

The Critical Role of Oral Language in Reading Instruction and Assessment

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Unlike mathematics or science, reading is the only academic area in which we expect children to arrive as kindergarteners with a basic skill level. Research has shown that oral language—the foundations of which are developed by age four—has a profound impact on children’s preparedness for kindergarten and on their success throughout their academic career. Children typically enter school with a wide range of background knowledge and oral language ability, attributable in part to factors such as children’s experiences in the home and their socioeconomic status (SES) (Hart & Risley, 1995; Fernald Marchman, & Weisleder, 2013). The resulting gap in academic ability tends to persist or grow throughout their school experience (Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 2007; Juel, Biancarosa, Coker & Deffes, 2003), which is why a strong focus on oral language development in the early years is imperative for future academic success. This white paper will examine the critical role of oral language in reading instruction and assessment and the implications for classroom teachers.

What is Oral Language?

Oral language is often associated with vocabulary as the main component. However, in the broadest definition, oral language consists of phonology, grammar, morphology, vocabulary, discourse, and pragmatics. The acquisition of these skills often begins at a young age, before students begin focusing on print-based concepts such as sound-symbol correspondence and decoding. Because these skills are often developed early in life, children with limited oral language ability at the time they enter kindergarten are typically at a distinct disadvantage (Fielding et al., 2007). Furthermore, because of various risk factors, Title I and English Language Learners are often among the most at-risk populations. Oral language comprises the following six areas:

1. Phonology

The broad definition of phonology includes the organization or system of sounds within a language. Once the phonological system has been acquired for basic listening and speaking, children begin to develop phonological awareness—the awareness of words in sentences or

syllables in words. Other aspects of phonological awareness include rhyme, alliteration, onset rime (word families), blending, segmenting, and manipulating sounds. At the most complex level of phonological awareness is phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is blending, segmenting, and manipulating words at the individual sound (phoneme) level.

2. **Vocabulary (Semantics)**

The development of vocabulary focuses both on expressive vocabulary and receptive vocabulary. Expressive vocabulary represents the words a student actively uses when talking, writing, or communicating. Receptive vocabulary represents the words that a student understands—based on context and background experiences—but may not necessarily use in his or her own speaking or writing. A common misconception regarding vocabulary is the idea that an individual’s vocabulary can be measured simply by the sheer number of words he or she can understand and use. This is the breadth of vocabulary knowledge. However, to measure the depth of vocabulary knowledge, a broader definition also includes a focus on areas such as multiple meanings of words (homonyms), shades of meaning, figurative language, and relationships between words (synonyms, antonyms, analogies).

3. **Grammar (Syntax)**

As children develop their oral language skills, they also develop an understanding of grammar—the set of structural rules that govern the combination of words and phrases into sentences—and how sentences are combined into paragraphs.

4. **Morphology**

Sometimes considered to be a subset of syntax or vocabulary (semantics), morphology is focused on the smallest units of meaning within a word and the rules about how those words are formed. For example, if one examined the word “cats,” a basic analysis would show there are four phonemes (/k/, /a/, /t/ and /s/). However, the word “cats” only has two morphemes (meaningful word parts). “Cat” is a feline animal, and “s” tells us that there is more than one cat. Morphology can also include the study of structural analysis—how words are joined together and build vocabulary by analyzing the morphological structure of the word (prefix, root and suffix)—which helps build upon the child’s foundation in vocabulary.

5. **Pragmatics**

Considered by some reading experts as the “hidden curriculum” in a classroom, pragmatics requires the understanding of the social use of language. This includes social norms regarding conversational turn-taking, personal space, and appropriate behavior with peers and authority figures in a variety of common social situations. In some classroom settings, students lacking background experience—attributable to cultural differences in some instances—don’t understand group dynamics and expectations regarding behavior. Understanding a variety of situations prepares students for more successful comprehension at later stages, including both listening and reading comprehension.

6. **Discourse**

Oral and written communication, also known as discourse, is a critical skill. For example, narrative storytelling follows a very specific format—beginning, middle, and end. These parts describe the main characters, the setting in which they live, the conflict, and the resolution. An understanding of story structure is essential in order to read, understand, and write narrative. In contrast, consider the structure of expository, or informational, text. These forms of writing also follow certain structures such as: persuasive, cause and effect, compare and contrast, and procedural. It is critically important that students understand these structures through listening comprehension before they begin to focus on reading comprehension. They first need to be able to understand and tell stories in those formats before they can begin to write those kinds of stories.

What is the role of oral language in reading?

Children with a history of oral language impairment are more likely to present with reading difficulties than their peers (general population). Some research identified this increased likelihood to be as great as four to five times more likely than their peers (Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 2001). It has been shown that children who struggle with phonemic awareness have significant difficulty acquiring phonic word-attack strategies. There is also evidence that a child’s level of vocabulary significantly impacts reading development, but there has been debate in the research over whether or not it is only vocabulary or if reading acquisition is affected by all of the oral language components mentioned above. A recent study of reading comprehension found that both reading accuracy as well as oral

language skills, beyond just vocabulary, predict performance on outcome measures (Foorman, Herrera, Petscher, Mitchell, & Truckenmiller, 2015a). Another question studied in the research is, “Which components of reading does oral language impact?” Evidence exists linking oral language to the word recognition aspects of reading and/or the comprehension aspects of the reading model. It is important to consider that “not only are oral language skills linked to the code-related skills that help word reading to develop, but they also provide the foundation for the development of the more advanced language skills needed for comprehension” (Cain & Oakhill, 2007, p. 31).

What are the implications for the classroom teachers?

Due to the growing number of diverse profiles of learning needs, the classroom teacher faces the daunting task of providing sufficiently powerful instruction to meet the needs of all students. In order to help close the achievement gap for some of these students, teachers must use effective assessments to identify gaps and then provide instruction that is more intensive than typical instruction to help accelerate learning.

Oral language assessment

Effective instruction in oral language starts with effective oral language assessment—before thinking about what skills should be taught or how to teach them, educators must first identify the student’s specific areas of need. An effective assessment will provide data profiles for a student (or groups of students) to help guide the appropriate instruction.

When specifically considering oral language assessments, they are often administered by specialists—such as a speech-language pathologist—in a one-on-one setting as part of a longer battery of tests. But given the critical nature of oral language skills and their connection to later reading skills, it is important to look for assessments that measure oral language skills across K–12 in a manner that does not require a specialist to administer each test, and that can be administered with higher frequency in shorter amounts of time (compared to the typical two to three hour battery). Also consider the broad range of oral language skills in addition to not only measuring how many words the child understands, but also skills within grammar/syntax and morphology. The most essential aspect of an oral language assessment, though, is the ability to immediately connect that vital assessment data back to teacher-led instruction.

Oral language instruction

Powerful or intensive instruction involves more than increased instructional time and smaller instructional groups. Instruction that is precisely targeted at the right level to the individual student provides clearer and more detailed explanations (i.e., explicit), corrective feedback, guided practice, and instructional sequences that are systematic (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). It is important to keep these key components of powerful instruction in mind, particularly in the many instances when the level of instructional intensity needs to be increased. These elements of instruction can be used with skills and activities that help develop a student's oral language skills.

- **Instruction in phonological awareness**

Instruction in phonological awareness involves activities around rhyme (e.g., pie/tie/cry), alliteration (e.g., Sally sails on Saturday), onset/rime (e.g., c – at, r – at, b – at, etc.), blending/segmenting, and manipulating activities at the word, syllable, and sound level. Intensive instruction works systematically through these types of tasks, working from simple to more complex. Phonology-based activities can also be incorporated throughout the day, for example, by having students line up if their name starts with the sound /b/ or come to the rug if their name is two syllables.

- **Instruction in vocabulary**

Instruction in vocabulary involves providing students with opportunities to develop deep vocabulary knowledge through multiple exposures in varied contexts (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006). When determining the words on which to focus instruction, a teacher should consider “high utility” words—words that can be used across multiple contexts. These high utility words can be especially helpful in the types of tasks that are being asked of students in directions (i.e., describe, analyze, etc.). Instruction in vocabulary should also focus on not only breadth of knowledge (number of words), but depth of knowledge. Depth of knowledge includes instruction in shades of meaning, multiple meanings, relationships between words (i.e., analogies, synonyms/antonyms, categories, etc.), and figurative language (i.e., idioms, similes, metaphors). Comprehension of figurative language can be especially challenging for English Language Learners. In addition to instruction in the depth of vocabulary, instruction focused on the meanings of prefixes, suffixes, and base and root words can help students build academic vocabulary that will be helpful in specific content areas.

Importance of oral language for ELL and Title I Students

Certain populations—including students in Title I and ELL subgroups—typically face a number of factors with regard to oral language development (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006; Hart & Risley, 1995; NICHD, 2005; Snow, Porche, Tabors, & Harris, 2007):

- **Amount of exposure to language**

Hart and Risley (1995) found a wide disparity in the quantity of words (sum of unique words and gross sum of all words) as well as the quality of language to which the children were exposed. Children in families considered low socioeconomic status (SES) were exposed to short imperatives and typically negative words such as “No... Stop that.” In contrast, children from high-SES families tended to be exposed to a greater quantity and quality of words. Their interactions included descriptive language, expansive narrations, and positive reinforcement for communication.

- **Exposure to print**

Children in a print-rich environment benefit from early exposure to reading and print concepts such as familiarity with letters and sounds, as well as exposure to the conventions of printed words (e.g., reading from left to right on a page and front to back in a book).

- **English not spoken in the home**

Children in homes where English is not spoken often lack exposure to critical oral language skills such as English vocabulary, grammar, pragmatics, and discourse. Without these skills being modeled and reinforced in the home, these students enter school already significantly behind their peers (Biemiller, 1998).

- **Background experiences**

Children in low-SES homes often lack the opportunity to expand their background experiences and knowledge, compared to their peers in other subgroups. These experiences and knowledge can be based on exposure to books, conversation, or first-hand experiences.

- **Parents' level of education**

Research has shown that there is a strong relationship between a parent's education level—in particular, the mother's education—and a child's oral language skills or vocabulary upon entering school (NICHD, 2005).

- **Transitions and disruptions in the student's home life**

Student mobility rate—the measure of how many students are transferring in and out of a school—within Title I and ELL subgroups is often among the highest within a given district. Such changes impact a student's achievement level throughout school (Snow, Porche, Tabors, & Harris, 2007).

The academic gap associated with SES and the significant relationship between SES and reading achievement have been well documented in research (Cain & Oakhill, 2007; Hart & Risley, 1995; Snipes, Horwitz, Soga, & Casserly, 2008; Snow, Porche, Tabors, & Harris, 2007). Similarly, “many related factors influence ELLs' academic outcomes, including educational history, cultural and social background, length of exposure to the English language, and access to appropriate and effective instruction to support second language development” (Francis et al., 2006, p.6).

In a review of the ELL research, Francis and colleagues (2006) highlighted key areas of focus for reading instruction for ELL students. These areas can also be applied to instruction in oral language as well. The research emphasizes the importance of teaching strategies and techniques for analyzing text—both narrative and expository—and strategies that teach the ability to break down the components of the text. It is important to focus on the *process* of comprehension, not just the end product of being able to answer multiple choice questions correctly or write a response. Such strategies as visualizing a story in the mind while listening or reading can be extremely powerful for students who struggle with vocabulary and oral language skills. Instruction should also include concepts such as how stories are constructed from the very basic structure of beginning, middle, and end to the more complex structures found in informational and expository text (i.e., compare/contrast, persuasive, cause/effect, etc.).

It is also important to engage students in discussions with heterogeneous groups so that students with lower vocabulary skills and limited background knowledge can benefit from hearing the discussions of

their peers. Classrooms should be print-rich environments where books and language surround students all day and where students have opportunities to engage in conversations, listen to stories, and build language around experiences they might only encounter through books/stories (i.e., a child from an inner city listening to a story about a boy growing up on a farm). Hearing stories read with expression and intonation, and with a focus on the phrasing and structures of sentences and stories, can be helpful later on when students strive to become fluent readers.

Summary

The key to assessment and instruction in oral language is assessing these skills early on and focusing instruction on building a foundation of these skills through listening comprehension and oral expression. Building the foundation of oral language skills can begin as soon as a child enters school. Since some children enter the school environment already four times behind their peers due to sheer exposure to words (Hart & Risley, 1995), it is critical to ensure kindergarten assessments include components of oral language so educators have the appropriate data to target instruction. Research has indicated that these early skills are among the strongest indicators of future success (Foorman, Koon, Petscher, Mitchell, & Truckenmiller, 2015b), so an early screener of language skills and an early and intensive focus on oral language skills—before students can read independently—is imperative for all students to read at grade level and succeed in all other subject areas. “It matters little what else they learn to do in elementary school if they do not learn to read at grade level” (Fielding et al., 2007, p.49).

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