PaSLP Essential Element 2

Essential Element 2: Oral Language and Academic Discourse
Oral language is the foundation for learning and for literacy development. Speaking and listening are tools of communication that become the basis for the written word.

Rationale

By listening and interacting with the adults in their environment, children learn all the components of our rule-ordered language system. From the individual sounds of language, to the meaning of words and word parts, to the various ways words are put together in sentences, as well as the rhythm and intonations of the language—young children integrate all the components of the communication system. It is these very structures that are the basis for written language and form a foundation for literacy development: *It is both from and through speech that children come to understand written language* (Adams, 1990). Infants emerge into a world full of sounds. Their growing brains are hard-wired to be particularly sensitive to the sounds of the language that their caregivers are using. This need is intrinsic and is necessary for infants to navigate the world and make sense of their experiences (Moats, 2010). By 10 months of age, infants are sensitized to, and can distinguish between, all the phonemes (speech sounds) in their own language and those in other languages (Gopnick, Meltzhoff, & Kuhl, 1999). As babies move from cooing to babbling, they recognize combinations of sounds, and typically between 12 and 18 months, they begin to use words. Between 24-36 months, young children learn how to put words together to make phrases and sentences.

Literacy is an achievement that relies on language proficiencies at many levels, from basic sounds to the complexities of text structures and literary devices. Language proficiency and reading achievement are highly correlated (Mehta, Foorman, Branum-Martin, & Taylor, 2005; Goodson, Layzer, Simon, & Dwyer, 2009). A young child's language skills, including vocabulary and complex language, along with phonological awareness and letter knowledge, are the most important and unique predictors of reading ability (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Goodson et al., 2009). The more children have experience with language and literacy before they begin formal schooling, the better equipped they are to succeed in reading (Snow et al., 1998). The school experience should enable children to refine and build on the language of their homes and communities.

Children come to school with marked differences in language and vocabulary. They come with language patterns that have been influenced by their culture and family. In their landmark study of young children just learning to talk, Hart and Risley (1995) found that the amount of "talkativeness" in families or caregivers distinguished students who were "language rich." When the data were extrapolated, the difference in the number of words heard between an average 4-year-old child from a professional family and an average 4-year-old from a low-income family was 30 million words (Hart & Risley,1995). Hart and Risley (1995) found strong correlations between young children living in homes with verbal parents in both higher IQ and better vocabulary scores. In a later study, Hart and Risley (2003) found that vocabulary use at age three was predictive of measures of language skills at ages 9-10, as well as of reading comprehension scores in third grade.

Language continues to develop during the primary years. However, the gap between children with advanced language skills and restricted language skills grows wider during the elementary years. In the upper elementary grades, those who enter fourth grade with significant vocabulary deficits show increasing problems with reading comprehension, even if they have good reading (word identification) skills (Beimiller, 2005). As students get older, reading vocabulary measures correlate higher with reading comprehension than do measures of oral vocabulary (Tannenbaum, Torgeson, & Wagner, 2006). These measures consider both word-reading skills and the knowledge of word meanings.

English Learners
Although it is essential to understand the development of language for all students, those working with English Learners (ELs) need knowledge that is even more specialized. The ELs' proficiency in his or her first language has many implications for second language literacy development. Students who are literate and educated in their first language can better transfer linguistic knowledge and conceptual knowledge to second language learning. Students who read in their native language already have phonemic awareness and basic literacy skills, and therefore need to be taught only the forms that differ in the second language. They may benefit from the use of translated materials and bilingual dictionaries. Students who are not literate in their native language have a greater challenge, as they must learn to read in a language that they are unable to understand (i.e., ELs who are not proficient in their native language will have more difficulty learning to read English than will native English speakers). Language transfer impacts ELs in several ways and can be advantageous or problematic. ELs may transfer cognates and familiar grammatical structures. Yet, unfamiliar, or differing structures may cause errors in language use. To understand the impact of the first language(s), it is helpful to consider how similar the first language(s) is in comparison to English. Consider, for example, the different challenges for native speakers of Spanish, as opposed to Arabic.

Language transfer issues, coupled with developing proficiency in English and limited vocabulary, may result in the production of student errors such as: encoding and decoding errors, pronunciation errors, omissions in speaking and writing, awkward language use, etc. Students may struggle to retain and comprehend information. Some of these errors may mirror those seen in students with learning disabilities; however, they should not be confused as such because they are a normal part of second language development. Such issues can be alleviated through direct instruction in English, the use of graphic and mnemonic supports, and increased exposure and interaction with English (Kauffman, 2007). Moreover, as discussed by Vogt (2012), in addition to instruction with the five core reading elements, ELs will need extensive practice with oral language. This would include high-quality instruction in language patterns at the word, sentence, and discourse level. Instruction should include opportunities to converse with their peers in structured, small group discussions.

Factors Affecting Language Transfer
- Alphabet
- Letter Recognition

- Phonetic relationships (e.g., the letter p in Ukrainian sounds like /r/ in English)
- Lack of mutual sounds or sounds that don't exist
- Grammar structures, exceptions to typical grammar rules, or grammar patterns that don't exist in one of the languages (e.g., some languages do not have a past tense verb form)
- Language functions that are not mutual
- Cultural functions (e.g., indirect vs. direct communication styles, social hierarchy in language, etc.)
- Idioms or figurative language

Oral Academic Discourse

Although receptive and expressive oral language skills are emphasized at the preschool and primary grade levels, additional attention needs to be given to the development of more formal discourse required for success in classrooms, especially in the academic disciplines. As students mature, their ability to communicate effectively within the context of each discipline requires specific attention to oral academic discourse. According to Gutierrez (1995), "becoming a member of a discourse community and developing discourse competence requires having linguistic knowledge, as well as knowing how to act, talk, interpret, and think according to a particular cultural or social group" (pp. 23-24).

As discussed in the *Accountable Talk Sourcebook*:

> "There is an extensive research base on classroom discourse which examines the nature of classroom talk and the relationship between talk and learning in school. Researchers and experienced classroom teachers alike know that simply getting students to talk aloud or talk to one another does not necessarily lead to learning. What matters is what students are talking about and how they talk. Such talk uses evidence from the disciplines; it enhances student thinking and enables them to use evidence appropriate to both use and create knowledge. Such talk requires students to listen and learn from one another, to use accurate knowledge, and to be accountable to rigorous thinking." (Michaels et al., 2013, p.1)

The PA Core Standards in English Language Arts require students to be able to engage effectively in a variety of collaborative discussions based on grade-level topics, texts, and issues, as well as present their ideas and reasoning clearly and effectively (PDE, 2014). In other words, students are expected to understand a language different from everyday speech. This language of schooling, "must be developed across content fields, grade levels, and cultural populations….and is also needed for the multiple sources that students will encounter" (Horowitz, 2014, p.63).

Frey and Fisher (2011) emphasized several classroom practices associated with promoting classroom discourse. First, it is important that teachers establish a language purpose for their

lessons. A language purpose is one in which the teacher identifies an objective for the students' use of content or social language (Hill & Flynn, 2006; Frey & Fisher, 2011; Soto-Hinman, 2011). In English language arts, for example, a teacher might establish a language objective for using specific academic vocabulary related to rhetorical devices in class discussion.

Teachers can also provide students with language frames to learn speaking and writing structures as well as academic vocabulary across the disciplines. Providing opportunities for students to produce language through speaking by utilizing the syntax of the discipline serves as a support for writing (Dougherty, Roberts & Billings, 2016; Fisher & Frey, 2014). Language frames in science may encourage conciseness and the use of past tense as in the following examples from Frey and Fisher (2011):

- *The purpose of this study was to…*
- *The results of the experiment were…*
- *The findings were significant because…*

Also, teachers can provide opportunities for students to engage in small group discussion using collaborative, higher-order tasks. Frey and Fisher (2011, p. 18) described a quality group task as one in which students have to "rely on one another," not one in which groups can divide the task amongst themselves and complete it without really having to engage in academic talk." In fact, higher-order tasks and questions are more likely to promote active academic conversations and discussion from students (Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2005).

Implications

General

Oral language and vocabulary can be developed and enhanced in three key ways: (a) listening to the language and being engaged in conversations, (b) being read to, and (c) reading independently. Parents, caregivers, and teachers *at all levels* should:

- Talk to students, engage them in conversation;
- Model language patterns;
- Deliberately use rich vocabulary and discuss word meanings;
- Provide time for and encourage conversations between students;
- Read to students and talk about what is being read;
- Encourage wide and independent reading;
- Value and encourage students to use their home language; and
- Provide rich experiences for students that enable them to gain world knowledge.

Birth to Age 5

The amount of talk in the young child's life is critical for oral language development, intellectual growth, and reading development. As children learn to take turns in the dance of conversation, their language abilities grow even more. Practicing language is as important as hearing language.

- Link spoken words to concrete objects and experiences to enhance understanding.

- Talk, talk, talk to the infant, the baby, and the young child.
- Get close to the young child so that he or she can see facial expressions, watch lip movements, and hear the voice clearly.
- Imitate the sounds the baby is making and add new ones.
- Introduce play with sounds and nursery rhymes, finger plays, jingles, and songs.
- Confirm and clarify the child's attempts at using new words.
- Elaborate on what children say and extend their utterances.
- Describe shared experiences with new and rich vocabulary.
- Use varied vocabulary and words that are robust in meaning (e.g., "ferocious" dinosaurs, a group of children make a "commotion"). Children love big words! Mealtimes provide a wonderful opportunity for this type of conversation.
- Discuss the meaning of words.
- In early learning centers, use a curriculum that provides rich opportunities for talk between teacher and children.
- Read, read, and read some more to the child. Interact with the child around the text (Whitehurst, 1992).
- Spend some time each day with an individual child and talking with that child about topics of interest. Such time provides opportunities for assessing the child's language and for fostering its growth.
- Foster strong relationships between home, daycare, and educational settings.
- See the Infant-Toddler and Pre-Kindergarten Learning Standards for Early Childhood (2014) for additional instructional implications.

Grades K-5
Oral language and vocabulary develop when teachers and parents:
- Talk to and with students, providing extended opportunity for discussion.
- Provide many opportunities for conversation between students. Use partnering, think-pair-share, small group, and whole class formats in the classroom.
- Foster word consciousness and teach students strategies for learning words on their own.
- Use explicit, robust vocabulary instruction, and be intentional about the words chosen (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2008).
- Create many opportunities for read alouds about a wide range of topics and include all genres.
- Foster discussion between children using open-ended questions about the text.
- Expect wide independent reading. Offer students opportunity to choose their own materials.
- Make available various genres of text, including narrative, informational, poetry, biographies, etc.
- Teach the importance of collaborating, being a good listener, and supporting ideas with facts.
- Develop a school-wide plan for vocabulary instruction across all domains (White & Kim, 2009).

- See the PA Core Standards (2014) for additional instructional implications.

Grades 6-12

Literacy demands intensify as secondary students are expected to learn new words, new facts, and new ideas from reading. Their literacy skills will enable them to learn new content; at the same time, the knowledge they gain from content will increase their literacy skills. Teachers in all content areas should:

- Use text-based collaborative learning that involves students interacting with one another around a variety of texts and topics.
- Include direct vocabulary instruction in language arts, as well as content area courses.
- Teach independent, word-learning strategies.
- Take advantage of the social interactions among students as a means of learning through discussions in the classroom.
- Provide opportunities for students to engage in one-to-one, small group, and whole class conversations. Content for the conversations can come from what is important in various domains.
- Teach the importance of collaborating, being a good listener, building on the ideas of others, and articulating ideas clearly, supporting those ideas with facts.
- Use active participation strategies so that all students are engaged in the classroom discourse.
- Use writing as a tool to help students think about and refine word choice, sentence structure, and pragmatics.
- Encourage wide, independent reading in a variety of genres.
- See PA Core Standards (2014) for additional instructional implications.