

Listen, Speak, Read and Write ! NOT Read, Write, Listen and Speak ! :

An ideal order of teaching English

Ariatna

Fakultas Bahasa dan Seni

Universitas Negeri Medan

Abstract

The topic of oral language has generated excitement and interest among language researchers for many years. While most educators are convinced that language plays a central role in academic learning, the notion that oral language is a prerequisite for reading and writing skills has increasingly gained support from many authors.

This paper will discuss a number of justifications for oral language as the foundation for building literacy skills. Taking the relationship of oral language and literacy as a point of introduction, the paper reviews the literature on what teachers should know about oral language and moves on to provide an outline of oral language problems before finally suggesting a number of useful ways for promoting oral language development in a language rich environment.

Keywords: oral language, literacy, speaking, listening, reading, writing.

Introduction

To better understand the relationship between oral language and literacy, it may be useful to look at how language scholars conceptualise them. In the words of Hill (2006, p. 21), the term *oral language* is defined as “communicating through speaking and listening” and the term *literacy* refers to “communicating through reading and writing”. While oral communication

differs from written communication in its grammatical, lexical and discourse patterns (Bygate, 2001, p. 14), they are both language-based in terms of meaning comprehension and production (Cambourne, 1988, p. 29).

When we speak and listen to people or read and write texts, we use language to convey our meanings. According to Bos and Vaughn (2005), the speaker is similar to the writer in a way they encode words for production (expressive language) and the listener and the reader are similar because they both decode words to gain comprehension (receptive language). Thus, for effective communication to occur, students need to know what is being communicated to them and how to communicate their ideas to others in both oral and written forms (pp. 70-71).

Given that language functions as an integral part of the communication processes, it follows that the four skills of language which include speaking, listening, reading, and writing are also interdependent (National Literacy Strategy, 1998; as cited in Grugeon, Dawes, Smith, & Hubbard, 2005, p. 1). As such, a problem in one mode of communication might have an impact on others. Researchers have found that students who have oral language problems are likely to experience problems in written communication (Bos & Vaughn, 2005, p. 71). As Aschberger (2008) puts it, “students with speech and oral difficulties are at risk of both reading and writing difficulties”.

The notion that oral language skills provide the foundation for written language skills has been advocated by many other authors. Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998), for example, contend that the ability to comprehend and articulate spoken language is essential for learning to read and write (as cited in Rivalland, 2004, p. 143). Along this line, Aldridge (2005) highlights the need for focusing on oral language instruction as a way of promoting a child’s literacy development (p. 177).

Another concept concerning oral language contribution to the development of literacy skills is put forward by Cohen and Cowen (2008). They posit that a child's oral language skills play a key role in determining his/her future literacy success. As such, they recommend that school teachers provide students with language-rich activities to promote their oral language proficiency (pp. 339-346).

The reason why spoken language has been seen as an important indicator of literacy success is because it marks the starting point of using language as a symbol for meaning. To quote Vukelich, Christie and Enz (2002, p. 2; as cited in Hill, 2006, p. 20):

Oral language involves first-order symbolism, with spoken words representing meaning. Written language, on the other hand, involves second-order symbolism that builds on the first-order symbolism of oral language. Printed symbols represent spoken words that, in turn, represent meaning.

From the description above, it could be inferred that language proficiency first occurs in students' oral language and then in their written language (Fillmore & Snow, 2000, p. 14). This statement is consistent with what Grugeon et al. (2005, p.1) says, "for at the heart of literacy is oracy, the way we access literacy is through oracy".

What teachers need to know about oral language

To start with, I would like to describe my basic premise about teaching. Underlying all of my teaching ideas is the belief that teachers play a vital role in making a positive change towards student learning. As put forward by Larsen-Freeman (2000, p. 83), I agree that improvement in teaching and problem-solving in the classroom lie in the hands of a teacher who is willing to learn new concepts, explore current approaches and experiment with different strategies.

It is frequently asserted that language serves as the means of oral and written communication for people both in society and in school (Nunan, 1999, pp. 71-72). While

children's language patterns are shaped by their home environment, the school setting is seen to be a place where children could refine their language use (Aldridge, 2005, p. 177). As children come to school with a variety of language backgrounds, a teacher should be able to notice these differences to be able to transform their language. In this regard, a teachers' knowledge plays a vital role in determining students' language and literacy success (Hill, 2006, ix).

Working with learners who have language problems requires classroom teachers to understand how language works. As their difficulties center on language areas, of particular significance for the instruction of oral language is the knowledge of basic language elements. Bos and Vaughn (2005) point out that for effective language instruction to occur, teachers should have enough knowledge of three areas of language: content, form and use. Content is usually termed as semantics, that is a branch of linguistics which study concepts and word meanings. Form refers to the sound and structure of words and is connected with three disciplines: phonology (sound rules), morphology (word formation), and syntax (word order). The last element of language is concerned with use or pragmatics. Pragmatic skills deal with how a child could communicate effectively in home, community and school environment (pp. 71-74). Research has shown that students who experience difficulties in the use of language appear to have limited knowledge and understanding of content and form (Owens, 2005, p. 345).

Relatedly, Fillmore and Snow (2000) place a great emphasis on the importance of oral language knowledge for teachers in a diverse classroom. In support of the view that oral language provides the base for literacy skills, they posit that every teacher needs to know the components of oral language and how different language structures work across languages to support students' language development. Such knowledge, which includes phoneme, morpheme and discourse patterns, would give teachers important tools for identifying the types of speech

errors that students produce and how their oral language problems could be improved in the future (pp. 14-16).

In addition to the knowledge of how language works, it is essential for teachers to understand the different functions of children’s talk. According to Halliday (1973, 1975, 1978; as cited in Hill, 2006, p. 32), there are seven functions of language by which children convey meaning during their verbal interactions with others. The following figure gives explanations and examples of Halliday’s seven speech functions.

FUNCTION	EXPLANATION	EXAMPLE
Instrumental (I want)	Satisfying personal needs	‘Can I have an extension?’
Regulatory (Do as I say)	Controlling the behaviour	‘Please come early’
Interactional (Me and you)	Getting along with others	‘Can we have lunch together?’
Personal (Here I come)	Telling about oneself	‘I can speak two languages’
Heuristic (Tell me why)	Learning new things	‘How does it work?’
Imaginative (Let’s pretend)	Making up stories	‘If you were a millionaire’
Informative (I’ve got something to tell you)	Giving information	‘Let me give you an example’

While the acquisition of these complete range of functions would enable children to adapt language to fit various situations (Ruddell & Rapp-Ruddell, 1994, p. 88), teachers’ knowledge of how language functions would assist them in assessing students’ use of language and in designing the right content of instruction (Hill, 2006, pp. 31-32).

Regarding oral language assessment, another useful concept that teachers should know is the process of oral language development. Literacy competence is often associated with children’s language development during pre-school and school years (Ruddell & Rapp-Ruddell, 1994, p. 83). During the process of acquiring oral language, children demonstrate active and positive behaviours towards their language development. When they see adults talking, they try to understand the rules that govern the language use, internalise them, and practice their own language (Owens, 2005, p. 305).

As with written language development, research suggests that children progress through developmental stages in acquiring oral language ability. The Education Department of Western Australia (1997) has clearly outlined eight phases of oral language developmental continuum which include beginning, early, exploratory, emergent, consolidated, extended, proficient, and advanced. The phases along with their indicators are summarised in the following paragraphs (pp. 111-129).

The first stage of oral language development is called *beginning language*. During this period, children start expressing themselves by crying and babbling while recognising people's voices around them. Then, they develop the ability of saying simple words and responding to simple questions or directions before finally being able to pose their own question. In the second stage, called *early language*, children begin to form particular oral language skills in the areas of speech pattern, social interaction, literacy and thinking. While still confusing tenses when telling simple stories, they demonstrate an increasing understanding of language concepts and symbols. They also learn how to engage in simple conversations.

As children move to *exploratory language*, which is the third stage of oral language development, they acquire most grammatical rules and become active participants in classroom interactions. They understand cause and effect as well as conversational conventions. In addition, they are able to describe events using story language. *Emergent language for learning* phase marks the beginning of using some complex grammatical features of language. In this fourth stage, children become aware of the differences between formal and informal language patterns and are able to take part in group discussions.

The next stage is called *consolidated language for learning*. It is a developmental period in which students show evidence of effective communication in a variety of settings. In other

words, they are capable of adapting language to suit different speech contexts. Thus, while they are capable of using the language of sociability with peers; they also have the ability to use language to report, describe and compare a curriculum-related topic in the classroom. Further to this stage, learners demonstrate knowledge of language structures to respond to texts. In this *extended language for learning* phase, students are able to express different arguments to support a claim and make oral hypotheses about a certain topic. Furthermore, their language of social interaction improves significantly as they could use appropriate social conventions to converse with others.

Some indicators existing during the seventh stage of oral language developmental continuum, which is *proficient language use*, include the ability to use paraphrasing to clarify meaning and influence audience. Students in this stage use language critically to analyse various kinds of texts and confidently acknowledge and contrast different perspectives to develop understanding and make a decision. Finally, *advanced language users* refer to students who exhibit a sophisticated knowledge of the power of spoken language in the areas of speaking and listening. In this last phase, students are able to communicate effectively in all language functions. They become critically confident users of language who could respond appropriately to people, texts and situations to achieve a variety of speech purposes.

Having seen the continua above, it is clear that the knowledge of language development would provide teachers with many insights into the linguistic behaviours that students show in the development of their oral language skills. Furthermore, such knowledge would help teachers link student assessment with their teaching practice especially in the implementation of relevant strategies for promoting students' oral language development (Education Department of Western Australia, 1997, p. 2).

Students with Oral language problems

With a good understanding of how children's language develops, teachers would notice that some students in the classroom are low achievers compared to their peers. Bos and Vaughn (2005) describe language problems as occurring in the areas of production and comprehension. They believe that students with language problems might experience developmental delays in one area alone or in both receptive and expressive language skills. Examples of such delays include the inability to follow directions, hear the sounds in words, understand questions, retrieve words, discuss abstract concepts or adjust language to suit different contexts. To illustrate this point, they point out how language problems vary from student to student. Monica, for instance, encounters difficulty when adjusting her home language to suit the school language. Malik is subject to word-finding problem in his effort to say a word or remember an object and Antoine could only communicate using simple words within simple contexts (pp. 69-71).

Despite teachers' efforts to offer the best academic experiences to their students in the school environment, the development of students' oral language skills often receives little attention from classroom teachers (Aldridge, 2005, p. 177). Given that oral language problems might affect students' literacy success, it follows that students with language difficulties need explicit instruction in oral language skills.

Strategies for developing oral language skills

The significance of teaching oral language skills to students with limited language abilities has been reinforced by many experts. Cambourne (1988), for example, suggests that there are a number of conditions that make oral language learning successful. Conditions like immersion, demonstration and engagement are some of the natural factors which contribute to children's

language success. The following paragraphs describe how these factors influence the development of oral language skills (pp. 32-38).

Language success is determined by children's interaction with other language users and by the opportunities offered to them to hear and practice language in a language rich environment (Smith & Elley, 1998, p. 12). As with the home environment, the school setting should enhance oral language as a tool for learning (Corson, 1988, p. 13). Classroom routines such as morning talk or show and tell are examples of language-based activities that help children use language effectively (Cohen & Cowen, 2008, p. 341). Children's use of language would be refined when they are given sufficient time to interact and experiment with different oral language skills across the curriculum. In the simplest terms, children would not learn to talk unless they have the opportunity to engage in that talk.

Therefore, while children need to experience immersion in all types of spoken language forms, demonstrations of how those forms are structured and used are also needed. Potential speakers need demonstrations of how language is spoken before they could begin speaking. Research by Snow and Dickinson (1991) shows that children who are richly exposed to various words, discourse patterns and oral language experiences are likely to succeed in their future literacy (as cited in Hill, 2006, p. 28).

However, immersion and demonstration are not enough. Cambourne (1988, p. 34) argues that learning would not take place unless there is engagement. Progress in language learning requires an extension of children's experiences. These experiences should develop from whole-class, small group and peer activities in which children are engaged in working collaboratively, exchanging opinions and communicating their ideas to others (Cohen & Cowen, 2008, p. 339). It

is through active engagement in speaking and listening experiences that effective learning occurs.

Given the fact, I have found that teachers need to create a pleasurable situation which could engage their students in listening and speaking sessions so that the students believe that a task is achievable, meaningful and has connections with the real world. Using drama activities, for example, could be engaging and enjoyable for children as they experiment with language meanings which are communicated through gestures, script, words, roles, rules and other symbolic tools (Grugeon et al., 2005, pp. 122-123).

Along this line, Bos and Vaughn (2005) assert that effective oral language instruction for students with language difficulties is likely to take place if a number of principles are held in view. These principles include teaching in purposeful contexts, following the sequence of normal language development, teaching comprehension and production, adjusting pace and increasing wait time, using conversations, using self-talk and parallel-talk, using modelling, using expansion and elaboration, using language as an intrinsic motivator, using language programs, and incorporating generalisation into language instruction. Serving as the guidelines for teaching, Bos and Vaughn's principles could be summarised as follows (pp. 81-86):

Teaching language in context means engaging students in activities that are related to the language skill being taught. In my experience as an ESL teacher, I have found that students learn best when they see clear connections between what they learn and what they use in their daily lives. In teaching the concept of past tense, for example, I ask my students to watch a movie extract about dinosaurs called 'Jurassic Park'. During this activity, students jot down verbs they hear from the movie. After watching the film, we discuss and write about some dinosaur facts in past tense forms such as what dinosaurs looked like, where they lived, and what they ate. As the

topic revolves around the lives of dinosaurs happening a long time ago, it allows students to understand that past actions or events should be told in past tense forms.

Some studies suggest that students with language problems follow the same sequence as their normal peers in the development of their language skills (Kamhi, 1999; Nelson, 1998; Nippold, 1998; Wiig & Semel, 1984; as cited in Bos & Vaughn, 2005, p. 82). As such, it might be useful for teachers to examine the language skills that students have acquired before teaching the subsequent areas in their developmental continua. For example, after students understand the concept of past tense, teachers might next concentrate on how the past participle works.

For optimal learning to occur, teachers should ensure that their students understand and are able to talk about the new knowledge being taught. Referring back to my example of teaching past tense through a dinosaur movie, it is important to test the students' understanding of the story at the end of the activity. In this case, while providing students with examples of how past tense operates, I always encourage them to come forward and retell the story in their own words. By doing so, students are not only exposed to comprehensible input, they also learn how to produce comprehensible output (Krashen, 1982; Swain, 1985; as cited in Nunan, 1999, pp. 44-46). In the simplest terms, they use the language receptively and productively.

However, Bos and Vaughn (2005, p. 83) remind us that it is important for teachers to adjust pacing when explaining the lesson as it might take longer for students with language problems to understand a difficult concept. Relatedly, teachers should also be aware of the fact that such students might also have difficulty with building an oral response. In this situation, what teachers should do is to increase wait time as their students think about what they would say.

Promoting oral language could also be done through meaningful conversations (Hill, 2006, p. 40). Given that classroom teachers are less responsive to students with language problems than they are to normal students (Pecyna-Rhyner, Lehr, & Pudlas, 1990), it is imperative to provide all students with great opportunities to converse with each other as they work, think and play at school (as cited in Bos & Vaughn, 2005, p. 82). In teaching the skill of book reviewing, for instance, classroom teachers might engage their students in group discussions rather than using a question-answer format.

Another way of stimulating students' speech is concerned with self-talk and parallel-talk during classroom activities. In self-talk, a teacher tells about what he/she is doing and thinking. Parallel talk refers to the teacher's description about what students are doing and thinking (Hill, 2006, p. 45). For example, while students are working on a particular task, a teacher might say, "I am sitting in the middle of the classroom. I am looking at what John and Mary are doing. John is drawing an animal picture. It looks like a tiger to me. Mary is also drawing a picture. But I am not sure what it is. I think I will ask Mary. Hi, Mary! Is that a rose you are drawing?". Self-talk and parallel talk are powerful in making students feel valued and enabled to explore with language structure because they enjoy the extra attention and the lesson given by the teacher about their own ongoing activities. Vygotsky (1962, 1986) maintains that adults' availability for interactive talk with children is positively correlated with children's language development as "such interaction provides a scaffold for children to approximate language modeled after adult forms" (as cited in Ruddell & Rapp-Ruddell, 1994, p. 94).

While it is true that students need to be modelled after their teacher for learning a new concept or function of language, they may also benefit from using computer software as a language model. Talking programs like *Talk Time with Tucker* or *Tiger's Tale* could help

students with speech recognition and promote their expressive language skills (Beck & McKeown, 2001; as cited in Aldridge, 2005, p. 178). In line with this, I agree with Polkinghorne (2008) on the idea that assistive technology improves natural ability and helps with student learning in the areas of production and comprehension.

Nevertheless, it is worth-noting that teachers should not correct students' mistakes in a judgmental way as this may affect their self-confidence and result in their hesitance to talk in the future (Lenters, 2004; as cited in Cohen & Cowen, 2008, p. 340). Instead, teachers could improve and enrich the content of the students' language by repeating their sentence in more complex way (expansion) or by supplying extra information on the topic being talked about (elaboration) (Hill, 2006, pp. 44-45). By doing this, students would not think that their teacher is correcting them.

In addition to expansion and elaboration, teachers should be aware of the power that language has in increasing students' motivation in the classroom. Using language as an intrinsic motivator means referring to what students say as being useful. While teachers need to correct students appropriately when they produce speech errors, I find it useful to compliment students when they give a good comment on a certain topic. In this regard, Seefeldt (2004) is quite true when he says "Children feel valued when their expressions are acknowledged in a respectful manner" (as cited in Aldridge, 2005, p. 179).

According to Bos and Vaughn (2005), while teaching in context is crucial to the instruction of oral language, students with language difficulties need to participate in language programs which offer intensive practice and feedback in various language areas. Language training programs like *DISTAR Language* or *Language for Learning* should promote students'

oral language as these programs teach them a new skill and allow them to practice it in a structured way (pp. 85-86).

The last principle that should be incorporated into language instruction is called generalisation. The advantage of generalisation lies in the way it enables children to learn new ideas and concepts in a variety of contexts. Children are likely to become competent users of language when they could practice and use their language skills both in the home environment and in the school setting with different people (Seefeldt, 2004; as cited in Aldridge, 2005, p. 180). In this regard, parents who have a good understanding of language development could act as a co-teacher in facilitating language learning for their children after school hours (Strictland, 2004; as cited in Aldridge, 2005, p. 180). In my experience as a father of two ESL students, I have found that doing language-rich activities together with my children in the home such as word talk, language games and story telling is powerful in enhancing the development of their oral language skills.

Oral language assessment

The diversity of language backgrounds requires teachers to consider the fact that students learn and communicate at different levels. As noted earlier, before choosing the content of instruction, teachers need to assess their students' current ability. While it is clear that language instruction begins with assessment, ongoing assessment should be considered as part of the teaching and learning processes (Assessment Reform Group, 2002). Continually observing and assessing children's ability and progress would give teachers valuable information about what to focus on and how to teach in the future.

With regard to oral language instruction, Cohen and Cowen (2008) maintain that teachers might benefit from using an observation checklist or rubric to assess students during their

listening and speaking activities. Using the observation form, teachers provide a periodical record of the students' progress and their achievement of targeted outcomes in the areas of listening and speaking. In addition, teachers could also conduct a self-assessment on their own classroom behaviour. By being a good listener, teachers might reflect on their practices and be better prepared to base their classes on a better view of language pedagogy in order to create an environment which promotes language development (pp. 335-343).

Conclusion

As the main means of communication, oral language has become a major focus of attention for many experts and educators. In support of the view that reading and writing both have their bases in oral language, language researchers have conducted a myriad of studies to find ways for promoting oral language development. Despite the controversy over the methods of teaching language, many writers seem to agree that teachers should provide students with language rich experiences to enhance the development of their oral language skills.

Together with continuous assessment, language knowledge and principles should guide language instruction if teachers are to achieve the desired outcomes in a differentiated classroom. In this regard, teachers need to have theories or approaches that underpin their teaching practice. An understanding of major principles in language learning and teaching is essential in the making of lesson plans, classroom activities and teaching techniques for students with a variety of language backgrounds and abilities.

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