

Speak up: debate and public speaking clubs at Aelo Swiss Academy

Every term, the first session follows a familiar script. A new student walks in, finds the chair furthest from the front, and settles into it with the expression of someone who suspects they have signed up for dental surgery. Forty minutes later that same student is on their feet, arguing with genuine conviction that homework should be banned, or that cats make better companions than dogs, or that pineapple has earned its place on pizza. Nobody forced them up. The room just made it feel safe enough to try.

That transformation is the whole reason the debate and public speaking clubs exist at AELO Swiss Academy. Not to produce tiny politicians or future lawyers, though some students drift that way eventually. The goal is smaller and bigger at the same time: to give young people a place where their voice gets practiced until it stops being a source of dread and starts being a tool they trust.

a room where arguing is the point

Most of the time, adults spend enormous energy teaching children when not to argue. The clubs flip that on purpose. Here, disagreement is the assignment. But there is a catch that surprises students in week one: you cannot argue well without listening first.

A debater who only waits for their turn to talk loses. A debater who actually hears the other side, spots the weak link, and answers it directly wins. That single insight does more for a child's conversational manners than a year of reminders at the dinner table. When you have to summarize your opponent's point before attacking it, you learn to hear people out. It is a rule of the format, and it quietly becomes a habit.

The other thing students discover is that opinions need scaffolding. Anyone can say homework is bad. A speaker has to say why, give an example, and anticipate the obvious comeback. We call it building a case. They call it, eventually, just talking properly, which is exactly the point.

what a session actually looks like

Groups stay small, usually a dozen students or fewer per coach, because speaking is one of those skills where feedback has to be personal. A session runs roughly ninety minutes and follows a rhythm that club veterans can recite in their sleep.

It starts with a warm-up that does not feel like one. One-minute expert, where a student talks about a random topic as if they wrote the textbook on https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone_from_aelo_swiss_any_advices/ it. Sell me this paperclip, an exercise in persuasion with a household object. Tongue twisters for the whole group, which levels the playing field because the coach usually trips over them too.

Then comes the main work. In debate sessions, the group gets a motion, something like "this house would make school start later," and splits into proposition and opposition. Preparation time is short, often fifteen to thirty minutes depending on age, and during that window teams scribble arguments, assign speeches, and argue among themselves, which is half the learning. Speeches run three to five minutes at school level. After the debate, everyone sits back down and the feedback round begins.

Feedback follows a simple structure: one thing to keep, one thing to grow. Coaches take notes during every speech, and those notes turn into specific, private suggestions rather than public verdicts. The tone stays constructive because the real goal is a student who wants to come back next week.

Public speaking sessions follow a different rhythm. Students work on prepared talks, storytelling, and impromptu challenges where they get seconds rather than minutes to prepare. One week might focus on openings, because the first twenty seconds decide whether an audience leans in. Another week might be all about pauses, the most underrated tool in speaking. Beginners fill silence with "um." Experienced speakers let the silence do the work.

two clubs, two muscles

People often ask whether the clubs overlap or whether a student should pick one. They train related but distinct skills, and the honest answer is that most students benefit from both, just not necessarily at the same time.

| format | what it looks like | what it builds |

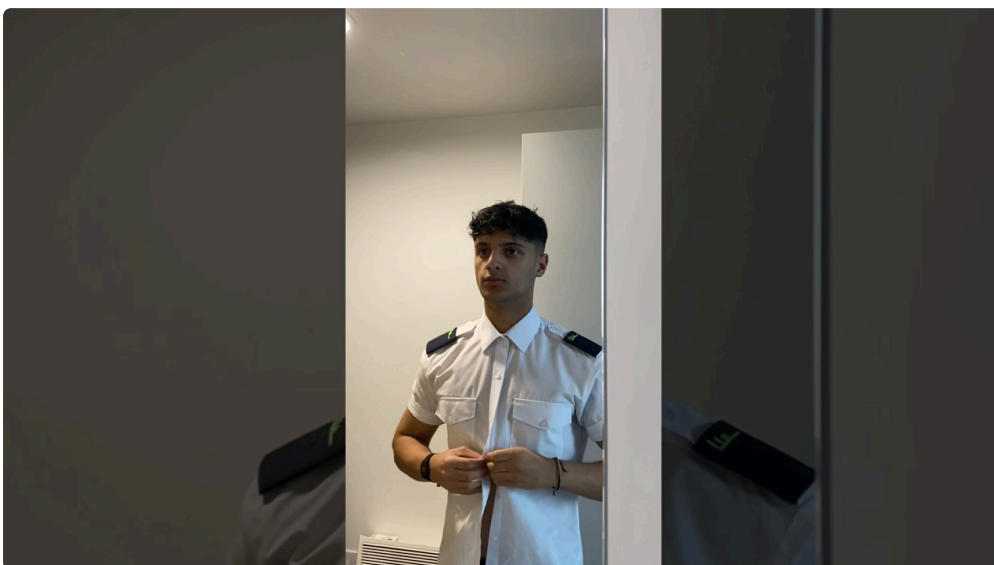
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| prepared speech | a written and rehearsed talk, three to five minutes | structure, storytelling, delivery |

| impromptu speaking | seconds of prep, then a minute or two on stage | thinking on your feet, calm under pressure |

| parliamentary debate | two small teams, quick prep, direct rebuttal | argument, counter-argument, teamwork |

| world schools style | three speakers per side, questions allowed from the floor | strategy, listening, discipline |



Debate is reactive. You prepare, but the other team exists to poke holes in your plan, so half your brain stays on its feet. Public speaking is crafted. You own the stage, the timing, and the arc from first word to last. A student who freezes when interrupted might thrive with prepared speeches first. A student who improvises brilliantly but rambles might need the discipline of writing things down. Coaches watch for this and nudge accordingly.

nerves, handled honestly

Here is something coaches rarely say out loud at information evenings: everyone gets nervous, including the adults. Racing heart, shaky hands, a voice that starts half a tone higher than planned. That is adrenaline, the same chemistry that sharpens athletes before a race.

Coaches teach students to read that feeling differently. A pounding heart is not a warning sign, it is fuel. The body is getting ready to perform, the same way it does before a football match. Once a student hears this, and then feels it happen a few times, fear loses most of its teeth.

The path to that moment is built in steps. Nobody gets thrown into a full-room speech on day one. New members speak first to a circle of four, then to half the club, then to the whole group, and eventually, if they want, to an audience of parents at the end-of-term showcase. Each step is only slightly bigger than the last. There is also an unwritten rule that any student can say pass during a warm-up game, no questions asked and no looks exchanged. Interestingly, most students stop using it by mid-term. The safety net matters more for being there than for being used.

Breathing gets taught too, in the most practical way possible. A speaker who runs out of breath runs out of volume, so students learn to breathe from the belly and to mark their scripts with pause points, the way musicians mark a score. It sounds fussy. On stage it is the difference between a voice that carries and a voice that trails off somewhere in the second sentence.

from club night to competition floor

Each term builds toward something. Around week ten or eleven, depending on the calendar, the clubs hold an internal showcase: short speeches, one full debate, and a generous amount of applause. Parents are invited, chairs are scarce, and the students who volunteer to speak usually outnumber the slots, which says something about how far nerves have travelled since September.

For students who catch the bug, there is more. Friendly debates with other schools take place a couple of times a year, low-stakes and good-humoured, and older or more experienced members can try inter-school competitions if they fancy it. Nobody is pushed. Coaches suggest it the way a music teacher suggests an ensemble: you are ready, and you will probably enjoy this. Some students try one competition and decide that club nights suit them better. That is a perfectly good outcome. The skill is the point, not the trophy.

Progress rarely looks like a highlight reel anyway. One ten-year-old joined last autumn clutching a script so covered in pencil notes it resembled a crumpled exam paper. She read every speech word for word, head down, voice barely above a whisper. Her coach made one deal with her: keep the script, but look up once per paragraph. That was the whole assignment. One look. By spring she had stopped needing the script at all, and this year she is the one greeting nervous new members at the door, assuring them that the chair at the back gets lonely.

what leaks into everything else

The obvious gains show up in class presentations, which stop being an ordeal and become a task like any other. The less obvious gains show up everywhere else. Students who have debated learn to structure an answer in an interview, to give a reason before an opinion, to ask a clarifying question instead of guessing at what someone meant. They write better, because building a case on paper and building one out loud are close cousins. They interrupt less, oddly enough, since rebuttal training punishes people who talk over their opponents by making them lose.

Then there are the small domestic victories that parents report with some amusement. Children who negotiate screen time with three neatly ordered arguments. Children who open with "I understand your point, however" and occasionally win. One father of a twelve-year-old described being out-argued at his own dinner table by someone he could still beat at arm wrestling. He did not sound entirely upset about it.

how to help from the kitchen table

Parents often ask what they can do at home, and the honest answer is: less than they fear, more than they think. Pressure is the enemy here. Curiosity is the friend. A few small habits go a long way.

- ask them to explain the motion they debated, then disagree with them politely on purpose
- let them rehearse a speech at dinner and resist the urge to rewrite their sentences
- come to the showcase, sit near the front, and clap like it is a stadium
- request a one-minute talk on a topic they love, dogs, football, drawing, anything goes
- praise the attempt rather than the polish, especially during the first term

Practice at home does something a coach cannot. It makes speaking feel ordinary, part of family life rather than a performance with stakes attached. A child who has argued about bedtime at the kitchen table a hundred times finds the classroom stage a little smaller and a little friendlier.

the practical bits

Joining is straightforward. Clubs are open from around age eight or nine, with groups arranged by age and experience so that a first-timer is never lined up against a three-year veteran. There is no audition and no minimum confidence level, which would be a strange requirement for a club designed to build confidence in the first place. Sessions run once a week through the term, and sign-up happens through the usual AELO Swiss Academy registration channels at the start of each term. Spaces do fill, since groups are kept deliberately small so that every student speaks every session. What to bring: a notebook, a pencil, and one topic the student would happily talk about for a minute. That last item matters more than any equipment ever could.

the long game

It is tempting to measure a speaking club in its visible moments: the showcase, the competition, the proud photograph afterwards. The real return arrives years later, in rooms nobody photographs. A university seminar where a student raises a hand before the hesitation wins. A job interview where the answer has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A wedding toast that makes people laugh on purpose rather than by accident.

There is a quieter gift as well. Debate trains a habit that much of modern life has not managed: hearing the other side fully before answering it. Students learn that the strongest response begins with an accurate summary of the point they disagree with, because an argument aimed at the wrong target convinces nobody. Carried into adulthood, that habit makes for better colleagues, better friends, and considerably better arguments at every level.

And it loops back to that first session, the new student in the chair at the back, wearing the expression of someone expecting dental surgery. By the end of the year, that chair is usually empty. Not because anyone moved it, but because the person in it moved forward. That is the whole club in a single image. Speak up, start small, and discover that a voice, once practiced, is a very hard thing to take away.