

Instruction in Speaking and Listening: Battles and Options

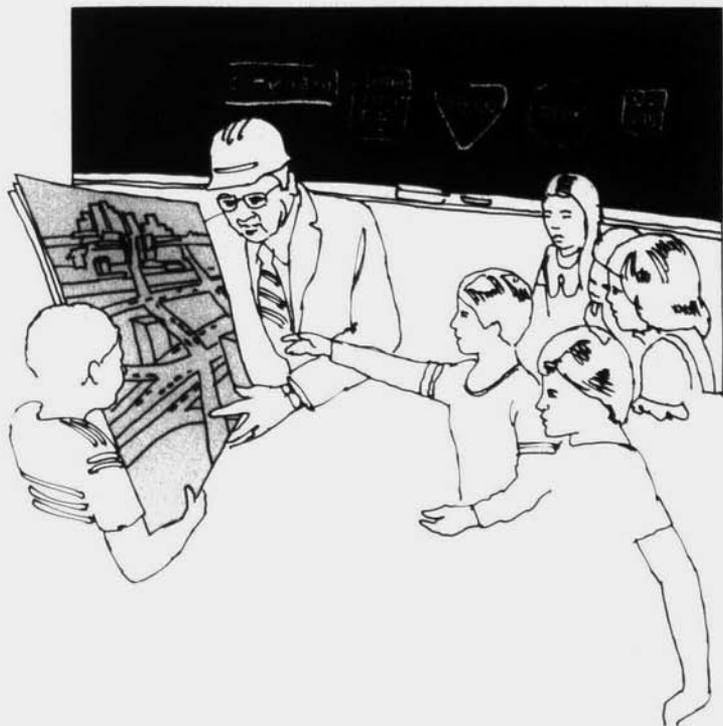
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Those of us who have acquired a smattering of knowledge in American history can recall a few dramatic details about the War of 1812. We remember, for instance, that this was the conflict that inspired Francis Scott Key to compose "The Star Spangled Banner," and that Andy Jackson commanded the troops that fought the Battle of New Orleans. The Battle of New Orleans is memorable because it was an artifact of an age predating electronic communications. It took place some time after the treaty ending the War of 1812 had already been signed. The news didn't reach the troops in time.

We're experiencing a sort of Battle of New Orleans phenomenon right now with respect to the teaching of oral communication—speaking and listening skills. The hegemony of educational policy and curriculum guidelines seems to reflect the view that oral communication ought to be the subject of deliberate instruction. Still, the news has affected what's going on in the trenches only to a limited degree. There is a battle yet to be fought—the battle for implementation at the classroom level.

It is no longer necessary to argue for speaking and listening as crucial skills, significant both in their own right and as the foundations for development of literacy and reasoning abilities. That argument has been made and accepted by Congress, which included speaking and listening among the basic skills enumerated in Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1978. It has also been accepted by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, the College Board, the Education Commission of the States, as well as numerous state and local educational agencies. A 1983 survey of educational policies regarding oral communication indicated that 23 states have enacted policies for curriculum or assessment of speaking and listening. Nine additional states are planning to do so. This represents a substantial increase in state activity compared with two years earlier (Van Rheenen and others, 1984).

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The battle for communication skills has already been won; the task ahead is to get teachers in the trenches to teach them, either in separate units or in their subject areas.

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Charging Full Steam Ahead Without Any Fuel

Nevertheless, national and state mandates supporting instruction in speaking and listening are filtering down to elementary and secondary classrooms only in scattered and exceptional cases. Toward the end of the funding period for Title II Basic Skills projects, I attempted to contact approximately 150 in-school and out-of-school projects that had listed oral communication among their objectives in official project descriptions. While the return rate was too low to sustain a rigorous survey study, some telling patterns of responses nevertheless emerged.

About half of the projects that responded indicated that oral communication instruction had been their lowest priority among the basic skills. With impending budget cuts, they had never gotten around to implementing that objective. Another block of programs indicated that they were primarily ESL projects. They were not directing their attention to interpersonal and public communication skills so much as to grammatical competence and vocabulary building. Similarly, another group of projects at the elementary level were primarily reading programs. Their involvement with speech and listening was restricted to a limited number of reading readiness exercises in phonics or word recognition. The exercises used oral activities as an incidental means toward an end. The residual projects, a bare handful of those that had checked off "oral communication" on their applications, had indeed developed coherent programs to promote speaking and listening skills.

Similarly, many noteworthy state and local curriculum documents spell out admirable programs in speaking and listening. These well-designed plans, however, too often lose their steam in the transition from district policy to classroom implementation. An objective pertaining to primary level listening skills becomes a memory game like "I'm going on a picnic and I'm going to bring..." An objective for using organizational patterns in oral communication at the secondary level becomes an oral-report-plus-outline about the life of a famous author. These are not inherently bad assignments; the problem is that they are too

often interjected into classwork in an isolated fashion, deriving from nowhere, leading to nowhere, unsupported by any related work, and ultimately encouraging perfunctory and formulaic responses. In five years the curriculum documents are dusted off, subjected to a round of revision, and sent out once more to the buildings to meet a similar fate.

Self-Contained Communication Courses

Across the nation, to be sure, well-designed programs providing for speech communication can be identified. These exemplars yield two models that can guide educators in infusing speaking and listening into school curriculums and classroom practice. The most visible of these models is the self-contained secondary school speech course. Typically these courses are treated as English or fine arts electives, though in some cases they are included in graduation requirements for all students (Book and Pappas, 1981). Very often the speech course focuses on public speaking performance skills and conforms to a speech-a-week curriculum that is heavily oriented toward evaluation. That is likely what most educators, as well as most students, think of as "speech." Curiously, this sort of oral communication course seems to enjoy a distinctly bivalent status. In some schools the speech class is the place to find the intellectual and social elite—leaders of school government and the honor society, for example. In other schools, the speech class is frankly regarded as a bonehead course, an easy pass for those not college-bound. In both situations the traditional speech course offers a learning experience that ought not be underestimated. For high achieving students a speech class provides leadership training and advanced skills in logical and critical analysis (Friedman, 1980). For other students it promotes self-confidence and fluency and can impart discrete consumer and employment competencies.

The familiar type of speech class oriented toward public speaking does not, however, represent the entire spectrum of possibilities for the self-contained course in oral communication (Brown, 1982). Alternative oral

communication curriculums may emphasize generic skills in audience analysis or listening. They may allocate greater instructional time to interpersonal communication skills like small-group decision making or informal dyadic interaction or more formal interviewing. Still another approach is organized around a range of communication functions—imagining, describing, controlling, ritualizing, expressing feelings—that can be realized in either public or interpersonal situations.

The concept of a self-contained unit in oral communication is not limited to the secondary grades. Innovative programs organized around speaking and listening objectives have been implemented with excellent results at primary, elementary, and middle school levels (Independence Public Schools, 1981). These may vary from a four-week middle school module that

relies on role-playing activities teaching about interpersonal relationships to a major oral communication strand that permeates a primary level language arts curriculum.

Communication Across the Curriculum

In contrast to the self-contained course or unit in speaking and listening, the second model of oral communication instruction exploits lessons in other subject matter as the vehicles for promoting communication skills. Individual teachers of talent have long recognized that opportunities for teaching communication skills lie not just in periods specifically designated for oral communication, but also in science, social studies, indeed, the entire range of content areas.

One fascinating illustration of oral communication instruction situated in a vocational class appeared in the Pub-



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lic Broadcasting System documentary, "High School," which portrayed the findings of the Carnegie Commission Report. The film showed interactions between a student and an instructor in an auto mechanics shop. At one point the student gestured in the vicinity of a pile of drop lights and asked a classmate to hand him "one of those things." The instructor would not permit the classmate to comply until the student used more explicit language in phrasing his request. In another sequence, the student, crouched under a car's dashboard, asked the instructor to see whether he was manipulating the proper mechanism. The instructor refused to look, instead ordering the student to describe the mechanism in words. Viewers of this episode do not know whether the instructor was operating from stated objectives pertaining to referential communication accuracy, to decontextualizing language, or to making private meanings public. It is nevertheless obvious that this auto mechanics instructor was a masterful (and certainly persistent) teacher of oral communication.

British pedagogical literature often seems more advanced than its American counterpart in recognizing the importance of developing "oracy" across the curriculum areas. British

educators, in particular, point out how classroom interaction can be managed to help students make sense of their environments or to foster attainment in academic areas like science (Mallett and Newsome, 1977). As a sign of the significance that our British colleagues attribute to oral communication proficiency, their regionally administered Certificate of Secondary Education Examinations include optional tests of speaking performance (Barnes, 1980).

As American teachers become familiar with interactive classroom designs that utilize instructional groups and peer or cross-age tutoring, they too are becoming more adept at incorporating speech communication instruction into their teaching of other subject matter. Nowhere are these innovations in classroom design more evident than in the current movement toward a "process" approach to the teaching of writing. Students learn a great deal about small-group communication, for example, in peer response and editing circles. Indeed, some composition teachers are finding that introductory work in small-group communication improves the efficiency of these peer work groups. In addition, many composition teachers initiate their classes with a series of oral communication exercises. These exercises serve to help construct a

climate of trust, which is prerequisite to students' casting off defensive feelings about writing and fostering their willingness to participate in a writing community.

Pros and Cons of the Two Models

The two models of oral communication curriculum—the self-contained speech course or unit and the approach that integrates speaking and listening into other content areas—have complementary strengths. On the one hand, the discrete course has the advantages of deliberateness and focus. There is no danger that the oral communication objectives will be shuffled to progressively lower priority levels until they become casualties of too many other curricular pressures and too little time. In addition, the self-contained speech course provides a forum in which certain information about human communication can be brought to students' conscious awareness. In the affective domain, stage-fright is one such matter. For the vast majority of students, their discomfort at public presentations is significantly ameliorated simply by learning about the mechanisms underlying this anxiety, by learning that it is a normal reaction to a stressful situation, and by learning some "gimmicks" to control it. In the cognitive domain, an educated individual ought to be aware of the several categories of nonverbal communication (kinesics, proxemics, paralinguistics, and so forth) and how their use compares across cultures. This sort of material is part of the subject matter of the speech course.

On the other hand, individuals develop communication skills by communicating about real topics to real audiences, and ideally for authentic purposes. The speech class is an artificial environment, like a laboratory, in which communication behaviors are simulated on command and analyzed with unnatural self-consciousness. Content area classes can provide contexts in which communication skills are applied to more genuine tasks. In content area classes, the power of the spoken word as an instrument for discovering or creating knowledge is more readily exploited. Instruction in speaking and listening can, moreover, actually reduce the burdens of teach-

ing a content area class. A class that is simultaneously studying communication and, say, American history will be an especially lively and responsive group. Students will absorb instructions more accurately and will be more willing to request clarification. Dyadic and group work will afford the teacher an opportunity to work one-on-one with those students needing special attention.

Problems in Implementing a Speaking and Listening Model

Given the respective advantages of the two models for delivering instruction in speaking and listening, it is difficult to recommend one over the other. The wisest course echoes the recommendation of the Carnegie Commission: students ought to be exposed to both a required course in speech communication and to oral communication instruction infused throughout content area classes—at both the elementary and secondary levels.

Consider how this might work in the case of listening instruction. An esteemed colleague once took to task those educators who advocated teaching a segregated unit on listening. "What would you do," she challenged, "teach listening from 10:45 to 11:10 and then not teach it the rest of the day? Okay, children, we're finished with listening for today." Of course listening objectives need to be treated along with those in reading, science, and mathematics throughout the day. For example, in a 2nd grade science lesson on the changing seasons, a teacher might ask the students to think about the sounds associated with each season (crunching leaves of autumn, howling winter winds, and so on). If a

community guest, say a road maintenance engineer, were to visit the class, the students might prepare by formulating questions about how the changing seasons affect this person's job since questioning is a component of active listening.

At the same time, those 2nd graders do need a distinct time in which to

deliberately focus on listening as subject matter. It may require only a few lessons to learn and reinforce some basic facts about listening. For example, listening is not like a sponge soaking up water; it is more like a little net used to catch one squirmy goldfish out of a whole tank of goldfish at the pet store (that is, listening is active and

Resources for Implementing Instruction in Speaking and Listening

The Speech Communication Association (5105 Backlick Road, Suite E, Annandale, VA 22003) is dedicated to promoting scholarship and pedagogy concerning oral communication. Educators planning new programs may wish to acquire several policy documents from SCA: "Essential Speaking and Listening Competencies for High School Graduates," "Essential Speaking and Listening Competencies for Elementary School Students," and "Standards for Effective Programs in Oral Communication." A number of ERIC bibliographies are available free of charge. SCA's Committee on Assessment and Testing maintains a state-by-state listing of individuals qualified to offer technical assistance. The following publications are among those that may be ordered from SCA:

Barbara Wood, ed., *Development of Functional Communication Competencies, K-6* (\$3.00) and *Development of Functional Communication Competencies, 7-12* (\$3.00).

Cassandra Book and Kathleen Galvin, *Instruction in and About Small Group Communication* (\$3.00).

Andrew Wolvin and Carolyn Coakley, *Listening Instruction* (\$3.00).

Douglas Bock and Hope Bock, *Evaluating Classroom Speaking* (\$3.00).

Don Rubin and Nancy Mead, *Large Scale Assessment of Oral Communication Skills* (\$11.95).

The National Council of Teachers of English (1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801) is a particularly good source of information about integrating oral communication with other language arts and about uses of drama activities. The following publications are among those available through NCTE:

Christopher Thaiss and Charles Suhor, eds., *Speaking and Writing, K-12* (\$13.00).

Sara Lundsteen, *Listening: Its Impact at All Levels on Reading and the Other Language Arts* (\$8.50).

Thomas Devine, *Listening Skills Schoolwide* (\$6.50).

Other publications about curriculum and instruction in oral communication include:

David Holdzkom, E. Jane Porter, Linda Reed, and Donald Rubin, *Research Within Reach: Oral and Written Communication* (\$7.50) (currently distributed by Harper and Row or through ERIC Document Reproduction Service, No. ED 225 180).

Mina Halliday, ed., *Teaching Speech Today: Six Alternative Approaches*. Skokie, Ill.: National Textbook Company, 1979.

Michigan Speech Association, *MSA Curriculum Guide Series*. (11 Volumes) Skokie, Ill.: National Textbook Company, 1979.

Nellie McCaslin, *Creative Drama in the Classroom*. New York: Longman, Inc., 1980.

More on Communication Skills

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Communication Throughout the Curriculum

February 28-March 1
Washington, DC
For details, see page 13.

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selective). But sensitizing children to listening as a process is a large part of what it takes to improve their listening performance.

When district or building leadership commits itself to implementing oral communication instruction, especially this two-tiered approach, then the war may be won, but several battles will yet lie ahead. These impediments, in brief, include the following:

Skepticism. Some teachers will continue to doubt whether students really need direct instruction in speaking and listening. Like sex education, it is supposed that students learn what they need informally. Experience indicates that these teachers will be won over, however, as soon as they see how even initial instruction improves the performance of some students.

Cynicism. Some teachers will regard a mandate to teach speaking and listening as yet another burden in an already overcrowded curriculum. Like collecting lunch money, it's a demand they can do without. These teachers, too, can be won over by the positive effects of this instruction on classroom climate.

Training, or lack thereof. While most states offer secondary level certification in speech, the great majority of teachers who will be responsible for oral communication instruction will have taken only a single preservice course in speech communication. Considerable inservice support will

need to be required, on an on-going basis. In Illinois, for example, the state affiliate of the Speech Communication Association has developed a series of inservice training modules that can be delivered by a network of specialists across the state.

Materials. Rudimentary but effective instruction in speaking and listening, happily, requires little investment in equipment or textbooks. Desirable materials include videotaping equipment and scripts for dramatic and interpretation activities. Many fine materials for listening instruction are commercially available (Patterson, 1979). It is important, though, that teachers not merely drum into service materials intended for reading instruction.

Accountability. Teachers are held accountable for many things, but rarely for their students' proficiency in speaking and listening. Since testing procedures exert such a strong influence on teaching practices, some formal means of assessing attainment in speaking and listening is necessary. Properly assessing oral communication skills is not easy, but it can be done.

Attitudes toward cultural differences. Individuals' speech is intimately bound up with their cultural identity. Any attempt to implement instruction in oral communication must, for example, address issues related to non-standard dialect. Speech instruction, in point of fact, is not directed toward eliminating dialect differences or teaching Standard English as a second dialect. A more appropriate goal might be to widen the range of styles that students control within their native dialects. But dialect is not the only cultural difference that impinges on oral communication. Teachers need to become aware of culture-specific norms in behaviors like responding to questions, taking turns, holding the floor, and verbal duelling.

Teacher communication. Explicit lessons need to be carefully crafted, but students will learn at least as much about communication by observing their teachers' communication behaviors. Thus teachers need to become aware of how they model speaking and listening behaviors. Another area of concern pertains to attitudes toward

communication. A sizable minority of students are hampered by a generalized apprehension about communicating, by reticence. There is some evidence that this dysfunction is acquired during the primary grades and that schooling may have something to do with its onset (McCroskey and others, 1981).

The Battle of New Orleans was an artifact of poor communication. Our efforts at teaching students about speaking and listening can help prevent or at least resolve a great many conflicts in their lives. Our own efforts to practice effective communication in implementing this new area of broad instruction can likewise help prevent unnecessary battles, or at least reduce them to mere skirmishes. □

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