Supporting students' speaking and listening skills

Many students from refugee backgrounds may have had little or no previous formal schooling or have had significant interruptions to their schooling. Such experiences impact on important language and literacy learning and as a result some students may not be literate in their first language. Developmentally, oral language comes before written language so skills in listening and speaking precede reading and writing. Indeed, students may have strengths in oral language that can be used to support the more formal elements of written English. Using existing listening and speaking skills and strengthening them provides a tool for learning and a foundation for literacy development. For students whose education pathways have been constant, but are learning English as an additional language, focusing on speaking and listening skills is also of great importance.

Listening Strategies

As key foundations for literacy and language development, listening and speaking skills are important skills in their own right. Students need opportunities to practise using these skills in a range of ways from informal conversation, to more formal verbal presentations alongside practising learning strategies such as problem solving through listening and speaking. It is important for students to be able to distinguish between informal communication in a social environment and more formal, complex language, used to discuss abstract concepts. It is the more formal and complex oral language that students need to develop for successful schooling.

Tutor Strategies

- speak clearly but naturally, pausing often
- use simple vocabulary to introduce new concepts
- avoid or explain idioms and acronyms: 'lend a hand'; 'knock off'
- Use gestures, visuals or objects to support listening
- Write key words and instructions out so the student can look, as well as, hear them
- Repeat when necessary
- Check understanding by observing and interacting and asking questions such as, 'What?, When?, Where?, Who?';
- Draw on first language and other language skills as a resource for second language learning: drawing on memorisation and classifying skills
- build on knowledge and experience
- encourage students to ask for clarification if they don't understand
- provide clear and explicit instructions.

Speaking Strategies

Encourage students to spend time speaking to you. Be mindful of how much time you are speaking versus your student: keep tutor talk time to a minimum and increase student talk time. Focussing on speaking practice also offers an opportunity to build on cultural traditions of oral story telling which many students may be familiar with. Encouraging pride in this tradition can be a useful tool in providing students with the confidence needed for preparing class presentations or other formal speaking activities. Also be aware of the range of spoken text types that students can practice, detailed in the following table.

Rehearsed	More structured	Spontaneous	More polished	Sculptural
Debates	Interviews	Conversation	Role playing	Storytelling
Oral reports	Directions	Brainstorming	Improvising	Readers Theatre
Presentations	Instructions	Exploratory talk	Monologue	Prepared dramatic presentations

Tutor Strategies

- Provide encouragement and practice to develop confidence
- Explore where and when students speak English so you can understand their prior knowledge of language use
- Model clear speaking and encourage students to practise clear speaking: songs and verse support enunciation
- Model and practise turn taking
- Allow enough 'wait time' for your student to process English and formulate a response
- Be clear about what target language you are listening for: 'I am listening to the way you pronounce the final sounds in these words'
- Practise using body language that supports intended text meaning
- Practise adapting language to context: use informal / formal language as appropriate
- Practise different registers: informal interpersonal language; formal academic language
- Use language to communicate a number of functions: apologising; greeting; reporting; asking for clarification; giving instructions, directions, explanations and descriptions; stating cause and effect; expressing preferences and opinions
- Focus on conveyance of clear meaning, including body language, tone and spoken English, rather than highlight errors
- Use speaking time to recycle vocabulary
- Model and provide opportunities for exploratory talk to stimulate thinking: to explore; clarify concepts; question; hypothesise; make deductions and respond to others' ideas
- Make links with school-based learning