There are some key aspects of oral language that have an impact on children’s literacy learning and development; phonological awareness, storytelling, and ‘talk about literacy’. These three can be considered as the oral language strand of literacy development. To some extent working with parents on these aspects of oral language in order to influence literacy is new ground. Little work has been done with parents on the oral language that contributed to literacy development. In another sense, it has always been known that oral language is the foundation for written language – it being more difficult to learn to read and write if you can’t speak or understand speech. However, perhaps it is true to say that has not always been clear which aspects of oral language can be influenced through early childhood education and work with parents.

Earlier work with parents has focused largely on written language, but research suggests that it is now time for a wider perspective. The changing factor in this decision is the research that shows the importance of certain aspects of oral language (notably phonological awareness, storytelling and ‘talk about literacy’). Rather than trying to change fundamental aspects of language use, it might be more feasible to focus on specific aspects.

**Phonological Awareness**

In the 1980s the work of Peter Bryant, Lynette Bradley and Usha Goswami and others at Oxford helped to pinpoint how important phonological awareness was in children’s literacy development. We should remember that our written language is a way of representing speech – or, to be more precise, the sounds of the words we use in speech. Therefore, using written language presupposes some knowledge of the sound structure of oral language. The question is, *What kind of knowledge of sound structure is most useful?*

Knowing the sounds that the 26 letters of the English alphabet supposedly ‘make’ is not all that helpful (partly because they are so inconsistent). Also, it does not much help knowing that letter ‘N’ can represent ‘nuh’ if you cannot ‘hear’ that sound in a word such as ‘string’.

One could tackle this from the opposite direction – by examining ‘sound awareness’ as a factor that could help literacy development. Linguists break oral language down into units called ‘phonemes’ (there are supposedly 44 in the English language) and it does seem that phonemic awareness is helpful in reading and spelling. However, phonemes are often difficult to spot (how many phonemes there are in the word ‘string’?) – and phonemic awareness seems to be something which we acquire as a result of becoming literate, not something which helps us to become literate.
In their book *Phonological Skills and Learning to Read*, Goswami and Bryant (1990) suggest that the important thing for children to be aware of is what they call *onset* and *rime* in spoken words. Roughly speaking the ‘onset’ is the beginning sound of a word (the ‘str’ in string’ and ‘rime’ the end sound (‘ing’ in string). Words like ‘strong’, ‘stretch’, and ‘stripe’ have the same onset as ‘string’. Words like ‘wing’, ‘thing’ ‘ring’ and ‘beginning’ have the same rime.

There is quite a lot of evidence that preschool children who are aware of onset and time find learning to read easier. For example, preschool tests of this kind of phonological awareness predict reading attainment later; also preschool ‘training’ to help children detect onset and rime can boost later reading attainment. This is discussed more fully in Goswami and Bryant (1990)

One way in which children become aware that words have different parts is through nursery rhymes which repeat words with the same onsets or rhymes. It is interesting to note a study by Maclean, Bryant and Bradley (1987) which found that preschool children’s knowledge of nursery rhymes – simply how many they knew (none, 1,2,3 etc.) predict later reading success in school This has obvious implications for teaching young children and for literacy work with their parents.

**Storytelling**

Gordon Well’s longitudinal study (Wells, 1987) suggested that the best predictor of children’s early reading attainment in school was a school entry measure which he termed ‘knowledge of literacy’. This was a simple test of how many letters of the alphabet they could name or ‘sound’ plus Marie Clay’s ‘Concepts of Print’ test (which assesses whether children can distinguish print from pictures, know what a word is, what a sentence is etc.). Children’s scores on this composite measure of **written** language development were a much better guide to school literacy attainment than measures of **oral** language development. Other researchers have also found that simple measures of literacy development are powerful predictors.

This does not mean that we improve school literacy attainment by teaching preschool children letter names and how to distinguish print, words and so on. It is much more likely that this knowledge of literacy at school entry is a sign of other important things happening in the preschool years.

Wells reviewed his data on children’s language in the home, looking for experiences which might be important. These were **listening** to a story; other sharing of picture books; drawing and colouring, and early writing. One of these activities – **listening to stories read aloud** – stood out above the others as being related to the ‘Knowledge of literacy’ measure and later test scores.
Wells suggested the reasons for this centered around the various benefits children gain from listening to stories:

- Experience of genre later encountered in written form
- Extension of experience and vocabulary
- Increased conversation with adult
- Child’s own ‘inner story’ validated
- Experience of language use to create worlds
- Insight into storying as means of understanding

Others, such as Margaret Meek and Jerome Bruner have emphasized the importance of story in thinking and in literacy development.

The challenge then, is to think of ways of supporting storying at home and in school.

**Talk about literacy**

We have already said that our view is not the school literacy can be improved just by teaching preschool children letter names, how to distinguish print, words and so on. It is clearly not the most important thing. However it is worth considering how children can be introduced to these things in meaningful contexts.

For preschool children written language can be a significant part of their worlds and some will notice that it is a significant part of the world of their parents or other family members. It is as natural for them to be curious about it, to ask questions, and to want to talk about it from time to time, as other matters that interest and confront them.

Children’s vocabularies grow at an astonishing rate in the preschool years. Some of these words could be about written language.

Clay’s “concepts about print test” explores their understanding of some words, such as ‘writing’, ‘word’, ‘sentence’ but there are many other literacy-related terms that children might acquire.

We have briefly outlined key studies and issues that influence our thinking in the development of key aspects of oral language: phonological awareness, storytelling and ‘talk about literacy’. This clear focus on aspects of oral language in relation to literacy rather than simply oral language can give focus to work on literacy with families.
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