

THE HONOURABLE CHIEF JUSTICE GEOFFREY MA TAO-LI (4): ADVICE ON ORAL ADVOCACY

What advice do you have for students who are learning oral legal argument in English?

Well, if you do not have the time to go to court and listen to a good oral argument, actually, by the way, you can learn a lot from bad oral arguments too. You learn from other people's mistakes before you make them. If you aren't able to do that, I think listen, although I don't often say this, listen to politicians speaking because they are very good at getting their point across. Their point may not necessarily be a good one, but they are good at getting their points across and indeed anybody else who is able to make a speech. Politicians do that, prime ministers do that, presidents do that. I'm not asking you to agree with what they say, but just with their technique.

What can students do to learn better oral advocacy skills?

We are talking in a context of English. If you don't think that your English is good enough, very often it is good enough, it's just a matter of confidence, the best way of honing your skills is to find a group of friends on whom you can practise because if you don't practise it, you'll never be good at it. And if you don't practise it, the more nervous you're going to be in speaking in public. Once you speak in public and you're comfortable with it, then there's really no going back and you've mastered it because the more you speak, the more you are relaxed. The more relaxed you are, the more you are able to engage in a conversation with your audience and the easier it becomes to get your point across, which, after all, is the point of speaking or oral advocacy.

What are the main challenges that novice lawyers encounter when engaging in oral advocacy in court?

The greatest challenge in terms of speaking is yourself, and by which I mean everybody who has to speak out is nervous. I've been speaking in public for many years now as a barrister and as a judge, and at no point am I not nervous. The secret is to do two things. The first is to slow down. The second is to pretend that at least your audience doesn't realize that you are nervous. Now, in order to get around that, because most people would say, 'Well, that's easier said than done', I think the key to it is concentration. Don't be distracted by what is around you. If you are nervous, you are

more likely to be distracted by many things which occur at the background or to the side, and so on.
Concentrate and I guarantee nothing will go wrong.