



STEP INTO LITERATE LANGUAGE

Oral language and written language

Anecdotally and through our observations we know that children, who have a rich spoken vocabulary and who can converse and explain their own point of view, are usually better equipped when they come to the task of learning to read and write.

Furthermore, research tells us that up to 50% of students with a history of speech and language delay are at risk of later literacy learning difficulty.

Consequently we must turn our minds to the aspects of oral language that are important to the process of learning to read.

The Language Continuum

Carol Westby says we can view language along a continuum with casual conversational style at one end and the formal literate language of planned speeches at the other extreme.

This continuum applies to written as well as spoken language. Consider the language of the casual note on the bench saying "Gone swimming – sandwich in fridge", compared with a report titled "The History of the Whaling Industry off the Southern coast of Victoria between 1850 and 2000".

Young children's early language accompanies play. They speak with others who share the same 'topic' – people who are in the same setting and who almost 'second guess' what is to be said. Much of the interaction centres on objects present or common experiences.

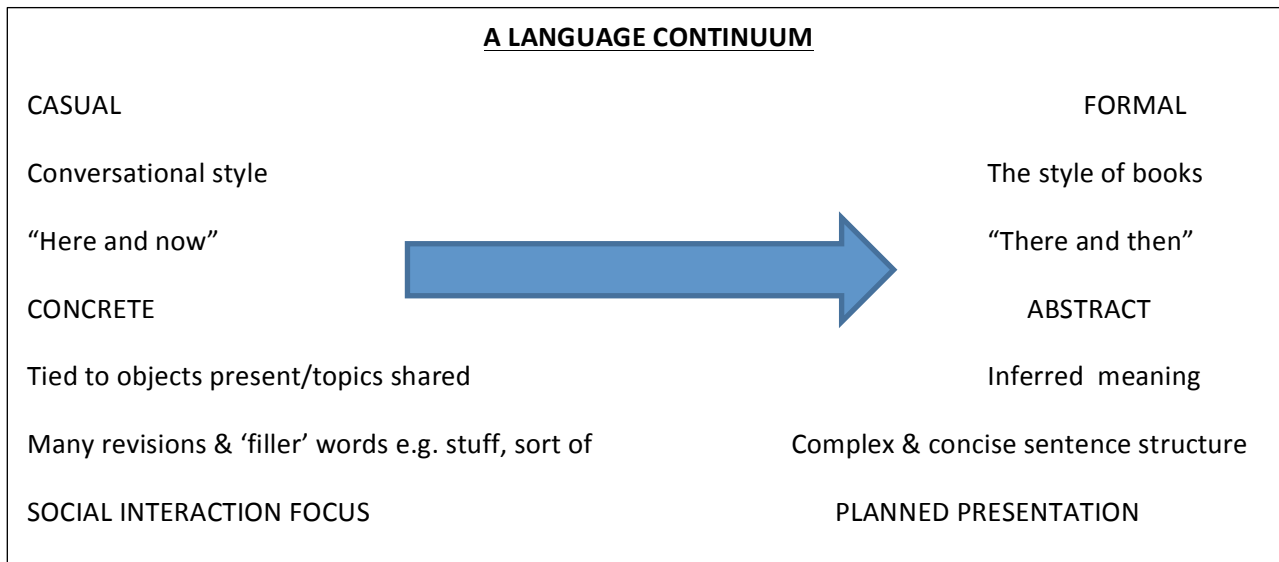
Often the conversational turn is brief as others 'chip in' to add something or clarify meaning. Language is mainly in the present tense. There is not a great demand for specific vocabulary and gesture and general 'filler' words such as 'stuff' and 'you know' are used. Consequently sentences are often short and disjointed as meaning is built by all taking part. This is the language of conversations, no matter how old we are! Children at school engage in this style of language as they greet each other in the morning, as they play in the playground, share lunchtime, and undertake a group activity in the classroom.

Steps to Literate Language

As children mature they must learn to relate events with which the listener is not familiar. Their language must accommodate past and future, topic back grounding, specific word use and complex sentence structures to make sure that those listening have understood.

Carol Westby in "Language and Reading Disabilities" Catts & Kamhi 1999, explains –
"A more literate style of language – in either written or oral – must be used any time the reader and writer /speaker and listener are not in the same time and space and do not share familiarity with the topic".

Below is a visual representation of the transition to literate language.



Adapted from work by Carol Westby.

It is important for teachers and parents and caregivers to be familiar with the features of literate language as they will then be in a position to help children make progress along the continuum – in both the written and spoken form.

- As stories are shared, take time to “talk about the talking” in the book – the style as well as the content. Comment on the author’s specific word choice and descriptions, explaining what is meant or asking the child how he/she would have described it.
- Give opportunities for children to have an extended “time to talk” in which they can relate descriptions or events that you might not know about. If you have shared a particular experience with them you might be able to orchestrate a legitimate “retelling” to a Grandparent, neighbour or friend for example.

What Does Literate Language Sound Like?

Compare these pairs of sentences:

He said he was coming. – He announced he would attend.

You can use a knife for lots of things like cutting. - The uses of a knife include cutting.

We had dinner and then we went to see grandma. - After we had completed our meal we visited our grandmother.

Using literate language may involve making different choices in vocabulary, word order and grammatical complexity. Its use can take many years to develop and refine.

Nippold, writing in Rhea Paul’s *Language Disorders from Infancy through Adolescence*. 1995 refers to the “literate lexicon”. In this lexicon or ‘store’ he identifies:

NIPPOLD'S LITERATE LEXICON

- Specific nouns – terminology for a specific area of knowledge. However even for the young child we can be “fussy” about words such as buckle, bristles, author and discover rather than just using the words belt, hairs, person and saw.
- Cognitive verbs – These are words that refer to unseen actions in our mind, giving a clue as to why we act the way we do. For example – decide, know, remember, wish, hope, wonder
- Linguistic verbs – These words give colour as they describe the manner in which things are said – for example, instead of using said or asked, you can use words such as hollered, queried, suggested
- Emotional vocabulary – Too often children have only words such good/bad, happy/sad, to explain their feelings. If they are to identify finer shades of emotions they will need labels such as embarrassed, angry, guilty, overwhelmed
- Relational words – Words that link ideas such as, so, because, therefore, but, lead to an explanation and understanding of cause and effect. Other relational or joining words such as then, after that, firstly, assist understanding of the sequence and timing of events.
- Idiomatic and figurative language – This refers to the common English usage of words for meanings beyond the concrete meaning. It gives colour and versatility to our language. It includes similes, metaphors and so-called clichés. The literate language we find in books often uses this style of language.

Remember!

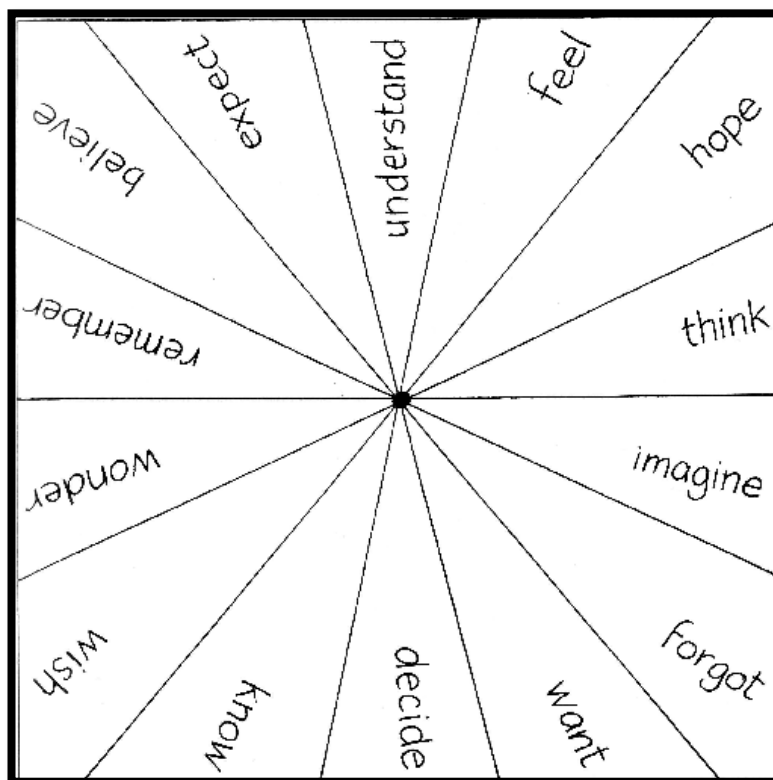
1. Children will be better prepared to cope with the literate language style of books if they have experienced exposure to literate oral language.
2. There are many steps along the way. Make sure that students have opportunities to practise oral language tasks – such as telling news.
3. Support the child along the continuum by providing props, pictures and objects which act as a “trigger” to make the “there and then” event more “here and now”.

Let's get practical

- There is an excellent resource called News Talk – for teachers and Speech Pathologists – developed by South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services Speech Pathologists – Brooke White and Sue Lawless. It is a CD and through the use of clear description, video clips and downloadable handouts, it outlines different stages of newstelling along the continuum. Contact: decs.noarlunga.reception.@saugov.sa.gov.au
- In our book “Time for Talking” (Longman 1997) there are suggestions to make practical resources for highlighting literate language features including “the Thinking Verb Dial”. (See over)

*Thinking Verb Dial

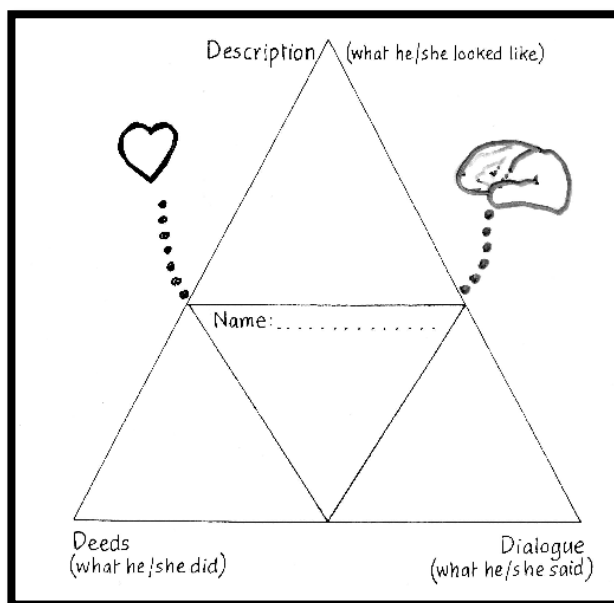
You can enlarge, colour, laminate and assemble a Thinking Verb Dial (page 125, Time for Talking) and use it when discussing a story or topic. e.g. What do you think the handsome prince was *hoping/wishing/expecting* when he brought the glass slipper to Cinderella's house?



*Character descriptions, when telling a story or recounting an experience, will add colour and assist understanding. The 3 D triangle depicted below right – from page 162 in Time for Talking - assists with this and reminds teachers and students of possible aspects to include. Note how the heart – representing the feelings – and the brain – representing the thinking or motivations – have been added to the original BLM.

3 D Character Triangle

The 3 D character triangle can be enlarged, coloured and kept as a lasting resource. It can be displayed next to the name, photo or drawing of the character being described.



Using Story Books to Develop Literate Language

Books for very young children tend to have a more casual or conversational style. The use of direct speech assists this. Make sure that you read a variety of books and when making your choices consider the features of literate language used. Don't forget to draw the children's attention to some of these as you enjoy reading together.

In the book *First Light* by Gary Crew and Peter Gouldthorpe, (Lothian 1993), there are many examples of literate language. This story is about a father and his son who are brought together as they go fishing at first light. Read how the author expresses each idea.

(The boy enjoyed making model aeroplanes alone in his room).

"This was no plastic model made from a toyshop kit, but a prototype, designed by the boy himself."

(The fishing trip was the father's idea).

"In the morning, the boy was woken by the screaming of the kettle. His room was dark. He lifted his arm to peer at the luminous face of his wrist watch. Four a.m. He sighed and turned to the wall, half-listening to the muffled voice of his parents in the kitchen."

(A description of the journey to the fishing spot).

"Mangrove branches sprang back and struck the boy across the face, stinging his cheeks, making his eyes smart."

(In the boat the boy's imagination flowed).

"He sighed and rested his arms on the gunwale. *The surface of the sea is a skin, he thought, a smooth, silky skin.* He was tempted to reach out and touch it but was afraid. *It's different from the skin of my plane. This moves like a creature, like a creature, breathing.*"

Notice how the author has used italics to represent the boy's thoughts.

Children's literature offers a wealth of exposure to literate language. Prepare children to enjoy this by strengthening their use and understanding of spoken language and by sharing books with them, accompanying their reading with questions, explanations and discussion.

This article was originally written and published by Sue Reilly and Elizabeth Love in March 2005. It was re-formatted with slight changes by Lucia Smith in May 2012.