



# A HANDS-ON APPROACH TO ORAL LANGUAGE



School makes particular demands on students to learn many concepts and master new ways of using their language. One of the important challenges for the classroom teacher is to find ways to assist this language growth. A “hands on” language approach involves children in active physical participation. It offers the best support for children’s language, thinking and social development as they progress through school.

Most young children develop oral language with ease. We can observe babies, very early in life, interacting through their cries and responding to human voice and physical contact. Soon they attempt to “talk” with their own sounds. Importantly, others close to them react and thus the wonderful cycle of communication evolves.

As children develop physically and cognitively, and start to explore their environment, they begin to understand and use their growing language skills for an expanding range of purposes. The journey of language development begins very early and must continue throughout childhood, into and beyond the adolescent years, if children are to progress well at school. **See table to the right...**

## WHY A “HANDS ON” APPROACH?

A “hands on” approach to learning language will -

- engage students and make language learning enjoyable and meaningful.
  - make abstract language concepts more tangible.
  - create a ‘real’ physical reason for effective communication.
  - teach concepts as children can see directly the consequences of actions.
- (Continued over the page...)
- provide the ‘props’ that support students as they begin to use more mature language forms.
  - promote the development of emotional expression.
  - assist memory and reinforce learning.
- give opportunities to use language to reflect, plan and organize.
  - provide concrete and immediate support for second language learners.

CHANGING USES OF LANGUAGE		
EARLY SOCIALIZATION	STRUCTURING INTERACTIONS	
protesting	direct	
requesting - actions or objects	command	
wanting attention	advise	
expressing emotions	enquire	
imitating	criticise	
greetings	persuade	
labelling	negotiate	
answering		
asking questions		
	COGNITIVE/ACADEMIC	
	imply/infer	
	compare/contrast	
	analyse	
	classify	
INTERPERSONAL	explain	INNER LANGUAGE
encourage	hypothesise	reflect
comfort	estimate	*think out loud*
reassure	evaluate	imagine
apologise	summarise	self question
	justify	
	COMMON ORAL &/OR WRITTEN GENRES	
	describe	
	inform	
	comment	
	report	
	recount	
	relate a story	

Adapted from "It takes Two to Talk" - A Hanen Early Language Parent Guidebook by Ayala Manoson and Bereiter and Engelmann- 10 cognitive uses of languages

## IMPLEMENTING “HANDS ON” LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES

### Real life experiences

Early language is learned as children physically explore their environment. Words such as *poking, mouthing, touching, sucking, banging and pushing* remind us of these early interactions that babies and toddlers have with objects and people in their environment. Early words and word combinations accompany these explorations fulfilling some of the early socialization uses listed in the table above. For example, ‘all gone’, ‘oops’, ‘fall down’, ‘that one’, ‘there’, ‘more’, ‘again’. In addition much early language grows out of children’s focus on themselves – their body and their needs. For example, ‘fat tummy’, ‘sore’, ‘drink please’, ‘my teddy’.

As children become more independent and enter the early school years they interact with a wider circle of people and experience new places and activities. Language grows rapidly and becomes a tool for reaching out to others and learning from them.

We know the excursions and other ‘real life’ experiences of early childhood education are very valuable. Consider the popular visits to the zoo, the fire station, the police station, the local park, library or shopping centre. The adults accompanying young children play an important role as they use their language to teach new vocabulary and explain unfamiliar events as the children experience the visit with all of their senses. All children will make sense of new experiences and learn language more easily, if they are allowed to touch and manipulate things as well as observe and listen on excursions and in the classroom.

Older children also benefit from engagement with a wide range of ‘real life’ experiences. If it is not practical to go out from the school on many occasions, efforts can be made to bring things in to the school. For example, stuffed animals from a museum, participation in music workshops, interactions over Skype with people in other states or countries, guest speakers with a DVD and practical things to show or costumes from another era of history.

From science to literature, from math to social studies – children’s language growth will be supported by the use of ‘real’ objects, people and experiences.

### “Play”

Children’s play develops in stages – moving from concrete interactions with real objects to highly organized imaginative themes. Paralleling this development, children move from playing alone, to playing alongside each other and eventually to playing co-operatively with others.

Language growth both reflects and supports the development of play and as children become less dependent on ‘real’ props to re-enact experiences, language begins to take on the role of ‘pretending’. For example a child might say – “You be the teacher and we’ll be the kids. I want to change my book but you wont let me.” In this way children use their language to establish the context for their play. Eventually they will use their language to plan and organize complex episodes of play based on events that they have never directly experienced, for example, a trip to the moon.

Play is serious ‘work’ for young children. However opportunities for children to engage in free play are decreasing. Child safety concerns and time constraints for families seem to have led to children spending more time in passive pursuits such as watching television

and playing digital games or else being involved in structured physical games or lessons. As a consequence, children miss out on valuable learning opportunities.

Carol Westby has written extensively on the important connections between play, language and literacy learning. She particularly alerts us to the role of play in assisting children to gain insight into the emotions of other people. During play Westby encourages adults to make frequent use of words describing the feelings and thoughts of either themselves or the 'play characters'. Westby has linked children's ability to take another's perspective to their later skills in social interaction and also to their comprehension of stories - why and how characters behave as they do.

For older children language continues to have an important role in play. Rules of the games need to be created and decided on. Children can make suggestions, give their reasons, negotiate differences and reach consensus through their language use. We can facilitate this during school breaks, if as well as traditional sports, we provide areas for 'free play', in which children can make up their own games using 'open ended' props such as chalk, bean bags and containers. We shouldn't forget indoor play activities for older students. Teachers can provide board games or the materials for students to create their own games. There are also many commercially available language board games for example "Communicate", "Balderdash". These have a variety of goals such as vocabulary development, giving explanations or encouraging fluent verbal expression.

### **Active Listening**

Listening is a very important part of classroom routine. Children will listen more attentively if they are aware beforehand of the reason they are required to listen. For example, you might say "I am going to tell you three important things to bring to school for the concert tomorrow." Teachers and parents can train listening skills by providing specific 'hands on' activities such as Bingo, Simon Says, or Tic Tac Toe.

Barrier games are also an excellent way for children to practise both giving and receiving specific instructions as well as learning prepositions, numbers and math concepts. Two students sit opposite each other, separated by a 'screen', (e.g. a piece of cardboard or a large book). Each student has an identical set of objects or paper and pencil. One student gives an instruction, which the other must follow. For example, "Put the frog on top of the yellow block." At the end of a series of instructions the partition is removed and any differences between the two players' object arrangements are discussed. You can modify the task by allowing the listener to ask for clarification, such as "Do you mean the big yellow block or the small one?"

A 'busy' scene, such as those from "Listen and Learn" (Love and Reilly, 2007) or "Where's Wally?" books, is an ideal stimulus for listening for details. Students are more engaged in the listening task if they can place counters on the details that they find. For example, "Put a counter on somewhere that is in shade." Or "Put a counter on the boy with long stripy socks." Concepts to be listened for and the length of the instruction can be varied. Similarly the instruction can be given with or without repetition. The 'hands on' nature of placing and collecting the counters motivates students to listen and also provides 'evidence' of their success with listening tasks.

### **Moving students along The Oral - Literate Continuum**

During many classroom activities children are expected to talk about events or experiences that have not been shared by others in the class. At these times they are required to use a more formal or 'literate style' of language. They will need to give the listener important background information. They will also need to use specific vocabulary, link their ideas and use more complex sentences involving words such as 'so', 'because', 'eventually' and 'later on.' You can read more about the features of literate language in Newsletter 11. February 2005. "Step into Literate Language".

'Hands on' props support both the understanding and the use of this literate language. Story telling or retelling is one of the many steps along the continuum to more literate language. Children can be supported in having a longer turn to talk if they are allowed to use puppets or dolls or are given a prop such as a pretend microphone when role playing an interview. Many classrooms have used a toy or puppet to go home and 'live' with a student each weekend. The children then report on the weekend's activities, often using some memorabilia to trigger their memory - for example, a ticket to a movie. Having the toy or puppet present builds a bridge between the shared knowledge of conversational language and more formal literate language. To tell news from the perspective of the toy/puppet is harder again but is an important step in the child taking on another's perspective.

When listening to the teacher talk about events that happened a long time ago or current events that occur in far-away places, students have to follow and understand complex and often abstract language. If teachers give practical demonstrations during lessons and ask students to draw or write key points on graphic organizers, they will provide support for understanding. Photographs, objects and 'memorabilia' can also be used to trigger memories and assist students in following and imparting information. Those listening will be more engaged if they can look at and handle these materials. For example, in a history lesson about the war, you might bring in an old letter, a watch or a uniform, to show as you talk about the life of a soldier.

### **Learning Concepts**

Physically handling, sorting and classifying objects whilst discussing attributes (colour, size, use, material etc) are powerful ways for children to learn language concepts and descriptive language.

Words we use often represent concepts rather than things. Prepositions such as 'in', 'under' and 'behind' are key concepts for young children to learn about spatial relationships as these underpin future learning in science and math. They are best learned in 'hands on' activities such as an obstacle course or by playing games such as 'Simon Says' or other games and play with blocks, small dolls, cars etc.

Older children will come across new and often abstract concepts in Math, Science and other subjects. Teachers can assist students to make connections between old and new knowledge and understand abstract concepts by involving them in hands on experiments, creating surveys or questionnaires, watching or making films, viewing plays, taking field trips and reading books written especially for young readers.

Students will benefit from talking about what they did during these activities – what was easy, what was hard, what was learned or what might have happened. This encourages students to use language to reflect on their own learning and understanding.

### **Music and Movement**

Language learning is supported well by music and body movement and rhythm. Young children enjoy action songs. The repetitive lyrics and accompanying movement facilitates the learning and recall of language. For example “*Head, shoulders, knees and toes*”. or “This is the way we clap out hands ...” Simple rhymes can be made up to accompany any children’s action – for example when a child is on a swing – “*Lim’s swinging, Lim’s swinging, She’s swinging way up high. If she goes up higher, she might reach the sky.*”

Similarly chants can be created to teach sentences, colours, numbers or other concepts. Older students can create language raps and rhythm to express feelings, create poetry and explain social situations. Carolyn Graham, in her book “*Creating Chants and Songs*” describes how she uses jazz chants to introduce and reinforce ‘chunks’ of language that are useful in everyday situations. Graham has had success, particularly with those students who are learning English as their second language.

### **MAKING A PLACE FOR LANGUAGE**

Tangible resources will remind us to plan for and organize oral language activities in the classroom. It is important that materials are stored in an easily identifiable place. In our Newsletter number 28 (June 2009) we suggested that you create an “Oral Language Trolley”. Alternatively, you can use a brightly coloured box or decorate a container. Inside this “language box” you can place cards, photographs, objects, amusing pictures or interesting photos/articles from newspaper. You may wish to have a number of different containers to separate out the language areas. For example a “word of the week” box, a file of “What makes me laugh” pictures, a “mystery” box that houses a special object that may trigger students to relate experiences or create stories. Additional hands on materials can be added to a “busy” box to further support younger students. For example, play dough, finger puppets, small figures, blocks, cars etc. Students will need to become aware of the special ‘place’ for language and the goals of the activities. It is important to reward students for their progress in oral language as well as written language.

### **CONCLUSION**

Language can and should be supported, extended and stimulated by the use of a range of ‘hands on’ materials. From early childhood to adolescence, students will enjoy and learn from real life experiences. Gradually, as students’ command of language increases, they will rely more on communicating through language alone. However it is important to remember that even as adults many people learn best when “doing”.

### **REFERENCES**

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