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The importance of oral language instruction in literacy learning is often misunderstood or overlooked in schools. Even if the importance is grasped, the challenge to make it a reality for many students remains. Teachers need more professional learning opportunities to develop their understandings of speaking and listening and the impact on instruction. They need powerful assessment tools to help them find the starting points for oral language and to guide their instructional decisions.

In the past, the majority of students entering kindergarten had good control of their first language. However, a growing body of evidence now suggests that this is no longer the case. Many students are arriving at school with insufficient language knowledge, whether it be knowledge of English or another language, to support learning. These students provide new challenges for teachers.

Many students arrive at school with insufficient language knowledge to support their learning.

The great majority of students have learned how to learn language before coming to school. However, some may not know as much about language as their peers. They may see little similarity between family-talk and the more formal teacher-student talk of the classroom (Cazden, 2001). Perhaps they speak a different language from their teacher. The teacher’s task in all cases is to help these students forge links between what they can already do with language and the new linguistic challenges of school.

It is important that teachers appreciate how well students have learned to communicate, develop their understandings of the world, and to test these understandings with adults. Every student has had experience using interactions with people and things to match language with what they know of their environment. Unfortunately, teachers often confuse lack of articulation with lack of knowledge or ability. To maximize oral language development, it is important to do the following:
What Is Language?

Language is purposeful. Children learn language and learn about language by using it for their own purposes. The purpose of language is the pivotal aspect of language development. The classroom program should provide students with many language opportunities that serve a variety of purposes, such as formulating ideas, seeking information, expressing opinions, engaging in discussions to relate information, questioning, describing, and persuading.

Language is universal. The language that students bring to school may not be the same as the language used by their teacher or peers, but it is, nonetheless, language. All languages convey meaning, and all are governed by rules, although the particular rules may differ from individual to individual. Therefore, most children in school have managed to grasp the rules of their particular language or dialect.

Language makes learning possible. It is widely agreed that we cannot think without language. Abstract thought requires words as vehicles for thinking. Language enables us to link with the thinking and experiences of others, generate new ideas and concepts, and transcend and expand on our own thoughts.

Oral language develops through use. Young children practice language as they talk to others and to themselves. They experiment with sounds, word order, and meanings, and they need other people to respond to their attempts. Language develops without formal teaching. For the language-deficient student, intervention is needed as a catch-up process.

Language acquisition is usually a rapid process. Children worldwide utter their first words at about one year of age. These words tend to be nouns or verbs derived from the child’s immediate experience. By 18 months, the typical child is speaking in two-word sentences. By age five or six, the child has mastered most of the regularly used syntax of language, and is often speaking in complex sentences. Language rarely develops as a direct result of deliberate instruction. However, for English language learners (ELL) and language-deficient native English speakers, the teacher is faced with the challenge of providing the language experiences necessary to develop proficiency in active dialogue.

The Oral Language and Reading Comprehension Link

Research demonstrates that oral language proficiency is strongly associated with later reading achievement, particularly in the area of comprehension. Prediction studies have shown that children’s performance on vocabulary (semantic) and grammar (syntax) tasks during preschool and kindergarten accounts for a significant part of the differences in their reading skills.
Most children who show signs of early difficulties with vocabulary knowledge and grammatical skills are more likely to exhibit reading difficulties later on. Therefore, teachers should start developing students’ semantic-syntactic proficiency as soon as possible. Specifically, teachers should allocate time for students to discuss, analyze, and reflect on text, including what they write themselves. Oral language instruction, followed by purposeful practice and rich modeling, is key.

Making the link between oral language capacity and reading comprehension is critical to penetrating the “black box” (Elmore, 2004) of reading comprehension. Teachers need to be aware that:

- Students’ receptive oral language ability greatly impacts their comprehension of texts read to and by them.
- Students will have great difficulty comprehending text structures that are equal to or more complex than the structures that they were able to repeat correctly on the Bookshop Oral Language Assessment.
- Instructional language and small group instructional strategies must focus on building students’ oral language capacity.
- Students’ receptive language must progress at levels that are just beyond what they are expected to read with comprehension.

The following chart provides an approximate correlation between oral language structures and the text structures that students encounter in reading. This information alerts teachers to the discrepancies that may occur when students are not achieving the minimum oral language standards but are expected to read grade-level texts with structures beyond their assessed receptive language capacity.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Sample Oral Language Assessment Structure</th>
<th>Sample Text Level Structure</th>
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<tr>
<td>K Year End 0L Standard 1 Score of 7</td>
<td>There are the children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0-9 Range) v5 Year Old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade K End of Year (Test Level A)</td>
<td>Look at the alligator eggs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(What Comes From Egg? Test Level A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 1 Mid-Year (Test Level B)</td>
<td>The girl in the car is waving her hand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4-10 Range) v5 3.5 Year Old</td>
<td>(6-10 Range) v5 Year Old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 1 Mid-Year (Test Level C)</td>
<td>You can get them from a store or from inside a pumpkin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6-10 Range) v5 Year Old</td>
<td>(A Pumpkin Grows, Test Level C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 1 Year End (Test Level D)</td>
<td><em>Perhaps my note has fallen off of the tree and my friend can’t see it, thought Lenny.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The brave fireman showed our class the big red truck.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10-15 Range) v5 Year Old</td>
<td>(Sorry and Thank You, Test Level D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 1 Year End (Test Level E)</td>
<td>Sheriffs protect animals and their young from predators and from unfavorable weather conditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10-15 Range) v5 Year Old</td>
<td>(Aren’t Horses, Test Level E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 3 Year End (Test Level F)</td>
<td>In the 1920s, before the days of electronic media coverage of sports, the fans of most teams did not learn whether their team had won or lost until the next day’s newspaper came out.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 3 Year End (Test Level G)</td>
<td>(The Sport, Test Level G)</td>
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The Role of Oral Language in Early Literacy

Understanding some of the changes that occur in a child’s spoken language, both before and after they enter school, helps teachers support the transition from spoken to written communication. Teachers can help students construct meaning both in texts that students read (comprehension) and texts that students write (cohesive composing) in the early years of school.

It is a widely accepted fact that humans are born with a disposition to speak. In the first years of life, children have a “private language” that is best understood by parents and caregivers. These caregivers are emotionally tied to the children and so understand their private frames of reference and respond to their efforts at communication. Such responses support the child from birth to age three, by which time the child is usually understood by others.

Children who lack special attention from a sole caregiver, or who experience many changing caregivers from birth to age three, may miss out on this nurturing. Children need someone intimately familiar with the world as they see it.
When a child cannot make himself understood, the communication process breaks down; when a listener does not respond, the child’s efforts are not rewarded. Children need to have “conversations” with adults who are willing to devote time to building and supporting the child’s development of their speaking and listening skills.

Young children pass through many discrete phases of language development before reaching school. Through each phase, they are exploring and learning the rules of the language spoken in their world. One such phase is the questioning phase—often the most frustrating for adults. Although the stream of questions seems irrelevant and repetitive to the sophisticated speaker, these questions are part of an unconscious search for more information. “What’s that?” draws a list of interesting nouns. “Why?” usually requires answers with because. Both introduce children to more complex language. It is essential that they have the opportunity to work their way through this stage of development.

Teachers are faced with increasing numbers of language-deficient native English-speakers and English language learners entering school. Some knowledge of the stages of productive oral language development that these students move though is essential. The language-deficient native English speaker is just as disadvantaged as the English language learner. Either they have missed out on the scaffolding of normal language development in the preschool years or they have a specific language difficulty. The teacher without a range of measures with which to assess students’ oral language ability will be working in a vacuum.

Stages of Productive Oral Language Development

The stages of productive language development are relatively predictable. However, both the rate of progress and the areas of growth within each stage are unique to each learner. It is only through targeted assessment and focused instruction that a clearly defined instructional path will emerge. (Critical Learning Instructional Path CLIP [Fullan, Hill, and Crévola, 2006]).

Most trained ELL teachers are familiar with the stages of productive oral language acquisition or development. It is our intention to provide the same knowledge base for all teachers of K–2 students. Based on our work with teachers, the information considered most valuable are the links we have demonstrated between oral language development and reading development, and their subsequent impact on oral language instruction. The Bookshop Oral Language Assessment data provide insights into the level or oral English structures a student can listen to with full understanding (receptive language). The stages of productive oral language development identify the level or oral English structures a student can use in normal speech (expressive language). Knowing that receptive language development precedes expressive language development (in a spiraling manner), we have identified the following links between the two.

1. Pre-Production

English language learners at this stage are often new arrivals who are beginning to make sense of English. They are generally atten-tive within whole class and small group shared reading sessions, where they become familiar with the rhythm and sounds of the language. Listening comprehension is vital at this stage, and use of the Oral Language Assessment helps...
teachers ascertain exactly what structures of oral English used by adults the students understand.

The building of background knowledge, exposure to songs and rhymes, and supportive picture cues are essential resources to students at this stage of development. The components and instructional strategy of the *Let’s Talk About It!* materials support these language-deficient students at this stage of development. It is critical that teachers provide opportunities for all students at this stage to engage in small group and one-to-one language activities that encourage participation. They should celebrate any and all attempts at articulation in a relaxed, supportive atmosphere. *Let’s Sing About It!* provides CDs, song and rhyme charts, and detailed lesson plans for small group shared reading experiences.

2. Early Production

At this stage, students are building confidence in their use of English and engage more freely in discussion and oral production. The songs and rhymes that are part of the classroom repertoire have become more familiar, and students feel comfortable joining in. Additionally, students are beginning to incorporate simple language structures into their day-to-day speech. Once again, teachers should be aware of exactly which structures of oral English students control as they listen to language.

Small group sessions in shared reading, read to, and oral language-reading and writing provide opportunities for true dialogue. As they engage in real conversations, students develop their ability to both listen and respond, and they are free to use simple language structures that reflect their past experiences and those of their peers. Additionally, as students develop a pre-emergent awareness of print, they can focus both on texts that incorporate their own language and on simple published texts. *Let’s Talk About It!* provides explicit and systematic lesson plans to promote oral language development for these students.

3. Speech Emergence

English language learners and language-deficient native English speakers at this stage are increasingly exposed to more complex structures (provided by the model of the proficient English language user) in the course of the discussion. They use these structures with more confidence, however inconsistently.

“My dad told me that he seed a big dog that runned all the way in front of his car.”

They are also more willing to incorporate newly acquired content language as they relate information, formulate ideas, and express opinions. As their level of structural complexity in oral English increases, they are able to recall and retell increased amounts of text read to them, and can confirm and reject predictions with greater confidence. Coupled with basic understanding of print, letter, and word knowledge, their oral English supports the reading of early emergent (A–B) and emergent level texts (C–D).

4. Intermediate and Advanced Oral Language Fluency

Students at this stage of development consistently understand and use more complex oral
for language use: questioning, challenging, persuading teachers and peers, and becoming more analytical.

The types and levels of complexity students encounter in their reading will move their development from emergent/beginning texts (D–G) to transitional and established texts (G–K). Students’ ability to listen to and comprehend language, incorporate more complex structures in their own language, and improve reading comprehension must develop simultaneously, or text comprehension may be hindered.

Promoting Oral Language Development

From birth to age five, a child’s language growth is entirely dependent on what people say—how much they speak to the child, in what language or dialect, and in what manner. The child who is always told to “be quiet” or “ask me later” will soon assume that he or she has nothing worthwhile to say, and will stop offering ideas or asking questions. Too often, teachers find students for whom this has been the predominant pattern of adult interaction prior to school. These students struggle to understand the interactive nature of language and are at an immediate disadvantage in terms of their vocabulary and overall literacy development.

The school environment may be radically different for some students compared to what they experience at home. Language demands at school can place some students in a demanding and stressful situation. The Bookshop Oral Language Assessment provides insights into which students are struggling to understand the instructional language. Once identified, the teacher must assume the role of the primary language nurturer during the school day for these language-deficient native English speakers and English language learners.

Language Modeling

Research has shown that the most effective way to improve language is for children to engage in many conversations with language-proficient adults, who are the most effective role models. Because so many students enter school without having been exposed to proficient language users in any language, the role of teacher becomes even more critical. Modifications to the instructional program and adjustments to classroom language must be made to support all students.

Language Expansion

When parents or caregivers are not sure whether or not they have understood a child, they often repeat some of what the child has said. A child who is learning language often leaves out important words or inflections. The adult, in responding, replaces the missing parts, thus providing a complete grammatical version of what the child wanted to say. This process is called expansion. In normal conversation, a child’s sentences, particularly questions, are in some way reformulated in the adult’s answers. This immediate feedback confirms correct structure.

Most parents spend time listening to what
their children have to say. However, parents who are not child-centered or who operate in chaotic environments often do not allow sufficient time to communicate with their children. As a result, less language expansion occurs. This leaves the child to struggle with the rules of language by trying to make sense of the adult speech around them without any supportive feedback. Teachers who are knowledgeable regarding the deficits that some children have are better able to design an oral language program to meet the needs of individuals.

Testing Language Rules

When adults speak with children, they usually adjust or simplify their language. When they speak among themselves, conversations are more complex. If children are left to decipher the rules for themselves, it becomes a near-impossible task. It is vital that language learners have many opportunities to test the rules of the language they are discovering, with the scaffolding provided by supportive adults. In the preschool years, these opportunities should occur on a regular basis. For the child without exposure to a willing adult, opportunities arise less often and so, too, does the testing of language rules, thus reducing the child’s language acquisition.

Teachers benefit from being aware of the prerequisites of language development and understanding that with students for whom English is difficult or new, the teacher must assume the role of language nurturer. This involves many one-on-one conversations and planned opportunities for discussion in a small group during the literacy block. The teacher’s efforts should never make the student reluctant to offer ungrammatical but expressive attempts at sentence construction. As teachers talk with students, students are able to revise and refine their language. They feel free to experiment and make errors, all the while gaining more control over the complexity of language. When a student presents a sentence, it is an experiment that is being tested. The listener’s response will either verify the attempt or provide a model to refine. If the sentence is understood, then the hypothesis is confirmed—their idea was understood as expressed. If the listener does not understand, the hypothesis is rejected, and a different sentence must be formed.

A language learner’s developing speech has its own grammar. Although the grammar may differ from adult grammar, it is nonetheless a system with its own conventions. For example, when a child says “We goed to the store,” the child has over-generalized the understanding that past events have -ed added. All language learners make errors. However, it is a step forward when the early language learner says “bringed,” “throwed,” or “writed.” This should be celebrated, not corrected, at these earliest stages of language production.

Young language learners seek patterns in language and try to follow these patterns in their oral production. Teachers of young students benefit from knowing why students speak as they do, as they can use this knowledge to inform both the classroom language program and specific language intervention. Teachers need a full picture of what skills students control. Both receptive and productive language must be examined in tandem so as to formulate the best way forward.

Language Feedback

Language instruction is most effective in context. That is, language feedback should be related to content rather than simply a grammatical correction.

“We runned and runned all the way to the top of them hills.”

“Wow! That is amazing. You ran and ran all the way to the top of those hills?”

The power of this process lies in the teacher’s ability to provide the correct grammatical structures as feedback. It is vital that teachers have specific data to understand a child’s
level of oral language development, as this provides the guidance for knowing when feedback is appropriate and when explicit comment is required. If the successful use of language best serves the language learner’s needs, the corrective approach to language development is, conversely, one of the least empowering—especially for students at the earliest stages of speech emergence. If the student’s language gets attention only when it is incorrect, how will he understand that all the other things he says are correct?

Once students have become more confident with their English language use and have firmly established control of many complex structures, teachers can provide explicit feedback when over-generalization or approximation has become a pattern. It is important that the feedback for students at this more advanced stage of development is still positive and constructive in its explicitness.

**Valuing Language**

Entering school places heavy demands on existing language skills as students learn new concepts relating to the school culture. Teachers often encounter students who have made a conscious decision not to communicate in the classroom. These students may have uncomfortable experiences in the classroom setting with the demands of “school talk.” They may have decided it is easier and safer not to participate—this way, they can’t make a mistake. Teachers must value what each child brings to school and establish a trusting relationship with each one.

Sometimes children acquire a particular way of talking that may be quite different from standard English. It is reflective of a particular speech group and identifies them with that group. It is personal and valuable, not simply incorrect English. All students’ language should be valued, never criticized because it differs from their peers’ or teacher’s. Powerful teachers will work to add standard English to the speech of these students, to be used in some oral situations and to open a world of books to them. It is vital that teachers empower students, not dismantle or demean what they have learned in the years prior to school.

**Language-Producing Activities**

Interesting or stimulating environments do not automatically enhance language acquisition. Teachers should ask themselves: Does the activity bring the student into conversational exchanges with a mature speaker of English? What opportunities exist for the student to have one-to-one conversations with an adult who can relate to the student’s frame of reference? The challenge lies in the teacher’s ability to arrange for language-producing activities in which adult and student must communicate in order to cooperate.

The provision of regular daily opportunities for students to talk to an adult is essential if language development is to develop at the rate necessary for students to engage in reading with understanding and in text creation that is meaningful and cohesive.

Language-producing activities should stimulate both a flow of ideas from the student and personal responses from the helper or teacher. In *Bookshop*, two innovative language-development resources foster language production for language-deficient native English speakers as well as ELL students:

- **Let’s Talk About It!** includes systematic and explicit lesson plans, photo charts, and sentence strips that foster opportunities for language development with peers and a proficient English-speaking adult in a small group setting.
- **Let’s Sing About It!** includes lesson plans, illustrated song or poem charts, and engaging music on CD to stimulate oral language production in a small group shared reading setting.
Understanding Oral Language Assessment and Instruction

Bookshop Oral Language Assessment provides powerful and important information about what students understand of instructional language. Administration of the assessment allows teachers to observe firsthand their students’ capacity to understand the more complex structures of oral English used every day by the adults around them. This assessment looks at students’ receptive language. The raw score can be correlated to appropriate instructional strategies that support oral language development by using the Key Assessments—Reading Stages Chart on page 40. This diagnostic tool assists teachers in adjusting instructional language so that students struggling to understand and use English will be supported.

Many media exist to help teachers create appropriate language experiences for their students. Music and song provide excellent stimuli. Video shorts, photographs, picture chats, and book experiences provide additional options for stimulating language. Class activities and significant events are also useful, though a stimulus does not have to be a real, firsthand event to qualify as an experience. Students need not actually make a trip to a zoo in order to think about such an experience and address it through language. Imaginary experiences, or experiences relayed as second-hand knowledge to students, can be brought to life through talk—through the experience of
language and a more knowing, English-proficient other. Some initial assessments teachers can use to determine the oral language capacity of all K–2 students follow.

**Oral Language Observation**

Teachers must attend to students who do not want to talk to them or who have difficulty understanding what their teacher is saying. These students may be at-risk.

Observant teachers are aware of the needs of their students. When equipped with powerful assessment tools, they can provide the necessary scaffolding to support students’ language growth. This means daily allocation of time when teacher and student engage in conversation. The at-risk language student who has difficulty responding spontaneously—often the most difficult student for the teacher to connect with—is often overlooked for the more responsive, verbal child. At-risk students may have been denied a supportive caregiver who talked to and with them during the formative years. It is vital that at-risk language students benefit from a systematic and explicit language program that analyzes their strengths and weaknesses, and gradually assists them in developing the oral language capacity to both engage in conversation and make meaning of their reading.

Language observation assessments also indicate students who need more opportunities and extra time in which to develop their oral language capacities. The following areas can be assessed.

**Language Structure (Syntax)**

The Bookshop Oral Language Assessment is designed to be administered at the beginning, middle, and end of the year to track change over time. Students are asked to repeat a set of graded sentences. Responses are recorded by the teacher, who then analyzes the structures used by students in their responses by comparing them to what students were asked to repeat. Refer to the Bookshop Assessment Manual for detailed assessment procedures.

**Inflections (Word Endings)**

Learning the rules for forming plurals and verb tenses, for relating verb forms to the person who is speaking, and for applying appropriate pronouns is not merely a matter of memorization. It is an actual process. When students enter school, this process is still in the formative stages. It is essential that teachers are aware of students for whom this is an area of difficulty. Students who do not understand these inflections may lose meaning when reading, as they are not noticing their errors. The use of reading records as well as close analysis of the Bookshop Oral Language Assessment will reveal any inconsistencies or deficits in this area.

**Articulation**

For students entering kindergarten or for whom English is new or difficult, it is important to check sentence structure, vocabulary, the rules for changing word endings, and the student’s control over the sounds of English. Learning to pronounce the sounds of a language is a gradual process that takes place over the first seven or eight years.
Oral Language Assessment

About the Assessment

Language development is a prerequisite for flexible, abstract thinking. Proficiency in receptive oral language is a foundational element of both reading comprehension and of the correct use of language structures when composing texts in writing.

The Bookshop Oral Language Assessment measures a student’s receptive language. It provides a quick and easy way to determine what structures of oral English students understand when spoken by adults. This assessment is appropriate for all students in Kindergarten through Grade 3. The series of sentences in this assessment reflect some of the structures of adult English language that are common to school and classroom settings. The sentences increase in complexity within each set; sentences in Sets 2 and 3 use the identical five language structures as in Set 1, but with increasingly complicated phrases and clauses.

As students repeat sentences of increasing structural complexity, the teacher notes any substitutions, omissions, transpositions, or expansions of words and phrases that occur when the sentences become too difficult. These observations then become the basis for intensive oral language development support. The observations need to be used to adjust the language used when working with these students in small groups or one-to-one.

The Oral Language Assessment use of repeated sentences is more than a test of short-term memory. Research tells us that repeated sentences are an effective test of language structure. One way to learn how much of the structure of adult speech a child has learned is to have the child listen to a sentence and repeat it.

The sentences in the assessment have a range of English syntactic structures. By asking a child to repeat the sentences, a teacher can quickly learn the child’s degree of control (see table on page 15). Teachers do not simply mark these efforts correct or incorrect—it is the analysis of how the child handles the sentences he or she is unable to repeat that provides important insights.

The language structures included in this assessment are vital for students to understand if they are to make meaning of classroom instructions, discussions, and stories that are read to and by them, and if they are to construct meaningful text. In general, students whose first language is English should be able to repeat all 15 sentences correctly in every detail by the age of six.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Minimum Standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>End K</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid 1</td>
<td>15*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Any student scoring below 15 after mid-Grade 1 will need a close analysis of their errors and language patterns.

What Is Needed

- 1 copy of the Oral Language Assessment (page 39) for each child to be assessed
- A quiet location, out of the hearing of children who will be tested later

How to Administer

1. Be sure you have the student’s full attention throughout this assessment. If attention should wander, gently redirect the student back to the task before moving to the next sentence.
2. Read each sentence to the student using the phrasing indicated by the bold italics. Speak clearly, with natural tone and pace.
3. Familiarize the student with the testing procedure. Tell the student, I am going to read some sentences, and I would like you to say exactly what I say. Let’s begin.
   - Sally is walking to her house.
     Very good. Let’s try this one.
   - Where are you going?
     Okay. Say these . . .

Procedure: Begin at Set 1. Administer the sentences in order from 1 to 5. Record the student’s repetition of the sentences directly on the scoring sheet, much as one would record a reading record. Continue to Set 2 and Set 3 in the same way.

Scoring: Score one point for each sentence repeated correctly in every detail.
Understanding Oral Language Assessment and Instruction

Interpreting the Data to Inform Instruction

The Bookshop Oral Language Assessment can be used for a variety of purposes. As teachers become familiar with the tool, they will also become more aware of the language of their students. It is recommended that all students in Kindergarten be administered the assessment as early as possible in the school year. In Grade 1, the assessment should be used for all students new to the school or for whom there are concerns regarding language. In Grades 2 and 3, the Oral Language Assessment is recommended for all ELL students as an initial assessment, and for all students when there is concern regarding their language (receptive) acquisition. This may include students for whom reading comprehension is lagging behind text accuracy. This would hold true for all students for whom English is a second language for up to five years after they first begin to learn English. This means that the Oral Language Assessment can be used with students older than six years of age if the start of English-language learning has been delayed.

Teachers often discover other areas of concern as a result of the concentrated assessment. Students with hearing problems may be identified sooner than through general observation. This allows for more immediate and effective changes in instruction, adjusting it to the students’ special needs to attain the best results in their learning. Speech problems are also detected early as a result of the intensive assessment time spent with students in a one-to-one setting.

Once assessments are scored, teachers can use the assessment data to learn about the students. The following table helps in making quick grouping decisions based on the oral language scores.

**Oral Language Assessment Scoring Rubric**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Raw Score</th>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–5</td>
<td>This student has limited control over the structures of oral English. This student is unable to follow simple instructions or a story read in class, e.g. during read aloud or shared reading. This student needs intensive small group oral language intervention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–10</td>
<td>This Grade 1 student is at-risk and requires intensive small group intervention in both oral language-reading and writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–14</td>
<td>This Grade 2 or 3 student is at-risk and requires intensive small group intervention in both oral language-reading and writing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Students who score 0 (zero) on the assessment are displaying little or no understanding of the basic structures of oral English. These students come from varying language backgrounds—they are both native English-language speakers and ELL. They are not operating as English-language users, nor do they have the language knowledge necessary to understand the classroom instructional language. These students need daily intentional one-on-one interactions with English-proficient adults.

- Students who score 1–4 are developing an understanding of language structures that preschool children with English as a first language naturally acquire.
A score of 5 indicates the skills of an average 5-year-old native English-language speaker.

A score of 10 indicates the skills of average 5.5-year-old native English-language speakers.

A score of 15 indicates the skills of an average 6-year-old native English-language speaker.

The implications of the above become a matter of urgency when related to the at-risk language learner in Grades 2 and 3, whose chronological age is closer to 8 or 9 years. It is important to remember these age equivalents when looking to group and instruct students within these score ranges. Implications for reading comprehension and writing are discussed on pages 24 and 26. ELL students with limited exposure to English will generally score lower than most native English speakers. This is to be expected. What is important to remember are the implications for learning. These students are exposed daily to English-speaking adults, since instructions are given in English most of the time. Helping these students understand the language of instruction is vital.

Implications for Instruction

Once the teacher has administered the Oral Language Assessment to those students who require it, the next step is to provide extra, intensive oral language activities and intervention. The lowest-scoring 25% in Kindergarten and Grade 1 and all at-risk students in Grades 2 and 3. It is important not to rely solely on unstructured observations and unconfirmed hunches when compiling an accurate assessment of the oral language development of students in their first years of school. A number of steps must be followed in order to provide a classroom program that meets the needs of these students.

1. Analyze the data.

- Look carefully at the actual record taken of the assessment.
- Look at language structures or parts that were too difficult for the student to repeat correctly.
- Look for patterns in the errors. Create a hypothesis of what the student does when he or she repeats difficult sentences. Do certain errors or patterns occur with certain sentence types?
- Look for omissions, substitutions, and expansions.
- Are some of the errors due to difficulty with vocabulary? If this is so, try substituting known words for unknown words, keeping the same structures. See if this improves the student’s performance.

2. Provide competent adult models.

- Provide multiple opportunities to engage in interactions with adults. To create a frame of reference, these adults need to get to know the students.
- Adult models initiate conversations with students that gradually extend their language by using only slightly more complex structures than students are capable of achieving independently. This is important. If the adult model is using complex sentences, students will not understand. If they cannot understand the language, they will not be able to use it themselves.

3. Align the instructional language.

- Identify which sentences the student can repeat correctly. Then use these sentences
Structural Elements (Graduating in Complexity) in Oral Language Assessment Forms

The Form 1 sentence in each set contains the grammatical constructions identified below. However, there is increasing complexity within each element as one progresses from Set 1 to Set 3. This is true throughout the sentence forms. For example, each Form 2 sentence contains the same structural elements as every other Form 2 sentence, but sentence complexity is continually increasing.

**Form 1 sentences** contain a *noun phrase* for the subject, some form of the verb ‘to be,’ and a *simple phrase* that contains no object.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb to be</th>
<th>Simple Phrase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set 1:</td>
<td>The puppy’s tail is</td>
<td>curly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 2:</td>
<td>That red bike over there used to be</td>
<td>my uncle’s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 3:</td>
<td>(You is implied) Be</td>
<td>ready to come inside when the bell rings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Form 2 sentences** contain a *noun or noun phrase* for the subject, a *verb phrase*, and a *direct object* (additional noun phrase).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Direct Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set 1:</td>
<td>Mommy is baking</td>
<td>a cake.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 2:</td>
<td>The girl in the car is waving</td>
<td>her hand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 3:</td>
<td>The car and the truck were carrying</td>
<td>some large boxes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Form 3 sentences** contain a *noun or noun phrase* for the subject, a *verb or verb phrase*, and an *indirect object* and a *direct object* (two noun phrases).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Indirect Object</th>
<th>Direct Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set 1:</td>
<td>The teacher told</td>
<td>them</td>
<td>a story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 2:</td>
<td>(Over the weekend) Jane brought</td>
<td>us</td>
<td>some cookies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 3:</td>
<td>The brave fireman showed</td>
<td>our class</td>
<td>the big red truck.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Form 4 sentences** contain an *adverb (here/there)*, then an *irregular verb*, then the *subject*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adverb</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set 1:</td>
<td>There are</td>
<td>the children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 2:</td>
<td>Here comes</td>
<td>the machine that digs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 3:</td>
<td>There go</td>
<td>the big holes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Form 5 sentences** contain a *pronoun or noun phrase* for the subject, then a *verb or verb phrase*, then an *object*, then one *additional structure*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb (Phrase)</th>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Additional Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set 1:</td>
<td>She’s eating</td>
<td>her lunch</td>
<td>very slowly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 2:</td>
<td>The bird built</td>
<td>a nest</td>
<td>high in the tree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set 3:</td>
<td>My friend likes to eat</td>
<td>ice cream</td>
<td>when it’s very hot out.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

to guide the level of instructional language.

- Engage in simple conversations with these students during small group instruction. Ensure that the language used is not too complex for them.
- Begin with what the students want to talk about. This allows opportunities to expand students’ language by encouraging their use of sentence structures.
- Develop some practice sentence structures for these students. Quick five-minute exercises repeating slightly more difficult sentence structures help students hear and understand increasingly more complex language.
- Become more familiar with sentence types, and remember that problems occur for these students when too many challenges are presented at one time.
- Remember to limit the number of words, phrases, clauses, and embellishments used in the early stages of a language program.
Encourage flexibility in students’ use of a variety of simple sentence structures, such as imperative sentences: *Come and watch me on the swing*, and short declarative sentences: *Emily is riding the bike*.

- Check on progress at regular intervals of no more than 12 weeks. This is especially important for assessing the value of the intervention. A cumulative record should show an increase in mastery of more complex sentence structures.

**4. Make links between oral language capacity and reading comprehension.**

- Remember that students’ receptive oral language capacities greatly impact their ability to comprehend the texts they read.
- Students will have great difficulty comprehending text structures that are equal to or more complex than the most complex structure they have repeated correctly on the assessment.
- Instructional language and small group instructional strategies must focus on building students’ oral language capacity. In this way, their receptive oral language should progress at complexity levels just beyond what they are expected to read.
- For more information regarding applying oral language to reading, see page 24.

### Oral Language Instruction

As teachers work to develop students’ oral language, they need to encourage students to say what they think. It is a time to look, think, and talk about what each individual understands or feels about the current experience, topic, or stimulus. It is a time for teachers to help students think logically, arrange ideas, solve problems, and draw conclusions. It is a time to help students explore, understand, talk, and read about their social and physical world. It is a time for expression, both rational and emotional.

Exploring oral language as a precursor to reading presents an opportunity for teachers to help students establish links between the real world and the symbols of language. The purpose of working with oral language as part of the reading acquisition stage is to help students understand that their thoughts can be talked about, written about, and read.

The natural outcome of the oral language experience is writing and reading. Teachers help students talk about their experiences (which may not necessarily be real or firsthand); they record students’ ideas; students and teacher read back the stories or ideas; and together they build a library of texts for rereading based on students’ own thoughts and experiences. It is essential to provide opportunities for learners to focus on their own thoughts and express them without fear of failure. Teachers support these oral attempts and model correct structures. Opportunities to explore and develop language are achieved through the ability of the teacher to create stimuli that students can think about and express through language. *Let’s Talk About It!* works in precisely this way.

### Scaffolding Language Learning

A scaffold is only helpful if it changes as the learner’s competence grows, just as a physical scaffold is raised higher and higher on a building as construction proceeds.

The peek-a-boo game (Snow, 1981) is a clear example of the role of a scaffold that allows the child to gradually take over more of the task. In many studies of this type of childplay, it has been seen that the adult acts out the script, but the child gradually takes over more and more of what the adult has previously been responsible for. The classroom teacher should be mindful of opportunities that exist within the instructional program for this type of careful scaffolding to occur. Guided instructional reading is a strategy that is structured so that the scaffold is gradually dismantled as the student becomes a more proficient reader. The *Bookshop Reading Program* lesson plans...
for Level A texts provide a structured dialogue model for early-emergent readers whose language skills are still developing. The lesson plans for Level M texts provide less structure for student discussion; teacher prompts are more open-ended and student-directed.

Addressing Language Deficiencies: A Dual Approach

Students with deficits in oral English have difficulty learning because they have to learn many new things about language at the same time. When students enter school with language deficits, a dual approach is required.

1. One-to-One Conversations

Schools must first know how many students fall into the oral language at-risk category. They then have to ensure that these students have daily opportunities to engage with adults in two-way conversations—this is the first step to oral language acquisition. Students who have language deficits struggle to read and comprehend text. This is a critical deficit as they progress through their schooling. Speech and language expertise is available and should be sought for students who have profound language deficits and production problems. But the general population of language-deficient students can be assisted by the classroom teacher and the instructional program, and does not require the intervention of the speech and language therapist. However, students’ receptive language must also be assessed and then developed ahead of the expressive language.

Teachers help by keeping students’ needs in mind and by creating opportunities for conversation. Having students with low language proficiency always working with other low-language students will not improve their oral language acquisition. They must have a sophisticated model of adult English in order to develop the language they need to use in their speech.

Teachers of language-deficient students need assistants (English-proficient parent helpers and volunteers) to engage in conversation with small groups of students. Teaching aides or classroom helpers should be trained to work with these language-deficient students. Parents also need to be informed of the importance of language in the home, which can be difficult when the home language is not English. In this case, it is important for families to engage in conversations with their children so that they become proficient in their language. The transition to a new language is easier for children who are orally proficient in their first language.

Although teacher language provides a good model for the language learner, it is not enough. Language learners need opportunities to form their own statements, to construct their own hypotheses that “this is the way you can say it in English,” to actually say it, and to discover from the response whether or not they have been understood. No amount of listening will improve their language if they are not actively engaged in both speaking and listening with the support of a proficient adult model.

The one-to-one opportunities that are provided for struggling learners within the classroom are vital to the sustained development of language and learning. The close, trusting relationship encourages risk-taking and trial-and-error that is often impossible for low-language students in whole class interactions.
2. **Small Group Language Instruction**

The second modification to the program of students with low-language proficiency is to include regular opportunities for small group instruction in read to, shared reading, and oral language-reading and writing.

- **Small Group Read To**

Books that are suitable for good or average readers contain language that is too difficult for the language-deficient student. Simpler texts with predictable sentence structures are required for the small group read to instructional strategy. Sentences should be of the same type as the ones students use in their speech. This does not mean, however, that sentences are so reduced as to be unfamiliar to the language learner. For example, sentences such as “Look, Mary, look!” are often found in highly controlled texts.

But students for whom English is new or difficult often find these contrived sentences difficult to comprehend or relate to. It bears little resemblance to their personal speech patterns.

For read to with students in Kindergarten and Grade 1 who score 0–4, select books at Levels A and B. For K–1 students scoring 5–7, select books at Levels B–D. For read to with students in Grades 2–3 scoring 0–4, select appropriate high-interest books at Levels E and F. For 2–3 students scoring 5–7, select high-interest books at Levels F and G. Due to their maturity level, age-appropriate interests, and to the consideration that students’ low-language levels may only recently have been diagnosed after years of exposure to high text levels, it would be difficult and devastating to back them down to levels that more closely match the level of oral-language structures indicated by the assessment.

- **Small Group Shared Reading**

Small group shared reading enables students to join in the reading of a text with a teacher or another experienced reader. The text is enlarged so that both students and teachers can explore the “visual intimacies” of print. Shared reading provides the visual scaffolding for the language-deficient student who needs the extra support of close proximity to text and illustrations. The teaching focus from that day’s whole class shared reading session would be repeated for low-language students, who benefit from the high degree of interaction and support as they revisit the focus.

- **Small Group Oral Language-Reading**

Language generation is the primary instructional focus at the outset of the oral language-reading and writing sessions. The goal is to stimulate as much oral language as possible, not to correct grammar, as this
inhibits free discussion and language development. Eventually, students’ dictated thoughts provide the best reading material, as they have created the text. What students produce, they can readily anticipate and recall. This provides the fluency that gives them time to attend to cues and to relate to several visual cues to one another.

For the language-deficient student whose reading is still developing, it is the language that assists the reading, not vice versa. While competent readers learn more about language through more complex texts, this is not the case for the language-deficient student. As they learn to read, pre-emergent and early-emergent readers match the text to what they remember of oral language. If their language development does not match their chronological age, the texts read to them must be low enough for them to predict and recall. Let’s Talk About It! provides explicit lesson plans that both support instruction and help teachers attend to the motivating, recording, and rereading of student-generated texts.

In the instructional strategy of oral language-reading, students dictate a story as the teacher records their thoughts. At first the teacher must be an accurate scribe and record exactly what students say. But as students move toward book reading, teachers should see increasing control of simple English structures by those students who began at low levels.

The stories that students dictate may have language that is:

**Grammatical:** The boy is riding his bike.

**Flexible** (they change the story as they read it):
This is a boy on his bike.

**Ungrammatical:** That there boy ride the bike.

**Spontaneous speech:** Well, it’s a boy and there is a bike with wheels and he’s riding it.

**Formal statements:** Here is the girl.

**Full of the excitement of telling:** They all runned and runned as fast as they could!

**Captions:** Boy’s bike

It is important that teachers of young students understand and analyze the types of sentences their students use in their dictated stories. All too often, teachers focus on correct form rather than using what students produce as a record of their development. The records that are collected on a daily basis as teachers work with these students provide valuable ongoing assessment data. Change over time can be observed if these records are dated and kept in a log. For the older at-risk language learner in Grades 2 and 3, the small group oral language-reading lesson plans in Let’s Talk About It! provide age-appropriate language development strategies. These lesson plans are designed to support students as they develop the language knowledge necessary to read and comprehend more difficult texts.

### Small Group Oral Language-Writing

Once students have been immersed in oral language-reading and are more readily articulating their thoughts and ideas, it is time to simultaneously work on oral language-writing. This does not mean that students must be articulating large quantities of grammatically-correct dialogue. Rather, it means that they have gained enough confidence to share their ideas and listen to the thoughts of others.

The goal of the oral language-writing instructional strategy is for students to use their newly-developed skills of articulation with the skills of recording their own thoughts. Pre-emergent and emergent writers are supported by the teacher, with students recording only what they know (a single letter, their names, and so on). The teacher does the greatest part of the recording at these early stages. The change over time will be evident in how much is actually recorded by students.

The Let’s Talk About It! lesson plans for oral language-writing in Grades 2 and 3 provide many examples of how to use the instructional strategy with students who are older and who, therefore, may have a larger bank of high-frequency writing words. These students are more able to record their ideas. But it is still the teacher’s role to make sure that students spend no time trying to work on words that are unknown. This is not the time for that sort of instruction. Oral language-writing is an oral-language development instructional strategy, not a stand-alone writing strategy.
The Oral Language Assessment offers teachers valuable information about their students at various stages of reading development. Students can usually only comprehend texts that are slightly less complex than the structures they are able to listen to and repeat in full detail on the Oral Language Assessment.

Our research shows that guided instructional reading is a powerful instructional strategy. However, it loses its potency when students are forced to read texts that are well beyond their oral language capacity. If students lack solid foundations in the structures and vocabulary of oral English, they will most certainly operate at total frustration levels as they struggle to attend to visual information in text, make letter-sound correspondences, and syntax and meaning connections. As low-language students try to hold all this information in their heads in an attempt to process text, all hope for comprehension is lost. They are on overload. Intensive oral language intervention in a small group sets a sound foundation for guided and independent reading.

In addition to the information provided by the Oral Language Assessment, listening to sentences that students generate as they try to read texts at the pre-emergent stage is a powerful initial assessment.

Listening to sentences that students generate as they try to read texts at the pre-emergent stage is a powerful initial assessment.

Developing “Book Talk”

The pre-emergent reader “reads” books by inventing text. However, for all readers, speech patterns and habits have to be modified in order to read the exact text. This is clearly understood when one realizes that many early readers start every page with such sentence openings as “Here is the...” and “I like the...” Clay (1991) calls this transition “talking like a book,” and it is very important at this early reading stage. Language development and reading development are intertwined. It is essential that teachers recognize and develop the capacities of all students in both language and reading. This “book talk” also lays the foundation for early writing patterns.

Observing the Pre-emergent Reader

The most powerful initial assessment of pre-emergent readers is for teachers to listen to sentences that students generate as they try to read texts at the pre-emergent stage. As students progress, the sentences they use become more like the sentences that occur in the actual text; that is, they produce the same kinds of sentences and use the same kind of vocabulary.

Teachers of low-language students should take regular reading records of exactly what students say while “reading” beginning level texts (A–B) that they are familiar with. The following procedure provides valuable language information for teachers of pre-emergent readers.

- On a clean sheet of paper, write the student’s name, date, and the name of the book.
- Write down the actual text.
- Record above the text exactly what the student says.

In analyzing these records, it is important to consider the following questions:

1. **Structure**

*Were any of the sentences correctly formed? How many sentences were grammatical?*

This indicates that the reader is attending to the correct structure, even though the actual text is different.

Student: *The cat is little.*

Text: *The kitten can play.*

2. **Exact Copy**

*Was the sentence produced an exact copy of the structure of the actual sentence?*

This shows whether or not the reader can...
invent book-like sentences.

   Student: I hit the baseball.
   Text: I hit the ball.

3. Self-Correction
Did the reader change the response without prompting?
Was the alteration (a) from ungrammatical to grammatical; (b) from his/her own sentence to the text model; (c) visual/phonics related?

Student: Can/sc in here
Text: Come in here!

   Reflecting on this type of record allows teachers to compare and contrast the oral language interactions, dictated stories, and the Bookshop Oral Language Assessment to get a complete picture of each student’s language development.

Understanding Oral Language Scores and Reading Comprehension at Different Reading Levels

   The Oral Language Assessment helps teachers identify students who are at-risk with regard to oral language development. In addition, research with hundreds of classroom teachers has shown a direct correlation between oral language and reading comprehension at specific reading levels.

   As students’ reading levels advance through guided instructional reading, our research shows that unless there is a solid oral language foundation, comprehension breaks down at even the earliest reading levels. The following chart shows direct links between oral language assessment raw scores and a reading-level range for reading with comprehension.

   For example, a student scoring a 2 on the Oral Language Assessment will struggle to comprehend a Level A or B book because the language structures in these texts are more complex than what the student can aurally comprehend. If a student cannot remember and read back the thoughts they have dictated, they will have great trouble trying to read the thoughts contained in a published text. Likewise, many low-language students struggle to comprehend and advance beyond books at levels D, E, and F because these students’ oral language scores are often in the lower score range. Multiple exposures to texts at levels beyond those suggested on the chart on this page will not result in students comprehending what they read during guided instructional reading. Students who score between 3–10 on the Bookshop Oral Language Assessment need many small group opportunities to work on oral language skills. They also need daily encounters with fluent adult speakers in small group shared reading, oral language-reading, read to, as well as one-on-one.
Implications for Guided Instructional Reading

Understanding students’ oral language capacities greatly impacts their advancement as beginning readers. Use the chart on this page and the Key Assessments/Reading Stages chart on page 40 for a proper balance of instructional strategies that will result in students learning at the edge of their comfort zones, and not stagnating at frustration levels. Refer to individual guided instructional reading lesson plans for more information.

Linking Oral Language Instruction to Writing Instruction

Building on Oral Language-Reading

Oral Language-Writing builds on the language work established through the use of the Oral Language-Reading instructional strategy. Students are now in a mind-set of generating thoughts and sharing ideas stimulated by the use of the photo posters in Let’s Talk About It! The emphasis is still on language development, but now there is a transition to having students record some of their thoughts for themselves. This is a gradual transition in the early stages of both language development and writing development. It is intended to consolidate the final aspects of language-
development work as a precursor to formal reading and writing.

The most difficult thing about Oral Language-Writing as an instructional strategy is keeping the focus on the language without overemphasizing the recording. Once students begin to record, teachers often forget the purpose of this instructional strategy, which is to have students see that they can quickly record their thoughts and ideas in a joint process with the teacher. It is an instructional strategy for consolidating ideas and for reinforcing what students already know about the formal aspects of writing. This is the initial instructional strategy in the writing process. As such, it is designed to emphasize the importance of the ideas themselves, not the recording of them.

**The Importance of Individual Data**

The fluency that is being worked on during Oral Language-Reading transfers to Oral Language-Writing if the teacher has a solid knowledge of what each student in the group knows about writing. It is essential that there is a Student Profile for every student or a data card with an up-to-date profile of students’ letter knowledge, word and sound knowledge, and concepts of print knowledge. For older students in Grades 2 and 3, it is important that teachers have a complete list of all high-frequency words that each student knows. This information, coupled with data from the Oral Language Assessment, provides the information necessary for teachers to successfully scaffold instructional strategies. The speed at which students record words (based on the data that the teacher has) impacts their beliefs about their language ability and their ability to think, speak, and record their thoughts.

**Oral Language-Reading and Oral Language-Writing Are Reciprocal Strategies**

Much of the work done in Oral Language-Writing reflects the work done in Oral Language-Reading. Although the format is different, the same skills are being observed in writing as in reading. The natural difference lies in the fact that in reading, students use the skills to break down the text and make sense of it, whereas in writing, students construct the text and try to ensure that it makes sense, says what they meant, and can be read by others. The two instructional strategies are, in fact, reciprocal.

When observing the work of pre-emergent writers, one should see reflections of what has been observed in their reading (see page 23). The strategy suggested for reading will also provide insights into things that can be observed in what students dictate and record in the writing aspect of the oral language strategy. For example, if a student attends to the structure and self-corrects when reading from a Level A or B text, is this also evident when organizing and recording thoughts during Oral Language-Writing? Are the student’s skills in Oral Language-Reading slightly ahead of those in Oral Language-Writing?
It is important to analyze students’ work in both areas during this vital stage of development. The observant teacher will pick up on the patterns and will thus be able to help students make rapid progress through this early stage to the more formal aspects of reading and writing.

**Understanding Oral Language Scores and Writing Development**

The Oral Language Assessment helps teachers identify students at-risk in their oral language development. As previously stated, our research has shown that there is a strong correlation between the oral language competencies of many students and their inability to comprehend texts read. *Let’s Talk About It!* has been designed to assist teachers with the instruction of those at-risk students in Grades K–3. The structured lesson plans are directed at these specific grade levels, and the examples of activities and dialogue guide teacher interaction with students in both Oral Language-Reading and Writing.

The table on page 24 is a useful guide when relating possible difficulties in reading comprehension to oral language development. It is also important to understand the connections to students’ writing development, and the difficulties in generating text that some students have. This difficulty is not solely one of limited writing skills. More often, it is a paralysis of thought generation caused by lack of understanding of English-language structures. This, coupled with lack of necessary writing concepts and writing experience, can compound the situation. It becomes increasingly evident in older at-risk students in Grades 2 and 3.

In Oral Language-Writing, students and teachers work through the generation of a discussion, the recording of thoughts, the revision of those thoughts and, finally, the publishing of the text. The most complex area is the review [revisiting of the thoughts], when students are asked to look over what was written, either as a group or individually, and decide if they are happy with it. Teachers encourage students to share their individual pieces and to take advice from peers. In order for this session of Oral Language-Writing to operate...
effectively, the oral-language score needs to be a minimum of 5. If this minimum score of 5 is required for Guided Instructional Reading to begin, so too is the same score needed to have an effective, reflective session within Oral Language-Writing.

Students are too often placed in Guided Instructional Reading groups before they have sufficient language. In addition, they are also placed in stressful and intimidating writing sessions, where they are expected to write to a prompt when their language ability indicates that they cannot confidently follow either stories read in class or the simplest of instructions.

The development of language learners who are grounded in the foundational competencies of English takes more than a few scattered language lessons or a pull-out group. Catching these students up requires a conscientious teacher who has carefully and systematically assessed their beginning points, and who understands both the strengths and weaknesses of each student in terms of language acquisition. *Let’s Talk About It!*, used in conjunction with the Oral Language Assessment, forms a well-constructed program when linked to the instructional strategies of read to, oral language-reading and writing, and small group shared reading.
oral language is the foundation upon which the ability to use knowledge, meaning, and grammar is founded. However, beginning with their earliest reading attempts, readers have to pay attention to print on a page. In a reading program that puts the greatest emphasis on books (written text) from the outset, students must search visually for details they can make sense of or interpret. This in turn means that they focus their attention on print information supplied through letters and words on a page. The decoding process begins before the message-building and message-getting processes have had a chance to build through thinking and talking.
Bookshop provides support materials to assist in developing students’ oral language capacities, while at the same time drawing students’ attention to print through the small group instructional strategy of oral language-reading. Let’s Talk About It! is a sequential, structured approach to both building the oral language capacity of students and developing their ability to distinguish print. Attention to print will build their print concepts and develop a sense of author. The program is built upon the belief that reading is a process of integrating all three cue sources: meaning (syntax), visual (graphophonic), and structure (semantic). The linking of all three is done through a stimulating set of photo posters that provide the stimulus foundation for the oral language component of the reading program as a whole.

Let’s Talk About It! helps teachers structure their teaching and provides models of appropriate instructional interactions. These interactions are influenced not only by the child’s language experiences, but also by cultural background. In order for the experience to be beneficial for the learner, teachers must modify instructional language so that it is only marginally more complex than the students’ language in the small oral language-reading group. The Oral Language Assessment assists in determining the strengths and challenges for each student in the area of receptive language. Once teachers know exactly what portion of their instructional language students understand, they can modify and adjust their talk to allow all students to both comprehend the language of the classroom and extend their own productive language.

Exploring oral language as a precursor to reading is an opportunity to help students establish clear links between the real world and the symbols of language. The purpose of working with oral language at the reading acquisition stage is to help students learn that thoughts can be talked about, written about, and read about. Through reading, these thoughts can be shared with others and explored even further. The oral language-reading instructional strategy enables teachers to help students develop language by looking at, thinking about, and feeling or reacting to certain experiences, thereby enriching their speaking and listening skills, as well as their attention to print. Let’s Talk About It! provides a structured and explicit instructional program that includes visual stimuli and detailed lesson plans to support oral language development and the initial linking of language to print.

It is essential to provide opportunities for learners to focus on original thoughts and to express their thoughts without fear of failure. Teachers must support students’ oral language attempts, and, subsequently, model correct language structures. The oral language-reading and oral language-writing instructional strategies provide opportunities for the following:

- Linking oral and written messages
- Exploring the reciprocal gains in speaking, reading, and writing
- Learning about concepts related to print

Print contains a message; these messages
are assembled in a consistent order of letters, words, lines on a page, pages in a book, and punctuation)

- Developing learners’ capacity to articulate ideas and recall them as they read back their thoughts

The instructional strategies of oral language-reading and oral language-writing are fundamental for students with language deficits. The assessment tools discussed on pages 12–26 and in *Managing Assessment and Instruction* assist teachers with grouping and instructional programs.

*Let’s Talk About It!* consists of four complete programs for Kindergarten through Grade 3. Each program contains the following:

- 48 full-color poster photos in a large easel format (22” x 28”). Photo topics are grouped into science, social studies, and “day in the life.”
- 48 4-page Oral Language-Reading lesson plan booklets (one per photo chart)
- 48 4-page Oral Language-Writing lesson plan booklets (one per photo chart)
- 48 double-sided text cards containing leveled-text sentences (two sentences per photo chart)

For maximum impact, it is better not to have the photo charts available for independent use. The mutual exposure should happen during the small group teaching sessions so as to generate spontaneous thought and discussion. Each time a lesson is selected, teachers use the Reading or Writing Focus Sheet to indicate the photo-chart number and the instructional focuses listed in the lesson plan. The names of the students are added to the assessment section of the focus sheets. This is a small group instructional strategy. The lesson plan formats follow.

### Oral Language ~ Reading

#### Oral Language: Photo

**Session 1: Generating a Discussion**

This introductory session focuses on the development of students’ oral language. Students sit in a semicircle in the rug area so that they can all see the photo chart as well as each other. A small group (no more than six students) makes for the best one-to-one language interaction. The larger the number of students, the fewer opportunities they have for individual input. Students are grouped according to their language needs as determined by the *Bookshop* Student Profile, as well as analysis of the Oral Language Assessment.

Language generation is the primary instructional focus for this initial section of *Let’s Talk About It!* The goal is to elicit as much oral language from students as possible. Accept all attempts—this is not a time for formal correction of grammar. If students are to feel successful as language users, teachers must accept all attempts at articulation. Always work toward having students use the photo charts as precursors to language. The goal of the instruction in this section is for students to know that what they think, they can say. For teachers of ELL students, this section is crucial for
confidence-building. It is vital for students to feel that their ideas are accepted in whatever way they produce them. Formal grammar correction will stifle their attempts and retard language acquisition.

It is possible that this section of the lesson will be the entire lesson. Depending on the language ability of the students, it may be enough to just get some dialogue going. There is no need to hurry. Students who have scored below 5 on the Oral Language Assessment need to spend time simply generating discussion. Too often these students are rushed into the writing aspect of the recording section. Many students with low oral English skills limit their ideas to what they think they should say or to what they are capable of writing. It is strongly recommended that these students not be pressured by having something recorded on chart paper at this stage. The initial session (generating a discussion) should provide ample material to draw on. The teacher is the facilitator, taking students back to their thoughts and then recording them on chart paper for all to see. This is an opportunity for students to learn that what they think, they can say; and what they say can be written down. Once again the emphasis is on the language, not on the recording process. The teacher merely records students’ ideas. Focus on the ideas of the group, not on the writing. Teachers are scribing the actual words of the students.

In order to elicit thoughts from each student in a nonthreatening way, it is important that the group be no larger than six students. The goal is a discussion, not a question-and-answer session. The teacher either writes each individual idea on a chart or combines ideas to form a single thought.

**Session 2: Recording Their Thoughts**

This section generally takes place the second day. It occurs once students have produced a number of ideas. Do not start recording their thoughts while they are still trying to generate ideas. It is important to keep these two phases of the lesson discrete in order not to belabor ideas by linking them to the written word. Remember that limited language users need to feel confident that they have something worth saying.

During this section of the lesson, teachers help students select and organize the specific ideas they want the teacher to record. The teacher records on notepaper (for his or her reference only) any ideas the group generates in order to facilitate returning to that point next time.

Some of the initial sessions for students scoring 0–5 are used to observe and assess. These sessions can be challenging, as students must be given time to articulate their thoughts without the teacher prompting or manipulating their words or ideas. Having students at this level understand that 1) they have thoughts and 2) they can be spoken without a teacher planting suggestions is a major accomplishment for them.

**Session 3: Returning to Their Thoughts**

The goal of this section is to ensure that students who are not yet proficient decoders of text are able to pull on their own thoughts and
ideas as a means for remembering what has been written down. This section may be a part of the same lesson as Sections 1 and 2, or it may take place on a subsequent day. Teachers assist students in understanding that what they think, they can say; what they say can be written down; and what has been written down can be read back. This is also an opportunity to reinforce the understanding that the written message remains constant. Pre-emergent readers are learning to associate print with spoken language. For this reason, it is important to write exactly what students say—not what sounds right or seems better.

Teachers reinforce early concepts about print, such as one-to-one correspondence, directionality, starting points, top to bottom of the page, and return sweep. Students are to reread the text many times, recalling who had the ideas and discussing their understandings of what they have said. Teach for fluency right from the start. Many of the students’ initial ideas will be expressed in simple sentences that can easily be read in a fluent manner. The lesson plans provide guidance in the assessment of students’ progress with language development.

Session 4A: Generating Predictions

This section of the lesson promotes the need to predict before reading. Students who have participated in earlier lessons have texts they have generated and can reread as a way to restart their ideas. Students who have not been exposed to this photo chart can use the picture to predict what the text might say.

Session 4B: Reading the Text

Teachers are encouraged to read the text card to students, ensuring that all students are looking at the print. Use a pointer at all times while working at this level. Encourage students to read along, and take this opportunity to model phrased and fluent reading.
Session 4C: Interpreting the Message

During this section of the lesson, teachers help students make connections to the author’s thoughts and messages. If students have previously generated their own text passages, they might like to compare their thoughts to the author’s, as printed on the text card.

One of the main reasons for including this portion of the lesson plan came from the BEL research project, which consistently showed that as students grew from pre-emergent to early emergent and emergent readers, teachers spent little time extending their oral language capacities. Teachers also tended to overlook helping emergent readers understand how to link what they know about the world to what they are reading. Let’s Talk About It! provides teachers with explicit lesson plans that help low-language students and pre-emergent readers forge links between what they think, what they say, and what is written down, as well as connecting their own experiences to the thoughts of others as they begin to read text. This final section of the lesson has a direct link to the visual information associated with the graphophonic aspect of reading.

Oral Language ~ Writing

Oral Language: Photo

Session 1: Generating a Discussion

This introductory session in Oral Language-Writing focuses on the articulation of the students’ thoughts that result from the photo stimulus.

As with Oral Language-Reading, students sit in a semicircle on the rug so they all can see both the photo chart and each other. A group of no more than six students makes for the best one-to-one language interaction.

It is important to keep the photo covered until the group is ready to begin the discussion.

Session 1 is not a time for formal recording. It is suggested that teachers take notes on the ideas shared in Session 1 for use in Session 2. This will help students recollect their thoughts.

Oral Language-Writing depends on the parallel work in Oral Language-Reading. The assumption in Oral Language-Writing is that students are working regularly in Oral Language-Reading sessions that develop their ability to formulate ideas and discuss them freely without the constraints of having to record them.

Always work toward having students use the photo charts as precursors to language. Students will be familiar with the Oral Language-Reading format of using the photo as a catalyst for discussion while not necessarily focusing the entire discussion specifically on the photo. Remember to accept all attempts at self-expression and to press students to expand upon both their own ideas and those of others.

The goal of the instruction in Session 1 is for students to understand that what they think, they can say. This should be a quicker process once Oral Language-Reading has been firmly established. It is vital for students to feel that their thoughts are valued and to understand that through sharing, the group will be able to create something for others to read and enjoy. Try not to emphasize formal grammar correction, as this stifles students’ attempts and retards language acquisition.

By now, students should be familiar with working in small groups and fairly comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas. The roles of listener and speaker are essential aspects for effective oral language sessions—always remind students of the importance of looking at the person who is speaking. The rules of effective engagement need to be consistently reinforced both before and during all sessions, without making the session feel too formal. The lesson plans give helpful hints for beginning each session.

It is important to develop students’ ability to question, disagree with, or add to the ideas of others. This takes time and relies on skillful teacher prompting and modeling. For example, That’s interesting, Jemma. I hadn’t thought of...
saying it that way. What do others think about Jemma’s idea? By modeling this type of interaction and prompting accordingly, students begin to understand that a discussion is not about being right or wrong. Rather, it is about sharing ideas, agreeing, and disagreeing in order to further develop understanding.

It is strongly suggested that students be encouraged to talk through their ideas with partners as well as think them through individually. Having students repeat the ideas of someone else in their own words further develops their ability to synthesize ideas.

**Session 2: Recording Their Thoughts**

This session is generally done on the following day. During this session, the ideas expressed by the students in Session 1 are recorded in a joint process. There are two different lesson formats for Sessions 2 and 3 in Oral Language-Writing: recording the thoughts on a chart as a whole (small) group, or having students record their thoughts individually on a sheet of paper. It is recommended that teachers work with whole (small) groups during the initial Oral Language-Writing sessions to get students used to the routine, recording a collection of their ideas on one large sheet of chart paper. This joint process greatly encourages ELL students to take risks. It is far less intimidating when the entire process is not solely reliant on their ideas. Joint group construction allows students to become confident in writing what they know in a collective, risk-free environment. Oral Language-Writing lesson plans clearly define the procedural differences between working through a joint text construction and working with individual students within the small group.

If working on a group construction of text, ensure that all students are in a semicircle where they can see both the photo and the chart paper. You may wish to place the chart paper on the floor so students can reach it easily when they record. If you are using a chart stand, be sure that it’s not too high, so students can record easily as well as see the text.

Once students are comfortably sharing ideas and attempting the known aspects of the text recording as a group, start using some of the individual recording lesson plan formats. When working on individual text constructions with students who are pre-emergent and emergent writers in Grades K and 1, ensure that each student has a black lead pencil or crayon and a clean sheet of unlined paper. It is essential to use unlined paper so students are not distracted by the lines, causing formation of the letters to take precedence over construction of the thoughts. Older, at-risk language students in Grades 2 and 3 do not need to be restricted to unlined paper; they are more developed in their motor skills and may be able to generate and produce high-frequency words faster than younger students. Have clipboards available so that each student has a flat surface on which to write.

During this session, teachers help students select and organize the specific ideas they want to record, either collectively or individually, depending on the lesson plan. The initial session (Generating a Discussion) should provide
ample material to draw on. The teacher is the facilitator, taking students back to their thoughts and then helping them record the easy parts (known letters, words, or word parts). This is an opportunity for students to learn that what they think, they can say; and what they say can be written down. Unlike in the Oral Language-Reading session, this section of Oral Language-Writing does have an emphasis on the actual construction of the text. However, there is always the predominant aspect of language development. Teachers merely help students record their ideas, writing all of the harder aspects of the text while students write what is known. It is essential, therefore, for teachers to have exact information regarding what skills each student controls. Student Profile cards must be readily available for each student in the small group. Remember that this instructional strategy is an oral language development strategy as well as a bridge to the writing process.

When working on a group construction, teachers may either write each individual idea on a chart, or combine ideas to form a single thought (see lesson plans for details). This group process enables individuals to add small aspects to the written piece as the group collectively formulates a single thought or number of thoughts. It is also possible to write each individual idea as a separate thought on the one sheet of chart paper.

When working on individual constructions on single sheets of paper, teachers assist each student individually to construct their texts. Pre-emergent and emergent writers initially draw pictures (using just a lead pencil) as a simple plan for their ideas.

Older at-risk language learners in Grades 2 and 3 are supported in this session by the teacher’s building confidence in their ability to construct more complex language structures. These older students will naturally have a greater bank of high-frequency writing words and so are able to construct much more of their text than students in Grades K and 1. It is not recommended that students of this age be directed to draw each time before beginning the recording. This can either be offered as an option or it can be expected of those students who still have difficulty organizing their thoughts. It is always important for teachers to modify this instruction according to student needs.

**Session 3: Returning to Their Thoughts**

Session 2 must precede this session. Session 3 is generally done on the following day so that students can readily reconnect with the discussion and sharing of ideas. The goal of this session is to have students return to the text they constructed either jointly or individually. Teachers assist students to understand that what they think, they can say: what they say can be written down; and what has been written down can be read back. This is also an opportunity to reinforce both the understanding that the written message remains constant and the connection between the stimulus and the text. Pre-emergent and emergent writers are learning to associate print with spoken language.

The lesson plans assist in developing the revision process with low-language students. During this session, students are encouraged to revisit the thoughts that were recorded during the previous session and decide if what they wrote is what they are still thinking. Students learn, over time, to ask questions of themselves such as. *Am I happy with what I have written? Do I want to change anything?* Teachers can encourage further thought and
reflection with prompts such as, Can someone add to this idea? Could we say it another way?

When the group has worked on individual constructions of text, they need an opportunity to share their written pieces. It is advisable that teachers assist pre-emergent students in the initial reading of their texts to the group. Older at-risk language students may be more than capable of reading back their own texts without help. Use teacher discretion in all cases, depending on student competency. Remember that at this point, the emphasis is on ideas and the language-development process, not on fluent rereading of text. By sharing individual texts in this way, the same questions regarding adding to, deleting from, or reconstructing texts are asked and considered with the assistance of group input.

This is an excellent opportunity to teach for more detailed aspects of text. The lesson plans provide specific teaching focuses, such as rhyme, development of simple language structures, and use of past experience and prior knowledge when constructing texts. These focuses can be used to guide your selection of lessons when matching instruction to the needs of individuals within the group.

Session 4: Publishing

During this session, students learn and consolidate their understanding of the publishing aspect of the writing process. Pre-emergent and emergent writers need a great deal of support, as they must present a final product that is correct in every detail. However, it is important that they maintain ownership of the piece. The lesson plans provide a variety of ways to address publishing. Once again, older at-risk students may have greater skill in preparing their texts for publishing, but close attention must still be paid to correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar.

It is important to have an avenue for presenting students’ final products to the class, and to have them readily available for independent reading by the authors and others.

Older, at-risk students may have greater skill in preparing their texts for publishing.

References


## Reading Focus Sheet – Grades K–3

**Class:** ____________________________  **Date:** ____________________________

### Whole Class

#### Instructional Strategy:
- [ ] Shared Reading  [ ] Read Aloud (Gr. 3 only)

#### Title: ____________________________

#### Comments for Future Instruction:

### Group 1

#### Instructional Strategy
- [ ] Oral Language: Reading
- [ ] Read To
- [ ] Shared Reading
- [ ] Guided Instructional Reading
- [ ] Reciprocal Reading (Gr. 3 only)

#### Materials:
- Title: ____________________________
- Text Level: ___  Chart #: ___
- Other: ____________________________

#### Focuses
- ____________________________
- ____________________________
- ____________________________

#### Comments for Future Instruction:

### Group 2

#### Instructional Strategy
- [ ] Oral Language: Reading
- [ ] Read To
- [ ] Shared Reading
- [ ] Guided Instructional Reading
- [ ] Reciprocal Reading (Gr. 3 only)

#### Materials:
- Title: ____________________________
- Text Level: ___  Chart #: ___
- Other: ____________________________

#### Focuses
- ____________________________
- ____________________________
- ____________________________

#### Comments for Future Instruction:

**Share focus:** ____________________________

#### Comments for Future Instruction:

---

**Key:** ✓ = observed understanding  **X** = additional instruction required
### WRITING FOCUS SHEET – GRADES K–3

Class: ___________________________  Date: ___________________________

**MODELED WRITING**

- **Focuses**
  - 
  - 
  - 

**SHARED READING**

**Comments for Future Instruction**

---

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<th>Writing Process</th>
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<td>Oral Language: Writing</td>
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<td>Guided Writing</td>
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**Focuses**

- 
- 
- 

**Comments for Future Instruction**

---

**WHOLE CLASS CONFERENCE**

**OBSERVATION**

**CONFE rence**

**ASSIGNING**

**Share focus**

**Comments for Future Instruction**

---

**KEY:** ✓ = observed understanding  ❌ = additional instruction

---

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**ORAL LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT**

**Name:** ____________________  **Age:** ____________________

**Date:** ____________________  **Grade:** ____________________

### SET 1

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The puppy's tail is curly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mommy is baking a cake.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The teacher told them a story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>There are the children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>She's eating her lunch slowly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>That red bike over there used to be my uncle's.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The girl in the car is waving her hand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Over the weekend Jane brought us some cookies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Here comes the machine that digs the big holes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The bird built a nest high in the tree.</td>
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### SET 3

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<td>Be ready to come inside when the bell rings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The car and the truck were carrying some large boxes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The brave fireman showed our class the big red truck.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>There go the men who clean the playground at our school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>My friend likes to eat ice cream when it's very hot out.</td>
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<th>BEGINNING STUDENT PROFILE</th>
<th>TRANSITIONAL STUDENT PROFILE</th>
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<td>5–7 Speech Emergence</td>
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**Appropriate Small Group Instructional Strategies**
- Small Group: Read To
- Small Group: Oral Language: Reading
- Small Group: Shared Reading
- Small Group: Guided Instructional Reading
- Small Group: Oral Language: Reading
- Small Group: Shared Reading
- Small Group: Guided Instructional Reading
- Small Group: Guided Instructional Reading
- Small Group: Guided Instructional Reading
- Small Group: Guided Instructional Reading
- Small Group: Guided Instructional Reading

**Grade K**
- Grade 1
- Grade 2
- Grade 3

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