

In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

## STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS.

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### INTRODUCTION

Allah (SWT) has blessed us with the ability to communicate with each other in various ways; the most important being writing and speaking. In this day and age, the ability to communicate effectively can be considered a survival skill, since it's a means of meeting our daily needs. More importantly, Muslims of all ages in our society frequently find ourselves in situations where we have to defend and explain our beliefs and actions to others either by speaking or writing, and using various media. We as educators understand that it is our responsibility to educate our students in such a way that they develop and master the skills required for effective communication in all subject areas. In addition, we are also fulfilling our religious obligations (and behaving charitably) when we communicate appropriately, as the following Hadith demonstrates:

Hazrat Abu Hurairah (R.A.A.) relates that the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) said:  
Even utterance of nice words is charity.  
(Bukhari and Muslim)

Traditionally, the communication skills of listening, speaking and writing are considered the responsibility of the language arts teacher, even though they are used, and can be taught, in all subject areas. Additionally, even though the skills are taught independently, they overlap, and one skill can be used to strengthen another.

I will now discuss some strategies and activities that I have implemented in my classes, which have not only improved my students' listening, speaking, and writing skills, but which have also improved their performance in other subject areas, as well as facilitating classroom procedures, motivating students, and strengthening students' self-esteem.

## LISTENING AND COMMUNICATION

The sense of hearing is a major means of acquiring knowledge; we find in the Holy Qur'an these two attributes in the same ayat (9: 98, 9: 103). In addition, in the Holy Qur'an, the sense of hearing is mentioned before the sense of seeing (22: 61). (It is no coincidence that the fetus develops its sense hearing before its sense of sight.) Listening is a prerequisite for speaking, and is considered "...the most important form of verbal communication in daily life." (Bianchi, Doris Balin., et al. 25).

We usually consider listening and hearing as synonymous, but as educators, we need to be aware of their differences. As the authors of *Easily Understood: A Basic Speech Text* explain, hearing is the sensory perception of sound, whereas listening is the process of interpreting, and evaluating what we hear. Hearing is the job of the ear; listening is the job of the mind." (Bianchi, Doris Balin., et al. 25). This indicates that hearing requires hardly any effort, and is fairly passive; while listening is the more complex activity, requiring active involvement. Our goal, therefore, is to strengthen student's listening skills.

A major obstacle in evaluating a student's listening skills is that there is no obvious, visible evidence that listening has occurred, so it has to be assessed indirectly. Activities that assess listening generally require students to speak, read, or write; so we have to be aware of students' abilities in those areas.

Fortunately, we can prepare our students to become better listeners in the following ways:

Explaining the difference between hearing and listening; hearing is passive, while listening is active.

Making them aware of the influence of emotions, and relationship to the speaker, on our ability to listen.

Illustrate the interrelationship between listening and the other forms of communication.

Prepare them to listen actively, by having the correct mindset. Remind students

to listen to what the speaker is saying, not what they think the speaker is saying.

Providing a purpose for listening.

## ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE LISTENING SKILLS

Discussion: Write the word "listen" on the board. Ask students to re-arrange the letters of the word to complete the sentence: "In order to listen, we need to be \_\_\_\_." I have seen many students' faces light up; as if they were not aware of the fact that they need to be silent to hear the speaker! This is a good motivator to discuss what hearing and listening are, and how to be better listeners.

Listening to a tape recording: This enables students to focus on their listening skills only, without being distracted. There are many books on tape and other resources, that can be used to develop comprehension and listening skills.

Peer coaching: Introduce this activity by stating that the students will be teachers. That should get their attention! Then inform them that they will teach their classmates to recite (or speak). Then discuss (or ask older students) what criteria they should listen for, so that the class develops a rubric which includes criteria like pronunciation, fluency, volume, etc. Divide students in groups of 3 or 4, so each group has varying abilities. Students will take turns reciting a poem or other self-selected passage to the group. The other members will listen to the student, and, using the rubric as a guide, then give suggestions on how the student can improve the recitation. The fact that students are listening to someone other than the teacher, and they have more control over their actions, motivates them, and helps them focus and remain on-task. It is very easy for students to be successful in this activity, so their self-esteem improves. An added benefit for teachers is that students are simply too occupied to even consider causing discipline problems. This activity can be developed further to develop students' speaking skills.

Dictation: This activity combines listening and writing and is more appropriate for older children. The students write as the teacher speaks, or reads from books or articles, or from the teacher's free writing (see journals). The teacher dictates phrases, and then says the whole sentence, and repeats the procedure for the whole passage. Again, depending on student ability and difficulty of text, the teacher informs students about punctuation and spelling of difficult words, since we want students to focus on what they hear. It is a good idea to do this activity regularly, so students have the opportunity to practice.

VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Many students (and adults) feel uncomfortable speaking in front of people. We can minimize their fears and bolster their confidence in various ways: by helping them practice what they plan to say, and giving them hints on how to present themselves. This includes paying attention to enunciation, fluency, volume, expression; as well as body language and eye contact. by discussing with students how they will be graded. This should be done when they are given the assignment, so they know how to prepare, and what they should focus on. It would be a good idea to provide them with a rubric, and explain what the criteria mean. by beginning with short assignments that require little preparation (like reciting from a prepared text). Then students move on to more complex and higher level activities, where students deliver prepared speeches using notes, and later, delivering impromptu speeches. It is preferred that students have simple, everyday topics, or topics they are comfortable familiar with; since the aim is to encourage them to express themselves verbally. by reminding them to be aware of the purpose of their speech (sometimes we have to speak out against injustice), and to speak at the level at which the audience can understand, as illustrated by the following Hadith:

Hazrat Ayesha (R.A.A) relates that the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) used to talk very clearly and distinctly so that his audience who listened to him, understood the point.  
(Abu Daud)

## ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE SPEAKING SKILLS

**Modeling:** Teacher recites a passage to the class more than once, while students look at the text. Each time, the teacher varies one criteria, so students can experience how that criteria influences the delivery, and subsequently, the message.

**Recitation:** Students recite from a selected passage. Initially, allow students to select the passage, even if it's at a lower reading level, since we want the material to be at their instructional level. In this way, we minimize interference from reading difficulties, and students have a greater opportunity for success. This will help build self-esteem. Provide students with opportunities to practice in class; individually and in groups.

Prepared speeches: Students are given a topic, and then given time to plan and practice their speech. They may use notes or other aids, short of reading the material. Once again, they can work individually, or in groups; and should be provided with opportunities do both. Students are expected to have sufficient content and be organized. This activity can be integrated with a writing assignment, since there are many common elements between the two; especially the influence of purpose and audience. It is especially useful for content-area subjects, where students do a report or project, and then speak to the class about it.

Impromptu speeches: Here students have an easy, familiar topic, and after thinking about it for a short time, deliver a speech. This activity can also improve students' brainstorming skills, especially if they work in groups.

Recording their speeches: Students record their speeches on tape and then listen to them. They evaluate their own speeches and suggest improvements. Older students can make video recordings, so they can also evaluate their appearance, postures, and gestures.

Peer coaching: This is an extension of peer coaching for improving listening skills. Once the group members have guided the student, s/he then delivers the speech to the class. Peer coaching encourages students to work together and reduces student anxiety by creating a relaxing atmosphere.

Interactive speaking: This includes interviews, debates and discussions; and integrates students' listening, speaking, and writing skills. Topics can be more specific and complex, and should allow for critical thinking and evaluation.

## WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Not very long ago, people could go through life not even knowing how to write their names. Today, even children need to be able to write; even if only to complete forms. However, schools are expected to teach students to write effectively for a variety of situations, as well as preparing them for college.

The ability to write is not based on one discrete skill; rather, it is the ability to use a variety of skills, with a required base of knowledge. This

includes (but is not limited to) development of fine motor skills, organizational skills, as well as knowledge of grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary. Deficiency in one area can create many obstacles. Fortunately, a strength in one area can be used to improve on the area that is weak. It is therefore useful to teach writing holistically, and by integrating it with other subject areas.

One valuable resource that all teachers have, is students' prior knowledge. Not only will it facilitate students' writing, but it is an extremely strong motivator, since it makes writing meaningful to them. Furthermore, by asking students to write about what they know, we are giving them the message that they are important, and that we care about them. It also promotes opportunity for success, which improves student confidence.

#### ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE WRITING SKILLS

Copying teacher's notes: While teaching a lesson, the teacher makes notes on the board (or overhead projector). After the lesson, students copy the notes. Students observe the teacher modeling note-taking and organizational skills, and then when they copy the notes, they practice their fine motor skills as well as spelling and grammar.

Teaching the writing process: This is not really one activity, but is the foundation of writing. It can even be taught in the earliest years, when students are required to generate ideas, organize their information, and then edit to produce a final written product. Older students should be able to understand the purpose of each step, and to employ the process from start to finish, to produce a written report, or a work of fiction. Students should be provided with many opportunities to practice the writing process in an integrated way, so they develop strong creative thinking and organizational skills. When assessing students' work, each step should be graded, so students appreciate all the components.

Student-made books: This is a good project to motivate students to write, as well as to provide them with practice in using the writing process. Students' books can even be published professionally.

Teacher-student conference: The teacher meets with one student at a time and

reviews the student's written work; discussing what the strengths are, and what modifications are required. If the teacher allows the student to supply most of the information, the conference becomes an excellent means of evaluation, and the students gain experience in metacognition. In addition, simply having the teacher's undivided attention is motivation enough for students to do their work, and to do their best.

Peer editing: Students work in pairs or groups, and edit each others' papers for mechanics, organization, purpose, effectiveness etc. It's advisable to have students of varying levels in each group, so they don't rely on the teacher. Students should also be encouraged to use the dictionary, thesaurus, and other resource materials.

Dictation: This was discussed earlier as a listening activity, but is also beneficial as a writing activity. Besides developing fine motor skills, it also gives students practice in note-taking skills, since they have to write what they hear.

Journal writing: This is an essential activity for any writing class, and is an invaluable tool for science and social studies. Students have a notebook that they use exclusively for journal writing. Once class begins, students write the date and start writing their thoughts, feelings, ideas, or observations (without concern for spelling nor mechanics) for about 5 minutes. Initially, for students who don't know what to write, they should write "I can't write anything.", or something similar, because that's what they're thinking at that time. Once in a while, students are given a journal topic (a current event, or a general subject) to write. Sometimes, students read their journal entries to the class, and that often leads to a discussion, or even a debate. The teacher periodically reads the journals and writes responses, without editing anything. Journal entries are only graded for creativity and quantity. However, journals are excellent evaluation tools; teachers can see what skills the teacher needs to review or teach. Students can also keep journals for science or social studies; and then they usually write in their journals at the end of class. It is a more reflective journal, and is usually not graded.

Teacher's mail: If possible, have a mailbox for each student, and one for the

teacher. Students write notes to the teacher about questions, problems, or suggestions that they have, and the teacher responds in writing. The students

love it when the teacher writes notes to the students. I've found that writing notes to students who don't like writing, motivates them, and gets them into the habit of writing. Again, do not grade this, and do not correct their writing. Instead, reply them by mail asking them to clarify their message. Often, students themselves will edit their work, to make sure their writing is understandable. They are learning a valuable lesson; that the purpose of writing is to communicate, and by experience, they realize the importance of correct spelling and mechanics. Teacher's mail is also a useful tool in dealing with discipline and academic issues in a non-confrontational way.

## CONCLUSION

This is only a sampling of activities that are available. Feel free to implement, combine or adapt these activities; and remember that "practice makes perfect". May Allah (S.W.T.) guide us, and give us strength to fulfill our duties.

## REFERENCES

The Holy Qur'an.

Bianchi, Doris Balin., et al. Easily Understood: A Basic Speech Text. Wayne, NJ: Avery, 1983.

Riyadh-us-Saleheen

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