

Introduction

1. What does “orality” mean?

Besides written expression, orality or oral expression is the second largest area of language application. (Strictly speaking, it is the first in the history of mankind as well as with almost all individuals. The cultural techniques of writing and reading emerge only after a long phase of purely oral communication.)

Oral communication is comprised of the two aspects, listening and speaking: the receptive side (hearing/listening comprehension) and the productive side (speaking) or oral communication. This indicates that the promotion of listening comprehension plays an equal and important role in terms of the development of communicative competences.

The work in the area of orality has to observe its own rules but does not occur separately from the promotion of writing competence. Rather, the two major areas are connected in what can be characterized as a circular relationship. That which is practiced in the area of oral communication will subsequently benefit the written expression and a developed written competence has beneficial consequences for the differentiation in oral communication.

Among the specific characteristics of oral use of language are the following points, which are also important for work in school:

- In oral communicative situations, the interlocutors are normally in the same place at the same time. This facilitates the use of mimicry and gestural language and non-verbal, situation signals (e.g. pointing out a person nearby or the cloudy sky). These non-verbal means help to support comprehension and are useful and functional in light of the “fleetingness” of oral communication. This is quite different in written situations, where the steps of «writing» and «reading» take place in a time-delayed fashion and can be repeated as well by going over and re-reading a text. (Phone conversations or written chats, represent a special position, which is not subject of this discussion.)

- In terms of language, orality follows its own rules, which are different from written language. Thus, incomplete sentences, sentence fragments, repetitions, selective language switching (e.g. from the first language to the language of the school, or from standard language to dialect), associative jumps, etc., are considered normal and do not interfere in everyday conversations, or only in exceptional cases. In the case of “cultivated” oral expression, such as in a presentation in school, stricter norms apply that are more oriented toward written expression. Here too, it would be totally false to demand of the students that they speak in a manner “as if printed”. However, this should not mean to forego training speech situations where a deliberately cultivated oral style and motivating contexts (scenic representations, oral presentations, etc.) are practiced.

2. Promoting orality – and what this means for HLT

Oral expression plays an important role in language teaching, and this applies of course to heritage language teaching as well. The importance of this role is already apparent in that the major part of communication takes place orally (particularly in the lower level classes). In order to effectively participate in the daily lessons, students must be able to listen and comprehend while listening and, on the other hand, they must have acquired various productive abilities in the area of oral expression. The prominent position of orality is shown in the following overview of the language skill areas and fields of action:

	Receptive abilities	Productive abilities
Orality: primary, “innate” talents	listening (listening-comprehension)	speaking
Literacy: secondary acquired cultural techniques	reading (reading-comprehension)	writing

As a peripheral complement to the two major areas of oral and written competence, the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar should be mentioned. This occurs “naturally” and uncontrolled, but is also supported and furthered in school.