



Canadian Language  
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Essential Skills

Niveaux de compétence  
linguistique canadiens/  
Compétences essentielles

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Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks

# On the Job

Essential Skill of Oral Communication



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# Oral Communication

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## Oral Communication: Talking the Talk

Integrating oral communication skills into the ESL classroom is nothing new – in fact that is pretty well a “raison d’être” in the first place! Most language learning methods used in Canada include a balanced approach to learning that integrates speaking and listening, as well as reading and writing.



*The separation into two skills of Speaking and Listening in the CLB 2000 occurred after direct feedback from ESL practitioners indicated that this was their preference.*

Oral Communication as defined in the Essential Skills Reader’s Guide refers to, “the use of speech to give and exchange thoughts and information by workers in an occupational group”. Dimensions of oral communication are based on four dimensions, including the range and complexity of the information, communication function and context and the relative risks of a failure in communication. Similar to the original, 1996 version of the Canadian Language Benchmarks, this was a single skill. However, as the CLB continued to evolve, the skill was broken into more discrete skills of Speaking and Listening.

### **Sample Oral Communication Tasks: Assemblers and Furniture Finishers**

Assemblers and Inspectors in electrical appliance, apparatus and equipment manufacturing (NOC # 9484) use the following Oral Communication skills:



- listen to announcements made by the lead hand, foreperson or operations manager to receive information. (1)
- interact with their lead hand or supervisor to receive parts lists, discuss quality problems and advise them when they are leaving their workstation. (1)
- may interact with suppliers to obtain information on the availability of parts or to explain rejection reports. (1)
- communicate with co-workers during the course of the shift to exchange information and troubleshoot assembly problems. (2)
- communicate with employees at all levels of the company during production meetings to discuss work processes and quality problems. (2)
- present proposed solutions to problems and suggestions for improving work processes to lead hands or supervisors. (3)

Oral Communication is not considered a most important skill for Assemblers and Inspectors.

Furniture Finishers and Refinishers (NOC # 9494) use the following Oral Communication Skills:

- talk with co-workers to exchange information about a customer's requirements and to coordinate work. (1)
- may speak with suppliers to place orders and to seek product information (1)
- speak with helpers to provide instructions and supervise them (2)
- interact with their supervisor to receive work assignments, discuss production problems and clarify procedures (2)

Oral communication is considered a most important Essential Skill for this occupation.

### Workplace Anecdote

An employer complained to a training provider that an ESL worker was making too many errors in his work. The employer commented that the instructions had been clearly outlined and the worker had nodded his head, smiled and gone off to do the task. The employer complained that if the worker did not understand, why did he act like he did understand and why did he not ask for clarification? When this was discussed with the worker he indicated that in his culture it is seen as weakness and incompetence to ask questions, especially of a superior. Practicing proper question formation, timing and appropriate cultural application before the worker enters the workplace is imperative so misunderstandings like this can be avoided. Sometimes employers jump to the wrong conclusions. They may assume that the worker's English is too weak or that they are not trained or skilled enough to do the job.



## Tips



1. In many workplaces 80% of all communication is verbal, used for such things as;
  - giving and obtaining information,
  - greeting people,
  - asking for instruction and direction.
2. A person usually cannot get a job without a job interview. This oral “test” can make or break a person’s chances for gainful employment. The North American job interview also follows cultural conventions. In many cultures, having completed the required education for the position is enough to get a candidate hired. It is a shock to go to a job interview where they ask questions like “Give me an example of a time when you had a conflict with a co-worker. What was the situation, what did you do and what was the result?” (Remember the STAR formula presented in the Writing section (Situation, Task, Action and Result)).
3. Using synonyms when communicating instructions helps to build vocabulary and thinking skills. For example: if you want learners to turn to a particular section in a text, instead of saying “Turn to page 26, the section called WH questions”, say “Turn to the section about questions that are used to find out information”. The students then have to identify key words and some idioms, review the table of contents, decide that the exact words are not listed and conclude that WH questions on page 26 is what they want. This is very active and more reflective of the workplace where instructions might be more ambiguous.
4. When communicating with others in Canada, it must be understood that it is the right of all people to be treated equitably and respectfully and is part of our constitution.



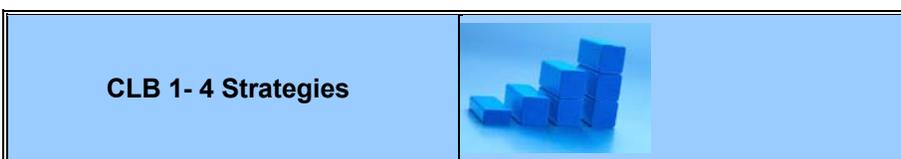
For more information on Canadian Human Rights, see:

<http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/charter/index.html> and <http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/h-6/243963.html>

Canadians believe that you should not be discriminated against because of race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation or age. Many cultures have not entrenched these values in their constitutions and therefore learners need to understand how Human Rights legislation will protect them and as well how it will affect their interactions in the workplace. Having a female colleague or boss, or working for someone who is a lot younger can be a shock to some newcomers. Being interviewed by a female, shaking hands and making eye contact can be disconcerting if the newcomer is not prepared.

### The Canadian Human Rights Act

The purpose of this Act is to extend the laws in Canada to give effect, within the purview of matters coming within the legislative authority of Parliament, to the principle that all individuals should have an opportunity equal with other individuals to make for themselves the lives that they are able and wish to have and to have their needs accommodated, consistent with their duties and obligations as members of society, without being hindered in or prevented from doing so by discriminatory practices based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, disability or conviction for an offence for which a pardon has been granted.



## CLB 1 –4: Five Strategies for Teaching Oral Communication

1. **Role Playing** — Role playing workplace situations such as the sample tasks listed for Assembler and Inspector would give learners an opportunity to build confidence. Simulating staff meetings, working in groups where results have to be reported, jigsaw activities<sup>1</sup> where learners have to get information from fellow classmates, group reports and presentations where roles and duties are determined by the group (not the instructor) are just some examples.
2. **Small Talk** —A lesson on small talk could be included as an enriching activity. Small talk, while not overtly defined in the Essential Skills framework, is an important element of the CLB framework. In the workplace, the person who makes the effort to get to know others and to be friendly has an easier time and may get promoted faster than the person who remains invisible. Learners have to know what are acceptable topics for small talk, how much time is appropriate for small talk and the consequences of not interacting with colleagues.

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<sup>1</sup> For a description of how to do a Jigsaw Activity, see the section in the “On the Job” series on *The Essential Skill of Writing*.



### Workplace Anecdote

A talented computer programmer from Russia was placed for work experience at a telecommunications firm. He was a very serious, shy fellow who would get down to work as fast as possible. He stayed in his cubical working during coffee and lunch. He rarely ventured out. When the instructor for the program inquired as to his performance on the job, the boss, who was also an immigrant, said that his work was good but unfortunately he would not be hired because he did not “fit in” with the team.

3. **Question and Answer** — Asking questions and clarifying information are important communication skills and are used most often in the workplace. In some cultures, it is seen as unintelligent to ask questions and bosses never ask questions or admit mistakes. Learners have to understand that in Canada making mistakes and asking questions is not considered a sign of weakness. More than that, it is necessary for successful workplace interactions if mistakes are to be avoided in the future.



4. **For the Asking** — Speaking in questions rather than statements or commands is good manners and respectful in our culture. If a person uses commands instead of questions they might be seen as aggressive. Teaching points regarding questioning techniques include:
  - **“You” Statements** — Statements that start with “You” sound aggressive in our culture. “You have my book.” is commanding. Where as “Do you have my book?” is less confrontational.
  - **Polite Commands** — Learners at CLB 3 or 4 can also start to understand that questions may in fact be polite commands. If you boss asks you “Can you complete this by 3:00”, it is not a question but rather a very strong suggestion or order.
  - **Paraphrasing** — Paraphrasing what is understood or confirming information is a skill that, when practiced, can help workers avoid many misunderstandings. If a learner can follow instructions with a verifying statement such as “So, you would like me to \_\_\_\_\_” the correct message is assured .This also can confirm that both parties have the same expectation.
5. **Acquiring Information** —Acquiring information in an oral context is a skill that is clearly dependant on being able to:
  - decide what information is needed,
  - create questions to ask for that information and
  - ask where or from whom the resources can be found to collect that information.

Much of what we learn informally is through mentally selecting the right questions that will elicit the information we need. Formal learning in a classroom is just a small percentage of our overall knowledge. Practicing asking questions, listening, clarifying and confirming information in role play situations will better prepare learners to do this in the workplace, in a second language.



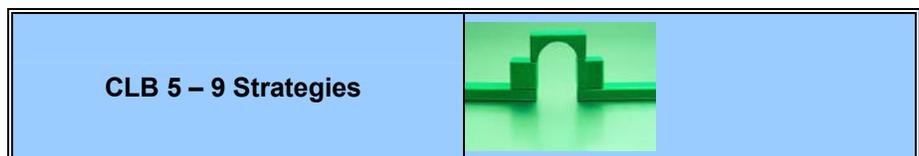
## Teaching Idea #1 – Small Talk

As an extension or alternative to the lesson above, you could follow it with this small lesson on “small talk”. Small talk may not be identified under the Essential Skill of Oral Communication for a given occupation. However, for ESL learners, small talk is critical to success at work and is imperative to learn and practice. Social conversation is an important element in the Canadian Language Benchmark framework. Many ESL learners report anxiety about having to make small talk at work. If a person is able to interact in this informal manner they usually feel more confident about other abilities at work.

### Lesson Objectives:

Learners will:

- define the term “small talk”
- discuss the importance of small talk at work and compare norms of Canadian workplace culture with that of their native country
- list topics of conversation that are considered appropriate or inappropriate in the Canadian workplace
- role play a social (small talk) conversation in the workplace
- practice small talk with a number of different partners in a classroom activity



## CLB 5 – 9 Strategies

*Correct verb tenses continue to be a problem with this level when communicating orally. In the workplace, colleagues are sometimes less tolerant of grammatical mistakes from people with strong language skills. The move has to be towards greater accuracy and proper pronunciation when communicating orally.*



All of the points listed under the “CLB 1 –4: Five Strategies for Teaching Oral Communication” on page 5 apply to the CLB 5 to 9 Learner. Learners of all levels need to continue to practice clarifying, confirming, paraphrasing, questioning, as well as discussion skills for meetings, greetings etc. Learners with benchmarks at CLB 5-9 sometimes have developed habits or have first language interference when creating questions or interacting in groups. Reinforcing the cultural use of questions and question structures and practicing these in a safe classroom environment can help to break some habits.

The following strategies may help with maintaining the workplace focus when practicing oral communication skills:

1. **Voice-Mail Messages** — Practicing taking telephone messages can be done by recording the learner’s voice mail messages from a phone or in a lab, compiling them into a collection of messages and playing them back for the class. Message scenarios can be developed ahead of time to ensure variety. The observable learner outcome could be to record a clear voice mail message that includes all the relevant information. In the second step of playing the messages back to the class, learners could be evaluated on their ability to write accurate messages from a recording which also practises writing skills. All the written telephone messages should focus on accuracy and when messages are unclear or ambiguous, indicating this as well. This feedback can be shared with the person who left the message so his/her speaking skills can also be improved. This is a real life activity as messages on voice mail are not always clear and understandable.



2. **Meeting Practice** — Role playing staff meeting scenarios with assigned positions such as ‘chair’ and ‘secretary’ helps to practice discussion and note taking skills.

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**Note:** Do not forget to give some orientation to styles of North American business meetings (e.g. formal, informal) and roles attendees are expected to undertake.

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3. **Networking Practice** — Practice networking (including speaking and listening skills) by encouraging learners to join professional associations or volunteer agencies to build contacts and practice oral communication. Doing contact assignments where learners interact with people outside the classroom, such as a group volunteer activity provides greater relevance and motivation. Fun activities that can involve learners as volunteers such as the United Way Campaign, Corporate Challenge or trade fairs afford the opportunity to interact with representatives from other businesses. In the community such activities as the Dragon Boat races, Run for the Cure, the Terry Fox Run or community league sports like soccer or hockey allow learners to experience the charitable side of Canadian culture.

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**Note:** Do not be afraid to discuss cultural interpretations of what networking means. Ask students how job search and networking are done in their countries. There are resources available about how job hunting is done in other cultures, as well as other cultural workplace differences. One book that several ESL teachers have praised is [Managing Cultural Diversity in Technical Professions](#), by Lionel Laroche (ISBN: 0-7506-7581-0).

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4. **Presentation Skills** — Include learner presentations as part of the lesson plan. Presenting information or research as an individual or as a group provides practice in public speaking, as well as build confidence in presenting in a second language. Limiting both the time of a presentation and the range of topics will encourage clarity and brevity. Colleagues will get impatient with a speaker who is not clear on the topic of the presentation and seems to be rambling. Making presentations in a Canadian workplace culture is often different from other cultures around the world. Some key things to reinforce are:
- Get to the point as quickly as possible.
  - Make the subject relevant to the audience.

- Interact with the audience if possible, asking questions or asking for feedback.
- Try not to lecture, or be the total authority on the subject.



5. **Negotiation Skills** — Design activities that require negotiation. The pyramid method<sup>2</sup> works very well with these types of activities and can be used anytime there are a number of choices to be made based on opinion.

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<sup>2</sup> A few pieces of information are given to a small group of students, who then become experts and share the information with others in their groups and make a decision, which the larger group then votes on with their decisions eventually coming up with a single decision.

## Instructional Design Ideas

<b>Instructional Design Ideas</b> 		
	<b>Classroom Idea</b>	<b>Link to Workplace</b>
<p>Try some of these ideas to practice and incorporate more workplace-like opportunities to practice Oral Communication skills.</p>	<p>Give instructions orally and test for understanding, then write the instructions on board.</p>	<p>Communicate instructions orally. Often communication such as listening and understanding instructions is the only form of communication at work. This could also be related to safety and emergency procedures.</p>
	<p>Build a lot of group work into the class. Create some lessons where the learners are directing or leading the activity and rotate the leadership roles so each student gets a chance to practice.</p>	<p>Simulate jobs where working with others is an important part of the job. It also provides a chance to practice and develop leadership skills within small groups.</p>
	<p>A rule for the classroom could be that deadlines may be renegotiated in advance, but never on the day of the deadline or once the deadline has passed.</p>	<p>Meeting and keeping deadlines is expected, and missing a deadline in the workplace without discussing it first is seen as being irresponsible and unprofessional.</p> <p>Practice communicating with colleagues and meeting and renegotiating deadlines.</p>
	<p>Practice and discuss the role of questions in oral communication. In some cultures, asking questions is a sign of weakness and workers do not want to show they are “not competent”. On the other hand, in our culture we ask questions to learn and sometimes just to be polite.</p>	<p>Reinforce the goal orientation of workplace culture. Clarifying and confirming understanding is very important for accuracy.</p>

**Notes:**

# Glossary of Terms

## **STAR**

STAR formula is a method used in career counselling for Describe a "situation" or task you faced, the "action" you took, and the outcome/result. Often used in resume writing, interview situations, and other work-related areas.



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