

Developing Oral Language in Primary Classrooms

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The development of oral language in classrooms has been an incidental occurrence historically. The amount of oral language that children have is an indicator of their success or struggle in school. To meet the needs of these children, teachers can make oral language development a primary focus for instruction. This article examines ways that teachers can both implicitly and explicitly teach children about language and its functions in primary classrooms through the environment, connections to literature, developmentally appropriate oral language activities, and engaging curricula.

KEY WORDS: oral language development; language development; early literacy; oral language instruction; literature for oral language development.

The development of oral language is crucial to a child's literacy development, including listening, speaking, reading and writing. While the culture of the child influences the patterns of language, the school environment can enable children to refine its use. As children enter school, they bring diverse levels of language acquisition to the learning process. Therefore, teachers face a challenge to meet the individual needs of each language learner, as well as discerning which methods work most effectively in enhancing language development. Conflicting messages regarding methodology in oral language development have resulted in a heavy reliance on programs and "quick fixes", inhibiting the use of authentic, contextualized language experiences in classrooms.

Most recently, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 has placed an overemphasis on using standardized means of testing children, while holding schools accountable for systematic progress during the year. While NCLB emphasizes scientifically research-based teaching methods, many of these methods primarily promote the teaching of discrete pieces of information and a fragmented curriculum

(Aldridge, 2003). The development of oral language, which ultimately impacts all aspects of curriculum, has been relegated to a more incidental by-product of many classrooms, in order to allow time to drill children on test items. Additionally, as curriculum is pushed down into the primary grades, teachers feel the need to spend time on academic content, rather than allowing children opportunities to build language.

The diversity of cultures in our schools presents additional challenges for teachers as they become understandably perplexed related to meeting the need for appropriate oral language activities for English Language Learners (ELL), as well as children whose primary language is English. When teachers make informed decisions related to their classroom practices, the experiences they provide for children tend to become more descriptive in nature, rather than prescriptive (Freeman & Freeman, 2004).

Hall (1987) found that oral language emerges in children when the following conditions are present: (a) children are the major constructors of language; (b) parent, teachers, and caregivers serve as facilitators, not transmitters, of language development; (c) language is embedded in the context of the daily life of the child; (d) children construct language in their pursuit of meaning and comprehension related to their world and print; (e) the conditions for developing language are identical to those for learning

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about the world; (f) social interaction is foundational to language development; (g) children understand the functions of language as they use it to clarify information about themselves and others; and (h) language is learned in a child-initiated, holistic manner.

Children acquire language through implicit and explicit instruction (Brabham & Villaume, 2002). The classroom can serve as a Mecca of language events that help children to construct new understandings about receptive and expressive language. The cost of deleting oral language development from our classrooms is high. Clay (1991) states,

If children have been slow to acquire speech or have been offered few opportunities to hold conversations (for many reasons) there can be limitations in the grammar they control, which might mean that they have difficulties with comprehending oral and written language. Such children may not have control of some of the most common sentence structures used in storybook English, and therefore are unable to anticipate what may happen next in the sentences of their reading texts. (p. 38)

Teachers can facilitate this language development process through several venues. This article will describe ways to enhance oral language development in primary classrooms, through the environment, connections to literature, developmentally appropriate oral language activities, and engaging curricula.

ENVIRONMENT

The development of oral language is facilitated through a carefully planned environment that promotes thoughtful, authentic opportunities to engage in conversations.

- Classrooms should be print rich with the language of the children. Children prefer to see their own work, rather than materials purchased from school supply stores and vendors. Any student work, including artwork, displayed on the wall of the classroom should be accompanied by a self-selected title or other related language associated with the piece.
- Teachers should also be aware that children use print available to them in the classroom when becoming readers and writers. Print on the walls should be functional and represent extensions of the studies that permeate the curriculum. Therefore, simple tasks, such as signing in or marking lunch choices each day should be facilitated by picture clues and language. Schedules for the daily classroom activities should be posted with pictures and words so children are capable of utilizing them independently. Coauthored charts, graphs, and language experience activities also comprise appropriate print for classrooms. This use of language from the children in the classroom represents a more holistic way of building language. Children understand the functionality of language when they see and hear themselves and others participating in language experiences.

- Classroom libraries should be organized in order to teach children self-selection, care, and use of books.
- The use of displayed environmental print and opportunities to utilize that print in meaningful activities connects signs, symbols, and logos found in the world of the child to print in the classroom (Kirkland, Aldridge, & Kuby, 2002). In a print rich classroom, teachers will notice children's collaborative efforts to use this functional print available to them as they attempt to make sense of their classroom and their world.
- Areas of the room should be devoted to children's retellings of favorite stories in order to enhance language development. Flannel board stories, dress-up areas, puppets, stories on overhead transparencies, as well as listening centers help children to experiment and explore stories repeatedly. While we see many of these activities provided in preschool and some kindergarten classrooms, their existence in the primary classroom is practically void. The prevalent use of 'cut and paste' stories in classrooms, however, does not reap the rich language that can be found when children are reenacting stories through more engaging experiences. This type of retelling encourages all children, including the ELL learner, to participate in the way that makes sense to them.
- Print rich classrooms contain many opportunities for children to socially interact with each other. Scheduled times for children to share and converse with each other enable them to expand their knowledge about language use. For example, a class meeting each morning and afternoon provides children the opportunity to talk about what is going on at home and in the classroom.
- Rituals and routines provide non-threatening venues for children to experiment with language. At the end of each day, an afternoon meeting, taking about 15–20 minutes, gives children a chance to converse about challenges and successes during the school day. A ritual song, poem, or book sends children home with language echoing in their minds. These rituals and routines also provide a non-threatening, predictable environment for children of all cultures to build a safe classroom community where children feel safe to express themselves in the most comfortable manner they choose.

CONNECTIONS WITH LITERATURE

Children's literature provides great models of language for children. Appropriate and engaging books offer opportunities for rich discussion in the classroom.

- Teachers should be discriminate in the literature they purchase for the classroom. With tight budgets in virtually every system in our nation, many teachers use their personal monies or small school funds to purchase books for the classroom. A knowledge of good authors and stories that contain strong storylines invite children to visit and revisit the content of the books, as well as initiate conversations related to the books.
- Teachers should use a variety of instructional strategies to support the use of children's literature throughout a child's primary years. It is particularly important that teachers use books like *Haunted Castle on Hallow's Eve* that include a variety of interesting words. If teachers ask students to say these words and define them based on the illustrations and

context of the story, children add to their knowledge of how words sound and what they mean. It is important to include books that offer ‘interesting’ words to stretch the child’s vocabulary and to balance novels that only model contemporary speech.

- Teachers must remember that children continue to love to play with language through the primary years and beyond. For instance, primary grade readers of Cooper’s *I Got a Family* delight when the little girl in the story said, “I got a Grampy, loves me sweet; takes me to Frosty’s for a treat.” When a teacher encourages children to create a rhyme about someone in their families that includes what they do together, she is nurturing the continued love of rhythm and sounds of language.
- Teachers must also remember the value of wordless picture books in stimulating oral language development. For instance, we recently saw a teacher institute a ‘story-tell’ around Chris Van Allsburg’s book, *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*. The students sat in a circle and the teacher encouraged them to look hard at the picture and notice as many details as possible. The teacher began the story and each child was encouraged to add to it, one after another around the circle. Only the person holding the “talking stick” could speak. The rest of the students listened carefully so that when their turns came, they would know what had happened so far in the story and were able to add a piece that made sense.

The use of activities with books like those outlined above will nurture children’s language development. Questions that can be used with a variety of books include such things as:

- How did you feel when you read this part of the story?
- What problems had to be solved in this story? What would you do to solve the problem?
- What other book (or story, video, movie) does this one make you think about? How are they alike? Different?
- If you were a character in this story, who would you want to be? What would you do?
- How does this story connect to something in your life?

In Table I we offer a listing of books to promote oral language development.

- Discussions centering around books should contain elements of questioning and conversation that mimic the real world of readers and writers. For example, low level questioning such as “Who are the characters in the story?” is important, but leave an impression with the child that reading is about looking for discrete pieces of information to regurgitate to the teacher. However, when high-level questions are asked such as “Does this book remind you of something that has happened to you?” meaning becomes the primary focus for the reading process. Children who engage in discussions that resemble those discussions found at the local bookstore or bookclub gatherings are more likely to become part of the “literacy club” (Smith, 1988; Strickland & Taylor, 1989).
- Teachers can no longer afford to squeeze a read aloud book between lunchtime and bathroom break. Because reading aloud is so important to language development, we must systematically and explicitly plan for its use in the daily routine (Headrick & Pearish, 2003; Morrow, 2003). Through this planned read aloud experience, allow time for language building prior to reading the book. During the reading of

Table I. Suggested Children’s Literature to Promote Oral Language Development

Barber, T., Barber, R., & Burleigh, R. (2004). *By my brother's side*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Blake, Q. (1996). *Clown*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., Inc.

Burton, V. L. (1978). *The little house*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

Bryan, A. (1989). *Porquoi tales: The cat’s purr, why frog and snake never play together, the fire bringer*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

Cooper, M. (1997). *I got a family*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., Inc.

Cronin, D. (2002). *Giggle, giggle, quack*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Defelice, C. (1997). *Willy’s silly grandma*. London: Orchard Books.

Fleming, C. (2002). *When Agnes caws*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Gag, W. (1977 [1928]). *Millions of cats*. New York: Putnam.

George, K. O. (1997). *The great frog race and other poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

Hodges, M. (1990). *Saint George and the dragon*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co.

Johnston, T. (1996). *The ghost of Nicholas Greebe*. New York: Penguin Group, Inc.

Kennedy, X. J. (1992). *Talking like the rain*. Boston: Little, Brown, & Co.

Lewin H. (1990). *Jafta*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publications Co.

Long, M. (2003). *How I became a pirate*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.

Martin, B. Jr., & Archambault, J. (1989). *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (1989). New York: Simon & Schuster.

McCloskey, R. (1976). *Make way for ducklings*. New York: Viking Penguin.

McKissack, P. (1986). *Flossie and the fox*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.

Merriam, E. (1998). *What in the world?* New York: Harper Collins.

Osborne, M. (2003). *Haunted castle on Hallow’s Eve*. New York: Random House, Inc.

Polacco, P. (1998). *Chicken Sunday*. New York: Putnam.

Prelutsky, J. (2001). *Pizza the size of the sun*. New York: Green Willow Books.

Silverstein, S. (1981). *A light in the attic*. New York: Harper Collins.

Steig, W. (1969). *Sylvester and the magic pebble*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Van Allsburg, C. (1996). *The mysteries of Harris Burdick*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Note: The children’s books were selected for children in primary grades.

- the book, we can conduct think-alouds as we move through the book. After the reading of the book, we facilitate the “grand conversations” (Peterson & Eeds, 1999) about the book, making connections to the world of the children in the classroom and other texts. These conversations might include favorite passages or illustrations from a book, retellings, recommendations about the book, or collaborative reviews of the book. For example, *Whoever You Are* by Mem Fox (2001) lends itself well to a discussion of the similarities found in the children of our own classrooms. By pairing this book with another book, such as *Hello World* by Manya Stojic (2002), children develop feelings of acceptance as they hear each other’s comments and conjectures related to the book and each other’s culture. These books represent relevant topics of discussion when attempting to transform our classrooms into more just environments for all children.
- By pairing works of art, music, poetry, dance, and drama in classrooms with selected books, children can make connections with multiple mediums of representation. During the fall of the year, pair Lois Ehlert’s (1991) *Red Leaf, Yellow Leaf* with Vivaldi’s Concerto No. 3 in F Major, “Autumn”, allowing children to reenact falling leaves. Demi’s (1990) *The Magic Pot* can be supported by the visual art of Chinese artist Li Keran entitled, “The new moon shines on the nine provinces”. When viewing works of art, use high-level questions such as: What ideas do you think the artist is trying to convey? What does the work of art remind you of? How does the artist use color, texture, line, space, or perspective to evoke a particular feeling about the painting? What does this painting tell us about the culture or context of the story we have read? These are questions that provide a core for meaningful conversations with children. When children are accustomed to conversations related to works of art, they are more likely to participate in conversations related to texts.
 - Readers’ theater (RT) is a “presentation of text that is expressively and dramatically read aloud by two or more readers” (Hancock, 2004, p. 288) and can be an effective venue for children to connect with literature. The primary emphasis is on reading aloud and on creating pictures of what’s happening in the text in the minds of the audience. Even though students read from a prepared script, they use their prior knowledge to connect with and interpret the text to gain personal meaning. Almost any story can be scripted for readers’ theater. Although some experts on readers’ theater argue that there should not be even the slightest change in the author’s work, we disagree and believe that teachers should change the work as needed for student performance. Readers’ theater also builds fluency for children who are low language learners or who are attempting to learn a new language (Manning, 2004).

DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE ORAL LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES

By building language building activities and experiences into the regular curriculum and the daily routine of the classroom, teachers can meet the needs of all children related to language development.

- A wonderful language building activity that has disappeared from classrooms, Show and Tell, enables children to describe self-selected items they have brought to school to share with other children. With the object in a bag or box, the child must give clues about the chosen object.
- The instructional strategy of daily news gives children the opportunity to see their language written down. As the year progresses, the daily news should move from a dictation activity to a more interactive writing (McCarrier, Pinnell, & Fountas, 2000) activity with the children assuming increased responsibility for the conventions of writing. The daily news also provides an opportunity for children to tell their stories orally before attempting to write the story. Through this oral rehearsal for writing, children clarify the stories and ideas they want to make public.
- Shared reading is a way of recreating the lapreading experience for children, as well as enhancing the development of oral language (Holdaway, 1979). One of the tenets of shared reading is the repeated reading of the story. It is through this revisiting of texts that children build familiarity of words and sounds contained in the text. This instructional strategy allows all children to participate in the reading as the text becomes more familiar. When the teacher uses a book appropriate for shared reading, it can be used for great language expansion activities. For example, the picture walk through the book on the first day allows children to predict about the story. Webbing, language experience charts, and venn diagrams are other ways to activate the child’s knowledge.
- A carefully planned guided reading lesson can also facilitate the development of oral language. When teachers utilize guided reading in their classrooms, they typically spend time at the beginning of the lesson to build prior knowledge about the topic of the book the children will be attempting to read (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). This is the perfect opportunity for teachers to plan a language building activity.

ENGAGING CURRICULA

Planning curricula around relevant, child-initiated topics facilitates the development of oral language. Integration of content area subjects provides a meaningful way to develop academic language.

- In primary classrooms, the “project approach” (Katz & Chard, 2000) or “theme immersion” (Manning, Manning, & Long, 1994) provide frameworks for planning appropriate curricula. Because these frameworks for curricula build on and are driven by the interests and questions of children, they provide opportunities for rich conversations incorporating content language. This interweaving or layering of subject matter helps children make connections between their world and school.
- Displayed realia and artifacts related to topics of study in the classroom provide opportunities for critical dialogue (Gentile, 2003). As children use a “minds-on” (Duckworth, 1987) approach to learning, they construct knowledge and language related to content areas of the curriculum.
- Animals in the classroom also provide a purpose for learning language through research. Flopsy, the classroom rabbit, was the topic of many conversations, as well as

content writing. The children decided the class needed a word bank related to words about Flopsy. The words the children stated they needed to write with included claws, sharp, fur, hop, carrot, clover, and kit. These words became part of the language of the classroom stories related to Flopsy.

CONCLUSION

Oral language is crucial to the literacy development. It is a key indicator of children's reading abilities (Dickinson, Cote, & Smith, 1993). We are finding that as schools become more pressured to cover test content, the opportunities for oral language in classrooms diminish. Additionally, the need for oral language experiences will increase as our schools reflect the diversity found in the United States today. By examining our own classroom environments, literacy materials, activities, and curricula, we can ensure that the foundational need for oral language development is not jeopardized. Print rich environments with predictable routines provide children with non-threatening contexts for language exploration. Appropriate and accessible literacy materials give children the opportunity to be immersed in language in oral and written form. Carefully planned literacy activities build on the language knowledge of the children in the classroom so that every child can participate in the process. Authentic and relevant curricula engage children in the learning process as they acquire language. It is through the planned, thoughtful orchestration of these resources that children build language quite naturally.

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