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Oral Language:
Why, What, and How in PreK

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Summary

Developing children’s oral language is one of the preschool teacher’s most important roles. In this paper, we explain *why* oral language is so important, *what* we work to develop in oral language, and *how* preschool teachers can foster this development.

Why Does Oral Language Matter in Preschool?

Oral language development, particularly children’s comprehension of books and other texts read to them, is important in part because it lays the groundwork for future reading comprehension (Duke and Carlisle, in press)—the ultimate goal of reading instruction. Research suggests that:

- Preschoolers’ oral language ability is highly predictive of their later reading comprehension (e.g., Nation and Snowling, 2004; Roth, Speece, and Cooper, 2002; Storch and Whitehurst, 2002).
- Young children’s overall, expressive, and receptive language comprehension is more related to their later reading comprehension than even alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness (Lonigan, Schatschneider, Westberg, and the National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008).
- Students’ reading comprehension is strongly related not only to how they do in English Language Arts, but also how they do in science and social studies learning (e.g., Cain and Oakhill, 2006).

In sum, young children’s oral language contributes to all aspects of their later school success.

Preschool Teachers Make a Difference

Fortunately, preschool teachers can make an important difference in children’s oral language development in the preschool years (e.g., NELP, 2008). For example, in one study preschool teachers’ use of extended discourse (sustained use of language, such as during discussion of a book or conversation during free play), and the degree to which preschool teachers exposed children to rare words predicted children’s reading comprehension growth in grades 4, 7, and 10 (Snow, Porche, Tabors, and Harris, 2007). In another study, preschool teachers’ use of inferential questions (questions that require children to “read between the lines”) during shared book reading corresponded with more complex, inferential responses and understanding by children (Zucker, Justice, Piasta, and Kaderavek, 2010)—preschool teachers shape the way children think.

What Are We Working to Develop in Oral Language?

We work to develop many aspects of oral language in the preschool years, including:

- **Phonology:** the study of sounds within speech.
- **Morphology:** the study of meaningful units of language, both words, and parts of words such as *-s* and *-es* to mark plural and *-est* to mark most.
- **Syntax:** the ways in which words are put together to form phrases and sentences.
- **Semantics:** the meaning of words/vocabulary, phrases, and larger units of language.
- **Pragmatics:** how we use language in specific situations.

A strong preschool program addresses all of these aspects of oral language. Such a program focuses on developing children’s ability to understand books and other texts that are read to them, known as their *listening comprehension*. The language of books is often different from the language of everyday life (Purcell-Gates, 1998), so children need exposure to that language in particular.

How Do We Develop Oral Language During Preschool?

Research supports a variety of strategies for developing oral language in the preschool years. In this paper, we focus on four strategies.



1. Teach New Vocabulary

A key part of fostering students' oral language development involves teaching them new words. Vocabulary knowledge is strongly related to later reading comprehension. For example, kindergarteners' vocabulary knowledge predicts reading comprehension in grade 4, even when controlling for many other factors (Senechal, Ouellette, and Rodney, 2006). Once again, preschool teachers make a difference. How teachers instruct and use new words affects whether and how well children learn them (e.g., Tabors, Beals, and Weizman, 2001).

Children learn a majority of new words incidentally through conversations, read-alouds, and other language exposure (Nagy, Herman, and Anderson, 1985); however, direct instruction also plays a powerful role in developing children's lexicon. One successful method of teaching new vocabulary, "Text Talk" (Beck and McKeown, 2001), involves teachers in targeting certain words from books for explicit instruction. Teachers then provide kid-friendly definitions of these words as they arise during the read-aloud, have children say the words aloud, discuss the words with children (for example, for the word *versatile*, ask children to think of an example of something that is *versatile*), and then revisit the words after the read-aloud.

When teaching new vocabulary, we also suggest that teachers do the following:

- **Teach words in meaningful groups**, such as words naming feelings
- **Offer taxonomic information**, such as that something is a type of plant or a type of insect
- **Provide nonverbal information**, such as acting out a verb or showing a picture of an object named by a noun
- **Use the word repeatedly in different contexts**
- **Promote curiosity about words**
 - Praising children when they ask you about a word they do not know
 - Modeling questions and curiosity about words
- **Promote children's use of new words**
 - Praising all attempts to use new words
 - Encouraging verbal risk-taking, for example by drawing attention to a child's use of a new word

(Some strategies are drawn from Bennett-Armistead, Duke, and Moses, 2005.)

2. Converse with Children

Another important method of cultivating preschoolers' language and comprehension entails regularly conversing with children (Cazden, 1972). These conversations can occur throughout the day, such as at drop-off and pickup, at mealtimes, and during outdoor play. Centers with rich content provide an especially important context for quality conversations with children.

In conversing with children, we suggesting the following:

- **Get close to the child**
- **Actively listen**



- **Respond to the child and elaborate/expand on what he/she says:**

–Child: *Me need butter on this!*

–Adult: *Yes, you do need butter on that corn.*

–Adult: *Yeah, here's the butter. You twirl it over the top of the big cube of butter.*

(Dickinson and Tabors, 2001, p. 105)

- **Get beyond the here and now**, for example by talking about something that happened the previous day or something that will happen the next day
- **Engage in pretend talk**, for example, asking about a character a child is pretending to be
- **Ask open-ended questions**—questions that have many possible answers
- **Tell stories**—this can help develop children's ability to understand and produce narrative discourse
- **Tell and explain your actions and thoughts**, for example, explain how you are figuring out how much of an ingredient to use when making something
- **Promote extended discourse**—sustained use of language, as in a conversation with many turns back-and-forth on the same topic
- **Encourage peer-to-peer talk**—for example, have each child turn to a child next to him or her to share his or her response to an open-ended question
- **Respect children's home language**—children who know more than one language have many advantages, including greater metalinguistic awareness
(Bialystok, 2001)
- **Correct only by restating:**
–Child: *I goed there yesterday!*
–Adult: *You went to the park yesterday? Great!*
(Some strategies are drawn from Bennett-Armistead, Duke, and Moses, 2005.)

3. Read Aloud

Reading aloud is one of the most powerful tools for developing children's oral language, particularly their ability to understand and produce the language of books (Purcell-Gates, 1988). Research consistently demonstrates that shared book reading interventions can promote a variety of language and literacy outcomes (e.g., Lonigan, Shanahan, and Cunningham, with The National Literacy Panel, 2008). For example, Dickinson and Smith (1994) observed that child-involved discussion during and following reading aloud predicted preschoolers' vocabulary and comprehension one year later. Similarly, reading aloud combined with teacher questioning has been shown to improve both the inferential and literal comprehension of preschoolers with language impairments (van Kleeck, Vander Woude, and Hammett, 2006).

To make the most of a read-aloud:

- **Choose texts worth reading.** Quality texts have interesting language, quality illustrations, and engaging and important themes or content.
- **Provide compelling reasons to comprehend texts.** Perhaps you ask children to listen for information they can use in a drawing or writing activity you have planned. Perhaps you read aloud to address a question a child raised about that topic. Perhaps you tell children this book will help them “get their sillies out.” Children will likely get more out of a read-aloud if they have a purpose for listening.
- **Read interactively.** Effective read-alouds involve a lot of discussion. Ask questions and make comments as you read and encourage children to do the same. Encourage children to read along with you in places where the text is predictable.

- **Emphasize certain ways of thinking during the read-aloud.** Effective readers exhibit specific habits of mind that enable them to make meaning when reading (Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995). For example, readers preview text prior to reading, make predictions, activate and integrate prior knowledge, pay attention to whether the text is making sense, problem-solve when meaning breaks down, actively construct and revise understandings, ask questions, and make inferences. By asking questions and making comments during a read-aloud, we can develop these habits of mind in children.



4. Build World Knowledge

Children’s oral language knowledge is necessarily limited by their world knowledge. Children who know little about animals have a limited vocabulary in or related to animals. Children who have heard few classic fairy tales and folktales are limited in their knowledge of the language and conventions such stories have. Thus, an important part of developing children’s oral language knowledge, particularly their later reading comprehension, is developing their world knowledge (Neuman, Roskos, Wright, and Lenhart, 2007; Wilson and Anderson, 1986).

To build world knowledge in preschool:

- **Make language and literacy instruction *about* something.** Focus on big ideas, essential questions, and core content about the world.
- **Go deep.** Address the same or related content in read-alouds, center activities, field trips, and other parts of the day so children have opportunities to build—and apply—their knowledge around a particular topic.
- **Expose children to informational texts, in addition to other genres.** Books that convey information are especially well suited to building world knowledge—and young children love them!
- **Activate children’s background knowledge when reading aloud.** Ask questions such as “Have you ever . . .,” “What do you know about . . .,” and connect their known knowledge to new knowledge as you read.

The DLM Early Childhood Express®

In *The DLM Early Childhood Express*®, we have made oral language development a top priority, carefully designing the program to capitalize on the difference preschool teachers can make in children’s oral language development. We address oral language development every day and target each area of oral language development:

- **Phonology:** We prompt children to pronounce new words and provide many lessons designed to develop children’s phonological awareness. Thus, an important part of developing children’s oral language knowledge, particularly their later reading comprehension, is developing their world knowledge (Neuman, Roskos, Wright, and Lenhart, 2007; Wilson and Anderson, 1986).
- **Morphology:** We provide explicit and incidental opportunities to learn new words and word parts, such as plural markers and comparatives.
- **Syntax:** Program activities involve children in hearing and producing important syntactic constructions, as in “This girl is _____. She needs _____ to keep her safe.”
- **Semantics:** We target important words and terms in each unit, as with words about animal characteristics, animal sizes, animal homes, and what animals eat, in Week 2 of our unit on Amazing Animals.
- **Pragmatics:** Carefully designed purposeful play centers, among other program elements, provide opportunities for children to learn how to use language in particular social situations.



The DLM Early Childhood Express[®] foregrounds research-supported strategies, as presented earlier in this paper, for promoting oral language development. For example, in teaching vocabulary, we present words in meaningful groups and provide repeated exposure to important words using a variety of techniques, both verbal and nonverbal. We provide centers rich in content and possibilities in order to stimulate conversation between teachers and children and from child to child. We target important kinds of language use, such as explaining and storytelling, and offer teachers many specific open-ended questions to ask children.

We have designed the program so that the read-aloud acts as a powerful catalyst for oral language development; we have selected high-quality books with interesting language, quality illustrations, and engaging and important themes or content. Books are closely connected to the focus questions of the units and to class activities (e.g., centers) to help give children compelling reasons to engage with the books. We provide key questions and prompts teachers can use to make read-alouds interactive and to encourage development of specific habits of mind of good readers, as in “Why are healthy habits important?” and “Stop and talk about how Jamal stays healthy.”

One of the most important aspects of *The DLM Early Childhood Express*[®] is the emphasis placed on building world knowledge. We recognize that oral language development depends on opportunities to develop content and conceptual knowledge. Oral language is developed through content areas and through books, photographs, centers, and other activities that focus on big ideas, themes, and questions. The program uses an unprecedented amount of informational text so that we are simultaneously and synergistically developing children’s language, literacy, and content knowledge. Most importantly, we are building on children’s natural curiosity about the world around them and their natural desire to communicate through the gift of oral language.

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