

Oral language Groups as Intervention? Why?

By Susan Boquist

When working with struggling readers and designing interventions, teachers assess letter and sound knowledge, word knowledge, text reading levels, etc. to find out what children understand about reading and what they yet need to learn to become successful readers. This information is what Marie Clay calls visible information – the letters, clusters of letters, and words that the reader sees on the page. However most of the information readers access when they read is invisible: phonological, structural, and semantic (Clay, 2001). Teachers do assess the phonological (sounds) but assessing a child’s language and what the child understands about story (meaning, vocabulary, and language structures) is not routinely assessed. Yet these knowledge sources are crucial to reading comprehension.

The proficient reader works to make meaning from the text that is being read. The literal meaning may come from the text. But the inferred meaning comes from the reader, interpreting what the author means, based on all their experiences with books, language, and life in general.

For example, consider the following:

He plunked down \$16 at the window. She tried to give him \$8, but he refused to take it. So when they got inside, she bought him a large bag of popcorn.

1. Where did he plunk down the \$16?
2. What kind of window was it?
3. How much was the entrance fee for each person?
4. Why wouldn’t he take the \$8?
5. Why did she try to pay her own entrance fee?

6. Does he like popcorn?
7. How old are these people?

(adapted from Weaver, et.al 1996)

Of the questions above, which answer can you find right in the text? Which cannot be so easily answered? The interpretation of the text will depend on the reader's prior knowledge. The reader must think about what is being read in order to get meaning from the text; identifying words is not enough (Weaver, et.al. 1996). This prior knowledge includes oral and book language structures as well as vocabulary. A substantial language experience expands the realm of possibility for what the words could be and what those words might mean. Building vocabulary and oral language will aid children to bring more invisible information to the reading task. Why must we pay attention to this in our schools?

Researchers are able to identify risk factors for children who are at risk for reading failure. Children from low-SES families as well as children with limited English proficiency are at risk for reading failure (August & Hakuta, 1997 as cited in McGee 2003). Researchers have also identified three language abilities that are moderately correlated with reading achievement in the early grades: mean length of utterance (the average number of morphemes – that is, meaning units such as roots and prefixes and suffixes – in speaking turn), syntactic complexity of utterance, and number of different vocabulary words (Scarborough, 1991; Walker, Greenwood, Hart, & Carta, 1994 as cited in McGee 2003). Research has shown that oral language development “sets a ceiling on reading comprehension for children.” (Andrew Biemiller, 2003 as cited in McGill-Franzen, 2006).

An oft-cited research study of children's language development, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young American Children*, asserted that a "30 million word gap by age 3" exists between children from professional families, similar to the college-educated mothers in the NCEES study, and children from families on welfare, presumably those with the least-educated caregivers. Not only did poor children have smaller vocabularies, but they were adding words at a much slower rate than the other children, making the vocabulary gap wider with each passing year... Sadly for children in poor families, preschool vocabulary predicted later language achievement, even in reading comprehension, in third grade. (Hart & Risley, 1995 as cited in McGill-Franzen, 2006)

Research has made it clear that language development affects reading comprehension. However it takes more than just exposing children to rich, literate language and expansive vocabulary. Children learn about language by using it, not just hearing it. Wells states, as cited in Lyons (2003), "The single most important factor contributing to young children's success or failure in learning to read and write is the teacher and the opportunities he/she provides for children to negotiate meaning through conversations." Vygotsky (1978) emphasized conversations, which he referred to as social speech, learned in social interactions, as the most powerful tool for thinking and communicating ideas (Lyons 2003). "For children with too little language, learning to read and write is very hard. It is essential in these early years that all children are not only exposed to an abundance of language but are also guided to skillfully use language to be eager learners, ready readers, and budding writers" (Roskos, et.al.2005).

What can teachers do? "One way to identify children who are at risk for reading failure would be to assess their language development and the amount and quality of their early literacy experiences" (McGee & Richgels 2003). This can be done with a variety of formal assessments

(many used by speech and language pathologists) as well as the Record of Oral Language (Clay, 199X) and the Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (Gentile 2004b). A retelling checklist (like those found in informal reading inventories) can be used to note how well a child may hold onto main ideas, details, and sequence of events. Teachers can note if a child adds any extra information, like the use of metaphors or similes, which can indicate a more abstract level of comprehension (McGee & Richgels 2003).

Classrooms, beginning in pre-school, should be rich in language interactions, guided by the competent adult speaker of the language. “Reading to children from books beyond their reading level is helpful and two reasons for this are because it contributes to incidental learning of new vocabulary (Elly 1989) and increases their exposure to literacy language. It is powerful to harness the established power of children’s oral language to literacy learning from the beginning, so that new literacy knowledge and new oral language powers are linked and patterned from the start. Children with the least preparation for literacy learning need such an integrated approach if they are to catch up to their classmates” (Clay 2001). While many teachers do read aloud every day, the reading needs to be purposeful and across the curriculum. The Common Core Standards recommends books that can provide those rich literacy experiences and provide the opportunity for children to hear complex stories rich in language.

Teachers also need to engage those at-risk students in conversations. “Oral language needs to blossom progressively in all children, and we can help it along through rich verbal interactions” (Levine, 2002). Levine goes on to say that children need to “joust vigorously” to stay in “verbal shape”. Not only do we need to engage children in conversations but in quality conversations. High quality conversations are those which engage the participants to solve a problem, complete a task, learn something new or share information (McGee & Richgels 2003). Engaging in small

group or individual conversation with the at-risk students will increase the opportunities for talk. Clay advises “When we try to provide experiences that will compensate for limited language learning opportunities we must go beyond the usual” (Clay 1991). Teachers need to think about modeling, recasting responses (expanding the child’s response), questioning, elaboration, and ‘tell more’ (McGee & Richgels 2003). Teachers must be persistent when speaking with these reluctant language users. Clay (1998) advises teachers to “talk to the ones who are least able to talk...Talk when the going is hard. Listen to when the child wants to talk...Reply, and extend the conversation.” This is not the interrogation procedure often used in school where the teacher knows the answer and the child must respond with that answer. The challenge is more mindful and purposeful conversations in the classroom and time for small group or individual conversations (through conferencing) to enhance language development.

Reading and writing are language activities. By simply retesting the literacy achievement of at-risk children without evaluating their growth in language, schools run the risk that these “children who start behind...will continue to fall further behind each year unless we change the way we assess language development, link results to instruction, and interact differently with these children on a daily basis” (Gentile 2004b).

Resources

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