Orality and Oral Composition in the 21st Century Classroom

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Abstract

The focus on orality in the classroom has long been one of process rather than product. Elements of orality, namely listening and speaking, have been used by classroom teachers as a means of engaging students in a meaning-making process as they tackle printed text and create their own written works. However, though English/language arts teachers have used orality to enhance comprehension and critical thinking skills, teachers have done little to intentionally develop students’ oral language skills. Traditionally, academic standards set for English/language arts, including the standards set forth by the National Council of Teachers of English and state departments of education, have reduced requirements related to orality to a process orientation, pushing teachers to focus more on printed text and written composition. This paper argues for the need to move toward a process-product orientation toward orality in the classroom and reveals the promise of the recently adopted Common Core State Standards to help redirect the focus of educators to the intentional development of the oral language skills necessary to function actively and responsibly as productive citizens and lifelong learners in a diverse, interdependent, global society.

Key words: orality; listening and speaking; oral language skills; Common Core State Standards
Orality and Oral Composition in the 21st Century Classroom

In the fall of 2010 while reading Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy* and studying the newly released Common Core State Standards (CCSS), I developed an interest in exploring the current state of orality in the secondary English/language arts classroom. For the first time in my professional career, I faced a set of standards that directly targeted speaking and listening, not as skills aimed at improving reading and writing skills but as skills worthy of intentional development and assessment by English/language arts teachers. Reading Ong’s text led me to question my own preparedness for addressing such standards and to outline what such preparedness might entail. Moreover, I wondered about the readiness of English/language arts teachers, secondary teachers in particular, to address orality in the product-oriented manner required by the Common Core State Standards. My initial attempts to discuss orality with teachers fell flat as orality was not a term in the teachers’ expressive or receptive vocabularies. In fact, I was frequently mistaken to have said *morality*. I decided, then, to observe a group of high school teachers in a single school, across grades nine through twelve, to determine through observation and analysis naturally occurring activities and classroom events that demonstrated the teachers’ understanding of orality. Perhaps, I reasoned, teachers understand more about orality than they are able to articulate. If not, however, such observations could prove helpful in determining needed areas of professional development. I wanted to see how teachers used speaking and listening in their classrooms, the ways they emphasized oral language and built upon students’ existing oral language capacities, how they used oral forms of assessment (oral presentations and oral quizzes), and how they tracked and monitored oral discourse in their classrooms. By focusing on a single school, I could capture the role of orality in the school’s culture as demonstrated by English/language arts teachers who met frequently in departmental meetings to make instructional decisions based on standards and assessment data. I could also work to develop a teacher-friendly vocabulary linked directly to teachers’ existing schema about oral language. In short, by observing teachers engaged in the act of teaching I could draw meaningful conclusions about the current state of orality in today’s classrooms and propose a plan for successfully transitioning into the new focus on speaking and listening as evidenced in the Common Core State Standards.

When I first contacted the teachers to discuss my interest in studying the current state of orality in the secondary English classroom, my request was met with an ironic mix of eager acceptance and cautious skepticism. One teacher, for example, replied via email, “You are welcome to come any time.” He added a few details about what he and his students had been focusing on, and then, speaking for himself and the other teachers I would observe, asked, “Could you help us understand what orality means? It might help us to make sure we cover what you are looking for” (Anonymous teacher, personal communication, October 25, 2010).

In this discussion, we see part of the dilemma regarding the current state of orality in the classroom. It is this dilemma that led me to observe the teachers in the first place. Even English/language arts teachers lack the vocabulary needed to discuss the concept of orality. But how did we reach this point when orality was once all we had, and given the reality that when a shift toward written text ensued, it was writing not speaking that was under the greatest scrutiny? Indeed, though orality and literacy were once fully distinguished processes (orality referred to
speaking and listening; literacy to reading and writing), literacy is defined today as a complex interweaving of language processes that includes multiple skills: reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visually representing. The notion of orality, then, once separate from literacy, is somewhat lost in the modern concept of what it means to be literate. What this expanded definition of literacy implies is not that each isolated skill is a component of literacy on its own but that the various skills and processes interact in the process of making meaning from print and non-print text, and it is this meaning-making process that constitutes literacy. What happens to the teachers’ understanding of orality in this context? I propose that teachers today largely see listening and speaking as processes rather than products—ways of helping students to read better, write better, interpret more accurately, and think more deeply—but not ends themselves, not final work products nor skills to be intentionally and strategically developed in the context of the English/language arts class. Further, if these skills are not ends themselves, then teachers have little need to discuss them. Collaborative meetings focus not on orality and literacy but on literacy alone with orality serving the sole purpose of developing literacy skills.

The problem with this limited focus is that while students enter our classrooms with an ability to speak and an ability to listen, they do not enter our classrooms with a masterful command of spoken language. Our students may talk often, but they do not orate. They may listen and respond in discussion, but they are not great interpreters. They may put together a brief oral presentation, but they do not orally compose. In fact, oral composition is an oxymoron in 2012. To create an oral composition in the 21st century classroom is to put in writing what one plans to say out loud, and while this is certainly one aspect of public speaking, when teachers have students write what they plan to say then assess them only on what they write, the entire notion of orality is lost.

In this article, I demonstrate how limited today’s teachers’ understanding of orality is, how necessary it is that we develop that understanding, and how the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) call us to a renewed focus and commitment to this very important language skill. The issues and concerns that necessitate this renewed focus are explored, and finally, a framework for redefining orality as its own multi-faceted language phenomenon with observable and measurable processes and products is proposed.

Snapshots of Teachers’ Understanding of Orality

I observed four high school English teachers in a high school located in a mid-size city with demographics that included white non-Hispanic students (69.5%), black students (26.7%), Asian students (2.3%), Hispanic students (1.1%), and an extremely small number of American Indian students (.4%). The male to female ratio in the school is approximately 1:1 across all racial groups with one exception: Hispanic females outnumber Hispanic males by 3:1. However, the percentage of Hispanic students is so low that even with the females outnumbering the males, the number of Hispanic females in the school is less than 15 total. I present these demographics because my observations revealed high rates of interaction between black and white students while interaction by Asian and Hispanic students was not evident. Moreover, the classes observed included no American Indian students.
I entered the classrooms with no preconceived notions beyond understanding from the confirmation email that the teachers were not familiar with the term *orality*. My observations revealed both problems and promise for the state of orality in the 21st century classroom and provided a way to frame this discussion. Consider the following snapshots (to maintain the anonymity of the teachers, all names are pseudonyms):

**English I Snapshot**

Lee Beau began her class with an exercise requiring grammatical and spelling corrections. Errors to be corrected included issues with subject-verb agreement and verb tense. The work was reviewed carefully and individual feedback was provided to help students understand the reasons for the changes. Most were simple changes that the students grasped easily, so there was very little discussion. The students moved quickly into a whole-class review of *Romeo and Juliet* with classroom discourse taking place in a very controlled manner. Ms. Beau asked questions that required a fill-in-the-blank type response. Few questions were truly open-ended. After the review, the class silently read Scene III, Friar Laurence’s cell, while an audio tape played in the background, providing a dramatic model of how Shakespeare should sound when performed. Ms. Beau would pause the tape periodically to provide the gist of events in the scene. Rather than relying on the students’ summaries, she provided all of the gist statements. The reading continued in this manner until the end of class. In this teaching of *Romeo and Juliet*, though a model for oral performance was provided, oral language, even class discussion, was limited.

**English II Snapshot**

Across the hall, English II teacher, Mr. Mitchell also began his class with an activity requiring grammatical corrections. The statements to be corrected included spelling errors (“makin” for “making,” for example); errors with parallel structure, and most interestingly, problems with the subjunctive “to be” verb. Student chatter was heavy in this classroom but not connected to the grammatical exercise. However, when Mr. Mitchell began to review the answers, the chatter nearly came to an end. Students’ responses were suddenly limited; in some cases students were given little opportunity to talk through their responses. For the subjunctive “to be” verb, however, there was a definite effort to help students think their way through the correction. Mr. Mitchell asked, “What would you say if you were in a formal meeting asking this question?” The question he referred to was, in fact, not a question at all but the following statement: “We recommend that she is invited to speak at the conference banquet.” The students were clueless, and when the correction was given, students exploded with chatter. “That don’t sound right,” one exclaimed. “That’s because it’s proper. We don’t know proper,” another responded. Several classmates nodded in agreement. The students had no oral language connection to the subjunctive form of the “to be” verb, and while Mr. Mitchell attempted to tie the rule of the standard English grapholect to the students’ spoken language, the grapholect and the students’ dialects were not in alignment. The students simply had no prior experience with a similar expression. They would not say under any social circumstances, “We recommend that she be invited to speak at the conference banquet.”
What was most profound about this snapshot was that the students were disengaged in the grammatical exercise until they saw the sharp contrast between their own dialect and the Standard English grapholect. The conflict sparked discourse, but the discourse during this grammar exercise took place in dialect. In fact, all of the classroom chatter took place in dialect. Most of this chatter, however, was off-task conversation. Whole class talk was limited, which affected Mr. Mitchell’s full understanding of his students’ oral language strengths (and weaknesses). Throughout the entire class session, students spoke actively to each other but spoke to Mr. Mitchell only when forced.

English III Snapshot

A few classrooms down the hall, students in English III began their session in a similar manner, correcting grammatical statements. The initial grammar exercise in this class moved quickly with students seeming much more in control of Standard English. Following this review, students completed a “Weekly Grammar Shot” for ACT prep. The work was completed orally and in writing with reasons provided for all choices. Again, discussion ensued around a conflict between the grapholect Standard English and the students’ dialects: Do we say “angry with” or “angry at”? The teacher, Mrs. Griffin, explained that it was “never” appropriate to say “angry at.” “When my son says, ‘Mommy, are you mad at me?’,” she explained, “I respond, ‘Yes, I am mad with you.’ I respond this way because I want to model correct usage.” Students seemed surprised by this information, but they readily accepted it. “I’mma hafta start saying that,” one joked. “Yo, Travis, I’m mad with you man,” he called out to another student. Several classmates giggled in response.

Following the back to back grammatical exercises, the class began a review of The Crucible. Mrs. Griffin asked many probing, higher order thinking questions that led students to return to the text, read again, and attempt to justify their answers by citing evidence from the drama itself. A few questions led to deeper discussion. Consider the following:

Mrs. Griffin: “Do you think John Hale will become a dynamic character, or do you think he will remain static?”

Student A: “I don’t think so. I think he’s going to fight the trial.”

Student B: “If he stops fighting the trial everyone will hate him. But if he stays on board, he has to live with his doubt.”

Student C: “Yeah, he doesn’t really believe in what he’s fighting for anymore, but I think he will keep fighting anyway. He’s under a lot of pressure to keep the trial going.”

The discussion continued a bit further before the students were assigned roles to be read aloud. They began at Act III, reading fluently and with expression. Characters exploded from the page, and the students obviously enjoyed the drama. They related to the characters, and they were pulled in further by the oral reading.

After the reading, the teacher stopped the discussion and asked students to update their Face Book pages. This final 21st Century connection was ironically completed on large sheets of white bulletin board paper which hung on the walls around the room. Students updated their status with comments about events in The Crucible. They had each been assigned different
characters, and they posted messages that reflected the characters’ status updates and responses to the updates of others.

*English IV Snapshot*

Next door, Mr. Nimb began his class with a grammatical exercise as well. The sentences this time, however, related to literature previously read with corrections as follows:

“Doctor Faustus’s mind is torn among the desire for worldly knowledge and the consciousness of human limitations.”

“This is surely a tragedy that retains its power and meaning for modern audiences.”

Mr. Nimb led students through a discussion of the corrections with edits made both verbally and in writing. This added visual output demonstrated Mr. Nimb’s mutual reliance on both literacy and orality. He was careful to randomly select students for this discussion, explaining that he aimed to ensure that the more auditory students had no opportunity to take over the class.

Following the grammar exercise, an interesting assignment was revealed. The students were asked to share their “3-minute fiction stories”—stories which had been previously assigned. The nature of this assignment was similar to most 21st Century oral composition tasks in English/language arts classrooms: “Write something that you will present orally.” Specifically, Mr. Nimb’s assignment read: “Write a 3-minute short story. Begin with the words, ‘Some people swore the house was haunted,’ and end with ‘nothing was ever the same after that.’” Mr. Nimb’s assignment seemed to have sparked interest. One by one the students took out their stories, hid them on their laps and looked down as they silently read over their work.

Ironically, while Mr. Nimb randomly selected students for the grammar review, he accepted only volunteers for presentation of this “oral composition”. Attempting to encourage students to share their stories, Mr. Nimb shared his own, revealing what he perceived to be the story’s weakest points and encouraging students to give him feedback for improvement. Still, few students opted to participate. Some students claimed they had no stories to share even while reading over their wrinkled page cautiously, contemplating volunteering but never quite gaining the courage to do so. In the end, only two students volunteered to share their stories.

The first student to read shared an excellent story, written in Standard English and filled with vivid description and action: The walls of the house were covered with a smoke grey layer of dust; the floors creaked; a nearly transparent spider-web met the main character in the doorway of the basement; the characters yelled, whispered, and trembled. The reading, however, while fluent in terms of stress and rhythm lacked the necessary expression, intonation, and shifts in volume that are characteristic of oral tales. The student had written a wonderful story that she was incapable of telling. The elements of orality fell lifeless against the backdrop of the printed text.
The second student was more energetic in her presentation, but her language was much more dialectal and her story lacked sensory detail. Further, the story seemed incomplete, like a frame to be filled in. She explained that it was hard to tell a story in three minutes. The time frame was too short; her sense of story-telling was far more extended. What was she to do in three minutes? Set up the story and get ready to tell it. But then, that would be pointless; that would not meet the requirements of the assignment. So what did she do? She left out the sensory details, the dialogue, and the extended action that would make her story more complete.

The first student was a white female and the second student was a black female. Perhaps there are cultural differences that made the black female more tuned in to story-telling as an art form. However, her writing demonstrated less command of the Standard English grapholect as the entire story, not just the limited dialogue, was dialectal in nature. At the same time, the student who had a strong grip on Standard English grammar and short story conventions was also far less comfortable with the oral telling.

The Current State of Orality in the Classroom

We can learn a great deal about the current state of orality and the current level of teachers’ understanding of orality through our glance into these four high school English classes. Through these snapshots, we see teachers working to balance both oral and written language, emphasizing orality as a comprehension process with listening sometimes given preference over speaking. We see teachers demonstrating appreciation for language diversity while working to build Standard English competency, and we see teachers building and maintaining classroom community. The snapshots revealed several key points about the current state of orality in the English/language arts classroom:

1. Teachers are consumed with a need to teach the grapholect Standard English but do not necessarily fully understand the differences between this grapholect and the students’ existing dialects.
2. Most oral discourse in the classroom is in direct response to written language. Even when the written language is written in Standard English, however, students’ spoken discourse occurs primarily in dialect.
3. Even when teachers assign tasks to be presented orally, they expect a written report and they grade the written product rather than the spoken one.
4. Students are capable of using paralinguistic cues such as voice quality as well as suprasegmental resources such as intonation and rhythm when reading drama.
5. Students have difficulty using paralinguistic cues such as voice quality, facial expressions, gestures, and proximity as well as suprasegmental resources such as intonation when reading their own oral compositions.
6. Teachers use of and emphasis on oral language is related primarily to process in the classroom rather than product. Assessment of oral competence ironically occurs in written form.
7. While students are building strengths in Standard English usage, they are not necessarily building strengths in oral language competence. Oral language competence includes an understanding of paralinguistic cues and suprasegmental resources that are not characteristic of written form.
The limitations on oral language in today’s classroom as identified in the statements above are not surprising. The academic standards and accountability systems under which schools have operated since the release of the 1996 NCTE Standards for the English/language arts, limited emphasis on orality to an emphasis on process.

**Process Oriented Standards: Process Oriented Implementation**

In 1996, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA) adopted new standards for the English/language arts. The 1996 national standards had been the driving force in the development of state standards and in shared practices regarding the teaching and assessing of students in English/language arts classrooms for nearly fifteen years when the Common Core State Standards were released. While the standards themselves are well-developed and have proven quite useful in improving literacy education, a breakdown of the standards reveals significant limitations when it comes to the components of orality. Three standards refer specifically to reading (Standards 1, 2, and 3); Standard 5 refers specifically to writing; Standards 4, 6, and 12 refer to some combination of written, spoken, visual, and other non-print texts; Standards 7 and 8 focus on research using print and digital media; and Standards 9, 10, and 11 focus on diversity and community. Of the twelve NCTE standards for the English/language arts, not one focuses exclusively on oral text and/or oral discourse. Further, of the elements included in Standards 4, 6, and 12, only written discourse is assessed in current high stakes tests. What happens then? Teachers focus their attention on written text, oral comprehension is ultimately integrated into reading comprehension through books on audio-tape or dramatic presentations on DVD, and oral composition is integrated into writing with texts to be presented orally assigned as written projects and scored with rubrics that focus more on the written product than the oral presentation. Remember the assignment: “Write a 3-minute short story” that you won’t even have to deliver orally.

Standards at the state level mirror the national standards but bring in a more narrow focus. For example, the most current Louisiana Department of Education standards (2006), prior to the CCSS, reduced the number of standards from twelve to seven, eliminating two of the standards related to oral language and rephrasing the standards to completely focus on a process orientation rather than a product orientation. Standard 4, for example, reads, “*Students demonstrate competence in speaking and listening as tools for learning and communicating,*” (p. 4) and Standard 7 reads, “*Students apply reasoning and problem solving skills to reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and visually representing*” (p. 8). In the state’s standards, then, assessing the standards as written is possible through instructional process and classroom activity. Teachers might, for example, use a checklist to monitor students’ group interactions and participation in class to determine if they are effectively using speaking and listening skills. But beyond this, nothing more is required. For Standard 7 of Louisiana’s content standards, like Standards 4, 6, and 12 of the national standards, the element of oral language is lost in a much longer list, and since of the skills listed only reading and writing are represented in the high stakes tests, only reading and writing are truly developed in the English/language arts classroom.
From Process Orientation to Process-Product Orientation

How does our process orientation affect our students’ orality? As Ong (1982) explains the “basic orality” of language is “permanent” (p. 7). Our students come to us as oral language users, and they will continue to be oral language users given no cognitive or physiological trauma to negatively impact their language processing abilities. However, our students will use language for social purposes that limit their interactions and their impact in our diverse and globally connected 21st Century society. If we use process only, our students develop the ability to engage in conversation with peers, but if we move toward a process-product orientation, our students develop the ability to engage in conversation with the world.

We must, therefore, renew our focus on orality to move beyond process and informal discourse to product and formal presentation. Oral language competence includes more than speaking one’s dialect in conversation to process information and it includes more than speaking in Standard English at the request of a teacher. Oral language competence includes knowing when to code-switch from dialect to standard form, answering a question quickly and concisely without writing the answer down first, telling a story to an audience and changing it as necessary to meet the needs and interest of the audience, giving a speech and/or oral presentation on a topic in a manner that addresses multiple audiences at the same time and choosing one’s words wisely in all cases based on knowledge of how language works, interpreting a speech or oral performance with careful attention to how the presenter uses language, and capitalizing on the aspects of oral language that do not exist in writing: paralinguistic cues, suprasegmental resources, situational transparency, and the power to interact with an audience.

Nonetheless, our emphasis on orality has not come close to helping students to develop the above competencies. As complex a construct orality is and as obvious it is that orality provides a foundation for literacy (even to the point of being redefined as an element of literacy), countless articles on 21st Century literacies focus on reading and writing. In “What Do We Mean by Literacy Now?”, for example, Harste (2003) proposes that “Students in the 21st century are going to have to be able to interrogate text for purposes of understanding how authors position readers” (p. 11), and while Harste’s point is well taken in his explanation of the subtle details readers must learn to recognize, I suggest that students in the 21st Century are going to have to be able to interrogate a speech, an interview on late-night television, a YouTube video, and even a commercial for how the performers position viewers. Even more so, however, students in the 21st Century must understand that with today’s technology they must be prepared to articulate their own words and performances carefully before an audience that exists beyond a single room and with a message that exists beyond a moment in time. Indeed, oral language is not necessarily disposable in 2012. What our current technologies allow is the long-term storage of oral language in oral form, and this is a phenomenon that did not exist until the late 19th Century with the onset of television and radio. Even then, however, such recordings did not come with ease. Today, there is so much more at stake: Our spoken words can be captured permanently with an instrument as small and easy to use as a Flip-camera and can be broadcasted to individuals across the world over an extended period of time at the click of a computer mouse through a podcast or YouTube video, for example. While our students may be somewhat protected from such exposure as they work in our classrooms, we must remember that we are preparing citizens of a society characterized by multiple literacies, connected globally by the
Internet, and expanding technologically by the minute. In other words, we must prepare our students for the dynamics of tomorrow, and that means preparing them to develop products of orality that allow their reach to extend far beyond their current social circles.

A New Set of Standards: Already on the Brink of Change.

There is hope, however, for the necessary renewal of interest and focus on orality in the 21st century classroom and for the shift to a process-product orientation. The CCSS, adopted July 2010, reflect a move in the right direction—a move toward an increased focus on oral language skills.

According to the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association (NGA), “a particular standard was included in the document only when the best available evidence indicated that its mastery was essential for college and career readiness in a twenty-first-century, globally competitive society” (Common Core State Standards, 2010, online). English/language arts strands addressed through the standards include reading, writing, language, and listening and speaking. The listening and speaking standards are addressed as entities separate from though integrated into reading, writing, and language, revealing a new, intensified focus on the speaking and listening skills. The anchor standards for speaking and listening (SL) are divided into two focus topics: (1) Comprehension and Collaboration (Standards 1-3), and (2) Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas (Standards 4-6) with the indicators stated as follows:

1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
2. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
3. Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.
4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
5. Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.
6. Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate (Common Core State Standards, 2010, online).

With these new standards we see clearly a national push toward building oral language competency, and with this push a need for professional development, new assessments, and innovative instructional processes. As we move forward to fully implementing the CCSS, we must first reach a point of fully understanding the indicators of each standard and the component(s) of orality that each indicator measures.
Components of Orality: Application in the 21st Century

As mentioned previously, we are unable to conceive of orality without literacy, so instead we speak of oral composition, but we speak of it in a way that stretches its meaning backward, folding in to written form. To create an oral composition in the 21st century classroom is to put in writing what one plans to say out loud. While this is similar to what Ong (2002) described as “secondary orality, the orality of telephone, radio, and television, which depends on writing and print for its existence” (p. 3), we must broaden Ong’s explanation to account for 21st century literacies. Secondary orality indeed depends on print for its existence, but in the 21st century classroom, that print includes more than the scripts behind telephone, radio, and television communication. It also includes the scripts behind YouTube, Windows Movie Maker, and podcasts. On a less technological note, the print on which orality primarily depends in the English/language arts classroom is that of the grapholect known as Standard English and the combination of this grapholect and various recorded dialects as seen in the work most widely read in the classroom: American, British, and non-western literature.

As we work toward implementing the SL strand of the CCSS, we must understand the many facets of secondary orality that are addressed in this strand. To assist in bridging this understanding, I propose a reduction in language that translates each anchor standard into a two-word identifier. The proposed language reduction serves as a framework from which teachers can understand, discuss, and apply pedagogical practices to meet the indicators in the SL strand, helping teachers to move orality into their expressive and receptive vocabularies (See Table 1 for a brief overview of this framework, using language from the CCSS and my own language reduction). A more detailed explanation of each facet, labeled with the reduced terms, follows.

Table 1
A Framework for Understanding the Anchor Standards of the CCSS S/L Strand

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<tr>
<th>FOCUS TOPIC 1: Comprehension and Collaboration</th>
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<tr>
<td>Oral Discourse</td>
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<tr>
<td>SL Indicator 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral Interpretation</td>
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<tr>
<td>SL Indicator 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral Interrogation</td>
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<tr>
<td>SL Indicator 3: Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.</td>
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<tr>
<th>FOCUS TOPIC 2: Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oral Composition</td>
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<tr>
<td>SL Indicator 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral Presentation</td>
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<td>SL Indicator 5: Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral Improvisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>SL Indicator 6: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.</td>
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</table>
**Oral discourse.** Oral discourse refers to the broad range of speaking and listening activities that take place in the classroom, including whole class, small group, and partner discussions. Through active engagement in conversation about various forms of print and non-print media, the themes and ideas presented, and the strengths and weaknesses of literary art and/or rhetoric, students build on a collective body of ideas and learn to express themselves more clearly and persuasively.

**Oral interpretation.** Oral interpretation refers to students’ interaction with speakers, oral performers, story tellers, and with video media for the purpose of comprehending and analyzing such presentations. Through active listening, students integrate speakers’ language usage with speakers’ use of audiovisual aids, evaluating specific media choices, word choices, analogies, and symbols to derive meaning from spoken text.

**Oral interrogation.** Oral interrogation extends beyond derivation of meaning to a higher-order, more evaluative interaction with the spoken text. Students engaged in oral interrogation question the speaker’s motives and line of reasoning, identifying strengths and weaknesses in arguments as well as key points made and reaching a point of agreement or disagreement with the intended message.

**Oral composition.** Contrary to the way oral composition often manifests itself in English/language arts assignments, oral composition is more than the process of writing what is to be presented orally. When it is written, however, oral composition refers to text that is written to be delivered orally, taking into account the unique aspects of spoken language and audience interaction that are characteristic of oral presentation. Teaching students to write full text for a speech to be given is not an idea unworthy of consideration. We know, for example, that presidential addresses are fully scripted prior to delivery as we often listen to media-born discussion that surrounds any change in word choice made by the President during the actual address. That being said, full scripting of an oral presentation is a skill worth developing. However, it is not enough. When possible, oral compositions should be drafted from an outline and several oral rehearsals before they are recorded in writing.

As Goulden (1998) pointed out, “the easiest method to ensure authentic oral language is by oral drafting and presenting the speech in an extemporaneous manner” (p. 93). Goulden provided a plan for leading students through the process of speech construction, and this process has as many stages as our traditional writing process. Pre-composing takes the form of outlining or otherwise mapping out the speech, while drafting and revising take the form of extensive practice in peer editing and private settings in which the student works through the speech, exploring “alternative ways to express the message” (Goulden, p. 93). Note cards, if used, are developed only after the student has fully composed the speech through oral activity. “The final text of the speech does not exist until the speaker presents the speech before an audience” (p. 93).

This same process can be used for multiple genres, including fiction monologues, oral short stories, and various forms of exposition. For example, in the “3-minute short story” exercise described previously, students could have worked with peers to orally draft their stories
or at least to orally revise the stories they had written. During the oral revision process, students could experiment with code-switching from one dialect to another to distinguish character and narrator or to distinguish between characters, for example. Exposition, on the other hand, would generally require that the entire oral presentation be presented in the Standard English form. Allowing students to practice oral delivery through a process of oral revision not only gives students sufficient practice to develop the confidence to present to a visible audience but also, as Gould explains, helps students to “build a backlog of different ways to express the same idea” (2006, p. 93). During the oral composition process, students must also determine what, if any, digital media, visual aids, data charts, graphic organizers, and/or perhaps even props are necessary to support the intended message. The selected supporting aids must be developed or otherwise gathered in time for the oral presentation.

**Oral presentation.** Once students have drafted and revised the text to be presented, it is time for the presentation. The oral presentation may take many forms depending on its purpose. In Saunders’s 1985 study of the use of oral presentations in the college classroom, students themselves decided whether to read their papers or to talk from notes. What I suggest in meeting the CCSS Standards is that even if students choose a read-aloud approach to the oral presentation, the reading is augmented by digital and visual media that help to communicate intended messages to the audience present. While, teachers may wish to require that students refrain from reading for some presentations, encouraging increased improvisation, it should be noted that in some professional communities the preference is that papers be read as written (or that papers be written to be read). Therefore, experiences in which students read aloud, those in which students speak from notecards, outlines, and maps, and those in which students speak from memory are equally important forms of oral presentation. It may be argued, however, that speaking without notes, working from maps, outlines, storyboards, or other visual stimuli such as graphics, charts, and graphs, is the form of oral presentation that represents the students’ ultimate speaking and listening product and demonstrates fully actualized comfort with the presented content, representing the move of the newly acquired information or recently expanded information to long-term memory.

**Oral improvisation.** While oral improvisation can refer to the full creation of spoken text before an audience, in the context of oral presentation, improvisation requires adjusting the prepared presentation to account for audience reaction, response, needs, and participation. During oral improvisation, the student uses cues from the audience for further development, repeating information as needed, answering questions asked, and responding to comments made, for example. Beyond the oral presentation, oral improvisation represents the ability to engage in continuous talk about the information presented in various discourse communities. It is the ability to talk about one’s research at the kitchen table with grandma, in the auditorium before the general school body, and in the board room with colleagues. In each instance, the discourse may take a different shape, but the ultimate message remains the same.

The breakdown described does not suppose that the components are mutually exclusive. The components overlap in a variety of ways. A student may, for example, develop an oral composition for an oral performance or presentation, and may orally improvise during that
presentation. Those of us who have experience with oral presentations in the professional field understand that while preparation is paramount, an ability to improvise is necessary. Hence, one can see why it is important that students develop composition, presentation, and improvisation skills. By breaking orality down into its many facets as applicable to the 21st Century and as necessary to meet the CCSS, we are granted a framework from which to develop curricula and assessments, both for the students and for the teachers themselves. Moreover, we are granted a vocabulary that is easy to manage, making it possible to have discussions about orality in the 21st century classroom and to make instructional decisions related directly to students’ strengths and weaknesses in specific areas.

Implications for Future Implementation and Professional Development

The current movement toward an increased emphasis on orality in the 21st century classroom is an exciting paradigm shift with broad implications for curricula, assessment, and program development. Implementation will take time, but teachers must begin to engage in professional development as necessary to gain knowledge of the key differences between (and similarities among) written and spoken language. Knowing these differences will play a major role in enabling teachers to effectively develop students’ oral language skills.

The CCSS do not redefine English/language arts, rather the standards enhance our understanding of the English/language arts and hold us accountable for accomplishing what English as a discipline is designed to accomplish. Poole’s explanation of the English/language arts in “What is English?” says it all:

So what is the subject of English/language arts? It is literacy both practical and artistic. It concerns itself with how language is used in the world to communicate across time and culture and attempts to meaningfully engage our students in these communications. It is about educating our students in the effective use of language so they might become active in this communication. It is also about language as a learning tool, a tool to help students make meaning. (1994, p. 16)

Indeed, the CCSS provide us with the indicators necessary to develop students with communicative competence so that they may function actively and responsibly as productive citizens and lifelong learners in a diverse, interdependent, global society in which communicating across time and culture in oral form is for the first time possible at the click of a computer mouse.

References


