

REVIEW OF

# Research on Teaching Communication

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The following reference document provides a brief review of academic research and relevant reports on best practices for teaching and assessing communication skills. The purpose of this research was to support the development of the Skills for Success Practitioner Competency Framework and was part of a series of research reviews on best practices for teaching each of the Skills for Success. This summary provides an overview of evidence-based teaching methods in the area of communication, key considerations when applying these practices, and a list of resources for further consideration.

## METHODOLOGY

Several search queries were conducted on Google and Google Scholar using combinations of the following keywords: teaching, strategies, intervention, approach, communication skills, oral communication skills, verbal communication skills, speaking skills, active listening skills, reception skills, adults, and workplace.

## STATE OF THE LITERATURE

There is substantive literature on teaching communication skills, which typically appears in research related to: (1) 21<sup>st</sup> century skills; (2) effective communication in clinical settings (e.g., medicine, nursing, and counseling); (3) workplace communication trainings; and (4) teaching speaking and listening skills to English as a second language (ESL) learners.

There are a few recent literature reviews summarizing the state of knowledge on teaching communication skills in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, namely two recent reports authored by Metusalem et al. (2017) and Thompson (2020). This report draws on these recent reviews, complemented by reviews and studies on communication skills in clinical and workplace contexts.

Best practices in **teaching English as a second language** is another important area related to improving communication skills, particularly for newcomers. There is a deep body of knowledge related on this topic, though it was considered out of scope for the purposes of this summary review.

## CONCEPTS

The following are the definition and integral constructs of communication as specified in the Skills for Success Framework (SRDC, 2021):

### DEFINITION:

“Your ability to receive, understand, consider, and share information and ideas through speaking, listening, and interacting with others. For example, at work we use this skill to discuss ideas, listen to instructions, and serve customers in a socially appropriate manner.”

### CONSTRUCTS:

- Listen with intention (e.g., pay attention)
- Listen to understand
- Speak with clarity
- Speak with purpose
- Adapt to your audience and contexts
- Adapt to other people’s different communication modes and tools

Definitions of *communication* (as a skill) vary in the research literature. For instance, Thompson (2020) describes *Complex Communication* as a skill that, in addition to speaking, listening, and intercultural communication, encompasses reading and writing (the latter two are separate skills in the Skills for Success Framework).

There are various communication-related perspectives (e.g., *Information Processing Perspective*, *Social Perspective*) and theories (e.g., rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, and critical) (Thompson, 2020); however, a review of these theoretical perspectives were deemed out of scope for the purposes of this review, which instead focused on identifying applied or best practice teaching approaches and principles.

## APPROACHES TO TEACHING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

### ORAL COMMUNICATION

**Public speaking:** A meta-analysis by Allen et al. (1989, as cited in Metusalem et al., 2017) found that the following approaches are most effective in helping individuals with severe public-speaking anxiety:

- Teaching relaxation techniques to help learners reduce their physiological arousal;
- Teaching cognitive reappraisal techniques to help learners reframe their experience;
- Providing training to improve public-speaking skills to help boost confidence.

**Presentation skills:** Based on a review of the literature, van Ginkel et al. (2015, as cited in Metusalem et al., 2017) formulated the following design principles to help develop learners' competence in oral presentation skills:

- Establish clear learning objectives;
- Make presentations relevant to authentic activities in the discipline;
- Present expert and peer models of successful performance;
- Offer practice opportunities;
- Provide explicit and timely feedback;
- Have peers provide formative feedback;
- Help students to self-assess, potentially by using video recordings.

The following practices are suggested to improve oral presentation skills:

- Watching video recordings of learners presenting – this can facilitate self-reflection and help identify areas for improvement (Murphy & Barry, 2016, as cited in Metusalem et al., 2017);
- Providing rubrics to help learners self-assess their performance (Ritchie, 2016, as cited in Metusalem et al., 2017);
- Receiving constructive feedback from peers and instructors (van Ginkel et al., 2017, as cited in Metusalem et al., 2017).

### INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Role-play is identified as an evidence-based technique to improve this skill, particularly when students:

- Receive feedback from peers or instructors;
- Are given opportunities to watch videos of their own performance; and
- Are provided with a clear rubric for self-assessment (Metusalem et al., 2017).

Baile and Blatner (2014) recommend the use of action methods, namely role-play.

- Role-play should entail the following three goals:
  - Foster a sensitivity to what is not spoken as much as what is overly stated (given that attitudes and emotions are heavily involved in human communication);
  - Help foster empathy in human interactions by helping learners recognize emotion and learn to respond compassionately; and,
  - Help learners enhance awareness of their own communication.
- The adult learning principles encompassed in their role-play model include:
  - The creation of a safe and comfortable learning environment so that learners are more at ease expressing themselves;
  - Learner involvement in the development of the learning activity;
  - Teachers providing basic knowledge, modeling skills, guiding practice, and offering corrective feedback; and
  - Structuring learning to give opportunities for learners to reflect on their learning and build confidence in their skills.
- Instructors can link different strategies to adult learning principals:
  - Warm-ups – to prepare a group for role-plays;
  - Role-creation – to create characters and immerse learners in their roles;
  - Doubling – a method for revealing unspoken thoughts, feelings, and attitudes;
  - Role-reversal – asking two individuals to switch roles so they might experience a situation from another’s perspective;

- Sharing – an element of debriefing when learners share feelings about what it was like to be in one or more roles.

Research indicates that simulation-based education (SEB) demonstrates potential for helping students improve communication skills, and that that these skills can be translated to situations beyond the simulated environment (Blackmore et al., 2018). SEB entails any educational activity that uses simulation aides to replicate real world scenarios and allow for the acquisition of skills through deliberate practice rather than apprentice-style learning (Al-Elq, 2010).

- SEB is most effective when students engage in high intensity interventions (i.e., multi-method, longer instructional time).
- SEB programs can improve self-confidence and communications in the workplace (King and Hoppe, 2013).
- SEB is best combined with well-designed instructional activities to foster effective communication skill development (e.g., tutorials with communication protocols, debrief and reflection sessions, dialogue to guide empathetic expression, feedback from instructors, scaffolding) (Lee et al., 2020).

There are existing curriculum and instructor guides to help improve learners’ workplace communication skills. For example, Ruetz (1997) produced a large instructor’s guide titled “Effective Communication”<sup>1</sup>. This guide provides teaching tips, outlines the role and responsibilities of the instructor, and includes lesson plans related to communication topics, such as speaking and listening<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED424385.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Note: This guide does not explicitly report on research-based evidence regarding effective teaching practices, so it was not examined in detail.

## ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

Brent and Anderson (1993, as cited in Metusalem et al., 2017, 18) note that in general “approaches to teaching listening strategies focus on paying close attention to the speaker and blocking out distractions, developing questions, connecting what one is hearing to their own knowledge, generating predictions, and summarizing.” Specifically, they suggest the following techniques to facilitate interpersonal conversations:

- Paraphrasing;
- Verbalizing emotions;
- Summarizing;
- Clarifying;
- Encouraging/prompting; and
- Asking questions.

Role-play with feedback, reflection, and discussion of active listening strategies are suggested approaches to improve listening skills (Metusalem et al., 2017).

Grognet and Van Duzer (2002) suggests several practices for teaching listening skills in the workplace including:

- Activate learners’ background knowledge and vocabulary through activities such as pre-listening activities where the learner reviews what they already know about the subject;
- Have learners engage in a post-listening activity where they act upon the new information they have listened to in a timely manner;
- Use authentic and relevant materials (i.e., applicable to real-world scenarios that the learner may experience in their workplace);
- Control the level of difficulty of the task to align with the ability level of the learner.

## INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Various teaching strategies can help develop intercultural communication skills, with one review identifying group discussion as the most common approach (Matveeva, 2008, as cited in Metusalem et al., 2017).

Other approaches include problem-based learning where groups tackle real-world problems, simulation-based educational games, and activities that allow exploration of new cultures (e.g., collecting cultural artifacts) (Metusalem et al., 2017).

## ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS

### ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Speaking skills are typically assessed through observation of speaking tasks. There are several rubrics designed to score oral communication skills. Examples of these performance-based assessments include:

- Oral Communication VALUE Rubric by the American Association of Colleges and Universities;
- Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form by the National Communication Association.

The Partnership for Assessment and Readiness for College and Careers has also released rubrics for assessing speaking standards. These types of performance-based assessments typically entail students producing a few words or a full speech based on a specific topic or scenario that is performed live or captured on video. There are also ongoing attempts to develop automated scoring assessments, but more research and development is needed in this area (Metusalem et al., 2017).

## ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

Assessment of listening skills typically involves having learners listen to a passage and answer questions that are select-response as opposed to open-ended. This helps ensure the scoring of listening skills are not confounded with writing skill ability. These types of questions can be found in standardized assessments such as the Stanford Achievement Test and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (Metusalem et al., 2017).

**Checklists vs. holistic ratings:** Some argue that checklist ratings may allow for better standardization, while others highlight that this approach may miss more general feelings and nuance (Metusalem et al., 2017). Findings by Cohen et al. (1996, as cited in Metusalem et al., 2017) suggest that holistic ratings may be equally or more valid than checklist-style assessments and that correlations between the two rating types are high.

**The Active-Empathic Listening Scale (AELS):** Preliminary evidence supports the reliability and validity of this general active-listening scale, which allows for self-reporting by those engaged in dialogue as well as by an objective observer (Bodie & Jones, 2012, as cited in Metusalem et al., 2017).

## INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Several qualitative and quantitative measures are used to assess intercultural communication skills, including case studies, self-rating scales, awareness tests, observation of interactions or presentations, and ratings of written work.

Many self-rated assessments demonstrate good reliability and internal consistency, though there is a lack of knowledge regarding how well self-ratings correspond with more objective measures of assessment (Metusalem et al., 2017).

There are also performance-based assessments that entail behavioural observation, such as the Behavioural Assessment Scale for Intercultural Communication that includes scales related to a range of actions (e.g., display of respect, interaction posture, showing empathy, etc.) (Koester & Olebe, 1998, as cited in Metusalem et al., 2017).

Performance-based assessments have challenges regarding the reliability of the scoring between examiners.

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Teaching students effective communication skills requires that instructors engage with a variety of strategies and activities to account for students' diverse experiences, backgrounds, and abilities. The activities mentioned in this review tend to be best suited to in-person settings, require significant time investments from learners and instructors (more intensive activities yield better outcomes), and interventions need to be adapted to suit particular contexts and situations.

The assessment of communication skills is largely done through observation methods and is therefore reliant on the ability of evaluators and instructors to ensure consistency. More qualitative forms of assessment can pose challenges in ensuring the standardization of evaluations, while quantitative assessments may not capture the subtle nuances of speaking and listening effectively.

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