The impact of oral language activities in preschool on reading competence in kindergarten and beyond

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Abstract
The following literature review examined the impact of oral language activities in preschool concerning literacy competence in kindergarten and beyond. Four questions were addressed: (1) What is the role of oral language on reading achievement? (2) What instructional activities are important in promoting oral language skills crucial for later reading development? (3) What challenges do educators face when incorporating oral language activities in the preschool classroom? and (4) What are guidelines for integrating oral language activities in preschool? Recommendations for the advancement of oral language instruction in the education system were presented.
THE IMPACT OF ORAL LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES IN PRESCHOOL ON
READING COMPETENCE IN KINDERGARTEN AND BEYOND

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ABSTRACT

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Background

“Oral language is the foundation on which reading is built, and it continues to serve this role as children develop as readers” (Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris, 1998, Topic 1, p. 1). Currently, preschool teachers accept this statement as a call to action. However, schools did not always view oral language activities, experiences that engage students verbally for gaining knowledge, as part of their role.

“Because young children learn to speak at home before entering school, oral language was thought of as coming first before reading and writing” (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2004). Educators viewed oral language as an area of development that occurred before formal schooling.

Despite this belief, research concerning oral language was taking place in the early 1900s. Many of the questions that were asked were philosophical in nature and led parents, such as Charles Darwin, to keep diaries of their children's language development. This action of keeping diary records of children continued into the first half of the twentieth century. Also at the beginning of the twentieth century, educational psychologists studied the language development of large groups of children in the school setting to examine gender and social class.
differences and to discover cures for developmental difficulties (Gleason, 2001).

In the classroom, however, oral language instruction was neglected. This may have been the result of Rousseau's theory, dating back to the 1700s, which suggested that children should learn naturally, and adults should provide as little intervention as possible (Morrow, 1997). Oral language and its five components: phonology – speech sounds, morphology – the putting together of sounds to create words, syntax – the rules that govern how words are put together to create meaning, semantics – the meaning attached to language, and pragmatics – the social context in which language is used, were not yet seen as a link to literacy. Language development was viewed as a process of maturation. As a result, reading instruction was delayed until a child was developmentally old enough (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2004).

The term reading readiness became popular in the mid 1900s. Teachers became unsettled with the practice of waiting for a child to possess the “. . .social, emotional, physical, and cognitive competencies” (p. 126) thought to be essential to reading. Instead, educators engaged in formal instruction, teaching a set of skills believed to be prerequisites for reading. Basal readers were used as a more direct approach to teaching literacy, and they were prominent during this time (Morrow, 1997).
Despite the direct teaching model used by some, many still clung to the theory of maturation (Morrow, 1997). Antonacci and O’Callaghan stated “... the young child was essentially passive and waiting to be molded intellectually, and linguistically, by the environment”, an idea aligned with the view of Noam Chomsky (p. 7). Thus, preschool teachers spent little time engaging in formal instruction of language development during this period (Antonacci & O’Callaghan, 2004). Psycholinguistics became a field as linguists and psychologists combined their knowledge to “... investigate whether the systems described by the linguist had psychological reality in the minds of the speakers” (Gleason, 2001, p. 27). An explosion of research began in this area following the influence of Chomsky who believed that providing an intellectually stimulating environment was key for language development (Gleason, 2001).

Though Chomsky proposed taking a passive approach to language instruction, it became evident during the mid 1900s that children from low-income families were falling behind in school endeavors. Researchers and educators started looking for early interventions to prevent the effects of poverty on children’s academic growth (Hart & Risley, 2003). One result was the establishment of Head Start in 1964. The goal of the Head Start program was to “... improve the learning skills, social skills, and health status of poor children so that they can begin schooling on an
equal footing with their more advantaged peers" (Currie & Thomas, 1995, p. 341).

The 1960s and 1970s brought significant changes in beliefs regarding oral language acquisition. Studies (Halliday, 1975; Menyuk, 1977) began to show that although language development was based, in part, on maturation, children play an active role in acquiring language (Morrow, 1997).

Studies by Bloom; Brown; Brown and Bellugi; Bruner; Cazden; Chomsky; Halliday; Lennenberg; McNeil; and Menyuk (as cited in Morrow, 1997) supported the following account:

They imitate the language of adults and create their own when they do not have the conventional words they need to communicate their thoughts.... Children who are constantly exposed to an environment rich in language and who interact with adults using language in a social context develop more facility with oral language than children lacking these opportunities. (p. 11)

Reinforcing these ideas was the constructivist, Lev Vygotsky. He emphasized the role of social interaction in language learning (Morrow, 1997). Antonacci and O'Callaghan, using Vygotsky's perspective stated "It is through language or social interaction that the adult mediates the child's literacy development" (p. 19). Vygotsky also believed that children needed to use their speech in order to solve practical tasks (Monroe,
1985). Socializing with adults and more proficient peers allows children to acquire skills above their actual developmental level (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

The whole language approach used widely in the late 1980s incorporated the beliefs of Vygotsky and Rousseau, as well as other progressive and constructivist theorists. The whole language approach was defined by Bergeron (1990):

Whole language is a concept that embodies both a philosophy of language development as well as the instructional approaches embedded within, and supportive of, that philosophy. This concept includes the use of real literature and writing in the context of meaningful, functional, and cooperative experiences in order to develop in students motivation and interest in the process of learning. (p. 319)

In this approach “... equal emphasis is placed on the teaching of reading, writing, listening, and oral language, because all help to create a literate individual” (Morrow, 1997, p. 15).

In recent years, research has demonstrated that collaborative academic talk, the practice of verbally interacting with peers which “... introduces them to new perspectives ... and facilitates reflection and innovative thinking” (Wollman-Bonilla, 1993, p. 49), is highly beneficial to the learning experience (Simich-Dudgeon, 1998). Though we
previously assumed "... most children come to school with all the linguistic knowledge that is needed to begin to engage in formal education" (Menyuk, 1995, p. 43), we now understand, "... that their language is not fully developed" (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2004, p. 9).

Most recently, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2001), was initiated to ensure that every child would be able to read by the end of third grade and to reduce the number of children needing special education services "... due to a lack of appropriate reading instruction in their early years" (Nelson, Benner, & Gonzalez, 2003, p.255). Further, NCLB stated that "... it is never too early to start building language skills by talking to and reading to children" (United States Department of Education, 2003, p. 1). NCLB created a program called Reading First, which supports programs that teach phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension - skills considered to be vital to reading success (United States Department of Education, 2003).

Research has suggested that oral language activities are linked to later literacy achievement. Antonacci and O'Callaghan (2004) stated:

As educators learn more about language acquisition and growth in young children and as they observe their language, they develop a set of expectations for children’s language use. They will also learn more effective ways to assist children in their lifelong journey of language and literacy development. (p. 32)
Rationale

Holbrook (1983) reported that oral language development in the classroom has been essentially neglected. This practice is the result of incorrect assumptions by early childhood educators about children's language and literacy learning. Many teachers view the development of language as a process that occurs naturally through maturation and experience. "Speech is not usually simply basic communication—it involves thinking, knowledge, and skills. It also requires practice and training" (Zhang & Alex, 1995, para 1). Early educators do not fully recognize the need to facilitate the process of language development.

Further, many teachers believe that to teach effectively they must talk while students listen. Teacher-dominated classrooms do not lead to oral language competence. "Such conventional teaching-learning is one of the obstacles preventing the real development of oral language" (Zhang & Alex, 1995, Teacher role section, para 2). As students passively listen, they are unable to utilize their language ability, which is a key learning tool that has been available prior to formal schooling (Zhang & Alex, 1995). Massey (2004) found the following:

Several studies have suggested that cognitively challenging talk is somewhat infrequent in the early childhood setting. Teachers devote considerable time to facilitating children's play, but the
conversations are not filled with rich, stimulating content. . . . Children have few opportunities to elaborate on teachers' questions and statements; therefore, they do not share explanations or ideas, which are key elements of cognitively challenging conversation. (pp. 227-228)

With the passage of NCLB, the focus on preschool instruction has intensified. The idea of universal preschool— the availability of a quality preschool education to every child in America—is proposed to help students in meeting the testing requirements of NCLB (Osorio & Dellinger, 2007, para 2). Ginsberg (2005) stated that children in preschool face increased pressure to learn and use large quantities of information. “A heavy emphasis on using approved science-based teaching methods can pressure teachers of young children to teach more content and earlier. As a result, children have fewer opportunities to talk and develop their language skills” (Kalmar, 2008, p. 89).

In addition to underestimating the importance of language practice in the early childhood setting, teachers often face a diverse population of learners within a single classroom. Classes include both children with identified disabilities and children with outstanding abilities, children who are already independent readers, and children who are just beginning to acquire some basic literacy knowledge and skills. Children in a classroom may speak different languages at varying levels of
proficiency. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), early childhood programs are serving more children with cultural and linguistic diversity. Because of these individual and experiential variations, it is common to find within a kindergarten classroom a five-year range in children's literacy-related skills and their level of functioning (2001b, Learning to Read and Write).

Even in families rearing their children similarly in a common culture, a study by Hart (2000) revealed a considerable difference in how often and in what ways interactions occurred among family members, and how this situation impacted language acquisition. Hart and Risley (2003) described their research involving ordinary families observed over a period of two and one-half years. The “... families differed immensely in the amount of experience with language and interaction they regularly provide their children” (p. 4). These differences were shown to influence children's language accomplishments.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate, through the review of research literature, the impact of oral language activities in preschool, and how they relate to a child's reading competence in kindergarten and later elementary school. The paper addresses the following four questions:
1. What is the role of oral language on reading achievement?

2. What instructional activities are important in promoting oral language skills crucial for later reading development?

3. What challenges do educators face in incorporating quality oral language experiences in the preschool classroom?

4. What are guidelines for incorporating oral language activities in preschool?

Importance of the Study

It is imperative that preschool teachers understand the importance of their role in developing literate citizens. A study by Connor, Morrison, and Slominski (2004) found that in classrooms judged as high-quality, even within the same school district, children received "... widely different preschool language and literacy experiences" (p. 680). Honig (1999) clearly stated:

In some USA communities, as many as 45% of youngsters are failing kindergarten because their pre-reading language skills are not at a level that can prepare them for successful beginning reading in first grade. Also, some low-income, low-education parents need far more help if they are to provide support for their children's early school success (Payne, Whitehurst, & Angell, 1994). Such outreach supports are in rare supply. Yet, preschool
teachers are gatekeepers into the rich territories of literacy. They need to expand their concern and expertise to families. (p. 2)

Knowledge regarding the importance of language in the early years, along with a dedication to all children, is crucial for student success.

Limitations

In reviewing the literature concerning oral language acquisition and its significance in later reading achievement, it was clear that the number of language variables studied was considerable. With the multidimensionality of language and literacy, finding studies that addressed the same aspects of each was difficult. Information for this review was synthesized with an emphasis in the areas of the social nature of language, the literacy components of phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension for their critical relationship to literacy success and classroom activities that support language skill development.

Research studies also varied in the characteristics of the populations studied. For the purpose of this review, students with typically developing language skills were included, though socio-economic status varied. General conclusions regarding oral language and its impact on literacy development were generated, and guidelines were developed to address these findings.
Finally, many of the research studies addressed children's oral language abilities as well as their environments, such as home and childcare settings, prior to entering preschool. Locating research articles pertaining specifically to oral language activities in the preschool environment proved to be a challenge. In some cases primary sources were not available and secondary sources were used.

Definitions

**Child care**- All educational and day-care services for children who are too young to attend kindergarten (Howes, 1988).

**Child managed activity**- An activity in which the child is directing his/her own attention without the support of the teacher (Connor, Morrison, & Slominski, 2006).

**Code-related skills**- Literacy skills which include phonological awareness, letter naming, phonological decoding, emergent writing, and print awareness (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005b).

**Collaborative academic talk**- The practice of verbally interacting with peers which “introduces them to new perspectives . . . and facilitates reflection and innovative thinking” (Wollman-Bonilla, 1993, p. 49).
Cognitively challenging conversation- Includes analyzing characters and events, making predictions, making connections between the text and life experiences, summarizing the story, and clarifying and evaluating story discussion (Dickinson & Smith, 1994).

Comprehension- “The ability to understand and gain meaning from what has been read” (United States Department of Education, 2003, p. 17).

Constructivist- A theorist who describes language development as an active and social process (Morrow, 1997).

Dialogic moment- “Listening to and encouraging a child to tell a story or express his/her feelings” (Antonacci & O’Callaghan, 2004, p. 33).

Dialogic reading- The child assumes the role of the storyteller as the adult asks questions, adds information, and encourages more sophisticated input from the child (Lonigan, 2006).

Emergent literacy- “Assumes that the child acquires some knowledge about language, reading, and writing before coming to school” (Morrow, 1997, p. 131). Literacy development begins early, is ongoing, and occurs through meaningful experiences in the child’s natural setting (Morrow, 1997).

Fluency- “The capacity to read text accurately and quickly” (United States Department of Education, 2003, p. 17).
High quality child care- Centers that provide: a staff with formal education and specialized early childhood training, a developmentally appropriate environment with age-appropriate and child-initiated activities, a child-centered physical environment to promote learning, a teaching staff who interact sensitively with children, strong staff communication, good health and safety provisions, including nutrition and food service, and good relations with parents (NAEYC, 2008).

Lexical awareness – The volume of words a person understands. (Pence and Justice, 2008).

Literacy Success- “A complex system of deriving meaning from print” that requires all of the following: (a) The skills and knowledge to understand how phonemes, or speech sounds, are connected to print; (b) The ability to decode unfamiliar words; (c) The ability to read fluently; (d) Sufficient background information and vocabulary to foster reading comprehension; (e) The development of appropriate active strategies to construct meaning from print; and (f) The development and maintenance of a motivation to read (National Institute for Literacy, 2007, para 1).

Metalinguistic skill- The development of consciousness of what one knows regarding language; Knowledge about language (Morrow, 1997).

Morphology- The “. . . aspect of language that refers to how words are built from morphemes, the smallest unit of sound” (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2004, p. 25).
Oral language activities- Adult-guided experiences that engage students verbally as “... a means for students to gain knowledge and explore ideas” (Zhang & Alex, 1995, Teacher Role section, para 1).

Oral language skills – Language skills including expressive and receptive vocabulary, syntactic and semantic knowledge, and narrative discourse processes such as memory, comprehension and story telling (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005b).

Phonological awareness- The sensitivity to speech sounds (Burgess, 2002), or the ability to manipulate words at the level of phonemes (Stanovich, 1992).

Phonology (phonemes)– The term referring to “... the speech sounds in our language” (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2004, p. 24).

Pragmatics- “The social context in which language is used” (Antonacci & O’Callaghan, 2004, p. 25).

Pretend Talk- Talk that occurs during the development and enactment of fantasy-play (Smith & Dickinson, 1994).

Progressive approach- A child-centered educational approach that integrates literacy development into content area themes found interesting to children (Morrow, 1997).

Preschool children- Children aged three through five who attend a preschool program.
Receptive language- The skill demonstrated by being able to listen and to understand what is being said (Morrow, 1997).

Scaffolding- Changing the amount and type of help an adult provides as a child improves his or her ability (Vygotsky, 1978). In the context of language development it is the manner in which adults adjust their own language, so that children are able to understand (Bruner, 1983).

Semantics- The meaning attached to language and words. (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2004).

Shared reading activities- A reading activity that allows the students to participate in the story, either by filling in repetitive or predictable words and phrases, or by acting out, retelling or engaging in other activities that extend the story experience (Morrow, 1997).

Syntax- “The structure of language or rules that govern how words work together in phrases, clauses, and sentences” (Morrow, 1997, p. 400).

Vocabulary- “The words students must know to communicate effectively” (United States Department of Education, 2003, p. 17).

Zone of proximal development- The range within which a child can perform with adult assistance (Morrow, 1997).
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

"The development of oral language is crucial to a child's literacy development, including listening, speaking, reading and writing" (Kirkland & Patterson, 2005, p. 391). This literature review will first look at the impact of oral language on reading achievement. The social aspects of language on cognitive and academic performance are discussed along with the relationship between specific components of language and reading development. The environmental characteristics valuable for oral language and reading acquisition are addressed including opportunities for pretend play and book reading techniques. Next, challenges associated with incorporating oral language activities in the preschool classroom are identified. Finally, guidelines for enhancing oral language activities in the preschool setting are provided.

The Relationship Between Oral Language and Reading Achievement

The social aspect of language and its impact on cognitive and academic performance. The brain grows very rapidly in the early years of a child's life. Yao and Hearn (2003) explained that young children are developing rapidly in the areas of cognition, language, and motor skills. Preschool participation provides learning opportunities to facilitate young children's development.
Oral language skills impact cognitive function through the acquisition of social skills. Honig (1999) discussed the importance of language skills in social situations. When conflict arises between peers, the ability to use verbal cues, future-oriented thinking, planning, and if-then reasoning can support students in resolving the conflict. Menyuk (1988) further described language as helping students to problem solve by talking their way through the problem. The opportunity for children to talk with their peers "... introduces them to new perspectives, and facilitates reflection and innovative thinking" (Wollman-Bonilla, 1993, p. 49).

Children's social behaviors and interactions often parallel their academic accomplishments. Positive, supportive relationships appear to be essential for cognitive development (Stern, 1985, as reported in NAEYC, 2001a, p. 3). Children who are not as competent as their peers in the area of oral language often develop difficulties in reading, writing, and other academic subjects (Howard, Shaughnessy, Sanger, & Hux, 1998).

Massey (2004) discussed the quality of experiences children get in school. "Children learn how conversations work by observing and interacting with adults. ... They learn the social aspects of conversation, such as taking turns and attending to the conversational partner, but they also learn grammar and vocabulary" (p. 227). Menyuk (1988)
explained that language allows children to store and retrieve information in all academic areas. "Language is used to learn to read, and reading provides a powerful linguistic window to further knowledge and to recall" (p. 43).

Antonacci and O'Callaghan (2004) described how engaging in conversation with peers leads to a desire to read, as well as growing confidence and ability. Further, a language-rich preschool environment can provide motivation for students, making it more likely they will read for pleasure in later elementary grades (Honig, 1999).

The multidimensionality of oral language in the process of literacy development. The multidimensionality of oral language and literacy skills makes it difficult to determine which aspects of oral language play critical roles in the process of literacy development as well as to identify the most important components to include in classroom instruction. The Reading First program set forth by NCLB provided funding to states using researched-based reading programs. Gambrell (2004) stated that phonemic awareness was emphasized by Reading First while the importance of other oral language components was overlooked. Neglecting various elements of oral language may be detrimental to reading achievement. "It is clear that we need to know more about the relationship between oral language and reading development because of
the important implications for . . . effective instruction for children who are struggling literacy learners" (Gambrell, 2004, p. 1).

There is disagreement over which language skills affect the ability to become a reader and at which point each skill becomes crucial to reading development.

Research conducted over the past two decades paints a complex picture of the skills undergirding the growth of literacy skill during the preschool years as well as an intricate portrait of the associations among these emerging skills and later reading development. (NICHD ECCRN, 2005a, p. 428)

The literature reviewed focused heavily on trying to find out which skills benefited children in the early process of becoming readers and writers versus those language skills which had the most positive impact on later literacy achievement.

There is general agreement that during the early stages of literacy acquisition it is important for students to have phonological or code-related skills (Gambrell, 2002; Lonigan, 2006; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). The NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2005b) included phonological awareness, letter naming, phonological decoding, emergent writing, and print awareness as components of code-related skills.

However, the relationship between oral language skills - described by NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2005b) as expressive and
receptive vocabulary, syntactic and semantic knowledge, and narrative discourse processes such as memory, comprehension and story telling—and early literacy success has been less clearly linked.

Storch and Whitehurst (2002) studied 626 four-year-olds attending Head Start programs looking at the role of code-related skills and oral language skills on reading achievement from preschool through fourth grade. The conclusions drawn by Storch and Whitehurst asserted that code-related skills played an important part in early reading success through second grade. Oral language skills did not have a significant effect on reading ability until third and fourth grades at which time comprehension was not based on word reading alone, but on general verbal ability. Storch and Whitehurst suggested the significance of incorporating activities in preschool that develop code-related skills. However, they also mentioned the importance of not focusing solely on code-related skills as oral language skills such as vocabulary need to be developed from an early age so that readers in later elementary grades will have success when reading and comprehending more complex text. One limitation of this study was its focus on receptive and expressive vocabulary to the exclusion of other oral language components which may have had a more direct impact on reading skills in the early years.

Lonigan (2006) discussed the importance of phonological awareness training. He asserted that students, especially those having
weakness in phonological awareness skills, might benefit from direct instruction in this area. He stated that an emergent literacy curriculum used in the classroom has the potential to enhance achievement. He pointed out that phonological awareness activities can vary and may not always be developmentally appropriate. Lonigan made his conclusions based on studies which revealed that phonological awareness training, including letter knowledge training (Ball & Blachman, 1988; Bradley & Bryant, 1985), and analysis skills paired with synthesis skills (Torgeson et al., 1992), produced larger gains in reading and spelling than engaging in other preschool classroom activities such as story time activities. Some of the gains in phonological awareness training lasted through first and second grades.

Motivated by research that demonstrated significant effects of phonological awareness skills on literacy acquisition, Cooper, Roth, and Speece (2002), "... sought to identify factors that underlie the development of this skill" (p. 400), specifically, whether or not family background factors and oral language skills affect phonological awareness skills in the early years of reading development. A sample population of eighty-eight kindergarteners was given a battery of language and literacy assessments. Results of the study indicated that general oral language skill measured in kindergarten did predict phonological skill through second grade "... beyond the influence of
letter and word knowledge" (p. 411). The researchers further suggested that general oral language skills, including "... semantics, syntax, and morphology, support beginning reading indirectly through their relationship with phonological awareness skills" (p. 413). Additionally, the study advanced the idea that family literacy and other background variables on phonological awareness may be mediated by the development of oral language skills.

The NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2005b) carried out a longitudinal study using 1,137 children to determine whether oral language skills beyond vocabulary played an important role in early reading acquisition. In contrast to the results obtained by Storch and Whitehurst (2002) and Cooper, Roth and Speece (2002), this study demonstrated that oral language categorized broadly to include grammar, vocabulary and semantics played both a direct and indirect role in creating the groundwork for early reading skill. It found that "... early comprehensive language skills are also directly related to first-grade reading competence" (p. 1000). The article emphasized that recent research evidence demonstrated oral language to have an important role in predicting reading success.

Additionally, a study performed by Catts, Fey, Zhang, and Tomblin (1999) found that oral language skills played an important role in both reading comprehension and word recognition independently of
phonological processing skills. This study used a large sample population with characteristics representative of populations found in many classrooms. The results of this study showed that while phonological awareness skills and oral language skills were both predictive of reading difficulties, oral language skills contributed its own unique variance toward word recognition and reading comprehension. This was in contrast to other studies that asserted that oral language skills only played an indirect role in early reading acquisition.

The review of literature suggested disagreement over the role of oral language in early reading development. Perhaps the disparity to some degree existed more in which aspects of oral language and literacy were being measured and compared, how literacy elements such as comprehension were defined, and variances in the populations studied. Gambrell (2004) discussed that early literacy should emphasize vocabulary development, print awareness and phonemic awareness as each of these components become more or less important at different stages in reading acquisition. Moreover, Catts, et al. (1999) asserted a need to expand instruction to include a variety of oral language components as part of reading instruction for poor and developing readers as the contribution of these language components proved to be significant.
Instructional Activities Important in Promoting Oral Language Skills Crucial for Reading Development

Pretend play. "The goal of fostering language development carries diverse meanings for different teachers – meanings that depend on the long-term goals they hold for children" (Dickinson, 1994, p. 185).

Dickinson (1994) stated that oral language differs dependent upon the context in which it is used. Children who are very skilled at conversation may not be skilled at the literacy activities valued in the school setting. Therefore, Dickinson (1994) researched the role of oral language geared toward literacy skill development. He found that in order for students to develop literacy skills, teachers “...need to make special efforts to create activities that support the kinds of oral language skills likely to foster long-term literacy development” (p. 186).

In his research, Dickinson (1994) spent time audio-taping preschool classroom conversations of three- and four-year-olds in a group of low-income, typically developing children over the course of four years. One aspect that was studied included the amount of time children spent in pretend play. In this study, it was discovered that three-year-olds spent more time than four-year-olds engaged in pretend play. The amount of time children spent interacting with other children was strongly related to vocabulary scores in kindergarten along with print skill, story understanding, and the ability to talk about language (p.
However, the research demonstrated that the amount of free play time teachers provided was only loosely related to the amount of time students spent in pretend play (p. 190). The conclusion was drawn that if teachers wanted to ensure that students would engage in a specific behavior, the environment would need to be organized in a fashion that encouraged the behavior.

Dickinson’s (1994) study further found that four-year-olds benefited more from small and large group activities with more teacher input than did three-year-old children. Small group activities including book reading were found to positively impact vocabulary and print skills. Four-year-olds in classrooms where teachers placed emphasis on reading and writing across the curriculum scored higher on vocabulary and story understanding assessments. Direct involvement from teachers played a significant role for building the language and literacy skills of the four-year-old children in contrast to the pretend play with peers that was important for three-year-old children.

Within the context of play, teachers engaged in a variety of conversations with students. Dickinson and Tabors (2001) studied these conversations and discovered that the amount and type of teacher interaction affected kindergarten literacy scores. They found that play was most beneficial to children when teachers did a small amount of talking or used specific types of talk. Specific types of talk found to be
helpful included talk by teachers that engaged their students in conversation during play using rare words, personal narratives, discussion about non-present topics and ideas, and talk that helped to extend play.

Massey (2004) described the phenomenon that many early child educators have discovered. Teachers in the classroom act like magnets for children (p. 229). Students enjoy adult attention in the classroom during playtime. It is important for adults to be available for students during this time. "...interacting with children during playtime provides teachers the opportunity to model language use, initiate conversation, and facilitate pretend talk" (p. 229). Dickinson (1994) emphasized that teachers should remain stationary during play times. He discovered that teachers were more likely to engage in cognitively challenging conversation with students if they remained in one area for an extended time rather than moving about the room.

Further, a study done by the NICHHD Early Child Care Research Network (2000), demonstrated that responsive and sensitive caregiving was related to cognitive and language outcomes throughout the first three years of life. The one-month-old infants of 1,364 families with healthy newborns were enrolled in the study. The child care settings of these infants were followed through age three to determine the impact of the quality, type, and amount of child care on several outcomes,
including language production and language comprehension. Though this study was limited to children aged up to age three, it seems likely that responsive and sensitive caregiving in the preschool setting would benefit the language development of preschool students as well.

*Story reading.* “Book reading has special potential for fostering the type of language development that is linked to literacy” (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001, p. 176). Understanding the importance of oral language development on literacy skills shapes the way story reading is structured in the classroom. Studies (Connor & Slominski, 2006; Dickinson & Smith, 1994) demonstrated that variation in the teacher’s story reading style can significantly impact the language and literacy skills of the students, producing very different results.

Dickinson and Smith (1994) studied the ways that teachers read books to preschool students. They found three distinct reading styles; didactic-interactional, co-constructive, and performance oriented. The didactic-interactional style required students to repeat information from the story or join in reading familiar, repetitive text. This style demanded low levels of cognitive skill. In contrast, the co-constructive and performance-oriented styles of reading required students to engage in extended discussion of the text and to reflect on material by relating it to other texts or experiences. These types of reading styles necessitated a high level of cognitive demand. In the co-constructive style, discussion
occurred before, during, and after the text, while the performance-oriented styled involved discussion following the reading of the text. The questions that teachers solicited tended to be an important factor in prompting complex discussion.

Dickinson and Smith (1994) asserted that students need to actively contribute to the discussion to get the greatest benefit. The analytical talk found in co-constructive and performance-oriented reading was found to correlate with children’s later language growth. They raised the concern that print related skills such as phonemic awareness and letter recognition should not override the importance of “... language abilities that bolster literacy skills” (p. 119). They stressed that other language skills that are less understood and more difficult to measure may be important in the long-term on mature reading skill.

The Dickinson and Smith (1994) study was not alone in determining that analytical talk with children during story reading proved beneficial to language and literacy development. Other reports (Connor & Slominsky, 2006; Dickinson & Tabors, 2002; Kirkland & Patterson, 2005; Lonigan, 2006; Massey, 2004) addressed the importance of story discussion under a variety of different terms including extended discourse, dialogic reading, and cognitively challenging talk. Each of these instructional strategies included the use of discussion about the text in a fashion that required a high level of
cognitive demand by requiring the student to make relations, discuss topics not immediately available from the text, or discuss things that happened in the past or will happen in the future.

Dickinson and Tabors (2002) studied seventy-four children from low-income families from preschool age through seventh grade. They discovered that extended discourse— not just reading the story, but discussing it—as well as the use of non-immediate talk—talk that is not immediately available from the text—were important factors in literacy development. The benefits of receptive vocabulary, narrative production, and emergent literacy in kindergarten were highly predictive of the students’ scores on reading comprehension and receptive vocabulary in fourth and seventh grade. Moreover, students from homes with low language and literacy environments, but preschool settings with high language and literacy ratings scored above average in this area. These findings suggested that students with low family backgrounds who attend quality preschool programs can succeed in the areas of language and literacy.

Lonigan (2006) reported on dialogic reading, an intervention “...developed to enhance children’s oral language skills” (p. 105). This style of reading required the student to become the storyteller with adult support. Lonigan described dialogic reading as a reading event that encouraged students to include more complex story elements as their
language skills become more developed. This story reading style demonstrated larger gains than conventional picture book reading.

Agreeing with researchers who stressed the importance of dialogic reading interactions, Massey (2004) emphasized the importance of carefully planning these reading events. He believed that through careful planning, instruction could be optimized to include more complex thought and language. Massey (2004) asserted:

Teachers tend to act as stage managers by providing direction to students, but do not always get into deeper levels of conversation and abstract thinking that could be experienced by making predictions, discussing vocabulary, analyzing the plot, or delving into character motivations. (p. 228)

Massey believed in the importance of devoting time to cognitively challenging talk. He asserted that book reading is a natural part of the day where teachers can accomplish this task.

Clearly, teachers have a difficult role in understanding the complex relationship between language and literacy, though it is important in providing an optimum learning experience. Dickinson and Tabors (2001) asserted that “... efforts to support early literacy development must not have an overly singular focus on print and print-based activities to the detriment of providing rich opportunities for oral language development” (p. 251). Scheduling opportunity for social interaction, the use of high-
quality play activities, language and literacy knowledge, and teacher approach are all key elements to instruction.

Challenges of Incorporating Oral Language Activities in the Preschool Classroom

"Oral language skill should be an integral part of reading instruction beginning in preschool and throughout elementary school" (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002, p. 944). Ideally, preschool classrooms would typify this statement; however, barriers exist that can prevent this from becoming a reality.

**Time.** Time is one major consideration in incorporating oral language activities in the preschool classroom. Research has demonstrated a correlation between the number of hours per week children attended preschool and learning the alphabet and letter-word recognition skills (Connor, Morrison, & Slominski, 2006). Many preschools operate only a few days each week with teachers trying to fit in as many learning opportunities as possible.

The development of oral language, which ultimately impacts all aspects of curriculum, has been relegated to a more incidental by-product of many classrooms, in order to allow time to drill children on test items. Additionally, as curriculum is pushed down into the primary grades, teachers feel the need to spend time
on academic content, rather than allowing children opportunities to build language. (Kirkland & Patterson, 2005, p. 391)

The importance of language skills was stressed by Montie, Xiang, and Schweinhart (2006) who emphasized that children display greater language growth in classrooms where teachers rank language skills among the most important skills for children to learn. In classrooms where the primary focus is academic content, language growth may be modest or nonexistent.

Harris (1992) referred to a statement made by Jerome Bruner, a well-known psychologist, "Bruner's original-and most important-insight was that children learn about language in the highly familiar context of social exchanges with caretakers" (p. 27). For teachers, spending quality time in conversation with students can be a difficult task. Teachers are often busy managing behavior, giving directions, praising children for good behavior, and most frequently obtaining items to set the stage for play (Kontos, 1999). Massey (2004) discussed the lack of opportunity for children to share explanations and ideas, which are considered cognitively challenging conversations.

Teacher approach. Teachers and administrators alike may differ on views of best practice. "We found that the use of preschool curriculum that blended a teacher-directed, basic skills approach with child-initiated learning activities was most consistently and strongly associated with
child outcomes measured between kindergarten entry and high school completion (Graue, Clements, Reynolds, & Niles, 2004, p. 25). Dickinson and Tabors (2002) discovered that more predictive than the classroom environment on language and literacy is the nature of the teacher-child relationship. The types of conversations found in the classroom were an important variable in literacy growth. Massey (2004) described the teacher's primary role as being available to students at playtime. Though it may prove difficult to *sit still* with a classroom full of students who have their own needs, Dickinson (1994) found that teachers are two to three times more likely to engage in cognitively challenging conversation with children when they are stationed in one area, rather than circulating around the room during play.

Researchers have criticized some of the interactions that occurred in the school settings (Menyuk, 1995). For example, children are often required to sit quietly for long periods of time without the opportunity to participate (Mishler, 1975). Kalmar (2008) commented that the view held by some teachers and administrators is that a quiet classroom is a place where learning occurs. "Conversation is seen as noise rather than a sign of learning" (p. 88). When teachers primarily utilize direct teaching methods and address comments and questions to the whole class, learning is minimized. Montie, Xiang, and Schweinhart (2006) made clear that whole group activities are not able to capture each child's interest,
or suit their learning ability. Children need the opportunity to explore on their own. Adult-child interactions where activities are not adult-centered support language growth for children.

**Student characteristics.** Student characteristics differ in many ways including diversity of language and life experiences, which include socioeconomic status, language abilities, and cultural backgrounds. The responsibility of meeting the needs of each diverse learner can be overwhelming. "Teachers face a challenge to meet the individual needs of each language learner, as well as discerning which methods work most effectively in enhancing language development" (Kirkland & Patterson, 2005, p. 391).

"A classroom of lively young children... is a community full of distinctly individual emerging human beings from divergent home cultures" (Greenberg, 1998, p. 68). Teachers have little or no control over the experiences a child has before entering preschool. As Hart and Risley (2003) explained:

So much is happening to children during their first three years at home, at a time when they are especially malleable and uniquely dependent on the family for virtually all of their experience, that by age 3, an intervention must address not just a lack of knowledge or skill, but an entire general approach to experience. (The Importance of Early Years section, para 1)
Children enter school with varying levels of language skill (Kirkland & Patterson, 2005). The type of instruction used may depend on a child's vocabulary and emergent reading skills when entering preschool (Connor, Morrison, & Slominski, 2006).

Dickinson and Tabors (2002) stated that “... children living in poverty are less likely to become successful readers and writers” (p. 11). Other research discovered that first graders from higher socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds knew twice as many words as children from lower SES backgrounds (Graves, Brunetti, & Slater, 1982; White, Graves, & Slater, 1990). Voluntary readers, those who choose to read for pleasure or information, tended to come from middle- and upper-class families (Morrow, 1983, p. 221).

Teachers need to assist language development for all students, especially children with language learning disabilities (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2004). Greenberg (1998) described the situation in which many teachers find themselves. Students with special needs are placed in the classrooms, though the teachers are not trained to work effectively with these students. These students end up “... socially excluded and educationally neglected” (p. 73).

Further compounding the challenges presented to teachers is increased language diversity described by Kirkland and Patterson (2005):
The diversity of cultures in our school presents additional challenges for teachers as they become understandably perplexed related to meeting the need for appropriate oral language activities for English Language Learners (ELL), as well as children whose primary language is English. (p. 391)

The teacher is a *key player* in creating an early childhood environment for second language learners (Garcia, 1997). Antonacci and O'Callaghan (2004) described teachers as requiring a consistent effort to assist second language learners in language in literacy development. Barriers listed by Cirino, Pollard-Durodola, Foorman, Carlson, and Francis (2007) in meeting the needs of culturally diverse learners included: Teachers' lack of understanding regarding language instruction based on information obtained through assessments, difficulty managing and engaging the class while working with a small group of students on a focus skill, knowledge of how to scaffold instruction to meet the needs of each learner, and the teacher's proficiency in the secondary language as well as in English.

*Parent involvement.* Finally, teachers may find it difficult to get parents involved in their child's literacy education. “Teachers need to view parents as partners in the development of literacy” (Morrow, 1997, p. 68). Teale (1984) revealed that children who become early readers were those that were read to regularly by parents or someone in the home.
Story readings encourage children to respond with questions and comments which become more complex over time (Morrow, 1997).

"The success of the school literacy program frequently depends on the literacy environment at home" (Morrow, 1997, p. 55). Helping parents to gain access to children's literature is of utmost importance. Children who showed a high interest in books and reading for pleasure were those with books readily accessible to them at home or who visited the public library (Morrow, 1983). Also Morrow and Tracey (1996) found that these same children were frequently involved in writing activities, but to avail children with these writing activities there must be materials available to them to meet this critical need.
Chapter 3

Guidelines

Forming Guidelines

It is crucial that early childhood educators realize the importance of oral language as part of the reading and writing process. Proficient oral language skills lead to learned literacy skills. Antonacci and O'Callaghan (2004) affirmed, "Being aware that children's oral language is central to their school achievement, teachers do not leave its development to chance" (p. 10). The following guidelines were developed based on a review of the literature to direct early childhood teachers in promoting oral language competence for their students.

1. Teachers should operate a child-centered program.

   Encouraging children to engage verbally works best in a program that values children and their understanding of the world around them. Teachers can give students confidence to communicate their own thoughts and knowledge with the class by being responsive listeners while children share their ideas (Zhang & Alex, 1995). "Teachers can get children talking by tapping into their prior knowledge or experiences, such as having them recount their visits to grandparents, the dentist, the zoo, or the beach" (Kalmar, 2008, p. 91).

   Not all children enter the classroom with the same language skills. Educators need to look at each child individually to provide effective
language instruction. Students whose primary language is one other than English or those who have language learning disabilities face a difficult task. Students should have the opportunity to hear their home language while at school. A strong language base in their native language will help lead to strong language skills in English. Supporting language acquisition among this population involves making language interesting, relevant, and just beyond the child's level of competency (Krashen, 1988).

It is important that children with language learning disabilities develop competence in oral language. "Research shows that children who are lagging behind their peers in oral language competencies develop serious reading and writing problems and are at risk in other academic areas" (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2004, p. 32). Programs that support these students have teachers who are willing to be educated regarding how to serve the needs of all children. Fortunately all children, regardless of their unique situations, can benefit from specific forms of scaffolding in order to achieve language development. This can be done by listening when a child talks, modeling good language use, promoting vocabulary through books read aloud, designing a rich language environment, scaffolding children's attempts at language, and engaging in frequent one-to-one conversation (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2004).
2. Teachers should promote a talk-rich environment.

Through skillful use of the classroom environments, teachers have a major opportunity to support language acquisition. "The benefits of encouraging talk in the classroom are endless" (Kalmar, 2008, p. 92). Clearly, the opportunity to talk frequently will have a positive impact on a child's learning and language skills.

In too-quiet classrooms, children may have to struggle to understand concepts on their own, but in classrooms that value speech, a few words from a classmate or adult can quickly clear up any confusion. . . . Talk serves not only to clear up confusion but also to share interests and ideas, expanding children's vocabulary, knowledge base, and understanding. (Kalmar, 2008, p. 88)

Students should have the opportunity to speak frequently throughout the day in a variety of settings. Speaking in large groups, small groups, one-on-one with the teacher, or in play settings with peers provides practice when they utilize different language skills. "Just as we use language to express a variety of meanings, we also use it for multiple reasons. . . . Therefore, language programs must be balanced, providing children with opportunities to use language for different purposes" (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2004, p. 25). The following terms, from Halliday (1975), distinguish different language purposes, or functions of language.
Instrumental- language used to acquire basic needs and wants
Regulatory- language used to get others to act a certain way
Interactional- language used to form social relationships
Personal- language used to express one's emotions and individuality
Imaginative- language used for fantasy and dramatic play
Heuristic- language used to explore and problem solve, and to ask questions
Informative- language used to teach and impart knowledge

Children who are encouraged to speak in small group or whole group settings in the classroom are developing their expressive language skills (Morrow, 1997). The opportunity for children to speak frequently in peer-to-peer interactions has an impact on later language ability. Montie, Xiang, and Schweinhart (2006) reported on one study that demonstrated that child-to-child interactions were positively related to language scores at age seven in settings where whole group activities were considered less important and used infrequently.

3. Teachers should employ instructional techniques that support oral language development.

Allowing children to talk frequently in the classroom and providing an environment conducive to language learning are extremely important;
however, there are specific behaviors a teacher can do to influence language growth and development.

Foremost, preschool teachers need to provide a balanced approach to language and literacy instruction. Studies have shown that the use of explicit teaching of letters, letter sound, decoding, and phonological awareness through teacher-managed meaning focused activities improves the language and literacy skills of children who begin the school year low in these areas; however, students with a high level of ability in these areas demonstrate growth through the use of child managed meaning-focused activities. Neither direct, explicit language instruction, nor child initiated meaning-focused activities should be used exclusively (Connor, Morrison, & Slominski, 2006).

The inclusion of literacy across all content domains gives students wider exposure to language and vocabulary. This exposure allows for increased language usage in a variety of settings that supports additional language growth. "The most effective teachers in early childhood classrooms promote language development within literacy and across the curriculum" (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2004, p. 10).

Beyond conversation, activities should provide opportunities for children to engage in the following: finger plays, songs, puppets, experiments, and rhyming and language games. These activities give children a chance to use vocabulary and repetitive text, to role play, and
to experiment with words in a way that allows an emotional connection and enjoyment with language (Honig, 1999)

Modeling good language usage is a powerful teaching strategy. Teachers need to be good and responsive models. Listening to others, taking turns in conversation, asking for clarification, being polite, and assisting language growth each play a role. (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2004). In addition to providing opportunities for children to talk, teachers can also model specific language techniques. Honig (1999) described how to encourage self-talk:

Talk about what you are doing for a child or for the group and how your [sic] are doing it: “I am setting out a large piece of collage paper for every child. Now I will give you some pieces to paste on your collage paper.” (p. 4)

Parallel talk was illustrated by Honig when she wrote:

Your words describe what is going on, what children are doing or feeling. . . . As a preschooler fills her pail with wooden beads, say clearly ‘you are filling up the tub with those wooden beads. You are piling up the wooden beads in your tub.’ (Honig, 1999, p. 4)

Modeling self-talk and parallel talk exposes students to vocabulary and gives them an opportunity to organize their thoughts. Children are then able to practice their daily language activities. “This early learning
that occurs in a naturalistic, risk-free environment prior to kindergarten is the basis for all further learning that takes place in school” (McLain & Heaston, 1993, Introduction section, para 4).

Additionally, teachers need to utilize a variety of questioning techniques such as convergent questioning. Requiring a yes or no answer, as well as Socratic questioning, is needed to encourage creativity and reasoning (Honig, 1999). “Asking Socratic, open ended questions is a powerful technique by which adults can stimulate children’s thinking as well as show genuine respect for their reasoning abilities” (p. 6).

Using cognitively challenging words and rare words, including time, space and number words, promotes receptive and expressive language development (Morrow, 1997).

Physics and math are integral parts of a preschool curriculum. Preschoolers love to measure, pour, compare, and count. . . . Talk about what you will do with the children after lunch, or before naptime or soon, or tomorrow or when you have finished a particular activity. (Honig, 1999, p. 10)

Finally, teachers should encourage children to use speech as a vehicle for learning. “From a Vygotskian perspective, language plays a critical role in learning. Indeed, language is considered a mental tool that is used for learning” (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2004, p.19). As children develop their language skills over time, classroom talk can be aimed at
exploring ideas found in texts and sharpening thoughts. “Speaking to learn is the vehicle for increasing and deepening knowledge” (Zhang & Alex, 1995, Teacher as Facilitator section, para 3).

4. Teachers should provide play centers that encourage oral language use.

Center play is a natural, effortless way for children to interact using language. Children often find it necessary to interact with peers in order to assign roles for dramatic play, establish rules for games, make plans for block building, and other language activities (Montie, Xiang, & Schweinhart, 2006). Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren, and Soderman (1998) found that “language used in play is far more complex than that used in regular conversations” (p. 169). Dramatic play in particular produces a large amount of language, as children negotiate roles and rules for play (Kalmar, 2008).

The materials for each center should be thoughtfully chosen. It is important that the items engage the interests of the students and lead to conversation. “A well-stocked classroom offers many interesting items to explore. . . . Teachers make sure there are lots of paper choices and available writing tools, child-size pointers, clipboards, wipe boards and more” (Kalmar, 2008, p. 92). The amount and variety of materials positively impacts language acquisition. Montie, Xiang, and Schweinhart
reported that as the number and variety of materials in the setting increased, so did cognitive performance at age seven.

The drama center should include props and clothing that allow children to perform adult roles. The sentences used during this type of play are often longer and more complex (Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren, & Soderman, 1998). Using dress-up areas and puppets to retell stories encourages all children, including the English language learner, to participate (Kirkland & Patterson, 2005). Further, an area in the room where children can draw and write should be available with a variety of supplies. The classroom library should be prominent with a variety of books that can be checked out and taken home. Kalmar (2008) illustrated the scene:

Talk-rich classrooms feature and display quality books that are well chosen, richly illustrated, and inviting. There are multiple copies of popular books and comfortable seating to encourage reading together. Also on the open-faced shelves are class-made books and photo albums, magazines, even toy and equipment catalogs, to capture children's attention. (p. 92)

Every classroom and play center contributes to literacy when children are talking with other children and are engaging in constructive learning activities (Morrow, 1997). It is essential that preschool teachers utilize centers as tools for language growth.
5. Teachers should engage in storybook reading.

It has generally been accepted, that reading to young children is important to children's later success in school (Teale, 1984). "Once children begin to retell or reenact stories, they construct their link between oral language and literacy" (Kalmar, 2008, p. 89). In retelling stories, students are exposed to complex sentence structure and additional vocabulary. "Thus, story reading and telling provide increased information about all aspects of the language; pragmatic, semantic, lexical, and phonological" (Menyuk, 1995, p. 50). Additionally, as the book gets read again and again, children are able to elaborate more each time it is read, for repeated conversations regarding the text after rereading stories allows for more complex discussion by preschool children than many other activities (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

In choosing stories, utilizing a variety of genres and styles assures that students will be exposed to more language and literacy skills. "It is clear that different types of children's books are associated with different amounts and types of talk" (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001, p. 49). The benefit of trade books was explained by Beck and McKeown (2007): "Such books characteristically present more complex structures and more advanced vocabulary than books children can read on their own in the early primary grades" (p. 252). McLain and Heaston (1993) highlighted the rhythm and patterns of poetry and predictable text
stating that these characteristics allow children to participate better in the reading process.

Cochran-Smith (1984) emphasized the interaction component of story reading. "This sort of framework accommodates a key to understanding nursery-school story readings: finished stories were neither adult performances nor child products. Rather, they were cooperative ventures shaped by a conversational network of adult-child verbal give and take" (p. 145).

In providing the joint topic and focus, the book affords an opportunity for complex, explicit language such as explanations, definitions, and descriptions. The book is also a starting point for facilitating talk about what is not immediately present: past experiences, predictions, and inferences. (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001, p. 35)

6. Teachers should develop partnerships with parents.

The importance of parents in a child's language and literacy development is vital. It was previously stated that the early learning that occurs in a risk-free environment, such as the home, is the basis for all further learning during a child's schooling (McLain & Heaston, 1993). Therefore, developing a partnership with parents is a valuable component of literacy instruction.
Teachers have a responsibility to share with parents, information on the importance of early language opportunities. "Teachers can encourage families to also expand and extend children's talk. The home and the neighborhood may present many everyday opportunities for conversation" (Kalmar, 2008, p. 92). In addition, teachers can provide parents with ideas for everyday practice. As well as sending home books from the classroom library, teachers can create a newsletter that contains words to songs and finger plays from school, questions to ask their child regarding school activities, suggested booklists to be used at the public library, and notification of opportunities for parent involvement (McLain & Heaston, 1993).

A key contribution to a child's language acquisition occurs when parents read to their children. Teachers need to make parents aware of the magnitude to which book reading affects their children. Dickinson and Tabors (2001) stated that they found that literacy was supported in the homes by parents to the extent that measuring the number of books, the time spent in reading to children, and the variety of reading was an indicator of the early literacy skills of their children. Early readers come from families where oral language is valued and literacy is viewed as a source of entertainment (Roskos & Christie, 2000).
Chapter 4

*Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations*

**Summary**

This research study clearly indicates the importance of including oral language activities in the preschool classroom. Britton (1993) advised:

We cannot afford to underestimate the value of language as a means of organizing and consolidating our accumulated experience, or its value as a means of interacting with people and objects to create experience; nor can we, on the other hand, afford to ignore the limits of its role in the total pattern of human behavior. (p. 5)

"When teachers and caregivers possess this disposition toward language, they will place it at the heart of their curriculum, creating one that is simply language based" (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2004, p. 21).

The four questions addressed in this research study are summarized as follows:

1. What is the role of oral language on reading achievement?

   Participating in oral language activities in the preschool years maximizes growth at a time when children’s language is developing rapidly. Children are in a setting where they can learn from adults and peers, leading to language growth as well as social and emotional
development. Vygotsky and Luria (1994) maintained that children can use language to moderate their own behavior.

Language was also viewed by Menyuk (1988) as a tool for further learning and problem solving. A link between language skill and literacy development was discovered. Language was demonstrated to have a positive effect on listening, speaking, reading and writing. The areas of word knowledge, vocabulary, phonological awareness, and grammar were enhanced by preschool participation in these oral language areas.

Disagreement was found over the significance of oral language skills in the early stages of reading development. However, it was generally agreed that skills related to phonological awareness affect the early stages of reading acquisition. It was also agreed that oral language skills related to comprehension, such as vocabulary, semantic knowledge and syntactic knowledge, are related to reading achievement beyond second grade. Certain periods in a child's schooling do not show a strong link between oral language ability in the early years and later literacy achievement; however, the relationship between early language ability and reading success reemerge at different points in a child's school career.

2. What instructional activities are important in promoting oral language skills crucial for later reading development?
Poor language skills were recognized as a primary barrier to school success. Oral language exposure and activities were established to positively impact literacy development. Dickinson and Tabors (2002) stated that children's preschool experiences had a positive effect on language and literacy development measures at the end of kindergarten. Children's exposure to stories, varied vocabulary, and language practice allowed them to make predictions, sound out words, and understand what they had read.

The use of pretend play in the preschool classroom was strongly related to language and literacy scores in kindergarten. Engaging children in conversation through play that involved personal stories, rare words, and talk about non-present topics improved later literacy scores. Pretend play was found to be especially beneficial to three-year-old children while small group instruction with more teacher involvement helped four-year-old students.

A variety of styles of story book reading was found among preschool teachers. Teachers who involved students actively in discussion about the text with high cognitive demand were responsible for bolstering the language and literacy scores of their students. Benefits of story book reading using complex conversation skills continued through the seventh grade.
3. What challenges do educators face when incorporating oral language activities in the preschool classroom?

Preschool teachers find it difficult to include every skill into each school day. Curriculum has been pushed down into the primary grades causing teachers to include extensive content. Spending quality time in conversation has taken a back seat to other classroom responsibilities.

Approaches to teaching vary widely among early childhood educators. Child-initiated instruction, a talk-rich classroom, and small group or individual instruction were favored as opposed to teacher-directed activities, a quiet classroom environment where children sit quietly, and whole group instruction. A lack of opportunity for children to explore, ask questions, and share ideas was shown to impede language growth.

Teachers have little control over the period before a child enters school. Children from a low socioeconomic background have a smaller vocabulary and are less interested in reading than children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Children with language disabilities and language diversity are often placed in the care of teachers with little knowledge on how to meet their needs.

Finally, parent participation in literacy activities with their children is crucial. Encouraging parents to read to their children benefits early
literacy development. Forming a partnership with parents and ensuring access to books is a responsibility teachers face in order to promote language and literacy success.

4. What are guidelines for incorporating oral language activities in preschool?

Guidelines for incorporating oral language activities in the preschool classroom will help to ensure that children receive appropriate language experiences. Teachers are responsible for engaging children verbally. Being available and allowing children to discuss their own experiences in a child-centered setting promotes language development. The guidelines are the following:

1. Teachers should operate a child-centered program.
2. Teachers should promote a talk-rich environment.
3. Teachers should employ instructional techniques that support oral language development.
4. Teachers should provide play centers that encourage oral language use.
5. Teachers should engage in storybook reading.
6. Teachers should develop partnerships with parents.

Children with language disabilities or whose primary language is one other than English have a particularly pressing need to develop language skills. Children who lag behind their peers in language
competency are at risk for developing problems in other academic areas (Antonacci & O'Callaghan, 2004). Designing an environment where children have frequent opportunities to talk, functional print is found around the classroom, and literacy is included across the curriculum are effective strategies for promoting language development.

**Conclusions**

The following conclusions were drawn from this study:

1. Oral language exposure benefits children's development in a variety of skill areas.

2. Oral language is an important link in young children's literacy development.

3. Oral language ability in the early years impacts literacy development in later elementary grades.

4. All forms of language including oral language, listening, reading and writing are interconnected and should not be taught in isolation.

5. Children, including those from diverse family backgrounds, benefit from oral language activities in the preschool setting.

6. The role of the teacher is crucial in creating a talk-rich, literacy-rich environment essential to the development of language and literacy competence.
Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed based on information identified in the literature:

1. Preschool teachers should provide a talk-rich environment that includes: opportunities for children to talk and share throughout the day, the use of questioning techniques that encourage students to think and verbalize ideas that are cognitively challenging, and engagement in frequent storybook reading experiences where children are active participants.

2. Training is needed to help teachers to become aware of the importance and long-term benefits of oral language activities at the early childhood level and how to incorporate language activities into the classroom.

3. Teachers knowledgeable in best practice for children from culturally and economically diverse backgrounds are needed to provide maximum benefit for these students.

4. Parent education offered by the schools should provide information on how to foster oral language competence in toddlers while in their home environment.

5. Further research is needed to more narrowly define and study each component of language and its contribution to literacy success in later elementary grades.
6. Research that leads to methodologies best suited for diverse learners is also recommended.
References


