Toole & Stinson, 2015, p.161). Putting on a class play generally involves reading the script, learning the parts by heart, then rehearsing and performing the play for an audience. The process encompasses aspects of drama and theatre as well as literacy and oracy: ‘while *dramatic dialogue* is experienced in its written form by those reading the script, the theatre audience experiences it not as literary English but as spoken English’ (Kempe & Holroyd, 2004, p.33). The concept of oracy was first coined in 1965 by Wilkinson (1965). As well as verbal utterances, the term encompasses the gestures, facial expressions, and body language that accompany such utterances (O’Toole & Stinson, 2015). Historically, several oracy traditions have existed within educational contexts (Hewitt & Inghilleri, 1993). The earliest recorded practice of oral training was the *Augustan* tradition, with its emphasis on elocution and aesthetics, and on the oral presentation of dramatic performances and poetry recitations (Hewitt & Inghilleri, 1993; Sansom, 2016). This tradition focused primarily on the quality of speaking and the idea of speech as an art form. While it has continued to play a certain role in oracy, later movements shifted the emphasis away from *how* something is spoken to *what* is spoken and have been concerned less with the *formation* of speech and more with the *content* of what is spoken (Wilkinson, 1970). This trend has continued (Dobinson & Dockrell, 2021; Kaldahl et al., 2019; Hewitt & Inghilleri, 1993).

Drama education has long played a key role in maintaining a broader view of oracy beyond the transactional and the functional (Stinson, 2015; O’Toole, 1991). O’Toole and Stinson (2015), for example, have mapped the breadth and depth of oracy by detailing its various characteristics. They categorised oracy skills into four dimensions: functional; dialogical; linguistic; and paralinguistic (O’Toole & Stinson, 2015, pp.163-164). The paralinguistic dimension is especially relevant to play performance and many of its features have been integral aspects of traditional elocution practices and formal *Speech and Drama* curricula such as volume, pace, and pause, (see for example AMEB, 2024; Krummel, 1976; Anderson, 1948). Kempe and Holroyd (2004) have also championed the paralinguistic aspects of drama for oracy. They emphasised the idea of the *voice as instrument* and the value of children being able to speak clearly and expressively. They argued that speaking well is akin to learning a musical instrument, so students need training and regular practise (Kemp & Holroyd, 2004). They insisted that the ability to speak effectively cannot be taken for granted and does not come about ‘simply by being involved in drama’ (Kemp & Holroyd, 2004, p.27) but requires specific pedagogical activities. They pointed with dismay to the low status of practical skill development in spoken language and the negative connotations that have come to be associated with activities belonging to the *Augustan* tradition (Kemp & Holroyd, 2004).

More recently, there has been somewhat of a renaissance in the aesthetics of dramatic speech

(Winston, 2015; Stinson, 2015). Winston, for example, commented that aesthetics have largely been absent from previous and current curricula. He suggested that the technical and cognitive aspects of a text cannot rightly be separated from its transactional meaning or indeed from its aesthetic qualities. A stronger focus on aesthetics can direct our attention back to the affective and experiential aspects of speech and drama. Winston has argued that the experience of beauty, the ‘instinctive, sensual immersion in the language of the poet,’ has been put firmly in the background while the rational and the intellectual have come to the fore and obscured the central role of aesthetics in drama (Winston, 2015, p.141). In Winston’s view, beauty must be felt to be known, and therefore a greater emphasis on the aesthetic can bring us closer to the visceral experience of being able to feel the beauty of the words themselves. Winston notes that it takes time to develop aesthetic qualities in any dramatic piece. The task of the teacher is pivotal as a role model for speaking the text and sensitising students to the beauty of its rhythms, melody, and phrasing. Far from being ‘old-fashioned’ or ‘elitist,’ a focus on beauty and the aesthetic offers drama educators a ‘language of value’ that has important benefits (Winston, 2015, p.135). This ‘language of value’ can shape what educators perceive as important and desirable by providing a framework for creating and evaluating speech in dramatic contexts. Aspects deemed worthy of attention might include melody, rhythm, contrast, a sense of coherence, the sensorial features of sounds, as well as clarity, and full-bodied, nuanced speaking. However, the concept of a ‘language of value’ is complex and problematic.

Aesthetics and aesthetic value have been subject to debate since antiquity. Contemporary views position aesthetic judgement as shaped by multiple factors, including sensory, perceptual, emotional, cognitive, biological, and cultural aspects (Chatterjee & Cardilo, 2021; Heinzlmann et al., 2020; Kirsch et al., 2016). While subjective opinions vary in terms of what constitutes ‘beauty’ and what is considered valuable, there is often also a certain level of consensus for judging a dramatic performance or other artwork. Consensus, however, is shaped by historical, social, political, and cultural contexts and is not ideologically neutral. This is particularly the case with standardised speech training, which has also been the subject of much debate (Knight, 2000; Knight n.d.; Oram, 2019). The notion of ‘standards’ in speech training has been prevalent in the US, Canada, Australia, and the UK since the 19th century. It has been widespread in both actor-training and drama-education contexts. Proponents employed highly prescriptive methods that promoted a ‘correct’ way of speaking. Emphasis was placed on the acquisition of a specific pronunciation and accent pattern that was considered to be ‘cultivated’ and ‘beautiful.’ As Knight (2000) and others have shown (Oram, 2019), the approach was embedded in class and racial bias because of its basis in upper-middle-class values and its failure to embrace racial diversity. Contemporary speech pedagogies are moving away from the idea of a single, standardized speech towards inclusivity and heterogeneity. Approaches are also becoming more holistic in their integration

of speech training with acting technique as a whole. The focus is more on effective communication through skill development and the physical aspects of voice production, with actors considered to be ‘vocal athletes’ who need to have the flexibility and agility to cope with a wide range of dramatic situations. In 1997, Knight proposed some general guidelines for speech training that did not subscribe to the ideologically charged regimes of the past. These include but are not limited to: ‘the ability to physically experience and isolate sound change in speech’; ‘muscularity of articulation’; the ability to ‘perceive subtle gradations of sound change’ and feel where these occur in the body; ‘flexible, active articulation’; ‘skills of making sound distinctions easily’; ‘detailed physical action of the articulators’ including ‘vowel and consonant sounds’; ‘the ability to hear – and feel – sound change’; ‘clarity of articulation.’ Rather than the goal being a particular way of speaking, Knight emphasized ‘phonetic rigor’ and the ability to use speech in order to ‘serve the dramatic purpose’ (Knight, 1997/2013, pp. 178-183). While still evolving, speech training is increasingly becoming more inclusive, mounting a challenge to the concept and practice of ‘standard speech’.

Notably, there is a large and growing body of research relating to drama and speech quality in the field of additional language acquisition (Kaldahl et al., 2019; Stinson & Piazzoli, 2015; Stinson & Winston, 2011). In TESOL, for example, drama is increasingly used as a pedagogical tool to enhance speaking skills, as it is seen as beneficial for helping students articulate language clearly and expressively. A significant number of studies have investigated the benefits of performing playscripts or short scenarios for speech acquisition and for improving the quality of speech (Stinson & Piazzoli, 2015). Key findings include the value of the following: verbal drills for articulation and enunciation; regular practise over an extended period of time; exercising mouth and tongue; teacher as language coach and role model; building student confidence; strategies for voice projection, vocal dynamics, volume, pace, intonation, and pause for effect; facial expression and body language as integral to speech acts; planned pauses and breathing (Basaran, 2024; Antar, 2023; Bora, 2022; Tribhuwan et al., 2022; Enerio, 2021; McAtamney, 2021; Öztürk-Pat, & Yilmaz, 2021; Godde et al., 2022; Özlem et al., 2020; Greenfader et al., 2014). These findings indicate that drama in second language acquisition is increasingly seen as a valuable pedagogical approach for improving students’ speaking skills and confidence.

Speech and Drama in Waldorf Education

Speech and Drama in Waldorf education has certain similarities with past and current trends in oracy. According to Langman, however, what distinguishes it from mainstream approaches is its ‘unique methodology’ (2014, p.20). As with Waldorf education in general, the *Speech and Drama* curriculum is based on a phenomenological worldview (*Steiner Education Australia*, 2015, p.12). To explore speech phenomenologically is to attempt to experience and grasp its essential nature through an active, participatory, reciprocal process. The aim is to

allow the phenomenon to ‘speak for itself’ by ‘taking up a certain attitude and practising a certain attentive awareness to the things of the world as we live them rather than as we conceptualize or theorize them’ (Van Manen, 2014, p.41; Ostergaard et al., 2008). Langman suggests that Steiner’s holistic perspective embraces the ‘great cosmic gesture’ (2014, p.14) by striving to work with the whole human being in relation to the cosmos. Speech is not merely viewed as a means of transmitting content, but as a living reality in which the sounds themselves are inherently meaningful (Kimbrough, 2009). For Steiner, the living nature of words and speech lies at the heart of the theatrical experience and, consequently, speech pedagogy (Kimbrough, 2009).

Steiner considered speech to be an art form that must be learned like any other art form. As with Kempe and Holroyd, he drew parallels between speech and music: ‘The forming of speech has to be an art down to each single sound that is uttered, just as music is an art, down to each single note that is played’ (Steiner 2007, p.27). The aim is not to achieve a particular way of speaking, but to engage in a creative, living, sculptural activity. As Langman comments: ‘We want to know how each sound can contribute its specific “gift” to our range of expressiveness. We shall immerse ourselves in each one until we understand what it requires of us that enables it to do its work’ (Langman, 2014, pp.125-126). In order to give artistic shape and form to speech, the student needs to allow the sounds themselves to be the teacher through the lived experience of speaking the sounds (Langman, 2014; Steiner & Steiner-von Sivers, 2013; Steiner, 2007). For this reason, speech training begins with a dynamic and active listening: ‘only in learning to hear can we learn to speak’ (Steiner & Steiner-von Sivers, 2013, p.34). The teacher plays a pivotal part as speech demonstrator, coach, and role model for imitation (Langman, 2014). The students must also learn to listen to their own speech, so they become fully conscious of every sound (Steiner & Steiner-von Sivers, 2013; Kimbrough, 2009). Like Winston, Steiner saw hearing and listening as a kind of ‘aural feeling’. The focus is on an affective consciousness whereby ‘hearing the sound is more like feeling the sound’ (Steiner & Steiner-von Sivers, 2013, p.67); ‘feeling our way towards the sound and the breath, raising them gradually into the sphere of consciousness’ (Steiner & Steiner-von Sivers, 2013, p.36). The goal is to develop a sensitivity to the sounds in the same way a chef develops a sensitivity to different tastes.

Unlike some speech pedagogies, Steiner’s approach does not focus consciously on speech physiology. While the sound feeling needs to be *conscious*, the physiology of the speech organs and regulating the breath need to be *unconscious*. Since speech itself can be considered part of the ‘whole world’ through its connection to the air then, in a certain sense, we speak with the air around us rather than with our speech organs *per se* (McAllen, 2001). As Steiner expresses it: ‘One uses the air instead. It should grow into a habit to feel what the air does. The special quality of wave sounds, vibratory, impact and breath sounds should be felt.’

(Steiner & Steiner-von Sivers, 2013, p.68). Thus, “speech is learnt through forming the sounds and not through an adjustment of the organs” (Steiner & Steiner-von Sivers, 2013, p.73); ‘We learn to breathe correctly by letting a number of well-placed sounds run through the speech organs, training them in this way’ (Steiner & Steiner-von Sivers, 2013, p.62). The approach aims for natural speech that develops holistically and dynamically, to bring ‘the organs of speech into motion in an organic way, into an all-round movement’ (Steiner & Steiner-von Sivers, 2013, p.46). To this end, Steiner developed a series of speech exercises to be practised regularly as ‘a kind of athletics’ or ‘gymnastics for the voice ... for the purposes of exercising the speech organs’ and ‘making them flexible and resilient’ (Steiner & Steiner-von Sivers, 2013, pp.46-48). The goal is for students to develop the capacity to shape and form words sculpturally and with a full-bodied resonance (Steiner & Steiner-von Sivers, 2013, p.67). Steiner also recommended reciting poetic verse to benefit and develop the speech organs: ‘Even as we recite the poem, we find we can learn from its fully formed speech how to develop and form our voice for its recitation’ (Steiner, as cited in Kimbrough, 2009, p.3). Steiner suggested that experiencing the sounds in this way is reciprocal and works back physiologically into the speech organs (Steiner, 1960, p.116). This holistic view of speech formation is at once embodied and organic, where students are intimately related to the world of sounds as intrinsic participants.

Methodology and Methods

This study is based in an interpretivist paradigm founded on the assumption that perspectives of reality are multiple and subjective. Since the interpretivist paradigm subscribes to a relativist ontology, any situation or experience can have many different interpretations which can potentially offer a deep understanding of the research phenomenon. This perspective can help to explore diverse viewpoints and complex issues within a given context. Vygotsky’s socio-cultural constructivism is an educational theory within the interpretivist paradigm. Key to this theory is the concept of *perezhivanie*, “lived through experience” (Michell, 2016), which describes an “indivisible unity” of the individual and the situation: “that which is being experienced,” and “how I, myself, am experiencing this” (Vygotsky, 1935, as cited in Michell, 2016, p.8, emphasis in original). Knowledge is therefore constructed through an individual’s personal learning experiences within their socio-cultural context and environment, predominantly through interactions with others such as teachers and peers. Another of Vygotsky’s key concepts is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Here the teacher plays an important role in assisting students to master skills and knowledge, going beyond what they could achieve on their own. Socio-cultural constructivism aligns with the aims of this study in its focus on drama and theatre within a learning environment where the teacher or instructor is serving a key role in the acquisition and development of specific skills through collaborative social exchange. The perspectives of the various participants in this study can offer diverse perceptions, viewpoints, and interpretations grounded in personal lived

experiences.

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore whether a program of speech activities can improve students' vocal skills and confidence during the regular play rehearsal period. Action research is a method of reflective practice that teachers and educators can use in their own school contexts to improve teaching and learning. They identify a real issue or problem in their own professional practice and classroom setting, then embark on a project of data collection and analysis or interpretation. The aim is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the situation and to achieve tangible improvements in pedagogy and student outcomes (Check & Schutt, 2017). As O'Toole & Becket note, "Action research is about change and intervention. Initially, the research question is usually conceptualised as a problem to be solved, or a vision to be achieved," (2013, p.63). In addition, "Action research ... is nearly always participant research – the researcher or research team is the one attempting to make the change" (O'Toole & Becket, 2013, p.62). The process of conducting action research can provide teachers with the knowledge needed to plan and implement successful teaching programs that are informed by practical investigation.

Data Collection

The research was conducted at 'Beachside' (pseudonym), a coastal Waldorf school in NSW, Australia. In 2021, while rehearsing the annual Grade 5/6 play, the class teacher and the researcher noticed that some of the children seemed shy and had difficulty speaking clearly and loudly. This problem of practice prompted the intervention and became the focus of the study. The intervention was implemented in August and September 2022, over the course of rehearsals and performances of the Grade 5/6 play. As part of the Waldorf Speech and Drama curriculum, students do a class play each year, and the content is related to the 'main lesson' subject matter (Steiner, 1995; Hewetson, 2010). Since the main lesson topic in Grade 5/6 is Ancient Greece, the teacher chose a play based on the myth of Demeter and Persephone. The script had 14 individual male and 12 female speaking parts. There was also one female and one male chorus with six students in each and one combined chorus. The children sang songs at various moments in the play, and a dance was performed by Persephone's maidens, all accompanied by a musician and some of the students. Two dress rehearsals were presented to the primary school students, and a final performance was presented to the families and school community. Prior to rehearsals, the children were given an independent task on the specific god or goddess they would be performing as a character in the play. This was part of the 'main lesson' work and involved researching, writing about, and drawing their god or goddess. The children were then able to use this deeper imagining of the character in creating and expressing their role. As background to this class's previous experience with plays, the

students had been through COVID periods of lockdown restrictions and, as a result, some children had missed doing a play in the previous two years.

Data was collected during three phases of the research process: pre-intervention, intervention, and post-intervention. Prior to the intervention, I conducted a semi-structured interview with the class teacher, and a questionnaire was given to the children. During the intervention phase, I recorded field notes in a daily reflective journal to document the rehearsal process, my observations of students, and strategies for progression. These reflections informed the planning of the next day's intervention strategies. Audiovisual footage was recorded of the final play performance to provide a detailed record of the students' vocal and dramatic execution. Following the intervention, the children were given a questionnaire, and I conducted a second interview with the class teacher. Field work was carried out during the children's regular class time for play rehearsals, which was a 2-hour session at the beginning of each school day for a period of four weeks. The participants for this study were the 26 children in Grade 5/6, their class teacher, and the author as participant-researcher. The student participants were selected through convenience sampling because they were in the class where the participant-researcher would produce the play. My role involved planning, directing, and rehearsing the play, which included voice training and vocal coaching. My personal training and experience in voice pedagogy has been with holistic approaches. As part of my undergraduate studies in theatre, I undertook vocal training based on Kristin Linklater's method. I also completed postgraduate studies in Rudolf Steiner's Speech and Drama with tutors trained in the work of Michael Chekhov and Dawn Langman, both grounded in Steiner's approach. I have directed, coached, and assisted many elementary and secondary school play productions. As participant-researcher, I acknowledge my positionality as that of an insider, having a pre-existing relationship with some of the participants at the research site (O'Toole & Beckett, 2013). Xu and Zammit (2020) note that such a position can carry potential advantages since a certain level of trust and rapport already exists but might also hinder the evidence through bias or personal perspectives. These potentialities are acknowledged as a limitation of this study.

Intervention

The intervention was implemented by the participant-researcher and occurred during the process of rehearsing, directing, and performing the play. I used a tiered approach involving whole class, small group, and individual vocal training, coaching, and directing. I worked with the whole class for 20 minutes each day at the beginning of the 2-hour session on a program of speech training. The remainder of each session was spent rehearsing the play. In the first part of the session, I facilitated a core program of speech exercises that I had planned prior to the beginning of rehearsals. These activities were then selected and implemented iteratively and progressively in response to each day's rehearsals. In the second part of the

session, I directed the play and worked with students on their speech and gesture. I provided individual and group coaching during this rehearsal process as students delivered their lines. Some small group work was also done outside the 2-hour session and away from the rest of the class. The overall pedagogical approach I used followed the Steiner curriculum, which is based on the principle of meeting the specific needs of the child at each stage of their development (Steiner 1995, pp. 109-115). During the 7-14 years period, a key aim is to nurture the children's feeling life, artistic sensibilities and image-forming capacities. For drama, the teacher's role is seen as 'speech conductor', guiding the children to develop their skills in creative speech through regular practice in observing, listening, speaking, and movement gestures (Steiner Education Australia 2015, p. 20). During rehearsals, I employed teaching techniques that were consistent with this approach. A key strategy involved modelling speech and gesture in an integrated way with the accompanying texts. I used the 'I do, we do, you do' technique, where I would speak a line of text with gestures, and the students would repeat these after me individually or in unison. Other strategies were also used on an *ad hoc* basis during rehearsals. At the start of the rehearsal period, I used imagery to 'set the scene' by describing the theatre in Ancient Greece. I explained how the actors spent many weeks rehearsing their plays and that they, the students, are like these actors, but they are also like the athletes in the Greek Olympics. I explained that we are training our voices every day to become strong and flexible so the audience can hear and understand what we say and to make the play come alive in performance.

The whole-class speech training at the beginning of each session was a program of voice exercises based on Steiner's Speech and Drama pedagogy. Texts and activities were sourced from my training in the various Steiner courses I had attended. These texts can be found in *Creative Speech* (Steiner & Steiner-von Sivers, 2013), *Speech and Drama* (Steiner, 2007) and the following books based on Steiner's work: *The Listening Ear* (McAllen, 2001); and *The Art of Speech* (Langman, 2014). I worked with certain texts almost every day, and others were brought in periodically and then repeated in later sessions. A week before the dress rehearsals, I began to include lines from the play itself, choosing a line from each character and also focusing on chorus verses that needed additional work. Texts were spoken with accompanying gestures to reflect the sense and emotion of the words or sounds. I began the training session with a physical and vocal warm-up designed to 'wake up', stretch, and relax the whole body. Following this, I worked with one of two core texts: lines 1-7 and 17-23 of "Andromeda," by Charles Kingsley (2010); and the first stanza of "The Sea Farer," an Old English poem (Anonymous, n.d.). In addition to these, I used other poems or excerpts as needed, such as "Song of Proserpine while gathering flowers on the plain of Enna", by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1820). After this I focused on the vowels and consonants. For example, I did the following vowel sequence exercise: ham, hem, him, hom, hum, hoom (see Langman, 2014, p. 98). I then focused on the consonants using texts sourced mainly from *The Listening Ear* (McAllen,

2001). Each day I did verses for a few different consonants and covered all the consonants over the course of the rehearsal period while also focusing on specific consonants as needed. For instance, the text for ‘t’ was the first stanza of “The Tyger,” by William Blake:

Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry? (1985).

To help students develop the ability to project their voices, I used the movement and imagery of throwing the javelin, based on Steiner’s activities with Greek gymnastics (2007, p. 190). This was done with the following texts:

Dart may these boats through darkening gloaming
Fling from forward forth (Langman, 2014, p. 153)

Rateless ration
Roosted roomily
Reasoned wretched
Ruined Roland
Royalty roster (Steiner and Steiner-von Sivers, 2013, p. 53).

After this I worked with Steiner’s tongue-twisters and nonsense sentences. Each text aims to develop specific qualities and capacities of speech formation, such as freeing the breath, giving full-bodied energy to the words, clear speech, resonance in contrasting tempos, long and short vowels, and flexibility and mobility with consonants. The following are some examples of texts:

Reforging gales
Through foghorns
Hails through surges
Through whirlpools
Whirlpool wails (Langman, 2014, p. 104).

Clip plop pluck cluck
Clinked clapper richly
Knotted trappings
Rosily tripled (Steiner and Steiner-von Sivers, 2013, p. 42; Langman, 2014, p. 151).

Narrow wren mirror royal
Gearing grizzled
Noting nippers
Fender coughing (Steiner and Steiner-von Sivers, 2013, p. 42)

Moisten mason mine essence
Lamer lightness Liza loiters
By beaten bowers bide brave
Come crooked craftiest cur
Trip dauntless the door of doom ... (Langman, 2014, p. 126).

March smarten ten claprigging rockets
Crackling plopping lynxes
Fling from forward forth (Steiner and Steiner-von Sivers, 2013, p. 42; Langman, 2014, p. 160).

Name neat Norman on nimble
On nimble moody mules (Langman, 2014, p. 149).

Lulling leader limply
Liplessly laughing
Loppety lumpety
Lackety lout (Steiner and Steiner-von Sivers, 2013, p. 41).

The overall aim of the whole-class training session was to explore a wide range and variety of speech sounds. The purpose was for the children to experience different qualities of speech and to expand their speaking beyond the everyday. The program was not only designed to foster technical dexterity, but to bring a vitality into speech and awaken a feeling for the sounds.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis involved both reflection *on* action and reflection *in* action and consequently included iterative and retrospective analysis (O'Toole & Beckett, 2013). After the pre- and post- questionnaires were completed, the number and type of student responses were recorded, counted and the results compared. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcripts of the pre- and post- interviews with the class teacher. The data generated during the rehearsal period involved reflection in action in an iterative, dynamic, responsive, and ongoing process which, as O'Toole and Beckett note, "... is a necessary part of various forms of participant-researcher study ... This kind of reflection has the great advantage that it

incorporates the emotional – even sensory and kinaesthetic – components of cognition, together with the sense of immediacy that consists of still being directly involved in action as you are beginning to process it” (O’Toole & Beckett, 2013, p.158). After each day's rehearsals, I recorded my observations in a journal and reflected on what had occurred, which informed further data collection and planning for the next session. During rehearsals, I constantly analysed students’ speech and gestures, then worked with them to make improvements. As Xu and Zammit (2020) note, thematic analysis in this kind of situation is an ongoing, iterative process of deep immersion in the data, moving back and forth between action and reflection as required. I analysed the data in my reflective journal and noted which students needed help with specific aspects of speech and what those aspects were. I identified the areas of speech that needed improvement and coded these as clarity, volume, pace, and expression. I then looked at each student and counted the number of aspects needing attention under each category. The problem areas emerged throughout the rehearsal period and in relation to my observations of the students as they progressed. As such, the analysis was inductive with codes being identified from these observations and were particular to each aspect of speech needing improvement (Saldana, 2016).

Findings and Discussion

Pre-Intervention - Teacher Interview & Participant-Researcher Evaluation

Prior to the play rehearsals, I conducted a semi-structured interview with the class teacher, ‘Jenny’ (pseudonym). My aim was to gather her thoughts on the class overall, specific issues she had observed, and what she hoped the intervention would achieve. Jenny described the class generally as being ‘very talkative’. One of the key improvements she was hoping to see was with the children’s ability to listen and focus:

They just don’t listen. So, I would like to see that come further ... Not talking to each other but giving attention to the teacher and the task ... And in terms of their speech – good clarity – clear speech. Valuing it really. Valuing their speech. Not just getting something out, ... you know, just filling the space with the sound of their voice. They find it very hard to be silent ... So, to actually get them to hear the correctness of words and to value their speaking ... yes, that would be great (personal communication, March 21, 2022).

Jenny said that a number of the children in Grade 6 had very soft voices, but there were some strong girls and boys in Grade 5. There were a few girls who were very timid and did not offer answers or suggestions in class discussions, and spoke very softly, ‘so voice projection is going to be a big thing’. Some of the girls did have strong voices but were flat and monotone, with very little expression. A few of the boys were also shy, had quiet voices, and poor

enunciation. One boy was very hard to understand. Others had ‘quite good annunciation’ but spoke ‘too fast’ (personal communication, March 21, 2022).

My first encounter with the children was when we held “auditions”. I was particularly struck by the level of enthusiasm, energy, and excitement about being in the play. Many of the children tried out for multiple roles, even those who seemed shy and those who were not strong readers. My own observations were in line with the teacher’s comments. I noticed that quite a lot of boys had loud and expressive voices. By contrast, only a few of the girls had loud voices; most seemed timid and had very quiet voices. Despite this, many of the girls tried out for the main female role, the character of Persephone.

Pre-Intervention – Student Questionnaire

My own and the class teacher’s observations were borne out by the students’ responses to the pre-intervention questionnaire. Many were excited and felt confident, but some felt nervous and shy. Twenty-three students completed the pre-intervention questionnaire. Some children were absent, and one student did not have consent. Below is a sample of student responses:

Question: Can you write a sentence or two about how performing makes you feel?

It makes me feel good and confident
It make me feel happy and it is fun. I like Saying the words.
happy I guess, but it is fun and nerve racking
I feel excited until we perform the play, then I feel nervous
Nervous at the start but then confident throughout the rest of the play
I get a bit scared the day before the play but on the day I fell confident. I quite like acting so long as I don’t have a cheesey line
I do not like performing
Nervous overwelmd shy
Uneasy and nervous
im feeling that I dont want to Be in a Play and Im not good at it
Makes me feell happy and excited but also nervous and really fun
It makes me feel very excited. I like acting a LOT!
Pretty normal but its different clothes and a different way of talking
Exhilerated. It gives me a tingly feeling [sic].

Intervention – Participant Researcher Evaluation

During and after rehearsals I evaluated each student’s speech work, identifying where improvements needed to be made and how each student was progressing. This was done

organically as I noticed each child's strengths and challenges emerge. My evaluations confirmed and validated the class teacher's estimation of the areas needing improvement. Initially, the teacher and I were mainly concerned with the students' clarity and volume, but throughout my daily observations, I noticed that expression and pace were also key areas of concern that presented challenges for most students. Many of the children had learnt their lines by heart and delivered them very fast with little expression. From my observations, I identified four key areas where the majority of students needed improvement. These were *clarity*, *volume*, *pace*, and *expression*. In addition, there were some specific areas needing attention, as follows:

- Articulation of consonants, especially enunciation of the whole word including beginnings and endings –
 - 4 students + general for all/most students
- Enunciation of vowels –
 - 1 student + general for all/most students
- Pronunciation –
 - saying 'gorn' instead of 'gone' – 2 students
 - saying 'v' or 'f' for 'th' – 3 students

Although variances in pronunciation were noted, these were not viewed as 'incorrect speech' or individual accent features that 'needed to be modified'. Rather, they were highlighted by the researcher when it became apparent that audience understanding would be impeded. They were addressed in a holistic way during the whole-class speech training with modelling of these sounds as part of the general work with texts.

Based on my evaluations, I planned the next day's rehearsal session around the aspects I had identified and with consideration of students needing attention. The focus was on increasing vocal muscularity so they could give full-bodied energy to each word and enhance audience understanding. Students were given additional guidance individually or in small groups. For example, I worked with a particular chorus because they were having difficulty speaking with expression. As well as modelling, the imagery of waves going up and down was used to help students modulate the text. I also worked with a group of students who were speaking very quickly, without pausing at commas or full stops. I used a strategy of modelling, plus walking the text to a drum beat, stopping at full stops, and saying the punctuation aloud. I also noted a cluster of students who spoke very quietly and had trouble projecting their voices. I worked with this group using the javelin exercise with accompanying texts. With the whole-class speech training, I purposefully selected texts from the program repertoire that would strengthen the specific aspects of speech formation I had identified. For example, many students were not fully articulating vowel sounds. To address this, I chose texts and sentences

in which these sounds are prominent, such as “A Fairy Song,” from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. A constant focus was on helping students fully enunciate each word and especially consonants. To this end, I worked with specific texts, such as the first stanza of “Sea Fever” by John Masefield (1978). When modelling throughout the speech training, I gave extra emphasis to these aspects, as well as general articulation, volume, speaking slowly, and with expression.

Post- Intervention Participant-Researcher Evaluation

My evaluation of the final play performance indicated that all the students’ speech showed improvement to some extent and in most or all of the key areas of concern identified during the rehearsal period. Overall, the students’ speech was generally clear with good volume, and the pace was slow enough that the audience was able to hear and understand what was being said. Some students started off softly then got louder and more confident with more expression as the performance progressed. This was particularly noticeable with three students, and was also reflected in some of the post-intervention student questionnaire comments:

At the start I was anxious, but closer to the end I was excited and confident.
I felt a bit shy at first but then I got more comfortable.
I was excited and nervis but I tried to imagine that only my parents were in the seats [sic].

Three of the girls who were noted as being shy and having very soft voices were loud enough during the performance, but still noticeably softer than the other students. This was also reflected in their comments related to confidence:

I still felt nervous but more confident
I felt more confident in this year’s play than I did in my last play But I was still quite nervous [sic].

Figure 1 shows a comparison of pre- and post- intervention data related to specific aspects of speech that I observed during the final performance and on the video recording. Two students were absent from the final performance due to illness, so only data from 23 students was available.

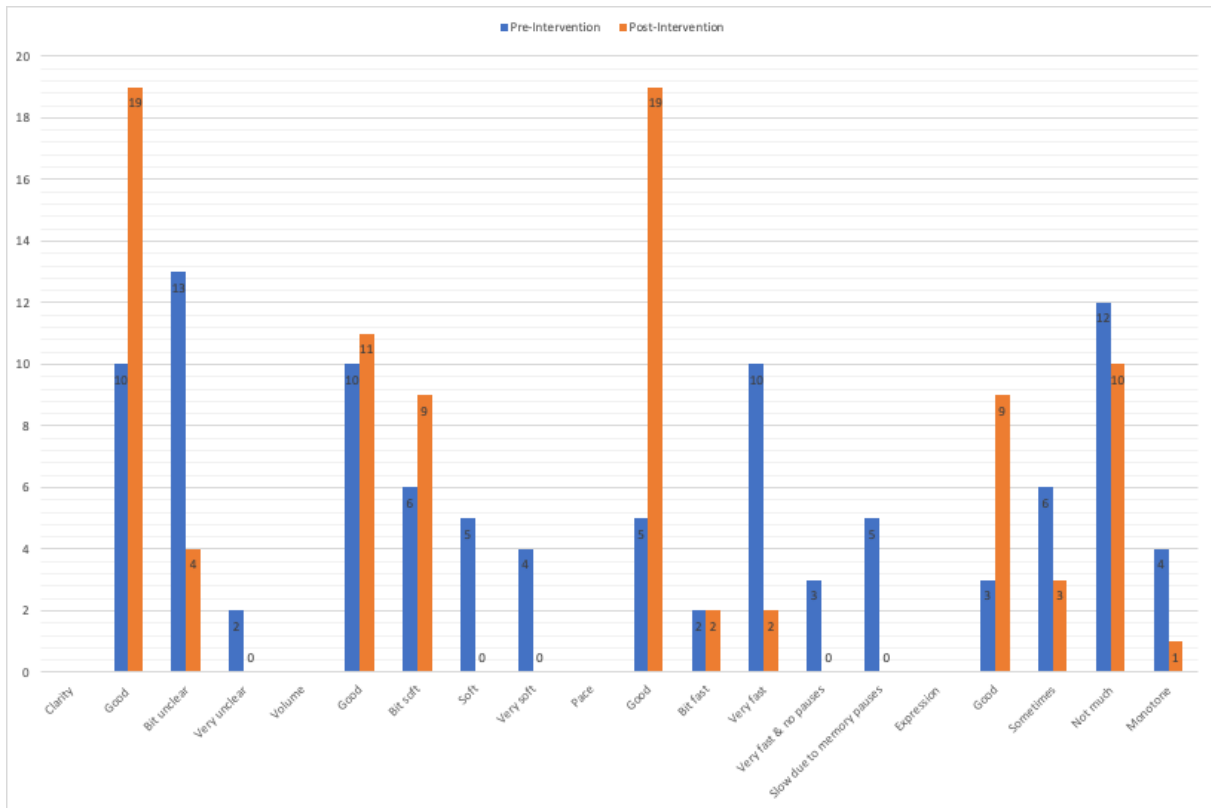


Figure 1. Comparison of Pre- and Post- intervention Evaluation.

As a general trend, students moved up the scale in all the key areas identified for improvement. Although my field notes indicate that most students showed a gradual improvement as the rehearsals progressed, performance nerves seemed to interfere with some students’ performances. Two students in particular had been steadily improving during the rehearsals but seemed to be hampered by nerves in the two dress rehearsals and final performance. This was the case with Jacob, for example, who had difficulty with pace. The following excerpts from my field notes are indicative:

Jacob – good strong voice but doesn’t stop at a full stop or comma – will need to walk when speaking and stop on the full stop.

Jacob – getting strong and clear ... way too fast. Still not stopping at punctuation but a slight improvement.

Jacob still not stopping enough but is better and slower.

Jacob – getting better with pace.

First dress rehearsal – Jacob – went quite fast and not facing the audience enough even though he had been doing really well in rehearsal and had improved out of sight.

Second dress rehearsal – some racing through their lines – Jacob, who had got better but must have been nervous.

Pre- and Post- intervention Comparison of Student Confidence

The purpose of the post-intervention questionnaire was to discover the children's perceptions of how confident they had felt performing in this class play and whether they felt more confident than in previous years. The second aim was to explore the children's perceptions about whether their speaking and acting had changed or improved and, if so, how. Twenty students completed the post-intervention questionnaire. Some children were absent, and one student did not have consent. Figure 2 shows a comparison of student responses in the pre- and post- questionnaire to the following questions:

- How are you feeling/did you feel about performing in the class play this year, with prompts of Confident, Shy, Excited, Nervous?
- Did you feel more confident than in previous years? How do you think your speaking and acting have improved or changed since we started rehearsing the play?

Many students gave more than one response.

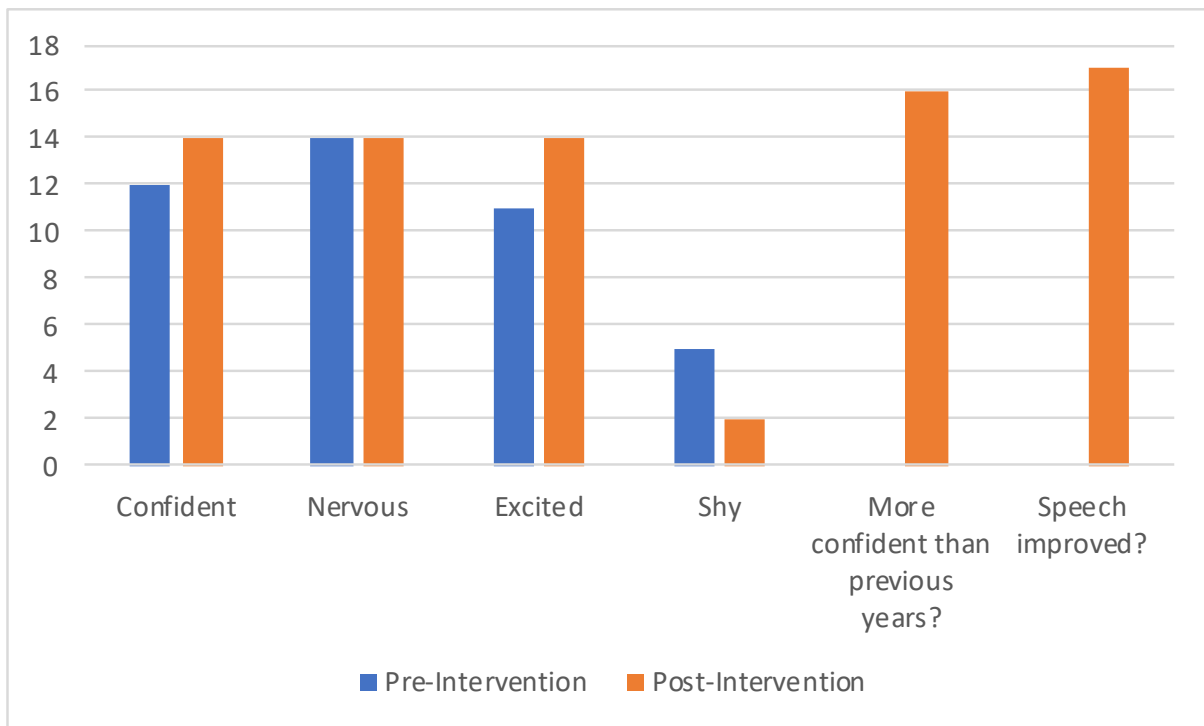


Figure 2. Comparison of Student Confidence.

There was only a small increase in the number of students who felt confident about performing in the play. Two students changed from *yes* to *no* and Jacob was one of these students. Notably, the majority of students felt more confident than in previous years and felt that their speech had improved. Below is a sample of student responses:

- Still nervous but more confident
- Definitely more confident
- No, not really. This is probably the worst
- I felt a bit shy at first but then I got more comfortable
- I learnt to talk slow and show expression
- Learning to punch out the d's and t's
- Speech more clear. I can project my voice better
- I have learnt to talk slow and show expression
- I think at the start of the play my voice was quiet but after practice it grew louder [sic].

Figure 3 shows student responses to the question:

- Do you think your speaking and acting have changed or improved since we started rehearsing the play? If so, how?

Some students gave more than one response.

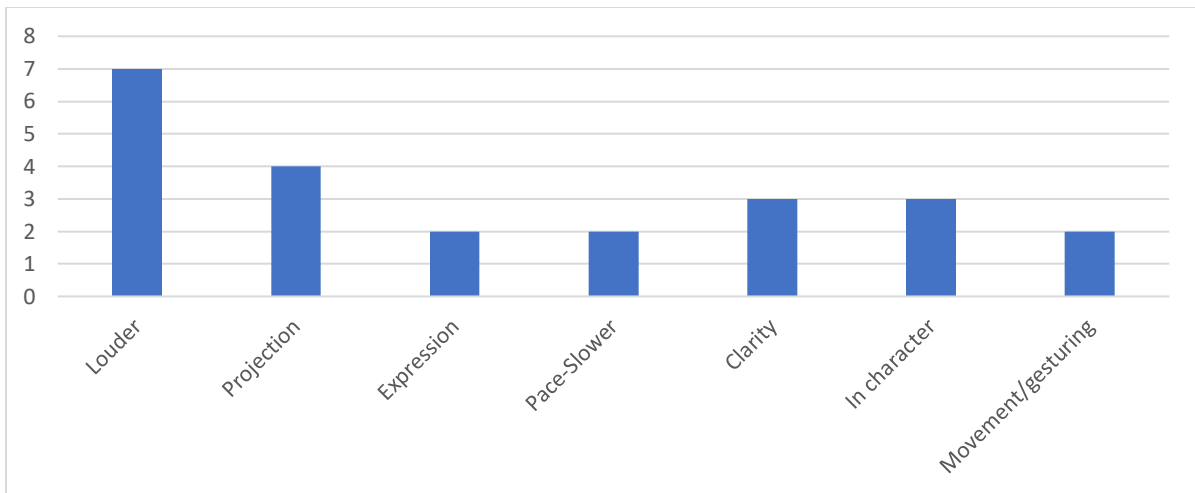


Figure 3. Student Perceptions of Improvement.

Post- Intervention Teacher Interview

After the final performance I conducted a semi-structured interview with the class teacher. My aim was to gather Jenny's perceptions of the students' performance and whether she felt they had improved, especially in terms of the issues noted in the pre-intervention interview such as volume and clarity:

Except for the few who regressed in the performance, I thought they all did really well. That's just nerves, isn't it. Francis improved enormously and the girls who had been timid and softly spoken were all loud enough and much stronger than they had been at the start. I mean, I think they all improved They were loud and clear, and they had better expression – they became less sing song.

I also wanted to discover Jenny's thoughts on the impact of the intervention overall and whether she had seen any broader effects of the speech work. She noticed in rehearsals that the children gradually became conscious of each other's speech quality.

They began to really see and hear when someone spoke well and to support each other. They would say to each other, 'That was great' or 'You need to be louder.'

She felt that the intervention gave the students the tools to 'embrace the character and not the idea that they start with, which is often wooden'. She thought the students were able to be more targeted with their speech and aim for something beyond themselves: "The speech is bigger than them and brings their capacities out so even they can see them." She felt it gave them the skills to be bolder in taking on a character through their speech and gesture (pseudonyms used throughout; personal communication, September 4, 2022).

Conclusions

This action research set out to address a problem of practice pertaining to low student competence and confidence in dramatic speaking within the context of a Grade 5/6 class play. The aims were to determine if a program of speech activities based on a Waldorf approach to Speech and Drama could improve the quality of dramatic speech and confidence in performance. The study found that implementing a directed and sustained series of daily speech exercises during the rehearsal period had a significant impact on the quality of students' speech, especially in relation to clarity, volume, and pace. Student perceptions of their confidence levels also increased, and the majority felt less shy and more confident than in previous years. The findings support and confirm prior research on the general benefits of drama for improving the quality of students' speech. The study addresses a gap in the literature by highlighting the value of implementing a dramatic speech program as part of a

regular classroom play rehearsal period. Findings suggest that a tiered approach and the role of the teacher as language coach and role model are central to the effectiveness of the program. Waldorf Speech and Drama was shown to be a valuable pedagogical stratagem for improving students' speaking skills and confidence. This phenomenological perspective was seen to encompass a broad, holistic viewpoint by justly addressing itself to the aesthetic and affective facets of speech formation. The scope of this study was limited to a small research sample and a narrow time frame. While positive results were evident within this context, future research might evaluate how enduring the improvements are and investigate whether a daily speech program over a longer period prior to the play rehearsals is needed to see lasting benefits. Given the important role of oracy in child development and the significant increase in the number of children requiring additional support with language learning, a program of speech exercises either in isolation or in tandem with the class play would contribute positively to improving children's speech proficiency.

Funding

The author did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work. No funding was received for conducting this study or to assist the preparation of this manuscript.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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