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What is oral language and why is it important?

Oral language encompasses two components. E*xpressive language* (speaking) is the use of words and non-verbal processes to share meaning with others. R*eceptive language* (listening) is the process of understanding what has been expressed. Listening can occur even when no sounds are heard, that is, by taking note of pitch, tone, stress, and use of gesture to understand a speaker's meaning. The relationship between a speaker and a listener will influence what words are spoken, for example, when speaking with an adult a student is generally expected to make eye contact and to speak in sentences but when talking with their friends they would likely use more colloquial language and non-verbals.

Oral language is the foundation for the development of literacy skills and is considered to be a strong indicator of later reading, writing, and overall academic achievement (Bradfield et al., 2013; Communication Trust, 2013; Gross, 2013; Hill, 2012; Hougen & Smartt, 2012; Kirkland & Patterson, 2005; Resnick & Snow, 2009; Winch et al., 2010) or as Babayigit (2012, p. 2) states [it is] *"…a complex and mutually facilitating relationship."* Allied to this relationship is the importance of motivation and *"High quality classroom talk is a key factor in improving pupil engagement and outcomes"* (Communication Trust, 2013, p.16).

Oral language is developed within cultural contexts and it is essential that young people have ample opportunities to master their first language. Resnick & Snow (2009, p. 3) assert that "*All students should learn the rules of standard-English-but not in ways that tread on their heritage."* However, students who speak more than one language must be taught how to *code-switch* so they understand and use Standard Australian English as it is the language of instruction and interaction in schools and the wider community. *"Speaking and listening are academic, social, and life skills that are valued in school and the world…*[and] *academically, children are judged in part, by what they say and how they say it"* (Resnick & Snow, 2009, p. 2). Prior to starting formal education, children are already on the way to developing their listening and speaking skills as they learn how to have their needs met, how to use language to interact with others, and how to adjust their language depending on the situation. The oral language that children have acquired through interactions with their families and wider community is built on by teachers who use explicit instruction in listening and speaking and vocabulary development because word meanings and understanding of sentence structures (syntax) is extended through talk.

Further, as students learn to read and write they come to realise that what is spoken can be written and read by themselves and others. Consequently, delayed oral language will have a significant impact on learning to read and write. As Babayigit (2012, p. 1) says *"Any weakness or developmental delay at core oral language skills may act as a bottleneck and constrain the ability to engage in higher-level comprehension processes, such as inference making and integration."* Voice recording of who speaks in classrooms would likely reveal that teachers speak for much of the time. If this is the case it is possible that some students barely speak at all during lessons. In fact, with 30 students in a class it is unlikely that ALL students will have a chance to talk if opportunity to speak is controlled by the teacher. Bullock (1975) suggested some time ago that students are only afforded a 20 second contribution in a 45 minute lesson. Recent research (Communication Trust, 2013) recent suggests there has been little improvement in the amount of time that students have to speak in class and that the average contribution of a student is four words while Grugeon (2005) claims it is three words. Further, much of teachers' speaking is procedurally focused on content delivery, classroom administration, and dealing with behavioural issues. Whatever the reason, long periods of listening do not guarantee improved speaking skills. Winch et al. (2010) remind teachers that every lesson at school places demands on students' listening and speaking skills.

Links with reading

Resnick & Snow (2009, p. 3) make the point that until students learn to read they *"…learn most of what they know by hearing other people talk"* and they further point out that *"…engaging in stimulating talk is the only way young children can expand their own language skills-learning words, putting sentences together, and practicing the "rules" of talk"* (p. 3). It is when students have learned to read that they can use written texts to independently broaden their knowledge and there is a reciprocal relationship with writing insomuch as if students don't speak the words they will not be writing them (Hougen & Smartt, 2012). Emergent literacy is what young people come to understand about reading and writing often well before they can read and write and one of the key influences is their oral language facility. As students start to learn to read they draw on knowledge of oral language and come to realise that what is written on pages and screens can be spoken and that how words are used in writing may vary from how they are used in speaking. Students' understanding of word meanings

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and spoken sentence structures help them to understand what is being read.

As students progress through school they need to develop more sophisticated speaking and listening skills so they can actively participate in discussions, and use more complex thinking and questioning as they respond to spoken, written, and visual texts. Listening comprehension is a precursor to reading comprehension and different levels of questions (literal, inferential and evaluative) should be posed to draw out their understandings. Further, students need to be taught how to remember their thinking about what they have read so they can make connections with prior knowledge as well as be able to infer and synthesise (Bayetto, 2013).

Factors that influence oral language development

1. Compromised hearing ability will affect students' capacities to fully engage with the needs and expectations of listening and speaking.
2. Auditory processing. Being able to perceive subtle differences in sounds and the meanings of words.
3. Articulation. Correct pronunciation of words supports a listener's comprehension.
4. Attending skills and being able to recall their thinking (auditory memory) so it can be shared.
5. Learning English, while learning in English. *"The distribution of language input across two or more languages means that L2* [second-language] *learners are likely to receive less input in any one of their languages in comparison with their L1* [first-language] *peers"* (Babayigit, 2012, p. 19).
6. Topics motivating enough to want to talk about them. Teachers can build on what already interests students or develop interest by making connections with their life-worlds.
7. Phonology. Listening has an important role in development of phonological awareness where students come to understand that sounds can be blended together to make words and that sounds in words can be segmented, isolated, and exchanged. Further, words can have common ending sounds (rhyme) and may start with the same sound (alliteration). New words can be learned by listening, and if understood, can later become part of students' spoken and written language. Logically then, phonological awareness supports development of letter-sound knowledge (alphabet and phonics).
8. Morphology. Knowing the meaning of word parts and how they are combined to make words and how the addition of affixes may change meaning.

9. Semantics. Comprehending the meaning of words may change depending on how they are used.
10. Syntax (grammar). Understanding how conventions are used when deciding word order so that what is spoken is understood.
11. Pragmatics. Understanding the social conventions of oral language, for example, the type of oral language to use in a particular context.
12. Thematic approaches to enhance vocabulary development.
13. Respectful listening behaviours that encourage students to want to speak. Start with talk between partners and later move onto small groups, whole class, and wider audiences.
14. Heterogeneous groups that change often so students can speak and listen with the full range of their peers.
15. Teachers allocating instructional time for oral language development.
16. Systematic and explicit instruction through demonstration (modelling), guided practice and multiple opportunities for independent practice with process feedback.
17. Teaching the full range of spoken text types as these provide a foundation for introduction of written text types. *Please note that when students can talk knowingly about a topic they are ready to write about it.*

Instructional approaches: Listening

1. *Readalouds.* Read to students at least three times a day (equal balance of fiction and non-fiction texts) and invite literal, inferential and (extended) evaluative responses.
2. *Audio texts.* Ask students to pose questions they have about the author, storyline, content and so on. Expect a response about what was heard as a way of developing their skills of taking a stance and justifying it.
3. *Following instructions.* Build capacity to follow multi-step instructions. Start with humorous tasks that can be physical or written e.g. barrier games.

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4. *Which Way?* Practice appropriate listening expectations for different contexts e.g. listening to family members, a friend, a neighbour, the media, a salesperson, and an employer. The following website has many examples. https://www.google.com.au/#q=first+steps+resource+book+oral+language

5. *How do they belong?* Show students items that are mentioned in a text that is to be read. Invite them to turn and talk with a partner about how they think the items may be explained in the text. Once they have listened to the reading, ask them to indicate whether they were correct or off-target!

6. *What's missing?* Read a sentence to students but omit a word. Ask students to name the missing word and explain why it makes sense to use it.

7. *Summarise it.* Read a news/sport report to students and ask them to summarise it.

Instructional approaches: Speaking

1. *Morning Talks/Show and Tell.* Arrange students in small groups so there is more opportunity to talk. The Oracy Project (in Hubbard, 2005, p. 35) suggests that *"…news time in practice is often an opportunity for the teacher rather than the children to talk."* Have students place their *Show and Tell* item in a bag or box and, without naming it, give clues for others to guess what it might be.

2. *No Pens Day*. Select a day when all teaching and learning is by listening and speaking. The following website shares how it is done in the UK. http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/resources/resources/resources-for-practitioners/no-pens-day-resources.aspx

3. *Closed Bag.* Place an item in a bag and invite students to feel it and decide what it is. Ask them to explain and justify their choice.

4. *Bring a box.* Give students a box (or bag) and ask them to put items in it from their homes that are important to family members or themselves and to share the reasons with others.

5. *Retells/recounts.* Have students retell narratives, memories, biographies, and what has been seen and heard in the media.

6. *Language facilitation strategies.* Invite a student to share what s/he knows or understands about a topic. After the student has spoken respond by building on what was said because staying with a topic develops elaboration about what is known. Conversations should involve six-seven exchanges in the early years of school and expand to eight or more by Year 3 (Resnick & Snow, 2009, p. 7). Cervetti, Pearson, & Jaynes (in Bayetto, 2013, p. 164) offer twelve approaches for extending thinking and discussion about texts.

7. *Readers' theatre. S*cripts offer students the security of speaking as a narrator or a character. After practice, students may record their readers' theatre and it can be posted on the class blog so families can access it at convenient times as a wider audience offers a compelling reason to speak. The following website has many freely available scripts. http://www.aaronshep.com/

8. Speaking and listening about music, dance and theatre styles, poetry, and student-created art. The following website has numerous instructional ideas. http://www.imagemaking.org/combined.html This website has a new piece of art for appraisal every day. http://artistaday.com/

9. *Conversation cards.* Give each student a card and ask them to share their responses to one of the questions. http://www.taoc.com.au/taocchildrens.html

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10. *Wordless picture books.* Have students narrate what is happening. An ability to read visuals and construct a narrative is the basis for development of retells about what has been read.

11. *Planned talks.* Use Erik Palmer's book (2011) as a resource for explicitly teaching students how to plan and present a talk.
12. *Debates.* All students have opinions so give them topical questions to discuss. When students can persuasively talk they are ready to persuasively write.
13. *Well then…* Show a picture, set a timer for three minutes, and ask one of each pair of students to start a narrative about the picture. When the timer rings, the other student says *Well then* and they have three minutes to build on what was said. Keep going!
14. *Displays.* Have students set up displays about designated or self-selected topics using texts, artefacts and visuals and to be ready to respond to questions what they have displayed.
15. *Hot seating.* Have students assume the role of a character/researcher and *"…answer questions, justify actions or explain events in their book, photograph or article"* (Smith, 2005, p. 98).
16. *Roles and responsibilities.* Students take on the role of reporters where they provide movie and game reviews, local sport results, council issues, lists of top-selling toys, new items on the market that may be of interest, summaries of what's new on websites e.g. National Geographic for Kids.
17. *Wonderopolis.* The following website has a new question to consider every day and students can post questions they are wondering about. http://wonderopolis.org/.
18. *Your speciality.* Have students prepare presentations about their topic/s of interest.

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