



Early Childhood Education: 8 Ways to Help Young Students Speak with Confidence and Poise

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Abstract: Nurturing confident and artful communication in early childhood is crucial for lifelong expression and interpersonal skills. This paper explores eight practical approaches to empower young students, including cultivating calm, transforming anxiety into focus, and using dialogue and drama to bring words to life.

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INTRODUCTION

As early as preschool, students can learn how to as early as preschool, students can unlock their full potential by learning how to enhance their speaking skills using techniques borrowed from actors, empowering them to become confident communicators. During class, you might invite a student to share the morning message, discuss their weekend, engage in a thought-provoking conversation with a classmate, or practice reading aloud with enthusiasm. Their days are filled with endless opportunities to speak, which makes perfect sense because effective communication is a vital competence required in most elementary schools and a life skill that sets them up for unparalleled success, personally, academically, and in their chosen careers. Yet, for some students, this experience can be daunting, and there is a pressing need for research around interventions for educators to support reluctant speakers. With some innovative tools from drama education, we can undoubtedly help our scholars discover their voice and unleash their communication potential. In my work as a director and educator, I've witnessed firsthand how the techniques that actors use to captivate their audiences can also be transformative for students, empowering them to develop these skills and cultivate a lifelong love for speaking.

Getting ready to speak

Approach 1: Breathe. The most vital preparation for speaking is breathing, which research reveals has a profound impact on our anxiety and emotions, unlocking a world of possibilities. Before uttering a sound, empower your students to tap into their inner calm by connecting with their breath. I love to facilitate this by having them place one hand on their heart and one hand on their stomach while taking three deep, transformative breaths. You can also explore meditative breathing techniques or engaging varieties like breath of fire or lion's breath, unlocking a newfound sense of confidence and self-expression.

Approach 2: Acknowledge and reframe nerve:

Observe your body's response to the anticipation of public speaking. The physiological manifestations of nervousness, such as sweaty palms, an elevated heart rate, and dry mouth, represent the body's natural mechanism for preparing for and safeguarding against perceived threats. Encourage students to become aware of their physical sensations and acknowledge their anxiety. Reiterate that these reactions are typical, though perhaps outdated, responses to nervousness, inherited from our evolutionary past. The current situation does not involve a threat; the task is simply to share information with peers.

Approach 3: Ground your feet.

Anytime we rock back and forth, we are giving our energy away. Have students squirt pretend glue on the bottom of their feet, or have them pretend that tree roots grow from there. The goal is: Plant your feet. With that newfound steadiness coming from the ground up, their messages will be clearer, and they will have more energy for volume and expression.

Approach 4: Warm up your instrument.

It's easy to get tripped up on words or even experience the sensation of having a fish in your throat. Actors utilize vocal exercises to ensure their "instruments" are warmed up prior to speaking. Here is a simple exercise that can be beneficial for students:

- First, open your mouth as wide as you can, as if you are surprised, and then, purse your lips as if you have just tasted something sour.

Approach 5: Get louder with music or a “playground” voice.

If students tend to speak too softly during presentations, it may be beneficial for them to channel the vocal energy they would use in a different setting. Before they begin, you could have them imagine they are on the playground, trying to get someone's attention. Another option is to have them, along with the entire class, sing a song such as “If You're Happy and You Know It (...give a shout!)” immediately before speaking or reading. This approach is likely to help them project their voices more effectively and is designed to enhance their vocal delivery.

Approach 6: Breathe with punctuation.

Kristin Linklater, a world-renowned vocal coach and acting teacher, reveals, “If you're holding your breath in any way, part of you is absent.” Embracing the power of breath is crucial not only as we prepare to speak, but also as we speak, allowing our voices to soar with conviction. Students will often discover newfound confidence when they master the art of breathing, making their words more impactful and resonant. If your early elementary students are reading, you can empower them to speak with expression and clarity by encouraging them to take a breath every time they encounter a period. This simple yet profound technique will unlock their full vocal potential, filling their speech with passion, variety, and a deeper connection to the words they speak.

Approach 7: Eye contact.

For example, if a student is giving a presentation on “Climate Change” in his English class, with eye contact, he looks around the classroom, making occasional eye contact with different classmates. He glances at his teacher and peers while speaking about the impacts of climate change. His eye contact makes him seem more engaged, confident, and connected to the audience. Classmates feel he is speaking directly to them.

Approach 8: Use dialogue, gesture and drama.

For exciting read-alouds, turn storytelling into a game. If the text has dialogue, get kids saying it themselves with call-and-response. Depending on the character, model how to use rhythm, pitch, or volume to change how a character sounds. Those simple technical shifts will make their (eventual) reading more dynamic, too. Similarly, gestures help make their ideas and characters come to life, and it's never too early to teach this. For example: Someone cheers, and they pump their fist. A character accuses someone, and they point. Another character dismisses an idea, and they flick their hand away. You can turn a story into a movement game and just isolate the gestures to show how much impact movement can have.

Conclusion:

Most importantly, have fun acting out stories to help students enjoy storytelling and exploring literature through play and imagination.

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