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Monica Gordon Pershey

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A Rationale for Classroom Listening and Speaking Instruction

Monica Gordon Pershey

Listening and speaking are challenging classroom objectives for many language arts teachers. Our students have been oral language users since their first year of life. They use language for a variety of purposes quite naturally and meaningfully. But the oral language skill has formidable inadequacies—it may be hard for them to express ideas, feelings, and beliefs; they may not be able to speak at length about school-related topics; higher level thinking could be difficult to verbalize; and linguistic concepts—such as identifying the grammatical elements of sentence structure—are difficult for them to discern. Given differences in children’s capabilities and in light of curricular demands, what aspects of oral language development might the classroom teacher reasonably be expected to address? How do teachers effectively incorporate oral language development into classroom routines?

My purpose in this article is to present a rationale for instructional decision making regarding classroom listening and speaking. I will offer a three-part model of language learning, describe some of the developmental tasks that youngsters face in each of these three areas, and provide a few examples of how the premises of this model translate into classroom practices.

Listening and Speaking are Language Learning

Perhaps the fundamental question is this: when a teacher is asked to help students improve listening and speaking, what is she being asked to do? The answer is this: the teacher is helping stu-

dents acquire three interrelated capacities: learning language, learning about language, and learning through language (Van Dongen 1986). Figure 1 briefly summarizes these competencies.

Students who use oral language to communicate in daily life continue learning language. Commonly, they are acquiring new communication behaviors to use for a variety of increasingly complex purposes. For example, socially, they are learning different ways to ask questions — probing or indirectly, perhaps. They are learning to persuade others, be it threateningly, charmingly, or through appeals to reason. Many aspire to describe events vividly, humorously, or engagingly in order to be considered interesting, funny, or exciting by their peers. They are learning to use trendy words that accent their social style.

Academically, children are learning to speak as required in different contexts, such as in peer learning groups, classroom presentations, grand conversations—discussions about response to text— and as authors of texts. This involves planning before speaking and adjusting a message to a time frame. Sometimes they speak as a solo “performer,” and other times they must contribute their part as a member of a team. In both social and academic settings, to learn language, students utilize memory, vocabulary, and discourse planning skills. Learning language means improving linguistic form, message format, awareness of the needs of listeners, style of delivery, and expressivity in order to impart purposeful communications.

Learning about language is a staple of the

language arts curriculum. Language is a system and a code which has its own rules, forms, and properties. When we learn to use language we are, as Britton said, “participants.” By contrast, Britton posits that language “spectators” can objectify a message and view the verbal transaction as a “verbal object” — an “artifact” to be held up for various types of analysis: the grammatical structure of the message, its information value, its aesthetic or poetic appeal, its social impact, its symbolism, its length, its clausal complexity, or any other sort of evaluation that the spectator may need to make. Learning about language as an entity may encompass divergent, interpretive thinking or may involve convergent learning, such as identifying the parts of speech used in a sentence.

Learning through language is perhaps exemplified by the slogan “language across the curriculum.” Language is the primary mode through which school learning occurs. It is a student’s primary tool for learning academic content. School success is dependent upon how well students comprehend and express the content they have learned. Teachers often devote a great deal of effort to teaching strategies that connect new to known information, build content area vocabularies, and help students organize, reason through, and memorize information. Students who are learning through language often must utilize higher order thinking and verbal reasoning skills.

Van Dongen noted that two or all three of these forms of language learning may occur simultaneously. For example, the student whose teacher asks him to orally summarize the main idea of a news article must exercise all three capacities at once. He must learn through language to apprehend the content of the article, must apply what he has learned about language to examine the written “object” and evaluate what the author has emphasized as the main idea, and must employ the language he has learned to prepare a verbal response to the teacher’s request.

What Tasks Do Language Learners Face in Each of these Areas?

Learning Language. Students need to acquire the ability to perceive the communicative demands of a situation and devise an effective message to use in that context. While this does involve semantic and syntactic skills, the domain of language at work here is pragmatics, that is, the use of words and sentences in context, based upon one’s interpretation of a context and one’s understanding of how to convey beliefs, knowledge, and intents in that context (Turkstra). Pragmatic language competence may vary with the demands of the communication setting; a child may seem to comprehend and communicate well in one setting and less well in another. To learn language well enough to function in school, students must be reasonably successful when they encounter the following communication demands (Silliman).

1. Transitioning from home language styles to school language styles. At home, children talk about immediate contexts. Meaning is situated in the people, things, and events they have experienced. In school, we tend to talk about ideas. At home, our communication goals are interpersonal, but at school communication is used to facilitate cognitive goals. Within households, there is likely to be a shared frame of reference. But at school, a teacher and child may differ in their frames of reference. When talking at home, backchannel feedback is expected (“yeah,” “uh-huh,” “what?” can be said while a speaker is talking). Simultaneous speaking and topic hopping are accepted. But at school, we must wait until a speaker is through to reply or ask questions. Usually the person who holds the floor is the adult who chooses the topic and when to end it. Importantly, at home, tacit knowledge is seldom discussed. At school, tacit knowledge is repeatedly rehearsed. At home, dialect may be spoken, but at school Standard American English might be expected.

2. Learning standards for school discourse rituals. Students must acquire and continue to respectfully use communication patterns that are unique to school. These include taking turns, rais-

ing hands, knowing an answer but not shouting it out, and answering a question on demand. More subtly, classroom decorum requires that we learn when to be self-reliant and when to rely on others, and when it is all right to be original, creative, or fanciful.

3. Learning to be on topic. Introducing a topic, maintaining talk on a topic, and appropriately ending a topic can be difficult skills. To change a topic, we must mark transitions or evidence cohesion across topics. Without verbal or nonverbal markers for topic switching, a speaker might seem to be bringing up an idea that is irrelevant.

4. Learning to respond to adults' four most important elicitations. Adults require many forms of language from children, but predominantly we require them to respond to choice elicitations, product elicitations ("What is the name of the capital city of Michigan?" "What animal is a marsupial?"), process elicitations ("How did this milk get spilled?") and metaprocess elicitations ("How do you find out who are the senators from Mississippi?").

5. Learning to respond to adults' attempts to repair a miscommunication. Adults ask children to clarify themselves in several ways, such as by (a) repetition ("Tell me what you said again?"), (b) confirmation (the adult repeats or paraphrases the student and then expects the child to continue), (c) specification (asking the student to clarify her meaning: "What is the fuzzy toy you want to buy?"), (d) pointing out similarity ("So this is like a ladybug" and expecting the student to continue), (e) pointing out dissimilarity ("So this is not like a ladybug" and expecting the student to continue), or by (e) supplying more information ("Yes, you are right, it is not like a ladybug. This is not like a caterpillar, either" and expecting the student to continue his explanation).

6. Learning to distinguish when knowledge is shared by a conversational partner and when it is not. Speakers need to be able to convey new information when there is not shared background knowledge but also must not provide tedious explanations of knowledge that is already mutual. We vary our delivery when we discuss an event in the

company's shared present, discuss an event in the company's shared past, discuss an event presumed to be shared or common knowledge, or discuss an event presumed not to be shared or common knowledge and for which the speaker provides explanation.

Children who have learned language well are aware of whether their listeners are comprehending and then modify or clarify their language as needed.

In summary, learning language refers to interacting in a way that meets contextual demands. Children who have learned language well are aware of whether their listeners are comprehending and then modify or clarify their language as needed. When confronted with the types of demands described above, the children who have learned language well self-monitor their communication in order to meet the informational needs of listeners. Such students tend to express ideas sequentially and logically, provide sufficient information but don't ramble on for too long, switch or maintain topics as needed, and vary how they converse with someone depending on that person's social status, age, and familiarity.

Learning About Language. Students can be guided to consciously analyze how language is used in a variety of spoken and written contexts, a skill often known as metalinguistic awareness (deVilliers & deVilliers). Metalinguistic awareness helps children mature in their ability to learn about language. This awareness is brought about by consciously examining how language is used and thinking about how ideas are expressed through language. Metalinguistic awareness may be evidenced when learners consciously examine and discuss what they unconsciously know about language (Bialystok, Dreher & Zenge, Pershey 2000a, Pershey 2000b, Warren-Leubecker & Carter). This is a complex task that integrates cognition and linguistic proficiency (Mey, Vygotsky).

There are several aspects of metalinguistic awareness. As the prefix "meta" implies, these

skills go beyond the spontaneous use of language to an examination of language as an entity. Perhaps most common to the language arts curriculum is metaphonological awareness. Other “meta” skills involve metasemantic, metasyntactic, and metapragmatic knowledge. Understanding that creating written language products requires attending to both linguistic macrostructures and microstructures is another “meta” skill.

Metaphonological awareness means that the student can examine elements of the sound structure of language and articulate perceptions and insights about this system. These may be their own original thoughts on the use of the sound system of language or may be statements that reveal that they understand linguistic rules they have been taught (e.g., the long “o” is pronounced as “oh”). To acquire literacy skills—reading and producing written language—children must develop phonemic awareness (conscious, explicit awareness of the sounds of a language as they occur in words and syllables) and sound-symbol correspondence. For many children, reading failure stems from a linguistic processing deficit that impairs their ability to detect and manipulate speech sounds. This problem may be hidden because in many cases the child’s speech is clear. This leads us to conclude that learning to perceive individual speech sounds and map them onto letters is actually a “meta” skill—it involves breaking apart and examining the component sounds found in words that we use in everyday life. We can also look at how adding sounds to words changes their meanings—“cat” has a different meaning from “cats”; “walk” has a different meaning than “walked.” This is known as morphophonology, that is, looking at how meaningless phonological elements (“-s,” “-ed”) become meaningful when added to words.

Explicit, systematic instruction about the sound structure of language has become a key component in a balanced approach to literacy (Routman). As students progress through the grades, they master the skills needed to decode and spell words of increasing phonological complexity. They need to learn to recognize and use obliga-

tory word endings and know how some spelling errors arise from the misapplication of rules.

Metasemantic awareness implies that semantics instruction goes beyond teaching vocabulary usage and includes word study. This might include understanding related words (electric, electricity), knowing the meaning of a variety of affixes, studying multiple meaning words, and looking at homographs (for example, DESert and deSERT) (Ganske). This emphasis on syllabication, pronunciation, and derivation ties in well with metaphonological study. Spelling becomes more meaningful when it is perceived as a tool for imparting meaning.

Metasyntactic awareness involves the study of sentence construction. This is perhaps most interestingly approached through literature study. How do authors construct sentences that have impact? Why do some sentences seem to have melody and resonance? How can a writer craft a variety of sentence types? McGee & Tompkins offer this suggestion: when a class is reading a work of literature, class members can select notable sentences and write them on squares of paper that will be fashioned into a quilt. Explicit discussion and instruction about sentence construction can ensue from these selected sentences. This may also promote comparison of how we speak in sentences versus how we write in sentences.

Throughout the middle and upper elementary school years, children become developmentally capable of using more complex sentence forms and analyzing how these forms are created. For example, they are able to create various phrasal constructions rather than just conjoin short sentences to form longer ones (“Before I went to the park, I saw a movie” rather than “I saw a movie and I went to the park”). They can intuitively change statements into questions or change a sentence from the active to the passive voice.

Explicit “meta” examination of sentence construction can also help students better comprehend dialogue passages, dialect usage, archaic language, and other challenging sentence forms found in texts, movies, and audio recordings.

Taken together, explicit and developmentally meaningful understanding of the phonological, semantic, and syntactic elements of language reveals knowledge of linguistic microstructures, the parts we use to produce a message. The purpose of a message, its context, and the strategies used to ensure that sentences are spoken in an order that makes sense constitute the linguistic macrostructure of a message. Explicit knowledge in this area encourages metapragmatic awareness (Nelson, Wilkinson et al.).

Metapragmatic awareness entails insight into the use, purpose, or intention of a spoken or written message within the context of a verbal interchange or written passage (Pershey, 1997; Pershey, 1998; Pershey, 2000a). There are diverse forms of metapragmatic awareness. Within the typical language arts curriculum, competencies that have metapragmatic elements often relate to reading to ascertain author's purpose, writing for a variety of audiences and purposes, and self-monitoring communicative style when speaking for a variety of purposes. Again, overt discussion of conscious knowledge is essential for metapragmatic awareness to flourish. As Sternberg, Okagaki, & Jackson describe, students self-monitoring can be guided by self-questioning, for example, "What should I do to orally summarize this paragraph to the other students in my learning group? How might I word this to share the author's point?"

Learning through language is basically what school is all about.

In summary, learning about language microstructures is a familiar area for most language arts educators. Classroom oral language use can be enhanced by devoting attention to "meta" awareness of microstructural elements as well as by drawing attention to macrostructures and metapragmatic awareness.

Learning through language is basically what school is all about. Language is a tool for learning and communicating. When we communicate about a topic, we transform our knowledge of that topic

(Vygotsky). To learn through language, students must continuously enhance their fund of verbal information. They must develop a lexicon for the topic under study. Also, they must use verbal reasoning to pose and solve problems and think critically. Learning through language is taking place whether students are processing factual information, drawing inferences, or articulating personal meanings that arise from exposure to curriculum content.

By what means might language arts teachers engage students in more sophisticated classroom talk about curricular topics? First, the teacher needs to identify the language-based skills that the curriculum requires. What are the language content demands — vocabulary, factual recall, etc.? What are the language process demands—giving oral reports, taking oral tests, presenting group projects, etc.? Then the teacher can identify the language-based skills and strategies that her students currently possess and plan to introduce as many skills and strategies as students can reasonably be expected to acquire in a given period of time.

Perhaps a balanced program of teacher-student conferencing, small group work, and whole class discussion might be useful for student monitoring and instructional delivery. In all contexts students should be (a) actively working with thinking strategies and "meta" tasks, (b) examining concrete and abstract concepts pertinent to the academic content, (c) experiencing language-based activities that are completed before, during, and after reading that will increase their motivation to read and learn, (d) building their conceptual background for the topic at hand, (e) acquiring strategies that provide purpose and focus during reading and that help comprehension monitoring (e.g., filling in graphic organizers or note taking guides, then discussing their work), (f) participating in discussion designed to integrate meanings across curricular areas.

Student talk in informal, one-to-one teacher conferences can reveal whether a student has learned the instructional content and can

identify the demands that the student cannot meet. Teachers might ask students to relate new to known concepts, discuss their understanding of one aspect of a text (e.g., recount a plot, analyze a character, define the theme of a story), or share the notes they have been taking while reading. The teacher may be able to ascertain any limitations in processing and using language that the student brings to the curricular task. At times the teacher may provide additional resources to help a student, such as a simpler text or a concise website.

In small group work, students can plan and prepare oral and written reports, study together and tutor one another, and work on comprehension and response activities. Language-based tasks for small groups include categorizing or organizing information, predicting and confirming text content, paraphrasing or summarizing text, and finding key words or sentences.

Whole class discussion may facilitate transfer of learning. It is here that discussion can promote generalization and integration of readings and class activities. Perhaps most importantly, teachers can utilize think aloud and write aloud procedures (Atwell, Routman) to model how to use language to puzzle through contradictions, ambiguities, unknown words, and other points of difficulty encountered during reading, listening, and writing tasks. In keeping with an emphasis on “meta” skills, teachers need to explicitly teach students what to do when they encounter thinking challenges and reasoning roadblocks.

Other whole class oral language activities include using polls or surveys to elicit student opinion, as well as facilitating all manner of reading performance activities and holding class meetings to decide on questions to answer during a unit of study.

In summary, learning through language is promoted by the following well-known tenets of effective instruction: (a) familiarity, (b) review and repetition, (c) clarity of content and purpose, (d) explanations that help the material make sense, (e) continuity in instruction, (f) enjoyment, (g) suf-

ficient time to achieve mastery, (h) dynamic, interactive activities, (i) higher level thinking, and (k) comfort (physical, emotional, mental).

In conclusion, designing classroom instruction to include a wide variety of listening, reading, writing, and speaking situations that are designed to help students learn language, learn about language, and learn through language would provide students with a full range of opportunities for developing their oral communication skills.

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About the Author

Monic Gordon Pershey is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Speech and Hearing at Cleveland State University. Her research has appeared in several journals including *Language Awareness* and *The Dragon Lode*.

Table 1: A Model of Language Learning (After Van Dongen)

<p>LEARNING LANGUAGE</p>	<p>Acquiring new communication behaviors to use for a variety of increasingly complex social purposes</p> <p>Learning to speak as required in different academic contexts</p> <p>Improving linguistic form, message format, awareness of the needs of listeners, style of delivery, and expressivity to meet contextual demands</p>
<p>LEARNING ABOUT LANGUAGE</p>	<p>Language is a system and a code which has its own rules, forms, and properties</p> <p>We can objectify a message and view the verbal transaction as a “verbal object” — an “artifact” to be analyzed</p> <p>Learning about language requires meta-linguistic awareness</p>
<p>LEARNING THROUGH LANGUAGE</p>	<p>Language is the primary mode through which school learning occurs</p> <p>Language is a student’s primary tool for learning academic content</p> <p>School success is dependent upon how well students comprehend and express the content they have learned</p> <p>Learning through language often requires utilizing higher order thinking and verbal reasoning skills</p>