Oral Language Proficiency
The Critical Link to Reading Comprehension

Let’s Talk About It! Supports Oral Language Development with ELLs

Our Changing Population
The number of ELLs attending U.S. schools has grown exponentially, and this trend will continue. According to the 2000 census, 9 million children between the ages of 5-17 speak a language other than English at home. Approximately 44% of all ELLs are currently in preK-3 grade classrooms. Previously teachers did not have to think about the rate of speech, choice of words, and the strategic use of language. These critical issues must be addressed.

Research Support
Educators are coming to see the importance of oral language acquisition and its impact on success in school. Researchers such as, Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, child psychologists at the University of Kansas, have conducted intensive research on language acquisition and school success of children from socio economic or working class families as compared to children whose parents were professionals. When all variables were accounted for, increased oral language development and subsequent school success came down to one simple factor—the number of words parents spoke to the child, not surprisingly, the kinds of words and statements that each child heard varied by class. The kinds of conversations parents and teachers have with students matters! Encouraging and increasing complex language spoken to a child increase their oral language acquisition, which in early childhood correlate strongly to increased I.Q. and academic success (Chard, 2006).

Many children arrive at elementary school with strong oral language due to their prior five years of listening and speaking the English language. They are able to communicate basic ideas and feelings clearly. However, many other students come to school with limited or no English language acquisition, although they more than likely possess some level of oral language proficiency in their native language. It is these children that benefit the most from daily, explicit, and intentional oral language development.

Mondo’s Program Research: Mondo’s Research Support Effects on English Language Learners

Since 1998, Mondo instigated multiple, third-party evaluative studies (quasi-experimental, experimental and matched evaluations)
One of these studies looked at the impact of Mondo’s BEL BOOKSHOP Program on cohorts of schools in three urban school districts. The study was conducted by two universities (Hill, Jaggar, 2002). Hill conducted further analysis of these data to demonstrate the impact of the treatment on elementary school English Language Learners. The findings were substantial and educationally important (Hill, 2003). The study showed that ELL students started behind levels of all other students in the Kindergarten grade, but then quickly caught up in their second year of schooling. While a lower percentage of Kindergarten ELL students met the year-end minimum reading text level, when compared with all other Kindergarten students. Nearly 60% of ELL students met the Kindergarten minimum standard as compared with 66.4% of all students. This is a significant achievement for ELL students. Additionally by the end of Grade 1 a higher percentage of ELL students (48.7%) met the year-end minimum standard reading text level compared to the achievement of all other students (47.5%).
The impact of the treatment on elementary English language learners is better understood when the premise from which Mondo’s program works is fully appreciated. The fact that the assessment is the key initiator of the instructional program for students, means that for the second language learner student just as for the native English speaking student, Mondo’s treatment allows for differentiated instruction to occur for all students. Mondo’s *Let’s Talk About It!* Program provides the resources for explicit instruction and intervention for raising the oral language proficiency for English Language Learners and its direct impact on ELL’s gains in reading achievement.

*Let’s Talk About It!* is supported from research drawn primarily on sheltered instruction, which evolved into the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol model or SIOP (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short, 2001), the research and successful practices in Classroom Instruction That Works with ELLs (Hill & Flynn, 2006), which is an extension on Classroom Instruction That Works (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001) refocused through the lens of working with ELLs, as well as effective strategies supported by research and practice (Herrell & Jordon, 2004). These three works include the analysis of over 2,500 research studies and countless hours of classroom field-testing.

**Oral Language Development**

Oral language cannot develop in a silent classroom. Children need to be surrounded by spoken language that is understandable or comprehensible in order to develop their own language (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short, 2001). The two most important elements of oral language development are **comprehensible input** and **social interaction** (Peregoy and Boyle, 2005). *Let’s Talk About It!* provides the instructional support to create an optimal environment for oral language development.

For young children, the initial acquisition of oral language almost always precedes the ability to read and write in a second language (Snow et al., 1998; Hurley & Tinajero, 2000). We also know that ELLs do not need to be fully proficient in oral English before they start to read and write (Hudelson, 1984). Let’s Talk About It! is structured in a way that builds oral language (Session 1), connects it to print (Session 2), which is then read (Session 3). This further extends to developing vocabulary and the comprehension strategies (predicting, inferring, and understanding the author’s intent) that strategic readers use (sessions 4A-4C).

It is important to take advantage of the many “teachable moments” throughout each day for oral language development in our classrooms (Houk, 2005). However, for low language students, teachers must build in daily time to provide explicit instruction that supports oral language development (Peregoy and Boyle, 2005). In most classrooms, the teacher is the strongest language model, and in classes with many ELLs, the teacher may be the only language model.

For low language students teachers must assume the role of the primary language nurturer during the school day (Crévola & Vineis, 2004)

Oral language development includes instruction in the form, content, and functions of language. For example, syntax, a part of form, refers to the rules that govern how we organize words into sentences, (Chard, 2006). For ELLs, syntax, the structures/order in which we use words, may be a stumbling block.
Other languages may use words in a different order. For example, in Spanish, many times the adjective follows a noun rather than preceding it. Students’ receptive language precedes their ability to produce language (expressive language) and the reciprocal nature of each impacts the others growth in a spiraling manner. As their receptive and expressive proficiency for using more complex structures increases, so will their ability to read and comprehend more complex structures in texts they read. Research shows that without a solid oral language foundation, comprehension breaks down at even the earliest reading levels (Crévola, Vineis, 2004)

One major urban school district using Mondo’s **Oral Language Assessment** had startling findings when analyzing data for their most struggling readers in Grades 1, 2 & 3. The following percentages of struggling readers did not meet the Grade 1 Mid Year Oral Language Assessment Standard (Score =15):

- Grade 1 94%
- Grade 2 86%
- Grade 3 82%

These data for struggling readers found a profound correlation between students oral language proficiency and their reading comprehension. Additionally, the analysis found that 38% of Grades 2 & 3 struggling readers did not meet early Grade 1 Standard (Score =10). Note that a score of 10 is the proficiency level of an average 5.5 year old child.

**Oral Language Assessment**

We need to know which structures of English language students understand when spoken to by adults. Mondo’s **Oral Language Assessment** is used to determine the receptive oral language capacity of all K-1 students, as well as at-risk language users in Grades 2-3, or any student for whom English is a second language for up to five years after they first learn English. This assessment provides valuable data about the errors in syntax and language structures children are making, and will help inform instructional decisions.

Understanding a student’s language proficiency helps teachers to guide instruction and adjust their own language accordingly. This adjustment of teacher language is referred to as **comprehensible input** (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short, 2001). This vital information informs the manner in which teachers speak and model and scaffold language for their students.

Knowing students level of oral language proficiency also impacts the teachers selection of appropriate reading texts that are more in alignment with students’ oral language level. In just 5 minutes Mondo’s **Oral Language Assessment** helps teachers find out a students oral language proficiency level and risk of reading failure.
Implications for instruction

ELLs go through predictable stages of second language development (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), which are important aspects teachers should know about their students. Mondo’s Oral Language Assessment (OLA) informs teacher about their students’ linguistic capabilities. Teachers use this information so that they can differentiate instruction and maximize oral language acquisition. It’s much more than just “exposing” children to English— that approach has been proven to have little impact. It’s not just the quantity of exposures to English that affect learning, it is the quality (Wong-Fillmore & Valdez, 1986). Teachers are already working very hard to meet the needs of their low language students. Mondo’s Oral language assessment helps teachers work smarter in a more data-driven purposeful, and explicit manner. Teachers make a difference and increase the oral language proficiency of their students by using Let’s Talk About It! as an effective small group instructional strategy in just 10-15 minutes, 2 to 3 times a week. Mondo’s Let’s Talk About It! Oral Language Program helps ELLs achieve grade-level literacy standards.

Let’s Talk About It! Instructional Design

All of the lessons in Let’s Talk About It! Oral Language Program follow a predictable lesson format. They are organized following the same steps outlined in figure 1.1. Predictable routines and signals (Herrell & Jordon, 2001) are extremely important in reducing the anxiety of English language learners (Krashen, 1982). Because ELLs do not always understand what is said, having predictable routines and signals helps them to relax. This allows ELLs to focus their energy on the content of these small group instructional conversations and on their own language acquisition.

Let’s Talk About It! provides model teacher language in every lesson plan. Knowing a student’s level of language acquisition (early production, speech emergence, intermediate) allows teachers to work within the student’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Depending on students proficiency levels, teachers can provide language models and explicit instruction as follows (Hill & Flynn, 2006):

- Ask questions that elicit more complex responses
- Model and extend use of language structures or
- Provide explicit extension and language instruction (intermediate level)

Session 1: Generating a Discussion

This introductory session focuses on the development of students’ oral language. Students sit in a semicircle in the rug area so that they can all see the photo chart as well as each other. A small group (no more than six students) makes for the best one-to-one language interaction. The larger the number of students, the fewer opportunities they have for individual input. Students are grouped according to their language needs as determined by analysis of the oral language assessments. Let’s Talk About It! uses large photo charts as a stimulus and precursor to language. In ELL literature this is known as visual scaffolding (Herrell & Jordon, 2001). Language generation is the primary instructional focus for this initial section of Let’s Talk About It!
Session 2: Recording Their Thoughts
This section is generally done on the following day. It takes place once students have produced a number of ideas. It is important to keep these two phases of the lesson discrete in order not to belabor ideas by linking them to the written word. During this section of the lesson, teachers help students select and organize the specific ideas they want the teacher to record. The teacher is the facilitator, taking students back to their thoughts and then recording them on chart paper for all to see. The teacher also encourages students to elaborate on the recorded text they contributed to both encourage clarification of their ideas and provide additional opportunities to hear other ideas again.

As the lessons progress, and students are more proficient, attention is given to introducing the different functions and forms of language.

Children use language for a multitude of reasons, including but not limited to the following (Gibbons, 1993):

- Agreeing and disagreeing
- Classifying
- Comparing and contrasting
- Criticizing
- Describing
- Enquiring or questioning
- Evaluating
- Explaining
- Expressing position or opinion
- Hypothesizing
- Inferring
- Predicting
- Sequencing

This session of every lesson in Let's Talk About It! highlights the different language functions and structures, or forms. (see Gibbons, 1993). This type of active scaffolding is especially appropriate for ELLs (Herrell & Jordon, 2004). In Session 2 teachers invite students to both listen to and expand upon the ideas and opinions of others.

Session 3: Returning to Their Thoughts
The goal of this section is to ensure that students pull on their own thoughts and ideas as a means for remembering what has been written down, as many are not yet proficient decoders of text. This is an opportunity to reinforce the understanding that the written message remains constant. Teachers reinforce early concepts about print, such as one-to-one correspondence, directionality, starting points, top to bottom of the page, and return sweep. Students are to reread the text many times, recalling who had the ideas and discussing their understandings of what they have said. Teach for fluency right from the start.
**Session 4A: Generating Predictions**
This section of the lesson promotes the need to predict before reading. Students who have participated in earlier lessons have texts they have generated and can reread as a way to restart their ideas. Students who have not been exposed to this photo chart can use the picture to predict what the text might say.

**Session 4B: Reading the Text**
Teachers are encouraged to read the text card to students, ensuring that all students are looking at the print. They encourage students to read along, and use this opportunity to model phrased and fluent reading.

**Session 4C: Interpreting the Message**
During this section of the lesson, teachers help students make connections to the author’s thoughts and messages. Teachers tend to overlook helping emergent readers understand how to link what they know about the world to what they are reading. *Let’s Talk About It!* provides teachers with explicit lesson plans that help low-language students and preemergent readers to both forge links between what they think and what is written down, and connect their own experiences to the thoughts of others as they begin to read text. This final section of the lesson has a direct link to the visual information associated with the phonics (letter sound correspondence/decoding) aspects of reading.

**Let’s Talk About It! Oral Language Writing**
Research shows that low-language students also need explicit instruction that helps them make the critical link to writing. Many students with limited proficiency with the structures of oral English struggle with composing their thoughts in a manner that is structured or that conveys complex ideas. Mondo’s *Let’s Talk About It!* program includes oral language writing lesson plans to support students with limited English proficiency during the writing block. See *Let’s Talk About It!* Oral Language Teacher guidebook for more information.
Executive Summary

Let's Talk About It! is supported by research in language development and successful ELL best practices. Let's Talk About It! provides the instructional support to create an optimal environment for oral language development which is supportive and safe (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) by building in daily time for social interaction and comprehensible input (Peregoy and Boyle, 2005). Comprehensible input refers to language used in ways that make it understandable to the learner even though second language proficiency is limited (Krashen, 1982). Paraphrasing, repetition of key points, reference to concrete materials and visuals, and acting out meanings are some of the ways speakers can help convey meaning and thus make language more understandable (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short, 2001).

Let's Talk About It! provides the visual support (engaging photos) needed to launch rich conversation for every lesson, thereby increasing comprehensible input. When we pair two communication channels, the verbal and the nonverbal, words and meanings become discernible to the learner (Peregoy and Boyle, 2005), for example, using the photo charts as a stimulus for conversation. Visual scaffolding is an approach in which the language used in instruction is made more understandable by the display of drawing or photographs that allow ELLs to hear English words and connect them to the visual images being displayed (Herrell & Jordon, 2001).

Let's Talk About It! is especially effective with English language learners because it establishes predictable routines and signals (Herrell & Jordon, 2001) which are extremely important in reducing the anxiety of English language learners (Krashen, 1982) and in increasing language acquisition.

Each lesson in Let's Talk About It! provides explicit instruction and teaches ELLs the rules and the art of engaging in meaningful conversation (Houk, 2005). During the earliest stages of language learning, face-to-face social interactions between learners and speakers of the target language provide optimal language learning opportunities (Peregoy and Boyle, 2005). Let's Talk About It! provides ELLs multiple opportunities to talk about a topic. This practice increases comprehension and participation for ELLs. Let's Talk About It! provides children the opportunity to learn and practice different discourse patterns, the complex syntax/structures and spoken and written language codes of English that will allow them to achieve high literacy standards.

Let's Talk About It! provides integrated oral language reading and writing lessons to support the language and conceptual development of ELLs. This approach creates a meaningful conceptual framework within which students are invited to use both oral and written language. The meaningful context established by the integrated approach supports the comprehensibility of instruction.

As the lessons progress, and students are more proficient, attention is given to introducing the different functions and forms of language (Gibbons, 1991). It is important to attend to the language demands that children will face, including form and function, and equip children to participate meaningfully and successfully. Lessons that explicitly, intentionally, and systematically address the different components of oral language empower ELLs with tools necessary to become strong readers and writers (Hill & Flynn, 2006).
References


