

## **Taking a “Slice” of the Oral Language Pie: An Approach for Developing Oral Language in Schools**

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Oral language is a major platform from which literacy skills develop. Schools are increasingly aware of the importance of oral language yet how to approach the task of building this fundamental skill can be overwhelming. “What is it?” “What do we do?” and “Where do we start?” are the common questions asked by educators. Building teacher knowledge about oral language is critical. There are however many aspects to this domain and without deep professional learning, educators run the risk of oversimplifying and reducing oral language to a line on the timetable. Oral language, like literacy, is much more than this as it is everywhere – in morning routine, in science, maths, English and beyond. There are different parts or “slices” of oral language that can be built -students need to “tune in” and listen; build language for thinking and reasoning; have words for talk and use language to talk about their world and their learning. Oral language is part of the fabric of teaching and opportunities for building this can be embedded across the curriculum and across the day.

### **Why is oral language Important?**

Oral language has an important social function – it is an important way we connect with other people, build relationships and share our thoughts and feelings. This social function is fundamental to human existence and in itself is an important reason for developing oral language. However in the context of education, it is well documented that oral language has an important role in the development of literacy skills (Scarborough 1998). It is through talk in the first instance that oral vocabulary is built; the ability to process and produce complex sentences is first practiced through speaking and our skills in recounting, narrating and persuading are first done through talk. Questions that involve lower order and higher order thinking are first tackled in the oral domain, long before they are applied at the level of reading comprehension. All of these skills are important in reading and writing – to make meaning of the words on the page as we read, the way words are put together to form sentences and the way the sentences are put together in a text requires competency with language. This develops first as oral language, which is often noted in curriculum documents through “speaking and listening”.

### **Narrowing the Focus**

Developing learning experiences that strengthen all of these oral language skills in prior to school contexts and classrooms is possible and can be done with cohesion and meaning through projects, topics, themes and books. It can however present as a daunting task, to think and plan for experiences that will develop all of these skills. Building on the research base of whole school change (Marzano et al 2005), one of the key platforms is to focus narrowly on one area, enabling educators to engage in deep learning about a topic, trial strategies and use professional learning communities as a forum for sharing and discussing practice. A less daunting approach for schools in their quest to develop the oral language skills of students is to focus on one aspect of oral language for a site focus. Metaphorically speaking, oral language could be seen as a “pie”, and professional learning targets a “slice” of the pie. Inevitably working on one slice will impact on the other pieces of the pie, however the focus on one area is a manageable way of deeply engaging with the huge domain of oral language.

# The Oral Language Pie

*A framework for developing oral language in the classroom*



*The four quadrants show four domains of oral language and the outer ring or the “plate” highlights instructional strategies that educators can use to develop these areas.*

**Opportunities to build oral language can be embedded across the curriculum and across the day**

## What are the four domains?

- **Listening & Responding**

Listening is a fundamental aspect of oral language – in order to understand what is said, sustained listening is necessary and then comprehension of what is said can occur. To engage in a conversation, we listen, comprehend and then respond, so a conversation happens when listeners and speakers take turns. At school, the need to listen increases as students are required to listen to teacher talk to guide them through learning on a daily basis.

To build comprehension of spoken language children must first sustain attention and then use their working memory to hold information. Some students are challenged to engage in the listening process, and sustaining concentration to “tune in” to others is an area that can be strengthened. Crevola (2012) notes the importance of building children’s ability to listen to themselves, which is part of children learning to “hold a thought” and develop metacognitive skills. She also notes that listening to others – teachers and peers, is crucial in developing comprehension of oral language. Important stages in the listening process begin with:

- **Recall** or repeating what the child has said, e.g. “What did you say?” and then repeating what peers have said, e.g. “What did she say?” This helps children tune into themselves and others and develop active listening skills.
- **Following Instructions**, a critical skill for students in all classrooms.
- **Understanding literal questions** or the questions that require student to recall facts about what they have heard, e.g “What is.....”. Sometimes they are known as ‘here’ questions as information is ‘here’ in what has been said.

These aspects all require attention, memory and basic language comprehension which are necessary for building oral language comprehension at more complex levels. Comprehension of oral language beyond this literal level leads to ‘building talk for thinking’ which requires individuals to hold larger chunks of information in working memory, connect this to background knowledge, make inferences, predictions and engage in reasoning. The processes used in oral language comprehension are therefore similar to those required for reading comprehension.

- **Growing Words in Talk: Vocabulary & Concepts**

Words are the building blocks of oral language so understanding and using words is a primary aspect of building talk. Children’s first words develop gradually and then a spurt in development occurs, often before the age of two. Vocabulary development can occur rapidly in the years prior to school and by Year 1, children can up have to 10,000 words in their spoken language (Ezell & Justice, 2008). Building vocabulary requires that children are able to hear, can sustain attention and are exposed to a variety of words in talk. Vocabulary is learnt incidentally though conversations, listening to stories, media – anywhere where language can be heard. Words are also learnt through deliberate teaching, when meanings are explained and words are modelled for children to copy.

Vocabulary is an important area to develop with children at all ages, and strong vocabularies are essential for literacy development. There is a clear relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension. To understand what is read requires one to understand between 90-95% of the

words in a text (Hirsch, 2003), as this allows the reader (or listener) to understand the main idea of the text. Access to a wide vocabulary for the writing process allows the writer to more precisely communicate their thinking and get their point across. Teaching vocabulary can occur across the curriculum, so look for meaningful contexts throughout the day to deliberately teach words and reinforce them. Targeting words that serve to make language more descriptive and precise has been shown to have a greater impact on literacy skills (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002). Sometimes these words are referred to as “rare words” or “wow” words. Finally teach the words until children talk them back at you, as then you will know the words are in their vocabulary.

- **Talking about my world: Recounts, Retells and other Genres**

Talking about our lives – what happened in our world is an important way of connecting with others and highlights the social role of language in our lives. This type of language is also used in literacy to learn about genre. When we talk about what we have done on the weekend, talk about what happened in the book we have read or the movie we watched, or how we made something, we are using oral language skills including selecting vocabulary, forming sentences, organising and sequencing ideas so they flow. When we talk about our experiences, in a sense we are ‘telling a story’. Research has indicated that children who practise telling stories, including recounting, are more prepared for many of the literacy tasks in school (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). It makes sense then to allow students to have experiences using talk in this way – recounting, telling stories, talking to instruct, describing and giving an opinion. Providing opportunities for students to use language in this way is important preparatory ground for genre writing. Start with doing - engaging learners in hands on activities, explicitly teach genre structure and use this to structure talk about experiences and finally move to the writing process.

- **Building Talk for Thinking**

Today’s society more than ever requires individuals to comprehend, apply knowledge, analyse, evaluate and create as described in Bloom’s taxonomy (2001). While this can be viewed as developing thinking skills, it is important to recognise that oral language competency is fundamental to the processes described.

An inherent part of the language of instruction is to ask questions. Questions are seen as a way of sparking thought and leading students to deeper understanding. Questions also “test” comprehension and very often, educators will ask a question and if the correct answer – or the answer that they want – is not provided, different children are asked until the “right answer” is offered. It is assumed that the “right answer” is enough to help other children comprehend, even if they had answered the question incorrectly in the first place. To keep the pace and flow of the lesson moving, further questions ensue. Meanwhile, the children who were lost after the first question find it increasingly harder to engage and behavioural problems can result. Very often in the classroom context, educators are quick to launch into questions that involve predicting, reasoning, explaining and asking for opinions or the “hidden and head” questions. While this is important, the value of scaffolding children to reach this level should not be underestimated. Begin by tapping into recall or the “here” questions, to check that children have understood the simple aspects of what they heard or have seen. Then progress to questions that involve reasoning to delve deeper into the more subtle aspects of comprehension which assist children to making connections about what has

been said or written. This process is not unlike climbing a ladder – start from the bottom at the simple level and climb to the top when asking more complex questions.

Building language for thinking also involves other aspects of learning. Children need to know how to ask questions to further their own learning. Building this aspect of metacognition or thinking is important for oral communication and for reading. Letting the listener know you are not sure what they mean is important, as a communication breakdown can result. Modelling how to ask questions to seek more information or clarify is important in this process. The ‘Think aloud’ strategy can help students understand the thinking process when we are listening to language and how to gain more information to aid comprehension. For example “*When Jack told me about the football on the weekend, I wasn’t sure what he meant when he said he ‘marked the ball’. I am going to ask Jack ‘What does marked mean?’*” Building skills such as ‘how to seek extra information’ is important for understanding language and for learning in the educational context and beyond.

### **What about your classroom?**

Think about the experiences you provide for your students in your classroom. How can you address these slices of the oral language pie? Will you focus on one piece of the pie or can several slices be consumed within the curriculum at different times of the day? Oral language skills can be planned, programmed and integrated across the curriculum, to build oral language in meaningful ways. Oral language can be SO MUCH MORE THAN A LINE ON YOUR PLANNER. How will it look in your class?

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