

# Assisting Children with Oral Language Delays

## Title:

To investigate programmes to support oral language development for children starting school with oral language delays.

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Cultural make-up: 95% New Zealand European, 5% South American, South African

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My sincere thanks to the schools in Otago and Southland who allowed me to visit and view the work they are doing in oral language

Principal and staff of Tisbury School

Principal and staff of New River School

Principal and staff of Tokanui School

Principal and staff of East Taieri School

## Executive summary

*“When children can understand, enjoy, engage with, and use oral language, visual and written language and symbols they are better able to express their individual identity and become active participants in a literate society (Hamer & Adams, 2003:p13).*

It has been said many times that “reading and writing floats on a sea of talk” and I believe most teachers would agree with this statement, however, through discussions with a variety of professionals including Speech Language Therapists, ERO, and a variety of colleagues from early childhood centres and schools around New Zealand, there is an emerging pattern of children arriving at ECE and schools with poor language structures, a lack of vocabulary to express their thought and feelings effectively and appropriately and an inability to form sentences; that is to make and create meaning.

*“Of the four modes of language, speaking and listening often take a secondary role to reading and writing. Because of the pressures of assessment, teachers can feel that if students are not reading and writing they are not learning” (Cameron & Dempsey, 2016: p10)*

If we truly believe that other literacy learning is dependent on having a strong oral language base it is time to review our current practices in New Zealand education system around how we support and encourage oral language development and how we communicate to parents the opportunities they can provide to their children to help ensure they make the best progress possible across all areas of literacy.

## Purpose

The purpose of this research is to provide ideas for teachers and parents and possible programmes for schools to run with students who start school with language delays. It is my intention to look at whole class activities and approaches, as well as small group interventions to support these students.

## Rationale and Background information

At present we have a range of students with hugely varying oral language abilities starting school (both English as a first language and English as second language speakers) and data shows that some children are coming in to school with very poor oral language skills. In particular, children have limited vocabulary, have trouble with sentence structure, often not speaking in whole sentences, they muddle tenses and misuse prepositions. This difficulty is often replicated in the playground where these students struggle to communicate confidently and competently with their peers and sees them playing alongside, in parallel play, with limited oral interactions occurring.

We are interested in developing and accelerating these students oral development as we firmly believe that success in reading and writing development is inherently linked to this early language development. This early learning achievement, or lack of it, is also often reflected in children's self-esteem, their attitudes about school, the relationships they are able to foster and sustain all of which can stay with them throughout their schooling and well beyond.

## Activities undertaken

During my sabbatical I visited schools in Otago and Southland who are running early language intervention programme, discussing the structure, focuses for teaching, data collected (prior during and after interventions) and overall success to help develop a model to implement in our own school. I have met with Speech Language therapists to discuss the skills and knowledge that underpins successful intervention programmes.

I have also spent much time reading some recently published practical classroom guides designed to enhance classroom practise, talked to Speech Language Therapists in our local area as well as read the material available to schools from the Ministry of Education. In this report I will make some recommendations in regards to this material.

## Research

*Much More than Words* is a MOE publication designed for teachers and parents to read. It outlines speech issues related to hearing loss and suggestions to support children with these issues. It also outlines expected communication milestones from ages 1-5 and speech sound development progressions. This booklet is an extremely useful one in making assessments around student's needs and decisions on whether a referral to a Speech Language Therapist (SLT) is appropriate.

*Learning Through Talk (1-3) and (4-8)*. These 2009 MOE publications provide extensive information for teachers including accepted theories of learning as well as practical support for the assessment and teaching of oral language. It provides examples of ways to link literacy programmes and provide scaffolding for learning to be successful. This is a resource that could easily provide the basis of a school wide review of oral language practices and assist in building strong, interconnected school wide oral language practices.

*The Oral Language Toolkit :A Practical Guide for teachers*. This book, published in 2016 by Jane van der Zeyden is a comprehensive and useful guide for teachers. It provides "rich classroom task examples...and explicit models and examples of strategies that teachers can utilise in their own classroom programmes". This book makes explicit links between speaking, listening reading, writing and vocabulary development identifying for each activity the aspects of literacy it includes. This book is an excellent resource and one I think all schools should consider purchasing to support oral language programmes.

*The Oral Language Book* This recent 2016 publication by Sheena Cameron and Louise Dempsey provides a practical guide for teachers. It is similar in layout to the reading and writing books previously published by this pair so may appeal to teachers who have already used these guides in their classroom. On page 19 Cameron & Dempsey summarise the traits of effective teachers of oral language (a useful starting point for schools reviewing their approach to oral language). This document is again one I would recommend for schools as a comprehensive guide to assist in developing robust oral language programmes.

*Teacher Talk and Learning Language and Loving It: The Hanen Programme (Canada)*. While speaking to our local Speech Language Therapist she discussed with me useful programmes that could be adopted by schools interested in a small group and whole class approach. The above programmes are available for purchase (approximately \$85 US dollar) which includes a teacher's manual as well as a DVD of teacher's modelling strategies in real classroom situations. These programmes are directed at pre-school teachers but would be highly appropriate to adopt in a new entrant classroom.

*Language Learning Intervention(LLI)* This is a MOE funded intervention for students with high learning needs. The beauty of this programme is it provides intensive support to the classroom teacher building teacher capability. There are five training modules, and funding includes release for teachers, parents and the SLT to attend a training day. The programme is closely supported by the SLT including an initial assessment of the student's language level, the kind of communicator they are and their home language environment. The SLT also helps plan programmes and reviews progress and provides support along the way. This is a limited resource and requires an application to the MOE. If you have students with high needs talk to your local SLT, RTL or GSE office and discuss how to make an application. Having had this programme running in our school I would recommend it as excellent professional development for the teacher involved.

*Talk to Learn.* “*Talk to Learn* is closely linked with the New Zealand Primary Curriculum and teachers can expect to continue to meet teaching goals. It was designed to be used with 5-8 year old students with identified language delays. The activities can be used in a small group situation of approximately five students with one teacher or support person. Specific language skills are consistently practised in each session. The variety of short, fun tasks are central to the success of the programme. The theme for the language group is ideally related to the topic study in the classroom. This ensures that students receive continuous exposure to the same information”.

This programme was written in 2001 and I would like to see the MOE review and add to the selection of topics and resources available within this package, broadening its scope for use.

### **Findings**

*Clay (p 50, 2007) suggests that children “require energetic and intensive extra opportunities to enrich and extend their use of English language. This is not a need to hear more English: it is more a need to use more English. School does not allow for the quantity of talking (and linking) that children need to do.”*

*In fact “entry into formal education settings such as schools reduces children’s opportunities for talking.....schooling can prevent children from using the language which they used so effectively before they came to school.”*

During my sabbatical I visited four schools that provided me the opportunity to observe their oral language programmes. The purpose of these visits was:

- a) to identify assessment tools being used / analyse their usefulness and ease of use
- b) to identify training and resourcing provided to programmes
- c) to assess the practical management of programmes
- d) to assess of the impact programmes are having on oral language acquisition
- e) to assess of the impact oral language acquisition is having on other learning area/ self esteem

### **School 1**

School 1 was a rural school, catering for year 1-8 students, decile 10 with a roll of 116 pupils. The junior school provides oral language opportunities through experiential based learning (discovery time) as well as opportunities for students to present regularly to the class.

Planning is supported by the language progression indicators. Most children arrive at school with reasonable oral language although the teachers have noted grammatical structures for many students are an issue and this is being reflected in their writing. Many of these children do not recognise when grammatical structures are incorrect.

The school makes referrals to the Speech Language Therapist for students with high needs and the school is able to access some support for these students.

This school represents many who do not have planned oral language interventions but rely mainly on teacher modelling, peer to peer interaction, experience-based activities and assistance from outside agencies for expertise, and additional support for students with high needs.

### **School 2**

School 2 was a city school, catering for year 1-6 students, decile 1, with a roll of approximately 200 students. Staff includes 11 teachers and 12 teacher aides. The school is 36% Maori, 17% Pacifica, 2% other and 45% NZ European.

The school has low literacy entrance levels and this is confirmed by SEA data taken on each student's arrival aged 5. The school believes strongly that oral language forms the basis to all other literacy learning and has therefore invested heavily in providing additional programmes to support this early oral development. As well as this the school expects teachers to provide three 20 minute sessions per week in class that are planned deliberate acts of teaching in the area of oral language. In the new entrant room the Talk to Learn programme forms the basis of this teaching and further up the school the Comprehension Strategy Instruction programme (CSI) is used.

As well as this the school offers the following oral language programmes to individual and or small groups of students.

**Ready Steady Go!** An introduction to school for pre-schoolers (age 4 ½ onwards) and their parent(s) offered 1 afternoon a week for 45 minutes. The programme includes modelling and interaction with children; reading to, poems, letter sound association activities, instruction following games, counting and 1 to 1 matching, Letter formation and reading instruction. The teacher works closely with the student/ parent to assist in developing some of these skills and children are provided with readers and activity sheets to take home and practise during the week.

**Early Words.** This programme is based on Yolada Soryl's work. Although a programme to develop sight words rather than an oral language programme, it is worthy of mention because it connects with so much of the other literacy work this school is doing. This programme is a 5-10 minute per day intervention designed to quickly build a bank of recognised sight words. The school is introducing it during the Ready Steady Go! visits so by the time 5 year olds start school they may already have 5-10 sight words. The school continues to build on this bank over the first few months at school.

**Talk First.** This is a one-on-one student/teacher aide programme. It is based on a programme developed by Helen Campbell-O'Brian in Southland. All students are assessed on arrival at school using the Talk First and JOST assessment tools. From this students are selected for the programme which is 15 minutes per day. The programme is based on repetition of simple concepts such as days of the week, parts of the body, animal names, sentence formation, grammatical structures, use of correct pronouns, correct use of tense etc. Lots of clear modelling, repetition, use of memory games, charts, picture cues and conversation help keep the learning fun and focused. Students are retested when exiting the programme and a score of 55/66 or better is the desired outcome.

**H.E.L.P.** This is a teacher aide led programme for year 3 / 4 students in the school. It is run with 3 or 4 students in a small group setting for 15-20 minutes a day. The teacher aide plans stories which are read to and discussed with the students, written and practical activities such as simple origami around a topic to help these students develop oral language, learn to follow a series of instructions and widen their known vocabulary in a particular area. The programme has clear aims which are communicated to the students and referred to daily at the beginning of a session. The goals (for the group I observed) were to follow instructions, make eye contact when speaking to someone else, to not interrupt when others are speaking and to develop new vocabulary.

### **School 3**

School 3 was a rural school close to the outskirts of the city, catering for year 1-6 students, decile 4, with a roll of approximately 112 students. Staff includes 5 teachers and 3 teacher aides. The school is 12% Maori, 6% Pacifica, and 82% NZ European.

School 3 is working hard to capture students early and provide intensive early interventions which are seeing most students *At* for national standards by the time they reach the age of 6. The school is well staffed with two experienced teacher aides who have had training in a

variety of programmes to provide this targeted support. They have a number of programmes to call on and may use all or some with particular students dependent on their particular needs.

**Early Words** (as mentioned above) is also used in this school to encourage early acquisition of sight words. This school introduces this programme on arrival at school.

**Read Together.** This is a programme the school runs annually for parents to support early reading and oral development. The programme provides support for parents in how to hear their children's reading (including the use of pause, prompt, praise strategies) as well ways to discuss text with the children (the 5 finger approach i.e. make 4 statements about the picture or text and ask 1 question).

**Perceptual Motor Programme (PMP).** This programme is used to "help students and prepare their brain for learning". As well as developing movement skills this programme helps develop perceptual knowledge and language around concepts of height, space and position in relation to the child's body/ world. Teacher Aides run this programme 4 days a week for ½ an hour a day with 3 to 4 students, however, they indicated that if a school had space to do so, this programme could easily be run with a whole new entrant or junior class. This programme is based on work by Gill Connell and further information can be easily accessed online.

**Talk First.** This programme forms the crux of the oral language intervention work this school does with new entrants. Testing is carried out "as early as possible after students arrive at school...so intervention can happen before bad habits develop". As stated previously this is a programme developed in Southland by Helen Campbell- O'Brian. The school's Teacher Aides assesses all students using the Talk First/ JOST assessment tool and then with the class teacher analyse results to decide on those for intake into the programme. During the training phase of this programme teacher aides had 1-1 ½ hours onsite training each week for 6 weeks. The programme has been running for 3 years in the school now and staff felt the success of the intervention can be seen in the confidence and level of social and academic interaction students have after they are discontinued from the programme. They believe it gives students the "best possible start they can have at school" leading to success in and out of the classroom. The intervention is again based on daily repetition of concepts and language. The first 15 minutes of the session is used to work on the areas of the child's language that were identified in the assessment as needing development. This may include games, puzzles, picture stories, movement activities etc. The Teacher Aides said the focus is on keeping the work fun and engaging with the students doing as much talking as possible. Approaches need to be flexible to meet the needs and progress of students. The second 15 minutes of each session to focus on retelling stories. The Oxford Press "Will and Biff" texts, form the basis of this work. The Teacher Aide initially covers text and tells the story the pictures show. Then the Aide runs through the book for a second time, this time reading the text. The third run through is where the student tells the story, again with the text covered. The Teachers' Aides know the texts thoroughly and have graded texts from simpler to more complex based on the picture cues. As students get more confident and competent they introduce more complex story lines.

#### School 4

School 4 was a semi rural school close to the outskirts of the city, catering for year 1-6 students, decile 10, with a roll of approximately 300 students. Staff includes 13 teachers and 3 ORRs funded teacher aides and 7 other teacher aides.

School 4 has a strong philosophy on which their literacy programmes are based. It believes there are a number of foundation skills children require in readiness for school and learning. Without these skills many children can be rushed into formal reading, writing and handwriting which can see students left behind as time goes on. The junior school's literacy programme is therefore based on a programme designed by Barbara Brann called '**Magic Caterpillar's Building Blocks to Literacy**'.

*"The programme stresses the interrelatedness of the skills across the domains. While the programme is presented as a framework of micro-skills, the delivery must provide immersion in language and literacy that will enable learners to understand the connections among oral language, reading, writing, handwriting and the sub-skills of spelling, syntax, word usage and so on"* (Brann, B, 2011)

Alongside this programme the school has adopted a play based programme they have name '**Dip Time**'. Each day for approximately 45 minutes the students have a number of varied activities to select from including art, construction, writing, technology, creative play, i pads etc. During this time 3 teacher aides are available, in addition to the classroom teachers, to roam talking and working alongside children about the activities they are engaging in. Both The Magic Caterpillar and Dip time programmes are designed to provide multiple opportunities on a daily basis to develop these foundation skills which include the oral domains of talking and listening.

Oral language screening also forms an important part of the school's oral language programme but is usually done closer to a child's 6<sup>th</sup> birthday, completed when staff have concerns about language acquisition.

The two assessment tools available to the school are;

**Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test.** This test assesses 13 domains and looks at syllable identification, rhyme, blending, hearing initial and final sounds, boundary and internal consonants and reading and recording non-word sounds. This test was provided to the school by their local Speech Language Therapist.

**Magic Caterpillar- Screening Kit.** This is a kit which can be purchased for a cost of approximately \$465. It provides a comprehensive screening tool covering 5 domains- talking, listening, looking, moving and print. Teachers use this tool selectively to assess students of concern. The kit also provides a number of activity cards for each domain allowing the school to target areas identified for focus through the assessment. These activities are suitable for a small group approach or in some cases, whole class.

In addition the school offers HPP as a programme to support reading and oral development.

**HPP.** *"The programme includes a one-hand, oral language approach that SES speech language therapist Annette Stock developed. Stock wanted a very simple way of encouraging parents to talk to their children in a way that gave them information and supported good oral language development.*

*So she developed an approach which encourages parents to count off on the fingers of one hand as they make up to four informative language statements about an illustration in a book prior to asking a question"* (Education Gazette, 1999).

This programme is used by teacher aides with individual students to support their reading and oral development.

## **General Observations**

Across all schools I visited there were some common elements I observed.

**Oral Competence.** All teachers talked about the “drop” over time in oral language competency they are observing when children are arriving at school. Teachers have noticed problems with correct sentence structure, a lack of exposure to rhyme (especially nursery rhymes) and poor grammatical structures. The teachers I meet had many theories about why this might be including the impact technology may be having on the number of oral interactions children and adults are engaging in; the impact time spent in childcare might have on oral development; the general busyness of family life and the lack of time there is for simple concepts such as meals at the table with the family which provide opportunities for conversational language, and health issues such as glue ear in the early years and the impact this can have on language development. Whatever the reason, there is a general consensus that children seem to be arriving at school less orally competent than they once did.

**Oral Delay’s Require Deliberate Acts of Teaching.** The Speech Language Therapists, Principals, teachers and teacher aides I spoke to all agreed that when a child arrives with an oral delay there needs to be quality assessment to ensure it is clear where the problems lie and then there needs to be planned, carefully selected, deliberate acts of teaching (which involve daily opportunities based on lots of repetition of the same concepts) to ensure the child has the best opportunity to enhance their oral capabilities. It is not enough just to immerse these students in an environment rich in print and speech.

**National Standards.** Many junior teachers talked about the dichotomy they believe exists between meeting students’ early learning needs and being pressured to report against national standards. Most teachers felt they needed time to focus on early oral language development, allow time to provide experiential based learning, and provide opportunities to develop other domains such as small and large motor movement skills. They said the need to introduce formal literacy and numeracy to ensure students were given every opportunity to ‘make the standard’ meant the foundation skills often took a back seat to more formal learning.

**Teacher talk.** All classroom environments I observed were still dominated by the teacher talking. Even in specifically planned oral language lessons the teacher did more talking than anyone else. Many of the interactions I observed in class lessons were teacher to student meaning oral interaction for many students was extremely limited. As teachers we need to find ways to allow students to lead the talk while we facilitate but don’t dominate.

**Access to Special Services.** All schools used Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour. Resource Teachers of Literacy and Speech Language Therapist specialists to varying degrees. Some schools found it easier than others to access these support people and some said the help came many months after the referral was sent.

**Links between decile and oral competency.** In visiting schools across the decile range it was clear that the lower decile schools were dealing with greater needs in the areas of oral competency. This finding is supported by work carried out by Dr Jannie van Hees from the University of Auckland. She found that “*children in disadvantaged communities generally*



*start school with an expressive vocabulary of fewer than 3000 words, compared with at least 6000 for children in advantaged areas". (NZ Herald; NZ Pupils Struggling to Speak)*

## Implications

Teachers have no shortage of material available to them in the areas of oral language. In looking at schools I believe those who seem to making the greatest difference to student's oral capabilities have some key factors in common;

- they strongly believe oral language is the foundation skill that ensures other literacy learning is successful.

- they have clear, well followed assessment practises for oral competency that help identify areas for focus and provide data at the end of the intervention of assist in reviewing the effectiveness of the programme.

- they resource programmes to provide the opportunity for these students to receive focused deliberate acts of teaching which support their oral development.

- these programmes are run by experienced and committed teacher aides who have received quality ongoing professional development to support the work they do.

- the programme has elements of flexibility. Children's needs drive the choice of activities, length of intervention and content.

- these intervention programmes are supported by other staff (class teachers senior staff and Principals), and there is regular and focused communication between teachers and teacher aides to link the work done during intervention and practises in the classroom

- there is no 'one size fits all' programme. Schools will use multiple approaches and some children will experience multiple interventions to help support their needs.

Schools who, like us, are noticing issues around oral competency on arrival at school may wish to adopt some of the suggested assessment practises or interventions outlined and use some of the resources reviewed in this article. As Albert Einstein so succinctly put it...

"Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results". If you are a teacher who feels what you're currently doing is not having an impact on the oral development of your students it might be time to look for a new approach.

Schools who want to make a difference for their students need to start with their teachers. Committing time and funding to professional development which allows teachers to review and revise current practises, investigate in depth resources available, visit other schools to observe practise and attend quality professional development are all important components of changing practise. This professional development may take a number of years to consolidate as practise in your school.

## Conclusions

Oral language acquisition is extremely complex yet at the same time quite simple. For most children immersion in conversation, a variety of experiences, play, adult modelling, being read to and family life see children develop oral and social skills which mean by five they are ready to approach school and experience success in the classroom and playground. For some, however, a lack of these experiences sees this development affected and they begin school unable to fully access the curriculum in all its facets.

Schools need to plan for students who do not arrive at school with these foundation skills.

Dr Jannie Van Hees, Auckland University Professor, is a well-known New Zealand expert in the field of oral language. As she so succinctly puts it;

*“Whether in junior or senior classes, what is evident is that classrooms are most often not optimal in terms of engaging children in rich, dialogic talk - talk that expands and enriches, talk that demands of the children thinking and giving children a voice in the classroom.....When children express their ideas and knowledge, great insights are had, says Jannie. “If we are not opening the window on children’s amazing brains and amazing concepts, what a delicious feast we’re missing out on”.*

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