

Children's oral language development and early literacy practices

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After many years as a language, literacy and communication lecturer in the School of Early Childhood at the Queensland University of Technology, Adele Amorsen now works as a member of the Prep teaching team at St Peters Lutheran College, Indooroopilly. She has a keen interest in the changing nature of children's oral language development and how this is affecting their literacy learning at the grassroots level in classrooms.



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Strong oral language skills and the ability to communicate effectively provide the foundation for learning in all curriculum areas. A well-developed knowledge of oral language and its uses enables children to manage and direct their own activities as learners and to operate successfully in formal classroom settings, where language is used in increasingly abstract ways. In relation to early literacy practices, oral language skills provide the foundation for sound literacy development and are the prerequisite to written language. The reciprocal relationship between children's spoken and written language means that oral language skills will have an impact on early and later achievements in learning to read and write (Morrow & Tracey 2007).

The development of oral language occurs from infancy, with rapid development in the early years.

Most of what children know about language they will learn by age five, despite the complexity of oral language learning.

Throughout the school years, there is expansion of children's ability to master speech sounds, use correct grammatical structures and enhanced vocabulary and communicate with a range of people in appropriate ways. Simultaneously, children's competencies in literacy expand to include reading and writing in increasingly sophisticated forms (McLeod & McCormack 2015). Combined, all of these skills align with the five key components of oral language as a system:

- phonology (the rules for putting sounds together in a language)
- morphology (the internal structure of words e.g. plurals, suffixes, prepositions)

- syntax (the structure of sentences that govern word order)
- semantics (the meanings associated with words)
- pragmatics (the appropriate use of language in different social situations).

At school entry, most children have a vocabulary of 4000–5000 words, have control of most grammatical structures, use talk for a range of purposes and can adjust their talk to suit particular contexts. However, approximately 7% of children entering formal schooling will experience language difficulties. Without intervention and ongoing support, children with language difficulties at age five are likely to continue experiencing difficulties throughout schooling and life (Association for Childhood Language and Related Disorders 2016). While some children require intervention via additional external support, all children in early years classrooms require explicit instruction in oral language through a range of teaching and learning strategies across the day.

Errors in children's oral language

If teachers are able to identify and respond to common language difficulties, then they can structure learning in ways that support individual children. This is particularly important for reading and writing skills, given that oral language provides the foundation for early literacy practices. While it is not necessary for teachers to know all of the technical language for common errors in children's speech, it is critical to build well-developed strategies for responding to errors in curriculum planning. Errors in children's oral language that translate to reading and writing include, but are not limited to, phonological substitutions and overregularisation errors.

Phonological substitutions:

- Replacing liquid sounds (e.g. r) with glides (e.g. w). For example, 'rabbit' becomes 'wabbit'.
- Replacing fricatives (e.g. th, sh) or affricatives (e.g. ch) with stop consonants (e.g. d, t). For example, 'this, that and there' becomes 'dis, dat and dere'.
- Replacing a consonant cluster with a single consonant. For example, 'club' becomes 'cub'.



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- Deletion of final consonants. For example, 'hat' becomes 'ha'.
- Deletion of an unstressed syllable in a word. For example, 'banana' becomes 'nana'.

Overregularisation errors:

- Applying plural 's' unnecessarily. For example, 'mans', 'foots', 'teeths'.
- Applying the regular verb ending 'ed' in place of using an irregular verb. For example, using 'goed' instead of 'went', 'falled' instead of 'fell', 'broked' instead of 'broke'.

Some errors in children's speech will be age-appropriate and part of typical developmental sequences, while others require correction so that they do not continue into higher grades and affect children's learning. Here, we present a case study of a child in Prep to highlight how language difficulties can have an impact on learning to read and write, and to show how individual programs of support can be structured for children who display errors in oral language at school entry.

Case study

This case study focuses on Henry. When Henry entered the Prep year he was able to communicate well with peers and adults, and he quickly established relationships for play and classroom interactions. However, he began the year with a number of underdeveloped articulation and grammar skills. As the year progressed and the curriculum placed increasing demands on Henry to record his thoughts in written form and to engage in reading longer,



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more complex sentences, his underdeveloped oral language skills became problematic.

When speaking, Henry employed a number of sound substitutions, including /w/ for /r/ ('wabbit' for 'rabbit', 'cwab' for 'crab') and /w/ for /l/ ('wion' for 'lion', 'wong' for 'long'). When writing, Henry reproduced the sounds he could hear in his spoken language (*rock* would begin with a 'w' and *let* would begin with a 'w'). During focused work on phonics, Henry had difficulty with the placement of articulators (tongue, teeth, lips, roof of mouth) to produce sounds correctly. This resulted in the use of phonological substitutions, as listed above (/w/ for /r/ and /w/ for /l/). In addition to sound substitutions, Henry used immature grammar patterns ('we goed to the park'; 'she put she's lunchbox in there'; 'them kids aren't coming inside'). In relation to reading, Henry's lack of knowledge and his use of non-standard grammar made it difficult for him to predict and use simple repeated language structures in texts, including early readers.

Differentiated learning: developing a program for Henry

In Term One, the teacher (Adele) and teacher aide began a dual-focus program for Henry around articulation and grammar. With support, Henry completed several sessions a week with the teacher aide on articulation of sounds for /l/ and /r/, and several sessions to support standard use of grammar. The articulation sessions began with discussion and practice of teeth and tongue position for required sounds. Henry then worked through a range of games and activities

for repeated rehearsal of the sounds in isolation, then within words and finally within the context of a sentence.

Grammar sessions involved games and activities around correct use of pronouns and tense. The teachers also frequently modelled correct grammatical structures in everyday classroom and playground interactions. In addition, great care was taken to ensure the teachers' language was simple and clear, while providing opportunities to extend and advance Henry's language development through rich oral language experiences. These included opportunities to develop vocabulary knowledge through Henry's interest areas. At the same time, the teachers built his background general knowledge by involving him in increasingly complex conversations around identified topics of interest. In small group work, the teachers partnered Henry with competent peers so that he could hear and use language and grammar in a range of contexts. In general, there was greater emphasis on early oral language, with increased opportunities to chant rhymes and poems, sing songs and clap patterns, and engage in targeted phonemic awareness activities. A sample of individualised goals for articulation and the resources sourced for Henry's program are provided below.

Resources sourced for Henry's program

- <http://mommyspeechtherapy.com/?p=1991> as an initial articulation screener
- <http://mommyspeechtherapy.com/?p=2113> for /r/ sound support



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- http://mommyspeechtherapy.com/?page_id=55 to use pictures to make games and activities for articulation work
- <http://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org/en/grammar-practice?page=0%2C2> for grammar games

In early years classrooms, it is the teacher's role to insert explicit instruction on oral language through a range of teaching and learning strategies across the day. Within formal and informal learning on oral language, teachers have many opportunities to model language, expand children's existing skills, give language

feedback and value what individual children bring to the task.

References

Association for Childhood Language and Related Disorders 2016, *Helping children to speak and find their voice*, accessed at: <http://www.childassoc.org.au/>.

McLeod, S & McCormack, J 2015, *Introduction to speech, language and literacy*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Morrow, L & Tracey, D 2007, 'Best practices in early literacy development in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade', in LB Gambrell, LM Morrow and M Pressley (eds.), *Best practices in literacy education*, 3rd ed, Guilford Press, New York, pp. 57–82.

| Henry's Term One articulation goals | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| Goal (SMART) Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely | Strategy/ intervention | Time frame | How I will monitor |
| Copy sound for /l/ after teacher modelling | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain and model teeth and tongue position for /l/ • Break /l/ words into initial + vowel and final sounds for modelling • Use singular images with modelled pronunciation | Weekly lesson with teacher aide (Monday) | <p>Video initial session and then video at monthly intervals</p> <p>Anecdotal records of particular sounds/ words that are difficult or successful</p> |
| Create /l/ or self-correct to /l/ sound independently in isolation and in sentences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide /l/ picture cards in pairs for Henry to work into a spoken sentence | Twice weekly lesson with teacher aide (Tuesday and Friday) | <p>Video initial session and then video at monthly intervals</p> <p>Anecdotal records of particular sounds/ words that are difficult or successful</p> |
| Use the /l/ sound correctly and independently during daily writing sessions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use desk card with /l/ picture as prompt during writing • Writing with a buddy to check the words that have the /l/ sound | Daily reminder before and during independent writing | Written anecdotal notes on daily writing samples |