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Documenting and Evaluating Oral Language Development in the Classroom

Ruth Crawford

What I want to know, is how her teacher is measuring those things like oral language. Well like, what does it mean when she gets a check plus in 'sharing with others' and only a check in 'can use language to describe events and objects?'

With my son, I know that he speaks well and shares things in class, but I don't think he gets enough credit for this. He is very verbal — that is his strength. Where his writing might be a bit behind, he makes up for that in his ability to speak well. I'd like to know that was taken into consideration.

These comments were made by parents discussing the necessity of creating a school-wide program of documenting and evaluating oral language. They articulate two very real concerns common to parents and educators alike: How is oral language valued and evaluated in the classroom? Concerns such as these confirm that it is not enough for teachers to simply expound the virtues of oral language or even to place check marks on report cards. In order to insure that oral language be given its rightful place in the curriculum, teachers

must implement validated programs that contain documentation and evaluation.

Oral language has long been overlooked as a critical component of language arts (Buckley, 1992). This neglect will continue until proper evaluation procedures are facilitated by teachers (Buckley, 1995). For that which is not evaluated is seldom valued (Loban, 1976). Researchers have determined that in order to facilitate oral language development, educators must provide a "curricula that is a thoughtfully organized, sequential set of experiences leading logically through the grades" (Stewig, 1988, p. 172) with practical and accessible means for documentation and evaluation (Loban, 1976). Stewig (1988) declared further that to appropriate oral language into the curriculum teachers must do these three things: "1) develop rationales, 2) plan curriculum sequences, and 3) implement evaluation programs" (p. 41).

In keeping with these guidelines the following program was implemented in a PDS (professional development school) encompassing grades pre-school through six. The author, in conjunction with teachers from this school, created and facilitated a program which consisted of identifying sequential oral language objectives for each grade, using video and audio recordings to document oral language events, and developing a system for easy retrieval and evaluation of these events. Using both audio and video recorders, students were taped at various times throughout the year during a variety of oral language events. The tapes were to become cumulative records with each grade level thereafter adding recordings. Parental involvement became a significant aspect of this program since parents were expected to examine taped recordings and provide related feedback.

The response of parents, students, and teachers in the school to this innovative program was overwhelmingly positive. Consequently, several unique discoveries were made as a result of the recordings. These discoveries provide insight into the emergent on-going nature of oral language development; the value of a cumulative video and audio record of oral language progression; and the need to establish consistent methods for documenting and recovering evidence from tapes.

Examining beliefs

The following questions concerning oral language were presented by teacher education students to the various PDS teachers: 1) How significant is oral language development to the overall educational progression of your students?, 2) How are the oral language objectives met in your classroom?, 3) What is the significance of documenting and evaluating the progression of oral language development in students? Unanimously, teachers agreed that "students must talk and communicate to learn well" (Hart, 1983, p. 164). They agreed too, that oral language is a developmental process which should be reflected in progressive and developmentally appropriate objectives in the classroom. Furthermore, all teachers answered positively when asked if they had instituted oral language objectives in their classroom. However, there was an indicated lack of continuity between grade level objectives; and few teachers had means for documenting and evaluating oral language development in their classroom.

Although all teachers perceived a need for oral language in the classroom, various levels of importance had been placed upon this need. In the earlier grades, teachers presented extensive lists of oral language objectives for instruction. However, in the upper grades the oral language objectives of teachers ranged anywhere from simply those listed on

their report card, to lists consisting of both whole class and individually established oral language objectives.

Often, teachers stress oral language less and less as students get older. This is an erroneous decision since students must continually develop proficient oral language skills in order to prepare for adult life where oral language is often the predominant mode of transferring information (Smith and Smith, 1994). Moreover, the ability to speak well "should be the hallmark of students who have had the privilege of twelve years of education" (Buckley, 1995, p. 45). Oral language objectives must then be both consistently and progressively stressed by teachers throughout grade levels.

Formulating new objectives

After establishing the existing oral language objectives of each level, a master list was comprised (see Figure 1). Each teacher was given this list to review before meeting again to discuss the creation of a continuum of oral language objectives. As a result, many teachers refined their previous objectives based on those adopted by other teachers.

After refining their objectives, teachers met to discuss the new continuum. There were, in all, three types of oral language objectives created. These objectives included: school-wide objectives, objectives specific to particular levels, and objectives individually created for specific students. Many objectives, such as "uses oral language to contribute information to the class" were determined appropriate for all levels. Thus, it was determined that these were to become school-wide objectives. Grade equivalent objectives were those established as developmentally appropriate for certain levels. Both school-wide and grade equivalent objectives were to be reevaluated annually through collaborative meetings in order to insure they remained developmentally

appropriate and appropriately progressive throughout levels. Individual oral language objectives would be those established each year by teachers, students and parents based on the abilities, needs, and desires of the individual student. The ability to create individual objectives would be particularly dependent upon the evidence derived from oral language records both past and present.

Figure 1
School-wide oral language objectives

The students will use oral language:

- * to communicate ideas to others
- * to expand vocabulary
- * to share experiences with others
- * to adjust to social situations
- * to resolve conflicts appropriately
- * to contribute ideas to class
- * to expand the awareness of others
- * to express thoughts and feelings
- * to examine and experience cultural diversity
- * to communicate in an organized manner
- * to participate in group discussions
- * to read the ideas of others
- * to read their own ideas when written
- * to ask questions and demonstrate understanding of the answers received
- * to analyze situations and respond to them
- * to describe a sequence of events or multiple events
- * to demonstrate an appropriate level of comprehension of concepts
- * to rephrase or add details to clarify their messages to others
- * to participate in social and instructional conversations
- * to demonstrate their construction of knowledge
- * to develop expression
- * to participate in group planning

Documentation

Once oral language objectives become a consistent aspect of the curriculum, teachers must document evidence of this. Buckley (1992) contends that to best evaluate oral language, teachers should use taped samples. Several teachers in the PDS were already using audio and video tapes to record oral language events in their classroom. Based on the determined availability and limited cost of these endeavors, this was established as an appropriate means for the documentation of oral language school-wide.

While many researchers mention the use of audio and video equipment for recording oral language (Loban, 1976; Wellhousen, 1993; Buckley, 1992; Stewig, 1988); little, or no, specific methods for documenting and evaluating these recordings have been offered. An array of difficulties arise when teachers use audio and video recordings without consistent methods for locating and documenting the specific events of children. "Searching through tapes for one piece of evidence was difficult without a record keeping system," remarked one PDS teacher. "It is especially difficult too, if a parent wants you to locate that specific sentence or event you might have mentioned as an illustration of their child's growth. You need to be able to put your hands on that place in the tape in order to show that you really are evaluating their child based on authentic incidence from the classroom" added another teacher.

Hence, teachers need a practical record keeping system that allows easy access for documentation and evaluation of the oral language objectives for which they are accountable. This system must also allow for additional input and observations to insure proper evaluation of language events (Goodman, Goodman and Hood, 1989). In order to satisfy these requirements, a consistent system for documenting,

recovering, and evaluating evidence from tapes was created. Based upon the principles of the recording system for kid watching, this DE (documentation/evaluation) process addresses specific behaviors (of oral language) to be observed; includes a limited number of specific items to be observed so that the checklists aren't too lengthy; and provides additional space for observations and comments (Goodman, Goodman and Hood, 1989). The DE process consists of two forms, 1) the target objective checklist, and 2) the anecdotal, or scripting, record.

Evaluation

As evaluation begins the teacher documents the time, date, and method of recording onto the pre-prepared target objective checklist. While certainly more than one oral language objective might be observed during any given event, teachers are cautioned to focus upon only the objectives which necessitate documentation at the current time. The goal being to document and evaluate identified aspects of oral language.

This example of an excerpt from a child's oral language demonstrates the placement of the oral language objectives and the corresponding documentation and evaluations on the target checklist (Figure 2). The method for recording the event is indicated by a V — for video tape, A — for audio tape, or O — for simple observation. The date and time of assessment are included to provide easy access to the corresponding tape — which is also labeled with the date, time and event recorded. Following the time is the teacher's evaluation, which as recommended by Loban (1976), uses the single criterion of effectiveness, ranging from high, to moderate, to low. These ratings are represented by the letters H, M, or L respectively.

As soon as the event begins, teachers record their insights and observations on the scripting form (Figure 3). This anecdotal record is necessary since the illustrations provide much needed descriptions and interpretations concerning the event. As with kid watching, teachers are encouraged to record instructional ideas which occur during observation. This allows teachers to refine instructional practices based upon documented observations of children's needs and abilities.

FIGURE 2
Target Objective Checklist

First Grade Oral Language Objectives: The Learning Uses Oral Language to:

Re-tell an event sequentially (V 9-13, 1:15 p.m. L) (A 10-12, 1:20 M) (O 11-6, 1:18 M);

Contribute information to the class (O 9-27, 10:05 a.m. M) (V 10-11, 12:16 a.m. H) (A 10-13, 2:05 p.m. M);

Represent views and opinions (S 9-18, 2:30 p.m. M).

These sheets may also be used as places to record vignettes. A vignette is a chronicle of an especially meaningful event from a child's classroom life (Pappas, Kiefer and Levstik, 1990). Since these are quite detailed accounts they are usually written some time after an event. It is advantageous for teachers to include at least one vignette per grading period since these may reveal events which were significant but not documented by either video or audio taping.

Both the target objective checklist and the scripting notes become part of the student's portfolio. Parents are asked to

take the tapes and these documents home to review and to provide feedback. On occasion parents may disagree with the teacher's evaluations of their child. If this is the case they are asked to provide further evidence from home to augment the child's portfolio. Often, parents undertaking this endeavor will discover that the teacher has in fact provided a clear indication of their child's growth. While other parents may produce evidence from home which substantiates their views and demonstrates the need to re-examine the teacher's assessment. Either way, parental feedback is a necessary component of the evaluation process.

FIGURE 3
The Scripting Record

Name XXXXXX Date and Time: 9/13/95 1:15
XXXXXX begins to tell the class how we made bread. Although he has use of the recipe chart the directions are not given sequentially. XXXXX stops several times to ask what comes next. I prompt him by telling the first step, and by asking him to provide the next. Yet he still does not give the steps in order. XXXXX has developed a willingness to speak in large group settings and even volunteered to give this information. He smiles as he speaks and even laughs at his own mistakes. He seems comfortable speaking in front of the class. All of this demonstrates his development. I plan to implement more opportunities for XXXXX to practice presenting information sequentially.

Oral language lessons

As a result of this program, teachers, parents and students reconsidered the importance of oral language in the curriculum. Teachers discovered that by creating consistent objectives, a clearer focus upon instruction and evaluation

was provided. These objectives also allowed neglected aspects of oral language to be uncovered as teachers came to appreciate their worth in a greater way.

The recording methods also proved advantageous. One teacher stated that these had allowed her "to know students better and be able to share evidence of growth." While another concluded that the "best thing about using recordings was the possibility to authenticate assessment." Teachers used words like validation, verification, and authentication to describe the advantages of using video and audio recordings to document oral language development.

Appreciation for this consistent method of documenting and recovering evidence from audio and video tapes was also strengthened. Gone were the days of hunting through tapes or trying desperately to recall examples from specific events to share with parents or other teachers. Through the use of effective documentation systems, teachers could now pass on information knowing that others would receive a clearer picture of where students were and where they were going. There was much to be said about using the tapes as cumulative records of oral language progression.

The response of parents to this program was overwhelmingly positive. Parents are a vital component in the success of any literacy program. Previous intervention endeavors (Crawford, 1995) reinforced the necessity of involving parents in both evaluative and operative modes. Parents played a key role in the development and facilitation of this program by sharing insights and opinions and by monitoring the assessment of their children. This interaction opened up channels of dialogue between parents and teachers concerning the significance of oral language development and the effectiveness of this new program.

Through this program parents came to better appreciate the oral language development of their children. They learned to view oral language less as mere "chit chat," and more as a means for communicating, investigating, and articulating the learning process (Smith and Smith, 1994). Furthermore, parents realized that they could assist their children's oral language development by planning home activities which reinforced objectives from the classroom (Crawford, 1995).

Students generally enjoyed being video or audio taped. Since the tapes were sent home they also enjoyed sharing their endeavors with family members. Through these recordings students were allowed to assess their own competency, and to realize things like, the more they practiced speaking, the more proficient they would become.

Eventually the program will be used to facilitate students in the art of self-assessment; in that students will be asked to assess the fulfillment of an objective based upon evidence taken from their recordings. By practicing self-assessment, students will become more responsible learners. By watching themselves develop over time they will gain a direction for learning with a vision toward the future.

Reflections

This program was founded upon the contention that educators must do more with oral language than pay lip service or plan activities. If teachers are to understand and facilitate the oral language development of children, they must implement programs geared toward documentation and evaluation (Bouffler, 1993). Our program provided the means to accomplish this through cumulative records of progression. Although this program is still in its infancy, results thus

far are promising. Forthcoming longitudinal studies should reveal the distinct advantages of such a program. We await that day, when our cumulative records allow for the examination of progression — grades preschool through six. Hopefully then even more will be learned about oral language development and the value of having documented this progression.

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