

VANCOUVER ISLAND UNIVERSITY

What Primary Teachers Need to Know About the Relationship Between Oral Language  
Development and Reading to Put in Place Effective Reading Teaching Practices

by

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AN APPLIED PROJECT

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We accept this Graduate Applied Project as conforming  
to the required standard.

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### **Abstract**

Oral language skills are woven throughout the curriculum in British Columbia as both skills to learn and skills that are needed for learning. Research shows that oral language skills are imperative for the development of literacy skills, in particular reading acquisition. Teachers need knowledge and tools to recognize oral language capabilities that affect reading. They also need guidance on how to foster oral language development in their classrooms. Based on research, the culminating product was an 8-page teacher resource called *A Resource for Primary Teachers: Oral Language Supports Reading*. This project includes background information to help a teacher understand oral language development and the relationship between oral language and reading, a checklist for teachers to identify oral language weaknesses in students, and effective teaching practices to address those weaknesses. Working collaboratively with speech-language pathologists, teachers can have valuable impact on developing oral language skills and thus reading success in their students.

*Keywords:* oral language, oral language development, reading, literacy, assessment, inclusive education, primary

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### Personal Context

When I first started considering topics for this Master of Education in Special Education project I found a myriad of topics that I was interested in exploring. As I worked to focus my guiding question, a critical consideration was that I wanted it to be useful to myself and others. I wanted it to be something that would have a positive impact on the teacher I am and a positive impact on the students that I and others teach. I have always believed that we should be purposeful in our actions, especially in teaching, where we have the opportunity to impact so many individuals.

When I started this project it had been almost nine years since I graduated from the University of Victoria with my Bachelor of Education degree in Elementary Education. Since then I have worked in First Nations Education, English Language Learning, Primary Classroom Teaching, Elementary Special Education, High School Special Education, Reading Recovery® (Clay, 2005a; Clay, 2005b), and Distance Learning. It has been a busy decade and a great professional learning journey. I am so thankful for the wealth of opportunities I have had in teaching and the experience and knowledge I have gained from it. I still have so much to learn.

My teaching experience has granted me perspective; an ability to look at a student and have an idea about where they came from, what support they might have been given, and in turn also, where they are going, what will be expected of them and what support might be available. My observations have been that the development of literacy skills is a key component to student success throughout school and later in life. This observation is well supported by literature (Comber, 2014; Hernandez, 2011; Morrisroe, 2014) and is evident in the work done by the



United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and documented in *Reading the Past, Writing the Future: Fifty Years of Promoting Literacy* (UNESCO, 2017).

Consistently, I have found throughout my various teaching assignments that early intervention and strong teaching in the primary grades is pivotal for all students and especially for those who may struggle with reading skill acquisition. Specifically, oral language has a significant and complex role in reading development (Davidson, Kaushanskaya, & Weismer, 2018; Foorman, Herrera, Petscher, Mitchell, & Truckenmiller, 2015; Lepola, Lynch, Kiuru, Laakkonen, & Niemi, 2016; Lervåg, Hulme, & Melby-Lervåg, 2018; Quinn, Wagner, Petscher, & Lopez, 2015).

### **Oral Language**

Honig (2007) described language as:

[A] fantastic gift: it empowers humans to create new ways of speaking with, for and to others about any topic or experience. Language is a rule-governed, meaningful communication system. It is a symbol system, where a word or phrase stands for or represents something else that can be touched, thought about, seen, heard, felt, done, imagined, longed for, rejoiced or anguished about. Language can be used for many different goals, among others: to teach, to scold, to encourage, to express affection, to pray; or to deceive, to insult, to explain, to clarify, to declaim poetically, to ask for more information; or to describe a robbery, a soccer game or a love scene. (p. 581)

I love this description of language because it shows the use of language in its most human element; how and where it matters most to us in our daily lives. *The First Steps' Speaking and Listening: Map of Development* (2013) provides a more technical description. It separates oral

language into speaking and listening and further breaks down speaking and listening into four aspects connected to literacy and can be seen in the following figure (Figure 1).

Aspect	Speaking and Listening is...
<i>Use of Texts</i> : what students do with texts to convey and interpret meaning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• composing and interpreting meaning from a wide range of everyday, literary, technical or mass media texts.</li> </ul>
<i>Contextual Understanding</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How the context affects the choice of language and the mode, medium and format used.</li> <li>• How the context affects the interpretation of text.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a social practice used to accomplish a wide range of purposes across a wide range of cultural and situational contexts.</li> <li>• the awareness of a person’s purposes, interests and biases when interpreting, responding to or composing spoken texts.</li> </ul>
<i>Conventions</i> : structures and features of texts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the language patterns, vocabulary and behaviours that are chosen with understanding and critical awareness to compose and interpret spoken language.</li> </ul>
<i>Processes and Strategies</i> : how students read, write, speak and listen and view.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the thinking, planning and reflecting used to compose and interpret spoken texts.</li> </ul>

*Figure 1.* The four aspects of speaking and listening. Reprinted from *First steps: Speaking and listening map of development* (p. 1) by Education Department of Western Australia, 2013.

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The Revised English Language Arts curriculum developed by the British Columbia (BC) Ministry of Education (2019) frequently refers to oral language in the big ideas, curricular competencies, and the content sections of the curriculum. In particular, one of the big ideas for K-2 is “[t]hrough listening and speaking we connect with others and share our world” (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). Oral language curricular competencies and content for English Language Arts from K-3 refers to: students learning features of oral language (adjust volume,

pace, tone, inflection, articulation, expression); ask clarifying questions related to a topic; make personal connections; make relevant contributions to discussion; stay on topic; explore oral storytelling by creating and sharing stories; focus on a speaker; listen for specifics; take turns; and, connect with an audience. Oral language is threaded throughout the BC curriculum and teachers rely on students developing these skills to access these and other areas of the curriculum.

### **Guiding Question**

My project addresses the question: What do primary teachers need to know about the relationship between oral language development and reading to put in place effective reading teaching practices that are rooted in research?

### **Rationale**

When I consider the primary classrooms I have taught in, many students have had or are receiving interventions with regards to literacy and in particular reading. Some of these include Reading Recovery® (Clay, 2005a; Clay, 2005b), the Fast For Word program (computer based language and reading intervention), small group reading instruction, small group work or education assistant support during literacy activities, and speech and language services. All of these services require teachers to identify students in need of these supports. Oral language development is something the average classroom teacher does not know enough about and teachers would benefit from more collaboration and shared knowledge with speech-language professionals (Brooke, 2015; Kohler, 2016). We know the connection between oral language and literacy exists (Davidson et al., 2018; Foorman et al., 2015; Lepola et al., 2016; Lervåg et al., 2018; Quinn et al., 2015), but do we as teachers really understand its importance and value its relationship to literacy? Antoniazzi, Snow, and Dickson-Swift (2010) found that teachers showed

poor ability to identify children whose oral language needs warranted further investigation. We assume that because most of our students come to school in kindergarten being able to speak to communicate their basic needs, that they have already developed their oral language and now it is our job to develop their reading and writing skills. What if we consider that oral language skills are still developing when students get to school or that they have not yet developed typically? Can I really expect a student who cannot orally compose an interesting story with details or understand my oral directions to be able to compose a written idea while also hearing and recording sounds, accessing known words and using their fine motor skills to shape legible printing or read a story independently and gather meaning from it? What can I do, and what should I do, as a classroom teacher to determine the missing skills and address them?

Literacy acquisition is a complex process (Brown, 2014; Hawken, 2008; Otto, 2015) where it is necessary for a symphony of skills to play together. My attitude as teacher is sometimes one of impatience because I do not really understand what is going on for a student when they struggle with literacy acquisition. I do not really understand that potentially it is me who needs to re-adjust my thinking and my teaching to make the task manageable for the student by working on the underlying skills that form the foundation for literacy skills. Perhaps they need my teaching to reflect a better understanding of their oral language development rather than only their reading or writing skills.

From teaching Grade 1 and Reading Recovery® I am familiar with the concept that children predict language when they are reading. As readers we do not decode every word we are reading because our brains are already filling in the gaps with what makes sense, what sounds right and what visually matches (Adams, 1998; Clay, 2013; Clay, 2005a; Clay, 2005b; Hughes, 2019). This does not negate the importance of decoding skill (word recognition). In 1986,

Gough and Tunmer named the theory called the ‘simple view of reading’: the idea that reading skill is based on a multiplicative relationship of word recognition and listening comprehension. This study is frequently cited and confirmed in current reading research (Catts, Adlof, & Weismer, 2006; Ebert & Scott, 2016). In the same way that a poor decoder will struggle with reading, a student with low oral language skills will struggle with reading if they do not hear when something does not make sense. Students with low language skills need to work harder and rely more on decoding than students who can predict language patterns (like correct tense for example). I think exploring this topic of oral language development and its connection to reading is incredibly important because it pertains to everyone and it address many different learners and their needs. I have noticed that oral language tends to be the thing least emphasized in terms of literacy skills. Perhaps this is because talking gets messy, noisy, we are worried kids could get off task, we think it is not really reading or writing or that it is so fun that it must not be learning! Our students need us to value and learn the connection between oral language and literacy so that we can support them in developing to their potential.

I am further inspired about this subject by a student I previously taught. This particular student came into Grade 1 struggling with reading, writing, and math. After targeted reading intervention, reading became a big strength for him. I observed that he had a vast vocabulary. For example, one day a teacher quickly said “let’s moonwalk out” and he didn’t miss a beat as he turned around and swished his way out the door. You are not born understanding what the ‘moonwalk’ is; it comes from your experiences with language. Someone has talked to him, shown him, opened him up to the word and concept of moonwalking and he in turn was able to hear it, understand it, and apply it. Is it that strong vocabulary and oral language that helped him become a proficient reader?

I have a basic understanding that oral language is pivotal to developing literacy and more specifically reading skills, but I do not know what to look for developmentally and I want to improve my classroom teaching to be reflective of current research in the field. The importance of literacy in our society is widely accepted (Statistics Canada, 2004; World Literacy Foundation, 2018) and many studies have been conducted to highlight the long term negative impacts of illiteracy or low literacy skills (Comber, 2014; Hernandez, 2011; Morrisroe, 2014). Low oral language skills were found to correlate with a several month gap in reading skills in students at age five; by the time students turn 14 the gap in reading skills widened to five years (Hirsch, 1996). There are so many factors at play for students when it comes to learning to read and write. The more we know about each of them and how they are connected and work together, the more powerfully we can target our teaching. I believe that I can strengthen my teaching if I understand the connection between oral language and reading and have tools to identify where they might be on the oral language development continuum and in response, what I can do as a classroom teacher. I think this understanding would be motivational for teachers. I teach in specific ways when I am presented or seek out evidence that a certain teaching practice can positively affect outcomes for my students.

This brings me back to my question, what do primary classroom teachers really need to understand about the relationship between oral language development and reading to put in place effective reading teaching practices that are rooted in research? Primary teachers are pivotal in noticing things about the students they teach. Students who may be diagnosed with learning disabilities are not identified when they start kindergarten so primary teachers need to be well educated in teaching practices and knowledge that are universal in design (Universal Design for Learning - UDL) and address those needs before they can be officially identified: “UDL is a

framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights on how people learn” (Center for Applied Special Technology, Inc., 2019). This means that teachers plan for diversity in what ALL students will need to learn, how they will learn, and why they learn. For example, when assigning a Social Studies project I need to consider that a student with a language disability may need to have adapted resources at their level, a meaningful way to present their knowledge, and a topic that is both engaging and motivating. I may choose to create an assignment that has clear guidelines and learning outcomes for the whole class, but that can be flexible in the content, resources, and manner the student shows his or her learning. UDL practices reinforce the belief that what is needed for a few students is often beneficial for all. In the BC Curriculum Overview the BC Ministry of Education (2019) emphasizes the use of UDL practices by educators under government policy that supports the principles of inclusion of all students: “[t]he driver for universal design is the philosophy of proactively addressing needs. [UDL] is integrated into regular instruction planning as a mechanism to make diversity the norm” (para. 78). I need to understand the role of oral language in literacy to be able to decide how to reach ALL of my students so they grow through the learning they do in my classroom.

### **Purpose of Project**

In my school district, kindergarten teachers are currently responsible for deciding which students receive a kindergarten screening for speech-language services in their primary years. As only a limited number of students from each class may be referred due to cost and use of speech language-assessment time, teachers are concerned they are not knowledgeable enough to identify these students, especially when it comes to catching those students whose needs are not profound to the untrained observer. What happens to those students whose needs are not pronounced or

who do not talk enough for the teacher to notice the concerns? Doak (2012) found that teachers felt relatively unprepared when it came to oral language knowledge and teaching. After kindergarten, it continues to be a classroom teacher's responsibility to initially identify and advocate for students potentially needing speech and language services or other additional supports. Even if students are referred to speech and language services for support, they will spend the majority of their school day in the general classroom. Therefore, it is crucial for classrooms to be environments which build these pivotal oral language skills that are needed for school literacy success.

The purpose of my research is to identify and share the current knowledge about oral language development that supports the development of reading skills as it is useful for a primary classroom teacher in British Columbia. For my project I will create a single resource based on the findings from a review of the literature on this topic. My resource will be divided into eight sections over seven pages. The first two pages consist of four sections with the following headings: Overview, The Oral Language and Reading Relationship, What is Oral Language, and Oral Language Development Continuum. These sections give a brief overview of the purpose and justification of the resource along with a classroom teacher level description of oral language using the BC Ministry of Education curriculum and a classroom teacher level holistic oral language development continuum. Found on the third and fourth pages is the photocopiable Student Observation Checklist for Classroom Teachers based on current research and BC curricular outcomes, along with a simple direction on how to use it. As teachers are not speech-language pathologists and do not conduct therapeutic levels of assessment and identification, I intend for this checklist to be an accessible and practical resource for classroom teachers. Teachers should be able to use it within the classroom in a timely and manageable



manner in order to notice oral language weaknesses and/or students who need referral. The last three pages are the accompanying classroom based strategies that teachers can use to improve the oral language at a whole class and individual student level. The classroom based strategies are organized under three headings: What's Next? Classroom Design, What's Next? Teacher Talk and Teacher Role, and What's Next? Lesson Planning. It will be a resource that primary teachers can realistically employ in their classrooms, is based on research of the oral language-reading relationship, and is reflective of the local BC curricular outcomes. I have chosen to do this research and create this resource this way because knowing *what* aspects of oral language affect reading and *when* they affect reading allows me to design most effective teaching practices that address those needed skills. The oral language checklist will help teachers identify and focus on which students most need these effective strategies and to support them to further advocate for needed additional supports.

This project is divided into three additional chapters. Chapter 2 will be an in-depth review of the pertinent literature regarding oral language development as it relates to reading success in students. I will need this information to be able to develop my teacher resource that includes an oral language continuum, a student observation checklist for classroom teachers that helps sharpen teacher acuity to oral language needs, and, accompanying strategies to address these needs in the classroom. Chapter 3 is a deeper description and justification of the teacher resource I create along with details about how and where I intend it to be shared and used. Chapter 4 focuses on my own reflections on the creation and use of my primary teacher resource along with my own conclusions around teacher identification and teaching of oral language that support primary teachers to be effective reading teachers.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature and examine the research regarding oral language as it relates to school literacy success. There is a vast amount of research in the area of literacy and specifically oral language. I have narrowed down the research to examine those studies which have attempted to specify where the connections are in the relationship between oral language and literacy particular to the area of reading. I have chosen to do this as there is ample evidence that reading performance supports writing performance (Graham et al., 2018). I will begin by briefly introducing the link between oral language and reading and by providing the reader with a broad sense of oral language development as it exists on a continuum. Then, I will review the definitions and conceptualizations of oral language through the lens of carefully selected resources and key studies. I will examine the results and subsequent interpretations of research studies focusing on oral language and literacy (specifically reading). I will discuss the foundational theories that currently exist; where there is consensus of theory on the impact of oral language on reading and where the gaps or disagreements lie. It is my intent to highlight significant findings in the field and synthesize the knowledge they bring to the topic of oral language as it relates to school reading success. I will investigate the research evidence to explore if it corroborates my own experience that teachers need to develop a strong understanding of the relationship between oral language development and reading to put in place effective reading teaching practices - the purpose of my applied research project. Lastly, I will present key findings and the knowledge created in regards to implementing effective oral

language practices that are based in research to support reading success. I will use these key findings as a basis for the resource I create as part of my applied project.

### **An Introduction to the Link Between Oral Language and Literacy**

Speech-Language and Audiology Canada (SAC) is a national member-driven organization of speech-language pathologists, audiologists, and communication health assistants that supports, promotes and elevates the professional research-based skills and knowledge of its members. The organization emphasizes that children need to develop speech and language skills in order to develop literacy skills, the ability to read and write, and that these skills are integral to enable humans to communicate (SAC, 2018). SAC is the only national organization for speech-language pathologists as most Canadian provinces certify through colleges provincially and is therefore considered among the profession as a meeting place for the most current national research and knowledge.

There is much research that has identified the oral language-literacy connection (Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 2001; Cutting, Materek, Cole, Levine, & Mahone, 2009; Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Henning, McIntosh, Arnott, & Dodd, 2010; Kendeou, van den Broek, White, & Lynch, 2009; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2005; Roth, Speece, & Cooper, 2002; Snow et al., 2014; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). More recent research has focused on confirming the link and investigating more specifically what aspects of oral language and reading are related and when the relations happen (Davidson et al., 2018; Foorman et al., 2015; Kim, Park, & Park, 2015; Lepola et al., 2016; Lervag et al., 2018; Quinn et al., 2015). Some of these studies also begin to explore the added role of executive functioning (Cutting et al., 2009) and working memory (Davidson et al., 2018) on oral language and reading as researchers look at the interconnectedness of these different skill areas. This knowledge is

valuable to both identifying at-risk students and developing effective teaching practices to remediate struggling learners and put into place strategies to prevent difficulties in the first place. In order to be more effective at recognizing at-risk students it is important that teachers have a solid understanding of how oral language develops.

### **Oral Language Development Continuum**

Figure 2 (below) demonstrates a big picture of the continuum on which oral language develops. By the time students reach kindergarten they should be in the early phase and ideally they are moving toward the conventional phase by the end of their primary years. Beginning in kindergarten, students are expected to have a growing grasp of oral language: “students are expected individually and cooperatively, to be able to... begin to use language to identify, create, and express ideas, feelings, opinions, and preferences; engage actively as listeners, viewers, and readers, as appropriate to develop understanding of self, identity, and community; exchange ideas and perspectives to build shared understanding; and explore oral storytelling” (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). Between Kindergarten and Grade 3 these curricular competencies are expected to grow in complexity and proficiency (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). This figure is included to help the reader envision, in a broad sense, the language skill development referred to in this review. Teachers need to have this holistic overview of oral language development if they are to be able to begin to recognize needs in their students.

Beginning Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● children use the language of the home and community to communicate with familiar others</li> <li>● often rely on non-verbal cues to convey and comprehend spoken language</li> <li>● speech may be characterised by short utterances and they may require support in unfamiliar settings</li> </ul>
Early Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● students use their own variety of English language to communicate needs, express ideas and ask questions</li> <li>● understand spoken language relating to personal and social interests and respond in their own way</li> <li>● becoming aware of appropriate ways of interacting in familiar situations</li> </ul>
Exploratory Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● students' use Standard English effectively within familiar contexts</li> <li>● communicate appropriately in both structured and unstructured situations</li> <li>● explore ways of using language for different speaking and listening purposes</li> </ul>
Consolidating Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● students use most language structures and features of Standard English appropriately when speaking in a range of contexts</li> <li>● show increasing awareness of the needs of their audience</li> <li>● experiment with ways to adjust listening and speaking to suit different purposes</li> </ul>
Conventional Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● students recognise and control most language structures and features of Standard English when speaking for a range of purposes</li> <li>● select and sustain language and style appropriate to audience and purpose</li> <li>● aware of the value of planning and reflecting to improve the effectiveness of communication</li> </ul>
Proficient Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● students' control of Standard English reflects their understanding of the way language structures and features are manipulated to achieve different purposes and effects</li> <li>● evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of spoken texts in relation to audience, purpose and context</li> <li>● experiment with complex devices to improve their communication</li> </ul>
Advanced Stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● students show a sophisticated control of Standard English in a range of contexts</li> <li>● understand the power and effect of spoken language, critically analysing factors that influence the interpretation of spoken texts</li> <li>● use complex devices to modify and manipulate their communication for a range of purposes</li> </ul>

Figure 2. The seven phases of oral language development. Adapted from *First steps: Speaking and listening map of development* (p. 6-7) by Education Department of Western Australia, 2013.

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In addition to a broad understanding of oral language development as it exists on a continuum, is important for teachers to have an common understanding of what makes up oral language to be able to effectively recognize oral language needs and teach in ways that promote oral language growth.

### **Oral Language Defined**

**Oral language in the BC curriculum.** According to the information page on BC's New Curriculum Online, literacy is defined by the BC Ministry of Education in this way: "...the ability to understand, critically analyze, and create a variety of forms of communication, including oral, written, visual, digital, and multimedia, to accomplish one's goals. Literacy helps students apply reading, writing, speaking and listening skills across a variety of subject areas" (2019, para. 17). Oral language is most frequently referred to in curricular resources in a most basic sense as a way of communication: speaking and listening (Bayetto, ND; BC Ministry of Education, 2019; Education Department of Western Australia, 2013; Honig, 2007). Speaking and listening can also commonly be more formally referred to as expressive and receptive language respectively (America Speech-Language-Hearing Association [ASHA], 2018; Bayetto, ND; Honig, 2007). As defined by the BC Ministry of Education (2019), oral language (speaking and listening) is a component of literacy. For the purpose of this project, I will begin with and refer continually to the BC Ministry of Education concepts of oral language as my project intends to support students and teachers in the British Columbia's education system. Though there is no one specific definition, oral language is interwoven throughout the English Language Arts Curriculum from Kindergarten to Grade 12. Oral language and literacy are both frequently referred to as skills to have and skills which enable learners to build other competencies and access curricular learning outcomes. For example, reading is a way in which students may gain

knowledge about a science concept or speaking and listening are ways in which students may gain and share their understandings about a social studies topic. Oral language and literacy are essential and intertwined aspects of school success as it is made clear in the current BC curriculum.

**Oral language as defined by speech-language professionals.** Much of the research, knowledge, and assessments around oral language come from the speech-language profession. It is difficult to find research-based and widely accepted detailed definitions of oral language within the education profession. Operationally, educators do not typically need such detailed definitions. ASHA (2018), the US national professional, scientific, and credentialing association for speech-language professionals and associates, is careful to separate language from speech: “a person can have problems with one or both” (para. 1). ASHA defines speech as how we say words and includes articulation, voice, and fluency. ASHA defines language as “the words we use and how we use them to share ideas and get what we want” (para. 11) and includes word meanings, making new words, putting words together, and what to say at different times. It is beyond the scope of this review to consider the physical ability of producing language sounds (speech) and so for the purposes of this review, I am specifically looking at what ASHA defines as language when I refer to oral language.

**Oral language as defined in the literature.** Definitions of oral language vary greatly in the literature and can pose challenges to make definitive comparisons and consensus among findings from across studies. Though the BC Curriculum is simple in defining oral language as the use of expressive and receptive language (BC Ministry of Education, 2019), we need a deeper understanding of the skills and processes that make up expressive and receptive language. I am investigating the oral language-literacy relationship through 13 key studies that specifically

look at explaining and exploring the role that oral language (or specific components of it) plays in impacting reading skills. In some studies the definition of oral language is clearly stated and in some studies it is not clarified. One can infer some of the researchers' definitions of oral language by the assessments they use to measure oral language abilities. It may be that assessments are chosen in part because of a limited choice of assessments available that are considered reliable and valid to measure components of oral language. Since this section is heavy on terms that might not be familiar to an educator, Appendix B (a selection of specific language and education terms defined) should be referred to when reading this section.

A 2005 study by the US NICHD states that “[o]ral language processes encompass various skill sets including vocabulary (receptive and expressive), syntactic and semantic knowledge, and narrative discourse processes (memory, comprehension, and storytelling)” (p. 428). Henning et al. (2010) cite the NICHD definition and state it like this: “Oral language includes vocabulary and semantic knowledge, grammatical skill, narrative discourse, auditory comprehension, and memory” (p. 232). Even when one study directly refers to another study’s definition, the definitions appear different, especially to a teacher practitioner who is likely to be much less familiar with the terminology in defining language in depth.

As stated previously, not all studies define oral language in depth or clearly, though they usually define the components of oral language they studied in particular. Roth et al. (2002) state that “there is theoretical empirical support that three domains of oral language are related to the development of reading ability: structural language (semantics, morphology, and syntax), metaseantics, and narrative discourse” (p. 260). Here their conceptualization of oral language is related only to what they hypothesized to be related to reading ability based on prior research. It is these three domains that they chose to assess in their study. Similarly, Storch and Whitehurst



(2002) cite that “a variety of oral language skills during the preschool period have been shown to contribute to a child’s reading ability, including semantic (word knowledge, expressive and receptive vocabulary), syntactic (knowledge of word order and grammatical rules), and conceptual knowledge, as well as narrative discourse (the ability to construct an original story and retell a recently heard story)” (p. 934). Cutting et al. (2009) also does not clearly define oral language (though similar to Roth et al. (2002) and Storch and Whitehurst (2002)), they discuss it in relation to prior research saying that aspects such as vocabulary, semantics and syntax have been shown to have an effect on reading comprehension and it is these aspects that they assess. Kendeou et al. (2009) define oral language skills as “skills that support comprehension, such as receptive vocabulary (ie. understanding of spoken words), and narrative comprehension” (p.765). Kendeou et al. (2009) acknowledge that there is a lack of consensus in the literature in the ways that oral language and literacy have been conceptualized and measured.

Foorman et al. (2015) conceptualized oral language as consisting of listening comprehension, syntax, and vocabulary and designed their study to measure this conceptualization of oral language in relationships to reading skills. Most recent literature begins to add in extra facets that might be affecting oral language, such as executive functioning (Cutting et al., 2009; Foorman et al., 2015) and working memory (Davidson et al., 2018). This complicates the picture of oral language as it sees it for what it likely is: a very complex combination of skills. Oral language can be defined and yet when measuring it according to those definitions, you may be also measuring other skills that are actually having an effect on those skills (like executive functioning and working memory). Older studies tend to have simpler interpretations of oral language, such as Catts, Fey, Zhang, and Tomblin (1999) who gave no direct definition of oral language but their assessment measures focused on receptive and

expressive language abilities. Lepola et al. (2016) focus on oral language comprehension, and one can infer their definition by their assessment of vocabulary knowledge, narrative listening comprehension, and inference-making tests. Quinn et al. (2015) specifically measure vocabulary knowledge and its developmental relationship to reading comprehension using only two tests to measure vocabulary knowledge. In comparison, Lervåg et al. (2018) use nine different tests to measure oral language; divided into the component areas of vocabulary, grammatical (syntactic and morphologic skills), verbal working memory, and inference skills.

For practical reasons, research studies have to decide what aspect of oral language they are going to assess. This is based on several factors: what they define as oral language, the age and development level they are researching and what oral language skills researchers believe to be typical in the development continuum, what they deem there to warrant further research, and what they are able to realistically measure. Each researcher is going to prioritize different aspects of oral language and needs to justify their choices to make their research valuable. Though there is a vast amount of research having already been done, it is clear by the definitions and conceptualizations of oral language in the literature alone, that there is still knowledge to be gained. This means that the subsequent interpretations must be considered carefully within the lens of BC Ministry of Education curriculum if they are to be used to inform teacher practice and the creation of a classroom teacher resource. The BC Ministry of Education (2019) focuses on the speaking and listening elements of oral language (expressive and receptive language respectively) within which speech-language research has further broken down the skills that make up and impact these areas. My resources will reflect the BC Ministry focus on the practical classroom use of these skills as skills to be learned by students and skills that support the learning of other curricular areas.

### **Examining the Research on the Link Between Oral Language and Reading**

In reviewing the literature, I was careful to narrow down my resources to consider those studies that pertained to the learning happening for the majority of students. A great deal of literature about oral language and literacy focuses on English Language Learners (ELL), those with diagnosed specific special needs that affect language (ie. Autism), students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (low SES), those with varied home learning environments, and preschool learners. Where possible, I have excluded studies that only look specifically on these learners as my focus is on all the students in the general classroom and those at risk for literacy deficits. I will make some references to studies that include preschool children (when children are aged 4 or 5) as this is the same age children typically enter formal schooling and therefore relate to the population of children I am researching.

There is a vast amount of literature and research attempting to identify a link between oral language and reading proficiency and to further understand it (Davidson et al., 2018; Foorman et al., 2015; Henning et al., 2010; Kendeou et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2015; Lepola et al., 2016; Lervag et al., 2018; NICHD, 2005; Quinn et al., 2015; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). These studies add valuable knowledge to the investigation and all attempt to determine more specifically where and when the relations occur. Despite the varying conceptualizations and definitions of oral language in the literature, I noticed two thematic aspects of oral language and their effects on reading show up in the research: structural language (including semantics, vocabulary, and syntax) and narrative discourse (including oral storytelling and comprehension). This is far simpler of a breakdown than a speech-language pathologist would make, but I needed to find a way to look at the research in a way that is relatable for a teacher practitioner. I attempted to separate my evaluation of the studies into the aforementioned two categories, but

discovered that like everything involving an understanding of learning processes we cannot see, there is so much interconnectedness and overlap in skills that it is impossible to separate into tidy categories and will therefore make mention of these overarching categories when a study focuses on one over the other.

Foorman et al. (2015) studied the structure of oral language and its relation to comprehension in Kindergarten through to Grade 2. The study was cross-sectional in design (assessing 218 students in Kindergarten, 372 students in Grade 1, and 273 students in Grade 2) and did not follow a specific group of students over time. The study found that oral language structure (conceptualized by listening comprehension, and vocabulary) was predictive of reading comprehension in Grades 1 and 2. This was in contrast to the findings of the frequently referenced study by Storch and Whitehurst (2002) which sought to examine two domains of emergent literacy (code-related and oral language skills) in preschool and kindergarten and demonstrate their relations to reading development from Grades 1 through 4. Storch & Whitehurst (2002) followed 626 four-year-olds from low income families at a Head Start Centre and at their respective schools for six years, assessing each student yearly (assessments on code-related skills like identifying letters, oral language skills and reading - both accuracy and comprehension). The researchers used “structural equation modelling to map the relationship between the code-related skills, language ability, and later reading ability... Structural modelling allowed [them] to evaluate the effects of multiple emergent literacy skills on reading achievement throughout elementary school” (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002, p. 936). Results indicated that the relationship between code related skills and oral language are strongest in preschool but still continue later, reading ability in early elementary is determined by print knowledge and phonological awareness, and reading in later elementary appears to be broken up

into two separate skills of reading accuracy and comprehension (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Strengths of the study are its large sample size and longitudinal data collection of the same students over a course of 6 years. The participants in the study are specifically low income so the validity of the study may be only specific to that group, though the researchers do try to account for this as well and give statistics to state that their results are valid to greater populations. In contrast to the findings by Foorman et al. (2015) that the impact of oral language begins to affect reading comprehension in Grade 1, Storch and Whitehurst (2002) found that oral language measures did not predict reading comprehension until students were in Grade 2.

Catts et al. (1999) identified poor readers in Grade 2 from a large sample of children who had participated in a previous study that had assessed their oral language abilities in Kindergarten. They included children with below average IQs and argued that this was a weakness in other studies because IQ tests tap verbal abilities and may inadvertently exclude those students most at risk for language and reading disabilities (Catts et al. 1999). The results of their study indicated that 73% of poor readers had had discernable problems in some aspect of language in kindergarten (receptive language, expressive language, or both receptive and expressive language) which supports Foorman et al.'s (2015) results that indicate oral language is predictive of reading before Grade 2. Catts et al. (1999) points out an important implication of their work to my own applied project creation: "Attention to early language problems by preschool and kindergarten teachers should help to identify children most likely to have later reading disabilities before they begin formal reading instruction" (p. 355).

Some studies have shown how different aspects of oral language have impacted different aspects of reading and at different times. Roth et al. (2002) looked for a predictive relationship between a broad range of oral language skills measured in kindergarten and compared them to

reading skills in first and second grade. They followed a group of 39 kindergarten children assessing oral language, background, and reading ability. They wanted to know the predictive relationships of aspects of oral language and background on reading ability and if different aspects of oral language were important to reading skills at differing points of development. Notable results indicated that while phonological awareness in kindergarten predicted word reading in Grades 1 and 2, it did not predict reading comprehension and that semantic abilities (an aspect of oral language) were the biggest predictor of reading comprehension ability. The researchers found that narrative discourse (an aspect of oral language) had no predicting effect on reading skills in the students in their study, but this could have changed if they had continued to study the students for a few more years. Storch and Whitehurst's (2002) study was unique in the literature in that it followed students into the early intermediate years and noticed that reading ability measures needed to change in later elementary due to more specific comprehension skills being differentiated strongly from reading accuracy skills. Roth et al. (2002) point out that in Grade 2 reading still requires a significant amount of decoding and that narrative discourse may be more predictive when reading becomes more complex and children become more skilled.

Kim et al. (2015) studied Korean-speaking Grade 1 students and investigated the role of discourse-level oral language skills (which they classified as listening comprehension, and oral retell and production of narrative tasks) in relation to reading comprehension and writing skills. Similar to Kendeou et al. (2009), they found that listening comprehension is related to reading comprehension. Kim et al. (2015) found that listening comprehension and oral retell and production of narrative tasks were not uniquely contributing to reading comprehension, but rather contributed under the general oral language discourse-level skills as a whole.

Lepola et al. (2016) focused on the aspect of oral language most closely related to narrative discourse (only considering structural language as it related to comprehension). They looked at early oral language comprehension and if it had a predictive effect on reading comprehension. They discovered oral comprehension had a longitudinal impact and that it is predictive of reading comprehension beginning in kindergarten and increasing in influence all the way to the fourth grade (Lepola et al., 2016). A unique aspect to this study was that they measured narrative listening comprehension in kindergarten before students were reading and that they found a significant link. Finding an assessment that could begin to predict outcomes so early is valuable to creating classrooms that address these needs right away and before the students actually begin to struggle with reading. A critique of their assessment is that they created it themselves and as is characteristic of many narrative discourse assessment practices, they are very prone to examiner interpretation.

Cutting et al. (2009) primarily wanted to understand more about children who demonstrate adequate word reading skills and yet still develop specific reading comprehension deficits (S-RCD). Cutting et al. (2009) hypothesized that either comprehension failure was due to a processing bottleneck (S-RCD students could be accurate at word reading but not necessarily fluent and this would cause a processing bottleneck) or higher-level processes and executive functioning skills came into play in some combination to create reading comprehension failure because bottom-up processes alone (such as word reading that is independent of fluency) could not explain the failure. Children with an IQ below 80 or with other disabilities that might more obviously explain study results were excluded. As is common in most of the studies reviewed, a host of Level B and Level C assessments were used by clinical professionals to measure the variables. Researchers determined their results by “analyses [that] consisted of four multivariate

analyses of variance (MANOVAs) with group as the independent variable and with (1) the basic descriptor variables (age etc...), (2) the fluency measures, (3) the oral language measures, (4) the executive function measures” (Cutting et al., 2009, p. 7). They also conducted two hierarchical regression analyses to assess the prediction of reading comprehension across all groups using the 4 mentioned variables stated above. The authors in this study specifically stated that they found a lack of evidence in research studies comprehensively connecting underlying neuropsychological processes to reading comprehension (Cutting et al., 2009). They chose to analyse data in such a detailed way as to be able to look at the information from many perspectives and to see evidence past the early primary years (rather than one cause equals one effect at any time, they thought maybe different factors have different influences at different times). Determinations from the study confirmed that fluency and oral language were predictors of reading comprehension skills at different times on the reading development continuum. There also appeared to be an associated deficit in executive functioning skills in those with specific reading comprehension deficits and those deficits may play a significant role (Cutting et al., 2009). A huge strength of this study is its comprehensive nature while one drawback is that it does not follow the children over time to see consistencies or changes as they only are assessed over a 2-day period. Cutting et al. (2009) make an important link between two often disassociated skills: reading comprehension and executive functioning and they open the floor for another study to look more in depth at this and potentially uncover findings that can support struggling readers with things that have not yet been tried.

Davidson et al. (2018) studied factors affecting reading comprehension in children with and without Autism. They looked at word reading, oral language, the added role of working memory in predicting reading comprehension and found that oral vocabulary was still a stronger



predictor of reading comprehension (Davidson et al., 2018). These studies highlight that there is no one factor alone that impacts reading ability.

Oral language is often attempted to be quickly assessed by assessing vocabulary. Vocabulary is simple and quick to assess and there is little examiner bias. NICHD (2005) studied a large number of children (1137) from the time they were 3 years old and until they were in Grade 3. They found that a broad conceptualization of oral language predicted word-reading in Grade 1 and reading comprehension in Grade 3. Like other studies, these findings were contrary to some of Storch and Whitehurst's (2002) findings that said that oral language was not a predictive factor of reading abilities until Grade 2. Many studies point out this contrast and explain that the differences may likely be in the different conceptualizations and assessment methods used. NICHD (2005) found that oral language "serves as a better foundation for early reading skills than does vocabulary alone" (p. 428). More recent evidence shows that vocabulary independently has a significant impact on reading development (Davidson et al., 2018; Quinn et al., 2015). Quinn et al. (2015) studied 316 children over a 4 year period from Grades 1 to 4 when 219 children remained in the study. They found that development of vocabulary was reflected in positive growth in reading comprehension and that students who performed higher early on had faster growth than students who performed lower early on in the study. The results of their study indicated a 'growth upon growth' phenomenon where growth in vocabulary and reading comprehension were a result of "constant yearly change and change proportional to the previous level of the variable" (p. 159). Similar to Davidson et al. (2018) who found that vocabulary was the strongest predictor of reading comprehension, this indicates that students with strong vocabularies early on reap the benefits earlier in terms of their reading skills; highlighting our needs to identify and target students who need support early on. Like Davidson et al. (2015),

Quinn et al. (2015) did not perform any targeted oral language or reading interventions on the students they studied and their results were based on the teaching students received in the general education classroom.

Though I have not gone deeply into the other things measured in each study (ie. phonological awareness or decoding skills), as noted in Foorman et al. (2015), in the primary grades we often focus on activities which strengthen decoding skills more than the activities which strengthen oral language skills. Kendeou et al. (2009) found that oral language skills and decoding skills had a reciprocal relationship early on (in 4 and 6-year olds) and were both predictive of reading comprehension. They also found that over time that relationship lessened as elementary children require less decoding skills when they become more proficient readers. Oral language was shown to make a greater prediction on reading comprehension skills by the time students were in the older primary years. Perhaps we need to consider the amount of time spent focusing on decoding skills and direct some of it towards building oral language skills in our classrooms. I will need to address these findings in my work as many teachers are quite set on teaching decoding skills, and rightly so, there is evidence that we need to be focusing on both when teaching reading. Also, since they found that assessing comprehension in non-reading contexts in 4-year olds could be predictive of later reading comprehension, it allowed for the novel idea that we can work on future reading comprehension long before children are proficient readers (Kendeou et al., 2009). It allows for an avenue to support reading comprehension in poor decoders by way of building comprehension outside of reading activities which may be difficult for those poor decoders.

### **Teachers and Oral Language Knowledge**

These studies (Davidson et al., 2018; Foorman et al., 2015; Lepola et al., 2016; Lervåg et al., 2018; Quinn et al., 2015) acknowledge that reading is also developed on a continuum and attempted to shed light on the idea that different skills can be predictors for reading ability at different stages along that continuum. These studies all uncovered answers and information about where to look next and new questions to be asked. I am researching what teachers need to know about the relationship between oral language development and reading to be effective reading teachers. Studies like these help me understand the role that oral language plays and the interconnectedness of the literacy acquisition process with other skills development continuums (like executive functioning and working memory). It is quite obvious that learning to read and write via oral language skills does not happen in a vacuum and it would be helpful to have an understanding of the language and evidence currently available. I appreciate how there is literature and comprehensive research addressing the specific development points because if I intend to create a resources for teachers to use to support them in creating reading programs that build oral language skills that impact reading skills, I see that I will need to be diligent in conveying in what classroom situations and at what development times certain skills should be emphasized.

Doak (2012) points out in her Master of Education Thesis, *Oral Language Education: Voicing Teachers' Experiences and Considering Perceptions and Practices*, “[o]ral language is integral to all learning because speaking and listening skills are required for students to participate meaningfully in classroom learning activities” (p. 13). Oral language provides access for students to other areas of the curriculum; an ability to speak and listen allows for meaningful discussion, reading for information, sharing information, hearing teaching, and writing assignments or recording learning in any school subject. Henning et al. (2010) showed that

preschool intervention on oral language alone had no significant effect on literacy skills two years later (school age). This justifies the importance for school-age educators to be knowledgeable and for students to continue to need access to education or supports that continue to develop their oral language proficiencies. Teachers need to be able to identify and advocate for support for those students quickly. Even if a student is referred to speech-language services in school, the time they will be allotted for intervention is minimal compared to the amount of time they spend in the whole classroom environment. We need to know what aspects of oral language have the greatest positive impact on reading and be able to create classroom environments and teaching practices that build those skills. Doak (2012) refers to a “relative lack of empirical literature which examines the relationship between oral language teaching practices and teachers’ perceptions of oral language” (p. 13). The results of her survey indicate that teachers felt generally underprepared in their education regarding their understanding of and teaching practices in regards to oral language. Antoniazzi et al. (2010) studied teacher identification of children at risk for oral language impairment. They found that teachers “showed poor sensitivity and specificity in identifying children whose oral language skills require further investigation (p.244) and that “teacher judgements of students’ language skills showed limited correspondence with formal language screening” (p. 249). Antoniazzi et al. (2010) advocate that “[s]creening for oral language deficits in educational settings is no less important than mass screening for disease” (p. 250). They argue that oral language competence should be considered to be a determination of health for life.

Both professions (teachers and speech-language pathologists) need to have a strong understanding of the link between oral language and literacy. Teachers and speech-language pathologists need to work together and give opportunities for each body of knowledge to inform

the other. In most of the studies the research and assessments were done using speech-language professionals, sometimes in conjunction with teacher educators. Though the language of the studies was very heavy for a teacher educator, the discussion sections in each study consistently point out that their results would have great implications for classroom teachers. There is a need for a gap to be bridged and the work to be synthesized so it is understandable by and useful to a classroom teacher. I began this research and project knowing that the subject matter was vast and broad, but also seeing that teachers need to have this vast and broad knowledge simplified for them as it pertains to the success of the students in our classrooms.

### **Effective Teaching Practices**

Opportunities to use oral language are more often utilized by the teacher of a class than the students themselves (Bayetto, 2001; Brooke, 2015; Professional Development Service for Teachers [PDST], ND; Zhang & Alex, 1995; Wasik, 2010). An action research study done in Northern Canada led teachers to notice that children used language for a wider range of purpose than they realized as “[t]heir assessment of children’s oral language had previously been based primarily on children’s participation in whole class lessons, a time when many children were very quiet” (Stagg Peterson, 2016, p. 386). Results of studies drive policy makers to consider the teacher role in the classroom and the model in which we teach. The new BC Curriculum inquiry model focus is more on student engagement and driving their own learning experiences. For example, a lesson idea on the BC Curriculum website tasks students with collaboratively brainstorming, planning, and using materials outside to create a shelter to learn about a science concept (extreme environments) (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). While doing this students use skills from the communication core competency; relying on their sharing collaborative knowledge and curiosity to complete a hands-on task. The teacher’s role is as a facilitator rather

than a direct instructor. Zhang and Alex (1995) emphasizes that “...implementation of oral language development across the curriculum requires teamwork. All content-area teachers have to be actively involved in this task. The goal is not only to get children to speak, but also to have them learn and develop through speech” (p. 4). In a survey study about teachers’ perspectives on literacy acquisition, Giles and Tunks (2014) concluded that educators should be utilizing differentiation in their teaching rather than relying on a single view of how to build literacy in the early grades.

It is clear in the literature that oral language plays a pivotal role in reading: “Children with problems of listening comprehension are at risk for reading comprehension problems even if they can decode words” (Duff & Tomblin, 2018, p. 4). We need to be teaching oral language skills that support comprehension as well as the mechanics of reading. A key finding in Lepola et al. (2016) was that “assessment of oral language comprehension among prereaders should focus not only on retelling abilities and vocabulary, but also on children’s inference-making skills” (p. 387). I will need to consider this when I make my resources as my checklist will need to include an evaluation of oral inference skills and my effective teaching practices resource will need to include strategies that build inference-making skills in students.

## **Conclusion**

Classroom teaching practices and interventions in the early primary grades that focus on the continued development of oral language skills can affect the development of proficient reading skills: research shows that both structural language (including semantics, vocabulary, and syntax) and narrative discourse (including oral storytelling and comprehension) contribute greatly to reading success. Key findings include most notably that listening comprehension is related to reading comprehension (Duff & Tomblin, 2018; Kendeou et al., 2009; Kim et al.,

2015; Lepola et al., 2016). There is also growing evidence that oral language comprehension has an effect on reading skills earlier than previously assumed (Lepola et al., 2016). Vocabulary has an independent and profound effect of reading success (Davidson et al., 2018) and that decoding skills have the most impact in the first few years of formal schooling (NICHD, 2005; Roth et al., 2002) and after that oral language skills, both structural language and narrative discourse, dominate the relationship to reading proficiency (Davidson et al., 2018; Kendeou et al., 2009; Lervåg et al., 2018). In addition, there is evidence that a ‘growth upon growth’ phenomenon occurs in oral language skills and that it is valuable to develop strong oral skills early on (Catts et al., 1999; Quinn et al., 2015). Research also demonstrates that teachers feel relatively unprepared to teach and show low sensitivity to oral language skills (Antoniazzi, 2010; Doak, 2012) and that more teacher professional development and collaboration with speech-language professionals is needed to increase the effect that strong oral language skills can have on reading success (Kohler, 2016).

## Chapter 3

### Considerations for Implementation of Product

#### Setting the Stage

As children arrive in kindergarten from all different backgrounds and home learning environments, we have an opportunity when children come to us for five hours a day, five days a week; around 180 days in a typical school year. That is an approximate total of 900 hours a year spent in the learning environments we create in our schools and in our individual classrooms. When you put it that way, it emphasizes the big responsibility it is and the potential for impact it can have. As research shows oral language development in the early school years is a critical piece in developing literacy skills (Catts et al., 1999; Davidson et al., 2018; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Cutting et al., 2009; Foorman et al., 2015; Henning et al., 2010; Kendeou et al., 2009; Lepola et al., 2016; NICHD, 2005; Roth et al. 2002), teachers need to be prepared to recognize concerns, advocate for support, and employ teaching practices that effectively support these important development aspects of school and life success.

The guiding principles for education in my school district (Saanich) are: (a) Learning requires the active participation of the student (b) Learning is an individual and social process (c) Learning occurs in different ways and at varying rates (School District 63 Saanich, 1997). These key principles that guide our district in the education of our students are exemplified through the lens of oral language and its developmental continuum. Speaking and listening are active processes. Oral language is most frequently a social process; we listen and speak when we are engaged in social interactions both in the classroom and in all areas of life. We also expect that our students will grow at different times in their skills and with different needs for support; this is true of both oral language development and literacy development.



In this chapter I will describe in detail the classroom teacher resource I have created as part of my graduate applied project along with a rationale for its design, implementation and dissemination.

### **Description of the Product and Design Rationale**

Doak (2012) found in her survey of teacher oral language experiences, beliefs, and practices, that in general, teachers have an interest in oral language that is driven by their belief that speaking and listening skills support overall learning. Antoniazzi et al. (2010) points out that teachers not only need education in the identification of oral language competence, but to also be provided with continuing education, training, and resources. I have been very involved in teaching reading in recent years as a classroom teacher, support teacher, and Reading Recovery® teacher. I am motivated by my interest helping develop proficient readers in the primary school years and in the critical role oral language development plays in reading development. My initial goal was to create an oral language checklist that classroom teachers could use to get a better sense of oral language needs in their classrooms. First, I myself needed a picture of oral language development as it is important to school literacy success and in line with the competencies expected of students in British Columbia which I found through my in-depth review of current research and literature. During my research I noted that feedback from teachers in a study about teacher assessment of oral language in early childhood by Humphry, Heldsinger, and Dawkins (2017) suggested that “to effectively support the development of oral language educators need to know, ‘What to listen for?’ and ‘How to respond?’” (p. 135). Developing a checklist alone was not enough, I needed to give teachers guidance on where to go in response to support their students’ oral language and thus reading development. With this in mind, I sought to synthesize research from a vast area (oral language) that speech-language professionals have

bachelor and master degrees in. Speech-language pathologists' knowledge is extensive and it needs to be. They are specialists who target students who need focused interventions beyond the classroom. Teachers reported in a study by Humphry et al. (2017) that they find it difficult to interpret information about oral language from speech-language pathologists. Additionally, they found that through using the oral language assessment from the study, teachers realized they needed to review and refine their oral language classroom practices on a regular basis. I aimed to take this information and translate it into a broad scope of information accessible and digestible by a teacher practitioner. This led me to create the culmination of my graduate applied project: *A Resource for Classroom Teachers: Oral Language Supports Reading*.

**A resource for primary teachers: Oral language supports reading.** I worked to design a resource written in teacher language with the target audience being primary (K-3) classroom teachers in my school district and potentially beyond to any primary teacher in British Columbia. *A Resource for Classroom Teachers: Oral Language Supports Reading* is on an 8.5 x 11 inch paper format that can be printed and photocopied for ease of use. The document is also available in a portable document format (PDF) version with the intention that it can be easily shared via e-mail or saved on district resource sites and individual teacher computers. Figure 3 below shows the first page of the document and demonstrates the design colours and scheme that is used consistently through the resource. I endeavoured to use a clear and appealing format that utilized headings, tips and focus points highlighted in red, and minimal extra information. Though the colours aid in the documents appeal and clarity, it can easily be utilized in a black and white format as well.

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## A Resource for Primary Classroom Teachers

# Oral Language Supports Reading

### Overview

- This resource is intended for primary classroom teachers who are interested in improving their students' reading skills by helping teachers identify oral language needs (checklist) and by providing accompanying classroom based strategies to address oral language development.
- This resource is not intended to diagnose needs at a clinical level, but to help increase classroom teacher awareness of typical oral language development in their students.

**Tip:** Every school has a Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) who is a powerful support to use alongside this resource and for when you notice that a student's needs are beyond classroom support.

### The Oral Language and Reading Relationship

**Focus:** A simple explanation about why oral language development is so important in the primary classroom to support reading development.

- Research shows that a student's oral language development and its composite skills areas (e.g. semantics, syntax, vocabulary, narrative discourse, listening comprehension) have a direct impact on a student becoming a successful reader.<sup>1</sup>
- Teachers can affect the oral language development of their students through classroom design, teacher talk/role, and explicit lesson planning.<sup>2</sup>

### What is Oral Language?

In its most basic sense, oral language is *speaking* and *listening*.

"[S]tudents are expected **individually and cooperatively**, to be able to... begin to **use language** to identify, create, and express ideas, feelings, opinions, and preferences; engage actively as listeners, viewers, and readers, as appropriate to develop understanding of self, identity, and community; exchange ideas and perspectives to build shared understanding; and explore oral storytelling" (BC Ministry of Education, 2019, Curricular Competencies). These skills are expected to **grow in complexity and proficiency** in the primary school years.

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*Figure 3.* Image of the first page of the product.

I have divided the resource into seven sections (Overview, The Oral Language and Reading Relationship, What is Oral Language?, Oral Language Development Continuum, Student Observation Checklist for Classroom Teachers, What's Next? Classroom Design, What's Next? Teacher Talk and Teacher Role, and, What's Next? Lesson Planning) over eight pages and I will describe and give rationale for each section below. I aimed to keep my resource under 10 pages as there is a plethora of large resources out there, but teachers are busy and often overwhelmed. The most used resources are often ones that are succinct. A resource that is too long may lead a teacher to not use it at all, whereas I hope that my concise and practical resource is a stepping stone for teachers not only use but to become more interested in the area.

**Overview.** The purpose of this section is to give a brief and concise overview of what the document intends to accomplish and who it is to be used by. As seen in Figure 4 below, I found it important to note what the document was not intended to do as well (diagnose at a clinical level). I included what my research led me to deem as an important tip that directs teachers to find the SLP who works in their school and seek out their collaboration in the use of the resource. Research shows that collaboration between SLP's and teachers is valuable to student progress and not utilized as much as it could be in schools. (Humphry et al., 2017; Malec, Peterson & Elshereif, 2017; Portier & Stagg Peterson, 2017; Wasik & Hindeman, 2011).

## Overview

- This resource is intended for primary classroom teachers who are interested in improving their students' reading skills by helping teachers identify oral language needs (checklist) and by providing accompanying classroom based strategies to address oral language development.
- This resource is not intended to diagnose needs at a clinical level, but to help increase classroom teacher awareness of typical oral language development in their students.

**Tip:** Every school has a Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) who is a powerful support to use alongside this resource and for when you notice that a student's needs are beyond classroom support.

*Figure 4.* Image of the product overview.

***The oral language and reading relationship.*** The purpose of this section is to provide teachers with a concise research based rationale that demonstrates the document's validity in existence and use.

## The Oral Language and Reading Relationship

**Focus:** A simple explanation about why oral language development is so important in the primary classroom to support reading development.

- Research shows that a student's oral language development and its composite skills areas (e.g. semantics, syntax, vocabulary, narrative discourse, listening comprehension) have a direct impact on a student becoming a successful reader.<sup>1</sup>
- Teachers can affect the oral language development of their students through classroom design, teacher talk/role, and explicit lesson planning.<sup>2</sup>

*Figure 5.* Image of the oral language and reading relationship in the product.

***What is oral language?*** The purpose of this section is to provide a short, concise definition pertinent to BC educators.

## What is Oral Language?

In its most basic sense, oral language is *speaking* and *listening*.

“[S]tudents are expected **individually and cooperatively**, to be able to... begin to **use language** to identify, create, and express ideas, feelings, opinions, and preferences; engage actively as listeners, viewers, and readers, as appropriate to develop understanding of self, identity, and community; exchange ideas and perspectives to build shared understanding; and explore oral storytelling” (BC Ministry of Education, 2019, Curricular Competencies). These skills are expected to **grow in complexity and proficiency** in the primary school years.

*Figure 6.* Image of the “what is oral language?” description in the product.

***Oral language development continuum.*** The continuum in this section (Figure 7) is adapted from *First steps: Speaking and listening map of development* (Education Department of Western Australia, 2013, p. 6-7). I decided to include this because it is a holistic overview of oral language development. Teachers need this overview to help give context when using the checklist in the subsequent section. I felt this continuum would be especially valuable for newer teachers or teachers who have taught in one specific grade for a long time. In her dissertation on effective oral language strategies for teachers, Kohler (2016) determined that “[t]here is a need for teachers to have a comprehensive understanding of oral language development to meet the needs of linguistically disadvantaged students” (p. 83).

## Oral Language Development Continuum

**Focus:** This figure demonstrates a holistic continuum of oral language development. By the time students reach kindergarten they should be in the early phase and ideally they will have moved to the conventional phase by the end of their primary years (American Speech-Language Hearing Association, 2019).

Beginning Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• children use the language of the home and community to communicate with familiar others</li> <li>• often rely on non-verbal cues to convey and comprehend spoken language</li> <li>• speech may be characterised by short utterances and they may require support in unfamiliar settings</li> </ul>
Early Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students use their own variety of English language to communicate needs, express ideas and ask questions</li> <li>• understand spoken language relating to personal and social interests and respond in their own way</li> <li>• becoming aware of appropriate ways of interacting in familiar situations</li> </ul>
Exploratory Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students' use Standard English effectively within familiar contexts</li> <li>• communicate appropriately in both structured and unstructured situations</li> <li>• explore ways of using language for different speaking and listening purposes</li> </ul>
Consolidating Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students use most language structures and features of Standard English appropriately when speaking in a range of contexts</li> <li>• show increasing awareness of the needs of their audience</li> <li>• experiment with ways to adjust listening and speaking to suit different purposes</li> </ul>
Conventional Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students recognise and control most language structures and features of Standard English when speaking for a range of purposes</li> <li>• select and sustain language and style appropriate to audience and purpose</li> <li>• aware of the value of planning and reflecting to improve the effectiveness of communication</li> </ul>
Proficient Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students' control of Standard English reflects their understanding of the way language structures and features are manipulated to achieve different purposes and effects</li> <li>• evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of spoken texts in relation to audience, purpose and context</li> <li>• experiment with complex devices to improve their communication</li> </ul>
Advanced Stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students show a sophisticated control of Standard English in a range of contexts</li> <li>• understand the power and effect of spoken language, critically analysing factors that influence the interpretation of spoken texts</li> <li>• use complex devices to modify and manipulate their communication for a range of purposes</li> </ul>

Figure 7. Image of the oral language development continuum in the product.

*Student observation checklist for classroom teachers.* At any given time, all students are going to be in varying places with regards to their oral language development and our teaching needs to reflect that understanding. Speech-language pathologists are specialists in our schools with incredible knowledge that we do not regularly take advantage of for our own teacher education. To be able to navigate the literature in Chapter 2, I regularly engaged in conversation and discussions with 2 different speech-language pathologists who work with primary aged-children and my experience was incredibly positive. My teacher education was not enough to quickly grasp all the terms and concepts referred to in the literature. I enjoyed the opportunity to collaborate with other professionals who bring a different perspective to the work I do in the classroom. In the same way, I created this checklist with collaborative feedback from those same speech-language professionals to ensure I stayed true to the deep knowledge and understanding the speech-language profession has to offer while bridging the gap to provide teachers with the pieces that they really need to know about oral language development to put in place effective classroom teaching practices. Humphry et al. (2017) points out that in order to be able to decide what good practices to employ, you need to be able to access and understand what level students are at. Lexia Learning, a reading technology company who receives grants from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), produces a number of well-researched white papers by knowledgeable people in their field. Dr. Elizabeth Brooke, a speech-language pathologist writes on the critical role of oral language in reading instruction and assessment:

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 high 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 within grammar and 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. (2018, p. 4)

Malec et al. (2017) pointed out that “[c]lassroom assessments should also take place in meaningful interactive contexts” (p. 379). When looking at oral language assessment in the classroom, Butler & Stevens (1997) stressed that assessment needed to be on an on-going and continual basis, and occur over time in appropriate settings. This meant my checklist needed to be written in a way to capture a teacher’s observations about a student that were not specific to one subject area, setting, or moment. As seen in Figure 8 below, the questions in my checklist refer to skills teachers observe students missing in their school experience rather than diagnostic questions that would be asked and recorded based on a single interaction. I am not looking to make any clinical diagnoses from the information I garner. I am only looking to increase teacher awareness of oral language weaknesses, identify student needs, and inform teaching practice. The checklist is written in a larger font than the rest of the document to support ease of teacher use in the classroom where a teacher has many responsibilities.

Student Observation Checklist for Classroom Teachers

**How to Use:** This checklist can be used as a guideline for classroom observation of your students and provides accompanying strategies for classroom intervention when concerns are noted. Concerns across multiple items may warrant a discussion with your SLP or School Based Team (SBT).

☞	Student Name:
✓	
	Sounds younger than they are/younger than peers because they aren't using appropriate grammar (e.g. uses simple words and makes mistakes in tense or speaks in partial sentences)
	Difficulty following oral directions particularly if multi-step or more complex (e.g. using <i>before</i> or <i>after</i> language)
	Difficulty answering questions
	Asks few questions that seek detail; asks no questions at all
	Difficulty communicating an idea with specific information
	Difficulty with understanding typical classroom vocabulary or uses non-specific, vague language such as <i>that, thing, over there</i> (e.g. "I went to a place <i>over there</i> and played with <i>this thing</i> .")
	Difficulty staying on topic in oral discussion (1-1 or in a group)
	Difficulty using language appropriately in different social situations (e.g. when talking to a teacher vs a friend)
	Unable to use repair strategies to clarify when someone doesn't understand them
	Difficulty using age-appropriate humour or does not use age-appropriate humour

✓	
	Doesn't attentively listen to stories being read (e.g. rolling on the carpet during read aloud)
	Difficulty understanding and retelling a story
	Difficulty identifying storytelling elements (e.g. characters, setting etc.)
	Difficulty taking someone else's perspective
	Difficulty with concept vocabulary such as emotions, sequencing and time
	Doesn't understand common idioms/figures of speech (e.g. its raining cats and dogs)
	Difficulty understanding humour in stories (e.g. doesn't laugh at the funny parts of a read-aloud)
	Difficulty making connections between ideas in class/stories and themselves

Figure 8. Image of the student observation checklist for classroom teachers in the product.

To create this checklist I reviewed multiple resources that have already been created to assess oral language development and reflected on the research I found in my literature review about which oral language skills have critical impact on literacy outcomes. Then I combined those things to create a checklist that also reflects the expectations for students in the BC curriculum.

**What's next? Classroom design, teacher talk/role, lesson planning.** The most valuable professional development and/or resources I have had have taken formats that clearly laid out information in language that I as a teacher understand and included practical ideas or strategies I

can logistically begin to employ immediately. Erin E. Flynn, a professor of Child and Family Studies at Portland State University, writes that “[e]arly childhood classrooms need to become laboratories for language” (2016, p. 159). She also points out that “[t]eachers cannot assume that students use and hear rich language in the classroom. Instead, teachers need to plan ongoing ways to engage children in the kind of language associated with literacy learning” (Flynn, 2016, p. 159). On pages 5 through 7 of the document I have included effective teaching practices in the resource. I chose to arrange the strategies in three categories and use the question, ‘What’s Next?’ in all three headings to highlight that these strategies are to be used in response to determined oral language needs through the checklist. Each heading then includes a theme for the effective teaching practices listed on the page. I decided to divide the strategies into Classroom Design, Teacher Talk and Teacher Role, and, Lesson Planning because each type of strategy may be more useful at different times. Classroom Design and Teacher Talk and Teacher Role may be useful at the beginning of a school year in particular when a teacher is setting up the classroom and determining routines and roles. Teacher Talk and Teacher Role also is useful for a teacher to read on an on-going basis and reflect on how they are contributing to the development of oral language that benefits literacy in the classroom. Lesson planning is more specific and offers teachers direct activities that benefit student oral language development.

*Choosing the Content: Effective Teaching Practices.* The 7 Principles of Learning (Dumont, Istance, & Benavides, 2012) include these three important principles I used when deciding on the content of the effective teaching practices in my resource: learners should be at the center, learning is of a social nature, and learning environments should use assessment that informs learning. All of the strategies and teaching practices I have included reflect these principles.

A critical consideration from my research was that “[c]hildren with problems of listening comprehension are at risk for reading comprehension even if they can decode words” (Duff & Tomblin, 2018, p. 4). Kendeou et al. (2009) reminds us that often the focus in classrooms is on skills that can be concretely taught or assessed (like vocabulary and decoding) but the research shows that the comprehensive oral language skills we need have just as big an impact if not a greater impact on literacy outcomes. Archibald (2017) found that classroom-based narrative language and vocabulary instruction had a statistically significant impact but might not be enough for students with the lowest range of oral language skills. This is why I pointed out in the checklist that teachers who notice pervasive difficulties in students through the checklist should have a conversation with their SLP or school-based team (SBT). I included teaching practices that enrich the subset areas of oral language discussed in the literature review (ie. structural language, semantics, narrative discourse, vocabulary, grammar, inference-making skills etc.).

### **Planning for Implementation**

Linda Darling-Hammond evaluates teacher education practices around the world and writes that teachers need time to collaborate and plan effective teaching, time and resources for new teachers to build their skills, and routine for ongoing professional development for all teachers (2005). In a study evaluating the “impact of teacher professional development aimed at improving the capacity of primary teachers in disadvantaged schools to strengthen children’s expressive and receptive oral language skills and early literacy success” (Snow et al., 2014, p. 495), they found that significant advantages were found in the students in the research schools; “significant differences were evident on vocabulary, syntactic understanding, and some aspects of phonemic awareness” (Snow et al., 2014, p.495). This is evidence that intentional education of teachers and their subsequent work in classrooms can make an impact; teachers can make a

difference in oral language and literacy outcomes. The work that I have done has value for the teachers and the students who have access to it.

### **Dissemination of the Product**

I plan like to share the knowledge and resource I created with the primary teachers at my school during a staff meeting. I will provide free access to the resources I have created in printed and bound format or PDF. A key point I have returned to many times is the importance and value in fostering collaboration between teacher educators and speech-language pathologists.

Additionally, I plan to share the product at an increased depth at a grade group meeting with the teachers of the four other Grade 2/3 classes at my school. I plan to host this session in collaboration with the speech-language pathologists at my school to begin to open the door to bridge the gap between teacher knowledge and speech-language knowledge. Doak (2012) noted that we as educators need to continually reflect on and share our practice to increase our effectiveness as teachers of oral language and literacy.

### **Further Considerations**

As cited in Erin E. Flynn's article, *Language-Rich Early Childhood Classroom: Simple but Powerful Beginnings*, she points out that "teachers are not always prepared for and supportive of variation in ways of using language, especially ways of using language drawn from outside European American Language traditions." (2016, p. 165). In our local school district we have varying background for students, for example my school has a large First Nations population and at my previous school 20% of the school population were English Language Learners. Creating a resource that specifically targets those populations is outside the scope of this project, though would be valuable.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Conclusion and Reflection**

#### **Where I Began**

When I started this graduate applied project I was curious; curious about the students I had taught and the observations I had made around their oral language competencies and the simple concept that I knew oral language was integral to their success. What I did not yet have a grasp on was how or when those oral language skills could affect literacy and reading in particular. I also did not have a picture in my head of how oral language typically develops and what signs of concern to look for. I had heard it said many times in teacher education and professional development that oral language was important, but I wanted to understand the rationale and have a tool to be able to monitor the oral language of the students I teach. As an Integration Support Teacher, Classroom Teacher, and Reading Recovery® Teacher, I have worked closely with SLP's and noticed their deep understanding of speech and language development in children. My first goal was to create a checklist that bridged the gap between teacher understanding of oral language and SLP formal assessment. I realized quickly that my checklist could not look like the diagnostic Level-B assessments I have been accustomed to giving as an Integration Support Teacher. My goal became not to diagnose students, but to become more aware of their skills or missing skills and after that have some direction on how to respond. I also realized that I needed to narrow the focus of my research to be able to gain depth of understanding. I decided to narrow my research to looking at oral language development with regards to reading in particular.

#### **Where I Am Now**

The purpose of my project was to answer the question: what do primary teachers need to know about the relationship between oral language development and reading to put in place effective teaching practices? This led to researching oral language development in primary age children and oral language skills that have been proven to impact reading success in schools. From this I created a concise and practical product entitled *A Resource for Primary Classroom Teachers: Oral Language Supports Reading*.

As primary teachers who cover a wide breadth of curriculum and teach in integral formative school years, we are often required to be mini-experts in many areas. Realistically we cannot be experts in everything. I have found a passion (oral language) to add to the passion I already had for teaching reading. One of the biggest take-aways from this project has been the value in collaboration with other professionals (ie. SLP's) that work in our schools. We may not have the ability to become experts in every area, but we have access to professionals who have focused on particular areas in their education and continue to do in their work every day.

I have already used the checklist to make observations about the students in my own classroom, advocated for additional supports or assessments for students I see concerns in, and increased my effort to use effective teaching practices that impact the reading skills of my students by building their oral language skills.

### **Looking Ahead**

Catts et al. (2001) looked at estimating the risks for future reading difficulties in kindergarten children. They made a critical observation: it is easier to prevent than to remediate reading (literacy) difficulties. We can make a difference if we can recognize needs and employ effective teaching strategies early on. Teachers have a complicated job to be continually figuring out what exactly is going on for their students. Teachers need consider the many factors that

might be affecting outcomes for our students. If a student appears to have strong oral language as per the checklist I have created, it is still important to look at other factors and signs of struggles as there are many pieces in the puzzle and so they can be identified and acted on as early as possible.

The next step in my work is to continue to analyze this research information about how, where and when oral language has an impact on literacy and use it to determine valuable teaching practices to improve those oral language skills that most improve literacy skills. There are two specific areas I feel would warrant a further exploration. First, it would be beneficial to look closer at studies that have been done that specifically look at the relationship between oral language and writing and see what this adds to the picture of the oral language-literacy relationship. Second, as I teach in a school that serves a community with a significant First Nations population, further research and development of a research-based resource specifically addressing the oral language learning practices and traditions that are specific to the local Indigenous language could be instrumental to further reaching those students.

### **Final Thoughts**

It is hard to believe that this project is complete. I am proud of it and I look forward to sharing it with my colleagues and using it with my students. Though this project is complete in one sense, its intended to be a continual work in progress. New research and new understandings about learning acquisition take place every day. I consider the work I have done here to be a stepping stone to an even deeper understanding of the relationship between oral language and literacy and an increased capacity to be an effective teacher.



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Appendix A

A Resource for Primary Teachers: Oral Language Supports Reading

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# A Resource for Primary Classroom Teachers

# Oral Language Supports Reading

## Overview

- This resource is intended for primary classroom teachers who are interested in improving their students' reading skills by helping teachers identify oral language needs (checklist) and by providing accompanying classroom based strategies to address oral language development.
- This resource is not intended to diagnose needs at a clinical level, but to help increase classroom teacher awareness of typical oral language development in their students.

**Tip:** Every school has a Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) who is a powerful support to use alongside this resource and for when you notice that a student's needs are beyond classroom support.

## The Oral Language and Reading Relationship

**Focus:** A simple explanation about why oral language development is so important in the primary classroom to support reading development.

- Research shows that a student's oral language development and its composite skills areas (e.g. semantics, syntax, vocabulary, narrative discourse, listening comprehension) have a direct impact on a student becoming a successful reader.<sup>1</sup>
- Teachers can affect the oral language development of their students through classroom design, teacher talk/role, and explicit lesson planning.<sup>2</sup>

## What is Oral Language?

In its most basic sense, oral language is *speaking* and *listening*.

"[S]tudents are expected **individually and cooperatively**, to be able to... begin to **use language** to identify, create, and express ideas, feelings, opinions, and preferences; engage actively as listeners, viewers, and readers, as appropriate to develop understanding of self, identity, and community; exchange ideas and perspectives to build shared understanding; and explore oral storytelling" (BC Ministry of Education, 2019, Curricular Competencies). These skills are expected to **grow in complexity and proficiency** in the primary school years.

## Oral Language Development Continuum

**Focus:** This figure demonstrates a holistic continuum of oral language development. By the time students reach kindergarten they should be in the early phase and ideally they will have moved to the conventional phase by the end of their primary years (American Speech-Language Hearing Association, 2019).

Beginning Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• children use the language of the home and community to communicate with familiar others</li> <li>• often rely on non-verbal cues to convey and comprehend spoken language</li> <li>• speech may be characterised by short utterances and they may require support in unfamiliar settings</li> </ul>
Early Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students use their own variety of English language to communicate needs, express ideas and ask questions</li> <li>• understand spoken language relating to personal and social interests and respond in their own way</li> <li>• becoming aware of appropriate ways of interacting in familiar situations</li> </ul>
Exploratory Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students' use Standard English effectively within familiar contexts</li> <li>• communicate appropriately in both structured and unstructured situations</li> <li>• explore ways of using language for different speaking and listening purposes</li> </ul>
Consolidating Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students use most language structures and features of Standard English appropriately when speaking in a range of contexts</li> <li>• show increasing awareness of the needs of their audience</li> <li>• experiment with ways to adjust listening and speaking to suit different purposes</li> </ul>
Conventional Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students recognise and control most language structures and features of Standard English when speaking for a range of purposes</li> <li>• select and sustain language and style appropriate to audience and purpose</li> <li>• aware of the value of planning and reflecting to improve the effectiveness of communication</li> </ul>
Proficient Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students' control of Standard English reflects their understanding of the way language structures and features are manipulated to achieve different purposes and effects</li> <li>• evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of spoken texts in relation to audience, purpose and context</li> <li>• experiment with complex devices to improve their communication</li> </ul>
Advanced Stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students show a sophisticated control of Standard English in a range of contexts</li> <li>• understand the power and effect of spoken language, critically analysing factors that influence the interpretation of spoken texts</li> <li>• use complex devices to modify and manipulate their communication for a range of purposes</li> </ul>

Figure 1. The seven phases of oral language development. Adapted from *First steps: Speaking and listening map of development* (p. 6-7) by Education Department of Western Australia, 2013. Copyright 2013. Used with permission under the Creative Commons.

## Student Observation Checklist for Classroom Teachers

**How to Use:** This checklist can be used as a guideline for classroom observation of your students and provides accompanying strategies for classroom intervention when concerns are noted. Concerns across multiple items may warrant a discussion with your SLP or School Based Team (SBT).

✎	<b>Student Name:</b>

✓	
	Sounds younger than they are/younger than peers because they aren't using appropriate grammar (e.g. uses simple words and makes mistakes in tense or speaks in partial sentences)
	Difficulty following oral directions particularly if multi-step or more complex (e.g. using <i>before</i> or <i>after</i> language)
	Difficulty answering questions
	Asks few questions that seek detail; asks no questions at all
	Difficulty communicating an idea with specific information
	Difficulty with understanding typical classroom vocabulary or uses non-specific, vague language such as <i>that</i> , <i>thing</i> , <i>over there</i> (e.g. "I went to a place over there and played with this thing.")
	Difficulty staying on topic in oral discussion (1-1 or in a group)
	Difficulty using language appropriately in different social situations (e.g. when talking to a teacher vs a friend)
	Unable to use repair strategies to clarify when someone doesn't understand them
	Difficulty using age-appropriate humour or does not use age-appropriate humour

✓	
	Doesn't attentively listen to stories being read (e.g. rolling on the carpet during read aloud)
	Difficulty understanding and retelling a story
	Difficulty identifying storytelling elements (e.g. characters, setting etc.)
	Difficulty taking someone else's perspective
	Difficulty with concept vocabulary such as emotions, sequencing and time
	Doesn't understand common idioms/figures of speech (e.g. its raining cats and dogs)
	Difficulty understanding humour in stories (e.g. doesn't laugh at the funny parts of a read-aloud)
	Difficulty making connections between ideas in class/stories and themselves

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## What's Next? Classroom Design

**Focus:** These strategies focus on the physical classroom and the classroom routines you develop that promote the development of oral language in your students.

- Place students who struggle with oral language in preferential seating (closer to teacher, next to a peer they are comfortable talking to).
- Consider the ratio of teacher talk time and student talk time in your classroom. Students need time to practice their oral language skills across subjects and environments (not just at recess!).
- Reduce audio and visual distractions in the classroom.
- Teach Think-Pair-Share at the beginning of the year and use it regularly:
  - a. Think (students have time to think in their heads before responding)
  - b. Pair (turn body to a partner, look at partner when speaking/listening and ask the students to tell their partner what they were thinking about)
  - c. Share (ask a few children to share what they or their partner was thinking with the group)
- Morning Meeting: Arrange students in a circle so they can see each other when they interact (make eye contact, show and see facial expressions).
- Set up classroom so all students can see and hear teaching/learning happening (e.g. whiteboard and projector are visible, students can be close enough to hear you/others).
- Simplify instructions and directions; use visuals in the classroom to support comprehension.
- Be sure to have students' attention before giving directions; have student(s) rephrase/repeat directions back to you to check comprehension.



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## What's Next? Teacher Talk and Teacher Role

**Focus:** These strategies focus on your role as the teacher to foster the development of oral language every day in the classroom through your own oral language as well as a focus on taking advantage of in context learning opportunities that come up.

- Take advantage of teachable moments: when a subject has captured students' interest and a new vocabulary word comes up, take the time to explain it to students in the immediate context.
- Use explanations of new words that are child-friendly; use concrete objects to help solidify new vocabulary (e.g. a 3-D solar system model when learning about space and space vocabulary).
- Associate new vocabulary with known vocabulary (students are far more likely to remember the meaning of *predator* if they associate it with what they already know about a *shark*).
- Use new vocabulary words several times in context (same day, next day, a few days later) and in various ways (word appears in read-aloud, science lesson, discussion, writing, opportunity for the students to use the word themselves).
- Teacher talk should be rich and varied in vocabulary (vary nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs etc.).
- Model use of specific vocabulary ("Sally, can you please put the plastic scissors in the blue basket on the back bookshelf?", as opposed to, "Can you put these over there?").
- Inspire discussion between students using motivating topics they will have an opinion on.
- Model correct sentence structure and grammar (rephrase what student has said and have them repeat).
- Talk regularly with students and show genuine interest in what they have to say.
- Consider what the experiences a particular student has been exposed to when considering motivating topics to grow oral language upon.
- Work towards conversation with an individual student with 3-4 successive turns; use motivating topics to the student.
- Watch for subtle communication from students who do not frequently speak aloud (gestures, facial expressions) that you can then build a conversation with them on.
- Read a variety of stories to students and facilitate discussion that encourages questioning, connections, problem-solving, evaluating, using prior knowledge, and making predictions.
- Throughout the day and in varying situations, model thinking and problem solving outloud.
- Ask open-ended questions that provoke continued conversation vs. one-word answers.
- Ask students a lot of *why* questions so they need to use language to demonstrate their thinking and ensure deeper thinking about the topic.
- Rephrase a question if a student does not understand the initial question; give wait time to a student to give them time to comprehend what they hear and formulate a response.
- Repeat and extend a student's response to demonstrate use of increasingly complex language.

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## What's Next? Lesson Planning

**Focus:** These strategies focus on explicit lesson plan ideas that support the development of oral language that has a direct impact on reading success.

- Pre-teach new vocabulary students will need to know to understand, before it comes up in a read-aloud or a science lesson.
- Interactive Read-Alouds: Model effective oral language delivery (expression/volume/tone, varying voices, gestures, facial expressions) and use of comprehension strategies as the story is read. Choose novels that require students to interact and that students will be interested in/excited about. Target new vocabulary and pronunciation in context.
- No Pencils Day: Have a day where all teaching and learning is done through speaking and listening.
- Show and Tell: Have students bring in a collection of items from home that are important to themselves or a family member and have them share why they are important.
- Mystery Bag: Place a mystery item in an opaque cloth bag and have students feel it, describe it, decide and justify what they think it is.
- Reader's Theatre: Scripts help students with confidence as they don't have to come up with the words to say themselves.
- In the Hot Seat: After reading a story to the class, have a student sit in the "hot seat" and respond to questions as though they are the character from the story.
- Wordless Picture Books: Have students use iPads to record their own narration of a wordless picture book.
- Felt Board: Model how to use with teacher read-aloud stories and then give students time to use it on their own. Provide various character and prop/setting felt pieces. Encourage students to retell known stories or create their own.
- Collaborative Story Groups: Have students sit in circular small groups and have one student start the story (or give them a story starter) and each student adds the next detail to the story.
- Teach students to break apart words into smaller meaningful chunks to find meaning in new vocabulary (e.g. root words, suffixes, prefixes). Build and break apart words and then use them in a sentence (e.g. The *fearless* mom protected her baby from the lion).

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## Appendix B

## Language and Education Terms

*Terms Used In the BC Curriculum*

*big ideas*: the key concepts, principles, and theories that are used to organize knowledge within an area of learning

*communication competency*: encompasses the set of abilities that students use to impart and exchange information, experiences, and ideas; explore the world around them; and understand and effectively engage in the use of digital media and provides a bridge between students' learning, their personal and social identity and relationships, and the world in which they interact

*competency*: represents the combined skills, processes, behaviours, and habits of mind that learners use to make sense of the world

*core competencies*: a set of intellectual, personal, and social competencies that students develop to engage in deeper learning and to support lifelong learning through the course of their schooling: communication competency, thinking competency, personal and social competency

*curricular competencies*: the skills, strategies, and processes that students develop over time (example: the principles of problem solving in math)

*literacy*: the ability to make meaning from text and express oneself in a variety of modes. This includes comprehending, making connections, critically analyzing, and creating and communicating for a variety of purposes

Adapted from Glossary of Curriculum Terms, Government of BC, Ministry of Education, 2018

*Terms Used in the Literature Review*

*executive functioning*: a set of cognitive skills that help a person analyze a task, make a plan and get things done

*grammar*: syntax and morphology (mechanics of the language); the rules of language relating to syntax and morphology

*narrative discourse*: the ability to tell a story

*morphemes*: smallest meaningful units of language

*morphology*: how morphemes are put together to form words; indicates how words are formed and provides a bridge between phonology and syntax

*phonemes*: shortest unit of sound in a given language that can be recognized as being distinct from other sounds in the language

*phonology*: the rules governing the patterning of speech sounds in a language, includes pauses and stresses

*phonological awareness*: the understanding that words are made up of individual sounds (from syllables to phonemes) and those sounds can be manipulated and changed to create different words

*pragmatics*: the social use of language, all the rules around what you say and when

*semantics*: knowledge of vocabulary, the ability express and understand concepts about object and events (meaning)

*syntax*: the way words are combined into phrases and sentences

*vocabulary*: knowledge of the meaning and pronunciation of words in language