

Use Your Words! Children's Oral Language in the Primary Years

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Language is a key aspect of social interactions. Often when we meet people for the first time, we greet them with our eyes, shake their hands, and start a dialogue. We might ask how they are doing, or how they feel at this moment, or what they think of the weather. Maybe the conversation would continue as we describe what we did at work, or what we did last weekend. And maybe the conversation would end with some advice for our conversation partner, or perhaps a witty joke. Many of these interactions occur in our everyday lives, whether we notice it—and choose to take part in it—or not. Children begin to explore the use and functionality of oral language communication, as they develop their understandings of sentence structures and build up their mental word banks.

In June 2014, the NOWPlay Project conducted focus group sessions to discuss issues relating to assessment, oral and written language development, and play. Here educators from Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario talked about their experiences observing children's use of oral language in different settings, inside and outside of school and classroom contexts.

So how do children use their oral language skills in social situations? Generally, the educators in the focus groups mentioned that children interact more with one another rather than with adults, and that they seem more comfortable talking to their peers in the context of play. The most common uses of oral language by children were identified as:

- Giving directions and/or instructions. Focus group participants said that there were not many children who did this, but many of the proficient speakers would use language for this purpose in their play and interactions with peers.
- Describing an object or activity. Some children used language in this way particularly when interacting with new adults, showing them around the classroom or showing off what they made or created.
- Asking a question. Children used language in this way to expand their own language understandings by asking the teacher specific questions about something that interested them.

Although many children used language in the above ways during their play activities, some educators observed that there were times when children would play with each other and, although it seemed like they were interacting with one another, they were really monologuing, or talking to themselves. For example, one child might give an instruction to another child, but the second child would then describe something on another topic or theme, instead of following the instruction that was offered by his or her peer.

Educators also mentioned that some students who were not as proficient as others in their oral language skills, were still interested and willing to communicate their thoughts. These children would often gesture to indicate their thoughts, for example by pointing, or would communicate their ideas through pictures. One participant noted that sometimes children seem to have a "shared

context", seen in scenarios when a child tries to communicate with someone, and if that person does not understand what was meant, another child, who has more developed oral language skills, intervenes to explain. This helps the first child communicate his or her thoughts.

When asked to describe the oral language of children in their classrooms, many teachers spoke about "how much the children talked" yet many commented on a "shyness" and reluctance to talk in front of the class. Some teachers mentioned that during play, some children seemed more comfortable talking with their peers, rather than to teachers or in front of the whole class. Most of the discussants categorized the observable oral language behaviours of children as such:

- Children who only use gestures and/or one-word answers;
- Children who are shy and hardly speak;
- Children who love to talk and talk about anything in any given situation.

For some of the educators, it was difficult to determine whether or not a child's lack of speech was due to development, or shyness and quietness in the classroom. Children who tended to use gestures were often encouraged to "use their words" instead of simply pointing to an object. One of the focus group educators described the difficulty of assessing a child's oral language skills since sometimes the amount of talking did not necessarily indicate the child's language skills. Rather than focusing primarily on a child's interaction between themselves and their teacher, or assessing them while they spoke in front of the whole class, many of the educators felt that the interaction between two students, particularly during play, was a more important indicator of how children used oral language in social settings. This interaction might help educators identify some of the students' particular needs. Participants noted that in some cases, language and literacy issues could be traced back to the home environment. One educator suggested that some of their students were not frequently read to or spoken to by adults outside of school, and this could potentially slow down a student's oral language development.

For many children coming from homes where multiple languages are spoken, there is a greater challenge for them to understand which language to use in each particular setting. Educators discussed multilingualism in their classrooms and how children dealt with their languages in different settings. Many of the children discussed in the focus groups spoke two languages: one being English and the other being an Aboriginal language (typically Cree or Ojibwe) or German. Of the children who spoke multiple languages, several educators commented on the fluency and proficiency of the children's oral language skills. However, some teachers noticed challenges for some students, expressed by one participant as "they would speak two languages but not enough of one." This suggests that despite the number of languages the children speak, for some children oral language fluency and proficiency is still a concern, particularly for those children who have trouble speaking both languages. Another educator commented that, "kindergarten is taught 80% Ojibwe, 20% English. But then, as soon as they [students] hit Grade 1, it's almost, like, the exact opposite, 80% English and 20% Ojibwe." One participant referred to their classroom as a "mish-mash" of languages, and expressed the difficulties in teaching English since it could be syntactically, or grammatically, different from Aboriginal Languages. For example, there were times when students spoke English using a Cree or Ojibwe syntactical structure, or vice-versa.

By the end of the focus group discussions, there were many questions that educators asked concerning their students' use of oral language. For example:

- What truly makes a developed oral language user—the amount in which the children speak or the quality of the way they talk? Is there a correlation between the two?
- With many students coming from bilingual backgrounds, is oral language proficiency important in both the home language and the school language?
- What does it mean for educators when some children enter school not being able to communicate proficiently in any single language yet have some knowledge of a multiple number of languages?

- What is or how much is "enough" of one language for a child to be considered proficient?
- Do children develop different forms of oral interaction sequentially, or do these come together as their language proficiency increases?
- Do children prefer one type of language interaction over another?
- How do children learn to interact socially in "shared contexts" and not just monologue to themselves?

Through the NOWPlay Project, the educators were hopeful about finding a way to resolve issues concerning the quality of the oral language used by students, and how often they speak and "use their words" in different settings, whether interacting with other children, adults, or family members.

Author Biography

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