11 Ways to Improve Your Students’ Oral Language Skills

Oral language is one of the most important skills your students can master—both for social and academic success. Learners use this skill throughout the day to process and deliver instructions, make requests, ask questions, receive new information, and interact with peers.

As a teacher, there’s a lot you can do during your everyday lessons to support the development of strong oral language skills in your students. The following is excerpted and adapted from *Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, OWL LD, and Dyscalculia* by Berninger & Wolf. It presents 11 ideas for supporting oral language development in your students. These teaching strategies can help students with specific language disabilities (including dyslexia), and they can boost the language skills of your other learners, too.

1. **Encourage conversation.**

   Every social interaction gives students a new opportunity to practice language. Some of your students might need a little guidance from you to engage in conversations, so spark interactions whenever you can. Ask questions, rephrase the student’s answers, and give prompts that encourage oral conversations to continue.

2. **Model syntactic structure.**

   Your students may not use complete oral syntax in informal speech, but encourage them to do so when they’re in the classroom. When a student uses fragmented syntax, model complete syntax back to them. This builds oral language skills and gives students practice in a skill necessary for mastering written language.

3. **Maintain eye contact.**

   Engage in eye contact with students during instruction and encourage them to do the same. Maintaining eye contact will help learners gauge their audience’s attention and
adjust their language, their volume, or the organization of their speech. This will help them be better understood, communicate more clearly, and successfully interpret nonverbal cues about their clarity.

4. **Remind students to speak loudly and articulate clearly.**

Ask students to feel the muscles used for speech while they’re talking and monitor their volume and articulation. Remind them that clear and loud-enough speech is essential for holding the attention of the group and communicating their information and opinions effectively.

5. **Explain the subtleties of tone.**

Your students have probably experienced playground arguments related to tone; misunderstandings are common when students are using loud outdoor voices. Remind your students how tone of voice—which includes pitch, volume, speed, and rhythm—can change the meaning of what a speaker says. Often, it’s not what they say, it’s how they say it that can lead to misunderstanding of motives and attitudes. Ask your students to be mindful of tone when they’re trying to get a message across, and adjust their volume and pitch accordingly.

6. **Attend to listening skills.**

Ensure that your students are listening by using consistent cues to get their attention. You might use a phrase like “It’s listening time” to give students a reminder. Some students might also benefit from written reminders posted prominently on your wall.

7. **Incorporate a “question of the day.”**

During each school day’s opening activities, ask a question to encourage talk. (You can even write one on the board so your students can read it and start thinking about their answer as soon as they come in.) Start with simple one-part questions like “What is your favorite animal?” If a student doesn’t answer in a complete sentence, model a complete sentence and ask the student to repeat your model. Once your students are successfully answering these simple questions in complete sentences, move to two-part questions that require more complex answers: “What is your favorite animal? Why?”

8. **Compile a class booklet of students’ phrases.**

Give your students a sentence to finish, such as “When my dog got lost, I looked...” Have each student contribute a prepositional phrase to complete the sentence (e.g., *at the grocery store, in the park, under the bed*). Then have your students create a class booklet by writing and illustrating their phrases. When all the phrase pages are assembled into a
booklet, students can practice reading the very long sentence with all the places they looked for the dog. Encourage them to come up with a conclusion to the story.

9. **Question to boost comprehension.**

Asking questions before and after a reading assignment not only helps sharpen oral language skills, it also helps students think about what they’re reading and absorb information from the words. You might try the following strategies to facilitate reading comprehension:

- If there’s an introduction to the story or passage, ask students to read it and answer purpose-setting questions: “Where does the story begin? “What kind of story or article is this? Why do you think so?”
- Ask students to predict outcomes: “What will happen? How do you know?”
- After the reading, ask students to reveal whether their predictions were correct and identify where the ending or conclusion begins.
- Have students summarize the passage: “Who were the characters?” “What was the plot?” “What was the outcome?” “What was the main idea?” “What were the supporting details?”

10. **Never assume students understood your instructional talk.**

You use oral language every day to teach—but some students may not be getting your message. In this chart from Berninger & Wolf’s book, Beverly Wolf shares some examples of how students in her classroom misinterpreted sentences delivered orally:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What the teacher said</th>
<th>What students heard &amp; wrote down</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rome wasn’t built in a day.</td>
<td>Row musnt bill tinted “a.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnabout is fair play.</td>
<td>Turnip outs fir ply.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.</td>
<td>Hum tedium tea set honor wall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always be polite.</td>
<td>Al waits beep a light.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time and tide wait for no man.</td>
<td>Diamond died weight for nome ann.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Adapted from Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, OWL LD, and Dyscalculia, by Berninger & Wolf*
Be aware of the potential disconnect between what you say and what your students hear. Go over your message and present it in multiple ways to be sure all students understand.

11. Teach concept words.

Some students may have difficulty with abstract concepts such as before, after, or following, and with sequences such as days of the week or months of the year. To help students learn and retain these concepts, you may need to present and review them many times and in multiple ways. For example:

- You might ask students to identify which holiday comes in each month and then review holidays for other months in sequence: “Groundhog Day is in February. What holiday is in March? In April?”

- Have students identify the month before or after a given month. “May is before June and after April.” “May is between April and June.”

Oral language is one of the foundational building blocks of learning. Try these suggestions with your students, and give them the boost they need for future academic and social success.