



Teaching and Assessing Middle-Years Students' Speaking and Listening Skills

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Saskatchewan Education guidelines state that 30-40% of the time devoted to Gr. 6-9 Language Arts should focus on development of students' speaking and listening skills. However, two middle-years teachers and the principal of a small urban elementary school in Saskatoon found that they have access to very few practical instructional strategies and almost no assessment tools that mesh with the curriculum. To remedy this lack, they initiated an action research study focussed on two questions:

- How can middle-years teachers effectively develop and enhance the acquisition of students' speaking and listening skills?
- What techniques are effective for assessing acquisition of middle-years students' speaking and listening skills?

The researchers conducted an initial review of academic, instructional, and curricular resources in order to provide direction to the study. Following this review, a list of qualities of thoughtful listeners and speakers was developed. The researchers then felt that it was necessary to develop an outlet for teaching these qualities to middle-years students. A Speaking and Listening Mini Unit was created and taught within the school to test, on a limited basis, the effectiveness of the various learning activities. To deal with the need for assessment tools, a generic rubric that could be applied to all formal and informal speaking and listening opportunities was also created using the list of qualities of thoughtful speakers and listeners.

Key findings of the study are:

1. Students' speaking and listening abilities improve when students are provided with a common language about speaking and listening skills and reasons why these skills are important for lifelong learning.
2. When teachers develop an initial focus on teaching these skills, more ways are found to include these two strands of study into all instructional activities.
3. Action research is an extension of reflective practice and has tremendous positive impact on the teacher-researcher's professional development.

With the benefit of a more focused delivery of listening and speaking skills, the students have gained an understanding of what these skills should look like. They have transferred the knowledge acquired into other subject areas. They have gained more confidence in speaking in front of the class and are taking more risks in the area of speaking. We have provided the students with reasons why speaking and listening skills are important for life-long learning and ways to determine if they are making progress in the acquisition of these skills.

It became apparent to us that we would be creating the bulk of our resources either from scratch or adapting/modeling them after ideas we had found in our search. Initially, this appeared to be a daunting task. As we laboured through it, focuses emerged and slowly we found ourselves moving forward rather than just treading water!

4. Speaking and listening skills need to be referred to over and over again. Without explicit direction from the teacher, students may not apply the skills they have learned.
5. It is impossible to evaluate all aspects of listening and speaking skills in a short time. Effective evaluation occurs on a frequent and ongoing basis throughout the year and with a variety of listening and speaking activities.
6. Identifying the “Qualities of Effective Listeners” and the “Qualities of Effective Speakers” is important in assisting teachers to integrate speaking and listening activities across the curriculum.

Although they successfully developed a framework for teaching listening and speaking skills, activities for teaching these skills, assessment strategies for evaluating them, and a mini-unit of instruction designed to introduce speaking and listening skills to middle-years students, the researchers regard their project as only a starting point. Most of their work was conducted during Language Arts classes. The next step, they suggest, is to develop ways of integrating speaking and listening skills across the curriculum.