

# PRINCIPAL'S SABBATICAL – TERM 3,

2011

## **Effective Oral Language Programmes in Multi-Cultural Schools**

Linda Birch, St Michael's School, Taita

### Purpose

St Michael's is a decile 1, multi-cultural school in the northern part of Lower Hutt. The school is predominantly made up of first and second generation Pasifika children, and more recently African Refugee children. The majority of children come to school with poor oral language skills, which limits their ability to communicate effectively with peers and teachers and ultimately impacts on their ability to read and write. The school is part of a cluster of nine schools that recognise that this is an issue affecting all the schools in the cluster.

The purpose of the sabbatical was to visit schools similar to St Michaels and those in the cluster, which had oral language programmes that were making a difference to the children's ability to read and write.

To do this I visited three South Auckland Schools and spoke with principals, SENCO's and learning support teachers about the programmes they have in their schools and the reasons they are successful. I was also very privileged to spend time with Jannie van Hees, a teacher educator at the Faculty of Education, The University of Auckland, who is one of the leading experts on oral language in New Zealand. Her book "Expanding Oral Language in the Classroom" provided a pedagogical foundation that underpinned a lot of the work being done in the schools visited. The book itself is a wonderful resource for schools looking to better understand the importance of the development of oral language and is full of very practical ideas and classroom examples.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Jannie for making the time to talk to me and my husband about her insights and ideas about oral language. I would also like

to thank the principals and teachers at St Joseph's Onehunga, St Joseph's Otahuhu and Wesley Primary School for their generosity of time, sharing of programmes and allowing me to be part of their schools for a short while.

The following are three case studies describing what each school is doing to ensure that oral language is given prominence in the curriculum and that staff have the understanding and commitment to ensure success.

### **School 1**

The school has a well-established oral language programme led competently by the school's ESOL teacher. She had previously worked with Jannie van Hees developing strategies and programs to support the development of oral language until 5 years ago when she decided to go back into a school. She is now in charge of the ESOL development in the school. The school has a high number of funded ESOL students and puts an emphasis on the use of adults as a resource for these children.

I was able to see one of the programmes that is used extensively with students in year 2 and upwards in action. The programme, Base Line English or Self Pacing Boxes, uses a resource that along with very child friendly visuals, introduces basic vocab, alphabet and blends to stimulate ideas, thoughts and conversation from children. The children work in groups of three with a teacher aide who scribes the ideas (in sentences) and then helps the children to put it together as a story. We watched two groups at work, one a year 2 group and the other an older group.

The sessions were very much "led" by the children who were very keen to share the ideas they had. The piece of text that had been created from the previous lesson had been typed up by the teacher aide and was read out loud by all the children. They then wrote their own text in their books which was often similar to the shared story but with one or two new ideas. These sessions last about 45 minutes.

The programme they are using is resource rich and depending on the level that the children start they may never complete all modules. Many children's oracy levels reach those of their peers relatively quickly through the intensive work they are doing in Base Line English.

Teacher aides are trained to deliver the programme and the children are grouped by the ESOL teacher according to their level of oracy. She works with the older students

who come into the school with more complex learning issues around oral language and communication.

Assessment is carried out pre and post. Children are videoed discussing a photo at the start of the intervention. They are then videoed again using the same photo six months later. The amount of progress is immense. This could be seen clearly in the development of the independent writing component. Year 2 children who could barely write a sentence at the beginning of the year were writing 6 to 8 complex sentences about a subject that they had thought about and discussed in depth.

The intervention appeared to be very effective and the clarity and structure of it meant that students, teachers and teacher aides all had the same understandings and expectations about what it would achieve.

## **School 2**

This school had been working on the development of oral language for a number of years, so teachers had been exposed to the theory and practices for some time. However in 2009 they pulled their learning together and became part of an oral language contract. They had worked with Jannie van Hees previously and were fortunate enough to work with her on this.

The key to successfully implementing the ideas developed by Jannie was to have a shared understanding by all staff, a clear goal they wanted to achieve and a process to achieve their goal.

The school is divided into 3 teams with the principal and two DPs (both released) as part of the teams. All are learners and part of their goal is to establish collaborative learning community.

Learning walks/4minute walkthroughs are commonplace and help the senior management get a better picture about how new learning in oral language is being embedded. There are also planned opportunities for all teachers to critique their own and others practice. Twice a year whole syndicates are released to work together. Each teacher takes a 20 minute lesson with the others watching, then collectively

deconstruct the teaching and establish next learning steps for the teacher. This process occurs for all teachers during the day.

Teachers also video their own practice and have a series of questions which guide self-reflection and self-improvement. They have also followed this process working with a buddy to help critique and are in the process of developing teams to regularly share practice through video. A big focus for success is ensuring that all teachers are well organized. Planning needs to be explicit in content structure and impact on student learning, focussing on the quality and quantity of oral language . Resources need to be organized and students managed appropriately.

While the school is working independently they are part of a cluster that regularly share good practice within their schools. The school management team have built an environment of trust that will ensure that teachers understand the importance of putting their teaching up for peer critique to continue to improve and imbed pedagogy and practice. Teacher aides are considered essential in helping children develop sound oracy skills and resourcing is targeted to ensure this (ELA inservice). Revisiting prior learning is built into the professional development to ensure that all teachers are up with current practice.

### **School 3**

In this school a great deal of importance is placed on the acquisition and development of oral language. This emphasis starts before a child even enters the school gate. Pre enrolment meetings are held for parents up to 12 months before the child's fifth birthday. Parents are expected to attend 3 meetings which cover the general expectations of the school, including what parents can do to develop numeracy before their child begins school and the importance of literacy, in particular oracy. Parents are encouraged to talk, talk, talk to their children about anything and everything. This helps build the platform on which children enter at five.

The school has been part of an oral language and literacy development for ten years. They have been privileged to work with oral language expert Jannie van Hees

to develop a programme that uses a wide range of strategies and methodologies to help children develop vocal, thinking and communication skills.

The new entrant class run an intensive intervention that requires children to interact experientially in a planned and directed way. At the beginning of the week the children are introduced to a high impact theme, eg, camping, water, gardening etc. They then participate in a variety of activities around this theme to build vocab. They touch, taste, wear, play with, act out, explore and talk about the objects relating to the theme. They then transfer the language and knowledge they have gained by using it contextually in reading, writing and numeracy tasks. This takes the whole day and uses three adults who run a rotational programme around the numeracy and literacy tasks. Throughout the rest of the week other tasks are developed around Monday's theme to embed and further develop the vocab. These may include art, drama or music. While this "discovery" or "developmental" approach is not new in itself it provides a vehicle to develop oracy in a tactile context, using targeted oral language strategies that are effective.

Teachers do not ask questions to develop children's thinking and vocab, instead they set up an environment that uses conversation to extend students. This creates a naturally flow (of conversation) rather than the somewhat stop start nature of questions and answers. Prompting children to give more information in a natural, conversational way, without questioning is a skill that teachers have had to learn, and still does not come naturally at times.

Van Hees says "with conditions in place that optimize opening up, teachers prompts, probes and contributory statements, stimulate and encourage students thinking expression and expansion in ways that asking questions usually does not. Therefore when one or more students have expressed a thought or an idea, simple prompts or nudging devices a teacher might use are ..."

The school has found that because all children are immersed in this way of learning oral language (and thinking) in the first year of school it has become second nature further on in their schooling. When a topic /object/idea is introduced in a classroom, children will start to converse about it, with less teacher domination and direction than in most classrooms.

The school has been fortunate in that they have not have had many changes in staff over the last few years. They have expert or mentor teachers who induct new teachers into the oral language programme. A hand book supports the learning and is full of helpful strategies and methodologies.

Three things stood out as being crucial for the success of the programme Teachers must willingly participate in the professional development and have a real understanding of the theory that underpins the programme. This ensures buy in and embeds the principles and strategies in the teaching.

Secondly that the most important resource is well trained people who will facilitate student learning and help extend their oracy. And lastly that oral language must be integrated into the whole classroom programme (particularly reading and writing) to give it meaning to children.

## **Conclusion**

While all three schools provided different experiences for children to develop oral language there were some common themes.

### The commitment and buy in from principals, leaders and teachers

This is essential for programmes to work. This must be underpinned by sound professional development that develops pedagogical understanding about the acquisition and use of language. Teacher commitment must also include ongoing critiquing of programmes and the delivery of them. Successful schools also have developed systems of induction for new staff, so that both staff and students knowing what is expected of them.

### Ensuring that interventions target the needs of specific groups

In all cases interventions were carefully monitored and data was collected pre and post.

### Immersing five year olds in rich oral language and thinking programmes.

All three schools mentioned the role oral language programmes play in junior classes and one school gave us a very detailed account of the intensive oral programme in the new entrant class.

### Engaging the Community

All of the schools attempted to engage their community to support student engagement and learning across the curriculum. A focus on oral language was delivered in different ways to their communities by each school, but was considered imperative to accelerate student progress.

### Next Steps

One of the key learnings was gleaned through the discussion with Jannie van Hees. So many of our children come to school unable to ask, answer or respond in any way to a question. Teachers spend a lot of time teaching children how to ask and answer questions. Jannie talked about the importance of oral texts (rather than questions), where a flow of natural conversation, discussion, debate or narrative takes place with a group of children, guided lightly by a skilled adult with prompts and scaffolding when needed. This is an area that I intend to develop with staff at our school and introduce to the cluster.

Discussions with junior school teachers have already led to changes in the new entrant class based on one of the programmes viewed. The immersing of our five year olds in an oral rich environment with a wealth of human and experiential resources will be trialled to measure the impact on reading and writing.

An aspirational outcome would be to involve Jannie in the development of oral language within our cluster. Whilst this may not be feasible promoting and using her resource will be.

I would like to thank the Board of St Michael's for releasing me for the ten weeks and the staff who 'picked up the slack' in my absence.

Van Hees Jannie. Oral Language in the Classroom, NZCER Press, Wellington 2007.