Oral language for literacy
Oral language skills make a very large contribution to literacy skill. There is a strong relationship between understanding of oral language, word knowledge and reading comprehension. The child’s level of skill in producing oral language is likely to be reflected, in time, in the written work he or she is able to produce.

It is not the case, though, that just any classroom talk will benefit children’s literacy development. Some types of talk are more beneficial than others. Researchers interested in this area have suggested that some types of oral language are more ‘literate’ than others. By this they mean that some types of oral language share more features with written language than do other types of oral language. What are these features? If we think about written texts, we can identify three important characteristics:

• Written language is always removed from the context – writing is about things that are not present in the environment.
• Written language provides no opportunities for the reader to ask questions about things which may not be clear.
• Written language is organised in particular ways, different ways for different types of text.

These features mean that, in writing, language has to be used in particular ways. The overall structure of the piece of writing is important, and providing enough information (using specific language) is also important. It is also true that written language often uses quite complex sentence structures.

All very interesting, but how does it relate to oral language? If we think about types of talk, it is clear that some sorts of talk are more ‘formal’ than others, and that these more formal sorts of talk share the important characteristics of written language. Long turns at talk, such as those found when children talk about their experiences, need to have an overall structure. The information needs to be organised in ways that make it easier to understand. Talk about things that are not present at the time of talking requires children to use more specific language, and often more complex sentences, than they do when the topic of their talk is available for all to see. In short, classroom activities that provide children with the best foundation for literacy are those that provide them with the opportunity to use long turn talk about topics that are not present in the classroom.

Researchers tell us that spoken and written texts are organised in different ways in different languages, and in different dialects. In Australian classrooms, particular ways of organising texts are valued – these are the ways of what is sometimes called the mainstream population. These ways of organising text are likely to be familiar to children from middle class Anglo-celtic backgrounds. Children from other backgrounds, including Aboriginal children, will have experienced different, culture-specific ways of organising text, and so will need time to develop knowledge of the text structures which are expected and valued within the classroom. They also need time to continue to develop proficiency in using the text types which are familiar to them from their homes.
Intervention Strategies

Classroom principles to support the strategy

• Provide models of extended oral texts – in all language codes.

• Scaffold children’s spontaneous language attempts – in terms of text structure, sentence types, specificity (i.e. avoidance of over-use of pronouns, use of more ‘literate’ vocabulary) – in contexts where this is meaningful.

• Encourage the use of specific vocabulary in language use in meaningful contexts. Usually, where the talk is about events, experiences and objects that are not present.

• Plan oral language experiences which focus on literate rather than oral style.

• Plan for repetition – of the same texts and of similar types of text.

Activities to implement the strategy

Activities which will help children to develop the types of language needed for literacy are those that aim to develop knowledge (understanding) and use of specific and descriptive vocabulary, a range of sentence structures and ways of organising texts. Aboriginal children, and other children whose first language is not Standard Australian English, will need opportunities to develop knowledge of Standard Australian English (‘school talk’), and will also need to continue to develop knowledge in their first language (‘home talk’).

The activities included here can be used to develop these types of knowledge. They have been organised into five main groups – understanding language; using specific vocabulary; descriptive language and sentence structures; learning about texts; and home / school talk. Many of the activities, however, actually develop more than just one aspect of language. For example, ‘Barrier Games’ and ‘Simon Says’ can be used to develop understanding of language if the child is the one who responds. They can also be used to develop the use of specific vocabulary, descriptive language and sentence structures if the child is the one producing the instructions.

There are also a number of very good published resources which you could use as a source of activities to develop oral language. ‘Time for Talk’ (published by the Education Department of Western Australia) and ‘Making the Jump’ (published by the Catholic Education Office) are particularly useful. Other resources which contain useful ideas are ‘Deadly Ways’ (published by the Deadly Ways Consortium) and ‘Solid English’ (published by the Education Department of Western Australia).
Treasure hunts

**Phase of Schooling:**
Early Childhood (K - 3), Middle Childhood (3 - 7)

**Outcome:**
Children will comprehend instructions which use spatial terms.

**Description:**
Teacher hides an object and then gives oral instructions to a specific child (or teams of children) to find the object.

Emphasise spatial terms e.g. above, near, under etc.

Vary the complexity of the instructions according to the age of the children.

**Variation 1:**
For older children, link to the writing system by including written clues that lead the child/ren to the hidden objects.

**Variation 2:**
Written clues could include rhyming clues e.g. look under something that rhymes with fat (mat).

**Source:**
Time for Talk, Education Department of Western Australia, 1998
Riddles

Phase of Schooling:
Early Childhood (K - 3), Middle Childhood (3 - 7)

Outcome:
Children develop inferential comprehension.

Resources:
Prepared word puzzles / riddles.

Description:
Explain to the children that riddles are something like puzzles, in that clues (pieces) properly put together create a mental picture that gives the answer to the riddle.

The riddles may be used in any order. It is unlikely that you will wish to use the entire exercise at one time.

Children will enjoy reviewing old riddles before you go on to the follow-up questions.

I am often taller than a house. I am green in summer. Birds nest in me. I give shade when the sun is too hot. Sometimes I become part of a house or a fence or a chair. I rhyme with three. I’m a __________. (tree).

I am a building. I give shelter to animals. Horses sleep in me. I rhyme with table. I’m a __________. (stable)

I live in a pond. When I was very young I was a tadpole. I rhyme with log. I’m a __________. (frog)

I am a small animal. I am grey. I like cheese. I say, “Squeak! Squeak!” I rhyme with house. I’m a __________. (mouse)

I am an animal. I have a bushy tail. I hunt birds and small animals. I also like to eat eggs. I look like a little dog. I rhyme with box. I’m a __________. (fox)

I’m big and orange-yellow. I’m very, very hot. I’m in the sky. You mustn’t look at me. I rhyme with fun. I’m the __________. (sun)

I am a bird. I hunt at night. I eat mice and insects. I rhyme with howl. I’m an __________. (owl)

I am round and rocky. Sometimes I look yellow, and sometimes I look silver-white. You usually see me at night. I recently had some visitors from another planet. They left me a flag. I rhyme with balloon. I’m the __________. (moon)
Oral Questions and Discussion:

This follow-up activity uses the answers to the riddles – tree, stable, etc. to answer the first question, and other clues in the riddles to answer the second question – birds, horses, etc. Use these questions to help children find the answer to the riddle, or as a starting point for further discussions.

What rhymes with *three*? What nests in a tree?
What rhymes with *table*? What lives in the stable?
What rhymes with *log*? What do we call a frog when he is very young?
What rhymes with *house*? What colour is a mouse?
What rhymes with *girl*? What does the squirrel eat?
What rhymes with *box*? Tell something about a fox.
What rhymes with *fun*? What colour is the sun?
What rhymes with *howl*? Tell something about an owl.
What rhymes with *balloon*? How is a balloon like the moon?

**Variation 1:**
Discuss each clue, and what it makes children think about. Each child will offer different ideas which can be discussed, and the link between the idea and the clue made explicit. This helps children to be aware of the different options. Discuss which clue provides the vital information.

**Variation 2:**
For older children, use riddles to guess the country, animal family or species, industry, club, book, film etc.

**Variation 3:**
Have groups of older children develop their own riddles to use with their classmates or with younger children.
Which animal?

**Phase of Schooling:**
Early Childhood (K - 3)

**Outcome:**
Children develop processes to assist their listening comprehension.

**Resources:**
Prepared clues.

**Description:**
Say to the children: ‘I am thinking of an animal. Listen carefully until I am finished. Then tell me what animal I am thinking of.

‘This animal is bigger than a car. It has grey hide with no fur. It has large flopping ears and a short tail. It is strange-looking – it seems to have a tail at both ends. What animal am I thinking of?’ (elephant)

The first child who replies correctly when called on becomes the leader and presents a description of an animal of his/her choice.

Help children to use visualisation techniques to solve the clues.

Some children might draw the animal as it is being described.

**Variation 1:**
Describe buildings, trees, people or other objects instead of animals.

**Variation 2:**
Discuss the different types of attributes e.g. physical, personality traits, function, relationship to others, location, movement, opinions by others.

**Source:**
First Steps Oral Language Resource Book
Focusing on key words

**Phase of Schooling:**

Early Childhood (K - 3)

**Outcome:**

Children develop skills to focus on specific types of words that carry important meanings.

**Resources:**

2 identical sheets of pictures, counters

**Description:**

Children with current or chronic otitis media may not attend to or comprehend pronouns, prepositions, number, and descriptive words such as colour or size. Instead they may focus on those words that have a physical representation (i.e. nouns). For example, if asked to ‘find the red dog’ from an array of plastic animals the child may pick up any dog. If told ‘it’s under the table’ the child may look at (but not under) the table.

Some children will need to be taught at the concept level with objects. Some children will have poorly developed auditory memory and will need support with instructions. For example:

- Teacher asks: ‘find the red dog’ – child gives any dog.
- Teacher simplifies instruction ‘look at the dogs’
- Wait until child is attending to the dogs ‘find the red one’

Using groups of closely related objects / pictures give instructions (find, point to, pick up) specific objects / pictures. You could use pictures of different dogs, cars of different colours, objects of different sizes. Use pictures and objects that are of interest to the children in your class.

Using objects, have children give you a specific number, size, colour.

Using objects, have children place them in, under, on, between, other objects.
**Variation 1:**
Apply to barrier games.
A teacher or adult may pair up with the child having difficulties.
Examples:
Use shelves drawn on paper to work with positional terms – “put the round cake on the first shelf”.
Use toy furniture – “put the plate on the table, the cat’s bowl under the chair.”
Paper dolls and clothes – “put the red jacket on the boy and yellow top on the girl.”
Build the complexity from single instructions (eg “put the blue hat on the mother”) to two instructions in a single sentence (eg “put the blue hat on the mother and the pink hat on the girl”).

**Variation 2:**
Play Barrier Games to develop children’s attention to discriminating words as well as positional or relational words. For example, on a sheet that has many different types of bears, children listen to and give instructions such as “put the yellow counter on the gold bear”.
Increase the number of descriptive words as children develop their listening memory e.g. “put the yellow counter on the gold bear wearing a red coat”.

**Variation 3:**
Instruct children as part of class activities, to pack away different objects in categories e.g. “put all the square red blocks in the blue container, all the yellow round objects in the far corner”.
Barrier Games

Phase of Schooling:
Early Childhood (K - 3), Middle Childhood (3 - 7)

Outcomes:
Children develop the ability to issue specific instructions to listeners. Children acknowledge listeners’ needs.
Children use processes to obtain accurate and helpful information e.g. asking questions to clarify or gain further information.

Resources:
Barrier Screen. Items needed for children to use e.g. farm animals, building blocks, beads, wrapping paper, counters, seeds, cars, etc.

Description:
See First Steps Oral Language Resource Book for a range of Barrier Games suitable for both early childhood and middle childhood phases of schooling.
Choose a simple activity, e.g. bead threading or block building. Form a circle with six or seven children. Introduce the task:

“This is a special telling and listening game. To win the game we must match our necklaces exactly without looking at each other’s necklace.
We’re going to make a necklace with these beads.
I’m going to tell you which beads to put on your necklace to make one exactly like mine.
You have to listen very carefully so you choose the right ones”.
Model instructions as you thread the beads.
For example, “Put the small, round bead next.”

As the task progresses, choose children to match their necklaces with that of the teacher. You may need to teach impulsive children a strategy for checking, such as putting their finger on each item in the sequence and saying its name.

When children are consistently following instructions, repeat the procedure with a barrier placed between you and the child.

Give each instruction twice.
After the first instruction, direct children to check their necklace with that of the person sitting next to them and to change their beads if necessary.
Use the second instruction as a final check.
At the end of the game, remove the barrier and check as a whole group.

As children become more familiar with the task, allow confident children to take on the role of instructor.
This game can address the following:

- Positional terms
- Colour, size, shape, patterns
- Direction
- Accuracy of items and description e.g. “Does your picture have a lady carrying a round case in her left hand?”
- Action words e.g. “put a counter on the man rowing a canoe”
- Expression e.g. “is the boy unhappy”?

**Variation 1:**
Describe the steps in building a particular construction.

**Variation 2:**
Draw an object or animal.

Children form teams or pairs. The aim of the game is for the team to have as accurate a drawing as possible.

One child is the instructor and has the set of visual instructions to use to help their team member/s to draw in a progressive or step by step manner. The instructor describes each part of the drawing as best as they can.

Two variations of this drawing barrier game are:

- The instructor can see the drawing and adjusts the instructions.
- The instructor does not see the drawing and only sees the final drawing. The former approach is best for younger children.

**Source:**
Guess who?

Phases of Schooling:
Early Childhood (K - 3), Middle Childhood (3 - 7)

Outcome:
Children develop listening and deductive thinking skills to solve clues.

Description:
Before beginning this activity, explain the game, and discuss the importance of considering the feelings of others. Take care that only admirable qualities and positive actions are used as clues.

Model the procedure. For example, ‘I’m thinking of a boy in this room who is always cheerful. Today I heard him offer to help someone who was having trouble with adding numbers. He has brown eyes and light brown hair. Guess who.’

The child who volunteers the correct name has a turn in giving clues. If no one can make the correct identification, give more clues until someone names the right person.

Model the thinking process involved in developing and using the clues provided. For example “The person I am thinking of has long brown hair and is wearing a red top. There are 12 children with brown hair but only 5 with very long brown hair. This person is wearing a red top, and there are only 2 others who are wearing red tops, but they don’t have long brown hair”. This shows children how to use information to gradually reduce the number of people who fit the description. Encourage children to share how they may solve the problem using the available clues.

Discuss the different types of clues which could be used – physical attributes, actions that all the class members would know about, seating position in the classroom, special role or jobs in the classroom.

Variation 1:
Describe storybook characters.

Variation 2:
Describe a well-known person, either from the past or present.
**Partner Simon says**

**Phase of Schooling:**

Early Childhood (K - 3), Middle Childhood (3 - 7)

**Outcomes:**

Children will develop vocabulary knowledge.

Children will follow instructions without using visual cues.

**Description:**

Model Simon Says.

Teacher gives the instructions e.g. “Simon says point to your hips.”

In pairs or small groups, children play Simon Says.

Child A gives the instructions, e.g. “Simon says point to your eyes”. Child B carries out the instruction.

Child A continues to repeat using different parts of the body, but if s/he gives an instruction without saying Simon Says, e.g. “touch your nose” and Child B does so, Child B is eliminated and the roles are reversed.

**Variation 1:**

Some children may find it beneficial to have a model of a body with parts labelled on display for their partner / teacher to point to when selecting a body part.

**Variation 2:**

Vary the instructions by including a variety of actions, e.g. ‘Simon says blink your eyes’.
Strategies to check meaning - puppet

**Phase of Schooling:**
Early Childhood (K - 3), Middle Childhood (3 - 7)

**Outcome:**
Children to develop listening behaviours and to comprehend spoken language.

**Resources:**
Puppets

**Description:**
The teacher uses a new puppet each week as a way of motivating the children to listen when issuing instructions and questioning.
When the teacher gives instructions, the puppet does something different. Children instruct the puppet and repeat what the puppet was meant to do.
Puppet talks through what s/he thought s/he heard and why it was misunderstood.
Puppet talks through ways to check understanding:
Look for visual clues.
Ask clarifying questions of the speaker.
Ask myself does it make sense?
Talk to another person to check what I have to do.
Think about what I heard.
Visualise – picture this like a movie.
Think about the speaker – What does s/he usually ask us to do?
Will it be the same or different? What have we just been doing?
What tone of voice did s/he use? Does s/he look happy, angry?
Listening strategies - before, during and after

Phase of Schooling:
Early Childhood (K - 3), Middle Childhood (3 - 7)

Outcome:
Children develop processes to assist their listening comprehension.

Description:
Introduce the idea of thinking about listening and processes that assist with listening.

Before: Ask these questions - Who am I listening to? Why am I listening? What do I think will be said? Can I write this down or think it aloud in my head?

During: What do I now know? What else do I need to know? Have I checked with other people? Have I asked the speaker questions? Can I repeat the information that I have so far? Do I have a picture in my mind? What puzzles me? What do I need repeated?

After: Were my predictions correct? How are they the same or different? Have I written some ideas down? Can I do a concept map? Have I checked my knowledge with others? What do I need repeated? What have I learnt? What questions do I have?

Variation 1:
Introduce a range of graphic organisers to help children monitor their listening e.g. semantic grids, concept maps, skeleton outline, flow chart, ‘what I know-what I need to know-what I have learnt’ charts etc.

Variation 2:
Use a framework that is appropriate for the oral interaction – news telling (recount framework) show and tell (report framework adjusted to suit the object of the show and tell), giving instructions (instruction or procedure framework)

Sources:
First Steps Reading Resource Book, EDWA, Longman Cheshire, Vic, 1994
Making meaning bridges

**Phase of Schooling:**
Early Childhood (K - 3), Middle Childhood (3 - 7)

**Outcome:**
Children use strategies to obtain information to make meaning.

**Description:**
Discuss the way two pieces of information can be connected to make meaning. For example ‘The dog barked. The dog ran into the shed’.

What could have happened? Why did the dog bark? Did something make it bark? Did it chase that thing into the shed? Did the owner come out and sent the dog into the shed to stop it disturbing the neighbours?

Discuss the fact that information is sometimes missing when people talk and so different people can have different interpretations. Talk about the way we use what we know about the world to help us to understand.

How can we obtain the information to help us work out the meaning?

- Ask questions.
- Listen for further information.
- Check with the speaker - paraphrase what you thought and see if that was what they meant.
- Visualise and check to see if new information fits with what you think is happening.
- Ask others what they thought.

Discuss the effect of hearing problems on understanding, and encourage children to ask for more information if they have missed some details.

Chart the strategies for children to refer to when they are unsure of what is happening in the class or in any situation.

**Variation:**
Show children one or two pictures or photos and children brainstorm what they think happened or is happening, and explain why they think this is the case. Encourage children to consider the questions they could ask to help gain more information.

**Source:**
Time for Talk, Education Department of Western Australia, 1998
Intervention Strategies

Grandma’s shopping - extending auditory memory

Phase of Schooling:

Early Childhood (K - 3), Middle Childhood (3 - 7)

Outcome:

Children develop auditory memory.

Resources:

Basket and objects, pictures of articles

Description:

Introduce the game Grandma’s Shopping basket.

Children sit in small groups. Smaller groups will maximise each child’s participation.

Teacher starts the game in his / her group by saying, “My Grandma is going shopping and at the shop (takes an object or picture) she bought a cake” (in response to the toy cake or picture of a cake). The next person in the group says “My Grandma went shopping and she bought a cake and a (picks up an object or picture) bucket” The next person continues the same pattern “My Grandma went shopping and she bought a cake, a bucket and some bread” Place pictures / objects in a shopping basket, out of sight, after each turn.

Continue the shopping until the first child gets the order incorrect or leaves out an item. A group could be determined a winner if they have the most objects/pictures in the basket.

Variation 1:

Use this activity or game without any pictures or objects.

Variation 2:

Play this game by adding in adjectives (fruit cake), adjectival phrases (a bucket full of sand) or adverbial phrases (a kangaroo jumping over the rock).
Connecting ideas

Phase of Schooling:
Early Childhood (K - 3), Middle Childhood (3 - 7)

Outcome:
Children to identify and use clausal connectors so they can express increasingly complex ideas.

Resources:
Big book text or small group work with normal book.

Description:
Children with chronic otitis media frequently have difficulty understanding complex grammar. Focusing on and exploring connecting words can be beneficial for both spoken and written language.

- Auditory attention to the words. Read a text and whenever you come to a connecting word, e.g. so, because, and, but, until, when, since, while, make it stand out using a dramatic reading approach. e.g. ‘He took it “because”’ (say ‘because’ loudly with facial expression, and pause).
- Use an oral cloze activity with a known text and stop before the connecting word. Children say the connecting word with the teacher.
- List all connecting words in the text. Encourage children to use them in both oral and written stories.
- Story retells are great for practising connecting ideas, and for developing text structures as well.

Variation 1:
Discuss the function of these connectors in relation to two or more pieces of information e.g. ‘The mouse ran into its hole because it could see the cat. The ‘because’ is saying that the cat is making the mouse to run into its hole, why? What do we know that the story doesn’t say? The ‘because’ explains why something is happening or what is making something happen’.

Variation 2:
Introduce different connectors as suggested in the above activity. Discuss how they help make meaning.
Variation 3:
Children innovate on a text e.g. *The mouse ran into its hole and...*, *The mouse ran into its hole while...*, *The mouse ran into its hole but...*, *The mouse ran into its hole when...*, *The mouse ran into its hole as...*, Provide models as required. Children will enjoy hearing and producing funny endings to these sentences. For example, *the mouse ran into its hole and crashed into the table*. Choose your connecting words carefully so that they match the subject – some are more formal or more sophisticated than others, and won’t be appropriate in all cases. *The mouse ran into its hole although...*, may not work as well as *The mouse escaped into its hole although...*

Other Sources:
Similar activities are found in the ‘Linguistic Structures’ section of ‘Time for Talk’.
Home talk and school talk

Phase of Schooling:
Early Childhood (K - 3), Middle Childhood (3 - 7)

Outcome:
Children are able to select the appropriate language code according to the purpose, audience and context.

Resources:
Cards with written or illustrated examples of different contexts, purposes and audiences.

Description:
Introduce or revise the concept of home talk and school talk and discuss situations in which using each would be appropriate.

Children draw a card from a bag or box and work in pairs to read or describe the context, decide on the type of language which would be used in the situation and develop a short role play which uses the appropriate language type.

Variation 1:
Have photos or illustrations of contexts and have children role play as the characters or participants. Discuss the use of language and why that language would be used.

Variation 2:
Set up role play centres (e.g. kitchen, shops, post office, picnic at the park, collecting bush tucker) in the classroom and invite different people to participate to encourage different language use.

Variation 3:
Record a variety of language use and ask children to guess the context, participants and purpose of the interactions. Discuss how the language would change if the context, participants and purpose changes. Children could role play these language changes.

Other Sources:
Time for Talk, Education Department of Western Australia, 1998
Word cloze -
key idea and non key ideas

**Phase of Schooling:**

Early Childhood (K - 3), Middle Childhood (3 - 7)

**Outcome:**

Children apply knowledge of language features.

**Resources:**

Suitable text with key words deleted. Suitable text with non key words deleted.

**Description:**

Introduce the concept of cloze activities by using a big book or charted text. After reading the text use sticky labels to cover particular words e.g. adjectives. Children read with the teacher to determine what is missing.

- Particular key words e.g. adjectives, verbs, nouns are deleted within a short story or passage. Children, in pairs, work together paying particular attention to the meaning of the passage, the flow of the language etc, in an effort to fill the missing words.

- Particular non key words e.g. in, the, and, but, are deleted within a short story or passage. Children, in pairs, work together paying particular attention to the meaning of the passage, the flow of the language etc, in an effort to fill the missing words.

If children have difficulties, children or teacher read aloud and the children follow to get a feel of what should be in the space.

Refer to texts that have similar sentence structures and identify what is missing.
Beyond the classroom

There are many opportunities in the home and the community for children to continue to develop their oral language skills. It is important that schools value these language experiences, and let parents and community members know how important they are. At home and in the community, children can:

- learn new and specific vocabulary in meaningful situations;
- learn about ways of organising texts by listening to stories told by elders and other adults;
- learn about producing texts by telling stories to younger siblings;
- learn about ways of organising texts and producing complex sentences by listening to stories read from books. These stories may be in the home language, or in Standard Australian English; and
- learn to switch from one language code to another by participating in different speaking situations.