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■ COVER STORY ■

Why public speaking matters in SCHOOL EDUCATION

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Nothing makes one feel more hyper-aware and self-conscious than speaking in front of a group of people. Unknowingly, we as an audience tend to quickly and, quite ruthlessly at times, categorise speakers into one of two groups: the 'alchemist' and the 'hostage'.

The alchemist is the epitome of a main character. This person has the ability to make topics such as spreadsheets or anthropology sound interesting. They're eloquent, have the perfect estimate of charismatic eye contact and graceful arm movements, and command attention without demanding it.

The hostage, however, makes you want to look away from the stage. They're visibly

uncomfortable, unable to connect with the room, and resemble a captive person desperate for an escape.

Unfortunately, recent school graduates contribute a high proportion to the hostage category. It takes experience to be able to articulate your knowledge into words when given the centre stage, and for most of us, this skill develops rather late. A compelling speaker not only sounds impressive but also carries a magnetic presence that holds attention effortlessly. While some possess natural fluency, for others, it takes practice and early exposure at school. Our few encounters with public speaking at school take place through the occasional project or presentation, yet it remains largely absent from the core priorities of many schools, including many English-medium ones

following the British curriculum.

In the assessment of oral fluency, there are very few, if any, courses dedicated solely to developing this skill. Since the ultimate measure of a student's academic ability relies on their written theoretical knowledge, it often becomes an afterthought. Some of us even go years without having to stand in front of a room and deliver a speech or presentation, as preparing for the O and A levels leaves little room for such practical skills. It seems as though the choice between the alchemist and the hostage is rarely up to us.

It's often at university, when entering lecture halls that require articulate speakers, that students realise that school never truly taught them how to withstand the pressure of all eyes being on them. This gap persists