Implementing Speaking and Listening Standards: Information for English Teachers

Without a great deal of warning or preparation, many English teachers find themselves in the position of being responsible for an expanded English curriculum that includes not only the traditional language arts of writing and reading but also the “new” language arts of speaking, listening, and media literacy. This paradigm shift that overtly includes and elevates the position of oral language arts in the English classroom is largely the result of the standards movement at both the national and state levels (Brewbaker 81).

The National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association’s Standards for the English Language Arts explicitly names “listening, speaking, viewing, and visually representing” in the overall goal statement and includes terms that refer to the oral language arts in nine of the twelve standards (103). A study that examined twenty-nine state standards documents revealed that every program included both speaking and listening as part of the state standards (Goulden 200).

With such a strong imperative, it is clear that, throughout the nation, English teachers will be making changes in what they teach. Those who have not been formally trained in speech education will need assistance in revising local curriculum and in preparing to implement speaking and listening instruction in their classrooms. Initial efforts to bridge knowledge and background gaps will of necessity take place at the local or personal level through inservice training for and self-education by teachers already in the English classroom.

Teachers charged with increasing the scope of speaking and listening instruction in their classrooms need help in two areas: (1) general information about what the content areas of “speaking” and “listening” include and how in a practical way teachers can incorporate appropriate instruction for these two language arts, and (2) specific information about the processes of speaking and listening that teachers can use when planning instruction, assignments, and assessments.

General Understanding of Speaking and Listening

What Do Speaking and Listening Mean? Without a professional definition to guide them, teachers may erroneously assume that any vocalizing is speaking and any silent, passive behavior is listening. The Speech Communication Association’s standards document clarifies the boundaries of what “speaking” and “listening” include as the terms are used by the speech communication discipline.

Based on the SCA guidelines, “speaking” includes both spontaneous informal speech (e.g., talking in work groups, responding in class discussion, participating in interviews) and prepared formal speeches. Speaking instruction focuses on expected behaviors (responses, delivery) in both formal and informal settings and the process of composing speech text (Speech Communication Association). Although they are worthwhile classroom activities,
oral reading, acting, and reciting are not technically “speaking,” and teachers should not assume that a curriculum limited to these oral activities fulfills speaking standards.

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The SCA’s explanation of “listening” is centered on a person’s engagement in a complex active process. Curriculum revisions might focus on learning about the elements included in the listening process and also learning strategies for listening for a variety of purposes (SCA 1–2).

How Can Teachers Add Speaking and Listening to a Full Curriculum?

There is a way to give students instruction, practice, and feedback about their speaking, listening, and viewing without deleting significant portions of the curriculum that focus on reading, writing, and literature. The key is integrating the three newcomers into the base of the traditional language arts.

Many language arts programs have already incorporated informal speaking as an integral part of the curriculum through small group work in writing workshops and literature discussion. The vignettes in Standards for the English Language Arts, designed to illustrate standards in practice, provide model examples of the use of informal speaking and listening integrated into literature and writing study. Eleven of the twelve middle school and high school vignettes presented in the NCTE-IRA publication include either informal speaking in the contexts of group discussion, or interviews, or both. A few examples of individual speaking presentations are also found in the vignettes (55–67).

An excellent illustration of how to integrate individual speaking, discussion, and listening is found in Rodney Keller’s approach to teaching writing called the “rhetorical cycle.” He leads his students through the stages of the rhetorical cycle as they develop individual written compositions. His stages include: (1) background reading from literature or on a specific topic; (2) individual thinking stimulated by prewriting activities; (3) speaking in small groups about each writer’s tentative plans; (4) listening and reflecting on the listener’s understanding of their plans; and (5) discussing each student’s proposal. Keller explains that, at the end of step 5, students have not only completed the prewriting phase, they have created an oral draft of their essay (27–32).

A second economical approach to integrating speaking and listening into the studies of reading and writing is to build on the commonalities between the pairs of language arts. Both teachers and their students need to talk about and identify the similarities and the differences that exist between reading and listening and between writing and speaking.

Just as a teacher might guide students to focus on the purpose (or genre) of a text students read in order to identify specific strategies for understanding, a teacher would also introduce the purpose for a listening episode to help students utilize the most appropriate listening strategies in that situation. Another potential commonality is the use of student responses to assess both reading comprehension and listening comprehension. Instruction that identifies a variety of appropriate listening response strategies (e.g., paraphrasing, questioning, extending) and then gives students practice with those strategies may overlap or at least correspond with reading instruction. A teacher can also adapt aids such as reading guides or graphic organizers to help students make meaning when listening. The Michigan State Board of Education’s language arts standards document provides a good model for correlating the teaching of reading, listening, and viewing (4).

Both writing and speaking are fundamentally discourse composition processes. At the most general level, the processes encompass analogous stages: pre-composition (prewriting); oral drafting (written drafting); revision; speaking (writing); post-speaking (postwriting). However, the two processes in detail are not identical because of the different nature of the products and the different delivery systems. Teachers and students need to recognize that
one does not write a text using the language, strategies, and conventions of written discourse, then read the paper out loud and call it a speech. The distinct language, syntax, and conventions of speaking, such as obvious sharing of the structure of the speech and repetition, are needed because of the transitory nature of the speech.

Building on the unique nature of each of the language arts and how they complement and intersect with each other is not only an efficient way to include speaking and listening, but also offers additional opportunities for practicing the common elements and processes that reading and writing share with listening and speaking.

Specific Instruction in Speaking and Listening

Speaking

The appropriate place to begin working with students on developing their speaking abilities is in the context of informal speaking. Extensive practice in exploratory talk and brief impromptu messages to the whole class create the foundation for students’ preparation and presentation of longer more formal individual speeches.

Informal Speaking

Very little direct instruction is needed for informal speaking. The teacher’s primary responsibility is to create classroom situations that promote active participation by all students in productive classroom talk. Most informal classroom talk will be either in the whole class setting, with students speaking to the entire class from their seats, or in small groups. There are three steps to encourage informal speaking participation by all students: (1) both teacher and students should expect every student to speak orally every day about class content; (2) the teacher should set up classroom structures and practices that make universal classroom speaking a reality; and (3) students should be given information and tools to prepare them to speak.

Perhaps the first rule of a fully participatory classroom is that the teacher will not depend exclusively on volunteers in class discussion.

Students need guidance in preparing to speak informally, either in small groups or before the whole class. Most people require a little thinking time before they orally explain, argue, or support an idea. Before turning students loose to “discuss this in your groups” or respond to a question requiring higher level thinking in class discussion, teachers should give students a few minutes to think about the topic and write some brief notes to explore and organize their thoughts. A good pattern for impromptu speakers to use is claim support. Students jot down a phrase or sentence that summarizes their answer and then map out the support for this central response claim.
The idea of everyone being an active contributor in class every day may be a new concept to students who have primarily experienced classrooms dominated by teacher talk or classrooms where the most assertive volunteers have participated in the classroom exchanges while other students played a passive role. Initially, the formerly silent students may be surprised and unprepared when asked to speak; however, when students realize that they are going to talk about class content, that they will have the opportunity to prepare to speak, and that their responses will be valued, then they are well on their way to being active participants in informal speaking. By making these recommended changes, the total amount of speaking time in the classroom does not have to change. The important change is the shifting pattern from minority participation to universal participation.

**Formal Speaking**

Once students have become reasonably comfortable with hearing their own voices and ideas in classroom discussion or recitation, they should be ready to move on to preparing and presenting short, simple individual speeches such as one-point speeches or narratives.

Teachers must lead students through the process of speech construction. As mentioned earlier, the foundations for the stage of precomposition should already be in place from their study of the writing process. However, the drafting stages for speaking and writing have important differences. In order to produce the appropriate word choices and sentence structure for the listening audience as opposed to the reading audience, the easiest method to ensure authentic oral language is by oral drafting and presenting the speech in an extemporaneous manner.

When using the extemporaneous mode, the speaker relies on detailed plans, extensive practice, and notes but does not create a written script. After speakers have researched the topic and chosen a thesis, audience outcome goals, main points, an organizational pattern, and support materials, they then make a detailed plan in the form of an outline, list, map, or any other note system that is preferred. The next step is to talk through the speech in a private setting following the written guide, stopping and restarting as needed, exploring alternative ways of expressing the message. By the time the speaker has worked through the speech, a rough oral draft exists. The next stage, of course, is revision based on a reevaluation of original choices. Speakers continue to individually and privately talk through the speech, perhaps several times, revising where needed.

When the speaker believes the speech is pretty well set, it should be timed and speaking notes prepared. In later run-through, speakers should become aware of delivery behaviors such as

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Initially, students often find the idea of speaking without a written text frightening. In the oral communication field, we have found that teaching students the process of oral drafting and giving them sufficient practice, beginning with short simple speeches, helps them develop the confidence to speak in this natural, audience-centered manner.

The most important criteria by which to judge effective delivery is whether or not the speaker has made direct connection with the audience. Delivery that just looks or sounds polished will have little real impact if they are not engaged in shared communication.
engaged in shared communication. The real secret to effective delivery is attitudinal rather than behavioral. Successful speakers who appear natural and comfortable focus on the message and getting that message to the audience, not on how they look and feel. When a speaker is drawn into the excitement of the message, then effective delivery behaviors usually just happen.

Although experts do not recommend teaching a lengthy list of “do’s” and “don’ts” of delivery behaviors, some students may need specific feedback so they can reduce voice and body problems that interfere with audience connections. Typical feedback topics include reminders to speak loudly and clearly enough that the audience can hear the message without undue effort and to make genuine eye contact with audience members. Real eye contact requires that the speaker scan the audience and briefly lock eyes with individuals. This should not be a mechanical head swiveling, or a fixing of the speaker’s eyes on the space above audience member’s heads, or brief flickers of the eyes up and down. Instead, the speaker should look directly into the eyes of audience members for a very brief time. Some beginning students find it very difficult to make direct eye contact because they feel shy or self-conscious. Nevertheless, they should try to do so, since it is through sharing glances with audience members that they encounter supportive audience responses that can help increase their level of comfort.

Feedback is also necessary when students behave in ways that are so obviously distracting that their actions create barriers between the speaker and audience. An occasional “um” or small nervous movement probably will not even be noticed by the audience. It’s not necessary to point out these minor natural flaws to speakers, since they are often reduced or eliminated as speakers become more comfortable in front of a group. On the other hand, speakers whose behaviors truly get in the way of the message (talking far too loudly; engaging in constant, undirected motion; or using frequent disfluencies or filler words) should be made aware of these problems in a private conference. Speakers may be able to achieve some level of control over such distractions once they realize what they are doing; however, if teachers assess speech delivery, they should remember that changing lifelong communication patterns is difficult and may not be possible except for very brief periods.

Speaking in Small Groups
Speaking in small groups is a special informal situation. Students are usually under less teacher supervision and have more independent responsibilities. Probably one of the easiest ways to include productive speech by every student every day is to take advantage of the cooperative learning that is already part of many language arts classrooms. In this less-controlled situation, though, it is easy for students to
avoid being active participants or to revert to non-productive or negative communication practices.

An excellent source for teachers who want to improve the communication aspects of small group work is the book Focus on Collaborative Learning published by NCTE. In the first two essays Dana Herreman and Richard Whitworth present concrete information on what students in the English classroom need to learn about small group communication (5–20). The following suggestions are in harmony with Herreman’s and Whitworth’s recommendations and also reflect current thinking and practices in the speech communication field.

First, enhancing the prospect of student active participation depends on the teacher’s plans and instructions for small group work. The smaller the number of students working together, the greater the likelihood that all will participate. For active sharing by all, groups of three to five members work best. A second teaching strategy for stimulating total member participation is to give different responsibilities to different students within the group. For example, make each student responsible for a particular piece or category of information; or assign different communication tasks (e.g., paraphrasing the assignment to the group, summarizing the group decision or plan, reporting back to the whole group) to different individuals within the group.

It is important to provide direct instruction about communication in small groups on the following subjects: (1) making and using agendas; (2) eliminating negative communication behaviors such as being rude, using personal attacks, monopolizing the conversation, dominating the decisions and process, and being stubborn beyond reason; and (3) promoting behaviors that move the discussion along, such as asking pertinent questions, summarizing, providing useful information, and helping others enter the conversation. Self-assessment, peer assessment, and teacher observation can all be used to track and reinforce progress in these group communication practices.

**Listening**

Teachers should expect and facilitate good listening practices in all classroom settings. People attend to others’ speaking when they have a motivation to listen. Some educators recommend that instructions or explanations be given only once. If students know they will hear something several times, they may just tune out altogether. Students may also ignore what classmates say if the exchange appears to be between only one student and the teacher. They just remain “on hold” until the student is finished speaking and wait for the teacher to tell them the “real answer.” To break these passive patterns, teachers should remind students to direct their comments to the whole class. Rather than depending exclusively on teacher evaluation or reiteration of what a student has said, the teacher can hand the conversational baton off to another student by asking what the listener thinks of the first student’s response or if the listener wants to add something to what has been said.

Content instruction in listening may be structured around purposes such as listening to acquire information, listening to analyze or evaluate, listening to extend empathy, or listening for entertainment. Concentrating on a specific purpose provides the framework for teaching students how to take notes, how to extract and identify organizational patterns from oral messages, and how to identify and test the arguments and reasoning found in oral and visual messages.

The richest classroom setting for students to practice and demonstrate proficient listening is in the small group context where they have maximum opportunities to respond. Teachers can introduce and model such listening response techniques as paraphrasing, summarizing, question-asking, evaluating, and turn-taking so that students will have an understanding of a variety of listening responses. Awareness of and responsibility for a menu of responses promotes active listening and gives students new tools for processing incoming data during a group discussion. Self, peer, and teacher assessment of response strategies used during small group discussion provide a means to guide students in the improvement of listening practices.

**Conclusion**

Teachers need not be overwhelmed by the prospect of implementing speaking and listening into the language arts curriculum. This article is not meant to be a prescription for implementation that must be rigorously followed step by step. Rather, it can serve as a guide to adding the new language arts to the traditional foundation. Implementation doesn’t have to occur all at once. Teachers just need to start, learn what works in their classrooms, learn what others are doing, learn more about the field of...
oral communication, and then continue to integrate additional “new language arts” instruction and assignments.

**Note**

The Speech Communication Association has recently changed its name to the National Communication Association. More information can be found on their web site: www.natcom.org.

**Works Cited**


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