ORAL LANGUAGE SUPPORTING EARLY LITERACY (OLSEL)
TARGETING ORAL LANGUAGE – AN IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

Introduction

There is a significant converging body of research evidence that confirms the important role oral language competence plays as a predictor of student learning and literacy learning specifically. In one sense, if we simply consider how much of our classroom day is language based, we do not need research findings to highlight the importance of language competence in facilitating all learning.

Consider students who have a language background other than English and have yet to become competent in English. What is the impact of their language competence when they first enrol in our school? How do we adapt our teaching activities to meet their specific educational needs?

For other students who have an English speaking background, we often assume they have sufficient oral language competence to cope with the demands of classroom teaching and learning. Simply put, this is not always the case. A significant number of children come to school with weaknesses in one or more areas of oral language (e.g. vocabulary knowledge, grammatical structure, awareness of the rules of communicative interaction). These weaknesses impact in two ways. The first is that they are more limited in their ability to follow and participate in teaching and learning interactions which are language based. The second is they are more limited in their ability to reflect on their language and use this to assist their learning. Both these limitations have significant implications for the child’s early literacy acquisition.

In most situations, there is no need to identify specific oral language activities to add to the daily teaching sequence. The activities currently being used to facilitate literacy acquisition and indeed all learning provide significant opportunities to enhance students’ oral language competence. What is needed is closer examination of the language involved in the work units to be implemented and to identify some explicit teaching activities that can be undertaken to strengthen and develop both the students’ oral language and their ability to use this language to facilitate their self-learning.

The Oral Language Supporting Early Literacy Program provides a wealth of information and ideas for strengthening students’ oral language to support their learning. The focus of this Implementation Guide is to highlight some key ideas that may assist with the implementation of OLSEL within your school.
Overview - OLSEL - Oral Language Supporting Early Literacy

The Oral Language Supporting Early Literacy research initiative seeks to develop the oral language competence of students in the early years, to facilitate early literacy development. The goal of the research initiative is centred around professional learning to support teachers to more effectively plan and implement strategies which specifically target the development of oral language skills in the early years of schooling with a particular focus on the first year of schooling.

One component of the research is the professional development. The OLSEL Professional Learning (PL) activity aims to assist curriculum leaders and teachers to implement an evidence-based practice approach which strategically supports the development of oral language skills of students in the early years by:

- strengthening the currency and depth of teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and skills;
- utilising the knowledge base in order to plan and implement learning experiences to support the development of oral language skills; and
- increasing teachers capacity to measure, analyse and report learning outcomes to build future learning directions.

The professional learning sessions

Schools are strongly encouraged to nominate teams of teachers currently working in the early years for participation in this program. Feedback from participants indicate that the effectiveness of school-based program implementation is greatly enhanced when the entire P–2 team attends or when all teachers at a particular level (e.g. all Prep teachers) attend together with a coordinator. This criterion is applied in selection of schools for participation in the program.

The professional learning sessions consist of five full days of Professional Development with ongoing support for 24 months from CEO support services staff. The PL activity:

- explores the research that links oral language development and development of literacy skills
- introduces the ICPALER framework (adapted from the ICPAL framework, Munro, 2005) as a model for understanding the language use of young students, and
- empowers teachers to effectively plan and implement learning experiences for their students that will support the development of oral language skills and improve literacy development.

General Points

As outlined, a major aim of the OLSEL Program is not to add additional oral language activities to the day to day classroom schedule but to consider the language demands of the tasks being undertaken. These tasks provide the teaching opportunities to strengthen the students’ oral language as well as to further develop their ability to apply this enhanced oral language competence to the learning task.
This model (adapted from Munro, 2009 OLSEL Session 2 Notes, Page 6) can be used to consider the language demands within the existing classroom activities, as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Decisions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is the expected outcome of the proposed literacy activity?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What new language will need to be introduced?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What language is it assumed the students already know?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What activities will be used to review the assumed language knowledge?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What activities will be used teach the new language?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What teaching climate is most useful for language learning?</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the aim is not to add new oral language activities to the daily schedule, there is a need to increase the time allocated to oral discussions and oral language development. This will necessitate some changes to current work plans with opportunities for oral language interactions made more explicit while the details of work unit outcome would remain the same.

Regardless of the content that may be the focus of a teaching and learning interaction, it is important to ensure that the conditions that facilitate language learning are in place. As outlined by Dr Munro in the OLSEL Program Manual (Session 2 Notes, Page 46), these conditions are as follows:

- Have students speak and explicitly comprehend oral language as often as possible;
- Discuss the purposes and values of listening and speaking;
- Model oral language actions;
- Let students see they are allowed to “try things out”; take risks and have time to do this;
- Provide positive and constructive feedback wherever possible;
- Help students build their self-efficacy as learners and users of oral language;
- Encourage students to make self-corrections;
- Let students see they have time to think & learn and gradually automatise their knowledge;
- Relax the reader before talking;
- Help students to “get ready” what they know for communicating;
- Scaffold the student’s learning;
- Assist students to expand their background knowledge;
- Encourage students to recall actions they can use when they listen or speak; and,
- Encourage students to think about why they are listening or speaking (i.e. their purposes).
The 4 Elements

In considering what aspects of oral language should be targeted to enhance early literacy acquisition, we can be guided by the current findings from the OLSEL Research Project being undertaken by the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (Funded by the Federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations). At this stage of the project, the following 4 elements of oral language ability have been identified as explaining the most variance in students’ early reading acquisition:

- Phonological and phonemic awareness;
- Comprehension and use of longer and more complex sentences;
- Awareness and application of the Story Grammar Sequence; and
- Vocabulary knowledge.

Activities that can be used to enhance the quality of existing teaching and learning interactions for each of these four areas, in no particular order, are as follows:

1. **Phonemic & Phonological Awareness**

Phonological Awareness has been highlighted in recent years as an important area of knowledge used by students to facilitate both their reading and spelling. You may hear the terms phonemic awareness and phonological awareness used interchangeably but these are actually different abilities. Phonemic awareness refers to the children’s awareness of individual sounds while phonological awareness refers to sounds in words and larger sound units.

A program developed by CEOM is the Phonological Early Reading Intervention (PERI): PERI provides teachers with the phonological foundations necessary for pre-literate and early literacy development (for students who are finding the ERIK program too difficult). The areas covered through PERI are: manipulating sound patterns in words, segmenting words into smaller parts, sound blending, manipulating sounds within words and phonemic recoding. All content for PERI has been taken from ‘Assessing & Teaching Phonological Knowledge’ by John Munro (1998), available online through ACER [http://shop.acer.edu.au/acer-shop/group/ATP/2](http://shop.acer.edu.au/acer-shop/group/ATP/2).

A sequence that follows the same developmental sequence as PERI and targets phonemic and phonological awareness is as follows:

- Children identify words that rhyme (e.g. who can think of a word that rhymes with “cat”? / which of these words does not rhyme with the others .. cat / sun / hat)
- Children break up or segment longer words into their syllables (e.g. child says “rainbow” while tapping out the syllables)
- Children segment words into onsets (i.e. initial sound) and rime units (e.g. cat .. c / at);
- Children blend individual sounds into words and segment words into individual sounds. Initially, target three sound words (e.g. cat / home ) then four sound words (e.g. stop / treat) and then five sound words (e.g. print / stand).
Select words (8-10) from a text you are about to read with the children or from a text a child may be reading individually. Practice the phonological/phonemic awareness task using these words for five to ten minutes before you read the text together. Doing this allows children to have some experience with the words before they read and thus facilitate their ability to apply their phonemic and phonological awareness knowledge to the reading process.

- Introduce the developmental sequence listed above. Initially, encourage (Prep) students to identify words that rhyme. You may need to teach the concept of rhyme.
- When you feel the group has a good awareness, introduce tasks that require the students to break words up into syllables. Practice clapping out the syllables in 1-, 2- and 3-syllable words.
- Next target onset-rime awareness. Make sure children are aware that the rime unit is common across words but the onset (initial sound) changes.

Next, focus on identifying individual sounds through blending to form a word as well as breaking words into individual sounds (i.e. segmenting). Students should be increasingly competent with word blending and word segmentation by mid-Year 1.

2. Comprehension and Use of Longer and More Complex Sentences

**Colourful Semantics (CS)** is a resource used by CEOM Speech Pathologists, it addresses three of the 4 elements*. This resource can be used, in conjunction with the strategies below, to increase the grammatical complexity of the sentences both comprehended and used (spoken, written and read) by the students. *CS also addresses vocabulary knowledge and awareness & application of story grammar. See attached Powerpoint for an introduction to Colourful Semantics.

**Strategies that can be used in conjunction with Colourful Semantics**

To increase the grammatical complexity of the sentences both comprehended and used by the students consider the following sentences and analyse how they are different.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The man drove the car</th>
<th>The second sentence is longer and more complex by adding <strong>adjectives</strong> and <strong>adverbs</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The old man drove his new car carefully</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The girl read the book from the library</th>
<th>The second sentence is longer and more complex by adding <strong>adjectives</strong> and <strong>adverbs</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The young red-headed girl read the picture book from the school library</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| The boy got home from school. The boy played football with his friends. The boy played with his friends after he got home from school | The second sentence is longer and more complex by adding a conjunction to join the sentences. |

By encouraging students to add **adjectives** and **adverbs** to sentences they are saying and writing, they are able to provide more specific information. The other group of words that allows students to formulate longer and more complex sentences is **conjunctions**. Conjunctions allow us to join sentences and often add to the meaning implicit in the sentence ideas (e.g. “because” links cause and effect; “if”
marks a conditional concept). In addition, conjunctions improve the cohesion of longer and more complex sentences and texts. The second group of words that add to the cohesion between and across sentences is **pronouns**. In the third example above, we have joined two sentences with the conjunction “after” and used the pronoun “he” rather than repeat the redundant subject (i.e. “the boy”).

Essentially, we can facilitate the length and complexity of the sentences comprehended and used by students by enhancing and expanding their use of **adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions** and **pronouns** in sentences.

- Select sentences from books you are reading with the class. Encourage students to brainstorm adjectives about characters, events and locations and adverbs about actions. See if they can change adjectives and adverbs used in the text with other ones they have thought of. See if they can add adjectives and adverbs to sentences.
- Read the text with the children. See if they can identify words that join sentences (i.e. conjunctions). Select two short sentences from the text and encourage the students to think of a conjunction to join the two short sentences into one long sentence.
- Discuss the sentences the students write. Take the opportunity to encourage them to add adjectives and adverbs to their first draft sentences.

You can also reinforce correct grammatical structure on an ongoing basis by your responses to students’ utterances. In their early years, the accuracy and increasingly complexity of children’s grammar is facilitated by the response strategies used by their parents or primary caregivers. These can be used by teachers in the classroom with equal effect. The types of strategies used by parents/caregivers are:

- **Modelling** Caregivers talk about activities as they are occurring especially regularly occurring routines (e.g. feeding and bath time). They refer frequently to objects of current interest to their child and will focus their child’s attention with the use of both verbal and gestural cues.

- **Imitation** This seems to occur most when the child has produced an utterance correctly. The imitation by the caregiver is really focussed on positively reinforcing the child’s utterance accuracy. The result is that the child 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 (e.g. child says “daddy work” / caregiver says “Yes, daddy is at work”).

  In using the expansion strategy the caregiver is “correcting” the grammatical structure.

- **Extension** These contingent responses are characterised by the caregiver adding related semantic content (e.g. child says “daddy car” / caregiver says “Daddy is going to work in his car”)

  In using the extension strategy, the caregiver is both modelling the correct grammatical structure and adding new ideas to the original sentence formulated by the child.

- Observe your students’ oral and written language. Identify particular grammatical structures you need to work on (e.g. past tense / use of verbs such as “is” and “are” / using conjunctions to join sentences / sequencing adjectives to describe an object).
• For a fortnight, focus on using that sentence type/grammatical structure. Aim to provide as many models as possible. When you hear the child “misuse” grammatical structure, use expansion and extension to facilitate the students’ language learning.

• By focusing on the structure for a fortnight, you will ensure that the required frequency and duration needed for many children to develop a structure is achieved. Please note that some children may need more time for this to be effective.

You could also introduce some specific teaching activities once you have identified a specific syntactic structure to target (e.g. children omit small auxiliary verbs such as “is” and “are” - the boy walking). Activities you can use to develop and strengthen a student’s syntactic competence are as follows:

• *Judgement of Syntactic Accuracy*: Formulate a list of sentences containing the syntactic structure you are targeting. Some should be syntactically correct while others have the syntactic error pattern you have observed the student using. Ask the students to tell you whether the sentence you say is correct or incorrect.

• *Reorganising the words in a sentence*: Provide the students with a written sentence containing the targeted syntactic structure but scramble the word order. The students have to put the words into the correct order to make the sentence.

• *Cloze Activities*: Provide the students with an oral sentence with the targeted grammatical structure missing (e.g. the boy ____ kicking the ball). Get them to complete the sentence.

3. **Story Grammar / Oral Narrative Schema**

Explicitly teaching students a narrative (story) sequence will assist them to better comprehend texts they are reading. It will assist them to be able to predict what might happen next and also to evaluate the quality of the story. In addition, learning the narrative (story) sequence will also assist students to provide larger amounts of information in a cohesive manner when formulating their own stories.

Use of Story Grammar is one strategy that has been found to be useful in this area. The Story Grammar sequence has the following elements:

**Setting** Information about the characters as well as the location and time of the story

**Initiating Event** The event that occurs

**Internal Response** The response of the characters to the initiating event

**Internal Plan** The reaction of the characters and what they decide to do

**Attempt** The actual action the characters undertake

**Direct Consequence** The impact of the characters’ actions

**Ending** Formal ending of the story
Generally, all narrative stories conform to this story grammar sequence. Longer stories are comprised of the setting and the formal ending along with a series of “episodes” with each episode containing the steps from the initiating event to the direct consequence. Simple stories, such as the one listed next, have a single episode structure. (This story is used as part of the ERIK assessment.)

*Jane was at school and went out to sit on the seats and eat her lunch. As she opened her lunch box, it fell over and her lunch went on the ground. Jane wondered what she was going to do. Her sandwiches now had dirt all over them. She decided to ask someone for help so she told her friend, Susan. Susan took one of the sandwiches from her lunch-box and shared it with Jane.*

*After lunch, Jane and Susan went into the playground and had a good time playing chasey.*

**Setting:** Jane was at school and went out to sit on the seats and eat her lunch

**Initiating Event:** As she opened her lunch box, it fell over and her lunch went on the ground

**Internal Response:** Jane wondered what she was going to do.

**Internal Plan:** She decided to ask someone for help

**Attempt:** She told her friend, Susan

**Direct Consequence:** Susan took one of the sandwiches from her lunch-box and shared it with Jane

**Ending:** After lunch, Jane and Susan went into the playground and had a good time playing chasey.

Working in a group, use the Story Grammar sequence to formulate a story about a stimulus picture or sequence of pictures. Questions to ask to facilitate the discussion within the group are as follows:

| Setting | **Who is in the story?** |
| Setting | **Where are they?** |
| Setting | **When is the story happening?** |
| Initiating Event | **What happened to the characters?** |
| Initiating Event | **What occurred in our story?** |
| Internal Response | **How did this make the characters feel?** |
| Internal Response | **What did they think about what happened?** |
| Internal Plan | **What did the characters decide to do?** |
| Internal Plan | **What did they need to do?** |
| Attempt | **What did the characters actually do?** |
| Direct Consequence | **What happened because of what the characters’ did?** |
| Ending | **How will our story end?** |
| Ending | **What do you think the characters will do next time?** |

- Using a Graphic Organiser, write down the ideas generated by the students in the group. Facilitate discussion amongst the students as to which idea will be selected for inclusion in the group story.
- When all the ideas have been generated and agreed on, write the story, with the students telling you what to write. When the story has been completed, read the story to the students.
• Have the students retell the story. You might encourage one student to retell the story to a certain point and then get another student to continue on. Make sure all the students get an opportunity to retell increasingly larger amounts of the story.
• Have students orally retell the story. In addition, get them to write the story as a retell task.
• Work through a similar sequence with the group making up a number of stories over a number of terms. Most stories follow a Story Grammar Sequence. Stories become increasingly complex as they contain more and more episodes. Episodes essentially are made up of an initiating event, an internal response, an internal plan, a consequence and an outcome.
• After the class has read a book together (e.g. Big Book activity), formulate a retelling script by asking questions for each step of the Story Grammar Sequence using questions such as the ones listed above.

Teaching tasks that focus on developing students’ competence in the awareness and use of story grammar will also facilitate their understanding and use of 4W + H (i.e. who / what / where / when / how) questions as these will be used frequently in context during the teaching and learning interactions.

4. Vocabulary: Teaching & Learning Strategies

Consider the task you are teaching or the next text/Big Book you are about to use. Reflect on the key vocabulary that is involved which students will need to understand and learn to use. You may find it useful to brainstorm a range of words and then divide them into one of the following groups:

Crucial: Students will need to know the meaning and be able to use these words in order to understand the theme or topic.
Useful: Knowledge and use of these words will expand the students’ learning of the topic.

Having identified the “crucial” words, implement directed teaching activities to ensure students gain this vocabulary knowledge. Apply the following sequence based on Munro (2005) to key vocabulary:

• Provide students with instances where a new word occurs highlighting its meaning;
• Say the new word accurately and ask the students to say the word;
• Describe the actions that characterize the word;
• Suggest how the word is like words the students already know;
• Encourage students to suggest synonyms and antonyms for the word;
• Identify contexts in which the word is and isn’t appropriate;
• Encourage students to define the meaning of the word; and,
• Ask the students to repeat the meaning of the word.

When introducing a new topic, you could encourage students to brainstorm words they think might be included in any text they read or listen to. This will have the added advantage of allowing them to reflect on what they already know about the topic. Remember, students will need repeated opportunities to effectively learn and use new vocabulary.
**Self Talk / Self Learning**

Although self talk is not one of the 4 elements identified by the current findings from the OLSEL Research Project, it is important to note that while developing and strengthening students’ oral language competence, it is insufficient on its own to facilitate ongoing learning. We can go a long way to assisting students to better regulate their learning by encourage them to reflect on their language and explicitly use their language to assist them undertake tasks. Ways this can be reinforced in the classroom are as follows:

- Encourage student to explicitly discuss what they know about a topic before you introduce it and ask them to explain why doing this will help them;

- Encourage students to explain how they will complete a task

- Before students start a writing piece, ask them to think about who will read it (i.e. take on the perspective or the person who will review the work)

- Encourage students to reflect on and explain what they have learned in a session or after a work unit. Again, ask them to explain how they might use this knowledge on other tasks.

- Use levels of questioning to depth students’ reflections on what they have learned (e.g. Blank’s Questioning levels / Wallach’s Questioning Rubric). Attempt to at least achieve a 50-50 balance with the frequency of questions at the complex end equalling the frequency of questions at the literal end.

- Reflect on the three elements of the Collin’s Model that are the learners’ responsibility: Articulation, Reflection & Exploration. Have I allowed some time for each of these.

Other important aspects, also targeted in the teaching as part of the OLSEL PL activity, are

- **Levels of Questioning** (Blank et. al., 2003)
- **Questioning as Scaffolding** (Wallach, 2008)
- **Model of Teaching and Learning** (Collins et. al., 1989)

One page summary, on each, to follow.
LEVELS OF QUESTIONING (Blank et al 2003)

One important way in which teachers can facilitate students’ oral language competence as well as their ability to think about what they are learning is to use differing levels of complexity in their questioning. Try to incorporate each level of questioning into all teaching and learning activities in the classroom.

Blank et al (2003) outlined the following levels of questioning complexity:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Directly supplied information</th>
<th>What sound is at the start of the word “car”?</th>
<th>What was in the box?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>Classification</td>
<td>What have all these words got in common? (e.g. grouping words on basis of rime unit or initial sound)</td>
<td>What have all the objects got in common?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>Reorganisation</td>
<td>Tel me about these words</td>
<td>Tell me about the objects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td>Abstraction &amp; Inference</td>
<td>What would happen if we changed a sound in the word?</td>
<td>Why do you think the objects were put together in the box?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reference

QUESTIONING AS SCAFFOLDING (Wallach, 2008)

The use of questioning has been shown to facilitate students’ ability to move from literal recall to more complex levels of oral and written comprehension. The following sequence of such scaffolding was outlined in Wallach (2008):

1. Labelling: What is this?

2. Item Elaboration: What colour is this?

3. Event Description: What happened?

4. Reason/Cause: Why is the boy happy?

5. Reaction: Should he be happy? Why?

6. Real-World Relevance: Would you be happy if that happened to you? Has anything like that happened to you?

Reference

A model of teaching that considers the nature of the learning process that could be applied to intervention with students who have oral language difficulties is that developed by Collins, Brown & Newman (1989). This model has six principles of instruction, three which are the responsibility of the Teacher and three that are the responsibility of the student. The principles are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsibility of the Teacher</th>
<th>Modelling</th>
<th>Teacher models the actual task and how it is to be completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coaching</td>
<td></td>
<td>The teacher guides, prompts and provides feedback as the student engages in the task. This support is required on an ongoing basis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scaffolding &amp; Fading</td>
<td></td>
<td>The teacher provides some cues to assist the student to recall how to complete the task. These cues occur less often and are faded out as the student is able to increasingly complete the task independently.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsibility of the Student</th>
<th>Articulation</th>
<th>Student explains what they have learned (ie. knowledge / process strategy) and when they can use what they have learned.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td></td>
<td>Students reflect on what they have learned focusing on identifying what they know now that that they did not know before.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td></td>
<td>Students are encouraged to consider how they can use what they have learned (ie. knowledge / process strategy) in new tasks and contexts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>