Put your ear a little closer – tuning into children’s language to aid literacy acquisition

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In the UK...

- Up to 80% of children starting school in disadvantaged areas may present with mild to severe oral language problems (Hartshorne, 2006)
- 1 in 10 children has severe Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) that requires specialist support; 2-3 in every classroom (www.ican.org.uk)

“Practitioners and teachers acknowledge they lack knowledge of typical and atypical language development in children and the impact this has on the cognitive, social and academic achievement of a child.” (Berkow Review, 2008:17)
“the range and depth of oral language knowledge varies greatly from child to child, creating the inevitability of individual differences.” Clay, (2001: 115)

- Children with severe SLCN
- Children with delayed or disordered speech when they enter school. (Locke et al, 2002)
- Children with normal SLC development
- Children with good SLC development

Up to 50% of children may have delayed/disordered speech, language and communication needs when they enter school.

Early speech, language and communication difficulties are a very significant predictor of later literacy difficulties. (Snowling, 2006)
What does this mean?

• Speech Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) are often called a ‘hidden difficulty’.

• Many children with SLCN look just like other children, and can be just as clever. This means that instead of communication difficulties people may see children struggling to learn to read, showing poor behaviour, having difficulties learning or socialising with others.

• Some children may become withdrawn or isolated. Their needs are often misinterpreted, misdiagnosed or missed altogether.
• “Reading and writing are two different ways of learning about the same thing – the written code used to record the oral language.”

Clay, (2005:48)
• “It is powerful to harness the established power of children’s oral language to literacy learning from the beginning, so that new literacy knowledge and new oral language powers are linked and patterned from the start.” (Clay, 2001:95)

• “Talk is essential in our lives, not least because most of us, as the saying goes, do not know what we think until we hear what we say.” (Chambers, 1993:32)

• “Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them. Every thought tends to connect something with something else, to establish a relationship between things. Every thought moves, grows and develops, fulfils a function, solves a problem.” (Vygostsky, 1986:218)

• “so the question is, if they can’t say it, can they read it?” (Dixon, 2012:34)
Plan of the seminar

• **What should we expect?** What is the typical developmental pathway of speech language and communication in children?

• **How do we know?** What can we do to tune into a child’s oral language development?

• **What can we do to help?** What strategies support children with these difficulties?
What should we expect?

What can a child do?
What does a child with average speech development sound like?
How do they behave in situations when they communicate?

Think of a child you know who talks well (aged 5 or 6) what do they do? How do they sound?
By the age of five a child should....

- **understand opposites**, such as high and low, wet and dry, big and little
- use **sentences of about six words** with correct grammar
- talk about events which **are happening, have happened** or **might happen**
- **explain why something happens**, such as "Mum's car stopped because the petrol ran out"
- explain the **function of objects**, for example, "This scrunchie keeps my hair away"
- **follow three directions**, for example, "Stand up, get your shoes on and wait by the door"
- say **how they feel and tell you their ideas**
- become interested in writing, numbers and reading things
- **speak clearly enough to be understood by anyone**

Factsheet produced by Speech Pathology, Australia (available at www.Speechpathologyaustralia.org.au)
Time to Talk
Implementing outstanding practice in speech, language and communication

By Jean Gross
Published 21st May 2013 by Routledge – 168 pages

Series: David Fulton / Nasen
Understanding context of message (to whom, about what, when etc)

Understanding the message

Attending to the message, (knowing what is Important and what isn’t)

Understanding the deeper layers of the message (inferring)

Breadth and depth of vocabulary known and understood that is in the message

Being able to link ideas across a longer message

Understanding the literal meaning of the message

Understanding Language (receptive language)
Expressive language

Knowing how to compose a message

Being able to monitor the message and self correct to ensure the correct message is given

Being able to select the right words

Being able to say the words, coordinating mouth, lips, tongue, breathing

Being able to put the right words into the right order (syntax)

Being able to control rate of speech and pace of speech and volume of speech to ensure it is clear

Expressive language

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Understanding the hidden aspects of the message – the social, or pragmatic aspects of the message

Knowing how to say the message; rules of communication

Understanding phrases/sayings/idiomatic or figurative parts of speech

Understanding how the message is delivered, the implied meanings.

Conversations and social use of language
The Communication Chain

Understand the meaning - literal and non-literal

Have ideas and decide what to say

Choose words = semantics

Plan words in an appropriate sentence structure = syntax (grammar)

Consider the impact the communication will have on others and its appropriateness

Modify the message

Select the sounds = phonology

Articulate sounds

Speak fluently

Self-monitor

Look / attend

Listen / Hear

Interpret non-verbal communication

Remember = auditory memory

Understand words = semantics

Understand sentence structure = syntax

Elklan, 2005

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Oral language development is “a problem-solving activity that demands a constructive effort.” (Langacker, 2000:283)

- Searches for and uses further information to give meaning and to gain meaning
- Relates new information to previous learning (active)
- Integrates and controls a range of information flexibly
- Notices new things and actively seeks new learning
- Self monitors leading to self-correcting
- Repeats and rehearses to secure learning

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• Oral Language development is a problem solving, interactionist activity (Wells, 1986; Langacker, 2000; Tomasello, 2003)

• Tomasello (2002) suggests that children use their innate pattern finding skills and intention understanding skills to help them learn the language

• Children learn oral language through conversation with more competent others who scaffold, explore and develop their communicative intentions (Clay, 2001)
• “The child who does not like to talk with the teacher or who has some difficulty in understanding what the teacher is saying may be a child at risk.” (Clay, 1991:73)
How do we know?

• What is there available to help us build up a picture of the strengths and weaknesses of a child as a learner of language?

• “There are no simple assessment tools that identify and assess language development. Moreover, the use of single measures is considered inadequate for determining whether a child at any age has typical or delayed language.” Dockrell (2001:74)
The National Strategies

APP Speaking and listening assessment guidelines: levels 1, 2 and 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pupil name</th>
<th>Class/Group</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>AF1 Talking to others</strong></th>
<th><strong>AF2 Talking with others</strong></th>
<th><strong>AF3 Talking within role-play and drama</strong></th>
<th><strong>AF4 Talking about talk</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talk in purposeful and imaginative ways to explore ideas and feelings, adapting and varying structure and vocabulary according to purpose, listeners, and content</td>
<td>Listen and respond to others, including in pairs and groups, shaping meanings through suggestions, comments, and questions</td>
<td>Create and sustain different roles and scenarios, adapting techniques in a range of dramatic activities to explore texts, ideas, and issues</td>
<td>Understand the range and uses of spoken language, commenting on meaning and impact, and draw on this when talking to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 3</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In most contexts:</td>
<td>In most contexts:</td>
<td>In most contexts:</td>
<td>In most contexts:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- develop ideas and feelings through sustained speaking turns</td>
<td>- respond to the speaker’s main ideas, developing them through generally relevant comments and suggestions</td>
<td>- show understanding of characters or situations by adapting speech, gesture, and movement, helping to create roles and scenarios</td>
<td>- recognise and comment on different ways that meaning can be expressed in own and others’ talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- organise talk to help the listener, with overall structure evident</td>
<td>- attempt different roles and responsibilities in pairs or groups</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- adapt language and non-verbal features to suit content and audience</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 3</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In some contexts:</td>
<td>In some contexts:</td>
<td>In some contexts:</td>
<td>In some contexts:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- recount experiences and imagine possibilities, often connecting ideas</td>
<td>- listen and respond to the speaker, making simple comments and suggestions</td>
<td>- extend experience and ideas, adapting speech, gesture, or movement to simple roles and different scenarios</td>
<td>- show awareness of ways in which speakers vary talk, and why, through exploring different ways of speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- vary talk in simple ways to gain and hold attention of the listener</td>
<td>- make helpful contributions when speaking in turn, in pairs, and small groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- make specific vocabulary choices and use non-verbal features that show awareness of different purposes and listeners</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 3</strong></td>
<td><strong>Level 4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In some contexts:</td>
<td>In some contexts:</td>
<td>In some contexts:</td>
<td>In some contexts:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- express feelings and ideas when speaking about matters of immediate interest</td>
<td>- understand and engage with the speaker, demonstrating attentive listening</td>
<td>- engage in imaginative play enacting simple characters and situations using everyday speech, gesture, or movement</td>
<td>- notice simple differences in speakers’ use of language and try out new words and ways of expressing meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- talk in ways that are audible and intelligible to familiar others</td>
<td>- engage with others through taking turns in pairs and small groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- show some awareness of the listener by making changes to language and non-verbal features</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Below level

Insufficient evidence

Overall assessment (tick one box only) Level Low Secure High
Assessment Focus 1
AF1 Talking to others
Talk in purposeful and imaginative ways to explore ideas and feelings, adapting and varying structure and vocabulary according to purpose, listeners, and content.

Assessment Focus 2
AF2 Talking with others
Listen and respond to others, including in pairs and groups, shaping meanings through suggestions, comments, and questions.

Assessment Focus 3
AF3 Talking within role-play and drama
Create and sustain different roles and scenarios, adapting techniques in a range of dramatic activities to explore texts, ideas, and issues.

Assessment Focus 4
AF4 Talking about talk
Understand the range and uses of spoken language, commenting on meaning and impact, and draw on this when talking to others.
Using an Assessing Pupil Progress Grid

• The expected level for a child aged 6-7 years is Level 2.
• This is a best fit model; at least 3 of the Assessment foci must be completed to attain the level.
• Evidence and observations can be collected over time and a range of classroom activities.
• Once the level is identified, it can be assessed as high, secure or low.
Things to consider...

**How does the talking sound?** pace, fluency, articulation of words, clarity of production of words, expression, appropriate stress and tone of the speech

**Does it make sense?** context, logical progression of sentences to construct meaning, does it make sense? Revising and self-correcting to ensure meaning, expressing feelings

**Does it sound right?** number of words in a sentence? Correct grammatical structure of sentences? Use of past, present, future, conditional tenses? Use of parts of speech; adjectives, adverbials, morphemes used

Dialect or accent doesn’t count!
How did the speaking sound?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How did the talking sound?</th>
<th>Did it make sense?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did it sound right?</td>
<td>What was the longest sentence you heard?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What was the most complex sentence you heard?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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What can we use?

- Running record, analysing errors, listening for self-correcting and re-running
- Vocabulary - looking for breadth and depth of vocabulary; how many words does a child know?
- Rules about inflections (creating tenses) – Biks and Gutches, Clay (2005)
- Articulation – listening for clear speech, recording mispronunciations
- Listening and retelling stories, especially a child’s early attempts at reading and writing.

Clay, (1991:74)
Lust (2006) noted that “the acquisition of syntax is fundamental to children’s acquisition of meaning and avoidance of gibberish” (p21).

Repetition is considered to be a natural skill, requiring relatively little concentration and the patterns of errors can highlight areas of difficulty for children. (Seeff-Gabriel et al, 2010).
Record of Oral Language - Fred

Fred – Level 1

My brother’s knees are dirty. My brother knee are dirty.

Baby is drinking some milk. The baby is drinking some milk.

Sally is staying at home. Sally is staying at home.

John is buying me a boat. John is buying me a boat.

I know he’s in there. I know he’s in there.

There’s another fire engine. There’s another fire engine.

She’s driving her car quickly. She’s driving her car quickly.

The car’s radio was stolen. The ( ) radio was stolen.

Sally is riding her bike. Sally is riding her bike.

Mary is going to town. Mary is going to town.

Mary is giving me a book. Mary is giving me a book.

I guess we’re lost. I guess we’re lost.

Here’s some more fish. Here’s ( ) more fish.

He’s playing that music very loud. He’s playing that music really loud.
Record of Oral Language - Fred
Level 2.

That big dog over there is going to be my brother’s.
That big dog (...) is gonna be my brother’s.

The boy by the pond was sailing his boat.
The boy over there was sailing his boat.

The bird flew to the top of the tree.
The bird flew from the tree.

For his birthday Mary gave him a truck.
Don’t know.

Can you see what is climbing up the wall?
Can you see whose climbing up the wall?

Here comes a big elephant with children sitting on his back.
Here comes (...) children (...) on its back.

My brother turned the television up very loud.
My brother turned the telly up so loud.

That old truck in there used to be my father’s.
That (...) truck was used to be by father’s.

The cat from next door was chasing a bird.
Next doors that cat was chasing a bird.

The dog ran through the hole in the fence.
The dog followed over the fence.

For the holidays, Grandpa bought us a ball.
One day Grandpa bought us a ball.

The boy saw what the man was doing to the car.
The man saw what was doing to the car.

There is my baby riding in his pushchair.
The baby was riding in his pushchair.

The girl threw her book right across the room.
The girl ran across the room.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Range of errors using the syntactic construction</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>up (turned up)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threw (irregular past tense)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is (what’s)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gave (irregular past tense)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>through</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>riding (is riding)</td>
<td></td>
<td>to</td>
<td>old</td>
<td>children</td>
<td>her</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is (is climbing)</td>
<td></td>
<td>over there</td>
<td>big</td>
<td>television</td>
<td>his</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic structure</th>
<th>Verb constructions</th>
<th>Linguistic concept of space</th>
<th>Adjectives (before the noun)</th>
<th>Irregular/proper nouns</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Bernard went into the garden. “Hello, monster,” he said to the monster.

The monster ate Bernard up, every bit. Then the monster went indoors.

“Roar!” went the monster behind Bernard’s mother. “Not now, Bernard,” said Bernard’s mother.

The monster bit Bernard’s father. “Not now, Bernard,” said Bernard’s father.

“Your dinner’s ready,” said Bernard’s mother. She put the dinner in front of the television. The monster ate the dinner. Then it watched television.

Then it read one of Bernard’s comics. And broke one of his toys.

“Go to bed. I’ve taken up your milk,” called Bernard’s mother. The monster went up.

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Summary

• A **profile of a child across several different activities** helps to build a picture of a child.

• **Close observation and analysis of our record keeping** can help us identify areas of challenge for children as communicators.

• Using specific assessments such as the **Record of Oral Language** add layers to the observations and support closer observation, identifying areas that might prove hard for the child.

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What can we do to help?

Some general principles

Consider and reflect on our teaching

1. Giving information in **short chunks**, with time to process information or ask for help in between.
   - Give **Think Time**.

2. Ensuring **instructions are concise** and easy to understand.
   - Monitoring how much **idiomatic or figurative language** is used.
   - Repeating and reinforcing new ideas and information.

3. Organise our teaching environment; avoid background noise
   - Using visual timetables, regular routines
   - Creating a language, talk rich learning environment where purposeful talk is planned; teach talking

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Sharing Stories

• “reading to children from books beyond their reading level is helpful and two reasons for this are, it contributes to the incidental learning of new vocabulary and increases exposure to literacy language.” Clay, (2001:95 )

• Reading the same book several times helps with language learning ( Horst et al, 2011)
During the Reading Recovery lesson

Familiar reading

• Broadening and deepening vocabulary – experiencing words in a context that is meaningful
• Practising new grammatical structures
• Deepening comprehension
• Organising language into smooth and fluent phrasing at an appropriate pace
• Responding briefly to questions or retelling a narrative
Developing study skills and ways of looking at words

- Playing with words; developing phonological awareness and helping children see and hear similarities and differences
- Inflectional understanding
“even the reading of a simple story involves the linking of many processes like visual perceptions, auditory/phonological analysis, movement, speaking/articulating, and knowledge of language use and reference.”

Clay, (2001:97)

Composing a story and Introducing the new book are the two parts of the lesson where we can really focus on supporting oral language development.
Composing

“We have known for a long time that conversation with an adult was the best tutorial situation in which to raise the child’s functioning to a high level”

(Clay, 1991:70)

• Extending the complexity of sentences that children record
• Introducing and practising sentences structures met in books
• Using them explicitly in our composing conversations
• 1. Open ended questions
  – I wonder why...
  – How would you feel
  – What do you think about
  – How do you think we could...
  – Tell me about...
  – How did you do that?
  – How are you going to ....
  – Perhaps?....

Topics for writing?

• **opposites**, such as high and low, wet and dry, big and little, describing things in books, in the classroom...
• use **sentences of about six words** with correct grammar
• writing about events which are happening, have happened or might happen
• explaining why something happens,
• explaining the **function of objects**, connected to non-fiction texts, or activities that have happened in class
• Writing about **how they feel/ felt, how characters feel/felt**

(Clay, 2005:56 “note down whatever bothers you so that you remember to work the alternative phrase into your conversation”)
New Book introduction;

- **Choosing books** – the challenge is to remain within the child’s experience and yet lift and extend their skills.
- Clay (2005:90) states that a new book should introduce one or two new things within the text that will challenge the child.
- “The introduction to the new book is particularly important for the child who does not have good control of language.” (Clay, 2005:91)
- Clay (2005:90) comments that using the ROL helps teachers choose books that are within a child’s control.
- Which aspect/aspects might be challenging for the child?
The possible meaning of books

- Consider the number and names of the characters, the number of events in each story, the numbers of settings; all these make the meaning more complex.
- Literary and figurative language can be particularly challenging.
- Children may find it hard to link the meaning of sentences together to make a coherent narrative.
- Consider **open ended questions** to encourage children to reflect on their understanding of a story. Can they make links with other texts they know? (Clay, 2005:97)
- Good comprehension relies on **understanding 90%** of the vocabulary (Nagy and Scott, 2000).
Word learning

• Children learn on average 7-8 new words a day.
• A child who enters school in the lowest 20% of vocabulary knowledge will need to learn 20 new words, every day for the next 3 years to catch up (Biemillar, 2011)
• Hart and Risley (2005) suggest that children need to hear and use new vocabulary at least 6 times in a context that is meaningful to them in order to be able to say it.

“Word meanings are dynamic rather than static formations. They change as the child develops; they change also with the various ways in which thought functions.” (Vygotsky, 1978:30)
Extending the vocabulary net

**Tier 1 words:** Anchor words
Basic words such as simple nouns, adjective, adverbs

**Tier 2 words:** Goldilocks words
These are words that a child is unlikely to meet in normal functional communication, but could be used in other contexts; words that enhance a vocabulary

**Tier 3 words:**
Step on technical vocabulary

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Stephen Parsons and Anna Brammagan, Words Aware, 2013
Storing vocabulary

Words that mean the same

Words that mean opposites

Rhymes with?

Put it in a sentence

Clap out the syllables

Creating a pictoword, or draw pictures

What does it mean?

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Introducing language structures

“The teacher must plan for the child to have in his head the ideas and language he needs to complete the reading.” (Clay, 2005:91)

• Explicitly highlight any interesting or potentially misleading phrases, especially those that will present a barrier to comprehension.

• “give the child opportunities to hear and use new words and structures.” (Clay 2005:91)

• Aim for a genuine conversation about the new text, that encourages the child to bring themselves to the text and to hear the language in a meaningful context.
In summary....

• Conversation supports children to develop their communication skills.
• The composing, writing and new book introduction parts of a lesson provide excellent opportunities for rich conversation.
• By focusing on the meaning of texts, we can provide a foundation for children to hang new language onto, clarifying meaning, extending and deepening vocabulary and developing syntactic understanding.
• As expert language users we model, but can also easily confuse.
In conclusion...

“the language activities of their classrooms will place heavy demands on knowledge of sentence structure and shades of meaning. If we harness established power of children’s oral language to literacy learning from the beginning, so that literacy knowledge and oral language processing power move forward together, linked and patterned from the start, that will surely be more powerful.”

Clay, (2001:95)
“If children do not have the linguistic capability to be able to think and learn, then we deny them the opportunity to invent new concepts, capacities and problem solving procedures. Without the skills to be able to measure and monitor their developing competences, teachers are acutely disadvantaged.”

Dixon (2012:46)
“Instead, put your ear closer, concentrate more sharply, smile more rewardingly and spend more time in genuine conversation, difficult though it is. To foster children’s language development, create opportunities for them to talk, and then talk with them (not at them).”

• Clay (1991:69)
Useful websites:

www.ican.org.uk
www.talkingpoint.org.uk
http://www.asha.org
www.elklan.co.uk
www.educationworks.org.uk
www.caslpa.ca
https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/
http://www.thinkingtalking.co.uk/ - Words Aware
References

- Dockrell, J. (2001) Assessing Language skills in pre-school children; *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 6, p74-85
- Dixon, M. (2012) Tuning in: supporting teachers to listen actively to children’s oral language in order to strengthen the teaching of reading
References


References


• Stephen Parsons and Anna Brannagan, *Words Aware*, 2013

Books used