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Oral language

1: Vocabulary helps in Reading: Oral language is an indicator of a child's vocabulary. The more words a child hears, the more words this child will recognize. Even if a child is excellent at phonic decoding, he/she will not 'recognize' a word that is not a part of his/her oral language.

On the other hand, if a word is already part of the child's oral language, no matter how irregular/difficult its 'spelling', the child might still be able to 'guess' it on the basis of its initial sound combined with the context of the sentence in which this word is used.

For example, in the sentence "I love to play c__t" the child might look at the picture on the page and see a bat and ball, and might confirm that the difficult word begins with c and ends with t and 'guess' that this word reads 'cricket.' But if this child had no previous knowledge of the concept and name of this game, he would not have been able to "read" it. Therefore, children with a richer oral language have a huge advantage in learning to read, simply because they know and recognize more words.

Knowledge of Syntax helps in Reading. Knowledge of how words are arranged in a sentence helps readers guess what word should come next as they are reading. For example, a child who knows basic Urdu syntax will sense that in the sentence, "Mein ne Babay ko ___" the blank is probably a verb (fail-fay-ain-laam) and know that this word should signify some action, and end in an -alif-aa sound (e.g. dekha, pukara, maara, daraya etc.). He will be able to anticipate the sound and feel of the correct word, even without being able to phonically decode it. Knowledge of a language's syntax is acquired through speaking and listening—and it gives the reader clues of what kind of word (noun, action, describing word, preposition etc.) should come next in a sentence.

Oral Language familiarizes children with language structures that they are likely to encounter in books. The more "kinds of language" a child hears (stories, proverbs, rhymes, metaphorical language, explanations) the more likely the child is likely to recognize and understand various "text structures" (even in other languages). A child who hears lots of stories will expect to read about a character, a setting, some problem, how this problem is solved and the lesson learned—because this is a typical story structure in any language! A child who has heard poems before will expect short rhyming phrases when he reads a poem.

Oral Language Builds a Base for Reading Comprehension: Children rely on the oral language they've learned at home. The more a mother talks to a child, the better prepared he/she is for reading! The more "stories" that a child has heard, the more easily he/she will

“understand” a storybook. The more rhymes children learn at home, the better their phonemic awareness and sense of poetry.

Kind of Oral Language: According to linguist Michael Halliday, humans use “talk” for different purposes as follows: The first four functions deal with everyday needs—physical, social, emotional:

- To express needs (E.g. Paani peena hai; Baahir jaana)
- To tell others what to do (E.g. De do, Challi jao, Utho)
- Make contact with others/ form relationships (Ao khelein; mein tum se kutti hoon)
- To express feelings/ opinions/ individual identity (Mein acha bacha hoon; mein dar raha hoon)

The next three deal with coming to terms with the larger environment around a child:

- To gain knowledge by asking questions about the environment/world (E.g. Yeh kon hai?; Chirya kidhar gai? Chanda mamoon kahan he?)
- To tell stories/jokes and to create an imaginary environment (E.g. Gurya so gai; Billi boli meow meow)
- To convey facts and information (Yeh chooza he. Chooze ko bhook lagi he.)

These last three uses of oral language (questions about the world, imaginary environment and conveying facts) form the basic model of the kind of language children will encounter in books or more sophisticated academic purposes.

Parents, caregivers and teachers who use oral language for these three purposes (questions, stories, information) actually help children build an internal awareness of sophisticated text models. These children have a head-start in comprehension because they are quicker to recognize and understand different text structures and purposes (e.g. story vs. informational text).

Teachers need to USE and BUILD UP children’s oral language. A child’s oral tradition includes stories from elders, rhyming games from siblings and/or friends, poems/lullabies learned at home, proverbs, riddles, folk songs etc. These are usually in the child’s mother tongue. In school, the child will often become part of a new oral tradition. This will often include poems, rhymes, stories etc., sometimes in a second language (e.g. Baa baa black sheep or Twinkle Twinkle in English.) Teachers who build children’s oral traditions engage them in telling/listening to stories, poems, information, songs, jokes, riddles etc., in all relevant languages (regional dialects, Urdu and English).

What does all this tell us? That:

1. Teachers need to USE children's oral traditions as part of literacy instruction
2. Teachers also need to BUILD UP children's oral language as part of literacy instruction.

Group Discussion and presentation: Using and Building Children's Oral Traditions

Divide student-teachers into groups of such that each group has 4-6 members and have the following discussion (allowing about 15 minutes for this discussion):

1. What oral traditions do children bring to school?

- Based on previous practicum school visits, what are the mother-tongues of the student population in your area?
- What are some of the stories/folk lore for children, poems, lullabies, clapping games or rhymes that these children might already know from parents, grandparents, siblings or neighborhood friends? Collect examples from different mother tongues spoken in your area. (E.g. Clapping games in Urdu: Chum Chum Chum, Umbrella le kar niklay hum or Dus pattay toray, Aik patta kacha...

Lullabies in Pushto: Lo lo lo lo, Ma bachay kho sho lolo... Rhymes in Punjabi and Pushto: Totia, Man motia, Tu raja de ghar na jaa in Punjabi, Tappay sung at weddings, called Maiyay in Hindko, Stories of Angiya Bangiya in Pushto, Sheikh Chilli in Urdu etc.)

Discuss ones which are especially relevant to your geographic region.

2. How can teachers in school USE (extend) some of these oral traditions in school?

Think up some possibilities and create some specific examples. (E.g. staging a play, poetry recitation, story-telling by the teacher etc.)

3. Often, children have to learn a new language at school e.g. Urdu or English. How might teachers BUILD (create) children's oral tradition in a new language?

- Think up some original possibilities and create some specific examples. (E.g. teaching poems and clapping games, by telling simple stories in the new language, reading small books aloud in the new language, through simple games etc.)

- Have groups present one example each, either of how they might use (extend) existing oral traditions or build (create) a new oral tradition in their classroom.