

Three Strategies for Enriching the Quantity and Quality of Classroom Talk

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As researchers and teacher educators, we have worked with many teachers who feel that their average lesson is "out of shape" when it comes to building students' oral language. Decades of focusing on raising reading and math scores have deconditioned many teachers' abilities to improve students' oral language skills across disciplines and grade levels. Especially in schools with low standardized test scores, lesson design has focused on quiet activities that prepare students for multiple-choice tests. Many students have come to think that learning means memorizing facts, shortcuts, word meanings, and grammar rules to be counted on tests.

Yet many valuable things that students need to learn for college and life cannot be easily counted. We argue that this is especially true for speaking skills. In fact, the ability to communicate orally is often cited as the number-one skill desired by employers.

This article focuses on a dimension of speaking that we call *oral output*. Oral output is a one-way, one-time message, without the back-and-forth clarification and negotiation of *interactions*. (True, improving students' output skills can also help them have better interactions.) We focus on *academic* oral output, which is talk that describes complex ideas with two or more sentences that are logically linked and organized. Examples of academic oral output include giving an oral presentation, sharing an idea with a partner in a pair-share, and answering a teacher's open-ended question in class.

We can design more and better activities to help students improve their academic speaking. Too many activities, for example, are over-scripted with a sentence frame for every response. Other activities are just plain boring to students because they are so inauthentic. *Authentic* means that there is a need and desire to use original language to describe one's ideas for a reason. Language should be used for real purposes, to bridge information gaps. When students truly want to express and receive a message to get something done—as opposed to using language just for show or points—they will push themselves to use more and clearer language. And if you provide structures and supports that help students expand and clarify their talk, both quantity and quality increase.

Here we describe three broad teaching strategies for building oral output skills in most lessons, along with examples of activities that embody the strategies.

Strategy 1: Build the habit of speaking in paragraphs.

Many children and adults have trouble clearly expressing their thoughts to others. In most cases, the thoughts are not logically organized into paragraphs. So, whether you teach kindergarten or high school physics, your students will benefit from some extra practice thinking and speaking in paragraphs (Zwiers, O'Hara, & Pritchard, 2014).

Here are several steps:

1. Model how to generate a mental topic sentence that makes a claim or an assertion. Display the sentence. You might share, *Many animals have adapted in order to camouflage themselves from predators*. Highlight the sentence's general or abstract nature.

2. Model how you think of other sentences that support and explain the first one. *For example, a flounder can match the pattern and colour of the sand or rocks he is resting on. Similarly, a ...*

3. Ask students for a topic, and then model for them how you generate topic and supporting sentences. For example, they might shout out, "Soccer," and you might respond with, "Soccer is a popular sport around the world for several reasons. One reason is that that all you need is a ball, a field, and something to make goal posts. Another reason is ..." Then toss out a topic to them. Let them think about it before sharing ideas with their partners and then with the whole class.

4. In pairs, have a student in the "listener" role say a topic or ask a question to the "speaker" role. (Use either random, easy, or lesson-based topics from prepared cards.) The partner then takes a moment to think of a topic sentence and support it with other sentences that are, ideally, linked with cohesive devices such as *first, second, in addition, another, moreover, however, for example, if*, and so on. The listener can offer extra ideas, if needed. For example:

Partner A: Why do you think we should study viruses? Answer in a paragraph.

Partner B: We should study viruses in order to understand how to prevent diseases. For example, we can learn how viruses reproduce to make vaccinations, like for smallpox. That's all I got.

Partner A: You could also say, "Another reason to study viruses is to learn how they spread from one person to another."

How this exercise increases the quantity of talk: Answers in paragraph form tend to be longer than the responses students have traditionally been asked to give. Most students are used to giving one letter, one-word, or simple-sentence answers. Also, when they practice in pairs, as in the above activity, all students get more chances to say more than in small-group or whole-class activities.

How this exercise increases the quality of talk: As students learn to organize their ideas hierarchically in their minds and use evidence and examples to explain and support assertions orally, they improve the clarity and cohesiveness of their talk.

Strategy 2: Engage pairs in semi-structured output activities.

This type of activity involves two students, each with a role, usually one as the "director" and the other as the "speaker." It focuses on contrasting two ideas or two sides of an issue. It is semi-structured, rather than hyper-structured and over-scripted, to allow students to form and articulate their ideas in their own words.

An example is a Pro-Con (adapted from Denis, Griffin, & Wills, 1981), in which the director says a topic, claps, and says, "Pro!" The speaker quickly thinks up and says positive aspects of the topic until the director says, "Con!" This change happens a couple more times. Between each set of pros and cons, the speaker must use an academic transition, such as *however, on the other hand, and then again*. In addition, you can encourage students to use connective terms within each turn—like *such as, in addition, for example*, etc. Some teachers also provide extra sentence stems:

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- One advantage is ...
- For example ...
- Another positive of ... is ... because ...
- A negative aspect of ... is ... because ...
- In spite of the fact that

Here is an example from a 5th grade history class.

Director: Declaring independence from England. Pro! (*claps hands once*)

Speaker: One pro of independence was to get away from paying taxes without being able to vote for them. We didn't have representation.

Director: Con! (claps hands once)

Speaker: On the other hand, a negative for independence was that lots of people would die in the war. And people would lose their homes and military protection by the British.

Director: Pro!

Speaker: Then again, independence would allow for freedom to have our own country and have a democracy. For example, to decide taxes.

Director: Con!

Speaker: However, we would have to create a military and a government and it might cost even more than paying for the taxes to England. In addition, not every colonist wanted to go to war, either.

*How this exercise increases **quantity of talk**:* After switching roles and finishing the second round, every student has had a chance to orally articulate an academic idea using original academic language to another person, face-to-face. This structure allows (and gently pushes) typically quiet students (those who mostly "listen" in small groups and pair-shares) to practice academic talk in a low-stress format.

*How this exercise increases **quality of talk**:* Notice how this type of activity helps to build several aspects of language quality. Practicing academic transitions and connective terms allows them to take root in students' minds and become more automatic in speaking and writing. Students also practice using examples to support whatever side they are describing.

If needed, before the activity, you and the class can make a chart with ideas for each side and then cover it up when the activity begins. The chart can prompt student talk, while covering it up forces them to say it authentically, with their own words and justifications, rather than just reading it from the poster or their notes. And to improve the director's listening skills, you can ask the director to listen carefully, decide which side of the issue the speaker personally supports, and then explain this observation to the speaker, using the speaker's words and nonverbal cues as evidence. Variations of this strategy include focusing on other thinking and language skills such as:

- Cause/Effect: The director might say, "The main character's decision to leave the community. Causes!"
- Compare/Contrast: The director might say, "Plant and animal cells. Compare!"

Strategy 3: Foster longer and stronger responses with successive partner activities

In this type of activity, students respond to the same prompt several times with different partners. In one variation of this strategy called an Interview Grid (Zwiers, O'Hara, & Pritchard, 2014), students formulate an initial response to a prompt or question, and then build their answer each time they share with a new partner. This augmentation demands the most modelling and energy from you. Why? The mode for many students is to say the same thing each time, fill in the blanks, get points, and keep the teacher happy. Emphasize that this and other similar activities are golden opportunities to practice and improve their academic speaking skills. Model for students how you start with an initial answer or idea, and then improve it each time you talk with a new partner, borrowing and building on previous partners' ideas and language.

In a 4th grade classroom, for example, students respond to "What do you think is the strongest theme in this story?" Armando starts with a basic idea that he shares with his first partner, Beatrice. Beatrice shares her idea with him, which is similar but she uses a better example from the text. Armando then uses Beatrice's text example and even borrows her expression, "A solid example of this theme is when the main character ..." With

Armando's third partner, he shares a much longer and more academic response than what he shared with his first partner.

How this exercise increases quantity of talk: Because students are asked to share orally in pairs with three or more different partners, the classroom is filled with focused talk during the activity. Many teachers also have students share their finalized, "bulked-up" ideas with the whole class.

How this exercise increases quality of talk: Unlike many classroom activities, this activity allows students to authentically practice their oral communication of an idea because, at each turn, they talk with a partner who doesn't know what they will say, and there's a real need to fill the information gap. If they develop the habit of improving their response each time, making it longer and stronger based on previous turns, the quality of their speaking skills soars.

A similar activity is Opinion Formation Cards (Zwiers, O'Hara, & Pritchard, 2014). Each student receives one of six (or four, or eight) cards with a quotation from controversial text(s) that they will read. Three quotations should support one side of the issue and three should support the other. You pose the main question (e.g., Should we ban genetic testing?) and ask students to form an initial opinion on the issue. They then meet with successive partners who have different cards, read their cards aloud, and explain their side of the issue. With each partner, answers should get longer and stronger. They might even change their opinion as they hear other perspectives and evidence: "At first I thought we should ban it because we shouldn't mess with nature, but then I heard enough benefits to put me more in the middle." Notice how this activity trains students to think on their own, shift their thinking based on textual evidence, and practice describing their ideas orally to others.

Talk is priceless. Language bridges the gap between our students and each other and their world of learning. We owe it to our students to use some of our precious lesson time on helping them improve their speaking abilities. We are confident that as you try the three types of strategies above, you will be pleased to see increases in the quantity of talk of all of your students and the quality of students' oral responses and academic communication skills.

References

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