

Oral Language Teaching Strategies

- Grade Three classrooms develop a climate and a social context that support language learning through discussions, story reading, Readers' Theatre, inquiry, doing experiments, problem solving, playing games, and other activities that promote listening and talking. The following Oral Language Teaching Strategies, emphasized in the program, can be used during whole-class, small-group, or individual communications and can be woven into conversations and discussions during any activity.

Note: Each of the following strategies is intended to stimulate, expand, or refine aspects of language development, including the non-verbal aspects of social communication (e.g., facial expressions and body language such as shrugging).

Oral Language Teaching Strategies

1. USE OPEN-ENDED PROMPTS TO PROMOTE DISCUSSION

The majority of your prompts should be open-ended to promote enriched discussion. Closed prompts result in “Yes” or “No” and other short or single word responses. Open-ended prompts often result in deeper and more extended responses which reveal more about a student’s thinking. For example,

Avoid: “Did you like the book?”

Consider: “I’m wondering what you enjoyed in the book?”

OR

Avoid: “Did you find out lots of new information from reading this magazine?”

Consider: “Tell me about the new information you learned from reading this magazine.”

2. FOCUS ON POSITIVE LISTENING

Students take their cues from you, so it’s important that you model what an attentive, alert listener does and then notice and provide positive feedback when you observe those behaviours being used in the classroom. Link good listening to comprehension. For example,

Teacher: “I noticed Tenisha moved her body around so that she could really listen to what Rachel was saying. People who are listening well look at the speaker and make sure they really attend to, and think about, what the speaker is saying.”

OR

Teacher: “Rodney, what a great job you did responding to Jaden’s question. You must have been really listening to what he was saying. When we listen closely to what others say, it helps us to form our own questions and opinions.”

Oral Language Teaching Strategies (continued)

3. ENCOURAGE PARTNER LISTENING AND TALKING (e.g., Turn and Talk or Think-Pair-Share)

Students benefit from opportunities to practise their listening and speaking skills with a partner before they share ideas with a group. Language performance is less of an issue with a partner, and some students talk more with one peer than they do in a large group. Build partner talk into many lessons, and encourage students to use some of the strategies you have taught them. Highlight a strategy to preface partner-talk sessions. For example,

Teacher: “When you talk to your partner, I want you to look at him or her and explain your ideas using a clear speaking voice.”

OR

Teacher: “Listen to what your partner is saying, and piggy-back by adding your ideas to theirs.”

4. USE A PAUSE AND THINK STRATEGY

Encourage students to pause and think before responding, especially when a more complicated issue is raised. This technique encourages students to take a few seconds to consider their views and the evidence they have to support them. For example,

Teacher: “Sierra asked, ‘Why did Sprout need Lumberjill’s axe for tree planting?’ I think we should pause and think about that before we share ideas in our groups.”

OR

Teacher: “We have just heard a lot of information about making an artificial leg. I want you to close your eyes and think about the information you have heard. Was there a fact that you found amazing?”

5. ASSIST STUDENTS TO INITIATE A DISCUSSION

Students often need help to initiate group discussions as some may be reluctant to join in, or some may dominate the initial “air time.”

Provide some starters for beginning a discussion. Build a starter list and add to this list over time. Take ideas from students when you observe an effective new starter being used. Starters might include:

- I’m thinking... because...
- I wondered about...
- I was puzzled about...
- This reminded me of...
- I didn’t agree with... because...
- I really enjoyed... because...
- I didn’t know...
- I liked your idea about... because...
- My idea is similar to yours. I also think...
- I was amazed at...
- Something I would like to know more about is...

Teach students to initiate a discussion in an open way that encourages further talk. For example,

Teacher: “Let’s read our list of starters together. (Choral read the list). Pause and think, ‘Which starter would I like to use to start our discussion on...?’ (Pause) Turn to your partner and share your idea. Why did you choose that starter?”

Oral Language Teaching Strategies (continued)

6. HELP STUDENTS TO BREAK INTO A DISCUSSION-IN-PROGRESS

Joining a discussion-in-progress can be tricky, and we need to teach some strategies to ensure that all students are heard and feel comfortable. The following approaches may be helpful:

- Teach students to listen for a small break in the discussion and then put forward their idea. A signal could be used initially to indicate that a student wishes to say something, for example, a hand signal or a small speaking stick (made from a popsicle stick).
- Ask students to check with their group to see if someone wants to add ideas. This puts the responsibility on the group as well as the new participant.
- Encourage a new speaker to piggyback on an idea expressed previously. Model this strategy. For example,

Teacher: “You could say, ‘Sunil said... and I’m thinking...’”

- Suggest that students may wish to use the starter chart and an “I” expression to break into discussions.

Teacher: “You might say, ‘I’m wondering about...’ or ‘I’m puzzled about...’”

- Teach students how to hold onto their idea until someone has finished speaking. They can put their idea in ‘the palm of their hand’ and show others they are ready to contribute to the discussion.

7. MODEL INVITING OTHERS TO GIVE OPINIONS

We want all students to feel at ease during discussions, and you can assist by modelling an invitational stance when you ask questions or invite opinions. For example,

Teacher: “I’m wondering what you were thinking when we finished the story.”

OR

Teacher: “I’m sure there was some interesting information that you heard about... that was new learning for you that you might like to share.”

Encourage students to invite other class members to join in discussions by using a friendly tone and helping them by adding, “What are you thinking?” (or a similar invitation) at the conclusion of their own ideas. For example,

Teacher: “People are going to join in when they feel welcome. When you’ve talked about your ideas, you can invite others to talk by saying, ‘What are you thinking?’ or ‘Do you have any ideas to add?’ Say it in a friendly way so that people know that you are interested in what they have to say.”

Oral Language Teaching Strategies (continued)

8. HIGHLIGHT ROLE-PLAY: EXPLORING OTHER PEOPLE'S VIEWPOINTS

Encourage role-playing to help students develop understanding of, and empathy for, other people's viewpoints. For example,

Teacher: "Let's pretend to be the man on the roof in this picture of a flood. What do you think he's feeling and saying?"

AND

Teacher: "Now let's pretend to be the rescuer in a boat. How do you think she feels? What do you think she's saying?"

9. FOCUS ON DISAGREEING AGREEABLY

Help students to cope with disagreements in social situations. For example,

Teacher: "You were arguing about who should get that part in the play. (Identify the issue) How else could you have handled that? (Provide an opportunity for student problem solving) Let's practise and try that again." (You may need to model if students do not suggest better strategies, e.g., "You could have said...")

Help students to disagree in discussions, too. It's a good idea to model a few disagreement openers. For example,

Teacher: "If you have a different opinion, you could say, 'You think... but I think...?' or 'I'm thinking something different...?' It's fine to have a different opinion. Just make sure you respect other people's opinions and talk about yours in a calm voice."

10. OFFER STRUCTURE TO RELUCTANT TALKERS

Help students who are shy or reluctant to talk by giving them more time in which to respond and by offering low-key prompts. For example,

Teacher: "Tell me how you made that, Raven? You can show me, too."

OR

Teacher: "You could draw what you think it would look like and tell me about it."

OR

Teacher: "If I started an idea could you finish it? I enjoyed that video and the part I liked best was..."

Teaching Tips:

- Showing and then talking may be easier for the reluctant talker.
- If a student needs extra time to organize his or her ideas, you could consider saying, "I'll ask you to tell me about it in a minute, Paavan."
- Talking with partners before being asked to contribute to group discussions will be less threatening.
- Using puppets sometimes helps reluctant talkers to share their thoughts.

Oral Language Teaching Strategies (continued)

11. EXTEND LANGUAGE

Although some students are able talkers, they still need to expand their language use and incorporate more specific, varied, and academic vocabulary into their repertoires. Take opportunities to stretch language use. You may make semantic webs of vocabulary to show alternatives for words. For example,

Teacher: “You said you were going to ‘fix’ the drawer. Now I know you aren’t going to put on a new handle, but you are going to ‘organize’ it. Are there any other words you could use that would tell us exactly what you are going to do? Yes, you could ‘sort out’ or ‘tidy up’ the drawer.”

Encourage students to use different transitional words to stretch their language. For example,

Teacher: “Kelvin just said, ‘After that the steam rises.’ There are lots of other words we could use instead of ‘after that.’ I can think of one. We could say ‘before long the steam rises.’ Let’s make a list of other words we could use.”

12. PURPOSEFULLY SEARCH DEEPER INTO IDEAS

Using open-ended questions enables you and your students to delve deeper into another person’s ideas. Questioning also enables listeners to clarify ideas when they do not understand what a speaker is trying to communicate. Questions can ensure that students make connections between prior knowledge and new learning. Model different types of questions and their purposes so students see how questioning propels a conversation forward. Questions might include:

- Why do you think that happened?
- Can you show me evidence of your line of thinking?
- What do you notice?
- So you think...?
- I think I understand but can you tell me your idea again?
- What do you think might happen if...?
- What does this make you wonder about...?
- I wonder why...
- Can you explain that again for me?
- I see your point, but what about...?
- Did they look like something...?
- What does that remind you of?