



*We should not ignore technological realities and the ways technology increases the demand to be well spoken.*

## Reading Like a Speaker: Using the Oldest Language Art and Web Tools to Improve Reading Instruction

*Erik Palmer*

**W**hat if the oldest of all literacies was also the most needed 21st-century skill? In fact, it is. And what if that very same ancient literacy can be used with 21st-century tools to enhance reading instruction? In fact, it can be. Oral language has been an afterthought in many classrooms, but it should receive more emphasis.

The root of the word *literacy* comes from *littera*, the Latin word for “letter.” For a long time, the use of the word was true to that root: *literacy* meant accomplished with letters, the ability to read letters and the ability to write letters. And *literature*? Why, books full of letters, of course. A *literate* person? Someone well read who has looked at many, many letters. But we must not forget something crucial that many of us seem to ignore: oral communication. We do not only read and write letters, we speak the words created by those letters. Because oral language pre-dated reading and writing in human history, perhaps it would be more correct to say we *lettered* the words created by our speaking. In any event, a truly

literate person would be a competent speaker as well as a good reader and writer.

Recently, the word *literacy* is being used in different ways and the meaning seems to have transformed. We speak of “visual literacy,” for example, and it has nothing to do with letters at all but rather with understanding images. We say students should be “computer literate” with the abilities to manipulate several devices and work with common software applications; again, it has nothing to do with letters. We have redefined *illiteracy* as well:

If people aren’t taught the language of sound and images, shouldn’t they be considered as illiterate as if they left college without being able to read and write?—George Lucas (Daly, 2004)

In the rush to define and embrace cutting-edge skills for the new era, words that used to refer to being adept with letters are now used as synonyms for *knowledgeable* or *educated*. Yes, today’s students need to be educated in understanding visual images and how to use them,

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and students need to be knowledgeable about computers. People who don't know the language of sound and image are uneducated, in a sense. Yet we must not forget the original definition of literacy. New skills are needed in the 21st century, but few students will succeed if they don't master letters—reading, writing, and speaking them. Of those three, speaking has become far more important as technology has advanced. If you ask people what skills they consider to be “cutting edge,” it is unlikely anyone would mention speaking skills. Yet in the new decade and beyond, a seemingly retro skill like verbal communication actually is cutting edge and is becoming more crucial to success.

## Teaching Speaking

The National Association of Colleges and Employers conducts a study every year that asks employers what skills they most value in prospective employees. In 2011, the top five skills were, in ascending order, initiative, analytical skills, teamwork skills, strong work ethic, and verbal communication skills (NACE, 2010). Verbal communication skill is number one on the list? Why? Because employers know that it is not what you know that counts, but rather whether you can *communicate* what you know, and oral communication is by far the number one way of communicating. How do all the cutting-edge technology tools affect communication? They make *oral* communication far more important. Skype, video calling on smart phones, video conferences, webinars, pocket camcorders, and podcasts put speaking skills on display like never before. Employers can find job candidates who are device “literate” but they want employees who can communicate well through those devices. Those devices demand effective oral language.

It is not the case that the focus of all instruction should be on preparing students for the workplace. I love reading a great book, and I thank my teachers for giving me a love of reading even though no employer has ever asked me to fire off a memo to an affiliate in Tokyo about “A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.” Even so, we should not ignore workplace readiness. We also should not ignore technological realities and the ways technology increases the demand to be well spoken.

What if we can enhance reading instruction *and* enhance speaking skills? What if we can instill a love of reading *and* get students ready for the workplace? What if we can use technology *and* improve reading and oral language? We can, and in our time-crunched classrooms, accomplishing multiple goals at once is imperative.

We have spent a great deal of time analyzing reading and the skills needed to become successful at it. We have lessons on letter sounds, vowel and consonant combinations, decoding words, root words, vocabulary,

sentence structure, plot lines, fluency, and so on. There are many programs designed to help struggling readers. Unfortunately, very little time has been devoted to analyzing speaking and the skills needed to become a successful speaker. Though every teacher has in-class student speaking activities, most teachers do not have lessons that lead students to being successful with those activities. Very few teachers have specific lessons on how to use hand gestures for emphasis or for description, or, for example, lessons on using speed and pacing for impact. After the book share, a rubric is handed back and students are scored in eye contact and a few other things, but that is about all there is for speaking instruction (see Figure 1).

It is likely that most teachers don't know how to teach speaking. There are many classes in teacher preparation programs about how to teach reading; many sessions at conferences on the subject of reading strategies; many books about how to improve reading instruction. There are almost none of those regarding oral communication. To begin then, let's establish a framework for understanding what it takes to be a competent speaker so we can impart the necessary skills to our students.

## Build and Perform

There are two distinct parts to all effective oral communication. The first part is building the oral communication. Building refers to all of the things we have to do before we ever open our mouths. For example, consider the teacher who has her students perform an oral presentation on historical fiction. The students have to include certain content (main character, historical events, rising action, etc.), organize that content, make a visual aid (plot line, map, etc.), and dress in a costume from the historical era. All of these things are done before presentation day and all of these are quite distinct from performance skills. These building elements should always be scored separately from presentation elements, just as punctuation should be scored separately from content in writing.

The second part of oral communication is delivering the message. I prefer calling this “performing” because the word *performing* has connotations that the word *delivering* lacks but that more accurately describe the task. To succeed at performing a speech, students need to

- appear calm and confident;
- make sure every word is heard clearly;
- have inflection/emotion/passion;
- look at audience members;
- move their hands, faces, and bodies; and
- speak at an appropriate and varying pace.

**FIGURE 1  
PVLEGS RUBRIC**

<b>POISE</b>	
4	You appeared calm and confident. There was no distracting behavior
3	You seemed calm and confident. Only one or two minor things were noticed, but they were not distracting to the listeners.
2	You mostly seemed poised. A couple of major distracting behaviors bothered the listeners.
1	You seemed wiggly and not at all poised. You had many distracting behaviors.
<b>VOICE</b>	
4	Your voice was just right for the space—not too loud or too soft. Every word was heard. You didn't mumble or blur words together. You didn't have any strange vocal pattern.
3	Your voice was just right for the space. A couple of words were mumbled or blurred together. You didn't have any strange vocal patterns.
2	You spoke a bit too softly or too loudly. Several times, your words were not clear.
1	The audience had a hard time hearing you. Many words were not understandable because of mumbling.
<b>LIFE</b>	
4	You had a lot of feeling in your voice. We heard emotion, passion, excitement, sadness, etc. You were fun to listen to.
3	You had some feeling in your voice. There were several parts that really came alive for the listener.
2	You only had one or two places where you seemed to come alive and put feeling into your speech.
1	There was no life in the speech. You spoke in a monotone and didn't put any emotion into any part of the speech.
<b>EYE CONTACT</b>	
4	You constantly looked at your audience. You looked at each member of the audience. You barely glanced at your note cards.
3	You mostly looked at your audience. Some members of the audience may have been missed because you only looked in certain directions. You used your note cards well.
2	You only occasionally looked at the audience. Many audience members were never looked at. You read from note cards over half of the time.
1	You never looked at anyone. You read from note cards.
<b>GESTURES</b>	
4	You had very effective hand, face, and body gestures. Your motions added a lot to your speech.
3	You had some gestures that contributed to your speech.
2	Only one or two times did we see some gestures.
1	You had no gestures.
<b>SPEED</b>	
4	You were not too fast or too slow. You varied your speed—faster for exciting parts, slower to add emphasis. You used pauses to let main points sink in with the listeners.
3	You were not too fast or too slow. Your speech had one speed. You didn't use pauses.
2	You spoke a little too fast or too slow.
1	You spoke way too fast. There was no change of pace.

In a shorter form, students need to think about Poise, Voice, Life, Eye contact, Gestures, and Speed. In an even shorter form, performance requires PVLEGS. (Years ago, when I wrote the skills on the board for students to see, one student called out, “Pee Vee LEGS!” as she mentally made a column of the capital letters I had written. I have been surprised at how useful students of all ages [and adults!] have found that acronym. ROY G. BIV is odd too, but it has been very successful, and almost all of us remember the colors of the rainbow because of that mnemonic device. If you master PVLEGS, you will be a successful speaker, and many, many students have told me that they think of the acronym every time they have to speak.) Each part of PVLEGS should be scored individually on the rubric. Some students excel at adding life to the presentation but are a bit wiggly; some are

totally poised but never look up from their notes; and so on.

The skills described here apply in all speaking situations, not just on the occasions we think of as “speech-making.” In an interview with a prospective employer, a successful candidate will think beforehand about what she is going to say and will build responses to likely questions. Then, being poised, having an appropriate voice, expressing passion and interest, making eye contact, gesturing, and speaking at an appropriate pace will set her ahead of other job seekers. In a committee, a member who comes prepared and has given forethought to what he is going to present will be more valuable to the group. If he pays attention to the elements of delivering his oral communication, he will be an even more effective member of the group. One on one, small group, large group, informal presentation, formal presentation—all require building what you are going to say and then delivering with PVLEGS to say it.

### **Cutting-Edge Communication**

Every teacher at every grade level in every subject has students speaking in class. If we had a common framework and language for teaching and

evaluating speaking, our students would be much more likely to meet the speaking standards in Colorado where “reading and writing” became “reading, writing, and communicating” and nationally where the Common Core State Standards have given emphasis to speaking. Our concern here, though, is to improve reading instruction while improving oral communication skills while using 21st-century tools.

Do you ever have students give book reports? After listening to 29 of them, are you inspired and filled with a desire to rush out and buy the 29 books presented? Probably not, and neither are the student listeners. If you are going to take class time for oral presentation, take time to teach them the speaking skills to do it well. Then perhaps the presentations *will* inspire students to read the books presented. Additionally, there is a fairness

issue here: Don't assign an oral presentation unless you are prepared to teach students how to succeed at orally presenting. Grading oral performance without specifically teaching speaking skills is patently unfair.

Listen closely as students read aloud. It is often painful and monotonous, and often kills a good story. When you put a new lens on the task, however, students read much differently. After teaching PVLEGS, ask students to think about reading in a new way. They are not "readers" but rather "speakers." That causes them to look at the text differently. Consider the following passage:

Life is too crazy. We are always busy. We rush to get up, wolf down breakfast, run to school, race to practice, hustle through homework, do our chores... we are always in a hurry. What if one day we just stopped? I mean stopped. Dead halt. Catch your breath. Relax. Take a break. It will improve your life.

Sometimes a "reader" will read a passage like this word by word, parsing the text with no regard to phrasing and no sense of reading for meaning or expression.

If you ask them to read like a speaker, a change occurs. A "speaker" will perform the words in the passage. This leads to an interesting discussion with students as well. Where does the text call for life? Where should pace be adjusted? What did the author do to suggest these things? It is much easier to grasp the concept of prosody when students think like speakers. Orthographic conventions (e.g., commas, exclamation points, italics) are not reading cues but are prosody cues, and thinking of *speaking* the text makes those cues more meaningful for many students. Reading aloud in class is, of course, an old-school activity (though that does not mean it should be abolished). Several tools and Web sites can be used to update these lessons.

### We Have the Technology

Hidden in the Applications folder on all Windows 7 personal computers is something called Sound Recorder. One click and students can record themselves reading and instantly play back the recording. Mac computers have GarageBand, which is less user friendly but also records voice. These are easy ways for students to practice fluency, prosody, and speaking skill with no risk and no in-class performance anxiety.

### Vocaroo

Vocaroo is a free, easy-to-use site that records student voices (<http://www.vocaroo.com>). The recordings can be embedded in a Web page or wiki, and/or you can obtain a link to share so that anyone with Web access can listen to the recording. Students can visit the site and will find the "Record" button on the first page that opens. No sign-in or registering is required—just click the button and record. When you are finished, the site gives you an embed code for wikis, blogs, or Web pages and a link to the recording, enabling anyone with Internet access to hear it. Maybe you want to have students read a story for the class, giving each student a small part and then combining those parts for an entire story. Embed the recordings on the class wiki or Web page, or put the Internet address in your class newsletter for parents and grandparents to find. Imagine how the reading changes when they read as speakers and when they read knowing the reading will be available for everyone to hear. Maybe you want to have students comment on a section of the book. More thoughtful analysis occurs when the comments will be posted for an

**P**oise • Appear calm and confident  
• Avoid distracting behaviors

**V**oice • Speak every word clearly  
• Use a volume level just right for the space

**L**ife • Express passion and emotions with your voice

**E**ye Contact  
• Connect visually with the audience  
• Look at each audience member

**G**estures • Use hand motions  
• Move your body  
• Have an expressive face

**S**peed • Talk with appropriate speed: not too fast, not too slow  
• Use pauses for effect and emphasis

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online audience. (Follow your school's privacy guidelines.) Vocaroo encourages practice and rereading. Before submitting the recording, a student has the opportunity to listen to it, of course. If they are not pleased, they can rerecord any number of times before copying the embed link or Web address.

### *Showbeyond*

Showbeyond is a free site students can use to create digital stories with print and narration (<http://www.showbeyond.com>). You (or your students) do have to register with the site, but there is no fee. Images can be uploaded, text can be added, and students can record narration. When finished, a Web address and an embed code are given. For younger students, the teacher can create a slide show with text and the students can record themselves reading the text. More advanced students can create their own show with text and narration. Students understand the importance of speaking well and reading well when they listen to their story and realize that the potential audience of listeners and viewers is the entire world.

### *Zooburst*

There are many free storybook creation Web sites that students can use to create online, and sometimes interactive, digital books. One of my favorites is Zooburst (<http://www.zooburst.com>). Zooburst adds a wrinkle to digital storybooks: theirs are three-dimensional. When the page turns, the book is an online "pop-up" book. Readers can manipulate the book and look at the pop-ups from different angles. Authors can upload images or choose from some stock images and backgrounds. Text can be written on the page, and, perhaps more fun, characters in the story are given text bubbles where the author can add words. Again, registration is required but the basic version is free; the premium version (monthly or yearly fee) allows the author to add voice narration.

### *VoiceThread*

Finally, let me mention a free site that offers an engaging way to have reading discussions: VoiceThread (<http://www.voicethread.com>). The teacher (or student) can create a page with an image, text, or narration, and students can go to the page and record comments. Students who are silent in class reading discussions often become quite vocal at VoiceThread. They have more time to think about the comment and they have the option



of rerecording, which avoids the worry about potential embarrassment from impromptu comments in class. Registration is required in order to comment, but registration is free. As with most sites, a premium version is available for educators. It allows teachers to create class groups so students do not have to register individually (monthly or yearly fee).

### **Welcome to the 21st Century**

Examples of all of these sites can be found at <http://www.PVLEGS.com>. If you are not a technological wizard, don't be intimidated. The sites are very easy to use. You have at least one student in your class who can show you how any of these sites work. We all have some students who are more computer literate than we are. And because these sites are so engaging, using them enables all of your students to become more tech savvy. What is also true is that by teaching speaking, these sites become much more effective and students become speaking literate. Finally, for those

of you who want to be true to the original definition of literate, by teaching speaking and using 21st-century tools, your students will make progress as readers and advance toward becoming truly literate individuals.

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*Erik Palmer is an educational consultant from Denver, Colorado. Palmer spent 21 years in the classroom teaching English, math, science, and civics, and was awarded Teacher of the Year in the Cherry Creek School District. He has presented at national, regional, and state conferences, and has presented keynotes and led in-service trainings for several districts. Palmer focuses on effectively implementing technology in every classroom and improving student oral communication. He is the author of two books: Teaching Speaking: To Any Age, For Any Purpose (Gregory and Ross Publishing, 2010) and Well-Spoken: Teaching Speaking to All Students (Stenhouse, 2011).*