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Teaching speaking, listening and writing

By Trudy Wallace, Winifred E. Stariha and Herbert J. Walberg

EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES SERIES-14

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Preface

As suggested by the title, this booklet is about the teaching of speaking, listening and writing. It complements previous booklets on promoting pre-school language, reading and teaching additional languages. It has been prepared for inclusion in the Educational Practices Series developed by the International Academy of Education and distributed by the International Bureau of Education and the Academy. As part of its mission, the Academy provides timely syntheses of research on educational topics of international importance. This booklet is the fourteenth in the series on educational practices that generally improve learning.

The first and second contributors to the planning and writing of this booklet are distinguished educators and scholars. Trudy Wallace taught secondary school English and graduate-level writing. She conducted research on eminent women writers, which she presented at Oxford University in the United Kingdom, the University of Cape Town in South Africa and in Caracas, Venezuela. She serves as editor on the *International journal of educational development*, and currently serves as Director of Gifted, Talented, and Enriched Academics for Chicago Public Schools.

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The officers of the International Academy of Education are aware that this booklet is based on research carried out primarily in economically advanced countries. The booklet, however, focuses on aspects of language skills that appear universal. The practices presented here are likely to be generally applicable throughout the world. Even so, the principles should be assessed with reference to local conditions and adapted accordingly. In any school, suggestions for practice require sensitive and sensible application, and continuing evaluation.

HERBERT J. WALBERG,
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Table of contents

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Introduction

Writing, speaking and listening are communication skills that are important in all subject areas in the curriculum. Hence, literacy should have a central position in the curriculum. Even so, differences between students' levels of literacy mean that some students fail to acquire the verbal foundations for learning. For this reason, increasing numbers of students fall short of proficiency as they proceed through the school. This booklet responds to calls for principles and teaching practices that address the worldwide problem of increasing literacy skills. It draws on educational research and extensive experience with classroom practices to explain important principles for increasing literacy.

In contrast to reading, less definitive scientific research is available on the other three language skills discussed in this booklet. For this reason, the limited research is supplemented here with the insights of experts and educators with long and varied experience in the teaching of language skills.

1. Learning time

Provide extensive amounts of time for language learning.

Although the teaching principles that follow this section promote skills in writing, speaking and listening, they are not complete substitutes for extensive exposure to good language usage and practice in its use. Other things being equal, the more time students have to study the facts, a principle or practice a skill, the better they learn. Teaching and study time in school, as well as student work done at home, advance students' learning.

Many studies have shown that extending learning time by lengthening classes, extending the school day, summer school participation and assigning homework promote language learning. Immigrant and language-minority students and those from homes of lower social status may need much more language instruction and more opportunities for practice.

The remaining principles in this booklet concern the quality or principles of teaching rather than the amount of instruction. The amounts of instruction and study, however, should be given equal weight since they are crucial ingredients of learning.

2. Variety of lessons

Students need a variety of experiences in writing, speaking and listening.

In school and in life, students face a diversity of circumstances that require language skills. For this reason, experience with a variety of reading, writing and speaking activities in school can help learners acquire the skills they need to be successful.

They need, for example, to practise varied kinds of writing. Teachers may present general guidelines for all writing, but specific types of writing, such as poems and essays, may require specific lessons.

Students can benefit from practice at writing about the results of their own research, as well as expressing their own feelings and experiences. The writing strategies involved in each form usually require explicit teaching, frequent practice and information given to students about their progress.

3. Speaking practice

Provide students with opportunities for practising specific speaking skills.

Students improve their formal speech when teachers provide insights on how to organize their ideas for presentation. Students can give better speeches when they can organize their presentation in a variety of different ways, including sequentially, chronologically and thematically. They need practice in organizing their speech around problems and solutions, causes and results, and similarities and differences. After deciding about the best means of organization, they can practise speeches with another student or with the whole class.

Teachers can also help students adapt their speeches and informal talks so as to correspond to the intended audience, the information to be communicated, and the circumstances of the occasion at which they will speak. The teachers can illustrate how well-known speakers have adapted their presentations in ways to suit these different circumstances.

Teachers can enable learners to present ideas to individual peers, peer groups and entire classes of students. They can learn to speak on a subject of their own choosing or on teacher-assigned topics. Preparing for debates and participating in them help students to see both sides of various issues. Students also benefit from interviewing others and from participation in dramatic presentations.

Students may enjoy speaking about their personal experiences. When given this opportunity, they can benefit from instruction in the elements of good story-telling.

Both teachers and students can provide suggestions for students' speeches. In constructively criticizing others, learners can learn to apply criteria for good speech and employ tactful social skills. In doing so, they can increase and improve their own speaking skills.

Students can also learn speaking and social skills by suggesting possible improvements to one another's practice speeches. Positive experiences in speaking can lead to greater skills and confidence in speaking in front of larger groups.

4. Speaking skills

Teach students to adapt their speech to specific situations.

Learners need to know how speakers differ from one another and how particular circumstances call for different forms of speech. They can learn how speaking styles affect listeners. Thus, the rate at which they speak, the volume and the precision of pronunciation may differ substantially from one situation to another.

It is useful for students to know that speech should differ in formality, such as when speaking to a judge, a teacher, a parent or a playmate. They may also benefit from learning about the differences among various dialects.

The subjects in the curriculum and examples from the media may provide occasions for different forms of speech. Oral presentations can be derived from poems, stories, newspaper and magazine articles, as well as scientific reports. Dramatic acting and watching skits and plays may provide the richest opportunity to see how character and circumstance affect speech.

5. Reducing speaking fears

Provide opportunities to practise speaking before increasingly larger groups.

Children, adolescents and adults sometimes fear the challenge of sustained, formal speaking before large groups. Teachers can help reduce unrealistic fears by pointing out how common they are among people and what to do about them. They can also help to reduce such fears by maintaining a friendly atmosphere in the class and providing opportunities for students to practice alone or with one other student and then before increasingly larger groups. Thus, students can practice speaking in front of their peers who face the same situation.

Students can practise presenting information, answering questions and holding group discussions. Frequent classroom presentations and discussions enable teachers to diagnose and remedy problems.

Students can benefit from learning by setting themselves presentation goals and assessing their own progress. Observing proficient speakers can help students to set such goals. Practising oral presentation in these ways can lessen students' anxieties while, at the same time, helping them to learn the subject matter of the lesson.

Students are less likely to be fearful and anxious and more likely to do well if they are well prepared. Preparedness can be enhanced by in-depth mastery of the subject matter, appropriate organization and rehearsing the presentation.

6. Improving listening skills

Provide opportunities for careful, focused listening.

Listening skills are essential for learning since they enable students to acquire insights and information, and to achieve success in communicating with others. Life within and outside school affords many listening opportunities, but some students fail to seize them because they let their minds wander or they may concentrate on what they want to say themselves rather than on what a speaker is saying.

Teachers can show students why good listening is useful and even crucial in some situations. Poor listening can lead to unnecessary arguments and problems. As in the case of doctors, careful listening and questioning might even save lives.

Students' listening skills may be enhanced and tested by asking them questions about what they have heard. They may be given practice in note-taking and could be asked questions about the facts and inferences that may be made from their notes. They can be taught to recognize the difference between the main points and incidental or less-relevant ideas and information.

Learners can also benefit from practice in recognizing the purpose of presentations and other information they hear. It can be useful if they are taught to set goals for what they want to learn from a presentation and to monitor how well they accomplish their goals.

Students can be taught to listen selectively for specific kinds of information, such as the main purpose, the themes, the details and any implications. They can even be tested for their ability to identify the essential information in the presence of irrelevant material and distractions, as is the case in much of adult life.

7. Frequent collaboration

Collaboration with classmates fosters communicative competence.

As in adult life, students can share with one another knowledge and ideas that help solve problems. Small groups working together within a class can help students communicate meaningful ideas to each other.

It is sometimes helpful to allow students within a group to conduct individual research, but require the group to make use of all the individually collected elements to write or present a report that depends on each individual's contribution. In this way, students can simultaneously be taught subject matter, research and presentation skills, and how to work well with others. They may also discover unexpected but valuable connections between various aspects of a topic.

Working together in twos, threes or larger groups can facilitate more frequent and insightful communications. In a class of thirty, for example, a student might be expected to speak only one-thirtieth of the time. In a group of two students, a student might speak for half of the time and listen for half of the time, and both the speaking and the listening can be concentrated on what the students need to know or desire to investigate.

None of this is to say that teachers should play a passive role. Rather, they can explain what is expected and show correct and incorrect examples. With practice, students can correct one another and themselves.

8. Writing skills

Beginning students can benefit from learning and practising one skill at a time.

Writing is the final product of several separate acts that are hugely challenging to learn simultaneously. Among these separable acts are note-taking, identifying a central idea, outlining, drafting and editing. Both young and old people can encounter the discouraging 'writer's block' if they engage in more than one or two of these activities at once. It is difficult to start writing a report, for example, without a central idea and notes to support it. Often, the more detailed an outline, the easier is the writing. People frequently find that they can finish faster by writing a first draft quickly and then editing and revising this draft.

Students may have different levels of computer skills that may affect their writing. Some, for example, may be fast at keyboarding, while others may not know where to place their fingers. As in the other acts of writing, it may be worthwhile learning and practising keyboarding in isolation before using it to carry out the principal writing tasks.

Although research is not definitive, it appears that computers can be both harmful and helpful in writing and learning to write. Some experience suggests that the neat appearance of words on the computer screen may suggest to students that all is well, even in the presence of logical, grammatical and stylistic errors. On the other hand, computers can make the rearrangement of words, sentences and paragraphs and other revisions far easier. Similarly, some more recent programmes can spot spelling and grammatical mistakes and suggest corrections.

9. Great writers

Encourage students to attain excellent—even great—writing skills.

As in eminence in other fields, great writers have often had not only their own writing ability but also strong motivation, supportive parents, inspiring teachers, informative literature and direct experiences, as well as exposure to skilful peers and fine writers. While perhaps only one in 100,000 or 10 million can attain the status of a great writer who is long influential and long remembered, all students can be encouraged to write as well as they are able.

Thus, parents who themselves write and who encourage, guide and express interest in their children's writing may be exceptionally helpful. From libraries, exchanges and purchases, they may be able to supply their children with magazines, books and other stimulating materials, as well as providing them with interesting experiences for joint discussion.

Similarly, teachers may not only conduct skilful lessons but also stimulate all students to become better writers, and identify talented writers for special encouragement and lessons.

To become better writers, students may need to read good—even great—literature, that can serve as a model for their own efforts. Hearing and reading about the lives of great men and women writers and how they developed their talents may stimulate them. Direct contacts with professional writers, such as novelists and news reporters, may be inspirational.

Inquiry and discovery also inspire great writing. Having topics that a person cares deeply about, as a consequence of personal interest and investigation, may prove decisive for a fine writing and even lead to a life devoted to writing.

Conclusion

The suggestions provided in this booklet have proved useful in research and experience on the teaching of writing. Teachers concerned with literacy will also have other valid ideas that they may wish to share. We hope that the principles expressed succinctly in this short booklet will provoke such sharing.

In addition to sharing ideas, actual progress requires putting ideas into classroom practice. Sharing ideas about how to do this among educators and other professionals may also be crucial.

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