
Exploring the Connections Between Oral Language and Literacy

Lorraine van Zon, M.Ed.

Literacy, the ability to read and write, is first of all language ability. To be literate is to be able to work with language on paper. The raw materials of literacy—sounds, words, sentences, and communicative intentions—are much the same as that of oral language. Parents and teachers constantly hear children making connections between something they have heard or seen and something being read: “It’s like the “M” in my name,” or “It looks like the duck in the park. Where does it say duck?” Thus, oral language encounters provide data for written language encounters and vice versa. Encouraging a child’s awareness of **phonology, semantics, syntax, and pragmatics** will only improve their overall language ability. Knowledge of the four main aspects of the language system and how they are interconnected, in form a child understands of the language he/she speaks, reads and writes. The following are general descriptions of the four main aspects of language:

Phonology

Phonology deals with a child’s knowledge of speech sounds and the rules of how to sequence and use these sounds. Awareness of sounds and syllables that make up words is necessary for learning to read. For example, when listening to the word “bat”, a child hears only one unit of sound. Yet, for the purposes of reading and writing, the child needs to understand that this single unit of sound is made up of three different phonemes, and each phoneme relates to one or more letters. Awareness of the relationship between sounds and letters is an integral part of phonological awareness.

Semantics

Semantics deals with the meaning of words and word combinations. This area of language is one of the most obvious links between spoken and written language. Semantic knowledge is used to assign meaning to written language.

Syntax

Syntax deals with how words are combined into large units of phrases, clauses and sentences. A child who has difficulty understanding or expressing sentence forms orally is likely to have the same difficulty when attempting to read or write these sentence forms.

Morphology, one aspect of syntax, refers to how parts of words change their meaning. Using the word jump, by adding “ed” (jumped) or “ing” are examples of bound morphemes.

Understanding the difference between the various bound morphemes helps listeners comprehend spoken language and readers comprehend written language. Again, a child who has trouble with morphology is particularly at risk for the same difficulty when learning how to write.

Pragmatics

When learning language, a child is not only developing linguistic competence, but communicative competence, as well because he/she is learning about different ways to use language for a variety of purposes.

Developing Oral Language Skills for Literacy

If a child has speech and language difficulties, early and continued help is important to encourage literacy development. It is a good idea for parents and teachers to work together with the child's speech and language clinician. Together, you can all note difficult areas of language that are related to reading and work to help the child better develop the necessary language skills. The following are some suggested activities for successful language and literacy development:

1. Talk to your child as much as possible. Talk to others in his/her presence. Give your child every opportunity to learn about the sounds of words and the rhythms of speech.
2. Enjoy books together in a warm and comfortable environment, sharing your thoughts and feelings about the book you are reading.
3. Encourage pointing to the unique features of objects illustrated in the book: "What a big truck! I like big read trucks." Explore standard syntax with your child. Parents and teachers can play with language by physically manipulating cards with words written on them. Each part of speech is given a colour- for example, the verbs are red, the nouns blue, adjectives are brown, the noun determiners are pink, etc. Various sentence patterns are drawn in colour on larger sheets of paper- for example, a pink line, a brown a blue line, a red line and a period. Placing cards on the appropriate colour lines, the child constructs sentences such as:

(pink)	(brown)	(blue)	(red)
Some	big	dogs	bite.

The	red	team	won.
-----	-----	------	------

Or

(pink)	(blue)	(red)	(brown)
Some	cats	are	large.

One direct result of this play with the structures of language is that your child will begin to talk about language. At this point, he/she does not need a lesson in grammar, but it is important that this linguistic awareness be developed.

The ability to think and talk about language is essential for young readers and writers as they develop their own literacy.

In summary, it is important that children come to appreciate the many different functions of spoken and written language. Exposing children to different speech styles and written text (stories, poems, nursery rhymes, and so forth) is helpful. It is also vital that you show the power of spoken and written language in the home and school environments by writing notes, having reading material available and engaging in a family and classroom talk time.