Federal, state, and local mandates for content standards have put additional pressure on teachers to raise the quality and quantity of learning for all students. There is increased concern as to how learners with limited English skills and cultural background knowledge can meet the same grade-level requirements as their native-language peers. This Bulletin examines aspects of oral communication and provides suggestions for teachers to help language minority learners, whether in the mainstream classroom or receiving ESL support, continue to develop and refine their oral language as they engage in learning.

QUALITIES OF ORAL COMMUNICATION

In order to succeed academically, all learners need to communicate effectively in English, which includes but goes beyond traditional notions of grammar and vocabulary. There is a functional quality to conversational usage, requiring the ability to engage in self-expression, to interact with others, and to learn about the world in order to meet needs.

Oral communication also recognizes variety of usage, i.e., that there are separate uses based on formal versus informal language, on how oral communication is used in different content subjects (e.g., math as opposed to English), and on geographic location.

Oral communication develops when learners speak in meaningful, interactive ways. This requires frequent opportunities for challenging interaction to help learners expand their ability to interact with others.

Finally, it is important to recognize that oral communication develops best within settings that permit native language use. In school this means providing opportunities for students to use their native language to clarify English concepts. Not only does this help learners to clarify their conceptual use of English, but also use of their native language validates their unique cultural backgrounds.

AWARENESS OF LANGUAGE USE

Be aware of language structures students use at different levels of oral proficiency. Make a conscious effort to help reinforce the language they are practicing.
Do not go beyond the structures listed below if students are incapable of doing so, or help increase student use of more complex language structures to expand their proficiency if it is appropriate.

LEVELS OF ORAL ENGLISH USE
The following are general descriptors for teachers to be aware of in using language with and/or expecting language from language minority learners:

A. Descriptors for Beginner English Learners
1. Use of present tense (He speaks English).
2. Use of singular and plural noun forms (car/cars).
3. Use of pronouns (I/you/they; me/mine, etc.).
4. Use of and response to yes/no questions.
5. Use of simple sentences (You are hungry, etc.).
6. Use of simple questions (Are you hungry?, etc).
7. Use of clearly spoken language and visuals.

B. Intermediate English Level Descriptors
Use of present (I go)/Progressive (I’m going)/Past (I went)/Future (I’ll go/I’m going to go) verb use.
1. Use of coordinating conjunctions (and, but, etc.).
2. Use of negatives (I’m not hungry/He isn’t sad).
3. Use of descriptive words (big, angry, red, etc.).
4. Use of ‘Wh’ questions (who, what, how, etc.).
5. Use of complete sentences with partial discourse on limited topics.

C. Advanced Level English Descriptors
1. Use of complex verbs (I had gone/He had been walking/They will have seen, etc.).
2. Use of idiomatic language (It’s raining cats and dogs outside!).
3. Use of complex sentences (Although it was raining, he went outside.).
4. Use of connected discourse on a wide range of topics.

SPECIFIC FUNCTIONS OF ORAL ENGLISH
The following are examples of oral language in different settings:

A. Specific Language Functions
1. Sharing and requesting information (I have two older brothers.).
2. Expressing needs, feelings, and ideas (I have a headache.).
3. Getting personal needs met (I have to buy some milk.).
4. Engaging in conversations (Hi. How are you?).
5. Conducting transactions (How much does this sweater cost?).
6. Describing, reading about, and participating in a favorite activity (I really like playing chess.).
7. Expressing personal feelings and ideas (I get lonely when my parents go out.).
8. Participating in popular culture (Did you see the latest Jackie Chan movie?).

General Language Functions
1. Testing hypotheses about language.
2. Practicing new language.
3. Using context to construct meaning.
4. Listening to and imitating how others use English.
5. Exploring alternate ways of saying things.
6. Focusing attention selectively.
7. Seeking support and feedback from others.
8. Comparing nonverbal and verbal cues.
10. Using native language to ask for clarification.
11. Selecting different media to help understand language.

SOURCES:
ESL Standards for Pre-K-12 Students (1997).
Alexandria, VA: TESOL, Inc.
Learning Results Grades K-5. ESL Curriculum Alignment. Portland Public Schools, Multilingual Programs, Title VII.
Alexandria, VA: TESOL, Inc.