

# Oral Language Development

The Foundation for Literacy

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**“Children’s early exposure to a rich set  
of language practices is critical for their  
later reading success.”**

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Neuman, Kaefer, Pinkham, 2018

# Introduction

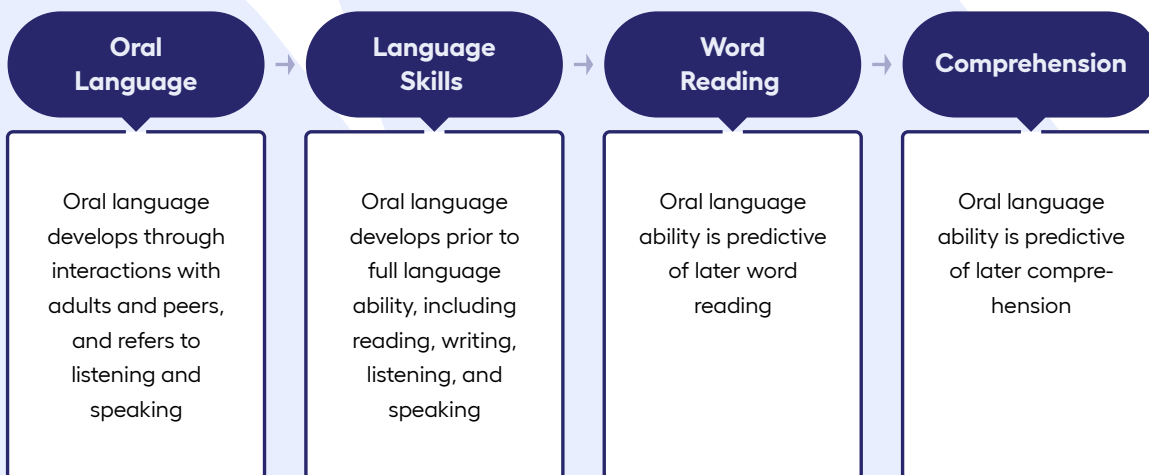
When infants begin to make sounds or say words, adults and other caregivers often respond with excitement and encourage further oral expression. Adults' excitement and encouragement are not only fun and rewarding for infants and toddlers, but are highly important for the development of children's oral language. Oral language develops as young children interact with adults and peers, are exposed to language in its various forms, and express and experiment with language themselves (Konishi et al., 2014; Honig, 2007). From infancy into early childhood, oral language begins to develop and establish the foundation of full language development, which includes utilization of the mechanics of language, reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Oral language development during preschool is critically important for early literacy acquisition (Whorral & Cabell, 2016) and for comprehending reading when students advance in school. Research has established the relationship between oral language, early literacy, and later reading comprehension, which is the ability to understand the meaning of text (Hjetland et al., 2018; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Shanahan & Lonigan, 2013). Shanahan and Lonigan (2013) reported that oral language has strong predictive correlations with reading comprehension and decoding skills (.70 and .58 respectively), meaning students with strong oral language skills are likely to demonstrate greater decoding and comprehension ability in school. Additionally, early oral language acquisition predicts rates of comprehension development in early elementary students. (Hjetland et al., 2018) (Figure 1).



Oral language is foundational for learning to read. If students enter school disadvantaged in terms of oral language development, they are likely to lag behind their peers in comprehension as they advance in school, and as language demands increase with text complexity and academic discourse (Shanahan & Lonigan, n.d.). Reading proficiency and comprehension are essential for school success and impact college and career readiness. Researchers (Chiang et al., 2017) have consistently reported that poor reading ability is likely to have detrimental effects on future income, employment opportunities, and participation in society. In contrast, students who can read by third grade are more likely to graduate from high school, with improved prospects for earning higher wages (Breslow, 2012).

Considering the relationship between oral language and reading development, educators must understand oral language and know how to support and promote the acquisition of oral language skills for all students. Specifically, understanding the processes by which students acquire oral language skills is essential for supporting early reading and comprehension. This paper will (a) define oral language; (b) describe and define components of oral language; (c) demonstrate that oral language is the foundation for early literacy achievement and later comprehension among school-age children; and (d) explore oral language development for specific populations of students.



**Figure 1.** *Relationship of Oral Language and Reading Skills*



# Oral Language: Components of Oral Language and Literacy Achievement

In the simplest form, oral language is the ability to understand spoken communications and to communicate verbally—it merely means communicating orally with others. However, oral communications involve more than just using words. Oral language consists of thinking, accessing linguistic knowledge, and the utilization of specific language skills. Components of oral language include phonology, syntax, semantics, morphology, and pragmatics (Byrnes & Wasik, 2019; Honig, 2007). Combined, the facets of oral language (in the framework of language development as a whole) are the mechanisms by which individuals achieve communicative goals and interact in society.

Oral language development is essential for early literacy development, comprehension, and social competence in school. Children who enter school with well-developed phonological, semantic, and grammatical knowledge learn to read better than students who enter school with lower levels of oral language proficiency (Byrnes & Wasik, 2019). This section describes how oral language foundations are essential for reading success.



## Phonological Processing

Phonology refers to the sounds produced in speech. When we speak, we use words. Words are composed of sounds, and the smallest unit of sound is a phoneme. When we say the word *sat*, we produce three separate sounds *s a t* that are blended to form the word. Oral language development requires the ability to recognize sound, as well as to segment sound and sound units to produce sounds.

Researchers Storch & Whitehurst (2002) identified a strong link between phonological processing and reading success. Phonological processing encompasses both receptive phonological skills and productive phonological competence (Byrnes & Wasik, 2019). Receptive phonological processing refers to the ability to recognize sound at various levels, including phoneme, syllable, and word, while being attuned to the prosody of spoken language. Productive phonological competence involves producing phonemes associated with native languages; combining phonemes into larger units such as syllables, onsets, rimes, and words; and creating expressions that reflect the prosodic features of native languages. Both receptive and productive phonological processing skills are essential for learning to read.

**The ability to process complex forms of language is particularly important for academic learning as students are exposed to abstract words, complex sentences, and sophisticated talk that permeates classroom instruction and conversation.**

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LaRue & Kelly, 2015

When learning to read, students must understand the relationship between sounds processed and written representations of sounds. A core skill deficit observed in segments of students identified with specific reading disabilities is the ability to analyze sound within spoken words (i.e., phonological processing skills such as phonemic awareness, phoneme discrimination, and rapid automatic naming) (McArthur & Castles, 2013; Snowling, 2000). Students who do not effectively process phonemic aspects of language are likely to have difficulty learning phonics, decoding words, reading multisyllable words, and reading fluently.

## Morphology and Syntax Knowledge

*Morphology* is the meaning associated with units of language. The smallest units of language that have meaning are morphemes. Words like *dog*, *cat*, *freedom*, and *safety* have a meaning, as do word parts such as *dis*, *un*, and *in* when used with words (e.g., *dislike*, *unkind*, *incomplete*). Morphology contributes to literacy by enabling students to decode and read longer words more

accurately, understand elements of the writing system, and process elements of language analytically (Nagy et al., 2003). Additionally, understanding that morphemes have meaning is foundational for deriving word meaning and learning vocabulary.

*Syntax* is the grammatical structure of language. It refers to the rules related to word order and the construction of sentences. For example, in English, adjectives usually precede nouns, and double negatives are generally not acceptable grammatically. Sentence structure in the English language ranges from simplistic forms of expression (e.g., *I see Mom*) to highly complex structures involving clauses, modifiers, conjunctions, and other grammatic types. Combining components of language to express thought requires syntactic understanding.

Creating a syntactic expression is a process of combining morphemes into thoughts or sentences within specific communicative structures. Knowledge of syntactic structure or grammar has been identified as a significant dimension of oral language (Lonigan & Milburn, 2017). The National Early Literacy Panel (2008) identified the ability to produce and comprehend grammar as having a substantial impact on later literacy skills.

Students access grammatical knowledge throughout their school day as they listen to instruction, answer questions, interact with peers, read texts, and produce written artifacts associated with learning. The ability to process complex forms of language is particularly important for academic learning as students are exposed to abstract words, complex sentences, and sophisticated talk that permeates classroom instruction and conversation (LaRue & Kelly, 2015). Without strong grammatical knowledge, students cannot become good readers or writers; grammar knowledge is foundational for school learning (Byrnes & Wasik, 2019).

## Vocabulary

Closely correlated with syntax knowledge, vocabulary is a significant dimension of oral language (Lonigan & Milburn, 2017). In building vocabulary, children associate words with specific concepts. To learn new concepts, children identify salient features related to concepts and attach meaning to words used to express specific concepts. For example, children learn that *dogs* have four legs, ears, tails, and fur. When they understand what a *dog* is, they can then understand what people refer to when they talk about *dogs*. Students then also understand what a dog is when they read about dogs. Understanding the meaning of words is essential for communicating and learning.

Similar to phonological processing, vocabulary involves both receptive skills (understanding words that are spoken by others) and productive skills (producing words that have meaning within the contexts used). Receptive vocabulary skills measured during preschool are a strong predictor of reading in second grade (Senechal & LeFevre, 2002). Additionally, students who enter first grade with larger spoken vocabularies score the highest on reading achievement tests at the end of first grade (Byrnes & Wasik, 2019). Students with larger vocabularies have more

robust reading comprehension than students with more limited word knowledge; vocabulary is therefore essential for reading success (Nippold, 2016). If students have limited vocabularies, it is almost impossible for them to become proficient readers.

## **Students who enter first grade with larger spoken vocabularies score the highest on reading achievement tests at the end of first grade.**

...  
Byrnes & Wasik, 2019

Vocabulary develops with grammatical understanding; vocabulary and grammatical development are reciprocal processes. As students acquire vocabulary, they understand communications from others and then communicate thought using grammatical structures within contextualized conversations. Conversely, as children listen to others who express thought using conventional grammatical structures, they learn new words from the contexts of the interactions, are exposed to ideas associated with the vocabulary used in conversation, and therefore increase in language development. Students need both well-developed vocabularies and strong foundations in grammar to process classroom discourse and written texts.

### **Pragmatics**

Engaging in socially appropriate communications requires the use of a variety of linguistic styles or registers that vary according to context, the purpose for communicating, and the relationship to those with whom communications occur (Wagner et al., 2010). Pragmatics is the ability to adjust and adapt language functions to reflect the situation, audience, and interaction type, and to use appropriate registers given specific settings (e.g., formal vs. information situations). Skills such as staying on topic, contributing relevant information, adjusting content and style to the thoughts and feelings of the listener, and offering support to conversational partners are utilized at school as children interact with peers and adults (Nippold, 2016). For example, when addressing a teacher (such as Mr. B or Ms. K), a child learns that appropriate titles are used in classrooms and that discussions are focused on academic content, where skills such as staying on topic and contributing relevant information are important for learning.

In academic settings, communication styles vary by subject areas. For example, scientific discourse generally focuses on research methodology and the use of formal, structured language, compared to literary discourse that utilizes metaphors and other figurative expressions (Herrmann, 2015). Children who do not acquire the ability to adapt language according to context, purpose, and academic discipline may have difficulty learning from interactive classroom discussions. Knowing how to communicate in classrooms and contribute to academic discourse is essential for school learning.



## Social Competence and Communication

As evidenced in this paper, oral language is foundational for reading success. It is not surprising that oral language also contributes to positive relationships at school and academic engagement. School environments are social environments, and socially skilled students perform better in school and engage more readily in school tasks (Byrnes & Wasik, 2019). Research has indicated that early peer relations predict academic performance in later grades. Children with lower social acceptance in first grade attained lower grades in fifth grade, through middle school, and achieve fewer years of education by age 25 (Rabiner, Godwin, & Dodge, 2016). Conversation skills and the ability to produce and comprehend implicit meaning in academic and social interactions correlate with social competence and significantly contribute to students' ability to participate in learning processes at school.

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...  
Byrnes & Wasik, 2019

## Specific Populations of Students

Extensive research on oral language development highlights the importance of social, interactive environments for typical development. However, some populations of students may have fewer or more opportunities to develop oral language depending on their capacity to learn linguistics in environments to which they are exposed, and their ability to process language.

### English Learners

Learning more than one language may provide learning advantages for preschool and school-age students. Research indicates that early bilingualism is associated with executive function ability, working memory, and improved language skills among pre-K students (Espinosa, 2015). Balanced bilingualism has long-term academic, linguistic, cognitive, social, cultural, and economic benefits (Espinosa, 2015; Bybee, Henderson, & Hinojosa, 2014).

## **“Children who have limited experience with [rich] linguistic interactions may have fewer opportunities to engage in the higher-order exchanges valued in school.”**

...  
New York University, 2017

However, various factors—such as equity, socioeconomic status, teacher shortages, academic support in languages spoken, and access to high-quality education—may diminish learning opportunities among English learners. Academic indicators for English learners suggest a significant opportunity to improve instruction for English learners, who historically lag behind peers in graduation rates and other indexes of academic proficiency.

Students should be supported in developing literacy in primary languages to improve educational outcomes for English learners. Proficiency in a primary language is a key factor that aids the development of literacy skills in a new language. English learners should receive high-quality input in each language spoken and should be encouraged to build on the skills they have in primary languages, with the goal of becoming fully biliterate (Rios & Castillon, 2018).

### **Students in Poverty**

Children’s early exposure to a rich set of language practices is critical for their later reading success (Neuman et al., 2018). “Children who have limited experience with these kinds of linguistic interactions may have fewer opportunities to engage in the higher-order exchanges valued in school” (New York University, 2017).

Socioeconomic factors may influence the opportunity to acquire oral language skills during the preschool years. Researchers (Colker, 2014; Hart & Risley, 2003; Snow, 2013) indicate that during preschool years, children living in poverty may be exposed to a lower quantity and quality of language learning environments. Additionally, when students in poverty attend school, the socioeconomic status of their school may impact language learning if they are not exposed to language-rich environments. New York University (2017) reported that students living in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty were less likely to have complex language building opportunities both at home and at school (New York University, 2017). Students who have not experienced high-quality language environments are not as well prepared to learn to read when they enter school (Whorral & Cabell, 2016).

Therefore, it is critical for early childhood educators to provide oral language instruction for students whose environments have not supported strong development of oral language. These students need rich, high-quality linguistic environments that provide ample opportunity to learn new vocabulary, interact verbally with peers and adults, and become exposed to a wide range of communicative structures.

## Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities may demonstrate oral language and reading impairments due to a variety of disabling conditions. Specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, and other health impairments are high-incidence disabilities that are likely to impact students' ability to acquire oral language and reading skills necessary for school success.

In school systems, early identification of students with high-incidence disabilities is a challenge. Approximately 39% of students receiving special education services are identified with specific learning disabilities, 15% with other health impairments, and 17.3% with speech or language impairments. Evidence suggests that students with specific language impairments are under-identified, and that many children with language, reading, and learning disabilities are identified late (during upper elementary grades), or are not identified at all within school systems (Catts, Compton, Tomblin, & Bridges, 2012; Leach, Scarborough, & Rescorla, 2003; Lipka, Lesaux, & Seigel, 2006). As many as one in five children with learning and attention issues are not formally identified with a disabling condition (Horowitz, Rawe, & Whittaker, 2017).

**“Each student is unique. While we can’t predict how any student will respond to an intervention, we can help students make progress and prevent struggles from becoming stumbling blocks. We can identify at-risk students early. We can use evidence-based instruction until the student becomes successful... Too often we aren’t doing enough early enough.”**

...  
Moats, 2010

Students with disabilities are particularly at risk for poor reading outcomes. Nationally, 71% of students with disabilities are likely to score at Below Basic on NAEP Reading assessments (The Nation’s Report Card, 2017). Students with disabling conditions that affect oral language acquisition and reading ability must be identified early (during preschool and early elementary grades) so that they can receive individualized instruction designed to support them in acquiring skills necessary for school success.

Many students with disabilities can succeed in general education if given free and appropriate education as mandated by law (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Students need to be supported early, with evidence-based instruction (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017) that is individualized to meet their needs.

# Conclusion

Oral language development begins early in life and is critical for acquiring the literacy skills necessary for success in school and college, and for career readiness. Oral language is multifaceted and includes the development of a variety of skills that establish the foundation for full language expression and use. In classrooms, educators should incorporate oral language development in early elementary grades, and should provide ample structured and unstructured opportunities for students to interact with peers and adults in developing and utilizing oral communication skills. Specifically, processing and expressing sound, learning, and using new vocabulary while expressing ideas using rich, complex language structures can help students both academically and socially.





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