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SUPPORTING ELLS' ACHIEVEMENT: ORAL LANGUAGE UNPACKED

WHAT IS ORAL LANGUAGE?

Oral language is the system through which we use spoken words to express knowledge, ideas, and feelings. Developing English Language Learners' (ELLs) oral language, then, means developing the skills and knowledge that provide the foundation for their listening, speaking, and writing. Broadly, oral language is made up of five components:

- **Vocabulary** (understanding the meaning of words and phrases)a
- **Syntax** (understanding word order and grammar rules)
- **Morphological skills** (understanding the meaning of word forms and parts)
- **Pragmatics** (understanding the social rules of communication)
- **Phonological skills** (an awareness of sounds, such as syllables and rhymes)

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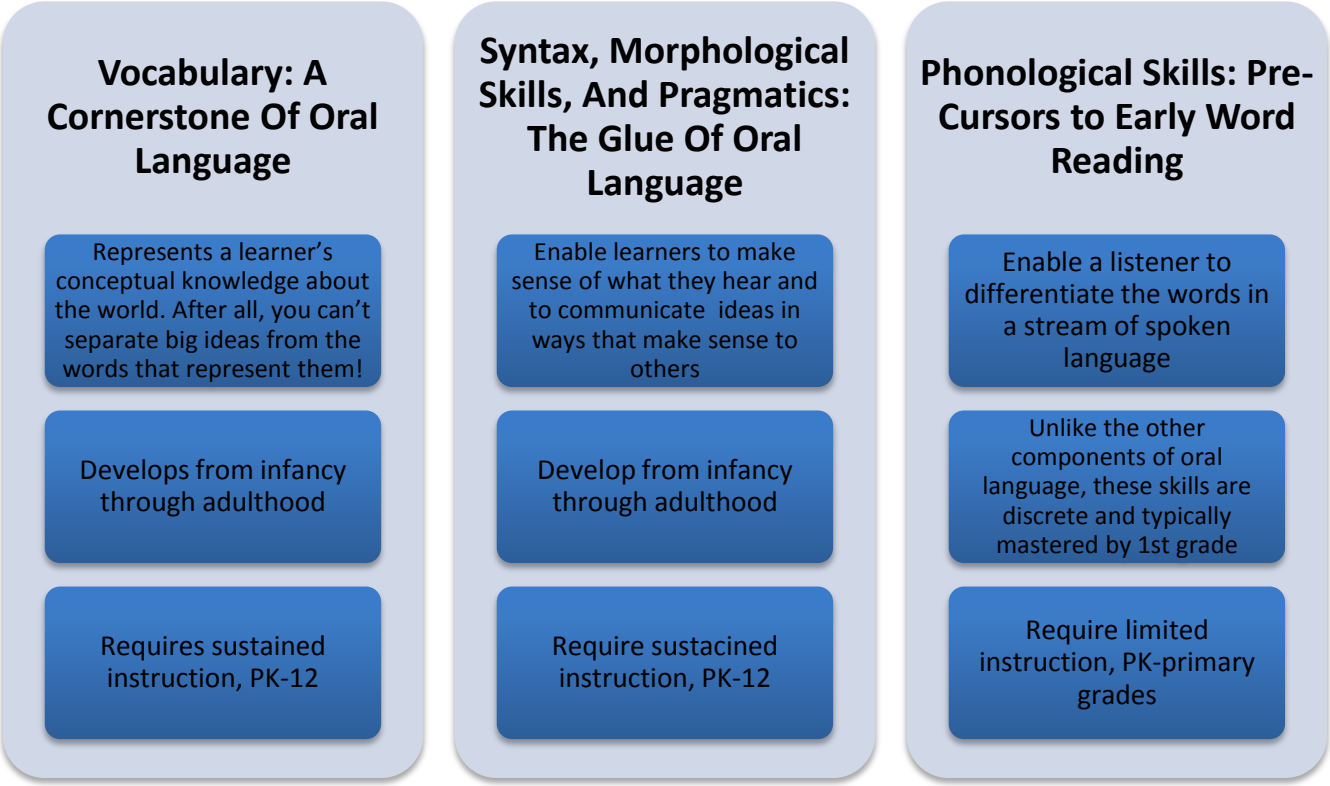
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH NYC DIVISION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND STUDENT SUPPORT

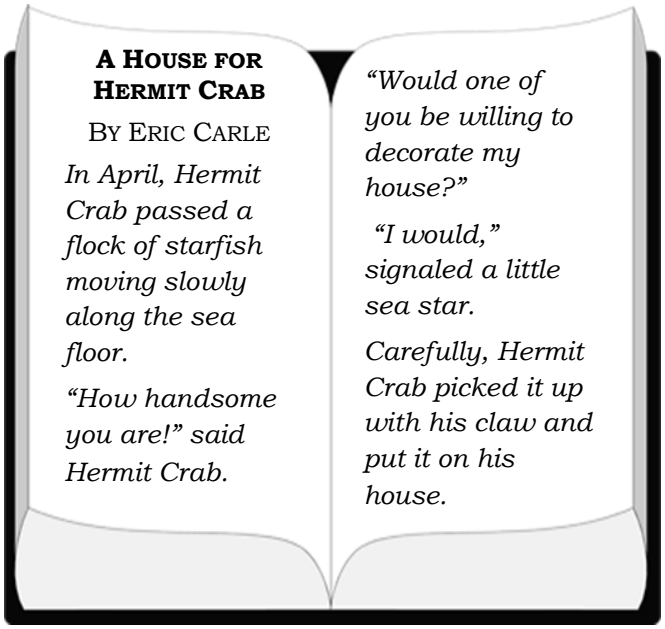
What Makes these Components Distinct?

All of these components of oral language are necessary to communicate and learn through conversation and spoken interaction, but there are important distinctions among them that have implications for instruction.



A student's **phonological** skills are foundational to her oral language and word reading development, but typically do not present lasting sources of difficulty for most learners, including ELLs. Students' skills in the domains of **syntax, morphology**, and **pragmatics** are central for putting together and taking apart the meaning of sentences and paragraphs, and for oral and written dialogue. In turn, having the **words** to engage in the dialogue—the **vocabulary knowledge**—is also a key part of oral language. These skills must be fostered from early childhood through adolescence, and are often sources of difficulty for ELLs, hindering their literacy development (August & Shanahan, 2006).

What Oral Language Competencies Do Learners Need to Make Sense of This Read Aloud?



A House for Hermit Crab

By Eric Carle

In April, Hermit Crab passed a flock of starfish moving slowly along the sea floor.

"How handsome you are!" said Hermit Crab.

"Would one of you be willing to decorate my house?"

"I would," signaled a little sea star.

Carefully, Hermit Crab picked it up with his claw and put it on his house.

Vocabulary

- Understand the meaning of words in this context (e.g., *pass* has 85 possible definitions!)

Syntax

- Understand Hermit Crab is doing the action—*passing*—and the flock of starfish is receiving the action, being *passed*

Morphological skills

- Understand that the suffix "-ly" changes the words "slow" and "careful" from action words to words that describe actions

Pragmatics

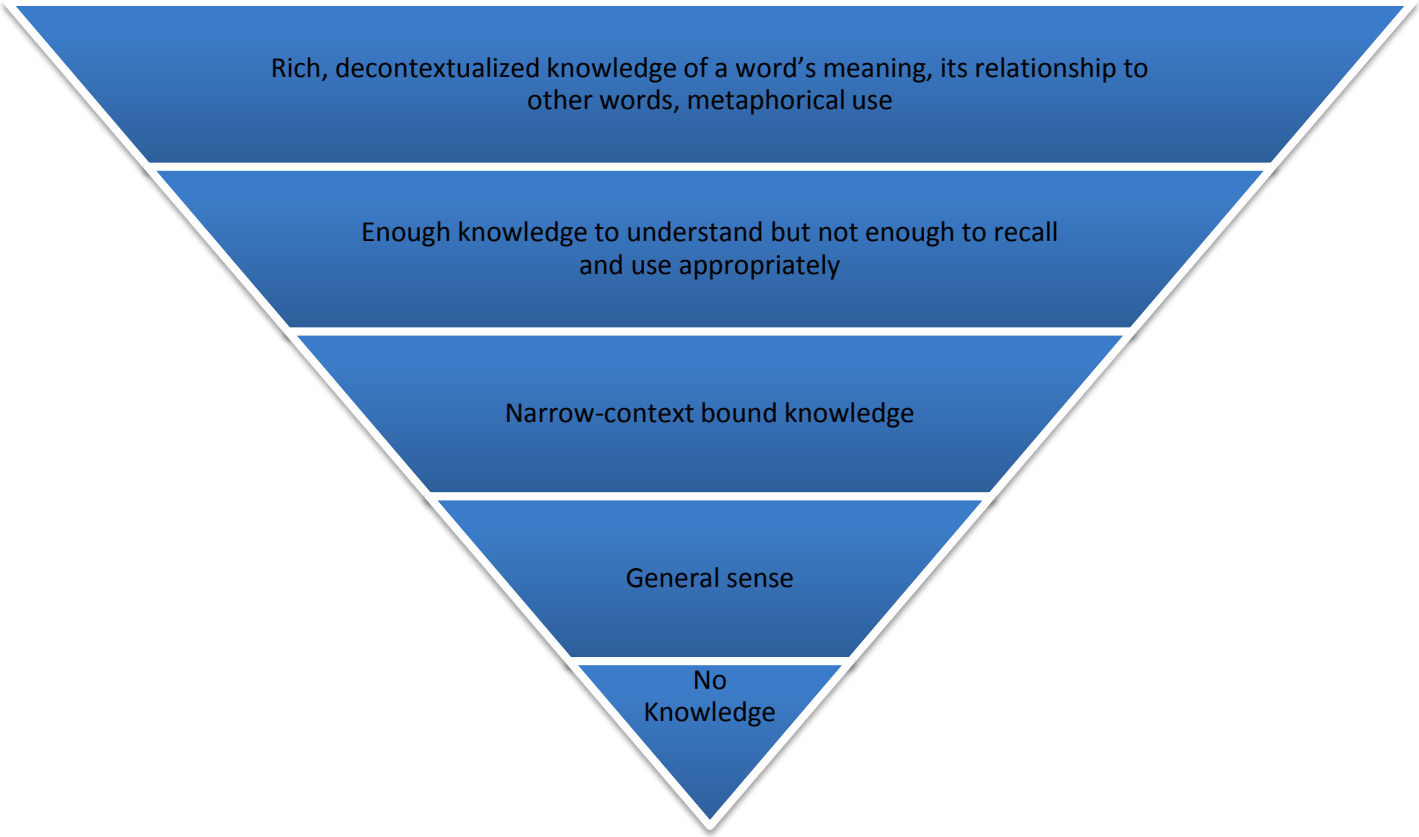
- Understand that read-aloud time is a time to listen and think about the story; spoken responses are appropriate when the teacher asks a question

Phonological skills

- "Hear" the four different words that make up the phrase, "how handsome you are"

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO KNOW A WORD?

5 LEVELS OF WORD KNOWLEDGE



Spotlight on Vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge involves understanding the meanings of words and phrases (aka *receptive vocabulary*) and using those words and phrases to communicate effectively (aka *expressive vocabulary*). Vocabulary knowledge is a key component of oral language, but it is not constrained to oral language; it is also integral to comprehending and communicating using print.

Vocabulary knowledge exists in degrees, such that any learner has a particular "level" of knowledge of any given word (see diagram; Graves, 1986; Nagy & Scott, 2000). This begins with the word sounding familiar and moves toward the ability to use the word flexibly, even metaphorically, when speaking and writing.

What Does this Mean for Instruction?

Promoting children's oral language, including the rich vocabulary knowledge needed for academic success, means much more than rote memorization and choral repetition! Effective instruction to build up oral language provides students with deep, language- and content-based learning experiences that provide plenty of opportunities for reading, writing, and meaningful discussion (Lesaux, 2012).

Instruction that promotes oral language development requires organizing classroom learning around content-based, thematic units of study in which the overarching instructional plan is based on topics that lend themselves to big questions without easy answers. These units of study feature:

- Rich, complex texts that serve as platforms for learning
- and discussion.
- A small number of academic words studied throughout,
- taking time to explore nuanced meanings and uses.
- Spaces and activities organized for collaborative learning.
- like labs, demonstrations, debates, and role plays.

To promote oral language, organize classroom learning around content-based, thematic units of study in which the overarching instructional plan is based on topics that lend themselves to big questions without easy answers

Within each content-based, thematic unit of study, it is important to weave in classroom practices that are useful for promoting oral language development and for putting Common Core Language, Listening, and Speaking Standards into action. In the diagram to the left, you will find eight strategies, which together, support learners as they build language and an academic identity in a way that is both fun and purposeful.

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- Graves, M. F. (1986). Vocabulary learning and instruction. *Review of Research in Education*, 13, 49-89.
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APPENDIX: DIGGING DEEPER INTO CLASSROOM PRACTICES THAT BUILD ORAL LANGUAGE

1. CLOSE, INTERACTIVE READ ALOUD

Defining Characteristics:

- Orients students to the text and their goals in interacting with text (e.g., purpose setting, connection to previous lesson and theme under study)
- Metalinguistic skills fostered through explicit strategies such as think-aloud, attention to vocabulary, analysis of figurative language, etc.
- Includes planned work and objectives post-reading (e.g., further discussion, extended writing opportunities, enacting the story)
- Emphasis on text analysis for content, including, when relevant, information and perspectives presented

How does this support oral language development?

Close, interactive read alouds make interactions with texts visible for ELLs by leading them through a deliberate, explicit process. The interaction among the students, the teacher, and the text become the context for reading, rather than limiting students to their own isolated—and varied—understandings of print.

2. Collaborative Discussion and Debate

Defining Characteristics:

- All participants understand the desired objective and goal of the discussion and receive feedback on their own participation
- Participants have a clear understanding of the rules of discussion, which are internalized over time
- Students have opportunities to act in different roles, e.g., moderator, formal listener for responding and/or reporting purposes, etc.
- Discussion provides opportunities to practice turn-taking, responding to others, staying on topic, and building on the points made by peers
- Students practice providing evidence to support a position and/or solve a problem
- Students are required to take different perspectives on the same issue, and/or a different perspective than their own
- Students practice and develop active listening, which depends upon their active questioning

How does this support oral language development?

In order for ELLs to build discussion and debate skills, which in turn supports their literacy achievement, we must teach and practice the process. We do this by modeling and providing structured opportunities to practice all elements of discussion—from citing evidence to formally constructing a position to responding to others' ideas. When students, both young and old, engage in interactive, peer-to-peer discussions they are acquiring academic ways of talking and presenting their ideas.

3. Multifaceted, Intensive Vocabulary Instruction

Defining Characteristics:

- Focuses on deep understanding of specific words, their elements, shades of meaning, and related words (in rich contexts)
- Word selection is especially important—words must be chosen carefully so they are high-utility (i.e., used often in academic print and dialogue)
- Emphasis is placed on content words and words that deliver the content to the reader
- Balance direct teaching of words with teaching word-learning strategies
    - Word-learning strategies include morphological awareness skills (understanding of word forms and how to transform words) and using context (when coming across unfamiliar words)
- Target vocabulary is actively encountered over time, especially through discussion of how word choice impacts meaning of oral and written language
- Word-learning is connected to content-learning

How does this support oral language development?

Vocabulary knowledge is a cornerstone of oral language and so including multifaceted, intensive vocabulary instruction in daily classroom practice is crucial. If ELLs are to keep pace with the language demands of the school curriculum, then teachers must provide them with clear and meaningful information about the concepts that words represent as well as multiple opportunities to encounter and use them.

4. Role Playing and Rehearsed Oral Performance

Defining Characteristics:

- Designed as a project for students to carry out (planning, managing, execution) including tracking progress towards goal
- Project is connected to text and/or language study
- Students have opportunities to practice and revise over time
- Project provides opportunities to take on different perspectives and/or identities
- Use of media (publishing, props, illustrations)
- Well-defined guidelines for presentation format

How does this support oral language development?

ELLs need opportunities to assume new roles through their school experience. They need explicit access to discipline-specific modes of communication, including hypothesizing, questioning, and constructing responses. In addition, ELLs benefit when they can complete a project that requires practicing academic language and vocabulary towards a formal presentation, be it a speech, a presentation, or reading their own work in front of an audience.

5. Language Frames For Speaking and Writing

Defining Characteristics:

- Provide grammatical language for academic tasks, such as responding to others' points
- Explicit and structured opportunities to practice standard oral and written academic language conventions
- Focus on formal academic English
- Focus on specialized academic vocabulary (e.g., "therefore," "however," etc.)
- Focus on specialized academic sentence structures (e.g., "as a result," "due to the…")

How does this support oral language development?

Adapting academic ways of speaking and representing knowledge is not easy for many students, including many ELLs. We can scaffold this process by providing language, including grammar and

vocabulary, for questions and answers. These may be modeled in early grades ("let's explain to our friend why that hurt our feelings…") or posted as sentence stems for proficient readers ("I have a contrasting point of view because…"). Whether written or oral, we are providing structure and practice for a new way of speaking and interacting, and building academic language skills.

6. Open-Ended Questions and Strategic Responses

Defining Characteristics:

- Provides student opportunities to engage with complex questions that aren't easily answered
- Provides students opportunities to ask and answer different types of questions (written, oral) in different contexts
- Students have opportunities to analyze and respond to various perspectives on the same topic, included guided practice for responding to peers
- Students provide evidence and information when responding, as well as acknowledging the information and perspective of others

How does this support oral language development?

Everyday classroom discussions that push ELLs to engage with complex questions and ideas without easy answers support oral language development by providing an interactive context for language use. This can be accomplished through a carefully-crafted line of questioning that pushes students to consider their positions and provide support for their answers or positions. These strategic responses encourage peer-to-peer responses as well as a deeper exploration of the content—a move in contrast to the far-too-typical scenario where we simply ask students to verify whether or not a response is correct.

7. Jointly Constructed, Academic Writing

Defining Characteristics:

- Ideas and drafts are developed over time, with explicit access—including modeling—of the planning and revision process
- Provides opportunities for students to develop writing in the context of a unit of study
- Writing instruction and activities are connected to other unit elements, .e.g., response to discussion and/or text
- Purpose and target audience of end product are clearly defined
- Writing prompts are those that do not have straightforward answers and are anchored in content
- Includes a student self-checklist for evaluation and revision

- Practice using academic language (including figurative language and different voices) and guided word choice
- Active use and practice of target vocabulary

How does this support oral language development?

Oral and written language development are closely linked. As part of the writing process, students must experience the formulation of ideas in action. At each stage of writing—whether the task at hand is a narrative or written response to a mathematical problem—students need clear models, explicit instructions, and feedback on their work.

8. Explicit Connections to Community and Content

Defining Characteristics:

- Students have opportunities to interact purposefully with community members in connection to school text and content
- Interactions create genuine extension activities to reinforce new knowledge and practice developing skills
- Provides an opportunity to seek out and gather primary data on a question or topic, using authentic and local sources
- Provides opportunities to develop and use classroom language and target vocabulary
- Provides an opportunity for students to present work and ideas to community members
- Explicit discussion of best ways to present ideas to broader audiences, including various media formats and visuals, as well as language style and word choice

How does this support oral language development?

In order to effectively build ELLs' oral language, the act of reading and writing must authentically connect to their lives beyond school. Sometimes we connect through content and themes, at other times by making explicit why certain skills translate into careers, college, or neighborhood improvements. Setting a tone and purpose that transcends the borders of schools motivates and enhances academic literacy acquisition.