**12 Ways to Get Students Speaking & Listening**

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**By Sarah Tantillo**

*“Of all the ways you can improve learning in your school, the Number 1 way is to strengthen students’ speaking and listening skills and habits.”*

I hope this and other observations I made in last week’s MiddleWeb post, [“Unlock Student Learning by Improving Oral Fluency,”](http://www.middleweb.com/24810/unlock-learning-by-improving-oral-fluency/) convinced teachers across the curriculum that they can significantly boost the performance of all students – and in particular, the shy non-participators – by pursuing a deliberate strategy to develop the habits of speaking and listening that most contribute to learning.

Here, without further ado, are a dozen things you can do to improve engagement and strengthen these skills. (If you read Part 1, you’ve already seen the first one.)

**1. Use Think-Pair-Share + cold-calling as often as possible.**

For example: “Take \_\_\_ seconds (or minutes) to jot down your thoughts about \_\_\_\_. [Wait the allotted time.] Now, take one minute to tell your partner what you thought. Then look at me when you’re both ready to share with the class.” Use popsicle sticks to [cold-call](http://teachlikeachampionch4.blogspot.com/p/technique-22-cold-call.html), to ensure that you’ll call on *everyone* eventually. Make it clear to students that you expect everyone to have something to say because they’ve all just written and talked about their ideas.

When asking students to share, you can increase the rigor (and strengthen listening skills) by asking them to report on what their *partners* said. Let’s face it: when invited to “share with a partner,” many students are simply waiting for the other person to stop talking so that they can say what they think. Their definition of listening, as my friend Katy Wischow once put it, involves “staring in silence.”

Having to report on their partners’ ideas forces students to listen more carefully. It also gives them valuable practice in paraphrasing and summarizing. *Note:* the first few times you do this, be sure to warn them so that they are prepared.

**2. Encourage students to *restate or paraphrase* – not repeat – what their peers say.**

If you ask them to “repeat” what others say, you miss an opportunity for them to practice paraphrasing. Repeating requires no thought. Also, repetition is boring – we heard it the first time. Make sure students know how to paraphrase and *why* it’s important.

When teaching students the value of paraphrasing — a vital conversational skill as well as a key critical reading skill – you might try the approach that Heather Lattimer describes in [*Thinking Through Genre*](http://www.stenhouse.com/html/thinking-through-genre.htm). Her colleague asks students to talk about how they responded to an excerpt from *Bad Boy*, by Walter Dean Myers.

Each time the first few students answer, Lattimer’s friend ignores what they said and instead tells her own reaction. The students become uneasy and reluctant to volunteer their thoughts. Then she calls on another student and paraphrases what he said before giving her own ideas. The students are surprised (and, quite frankly, relieved). Then she debriefs with the students on the different ways she conversed with students. They get the point: paraphrasing is a way to show that you are listening to the other person.

**3. Move from paraphrasing to inference as much as you can, and ask students for *evidence* to back up their ideas or arguments.**

For example: “What can you infer from what James just said? What evidence gave you that idea?” Teach students how to paraphrase and infer early in the year so that they can log many hours of practicing these skills.

Also, clarify the difference between argument and evidence. No matter what grade or subject you teach, even if the terms are not new to them, the review will establish a common language in the room. Posters can serve as handy reminders. The more students are invited to explain their ideas, the stronger their inference and comprehension skills will become.

**4. Treat students as sleuths out to solve a mystery.**

Tell them that they are the Detectives, and you are the Clue-Provider. My high school Latin teacher was a master at this. He knew that if we had to figure things out, we would not only remember them but also be able to explain them. In his class, in order to catch all of the clues, we had to listen *very* carefully.

**5. Ask *why* as often as possible, to give students more opportunities to explain their ideas.**

This will boost their inference skills. Even when they give the “correct” answer, ask them why because (1) they might have guessed and (2) their explanation will teach others in the room who might not have understood the material.

*Note:* The first few times you ask why, students who aren’t accustomed to being questioned might back away from their response or become defensive. I like to tell students, “I’m not asking why because I think you’re wrong; I’m asking why because I genuinely want to know how you think and because your explanation will help your classmates understand this better.”

**6. Require students to respond with *complete* sentences.**

This practice will enhance their fluency and comprehension. Explain why you have this expectation (which is for their benefit) to make it the *norm* in your class. Initially you might have to correct them a few times and model it or provide sentence starters, but students will quickly get the hang of it. I’ve taught sample lessons in classrooms where I made it the norm within five minutes. Set high standards for discourse in your room, and students will meet or exceed them.

**7. Don’t repeat what students say.**

Students are like cats who want more food in their bowl: they train us! If you allow students to train you to repeat what they say, then they won’t develop proper speaking or listening skills. When you repeat what students say, it sends the message that they should not to listen to one another. It also teaches them to mumble because they know you will amplify everything.

Another downside is that repeating unnecessarily lengthens class discussions and undermines the ratio of student cognitive work. [Doug Lemov](http://teachlikeachampion.com/books/teach-like-a-champion/) describes an array of methods for enhancing this ratio, including unbundling (asking numerous questions to dissect a topic or problem), feigning ignorance, and batch-processing (instead of responding to every single comment, responding after several have been made), among others.

**8. Use think-alouds to model how you think, including the questions you ask and the way you figure things out.**

Then you can invite students to pair up and practice their own think-alouds. Making thinking *visible* in this way makes it more accessible for everyone, especially those students who might otherwise believe that “some people just ‘get it,’ and some people don’t.” They will see that in fact reading and thinking *require work.* Good readers *wrestle* with the text.

**9. Invite students to *ask* questions as often as possible.**

But this does *not* mean asking, “Does anyone have any questions?” for which the answer is almost invariably, “No.” Instead, ask, “What questions could we ask in this situation?” or “What questions can we ask about \_\_\_\_?” Then write their questions down on the board to show how much you value them. As a default, students need to know the utility of applying Five Ws and the H (who, what, when, where, why, and how) to pick apart texts.

**10. When reading aloud, require students to listen with a purpose or question in mind.**

Reading aloud mindlessly is boring. It’s an invitation to daydreaming at best and disruptive behavior at worst. But you can’t blame the students; if you fail to engage them, they will find *something* to do. Spare yourself the agony by hooking them with a great question. For instance, invite them to make predictions based on evidence from the text so far. Then: “OK, let’s see who’s right!” and read the next bit.

**11. When lecturing or presenting new material, provide guided notes to keep students engaged.**

In addition to keeping students actively involved, guided notes provide models of good note taking, another important skill. They also ensure that everyone walks away with the same basic information and a review sheet for later reference.

**12. Whenever a difficult-to-pronounce word appears, engage the *entire* class in choral pronunciation of the word.**

It’s highly probable that if one student mispronounces a word, others in the room would make the same mistake. In fact, if you correct this one person and move on, chances are good that the word will pop up again and someone else will stumble over it. So, it’s better to spare this first reader the embarrassment and instead send a positive message to the whole class, which is this: “This is an important word, and we *all* need to know how to pronounce it. So let’s go.”

