

# Curriculum Inquiry Project

## Research Brief

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### *Creating Comfortable Speakers*

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#### **Background**

“Grasp the subject, the words will follow.” – Cato the Elder

“It usually takes me more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech.”

– Mark Twain

For many reasons, students fear public speaking. In the International Baccalaureate (IB) English A1 program, however, students are required to complete two oral assessments that require them to complete tasks that test their abilities to process literature orally. One task that is completed during the senior year is particularly daunting for students as they must not only speak about a piece of literature for a prescribed period of time but they have no real choice in their selection and have only 20 minutes to prepare the oral literary analysis or commentary they will eventually give. In the six years that I have been at Thomas Edison High School, I have become aware that this particular task is the one that frightens my students the most about the IB English program. I wanted to explore ways to lessen the anxiety level around this particular task for my senior IB English students and in my role as the IB English team leader, work with the rest of my English faculty to make students more comfortable when faced with oral activities including Socratic seminars, class discussions, and the junior year individual oral presentation.

#### **Lines of Inquiry**

- *How can I get my senior IB English students to be more comfortable speakers so that when they go into their individual oral commentaries in February they do not experience the high levels of anxiety that past students have experienced?*
- *What additional activities can the IB English team consider implementing to help students become more comfortable and confident speakers overall?*

## Action

Because of my past experiences teaching IB English and administering the senior oral commentary assessments, I sent out an email to 15 former students asking for feedback about their experiences with the formal oral commentary assessments. I asked these students, now attending various universities, two questions – one concerning their experience with the oral commentary and one asking for suggestions how to make the oral tasks less stressful. I also queried my current senior students, asking them to provide me with information about the kinds of oral tasks they completed during their junior year and what topics they pursued for their individual oral presentation assessment. I then asked these students questions specific to their fears about speaking in front of a class, impromptu speaking, and the formal oral commentary (also known as the Internal Assessment).

In terms of my classroom structure, I redesigned my curriculum this year so that my students would be exposed to more oral tasks prior to their formal oral commentary in February. In previous years, I did not start discussion of the formal oral commentary until November and did not have the students complete any kind of oral literary analysis until December. This year, however, I began to talk about the assessment right away (the second week of school) and required my students to complete a seven-minute oral commentary in October, two months earlier. Although this commentary was shorter than the one they will complete in February, students were exposed to this task earlier. In addition, I added a 10-minute oral literary analysis in December and my students will have another one in January at the standard 12-15 minute assessment timing, this one being the final practice run before their formal oral commentary in February. The actual formal oral commentary should be 12-15 minutes according to IB English guidelines.

In my role as IB English team leader, I used a group meeting to discuss the issue of student anxiety when presented with oral tasks. I asked colleagues to bring ideas and activities that they could share to minimize student speaking stress. It is important to note that in the Diploma Programme at Edison, the individual oral commentary (the senior year oral assessment) is not completed until February of the senior year and the individual oral presentation (the junior year oral assessment) is not completed until March of the junior year. Because of these timelines, any plans the faculty members made will not produce immediate answers for these lines of inquiry but should contribute to any future result.

Finally, in an attempt to reach out to the IB English A1 community at large, I also posted a question to the Online Curriculum Centre (OCC) regarding the issue of oral speaking anxiety.

## Data Collection

Of the 15 emails I sent to former students, I received nine responses. I was careful to send email to a mix of students, including those who did not do very well on their oral assessments. Of these responses, many students were focused on my first question about their particular experiences during the oral commentaries themselves and less on my second question concerning what I could do to make the oral tasks less stressful. My current senior students came to me from four IB English 1 instructors. From their surveys, I learned that they completed a wide range of oral tasks during IB English 1 (junior year IB English), however, no student listed an activity similar to the oral commentary requirement completed during the senior year. This activity is different from many other oral tasks in that it has a semi-random passage selection and students only have 20 minutes of preparation time before they have to deliver an oral literary analysis which is taped. By semi-random passage selection, it means that the students have studied the works sometime during the first semester but have no choice in the extract they will have to complete formal oral commentary on.

In regards to my class structure, I self-assessed lessons and activities regarding oral tasks upon completion, considering what might be better sometimes even for the following class period. Given that I have four sections of the same course, it is sometimes possible to make adjustments within a given lesson or activity.

During the IB English team meeting, our faculty discussed the range of activities completed in the IB English classes. I listened and then noted my reflections after the meeting. One faculty member brought up the idea of having IB English 1 students listen to some formal oral commentaries at the end of the junior year as a way of getting them ready for IB English 2 and then having students assess these “taped” commentaries. Another faculty member suggested taping students either via video or via audiotape during their junior individual oral presentation and allowing students to critique their own performance.

Online, I collected two responses from the Online Curriculum Center to my question regarding anxiety with oral tasks, one from an English teacher from the Western Academy of Beijing and another from the Diploma Programme Coordinator of the Weston Collegiate Institute of Toronto.

## Findings

When I heard from my former students, they were generally willing to discuss the issue of stress and anxiety although many wanted to talk about their own experiences. I’m not sure if this was some kind of cathartic closure for them but was pleased that now, looking back on their experiences, the students that responded to me were overwhelming positive about the value of learning to speak in front of a group

and process a piece of literature orally (even individually and while being taped) with a level of comfort. One former student, now at the University of Mary Washington, wrote, "I hated that oral commentary. Just the thought of it made me sweat and tense up. But I realize now how important it truly was now that I've done at least four oral presentations in my three months here."

My former students were not as helpful about suggestions for present and future students, however. They did appreciate the practice oral commentary they did complete and noted that some other IB English classes did not have this opportunity (different instructors do different things) but did not add additional ideas to the ones already considered by either myself or my colleagues. Another student, currently at Virginia Tech and perhaps summing up the sentiment of my former students, emailed, "We did do *a lot* of speaking in your class --- you're thinking of ways to incorporate more to *lessen* stress on students?" As the student italicized certain words, I left them in this brief as well.

I found out that my current students completed a wide range of oral activities during their junior year including in-class planned oral presentations, group discussions, and Socratic seminars of all shapes and forms. In addition, all students had to complete the individual oral presentation assessment, which is worth 10 percent of the student's total IB grade.

When asked to elaborate about their fears concerning oral speaking and oral literary analysis, Wing wrote, "I don't like speaking at all because when I make a mistake, it feels like everyone is laughing. Not cool. I start to shake and it doesn't stop until the adrenaline dissipates." Philip, another student, said, "I am just afraid that I won't have enough prepared to fill the time I need." It seemed to me that the 20 minutes that the students would have to prepare for their oral commentary would again be the thing that would concern them the most.

Each oral activity that students had to complete in my class was designed with the idea of making the students comfortable with speaking aloud. In the last two months, I have had my students complete a seven-minute formal oral commentary, complete three Socratic seminars and have held countless classroom discussions. Students who were quiet at first were nudged quietly by me at first, and then more aggressively by others to speak up in class. I found it interesting and encouraging that my students took an active role in requiring others to speak up in class. Steven told me, "It's important for me to get everyone in my group to participate in discussions; we'll all get more out of the text if we all try."

On an academic level, my students know the importance of being able to speak effectively. They tell me it is important for their future career aspirations and goals but that doesn't always tell the emotional story behind the task at hand. Some are trying other methods to boost confidence. Kyle wrote, "I'm trying to make my fears about

public speaking go away by participating in theatre this year. I don't want to choke on my formal oral commentary."

The various classroom oral activities are giving my students continual practice with speaking. For each activity, I require students to participate and a portion of their grade is based on both the *quality* of the participation and the *quantity* of the participation. I have worked with some of the more nervous and reluctant students individually to try to make them more comfortable and have started seeing some results. One student, Richard, did not complete the first oral commentary I assigned because of nerves at all and instead turned in a written piece. This written piece was rather well done. I have been struggling with this student all semester to participate in oral activities. In speaking with him, Richard said one of his biggest fears is that he will forget important information when delivering his oral commentary and this is one of the reasons he stays quiet. "I'm scared about organizing my thoughts," Richard said, "I don't want to fail." Getting this student to participate is still a struggle but I am hopeful.

From my posting on the Online Curriculum Centre, I found two good points. One of them I already agreed with – *the more students speak, the more comfortable they will be with it and the better they will be at it*. This is what I had been trying to do through additional oral activities and I hope these additional activities will pay off when it comes time for my students to complete their formal oral commentaries in February. The second point I had not considered: *those with a sincere and deep interest in literature do really well on the individual oral commentary*. This point I thought about while I was putting together this research brief. Students without a true interest in literature probably can do well on the individual oral commentary but the best commentaries are the ones with passion. There is always a difference in the student who is simply intelligent and the one who has a true love for the subject.

## **Implications and Future Directions**

As this curriculum inquiry is an ongoing project, I will continue to monitor my students and their comfort level concerning oral tasks, specifically looking towards the formal oral commentary assessment which will be completed in February. I will continue to quietly (and not so quietly) nudge those students who need a little extra support and explore ways that I can make sure that every student that crosses my classroom door's threshold, does not panic over this assessment.

In my role as my school's IB English team leader, I will work with my colleagues to support ways to integrate more oral speaking tasks into their classrooms and provide any support they may request.