

**ERIK PALMER**



**TEACHING THE  
CORE SKILLS OF  
LISTENING &  
SPEAKING**





1703 N. Beauregard St. • Alexandria, VA 22311-1714 USA  
 Phone: 800-933-2723 or 703-578-9600 • Fax: 703-575-5400  
 Website: [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org) • E-mail: [member@ascd.org](mailto:member@ascd.org)  
 Author guidelines: [www.ascd.org/write](http://www.ascd.org/write)

Gene R. Carter, *Executive Director*; Richard Papale, *Acting Chief Program Development Officer*; Stefani Roth, *Acting Publisher and Acquisitions Editor*; Julie Houtz, *Director, Book Editing & Production*; Katie Martin, *Editor*; Louise Bova, *Graphic Designer*; Mike Kalyan, *Production Manager*; Valerie Younkin, *Production Designer*

Copyright © 2014 ASCD. All rights reserved. It is illegal to reproduce copies of this work in print or electronic format (including reproductions displayed on a secure intranet or stored in a retrieval system or other electronic storage device from which copies can be made or displayed) without the prior written permission of the publisher. By purchasing only authorized electronic or print editions and not participating in or encouraging piracy of copyrighted materials, you support the rights of authors and publishers. Readers who wish to reproduce or republish excerpts of this work in print or electronic format may do so for a small fee by contacting the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC), 222 Rosewood Dr., Danvers, MA 01923, USA (phone: 978-750-8400; fax: 978-646-8600; Web: [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com)). To inquire about site licensing options or any other reuse, contact ASCD Permissions at [www.ascd.org/permissions](http://www.ascd.org/permissions), or [permissions@ascd.org](mailto:permissions@ascd.org), or 703-575-5749. For a list of vendors authorized to license ASCD e-books to institutions, see [www.ascd.org/epubs](http://www.ascd.org/epubs). Send translation inquiries to [translations@ascd.org](mailto:translations@ascd.org).

All material from the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects and from the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics © 2010 by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America. Cover art © 2014 ASCD. ASCD publications present a variety of viewpoints. The views expressed or implied in this book should not be interpreted as official positions of the Association. All referenced trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

All web links in this book are correct as of the publication date below but may have become inactive or otherwise modified since that time. If you notice a deactivated or changed link, please e-mail [books@ascd.org](mailto:books@ascd.org) with the words “Link Update” in the subject line. In your message, please specify the web link, the book title, and the page number on which the link appears.

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-4166-1756-3 ASCD product # 114012 n3/14

Also available as an e-book (see Books in Print for the ISBNs).

Quantity discounts: 10–49 copies, 10%; 50+ copies, 15%; for 1,000 or more copies, call 800-933-2723, ext. 5634, or 703-575-5634. For desk copies: [www.ascd.org/deskcopy](http://www.ascd.org/deskcopy)

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

TK

Acknowledgments .....	vii
Introduction.....	1
1. The Most Fundamental Skills for Success.....	9
2. Core Skills, Core Standards.....	24
3. Collaborating/Discussing .....	30
4. Listening/Media Literacy.....	56
5. Questioning/Reasoning.....	84
6. Speaking Well.....	106
7. Incorporating Multimedia.....	131
8. Adapting for the Occasion .....	151
9. Assessing Listening and Speaking.....	166
Final Thoughts .....	188
References .....	190
About the Author.....	194

# INTRODUCTION

*How do you teach listening and speaking?*

There are two ways to approach this question. The first is in a global, impersonal sense. The focus is procedure. Think of it as similar to questions such as “How do you copy a paragraph in a MS Word document?” and “How do you find a common denominator?” Many of us could quickly rattle off the process for finding a common denominator, but how many of us are prepared to describe the process for building strong oral communication? How *do* you teach listening and speaking?

My sense is that when many teachers consider the question, their first thought is, “Well, you really don’t have to. Speaking? My kids are always talking! And teaching *listening*? We are *always* doing that—always reminding them to sit still and be quiet.” But is this true? Are all of our students well spoken? Have they all mastered listening to each other, entertaining diverse points of view, evaluating evidence and supporting arguments, collaborating with others, and analyzing the media they are exposed to daily? Do they all communicate effectively in conversations, discussions, and presentations? Obviously not. Listening and speaking are skills, and like all skills, they can be improved with deliberate instruction and purposeful practice.

The second way to respond to the question is personal: How do *you* teach listening and speaking? What do *you* do in your classroom to help students learn to listen and speak effectively?

Imagine you are in a faculty meeting, and your administrator stands up and explains that the school will be launching a listening and speaking skills initiative in line with new standards. “As part of your assessment this year,” your administrator says, “I will look for specific lessons that teach to the listening and speaking standards.”

Be honest, now: How prepared would you be?

If the new initiative had focused on writing standards, you’d probably be in good shape, especially if you teach elementary school or language arts. In those contexts, every teacher teaches writing and knows that there’s more to “writing instruction” than “make students write.” It’s necessary to prepare specific lessons that teach students *how* to be better writers—lessons that break the skill of writing well into subcomponents. There are lessons and worksheets about capitalization, punctuation, and sentence structure. Students complete practice exercises focused on topic sentences and supporting details, good word choice, and effective organization.

Yet when the topic turns to listening and speaking, how many of us can break oral communication skills into subcomponents? How many of us can point to specific lessons? Yes, we incorporate oral activities into our instruction. Our students listen to lectures, explanations, and material read aloud. They ask questions, speak in small groups, and present reports on various topics. But just as making students write a lot doesn’t automatically make them good writers, making students listen a lot does not automatically make them good listeners. And occasionally making them speak in front of the class does not automatically make them good speakers.

## **Challenging Current Practice**

When I ask teachers at workshops how they teach speaking, these are the kinds of answers I get:

Our 7th grade students do a history project, and they have to dress up like a historical figure and do a seven-minute presentation in front of the class and parents. Other students listen and give feedback.

We record a podcast about our favorite activities and post it on the class wiki where students can post comments.

Students have a weekly Share Time, and they take turns talking about the item they bring in. The class asks questions.

I do “Ignite” presentations about our project-based learning topics.

After the poetry unit, we have a “Poetry Café,” and each student memorizes and presents a poem to the class. The students vote on the best poem.

The students take turns doing “Science in the News,” an oral report about scientific events that are making headlines. I have students discuss the events.

What you see here is a nice sampling of the kinds of listening and speaking activities that go on, formally and informally, at all grade levels and in all subjects. However, none of these responses actually answers the question I asked: “How do you *teach* listening and speaking?” These teachers do not distinguish oral communication *activities* from oral communication *instruction*. It’s a very common mistake—and one that must be challenged. To the Poetry Café teacher, I might say the following:

Yes, you require every student to recite a poem and require the class to listen, but do you teach specific lessons first? For instance, poetry will only come alive if the poems are well delivered. Do you have lessons about vocal inflection, what it is, how it affects meaning, and how it sustains interest? Do you make it clear to students that the speaker must add life to the words and the audience must listen for it? Do you have lessons focused on pacing, pausing, and adjusting speed for effect so that your students will be able to use each of these techniques to enrich their presentation? Do you ask listeners to be aware of the techniques used?

I might challenge the “Science in the News” teacher who assigns this way:

How do you prepare your students for these oral reports? Do you have lessons on eliminating “like,” “ya know,” and similar phrases? Do you have lessons on effective volume and pronunciation to

ensure that every word is heard? How do you prepare your students to discuss these news stories? Do you teach them to ask questions for elaboration? Do you teach them to analyze and evaluate the speaker's motives—to ask, for example, why the speaker chose this article, “Hottest July in History,” as newsworthy and not some other topic?

In all likelihood, few students assigned to recite a poem receive the kind of lessons I've described, and few students discussing content-area topics, current events, and project work get the sort of guidance I have mentioned. Although their teachers might make comments on such matters *after* the presentations, only a very small number offer direct instruction *before*. I know that for part of my teaching career, the answer to “How do *you* teach listening and speaking?” was “Well, I guess I really don't.” I suspect the same is true for many other teachers. And it might be true for you.

This book is designed to change that—and to help you answer the “How do you teach listening and speaking?” question in both the general and the personal sense. Together, we will look at the importance of listening and speaking skills—whether for conversing one-to-one, engaging in a small-group discussion, participating in a meeting or webinar, delivering or consuming a podcast, making a major presentation, or learning online—and consider specific ways that *you* might teach listening and speaking.

## **Listening and Speaking: “Core” Skills**

So why this focus on listening and speaking? Why now?

The immediate impetus may be the Common Core State Standards. As I write this, most U.S. states have adopted the standards, and the Common Core's set of English language arts and literacy (ELA) standards include “Speaking and Listening” as one of four content strands, alongside reading, writing, and language (grammar and usage). I will talk much more about the standards in later chapters. And I will say outright that I am happy that after decades of oral communication being an afterthought (if not ignored completely), it is getting attention.

I have structured this book to align with the six Common Core anchor standards for speaking and listening. Although I am aware that the Common Core may one day disappear and be replaced by a newer educational initiative, I believe the concepts these standards address—skills that all parents would see as appropriate and necessary for their child to learn—have enduring value and are a sound foundation for oral communication instruction.

Consider too, that the Common Core State Standards reflect the movement toward improved college and career readiness. Ask yourself, what skills are most useful in the world beyond our K–12 classrooms? What will our graduates be doing, and what must they all be able to do successfully, no matter what field they are in? I would argue that the answer is *communicate*. And what does communicating in the workplace entail? Take a look at these numbers (Worth, 2004, p. 3):

#### How We Spend Our Communication Time

Writing:	9%
Reading:	16%
Talking:	30%
Listening:	45%

As adults on the job, we devote fully three-fourths of our communication to listening and speaking. I believe that alone is justification for increasing efforts to prepare students to listen and speak well, but I will offer additional justification as we explore these skills.

## Changing Our Teaching

As I said, few of us have a firm idea of how to teach listening and speaking. This is not surprising. Our teacher preparation included classes about how to teach writing, reading, math, and science. We took classes on discipline and classroom control and on how to work with diverse learners and learners with special needs. In our teaching practice, we have professional development focused on differentiation, RTI, bully proofing, and using technology. Is there

anything about how to teach oral communication skills, either in pre-service or in-service training? No.

Successfully teaching listening and speaking is a matter of both rethinking what we do and redefining our expectations of students. For example:

- Parroting back information does not signify good listening or good speaking.
- Quietly waiting for the chance to give an opinion without considering what anyone else is saying is not acceptable.
- Watching hours of video without being able to critique the techniques used to produce the video is problematic.
- One-way presentations in which a teacher or student talks *at* the class without the class thinking about and analyzing the presentation should not be allowed.
- Assigning speeches before students have learned the specific skills needed to give a good speech is unfair.
- Making podcasts without having first honed the communication skills involved and then posting the resultant poor speaking on the class webpage or YouTube is an embarrassment.

In short, this book is about taking something we all “sort of” address and making our instruction much more purposeful, directed, and specific. I will examine the expectations in the Common Core’s speaking and listening standards and suggest ways to help students meet these standards. They are more wide-ranging than the words *listening* and *speaking* suggest and, again, they would have broad value even if there were no such thing as the standards movement. While some teachers may be masters at fostering the targeted, standards-based skills—collaborative discussion, evidence-based argumentation, valid reasoning, and so on—for many, teaching this content presents new challenges. For them, I offer activities associated with each skill, targeted to a variety of grade levels.

Finally, this book is intended to motivate you. As the examples in the chapters ahead illustrate, speaking and listening skills cross all content areas, and they are tied to long-term student success. For a long time now, instruction has focused heavily on the subjects

addressed in state-mandated tests, and because listening and speaking were left off “the Big Test,” they have not received the instructional emphasis they deserve. That has to change, and it *is* changing—due to new standards focused on college and career readiness and the reality of 21st century communication. It’s time to teach listening and speaking. Let’s get started.

# 1

## THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

---

The cliché is that if you asked a fish about water, the fish would reply, “What’s water?” Completely surrounded it, the fish doesn’t even recognize water as a separate entity and certainly doesn’t realize water’s importance.

This is how it is with listening and speaking. They are so deeply embedded in so many aspects of our lives that most of us don’t think about them much. Like the fish with water, we take listening and speaking for granted. It’s time to change that—to bring listening and speaking to the forefront of educators’ minds and to purposefully teach the listening and speaking skills that are the foundation of so much of human interaction.

This is probably the right time to mention that, yes, I prefer the phrase “listening and speaking” to the “speaking and listening” that’s more common in English language arts (ELA) standards and discussions of those standards. And the reason I turn the phrase around is to emphasize that in life and in all learning, listening is the predominant language art.

## Listening Comes First

How do infants learn? What is their first exposure to language? Listening. We all listened before we spoke and well before we read or wrote. Even our most visual and kinesthetic students have a learning history that began with listening. Appendix A to the Common Core ELA standards examines the crucial connection between listening and learning. One of the references is to a study by Sticht and James, who “found evidence strongly suggesting that children’s listening comprehension outpaces reading comprehension until the middle school years” (Common Core State Standards Initiative [CCSSI], 2010b, p. 26). In other words, all of us were auditory learners once, and all of our young students will gain more from listening than from any other input.

Even after reading comprehension catches up and students are able to effectively get information from print, they still take in a tremendous amount of information from listening—to their teachers, of course, but also to one another and to speech delivered via various electronic media. The International Listening Association claims that 85 percent of a student’s learning is derived from listening (Mackay, 2005). It would be a challenge to find a teacher who *doesn’t* believe that we can improve student learning by teaching them to listen well.

## Listening + Speech = Classroom Communication

If listening is the primary way that students take in information, it makes sense to pay close attention to what they’re listening *to*. In the classroom, it’s most likely to be spoken language—lectures, certainly, but also process explanations, project instructions, one-on-one conferences, presentations given by classmates, and discussions in groups. Education is fundamentally and unquestionably grounded in oral communication.

Studies reveal that students spend 50 to 75 percent of classroom time listening to teachers, other students, and audio media (Bass, 2005). Teachers lecture, explain, and cajole. We answer

questions, present, and lead discussions. Most of our important directions, announcements, and explanations are oral. Given that so much teacher time is spent speaking, it would be wise to figure out how to do it well. And when the teacher is not talking, students still spend time listening—to other students as they present, to videos shown, to each other as they work together. You have heard many student discussion comments and probably hundreds of student presentations. How many were impressive? Would learning improve in your classrooms if those comments and presentations were well spoken?

Oral language dominates even outside of traditional instructional approaches. Some might point to the flipped classroom as an exception, but this model doesn't reduce the amount of listening students do; it just moves listening to the home. In fact, flipped instruction absolutely requires that the teacher command impressive oral communication skills. It is difficult to make a riveting presentation for a 10-inch screen. Requiring students to watch much of what teachers are currently putting out there amounts to cruel and unusual punishment (Palmer, 2012).

It's no different with online instruction. In my state, Colorado, a student in a rural high school who would otherwise not have access to AP Physics can now link up to an AP Physics classroom hundreds of miles away. But in order to do well in this environment, the online learner needs strong independent listening and media literacy skills, and she needs her faraway AP Physics teacher to have strong speaking and media presentation skills.

With so much of learning based on listening, we have to make sure that both the listeners and the speakers being listened to are competent. Let me be clear: I don't want my emphasis on listening and speaking as the core skills of language arts to devalue the work of reading teachers or discourage the teaching of writing. We and our students certainly read and write to learn, and we must make our students competent readers and writers. But think about *how* we teach reading and writing. Think about how much listening and speaking is involved. The water is everywhere, and everything depends upon it.

Now let's get more specific and look at the crucial roles listening and speaking play across content areas.

## **Listening and Speaking in Classroom Discussion**

Every class has discussions. I think it's because, intuitively, we are aware that discussions enhance understanding. As students verbalize and listen to others, they can gain insights and learn more about the subject under discussion, whether it's a poem, a function in calculus, a tectonic plate in geography, or an amendment to the Constitution.

There is an established connection between discussions and academic achievement. In one study, inserting a 10-minute discussion of a story during a 90-minute language arts class had a significant impact on students' performance, improving their grasp of the story's basic facts, of the characters' feelings and motives, and of the story's overall meaning (Fall Webb, & Chudowsky, 1997). When students discuss, they are more likely to retain the information and be able to retrieve it later (Hammond & Nessel, 2011). Discussions also improve intellectual agility and help develop skills of synthesis and integration (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999). All the benefits of discussion are enhanced when the discussion participants are skilled speakers and listeners.

## **Speaking and Listening in Reading Instruction**

When I started teaching, my teammates told me that they all required one traditional, stand-up-and-speak book report every quarter. I was quite sure they meant that I should be doing the same, so that's what I did. It was only after many, many boring student book report talks that I started to wonder what the point of this assignment was. Was it to see if my students understood the books they read? If that's what I really wanted to find out, I could just ask them to tell me about the book in writing or in a personal conference. Was the goal to "scare" students into reading? "You'd better

read, because otherwise you will look foolish when you have to give a talk in front of the whole class.” No, that wasn’t it. (And if it had been, I would’ve needed to rethink my ideas about student motivation.) Was I hoping these talks would inspire other students to read the books their classmates described? That was closer to what I had in mind. But apparently I needed to teach my students to speak about these books in a way that could inspire, because I wasn’t seeing anybody sprinting to the library at the end of class. Actually, if the assignment really *was* about oral presentation, shouldn’t I be giving my students instruction on how to present well? Why was I just assuming they all knew what to do?

Why *do* teachers assign oral book reports? I am surprised at how often I get quizzical looks when I ask this question. First, yes, we want to encourage reading. Students get better at something when they have more opportunities to practice it, and requiring one book report a quarter provides regular reading practice. Book reports also prompt readers to think critically about what they are reading in order to present the main character’s traits and how she changed during the book, to describe the plot points and climax, to discuss the themes, and so on. But students could demonstrate this kind of critical thinking in other ways. Implicit in assigning book reports, then, is that we want to involve both the presenter and the listeners in this critical thinking. We want to encourage both the presenter and the listeners to read this book and other books. That means the speaker has to have strong presentation skills. And that means we need to teach those skills.

Oral book reports were not the only listening and speaking practices incorporated into my reading instruction. I read aloud to students, another familiar and seldom-questioned feature of many classrooms. The rationale for this one is easier to convey. We read aloud to demonstrate the enjoyment of reading but also to expose our students to language and to ways of using language that they would not otherwise encounter. Well-chosen stories are a way to introduce new words and their proper pronunciation in an engaging, memorable context. Himmele and Himmele (2012) put it this way:

In addition to getting kids hooked on books, narrative read-alouds are an effortless way to help students acquire the academic language they will need to comprehend informational texts... research has shown a strong positive correlation between read-aloud experiences and vocabulary development. (¶4-5)

Certainly another benefit of reading aloud is that it shows students how words on a page (or screen) can come to life and become something meaningful and valuable. When a teacher models good reading, complete with inflection, gestures, and explanations, individual words combine to form a big picture and become a way to learn about other people and places—a doorway to adventure and understanding. In this data-driven era, we don't *measure* the value of instilling a love of literature in children, but the value is still there. Many struggling readers have been inspired to continue the struggle because some oral presentation made a story come alive. This only happens if the material is read well and if the students are listening well.

Why do we have students read aloud? The usual answer that we want to help them improve their reading fluency. Beginning readers are “word bound,” focused on making sense of letters and letter combinations. At some point, they achieve fluency, meaning that the struggle to sound out words transitions to making sense of word combinations and getting meaning from print. Advanced readers move beyond fluency and begin to understand prosody, the rhythm and inflection in the writing. Orthographic clues such as italics, exclamation points, and bold print give readers suggestions about what the passage is supposed to *sound* like. But fluency and prosody in reading make no sense to children if there is no fluency or inflection in their speaking. How can students make their reading come alive if they have never been taught how to make their voice come alive? Until we teach oral language, we risk embarrassing student readers and boring student listeners.

Let's look at one more common feature of reading instruction: reader's theater. Why do we use it? Erika, an 8th grade language arts teacher in Denver, offers this explanation in a video she made for the online book *Digitally Speaking*:

It helps the students see that literature can come alive. Using your voice to portray the actors and the characters helps the students see that it's not just boring words on a page. It's exciting information that can relate to what they are doing today. Practicing speaking skills is really important so that when we do reader's theater, the student can really get into the part of the character.... It's about using your voice and using life in your voice to bring the characters to life and to further understand why the characters think what they think or do what they do or say what they say. (Palmer, 2012).

It is easier to comprehend text when we practice it and speak it; it is easier to comprehend character motivation when we “become” the character and interact with other characters. What Erika points out is that successful reader's theater depends on successful speaking skills.

## Listening and Speaking in Writing Instruction

Sharon teaches 5th grade language arts. Like many English teachers, she frequently gives her students prompts that they respond to, in writing, in their journals. Afterward, she draws from the deck of student name-cards and asks individual students to share something they have written. They can share any piece of the writing they choose, and they can choose the selection for any reason. Other students are encouraged to chime in with comments. Step inside the classroom, and this is what you might hear:

*Jamal:* I like how I described something my sister said, because it's funny: “If you wasn't faster, he'd a done some damage.”

*Sharon (the teacher):* I like the way you captured the way people really speak sometimes, Jamal. You have a good ear. What did others think?

*Kim:* Don't you have to write it better? That's bad English, isn't it?

*Sharon:* Well, it's not formal English, but sometimes we don't speak formal English. If you are quoting someone, you

should record exactly what they say. How would you make it formal English if you wanted to?

*Andre:* I'd say, "If you weren't faster, he would of done some damage."

*Sharon:* "He would *of* done some damage?"

*Melissa:* *Have!* He would *have* done some damage!

Sharon has students listen to their classmates' writing as an opening to instruction, and she uses shared writing as a way to inspire students to improve, like so:

*Herschel:* I want to share this one part—"The cat was curled up and cozy just catching a few Zs." I wrote it like that because you told us to try alliteration.

*Sharon:* "Curled up and cozy!" That really works, doesn't it? Who has cats? Can't you just picture that? Very nice.

Herschel gets validated as a writer, and other students see an effective application of a concept presented in class. Sharon encourages students to "steal from one another and use others' good ideas." (The plagiarism lecture comes later—right now she wants students to copy good models.)

This is one way that teachers use listening and speaking in writing instruction. Peer conferences are another. As a student speaks his written words, he can often discover a mistake: a left-out word, an awkward phrase, a wrong-sounding verb tense, and so on. As the peer listens, she can notice those places where the writing is unclear or lacks detail. If she gives good comments, the writer gains information that can support better self-assessment and better writing in the future.

There is an obvious connection between writing and oral presentation. Skills overlap. A person writing an essay and a person writing a speech both need to identify the audience and craft a message for that audience. They both need to define a purpose, add interesting and relevant content, organize that content and use

transitions, and craft a powerful conclusion. Oral assignments give us opportunities to reinforce what we teach in written assignments.

There is a side benefit as well: speaking assignments can encourage students to write. We have all heard that one of the most prevalent fears people have is a fear of public speaking. What we usually miss is that there are some people who *love* speaking. Some of your students hate writing, but when given an opportunity to talk, they will enthusiastically write to prepare for the activity they feel comfortable doing (Palmer, 2012). For these students, oral assignments become a way to get written language assignments without a battle. When the writing will lead to a podcast posted on the class wiki page rather than just another paper to hand to the teacher, their engagement increases exponentially.

## **Listening and Speaking in Presentations**

In math class, a student goes to the board to explain a solution to a problem. In science, lab partners explain their lab results to the entire class. In social studies, students do a newscast on a current political campaign. In health class, a team reports on smoking and its health effects. In French class, a student talks about the customary foods of France. In every subject, at some point we call upon students to convey information orally.

My experience is that those presentations are tolerated by classmates, and the general mediocrity of these presentations is tolerated by teachers. Although learning to tolerate mediocrity may be a life skill we (unfortunately) need to develop, this is not likely the goal teachers have in mind for these assignments. What they want is for these presentations to impart useful information, to further understanding, and to engage the whole class. If students possess effective listening and speaking skills, these aims are well within reach.

Early in my teaching career, my father gave me a copy of *Writing to Learn* by William Zinsser. I have always used writing as way to learn: if I write something down, the act of writing seems to help

me remember. Zinsser makes a bigger claim, though—that information that is difficult to grasp becomes understandable through the process of writing. As the writer is forced to condense material into clear, logical, and accurate sentences, that material becomes part of the writer’s knowledge. As Zinsser puts it, “The hard part isn’t the writing; the hard part is the thinking” (1988, p. 56). It’s a strong argument for writing across the curriculum. Writing in English class may be about creating effective topic sentences, but in other classes it is about making the content personally meaningful. Presenting orally requires the same kind of thinking that writing does. The act of creating a presentation helps the presenter, who gains a deeper understanding of the material. The learning sticks. No matter the content area, presenting-to-learn is an important strategy.

## **Listening and Speaking as 21st Century Skills**

Years ago, I heard a speaker say that my students could expect to spend half of their time on the job reading in order to keep up with the continual changes affecting the other half of their jobs. I believe that statement can be updated: when our students enter the workforce, they will be spending half of their time *listening*—to videos, webinars, and video conferences. This won’t be the case only in high tech or professional careers, either. When I last got my hair cut, the stylist told me she had just finished a session of mandatory webinar training. In short, many of our students will find that professional success depends on having good listening skills.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a national U.S.-based advocacy group focused on technology infusion in education, stresses that students must be proficient communicators, creators, critical thinkers, and collaborators. When we consider the digital tools created in the past 20 years, the demand for these “Four Cs” makes perfect sense. Podcasts, videos, webinars, FaceTime, and video conferences make it easy to collaborate, and communication skills are necessary to make that collaboration work.

The rise of online video presents a particularly powerful argument for the importance of oral communication. Chris Anderson,

curator of the popular online TED talks, notes that the ease of making videos translates into easier transmission of information. Rather than trying to write about a procedure, for example, we can simply record video and let the viewer *hear* and *see* the procedure. As a result, writing is increasingly giving way to telling and to showing. Here's Anderson:

I believe that the arrival of free online video may turn out to be just as significant a media development as the arrival of print. It is creating new global communities, granting their members both the means and the motivation to step up their skills and broaden their imaginations. It is unleashing an unprecedented wave of innovation in thousands of different disciplines: some trivial, some niche in the extreme, some central to solving humanity's problems. In short, it is boosting the net sum of global talent. (2010, ¶10)

Anderson has noticed that the motivation to step up skills extends to oral communication skills. When people see his TED talks online and listen to the expert speakers, they realize the need to become better speakers themselves. In other words, TED talks not only demonstrate how much good speakers can teach us via presentation, they also demonstrate the importance of effective oral language. Listeners are inspired by the innovative ideas in the talks, and they are also inspired to work on presenting their own ideas more effectively. And of course, the crowd-accelerated innovation Anderson talks about only occurs when listeners are effective at grasping the ideas and advancing them.

## **Listening and Speaking in Language Acquisition**

How did we learn our native language? Immersion. Long before we received any formal instruction, we picked up our language first by hearing it spoken in natural and meaningful contexts and then by trying to use it ourselves (Weaver, 1980). In the same way, school-age children acquiring a new language need to experience how that language works, which involves understanding the interconnection among listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Language proficiency increases when we teach strategies that develop these

interconnections (Shaw, 2008). We learned our first language by interacting with others, and to learn a new language, students need opportunities to use that language in meaningful interactions with others (Shrum & Glisan, 2000). Those interactions are primarily verbal.

Recall that vocabulary acquisition is one of the skills promoted by reading aloud. We find a similar situation in second-language instruction. Students participating in a textbook dialog exercise have a better chance of retaining new vocabulary words if they and their peers deliver the dialog well. The way words are spoken gives clues about their meaning. Proper inflection can reinforce that meaning. To do this presupposes that the students speak well in their native language. Dialog containing “It is hilarious!” will likely not be delivered well if the native language phrase “Que era de risa!” is not delivered well. By developing speaking skill in the first language, then, we can support second-language acquisition. When oral communication skills are strong, dialogue comes alive, retention is improved, the patterns of the target language are more easily detected, and interest and engagement are increased.

## **Listening and Speaking in Instruction for Students with Disabilities**

Consider these sobering statistics from the National Council on Disability (2004): more than 40 percent of U.S. secondary-age students with disabilities do not attain a high school diploma at the end of high school, and dropout rates for youth with disabilities are three to four times higher than for students without disabilities. To what extent does this reflect the failure of one-size-fits-all instruction to meet the needs of these students?

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a promising avenue for ensuring that *every* student in our schools can access content and demonstrate understanding. UDL takes its cue from the universal design movement in architecture—the idea of which was to make physical environments accessible for everyone. The classic example is the curb cut: equally beneficial to people in wheelchairs, parents

pushing strollers, cyclists, delivery people with hand trucks, individuals with mobility issues, and your run-of-the-mill pedestrian.

UDL is guided by three principles:

*Principle I: Provide Multiple Means of Representation*

Learners differ in the ways that they perceive and comprehend information that is presented to them. For example, those with sensory disabilities (e.g., blindness or deafness); learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia); language or cultural differences; and so forth may all require *different ways* of approaching content. Others may simply grasp information quicker or more efficiently through visual or *auditory* means rather than printed text.

*Principle II: Provide Multiple Means of Action and Expression*

Learners differ in the ways that they can navigate a learning environment and express what they know. For example, individuals with significant movement impairments (e.g., cerebral palsy), those who struggle with strategic and organizational abilities (executive function disorders), those who have language barriers, and so forth approach learning tasks very differently. Some may be able to *express themselves well in written text but not speech, and vice versa...*

*Principle III: Provide Multiple Means of Engagement*

Affect represents a crucial element to learning, and learners differ markedly in the ways in which they can be engaged or motivated to learn.... Some learners are highly engaged by spontaneity and novelty while others are disengaged, even frightened, by those aspects, preferring strict routine. Some learners might like to work alone, while others prefer to work with their peers. In reality, there is not one means of engagement that will be optimal for all learners in all contexts; providing *multiple options* for engagement is essential. (CAST, 2011, p. 5) [emphasis added]

How do the principles of UDL connect to the topic of this book? High-stakes testing has had the effect of focusing instructional intention on reading and writing (assessed subjects). UDL reminds us to consider how else students might access content and demonstrate understanding: by listening to the text rather than reading it, by recording a presentation rather than word processing a written report, or by reading and discussing with a partner instead of reading and reflecting alone. Our schools adequately address the strong reader and the strong writer; following the principles of UDL will

help us address the strong listener and the strong speaker at the same time that we use listening and speaking to accommodate students with unique needs.

## Listening and Speaking in Life Beyond School

Business leaders have long recognized the need for effective communication in the workforce. Figure 1.1 shows employers' ratings of their "most-valued" skills, as identified on a 2012 survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. Notice how many involve listening and speaking. Facility with written language barely makes the top 10.

Figure 1.1	The Top 10 Candidate Skills and Qualities Employers Seek
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization</li> <li>2. Ability to work in a team structure</li> <li>3. Ability to make decisions and solve problems</li> <li>4. Ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work</li> <li>5. Ability to obtain and process information</li> <li>6. Ability to analyze quantitative data</li> <li>7. Technical knowledge related to the job</li> <li>8. Proficiency with computer software programs</li> <li>9. Ability to create and/or edit written reports</li> <li>10. Ability to sell or influence others</li> </ol>	

Source: National Association of Colleges and Employers (2012).

According to a Stanford Business School study, our students will graduate into a business world in which verbal fluency and sociability are the two most important predictors of success. (Cain, 2012). A senior manager at Eastman Kodak puts it this way: "It's not enough to be able to sit at your computer excited about a fantastic

regression analysis if you're squeamish about presenting those results to an executive group" (Cain, 2012, p. 31). And, to be clear, we aren't talking about fear of large-group presentation only. Presenting those results may involve a small group and may not be in person but online. Success is likely to depend on being comfortable communicating orally in many different modes—large-group presentations but also in small-group meetings, in person but also online.

Students graduate to civic responsibilities as well. I finished my teaching career as a civics teacher. Civics is a subject that naturally leads to many discussions of polarizing topics: the national debt, entitlements, gay rights, gun control, use of drones, climate change, and so on. It is difficult to find models for civil and collaborative discussions of these issues. What we tend to see on television are less discussion than they are virulent attacks, which make for great theater and seem to attract viewers but do nothing to move participants toward understanding and solution. Somewhere, this trend has to be reversed, and that somewhere may be your class as you teach listening and speaking skills: how to identify key points, how to construct counter arguments, how to reach evidence-supported conclusions, and so on.



In sum, listening and speaking are the water that surrounds everything in our classes and upon which instruction depends. We do a disservice to our students if we assume they can somehow become effective listeners and communicators without direct instruction.

We have all noticed the problem. Few teachers would say, "Not *my* kids! They have mastered listening and speaking!" We have all noticed the problem; now we need to respond to it. Effort is involved. Changing our teaching is involved. You may be tempted to view the next chapters as "More Work for Me." To some extent, they are. But I hope you also see what follows as "Essential Instruction That All Children Need." Let's get to it!

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, C. (2010, December 27). TED curator Chris Anderson on crowd accelerated innovation [Video]. Retrieved August 1, 2013, from [http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/12/ff\\_tedvideos/](http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/12/ff_tedvideos/)
- Andrews, P. (2008, March). The search for America's worst avid golfer. Retrieved August 20, 2012, from <http://www.golfdigest.com/magazine/gd0585wagandrews>
- Bass, A. (2005). Enhancing listening skills. *The Balance Sheet*. Retrieved August 20, 2013, from <http://balancesheet.swlearning.com/0905/0905c.html>
- Boyd, D. (2005). Wikipedia, academia and Siegenthaler [Blog post]. Retrieved September 18, 2013, from Apophenia at [http://www.zephorias.org/thoughts/archives/2005/12/14/wikipedia\\_acade.html](http://www.zephorias.org/thoughts/archives/2005/12/14/wikipedia_acade.html)
- Brookfield, S. P., & Preskill, S. (1999). *Discussion as a way of teaching: Tools and techniques for democratic classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bumiller, E. (2010, April 26). We have met the enemy and he is PowerPoint. *New York Times*. Retrieved August 1, 2013, from [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/27/world/27powerpoint.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/27/world/27powerpoint.html?_r=0)
- Cain, S. (2012). *Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Carr, N. (2011). *The shallows: What the Internet is doing to our brains*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
- CAST. (2011). *Universal Design for Learning guidelines version 2.0*. Wakefield, MA: Author.
- Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2010a). *Common Core State Standards for English language arts & literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects*. Washington, DC: CCSSO & National Governors Association. Available: <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy>.

- Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2010b). *Common Core State Standards for English language arts & literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. Appendix A: Research supporting key elements of the standards, glossary of key terms*. Washington, DC: CCSSO & National Governors Association. Available: [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_A.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf)
- Delpit, L. (2006). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: The New Press.
- Education Northwest. (2013). 6+1 Trait® Writing. Retrieved September 26, 2013, from <http://educationnorthwest.org/resource/949>
- Edutopia Staff. (2012, December 15). *Five tips for building strong collaborative learning*. Retrieved February 26, 2013, from <http://www.edutopia.org/stw-collaborative-learning-tips>
- Fall, R., Webb, N., & Chudowsky, N. (1997, August). *Group discussion and large-scale language arts assessment: Effects on students' comprehension*. (CSE Technical Report 445) Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- Gagne, M. (2012, December 17). Tiverton Middle School group Skypes with authors to hear the stories' stories. *The Herald News*. Retrieved February 27, 2012, from <http://www.heraldnews.com/news/x1631894112/Tiverton-Middle-School-group-Skypes-with-authors-to-hear-the-stories-stories>
- Hammond, D. W., & Nessel, D. D. (2011). *The comprehension experience: Engaging readers through effective inquiry and discussion*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Himmele, W., & Himmele, P. (2012, December 6). Why read-alouds matter more in the age of the Common Core Standards. *ASCD Express*, 8(5). Retrieved July 31, 2013, from <http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol8/805-himmele.aspx>
- Krane, B. (2006). Researchers find kids need better online academic skills. Retrieved July 31, 2013, from *U. Conn Advance* at <http://advance.uconn.edu/2006/061113/06111308.htm>
- Lent, R. (2012). *Overcoming textbook fatigue*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Lowmiller, P. (2004, February). *Affect psychology in the classroom*. Retrieved February 26, 2013, from <http://waldenpdk.org/programs/Lowmiller/part3.html>
- Mackay, H. (2005). Now hear this! Good listeners have success. *The Times Union* [Albany, New York]. Retrieved February 20, 2013, from <http://albarchive.merlinone.net/mweb/wmsql.wm.request?oneimage&imageid=6318133>
- Marzano, R. (2013, February). Asking questions at four different levels. *Educational Leadership*, 70(5), 76–77.
- Mayer, R. (2009). *Multi-media learning*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- McMillan, D. (2010). *Life after death by PowerPoint 2010* [Video]. Available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbSPPFYxx3o>

- Measured Progress/ETS Collaborative. (2012a, February 28). *English language arts item specifications showcase 3 materials* [Draft]. Retrieved September 9, 2013, from <http://www.acsa.org/MainMenuCategories/ProfessionalLearning/OnlineTrainings/ACSAOnlinePD/Curriculum-and-Instruction-Leaders-Webinars/elaitems022812.aspx>
- Measured Progress/ETS Collaborative. (2012b, April 13). *Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium: English language arts item and task specifications*. Retrieved September 9, 2013, from <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/TaskItemSpecifications/EnglishLanguageArtsLiteracy/ELARubrics.pdf>
- National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2012, October). *Job outlook 2013*. Bethlehem, PA: Author.
- National Council on Disability. (2004). *Improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities*. Washington, DC: Author. Available: <http://www.ncd.gov/publications/2004/Mar172004>
- National Education Association. (2012). Preparing 21st century students for a global society: An educator's guide to "the four Cs." Washington, DC: Author. Available: <http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/A-Guide-to-Four-Cs.pdf>
- National Public Radio. (2010, January 13) Code switching: Are we all guilty? *Tell me more* [Podcast transcript]. Retrieved February 22, 2012, from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=122528515>
- Palmer, E. (2011). *Well spoken: Teaching speaking to all students*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Palmer, E. (2012). *Digitally speaking: How to improve student presentations with technology*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Pink, D. (2005, March). The book stops here. *Wired Magazine*, 13(3). Available: [http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/13.03/wiki.html?pg=1&topic=wiki&topic\\_set=](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/13.03/wiki.html?pg=1&topic=wiki&topic_set=)
- Reynolds, G. (2008) *Presentation Zen: Simple ideas on presentation design and delivery*. Berkeley, CA: New Riders.
- Rubenstein, G. (2008) *Collaboration generation: Teaching and learning for a new age*. Retrieved January 16, 2013, from <http://www.edutopia.org/collaboration-age>
- Schwerdt, G., & Wupperman, A. (2011, Summer). Sage on the stage. *EducationNext*, 11(3). Retrieved March 4, 2013, from <http://educationnext.org/sage-on-the-stage/>
- Shaw, T. (2008). *Integrating listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills in the foreign language classroom to increase student proficiency and self-perception of proficiency*. Retrieved January 29, 2013, from <http://digitalcollections.carrollu.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/edthesis/id/30/rec/16>
- Shrum, J. L., & Glisan, E. W. (2000). *Teacher's handbook: Contextualized language instruction*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

- Sticht, T. G., & James, J. H. (1984). Listening and reading. In P. D. Pearson, R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, & P. Mosenthal (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research: Volume I* (pp. 293–317). White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Treasure, J. (2011, July). *5 ways to listen better* [Video]. Retrieved August 9, 2012, from [http://www.ted.com/talks/julian\\_treasure\\_5\\_ways\\_to\\_listen\\_better.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/julian_treasure_5_ways_to_listen_better.html)
- Walsh Dolan, M. (1985). Integrating listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the classroom. *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, 1(1), 4. Available: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1769>
- Weaver, C. (1980). *Psycholinguistics and reading: From process to practice*. Cambridge, MA: Winthrop.
- Wikipedia. (n.d.a). *Wikipedia: About*. Retrieved August 20, 2013, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About>
- Wikipedia. (n.d.b). *Reliability of Wikipedia*. Retrieved September 18, 2013, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reliability\\_of\\_Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reliability_of_Wikipedia)
- Worth, R. (2004). *Career skills library: Communication skills* (2nd ed.). New York: Ferguson.
- Zapato, L. (2013). *Help save the endangered Pacific Northwest tree octopus from extinction*. Retrieved January 16, 2013, from <http://www.zapatopi.net/treeoctopus/>
- Zinsser, W. (1988). *Writing to learn*. New York: Harper & Row.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Erik Palmer** is a professional speaker and educational consultant from Denver, Colorado, whose passion for speaking has been part of every one of his careers. Before going into education, he was the national sales leader for a prominent commodity brokerage firm, a floor trader on a Chicago commodity exchange, and a founder of a publicly traded commodity investment firm. He left the business world and became a teacher, spending 21 years in the classroom in the Cherry Creek School District in Englewood, Colorado, primarily as an English teacher but also as a teacher of math, science, and civics.

Erik is the author of *Well-Spoken: Teaching Speaking to All Students* and *Digitally Speaking: How to Improve Student Presentations with Technology* and a program consultant for Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's English Language Arts program, *Collections*. He presents frequently at national, regional, and state conferences, and he has given keynotes and led in-service training in school districts across the United States and Mexico focused on showing teachers how to improve students' oral communication and help develop the skills necessary to speak well in school and beyond.

Erik can be reached through his website, [www.erikpalmer.net](http://www.erikpalmer.net), or the website he has devoted to oral communication, [www.pvlegs.com](http://www.pvlegs.com).

## **Related ASCD Resources**

At the time of publication, the following ASCD resources were available (ASCD stock numbers appear in parentheses). For up-to-date information about ASCD resources, go to [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org). You can search the complete archives of *Educational Leadership* at <http://www.ascd.org/el>.

### **ASCD EDge Group**

Exchange ideas and connect with other educators interested in English and language arts, Common Core State Standards, and 21st century learning on the social networking site ASCD EDge™ at <http://ascdedge.ascd.org/>

### **Online Courses**

Common Core and Literacy Strategies: English Language Arts (#PD11OC135)

Common Core and Literacy Strategies: History/Social Studies (#PD11OC132)

Common Core and Literacy Strategies: Science (#PD11OC133)

### **Print Products**

*Common Core Standards for Grades K–2 Math and English Language Arts:*

*A Quick-Start Guide* (#11314) by Amber Evenson, Monette McIver, Susan Ryan, and Amitra Schwols; edited by John Kendall

*Common Core Standards for Grades 3–5 Math and English Language Arts:*

*A Quick-Start Guide* (#113015) by Amber Evenson, Monette McIver, Susan Ryan, and Amitra Schwols; edited by John Kendall

*Common Core Standards for Middle School English Language Arts: A*

*Quick-Start Guide* (#113012) by Susan Ryan and Dana Frazee; edited by John Kendall

*Common Core Standards for High School English Language Arts: A Quick-*

*Start Guide* (#113010) by Susan Ryan & Dana Frazee; edited by John Kendall

*Engaging Minds in English Language Arts Classrooms: The Surprising*

*Power of Joy* (#113021) by Mary Jo Fresch, Michael F. Opitz, and Michael P. Ford

*Teaching 21st Century Skills: An ASCD Action Tool* (#111021) by Sue

Beers

*Teaching Reading in the Content Areas: If Not Me, Then Who?* (3rd Ed.)

(#112024) by Vicki Urquhart and Dana Frazee

For more information: send e-mail to [member@ascd.org](mailto:member@ascd.org); call 1-800-933-2723 or 703-578-9600, press 2; send a fax to 703-575-5400; or write to Information Services, ASCD, 1703 N. Beauregard St., Alexandria, VA 22311-1714 USA.