Why Schools Need to Do a Better Job of Teaching Speaking Skills

By Erik Palmer

I got an email last week from a student who was in my class eight years ago. She had to do a presentation to complete her master’s degree, and the professor had warned the students that no one ever gets an A grade. Paige got an A+. She was emailing me to credit me for her success and thank me for teaching her a life-long valuable skill. She thanked me for teaching her how to be well-spoken.

Every one of us has heard some adult say, “I wish I could speak better” or “I don’t like presenting” or “I’m not really good at talking to groups” or something similar. None of us has ever heard an adult say, “I wish I had been taught more about iambic pentameter” or “I feel bad that I don’t remember much about the quadratic formula/mitosis/the bourgeois monarchy.” That contrast should tip us off to a problem in education. We may be focusing on things that are less important in life at the expense of something that matters a lot: speaking.

Let’s look numerically at how we fail to value oral language in schools. Consider the Common Core State Standards in English/language arts. They are divided into four areas: reading; writing; speaking and listening; and literacy. Why are speaking and listening crammed together? Why not five standards? Listening and speaking make up as much as 75 percent of adult communication, yet represent just 25 percent of the standards.

Consider the book Pathways to the Common Core by Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth, and Christopher Lehman. You might think, based on the standards’ breakdown, that the book would devote twenty-five percent of its pages to each of the four language arts strands. Actually, the speaking and listening section is less than five percent of the book. Odd, when you consider that oral-communication time is generally larger than reading-communication time and writing-communication time once students become adults.

Consider the catalog of the National Council of Teachers of English. There are about 200 titles in
the catalog, but not one is focused on oral communication, and neither listening nor speaking is even mentioned in the table of contents. Strange, when you consider that year after year verbal communication is high on the list of skills employers look for in prospective hires.

Most schools do not have a scope and sequence for speaking. Most teachers have never attended a district workshop about how to teach speaking: RTI, yes; bully-proofing, yes; a new math program, yes; instructional rounds, yes; speaking, no. Teacher-preparation programs do not have a class devoted to teaching listening and speaking. Education conferences don’t have sessions on how to teach speaking. Yes, some schools now pay lip-service to oral communication and are hip enough to claim to value presentation skills, but such stated priorities mean little without coherent instructional support.

**Empty Talk**

None of this would matter if students already spoke well. If we saw great book reports, wonderful poetry recitations, terrific explanations, brilliant discussion comments, and so on, we could say that our students have mastered oral communication and teaching specific skills is not necessary. That isn’t the case, is it? Look at students’ public speaking with fresh eyes. How many impress you? One or two per class? A teacher at a recent workshop commented that students’ summative presentations in her class are PowerPoint presentations that “are often boring recitations of what they read.” Pretty typical of what we all see, right? If only one or two students pass your fractions test, you are the one who failed, not them. You obviously didn’t teach needed skills. As a teacher, you would go back and offer another lesson about finding common denominators and give some practice activities. You would reteach least common multiples and have them do some practicing. Yet if only one or two students do well with the presentation after the biome research, you might say, “Oh well, that’s just how kids speak.” Why do we sell students short? Why do we fail to help them?

Partly, I think, it’s because we don’t have a framework for teaching speaking. As I mentioned, most of us were never trained. The first thing I did when I developed my own materials for teaching speaking was to come up with a practical, understandable way to conceptualize what it takes to be a great speaker. If you look at the language used on score sheets and rubrics at your school, you will likely find no consistency of language or expectations. I sought to remedy that with a **detailed framework** setting out what students need to do before they open their mouths and what they need to do as they are speaking.

Additionally, we fail to help them because we don’t teach all the little lessons needed to develop the skills of oral communication. There are many little lessons on the way to writing an essay. Capitalization, punctuation, sentence fragments, topic sentences, paragraphs, and more all get specific attention. The multiple components of good presentations or speeches should get similar treatment.

Most student talks do not leave a big impression on the class. Two days later, few listeners can recall much about what they heard. So here’s a lesson idea: “Class, when you build your talk, think about connectors. Every speech needs specific statements to connect the topic to the lives of the listeners. Let me share some examples. Then, in small groups, look at the topics I handed out and discuss how you might make that topic really connect to the audience. We want the audience to really feel that the topic matters to their lives.”

Or, if students do not seem to be using many gestures, why not some specific lessons on gestures, with practice activities? “Today we will learn about emphatic hand gestures. Look at these phrases.
How might you gesture as you read them?” Later, “Today we will learn about descriptive hand gestures. The little speeches I handed you call for some hand motions to make the words come alive. Who wants to demonstrate?” Then, “Today we will learn about facial gestures.”

If students are generally speaking too quickly, many teachers just say, “Speak slowly.” Commenting after the error is not teaching speaking, and in this case, the comment is bad advice. Why not some lessons about using speed well? “Speaking slowly makes talks boring, kids. Today we will learn about how to speed up to add excitement.” Later, “Today we will have some practice with little speeches that call for pauses. Notice how I stop briefly as I say this. ‘Eight hundred million people are starving. Eight hundred million. [pause] Yeah, that’s a lot.’ That really made the number sink in, didn’t it? Now you try with some of these lines that I handed out.” Purposeful, specific lessons are needed if we want to create well-spoken students.

Most adults wish they were better speakers. Indeed, it is widely known that many adults fear speaking. Why? Because no one ever taught them how to do it. Throughout school, we were often made to talk, but we were never specifically, systematically, consistently taught how to do those talks well. Let’s stop making that mistake. Teach speaking.

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