ORAL LANGUAGE COMPETENCE AND EARLY LITERACY ACQUISITION

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EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION/SUPERVISION

ED 500B

JULY 29, 2009

APPROVED BY: Derek L. Anderson, Ed.D.

DATE: August 3, 2009
ABSTRACT

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BY

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The acquisition of oral language is a natural process for most children. A child’s ability to speak will grow with age, but it does not ensure that such growth will lead to perfection as children begin reading and transition to more proficient readers. Learning and speaking more effectively requires consistent practice and modeling. This review of literature discusses the need to improve not only a child’s ability to speak, but to communicate and organize their thoughts more effectively leading to accurate listening and reading comprehension. Knowing the ultimate goal of formal literacy instruction in K-3 classrooms today is to promote understanding and derive meaning from written text, this review will examine the oral language skills necessary for young children as they begin school. The review will also highlight the importance of developing oral language proficiency in a broad sense for later reading success, as well as offer suggestions for teachers of young children to facilitate the development of oral language skills.
DEDICATION

For my parents, the two most influential teachers in my life.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of students enter Kindergarten with oral language deficiencies. These students are often provided intervention services that focus on the development of phonological awareness skills. Nearly half of these students continue to struggle with literacy acquisition, particularly comprehension as they proceed through their elementary school years in spite of the interventions they have been provided. Research indicates certain aspects of oral language appear to be emphasized during reading instruction, such as phonological awareness, while others are only given minor emphasis (American Association, 2002).

The development of literacy skills begins long before children receive formal instruction in reading. Literacy success is largely dependent on the skills children acquire in these early formative years. Speech-language pathology and special education literature recognize a number of children’s reading difficulties have their roots in early oral language disabilities (Roth, Speece, & Cooper 1996). What effect does instruction in phonological awareness have on the development of reading accuracy, reading comprehension, and overall oral language development?

The amount of time and money school districts spend on the remediation of literacy acquisition problems for K-3 children is significant. When designing effective remediation programs for struggling readers, Storch and Whitehouse (2002) suggest oral language skills should be taught beginning in preschool and throughout a child’s early elementary years. Instruction in oral language that focuses primarily on phonemic awareness, although necessary, does not appear to be sufficient in the general development of language skills as linked to reading comprehension.
The purpose of this review of literature is to define and describe oral language and the connection between oral language development and reading acquisition for young children. Extensive research highlights phonological awareness as the strongest oral language predictor for reading success. Although phonological awareness can be directly linked to reading accuracy and decoding, research has only casually established a correlation between phonological awareness and reading comprehension. The research linking phonological awareness and reading comprehension will be examined first, followed by the connection between phonological awareness and reading accuracy. Finally, the review offers conclusions and instructional recommendations highlighting the important role of additional oral language skills for teachers of young readers including: concepts of print, narrative discourse and use of syntax and semantics necessary for young children to achieve reading success throughout their elementary school experience. Success in reading can not simply be defined as reading words accurately. Accurate comprehension and understanding of text must be considered as well.
DEFINITION OF TERMS

**Phonological Awareness**- The general ability to attend to the sounds of language as distinct from its’ meaning.

**Phonemic Awareness**- The insight that every spoken sound can be conceived as a sequence of phonemes.

**Metalinguistic Ability**- Refers to language or thought about language: for example noting that the word “snake” refers to a long skinny thing all in one piece but the word itself is neither.

**Narrative Discourse**- The ability to develop or retell a story in a logical sequence.

**Semantic Knowledge**- The knowledge of actual word meanings in language especially meaning of individual words and word combinations in phrases and sentences.

**Syntactic Knowledge**- Knowledge of the orderly arrangement of words in sentences to express ideas.

**Decoding Ability**- The ability to figure out how to read unknown words by using knowledge of letters, sounds, and word patterns.

**Graphemes**- Written symbols or letters of the alphabet: arbitrary, abstract, and usually without meaning. The written equivalent of phonemes.

**Phonemes**- The smallest sound or part of a word.

*Above definitions are taken from:*

ORAL LANGUAGE DEFINED/DESCRIPTED:

Oral language is defined as “the complex system that relates sounds to meanings, made up of three components: phonological awareness, semantics, and syntax” (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998, p. 105). Phonological awareness is considered the strongest oral language predictor for reading success and includes the understanding of combining the smallest units of sound or phonemes. For instance, children learn the /m/ is the first spoken sound they hear in monkey long before they understand that the sound is represented by the printed letter /m/. Although children are not typically aware of their knowledge of these rules, their ability to understand and articulate words in their native language is an accurate representation of their understanding.

The semantic component of oral language refers to a child’s knowledge of morphemes, or the smallest units of sound that carry meaning and can be combined to form words and sentences. For example, “dog” + “s” includes two morphemes that make up “dogs” and means more than one dog. The semantics of any language are often printed in dictionaries. Knowledge of semantic rules are essential in understanding not just the words comprising a language, but what meanings and words are important to speakers of the language.

The syntax component of oral language involves the ability to combine morphemes into words and make sentences. Children develop the ability to combine two or more morphemes such as “more cookie” using their knowledge about the syntactic component of our language and how the words are combined to convey meaning. The
rules of syntax become more and more complex throughout a child’s development. Children typically move from combining two or three morphemes to adding proper inflections and suffixes to words. For instance, adding “ing” to “eat” forms “eating” and represents the present tense of the word “eat”. Eventually a child’s knowledge of syntax will be used to articulate statements, questions, and commands. All three components of language work together as children develop the skills necessary to learn to read.

Some experts in the language field argue a fourth component should be included in the definition of oral language skills pragmatics, which represent the understanding of language use. A child’s understanding of pragmatic rules is a large part of their communicative competence or ability to speak in different situations appropriately. For example, children learn they speak more formally when they are in school than when they are at home. Learning pragmatic rules is particularly important as children acquire reading skills and recognize book language, which is text written in books in formal rather than spoken language. This pragmatic component of language continues to be important as children move into adulthood since people sometimes are judged based on what they say and when and how the words are said.

Oral language development is considered a key indicator of a child’s reading ability. The development of oral language for most children is a natural process, heavily influenced by home literacy and preschool experiences. Most children are able to learn the rules of our language over time with little or no formal instruction. Because most humans are born with the ability to speak and hear, humans have a natural ability to learn the rules of their language used within their environment.
Children do not typically learn oral language skills simply by imitating what is heard around them. Young children progressively work through the linguistic rules of their language on their own. This language development is evident when children use forms such as, “I brush my teeths” or “Her is tall.” Eventually children learn the conventional use of “teeth” and “she” as they sort out the syntax rules of their language for themselves. Development of these language rules emerge as children practice and hear correct spoken language in books or everyday situations.

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS AND EARLY READING:

A documented relationship between phonological awareness and early reading has existed since the early 1970’s. Phonological awareness is defined as “an awareness of sounds in spoken (not written) words that is revealed by such abilities as rhyming, matching initial consonants, and counting the number of phonemes in spoken words” (Stahl & Murray, 1994, p. 221). Measures of phonological awareness assess early achievement in reading more accurately than age, scores on IQ test, or socioeconomic status (eg., Gough, Juel, & Griffith, 1992; Share, Jorm, Maclean, & Matthews, 1984; Wagner & Torgesen, 1987). Successful training in phonological awareness has led to marked differences in achievement during a child’s acquisition of reading (Ball & Blachman, 1991). When phonological awareness is an independent variable in studies and the dependent variable is progress in learning to read a clear distinction must be made. Early elementary students provided with specific training in phonological awareness typically score higher on both PA tasks and reading accuracy during
kindergarten and first grade. Links between specific PA training and progress in reading comprehension have only been casually established beyond first grade.

Tasks measuring phonological awareness in young children have been administered in numerous studies. These PA tasks include identifying and supplying rhymes (Does *cat* rhyme with *mat*? and Give me a word that rhymes with *man*?), initial sound identification (Does *pail* begin with /p/?), isolation of phonemes (What is the first sound you hear in *cup*?), phoneme blending (What word does /m-a-p/ make?), and phoneme deletion and substitution (Say *fish* without the /f/?, Change the /f/ in *fish* to /w/).

These assessments of phonological awareness progressively increase in difficulty from one to the next. Identification and supplying of rhyming words is much easier for most children than adding or deleting phonemes from words that are supplied. The question becomes: How much phonological awareness is needed for children to learn to read?

For decades researchers recognized the ability for a child to identify the spoken sounds in language as essential for them to blend individual letters into speech sounds and words. Children with the inability to identify individual sounds in spoken words and segment these sounds are likely to struggle with beginning reading tasks (Fischer, & Carter, 1974; Liberman, Shankweiler, Savin, 1972; Stanovich, 1986). A study conducted by Stahl and Murray (1994) involved 52 kindergarten children and 61 first graders from a small city in the southeastern United States. Boys and girls in the study were equally represented from middle and upper-middle class homes. Four tasks to assess phonological awareness were administered to all of the students including
blending, segmentation, phoneme isolation, and deletion. Students instructional reading level was then determined using a commercially published reading inventory. The reading test contained sight word lists and leveled reading passages. Leveled sight word lists were used to determine which leveled passage would be appropriate to begin leveled reading. Scores for words read correctly from each passage were calculated to identify each child’s instructional reading level. Each passage read with 95% accuracy was determined adequate. A spelling measure was also administered to each student to measure the child’s emerging knowledge of words (Tangel & Blachman, 1992). The spelling assessment included five words (lap, sick, elephant, pretty, train) orally dictated to each participant with an example sentence. Students were asked to spell each word to the best of their knowledge even though they may not know how to spell the word exactly. This assessment was scored using a seven-point scale with (0) representing letters randomly strung together to (3 or 4) for more accurate invented spellings and (6) for correct conventional spellings. Isolation of phonemes, the easiest of the four PA tasks, appeared to have a direct correlation with children who were unable to pass the pre-primer word list on the reading assessment. Of children who scored below four on the phoneme isolation assessment, ninety-percent were not capable of passing the pre-primer word list for beginning reading. This finding represents the connection between poorly developed phonological awareness and the inability to begin reading. Phoneme manipulation and deletion, the most difficult of the PA tasks administered, appeared to be the strongest predictor of reading ability once a limited level of letter recognition was established. Results from this non-experimental study certainly represent the direct
relationship between phonological awareness and reading ability for K-1 children. This study includes data that demonstrates the effect oral language, particularly phonological awareness has on only reading accuracy (the ability to read words correctly) not reading comprehension.

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS AND READING COMPREHENSION:

Researchers posit a direct relationship between language development and reading comprehension. Nation and Snowling (2004) present two plausible reasons to support these findings:

‘During development, English speaking children must learn to read not only regular words with systematic grapheme-phoneme correspondences, but also exception words that do not conform to such ‘rules’. One way for children to learn to read exception words is by using the context in which these words are written to decipher their meaning and sound. To take an extreme example, BOW is a homograph, the pronunciation of which can be disambiguated by context (he took a bow at the end of the performance; he took a bow and arrow from his bag)” (p. 352). Second, “…is that meaning-based knowledge has a direct effect on the development of word recognition (that is at the word level). Drawing on Plaut et al.’s connectionist framework, the assumption here is that as soon as a child begins to compute the pronunciation of a printed word, activation feeds forward via semantic units to phonological representations. This process may be particularly important for reading irregular words (e.g. ‘sign’) that share morphemic segments with regular forms (e.g. ‘signature’). At the same time, activation would be fed to phonological units via hidden units in the phonological pathway. Pooling of activation from semantic and phonological pathways should result in a faster, more accurate response to the word than could be the case if either pathway were working in isolation” (p.352).
The ability to decode words is certainly an important component of reading that must be mastered by the emergent reader as they enter first grade. The idea is widely accepted that a direct pathway to a child’s ability to decode stems from their level of phonological awareness. However, aspects of oral language in addition to phonological awareness must be considered when a well-balanced literacy program is designed.

Findings from research indicate code-related skills and oral language skills play an important role in the acquisition of reading at different points. Students in kindergarten and first grade, as indicated previously rely heavily on the code-related skills they acquire during instruction to attack and decode unknown words necessary for early reading. These skills must be applied for proficient reading accuracy. However, as children enter third and fourth grade and become more skilled readers, they begin to rely more heavily on their oral language skills (semantics/syntax, and vocabulary) to have accurate comprehension (Nation & Snowling, 2004).

Storch and Whitehurst’s (2002) findings indicate, as students enter third and fourth grade reading comprehension and reading accuracy appear to be separate abilities influenced by two separate sets of skills. This longitudinal study of 626 children from preschool through fourth grade reviewed oral language and code-related skills necessary for reading. Assessments in concepts of print, phonological awareness, and oral language were administered in preschool and kindergarten. Skills related to reading accuracy and reading comprehension was administered in first through fourth grade. The sample of 626 preschool students came from eight Head Start centers in Suffolk County, New York. Each participant was eligible for enrollment in the Head Start program.
between the 1991-1994 school years had an average annual household income of
$10,500. Fifty two percent of the children in the study were male while forty eight
percent were female. The group consisted of a culturally diverse sample of thirty-nine
percent African American, thirty-four percent Caucasian, sixteen percent Latino, and
eleven percent not identified. Subjects in this study were selected randomly for
participation.

Literacy skills were assessed six times during the spring of preschool through
fourth grade. Students were assessed by doctoral students in clinical psychology with
experience assessing young children. Each assessment session took place over a two day
period in a quiet one on one setting. Preschool children were assessed in the spring of
Head Start and again during the spring of their kindergarten year using twelve subtests
from Developing Skills Checklist (DSC; CTB, 1990). These subtests assessed letter
naming, letter-sound correspondence, rhyming, and segmenting sentences and words.
One point was given for a correct response on each multiple choice question.

Oral language skills were also assessed in both the spring of Head Start and
Kindergarten using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test Revised (PPVT-R; Dunn &
Dunn 1981). This test assesses receptive language skills. The One Word Picture
Vocabulary Test (One Word; Gardner, 1990) was also administered to assess expressive
language and vocabulary, along with the Renfrew Bus Story (BUS; Glasgow & Cowley,
1994), used to assess each participant’s ability to retell a story recently heard using
pictures. The Stanford Achievement Test-Eighth Edition (SAT; Psychological
Corporation, 1989), and the Wide Range Achievement Test Revised (WRAT-R; Jastak &
Wilkinson, 1984) were used to assess the ability to read printed words aloud and matching pictures with printed words. Additionally, children were administered the Woodcock Reading Mastery tests Revised (WRMT-R; Woodcock, 1987) to determine their ability to sound out printed nonsense words. The Word Reading and Word Attack subtests from the SAT and WRMT-R were administered again at the end of second grade after substantial formal reading instruction had occurred. The Reading Comprehension subtest from SAT as well as the reading subtest from WRAT-R was administered to assess the children’s ability to derive meaning from short written paragraphs. Each of these measures was utilized to assess both reading accuracy and reading comprehension. The SAT Reading Comprehension and SAT Reading Vocabulary were used to assess reading comprehension, while the WRAT Word Reading, SAT Word Reading, Word Attack, and SAT Word Study Skills were used to assess reading accuracy.

Quantitative data was compiled to highlight the noteworthy correlation between oral language skills (i.e., phonological awareness), word attack skills in young children and reading accuracy. Data from this study also supports the correlation between oral language skills such as vocabulary and syntax with reading comprehension after formal literacy instruction has taken place. Data from this study strongly suggests the need for beginning readers to focus on the code-related aspects of learning to read when a marked deficiency is present in preschool and kindergarten. However, instruction in vocabulary and syntax should take place simultaneously as children make progress in decoding to ensure development of more advanced oral language skills needed for accurate comprehension are in place as they become more proficient readers.
Kozminsky and Kozminsky (1995) conducted a study of 70 kindergarten children from two public schools in Isreal to determine the effects of early training in phonological awareness on reading comprehension through third grade. One kindergarten class was randomly assigned as the experimental group which received an eight month phonological awareness training program. The program included specific training activities in addition to the regular national kindergarten curriculum. Phonological awareness tasks were administered to both the experimental group and control group at the beginning of kindergarten (pre-training), at the end of kindergarten (post-training), and at the end of first grade. Reading comprehension was measured using the Hebrew-language Reading Comprehension Test (Ortar, 1987). The comprehension assessment consisted of 68 multiple choice questions and was administered at the end of first grade and third grade. Results indicated a strong correlation between well developed phonological awareness skills and reading comprehension for the experimental group at the end of kindergarten and first grade. The control group scored significantly lower on both the PA tasks and comprehension assessment at both testing points. However, a correlation between PA scores and comprehension scores was still evident ($r = .72$, $p < .05$) Although a strong correlation between PA tasks and comprehension were identified for both the experimental and control groups at the end of first grade, no such links were evident for either group at the end of third grade. Results of this study may have been altered slightly if it were conducted in English.

The evidence to support a connection between PA and reading comprehension in first grade and lack of evidence to support a connection between PA tasks and
comprehension at third grade can be linked to the different roles phonological awareness plays at first and third grade levels. Students in first grade rely heavily on their knowledge of phonemic awareness to decode unfamiliar words they encounter in text. A foundationally solid understanding of the sounds used to comprise words allows children to focus more of their cognitive energy on understanding what they are reading while relying less on context for understanding. In contrast, students in third grade rely more heavily on context to understand what they are reading while the phonological awareness skills used in decoding are less reliable because of the increased number of words that can not be “sounded-out” phonetically at this more advanced stage of reading acquisition (Storch & Whitehurst 2002; Ball & Blachman, 1991).

Both oral language and reading skills are developmental in nature. Phonological awareness clearly plays an important role in word decoding as children begin reading. As reading acquisition progresses other oral language skills become more influential. Roth, Speece, and Cooper (2002) explored this hypothesis. Findings from the first three years of their longitudinal study clarified the relationship between expressive and receptive language and the acquisition of reading skills. This study identified additional language skills influencing progress in reading for beginning readers. Researchers in this study focused on a broad oral language framework which included structural language (semantics, syntax, and morphology) narrative discourse (story comprehension, ability to orally produce a familiar story) and metalinguistics (phonological awareness, metasemantics). The broad framework used in this study views language as a complex
system that overlaps each other, and recognizes literacy tasks measure various components of language as related to reading.

Roth, Speece, and Cooper (2002) studied a group of sixty-six kindergarten children from the Mid-Atlantic States through the end of second grade. Of this randomly selected sample fifty-eight percent were boys and forty-two percent were girls with forty-five percent being African American, one percent American Indian, forty-eight percent Caucasian, and five percent Asian American. All of the sixty-six children spoke English as their native language. From the original sample established when the children were in kindergarten, forty-eight first grade and thirty-nine children in second grade were located for follow-up assessment. Data from assessments to measure narrative discourse, metalinguistics, and structural language was collected. Reading measures were also collected at the end of kindergarten, first and second grades. The researchers used the Reid, Hresko and Hammill (1991) Test of Early Reading Ability—2 Word Attack subtests from the 1989 Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery Revised, and the Letter-Word Identification subtests at the end of kindergarten. At the end of first and second grade researchers administered Letter-Word Identification, Word Attack subtests, and the Passage Comprehension subtest from Woodcock-Johnson. From the data they highlighted the factors related to metalinguistics, narrative discourse, and structural language.

The data revealed the importance of phonological awareness in kindergarten, first and second grade for nonsense word reading and decoding. Results from the study indicate semantic abilities (deriving meaning from printed words) and print awareness
were the strongest predictors of both first and second grade reading comprehension. Word retrieval and vocabulary (oral definitions) were the two most important semantic skills linked to reading comprehension. The ability to supply definitions for words appears to strongly influence a child’s reading ability as more advanced reading emerges at the end of first and second grade.

Measures of narrative discourse, ability to retell a familiar story, administered at the end of kindergarten using the Del Rio English Story Comprehension Test (Toronto, Leverman, Hanna, Rosenzweig & Maldonado, 1975) did not appear to be associated with reading comprehension at the end of first or second grade. Researchers from this study indicate reading at the end of second grade still relies heavily on decoding, and as children become even more proficient readers the use of narrative skills becomes more important. Continued analysis of this longitudinal study may provide additional information about the role narrative discourse plays in reading comprehension abilities as these children progress from beginning readers to proficient readers.

ORAL LANGUAGE AND READING ACCURACY

Research to document the relationship between oral language phonological awareness in particular and reading accuracy is abundant. The limited connection between phonological awareness and reading comprehension has been discussed previously. Peyton, Sanders and Vadas (2006) conducted a study to identify the direct correlation between training in phonological awareness and reading accuracy. The study included 126 kindergarten students identified as at risk for reading failure at the beginning of the school year. Students were assessed using Dynamic Indicators of Basic
Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS Good & Kaminski, 2002). Children were administered Letter Name Fluency, Phoneme Segmentation Fluency and Nonsense Word Fluency subtests to determine eligibility for the study. Of the 126 children recommended for the study, 67 met criteria. Children included in the study were able to name twenty or fewer letter names from a pre-printed sheet in one minute, segment less than 18 phonemes in words dictated for them, and read less than 13 sounds on the nonsense word subtest each timed for one minute respectively. Special education, Title I and English Second Language students were not excluded from the study. The 67 students qualifying for the study were divided into a treatment group of 36 and a control group of 31. Of these 67 students comprising the treatment and control groups 100% were below the 13 percentile nationally when all subtest results were compiled.

Students in the treatment group were provided an intensive one-on-one tutoring program provided by trained paraeducators for eighteen weeks. Control group students were still provided with supplemental support services provided by Title I or special education according to individual qualifications. Tutoring sessions for the treatment group lasted for approximately thirty minutes each day outside of the student’s regular classroom. Each thirty minute tutoring session was divided into seven sections:

1. Letter-sound correspondence
2. Phoneme segmenting
3. Word reading and spelling
4. Irregular word instruction
5. Phoneme blending
6. Alphabet naming practice

7. Assisted oral reading practice

Post-tests were administered to both treatment and control groups at the end of kindergarten and first grade. In reading accuracy and efficiency using the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency assessment students from the treatment group attained average scores in the 45th percentile. Control group students given the same assessment had average scores at or below the 25th percentile in reading accuracy. Results from this study clearly represent the direct correlation between well developed phonological awareness skills and reading accuracy for kindergarten and first grade students. The treatment group in this study maintained higher scores on reading accuracy assessments when administered at the end of first grade as well. Major findings from this study can be summarized by mentioning the positive impact code-related tutoring in phonological awareness has on children identified as high risk for reading failure at the beginning of kindergarten.

CONCLUSIONS

The development of a child’s oral language is one of their most impressive and natural accomplishments. Teachers of young children can help foster natural language development by creating classroom environments rich with language development opportunities. Young children should be treated as conversationalists, even before they begin talking. Children learn the dynamics of holding conversations (looking at the speaker, taking turns, and using facial expressions) provided they have active experiences with adults engaged in conversation. Primary school age children develop the oral language skills required for proficient reading comprehension as they become more
skilled readers. Essential language skills needed beyond phonological awareness, which aids primarily in the decoding of unknown words, must be integrated into all areas of the curriculum. Oral language development and reading acquisition will both be enhanced in classrooms full of actively engaged conversationalists and learners.

Knowing comprehension is the ultimate goal when teaching young children to read, educators should consider a broader set of oral language skills than just phonological awareness when designing effective literacy programs for beginning readers. Research discussed in this review highlights the positive influence phonological awareness skills have on reading performance. However, evidence to support the necessary development of additional oral language skills such as syntax, semantics, metalinguistics, and narrative discourse as students become more proficient readers cannot be ignored. Perhaps the task of teaching children to read would be less daunting if essential elements of oral language necessary for good comprehension when students become more proficient readers were included along with the predominantly code-related phonological awareness instruction children receive during kindergarten and first grade formal reading instruction.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

PURPOSE:

The purpose of this review is to highlight the development of oral language and its influence on the acquisition of early literacy skills for beginning readers. Working primarily with K-3 students in a rural, predominantly Native American community over the last nine years prompted an interest in the lack of oral language skills among our local student population. Much focus is placed on the code-related aspects of teaching children to read during their formal K-3 literacy instruction in our district. Utilizing this approach has proven effective in raising literacy scores directly related to decoding, encoding, and oral reading fluency. However, once students reach third and fourth grade they have not demonstrated similar gains when reading comprehension is assessed.

PARTICIPANTS:

Most studies in this review were conducted with students in kindergarten through third grade. Participants came from both low income and middle to upper class households in either very rural or urban communities. Control groups and experimental groups ranged from 52 to 626 with an average size of 167 students.

PROCEDURES:

Studies highlighted in this review were both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Quantitative data studied was comprised of pre and post assessment results to measure growth on specific phonological indicators directly related to early reading acquisition over a one or two year period. Data was also collected to track improvement in reading comprehension as students became more proficient readers in third grade. Several studies
presented a comparative analysis of phonological assessment scores in kindergarten and first grade with reading comprehension scores for the same students as they completed second grade or moved on to third grade. Interviews with both teachers and students were conducted and compiled with field notes to measure differences in instructional approaches utilized by teachers and their influence on achievement over time. Each study discussed in this review used random groupings of students for purposes of accuracy in results.

MATERIALS:

Phonological Awareness (PA) was assessed using several different tools. Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) is a battery of six literacy assessments administered to K-8 students in a one-on-one setting. Each subtest is a one minute timed assessment. In kindergarten and first grade participants in several studies were administered both Initial Sound Fluency (ISF) and Phoneme Segmentation Fluency (PSF). The ISF subtest requires students to identify the beginning sound they hear in words dictated for them by pointing to a corresponding picture which begins with the sound. The PSF subtest requires students to segment a word into individual sounds after it is dictated for them. Additional assessments to measure knowledge of PA tasks also assessed:

1. Rhyme Detection
2. Sentence Segmentation (segmenting a dictated sentence into words)
3. Syllable Segmentation (breaking dictated words into syllables)
4. Syllable Synthesis (combining syllables to make words)
5. Sound Deletion (sounding out the remaining parts of a word following the deletion of a phoneme)

6. Phoneme Synthesis (combining individual phonemes into words)

Additional assessments to assess phonological awareness included: Developing Skills Checklist (DSC; CTB, 1990), Test of Early Reading Ability (Reid, Hresko & Hammill, 1991), Letter Word Identification and Word Attack subtests from the 1989 Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery Revised. All PA assessments were administered by a single examiner. One point was given for a correct response on each respective subtest.

Reading comprehension and oral language were assessed for comparative analysis using a variety of assessment tools. The Hebrew Language Comprehension Test is a multiple choice test which consists of 68 items. Fourteen of the initial questions on the assessment require the students to match a dictated word to a picture. Remaining items on the assessment are comprised of comprehension questions in response to a brief text which gradually increases in difficulty and length. Additional comprehension assessments including the Woodcock Johnson-Psycho Educational Battery Revised, and the Letter/Word Identification subtest from Woodcock Johnson were also administered at the second and third grade level. Subtests from the Woodcock Johnson assessed knowledge of words and their meaning along with a students’ ability to derive meaning from a short piece of text which gradually increased in complexity. Additional assessments used to assess reading comprehension and structural language included: Del Rio English Story Comprehension Test (Toronto, Leverman, Hanna, Rosenzweig & Maldonado, 1975), Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test Revised (PPVT-R; Dunn & Dunn,
One Word Picture Vocabulary Test (One Word; Gardner, 1990), Renfrew Bus Story (BUS; Glasgow & Cowley, 1994), Stanford Achievement Test-Eighth Edition (SAT; Psychological Corporation, 1989), Wide Range Achievement Test Revised (WRAT-R; Jastak & Wilkinson, 1984), and Woodcock Reading Mastery tests Revised (WRMT-R; Woodcock, 1987). Comprehension and oral language assessments consisted of measures to evaluate knowledge of vocabulary by matching pictures to printed words, sequencing pictures to retell a story in its’ correct order, or multiple choice questions in response to written passages which gradually increased in complexity. Comprehension and language assessment tools were administered in twenty four forty minute sessions by a single examiner.
CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

SUMMARY:

This review of literature was conducted to provide answers to the following questions: (1) Is phonological awareness the only oral language component to be considered for K-3 teachers providing formal literacy instruction? (2) What influence does instruction in phonological awareness have on reading comprehension as students transition from beginning to more proficient readers? (3) As schools become more pressured to cover state assessment test content, have we lost sight of the importance of providing opportunities to develop oral language in our classrooms? Finally, (4) Would the addition of an oral language component to the K-3 literacy curriculum in the Watersmeet School District improve comprehension scores on our state MEAP assessment for third and fourth grade students? In addition to providing information to answer these questions, this review has highlighted the importance of a balanced literacy curriculum for elementary students, provided detailed definitions and descriptions of the elements of oral language and their influence on reading acquisition at various stages of development, and finally, provided an organized summary of the need to consider oral language components in addition to phonological awareness when developing a well-balanced literacy program.

While identifying and describing the various components of oral language, this review also highlighted the influence each of these components has on literacy acquisition as students progress from beginning to proficient readers. The role of syntax, semantics, and vocabulary in literacy instruction has been directly connected to
improved performance on reading comprehension assessments at the end of both second and third grade (Ball & Blachman, 1991; Roth, Speece, & Cooper, 1996; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Storch & Whitehurst, 2001).

IMPLICATIONS:

Proficiency in oral language has clearly been associated with achievement in reading, particularly in the area of reading comprehension. Studies discussed in this review demonstrate children’s performance on semantic (vocabulary) and syntax (grammar) related assessments account for a variance in reading ability as children become more proficient readers (Ball & Blachman, 1991; Roth, Speece, & Cooper, 1996; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Storch & Whitehurst, 2001). Findings in this review favor the inclusion of semantic and syntactic related skills in formal K-3 literacy instruction to promote reading comprehension skills as students enter second and third grade. A review of a larger number of studies might provide more certainty in the effects of including a broader set of oral language skills in formal K-3 literacy instruction and their effect on overall literacy acquisition. Generalizations about larger populations based on results from this review are not completely possible. However, these findings certainly indicate a need for promoting semantic and syntactic proficiency as well as code-related reading proficiency during the critical years of K-1 literacy instruction.

Classroom teachers hoping to improve student performance on state assessments, which often measure ability to derive meaning from written text, might consider an additional focus on fostering oral language development during regular literacy instruction. Comprehensive oral language skills are directly related to reading.
Consequently, instruction which focuses on only vocabulary and phonemic awareness will prove too narrow to support later academic achievement in reading. “Oral language skills should be an integral part of reading instruction beginning in preschool and throughout elementary school” (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002, p. 944).
CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS

Oral language is a key indicator of children’s reading abilities and is crucial to successful literacy development (Dickinson, Cote, & Smith, 1993). The environments and instructional approaches found in classrooms across the United States differ greatly. Schools today are increasingly pressured to cover state test content, causing opportunities to develop oral language skills in children to diminish. The need for children to engage in oral language experiences continues to increase along with the level of cultural diversity found in today’s classrooms. As teachers examine their own classroom materials, instructional practices, and curriculum we can work to recognize the foundational need to develop oral language skills for our children. Teachers should encourage interaction among students in their classrooms. Activities fostering collaboration among small groups of children should be balanced with activities requiring individual completion of tasks.

ROLE OF THE TEACHER:

Often oral language is utilized more by teachers than by students in the classroom. The development of oral language skills as commonly practiced in most of today’s classrooms rarely functions as a method for students to explore new ideas and in turn gain knowledge. Two basic assumptions support these facts. One assumption that exists is, the teacher’s role is to teach—typically interpreted to mean to talk. While students sit and often listen passively, most teachers spend several hours each day talking. This conventional approach to learning is one obstacle which prevents the development of oral language. The second assumption is that children have developed all of the oral language
skills they need to make progress long before entering school. It is commonly assumed that reading and writing are the primary literacy tasks to be focused on as children begin formal literacy instruction. This review of literature highlights the need to include oral language instruction as part of literacy to avoid a decline in students’ ability to make predictions, reason, and organize a logical sequence of thoughts as they progress from lower to higher grades. After spending several years in a passive learning environment, students become accustomed to listening to their teacher talk and completing their assignments. Learning in this type of atmosphere is simply interpreted as writing down whatever is being explained. These environments will often teach students the basics of literacy, but rarely teach them to think critically and make sound judgments independently. When oral language development is implemented in classrooms, teachers are improving oral communication and ability to reason effectively. All previously mentioned skills will help to enhance overall reading and listening comprehension skills.

TEACHER AS FACILITATOR:

Understanding the importance of oral language skills will help us re-evaluate the teaching-learning relationship. Teachers should not always assume the role of knowledge giver and authoritarian in the classroom. Our role as educators may be more effective if we begin to see ourselves as interested and friendly facilitators of student learning. This discussion of the role of oral language in today’s classrooms does not deny the integral role a teacher plays in the classroom. Instead, it presents a slightly more demanding task for teachers. In an effort to truly facilitate the learning process which enables students to
organize their own thoughts, and explore their own thinking, the teacher is required to do more than just explain the meaning of written text.

Teachers should begin by actively encouraging students to bring their background knowledge and experiences into classroom literacy activities. This requires the teacher to be a skilled and responsive listener. Facilitating a child’s discussion in class alone is not enough for language instruction. However, it will help to create an environment which fosters learning and teaching. Active two-way communication will allow classroom teachers to raise questions about the content of the class or meaning of written text. Implementing oral language development across the curriculum will require teamwork and collaboration. The goal of all literacy and content area teachers should be to not just get children to speak, but to have them develop and learn through speech. Over time classroom discussions can be directed toward the comprehension goals for all students to sharpen thoughts and explore ideas found within written texts. Children will understand the function of language when they hear themselves and others being part of the experience.

Other recommendations for incorporating oral language into daily literacy instruction for K-3 teachers include:

- Providing a classroom environment rich with print actually written by students.
- Posting schedules and classroom activities accompanied by pictures and words which enable children to use them independently.
- Posting coauthored projects, graphs, and charts that contain use of children’s own language.
• Devoting an area of the room near a reading area for children to retell favorite stories to teachers and peers.

• Providing a listening area and encourage children to hear stories repeatedly and act them out using flannel boards, puppets, or costumes.

• Scheduling a time each day for children to converse about what is happening in the classroom or at home.

• Ending or beginning each day with a poem or song that allows them to hear language experiences over and over in their minds.

• Designating a read aloud time everyday to read texts with unfamiliar vocabulary. Model the meta-cognitive process used to derive the meaning of unknown words using either context or illustrations.

• Utilizing wordless picture books to promote exploration with language and facilitate discussion as children create their own written or spoken text.

• Incorporating high level questioning in the discussion of every story that is read. Ask if a particular book character reminds them of someone they know? Is the setting of this story like anything you have ever seen? Allow them to personally connect with the text.

• Writing a ‘Daily News’ message each morning to summarize the events of the day. Model this activity first in an effort to teach proper spoken language before transitioning to a written form of this activity.
• Discussing prior knowledge about every story prior to reading in both large and small group settings. Model the thinking involved in making predictions about story events while examining illustrations.
REFERENCES:


