

Listening and Speaking Skills

Effective speaking and listening skills need to be explicitly taught and applied purposefully in order for pupils to use them independently for effective communication. There are three aspects of speaking and listening skills which we need to consider when planning for effective oral language instruction.

1. Unspoken/Broad Rules of Social Interaction

Here we are concerned with developing the children's sociolinguistic competence, which we can define, quite simply, as knowing and understanding how to speak given the social situation you are in. A child needs to know for example that 'Good morning' is an appropriate greeting to an unfamiliar adult visitor and 'Hiya' is an appropriate greeting to a peer on yard. Spoken language plays an important role in pupil's personal and social development. It allows them to gain an understanding of themselves and others, and strengthens social relationships. Pupils draw on their social skills to express their ideas, opinions and feelings with peers and teachers. While most pupils will engage in social interaction without much conscious effort, such interactions are governed by intricate '**unspoken rules**'. Many of these rules are assumed and will not be discussed; they are learnt through interacting with other speakers. Teachers can help build pupils' awareness of the way communication works by considering the '**unspoken rules**', which are often unconscious, drawing pupils' attention to these rules and explicitly teaching how to develop/improve them where appropriate. For example:

- If someone is coming into our class to tell a story our unspoken expectations of the **SPEAKER** are that he is prepared, interesting, funny, remembers the story, keeps our attention etc. His unspoken expectation of us the **AUDIENCE** is that we listen attentively, make eye contact, be engaged in the story etc.
- If three children are having a conversation and one does all the talking and does not give the other children a pause or a question to enter, then that child needs to become aware that he is breaking the unspoken rule of **turn-taking**. Equally, the silent children need to become aware of the unspoken expectation that they should participate and take turns in the conversation.
- If a teacher greets a child in the morning and the child does not return the greeting, we need to draw the child's attention to the rule that a greeting requires a response (**adjacency pairs**).
- The person who is speaking '**holds the floor**' through their use of voice and body language. The speakers and listeners present use social norms, eye contact and body language to judge when a new voice can take the floor.
- **Repair** takes place when a speaker has to fix something he/she said (*I seen, I mean I saw*). Listeners can seek a repair when they don't understand what has been said. This could be expressed through a facial expression or body language.

It is also important to remember that there are cultural and individual differences. Some cultures subscribe to different rules and some individuals may not acquire the 'rules' to the same extent as others (Oliver et al 2005). Nigerian and Korean children, for example, may have been raised with the social rule that it is rude to make eye-contact with a teacher.

In addition to these broad rules, speaking and listening skills also refer to a more specific set of skills that need to be applied in different speaking and listening situations, in different ways. These include use of voice and use of non-verbal behaviours;

2. Use of voice (Paralinguistic Skills)

Volume

Volume depends on the needs of the situation, purpose and audience. There are times when loud voices are required such as in a play, or during assembly. There are also times when quiet voices are necessary such as working in the library. Generally, a voice should be loud enough that the intended audience can hear and understand the message being delivered. The use of varying volume will help to create emphasis or drama when recounting events, telling a story or persuading an audience.

Intonation

Intonation indicates the changes in speech; a downward intonation indicates that a message is complete, while an upward intonation indicates a question.

Stress

When we speak in sentences we tend to give some words more stress over others. For example, if we say 'The **Lion** is a member of the **cat** family' we are asking our listeners to hang onto those two words as the key meaning bearing words. Equally the stress patterns within a word can change its meaning. For example **PER**fect means excellent whereas per**FE**CT means 'to make perfect'.

Pitch

Pitch is useful to use when expressing emotion. Our pitch rises when we are excited and lowers when we are sad.

Pauses

Pauses are moments of silence between phrases, used to separate ideas and also used for holding attention. This is particularly useful when giving formal presentations such as an oral report or telling a story.

Pronunciation

Pronunciation refers to the way words are said. Some younger pupils may have difficulty in pronouncing the sounds in some words and will benefit from hearing those words modeled in meaningful contexts. Pronunciation varies across regions. It is important that pupils know the accepted pronunciation of words in Standard English.

Markers

Speakers use markers to give themselves thinking time, or to provide structure to the content of their speaking (hmm, err, firstly, secondly)

3. Use of Body (non-verbal behaviours/Extra-linguistic Skills)

Proximity

Proximity is the amount of personal space between people who are talking. The relationship between them, their personalities, and their culture or whether the situation is personal, social or public will all affect the amount of proximity needed.

Eye contact

Eye contact is the use of the eyes or gaze in face to face communication. The level of eye contact often depends on the relationship between the communicators and affects both the speaker and the listener.

Affective Displays

Affective displays include posture and facial expressions that indicate a person's emotional state.

Kinesics

Kinesics are gestures that have the same meaning as a word or phrase e.g. stop, come here. These gestures can accompany or at times, replace speech.

Further Information in First Steps Speaking and Listening Resource Book 2nd Edition