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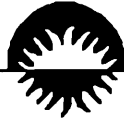


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Oral Language, Literacy and Schooling: Kindergarten Years

**Karen F. Thomas
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Sherrie K. Wampler**

This article reports the findings from the second year of a three year study following four children from a pre-kindergarten Headstart program through first grade. Grounded in the developmental theories of Vygotsky (1986), who has asserted the importance of social interaction and language learning, and Halliday (1975), who has provided a sociolinguistic framework for children learning language in social functions that promote meaning in their lives, it is an attempt to document the impact of oral language on young children's reading and writing. In the initial year of this study, we identified four children who demonstrated varying levels of Halliday's oral language functions and compared their use of talk with their understanding and performance of literacy tasks (Thomas and Rinehart, 1990). We used Halliday's (1975) seven functions: 1) *instrumental*, to have needs met; 2) *regulatory*, to regulate behavior; 3) *interactional*, to establish a me-and-you relationship; 4) *personal*, to assert one's self in opinion and feelings; 5) *heuristic*, to ask questions fostering learning; 6) *imaginative*, to play; and 7) *informational*, to pass on information, to screen over 40 children to select subjects who displayed varying degrees of the seven

functions. We selected four who provided us with varying uses of oral language demonstrated in classroom exchanges, classroom activities, writing activities, and reading activities. As participant observers, we collected over 36 hours of talk on audio and video tapes as well as hand tallied accounts from personal participation and observation. The selected four subjects were then ranked as numbers one, two, three and four with one representing full control of all seven functions. Subjects numbered two, three and four exhibited decreasing use of functions in social settings in the classroom with number four representing restricted use of language functions. In addition to the data collected in the classroom, we held interviews with parents in the first year of our study. The results of the first year indicated: 1) Subjects with the most developed use of language functions have the best understanding of the writing and reading process. 2) As oral language function use decreases so does the understanding of the writing and reading process. 3) Subjects who are frequently read to have better oral language development. 4) Subjects who wrote/scribbled at home as part of adult activities had a better understanding and performance in writing. 5) Subjects who spent more time actively engaged with adults in talk had a heightened sense of language development. 6) Talk was necessary to help subjects begin and sustain writing. 7) Heuristic, interactional and personal language functions best served subjects' writing. 8) Understanding of and performance in print awareness tasks paralleled the level of use of language functions. 9) Classroom activities and time devoted to oral language growth promoted writing interest.

The aim of the second phase of this study was to investigate the impact of kindergarten instruction on the development of literacy in our four subjects one year later. After a year in the same Headstart, these four children went

on to three different kindergartens with different instructors. Exploring the interplay among the changes in relationships of talk, writing and reading behaviors as a result of formal instruction in kindergarten, we asked the following questions: 1) how does kindergarten instruction influence our subjects' seven oral language functions?; 2) how is oral language used in kindergarten to facilitate literacy in the four subjects?; and 3) how has the understanding of literacy changed in these four subjects from Headstart to kindergarten?

Method

Subjects. The subjects for this second year study were the same four students from the initial year so that comparisons could be made. Gary, who ranked as the number one language user of Halliday's seven functions, was five years seven months at the time of this study and maintained his standing in oral language development. Seth, who ranked number two in uses of Halliday's language functions was five years nine months at the time of this study and shared the second place this year with Polly in language function use. Polly was five years eight months and shared the second place with Seth in oral language. Robbie, who ranked in last place in oral language function use, was five years five months at the time of this study. All four children now attended different kindergartens. Polly and Robbie shared the same kindergarten teacher in a setting characterized as a traditional skills based, basal-driven classroom. Seth attended yet another kindergarten in a neighboring city that is also characterized as a traditional skills based, basal-driven setting. Gary attended a third kindergarten best characterized as an eclectic setting.

Materials and measures. *Oral language.* Halliday's seven classifications of language functions served again as

the basis for measurement of oral language development. In transcribing their oral language from tapes, we obtained a measure of their language functions in the writing center. In addition, we used tally sheets outlining Halliday's seven oral language functions to mark which functions were employed in classroom oral language exchanges as we observed them. These tally sheets allowed for a frequency count of the seven language functions. In both instances, the classroom and the writing center, we tallied the occurrence of talk that demonstrated a particular function. All functions were agreed upon by two of the researchers. When there was a question regarding a function, the third researcher resolved the matter.

Print awareness. Students completed two print awareness tasks. The first measure involved student reaction to print information on index cards. These cards were initially developed by Freeman and Whitesell (1985) based on the work of Ferreiro and Teberosky (1983). For this task, children were to decide whether print presented on index cards could be read or could not be read. The cards had examples of lower and upper case print number, cursive and manuscript words (see Appendix A).

The second measure for print awareness called for children to recognize logos on cards. We developed the cards to exemplify print seen and experienced in everyday life. Two sets of cards were involved. In the first instance each card had the actual logo and the accompanying print. For example, one card contained the yellow arches from McDonald's and the word McDonald's printed on the card just as it is seen in advertising. The second set of cards only contained the decontextualized print of the name of the product, brand or service offered.

Print concepts. In order to determine reading behavior involving books, we used 19 items from Clay's (1985) *Concepts About Print Test* (CAPT). Not used in the first study year because children were not in the stages of beginning reading, we decided to use this test now that our subjects were involved in beginning reading instruction. Using an age appropriate tradebook, the four subjects attempted to identify nineteen different print concepts (see Appendix B).

Writing samples. We collected writing samples from all of the children for comparison with written products from the first year of the study. Children wrote in response to topics we suggested, topics they generated and stories we read to them. We categorized elements of each written product using Clay's (1975) classification protocol, which involved code; language level; message quality; and directional principle (see Appendix C for description and instrument).

Procedures

Having received permission from appropriate elementary school personnel and the parents, we began to collect data in the three different classrooms. Gary attended one kindergarten while Polly and Robbie shared the same kindergarten class. Seth had moved to a neighboring city attending yet a third kindergarten. For a period of two to three days a week during the last three months of school we went to these classrooms where we were participant observers becoming a part of these children's circle time, reading time, special activities time, recess and lunch time.

In addition to these routines, we set up a writing center consisting of a small work table, chairs and writing material. The center was located in a private niche of the room. At the writing center we kept a full supply of pens, pencils, magic

markers, crayons, unlined paper and various trade books which we brought. From writing center activities we gathered writing samples and audiotaped children's language while they wrote. The four children wrote for us at the writing center during every visit to the school. The print awareness and print concepts tasks were also administered in the writing center.

Thus, data collection for oral language came from observations of all four children in the classroom setting and audiotapes of their work in the writing center. Tallies of language functions came from talk observed in the classroom and tape recorded talk in the writing center. Analyses were conducted qualitatively by comparing student performances across identified categories and judging differences and changes in performance. The findings are described below.

Results

Instructional settings. Gary, as the only subject who demonstrated use of all seven functions, continued this same pattern in kindergarten. Gary's classroom practices were teacher-led and involved the following routines: 1) large group activities with teacher-led discussion; 2) teacher-led ability-grouped reading instruction following a phonics approach adhering to the reading basal manual; 3) whole group LEA activities; 4) teacher-led reading-to-students experiences; 5) letter-formation exercises emphasizing tracing and correct position and formation of alphabet; 6) coloring pictures; and 7) peer interaction characterized by a good deal of freedom for students reading together in classroom library as well as playing games together and generally engaging in any of the teacher-provided activities. The presence of print in Gary's room was limited to a small classroom library and occasional LEA activities. Print was

displayed rarely. The chalk boards were usually bare as were the bulletin boards.

Seth, rated as second in use of language functions, now shared this ranking with Polly. Seth's classroom was also designated as teacher-led involving the following activities: 1) small group activities grouped by ability for instruction in math, reading, science, health, and handwriting organized around a rotating basis as students went from table to table under supervision of teacher and teacher aide; 2) structured basal lessons in all academic subjects; 3) teacher-led large group discussion; 4) free play time allowing children social interactions daily; 5) teacher-led reading-to-students once a day; 6) seat work time involving quantities of worksheets/workbooks. Seth's room had several visual representations of print on the chalk boards, bulletin board and walls.

Polly, who demonstrated a growth in oral language functions used, now rivaled Seth in oral language functions in the classroom while Robbie still ranked fourth in use of language functions with a definitive growth in oral language. Polly and Robbie share the same kindergarten session. Their teacher conducted the following routines: 1) small highly-structured ability-reading groups; 2) math, handwriting, and art work completed at assigned small table seats through worksheets; 3) teacher-led reading to students once a day; 4) small classroom library used during free play time as well as quiet social interaction activities allowed at this time. This room also had print displayed on all available bulletin boards, chalk boards and walls.

A comparison of the oral language functions from the first year with the language functions from the second year showed both a decrease overall in child-initiated talk and a

decrease in some specific functions used in kindergarten. After tallying frequencies of the specific language functions used by each subject during the initial year and during the kindergarten year, we saw a pattern of reduced talk altogether as well as a decrease in the rough percentages of the certain language functions. The most notable changes involved an increase in the informational function and a decrease in the imaginative, interactional and heuristic functions (see Appendix D).

Writing episodes. One year later, Gary, clearly the most prolific writer in Headstart, now viewed himself as "not a very good writer." In fact, he appeared to avoid writing completely. This represented a dramatic change from the first year when Gary's compositions in mock linear had a complete story line with beginning, middle and end. Only when Gary was presented with a "magic pen" this year could he write. His form of writing again represented mock linear with no growth represented in topics, interest or excitement. Gary's talk during writing again represented the imaginative as well as the personal and heuristic. Seth also tried to avoid writing with statements such as "I may do the writing next time," and "I'm not good at writing stories." When Seth did consent to write, he insisted on copying from books or any piece of print in sight. Last year, Seth eagerly drew and wrote stories making marks representing his text. Seth insisted on spelling correctly. Seth's stories this year had no accompanying drawings, just letters (e.g., NO EBB). He clearly stuck to letters that he knew how to make with a story line to go with the letters. Polly also commented that she did not know how to write a story and that spelling had to be correct or else she did not consider it as writing. Polly also copied from any piece of text in sight and a story that she finally consented to write had the following text according to her reading of it: "Polly saw a bee in the flowers."

However, her text looked like this: "Polly ABSC Crayola Polly." She wrote her name and copied the word crayola from the coloring crayons on the table. She only attempted what she knew to be correct and what she could copy. Robbie, on the other hand, viewed himself as a writer. Interestingly enough, Robbie — as the least developed user of language functions — was at the point that Seth and Polly were last year at this time. Now Robbie made random marks and upper case letters to represent his writing.

None of the three instructional settings provided writing time for children to explore print nor did the teacher encourage children to compose stories. Only an occasional LEA lesson in Gary's room fit a description of children composing. There were no students' models displayed in the classrooms as well as no writing centers nor time devoted to writing. The only writing accomplished by these four subjects was structured handwriting exercises and copying and tracing of letters on dittoed worksheets or workbook pages. Correctness of form predominated. The only composing these subjects did occurred in the writing center we established for this study.

Because three of the four subjects were concerned with not being "good writers," their talk in the writing centers evolved around questioning their writing. They attempted to elicit clarification in what they were doing when they wrote with us using heuristic and regulatory functions of language.

Print concepts. Using an age appropriate trade-book, the four subjects were asked to help identify nineteen different print concepts (see Appendix B). This print awareness task was not administered last year. We decided to use it because the children were into beginning reading and Clay's (1985) task was appropriate. Gary was able to iden-

tify thirteen concepts followed by Seth who identified twelve. Polly and Robbie identified ten print concepts each. Robbie, the least developed in using seven language functions, was the only child who did not have any idea what the story was about.

Logo recognition again proved to be an easy task for Gary followed by Seth, Polly and Robbie. However, Gary was the only one who could read three names from the de-contextualized logos. The other three could not recognize any of the brand names or businesses without the accompanying colorful logo.

The cards to be identified *for reading or not for reading* proved quite a different task this year. The result of formal letter and word recognition instruction figured prominently in these four children's rationale in determining what was or was not for reading. Gary clearly lead in correct responses as well as explanations followed by Seth, Polly and Robbie. Gary and Seth focused on letters as the marks for reading but not numbers. Polly and Robbie had no consistent set of rules for what was to be read and what was not for reading but clearly displayed knowledge of each letter name and number. This represented little change from last year. Gary and Seth retained their edge in this task.

Discussion and implications

We noticed a glaring difference between the practices of Headstart and these three public school kindergartens. Headstart clearly emphasized socialization with attendant language activities allowing talk and play which fostered the seven language functions while kindergarten practices fostered formal introduction to literacy through basal readiness programs with a prescribed sequence of skills to be covered. Hence, oral language in these kindergartens fostered

instrumental and regulatory functions almost exclusively. On any given day in the kindergarten classes, the predominant use of the instrumental and regulatory phrases of all three teachers included *I want, do this, do exactly as I say*. The third oral language category of all teachers involved the informational function. Teachers appeared to be compelled to pass on information to the children in isolated bits and pieces regarding the separate skills comprising all of literacy. Unfortunately, there was little time provided for the children to talk and explore different social settings to foster other language functions and development. The models provided by the teachers for these children set the tone for instrumental, regulatory and informational functions.

Secondly, writing was not a part of these kindergarten programs. The only writing (i.e., composing) and exploration of print done by these children occurred when we set up our writing corners in each of the classrooms. As we asked children to write with us we noted a conflict in what the kindergarten teacher presented as writing and what we practiced as writing. In Headstart invented spelling, scribbling, marking and drawing poured forth from our four subjects with accompanying text provided orally (Thomas and Rinehart, 1990). Now the conventions of orthography and the writing system have become important as Gary, Seth and Polly struggle to write. Only Robbie appears unfettered by writing tasks. Possibly, the three most developed in oral language are in the process of changing their control over writing while Robbie has not reached this level. More likely, Dyson (1985) has offered the plausible explanation that "...writing is a matter of social learning, of playful exploration and self expression." With this in mind, after one year of formal education, three of these four children appear to have lost this sense of playful exploration and self expression which they demonstrated in Headstart. Quite clearly, formal

instruction in literacy skills has taught these three that there is only one correct way to write and the way they used to write is wrong.

Our third observation indicating a difference from the first year to this year involved the print concepts task. Gary was the only child in the initial study who could identify a main idea from a story read to him. A year later, Seth and Polly join Gary in understanding and recognizing that a story has a main idea. Also, all four children indicated some knowledge of punctuation as part of the writing system along with directionality (left to right, top to bottom). Formal education seems to have enhanced these children's understanding of story print.

Next, we observed that all four subjects viewed themselves as readers this year whereas in the first year they did not see themselves as readers. However, after formal teaching of various letter names and a few simple words, including their own names, these subjects were now beginning to identify themselves as readers. Along with this recognition of their own reading ability, however, they were also discovering a correct way of reading. They define this as pronouncing the words correctly and quickly.

Finally, the two who made the greatest gains when compared with last year's results, Polly and Robbie, attended the same kindergarten class with an instructor who allowed more play time during which children could talk to each other than the other kindergarten instructors. Gary, the most advanced in oral language, made the least gains while enrolled in a kindergarten whose instructor openly admitted displeasure with Gary's frequent and advanced language. Gary's kindergarten teacher reported that through her instruction she hoped to make him less

inquisitive and more like the other children. Seth, in yet a third kindergarten, went through a year of adjustment with a move to another city and a whole new neighborhood of changes. His year of formal instruction offered him structure; however, he did lose some of his playful exploration with print.

Even though three of our four subjects appeared to lack confidence in their writing, they anxiously awaited our coming to their classrooms so that they could scribble and explore print. The only other opportunities we witnessed for using paper and pencil involved matching pictures to letter sounds, underlining responses, filling in boxes, or coloring existing pictures. There appeared to be little freedom to explore print in these three kindergarten classrooms. Instructional emphases showed little evidence of knowledge of invented spelling, the reading-writing connection, or whole language beliefs.

Our results suggest that these children may define writing and reading as their instructional programs dictate. Clearly at this point, three of our four students perceive writing as form and do not see it as a function of expressing meaning. Similarly they seem to view reading as sounding out the new letters learned in reading groups. In revealing literacy to these young learners piecemeal, not at all in the natural way they learned oral language through meaningful social settings with accompanying context, these teachers appear to be limiting how these children define literacy.

Teachers of young children must listen to their children to determine developmental progress in oral language and provide models for language development. In addition, teachers must provide opportunities for students to explore print and allow oral language development during

composing. Furthermore, teachers must bring talk and writing into the proper perspective. Finally, teachers must align literacy instruction in keeping with how children learn language – in meaningful social contexts that touch children's lives. This second year study clearly demonstrated that teachers have a tremendous impact upon children's literacy learning and teachers' instructional practices do make a difference in how children define and accomplish literacy.

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APPENDIX A

ITEMS INCLUDED ON PRINT AWARENESS TASK

| Letters in Lower case | Letters in Upper case | Words in Lower case | Words in Upper case | Letters in Cursive | Words in Cursive | Numbers |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|---------|
| t t | BBBB | circle | TOO | <i>lll</i> | <i>man</i> | 2357 |
| oso | GDY | duck | AN | <i>tra</i> | <i>of</i> | 5 |
| csf | P | to | CAT | <i>sss</i> | <i>something</i> | 6 |
| | | | LOOK | <i>a</i> | | |



"Expanding Horizons," a feature included periodically in *Reading Horizons* (see pages 174-177 in this issue), enables our readers to share exciting teaching ideas with one another. If you have a short practical article to submit to "Expanding Horizons," send three typed copies, with a self-addressed stamped envelope, to: Editor, *Reading Horizons*, Reading Center and Clinic, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo MI 49008.



APPENDIX B
PRINT CONCEPT CHECKLIST

| Concept | Subjects | | | |
|----------------------------|----------|------|-------|--------|
| | Gary | Seth | Polly | Robbie |
| Front of book | + | + | + | + |
| Print carries message | + | + | + | + |
| Start at top left | + | + | | + |
| Progress left to right | + | + | | + |
| Return to lower line left | + | + | | + |
| Points to individual word | + | | + | |
| First/Last word of page | + | | + | |
| Beginning/End of sentence | + | | | |
| Beginning/End of Paragraph | | | | |
| Left page before right | + | + | + | + |
| Question mark | + | | + | |
| Period | + | | + | |
| Comma | | | | |
| Quotation Mark | | | | |
| Upper /Lower case Match | + | + | + | + |
| 1 letter/ 2 letters | + | + | + | |
| 1 word/2 words | + | | + | |
| First/Last letter | + | + | | |
| Capital Letter | + | + | + | + |
| Totals | 13 | 12 | 10 | 10 |

+ correct response
after Clay (1985)

APPENDIX C

DEVELOPMENTAL WRITING STEPS AND ORAL LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS USED IN CHILDREN'S WRITING

| * FUNCTION USED WHILE COMPOSING | Gary | Seth | Polly | Robbie |
|--|------|------|-------|--------|
| -instrumental | + | + | + | + |
| -regulatory | + | + | + | - |
| -interactional | + | + | | |
| -personal | + | + | + | + |
| -imaginative | + | + | + | |
| -heuristic | + | + | + | + |
| -informative | + | + | + | + |
| ** CODE | | | | |
| -scribble | | | | |
| -linear mock | + | | | |
| -mock letters | | | | |
| ** LANGUAGE LEVEL | | | | |
| -alphabetic (letters only) | + | + | + | + |
| -word (any recognizable word) | + | + | + | + |
| -word group (any 2 word phrase) | | | | |
| -sentence (any simple sentence) | | | | |
| -punctuated story (2 or more sentences) | | | | |
| -paragraphed story (2 paragraphs) | | | | |
| ** MESSAGE QUALITY | | | | |
| -concept of signs | + | + | + | + |
| -concept of message conveyed | + | + | + | + |
| -repetitive, independent use of sentence patterns (e.g. "here is a ...") | | | | |
| -attempts to record own ideas | | | | |
| -successful composition | | | | |
| ** DIRECTIONAL PRINCIPLES | | | | |
| -no evidence of directional knowledge | | | | |
| -knows: -to start top left | + | + | | + |
| -to move left to right | + | + | | + |
| -to return down | + | + | + | + |
| -reversal of: -right to left | | | | |
| -return down right | | | | |
| -correct directional pattern | + | + | | |
| -correct directional pattern & spaces between words | | | | |
| -appropriate extensive text | | | | |

* Halliday (1975) ** Clay (1975, pp. 66-67)

APPENDIX D

PERCENTAGES OF LANGUAGE-FUNCTION-USE WITNESSED IN HEADSTART AND KINDERGARTEN

| Language Function | Gary | Seth | Polly | Robbie |
|-------------------|------|------|-------|--------|
| Instrumental | | | | |
| in Headstart | 15% | 10% | 18% | 12% |
| in Kindergarten | 13% | 20% | 16% | 12% |
| Regulatory | | | | |
| in Headstart | 15% | 25% | 20% | 12% |
| in Kindergarten | 27% | 17% | 20% | 20% |
| Interactional | | | | |
| in Headstart | 15% | 14% | 18% | 5% |
| in Kindergarten | 11% | 5% | 10% | 3% |
| Personal | | | | |
| in Headstart | 17% | 10% | 10% | 3% |
| in Kindergarten | 10% | 14% | 10% | 12% |
| Heuristic | | | | |
| in Headstart | 18% | 20% | 18% | 6% |
| in Kindergarten | 14% | 23% | 12% | 5% |
| Imagination | | | | |
| in Headstart | 10% | 6% | 6% | 0% |
| in Kindergarten | 5% | 1% | 10% | 0% |
| Informational | | | | |
| in Headstart | 10% | 15% | 10% | 62% |
| in Kindergarten | 20% | 20% | 22% | 48% |
| Totals | | | | |
| in Headstart | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| in Kindergarten | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |