



Teaching Talk

Incorporating Intentional Instruction of
Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication in
the Classroom

Curriculum connections

- Listening, speaking and non-verbal communication
- Building community
- Assessment
- Inclusive design for learning

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What it is

While much of English/Language Arts instruction focuses on the development of reading strategies and writing skills, oral language and non-verbal communication skills are no less important. **Oral communication refers to the application of listening, speaking, and non-verbal communication skills in order to communicate in meaningful ways, as well as the development of strategies that facilitate understanding.** This involves direct teaching and student reflection on listening skills and effective strategies that support comprehension, along with appropriate speaking strategies relevant to the purpose, understanding of how verbal and non-verbal cues affect communication, and the ways in which word selection and sentence structure are used to effectively communicate meaning. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2023)

While the primary years focus on turn taking while speaking using simple sentences, throughout the junior years, students consolidate their understanding of complex and compound sentences, and are expected to use them when speaking. They should be able to listen to understand a variety of sentence structures and to use comments or questions in response. By the intermediate grades, students continue to build on these skills, in particular thinking further about purposes and audiences related to speaking and listening.

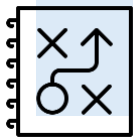


Why it matters

An understanding of how to communicate clearly using a combination of oral language and non-verbal cues is essential for being able to share ideas in the classroom, and to carry out day to day interactions outside of the classroom. **These skills differ from those used to communicate online**, and students will benefit from support with distinguishing these differences. There is a growing understanding that oral communication skills directly impact reading and writing skills. Studies also indicate that promoting oral communication and rich discussions in content areas increase achievement in math, science, and social studies. When students have the communication skills needed for meaningful discussion, they are able to process their learning, as well as recognize and work through misunderstandings and gaps in knowledge (Duhaylongsod et al., 2023).

By building students' oral communication skills, teachers are **also giving students the opportunity to develop their collaboration and critical thinking skills**. This is especially important when carrying out inquiry-based learning in the classroom. In order to learn through inquiry, students need to be able to ask each other questions and share their understanding with others. This happens largely through verbal communication.

Building students' capacity for discussion also leads to improved class culture and increased agency and equity for students. In order to solve problems in the classroom and the community at large, students need to develop the necessary communication skills. "The seeds of building community and building bridges between communities are planted in conversations students have with each other every day" (Vilen & Berger, 2020).



How it works

Moving away from teacher dominated question and answer type discussion towards a more dialogic approach gives students more opportunities to develop their communication skills. Engagement in student-led talk and student-student interactions supports understanding and literacy development (Edwards-Groves, 2024). Some students are more verbal than others and some students may be non-verbal. Educators will want to adapt their approach and activities to include everyone. Adapting activities is an opportunity for everyone in the classroom to learn about differences and collaborate in ways they may not be used to.

12 things to try in your classroom

1. Morning Meetings

Start the day with mini discussions. In pairs, have students discuss their responses to a question (e.g., What is your favourite thing to do at recess? Who would you like to see in concert? For more ideas, see [200+ Morning Meeting Questions To Start the Day Off Right \(Free Printable and Slides\) \(external resource\)](#).) Set the stage for success by modelling and discussing the communication skills they will be practising (i.e., facing or sitting beside their partner, using facial expressions or gestures such as nodding to show that they are listening, responding to their partner's answer by making a connection and sharing their own answer).

2. Speech Dissection

As a class, watch TED Talk clips of students their age and discuss the presentation skills used by the presenter (e.g., hand gestures, use of visual aids without reading from them, word choice and sentence structure) to co-create success criteria for writing and presenting speeches.

3. Speech Jigsaw Practice

Read a speech as a class. Review the success criteria for speakers (see [Sample success criteria for speaking and listening](#) example below), and then give each group a part of the speech (introduction, a body paragraph, or conclusion). In small groups students discuss what techniques (vocal expression, volume, posture, gestures) they would employ if presenting the speech. Then regroup the students so that each group member has a different section of the speech, and have them present to each other. At the end, give them time to give each other constructive feedback (e.g., “It was really effective when...”; “One thing you could try is...” based on the success criteria.

4. Poetry Café

Students present a poem of their choosing, or one that they have written, using effective speaking strategies. Prior to the poetry café, review the active listening strategies that the audience should be using and the speaking techniques that will make for an engaging poetry reading.

5. Interviews

Students can interview each other about their own lives or interests, or they can take turns being an ‘expert’ on an

area of personal interest or learning in the content areas. The interviewer will practise active listening skills in order to ask appropriate follow up questions, and the interviewee will practise clear communication using complex and compound sentence structures.

6. Listening Summary

In pairs, students take turns speaking for one minute about something that is important to them (e.g., a book they are reading, an extra-curricular activity they enjoy, a game that they like to play), while the other student listens. The listener then summarizes in a few sentences what they learned from the speaker. Clarification and discussion of any misunderstandings can follow.

7. Knowledge Building Circles

Students are seated in a circle facing each other, and have the opportunity to share new understandings, ask questions, make observations, and build on others' ideas. See [Oral Language Activities - Knowledge Building Circle \(external link\)](#) for a detailed procedure.

8. One Line, Many Meanings Drama Game

Students are given a phrase or sentence to say (e.g., "I'm fine"; "It doesn't matter"; "What do you think?") and play with intonation, facial expression, and body language to change the meaning. For example, show the person really is feeling okay, or rather is angry or sad. Discuss the non-verbal cues that help the listener understand the true meaning.

9. News Report

Pretending to be a news anchor, students present a news item related to a topic they are studying in Language Arts or English, or through cross-curricular work in science or social studies. Practise using tone and facial expression to convey the degree of seriousness appropriate for the news topic.

10. Public Service Announcement

Students work individually, in pairs, or in small groups to create and present a 30 second public service announcement related to a theme or idea in Language Arts or English or a cross-curricular concept they are studying (e.g., in health).

11. Silent Conversation Drama Activity

Give pairs of students a scenario from a book you are reading in class. Students then act out a silent conversation using only facial expressions, posture, and gestures. Before starting the activity, discuss the ideas the characters are trying to communicate to each other in the scene, and brainstorm ways they can communicate those ideas non-verbally.

12. Mystery Video

Play a video clip with the volume muted. As a class, discuss what may be happening in the video based on the facial expressions, posture, and gestures observed. Encourage students to explain how the non-verbal cues are communicating meaning even though they can't hear any words being spoken. This can also provide an opportunity to discuss how these gestures may have different meanings in other cultural contexts. (Visit

[Cultural Differences in Body Language to be Aware of \(external resource\)](#) for more information on cultural differences in non-verbal communication.)

When students have the skills to understand and communicate with one another verbally and non-verbally, they are better able to have meaningful conversations that support their learning across all subject areas. Providing students with various opportunities to develop and practise these skills will increase confidence and literacy outcomes.

Sample success criteria for speaking and listening

Using success criteria related to listening and speaking helps learners determine the sub-skills related to effective oral communication.

Listeners

- ⇒ Focus attention and minimize distractions (e.g., Are there things I need to set aside so that I can listen carefully? Are there distractions that I can't control (e.g., background noise) that will require me to focus differently?)
- ⇒ Describe ways to that directs your attention to the speaker (e.g., look at, turn my body towards, or come closer to, the speaker)
- ⇒ Identify the purpose for listening (e.g., Are there explicit directions in terms of my purpose for listening? Is the listening purpose implicit, and therefore I will need to determine a purpose for my listening?)
- ⇒ Use gestures to show agreement, appreciation, or understanding (e.g., nodding, leaning forward)

- ⇒ Describe/retell the meaning of what is being said, and keep a running summary (e.g., in my head or by making notes) about the information I am hearing
- ⇒ Make connections to the information received (e.g., Is this what I expected to hear? Does this relate to information I already know? What am I anticipating I might hear?)
- ⇒ Ask clarifying questions to increase understanding, at an appropriate break, without interrupting the speaker

Speakers

- ⇒ Use a volume that is loud enough to be heard by all
- ⇒ Identify the purpose for speaking (How will my language and the information I share meet my purpose?)
- ⇒ Identify the audience (What does my audience already know? What will they want to know? What language can I use to help my audience to understand?)
- ⇒ Organize ideas in a way that will promote understanding
- ⇒ Use vocal techniques (e.g., tone, expression, pacing) as well as facial expressions and gestures (e.g., pointing to a visual cue, moving an open hand in a forward circular motion) to engage the audience
- ⇒ Use a variety of sentences that are ordered logically to communicate ideas
- ⇒ Choose words that clearly communicate what I want to say
- ⇒ Describe a method for remembering information that will be presented (e.g., Will I use a set of notes to refer to? Will my information be on a set of slides that I will speak to (without reading directly from them)?)

Inclusive design for learning

Educators know that every student is unique and variable, that there is no average student. When learning is designed inclusively it can help to address exclusion of persons with identified, unidentified, permanent or episodic disabilities. Through the individualisation and adaptation of learning materials and leveraging the flexibility of digital resources, excluded or struggling learners can be included, to the benefit of all learners (Watkins et al.). The following lists of considerations can enhance a teaching environment, help to create more accessible resources and support inclusive learning by design.

Considerations for supporting neurodiversity of learners

- ⇒ Eye contact or looking at the speaker may be uncomfortable or anxiety-inducing for some students. **Students looking away or at the ground is not an indication that the student isn't listening.** Removing visual distractions can be helpful.
- ⇒ **Fidgeting and body movements are not always an indication of distraction.** Fidgets, doodling, hand and body movements help some students stay regulated, which improves their ability to listen.
- ⇒ Some students **may make auditory noises to stay calm** as they process what they are listening to.
- ⇒ **Regulating the impulse to interrupt** and share an idea before the speaker has finished their thought will be more challenging for some students. Drinking water or chewing gum can provide sensory input and help the student pause and think before speaking.
- ⇒ **Interpreting non-verbal cues and gestures may be more difficult.** Specific explanation and demonstration of common gestures and cues can help build understanding.

Considerations for supporting language diversity in learners

- ⇒ Provide **clear speaking prompts as well as supports** such as graphic organizers and sentence frames, when needed.
- ⇒ Give students time to **formulate and organize their thoughts** before speaking.
- ⇒ Depending on where the student is on the continuum (e.g., STEP) of acquiring fluency in English, they may be at varying levels of readiness in terms of using vocabulary and simple, complex and compound sentences, as listeners and as speakers. Their **level of readiness may also differ between listening and speaking**.
- ⇒ **Provide students opportunities to share communication strategies** and practices that are common in their first language.
- ⇒ **Encourage multilingual learners to use translanguaging**. This may involve students taking notes in another language while listening to information in English, writing speaking notes in their first language and then writing English phrases beside it, or communicating using a combination of English and their first language along with non-verbal cues to promote listener understanding.

Resources

In order to facilitate meaningful classroom discussion, it is important that students have the language to use when they want to acknowledge a classmate's point of view, add on to someone's idea, clarify, or disagree respectfully. Consider Jennifer Casa Todd's peer feedback conversation starters and build on them with sentence starters of your own: [Peer feedback: the why and the how \(external link\)](#)

For an explanation of common North American hand gestures, with accompanying videos and pictures, visit: [60 Hand Gestures You Should Be Using and Their Meaning \(external resource\)](#)

Links found in the document

[200+ Morning Meeting Questions To Start the Day Off Right \(Free Printable and Slides\) \(external resource\)](#)

[Oral Language Activities - Knowledge Building Circle \(external link\)](#)

[Cultural Differences in Body Language to be Aware of \(external resource\)](#)

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Updates

When updates are made to this document, they are tracked below with date and description of update.

- February 2025: initial release