

“THE ORAL LANGUAGE TROLLEY”

WHY ORAL LANGUAGE?

Oral language – both speaking and listening – now has its rightful place in the school curriculum. It is after all, the foundation for literacy skills and is crucial to both students’ learning in the classroom and their overall social adjustment. Language is important for the “3 L’s” – literacy, learning and life.

Oral language is not as easy to address in the classroom as it might first appear. Some people may think that as long as students are vocal in the classroom, that oral language is being “dealt with”. However a good oral language program goes beyond this. It should set specific goals and language targets that are known to impact directly on learning outcomes. Vocabulary development, storytelling ability, the use of literate language and having an extended turn to talk to explain and give your opinion are some of the important areas of oral language. You can read about these areas in some of the past ‘Love and Reilly’ newsletters, available on the website www.loveandreilly.com.au

An oral language program takes time to plan and organize. Goals for groups and individual students will need to be set and outcomes assessed. If teachers are familiar with key areas of oral language they will be more confident in incorporating oral language activities into existing timeslots and integrating them across other areas of the curriculum.

WHY AN ORAL LANGUAGE TROLLEY?

An oral language trolley provides a focus around which oral language activities can be planned and implemented. Of course, instead of an actual trolley, it may be a colourful box or case that houses the materials or a specific table area in the classroom during the literacy block. On the trolley there will be materials that can be handled by the students and the teacher or group leader. They may include items such as everyday objects, pictures, language activity cards, board games and paper and pencil tasks. The selected items will form the basis of the oral language activities for the session. Teachers may select trolley items to address several language goals in the one session or concentrate on a single language goal through a variety of activities.

It will be helpful to set aside a specific time and place for use of the oral language trolley, and share its name with students. Some examples include “Talking Time”, “Talking Turns”, “Talk and Listen”, “Learn through Talking”. Such a name provides authenticity to the session, just as a “maths”, “reading” or “story writing” session would. It is also important that the goal of each activity is talked about so that students can understand why they are playing a particular game and appreciate their own progress.

It is important to take oral language “out of the air”. We need to link oral language activities to tangible resources, which will encourage students’ interest and

engagement in the tasks. Many younger students will still be at the stage of needing 'hands on' materials to support their efforts with language. Materials also provide a useful connection between home and school. They act as a "trigger" for students to recall and talk about their experiences with family or friends outside the school situation.

Teachers benefit from the presence of concrete materials too. Activities which have a structured beginning and ending and stated goals are easier to set up, manage and remember.

WHAT MIGHT THE ORAL LANGUAGE TROLLEY BE LIKE?

- The language trolley should look appealing without looking cluttered.
- Activities might vary from session to session but some continuity should be provided so that students can improve their efforts and learn to play the activity independently.
- A facilitator will need to run the group. This could be a teacher, teacher aid, parent, community volunteer, student teacher or students from higher grades.
- Each session needs a plan with aims set out. The outcomes for the group and for individual students can be recorded in a notebook. This written record could also include group story details or vocabulary suggestions for future sessions.
- Resources can include any of the following:
 - photographs
 - unusual or quirky pictures from newspapers, magazines or advertisements.
 - objects that beckon discussion. E.g. an old hat with a "chewed" brim
 - a pack of cards which pose a topic for discussion
 - a board game
 - paper and pencils for drawing
 - a puppet, doll or stuffed toy that provides a character in an ongoing story
- A single resource can be used to achieve a number of language goals. Conversely one language goal may be addressed using a variety of resources during the session.

SETTING THE ATMOSPHERE

- Contributions of all group members must be valued.
- Students must feel 'safe' and free to offer ideas and opinions in front of their peers.
- Time must allow for students to have an extended turn to talk before another interrupts with a question or comment.
- Activities that are 'open ended' with minimal 'right or wrong' answers are more conducive to participation and acceptance within the group.
- "Rules" for turn taking in both talking and listening will need to be discussed and revisited.
- Students need to be told about the goal of each activity and why it is important.
- The attainment of a goal and/or special effort and improvement in the group should be acknowledged and rewarded.

Below are some suggestions for **GOALS** and **ACTIVITIES** using your "Oral Language Trolley".

VOCABULARY

Vocabulary underpins comprehension of both spoken and written language.

We should **aim** for students to show

- an interest in learning about new words
- a sense of curiosity about what words mean
- an awareness of words with similar, opposite or associated meanings
- an ability to correctly pronounce the new word and talk about how it differs from similarly sounding words
- a knowledge of where and how to find out about words
- a desire to revisit words and discuss the meanings of a word previously studied
- an ability to move from the concrete word meanings to more abstract and idiomatic use
- an appreciation of humour that is based on word meanings or pronunciation
- an ability to use new words in a variety of contexts such as discussion, Show and Tell or storytelling.

On the language trolley you might include

- a focus word written on bright coloured card. Source words from stories, newspaper headlines, conversations or select from a topic of study
- a diagram showing a 'web' of meaning in which students write or draw their understanding of what a word means and its connection to other words/concepts
- paper and pencils for students to link their knowledge of a word with images
- a joke book
- Word Journey (Love and Reilly 2003) – board games for vocabulary building.

DISCUSSION

The ability to take part in discussion is a vital life skill and is crucial to getting along with peers and adults both during and after the school years.

We should **aim** towards students being able to

- explain reasons why something came about
- predict what might happen
- give their opinion on a specified topic
- provide reasons why they hold a viewpoint (justify)
- interpret what others are thinking or how they are feeling
- to find positive and negative points on/about a topic.

On the language trolley you might include

- topic pictures – with an accompanying open ended question or statement for discussion
- topic cards chosen at random by any group member. Use your own or select from resources such as those in Chatterbox (Love and Reilly 2003) and Spot on Speaking (Love and Reilly 2009) or materials from Innovative Resources <http://www.innovativeresources.org>
- written 'language frames' to guide discussion. For example *If ... then ... because...* such as in Language Spinners (Love and Reilly 2004).

STORY TELLING

Storytelling is an enjoyable avenue for learning, both in spoken and written language forms. The ability to understand how a story 'works' and to tell and later write a story is an important milestone of the primary school years.

We should **aim** towards students being able to

- understand the key elements of a story
- describe a character in the story
- discuss the thoughts and feelings of the characters in the story
- explain some of the reasons why things happened
- entertain listeners as they tell a story
- use props to support their story telling or retelling.

On the language trolley you might include

- a loved story book – a facilitator re-reads the story and then invites students to re-tell it, with or without, a twist or change in the plot or characters
- photographs or pictures that will act as a trigger for students to tell stories from their own personal experiences
- a small pirate puppet about which the group makes up a story
- the "Talking Time" notebook into which the outline of a story told is recorded
- a whiteboard and pens for 'drawing a story' as a student is talking
- physical representation of the elements of the story – for example magnetic frames and shapes in StoryTalk (Love and Reilly 2007) or Story Box (Sandpiper publications)
- picture cards to trigger storytelling, e.g. Storycatching <http://www.innovativeresources.org>

LISTENING

Accurate and sustained listening is demanded of students during much of the school day. A weakness in this area has serious consequences for students' behaviour and learning in the classroom. Teacher's explanation of the reason for listening and a commitment to training listening skills will enhance students listening.

We should **aim** towards students being able to

- listen for and recall details
- listen to follow directions
- listen to interpret information according to given criteria
- seek clarification when they have misheard or not understood.

On the language trolley you might include

- a tape recorded story. Prior to listening to the story students are asked to listen for key events or details for later recall or discussion
- paper and pencils, objects, black line drawings or diagrams so that listening tasks have a tangible outcome (see Listen and Learn – Love and Reilly 2008)
- coloured origami paper which is folded according to the spoken instructions
- barrier game sheets (My Barrier Games Pack - <http://www.sandpiperpublications.com.au>)
- barrier game objects (Listen and Learn – Love and Reilly 2008).

Of course “Talking Time” focused on the use of the language trolley should not be the only time that oral language receives specific focus during the school day. However it is an important way to ensure that appropriate and specific language skills are developing.

Teachers are very adept at recognizing opportunities to link oral and written language. However they should remember to provide a time and a place for all students to enjoy and practise oral language for its own sake.

Children who are confident with their oral language skills will have a head start in learning and life.