Oral to Literate Continuum

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Children come to school with widely different experiences in talking. While some children may be competent in everyday conversation, they may have limited experiences with the kind of talk that’s expected at school – talk that’s needed as a foundation for written language.

In everyday conversation, particularly with familiar people, there’s often a shared context. That is, both the speaker and listener may have shared an experience such as going to the playground together, or the listener knows the kinds of experiences the speaker is talking about, and can “fill in the gaps” from their own knowledge of the topic. The conversation might also be about the immediate environment or “here and now”. For example “I found it there.” This means that information is provided by more than just the speaker’s words. The speaker’s message is also helped by gestures, body language, questions from the listener, things that you can both see, and so on.

The language of learning, both spoken and written, often requires the speaker to use more detailed, descriptive information. Sentences are usually longer and use more formal grammar, and the language used must be able to provide all the information needed. For example “I found the wheel of my truck under dad’s chair in the lounge room” has a lot more information compared with “I found it there”, which assumes the listener is in the same room and can see what is meant.

We can’t assume that children will “pick-up” the language of learning just by being at school, particularly if they’ve had limited opportunities to practise school language or if they have oral language delays. Newstelling is a very effective activity which can be used to help bridge the gap between oral or everyday conversation style language, and literate language, which is the language of learning.

The oral to literate continuum is a way of thinking about some of the stages of language development from oral style through to literate style language. The continuum shows how language development moves from simple “here and now” talk at Stage 1, to writing more abstract, oral-literate language at Stage 4 & 5, to using more literate type of language in Stage 6.
Stage 1 involves the child talking about or asking about things that are present, such as the talk that occurs during hands-on activities, home corner play, and so on. Stages 2 & 3 involve the child beginning to learn how to talk about past events. At stage two, lots of visual and verbal prompts are provided, eg looking at some recent photos of an excursion and talking about what they did. At stage 3, less prompts from the teacher are needed.

By Stage 4, the child is able to talk about past and future events in a monologue much more independently. These activities are more structured and involve planning on the part of the child (eg. story retells). The complexity of their oral language continues to develop, and at Stage 5 their writing reflects the simple structure of the earlier “here and now” style oral language. Sometime during the child’s middle and upper primary school years, he/she develops the ability to write using complex, literate style language.

The continuum highlights the fact that children need to develop the ability to talk using this oral-literate style of language before we can expect them to write using more literate language. If we look at newstelling in a structured developmental way, we can provide children with appropriate experiences, no matter what language skills they come to school with, to move them along the continuum from more oral to literate style language.

The way we build the bridge between oral and literate styles of language is by designing the newstelling task so that early on, teachers provide scaffolding such as shared context (the object is present or the activity is shared), lots of visual cues and lots of verbal prompts. Gradually, we then reduce the amount of scaffolding, and select more complex types of newstelling activities as the child becomes competent at each stage.

In summary, practising newstelling can teach children very important oral language (speaking and listening) skills that have an impact on their written language development. Newstelling is not just an oral language activity, it is also an important literacy activity – preparing children for written language.