

LAUNCHING INTO LANGUAGE

Using books for oral language in the classroom.

The ability to use and understand oral language is a valuable **life skill**. Children who can communicate well verbally are at an advantage when making friends and also when relating to their teachers. Children's oral language skill enables them to express their thoughts, emotions and ideas and helps them direct their own learning. Oral language facilitates curiosity. It also supports the development of imaginative play, which is an important arena for developing understanding of how others think and feel.

In the school classroom oral language has an important role in **learning**. It has been described however as a "double edged sword" – being both the main means by which the curriculum is delivered and also the content of the curriculum. Children who find language processing difficult are therefore at a double disadvantage in their learning.

Oral language skills are also the important foundation from which written **literacy** develops. These oral language skills continue to grow in tandem with written language skills, throughout primary and secondary school years and on into adulthood. We feature the importance of promoting the more academic or literate style of oral language in Newsletter 24 (August 2008) *Language Milestones for School Success*.

Planning for oral language

Teachers keenly appreciate the importance of oral language skills as their students interact and learn in the classroom. They make many opportunities during the course of the day for incidental discussion, questions, feedback about learning tasks and sharing of knowledge and experiences.

However, it is important that oral language receives explicit focus during planning. Teachers will need to identify specific goals and plan how to incorporate meaningful activities into the already busy curriculum. This will lead to positive outcomes for the linguistically able students as well as meeting the needs of those with poor oral language skills. This article explores some of the ways teachers can utilize literature in the classroom.

Oral language and storybooks

Exploration of a good story during shared reading offers a myriad of opportunities to extend and teach oral language skills. Students and teachers should enjoy reading together, discussing characters and events and predicting likely outcomes. However teachers can also use storybooks as a starting point to enrich vocabulary, develop students' literate language and improve their understanding of different types of genre. A planned approach, which includes rereading the story with a different focus for discussion, or a more in depth examination of the text, will benefit all students.

Repeated readings of the same story enable the highlighting of **specific language** elements in the story. Examples of each, taken from the book "Mrs Armitage on Wheels" by Quentin Blake, are in brackets. *This story is about the eccentric Mrs Armitage, who decides that her old bicycle can be improved by the addition of a range of gadgets and devices.*

- vocabulary choices (*penetrating, faithful, tarpaulin, wreckage*)
- 'colourful language' (*down-hearted*)
- complex sentences with 'padded out' nouns or verbs (*Mrs Armitage was turning the pedals so fast and blowing the mouth-organ so hard that soon she was nearly exhausted.*)

"The Royal Guest" - a delightful storybook by Tohby Riddle - illustrates some further language features. *This story is about the Queen's forthcoming trip to Australia. There is concern about the cost but luckily Mrs Jones from Padstow offers to put her up. All the Queen has to do is bring along her sleeping bag!*

Below are some of the language features that could be discussed.

- Cognitive (thinking) verbs (*wondering, remembered*)
- Feeling words (*delighted, anxious*)
- Unusual word order (*After exchanging greetings with the dignitaries and vast crowds of well-wishers who had come to catch a glimpse of her, the Queen proceeded to the bus stop.*)
- Double meaning words or idiomatic/colourful language (*times were tough, catch a glimpse, till all hours, drove like the wind, next leg of her Australian tour*)

Of course, books will vary in the number and type of **special language features** that can be highlighted. Many books seem to be "loaded" with interesting vocabulary, providing rich detail, or referring to the thoughts (cognitive verbs) and feelings (emotional adjectives) of the characters. Some books are written in a casual 'oral' style, with a lot of direct speech and are written in the present tense. Others may be written in a more literate style and use the past tense. The teacher may wish to focus on unusual word order or the colourful description that the author has used to relate the story.

It can be helpful to attach non-permanent 'sticky notes' to the back cover/inside back cover, to remind you about the special language features that you wish to discuss with your students as you read and re-read the story. These notes may be quite detailed, even to the point of writing specific words or phrases. Include the page number for quick reference. Remember to help students explore the language used both the context of the story as well as how it might apply to their own experiences.

Non-fiction books as well as fiction books, can be the source of enjoyment and language learning opportunities. Repeated readings and explicit exploration of non-fiction texts will give opportunity for clarification and discussion. In non-fiction texts language markers are used to highlight the organization of the information. Students

who recognize these language 'cues' will be guided in their understanding of informational texts.

Some examples of language markers are in brackets.

- compare & contrast (*both, different, alike in the same way, whilst, on the other hand, as well*)
- sequence (*first, second, then, next, after, finally*)
- process (*first you ..., before, then, after, while, in the end*)
- cause & effect (*because, consequently, as a result*)
- discussion (*means, so, also, however, this shows, therefore*)
- argument (*People say that..., I believe, I agree/disagree, because, for example*)

Teachers can show during shared reading how they use these markers to inform their reading. The website *Reading on line* (www.readingonline.org) has an extensive invited article titled "An Approach to Factual Writing" which provides excellent background information to different written genres.

Boys in particular often prefer factual texts to story-books. It is interesting to consider why young children borrow fewer factual books than fiction from libraries. We might also reflect on our own preferences when purchasing books, borrowing books or choosing books to share with our students.

Classroom language activities that "grow" out of a book

If you have enjoyed and explored a story or a factual text a number of times with your students, you may like to use the book as a "springboard" for further oral language activities. Keep a range of genres and essential language "building blocks" in mind as you plan the activities. The following headings may assist you. Remember that it is not always easy or necessary to think of an activity for all the areas, based on one particular book. However, spend time discussing and brainstorming possibilities with your colleagues and you will be surprised how many imaginative ideas will come to mind.

Here are some suggestions for the class or small group, based on the book *The Royal Guest*.

- recount/report (*Pretend Mrs Jones rings a friend and recounts the Queen's visit to her home.*)
- narrative (*Create a new oral story – the Queen's visit to the Bradley family in Footscray.*)
- instructions (*Mrs Jones made sandwiches for the Queen's lunch. How do you make a sandwich?*)
- argument/persuasion (*Is this story 'possible' or 'impossible'? Give your reasons.*)
- social use of language (*Imagine you met the Queen sitting on Mrs. Jones' steps. Role play the meeting. Discuss how you adjusted your language when talking with the Queen.*)
- describing (*Describe a Queen's crown using words and a drawing.*)
- vocabulary (*The Queen thanked Mrs Jones for her hospitality by giving her one of her old crowns. What does the word hospitality mean?*)
- discussion (*What hospitality would you be able to offer if the Queen came to your house?*)
- questions (*What questions might the Queen ask of Mrs Jones's friends when they came to play cards?*)

Activities that relate to a particular book are often available on the internet. Simply use your search engine, entering the title of the book followed by the word 'activities'. Try to keep a balance between practical 'hands on' activities – making puppets for example - and oral language tasks. Remember that you can augment any practical task with the addition of specific oral language goals such as a recount, or giving instructions. Many state education departments also provide web resources and activities that address a range of language activities in the key learning areas.

Organizing your resource library

As mentioned earlier, it is useful to attach 'sticky notes' to books to remind us of the language areas for attention in class. Teachers can also keep a record of library books under headings relating to **oral language genres**. These can be a useful starting point for exploration of specific language genres. The following list gives some examples of books.

Definition – *Dictionaries, make your own topic dictionary*

Lists and classification – *Dorling Kindersley Eye Witness and other information books, ABC books*

Description – *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge (Mem Fox), My Brown Bear Barney (D. Butler)*

Recount/Process – *The Shopping Basket (J. Birmingham), Who Sank the Boat? (P. Allen) Greetings from Sandy Beach (B. Graham)*

Explanation – *Yikes! In Seven Wild Adventures Who Would You Be? (A. Lester)*

Opinion/Persuasion - *I Don't Like Kisses (R Mainzer), Would You Rather? (J. Birmingham)*

Perspective - *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs (J. Scieszka)*

Analysis - *Reversible books e.g. The Little Red Hen/ Help Yourself, Little Red Hen! (Another Point of View) (A. Granowsky)*

Teachers may wish to have an additional catalogue for books according to **themes** such as friendship, imagination, holidays, grandparents, pets. Many other teachers have shared information about categorizing books by theme on internet sites.

There are excellent books that explore a variety of themes. For example, suppose two different *holiday* stories were read to the class. The following oral language tasks may spring from this theme.

- Ask students to say which holiday they would prefer and give their reasons.
- With a partner, discuss which items you would need for a holiday at the beach.
- Compare this list with items you would need for a winter holiday.
- Talk about words that describe how people feel when they are on holiday.
- Asking questions. Students could survey others about the nature, location or duration of their last holiday.
- Students could give an oral report of their findings.
- Create a new oral story called "My holiday disaster/nightmare" about a holiday that didn't go according to plan.
- Does everyone need a holiday? Why or why not? What about the pets of the family?

Books – something for everyone!

Story books are not the sole domain of younger children. Older students, even those at secondary school, will enjoy re-visiting picture storybooks, and through discussion learn to critically examine the author's use of language, style, illustrations etc. Picture books also offer a forum for the introduction and discussion of sensitive themes or topics, such as death or bullying.

Teachers at all levels should feel they can relax and enjoy sharing books with their students. Shared reading gives teachers the opportunity to show their love of books and enthusiasm for language and to model their own thinking skills. Questions, vocabulary focus and discussion often follow naturally from book reading time.

Imaginative teachers will also use books to help them launch other oral language activities across the curriculum. Purposeful, planned oral language tasks that grow out of books, allow teachers to observe and promote their students' progress in using their language skills for life, learning and literacy.

Some useful resources

An Approach to Factual Writing by David Wray and Maureen Lewis. *Reading Online*, www.readingonline.org

Posted May 1998 © 1998-2000 International Reading Association, Inc.

www.primaryresources.co.uk

Information for using picture books in high school

<http://www.det.wa.edu.au/education/cmis/eval/fiction/classroom/picturebooks/>

Categorizing picture books according to themes

www.preschoolrainbow.org/book-themes.htm

The Oracy Program, Adele Wallis, Sandpiper Publications

www.sandpiperpublications.com.au