

# Oral Language Play and Learning

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Oral language and written language are different linguistic modes and both are important in their own right. This article briefly describes oral language from linguistic, social interactionist and cognitive development viewpoints as each view highlights different aspects of oral language. An example of a play based developed oral language program is provided as a way of illustrating how play is multidimensional in the way it contributes to oral language.

Oral language is one mode of meaning making alongside visual, auditory, gestural and spatial forms of communication. Oral language is central to learning yet it is often undervalued in written cultures because written language is the primary means of access to power and privilege. Spoken language is important in its own right and especially in school as it is central to teaching and learning.

From a linguistic viewpoint Halliday (1985) writes that spoken language in all its many forms is as highly structured and organised as written language. Oral and written language are both important but each provides different ways of knowing. Oral language functions allow students to think and access knowledge in different ways. There are many ways spoken language is used to express meaning, for example to problem solve, hypothesise, imagine and inform (Halliday, 1975).

Oral language is closely related to thinking and understanding. From a social interactionist view

point Vygotsky's (1978) view of how the individual learns through interactions with others is also important for spoken language. Higher forms of cognitive functioning are mediated by culturally derived artifacts such as signs and symbols for example in spoken and written language. Private speech, or thinking and talking out loud, is used for planning, memorising and regulating behaviour.

Alongside linguistic and social interactionist views of oral language there is an increasing body of research from cognitive and developmental psychology which examines the elements of oral language and their relationships to later literacy learning. Phonology, vocabulary, syntax, discourse, and pragmatics are aspects of oral language that children need to have control over prior to starting the beginning to read process (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). In a review of research, the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) concluded that some aspects of oral language, such as phonological awareness have substantial correlations with decoding and vocabulary and narrative discourse relate to reading comprehension. The quest for finding which particular aspects of oral language predict literacy development has created a large body of research. However, rather than seeking one particular aspect of oral language as predictive of future literacy development, Roth, Speece and Cooper (2002) write that oral language is multidimensional in the way it contributes to early reading.

Table 1 Language functions used to express meaning

Language functions (Halliday, 1975)	
instrumental	'I want' language as a means of getting and satisfying personal needs. Example: 'Can I have the cup?'
regulatory	'Do as I tell you' controlling the behaviour, feelings or attitudes of others. Example: 'I want to go home now'
interactional	'Me and you' getting along with others, establishing relative status. Also me against you—establishing separateness. Example: 'You want to play?'
personal	'Here I come' language to tell about themselves, awareness of self, pride. Example: 'I can draw'
heuristic	'Tell me why' learning new things and testing knowledge. Example: 'How does this work?'
imaginative	'Let's pretend' creating new worlds, making up stories, poems. Example: 'You be the Princess'
informative	'I've got something to tell you' communicating information, descriptions, expressing propositions. Example: 'I'll tell you about the caterpillar.'

Most teachers agree that children's oral language is important for learning and with increasingly diverse groups of children attending school, oral language has become a focus for teaching. The following section reports on how teachers in a school with children from different cultural groups decided to develop an intensive oral language intervention program designed to develop oral language structures, phonology and vocabulary in rich play contexts.

### **Play-based oral language**

The teachers decided that a play-based program would be a developmentally appropriate and intrinsically motivating approach for children in order to experiment with oral language and get immediate feedback. Play-based activities also involved sustained symbolic thinking, use of narrative and the use of oral language to inform, hypothesise and imagine. It was thought that the use of language in context would lead to purposeful talk, allow for the development of vocabulary in rich contexts and this was to be supported by authentic and relevant picture books. Oral language development in context rather than a series of isolated vocabulary, grammar and phonological awareness drills, was thought to produce more robust oral language development.

The teachers created fifteen themed play boxes with sets of levelled questions for teachers/adults to use to stimulate children's oral language. The children's language could then be extended by the adults when appropriate. Each box contained books both fiction and non-fiction based around each theme together with materials/resources related to the theme. Oral language development was facilitated through structured and pretend play-based scenarios, and the teachers extended children's language using levels of questioning (Blank, Rose & Berlin, 1978). The levelled questions, from concrete to abstract, ranged from questions that encouraged children to:

1. Describe things
1. Describe and analyse
2. Retell and sequence
3. Go beyond the here and now.

To provide further demonstrations of language vocabulary and models of different sentence structures the fiction and non-fiction books were read aloud. There were four junior primary classes participating in the program and the students were in mixed groups according to age/grade/oral language skills.

The use of narrative was encouraged in each play session with adults assisting students to formulate stories based around their play experiences. The adults worked with students to develop their use

of narrative language features. They began with describing, analysing, retelling sequences of events and then moving to problem solving and imagining which incorporated narrative features similar to many picture books in school. This essentially built on children's oral language skills, presenting them with different syntactic structures to everyday oral language and worked to scaffold children's learning for early writing and reading. The teachers photographed the play sessions and then students dictated their stories which were recorded onto PowerPoint slides which were then replayed for the children to read. This language experience procedure enabled children to contemplate how spoken language can be represented in written form.

The children were assessed before and after the play based oral language program using a range of oral language assessment tools, including phonological awareness, syntax and grammar, vocabulary and reading level.

### **The questions used to extend language and for oral language models**

The teachers developed a range of oral language questions to encourage children's responses and to provide models of different oral language structures. The questions were designed to extend children's oral language and moved from simple to more complex use of language. For example, in the play box that was set up as a doctor's surgery the following question were used:

#### *Levels of questions to promote children's oral language*

##### **1. Describe things**

- Simple here and now: matching, identifying, labelling
  - Show me a bandage
  - What is this called?

##### **2. Describe and analyse**

- What is seen, heard, touched
  - What do you use a stethoscope for?
  - What would you use to fix a broken bone?

##### **3. Retelling**

- Sequencing, predicting, excluding
  - Tell me what the doctor might say to their patients
  - What is something that would not happen in a surgery?

##### **4. Beyond the here and now**

- Cause and effect, inferencing, problem solving, imagining
  - Why does a surgery have to be kept clean?
  - What happens if the doctor is sick?

## Books in the play boxes

Fiction and non-fiction books related to the themed topics were placed in the play boxes for teachers to read aloud. The written language in the books provided models of book language with extended vocabulary, greater syntactic complexity than the children's oral language, phonology, and models of narrative and scientific language. The teachers used books to provide models of language and also described how meanings can be expressed in written language.

The teachers were aware of many of the differences between oral language and written language. For example spoken language is often contextualised using gesture, facial expressions and intonation. However written language is decontextualised and removed from the here and now. In written language complete sentences, using subject and object are necessary to communicate meaning.

Oral language uses sentence fragments such as 'Sit over there.' and this may be accompanied with a gesture. But in written language this sentence may be written as: 'Tom sat on the chair.' where the subject 'Tom' has to be identified as well as the object 'chair'. Purcell-Gates (2001) explains that oral language can have *exophoric* external references to meanings outside of the text but written language must have *endophoric* or within-text references. The differences between oral and written language vocabulary, sentence structures and conventions will now be explored.

## Vocabulary

Oral language vocabulary	Written language vocabulary
Sit over there....	Tom sat on the chair
Oral language is contextual and relies on gestures and is often a sentence fragment. In written language the subject and object are identified	

There are more rare words in written language than spoken language. As an example, the picture book *Where the wild things are* by Maurice Sendak contains rare words such as 'gnashing teeth' and 'terrible roars' which may not occur in everyday conversation. In an analysis of a range of spoken and written texts, Hayes and Ahrens (1988) revealed the amount of rare words used in everyday speech to be 17.3 in one thousand words whereas in children's books there were 30.9 rare words per one thousand words - nearly double the amount in everyday speech. It is probable that children who are read to before school will be exposed to many rare words.

The syntax of written language is also different from oral language. For example in the book *Where the wild things are* we read about Max who 'sailed

off through night and day and in and out of weeks' which is a lyrical use of language. The syntax of written language contains more lexical items such as nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs in a sentence. Written language also includes dialogue as in the following example: 'And now,' cried Max, 'let the wild rumpus start!'

## Sentence structures

Oral language	Written language
We walked for charity on Sunday	The Charity Walk will raise money on Sunday.
Nominalisation occurs where a verb is changed to a noun	
We hid the book	The book was hidden.
Objects are placed first in a sentence in written language.	
That cat chased a bird.	The cat from next door was chasing a bird.
In written language there is an increased number of lexical items such as nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs in a sentence	

Written language contains letters to represent sounds, punctuation and various font styles to represent intonation, stress and pitch. The sections or new ideas are represented in written language with headings, paragraphs and words to show the sequence of ideas, for example first, second, last and summary.

## Reference conventions or mechanics

Oral language	Written language
sounds	letters
intonation, stress, pitch	punctuation and capital letters, underline and bold font
expressions to indicate topic changes, 'now, right, right then'	headings, new pages, paragraphs, sections or chapters, words like first, second, summary.

In summary, children's oral language is thought to be acquired naturally in the child's family and community, whereas written language has to be learned with explicit teaching of vocabulary, sentence structures and conventions. When educators explore oral language from linguistic, social interactionist and developmental psychology viewpoints it is apparent that oral language is fundamental to learning and thinking, has many different functions and is comprised of many elements.

In the example of play boxes with books, the children were learning to use language for many