

**Oral Language Assessment in the Preschool and Primary
Grades: Definitions, Measures, and Theoretical Lens**
**L'évaluation du langage oral au préscolaire-primaire :
définitions, prises de mesures et considérations théoriques**

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Article abstract

The overarching goal of this literature review is to improve the understanding of the importance of oral language to critical emergent literacy skills and provide an overview of available assessment measures for use within the classroom. An overview of the components of language (i.e., content, form, and use) is provided. Measures of oral language gleaned from a comprehensive literature review of the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database are discussed, organized according to the components of language they are assessing. An examination of the theoretical foundations of language acquisition and development provides an orienting framework for educators.



ORAL LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT IN THE PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY GRADES : DEFINITIONS, MEASURES, AND THEORETICAL LENS

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ABSTRACT. The overarching goal of this literature review is to improve the understanding of the importance of oral language to critical emergent literacy skills and explore available assessment measures for use within the classroom. An overview of the components of language (i.e., content, form, and use) is provided. Measures of oral language gleaned from a comprehensive literature review of the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database are discussed, organized according to the components of language they are assessing. An examination of the theoretical foundations of language acquisition and development provides an orienting framework for educators.

L'ÉVALUATION DU LANGAGE ORAL AU PRÉSCOLAIRE-PRIMAIRE : DÉFINITIONS, PRISES DE MESURES ET CONSIDÉRATIONS THÉORIQUES

RÉSUMÉ. L'objectif principal de cette revue de la littérature est d'améliorer la compréhension de l'importance que revêt le langage oral dans l'émergence des compétences en littératie. Celle-ci vise également l'exploration des outils évaluatifs utilisés par les enseignants en classe. Les composantes du langage (le contenu, la forme et l'utilisation) sont abordées. L'auteure présente également des données en lien avec le développement du langage oral tirées d'une revue de la littérature exhaustive réalisée par la base de données *Education Resources Information Center* (ERIC). Une analyse des fondements théoriques de l'acquisition et du développement du langage offre un cadre orientant aux enseignants.

Current research has highlighted the importance of developing oral language skills in educational settings (e.g., Moats, 2020; Shiel et al., 2012). There are a multitude of reasons why such a focus should be a priority in preschool and early school settings. As stated by Cregan (1998):

Oral language is the child's first, most important, and most frequently used structured medium of communication. It is the primary means through which each individual child will be enabled to structure, to evaluate, to describe and to control his/her experience. In addition, and most significantly, oral language is the primary mediator of culture, the way in which children locate themselves in the world, and define themselves with it and within it. (p. 7)

Oral language includes both speaking and listening with the purpose of communicating and provides the foundation for emergent literacy (McIntyre & Hellsten, 2004). That oral language supports reading and writing is well supported by the research literature (Curenton & Lucas, 2007; Konza, 2011; Myhill & Jones, 2009). However, a survey of teachers on the subject of young children's skills on entry to school (at ages 4 and 5) has revealed that half of the children were unable to speak audibly, be understood by others, reply to simple instructions, recognize their own names, or count to five (Wells, 2003). According to the Ministry of Education's Early Years Evaluation (Government of Saskatchewan, 2016) only "59 per cent of Saskatchewan children going into Kindergarten arrive at school fully ready to learn" (p. 4; key areas assessed were awareness of self/environment, social skills/approaches to learning, cognitive skills, physical development, and language/communication).

Children who enter formal schooling without the necessary oral language skills face challenges for academic success in reading and writing, as well as in future personal, social, and economic activities. An eight-year longitudinal study reported that students who performed poorly on oral language measures in Kindergarten and Grade 1 also performed poorly on standardized and non-standardized measures of school achievement in Grade 7 (Noonan et al., 1998).

In order to address deficiencies in oral language, laying a strong foundation in oral skills during the primary years is essential, along with proactively addressing challenges. Cutler and Graham (2008) reported that, "There is a growing consensus that waiting until later grades to address literacy problems that have their origin at the primary level is not particularly successful" (p. 908). In order to facilitate the development of children's oral language during these early years, it is important that teachers be able to identify children's areas of weakness and strengths.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

I recently had the honor of spending four years as part of the Northern Oral Language and Writing Through Play (NOWPlay) research project (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education; OISE, University of Toronto). This is a cross-Canadian research project in northern rural communities from Alberta to Ontario that involves working with researchers, teachers, early childhood educators, and parents/caregivers to develop play-based tools for assessing young children's oral language/writing development. In 2014, we conducted focus groups consisting of principals, teachers, day care workers, parents, and researchers in order to gain an understanding of what is happening in the field in the areas of oral language and writing assessment (Heppner, 2014). It was found that, although educators were aware of their students' areas of

weaknesses in oral language, they were unsure how to assess these skills. “Indeed, one of the participants noted of oral language: ‘it’s kind of slippery, it’s hard to assess’” (Heppner, 2014, p. 1). It was this finding that prompted me to review the literature on available oral language assessment measures. The area of oral language can present an added challenge as research has shown that both pre-service and in-service teachers may lack awareness of its three functional elements: form, content, and use (Mather et al., 2001; McIntyre & Hellsten, 2008; Moats, 1994). Without an understanding of these language components, educators will be unable to select appropriate assessment measures and instructional strategies to support the development of oral language skills of the students in their classrooms.

For educators to choose effective interventions to support young children’s oral language development, they must have a firm grasp of what they are assessing, the most effective means of assessment, and which theoretical perspective provides a suitable foundation for choosing appropriate instructional practices. The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of each of these domains with respect to children aged 3 to 9 years: the components of language, the assessments recommended for use in evidence-based practices, and the developmental theories guiding research on oral language assessment, which comprised the research questions informing the present inquiry.

SELECTION AND INCLUSIONARY CRITERIA OF RELEVANT STUDIES

A comprehensive review of the database *Education Resources Information Center* (ERIC) was undertaken to retrieve relevant studies. This database was chosen because it is a prominent, widely used database for educational research. Search terms included *oral language assessment* and *oral communication assessment*, as well as a combination of the key terms and a variety of sub terms related to language (see Appendix A for a complete list).

The inclusionary criteria set were: English language peer-reviewed articles published between 1980 to the present (a time of increased productivity in research on emergent literacy), primary research (i.e., not a review or opinion piece), methodologically diverse (i.e., empirical/numerical, qualitative, etc.), and with an age range of study participants at the preschool–primary aged children level (i.e., ages 3 to 9 or preschool – Grade Three). Studies examining second language learners, or presenting non-typical language development (e.g., autism, selective mutism), were excluded as this was beyond the scope of this review. A total of 15 studies met the criteria. Although all forms of methodology were to be included in the review, the 15 studies that met the criteria all utilized quantitative measures.

OVERVIEW

The review first provides an overview of the components of language (i.e., content, form, and use). Next, the measures of oral language gleaned from the literature review are discussed and organized according to the aspect(s) of language they are assessing. Finally, the theoretical foundations of language acquisition and development underpinning the research are examined.

The components of language

With the main purpose being communication, oral language not only includes speaking (expressive language skills) but also listening (receptive language skills) (Bloom & Lahey, 1978; McIntyre & Hellsten, 2004). Bloom and Lahey (1978) have defined language as “a code whereby ideas about the world are represented through a conventional system of arbitrary signals for communication” (p. 4). Lahey (1988) has further pointed out that, “The key words in the definition are *communication*, *ideas*, *code*, *system*, and *conventional*” (p. 2, emphasis in original). Distilling the main elements of Lahey’s (1988) definition, oral language is understood as the primary means of intentional *communication*. Language helps individuals express their *ideas* (i.e., perceptions/beliefs about events). Language is a *code* which provides the speaker with a method to combine essentially arbitrary elements (i.e., spoken sounds) to represent an object or event. The code provides a *predictable system* (i.e., sounds combine to form words, words to sentences, etc.) which enables the speaker to express an unlimited number of possible sentences. The elements of the language system have been implicitly determined by the *social conventions* of the language speaking community (i.e., rules for word choice and sentence composition).

To adequately define language “we have to consider what people do and what they say, together with what they mean” (Lahey, 1988, p. 8). Further, as noted by Bloom and Lahey (1978), “Language consists of some aspect of content or meaning that is coded or represented by linguistic form for some purpose or use in a particular context” (p. 11). Thus, language can be conceptualized as having three major dimensions: content, form, and use (Bloom & Lahey, 1978; Bloom & Tinker, 2001; Lahey, 1988; Owens, 1992).

Language *content* refers to the meaning (the semantics) of the language which is based on the speaker’s ideas about the world — ‘what’ people talk about (Bloom & Lahey, 1978; Gerber, 2003). Lahey (1988) explained:

Our ideas about objects and events, and the way in which objects relate to themselves and to one another in different events, can be expressed by different sorts of words or signs and by the linguistic relations between words or signs. Such linguistic representation depends on the conventional, arbitrary units that give language its form. (p. 11)

Language *form* is the conventional system of symbols governed by the underlying rules of the phonology, morphology and syntax of language; it is the way in which sound and meaning are connected (Gerber, 2003; Lahey, 1988). Owens (1992) defined *phonology* as the “aspect of language concerned with the rules governing the structure, distribution, and sequencing of speech sound patterns” (p. 530). Simply stated, phonology is comprised of anything that involves sounds within a language (Richgels, 2004). *Morphology* refers to the construction of words and their parts; it is the “aspect of language concerned with rules governing change in meaning at the intraword level” (Owens, 1992, p. 528). Finally, *syntax* is defined as the “organizational rules specifying word order, sentence organization, and word relationships” (Owens, 1992, p. 533). Here, at the sentence level, an infinite number of propositions can be conveyed through the relatively small number of available sentence structures (Richgels, 2004). The form of what speakers express is dependent upon the purpose and the context of the utterance, and thus, it is important to consider language use.

Language *use* (or *pragmatics*) refers to the interpersonal aspects of communication, or the “functions, contexts, and conversational rules” (Gerber, 2003, p. 76) that occur within a context of communication. Lahey (1988) explained that there are three main aspects of language use:

1. The use of language for different goals or functions.
2. The use of information from the context to determine what we say in order to achieve the goals.
3. The use of the interaction between persons to initiate, maintain, and terminate conversations. (p. 15)

The components of language (content, form, and use) are interrelated and provide the foundation for a comprehensive knowledge of language as well as language competence (Bloom & Lahey, 1978). Many children learn their native language without difficulty. What then do educators do when they encounter children who present “little or no talking, little or no understanding of instructions, unusual use of words or phrases, or grammatical mistakes that interfere with communication” (Lahey, 1988, p. 21)? Are the disruptions occurring in content, use, or form? Or does the child’s language present a distorted interaction of content, form, and use? Lahey (1988), and Bloom and Lahey (1978) provide useful descriptions of various language disorders and how they present in children (disorders being an important discussion, however one that exceeds the breadth of this review). What follows is a review of the research literature identifying which evidence-based assessments are being used to investigate language in young children. To choose appropriate measures for identifying their students’ strengths and areas in which they can improve, it is important for educators to know which evaluating tools are available.

EXAMINATION OF ORAL LANGUAGE ASSESSMENTS

A number of standardized, norm-referenced assessments exist that provide a global view of young children's oral language development: the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, Fourth Edition* (PPVT-4; Dunn & Dunn, 2007), and the *Preschool Language Scale, Fourth Edition* (PLS-4; Zimmerman et al., 2002), for example. However, these measures require extensive training in knowing how to administer them, are expensive, require a significant amount of time to administer, and provide only a single point-in-time measure (Bradfield et al., 2014). These measures certainly have their place (e.g., see Lonigan et al., 2011). The goal of the present systematic review, however, was to investigate oral language measures that can be used in the classroom and that can inform instructional decision-making.

Stanovich and Stanovich (2003) acknowledge that “there is evidence that children experiencing academic difficulties can achieve more educationally if they are taught with effective methods” (p. 2). Effective educational practice is informed by evidence-based research. Both novice and seasoned teachers are inundated with information from publishing houses and mass media outlets disseminating untested educational resources. Peer-reviewed research journals provide quality control mechanisms imparting greater confidence in the discernment of practices based on research evidence (Stanovich & Stanovich, 2003). The assessments gleaned from the ERIC database and discussed within this article are supported by an established research base. They provide data enabling the teacher to confidently identify children's area(s) of need, resulting in the selection and utilization of effective teaching methods.

As noted by Manzo et al. (2006), “About 98% of human teaching and learning is mediated by — or passes through — language” (p. 616). In acknowledging that much of the instruction in school is language-saturated, we must also acknowledge that children's language capabilities may well predict what they are able to take from instruction. As previously noted, oral language (listening and talking) provides the foundation for developing reading and writing skills. It is essential to identify the language components that children may need for their additional development because these are critical predictors of later reading/writing achievement. Formative assessment (i.e., gathering data for improving student learning) allows for immediate and effective early intervention (Dixon & Worrell, 2016). Initial screening and ongoing monitoring of students with “appropriate measures have a documented relationship to *positive child outcomes*” (Gresham, 2007, p. 17, emphasis in original). Opportunities for practicing and developing particular components of oral language increase when they are consciously targeted in each lesson (Konza, 2011). An examination of the 15 studies that met the research criteria for this literature review reveals evidence-based practices for assessing oral language utilized within classroom settings.

Assessment of language content

Assessment of language content was observed in three studies. Two of the studies (Bradfield et al., 2014; Marcotte et al., 2014) measured the expressive language of young children, while the third study (Camilleri & Botting, 2013) assessed receptive vocabulary. “Expressive language is the use of words to express meaning, and receptive language is the ability to listen, process, and understand the meaning of spoken words” (Bradfield et al., 2014, p. 234).

Bradfield et al. (2014) developed and tested an assessment of children’s expressive vocabulary, the *Early Language and Literacy Individual Growth and Development Indicators* (IGDIs). In order for their measure to have high utility in early childhood settings, they ensured it was “easy to administer, score, and interpret; standardized; repeatable; and related to important long-term outcomes” (p. 235). With similar goals, Marcotte et al. (2014) provided evidence that the screening/progress monitoring measure, *Dynamic Indicators of Vocabulary Skills* (DIVS), is an effective measure of early vocabulary acquisition. “The brief 1-min DIVS tasks primarily reflect expressive language of young children. This testing method reflects children’s agility with vocabulary production—a more difficult cognitive task than receptive word knowledge” (Marcotte et al., 2014, p. 135).

Camilleri and Botting (2013) recommend the *Dynamic Assessment of Word Learning* (DAWL) as an effective assessment of receptive vocabulary. The DAWL is an interactive assessment that involves conversational interactions between the child and assessor. In dynamic assessment, the assessor takes an active role by teaching a task and/or providing direct prompts and feedback. Both the child’s level of independent performance as well as his/her progress is measured, taking into account both the products and processes of learning. Camilleri and Botting (2013) reported that dynamic assessment takes into account the child’s ability to learn with assistance, as compared to static assessment, which measures only a learned product.

Classroom practice: Expressive and receptive language. Some children arrive at school with highly developed expressive and receptive vocabularies. However, other children come with smaller vocabularies and lack competence as vocabulary users. Konza (2011) notes,

Students who have trouble concentrating during teacher talk; who look blank or confused; who answer questions inappropriately (for example, they might give a “where” answer to a “why” question); who only partially follow directions; or who wait until others have responded before they respond, may not be understanding much of what the teacher is saying. (p. 3)

Vocabulary development refers to word knowledge and is an essential component of reading for meaning (Konza, 2010). For successful reading, children must automatically recognize and understand words. If vocabulary is known to the children, it is easier for them to understand the text they are

reading. A word must be in one's oral vocabulary if it is to be understood when encountered in print. As noted by Bromley (2007), "Vocabulary is a principal contributor to comprehension, fluency, and achievement. Vocabulary development is both an outcome of comprehension and a precursor to it, with word meaning making up as much as 70–80% of comprehension" (p. 528). Oral vocabulary is key in making the transition to written language.

Assessment for language content not only guides instruction but also consists in identifying expressive/receptive language impairments so as to design individualized interventions for children presenting low vocabulary knowledge. Rich and focused instruction has been shown to increase children's oral vocabulary repertoires (Beck & McKeown, 2007). Developing a robust store of words requires a learning context that "extends far beyond the typical dictionary definition or 'use it in a sentence' exercises. It requires careful choice of words for instruction, and strategies that develop deep understanding, regular use, and an increasing 'word consciousness' in all students" (Konza, 2010, p. 5).

Assessment of language form

The systematic review revealed six articles on the subject of evidence-based practices for assessing language form. The areas under investigation were phonemic awareness (Watkins & Edwards, 2004) and phonological awareness (Bridges & Catts, 2011; Chafouleas & Martens, 2002; Kantor et al., 2011; Vloedgraven & Verhoeven, 2007; Webb et al., 2004). Phonemic awareness is the understanding that "spoken words are composed of a series of discrete sounds [phonemes] that can be manipulated ... and the ability to hear and manipulate the individual sounds within words" (Watkins & Edwards, 2004, p. 3). Phonological awareness includes larger units of sound. "Among other things, phonological awareness generally includes the ability to generate and recognize rhyming words, to count syllables, to segment words into their constituent phonemes, and to separate the beginning of a word from its ending" (Webb et al., 2004, p. 305).

Watkins and Edwards (2004) presented the *Mountain Shadows Phonemic Awareness Scale* (MS-PAS) as a means to assess the phonemic awareness skills of young children. This measure was developed in response to a need for a reliable, valid, cost-efficient, teacher-friendly method for screening phonemic awareness skills.

Phonological awareness was measured with tasks involving rhyming, phoneme identification, phoneme blending, and phoneme segmentation (Chafouleas & Martens, 2002; Vloedgraven & Verhoeven, 2007; Webb et al., 2004). A "paucity of publicly available phonological awareness assessments targeted at preschoolers" (p. 306) was reported by Webb et al. (2004). Due to the

importance of preliteracy assessment (and its direct link to later reading and writing) these authors set out to assess phonological awareness skills of four- and five-year-old children in a valid way.

Classroom practice: Phonemic and phonological awareness. If children are unable to hear the separate sounds (phonemes) within spoken words, they cannot relate those sounds to letters. Preschool children's phonemic awareness skills have been identified as "the single best predictor of their future reading ability, better than either SES [socioeconomic status] or IQ ... Being able to *blend* together and to *segment* phonemes are the most crucial phonemic skills for reading and spelling" (Konza, 2010, p. 2, emphasis in original). Once children understand that words are comprised of a series of sounds, they must then learn the relationships between letters and those sounds. "This letter-sound relationship is referred to as the *alphabetic principle*, or more commonly, *phonics*" (Konza, 2010, p. 3, emphasis in original).

Research on the development of phonemic awareness in young children has shown that instruction is most effective when focused on blending, segmenting, and manipulating phonemes (Reutzel, 2015). With regards to effective alphabet knowledge instruction, Piasta and Wagner (2010) recommend a multicomponential approach with lessons including a variety of learning activities such as letter recognition/naming, sound/symbol association, writing, and upper- and lowercase letter discrimination/categorization.

The assessment data provided from measures of phonemic and phonological awareness skills enables identifying those in need of further individual assessment/intervention. Chafouleas and Martens (2002) found that measures of phonological awareness could be effectively used for progress monitoring within the classroom. Reliable, efficient and sensitive to growth, such measures have the capacity to inform teaching. Vloedgraven and Verhoeven (2007) suggested that screening for difficulties in phonological awareness is also important for identifying reading problems as well as dyslexia.

Assessment of language content and form

Five studies identified in the literature review showed assessment of both language content and form. All but one assessed young children's spoken narratives. Kaminski et al. (2014), in their study, investigated *The Preschool Early Literacy Indicators* (PELI), an assessment tool designed for screening and progress monitoring of preschool students' acquisition of early literacy and language skills (i.e., alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, vocabulary, and listening comprehension).

The other four studies focused on analyzing children's oral narratives as an informative approach to language assessment within early childhood settings (Heilmann, et al., 2010; Justice et al., 2010; Pena et al., 2006; Riley & Burrell,

2007). A narrative “refers to one’s production of a fictional or real account of an experience or event that is temporally sequenced” (Justice et al., 2010, p. 219). All four studies reported that children’s oral narratives provided a rich source of assessment for determining oral language skills within the classroom context (as opposed to the contrived measures of standardized assessments). The children’s narratives were elicited by either a story re-telling (Heilmann et al., 2010; Riley & Burrell, 2007) or by using a wordless picture book as a stimulus (Justice et al., 2010; Pena et al., 2006). The resulting narratives were then examined for language form (i.e., syntax, sentence structure, morphology, phonology) and language content (i.e., vocabulary, literate language features, organization of story content).

Justice et al. (2010) pointed out that narrative assessments tend to be under-utilized because they involve time-consuming methods of language sampling (i.e., elicit the sample, then transcribe/parse/analyze the sample). In an effort to make narrative assessment a more routine part of language screening and assessment within early childhood classrooms, Justice et al. (2010) developed the *Narrative Assessment Protocol* (NAP) which can be administered by classroom teachers.

Classroom practice: Early literacy indicators and oral narratives. Oral narrative skills are considered to be the “gateway to reading and writing” (Curenton & Lucas, 2007, p. 377). Prior to age 2, children primarily use contextualized language centring around objects, people, and events that are immediately present in the child’s physical environment (Uccelli et al., 2018). During children’s third year they begin to develop decontextualized language, which enables them to construct narratives about past or future events (e.g., “We went to the beach”), provide explanations (e.g., “I got my rubber boots because it’s raining”), or engage in pretend play (e.g., “My doll is thirsty”) (Uccelli et al., 2018). In the creation of a story, young children produce a “decontextualized description of events” (Curenton & Lucas, 2007, p. 377), focusing on objects that are not directly present or on events from another context and time. This use of decontextualized language sets the foundation for literacy: “Children who have good narrative skills have better emergent literacy skills and better reading abilities than those who do not” (Curenton & Lucas, 2007, p. 377).

Konza (2011) notes that,

Reading stories (narrative texts) provides the perfect oral language support – they provide both stimulation and motivation. Sharing a book encompasses much more than simply reading it. Questions about the author and the pictures can accompany questions about the actual content. Open-ended questions like “What do you think is going to happen now?” and “Why do you think she did that?” encourage language and broader cognitive development. Retelling activities draw on memory and logical reasoning, and build sequencing skills, practice of different tenses and use of time-related connecting words. Talking about the story or content builds world

knowledge, promotes imagination, helps children draw information from different sources to make inferences, engages them in critical thinking, and develops vocabulary and understanding of language structures. (p. 4; emphasis in original)

To encourage growth in language structure, narrative elicitation techniques can include using puppets/dolls, wordless picture books, verbal prompts, and drawings. Mardell (2013) recommends *gentle scaffolding* while nurturing emergent literacy skills through teacher modeling, dialogue, and the use of probing questions. A play-based instructional technique, developed by preschool and kindergarten teacher/early childhood education researcher Vivian Paley, known as *story telling/story acting* (ST/SA; where a young student dictates a story which is later dramatized by the class) has also been shown to foster the development of oral language and narrative form (Cooper, 2005).

The *Preschool Early Literacy Indicators* (PELI) assessment has shown itself to be useful within a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework where “high-quality teaching and responsive caregiving are provided to young children by using a data-based decision-making process to differentiate support for all children according to level of need” (Kaminski et al., 2014, p. 71). Briefly, RTI is a multi-tiered approach involving early identification and support for students with learning and behaviour needs (i.e., Tier 1 is universal programming within the typical classroom environment; Tier 2 involves targeted group interventions for supplementary instruction; Tier 3 refers to intensive individual intervention). Assessment data is at the center of decision-making within the RTI framework. The data can be used to effectively identify the children who need support, provide benchmark data, and determine the effectiveness of various interventions. Additionally, oral narrative assessments provide a measure of children’s narrative skills and ability to use language in authentic contexts. Justice et al. (2010) have noted that presently “there is great interest in the systematic implementation of language assessments within preschool programs to promote differentiated instruction within the general curriculum and to identify children who may require more intensive language development supports” (Justice et al., 2010, p. 225).

Assessment of language use

One article emerged as investigating language use (Smith et al., 2000). The *Teacher Assessment of Student Communicative Competence* (TASCC) developed by Smith et al. (2000) is a measure of “students’ communicative effectiveness in the classroom ... [assessing] students’ verbal and nonverbal communicative abilities and use of compensatory strategies” (p. 3). The TASCC measures five areas of communicative competence: (1) comfort level with communication (e.g., initiating/maintaining interactions with others); (2) intelligibility (i.e., comprehensibility of speech); (3) ability to recognize and clarify misunderstandings in communication; (4) appropriateness of communication

within particular social contexts; and (5) ability to use appropriate nonverbal communication (e.g., to express feelings or intentions) (Smith et al., 2000).

Classroom practice: Language use. The ultimate goal of language use is communication. The attainment of language form and content is meaningful only to the extent that children use these components successfully to interpret and express intended meaning in a variety of social contexts. This pragmatic use of language, its communicative function, “is seen as the driving force of language learning for the child, and the motivation for the child’s acquisition of the structural components of vocabulary and grammar” (Sheil et al., 2012, p. 126).

It is important that students learn when their language or social interaction is inappropriate or incorrect. The teacher’s role is to “facilitate the child’s communicative intent and to develop the child’s communicative competence” (Shiel et al., 2012, p. 126). Researchers have identified teacher-child dialogue (i.e., one-to-one, small group, whole group) as an essential context for language development (Shiel et al., 2012). Using a supportive style of interaction, the teacher can scaffold the child’s learning and facilitate interpretation of meaning, these by way of structuring dialogue in highly motivating contexts and providing contingent responses (i.e., responses that immediately follow the child’s remark, are meaningfully related, and are at the level of the child’s communicative functioning) (Shiel et al., 2012). “Teachers can *elaborate* on students’ language by adding new information, they can *extend* the conversation through questioning, *reinforce* the language through repetition, *model* self-talk and *build other communication skills* such as taking turns, eye contact and appropriate social distance” (Konza, 2011, p. 3, emphasis in original).

Oral language development is also facilitated through conversations with better language users (i.e., those who use more sophisticated vocabulary and language structures). Teachers can increase the contact that young children have with more skilled language users by setting up language interaction pairs or small groups.

This can involve students from a “buddy class”, parents or other volunteers engaging with students on a regular basis, perhaps sharing a book together, talking about a weekend activity, a celebration – any event that will promote spontaneous language. These activities also help children develop appropriate turn-taking, intonation, expression and eye contact. If older language users are not available, pair those children who need more support with better language users among their class peers for 15 minutes of table talk every day... Provide material such as play dough, pictures or objects to prompt the discussion, and rotate these each day to initiate new conversations. (Konza, 2011, p. 4)

Creating a variety of opportunities to engage in conversations and discussions effectively builds competence in children’s oral language skills.

Smith et al. (2000) have indicated that the TASC assessment can be used by teachers to identify and analyze students' strengths and challenges within their language use, provide intervention targets, and establish baselines for the evaluation of progress. In obtaining information on children's ability to use language in communicative ways, teachers can plan appropriate instruction and improve classroom practice.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Educational theories provide orienting frameworks for researchers engaging in educational investigations. They also provide orienting frameworks for educators. "Teachers with a firm grasp of educational and psychological theories have a clear basis for making instructional decisions. Their understanding of educational theory provides them with a foundation for understanding why they are choosing the instructional practices that they use" (Tracey & Morrow, 2012, p. 6). Indeed, highly effective, exemplary educators align their teaching practices with their theoretical beliefs (Pressley et al., 2001). By examining the theories underpinning oral language assessment in the research studies, those can be identified that can help teachers select appropriate assessment measures and instructional strategies to develop their students' oral language skills.

The research studies included in the systematic review stated or implied their grounding in an emergentist view of language acquisition/development. Shiel et al. (2012) succinctly describes this perspective:

From an emergentist perspective, within the individual child, language develops in tandem with, and is influenced by, physiological, cognitive and social development ... The child is an active learner who brings various capacities to what is a complex task and language emerges in the interaction between the predispositions the individual child brings - the individual biological, social and cognitive profile - and his/her social linguistic environment. (p. 63)

The emergentist view is compatible with socio-constructivist theory, also evident in the reviewed studies, especially those utilizing dynamic assessment. Socio-constructivist theory, created by Vygotsky (1978), is founded on the belief that children's growth is predominantly the result of their social interactions with others. Two key concepts of social constructivism are: Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, which refers to the ideal difficulty level of a task necessary to optimize learning; and scaffolding, which refers to the assistance that adults provide to children during educational tasks. Vygotsky (1978) defined the zone of proximal development (and the support scaffolding provides) as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86).

Finally, it is important to recognize socio-cultural influences on language learning, understanding that language development is embedded within specific cultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Children learn language by drawing upon a range of mediational tools to construct meaning within their social contexts (Kennedy et al., 2012). Hill (2011) stated that “the challenge remains to develop ecologically valid, socioculturally and environmentally responsive assessment tools (for understanding children’s literacy development) grounded in the local community’s cultural constructions of meaning” (p. 166).

DISCUSSION

This literature review was interested to find out, firstly, which evidence-based assessments are being used within pre-school and elementary classrooms to evaluate the oral language skills of children between the ages of three to nine years; specifically, what aspect(s) of language (i.e., content, form, use) are being assessed? Secondly, what are the theoretical perspectives underpinning the research on oral language assessment of young children?

The review revealed a variety of measures being used within the classroom to assess the oral language skills of young children. These measures are summarized in Tables 1 to 4 (Appendix B). It is encouraging to see that the majority of the studies were conducted within the last ten years. This shows promise that oral language development is on the “research radar” and is deemed important, as something that must be investigated.

Theories shape the way oral language is conceptualized, taught and assessed. The emergentist view of language acquisition and development takes into account the importance of the child’s physiological status, cognitive skills, social precocity and the interactions of these significant components (Shiel et al., 2012). The socio-constructivist view draws attention to the importance of the contribution of knowledgeable adults in the language construction process, while a socio-cultural stance identifies the wider cultural context for language learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Effective classroom assessment and instruction occurs when educational theories are linked to classroom practice (Pressley et al., 2001).

CONCLUSION

To reiterate, educators need to choose effective interventions to support young children’s oral language development. To do so, they must have a firm grasp of what they are assessing, the most effective means of assessment, and which theoretical perspective provides a suitable foundation for choosing appropriate instructional practices. Given the importance of oral language development in emergent literacy, it would be advantageous for preschool and primary teachers to become experts in oral language development: “Broadening the

base of expertise in all teachers, so that every child benefits from quality first teaching, is the most effective way to reduce the need for intervention” (Konza, 2010, p. 7). Teachers are in an excellent position to observe and assess the language skills of their students.

A review of additional databases (e.g., ProQuest Education Journal, PsycINFO) would provide further data to add to the repertoire of evidence-based assessment measures that prove useful in a classroom context, for instance, those that can assess and support students presenting challenges in the areas of language content, use, and form. Future research on the appropriateness of using certain measures in a variety of cultural contexts would also be desirable as would developing measures that can capture oral language use between children within various communicative contexts and not only teacher-child interactions.

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APPENDIX A

Terms and sub-terms utilized for systematic review

- Search terms: oral language assessment, oral communication assessment
- Sub terms: oral language assessment, oral communication assessment+
 - language knowledge, language processing, receptive language, listening comprehension, auditory comprehension, expressive language, oral expression, language form, language structure, phonology, morphology, syntax, phoneme, morpheme, grammatical morphemes, grammar, grammaticality judgement, syntax construction, sequence, suffixes, prefixes, affixes, plurals, pluralization, tenses, language content, semantics, lexical development, vocabulary, word meaning, nonliteral language, contextual meaning, basic concepts, antonyms, synonyms, sentence completion, paragraph comprehension, sentence comprehension, and word retrieval, word finding, language use, pragmatics, social communication, social skills, social interaction, functional language, ambiguous sentences, supralinguistics, suprasegmentals, inference, figurative language, idiomatic language, metalinguistic skills, prelinguistic language, emerging language, developing language, speech, communication, speech sounds, sound development, speech improvement, sound sequence, phonological awareness

APPENDIX B

TABLE 1. *Summary of the measures/constructs for the language component: FORM*

Study	Measure	Construct(s) Measured
Camilleri & Botting, 2013	Dynamic Assessment of Word Learning (DAWL)	Receptive vocabulary
Bredfield et al., 2013	Early Language and Literacy Individual Growth and Development Indicators	Expressive vocabulary
Marcotte et al., 2014	Dynamic Indicators of Vocabulary Skills (DIVS)	Expressive vocabulary

TABLE 2. *Summary of the measures/constructs for the language component: CONTENT*

Study	Measure	Construct(s) Measured
Watkins & Edwards, 2004	Mountain Shadows Phonemic Awareness Scale (MS-PAS)	Phonemic awareness
Bridges & Catts, 2011	Dynamic Screening of Phonological Awareness (DSPA)	Phonological awareness
Chafouleas & Martens, 2002	Accuracy-based tasks (rhyme-providing, sound-providing, blending, segmentation, deletion)	Phonological awareness
Kantor et al., 2011	Measures of elision, blending, and initial sound matching, print awareness	Phonological awareness
Vloedgraven & Verhoeven, 2007	Tasks in rhyming, phoneme identification, phoneme blending, phoneme segmentation	Phonological awareness
Webb et al., 2004	The Phonological Awareness Test	Phonological awareness

TABLE 3. *Summary of the measures/constructs for the language components: CONTENT & FORM*

Study	Measure	Construct(s) Measured
Kaminski et al., 2014	Preschool Early Literacy Indicators (PELI)	Alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, vocabulary, listening comprehension
Heilmann et al., 2010	Narrative Scoring Scheme (NSS)	Story grammar, literate language, cohesion
Justice et al., 2010	Narrative Assessment Protocol (NAP)	Sentence structure, phrase structure, modifiers, nouns, verbs
Pena et al., 2006	Narrative-based dynamic assessment task	Story components, story ideas and language, episode structure
Riley & Burrell, 2007	Tell Me – New Zealand School Entry Assessment Story Retelling Task	Sentence structure, vocabulary, organization, description / expression, content

TABLE 4. *Summary of the measures/constructs for the language component: USE*

Study	Measure	Construct(s) Measured
Smith et al., 2000	Teacher Assessment of Student Communicative Competence (TASCC)	Approach / avoidance attitude, intelligibility, clarification / repair (of output) / comprehension (of input), appropriateness of communication, pragmatic / nonverbal communication