To assist with an understanding of children’s oral language competence and the language abilities expected of students when they commence school, it is useful to have an awareness of the developmental progression children have experienced prior to coming to school. During their early years, children experience rapid growth in their language development and commence school as competent users of language within a communicative context as can be see from the following steps:

By 1 year: Children’s use of single words emerges; children respond to their name and simple directions (eg. stop / no)

By 3 years: Children now have a vocabulary approximating 1000 words. They predominantly use four to five word sentences with use of verb tenses emerging. Language can be used for various purposes including to request assistance, to request objects and to comment on objects and actions. Children can tell simple stories containing unrelated sequences of events.

By 5 years: Children are now sophisticated users of oral language. They have developed a range of abstract conceptual knowledge and general vocabulary knowledge is continuing to grow. Increasingly longer and more complex sentence patterns are used including questions and command patterns. Plots begin to emerge in a their story formulation. They may begin to use indirect requests of others.

This development occurs as children actively participate in many and varied communicative situations as well as with many and varied people. Cambourne (1995) identified the following conditions as being essential to allow for effective oral language learning:

Immersion: From the moment of birth, children are immersed in oral language. It is occurring around them and is an essential condition to facilitate language development.

Demonstration: Children need to see, hear and experience language interaction.

Engagement: Children need to actively participate in the language interaction. Simply being immersed in it and having it demonstrated is not sufficient to allow for language learning.

Expectations: Children receive messages from others that they are expected to talk and that they are more than able to do so.
Responsibility: Children are allowed the opportunity to be selective in what language they experience and how they use their language in certain situations.

Approximations: Children are supported to communicate even though they may have acquired all the language they need. They are encouraged to “have a go” and their attempts are responded to in a meaningful manner.

Employment: Children are provided with many opportunities to develop their oral language competence.

**ACTIVITY**

**COMPARE CAMBOURNE’S CONDITIONS THAT FACILITATE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT WITH THE TEACHING CONDITIONS LIKELY TO FOSTER ORAL LANGUAGE LEARNING OUTLINED BY MUNRO (2005)**

It is important to view the child as an active participant in their language learning with the effectiveness of this learning dependent on their interaction with their caregivers. McLaughlin (1998) described toddlers as resourceful and persistent when seeking information and feedback from their caregivers. In a typical day, a two-year old can produce anywhere from 10,000 to 20,000 words while their caregivers are thought to respond with over twice this many.

While there are common aspects of development across the language areas and children reach similar endpoints, development for all children is not uniform. It is important to think of language development as being on a continuum of growth.

When considering language from the perspective of the ICPAL Model, development of ideas, conventions as well as the use of language (i.e. pragmatics) is intertwined and difficult to identify as distinct elements (Munro, 2005). As such, an overview of critical periods of language growth will be focused on here.

**Pre-Verbal Learning**

Figure 1 outlines the processes involved in the development of early language ability. Children need to develop an inner sense of an object or idea (concept formation) as well as awareness that this object or idea still exists even when it is actually not present (object permanence). Children need to develop an awareness of and acquire a response to certain things said by the same person in the same situational context (i.e. situational understanding). They need to learn to respond to a particular interaction which underpins early turn-taking behaviour.

Symbolic understanding is a critical area of knowledge before language can successfully develop as language is essentially a range of symbols used when
communicating and thinking. The word “cup” has no meaning unless a child can match it with the object it represents. The process of early language learning sees the child having to become increasingly proficient at learning to use symbols that increasingly have less perceptual similarity to the objects they represent (Cooper, Moody & Reynell, 1978).

With the development of this knowledge, the child’s verbal comprehension and expressive production becomes increasingly sophisticated with rapid growth across both areas experienced.

Munro (2005) outlined a similar range of abilities as can be seen in Figure 2.

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**Figure 1.** Illustrating the integration of some of the processes involved in the development of verbal language (Cooper, Moodley & Reynell, 1978)

**Figure 2.** Capabilities required by children to facilitate language learning (Munro, 2005)
First Words

First words emerge around twelve months with nouns being the most common word type used. Increasingly as they become more active, toddlers use more verbs. They use words both to refer to things (referential words) as well as to express personal information.

A characteristic of early vocabulary development sees the occurrence of a broad use of the word known as “overextension” or a limited use of a word known as “underextension”, eg.

Overextension: child uses the word “kitty” to represent all four legged animals;
Underextension: child uses the word “cup” to represent the cup he uses every day but not for any other cup that he comes into contact with.

Overextensions occur more frequently than underextension with more accurate use of vocabulary evident as the toddler acquires greater awareness of the perceptual attributes of objects and actions. This developing conceptual sophistication is the foundation that allows for vocabulary growth.

Two Word Combinations & Beyond

The emergence of two word utterances is a good example of the interaction between the various components of the ICPAL model (ie. Ideas, Conventions, Use of Language). After a period of trial and error, two word utterances emerge at around eighteen months of age. The various examples of two word utterances reflect specific semantic relations between the words including the following:

- Agent & Action  daddy go
- Action & Object  kick ball
- Agent & Object  daddy ball
- Action & Location  mummy car
- Possessor & Possession  Mummy cup
- Attribute & Entity  big cup

Examples of these utterances were initially identified by Brown (1973) and interestingly, cross-linguistic research has revealed that these occur across a range of languages and it has been proposed that they are in fact universal to all languages (McLaughlin, 1998). The interaction between components of the ICPAL Model can be seen when a toddler says the utterance “Mummy car”. While the words used and the word sequence (ie. syntax / convention) are the same, the underlying semantic relation (idea) may be different (ie. Possessor + Possession / Agent & Location / Agent + Object). The reason for the utterances may also differ (eg. to convey information / to request information).

The role of the caregiver in facilitating the development of a child’s language is critical. Lund & Duchan (1993) identified that caregiver verbal interactions were characterised by the use of a range of teaching behaviours closely aligned with the child’s emerging language abilities and interests. Examples of these “teaching behaviours are as follows:
Modeling

Caregivers talk about activities as they are occurring especially regularly occurring routines (eg. feeding and bath time). They refer frequently to objects of current interest to their toddler and will focus their toddler’s attention with the use of both verbal and gestural cues. Caregivers also use simplified sentences when interacting with their toddler. Shorter sentences are used and this is a common feature up to two and a half years of age.

Caregivers also repeat words when talking to their toddler with these key words occurring in consecutive sentences (eg. I can see your cup. You like your cup).

Prompting

Caregivers use language to cue their toddler to make a response. The cues used change as the language ability of the child develops, eg.

- Imitation: Say “car”
- Fill in: Daddy is in the ______
- Questions: Is this a “car”? What is Daddy in?

Contingency Queries

These are specific and non-specific queries used by caregivers to maintain the interaction sequence (eg. where did dad go? Do you mean the car? Huh?). Sometimes, these queries may be used to repair the communication.

Imitations

These seem to occur most when the toddler has produced a word or an utterance correctly. The imitation by the caregiver is really saying “well said!”). The result is that the toddler will often say the utterance again.

Expansion

These contingent responses add elements to the child’s utterance usually converting the child’s “immature” sentence into its more sophisticated grammatical form (eg. child says “daddy work ” / caregiver says .. Your right. Daddy is at work”).

Extension

These contingent responses are characterised by the caregiver adding related semantic content (eg. child says “daddy car” / caregiver says “Daddy has a big car”).

These teaching strategies used by caregivers during early language acquisitions can equally be used by Teachers in classrooms to support the oral language learning of students.

Between the ages of two and five, children continue to experience rapid language growth in their language ideas, their use of language conventions as well as the language purposes. Their sentences become progressively longer and more complex. The range of ideas expressed in these sentences becomes more complex with the use of abstract ideas emerging as they transition into school. They become more effective conversational partners as they learn how to start and end conversations more appropriately as well as maintain topics being discussed and become more aware of appropriate turn-taking behaviours.
Children also increasingly use their language to guide their play. They can be heard talking through the actions as they move dolls to different parts of the doll house. This early use of self-talk becomes an important language skill in assisting students to direct their task completion.

**ACTIVITY**

**WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT ORAL LANGUAGE DEMANDS OF THE SCHOOL IN COMPARISON TO THE HOME ENVIRONMENT?**

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**Transition from Home to School**

The transition from home to school is a significant point of the developmental language continuum for children. The nature of the interactions in the home and the school differ.

At home, parents and other familiar communicative partners have a well developed understanding of the child and adapt their language appropriately to ensure effective communication occurs. Within the home, there is often a shared understanding of the topic of discussion as well as a joint sharing of the actual experience. Much talk is about what the child and the communicative partner have done together. School discourse has far less context support and studies have shown that primary school children can spend well over 50% of the time listening to Teachers.

Much of the discussion that occurs at school is about activities and objects that are not present (ie. not in the “here and now”). As well as their language being the basis of their communication, they also need to become proficient at learning to think about or reflect on their language (Tattershall & Craighead, 1985). To successfully interact with the school and classroom, the following abilities need to be acquired:

- they need to develop sophisticated levels of metalinguistic ability;
- they must consciously learn to think about sounds, words and sentences;
- instead of using sounds, blends, words and sentences that must learn these as vocabulary items (eg. what “sound” is at the start of the “word” bus?);
- they need to be able to reflect on language organization approaches when reading texts and apply this knowledge when they are writing;
- they need to learn the sequence for talking in class (ie. when to talk and when not to talk);
- they need to learn the “hows” and “when’s” of seeking clarification when uncertain about task demands; and,
- they need to learn the rules to interact effectively in 1:1, small group and whole class discussions.
Knowing the rules of how classrooms operate is required for effective learning to take place. When students have difficulty at school (eg. following directions, conforming to routine, meeting behavioural expectations), the following questions should be considered:

- Is the child aware of the new set of “rules”?; or,
- Is the child struggling to know how and when to apply the “rules”?

**Language and Literacy Links**

Oral Language provides the foundation on which written language development occurs. Moore (1991) described the importance of oral language as follows:

*We learn to talk by talking. We learn to listen by listening. The more we talk and listen to others talking, the better our ability to manipulate language. The better our ability to manipulate language, the better our ability to think and therefore to read and write, for both of these are thinking activities.*

Tunmer et al (1998) proposed a model implicating phonological awareness as well as syntactic awareness in early literacy outcomes. Figure 3 is a visual representation of this model.

![Figure 3. Conceptual Framework for Early Literacy Development (Tunmer, Chapman, Ryan & Prochnow, 1998)]
In addition to phonological awareness and syntactic awareness, a number of oral language abilities have been suggested as predictors of early literacy outcomes. An overview of this research follows.

1. Phonological Awareness (Conventions)

Phonological awareness has been identified by many researchers over a number of years as a factor having a significant impact on early reading outcomes (Catts, Gillespie, Leonard, Kail & Miller, 2002; Torgeson et al, 2001; Bus & van Ijzendoorn, 1999; Stanovich, 1999; Siegel, 1999; Tunmer et al, 1998; Morris et al, 1998; Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley 1995; Kamhi & Catts, 1986; Tunmer & Cole, 1985). Phonological awareness refers to the readers’ knowledge of the sound system of language. The term phonemic awareness is often applied when the focus is on individual sounds with the term phonological awareness being applied when word level analysis occurs (eg. identification of onset and rimes). This knowledge allows readers to acquire competence with the alphabetic principle establishing effective sound-letter linkages facilitating the pathway to reading fluency.

In their meta-analysis of intervention studies, Bus & van Ijzendoorn described phonological awareness as a “necessary but insufficient” ability needed to facilitate early reading development. They also indicated that phonological awareness intervention needed to be directly linked to the reading task to facilitate development.

National Reading Panel (2000)

The results of the meta-analysis were impressive. Overall, the findings showed that teaching children to manipulate phonemes in words was highly effective under a variety of teaching conditions with a variety of learners across a range of grade and age levels and that teaching phonemic awareness to children significantly improves their reading more than instruction that lacks any attention to PA.

Specifically, the results of the experimental studies led the Panel to conclude that PA training was the cause of improvement in students’ phonemic awareness, reading, and spelling following training. The findings were replicated repeatedly across multiple experiments and thus provide converging evidence for causal claims. While PA training exerted strong and significant effects on reading and spelling development, it did not have an impact on children’s performance on math tests. This indicates that halo/Hawthorne (novelty) effects did not explain the findings and that indeed the training effects were directly connected with and limited to the targeted domain under study. Importantly, the effects of PA instruction on reading lasted well beyond the end of training. Children of varying abilities improved their PA and their reading skills as a function of PA training.

PA instruction also helped normally achieving children learn to spell, and the effects lasted well beyond the end of training. However, the instruction was not effective for improving spelling in disabled readers. This is consistent with other research showing that disabled readers have difficulty learning how to spell.

Programs in all of the studies provided explicit instruction in phonemic awareness. Specifically, the characteristics of PA training found to be most
effective in enhancing PA, reading, and spelling skills included explicitly and systematically teaching children to manipulate phonemes with letters, focusing the instruction on one or two types of phoneme manipulations rather than multiple types, and teaching children in small groups.

PA instruction is ready for implementation in the classroom, but teachers should keep in mind several cautions. First, PA training does not constitute a complete reading program. Rather, it provides children with essential foundational knowledge in the alphabetic system. It is one necessary instructional component within a complete and integrated reading program. Several additional competencies must be acquired as well to ensure that children will learn to read and write. Second, there are many ways to teach PA effectively. In implementing PA instruction, teachers need to evaluate the methods they use against measured success in their own students.

2. Vocabulary Knowledge (Ideas)

Vocabulary knowledge is seen as one of these abilities (Swanson, 1999; Morris et al, 1998; Vellutino et al, 1996) and it has also been shown to be a stronger predictor as students’ progress through the primary years (Roth, Speece & Connor, 2002). While the argument that having a wider vocabulary knowledge will facilitate enhanced reading comprehension outcomes seems logical, Stanovich (1999) has questioned whether weaker vocabulary knowledge should be viewed as a cause of reading difficulties in older students or whether it should be viewed as a consequence of less reading experience.

National Reading Panel (2000)

The studies reviewed suggest that vocabulary instruction does lead to gains in comprehension, but that methods must be appropriate to the age and ability of the reader. The use of computers in vocabulary instruction was found to be more effective than some traditional methods in a few studies. It is clearly emerging as a potentially valuable aid to classroom teachers in the area of vocabulary instruction. Vocabulary also can be learned incidentally in the context of storybook reading or in listening to others. Learning words before reading a text also is helpful. Techniques such as task restructuring and repeated exposure (including having the student encounter words in various contexts) appear to enhance vocabulary development. In addition, substituting easy words for more difficult words can assist low-achieving students.

The findings on vocabulary yielded several specific implications for teaching reading. First, vocabulary should be taught both directly and indirectly. Repetition and multiple exposures to vocabulary items are important. Learning in rich contexts, incidental learning, and use of computer technology all enhance the acquisition of vocabulary. Direct instruction should include task restructuring as necessary and should actively engage the student. Finally, dependence on a single vocabulary instruction method will not result in optimal learning.

While much is known about the importance of vocabulary to success in reading, there is little research on the best methods or combinations of
methods of vocabulary instruction and the measurement of vocabulary growth and its relation to instruction methods.

3. Listening Comprehension / Text Comprehension (Ideas/Conventions)

Listening Comprehension has also been proposed as a potential factor in reading outcomes though the impact becomes increasingly noticeable following the early years (Roth, Speece & Connor, 2002). Aaron, Joshi & Williams (1999) identified a number of children who had developed adequate decoding skills but struggled to effectively comprehend text. While they indicated this outcome was due to a lack of reading fluency for some students, weaknesses in their oral sentence comprehension was seen as the potential factor in other students. It would make sense to consider that students who have oral comprehension weaknesses can be expected to have similar difficulties with written comprehension. Gough & Tunmer (1986) suggested that reading comprehension should be seen as an interaction of decoding and listening comprehension as indicated by the following formula:

\[
\text{Reading Comprehension} = \text{Decoding} \times \text{Listening Comprehension}
\]

National Reading Panel (2000)

Comprehension is defined as “intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader” (Harris & Hodges, 1995). Thus, readers derive meaning from text when they engage in intentional, problem solving thinking processes. The data suggest that text comprehension is enhanced when readers actively relate the ideas represented in print to their own knowledge and experiences and construct mental representations in memory.

The rationale for the explicit teaching of comprehension skills is that comprehension can be improved by teaching students to use specific cognitive strategies or to reason strategically when they encounter barriers to understanding what they are reading. Readers acquire these strategies informally to some extent, but explicit or formal instruction in the application of comprehension strategies has been shown to be highly effective in enhancing understanding. The teacher generally demonstrates such strategies for students until the students are able to carry them out independently.

The literature search identified 453 studies that addressed issues and topics relevant to text comprehension since 1980. Studies published between 1970 and 1979 were added if they were of particular relevance, resulting in 481 studies that were initially reviewed. Of these, 205 studies met the general NRP methodological criteria and were then classified into instructional categories based on the kind of instruction used. Application of the more specific review criteria precluded formal meta-analyses because of the large variation in methodologies and implementations used. The Panel found few research studies that met all NRP research methodology criteria. Nevertheless, the Panel employed the NRP criteria to the maximum extent possible in its examination of this body of literature. (See the Comprehension section of the Report of the National Reading Panel: Reports of the Subgroups.)
In its review, the Panel identified 16 categories of text comprehension instruction of which 7 appear to have a solid scientific basis for concluding that these types of instruction improve comprehension in non-impaired readers. Some of these types of instruction are helpful when used alone, but many are more effective when used as part of a multiple-strategy method. The types of instruction are:

- Comprehension monitoring, where readers learn how to be aware of their understanding of the material;
- Cooperative learning, where students learn reading strategies together;
- Use of graphic and semantic organizers (including story maps), where readers make graphic representations of the material to assist comprehension;
- Question answering, where readers answer questions posed by the teacher and receive immediate feedback;
- Question generation, where readers ask themselves questions about various aspects of the story;
- Story structure, where students are taught to use the structure of the story as a means of helping them recall story content in order to answer questions about what they have read; and
- Summarization, where readers are taught to integrate ideas and generalize from the text information.

In general, the evidence suggests that teaching a combination of reading comprehension techniques is the most effective. When students use them appropriately, they assist in recall, question answering, question generation, and summarization of texts. When used in combination, these techniques can improve results in standardized comprehension tests.

Questions remain as to which strategies are most effective for which age groups. More research is necessary to determine whether the techniques apply to all types of text genres, including narrative and expository texts, and whether the level of difficulty of the texts has an impact on the effectiveness of the strategies. Finally, it is critically important to know what teacher characteristics influence successful instruction of reading comprehension.

4. Syntactic Awareness & Ability (Conventions)

Another area of oral language viewed as a variable in reading outcomes is that of syntactic knowledge. Chan & Dally (2000) indicated syntactic awareness influenced reading by allowing readers to monitor their ongoing comprehension processes as well as assisting with word recognition skills. While there has been support for this view (Bashir, Conte & Heerd, 1998; Tunmer, Herriman & Nesdale, 1988; Tunmer & Cole, 1985), other evidence has suggested syntactic awareness explains little if any variance in reading outcome (Roth et al, 2002).

5. Oral Narrative Schema (Ideas / Conventions)

Oral narrative ability is another area of language ability often viewed as impacting on reading outcomes (Bashir et al, 1998; Westby, 1991).
Competence with oral narrative tasks is seen as facilitating the transition between oral and literate texts. While studies have linked weaknesses in oral narrative ability to weaker reading ability in both younger and older students, Roth et al (2002) indicated that this link between narrative ability and reading had been inferred rather than demonstrated. As such, while a relationship appears to exist, a causal link has not been proven. Given that experience with written texts prior to attending school influences early reading outcomes (Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1999), it may be that this experience facilitates narrative awareness.

**Developmental Considerations: Second Language Acquisition**

- Phonological and Syntactic patterns evident in the second language that are consistent with those described as “errors” in first language learners are to be expected and should not be viewed as an indicator of an oral language difficulty.

- Students may experience some decrease in their first language competence as they acquire the second language. This is more noticeable when the student had not acquired significant competence in the first language.

- Students from an ESL background should be compared with other speakers of similar background and experience.

- Monitoring of how a student from an ESL background responds to targeted and appropriate language teaching is the significant variable to consider.

**References**


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