Checking for Understanding: Formative Assessment Techniques for Your Classroom

by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey

Chapter 2. Using Oral Language to Check for Understanding

Humans have been using their voices to engage in critical and creative thinking for a long time—much longer, in fact, than they have used writing instruments. Sumerian cuneiforms, the first writing system, were not developed until about 4000 BCE (Ouaknin, 1999). This is a relatively short amount of time when you consider that humans have been communicating orally for at least 50,000 years (Ong, 1991). Interestingly, there are thousands of languages that have no written literature associated with them. As Ong (1991) notes:

   Indeed, language is so overwhelmingly oral that of all the many thousands of languages—possibly tens of thousands—spoken in the course of human history only around 106 have ever been committed to a degree sufficient to have produced literature, and most have never been written at all. Of the some 3,000 languages spoken that exist today only some 78 have a literature. (p. 7)

That isn't to say that oral traditions are inadequate. Humans have a long history of using oral language to communicate with one another. Oral language has served us well in conveying information that keeps members of our communities alive, healthy, safe, and fed.

The classroom is no exception to these oral traditions. In a book focused on the ways in which teachers and students interact, it seems appropriate to begin with the oldest language tradition—oral. We'll define oral language first, explore the development of oral language, review some cautionary evidence of the misuse of oral language in the classroom, and then explore the ways in which oral language can be used in checking for understanding.

Oral Language Defined

We've adopted the speaking and listening definitions put forth by Cooper and Morreale:

   **Speaking:** Speaking is the uniquely human act or process of sharing and exchanging information, ideas, and emotions using oral language. Whether in daily information interactions or in more formal settings, communicators are required to organize coherent messages, deliver them clearly, and adapt them to their listeners.

   **Listening:** Listening is the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages. People call on different listening skills depending on whether their goal is to comprehend information, critique and evaluate a message, show empathy for the feelings expressed by others, or
appreciate a performance. Taken together, the communication skills of speaking and listening, called oral language, form the basis for thinking. (2003, p. x)

In addition to these general definitions of speaking and listening, there are other language registers that humans use to communicate. In her work on understanding poverty, Payne (1995) delineates five distinct language registers. Each of these is explained in Figure 2.1. Speakers need to recognize these language registers, use them appropriately for the setting, and move fluidly between registers. As Romaine (1994) notes, “The concept of register is typically concerned with variations in language conditioned by uses rather than users and involves consideration of the situation or context of use, the purpose, subject-matter, and content of the message, and the relationship between the participants” (p. 20).

**Figure 2.1. Language Registers**

**Fixed or frozen.** Fixed speech is reserved for traditions in which the language does not change. Examples of fixed speech include the Pledge of Allegiance, Shakespeare plays, and civil ceremonies such as weddings.

**Formal.** At the formal level, speech is expected to be presented in complete sentences with specific word usage. Formal language is the standard for work, school, and business and is more often seen in writing than in speaking. However, public speeches and presentations are expected to be delivered in a formal language register.

**Consultative.** The third level of language, consultative, is a formal register used in conversations. Less appropriate for writing, students often use consultative language in their interactions in the classroom.

**Casual.** This is the language that is used in conversation with friends. In casual speech, word choice is general and conversation is dependent upon nonverbal assists, significant background knowledge, and shared information.

**Intimate.** This is the language used by very close friends and lovers. Intimate speech is private and often requires a significant amount of shared history, knowledge, and experience.


**Oral Language Development**

Oral language development is not simply teaching children to speak. Oral language development must focus on students’ ability to communicate more effectively. Oral language involves thinking, knowledge, and skills that develop across the life span. These are critical because “speaking and listening are to reading and writing [as] walking is to running” (New Standards, 2001, p. i).
Oral language development is a natural process for children and youth. It occurs almost without effort. While the ability to communicate improves as students get older, such growth will not automatically lead to high levels of performance and skill. To speak in highly effective ways requires attention and practice. Unfortunately, as Stabb (1986) notes, teachers often become “so involved with establishing routine, finishing the textbook, covering curriculum, and preparing students for standardized tests that we have forgotten one of our original goals, that of stimulating thought” (p. 290).

A great deal is known about the oral language development of young children (see Biemiller, 1999; Kirkland & Patterson, 2005). As noted in Figure 2.2, researchers, parents, and teachers have articulated developmental milestones for children’s acquisition of oral communication skills. Much less is known about oral language development for older students. However, some school districts, such as Long Beach Unified School District in California, have established goals for oral language across the grade levels (see Figure 2.3).

**Figure 2.2. Stages of Early Oral Language Development**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1</td>
<td>Infant</td>
<td>A child at this stage smiles socially, imitates facial expressions, coos, cries, babbles, plays with sounds, develops intonation, and repeats syllables.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2</td>
<td>18 months to 2 years</td>
<td>A child at this stage responds to specific songs, uses two-word sentences, depends on intonation and gesture, understands simple questions, and points to and/or names objects in pictures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 3</td>
<td>2 to 3 years</td>
<td>A child at this stage begins to use pronouns and prepositions, uses “no,” remembers names of objects, and generalizes. There is a high interest in language and an increase in communication. There is a large jump in vocabulary growth and articulation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stage 4  3 to 4 years
A child at this stage communicates needs, asks questions, begins to enjoy humor, has much better articulation, begins true conversation, responds to directional commands, knows parts of songs, can retell a story, speaks in three- and four-word sentences, is acquiring the rules of grammar, and learns sophisticated words heard in adult conversation.

Stage 5  4 to 5 years
A child at this stage has a tremendous vocabulary, uses irregular noun and verb forms, talks with adults on adult level in four- to eight-word sentences, giggles over nonsense words, engages in imaginative play using complex oral scripts, tells longer stories, recounts in sequence the day's events, and uses silly and profane language to experiment and shock the listener.


**Figure 2.3. Goals for Speaking and Listening by Grade Levels**

**Kindergarten–2nd Grade**
Students listen critically and respond appropriately to oral communication. Students will:

- Determine the purpose or purposes of listening (e.g., to obtain information, to solve problems, for enjoyment)
- Ask for clarification and explanation of stories and ideas
- Paraphrase information that has been shared orally by others
- Give and follow three- and four-step oral directions
- Speak clearly and at an appropriate pace for the type of communication (e.g., informal discussion, report to class)

Students deliver brief recitations and oral presentations about familiar experiences or interests. Students will:

- Describe story elements (e.g., characters, plot, setting)
- Report on a topic with facts and details, drawing from several sources of information
3rd–5th Grade

Students deliver focused, coherent presentations that convey ideas clearly and relate to the background and interests of the audience. Students will:

- Ask questions that seek information not already discussed
- Interpret a speaker's verbal and nonverbal messages, purposes, and perspectives
- Make inferences or draw conclusions based on an oral report
- Retell, paraphrase, and explain what has been said by the speaker typically listened to for recreational, informational, or functional purposes
- Select a focus, organizational structure, and point of view for an oral presentation
- Clarify and support spoken ideas with evidence and examples
- Analyze media sources for information, entertainment, persuasion, interpretation of events, and transmission of culture

Students deliver well-organized formal presentations employing traditional rhetorical strategies (e.g., narration, exposition, persuasion, description). Students will:

- Deliver narrative presentations that establish a situation, plot, point of view, and setting with descriptive words and phrases and show, rather than tell, the listener what happens
- Deliver informative presentations about an important idea, issue, or event by framing questions to direct the investigation, establishing a controlling idea or topic, and developing the topic with simple facts, details, examples, and explanations
- Deliver oral responses to literature that summarize significant events and details, articulate an understanding of several ideas or images communicated by the literary work, and use examples or textual evidence from the work to support conclusions

6th–8th Grade

Students formulate adroit judgments about oral communication. They deliver focused and coherent presentations that convey clear and distinct perspectives and demonstrate solid reasoning. They use gestures, tone, and vocabulary tailored to the audience and purpose. Students will:

- Paraphrase a speaker's purpose and point of view and ask relevant questions concerning the speaker's content, delivery, and purpose
- Deliver a focused, coherent speech based on organized information that generally includes an introduction, transitions, preview and summaries, a logical body, and an effective conclusion
• Evaluate the credibility of a speaker and evaluate the various ways in which visual image makers communicate information and affect impressions and opinions

• Demonstrate appropriate group discussion behavior by listening attentively, collaborating equitably, and asking questions and extending discussions

Students deliver polished formal and extemporaneous presentations that combine traditional rhetorical strategies of narration, exposition, persuasion, and description. Student speaking demonstrates a command of standard American English and the organizational and delivery strategies outlined in the California ELA Standards. Students will:

• Deliver narrative presentations that relate a coherent incident, event, or situation and elegantly express the significance of, and the subject's attitude about, the incident, event, or situation

• Deliver oral responses to literature that interpret the reading and provide insight through textual references, with judgments supported and discussed using text connections (text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world)

• Deliver research presentations that define a thesis, express important ideas using direct quotations from significant sources, and utilize visuals (charts, maps, and graphs) as a tool for presenting important information

• Deliver persuasive presentations that use supportive arguments with detailed evidence, examples, and reasoning and that anticipate and answer listener concerns and counterarguments effectively

• Recite poems, sections of speeches, or dramatic soliloquies using voice modulation, tone, and gestures expressively to enhance the meaning

From “Goals for speaking and listening by grade levels,” from the Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development, Long Beach Unified School District.

There is a significant body of evidence on the importance of attending to oral language development for English language learners across the K–12 spectrum (Rothenberg & Fisher, 2007; Short & Echevarria, 2004/2005). Given that oral language is the foundation of print literacy, it seems reasonable to suggest that all teachers, and especially those who teach English language learners, focus on speaking and listening in the classroom.

**Misuses of Oral Language in the Classroom**

Regardless of the size of the school, its demographics, the age of the teaching staff, or any other factor that we can think of, oral language will be used in the classroom. People will talk and listen—that's a given. The ways in which this talking and listening are used are the real key. There are at least three areas that we should address before continuing our discussion of the use of oral language in checking for understanding: poverty, language, and perceived skill
Poverty, Language, and Perceived Skill Level

In classrooms where there are increased numbers of students living in poverty, teachers talk more and students talk less (Lingard, Hayes, & Mills, 2003). In addition, there is an increased focus on basic skills in these classrooms and less attention to critical and creative thinking (Stipek, 2004). Teachers of struggling student groups or tracks usually offer students “less exciting instruction, less emphasis on meaning and conceptualization, and more rote drill and practice activities” than do teachers of high-performing or heterogeneous groups and classes (Cotton, 1989).

English language learners in many classrooms are asked easier questions or no questions at all (Guan Eng Ho, 2005; Rothenberg & Fisher, 2007). Several decades ago, Flanders (1970) noted that teachers of high-achieving students talked 55 percent of the class time. He compared them with teachers of low-achieving students who monopolized class time, talking at least 80 percent of the time.

In other words, the amount of teacher versus student talk in a classroom varies by the demographics of the students. In addition, students who live in poverty, are English language learners, have disabilities, or are otherwise at risk in school spend more of their time on basic skills and less time engaged in activities, lessons, or inquiry that fosters creative and critical thinking.

Gender Differences

Interestingly, gender also plays a role in how much talk there is in a classroom. While there are debates on which gender is at greater risk for school failure and lack of engagement (van Langen, Bosker, & Dekkers, 2006; Wilhelm & Smith, 2005), there is clear evidence that the amount of time that girls spend participating orally in class decreases as they get older (Orenstein, 1994). In addition, there is evidence that teachers call on boys more often than girls, ask boys more higher-order questions, give boys more extensive feedback, and use longer wait time with boys than with girls (Sadker & Sadker, 1986, 1995).

The Initiate-Respond-Evaluate Model

In classrooms across the country, teachers ask students questions and students respond. The Initiate-Respond-Evaluate model of questioning dominates classroom discourse (see Cazden, 1988). In this model, the teacher asks a question, specific students are called on to answer the question, and the teacher evaluates the response. A typical interaction might look something like this:

Teacher: Why did the Puritans leave England? (Initiate)

Student: Because they were not treated right because of their religion. (Respond)

Teacher: Yes. (Evaluate) And why else? (Initiate)

While this interaction requires oral language, it focuses on “guess what's in the teacher's head” or what the teacher already knows, not on critical thinking by the whole group. In addition,
when one student is provided the opportunity to answer, the ability to check for understanding with the larger group is lost. Cazden (1988) suggests that teachers ask themselves two questions about the discourse in their classrooms:

- How do patterns of talk in the classroom affect the quality of students' educational opportunities and outcomes?
- How is discourse used as a support for deeper student learning?

Let's explore these questions as we consider the ways in which teachers can proactively and positively use oral language to check for understanding.

### Oral Language Strategies in Checking for Understanding

#### Accountable Talk

How often have you assigned a partner discussion topic to students, only to hear the conversation devolve into a chat about weekend activities, a new movie, or the lunch menu? Often these students are not being willfully disobedient, but rather lack the skills necessary to conduct a meaningful conversation about an academic topic. Accountable talk is a framework for teaching students about discourse in order to enrich these interactions. First developed by Lauren Resnick (2000) and a team of researchers at the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh, accountable talk describes the agreements students and their teacher commit to as they engage in partner conversations. These include the following guidelines:

- Stay on topic.
- Use information that is accurate and appropriate for the topic.
- Think deeply about what the partner has to say.

We consider accountable talk to be crucial to classroom discourse because it creates shared expectations for all academic communication in the classroom. The three principles are equally relevant in a guided reading group, a book club meeting, a Socratic seminar, or a whole-class discussion.

Students are taught how to be accountable to one another and to their learning using techniques that forward the conversation and deepen their understanding of the topic at hand. The Institute for Learning Web site ([www.instituteforlearning.org](http://www.instituteforlearning.org)) describes five indicators of accountable talk; we have added an example after each:

- Press for clarification and explanation: “Could you describe what you mean?”
- Require justification of proposals and challenges: “Where did you find that information?”
- Recognize and challenge misconceptions: “I don't agree because . . .”
- Demand evidence for claims and arguments: “Can you give me an example?”
- Interpret and use each other's statements: “David suggested . . .”

These communication skills are invaluable for students using inquiry as a way to engage in
active learning. Teachers fostering accountable talk in the classroom can monitor the use of these indicators by listening to partners exchange information. In addition, the questions students ask of one another should inform the next segment of teacher-directed instruction.

Sixth grade teacher Ricardo Montoya monitors partner conversations to make teaching decisions. During one lesson, he introduced the concept of physical and chemical weathering to students, assigned them to partner groups, and asked the partners to identify examples of the two types of weathering using a series of photographs. As Mr. Montoya listened in on the students' conversations, he noticed that several partners were asking clarifying questions of one another concerning a photograph of acid rain. A few partners felt it was an example of physical weathering because of the force of the water. Many others described it as chemical weathering due to the acidic quality of the rain. Mr. Montoya asked partners to share their conversations, including their disagreements, with the rest of the class. He then led a class discussion on the possibility of considering acid rain as an example of both chemical and physical weathering. Mr. Montoya's attention to the students' conversations helped him to make the next instructional step in his lesson.

Noticing Nonverbal Cues
Another way that teachers use oral language to check for understanding involves noticing the nonverbal cues that students give. While it may seem a stretch to include nonverbal cues in typical oral language interactions, remember that a significant portion of our communication comes from facial expression, eye movement, and such (see Calero, 2005). Students in our classrooms often let us know that they do or do not understand something through nonverbal cues, which may be as simple as the look on one's face or as complex as throwing one's hands in the air (in triumph over a math problem or in agony over a reading assignment). As a teacher, you can use nonverbal cues to determine if your students look puzzled, harried, or bored. With practice, you will find yourself noticing and responding to these nonverbal cues while teaching.

Fifth grade teacher Amanda Chavez uses a daily shared reading lesson to model her thinking and comprehension strategies for students. She knows that her modeling will provide students with increasingly complex ways of thinking about texts. During her shared reading about Sojourner Truth from Americans Who Tell the Truth (Shetterly, 2005), Ms. Chavez noticed that Angel had a puzzled look on her face. Ms. Chavez paused in her reading and added some background information, watching Angel's face the whole time for signs of understanding. When Ms. Chavez said, “It seems strange now, but during the times of slavery, people could sell children who were born into slavery,” Angel's face changed noticeably. It became clear that Angel couldn't grasp the text about Sojourner Truth's life until she had the understanding that people have sold children.

Value Lineups
Many students master the skill of explaining their own position on a topic, but fewer learn the art of listening to positions that differ from their own. However, this ability is at the heart of meaningful discourse in the classroom and is essential to all learning. In a truly learner-
centered classroom, there is a free exchange of ideas that results in arriving at solutions to problems. Active learning results not from a knowledge dump emanating from the teacher alone but from a deeper understanding of the nuances and shades of gray that elevate knowledge. The National Research Council (2000) contrasts experts with novices in this way:

> Experts first seek to develop an understanding of problems, and this often involves thinking in terms of core concepts or big ideas. . . . Novices' knowledge is much less likely to be organized around big ideas; they are more likely to approach problems by searching for correct formulas and pat answers that fit their everyday intuitions. (p. 49)

Value lineups help students to develop such in-depth knowledge by enabling them to explore core concepts and understand problems by having them first analyze their beliefs and then listen to the positions held by others. The value lineup is a structure for fostering peer discourse based on students' opinions about an academic topic (Kagan, 1994). Students are asked to evaluate a statement and instructed to line up according to their degree of agreement or disagreement with the statement. After forming a single line, the queue is then folded in half so that the students who most strongly agreed and disagreed with one another are now face to face. Students then discuss their reasons for their positions and listen to the perspectives of their partners. This cultivates a broader understanding of the distinctions of understanding on a topic.

When Deborah Chin's 10th grade biology students were beginning a unit on the use of cloning, she asked them to consider their values and beliefs about cloning in reaction to this statement: “Scientists should be allowed to pursue research in cloning.” Ms. Chin's class then placed themselves on the wall of the classroom where the numbers 1 through 5 were displayed in a Likert-type scale. She reminded them that a 5 meant they strongly agreed, 4 meant they agreed, 3 meant they were not sure, 2 meant they disagreed, and 1 indicated that they strongly disagreed.

The students spent the next two minutes lining up according to their opinions. Ms. Chin then located the 18th student in line (the halfway point in this class of 36) and folded the line in half. Now the first student spoke to the 36th student, the second spoke to the 35th, and so on. Ms. Chin walked the line, listening to their conversations about why they agreed or disagreed with scientific research on cloning. She heard Anne, who strongly agreed, explaining to Paul, who strongly disagreed, about her recent trip with her family to Yosemite: “There's this project to clone the champion trees of the country so that they can be planted in other places, especially in cities.” She went on to explain that champion trees are the largest of their species and possess unique genetic features that make them more durable. Paul remarked that he never thought of cloning trees, only of humans, even though Ms. Chin's question did not mention this.

After several minutes of conversation, Ms. Chin instructed students to return to their seats. The lively debate continued, but important information from multiple perspectives was shared in the discussion. A number of factors were introduced to the problem of cloning, including benefits and moral and religious objections. By using the value lineup, Ms. Chin was able to
assess preconceived notions, background knowledge, and gaps in information. In addition, her students were challenged to consider other perspectives on the topic.

**Retellings**

Retellings are new accounts or adaptations of a text that allow students to consider information and then summarize, orally, what they understand about this information. Retellings require that students processing large segments of text think about the sequence of ideas or events and their importance. Inviting students to retell what they have just heard or read is a powerful way of checking for understanding (Hansen, 2004; Shaw, 2005).

Gambrell, Koskinen, and Kapinus (1991) examined the use of retellings with 4th grade proficient and less-proficient readers. They found that students who employed this technique made significant increases in the number of propositions and story structure elements recalled as well as the overall number of comprehension questions answered correctly. These authors note that students needed at least four practice sessions with retelling to become comfortable with the strategy. Like Cambourne (1998), Gambrell and colleagues argue that retelling is a more effective postreading activity than teacher questioning.

As noted above, students need to be taught the procedures of retelling. Understanding these processes helps establish purpose in reading and guides students' attention to key information from the text that they can use in their retellings. Figure 2.4 provides a number of variations on retellings, some of which, also known as summaries, will be discussed in the next chapter on using writing to check for understanding. In introducing the retelling technique, teachers should do the following:

1. Explain that the purpose of a retelling is to re-create the text in your own words.
2. Ask students to discuss the ways in which they talk about their favorite movie or CD. Make the connection between talking about the movie or CD and talking about a piece of text.
3. Model a retelling from a short piece of familiar text for students. If students know the piece of text well, they can compare the original with the retelling.
4. After the modeled retelling, ask students to discuss the similarities and differences between the original and the retelling.
5. Select a new piece of text, read it aloud, and create a retelling as a group. Again, ask students to discuss the similarities and differences between the original and the retelling.

As students become increasingly familiar with retellings, they can be used to check for understanding.

**Figure 2.4. Variations on Retellings**
Fourth grade teacher Aida Allen used the story retelling rubric found in Figure 2.5 to check her students' understanding of fiction and story grammar. She introduced the rubric after reading aloud *Walter, the Farting Dog* (Kotzwinkle & Murray, 2001). As a class, they created a retelling. Ms. Allen then facilitated the students in a discussion of the rubric, and they evaluated their group retelling using this tool. Next, Ms. Allen gave each group of four students different picture books. Their task was to read the book together and create a small-group retelling. The books she selected were all from the Walter series: *Walter the Farting Dog Goes on a Cruise* (Kotzwinkle, Murray, & Gundy, 2006), *Rough Weather Ahead for Walter the Farting Dog* (Kotzwinkle, Murray, & Gundy, 2005), *Walter the Farting Dog: Trouble at the Yard Sale* (Kotzwinkle & Murray, 2004), and *Walter the Farting Dog Farts Again* (Kotzwinkle & Murray, 2005).

**Figure 2.5. Retelling Rubric for Fiction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Exceeds Standards (2)</th>
<th>Meets Standards (1)</th>
<th>Needs Improvement (0)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characters</td>
<td>Your retelling describes the characters so that others have a good idea of what they are like.</td>
<td>Your retelling names the characters but does not describe much about them.</td>
<td>Your retelling confuses the identity of the characters or does not name them. Think about who was in the story and how they acted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>Your retelling helps others get a clear idea of when and where the story took place.</td>
<td>Your retelling provides some details about where and when the story took place.</td>
<td>Your retelling needs to describe when and where the story took place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem</td>
<td>Your retelling describes the problem, why this problem occurred, and how it might be solved.</td>
<td>Your retelling names the problem but not how it occurred or might be solved.</td>
<td>Your retelling needs to describe the problem, how the problem developed, and how it might be solved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution</td>
<td>Your retelling focuses on how the characters solved the problem.</td>
<td>Your retelling includes some of the important events that led to the solution and most are in the correct order.</td>
<td>Your retelling needs to focus on the major events and how these events led to the solution to the problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery</td>
<td>Your retelling uses good rhythm, fluency, expression, and gestures. Your voice changes for different characters.</td>
<td>Your rhythm and expression are good most of the time and you use some gestures. Your voice changes for some of the characters.</td>
<td>Your retelling needs to include expression and gestures. Your voice should change for different characters.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As each group presented their retelling, another group (assigned by Ms. Allen) used the retelling rubric to provide feedback. Ms. Allen reminded her students after each retelling that “we are all learning how to use the story retelling rubric—let’s all help each other get really good at this.”

Following several practices with using the story retelling rubric in groups, students were asked
to meet with Ms. Allen individually to discuss and retell information from the books they were reading in their literature circles. The focus was on dog stories and included *Shiloh* (Naylor, 1991), *Where the Red Fern Grows: The Story of Two Dogs and a Boy* (Rawls, 1961), and *My Dog Skip* (Morris, 1995). Ms. Allen used the information she gathered during student retellings of the books they were reading to plan individual interventions as well as some whole-class lessons.

Ms. Allen noted that her students rarely used dialogue during their retellings to discuss characters and the problems they faced. In subsequent shared readings, she modeled several retellings using character dialogue to address this whole-class need. Similarly, she noted that one student, Miriam, had difficulty with sequence; she met with Miriam during reading conferences and helped her use a graphic organizer to record events in order.

U.S. history teacher Jamie Ryan used the informational text retelling rubric shown in Figure 2.6 in her class for discussions about the textbook and primary source documents that her students read. During the course of study on the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, students read a number of primary source documents, including the proclamation by the mayor dated April 18, 1906. A number of primary source documents can be found on the Gilder Lehrman Institute for American History Web site ([www.gilderlehrman.org](http://www.gilderlehrman.org)). One student correctly noted in his retelling that the mayor had authorized the police to kill any looters they found. He also pointed out that the mayor's proclamation gave the police "exceptional powers—they could legally kill any person for ANY crime." The rubric allowed Ms. Ryan an opportunity to check her students' understanding of the various texts they read and to determine areas of need for each student.

**Figure 2.6. Retelling Rubric for Informational Text**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Exceeds Standards (2)</th>
<th>Meets Standards (1)</th>
<th>Needs Improvement (0)</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Ideas</strong></td>
<td>Your retelling identifies all of the key ideas from the text.</td>
<td>Your retelling identifies a number of key ideas from the text.</td>
<td>Your retelling needs to identify and describe the key ideas from the text.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Details</td>
<td>Your retelling helps others understand the text by providing details for each key idea.</td>
<td>Your retelling provides some details for some of the key ideas.</td>
<td>Your retelling needs to link details with key ideas.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequence</td>
<td>Your retelling identifies a clear sequence of information that helps the listener understand the information.</td>
<td>Your retelling provides information in a sequence, but the sequence is slightly confused or out of order.</td>
<td>Your retelling needs to have a sequence that helps the listener understand.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>Your retelling ends with a conclusion that is directly linked to the information you provided.</td>
<td>Your retelling includes a concluding statement.</td>
<td>Your retelling needs to focus on the major idea from the text and needs to summarize the information gathered.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery</td>
<td>You use good rhythm, fluency, expression, and gestures.</td>
<td>Your rhythm and expression are good most of the time and you use some gestures.</td>
<td>Your retelling needs to include expression and gestures.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Think-Pair-Share**

Think-Pair-Share is a cooperative discussion strategy that allows students to discuss their responses with a peer before sharing with the whole class. Developed by Lyman (1981) and colleagues, there are three stages of student action:

1. **Think.** The teacher engages students' thinking with a question, prompt, reading, visual, or observation. The students should take a few minutes (not seconds) just to *think* about the question.

2. **Pair.** Using designated partners, students *pair* up to discuss their respective responses.
They compare their thoughts and identify the responses they think are the best, most intriguing, most convincing, or most unique.

3. **Share.** After students talk in pairs for a few moments, the teacher asks pairs to share their thinking with the rest of the class.

Naturally, there are opportunities to check for understanding throughout the Think-Pair-Share activity. The teacher can listen in as pairs discuss their responses and can note the ways in which pairs share their responses.

In her 2nd grade class, Yazmine Sanchez invited her students to think about a person who made a difference. This introduction to a major 2nd grade social studies theme served to activate her students' background knowledge and to help them make connections with the curriculum they were about to study. After a few moments of thinking time, Ms. Sanchez asked her students to turn to a partner and talk about the person they were thinking of. Ms. Sanchez listened in on several students' pair conversations, noting their personal connections to the topic. She then invited pairs to share with the whole class. But she wasn't done yet; she continued this process with several additional questions, including the following:

- What did this person do that makes you think he or she made a difference?
- Who else do you know who made a difference?
- What characteristics are shared by people who make a difference?

With each question, Ms. Sanchez asked her students to think first, engage in a partner conversation, and then share their ideas with the whole class. Along the way, Ms. Sanchez made notes about what her students already knew, what misconceptions they had, and how they used language to express their ideas. Her checking for understanding was used to collect information that she could use in her instruction throughout the unit.

Similarly, high school government teacher Angie Jenkins uses Think-Pair-Share to engage her students in current government issues each day. During a discussion about immigration policy in the United States, students noted the potential changes to the policy. The variation Ms. Jenkins uses with her high school seniors is that they have to share their partner's thinking, not their own ideas. She does this to ensure that her students are listening and thinking as their partner talks, rather than forming rebuttal arguments. In one of the discussions on the changes to the immigration policy, Malik said, “My partner is going to participate in the walk out because she thinks that it’s important to send a message and cost the government money. By not being here at school that day, she’ll cost people money.” Another student indicated, “Arian is going to come to school because she says that her mom came here to make sure she got an education.”

The Think-Pair-Share time provides Ms. Jenkins with an opportunity to determine whether her students understand the current events that affect their lives and to ascertain if students still have any misunderstandings about these events in terms of government policy. She is interested not in changing their views of current events but in making sure that they can think critically about the events that will shape their experiences as adults.
Misconception Analysis

Misconceptions include preconceived notions, nonscientific beliefs, naive theories, mixed conceptions, or conceptual misunderstandings. Most of us have them and are not happy when we’re told we’re wrong about something, especially if it’s something in our basic belief system. Children and youth are no different; they have misconceptions that interfere with their understanding of content or information and often are not readily willing to be challenged in these beliefs. As such, misconception analysis is an important part of checking for understanding.

Misconception analysis provides students an opportunity to discuss, often in small groups, misunderstandings that they have. Typically the misunderstandings or misconceptions are first identified by the teacher. Of course, there are numerous opportunities for students who have been exposed to misconception analysis to use the technique on their own and with peers as they identify topics that need clarification.

Based on her checks of understanding, Colleen Crawford knew that her 5th graders believed that stars and constellations appeared in the same place in the sky every night. In effect, they had overgeneralized information about the North Star that they had learned in the social studies unit on the Underground Railroad. Ms. Crawford provided small groups of students with different informational text sources about the night sky. Students were asked to read and discuss the information in their texts. Ms. Crawford asked a number of questions of each group that were specific to the texts the group was reading. Then she asked the whole class the big question: “What does your source say about star movement?” As each group searched for this information, Ms. Crawford visited different groups and asked clarifying questions. As each group reported what their text sources said about the movement of stars over time, Ms. Crawford began asking other students to repeat the information and to confirm that their source said the same thing. After each group had discussed their response, Ms. Crawford noted, “We know that we can't believe everything we read and that we should always read critically. But what happens to our understanding when text after text—Web pages, textbooks, trade books, newspaper articles—all report the same thing? Should we change our understanding? Should we assume that there are lots of stars and constellations that move and appear in different places at different times of the year?”

U.S. history teacher Ted Clausen was discussing presidents of the United States with his students. The conversation ebbed and flowed in a highly interactive and engaging way. They had read from a variety of sources and were taking notes from the discussion using graphic organizers. At one point in the discussion, a student said, “You said Roosevelt was president, but he wasn't elected.” Mr. Clausen replied, “Yes, in 1901, Theodore Roosevelt was president of the United States, but he wasn't elected to that position. How might that happen? Talk in your groups.” After a few minutes, several groups had ideas. One group posited that he was appointed, to which Mr. Clausen responded, “No, we've only had one appointed president and it was George W. Bush.” After more discussion, a group said, “Maybe the president died and Roosevelt was vice president and took over?”
Mr. Clausen excitedly responded, “Yes, exactly. Who was that person? The president who died? Well, actually, was assassinated?” After a long pause, Mr. Clausen added, “His first name was William.” Michael’s hand shot up and he said, with great earnestness, “Shakespeare!” Mr. Clausen replied, “I appreciate your effort, but that's not the right person. Groups, let's explore why that could not be the right answer.” After a few minutes, Mr. Clausen asked groups for their responses, which included the following:

- Shakespeare was British, so he couldn't be president of the United States.
- Shakespeare lived hundreds of years ago, long before there was a United States.
- Shakespeare was famous for being an author, not a president.

Through his checking for understanding and the trust he created in the classroom, Mr. Clausen ensured that misconceptions were analyzed and clarified. He knew that his students could identify the reasons that answer was incorrect. But more importantly, he created an environment in which students could analyze incorrect answers for misconceptions. As Michael said afterward, “It's okay to answer in his class 'cuz you get to talk about the answers and figure out why they're right or not. Everybody learns; nobody has to get uptight about it.”

**Whip Around**

The whip around is a useful instructional tool teachers can use to check for understanding in a group setting. While the whip around may not provide individual, student-level information about understanding, it is useful in helping teachers determine if they need to reteach content to the group. As such, the whip around is often used as a closure activity at the end of a period of instruction.

The procedure is fairly simple. First, the teacher poses a question or a task; typically, students are asked to make a list of at least three items. Students then individually respond on a scrap piece of paper. When they have done so, students stand up. The teacher then randomly calls on a student to share one of his or her ideas from the paper. Students check off any items that are said by another student and sit down when all of their ideas have been shared with the group, whether or not they were the one to share them. The teacher continues to call on students until they are all seated. As the teacher listens to the ideas or information shared by students, he or she can determine if there is a general level of understanding or if there are gaps in students' thinking.

Third grade teacher Mandi Smith uses the whip around technique as her daily closure activity. During her unit of study on insects, she asked her students to make a list of the characteristics that distinguish insects from other creatures on Earth. She said that she has to be very specific or her 3rd graders will write comparisons with dinosaurs, space people, and other things not found on Earth. As they completed their whip around, Ms. Smith was pleased to learn that the vast majority of her students understood that insects have three body parts, the head, abdomen, and thorax; that insects have eyes and one pair of antennae and mouthparts; that they all have six legs; that their skeleton is an exoskeleton; and that they have an open circulatory system. Ms. Smith noted, however, that the students did not discuss wings, what
the antennae do, or how the mouthparts and legs have adapted. She knew that she would need to review this information the following day to ensure that her students grasped it.

Similarly, health educator Stacey Everson uses a whip around at the end of her classroom discussions. During a 9th grade health education lesson, Ms. Everson asked students to identify the risk factors for suicide. After writing individually for several minutes, the students stood up, and Ms. Everson invited them to share one at a time. She analyzed their responses and noted the factors that most students had on their own pages. She also noted areas that were not addressed by students and provided the class with supplemental readings on the topic as well as a yellow ribbon card (see www.yellowribbon.org for details), which provides students with permission to ask for help as well as tells them what to do if someone else uses the help card.

**Conclusion**

There are a number of ways that teachers can use oral language—speaking and listening—to check for understanding. Through careful planning and analysis of student responses, teachers can close the gap between what students need to know and what they already know.