

There is an old American show business bit of wisdom that says something like, ‘.....try to never be booked following a kid or an animal act ---- you can never hope to compete.’ And here I find myself following my own protege.....Well, there is a second bit of wisdom that says, ‘The successful man/woman/teacher is the one who follows what he prescribes to others.’ With that in mind I will describe a few of the little things that I do to for the students to prepare them for the great event that is the BBC Speaking Contest. Thus, as I speak I will do my best to be charming, concise, and, above all else, I will try not to bore you by telling you things that you already know.

The five areas that I will touch on are: Selection, Content, Presentation, Nerves, and Handling Questions.

Firstly, the selection process is a fairly luxurious task as we only have to select two candidates. I always look for expressive students. Those who show a bit of flair. And, of course, I look for those who are very competent in English. Also, I am also on the look-out for someone who is not *yet* one of the stars in class. Someone who is on the ascent....Why? Because I think they will want it more, they will put their heart and soul into their efforts, and they will work the hardest. Thus, I tend to avoid the overly confident.

Second, with content, I think you need to keep time on your side. I always require that they produce the full speech immediately. By doing so I have the time for numerous back and forth sessions with my student speakers so that nuance can be added into what they have written. Take care with time once you feel the speech is ready as it will have likely become a bit too lengthy and stuffed with favorite ideas. It can be difficult to let go of some of these inspirations, but rid you must. This weeding out process is known as ‘Killing your darlings.’

Next, with presentation, you will, of course explain to them the importance of making meaningful pauses, appropriate gestures, and of keeping eye contact with their audience. At this point you may notice that students have become very attached to having their full speech on full A4 sheets of paper. They hug them like a security blanket. I begin insisting that they convert the speech onto notecards. If I meet with resistance to this step, then I go ahead and print out

their speech, cut it up, and then paste it onto cards myself. After having heard them present the speech a few times using the cards, I next play one of my dirty tricks. Without warning I take the cards away from them and ask them to give the speech by telling it to me. It seems to me, at least, that at this point the speech crosses the line into being organically their own.

When it come to handling nerves, the first thing I tell them is that *I know* that judges prefer a speaker who is slightly nervous. It is endearing and, on the other hand, judges do not care for slick candidates. Also, I impress upon them that the best preventative is to be fully prepared. I expect them to give only their Introduction and Conclusion by heart. During the Body of the speech it is preferable for them to refer to their notecards. There are ways to control one's breathing if not the whims of that day's judges nor the surprisingly incredible brilliance of a co-contestant. But, I *absolutely* promise them that if they go fully prepared they will have an interesting and satisfying day.

Finally, Q & A. Questions and Answer sessions are tricky. We always do our best to prepare by thinking up every conceivable difficult question and yet we are always surprised by some of the questions that are asked. Judges and audiences do their best to produce questions on the spot. But sometimes even a single question can be difficult to conjure, particularly when there have been a number of speeches on the same topic during the same heat. I have also noticed with my candidates that there seems to be a perverse relationship between splendid speech delivery and faltering on questions. Conversely I have seen students deliver a pallid speech and then immediately ignite during Q&A giving engaging and articulate answers. So, you can only do your best to guess ahead of time what will be asked when the big day of the BBC contest arrives.

The first big day will be a preliminary heat. It is usually held at the James Boswell Institute located on the campus of University College in Utrecht. UC is one of the most competitive and prestigious universities in the Netherlands. Just walking across its campus to reach JBI sets a higher tone. Already the students are stepping up a level by stepping out of their ordinary classrooms. These heats are held in classrooms, not up on a stage, and there are no microphones

It is a professional yet friendly contest with your peers. For some reason my memories of those afternoons has a golden light falling through the classroom windows, a memory like a Vermeer painting.

I would be remiss not to mention the important detail of always being greeted by the impeccably tailored Hans Kräwinkel together with his legions of enthusiastic GNE volunteers. I must say that even from the 1st day of the preliminaries one is impressed by the meticulous organisation of this dignified and at the same time always somewhat playful contest. One notes also a certain underlying generous spirit made possible by the BBC and the other corporate sponsors.

In a good year we will be invited to attend the Finals. The Finals are *indeed* a special day made even more so by their location in the beautiful and historic Academic Building of the University of Utrecht. Walking in, the students feel honored with the regal treatment. Yet, this is not going to a fuddy-duddy afternoon. The mood and tempo are lightened by the emcee, always a witty, national personality. Now, by the time the jury is out deciding fates the tension *could* be unbearable were it not for the hilarious antics of the Boom Chicago improvisational group from Amsterdam who keep us entertained and distracted.

And then the winners are announced. Whether it is the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat, I promise you, I absolutely promise you that you won't regret a minute of the time that you have invested in your student's heroic journey.

