

The Importance of Oral Language Development in Young Literacy Learners: Children Need to Be Seen and Heard

Jolene Reed and Elizabeth L. Lee



Bryan's staccato reading often interfered with his ability to comprehend the meaning of the story. He word-called what he knew and then waited for me to tell him the words he did not know. My efforts to get him to put words into meaningful, fluent phrases were often unproductive. Further, in the writing portion of the Reading Recovery lesson where the student and teacher first converse and then write a single sentence generated by the student, Bryan showed no progress. His portion of the student/teacher conversation was usually a one or two-word phrase. He

Children use language structures as a basis for learning how to read. Therefore, literacy learning for young children must incorporate the child's personal use of oral language. It is their personal oral language that supports them as they attempt new concepts and become better readers. Because of the important role that oral language plays in a young child's literacy development, it is of the utmost importance that adults who work with young children support the growth of the child's spoken language beginning in infancy. This article discusses activities that will support oral language development in young children so that they will have a strong linguistic foundation upon which to build literacy skills. Through interactions with the young child that include quality conversations and play, the child's language development will be strengthened, resulting in a greater foundation for literacy learning.

A Challenge

A few years ago, I was a Reading Recovery teacher leader working with a young first grade student whom I will call Bryan (a pseudonym). Reading Recovery is a one-to-one intervention for struggling first grade readers. It was expected that learning to read and write would be difficult for these students. Bryan, however, proved to be a bigger challenge than most.

had extreme difficulty generating a sentence that he wanted to write, and he could not remember his thought long enough for us to get it recorded into his writing journal.

Bryan's lack of success during lessons often left me near desperation. This prompted me to contact the nearest university training center and request a trainer to observe my sessions with Bryan. Following an observation, the trainer emphasized that until I could get Bryan to produce the language needed to anticipate the meaning of text, he would continue to struggle as a literacy learner. This advice prompted me to more closely study the relationship between a child's oral language development and the child's endeavor to learn to read.

Role of Oral Language

The oral language foundation of the young learner is important. Children entering elementary school already understand how to use language and that language has patterns (Halliday, 1975). Teachers and parents should realize that oral language development aids the early foundations of literacy. The process of learning to read requires that the child learn to use the visual information that their eyes perceive on the printed page in tandem with the intuitive knowledge of the semantics and syntax

of oral and written language. The student begins to analyze the relationship between the printed symbols written on a page of text and the structure of their oral language (Clay, 2015, p. 95). The acquisition of these skills depends on the child's utilization of expression, meaning, and their language. The relationship between oral language development and the reading acquisition process of the emerging literacy learner is well documented in the literature (Byrnes & Wasik, 2019; Clay, 2015a, 2015b; Fountas & Pinnell, 2016; Scharer, 2018; Vukelich, Enz, Roskos, & Christie, 2020).

Children's control over how they speak and use language is fundamental to their reading, writing, listening, and speaking acquisition. Children's knowledge of language is subconscious and intuitive. They become masters of the uses of language. For example, they are able to grasp pragmatic knowledge and concepts such as subject/verb agreement, use of tense, the importance of meaning, and the use of register unknowingly. Lindfors (1987) explains that the mastery of oral language controlled by children when they enter kindergarten is basic to all their future learning. What they are able to hear, read, speak, and write depends on their understanding of the relationships between expression and meaning.

Children use language structures as a basis for learning how to read. Therefore, literacy learning must incorporate the child's personal use of oral language. Children apply oral language to grasp the basic foundations of reading. This will support them as they attempt new concepts and become better readers. They then must recognize the patterns in textual language to get better at reading itself. As textual patterns become more sophisticated, children will begin to notice that these patterns differ from the textual patterns they encounter in text. They learn that there are differences in the way they talk and the way that books "talk". They begin to understand that textual language can be different from spoken language. Clay (2015a) asserts that if the literary language encountered in text varies significantly from the language patterns that are familiar to the child, the child may find the process of learning to read difficult and laborious. For this reason, it is important that children learn to "talk like a book" (p.79). "Talking like a book" is evidenced when a child who is not yet reading conventionally sits with an open book and "reads" the story using the tonal inflection of a reader and incorporating phrases of literary language found in text such as "Once upon a time" or "Down came the spider". According to Clay (2015) this child is beginning to acquire "a feeling for the kinds of language that he can expect to find in books" (p.73). The child is also demonstrating knowledge that books at times use language in ways that differ from oral language.

Supporting Oral Language Development

Because of the important role that oral language plays in a young child's literacy development, it is of the utmost importance that adults who work with young children support the growth of the child's spoken language beginning in infancy. Following are some activities that will support the oral language development in young children so that they will have a strong linguistic foun-

ation upon which to build literacy skills. Through interactions with the young child that include quality conversations and play, the child's language development will be strengthened, resulting in a greater foundation for literacy learning.

Oral Interactions with Significant Adults

It will come as no surprise to anyone that the most important way to help young children develop their oral language is for an adult to talk with them and not simply talk to them. The difference between those two small words is extremely important. Speaking to a child only requires the child to listen, which is known as receptive language. Listening is a passive activity. The brain does not have to initiate any activity prior to receiving an incoming message. Speaking, however, is active and requires the child to first mentally develop an idea and then produce language to communicate that thought orally. This is known as expressive language. Speaking with a child allows the child to develop expressive language as they fine-tune comments using increasingly precise vocabulary that more accurately articulates the message they wish to convey.



Clay (2015a) states that one of the most important ways of developing a young child's receptive and expressive language skills includes involving young children in conversation with significant adults. The ideas presented in the child's speech can be appreciated and expanded during daily conversations. This type of interaction provides a scaffold to increase the child's vocabulary as well as increase the complexity of language structures utilized by the child. For example:

Child: Ball
Adult: You need a ball? What kind of a ball do you need?
Child: Red
Adult: You want a red ball? How are you going to use the ball?
What do you want to do?
Child: Play catch.
Adult: Oh. Are you going to play catch with Daddy?
Child: Daddy will play catch with me.

The child described above predominantly speaks in short, 1-2-word phrases. Each phrase communicates his immediate need. The adult in this scenario accepts and appreciates what is being communicated by the child. However, each of the adult's responses encourage the child to expand his communication by



the inclusion of additional details and longer phrases. Over time, this type of interaction with adults encourages the child to spontaneously generate oral patterns of speech that include more information, thus better communicating with the other person involved in the conversation. These communication patterns will grow increasingly complex. For example, a child in the early stages of language development may be able to communicate to a parent that they are hungry. A child with a more developed set of oral language skills will be able to better convey the message of where their level of hunger lies on a continuum. Are they ravenously hungry, feeling like they are starving and need to eat a large meal immediately? Or are they just in the mood to munch on something less substantive—perhaps a cracker or an apple slice? Are they somewhere in between the two ends of this spectrum? The more often complex language patterns of an adult are allowed to swirl around in the mind of the child, the more the child will begin to internalize and incorporate these patterns into the language they produce.

How does this support learning to read? A child just learning to read is supported in their literacy endeavors when they can anticipate and predict the text structures included in the text they are attempting to read. While an early reading text may or may not incorporate the specific phrase of “Daddy will play catch with me”, it will contain phrasing of similar complexity such as “Tom and I will swim in the pool”. A child who can orally produce sentences that include items such as adjectives and descriptive phrases is more readily equipped to anticipate, predict, and produce those same patterns when encountered in literacy activities.

Listening to Stories Read Aloud

We read aloud to children for many of the same reasons that we talk to children. Getting lost in a good story can be a soothing and comforting experience for a child. As a child listens to an adult read aloud, a bonding relationship begins to form be-

tween the child and the adult. Listening to stories read aloud can provide reassurance to the child who is experiencing insecurity. Hearing stories where problems are encountered and solved provides encouragement and moral support to a child experiencing life’s uncertainties. In addition, the child learns to view reading as a pleasurable experience, builds the background needed to understand various stories, increases vocabulary of new words as these words are integrated with the actions of the story, and is exposed to how fluent reading sounds by hearing the phrasing and prosody of the adult reading voice.

Dramatization of Stories

Young children enjoy acting out stories. After hearing readings of stories, children can use props such as puppets and flannel board characters to retell the story. Children, including those who are hesitant to speak publicly, are more willing to retell stories while manipulating these props because the language becomes more about the prop being used and less about their own language. Their language becomes more about the character in the story and how that character responds and less about how they themselves would respond. Children involved in such activity allow themselves to become lost in the activity, the storyline, and the characters. Consequently, they are not as self-conscious about the language they are producing.

Wordless Books

Recently, more and more wordless books are hitting the market. These books tell stories either through the use of pictures alone, or with pictures and very few words added. The lack of words on the page force the telling of the story to become an exercise in oral storytelling. An example is *Tuesday* (1991) by David Wiesner. Printed words in the text are at a bare minimum, primarily telling the reader the day of the week and time of the occurrence. The story is suggested in the pictures with the reader being left with the task of inferring and telling the actual story of the “what and why” of story events. This specific book begins on a Tuesday evening as the people in the story are settling down for the evening. Frogs begin flying on lily pads. As the evening progresses, the flying frogs are seen engaging in all kinds of mischievous escapades. As the sun begins to rise, the frogs fly back to their pond leaving the people in the city to ponder the chaos left behind. No two readers of this text would create the same story. The story of the book is limited only by the reader’s creative mind.

Toys

Toys can promote growth in oral language skills, which are precursors to literacy skills. Literacy skills include listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening and speaking skills commonly occur before the ability to read and write; therefore, toys that aid in the development of these skills can be considered tools for literacy learning. Many toys that aid in oral language development also promote the development of the whole child which includes the social, emotional, intellectual, communicative, and physical areas of development. Knowledge concerning various types of toys that most effectively encourage a child to listen and speak can be helpful to adults who are involved in teaching young children.

Pretend Play Toys

Pretend play toys can help a child develop vocabulary skills related to their social/emotional development by regularly encouraging social interaction. Children often think in pretend scenarios imagining they are someone else in a previously observed scene. It is common to observe children role playing the duties of a waitress, bus driver, doctor, teacher, or parent. Toys made for pretend play are meant to enhance a child's listening and speaking skills by encouraging social collaboration and self-expression as they verbalize wants and needs, as well as by describing opinions and emotions related to using pretend play toys in these imaginary scenarios. The social aspects of pretend play toys also prompt discussion, which in turn, extends vocabulary specific to a theme or topic. Examples of pretend play toys that can encourage oral language development include Melissa and Doug Role Playing Sets, Playmobile themed toys, or Little People Playsets.¹

Sensory Play Toys

Sensory play toys can help build a child's oral language skills in relation to their physical development by encouraging them to use their body to interact with the toy. While interacting with the toy the child may describe how the toy smells, feels, sounds, tastes, and/or looks. Little Tikes Fish 'n Splash Water Table, Step2 Naturally Playful Sand Table, and Whitney Brothers Light Table are examples of sensory play toys that offer opportunities for sensory learning. More classic sensory play toys include playdough, stacking and nesting toys, wooden blocks, or balls of various shapes, sizes, and textures. When playing with these toys a child may learn to use comparisons such as bigger or smaller than. When describing the location of these toys they may expand their oral language skills by developing the use of directional prepositions such as on, off, in, out, above, and below. In addition, when describing their size, shape, texture and color they may develop a broader understanding of the use of adjectives.

Technological Toys and Apps

Technological toys and apps often concentrate more specifically on engaging a child's cognitive development through the practice of using sounds, letters, words, phrases, and sentences. Oral language learning through the use of technology and apps is a more direct approach to cognitive-linguistic development. Although typically not as multi-sensory or socially collaborative in approach as pretend play or sensory toys, whenever developmentally based and appropriately used, a major benefit of technological toys and apps is that the child's developmental progress can be stored and retrieved across time. This may prove beneficial to the current understanding as well as future needs of a child's oral language development.

There are several technological toys and digital language applications that strengthen the parts of the brain responsible for oral language development. Some of the technological apps found on Google's Android and Apple's ios may include Peek-a-Boo Barn, Baby Sign and Learn, iTouchLearn Words Speech and Language Skills, Rosetta Stone Kids Lingo Letter Sounds, Articulation Station, and Teach Your Monster. Examples of technological

toys include LeapFrog Learning Friends 100 Words Book, LeapFrog My Pal, and Alphabet Island.¹

Conclusion

Research shows that early childhood oral development can positively or negatively influence a child's ability to learn language and develop literacy skills (Clay, 2015a; Lindfors, 1987). Adult conversation with the child and the use of pretend play toys, sensory play toys, and technological toys and apps can benefit the oral language development of a child and help prepare them for later learning. Therefore, it is important that adults who are responsible for the development of young children be aware of the importance of the role of conversation and toys in the development of the child's oral language. The scenario involving Bryan at the beginning of this article is a good example. If the adults in his life had more fully recognized the importance of oral language development and incorporated some of these suggestions, his road to literacy learning might have been easier.

Jolene Reed, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at Sam Houston State University. She is a former classroom teacher, Reading Recovery Teacher Leader, and literacy coordinator for a public school system. She is heavily involved in community literacy tutoring programs for elementary school children. Her interests include supporting struggling literacy learners and preservice teacher education.

Elizabeth Lee, EdD, is an Assistant Professor at Sam Houston State University. She previously taught elementary grades 1st and 3rd and obtained her doctorate in Reading, Language Arts, and Children's Literature. She is interested in Early Childhood Education.

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¹ Programs, materials, and software listed by the authors do not constitute an endorsement by SECA.