Show-and-Tell: Assessing Oral Language Abilities

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SHOW-AND-TELL: ASSESSING ORAL LANGUAGE ABILITIES

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The oral sharing of a personal experience or an object with a peer audience is often a regular part of a student's school day. This sharing time is usually called show-and-tell in the elementary grades and personal reporting or monologuing in the intermediate and upper grades.

Show-and-tell is important as a school learning activity. The oral language and thinking abilities that are developed during show-and-tell enhance success in reading. Pilon (1978) views the development of oral language abilities as critically important for success in reading. Moffett and Wagner (1976) point out that formulating and presenting ideas during show-and-tell provide students with necessary practice to help build continuity of thought, sequencing of information, and clarification and extension of concepts—all of which are essential for success in reading.

In addition to improving their communication skills and organizing their thoughts during show-and-tell activities, students learn how to put themselves at ease before an audience. Show-and-tell is one oral language activity which helps prepare students to meet the more complex and demanding tasks of making school announcements, giving reports, narrating exhibit explanations and slide shows, and presenting stories, plays, and panels.

More than merely a pleasant and interesting time for sharing, show-and-tell can be used as a diagnostic setting to informally assess a student's oral language abilities. To do so requires structure, of which one kind can be provided through a focus on the skills of language elaboration. It is elaboration before a peer audience which is the intent of show-and-tell.

Elaboration is defined by Moffett and Wagner (1976, p. 6) as "...the flowering of an idea...the unfolding of a given..." and "...a tool for finding out fully what one means." The demands of show-and-tell require that the speaker elaborate to: 1) communicate an ex-
perience or describe an object; 2) maintain continuity concerning a topic; and, 3) structure a sequence of information. The competencies of language elaboration become a practical tool for defining, clarifying, and qualifying an incident or a description to an audience of one's peers. As such, show-and-tell can be used as a diagnostic setting to obtain an informal assessment of a student's language elaboration abilities.

A Diagnostic Setting

Questioning is the important condition for establishing show-and-tell as a diagnostic setting. This allows the interests of the peer audience to influence the speaker's elaboration. Questioning also gives the speaker feedback to help him or her stay on the topic and maintain a sequential continuity. Peer questioning helps in organizing and stating the information the speaker has begun to elaborate (Moffett and Wagner, 1976). Teacher questioning challenges the speaker's thinking about the subject chosen (Smith, et al, 1976). Peer and teacher questioning makes both the audience and speaker think a little more.

The informal assessment of the student's ability to elaborate depends on the questions, for they provide the defining, clarifying, and qualifying format. The following guidelines help to establish a questioning framework for show-and-tell:

1. The best classroom climate for showing-and-telling is when students talk, knowing that others are listening with interest.

2. A small conversational peer group is best. A small group enables everyone to have a turn without group
loss of interest.

3. The time should be kept short. Show-and-tell as a diagnostic setting is intended to be friendly but purposeful.

4. The speaker begins to show-and-tell on a topic of his or her selection.

5. After the speaker has told and shown all that he or she wants, the audience is encouraged to ask questions. At first the teacher takes the lead in asking questions but as soon as the peers begin to understand the possibilities they are given the first questioning opportunities.

The accompanying Show-and-Tell Questioning Guide for Language Elaboration can be used to help the peer audience and the teacher form questions which encourage further elaboration from the speaker. Likely questions for the guide were developed from Boyd (1970), Chambers and Lowry (1975), Moffett and Wagner (1976), and contributions from practical use.

SHOW-AND-TELL QUESTIONING GUIDE FOR LANGUAGE ELABORATION

Directions:
Use the appropriate (or similar) questions after the speaker has completed the initial remarks. The guide may be used with something the speaker brings to show, or with telling about an experience.

ELABORATION

Defining (an object)

- How does it work?
- What are the major parts?
- What have you done with it?
- What is it made out of?
- How long will it last?
- Where can you get another one?

& Others

Clarifying (an object or experience)

- Can you give another example?
- Will you explain that some more?
- How did you feel about that?
- How did you get there?
- Why were you doing that?
- Where did you go then?
- Is there any place you can keep it?
- What did your parents want you to do?
- Who helped you?

& Others
Qualifying (an object or experience)

Would that always happen?
Would that be so for everyone?
What might happen if you really did that?
What other possibilities are there?
Why did you do that?
Would you be willing to do it again?

Assessing Elaboration Abilities

After a speaker has finished showing-and-telling, and after the audience has had questioning opportunities the teacher can informally assess the speaker's elaboration abilities by using the Language Elaboration Checksheet. Items on the checksheet were developed from information presented by Moffett and Wagner (1976), Pilon (1978), and Smith and others (1976) and modified from practical use. The checksheet enables a teacher to focus observations on the elaboration competencies of defining, clarifying, and qualifying.

Language elaboration strengths and weaknesses can be recorded on the checksheet. The checksheet Assessment Scale is numbered from "1" to "5" with "5" as the highest rating. A "1" indicates inadequate performance. The standard used for the first assessment should be a comparison of the student's performance to that which might logically be expected from the peer group. Thereafter, the standard should be a comparison to the student's own abilities as previously checked.

Periodic assessments can be rated on the checksheet by using a different colored pencil for each of the various assessments. Periodic assessments enable the teacher to compare individual performances and note the progress of a particular child. Instructional objectives can be set, based on weaknesses identified on the checksheet.

LANGUAGE ELABORATION ASSESSMENT CHECKSHEET

Directions

Note the listed competencies as the student is showing-and-telling about an object or experience, placing a check (✓) in the assessment column to indicate student strength or weakness.

Assessment Scale

1—Inadequate 2—Fair 3—Good 4—Very Good 5—Excellent
Defining

- Gave relevant information
- Used likely referents
- Sequenced definitions

Clarifying

- Chose words that made images
- Developed descriptive details
- Developed related examples
- Accurately extended concepts

Qualifying

- Used explicit circumstances
- Made comparisons or contrasts
- Offered likely implications

Responding to Audience

- Tried to make topic interesting
- Tried to stick to the topic
- Tried to answer questions fully

Outcomes

Responding to audience questions provides practice for language elaboration competencies of increasing complexity. Practical use of the questioning format has indicated that speakers begin to anticipate likely questions and present more information without waiting for the audience questioning. Elaboration abilities
grow as students learn to show-and-tell at increasing levels of difficulty.

Summary

Show-and-tell is an important school learning activity. Show-and-tell gives students an opportunity to practice and improve their oral language abilities. A command of oral language is an essential foundation for success in reading.

A teacher can use the show-and-tell activity as a diagnostic setting for assessing a student's oral language abilities. One might structure show-and-tell to focus on language elaboration competencies. Questioning serves as a diagnostic prompt for assessing elaboration through defining, clarifying, and qualifying. The show-and-tell Questioning Guide for Language Elaboration and the Language Assessment Checksheet are two aids which a teacher can use to informally assess a student's oral language abilities. Weaknesses of elaboration can be identified; the teacher can focus questions to help students develop their oral language abilities during upcoming show-and-tell sessions.

Note:

Photograph #1 - Earlington Heights Elementary School, Miami, Florida
Photograph #2 - Pines Middle School, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida

REFERENCES


