

Connecting Language & Literacy

From Early Assessment of Oral Language Skills to Confident Reading



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Starting Strong: Oral Language In Action

Oral language forms the basis of early childhood development. Substantial oral language exposure significantly impacts cognitive growth, literacy acquisition, and social-emotional well-being. Educators can create language-rich environments that have a profound impact. These environments foster strong communication skills in young children and lay the foundation for their long-term educational and social success.

What is Oral Language, and why is it Important?

Oral language is spoken language; it is our ability to express ideas and understand what is being said. Oral language includes listening, speaking, and understanding the meaning behind words. We use oral language to express thoughts, ask questions, follow directions, share ideas, and engage in conversations. Therefore, strong oral language skills are essential for a student's ability to participate in socializing and, thus, learning! Development begins early in life and extends through early school years, even into adulthood.

Additionally, proficient oral language skills empower students to effectively engage with classroom instruction, comprehend intricate concepts, and forge strong peer relationships. Conversely, students with underdeveloped oral language skills face significant hurdles in learning to read, performing well academically, and interacting socially. Oral language plays a big part in literacy, supporting reading comprehension, writing, and overall academic success.

Early Identification & Assessment

Early identification of oral language skills is vital, especially in vulnerable communities, as it enables timely intervention. Educators play a key role by using practical assessment tools, fostering language growth, and collaborating with parents and speech-language pathologists for effective classroom interventions.



Importance of Oral Language Skills

Studies show that children who experience delays in their oral language skills often face difficulties with foundational literacy skills, such as phonics, word recognition, and reading comprehension. These delays can lead to a domino effect, impeding overall academic progress and creating long-term learning gaps (West et al., 2021).

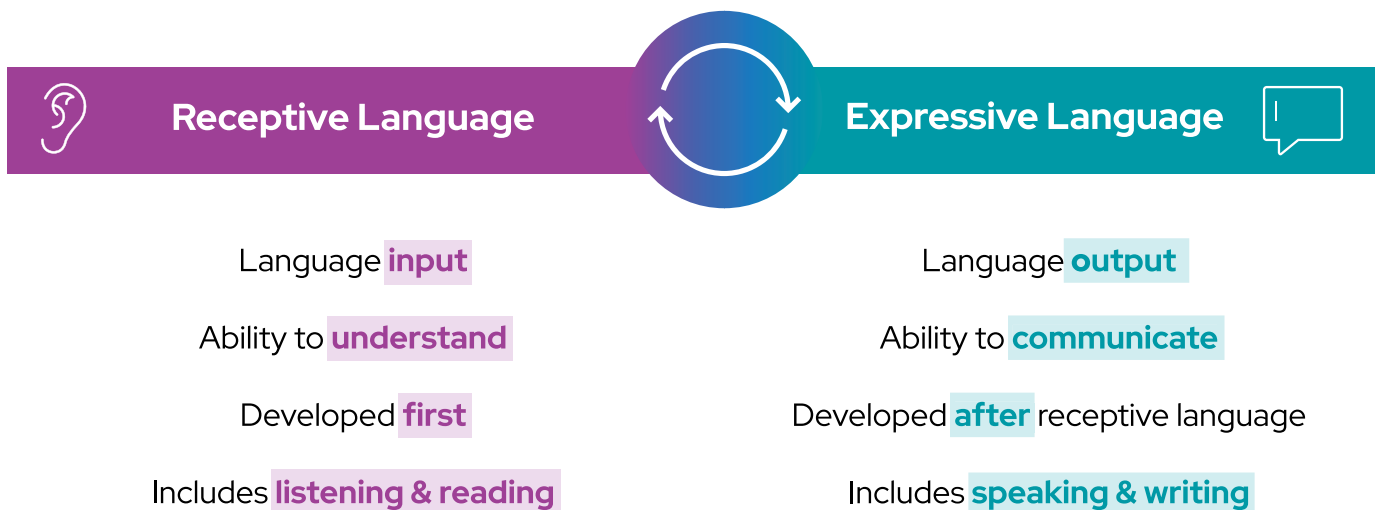
Dr. Charles Hulme, a leading authority on language development, points out that communication is cyclical, a continuous interaction between speaking and listening. To understand speech, a student must listen and attend, understand words, understand sentences containing all those words, and concurrently process language for meaning. To communicate effectively using speech, one must choose words, plan words to create sentences, thoughtfully combine sentences with clarity, and speak clearly.

Oral language is complex. It can be broken down into receptive and expressive language:

- **Receptive language:** the ability to understand and interpret messages, representing the input side of communication; it's typically developed first, as early as in the womb.
- **Expressive language:** the ability to communicate thoughts, ideas, and emotions through spoken, written, or signed language; this is the output part of the chain, where an individual encodes and sends a message to others.

Effective communication depends on this seamless exchange: the sender's clarity and effectiveness of the message (expressive) and the receiver's ability to accurately understand the message (receptive). The receptive and expressive components are often assessed when looking at oral language skills and are essential for early literacy development (McIntyre, McDonald, & McLachlan, 2017).

Receptive and Expressive Language

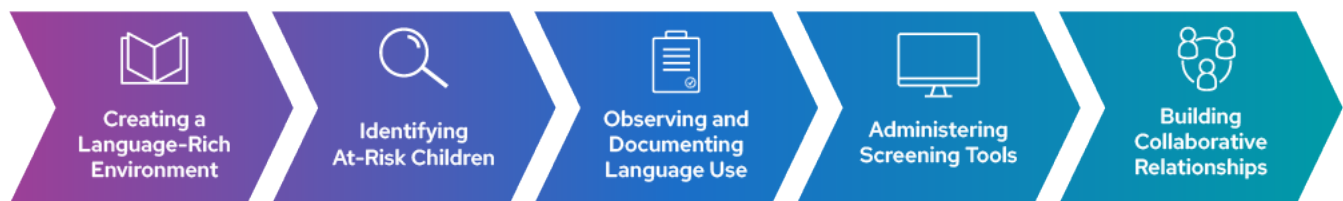


Teachers' Role in Assessing Oral Language Skills

Educators play an essential role as they are the primary language models for young children. Their increased and consistent use of rich language in interactions creates an environment for children to hear and practice these modeled language patterns, which can significantly influence their students' language development.

Educators should strive to introduce new vocabulary, model complex sentence structures, and provide children ample opportunities for extended conversations in the classroom. These conversations promote language development while enhancing children's communication skills. Additionally, educators must be mindful of the varying life experiences children bring to the school based on their geographical and cultural contexts. For example, a child on the East Coast or the South may have different life experiences than those on the West Coast. Teachers can support children's understanding of these differences using context-specific vocabulary, storytelling, and discussions that draw on diverse experiences to build a broader understanding of the world (West et al., 2021).

Educators' responsibility in assessing oral language skills is complex. It is a multifaceted role that involves various aspects of language development and requires a comprehensive approach.



1. Creating a Language-Rich Environment

Developing a classroom that encourages rich oral language usage will prioritize spaces and activities that invite conversation, exploration, and play. Physical spaces may include resources that allow children to engage with language throughout the day.

- * Reading corners
- * Storytelling areas
- * Interactive bulletin boards

Incorporating verbal storytelling and group discussions will allow children to practice speaking and listening in a supportive learning environment. Educators can further promote language development by modeling and asking open-ended questions, encouraging children to think critically and elaborate on their responses. These imaginative and educational interactions can help children acquire vocabulary while assisting them in learning how to use language in different contexts and for various purposes.






What is the benefit of establishing an academic environment that prioritizes oral language?

Research demonstrates that children exposed to diverse vocabulary and language experiences are more likely to develop strong foundational literacy skills. These early language experiences are pivotal in bridging the gap between oral language skills and later academic success.

2. Identifying At-Risk Children

Educators have the unique opportunity to observe children's language in various settings. These settings might include classroom activities, playtime, and interactions with peers. Since educators witness children doing many activities and engaging with others, they can identify children exhibiting language challenges.

Teachers should look for signs that include:

-  Limited vocabulary
-  Difficulty understanding directions
-  Struggling to express themselves clearly

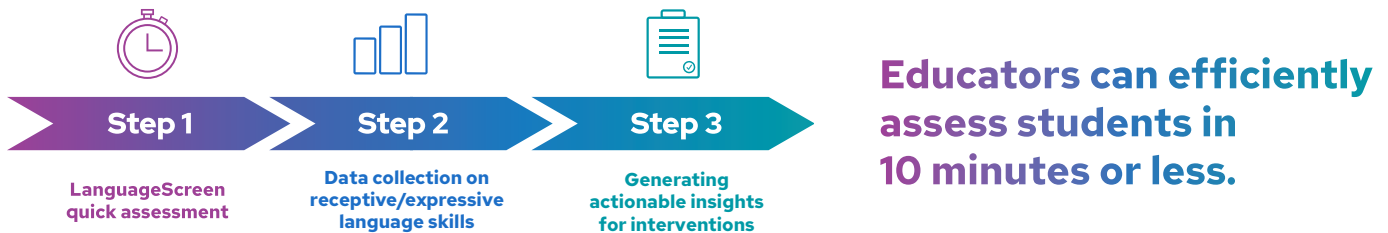
3. Observing and Documenting Language Use

By observing and documenting oral language use during daily activities, teachers can conduct informal assessments to gather insight into students' oral language skills or potential deficits. Notes could include sentence complexity, diversity of vocabulary, and ability to engage in conversations or follow narratives. These observations and documentation provide valuable insight into a child's language development progress.

4. Administering Screening Tools

Assessments with accurate screening tools are incredibly powerful for identifying children with foundational language challenges. Screening tools obtain a more objective measure of a child's language abilities while identifying any masking that students may have learned to "cover up" their language challenges. For example, educators may use a standardized screening assessment like LanguageScreen by OxEd & Assessment, which can be administered quickly yet provides reliable data on a child's receptive and expressive language skills.

Educators may not see missing skills if we do not systematically look at our students' oral language capabilities. Therefore, they may be unable to isolate and target interventions to meet each learner's needs, but their strengths may also go unnoticed.



Finding an adaptable screening tool is also valuable, especially when testing young children. LanguageScreen adapts to the child's age and ability, creating a positive and engaging environment.

5. Building Collaborative Relationships

Educators, caregivers, and speech-language pathologists should collaborate to support children's language growth. By working together, these professionals can share insights about a child's language development and coordinate strategies to reinforce language skills at home and in the classroom.

Teachers should transparently share their observations with parents and/or speech-language pathologists. This partnership ensures language development is consistently supported across different spaces and interactions. It also allows the support team to understand better what interventions are working and what improvements must be made.

In addition to family partnerships, collaboration with speech-language pathologists can help identify language delays early and implement specialized interventions.

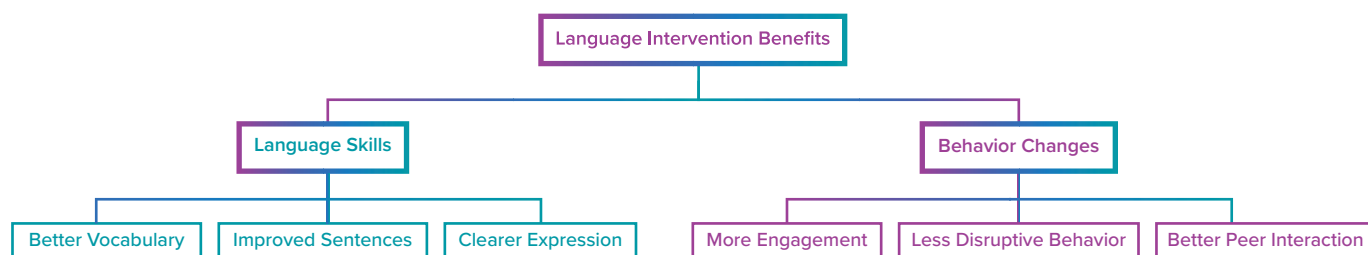
Although teachers and educators are not responsible for or adequately trained to diagnose any suspected language disorder, they can work closely with professionals to assess language skills, monitor progress, and adjust instructional practices to meet individual needs.

Strategies for Improving Oral Language Skills in Young Children

1 Evidence-Based Interventions

Implementing a school-based language intervention program can improve oral language skills and support positive student behavior. Research from randomized controlled trials demonstrates that children who participated in such interventions showed significant gains in their language skills—consistent across communities, including English language learners and different genders—but also demonstrated substantial behavioral improvements, highlighting the impact a targeted intervention program can have (West et al., 2021).

Key findings from a study of TEL Ted, a complete oral language toolkit from OxEEd & Assessment to Teach Everyone Language, indicate that children receiving language intervention consistently outperformed the control group in critical areas of language development, including vocabulary acquisition, sentence structure comprehension, and expressive language skills. These improvements were evident in academic settings and everyday communication, showcasing the far-reaching impact of targeted language interventions. The program also demonstrated effectiveness across diverse populations, addressing equity gaps in education and contributing to notable behavioral improvements, such as increased classroom engagement and enhanced peer interactions (West et al., 2021).



2 OxEEd & Assessment

Really Great Reading and OxEEd & Assessment (OxEEd) have partnered to provide effective oral language solutions, addressing key needs in language development. This collaboration combines OxEEd's expertise in assessing and improving oral language with Really Great Reading's focus on foundational literacy. As part of this collaboration, OxEEd's LanguageScreen is an innovative digital tool designed to assess and track early oral language skills in children aged 3.5 to 11. This tool equips educators with a quick, efficient, and engaging way to identify language delays, using child-friendly tasks that assess vocabulary, listening comprehension, and narrative skills. The assessment takes less than 10 minutes per child, automatically analyzing the results and providing actionable insights that educators can use to tailor interventions and support (Hulme et al., 2024).



In the classroom, LanguageScreen can be integrated seamlessly into routine screenings or ongoing progress monitoring to ensure children develop strong foundational language skills. Its utility lies not only in its efficiency but also in its ability to identify at-risk children early. This early identification allows for timely, targeted support, promoting readiness for literacy and academic success. The tool has demonstrated a particular impact in underserved communities, where the early identification of language delays is crucial for bridging language and achievement gaps (West et al., 2021).

Many assessment tools for oral language skills require a trained speech-language pathologist to administer. However, LanguageScreen eases the workload of overworked and short-staffed speech-language pathologists by making universal screening more accessible and manageable for schools. Designed with speech-language pathologists and educators in mind, LanguageScreen enables any trained adult in the school setting to reliably assess language skills through engaging, interactive activities. The automated analysis generates clear, actionable reports that guide interventions with precision and efficiency (West et al., 2021)

LanguageScreen was rigorously co-validated against other established language assessments to ensure the reliability and trustworthiness of the data. Studies have demonstrated that it is as reliable as tools administered by speech-language pathologists. This reliability ensures that schools can confidently use LanguageScreen for universal screening, freeing speech-language pathologists to focus their expertise on children requiring more intensive support. By addressing both the need for early identification and the logistical challenges of universal screening, LanguageScreen is a critical resource for improving outcomes in language development and academic readiness (Hulme et al., 2024; West et al., 2021).

Prioritizing Oral Language for Lifelong Success

Oral language development is the cornerstone of a student's present and future academic success. Early assessment and identification can ensure children develop the language skills they need to function academically and socially. Vulnerable communities have the most pervasive language deficits. Providing that population with the knowledge and supportive tools required to identify, intervene, and find specialist support is vital to student success. Prioritizing oral language development and investing in research-based interventions, we should place every child on their life's path to win.

Prioritizing oral language development creates a foundation for a child's lifelong learning and success in and out of the classroom. Rich oral language experiences in early childhood lay the groundwork for enhanced literacy, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills. Vulnerable populations facing the most significant language acquisition barriers stand to benefit the most from these efforts. By prioritizing oral language development and investing in evidence-based interventions, we can set all children on a path to success.



References

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