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Listening CHEC Strategy: Ask, Don't Tell

Talking about listening is a good thing unless that's all we do. We also need to take the time to model listening and to give students opportunities to practice listening. This creates a new classroom environment, one rich with opportunities for response and thus greater student engagement.

Good listening is an essential part of good communication, which means that good communication cannot occur without good listening. Therefore, if teachers infuse their classrooms with a culture of active, dynamic communication—the give and take that creates shared meaning—teachers will know that listening is taking place. Teachers should catch students listening, point it out, and celebrate it.

"CHEC" * breaks this process into three steps: check, engage, and celebrate. Accomplish the first step with yes-or-no questions directed at the group. Read faces or postures for clues as to whom you need to try to engage, which is the next step.

Engagement occurs through mini-conversation, one student at a time.

"Before you start working on your poems today, I want to review the concept of 'metaphor.'"

Most students lean forward and nod their heads, but one fellow in the back tosses his pen down on his notebook, folds his arms across his chest, kicks his legs out, and leans back in his chair. Because the body language suggests that the student still needs to be engaged, the teacher focuses on this student.

> "Hey, John," says the teacher to the student, "What if we played basketball against each other? What would happen?"
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> John unfolds his arms. "Man, I would dunk on you."
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> "Slam dunk?"
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> "You know it." The other kids laugh.
>
> "Suppose I were to give you a quiz and I called it a 'slam dunk.' Tell me how hard you think the quiz would

be."

"It's a sure thing, like how sure it would be that I would dunk on you."

"OK. That's all a metaphor is, John. You say a quiz is a slam-dunk. It isn't really a slam dunk, of course, but you know the quiz is automatic, a sure thing, like a slam dunk. Who remembers what we said about metaphors yesterday?"

Shanika raises her hand. "It's like you call something something it isn't in order to make a point about the thing you're trying to talk about."

John laughs.

"You got it, Shanika. I can always count on you. Thanks for the help. John, thanks for letting me pick on you a little bit. OK, now you all have it down, so show me what you can do."

You can engage a successful student to show the others what success looks like and what rewards success offers. You can engage struggling students to see what they know and assess what their next step ought to be. You can engage all students to let them experience success and to acknowledge and praise them for what they *have* learned.

Engagement is a dimension of higher-order thinking. Teachers achieve it through open-ended questioning. They ask questions that require active thought and specific examples from textual, visual, or oral presentation. In the case just discussed, the open-ended questions were: (in other words):

"Define 'metaphor'."

"Discuss the mechanics of a particular metaphor."

"Explain how you can use prior knowledge to decode a metaphor."

"Given your understanding of the term 'slam dunk,' evaluate the difficulty of a quiz that the teacher calls a "slam-dunk."

"Given your understanding of the term 'slam dunk,' infer a teacher's meaning when she calls a quiz a "slam dunk."

Open-ended questioning forces thought. If a student is not sure what "discuss" means, the teacher should ask another student to explain the word, then go back to the first student. "Discuss" means 'tell about.' Explain means 'show how.'" Use power words when you question students. Ask them to identify, explain, compare, contrast, summarize, apply, infer, analyze, evaluate. Have posters with these words and their definitions on the wall so that students can look up what is needed for each operation. Teach the power words explicitly and give students multiple opportunities to use them during class discussions.

This kind of thought is operational, similar to figuring out the right way to solve a math problem. The state standards refer to this kind of thinking as "constructed response." When the student performs one of these operations, it is time to celebrate.

Celebration is a dimension of specific, authentic praise: "Thanks for letting me pick on you a little bit, John. It helps everyone to review things we've talked about in class. Shanika, your answer reminds me that I can always count on you."

Always praise a student when she shows that she can do one of these operations. This celebration takes about a minute. Teachers don't need to dance around, hand out candy, or break into song. Simple, authentic praise seals the engagement, plugs into the student's drive for success, and moves the class through a moment of shared meaning. When teachers praise students authentically, they model the process and rewards of listening.

Checking, engaging, celebrating will help you create a culture of shared meaning. This culture will engage, support and nurture learners at all levels, from all backgrounds. As the culture of communication grows, you will know one thing for certain: the students are listening. They are listening not because you told them but because you asked them.

*Steve Slavik, now the curriculum and instruction leader for Integrated Language Arts in the Anoka-Hennepin ISD #11, once told me that a good response follows the format TEC: thesis, evaluation, and conclusion. I have twisted this a bit to come up with CHEC: check for understanding, engage, and celebrate. These three actions are similar in purpose and effect to those of TEC.

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Oops, Oh! Huh?: Categorizing Students' Reactions to Errors in Their Writing

Much has been written about meta-cognition and reflection in the writing process. Work by Chris Anson, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Donald Schon, Terry Underwood and others has cut a wide investigative swath into the processes and benefits of guided reflection before, during, and after a student has "completed" a piece of writing. In her book, *Turns of Thought: Teaching Composition as Reflexive Inquiry*, Donna Qualley connects reflection with discovery. Qualley suggests that students experience a series of discoveries as they navigate through the sometimes smooth but often choppy waters of the writing process. Students, according to Qualley, arrive at "a kind of understanding whose essential truth is only realized or more fully grasped as it is made manifest through the individual's experience and contemplation of that experience" (35). It is this notion of discovery and contemplation that has prompted me to devise a system whereby students might categorize their reactions to the errors in their writing.

To a limited extent, Richard Haswell has examined students' various perceptions of their errors. Haswell points out the distinction between "those errors that stand on the edge of