What You Need to Know:
Oral Language Development

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What is Oral Language Development?

Oral Language Development is the most sophisticated of all the reading skills. It is the first skill that children begin learning, and it is the one skill that people continue learning throughout life—whether or not they know it!

Definition

> *The ability to understand how language is used in a particular event, setting, context, or culture.*

Before we go any further, I will take a moment to define the terms in the definition. (This will help you develop your own oral language skills because you will have a better idea of what these words mean in the context of this book!)

Understand:	Ability to make sense or develop an interpretation
Language:	Individual words and words in a string that are intended to express an idea
Event:	An occurrence or events in a single time and place
Setting:	A type of location or place
Context:	Conditions, framework, or social environment in which language use occurs
Culture:	The expectations, rules, experiences, and beliefs shared by two or more people

"Oral Language Development" is better described as "Oral Language Skills." Oral language development simply refers to the process of developing one's oral language skills. Typically, when people describe oral language skills, they are talking about very young children learning how express themselves, such as by naming things, speaking in complete sentences, or understanding and answering simple questions. However, oral language skills go far, far beyond these basic skills.

If we think about what is happening with oral language development, we see that what we are really teaching children is how to communicate in various events, settings, contexts, and cultures. For example:

- When we instruct children to use their "inside voice," we are really telling them that in the "inside" setting, there are different rules for talking than there are for the "outside" setting.
- When we tell children to say "please" and "thank you," we are instructing them on the rules for communicating based on the expectations of our culture.
- When we teach children that the way we talk at home or with friends may not be the same as how we talk to people in authority, we let them know that their are different rules for different contexts.

All of this is oral language development.

Oral Language and Young Children

At the lowest level of oral language skills, children learn to name objects and use basic speech patterns. For example, a parent might pick up a ball and say, “Ball. Do you want the ball?” The parent is telling the child that the object he or she is holding is called a ball, that “ball” is the word in the parents’ language for the object. The child learns that to indicate the object to the parent, the child needs to use the word “ball.”

If a parent asks the child, “Do you want to go outside?” the parent is modeling how the child can put words together to ask a question. The parent is demonstrating what he or she thinks is the acceptable way to put the words together. If the parent asks, instead, “Go outside?” the parent teaches the child that that is an acceptable way, too.

Basic speech patterns and vocabulary are not the entirety of oral language skills. These behaviors represent only a small part of oral language, only a few of the many and complex oral language skills.

Some people may consider that oral language instruction is only for very young children. For example, in many school environments, teaching and reinforcing oral language generally focuses on children under five or six years old. The focus on very young children’s oral language skills is extremely important. Oral language builds the foundation for the ability to communicate: both to understand received information and to express information.

I have known children who have very poor oral language skills. Even at the age of three or four years old, they are still pointing at objects they want and making meaningless sounds. They do not have the words to name objects or express their desires. Other children may still talk in “baby talk” when they are in kindergarten or first grade. They may be unable to understand simple questions and provide a meaningful response. With so few words at their disposal and with little to no grasps of the syntax of language, these children are going to have a really tough time learning to read.

I understand why early childhood educators focus on oral language development and why many people think oral language development is for young children. I understand the value of helping students develop basic speech patterns and vocabulary. Instruction in basic and low-level oral language skills is important when working with very young children. Unfortunately, once children have more or less accomplished those low-level skills, explicit instruction stops.

Based on the thousands of teachers I have worked with through our reading tutoring program and prior similar programs, I know that few teachers past about third or fourth grade ever think about oral language skills, much less provide any explicit instruction in oral language skills. This is a problem. As communication situations and ideas become more complex, as expectations for comprehension and expression increase, and as children encounter a wider variety of cultures, they need increasingly stronger and more sophisticated oral language skills.

Breaking Down Oral Language Skills

Oral Language is not a single skill but a collection of five sub-skills:

> *Vocabulary:* learning and using the names of things, ideas and concepts, processes, etc.; learning to differentiate between idiomatic, local definitions and universally accepted definitions; learning to identify, use, and interpret connotative meanings of words and phrases
>
> *Syntax:* learning and using grammatically correct sentence structure; learning and using the rules of language usage
>
> *Morphological Skills:* understanding word parts, roots, affixes, etc.; understanding how interactions among words affect their meaning
>
> *Pragmatics:* learning to use language effectively to accomplish a purpose; learning how to modify language as appropriate for the context, setting, and culture
>
> *Phonological Skills:* learning to identify and modify sounds within words

Instruction in any of these sub-skills contributes to a student's oral language development. If you provide instruction in each area, you will help students develop strong oral language skills that will help them communicate not only when speaking and listening but also when writing and reading.

Explaining These Sub-skills

Two of these sub-skills can be developed fairly early in life: phonological skills and syntax.

> ***Phonological skills:*** Most people learn phonological skills at a young age, perhaps before age six or seven. Children who do not develop phonological skills are at great risk of reading difficulties later. Many of the students whom we tutored struggled with phonological skills. They needed explicit instruction and practice in identifying and manipulating sounds within words. Because the connection between phonological skills and reading ability is so strong, we insisted that tutors provide instruction in phonological skills at all grade levels. The results show that this approach was successful. I will discuss this topic more thoroughly in the chapter on phonemic awareness.
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> ***Syntax:*** Students learn syntax by the end of fourth or fifth grade, right? Not so in many cases. Even the most cursory examination of students' writing reveals that many students have a weak grasp of syntax. Many adults, too, admit to difficulty with grammar. This is a big deal. Changes to the grammatical structure of a sentence can change its meaning. For example, the sentences "I have been to the movies" and "I went to the movies" mean different things. Without a good understanding of syntax, we may have difficulty communicating our ideas clearly, and we may have difficulty interpreting what other people say and write.

The other three oral language sub-skills continue to develop throughout a person's life:

vocabulary, morphological skills, and pragmatics.

Vocabulary: We learn new words, new meanings, and new connotations as we read more and have more interactions with different types of people. We do not simply learn definitions of words. Instead, we develop our understanding of how words are used, how similar words can express various ideas, how people use different words to express the same idea, and how people interpret word usage.

For example, think about the words "orient" and "oriental." These words mean "east" and "eastern," respectively. Once upon a time, people from China, Japan, and other nearby countries were called "Orientals." This is no longer appropriate. Now we say "Asian." The terminology has changed because the interpretation of, and response to, the term "oriental" has changed. Within the context of oral language skills, learning how words are used and interpreted is the sub-skill of vocabulary.

Morphological skills: In connection with vocabulary, we develop our morphological skills to expand our understanding of how words can be modified to express different ideas. Also, we learn how to interpret changes in word order and how changes in sentence structure can affect interpretation.

For example, consider the sentences "Absolutely, this is the truth" and "This is the absolute truth." The first sentence implies an agreement about the truth. In contrast, the second sentence implies that the "truth" is entirely correct and not subject to debate. By changing the word order, the speaker or writer has changed how the sentences are interpreted. Morphological skills help students understand these differences in interpretation.

Pragmatics: We use language to accomplish a purpose. What we say, how we say it, and whom we say it to affects whether or not we accomplish that purpose. As our pragmatics skills develop and improve, we learn the expectations for communicating in various contexts, settings, and cultures so that we can accomplish our purposes.

For example, our skill with pragmatics may determine whether we say "Give me a raise," "I want a raise," or "I believe I deserve a raise." Each of these three statements communicates the same basic idea, but they may provoke very different reactions. When we use our pragmatics skills, we think about what our purpose is, who the listener or reader is, and how we might best communicate our ideas.

Most importantly, perhaps, we become better at understanding what other people mean when they speak or write, and we learn how to communicate appropriately so that we can build positive relationships with others.

This is the reason why I say that oral language skills are the most sophisticated of all the reading skills: the learning never stops.

Connection to Reading

The National Reading Panel had very little to say about oral language, mainly because it is oral. But if we think about how we use oral language skills, what those skills are for, we see that they

transfer directly to making meaning from text, i.e., reading. Oral language skills focus on learning how language is used to communicate ideas, which includes in text.

Think about something you recently read and then consider the following questions.

- What writing style did the author use?
- Was the writing casual or formal?
- What types of words did the author use?
- What implications did the author convey, beyond the actual words?
- How did the author use sentence structure, grammar, and punctuation to communicate clearly (or not)?
- Did the author write the way you would write?

(If you read a story with characters, you could ask these same questions about the way the characters speak. Not only will this contribute to oral language development but also it will contribute to increased comprehension.)

Did you try to answer the questions? If so, then you were analyzing text by using oral language skills. You applied your oral language skills to reading. We help students learn to do this, as well. As it turns out, not only do students strengthen their comprehension of the text but also they form impressions of the author's credibility, character, and competence.

We use these skills when listening, and we can use them when reading. Whenever we help students analyze the way language is used in text, we are helping them develop and then use oral language skills.

What Works for Oral Language Instruction

Now that you have an understanding of the sub-skills for oral language, you have many clues for the types of strategies and activities to help students develop oral language. In brief, any activities that engage students in those sub-skills will contribute to oral language. If you use those activities with text, you help students develop their reading comprehension.

Here is the caveat: You need to use strategies for ALL the sub-skills.

In my observation of teachers and in my review of instructional plans for thousands of reading tutors, however, I noted that teachers for younger students tend to focus only on basic (non-nuanced) vocabulary and phonological skills. As students advance to upper elementary, teachers tend to focus on connotative/nuanced vocabulary and syntax. Not until students get to middle or high school do teachers begin to focus on morphological skills and pragmatics. In part, I believe, they do this because simple vocabulary and phonological skills are least complex to grasp and morphological skills and pragmatics are most complex. This is a mistake.

Students at all ages can learn—or begin learning—all the oral language sub-skills. The more complex skills, such as pragmatics, and the more complex concepts, such context-dependent

expectations, might be presented in simple forms for younger children, but children can learn them if the teacher uses effective and appropriate strategies.

Although you can use many different activities to teach oral language skills, effective activities can be grouped within five types of strategies.

Five Strategies for Teaching Oral Language Skills

- Modeling
- Analysis
- Practice with correction and reflection
- Discussion
- Explicit instruction

Truly, all five strategies are necessary to help students develop their oral language skills, which means you need to design activities that employ all five strategies. Although it is possible to address all the strategies through one carefully designed, comprehensive activity, you might need several activities. The only strategy that you will use all the time is modeling.

Modeling: Your primary responsibility as a reading teacher is to conscientiously and consistently model the language use that is appropriate for an event, setting, context, or culture. Children learn to speak according to what they hear, so your job is to make sure they hear appropriate language use. Exposure to language leads to familiarity, which, in turn, leads to students' ability to use language in that same manner.

Under the modeling strategy, you are using language in a certain manner and helping students understand what you are doing and why. How do you want students to communicate? What types of language usage or patterns do you want them to learn? If you don't model it, they won't learn it. Modeling is not restricted to specific times, activities, or content areas. It is what you do all the time, every time, and in every place. If students can hear you speak, you are modeling language use.

Normally, you are communicating with students in an academic context, within the culture of learning that you create in your classroom. This means you need to use academic language: precise and concise explanations, grammatically correct sentences, and standard vocabulary that avoids colloquial or idiomatic expressions. As you engage students individually or in non-classroom settings, you might modify your language use. In either case, you need to explicitly describe the language expectations, model their use, and prompt students to adhere to those expectations.

Analysis: Analysis means developing conclusions about language use. To help students develop oral language skills, you teach them to perform three types of analysis: (a) Word Analysis, which is analyzing word parts and their effect on meaning; (b) Text Analysis, which is analyzing the way the author or characters use language; and (c) Message Analysis, which is analyzing the author's intention, purpose, and content.

To a certain degree, analysis strategies use text to provide modeling, and activities engage

students in analyzing how language is used in the text. Activities provide students with opportunities to do one or more types of analysis. As you design or reflect on your instructional activities, make sure that students have the opportunity to do all three types.

***Practice with correction and reflection*:** Oral language is a set of skills. Like other skills, such as playing an instrument or learning a craft, development takes guidance, opportunities for practice, and reflection on results supported by correction. Which is followed by more guidance, more practice, and more reflection supported by correction.

Students need many opportunities to communicate (whether in speech or writing), and you, the teacher, need to provide correction and help students think about how they are using language in a specific event, setting, context, or culture. As with modeling, you do this all the time. However, you can also design specific activities to provide practice with feedback.

You need to make a judgment call when providing feedback. On the one hand, if students understand the difference between appropriate and inappropriate language (as determined by the event, setting, context, or culture) but choose to use inappropriate language, the correction may be punitive. More commonly, if students have not yet learned that difference—or have not learned the reason for the difference—the correction needs to be instructional with the opportunity to try again. Language takes a lifetime of practice.

Discussion: Discussion brings all the strategies together. The teacher provides questions for student response and facilitates students asking and responding to questions from each other. Questions address various levels from Bloom's Taxonomy, Depth of Knowledge, or similar systems of interacting with text.

Explicit instruction: Language follows a series of patterns: patterns for word use, patterns of sentence structure, patterns for volume and tone, etc. With explicit instruction, you teach students the patterns that are appropriate for various settings, events, contexts, and cultures. You teach them, "In this place, for this purpose, here is how you say…."

I will address discussion and explicit instruction more fully next.

The Number One Strategy: Discussion

Remember, the definition of oral language development is learning how language is used in a particular event, setting, context, or culture. People do this by experiencing a wide variety of language uses, analyzing how people communicate, identifying patterns, relating language usage to results, and testing assumptions about communicating.

The number one strategy for helping students develop their oral language skills is discussion. Discussion is not about responding to questions with the "right" answer. Discussion is

- sharing one's own ideas,
- asking questions,
- agreeing and disagreeing,
- explaining and defending a position,

- contributing more information, and
- expanding on others' ideas.

In the context of reading, we discuss language use, whether the author's or the characters'. Your job, as the teacher, is to ask open-ended questions that provoke and permit discussion about the language. For example, if two characters, Bob and Tom, are having a disagreement, you could ask the following questions for discussion.

1. Do Bob and Tom seem to be agreeing or disagreeing? What are they disagreeing about? (Setting the stage for the discussion of language use)
2. How do you know that they are disagreeing? What did Bob say that makes you think he disagrees with Tom?
3. Are they talking nicely or meanly (e.g., is the disagreement respectful, hostile, friendly, derogatory, angry, sarcastic)? What makes you think that?
4. What is another way they could talk to each other and what other words might they use?
5. Thinking about the actual words used, how did Tom react when Bob disagreed? Was that the reaction Bob wanted? If not, how else might Bob have expressed his disagreement?
6. What would be the difference between saying "You're wrong," "I think you're wrong," "I don't agree," "Bob, that is not true," and "That's stupid"? How might these different ways get different reactions from Tom? How does the message change with these different ways?
7. Tom could say "You ARE wrong" or "YOU are wrong"? How does the emphasis change the meaning?
8. If their relationship were different, such as a boss and an employee or as two friends, how might they talk differently?
9. What are some ways you expressed disagreement and what kind of response did you get? How might you have expressed disagreement differently?

As you can see, discussion goes far beyond simple recall. Instead, the questions need to reflect all the levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, Depth of Knowledge, or similar systems for categorizing interactions with text. If you limit the questions to the simplest levels or superficial who, what, when, and where types of questions, you are not helping students understand or analyze the text; you are only testing their recall. There will be no reason for discussion.

I will address question types more thoroughly in the chapter on comprehension. Regarding oral language skills, the central theme of the discussion questions is how the author or characters are using, or could use, language. Overall, we use discussion to help students be aware of the interaction among language, message, and purpose.

Integrating Oral Language Development and Comprehension through Discussion

One great advantage to using discussion is that it integrates easily with the number one strategy

for developing comprehension, which is also discussion! With the right discussion questions, you can address oral language and comprehension at the same time. In fact, you can not fully address comprehension without addressing oral language: understanding language use leads to understanding the text.

The Number Two Strategy: Explicit Instruction

You can explicitly teach students language patterns to use, and you can tell them how those patterns are interpreted. Examples include the following.

- Remember to say "Please."
- Call him "Mr. Wilson," not "bro."
- Saying "I ain't got no" is incorrect. Say "I don't have" instead.
- If you call people "stupid," they won't like you.
- When you get to the bank, tell the clerk, "I would like to open an account. Is there someone who can assist me?"
- Don't be offended if they call you "son." That's just how they talk here.
- Make sure to use correct grammar and avoid contractions.

When you provide explicit instruction in language use, you provide the patterns to use in various events, settings, contexts, and cultures. For many students, especially those with limited exposure to language use outside of a familiar context (family, friends, local community), explicit instruction can be useful.

Once students have a grasp of the language "rules" for a particular event, setting, context, or culture, you can ask students to analyze text to see the degree to which those rules have been applied by the author or characters. Students can use their understanding of language usage to analyze and evaluate the content, such as the author's credibility or a character's personality or background.

For example, you can have the students write a response to a prompt, such as

- "Does the author use correct grammar? How does that affect your confidence in the author's knowledge of the topic?"; or
- "Did the character speak appropriately to his uncle?"

After students write their responses, they should share their responses and discuss each others' responses to hear various interpretations and strengthen or modify their own understanding.

Which, of course, brings us right back to discussion. Engaging students in discussion after they write a reflection is a good strategy for helping students strengthen their oral language skills. The writing exercise helps them reflect on the text and their own understanding, and it prepares them to participate meaningfully in discussion.

The one thing you absolutely do not want to do is collect their responses, grade them, and move on to the next topic. If their responses are not particularly complete or if their ideas are not

defensible, students need the opportunity to develop a better analysis and interpretation. Otherwise, they will have learned nothing other than the fact that they got it wrong. On the other hand, if you provide feedback or engage students in follow-up discussion, they have the opportunity to expand their understanding and improve their own skills.

Sample Activities for Oral Language Development

Strategy	Sample Activities Types	Oral Language Sub-skills
Modeling	Continuous demonstration by the teacher or other adults	Vocabulary Syntax Morphological Skills Pragmatics
Analysis	Creating word groups and modifying words Rhyming and “word play” Close reading Writing to prompts Discussion Character analysis Direct instruction Cause and effect study	All sub-skills
Practice with Reflection and Correction	Teaching language patterns Guided oral reading / choral reading Reading and writing skits or plays Revising and rewording Writing to prompts Short-answer questions Direct instruction	Vocabulary Syntax Morphological Skills Pragmatics

Discussion	Writing to prompts followed by student discussion Graphic organizers followed by student discussion Student-created questions followed by student discussion Text analysis followed by student discussion	All sub-skills
Explicit instruction	Teaching language patterns Revising and rewording Direct instruction Discussion Character analysis	All sub-skills

What Does Not Work for Oral Language Instruction

If you are guided by the instructional strategies for oral language development, as well as the sub-skills that students need to learn, you can find or design many effective instructional activities. On the other hand, four common instructional strategies are either not effective or minimally effective.

Strategy	Reason Why It Does Not Work
Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)	SSR does not require analysis, practice, correction, reflection, or discussion. There is no opportunity to interpret language use from multiple perspectives. SSR might help strengthen existing skills, but it does not help expand or increase skills.
Worksheets	Worksheets cannot engage students in analysis, discussion, practice, or reflection. There is no exploration of ideas or opportunities to interpret text/language from multiple perspectives. You could use some types of worksheets, such as graphic organizers, to help students prepare for discussion. By themselves, however, they are not effective for developing oral language skills.

Individual Work (other than worksheets)	When students work individually, they do not have the opportunity to reflect on or discuss text from multiple perspectives and can not broaden their understanding of language use. You could use some types of individual work as a preliminary step to help students prepare their ideas for discussion.
Computerized Instruction	Computerized instructional programs may assist somewhat with phonological skills or vocabulary, but they cannot assist with pragmatics and morphological skills. Those skills are too complex and too dependent upon individual interpretation, situational analysis, context, and culture. Computerized instruction is also very poor for helping students understand syntax.

Companion Reading Components

Oral language skills are best taught when combined with instruction in the following four reading components. As you are helping students develop their oral language skills, also provide instruction in these components.

Phonemic Awareness: The oral language phonological sub-skill overlaps with the skills students learn during phonemic awareness instruction. As such, you can help students improve their phonological skills while improving their phonemic awareness, and vice-versa.

Vocabulary: The reading component of vocabulary comprises learning the meaning of words, the interpretation of words, and the process for learning new words. The vocabulary reading component contributes to oral language skills by expanding students' word knowledge, while the oral language skills assist with interpretation of the words. Together, they lead to increased overall comprehension.

Fluency: The emphasis on accurate decoding in fluency contributes to students' phonological and morphological sub-skills. Furthermore, the fluency emphasis on pacing and expression contribute to a better understanding of how an author or character is using language to convey information. When we teach students to vary their pacing and expression for fluency, we are also helping students understand how to modify language use or oral language skills.

Comprehension: As students improve their comprehension skills, they learn to create a defensible interpretation of the text. Part of this process is understanding how the author or characters use language, gauging the effectiveness of language use for a purpose, and analyzing the appropriateness of the language. The skills students develop in comprehension and the skills they learn in oral language development depend on each other: they cannot be used and, therefore, cannot be taught in isolation.