

## **It's Kind of Slippery, It's Hard to Assess!**

### **Current Practices in Oral Language and Writing Assessment**

**By Denise Heppner**

“Rocker buy bay bee inner tree hops”<sup>1</sup>, when the wind blows the cradle will rock (an actual ‘mis-heard’ saying from a person with an oral language disability). Can you decipher this familiar song: “Law tent britches full in town”? How about this one: “Sinkers honkers sick spentz”?<sup>1</sup> In June 2014, the NOWPlay Project brought together a variety of individuals from four Canadian provinces who work with young children, to get a sense of what is happening in the areas of oral language, writing and play-based learning. Principals, teachers, day care workers, parents, and researchers gathered in focus groups to discuss current practices. Oral language includes both speaking and listening with the purpose of communicating<sup>2</sup>, while writing, another social practice, utilizes print and visual images to communicate.<sup>3</sup> Any areas of weakness in these social practices will greatly impact a child’s quality of life!

As educators, it is important to assess the oral language and writing skills of the young people that we work with to gain a sense of where we can provide support for their development. An exploration of the NOWPlay participants’ conversations revealed that a variety of different assessment tools were being used in classrooms, daycares, and Aboriginal Head Start programs, but few focused on oral language or writing. This was most certainly not from a lack of awareness of students’ needs in these areas, but from the challenges inherent in assessing oral language and writing skills. Indeed, one of the participants noted of oral language: “it’s kind of slippery, it’s hard to assess.”

The focus group participants indicated a variety of standardized reading and mathematics assessments that they found useful for monitoring progress and providing useful information at the instructional level. The ones most frequently identified were the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System (reading performance), Canadian Achievement Tests (CAT; basic skills in reading, language, spelling, and mathematics), Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT; basic skills in reading, spelling, and mathematics) and the Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta’s Reading Readiness Screening Tool.

Teachers can be very creative and their passion to assist their students has often resulted in the construction of their own assessment measures. One participant mentioned her ‘ice cream reading achievement chart’, where levels of achievement corresponded to the number of ice cream scoops, with the highest level earning cherries and sprinkles. The teachers at another school developed a way to address their concerns about assessment and achievement consistency and a common understanding of goals within the school: “We developed a reading assessment that includes the five elements of reading, depending on the grade level. So every year, that profile moves along with the student. And we are looking at doing one for numeracy this fall.” One school division had the kindergarten and first grade teachers form a Professional Learning

Community to collaboratively develop a curriculum-based kindergarten assessment for literacy and numeracy. “And so we all use one consistent template now, divisionally across the board, for all of our kindergartens. Which I find helpful, because then, if you need to talk to your colleague, they know what you’re talking about. Not, you know, ‘Okay, well in language development, or in social development, what standards are you using?’”

The most common forms of assessment for oral language and writing skills identified by the focus group participants were informal methods. Observations, photographs, and written notes of what students are doing and saying were discussed by many. Writing portfolios were acknowledged as being useful for teachers, parents and students, showing “their growth throughout the year”. One participant stated openly, “For oral language [assessment], I don’t know what we have.”

Oral language ‘sampling’ had been used by one participant who indicated that it provided useful information. With this technique she would record a sample of a student’s conversation, transcribe it, and analyze it for language content in terms of vocabulary, structure, mean length of response, average sentence length, ability to maintain a topic, the ability to shift topics, and so on. The information was then discussed with the classroom teacher and together language goals and strategies for intervention were developed. This technique is traditionally used by Speech Language Pathologists and although considered to be an effective measure of oral language skills, it is very time consuming<sup>4</sup>.

The need for appropriate and relevant assessments for evaluating oral language and writing skills was evident as the participants discussed the difficulties they encountered using existing measures. An Ontario writing assessment was described by one educator as a “really awkward tool to use” and that the “bottom level was so high” that it wasn’t useful for her students. She thought that her students might reach the *bottom* level of the measurement by the end of the year and that she needed an assessment that contains “a true bottom, not what you think should be the bottom ... I’ve got one kid who just writes his name over and over and over again because that’s one word he knows. If I sit with him, if I’m right with him, I can push him to write a phonetic word. But if I have to walk away ... then his name is back on the page over and over again.” Another participant indicated that the assessments she was using were frustrating because they required a considerable amount of time to administer. Another participant advocated for daily assessments of her students rather than infrequent ones administered by external examiners: “Because, you know, especially these little guys ... once a year, people come and test them. Well if they’d come back the next day the tests would be totally different because ... maybe we had another fire ... or maybe they [students] didn’t have breakfast ... or the parents were fighting, or something ... as teachers, we are there every day and we are, I think, better equipped [to effectively assess our students].”

A useful measure of oral language, one that teachers understand the theory behind and can apply in a timely manner on a regular basis within their classrooms, is greatly needed. One

participant was excited about learning more through the NOWPlay Project and expressed a desire to increase her knowledge and thus her confidence: “Am I doing this correctly? Am I gauging their writing samples or their language samples appropriately?” Her ultimate goal being, “to better understand my students and how to help them and what I need to do to improve their language.” This theme was echoed by another participant: “I think probably we’re all used to doing anecdotal records ... So that’s something that comes naturally. But the quantitative side of things and being able to put that into developmental categories and where do they fit on the continuum, I think is something that I don’t always feel confident in.” She expressed her desire to learn “new techniques in how to gauge where the child is at.” Participants communicated their need for guidelines and clarity: “we’ve established a measurable reading program in our school and we want to establish a measurable writing and oral language. Because the expectations are very vague. It’s like, for oral communication, ‘A student will elicit appropriately, a student will speak appropriately,’ but it doesn’t say what appropriately is. Whereas in Math, it says ‘the kids will add one-digit numbers’ so it gives you something measurable ... So having something measurable that’s a clear indicator of what you mean, it’s very difficult to assess a student without having something measurable to compare it to ... That’s what I’m hoping that you’ll bring from the university ... consistency.”

Oral language and writing skills are essential for success within our global society. It is the goal of the NOWPlay Project to work with individuals in creating authentic, relevant, and research-based practices for assessment and intervention in these areas. It is our hope that through effective assessment and development, “Law tent britches full in town” (London Bridge is falling down) and “Sinker’s honkers sick spentz” (Sing a song of sixpence)<sup>1</sup> will be able to be enjoyed by everyone, received and expressed in their original forms of nursery rhymes and singing games.

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<sup>1</sup> Chamberlain, S. P. (2005). Recognizing and responding to cultural differences in the education of culturally and linguistically diverse learners. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 40*(4), p. 207. Cited in Smith, T. E. C., Polloway, E. A., Patton, J. R., Dowdy, C. A., McIntyre, L. J. & Francis, G. C. (2009). *Teaching students with special needs in inclusive settings (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*, p. 92. Toronto, Ontario: Pearson Education Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, T. E. C., Polloway, E. A., Patton, J. R., Dowdy, C. A., McIntyre, L. J., & Francis, G. C. (2009). *Teaching students with special needs in inclusive settings (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*. Toronto, Ontario: Pearson Education Canada.

<sup>3</sup> Graham, S., MacArthur, C. A., & Fitzgerald, J. (2007). *Best practices in writing instruction*. New York: Guilford Press.

<sup>4</sup> Heilmann, J., Nockerts, A., & Miller, J. F. (2010). Language sampling: Does the length of the transcript matter? *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools, 41*(4), 393-404.