

Le Concours d'art oratoire – by Livia Poljak

May has always been characterized as being the month of flowers (after the showers), filled with sunshine and warmth and... French language...?

For many of us French immersion, francophone and core French students, May is a time in which we can showcase our knowledge and abilities in French public speaking in the form of the French speech contest, better known as Concours d'art oratoire.

All across BC, French speaking students everywhere begin preparing for this contest, choosing topics that interest them, researching them and finally going through many a Petit Robert and Bescherelle before finally being able to present their findings to the class. Some are humorous, some informative while others give us something to think about later on; still others bring tears to our eyes. The choice of topic does not make much difference. It's only the presentation and motivation of the student that matters.

Being a student of late immersion, I have been participating in Concours both in the district and provincial levels for seven years, and I can say from my personal experience that the very atmosphere of the classroom shifts dramatically during this exiting period of time. French class somehow becomes louder as students discuss their topics with one another. There is always something new and interesting to be learned, and new vocabulary words to be discovered.

I remember the first time I presented my Concours in grade 6. Although I was not a shy individual – I had been reciting poetry as entertainment since I was three – I found myself somewhat nervous about presenting something in another language, especially one that I had just begun studying. My nervousness increased even at the district level competition. After winning there though, the taste of victory – of having advanced so much in the French language – was something I would have the honour of relishing for the next six years.

It takes a tremendous amount of courage to stand up in front of an audience – in front of judges you know are recording your every word. However, during the individual speeches, none of that seemed to matter, ever. All that was important was that for three to five minutes each participant had the opportunity to be the centre of attention and the most important figure in the room. For five minutes, you are the best, and most importantly you are communicating fluently in a language that most of the time is not even your first – and everyone in the room understands you and reacts positively towards you. Talk about confidence booster!

This year was my last year as a participant in Concours d'art oratoire, and the pressure was on! In grade 12, the first place winners, along with receiving the Prix Trudeau, also get to compete in the National competition in Ottawa. As excited as I was, I also felt somewhat sad. I had

worked so hard – everyone had in fact – for seven years, and now it would all be over. However, as I stood in front of everyone while I received the gold medal for winning first place (“Oh my gosh, is this really happening?”) I realized something. Regardless of whether I would have won or not, I was still bilingual, and that is a far greater prize than any first place medal could ever be. I was proud that I spoke both official languages of Canada fluently. The fact that I was able to prove it with Concours, was just the icing on my already perfect cake. As for next year’s competitors, remember to be proud of yourselves regardless of the outcomes. You’ve already achieved what some believe is the impossible, and no one can take that medal of honour away from you. Ever!

What makes Livia’s victories over the years particularly unique is that she spoke neither English nor French as a young child. Her family immigrated to Canada from the former Yugoslavia when Livia was four. Her impressive language résumé now includes English, Hungarian, Serbian and French.

Le Concours d’Art Oratoire – Article by Hasheem Hakeem, a Grade 11 student at Dr Charles Best School, who has competed in the French speaking competitions for many years.

January 2007! Not only the beginning of a new year but a time for both French immersion and Francophone students to begin preparing for the 24th annual “Concours d’art Oratoire”, a French public speaking contest in which courageous and talented students present a 3-5 minute speech on a topic of their choice.

Wow! It has been so many years since the concours d’art oratoire had started. For me, it started at the young age of seven when I was just in grade 2. My teacher had us present a speech to our class that we had written. For me, it came naturally speaking to a group of people and I honestly felt pretty comfortable doing it. At first, I thought I was weird because everyone was always so nervous whereas I didn’t think too much of it. At such a young age, I did not know that I had a unique talent but my teacher certainly did. After having made it to the district finals that year, I was content and enjoyed what I was doing. After all, who doesn’t like what they’re good at, it’s natural.

Since then, I have been competing in the concours d’art oratoire every year and I must say; it has been getting more and more competitive every year. Through a talent in public speaking, I managed to win the school finals 8 times: 3 during elementary school, 3 during middle school and currently 2 during high school. Following the school finals came district and even provincial finals. Even though I was never really nervous, it was natural to feel a little tense sometimes considering the competition became more serious every year, especially during provincials.

Nonetheless, I never allowed this to lower my self-confidence but rather used it as a thrust for motivation. I successfully managed to win the district finals for 5 consecutive years and placed second in the provincial finals 3 times, in which two were from my 2 years in high school. Yes, it does kind of irritate me that I have not gotten first yet but that will definitely be my optimal goal for the next two years. I truly believe a competition like this is like any other; it requires practice, experience and initiative. Experience comes from so many years of hard work and applying the talent that one has to their goals. Practice is evident, it's required in almost everything we do. The composition of such a speech is not at all as easy as it may seem but rather takes a lot of research, reflection and editing. A process that takes a long time but one that I have been willingly going through for almost 10 years now. And let's not forget, my favourite part and most important part, the presentation! Standing up in front of all those people and reciting your memorized speech with expression intent and enthusiasm.

Not only is this a public speaking competition, but over the course of several years, has also become a tradition embedded in the French Immersion program; one of which I am truly proud of. Well, with only 3 months away, I know I can't wait so let's get preparing! Good luck to all and hope to see you all soon at the concours!

--- Hasheem finished first this year in Grade 11 Immersion. Bravo Hasheem! You realised your dream!