

The importance of TOPIC within the Oral Language Learning

Literacy is developed and made purposeful within a way of life, and that way of life is described as people talk and interact with one another

Button & Millward, 2005 (para. 5)

Oral Language Learning

From a child's first few months they are exposed to communication in the form of speech, or, oral language. The ability of a young child to be exposed to and retain oral information and conventions suggests that oral language is a process of internal program where the individual must 'make sense' and store such information for their own use. It is through oral communication that a child first learns how to interact with their environment, imitating sounds, manipulating speech and ultimately, using language to meet an intrinsic purpose. A symbol system, where a word or phrase represents something that can be thought, felt, acted, seen, heard or imagined, allows for an effective path between one's own thinking and the thinking of others, or 'awesome' social interaction (Sterling Honig, 2007). Oral language is central to socialization, as much so, that Sterling Honig (2007) recalls usurpers in Tsarist Russia depriving heir line infants of any oral interaction when overthrowing the emperor. The infant would be put in a tower with a deaf-mute caregiver, thus, ensuring the child would never grow up 'normally' and not pose a threat to the usurpers.

Oral language is far more complex than merely speaking. Munro (2009) suggests that oral language comprises of numerous aspects which interact with each other to allow for communication. Children, most likely, would never know how much they have learnt in regards to such aspects of oral language (Sterling Honig, 2007). Although these aspects of oral language may remain a 'hidden' recipe within the mind of child, it is the ability to learn and use this information for communication that remains the critical notion. Lindfors (1987) writes that 'virtually every child, without special training, exposed to the surface structures of language ... builds for himself ... a deep-level, abstract, and highly complex system of linguistic structure' (Sterling Honig, 2007, p. 582). Munro (2009) implies that from experiences, children obtain 'patterns and rules' for utilising language. He breaks this up into two forms, a) E-Language: what the child uses to interact with other people and b) I-Language: the 'internal' knowledge a child creates from experiences. Therefore, oral language becomes speaking, listening, metacognitive processing and delivering of accurate (or most appropriate) language. Munro also suggests that it is the culture of the individual which shapes the E and I Language. Consequently, each person will differ in their I-Language as they have extracted from E-Language different ideas, rules and purposes for use. Ultimately, oral language knowledge enables us to effectively learn other new knowledge, connecting this with past knowledge, thus creating, the vehicle required for learning.

These various aspects of oral language together create the power of communication and purpose, the art of interaction and the science of language rules and conventions. This precedes any formal reading or writing skills an individual develops, but not without clear connection.

Oral Language Learning in the Early Years

One might ask how oral language relates to the development of students in the early years. This question may be better answered by another: 'how can oral language not relate to the development of students in the early years'. Research in relation to oral language learning with the early years of schooling has greatly suggested that such learning occurs regardless of teaching, but happens much more successfully and confidently with explicit instruction, experiences and direction. Articles by Sterling Honig (2007), Kirkland and Patterson (2005), Button and Millward (2005), Kobayashi (2008) and Lain (2003) all affirm the opinion that it is crucial to effectively teach and allow experiences for oral language and its development. Button and Millward (2005) express the need to give 'a higher status to talk in the classroom' as children come to school 'as experienced language users, used to talking and listening' (para. 3). Kirkland and Patterson (2005) assert that an indicator of success or struggle at school is the amount of oral language a child has attained. Within this article, Clay (1991) states,

If children have been slow to acquire speech or have been offered few opportunities to hold conversations there can be limitations in the grammar they control, which might mean that they have difficulties in comprehending oral and written language. (p. 38)

Therefore, without sufficient oral language instruction, a student may be disadvantaged from the very onset of learning, not equipped with an effective and primary source for understanding and using information. For students within the early years of schooling to show and feel success, oral language must be a central part of all learning, with an explicit approach to allowing students to develop their own knowledge of oral language and the key purpose of its nature.

Oral Language and links to Early Literacy acquisition

'The development of oral language is crucial to a child's literacy development' and academic and social success (Kirkland and Patterson, 2005, p. 391). Psychologists such as Piaget and Vygotsky have recognised the important relationship that exists between language and thought (Neuman, 2006). Roth et al (2002) acknowledged the work of Aram and Nation (1980), Catts (1993) and Wilson and Risucci (1998) who suggested that 'an oral language deficit in preschool years continues a risk factor for successful literacy acquisition' (p. 259).

Students use words (language) to develop concepts, which could in fact, drive cognitive development. It has been suggested that a child with higher oral language skills may often think more deeply and better express themselves, a theory which seems quite logical (Neuman, 2006).

Within early literacy acquisition, oral language is the primary method by which students learn to extend their knowledge. Without a connection with oral language, learning how to read and write would seem near impossible. Below I have illustrated the relationship between oral language, reading and writing.

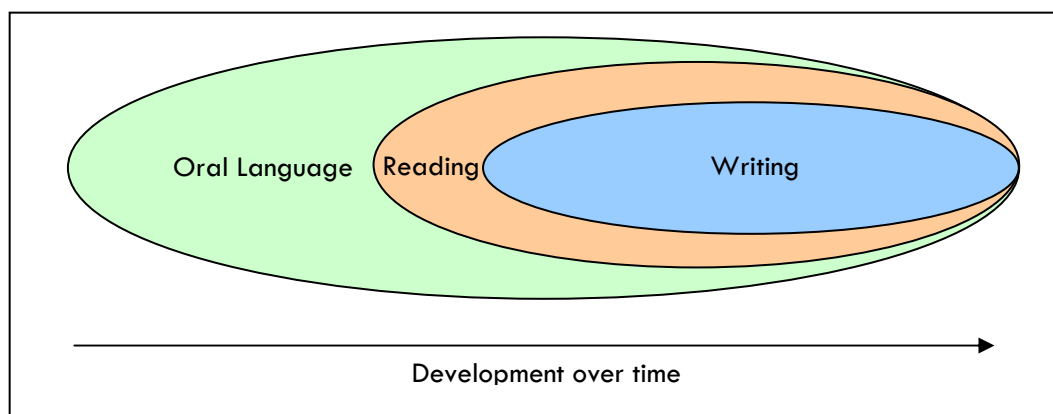


Diagram 1: Development of Literacy Knowledge

The diagram above illustrates how oral language not only precedes reading and writing, but how reading and subsequently, writing is 'laid' upon an oral language foundation and use thereof. Bowyer-Crane et al (2007) predict that a child having oral language difficulties would benefit from interventions that promote linguistic comprehension. This would then become a platform for reading comprehension, the primary purpose for reading. Similarly, one must be able to read and gather visual information prior to writing (writing as effective communication). Button and Patterson (2005) state that 'literacy is a development of our experience of oral language forms' and this should be considered when helping to develop children's literacy (para 9). Furthermore, Button and Pattern feel that all written forms of language connect with the spoken word. Consequently, it would be seemingly impossible to separate oral language from reading and writing.

Munro (2009) has developed a model for investigating oral language. The model ICPALER is an acronym for Ideas, Conventions, Purpose, Ability to Learn and Expressive and Receptive language. Oral language, as it is discussed within the model, offers key points for not only linking oral language experiences through Literacy, but allows one to investigate how to close the gap between what a student can do and where they need to go. The model came about due to the need to attend to oral language as a means of achieving higher literacy results. Munro expresses the research 'has shown that children's literacy ability is linked with their knowledge of how:

- words are used and what they mean,
- to speak accurately and to use sound patterns in their language
- to speak accurately in sentences
- to stay on the topic of a message
- to use speech to say what they want, how they feel, to communicate their goals and intentions and
- to teach themselves new words and ways of speaking.' (p. 7)

In summary, a child's literacy ability is severely enhanced through the implementation of an effective oral language focus with the classroom.

Literacy is central to all learning and without firm literacy knowledge; students cannot ascertain specific knowledge and skills in other areas. Oral Language, specifically, impacts all aspects of curriculum and is therefore crucial for the academic and social development of all students (Kirkland and Patterson, 2005).

Topic aspect of Oral Language

Although the ICPALER model (Munro) describes the key areas with oral language learning, there are many aspects which resinate within each of these. One such aspect is that of topic and associated knowledge. Visualise for a moment talking about a topic you have little or no knowledge about, for example, robotic technology. Now, imagine you are discussing how such a technological advancement has taken place over time and how to design the ultimate robotic model. It is difficult, no doubt. I personally do not know enough about this subject to hold a conversation, let alone stay interested. I certainly would not choose to read a book about robots and I do not see myself writing such a book. Prior to exploring this topic I would need to gather everything I could to ensure I could keep some comprehension while talking or reading. Hence, I would need to employ my knowledge of the topic (if not develop my knowledge) to successfully interact. Munro describes topic meanings as a 'coat hanger' for ideas. A place in the mind to 'hang' new ideas and to predict what might be expected. Having knowledge about the topic will also help you stay relevant to the situation or experience. Within the area of topic knowledge is associated vocabulary. Knowing topic vocabulary will enhance both conversation and comprehension. A topic has specific words or sentences which maintain relevance. We could call this a vocabulary network. Such a network could be constructed within the memory as described below. It is important to note here that vocabularies (or concepts) are stored in three ways; the image, action and symbol.

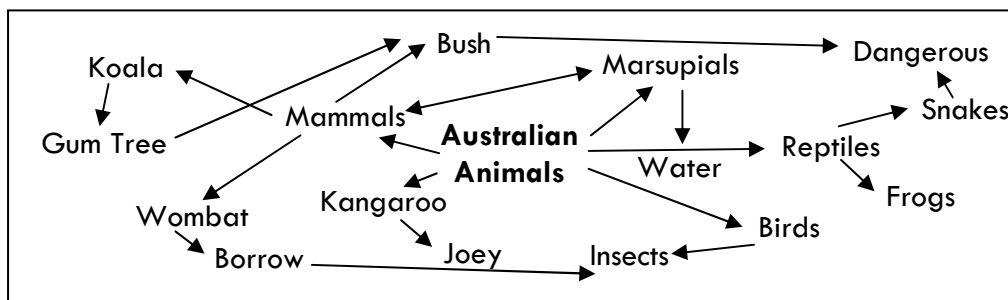


Diagram 2: An example of a Vocabulary Network.

If a child was reading a book about Australian Animals, the above diagram could represent what they know. They would know what words to possibly expect and how certain terms interact with the topic. Similarly, if the child learns a new word, they would have somewhere to 'hang' the new knowledge on. This child would have an advantage over a child who does not know of any Australian Animals, or has store insufficient information. Obviously, a vocabulary network can become as large as the specific knowledge one gains. Kobayashi (2008) supports this theory stating that topic knowledge provides a basis for remembering and understanding. Kobayashi's study investigated the use of paraphrasing and summarising and noted that when linked with topic knowledge, comprehension was much deeper. Essentially, a greater amount of information was retained.

Knowledge of topic also helps one to ascertain the response of others and hence, reach a purpose for communication. Munro (2009) writes that when talking a child may take necessary steps to see what others know and adjust their communication accordingly. One may also desire the reverse effect, where they display their superiority by limiting the comprehension of the audience. Regardless of the situation, without topic knowledge, the purpose for communication would become void.

Implications of Topic on Oral Language learning

It is clear that without topic knowledge, learning would prove a difficult task. In fact, what would the purpose be? Most children begin school with adequate knowledge to initiate conversation about topics which are important to them (Button and Millward, 2005). The very first implication for oral language learning is to ensure 'topical talk' has a defined space within learning time. Allowing students to develop further knowledge through scaffolded talk with peers and teachers will help to develop further oral language structures and ideas. It will allow for students to frame-up a purpose for talking and communicating. They will maintain interest and increase their comprehension of the topic during the discussion.

Using a specific topic also allows students to learn oral language structures in a meaningful way. Kirkland and Patterson (2005) summarise this accurately:

Because ... frameworks for curricula build on and are driven by the interests of and questions of the children, they provide opportunities for rich conversations incorporating content language. (p. 394)

It would be highly possible to develop specific aspects of oral language (and literacy in general) using all areas of the curriculum. The topic becomes the catalyst for further knowledge development of ideas, conventions and purposes.

Ultimately, students need to be exposed to language through spoken form to enhance their knowledge. The learning of oral language, as indicated in ICPALER, needs to be explicit and time rich. It requires the use of topic to ensure the learning is both meaningful and retained. That is, students need to learn oral language knowledge in context. Described below is a developmental pathway for learning to use a new word. It is critical that the child:

1. Hear the word
2. Experience the use of the word within context
3. Experiment with the use of the word through rehearsal, play or direct dialogue
4. Automate when and how to use the new word appropriately.

These points all involve the use of topic knowledge and development through recognising a purposeful use for the word, 'playing' with the word within context and joining this new word to their existing vocabulary network. The child has moved from 'learning how to say the word' to 'learning how to use the new word'. This has become part of their I-Language, thus, allowing them to use it in their E-Language. If we were to subtract the context or topic for learning the new word it would become difficult to recognise where and when to use the new word, or simply, why the new word is necessary for communication.

Analysing the topic knowledge of a child may also help diagnose where difficulties may be in regards to oral language. If a student is unable to maintain a conversation among peers it may present as an inability to effectively communicate through speech. Although this may be true, it could also be a result of not linking topic knowledge to the conversation or not having any topic knowledge to present. The child may also not be able to change the conversation for his own purpose, again, not able to use specific topic information to connect with another. One could also investigate how the child retrieves information on a topic and the information

which is taking up the 'thinking space' of the child, consequently, counteracting any chance of effective comprehension.

Ultimately, without the knowledge of topic within the appropriate context a child's ability to use oral language may become inhibited. They may not be able to participate and learn new information as a result of having no 'coat hanger' on which to store information. Oral language development is dependent on the topic level of new learning; learning within an appropriate context.

Implications of Topic on Literacy Learning

'Language and vocabulary represent the very foundation of learning to read and write' (Neuman, 2006, para. 1). It is through the process of using topic specific vocabulary in the course of oral experiences that students are able to read and construct text. Little can be achieved by disregarding the topic knowledge required by an individual. It is through this knowledge that an individual makes sense of the world and defines a required purpose, hence, making meaning which is what reading is all about.

Consider reading a book with a group of students. It would be useless to simply read the text from start to finish in five minutes without the input of the students, if comprehension of the text is valued. It would however, be wise to conduct conversation around the thoughts of the students prior to reading the text. Allow students the time to discuss and retrieve information necessary for understanding the text. Access vocabulary networks, gather experiential knowledge and make predictions about the text. Allow students to partake in the reading process through the use of conversation. Students are at an advantage if they have had the experience of developing contexts through their talk (Button and Millward, 2005). While reading it is important to stop and process new information giving students an opportunity to 'hang' such information on their 'coat hangers'. Students will have a much easier time actively constructing meaning if they are able to build the context prior to, during and after reading (Lain, 2003). Similarly, the writing process requires an equal amount of oral language and topic knowledge. The student must talk about their writing prior to, during and after writing. This process will enhance the final product and the learning which is taking place as children use the natural medium of language for thinking (Neuman, 2006). Button and Millward (2005) conclude that it is 'not possible to attend to the children's reading and writing (or their knowledge and understanding [of a topic]) without attending to their talk' (para. 1). By allowing students to talk we are inevitably cultivating their development as members of a literate society.

The research conducted by Kobayashi (2007) found that topic knowledge 'enhanced the recall of ideas' within text (p. 133). Kobayashi related this to prior findings that 'topic knowledge was positively associated with memory and understanding of a single text' (p. 133). This highlights the important role of topic knowledge in the processing of text and literacy outcomes.

Implications for Early Years Teachers

Understanding that children experience greater success with reading when they have brought together their prior knowledge, indicates that it necessary to engage students in oral language (Lain, 2003). It is through this process of structured oral language that a child is able to construct meaning and draw from the text, information needed for comprehension. Taking into account the ICPALER model, teachers have a clear outline of oral language to follow within the classroom environment. They are able to use

the model to diagnose where students have limited knowledge, analyse this and teach in a targeted manner. Literacy learning can only be enhanced through the explicit instruction of oral language. Button and Millward (2005) stress that children require the opportunity and encouragement to talk to good purpose, with listeners in mind. Teachers can successfully provide such opportunities through the use of topic knowledge. There are numerous strategies which can be employed for this purpose. Kirkland and Patterson (2005) use the work of Hall (1987) to describe the key conditions that are required for oral language to emerge within the classroom. These points have been summarised below as they have specific implications for the classroom environment:

1. Students should be the major constructors of language,
2. Language should be embedded in the context of daily life,
3. Students should construct meaning through language for comprehension related to their world and print,
4. The conditions for developing language are identical to those for learning about the world,
5. Students are immersed in specific social interaction,
6. Language is learned through initiation of the student.

If early years teachers were to take these points into consideration, they would find that the environment of the classroom becomes conducive for oral language development. Children's work should be shared and displayed allowing students to discuss a topic or idea. Similarly, other print within the classroom would also link within common topics so that children can build their knowledge prior to learning in all areas of the curriculum. Teachers could also reserve a space in the classroom to allow play to occur. This could include toys, dress-ups, scripts and guides for sharing topical information, such as show and tell. Beyond this, teachers may also link oral language through literature, thus predicting and retrieving prior knowledge, paraphrasing and summarising during reading and recalling and drawing conclusions after reading a text. Doing this through the use of topic may enable students to successfully interact with the text. If a teacher draws out content specific vocabulary and defines these based on the illustrations and context, students will add to their existing knowledge (Kirkland and Patterson, 2005).

Another key aspect for the classroom environment is to ensure there are clear and authentic connections made between the world of the children and that of text. This is enhanced through the use of topic knowledge and building, which impacts on oral language. Children bring with them varied understandings of the same topic and can enrich the context greatly through discussion. Furthermore, students should be engaged in the meaning behind the text and interpret this for themselves adding to their existing knowledge. This is achieved through talk and explicit learning, whereby, students discuss the process they used to develop new understandings.

When planning for literacy development in the classroom it would be ideal for the teacher to explicitly indicate where they are meeting the needs of oral language through the program. This would allow teachers to create a clear pathway for development and keep a record of the various skills the students may be showing and that which needs to be planned for following weeks. By investigating oral language outcomes, as we do reading and writing outcomes, teachers can begin to focus on key instruction and learning objectives in this area. This may also ensure the classroom environment and program is encouraging a value towards oral language learning.

Oral language and topic knowledge are central to all literacy learning and must be recognised as so. Neuman (2006) urges teachers to 'never underestimate the importance of language and vocabulary. When you plan for and regularly use some of these strategies, you are building literacy for children's lifelong learning' (para. 11). A child ultimately needs to become aware of the use of language and its purpose within interaction. It is by recognising language, and in particularly oral language, that a child is able to experience and use their knowledge for effective communication. It is therefore the role of the teacher to ensure that there are multiple opportunities for this within the curriculum on all occasions. Utilising strategies to introduce topic knowledge ensures students are able to participate on various levels of thinking and talking.

Conclusion

'Since social context is so critical for rich oral language acquisition ... teachers need to become aware of their own understandings about how language is organised and what the different aspects of language are' (Honig, 2007, p. 611). The model developed by Munro (2009), ICPALER, allows teachers the possibility of extending their own knowledge and the knowledge of their students. They are able to use the model to address 'gaps' in understandings and construct meaningful oral language and literacy experiences. With the use of topic knowledge, oral language is further enhanced and provides a platform for students to interact socially. Explicit learning can also take place here as students articulate not only what they are thinking, but how their thinking has changed and developed. Ultimately, to make sense of what we read and write we need to make connections with our oral knowledge (Munro, 2009). Hence, oral language is intertwined with all learning of new knowledge and requires high attention within the educational context. Through understanding how oral language operates and how to use it effectively, students are further equipped to develop key skills needed to be an active social participant.

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