LITERACY PRACTICES THAT ADOLESCENTS DESERVE

Opportunities to Develop Oral Language

JEFF ZWIERS

Literacy Practices that Adolescents Deserve: Opportunities to Participate in Oral Communication

Reading and writing may float on a sea of talk,
but it is the winds of great teaching
that help students reach their destinations.

Introduction

It seems counterintuitive to spend class time on talking in order to build students' reading and writing skills. Yet one of the pillars of powerful literacy is oral language that approximates the language of texts.

Let's start by looking at speaking, one of the four commonly-cited modalities of language. Roughly speaking, speaking exists in two forms. One is output, which includes being able to articulate academic ideas with connected sentences and appropriate organization. Output tends to be one-way and one-time, and often used to answer a question, transmit information, or accomplish a task. It is not back-and-forth nor is it influenced by the listener's comments. Examples of output include oral presentations, jigsaws, and answering questions during class discussions.

Yet speaking also occurs in what should be considered a fifth modality, conversation. Conversation involves back-and-forth construction and negotiation of ideas with others. Unlike output, in an conversation a student's next response depends on the current response of another person. The back-and-forth responses build up ideas that were not in individuals' minds before they started talking. Conversations cannot be memorized (as output can be), they vary widely from day to day, and, unfortunately, are difficult to assess. Yet conversations also have the potential, unrealized in many classrooms, to fortify students' comprehension and production of complex texts. Note that while conversations can happen in whole class settings, because of the lack of time that a student gets to share, if at all, when all 30 students are involved, this e-book focuses on paired and small group conversations.

Connecting Oral Language to Literacy

Why is oral language so important for literacy? Let's start with the reading part of literacy. The closer a student's talk is to how the text uses language, the more smoothly that student will process the text's language.* The brain has a fascinating ability to take in language and store its word meanings, grammar, and overall discourse features. The wider the variety of a student's exposures to listening to and speaking text-like language for authentic purposes, the less overwhelmed that student is when a text presents high concentrations of complex words, syntax, and text structures. That is, the more our students' inner language of thought overlaps with the vocabulary, grammar, and text structure of what they read in school, the better.

Similarly, when writing, the more sophisticated and varied a student's oral language is, the more fluent, error-free, and clear a student's writing tends to be (CITE). The text-like language that a student uses to make meaning inside his or her mind is the language that he or she tends to put on

paper, particularly in first drafts. Then, when revising, students often apply knowledge of written rules and conventions.

Despite their importance, output and conversation tend to be the most neglected of the language modalities to be developed in classroom lessons (Horowitz, 2007). A variety of classroom observation studies have shown the immense lack of oral language by students in school-based lessons (Nystrand & Duffy, 2003; Nystrand, ----). Other researchers have observed oral responses by students; however, most were one-word or one-sentence responses given to answer teacher questions, and often for the purpose of praise or points—not for authentically communicating information or building ideas (Zwiers, 2008).

Most alarming, though, is the evidence that oral language development has been even rarer in the classrooms with high concentrations of academic English learners (Zwiers, 2008). These are the students who need the most acceleration in oral academic language. Yet many settings with diverse learners have focused on raising test scores. In such settings, students have spent much of their time on silent grammar, short-answer, and vocabulary activities.

Why the persistent neglect of oral language development? One reason is the adherence to traditional teacher-centered approaches such as "watch, then listen, then practice silently" and IRE (Mehan,), in which the teacher initiates a response from students, a student responds, and the teacher evaluates the response. Such approaches do not value students' oral processing of more complex ideas and concepts. Second, many teachers don't like the noise of many students talking nor the feeling that they lack control over the lesson. Others simply believe that students need to spend all of their time practicing what will be tested. And since oral language doesn't get tested in most settings, it has much less priority. And at the secondary level, in particular, content area teachers are highly focused on delivering content and are less invested in literacy and, even less so, oral language.

Quality of Oral Language
In many classrooms teachers have begun to increase the quantity of student talk. For example, a popular oral language activity is the "think-pair-share," in which two students respond to a prompt. Yet often, one partner answers the prompt and the other listens, agrees, and/or says something similar. This type of oral communication does increase the quantity of talk in the room, but is usually basic output that is focused on one-word or one-sentence answers. Therefore, even more urgent is the need to improve the quality of talk in classrooms. This means improving both the quality of output and the quality of conversation.

Upping the quality of oral output. Again, the more we can develop students' oral language in ways that align it with the language of texts, the better students will write and read academic texts in each discipline. This means a shift, on the part of both teacher and student, from focusing on right answers to focusing on strong ideas. This means a shift from the mentality that learning is evidence by an accumulation of points to the notion that learning embodies the growth of concepts and the abilities to communicate those concepts to others with multiple connected sentences. For example, a fifth grade teacher decided to suspend weekly vocabulary quizzes and have students read a grade level text, learn seven new words from it, and use the words in an oral presentation of the text's topic to small groups each week. She modeled how to connect sentences in logical ways and even to talk in paragraphs. She said that this experiment developed students' vocabulary, grammar, reading, and writing much more than quizzes ever did.

Conversations influence how students think. In fact, Lev Vygotsky argued that outer dialogs shape our inner dialogs. We are constantly conversing with our selves based on what we are doing. As you read this, for example, you are engaging in a form of inner dialog that allows you to process the ideas in this text. You tell yourself many things throughout the day; you argue two sides of an issue to make a decision; you . Again the more our outer dialogs (classroom conversations) build up the language, thinking, and knowledge structures of texts, the more our inner voices

The quality of conversations. Perhaps an even greater shift for many teachers is going from whole class "discussions" to pair and small group conversations. A high-quality conversation has several features. First, it is not a bag of popcorn; that is, partners do not just pop ideas out at random; instead, they build on previous responses, both their own and by their partners. Second, they build up an idea as they take turns. This idea becomes stronger because it is clarified, supported, and appropriately negotiated by conversation partners. And third, the conversation fosters learning by focusing on the lesson's objectives. Here is an example from an eighth grade classroom during a lesson on character traits in a short story.

Darla: I think he was lost.
Alex: What do you mean?
Darla: You know, he's lost in life. He didn't know what to be or how to act.
Alex: How do you know? From the story?
Darla: The part where he told Cat he felt like he was floating on the ocean.
Alex: I thought he was just sick or something. I think an example of that may be when he went to the library and found random books to look at.
Darla: Oh yeah. He just pulled them and looked at them.
Alex: But I also thought he was, like, individual.
Darla: You mean not peer pressured?
Alex: Yeah, he was different and maybe kinda wanted to be.
Darla: How can you tell? Where in the story is that?
Alex: When he wears his father's old hat to the game. He didn't care that others made fun of it.
Darla: OK. So what's the most important trait?

Notice how the two students stay with one idea (being lost) for several turns. Alex even helps build up that idea with an example about the library. Then they focus on building Alex's idea by clarifying it and finding examples to support it. Conversations like this one help students to learn from one another and build ideas that were not in either partner's head before the conversation began. The conversation forces each partner to articulate thoughts in response to what was said before. This type of talk can also better prepare students to look for character traits in future texts.

Classroom Strategies

Participation in oral activities helps students learn vocabulary, syntax, and macrostructures needed for reading and writing in different disciplines. And students who talk about and share their perspectives on the texts often come to deeper understandings of the topic than just going solo. Yet we can't just show up one day and tell students to give powerful presentations and have deep discussions. We need to have an effective arsenal of strategies, activities, teaching practices and habits that support students' development of output and conversation skills. Here are a few activities and links to related resources.
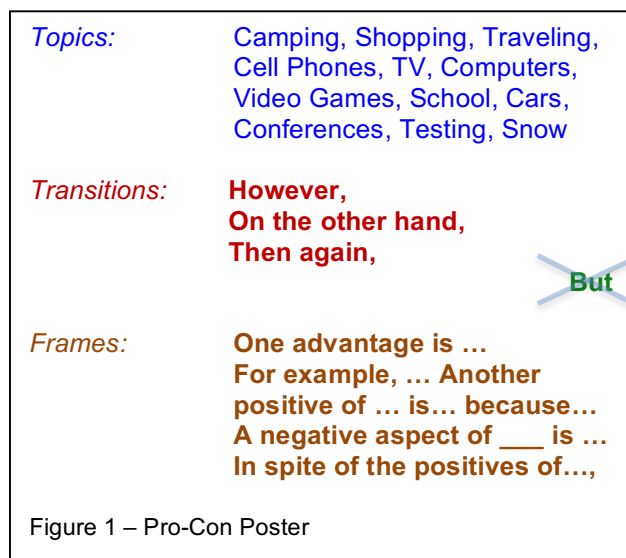
Output Activities

Activities that encourage and build students' abilities to orally communicate complex ideas not only display what students know, but they also help to solidify their content understandings and foster disciplinary thinking and language skills. Vygotsky, for example, emphasized that cognitive growth is "more likely when one is required to explain, elaborate, or defend one's position to others as well as to oneself; striving for an explanation, often makes a learner integrate and elaborate knowledge in new ways" (1978, p. 158).

Pro/Con Improv

This activity (Rittenberg, 1980; Zwiers 2008) helps to build improvisation skills, sharpens student thinking about two sides of an issue, and helps train students to use appropriate transitions to connect and contrast ideas. It is engaging and can be a foundational activity for many potential variations that you can use throughout the year as the complexity of subject matter topics increase.

One partner (the director) says the topic and then "Pro!" while clapping once. The other partner (actor) says two or three "pro" reasons for the topic. The director says, "Con!" and the actor immediately switches to the negatives of the topic, using a transition such as *however, on the other hand, yet,* etc. Actors should not use *but* because it is already used so often. The director has the actor switch two more times or so. Actors can use pro and con starter frames such as those in Figure 1. At the end, the director decides toward which side the actor leaned and describes why. After practicing with familiar topics, such as those in Figure 1, academic topics are used. Variations include "Compare-Contrast," "For-Against," and "Causes-Effects."

Topics:	Camping, Shopping, Traveling, Cell Phones, TV, Computers, Video Games, School, Cars, Conferences, Testing, Snow
Transitions:	**However,** **On the other hand,** **Then again,** ~~**But**~~
Frames:	**One advantage is …** **For example, … Another positive of … is… because…** **A negative aspect of ___ is …** **In spite of the positives of…,**

Figure 1 – Pro-Con Poster

Interview Grid

An interview grid is very simple on the surface. It has a question or two at the top and student names down the side. Students interview one another and paraphrase their peers' answers next to the names on the chart. The power of the activity is in how you push students to push themselves to be better oral communicators. This is another case of shifting from a focus on answers and finishing as fast as possible to a focus on strengthening one's idea and abilities to communicate it to a variety of other people.

Name	What was the most significant effect of the Industrial Revolution?
Me	Disease
Daniel	Imperialism
Elena	Industry

Figure 2 – Sample interview grid

Students' language benefits from the repeated practice that students get in describing their complex idea to others. Each time they talk, they: (a) try out their current way of describing their idea or understanding, and (b) get to hear content and language used by others that they can "borrow" for working with the next partner. For example, if students are asked to share what they think was the most significant effect of the Industrial Revolution, Daniel might start with a basic answer in his first turn, "I think it was imperialism." The teacher reminds students, before they switch, to take notes and beef up what they will say to the next partner. It needs to be better,

longer, and stronger with each turn. So Daniel says to his second partner, "I think the main result of the Industrial Revolution was imperialism. It was caused by the need for resources around the world. It is important cuz it changed countries and controlled them. For example, England took over India." Notice how Daniel was able to strengthen his response by using some ideas from his first conversation and by having practiced already.

Formative Assessment of Oral Output
Apart from the occasional oral presentation in front of class, students' oral output is seldom assessed. Yet there are many opportunities to both assess and push students to improve their abilities to use increasingly clear and complex words, sentences, and message organization strategies. Teachers can use a tool like the one in Figure 3 to formatively assess output and provide feedback to students.

Feature & Symbol	Description	Rating & Rationale
Focused on learning	Relevant to the topic or task.	
Purposeful & Original	Original, whole, memorable, meaningful, purposeful	
Linked sentences	Coherent with logically linked sentences	
Use target language	Uses target language and language of text(s)	
Disciplinary thinking	Shows disciplinary thinking (interpretation, cause-effect, perspective, problem solve, argumentation)	

Figure 3 - *Output Student Observation Tool*
From Zwiers, O'Hara, & Pritchard (in press). *Common Core Standards in diverse classrooms: Essential practices for developing academic language and disciplinary literacy.* Stenhouse)

Conversation Activities
Students need large amounts of practice and support over time when it comes to academic conversations that focus on what they are supposed to learn. Why? In most settings, they haven't had much practice talking about academic topics in academic ways. Here are a few practical ways to get started in teaching students how to have productive conversations.

Teach Constructive Conversation Skills
There are many types of conversation. In school we want students to construct meaning in their conversations. We want them to build ideas and improve their uses of academic language as they talk about content. There are four skills that help people build ideas and understandings in conversations. These are creating, clarifying, and fortifying, and negotiating (Zwiers, O'Hara, & Pritchard, in press). Notice that each skill also parallels the thinking that we often use to

understand difficult texts. For example, if I am reading an article on geothermal energy, I first create or pose an idea in my mind of what geothermal energy is in the beginning of the article. Then I clarify this idea as I read more. Then I start to form my own ideas and opinions and fortify them with examples from the text and my own life. Finally, I begin to negotiate and weigh different solutions proposed in the text. Each of these skills can, are, and should be developed through conversation.

One way to teach these four skills is to use symbols, as shown in the poster in Figure 4. Each of the skills has a symbol and both prompt and response sentence starters to help students use the language of the skill. But take care not to overdo the sentence starters! Choose a few, as needed, and focus more on developing the skill. Most teachers start with a focus on one skill and add others over time.
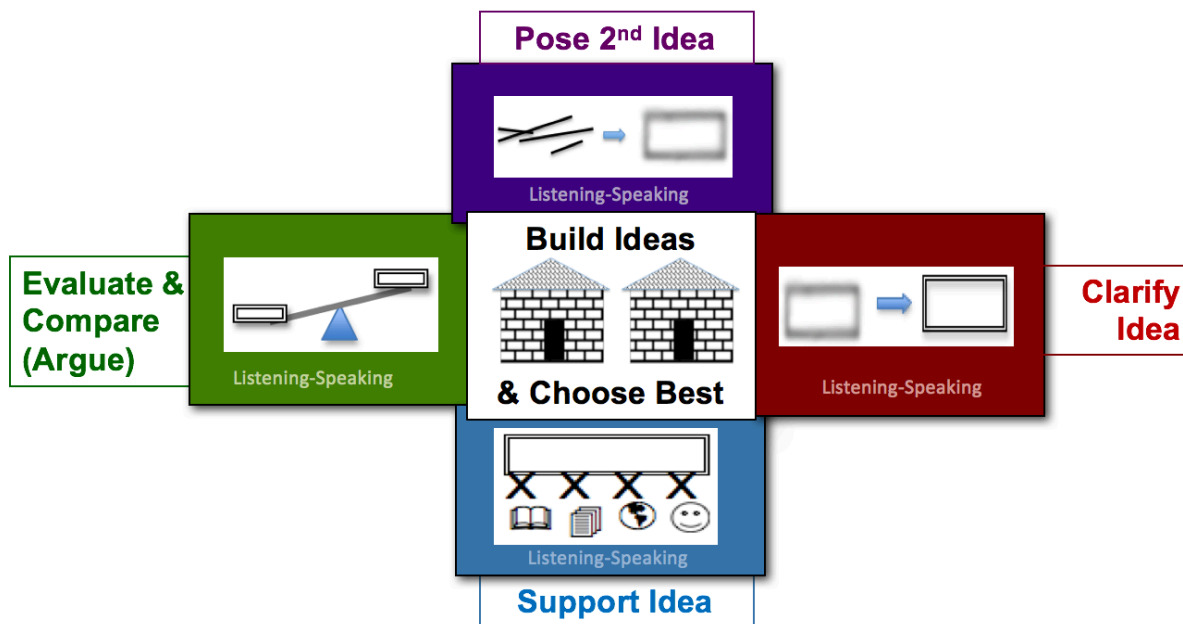

 Figure 4 – Constructive Conversation Skills Poster

Another way to teach the skills is to use gestures. 'Create' is one palm tapping the side of the head and going up (as in "I just got an idea!"); 'Clarify' is both hands making circles up at your eyes like binoculars; 'Fortify' is two hands holding up an invisible roof; and 'Negotiate' is leaning to each side with both palms out facing up like a seesaw.

Here are brief descriptions of each of the four conversation skills and activities to build them.

Pose & Create Ideas
Creating ideas means generating interpretations, opinions, conclusions, hypotheses, or solutions that help to foster the intended learning in the lesson. In many school settings, though, creating ideas has taken a back seat to memorizing, reciting, and choosing the ideas of others. Consequently, many teachers have not focused on teaching students how to create ideas that help them learn.

Creativity Stages

Students can benefit from talking through the commonly-cited stages of creativity. First of all, creativity should happen for a reason, such as to solve a problem or communicate a message. So the first stage that students engage in is defining the problem, challenge, or purpose. When students read a novel, for example, a purpose for creating ideas could be to interpret themes that they think the author intended them to learn; for a primary source in history, a purpose could be to evaluate its possible biases and its importance in showing what happened. In the second stage, students connect and rearrange information in new ways and look at it from new perspectives. They might connect the actions of a character in the novel to a movie that they saw; they might connect the language in the primary source to a recent presidential speech. In the third stage, students narrow down the ideas to one or two most likely to be useful. A student might say the novel makes us think about how significant and insignificant humans are; a history student might say that the primary source was important because it helps us see how indigenous people felt about colonization. Thus, students work together to create ideas, benefitting from the ideas and thinking of others.

Clarify Ideas
Clarifying ideas means ensuring that all participants understand the idea or concept being discussed. Helpful subskills for clarifying are paraphrasing, elaborating, explaining, and using analogies. Yet because many students have not been asked to engage in purposeful and extended paired conversations in recent decades, they have lacked the loads of practice needed to effectively clarify ideas with other students.

Supported then Unsupported Conversations
This activity can be used to help students improve their clarifying of ideas in conversation. First, they use a support such as a graphic organizer to describe their idea. For example, it could be a cause and effect diagram (link) in history. Students use the diagram in their first conversation with a partner, who asks questions to make sure the idea is clear. Student A might start with "I think the main cause of revolutions is poverty." Student B might ask, "How do we define poverty? Revolution? How does poverty cause revolutions? Why is poverty a bigger cause than the desire to have control? What's an analogy for this?" After clarifying their ideas in the first conversation, students split up to have a second conversation with a different partner without the support (cause-effect diagram). This pushes students to remember the information without reading off the visual and pushes them to be clear from the start, with more complete clarifying for the new partner because they will have learned what was needed from the first conversation. They can then engage in fortifying and negotiating, described next.

Support Ideas
Supporting ideas means using evidence or examples to support a point or position. Students often need to develop two related subskills: (a) identifying the best examples and evidence to support their ideas, and (b) explaining how the evidence supports the idea. These two skills, not coincidentally, also help students to understand complex texts, comprehend expository speeches, and engage in argumentation with others.

Claim-Support-Explain Chant
One way to scaffold these skills in a conversation is the little gesture chant called Claim,-Support-Explain (Zwiers, et al., in press). Put your fist out and down, like planting a flag as you say "Claim." Then put your other hand flat under your fist to support it. Move both hands toward your face as if you are taking a closer look. Remind students what each term means, if needed. (The claim is one's opinion, idea, interpretation, view, or position on an issue. Support

is the evidence or data used to support the claim. Explain is your explanation of how the evidence strongly supports your claim.) Students prepare for conversations by reading a text and generating a claim, which could be an interpretation for its theme, its position on an issue, a personal opinion that emerged, etc. They also prepare a mental list evidence or examples to use in the conversation, knowing that partners will ask for these. Finally, they prepare to explain their strongest piece of evidence. In their conversations, partners use the gestures to remind them what to prompt for. Partners should also ask clarifying questions and work with each other to support the claim begin discussed. Near the end of talking about one partner's claim, they work together to choose the strongest evidence and explain why.

Evaluate, Compare, & Choose ideas
Many standards emphasize the importance of being able to argue, choose, and negotiate ideas. This means being able to analyze, compare, and evaluate the degree of support, or "weight" of evidence for a position or side of an issue. As an example, here is the rest of Darla and Alex's earlier conversation about character traits.

Darla: OK. So what's the most important trait?
Alex: I don't know. How do we decide?
Darla: That critter… criteria poster, I guess.
Alex: So, amount of evidence. I think the 'lost one' has some, but it's not strong.
Darla: Me too.
Alex: But the criteria of life lesson for us, what about it?
Darla: Yeah. That could be 'be yourself,' like you said.
Alex: Hmm. OK. Which weighs more, like on that seesaw thing? Maybe be proud of ourselves. At the end where it says he stood up straight for the first time.
Darla: Yeah. Even when you are different. And maybe you don't get lost if you be yourself, individual.

Notice how the conversation got more interesting as students compared and used criteria to choose the most important trait. The following activity was used by students to evaluate the strength of the evidence for each side of their decision.

Argument Balance Scale
When we think about two sides of a controversial issue or decision, it is somewhat like a balance scale in which we give different values, or weights, to different reasons and evidence on each side. This visual organizer allows students to talk through the process of weighing and comparing reasons that weigh against each other on two sides of an issue (Zwiers, 2008). (And for an even more hands-on activity, there is a 3-D version of the scale cut from one piece of 8.5"x11" piece of paper.)
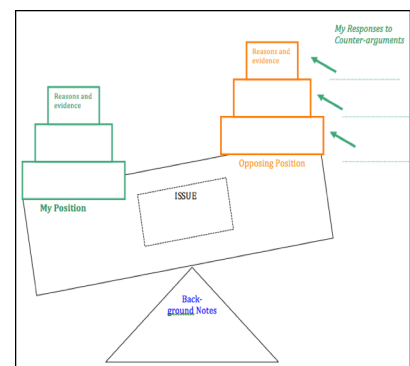

Figure 5 – Argument Scales

At the beginning of the activity, each pair is given or creates a balance scale. Students write the issue in the center box on the crossbar. Then they write down the two opposing perspectives on each side. Students then make criteria-reason-evidence cards of two different colors that will go on each side of the scale. Students talk about the criteria they will use, reasons relating to criteria, and evidence supporting the

reason. Students might put monetary cost as the criterion, 'It costs too much" as the reason, and a statistic from an article as evidence. On the opposite side, they might create a card with cost as the criterion, "The long-term costs of the pollution caused by fossil fuels," and a statistic from an article. Students create large, medium, and small cards according the weight of the reason and evidence, which is agreed upon by talking to one another. They can also add weight with paperclips.

Formative Assessment of Constructive Conversations
Formative assessment of student conversations is a powerful way to see what students have learned and how well they co-construct ideas with others. It is also challenging because it happens in real time, as students are talking, and we cannot get around to every pair or group as they interact. Therefore, we need to be skilled at getting the most "data" that we can as students talk. We can use the following assessment tool in Figure 6 to look at several features of conversation that we would like to see.

Turns build on previous turns to build up a relevant idea(s)

_____ Students create or choose a relevant initial idea(s) that is focused on learning objective(s)

_____ Students clarify idea(s) (by paraphrasing, defining, elaborating)

_____ Students support ideas (using evidence, examples, explanations)

If there are two or more competing ideas (i.e., an argument),

_____ Students evaluate the strength/weight of the evidence of each idea

_____ Students compare the strengths/weights and choose the "strongest/heaviest" idea

_____ Students explain (and/or negotiate) final decisions

Figure 6 – *Constructive Conversations Student Observation Tool*

Oral Language Resources

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Colorín Colorado (www.colorincolorado.org) is a free web-based service that provides information, activities and advice for educators and Spanish-speaking families of English language learners (ELLs).

Constructive Classroom Conversations MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) archived at www.novoed.com/common-core. This course focused on gathering and analyzing short classroom conversations with the intention of improving students' oral language.

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Adolescent Literacy Position Statement
http://www.reading.org/general/AboutIRA/PositionStatements/AdolescentLitPosition.aspx.
IRA E-ssentials
http://www.reading.org/general/Publications/e-ssentials.aspx