

Topic: Developing Discourse in the Primary Classroom

Before man's arrival on earth language did not exist. And what is it? Barely a breath.
A few noises strung together... It is a mystery impossible to fathom.
(Montessori 1967, pp. 108-10 as cited in Honig 2007).

Gaining Meaning through Oral Language

Imagine a world, in which there was no language; a world which had no labels for the things we see, or the emotions we feel; a world of silence in which you had no means of expressing what you felt or thought; a world of isolation and misunderstanding. As a language user this can be a very difficult task, as language is as natural to us as breathing. Everything you look at brings to mind a label, and with it the many ideas, emotions and experiences which it has been linked to throughout your life. By the age of three we each have approximately 1000 words which we have not only heard, but also stored and created links to (Munro 2007). Each time we look at a person or an object a pathway in our brain is illuminated and a label is retrieved, not only for that object but for all the other objects and experiences with which it is associated. Language is the way in which we are able to make sense of our world. It is language which gives us the ability to link meaning, experiences and labels to these objects and find understanding in the world which we encounter each day.

Oral language development as a social process

Language is also crucial in building connections with other human beings. Oral language is essentially a social process in which we use the labels and understandings we have ascertained through language to communicate with others. It is the tool that binds humans together in communities and enables us to live as a social unit. Research suggests that oral language is essential to success as we are required to use it each day to communicate our needs and emotions with the world around us. Language provides the means to maintain a shared identity, relate to each other, and learn socially and culturally appropriate ways of behaving, speaking and thinking (Schoenberger, Campbell & Hanson 2005). "The social dimension of language as a human phenomenon is what makes language alive, dynamic and real." (Williams, Stathis and Gotsch 2008, p3). The relationship between language and social interaction is reciprocal; just as language assists our belonging to a social network, the interactions that take place with other language users within this network lead to new links and understandings about language. We "eventually learn how to use language to communicate messages and convey feelings that enable us to function in a society." (Schoenberger, Campbell & Hanson 2005 para 2)

The development of Oral Language

The reciprocity of social interaction and language acquisition defines learning language as an ongoing, natural process. It is in the years that precede schooling that a child's language begins to develop through the opportunities they have to communicate with other language users such as their parents and siblings. In fact, research shows that children can display receptive vocabulary at 9 months of age and begin uttering their first words at only 12 months. Weigel, Lowman and Martin (2007) suggest that when children are given positive opportunities for exposure and experimentation with language they are more likely to experience optimal language and literacy outcomes when they begin schooling. Furthermore, it is during these preschool years that language acquisition is dependant on participatory, social interaction with significant others and therefore can not be developed in the absence of these interactions (Dickinson and Tabors as cited in Weigel et al, 2007). Ordinarily these exchanges are predominantly between a child and its primary caregiver, but language development is not exclusive to these significant others. Each opportunity for interaction has an impact on language development, whether positive or negative, significant or minute. For language development to be valuable, these interactions need to come in many forms. A child is always observing interactions between other language users, at home they are hearing and seeing their family members communicating their emotions and thoughts to one another; At the shopping centre a child may observe unfamiliar persons conversing with each other, learning new vocabulary, pragmatics and being exposed to new discourses; in the doctors waiting room a child will observe other children relating and interacting with each other or their caregiver talking more formally to a receptionist about their appointment. Weigel, Lowman and Martin(2007) suggest that it is essential for adults to expose children to a variety of sounds and discourse for children to successfully develop their language. As these arrays of experiences build, a child's knowledge of language conventions begins to grow; how others use language in different situations; how others adapt their language use between different audiences; how others use language to achieve a purpose. "Oral language interactions and the chance to produce the language in meaningful dialogue and activities provide the practice that is critical to internalising the language"(Williams, Stathis and Gotsch 2008). Vygotsky (1978) found that children formulate language rules and conventions from models they observe in their social environments. They begin to internalise their understandings gained from external verbal interactions into organized thought and they are able to rationalise their world through the internal language they develop.

Just as interactions can have a positive influence on a child's language development, an environment which does not value oral language can have the polar effect. "Children's language development does not happen in a vacuum. Rather, it takes place in a powerful environment that can either help or hinder children's gains in speaking and listening abilities." (Weigel, Lowman and Martin 2007). Language development is dependant on the quality, quantity and nature of the interactions that occur at home and everyday settings. Hart and Risely (as cited in Weigel et al, 2007) suggest that for children who come from homes which are not as rich in oral language there is a significant delay in language acquisition. The rate at which a child develops speech is affected by the lack of discourse they are exposed to in their home environment. This delay is often apparent when a child begins their primary schooling and is expected to interact with peers of a similar age. "Not all children come to school with backgrounds that are rich in oral language. Many enter with partial expressive skills or knowing less vocabulary than their peers,"(Schoenberger, Campbell & Hanson 2005 para 5).

The Impact of Oral language development on Literacy Development

When language acquisition is impeded, it impacts not only the ability to be successful in oral interactions, but there are also further implications on the ability to develop successfully in Literacy. A Child's early knowledge about using language contributes to their Literacy development. Maurano (2009) identifies the dependence which Literacy acquisition has on a learner's proficiency in oral language. Just as we use language to make sense of our world, we also use language to make sense of a text. Levelt (1989) found that whether a communication is written or oral, the same cognitive processes occur at the formulator level. "To separate the teaching of reading from broader issues involved in literacy learning is problematic and opens up the prospect of a decontextualised approach to the teaching of reading. Such an approach would ignore the ways a child has been 'learning literacy' from infancy and fail to capitalise on the 'funds' of knowledge he/she brings to the formal reading setting (unknown author, 2007, para 3). Language and Literacy are always developing together. This implies that any difficulties that children face in their language acquisition will ultimately influence their literacy development, and in the same way literacy knowledge will impact on ability to acquire language. Due to the reciprocal nature of this development, any deficit which results will become more pronounced as the years of schooling progress (Aldridge 2005).

Implications on Teaching and Learning

This has great implications for the classroom setting. Schoenberger, Campbell & Hanson (2005) believe that oral language must be valued as a tool which enhances our learning and as such must play a significant role within a classroom. Therefore a classroom must be a place where discussion and

collaboration are encouraged. Dyson (as cited in Weigal et al, 2007) found that within a classroom that fostered rich peer talk, children encouraged others to extend and elaborate through modeling and direct instruction. Maurano (2009) believes that oral language does not require direct instruction as children are exposed to oral language everyday, but further research shows that there is a place for both immersion and scaffolded language activities which target specific language skills. As Schoenberger, Campbell & Hanson (2005) have identified earlier there is a large expanse between the oral language skills which children possess at the time they enter a primary school classroom. It can be assumed that the children who demonstrate proficiency in oral language skills have been previously exposed to a range of oral language as Maurano suggest, but this is not the case for children who enter the classroom with an apparent delay in their language production. Moreover, it is the lack thereof which ultimately results in this inequality of language proficiency. It is therefore imperative that these crucial interactions which many children have been denied be built into classroom practises. Fulk-Row (1996) indicates that with many children exposure is not enough. Some children require more explicit modeling and instruction in how to use language as an effective tool. An environment conducive to oral language development must be well-planned. Opportunities for experimenting with different aspects of language such as sounds, vocab, grammar, topic, and discourses need to be employed. The environment must be rich with materials and visual aids that encourage new and expanded vocabulary and create shared experiences to link positive emotion to their new learning.

The Teacher's Role in Enhancing Oral Language Acquisition

The role of the teacher is to provide a model of appropriate language, to expose them to a wide range of discourses and elaborate on children's expression when appropriate to highlight possible pathways of a discourse. Albridge (2005) believes that an important aspect in fostering a child's desire to communicate is to encourage risk taking and create an environment where children feel safe to experiment with language and discourse and feel that their ideas are validated ideas. By acknowledging children's oral explorations respectfully and praising the way children apply new language skills children feel valued and in turn appreciate the value of using language in this way (Albridge 2005). This provides the safety and security needed for children to feel enabled to explore with language and begin to automatise these new skills.

A Way of Examining Oral language Aspects

There are many skills which work together when using language effectively. Munro (2009) organises these language skills using the ICPALER model. This model provides a framework for discerning the ideas and competencies within the realm of oral language. Each of these aspects of communication can be

examined within the framework in order to identify difficulties in language acquisition and specific teaching points to address within a classroom. The ICPALER model can be used to create a language profile and highlight trends in a child's language acquisition which can then be addressed purposefully.

The model is organized into 6 aspects of language to consider when evaluating what a language user already knows, and areas in which they are still developing. The 6 aspects are described as Ideas, Conventions, Purpose, Ability to Learn, Expressive, Receptive.

Ideas relate to the meanings communicated through the different levels of language such as words, sentences, discourse and topic.

Conventions of language refer to the ability to use and manipulate language both expressively and receptively. The conventions illustrate how children use and manipulate sounds within words (phonological conventions), words within sentences (grammatical conventions) and sentences within discourse (genre conventions).

Purpose describes the way in which language is used in social interactions to achieve desired outcome. It includes skills such as managing and directing, listening and speaking between the lines, adjusting to context and audience, and using language for different goals.

Ability to Learn refers to ways of perceiving others oral language through hearing and short-term memory, ability to learn skills which enable language acquisition such as the ability to use symbols, conceptualise, link ideas, sequence ideas and transfer what has been learnt, and opportunities to develop Expressive and Receptive language skills (Munro 2009).

The Significance of Discourse in Being a Successful Language User

A significant aspect of language ideas identified by Munro is the concept of discourse. Discourse is the meaning created by integrating sentences into an idea which has more meaning than an isolated sentence. Any communication in which more than one idea (or sentence) is linked in some way, a discourse is gradually developing. The discourse of any communication begins to reveal a logical pathway which a language interchange may take (Munro 2009). Similar to the topic, the discourse develops a sequence or flow of the conversation, but unlike the topic, discourse is the term used to describe the communication as a whole. It describes the maintenance of topic, the thread which links ideas at a conceptual level and that gives the communication relevance to a particular audience or situation. Considering that each oral interaction can be defined as a discourse, it is essential that children learn to use discourse effectively.

There are many skills involved in participating in diverse discourses effectively, each of which can be monitored and targeted by teaching instruction to ensure success in oral language. In order to use discourse effectively children need to be able to:

- use conversational cues to identify and distinguish the discourse of each interaction. Discourse meanings need to be inferred by selecting key words and grammatical features of a discourse in order to become a successful participant.
- identify topic and retrieve prior knowledge of the topic at hand.
- develop networks of meanings in order to elaborate and remain within the appropriate discourse meaning
- link ideas within a discourse to create new learning pathways.
- predict possible pathways and formulate further ideas which may be appropriate. This especially pertains to the many discourses children are exposed to in classroom and expected to recreate eg. Narrative, description, exposition, recount etc.
- know particular rules or pragmatics of differing discourse which indicate required levels of participation and degree of formality.
- listen to others and use conversational cues such as pauses and eye contact to know when to become involved.
- track the discourse meaning to identify when ideas are inappropriate to the discourse.
- identify and use pronouns effectively to describe subjects which have been introduced in earlier interaction.
- to create a discourse that flows, or identify a discourse which is disjointed.
- identify the purpose and audience for each interaction.

Identifying Difficulties in Discourse

Difficulties in discourse can be identified by observing children's verbal interactions with others. As discourses vary in the skills they require it is possible for children to display difficulties in specific discourse types and not others. Therefore it is important to observe children in many situations, engaging in different discourses in order to make accurate conclusions about a children's competency with discourse. When observing a child within these discourses it is possible to note how well children are able to:

- keep track of a conversation
- predict what might be said next.
- maintain different types of discourse.
- identify when an idea is unfitting to a discourse.
- retell earlier events/stories in sequence.
- extend or elaborate on ideas.
- provide examples of ideas.
- ask question of others.
- present opposing point of view.
- use pronouns.
- recall main ideas.
- have ideas ready in time to participate before the conversation has moved on.

- follow instructions.
- comprehend stories they hear.
- Speak spontaneously without prompting.
- Using connectives.
- Verb agreement across sentences.

Implications of Difficulties in Discourse

When a child displays difficulties in any area of discourse and is unable to use discourse cohesively they will be less likely to link ideas and communicate with purpose. This can lead to a child being misunderstood in their interactions, they may lose meaning in their own language use and have difficulty understanding the meaning of others. These discrepancies may further lead to isolation or exclusion from social interactions and this will result in larger gaps in learning and competence. As teachers our core business is to increase a child's outcomes across all learning areas in order for them to function successfully within our society. Therefore it is imperative that any discrepancies identified be addressed with classroom instruction in order to give each student the best chance at functioning in our world. It is vital that children who are displaying difficulties in discourse cohesion are provided explicit instruction in the skills which they are lacking. Research shows that providing support and opportunities for students to practice a new skill helps them to store the new skill in long-term memory and ultimately become proficient in discerning when to use the new skill automatically. It is essential to provide scaffolding when introducing a new skill so that children may first practice new skills with assistance. They must also be given the opportunity to reflect on the value of their new skills, attaching positive emotion and purpose with their new learning. It is only then that children will begin to connect new skills with their networks of meaning and activate the process of automatising this skill.

Opportunities to Develop Discourse Cohesion

Fulk-Roww (1996) suggests that in a classroom environment where oral language is major medium of teaching and learning it is imperative that students learn to recognise and use these classroom genres in order to participate in discourse successfully. Children need to be presented with a range of discourses within the classroom so that they may begin to discriminate between their features and the different skills which they will need to use these skills effectively. Many "classroom" discourses occur as an authentic part of the classroom environment in which children have the opportunity to observe and practice these discourse repeatedly over a period of time. In relation to discourses which are not readily experienced within a classroom, it is possible to construct opportunities within the school environment to explore diverse discourses such as telephone conversations, playground discourse, discourse with adults, narrative discourse, consumer discourse, etc. Bauman

and May (as cited in Canning 2007) advocate play as a powerful way to develop language as children explore ideas and co-construct shared meaning. As they are able to participate autonomously, children develop a feeling of ownership over the play discourse and share a sense of empowerment. Play is a flexible learning tool as it is essentially a creative and fictional medium which is not dependant on resources to be effective. Children are able to “play a role” in any discourse by imitating interactions which they have experienced or learnt about without fear. Social play is something which children can participate in a safe and non-threatening way in order to experiment with new discourses. It has been suggested that play is intrinsically motivated as the child is able to decide how they engage in play, which interactions they engage in, the discourse of the play that they construct and the social connections they make. Discourses are initiated and developed by children. This enables them to attach meaning to their interaction and experiment with social discourses without inhibition. (Canning, 2007 p5).

The Impact on Literacy and Oral Language

Difficulties in Discourse have so many implications for a child’s ability to understand their interactions and the world in which they live that it is hard to dispute the positive impact which discourse development would have on both oral language and Literacy development. Children are expected to learn in a classroom setting predominately through oral discussion and instruction. When there is an obstacle, such as discourse difficulty, to gaining knowledge and learning from this instruction the ramifications for a child’s progression in their learning is great. If these ambiguities and misunderstandings can be addressed at the discourse level, a child is more likely to gain meaningful understandings within the classroom and further develop their oral language and, in turn, their literacy development. When a child can understand the message which is being conveyed to them by both the teacher and their peers, their learning in all areas of the curriculum would be enhanced. They would be able to engage in discussions about new topics and vocab, question things which they have not understood, and develop new networks of meanings to draw on when they are learning any new skill or topic. Discourse is the means which understandings can be developed and explored, and when these difficulties are addressed further difficulties in other areas of learning will be more easily targeted.

Conclusion

Language is a powerful tool in gaining meaning from the world around us. It gives us a way to conceptualise, catagorise and rationalise the things we encounter each day. Without an adequate grasp of language it is impossible to function adequately in our society. A child begins to learn conventions of language from a young age. When a young child is exposed to experiences involving language interactions they begin to analyse many aspects of communication and develop an understanding of how to use language effectively in different situations. These experiences give clues to many

aspects of language; vocab, sentence, discourse, topic, phonological conventions, grammatical conventions, genre conventions, purpose and audience. The opportunities for children to experience language in different contexts are a significant factor in early language development. Children who have not had the same opportunities may have later difficulties in aspects of their oral language, and ultimately their literacy development. As a classroom teacher it is important to address these inequalities and give each child an opportunity to become a successful member of their society. In the classroom oral language needs to be learnt in both informal and formal setting, with opportunities for social interaction being presented along with explicit instruction in oral language skills. In order for this instruction to be affective, we need to know what to look for when observing child's language and which skills to address. The ICPALER model organises skills which are crucial to oral language and acts as a document to aid in the profiling of a student's oral language, the skills which they possess, and the skills which they need exposure and instruction in. Discourse is an aspect of the ICPALER model which impacts greatly on a child's ability to understand their language interactions with others and gain meaning from those interactions. When a child has difficulty with Discourse they are greatly disadvantaged within a classroom setting and may have further difficulties as their schooling progresses. It is possible to address discourse difficulties within a classroom with explicit instruction and an planned opportunities for natural language acquisition to take place. Social play can be a powerful way to further develop discourse knowledge and competency as it allows a participant to engage in new discourses and develop new understandings of how to be a successful participant in discourse. The nature of discourse allows it to impact on all areas of learning as it assists in gaining meaning and new learning from any interaction. When discourse difficulties are addressed successfully this has a reciprocal effect on any new learning and give a child more chance of becoming a successful member of our society.

References

Aldridge, J. (2005). The importance of oral language. *Child Education*, 81, 77 – 81..

Canning, N (2007) Children's empowerment in play. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 15:2, 227-236.

Fulk-Row (1996) *Guiding Language Participation in Classroom Discourse: Strategies for Children with Language Difficulties*. Paper presented at the National Council for Teachers of English - Research Assembly, February 24 1996.

Honig, A (2007) Oral language Development, *Early Child Development and Care* 177:6 & 7, 581-613

Levelt, W (1995). The ability to speak: from intentions to spoken words. *European Review*, 3:1, 13-23.

Munro, J (2007) *Oral Language Supporting Early Literacy - OLSEL Pilot Program*. Melbourne: The University of Melbourne.

Munro, J (2009). *Oral Language Learning : the primary years*. Course notes (460735), The University of Melbourne.

Maurano (2009) *Exemplary Practises that Support Early Literacy*
http://www.bridgew.edu/Library/CAGS_Projects/MMAURANO/OralLanguage.htm
Downloaded September 20, 2009

Montessori, M. (1967) *The absorbent mind*, New York, Dell.

Schoenberger, L, Campbell, B & Hanson, S (2005) *Oral Language Development in the Early Years*
http://www.prel.org/readingframework/mod2/word_docs/Oral_Lang_Dev_Early_Years.doc
Downloaded September 20, 2009

unknown author (2007) *Submission to Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy*
http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/early_childhood_news/submissions/submission_to_inquiry_into_the_teaching_of_literacy.html

Downloaded September 20, 2009

Vygotsky, L (1978) *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological Processes*, Cambridge M.A, Harvard University Press.

Williams, C, Stathis, R and Gotsch, P (2008) *Speaking of Writing: The Significance of Oral Language in English Learners' Literacy Development*. Ruidoso, NM: Teacher Writing Centre.

Weigel, D, Lowman, J and Martin, S (2007) Language Development in the years before school: A comparison of developmental assets in home and child care settings, *Early Child Development and Care*, 177:6&7, 719-734.