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4-1-1978

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### Recommended Citation

Cunningham, P. M. (1978). If They Talk When You Say "Listen!" And Won't Talk When You Say "Discuss!" Read!. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 18 (3). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol18/iss3/4](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol18/iss3/4)

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# IF THEY TALK WHEN YOU SAY "LISTEN!" AND WON'T TALK WHEN YOU SAY "DISCUSS!" READ!

*Patricia M. Cunningham*

DIRECTOR OF READING  
GRAHAM, NORTH CAROLINA

Time: Wednesday morning during recess, mid October

Place: The Faculty Lounge

Me: I'm really interested to know what kind of activities you teachers out here in the real world do that you think helps improve listening and speaking skills.

Mr. Jones: Why, my children talk all the time; I can't ever shut them up.

Mrs. Black: Kids today just don't listen; if I tell them once I tell them a hundred times . . .

Mrs. McGinchy: My children give oral book reports once a month.

Mrs. Bilco: Yes, and I have Show-and-Tell every morning.

Mr. Bull: Someone's always putting something into the elementary and no one ever takes anything out.

All: Yes, that's right, Mr. Bull. You said it!!

Me: Do you realize that according to some research adults spend most of their time listening and the next largest portion speaking? A very small percentage of adult time is spent in reading and writing and yet we don't give direct instruction in listening and speaking.

(A few moments of reverent silence—the secretary calls from the office and asks for PTA attendance figures and the bell rings signaling the end of morning recess. The teachers leave. Mrs. Bilco and Mrs. McGinchy linger a moment.)

Mrs. Bilco: Well, how do you teach listening and speaking? I have done some of those activities the magazines suggest where you have children listen for different sounds and reproduce different rhythms, but I didn't see where that helped them listen to me any better.

Mrs. McGinchy: Yes, I tried that too one rainy afternoon. It was fun. I know I talk too much and they don't talk enough, but when I let them talk it is chaos! I just frankly don't know what to do.

(Mrs. Bilco and Mrs. McGinchy hurry off to find their children. I flee back to my ivory tower.)

Speaking and listening, it appears, are elusive to many classroom teachers. There are no textbooks or teachers' guides. The many experts, who exhort teachers to include them, either don't tell how or suggest some isolated activities which at best fill up rainy afternoons. What can I tell Mrs. Bilco and Mrs. McGinchy? How does one teach speaking and listening in a structured, ongoing way?

After several weeks of study and thought, I return to the elementary school armed with two tools to fix the speaking-listening breakdown: group discussion and story dramatization. Group discussion is not new nor is the suggestion that it be a daily part of the elementary school program. Likewise, journals and textbook articles prod teachers to use creative dramatics with their children. The problems with their implementation appear to be two: (1) Teachers see them as something added and as not related to what they are already trying to do. (2) Teachers don't know how to "teach" discussion and dramatics.

The issue of "why discussion and dramatics?" is easily answered. Discussion and dramatics can be the structured, planned, ongoing "how" of providing instruction in speaking and listening. The issue of "where and when" is answerable only in terms of the individual classroom schedule. Many teachers, once they have learned how to handle them, use small group discussions as the mainstay of their Social Studies program. Other teachers plan for several discussion periods each week and include them as part of Social Studies, Science or English and they fit the content. This is not expedient; it is proper! To have a discussion, one must have something to discuss. Small group discussions result in increased learning of and enthusiasm for the content of a subject; the increased listening and speaking skills are a bonus!

So far, so good! Mrs. Bilco and Mrs. McGinchy agree that discussions would improve speaking and listening as well as increase content learning. They see that it is not just adding one more thing to the curriculum. Their concern is "How?" How do you get the students into groups? How do you know what to have them discuss? How do you keep them on the subject? How do you handle discipline problems? One "How" at a time, please ladies!

(1) How do you get the students into groups?

Groups for small-group discussion should be heterogeneous but not haphazard. From four to six is a workable number and whenever possible the leaders, quiet children and troublemakers should be divided up between the groups. The teacher should form groups on this basis and then observe them working for a few sessions. She can then make changes on the basis of her observations. Once the new groups are formed, they should probably remain stable over a period of time so that the children adapt to each other and develop some group cohesiveness. The group should meet together in the same place and procedures for getting into groups (moving desks, chairs, etc.) should be practiced until they can be quickly and expediently accomplished.

(2 and 3) How do you know what to have them discuss? How do you keep them on the subject?

These two questions will be answered together because, at least in the beginning stages of small group discussions, they are inseparable. The topic of discussion must be one about which the children have some information and opinions. Discussions are most productive when they follow some common input. This input might be a story they have read or listened to, a television program most have watched, a science experiment, a visit from

an “expert.” The list of inputs in an elementary classroom is infinite.

Once the topic is chosen, the form the discussion takes will be molded by the form of the question. Assume the topic is “Packaging of Foods.” The teacher might say to the small groups; “Discuss the different ways foods are packaged.” Chances are the discussions will be short and the off-subject ramblings long. Imagine instead that the teacher provided each group with markers and index cards and instructed them to decide which foods most of their group liked to eat. A recorder (selected by the teacher for his writing skills) would write each agreed-upon food on an index card. When each group had accumulated a stack of cards, the teacher would stop the groups and ask the total class for suggestions about what kind of packaging food came in. The children would list such packaging as boxes, bags, cans, jars, bottles and frozen food containers. Each group would then be provided with six envelopes. On each envelope the group recorder would write one of these six packaging modes. The teacher would then instruct the groups to take each of their foods, decide which way it was usually packaged and put it in the appropriate envelope. (For foods packaged in several ways, additional cards could be made and filed in more than one envelope.) When the groups had sorted their cards, each group shared their results with the total class.

This particular activity was quite successful with a group of third graders who had not previous experience with small group discussions. The lesson would not have been successful had the students been told: “You have 20 minutes to discuss how foods are packaged.” Other ways of structuring the packaging discussion might include:

1. Whole class brainstorms “foods we eat.” Teacher writes suggestions on board. Children assemble in small groups and list those foods under appropriate packaging headings.
2. Each small group is given a type of packaging and must think of as many foods as possible which come in that packaging.
3. Groups are first asked to list six types of packaging, then list foods under the appropriate headings.

The irony is that you don’t get children involved in discussions by telling them to discuss. You ask them to brainstorm or list or compare or sort and in the process of making these decisions, some lively discussions ensue.

(4) How do you handle discipline problems?

Most discipline problems during group discussions will be avoided if (1) the children have practices getting into their groups, (2) the group membership is heterogeneous, and purposefully planned, (3) the topic is one they have some prior input on, (4) the task is structured by more than just “discuss” and, (5) the teacher limits group discussion time to a short period and provides activities for those who finish early.

Occasionally, one group is uncooperative and unruly and will consistently not get down to the task at hand. A statement such as “I’m sorry you don’t seem able to work together today” followed by moving their desks to separate areas and assigning them some individual work to complete is usually an effective remedy. This group should, of course, be given a fresh chance to work together each time discussions are held. Once the teacher

has the other groups working together successfully, she may join the obstreperous group and help them learn to work together.

Story dramatization, like group discussion, may enhance the learning of content subjects. Folk tales which are sequential and contain much dialogue are among the most easily dramatized. The dramatization of a folk tale of a country being studied in a Social Studies unit increases curiosity about and a feeling of common history with that country. Story dramatization may become an expansion of the daily time most teachers spend reading to their students. One day a week this story-reading combined with the English period would provide ample time for the dramatization of one or two scenes from a story.

Dewey Chambers<sup>1</sup> provides a clear, readable and entertaining account of the “hows” of story dramatization. Any teacher who desires to try this technique would feel able and willing after reading his chapter, “Creative Drama in Action,” in which he presents an actual account of a fourth-grade class planning and executing the dramatization of several scenes from the old French tale, *Stone Soup*. In the next chapter, Chambers lists and expands upon the following 12 steps in creating a story dramatization:

1. Select a good story for creative drama and then tell it.
2. With the class, break the plot down into sequences, or scenes, that can be played. Note these on the chalkboard.
3. From those noted on the board, choose a scene, or scenes, to be played.
4. Break the scene, or scenes, into further sequence.
5. Discuss the scene or scenes. Discuss setting, motivation, characterization, the times, physical makeup of the characters, etc. Help the children to develop mental images of the characters, what they did, how they did it, why they did it.
6. Choose the players. Let them go into conference and plan in more detail what they will do during the playing period.
7. Plan with the youngsters who remain. Let them know that the play will be re-cast and re-played, and that they might pretend a part in the next playing.
8. Instruct youngsters to watch the play for five things they like and five things that could be improved in the next playing.
9. With an agreed-upon signal, start the play. Let it continue until finished.
10. Let players return to the group, and all evaluate the play, using the criteria in #8.
11. Re-cast, instruct remaining students as in #8, and replay the scene.
12. Evaluate. If time permits, re-cast and re-play.<sup>2</sup>

Purposeful critical listening is a must for successful story dramatization. While listening to the story being told or read, children listen for the order

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<sup>1</sup>Dewey W. Chambers, *Storytelling and Creative Drama* (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Co., 1970) 60-88.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 73.

of events to decide which scenes follow which and to determine the sequence of events within the scene. They listen to remember the details of setting and characterization. From the literally stated, they make inferences about the characters' motivation and try to develop mental images of the characters. During the dramatization, the audience becomes critical listeners and observers as they watch to note things they especially liked and things they would want to improve in the next playing.

The potentials for increased fluency in speaking are also abundant during story dramatization. Vocabulary is stretched as children seek just the right verb to describe how the old man walked and the adjective to describe the look on his wife's face when he returned after all those years. The players have a conference during which they discuss exactly how they will play the scene. The players act and speak as the characters they are portraying. The audience explains to the players what they think was good and what might be improved.

Small group discussion and story dramatizing can provide the structure for the teaching of listening and speaking. Teachers can schedule them regularly into the various subject areas of the curriculum and can observe tangible growth in their students' verbal communication skills. Mrs. McGinchy and Mrs. Bilco are now using both with success; even Mr. Bull appears impressed. Listen!

Time: Wednesday morning during recess, mid April

Place: The Faculty Lounge

Mrs. McGinchy: Yes, I would never have believed it would work. And the first time I tried putting them into groups it was a little chaotic. But we practiced moving the desks and I made sure those first discussions were highly structured and on topics they knew a lot about to start with.

Mrs. Bilco: Well, even my first graders are doing it. We have discussions almost every day as a part of some subject. It just seems so natural. But the best part is the dramatics. When I pick up a book now, they listen so hard I think their ears will fall off. I never tell them ahead of time if we are going to act it out. So they listen intently to every story I read.

(Mr. Bull leaves the lounge)

Mrs. McGinchy: I guess he still thinks there isn't time for these things.

Mrs. Bilco: Well, I don't know. The other day I saw him outside your room while your kids were acting out a story and he was actually smiling. Maybe some day. . .