

Education researchers at Pearson teamed up with the Partnership for 21st Century Learning to conduct a review of the research literature on teaching and assessing communication skills in K-12 and college classrooms. What follows is a summary of the most significant findings and implications.

## Why Is Communication Important?

Communication skills are central to success in school, work, and life. The P21 Framework for 21st Century Learning includes communication as one of the four Cs, along with collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. Research indicates that developing strong communication skills is important for a variety of reasons:

- Strong communication skills are associated with improved interpersonal relationships and health outcomes.
- Reading skills early in elementary school are predictive of academic success in middle and high school, and strong communication skills upon entering college are linked to higher grades and graduation rates.
- Employers seek job candidates with strong communication skills.

## What Communication Skills Do Learners Need?

Communication can be defined as a social process in which information is exchanged in order to convey meaning and achieve desired outcomes. Communication takes many forms, from writing a paper or reading a book, to delivering a presentation, to engaging in conversation or debate.

Numerous theoretical frameworks of communication have been proposed. From those frameworks, we identify the following core communication skills (see the full paper for examples of each skill in use):

- **Identifying desired outcomes:** determining desired results or consequences of the communication.
- **Crafting clear messages:** creating messages that clearly convey intended meaning and appropriately utilizing nonlinguistic cues such as body language and visual aids.
- **Modeling others' minds:** recognizing and accounting for others' knowledge, beliefs, dispositions, and emotions.
- **Adhering to conventions:** following the rules or norms of specific disciplines or communicative contexts.
- **Accounting for social and cultural differences:** identifying and accounting for variability in social and cultural norms.

- **Selecting appropriate channels:** utilizing the most appropriate communicative channel.
- **Active listening:** actively attending to communication, withholding judgment, and monitoring and clarifying understanding.
- **Deep reading:** critically analyzing text or speech, monitoring comprehension, drawing inferences, questioning, and reflecting.

## How Can I Teach Students to Communicate?

Teaching across all disciplines and levels should include direct communication-skills instruction. Direct instruction is often limited to certain disciplines (e.g., composition), with other disciplines teaching communication skills indirectly through activities such as reading or writing assignments, presentations, or class discussions. Any course can teach communication skills alongside other material by identifying the forms of communication in the discipline, integrating engagement with those communications into the curriculum, and providing direct instruction of relevant communication skills. For example, math teachers can provide a brief lesson on reading strategies for comprehending mathematical proofs, or a history teacher can give a lesson on writing conventions in history before assigning a term paper. Instruction ideally would include demonstrations of effective use of skills as well as opportunities for practice and feedback. Communication skills should not be treated implicitly by assigning students a communication activity without providing direct communication skill instruction.

Research on communication skills teaching has established a variety of effective practices, which are reviewed in detail in the full paper. Communication skills are often taught holistically in the context of specific forms of communication (e.g., writing a report, conducting an interview). The most effective teaching practice will depend on the form of communication in which students will engage and the specific skills targeted in instruction. In classrooms that include nonnative speakers or students with language disabilities, some practices reviewed in the full paper may benefit from modification to meet these students' unique needs.

## How Should I Design Communication Activities for My Classroom?

Multiple communication skills can be taught in combination through activities built around specific communicative tasks. Activities ideally will mirror the communicative tasks that students are likely to encounter later in school, work, and life, becoming progressively more specialized throughout a student's education. It is important that all activities be accessible to students with a range of skill levels. Importantly, activities that are intended primarily to teach other knowledge or skills can also be used as opportunities for

communication training. Ideally, activities will require many of the core communication skills, though it may not be possible for certain tasks to incorporate all skills. Many instructional activities can be modified to incorporate various skills; for example, a book report can require students to identify idioms or cultural references in the book or in their own writing and to determine how the same idea could be communicated without relying on culturally specific language.

Any communication activity should include time for students to plan and reflect before engaging in communication itself. Students should be encouraged to consider desired outcomes, other communicators' knowledge and beliefs, communicative conventions and strategies, and so forth. Less advanced students likely will benefit greatly from direct instruction in the planning and reflection phase, including opportunities for practice and feedback on each component skill. Advanced students may need less direct instruction; still, activities should be structured to require planning and reflection of all students, possibly through independently graded components of the activity.

Activities should require careful consideration of feedback. Instructor-provided feedback is valuable, but it can be difficult for an instructor to provide detailed feedback in large classes. Peer review can be helpful here, and research has shown peer review to be valuable for both reviewer and reviewee. It is important to provide guidance to peer reviewers, including rubrics, and to have students receive feedback from multiple peers. Finally, students should have the opportunity to incorporate feedback into a revision or follow-up activity when possible.

## How Should I Evaluate Students' Communication Skills?

Many instructors develop their own assessments, which have the strength of being tailored to specific educational contexts and goals. When designing any assessment, it is important to ensure alignment between the skills to assess, the evidence of those skills, and the tasks meant to elicit that evidence. Tasks should approximate real-world communication scenarios, and evidence can be obtained through direct observation of the task or examination of an artifact of the task. Peer scoring can be used when large class sizes make instructor scoring impractical.

Many organizations have developed assessment instruments and rubrics that can be adopted and adapted as needed. Rating scales and rubrics generally enhance assessment reliability. While recent advances in technology have driven development of numerous automated assessment systems, some skepticism remains regarding their validity. Automated assessments may be useful for students to receive formative feedback but should be approached with caution in summative assessment.

The main conclusions and implications of the research for classroom practice are as follows.

Conclusion	Recommendation
Communication skills are associated with personal, academic, and career success.	Teach communication skills explicitly throughout all levels of education.
Core communication skills extend beyond those required for fundamental reading, writing, speaking, and listening fluency.	Provide direct instruction in higher-order skills such as identification of desired outcomes, channel selection, and active listening.
Peer feedback has been shown to benefit speaking, reading, and writing skills and to be a valid form of assessment when implemented properly.	Incorporate peer feedback into communication-skills teaching and assessment, ensuring that peers receive proper training and support (e.g., rubrics) and that students receive feedback from multiple peers.
In written and oral presentation, crafting a clear message involves an iterative revision process requiring numerous self-regulatory skills.	Provide direct instruction in the process of effectively planning and iteratively revising written and oral presentations.
Role play can serve as an effective means for teaching and assessing interpersonal communication.	Utilize role play in teaching interpersonal communication.
Self-assessment of video recordings can improve learning of public speaking and interpersonal communication.	Have students view and self-assess video of presentations and role plays.
Students must be prepared to communicate effectively with people from different cultures.	Teach students to recognize and account for cultural differences in communicative norms.
The modern world presents a proliferation of digital communication channels, but research on teaching and assessing effective communication skills in those channels is lacking.	<p>Explicitly teach and assess communication skills for modern digital channels.</p> <p>Research effective teaching and assessment strategies for communication skills in modern digital channels.</p>
Many instructors use locally developed assessment techniques.	Utilize the evidence-centered design framework to develop assessment techniques that accurately capture the communication skills students are meant to acquire.
A variety of established rubrics have proven useful for assessing a variety of communication skills.	Utilize rubrics in assessment and consider using or adapting existing validated rubrics.
Recent years have seen advances in development of automated assessment systems, though there is skepticism surrounding their validity.	Avoid using current automated assessment systems for high-stakes summative assessment but consider using them to provide formative feedback when doing so might otherwise not be possible (e.g., in large student-to-teacher ratios).