# Developing Language, Speaking, and Listening Skills

As you learned in the first module of this course, literacy has several key components. In Module 3, we looked primarily at how comprehending texts is the foundation for critical thinking and learning, or formulating, new knowledge. In this reading you will consider language, speaking, and listening skills and how they contribute to students' literacy.

## Language

> *"Language permits its users to pay attention to things, persons and events, even when the things and persons are absent and the events are not taking place. Language gives definition to our memories and, by translating experiences into symbols, converts the immediacy of craving or abhorrence, or hatred or love, into fixed principles of feeling and conduct"*

> –Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited*

As Huxley eloquently shows, language is far more than vocabulary, grammar, usage, and mechanics. In essence, language is the way we think. We learn to make logical statements. We learn to identify arguments and analyze them. We learn to see beauty through words. Through language, we process the universe around us. We remember all that has gone before, and we imagine all that is yet to be.

It is from this larger perspective that we take a look at language tools—vocabulary, grammar, usage, and mechanics—as a means for equipping students to think critically, to express themselves clearly, and to engage with the constantly changing world around them.

## Common Core State Standards: Language

According to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), mastery of language includes three elements:

- An understanding of the **conventions of standard English:**
  - standard grammar and usage in reading and speaking
  - standard usage of capitalization, punctuation, and spelling
- The **knowledge of language:**
  - the way language works in varying contexts
  - language choices that affect style and meaning
- The **acquisition and use of vocabulary:**
  - the use of context clues, word parts, or references to determine what unknown or multiple-meaning words mean
  - figurative language, relationships between words, and nuance
  - academic words and phrases, including the knowledge to find the meaning independently

The CCSS provide standards that break down the three elements so that, throughout the K–12 years, students develop increased proficiency in language skills and thereby improve their ability to express themselves through language. According to the CCSS Initiative document (2010), "The inclusion of Language standards in their own strand should not be taken as an indication that skills related to conventions, effective language use, and vocabulary are unimportant to reading, writing, speaking, and listening; indeed, they are inseparable from such contexts" (p. 25).

### Developing Vocabulary

Vocabulary development has always been an important educational goal. But the CCSS views vocabulary a little bit differently. First, the CCSS considers three tiers of vocabulary:

- **Tier 1:** Basic vocabulary and words commonly used by students

- **Tier 2:** High frequency and multiple-meaning words

- **Tier 3:** Domain or context-specific words

The Common Core State Standards recognize the importance of all three tiers, but put special emphasis on Tier 2 words because they are powerfully useful and they often contain nuance and insight into an author's purpose and meaning. According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) web page Key Points in English Language Arts, the standards "expect that students will grow their vocabulary through a mix of conversations, direct instruction, and reading. The standards will help students determine word meanings, appreciate nuances of words, and steadily expand their repertoire of words and phrases" (CCSSI, 2010, Language section, para. 1).

## Strategies for Language in English Language Arts

The emphasis of the CCSS is always to begin with a text. You will want to keep this in mind as you consider how to develop students' language skills. Here are several strategies that might help you address language standards in your classroom.

**Word Choice**

Vocabulary should be taught within the context of a text. Instead of telling students what a word means, the teacher invites students to identify and consider the definitions of unknown words. For example:

- What do you think this word means?

- What is a synonym or antonym for this word?

- How do you know? Use the rest of the text to support your understanding of the word.

### Taking Instruction a Step Further

But teachers should take the discussion a step further for some of the more important Tier 2 words by asking students *why* the author chose to use the word he or she did. For example, if the words *large* and *bulky* are synonyms, why didn't the author just use the word *large?* Discuss what is unique about the word *bulky.* What does the word connote? What nuances are there? Do students appreciate the shades of meaning that distinguish similar words from one another? As you can see, this kind of discussion is not easily separated from the meaning of a text.

### Figurative Language

Another language skill that contributes to deep comprehension of a text is the understanding of figurative language.  For example:

- What does a metaphor/simile/image provide that straightforward language does not?

- How does the figurative language affect the meaning?

### Taking Instruction a Step Further

Not only do students need to know what specific figurative language means, but they also need to consider why an author would choose to use figurative language rather than stating something outright. Teachers can help students meet the CCSS by asking probing questions, such as, What does this expression tell you about the author? What does it suggest about the author's purpose?

## Speaking and Listening

Terry Roberts and Laura Billings state the importance of speaking and listening in an article in *Educational Leadership* (2008): "Both speaking and listening are forms of thinking because they allow a nascent thought to be refined through conversation. The better a student's verbal communication skills the more quickly his or her thoughts about a complex topic gain clarity and coherence" (p. 3). In other words, we

learn to think when we listen and when we speak. According to the CCSSI web page Key Points in English Language Arts, the CCSS expect that "students gain, evaluate, and present increasingly complex information, ideas, and evidence through listening and speaking as well as through media" (CCSSI, 2010, Listening and Speaking section, para. 1).

## Common Core State Standards: Speaking and Listening

According to the CCSS, speaking and listening includes two main elements:

- The ability to **comprehend and collaborate** with others:
    - participation in discussions and projects
    - evaluation of a variety of information from various sources, including media
    - evaluation of what a speaker says
- Skills in the **presentation of knowledge and ideas:**
    - audience-appropriate and logical presentation of information
    - use of media support
    - adaptation of speech to context and task

The Common Core State Standards emphasize the importance of engaging students in academic discussions in a variety of forms and settings—whole-class, small-group, and one-on-one. According to the CCSSI web page Key Points in English Language Arts, some of these discussions are formal presentations, but many are the more informal discussions that reflect real life, where students "collaborate to answer questions, build understanding, and solve problems" (CCSSI, 2010, Speaking and Listening section, para. 2).

The following chart shows the progression from elementary to middle grades for this "comprehension and collaboration" standard for listening and speaking:

1. Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on *grade level topics and texts,* building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

| Grade 4 | Grade 7 |
|---|---|
| **a.** Come to discussions prepared, having read or studied required material; explicitly draw on that preparation and other information known about the topic to explore ideas under discussion.<br><br>**b.** Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions and carry out assigned roles.<br><br>**c.** Pose and respond to specific questions to clarify or follow up on information, and make comments that contribute to the discussion and link to the remarks of others.<br><br>**d.** Review the key ideas expressed and explain their own ideas and understanding in light of the discussion. | **a.** Come to discussions prepared, having read or researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence on the topic, text or issue to probe and reflect on ideas under discussion.<br><br>**b.** Follow rules for collegial discussions, track progress toward specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed.<br><br>**c.** Pose questions that elicit elaboration and respond to other's questions and comments with relevant observations and ideas that bring the discussion back on topic as needed.<br><br>**d.** Acknowledge new information expressed by others and, when warranted, modify their views. |

## Strategies for Speaking and Listening in English Language Arts

Collaboration is one of the most important aspects of the Common Core speaking and listening standards, in large part because it reflects how things happen in the real world. Seldom does a professional work in complete isolation. The very best ideas and inventions come from the confluence of various minds to work on a problem. Therefore group work, either in pairs, small groups, or large groups, should be part of every classroom. Take a look at several specific ways you might promote listening and speaking skills in your classroom.

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## Think-Pair-Share: Evaluating Persuasion

This collaborative activity encourages students to both speak and listen as they work together. For example, a group of students reads a persuasive text or listens to a persuasive speech. The teacher asks a challenging question such as the following: Is this author's argument effective? Explain your answer, using details and evidence from the text.

Students, then, have a short amount of time to consider their answer (Think). Guide them by giving them questions such as

- What is the argument?

- What clues do you have about the author's viewpoint?

- How does the author support his or her viewpoint?

- Is the author's support valid?

Then students pair up with another student (Pair) and discuss their answers (Share). Finally, the teacher leads the whole class in a discussion where students listen to others' ideas and articulate their ideas in a respectful manner.

## Looking for Propaganda

To encourage students to listen carefully for propaganda, read aloud a persuasive text, or have students watch a commercial or listen to a news-like round table discussion. Ask students to identify persuasive language that they hear, particularly language that uses propaganda. In small groups or as a large group, consider students' impressions, ideas, and thoughts about the effectiveness of the language. Which arguments were most convincing? Which words were most powerful? Since these types of activities don't yield concrete right or wrong answers, discussions could become emotionally charged. As students learn to deal with conflicting

opinions, they will develop the types of listening and speaking skills the CCSS aim for.

### Debating

At any grade level, students can participate in debates that will enhance their critical thinking skills. Choose a topic that forces students to think critically about a text or one idea within that text. The topic should be debatable—meaning that it is not a fact. For example, text-based debates can focus on both literary and informational texts: point of view, character development, theme analysis, author's intent, persuasive effectiveness, and so on. In small groups, students develop their position with textual evidence and support. Students then orally debate as teams.

## Conclusion

As you can see, the language, speaking, and listening standards are truly integrated in nature. The suggested approaches are just a few among many possible configurations for engaging students in thought-provoking discussions. Together, these skills, along with reading and writing, support student literacy and complex reasoning skills in the English language arts classroom.