

Research into practice

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Paper 1 in the series
Understanding the reading process expands on research around *Oral language* as one component of 'The Big Six' that supports learning to read.



Oral language abilities are not only closely related to the development of early reading skills, but there are also substantial long-term correlations with reading in the middle years of primary school.

Oral language

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"We live at the level of our language. Whatever we can articulate we can imagine or understand or explore."

Ellen Gilchrist (2000)

Introduction

In many ways, our early years frame the trajectory of our lives, and this is certainly true of our literacy development (Catts et al, 2002). This is of particular significance for children who arrive at school without the oral language skills that support the development of reading and therefore academic success at school. Low literacy skills have been related to poorer outcomes in school achievement, measures of self esteem, physical and mental health, housing, employment, socio-economic status, community participation, illicit drug use and criminal activity (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007; Dugdale & Clarke, 2008; Firth & Cunningham, 2007; McWhirter et al, 2007). Thus an individual's literacy level has a major impact across personal, social and economic domains.

The importance of the early years

Oral language abilities are not only closely related to the development of early reading skills, but there are also substantial long-term correlations with reading in the middle years of primary school (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). It is impossible to understand the written form of a language without a wide vocabulary and familiarity with language structures. These are, in most cases, already well developed before a child begins school (Reese, Sparks & Leyva, 2010; Skeat et al, 2010), thus parents are rightfully regarded as a child's first teacher.

As parents interact with their young children, they shape the foundations of language development (NELP, 2008). Certain features of these early interactions are particularly important: the frequency of one-to-one or small group interactions (Morrow et al, 1998), the quality of language, that is, the number and variety of actual words that children hear (Fernald, Perfors & Marchman, 2006); the reading aloud of story books; and the quality of play experiences (Tomopoulos et al, 2006). If children participate in rhyming games, singing and word play, English language skills are further enhanced (Fleer and Raban, 2005).

As children engage in these early interactions, they unconsciously come to understand various aspects of language that will ultimately support their reading development. As children make sounds and combine them into words and sentences, they literally "tune in to" the *phonological system* – the intonation and rhythm of the language and its common sound patterns (Dickinson et al, 2003; Goswami, 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Children's awareness of the separate sounds in words then forms the basis for learning the written symbols that match those sounds – they begin to understand *the alphabetic principle*. Oral language builds children's *vocabulary* knowledge. The explosive growth of vocabulary that occurs between the ages of two

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and six has a direct influence on their later reading ability (Biemiller, 1999). Preschool children with strong receptive vocabularies tend to have better *listening comprehension*, word recognition and *reading comprehension* in the later primary years (Scarborough, 2001). Thus oral language has a direct effect on other elements of the “Big Six” – it positions the child as an active, literate oral language learner and prepares him or her for the challenge of learning to read. Without this early preparation, the child will be unable to capitalise on even the best learning environment at school. And apart from the close relationship between oral language and reading, it must be remembered that almost all classroom-based learning depends on oral language. Thus helping children develop mastery in this area is important for their overall academic success.

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General principles regarding oral language development

Refer children for assessment if speech and language delays are significant

Referral to a speech pathologist via the school reporting system is recommended if a child's speech or language is significantly delayed or different from peers, particularly in the early years of school. Whether a hearing assessment has been conducted should also be investigated. Hearing problems can be an outcome of a range of causes, including inherited conditions, infections during pregnancy, birth difficulties, and chronic ear infections, and need to be identified as early as possible.

Build oral language across all the year levels

Oral language skills continue to be important throughout all the school years – in fact, throughout life. Oral language proficiency assists the establishment and maintenance of personal and social relationships, in communicating and meeting everyday needs, in managing our business, recreational, health and financial affairs, in optimising employment opportunities – in every facet of our lives. Thus oral language development is not just the domain of the early childhood teacher, teachers can continue to help students become more articulate and sophisticated users of the language throughout their school years, and thus equip them for fuller and more rewarding participation in life.

Allow wait time

Waiting at least 3–5 seconds for children to respond is difficult but important. In reality this should be called “thinking time” rather than wait time, because some children need additional time to process information before composing their answer. Answers tend to be more complex if students are given more time to formulate their answer. The acronym OWL (observe, wait, listen), has been successfully used to help remember the importance of giving children time to respond (Konza et al, 2010; Pepper & Weitzman, 2004) – it is also a useful tip for teachers.

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General principles regarding teacher language

Model clear and correct use of oral language

One of the most important things that teachers can do is to provide a good model of oral language use. Giving unambiguous instructions, using accurate descriptive and positional language, utilising precise terminology where necessary and giving clear feedback are ways in which teachers can demonstrate how the correct use of language assists communication and facilitates understanding.

Monitor student understanding

Teachers need to ensure that, whatever year level they are teaching, their language of instruction and management is *comprehensible* to their students. This will require regular checking for understanding until teachers have a clear idea of the level of their students' receptive language skills. Students who have trouble concentrating during teacher talk; who look blank or confused; who answer questions inappropriately (for example, they might give a "where" answer to a "why" question); who only partially follow directions; or who wait until others have responded before they respond, may not be understanding much of what the teacher is saying. Teachers who are aware of these indicators can monitor their students' understanding and adjust their language where necessary.

Adjust language according to student need

"Teacher talk" is not necessarily better, but is often very different from the language children hear in other environments. Student language proficiency may be different from that required to access the curriculum, or even to understand simple classroom instructions. Confusion and disobedience can result from the fact that students are unfamiliar with the language structures and "lexical density" of the more formal language of school. This does not mean that teachers should use the same language as students, but that they may need to use simple, direct language, and incorporate strategies like *emphasising important words*, and *placing verbs at the beginning of sentences* when issuing instructions.

Young and less able users of the language tend to understand verbs and nouns more easily than the more abstract parts of speech like prepositions, and the more complex constructions like the negative. An instruction like "Don't cut out before you colour in" is likely to be heard as "blah blah cut out blah blah colour in", resulting in the exact opposite of what the teacher wanted – and some confused children who don't understand what they did wrong.

If students are having trouble understanding classroom instruction or teacher directions, remembering the four S's (*say less, stress important words, slow down, show*) can be helpful.

Teaching strategies

Teach active listening

Listening is a core component of oral language. Some students can *hear*, but are not *active listeners*. Active listening requires selective and sustained attention, working memory, cognitive processing, and information storage and recall mechanisms. Teachers can help students develop these skills by giving them tasks such as listening for specific or key information, listening to answer specific questions, and listening to follow instructions (treasure hunts!) Barrier games and story grammar activities require active listening. For older students, teaching note-taking skills from oral input also develops listening skills.

Build on student language

Students' spontaneous communications and responses to questioning are also opportunities for development of communication skills. Teachers can *elaborate* on student's language by adding new information, they can *extend* the conversation through questioning, *reinforce* the language through repetition, *model* self-talk and *build other communication skills* such as taking turns, eye contact and appropriate social distance.

Build oral language development into daily routines and classroom activity

Oral language development can occur any time, anywhere. Because oral language permeates the school day, it is easy to build oral language practice into daily routines such as roll call, distribution and collection of materials, classroom organisation, entry and exit routines and instructions. For example, during roll call, the teacher could ask a question of each child that must be answered in a sentence (e.g. Where were you born? What is the name of one of your friends?) Other activities that incorporate open-ended questions can be built into problem-solving in mathematics (Can you think of another way to...?), daily story book reading (How did that make you feel?) conflict resolution (How do you think he felt when...?), and classroom organisation (How might we...?).

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Provide opportunities for social interaction

Oral language develops through practice, but most talking in classrooms is done by the teacher. Sylva et al (2004) found that 73% of preschool children's time in the United States was spent without any direct teacher-child interaction. Those interactions that did take place took the form of closed questions that did not build oral language facility or literacy skills. Only 8% of children's time was spent in elaborated interactions with teachers. Considering the increased size and complexity of older year levels, we can assume that generally the percentages are no better for older children, and are probably worse. Children need time, opportunities and resources to develop oral language skills.

Oral language develops most effectively through one-to-one conversations with a better language user who can model more sophisticated structures and vocabulary. Creative ways to increase the contact that students have with better language users *in pairs or very small groups* should be a priority. This can involve students from a "buddy class", parents or other volunteers engaging with students on a regular basis, perhaps sharing a book together, talking about a weekend activity, a celebration – any event that will promote spontaneous language. These activities also help children develop appropriate turn-taking, intonation, expression and eye contact. If older language users are not available, pair those children who need more support with better language users among their class peers for 15 minutes of table talk every day (Woodward et al, 2004). Provide material such as play dough, pictures or objects to prompt the discussion, and rotate these each day to initiate new conversations.

Incorporating as many opportunities as possible for students to engage in discussions and conversations – and equalise the talking time – is the easiest and most effective way to build oral language competence, which is the forerunner of broader literacy achievement.

Explore story books together

Reading stories (narrative texts) provides the perfect oral language support – they provide both stimulation and motivation. Sharing a book encompasses much more than simply reading it. Questions about the author and the pictures can accompany questions about the actual content. Open-ended questions like "*What do you think is going to happen now?*" and "*Why do you think she did that?*" encourage language and broader cognitive development. Retelling activities draw on memory and logical reasoning, and build sequencing skills, practice of different tenses and use of time-related connecting words. Talking about the story or content builds world knowledge, promotes imagination, helps children draw information from different sources to make inferences, engages them in critical thinking, and develops vocabulary and understanding of language structures. It also builds positive attitudes towards reading as an enjoyable and valuable activity (Tamis-LeMonda & Rodriguez, 2009). Picture books can also stimulate language and promote a rich discussion of ideas.

Sharing books with younger children also develops essential knowledge such as how to hold a book, turn pages and direct one's eyes when reading. Pointing to words as the story is read builds the understanding that the print, not the picture, tells the story; that we read the left hand page before the right; that our eyes sweep from the end of one line to the next; it builds concepts of letter, word and sentence, familiarity with letter shapes and sizes, upper and lower case, punctuation, and eventuality such subtleties as the importance of letter orientation and order. These are critical understandings that prepare children for the complex task of reading.

Older children also benefit from having books read to them – even those who can read for themselves. Teachers can read books that expose the students to more sophisticated vocabulary and syntactic structures than students would be able to read alone, and that can promote discussion about diverse and important topics that may not otherwise be raised.

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Model thinking processes through “Think alouds”

Many teachers will have observed young children talking to themselves in a more-or-less reporting style as they engage in an activity. A typically developing five-year-old might be heard saying “I’m colouring in the hair now. I’m choosing yellow...oh, that one’s broken...I’ll pick orange...” and so on. As children mature, this “overt” speech becomes progressively quieter mutterings or whispers until it is “covert” or private speech – essentially the overt speech has become thought. This developmental progression is consistent with the private speech research (Berk, 1986, Bivens & Berk, 1990). While most activity conducted by adults proceeds without overt speech, many of us revert to this when tasks become difficult. The more difficult the problem, the more likely we are to articulate our thinking processes as we search for a solution. Even quite minor hiccoughs in our day require this strategy – muttered utterances like “Where did I leave my keys?” and “Now why did I come in here?” punctuate our days.

Students whose language skills are not well developed are less able to use this strategy for either minor or major problem-solving tasks. Modelling this for a range of tasks and situations is a very useful strategy. Making the teacher’s thinking processes transparent by thinking aloud reveals for many students the “secrets of learning” – the strategies that efficient learners use to work their way through a task or problem.

Self-talk is also a useful mediating strategy when feeling frustrated or becoming angry. Children who cannot manage their anger are often those who are less articulate – they need to resort to a physical manifestation of their frustration. Developing their oral language skills and use of language-based strategies does two things: it increases the chances that they have the words to resolve the issue verbally; and it increases the chance that they can engage in positive self-talk and talk themselves down from mounting anger through the use of calming statements. “OK – I don’t have to get angry...I can handle this...I just have to take three deep breaths...then I think about what else I can do...I could just walk away...I could count to ten...” and so on. Teachers could refer to times when they have used these strategies, thus providing models of these important social and self-management skills.

Consider the language demands of each lesson

The language demands of each lesson need to be considered with explicit teaching of new vocabulary and other elements of language incorporated into planning. Targeting a particular aspect of oral language in each lesson increases the opportunities for practice. It might be the use of descriptive words in a discussion before a writing exercise; practice of comparative adjectives in a maths lesson; directional terms in a geography lesson; conversational skills in a health/personal development lesson. By consciously paying attention to the oral language components, it increases the likelihood that these elements will be made explicit, practised, and therefore developed.

Don’t be afraid to “correct” children’s communication

Students need to learn when their language or social interaction is incorrect or inappropriate. The most effective response is to model the correct way without explicitly pointing out the error. Regular errors should be targeted in a later lesson. Students also need support if they are standing too close, not giving appropriate eye contact, not allowing others to have a turn – these need to be gently pointed out. While many children learn these skills over time, some children do not have the opportunity, so it is up to their teachers to support their development of these skills.

Conclusion

The link between oral language and broader literacy development is well established. Reading proficiency is built on a wide knowledge and fluent use of oral language and teachers can do much to support students in this across all content areas and with all year levels. Engaging in conversations with them as often as possible, providing many opportunities for them to engage with other fluent speakers and exploring books together are simple and rewarding ways to help develop these critical skills.

The more difficult the problem, the more likely we are to articulate our thinking processes as we search for a solution.

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References

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Understanding the reading process

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Oral language

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