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ASSESSING ORAL LANGUAGE

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Assessing pupils' oral language is not a straightforward activity. In order to know what to look for, it is necessary to know something of the nature of oral language and the role it plays in the learning process. In this chapter we look at ways to characterise each pupil's use of oral language skills and ways this diagnosis can be incorporated into the classroom program.

INTRODUCTION

The assessment of oral language is perhaps the most neglected area in language assessment. We could suggest a couple of reasons for this.

Firstly, oral language has traditionally had less status in education than written language. Even among students we often hear remarks such as 'We didn't do anything today. We just talked.' The written mode is generally associated with great literary works, with essays and examinations, with scholarship, with power. This is gradually changing as education systems increasingly acknowledge spoken language in their syllabuses and make it a compulsory component of the assessment process. Generally, however, the oral mode remains the poor cousin in the language arts.

Secondly, spoken language by its very nature is fleeting. It vanishes at the moment of utterance, unlike written language which is a permanent record. To assess oral language, the teacher would need to be physically present as the language occurs and to make instantaneous judgments. With written language, the teacher is able to take the texts to the staff room or home and review them at a convenient hour, with time to make considered judgments. This issue is also becoming less of a problem as modern technology gives us the tools to capture sound and make it 'storable'. Tape-recorders and video cameras are becoming commonplace in the classroom.

But while oral language is now higher on the agenda and more accessible for analysis, there still remains a major question: what we are looking for when we assess spoken language?

SOME COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

Much of what goes on in the name of assessing speaking and listening is based on ill-conceived or inadequate views of oral language.

To begin with, there is the trap of assessing spoken language according to the criteria developed for written language. Firstly, there is an expectation that sentences will be complete and well-formed, that the meaning is always made clear for the reader and that the text is well-structured and coherent. These same criteria need not apply to spoken language. By its very nature, spoken language is 'first draft'. We generally do not have the opportunity to revise and polish our oral language as we do with a written text. If you read a transcript of a conversation you have participated in, you will probably be surprised at the false starts, hesitations, backtracking, fillers ('um', 'er'), apparently incoherent sentences, and so on which are typical of even very articulate speech. They are in fact quite characteristic of 'language on the run' where thought is being shaped at the moment of utterance. We can often assume a shared knowledge with others involved in the interaction and many of the meanings are retrievable from the physical context. There is usually no need to insist on 'full sentences' and 'making our meanings explicit' because oral language takes place in the here and now. If the meaning isn't clear, we can always ask for clarification. Imagine a scenario of someone walking into a room, hammer in hand, and saying:

So what about . . . put it here?

The first three words might refer to a previous conversation about where to hang a picture. The speaker then goes on to suggest a possible place. As a written text this would be meaningless, but in oral language it is perfectly appropriate and functional. In fact it would sound quite contrived to say:

Do you remember we were discussing where to hang the picture? Well, here I am with my hammer and there is the picture. Will I hang it on the wall next to the window?

So we need to assess oral language on its own merits, not according to borrowed criteria.

Another common but questionable approach to assessing speaking is to focus on the sound stream — aspects such as enunciation of words, clarity of expression, tone, accent, pitch and stress. Not only are these often ill-defined notions, they are relatively superficial. Certainly if a child constantly mumbles incoherently this would require attention. Ultimately surface features should facilitate understanding but in themselves they are of minor interest. It is like concentrating on handwriting, spelling and

punctuation in written language. These features are important up to a point in making your meanings accessible to others, but should not become the major focus of our assessment.

Another problem is that when dealing with aspects such as accent and pronunciation, we are likely to make value judgments about a student's cultural background. Students from different social classes, from different ethnic groups and from different parts of Australia will speak different varieties of English. Each is equally valid. They are very much a part of the child's identity, and to imply that they are somehow 'wrong' or 'inferior' can result in alienation from the school or from the home. Standard Australian English (SAE) is simply one of these varieties. Admittedly there is a prejudice in our society which maintains that SAE is intrinsically 'better' than other versions of English. This leads to SAE being used as a gate-keeping mechanism to filter out those from different socio-economic or cultural backgrounds. Students need to be alerted to this and given the option of adding SAE to their repertoire. They then have the advantage of being able to operate in a greater variety of contexts without feeling that they have to abandon their home language.

A similar way of assessing oral language is to take the 'language as communication' approach. This approach argues that language is a medium for conveying messages. The more adept you are at delivering your message, the better communicator you are. Assessment would involve identification of such skills as maintaining eye contact, employing appropriate body language and gestures, nodding your head, using interesting facial expressions, engaging your audience, varying your delivery to maintain interest, and generally exuding confidence. Undoubtedly these are handy strategies to enhance your oral delivery, but they are still somewhat peripheral.

Here again there is the possibility of cultural bias due to the fact that such strategies or behaviours are usually culture-specific. Maintaining eye contact, for example, is considered impolite in certain cultures. In some cultures, it is quite appropriate for speakers to constantly talk over the top of each other. In other cultures, the talk is punctuated by long pauses which native English-speakers would find uncomfortable.

The above approaches to assessment emphasise the 'performance' aspect of oral language and are more concerned with the trappings than the substance.

Speak up, girl!

Don't talk through your nose!

Look me in the eye when you talk to me!

Don't end your sentences with a preposition!

Nicely rounded vowels as we read 'The Highwayman'.

Robert, you're falling behind the others — keep up!

Lively voices, now!

In this chapter we will concentrate instead on the *meanings* pupils make in oral language. In fact, we will be looking at the assessment of pupils' 'oracy', a complex competence involving the ability to operate effectively in a variety of speaking and listening activities in different contexts.

ASSESSING ORACY

Traditionally, speaking and listening have been regarded as discrete skills — the production of speech and the reception of speech. This was based on a view of oral language as the trading of messages. On the one side we had the active speaker who formulated a message and used language to convey it to the waiting listener — preferably utilising the most effective communication skills. On the other side, we had the passive listener who attempted to decode the message and comprehend the speaker's meaning.

Such a view, however, ignores the interactive nature of oral language. In oral interaction, meanings are constructed jointly. The meanings develop as the discourse proceeds — as the participants interrupt each other and head off in unexpected directions, as they elaborate on each others' contributions, as they challenge each other and stimulate exploration of other possibilities.

The term 'oracy' was coined in 1965 by Wilkinson, to indicate this close relationship between listening and speaking. There was great interest at this time in the role played by oral language in learning and much research effort had gone into analysing the patterns of language interaction in the classroom. Initially, interest centred on the way in which language was used in the traditional teacher-centred classroom. Statistics showed that classroom discourse was greatly dominated by the teacher. Teacher monologue consumed about two-thirds of classroom time, and of that two-thirds, most of it was taken up with procedural matters. When students were allowed to speak, their contributions were generally restricted to answering the teacher's questions.

Teaching was seen as the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the students. Every so often, the teacher would question the students to check whether the knowledge had been taken in. While this is still a common model of teaching and learning in some Australian schools and in many other countries, increasingly it is acknowledged that pupils learn best by actively engaging in the construction of meaning. Such a view of learning has led to a greater emphasis on encouraging pupils to use exploratory talk in pairs and small groups.

Oral language these days is seen to play an important role in the learning process. It is no longer seen simply in terms of 'performance'. Today we have a much more complex understanding of the nature of oral language and what is involved in its use in the classroom. Consequently, our assessment procedures need to be much more sophisticated. In order

to develop an appropriate assessment instrument, we need to draw on a comprehensive model of language which encompasses the various dimensions of learning in the oral mode.

As in other chapters of this book, we could look to Halliday's functional model of language to provide us with such a framework. A functional approach to language describes 'language in use'. It is not interested in prescribing rules about what is 'correct' and 'incorrect'. Rather, the emphasis is on how effectively we use language to achieve our goals.

A functional model of language begins by recognising the relationship between a text (written or spoken) and its context. When we are engaged in assessment we need to constantly remind ourselves that the texts we construct will differ according to the context in which they are produced. The criteria we use to assess one text won't necessarily be appropriate for assessing other texts. Our criteria need to take into account certain factors in the context, and how these differ from context to context.

We use texts to achieve different *purposes*, for example, so we need to develop criteria which reflect the different purposes for using language and how successful we are in achieving those purposes. We also need to consider the *mode* of language used — is it written or spoken? If spoken, is it monologue or dialogue? Is it spontaneous or carefully prepared? Our assessment criteria will also differ according to the *tenor* of the situation. Who is involved in the interaction? What roles are they playing? What is their relationship? And finally, we need to recognise how oral language is being used to develop our understanding of the world, how it is constructing a particular *field* of knowledge.

Let us look at each of these contextual factors in more depth.

ACHIEVING OUR PURPOSES THROUGH ORAL LANGUAGE

Our purpose for using language varies from one context to another. Our purpose might be to explain something, or to tell a story, or to give directions. These purposes give rise to different *genres*. In oral language, we typically find genres such as:

- giving an account of what happened (Recount);
- arguing two sides of an issue (Debate);
- describing a significant incident (Anecdote);
- telling someone how to do something (Procedure);
- describing a person or place (Description);
- finding out information from someone (Interview);
- maintaining relationships (Casual Conversation);
- working out what to do (Planning).

Each genre has its own particular structure. The text will move through a series of stages in order to achieve its purpose. This is called the schematic structure of the genre. The structures of some spoken genres are more predictable than others. A church service, for example, is usually quite ritualistic. We could walk in half way through and know what is coming next. A news broadcast would have a recognisable structure, usually consisting of the headlines, 'story of the day', other news accounts in order of interest/newsworthiness (international, national and local), 'personal interest' stories (and other 'fillers'), sport and weather. A recount will usually begin by giving some idea of who was involved, the time and possibly the location and will outline a series of events in chronological order, often including some sort of comment on the events. A chance encounter with an acquaintance will be relatively predictable, usually starting off with greetings, followed by a topical comment (enquiry as to health, the family, the weather), perhaps an observation about the business at hand (shopping, visit to doctor), some sort of excuse for having to leave, a promise to meet soon (optional!), and farewells. A 'knock knock' joke has a predictable structure. And so on.

Other oral genres, however, are not so predictable. Nevertheless, continuing research in this area is discovering fairly predictable patternings in genres such as dinner table chat, doctor-patient interviews, coffee-break conversations in the workplace, and even gossip.

Each culture will have its own purposes for using language and therefore its own genres. So we could say that the genre of a text relates to its cultural context.

In addition to becoming familiar with the genres of the culture and the classroom and learning how to handle them successfully, we need to encourage children to constantly question these genres — to challenge whether in fact they are functional, or whether they have become strait-jackets.

In our assessment of students' oral language, we need to take into account:

- the sorts of oral genres which students need to have control of in order to participate effectively in school, in the community and eventually in the workplace;
- the range of genres which the pupils are able to operate in confidently;
- the successfulness of the pupils' use of the genre;
- the pupils' familiarity with the different stages of the genre (particularly in the case of children from other cultures, where the stages might be quite different); and
- the effectiveness of the interaction at each of the stages.

Of course, such assessment should not result in imposing recipes or formulae. Our first objective should be to gain an impression as to whether the overall interaction successfully achieved its purpose. Could the instructions be followed? Was the argument persuasive? Did the story entertain? Was the problem solved? If we want to probe deeper, perhaps to ascertain how the interaction might have been more effective, we could look at how the text was structured and at particular stages within the overall structure (remembering of course that some stages will be optional, or might not appear in a strict sequence) We should remember also the relative unpredictability of some oral genres, and the possibility that we might be dealing with a case of mixed genres.

Within each genre, we need to take into account other factors which will influence the sort of language being used. As mentioned above, in any particular situation, we find a certain mode being used, we find characteristic tenor relationships, and we find a specific field being developed. The combination of these factors in any one situation is referred to as the register of a text. (See Chapter 8 for a further discussion of genre and register).

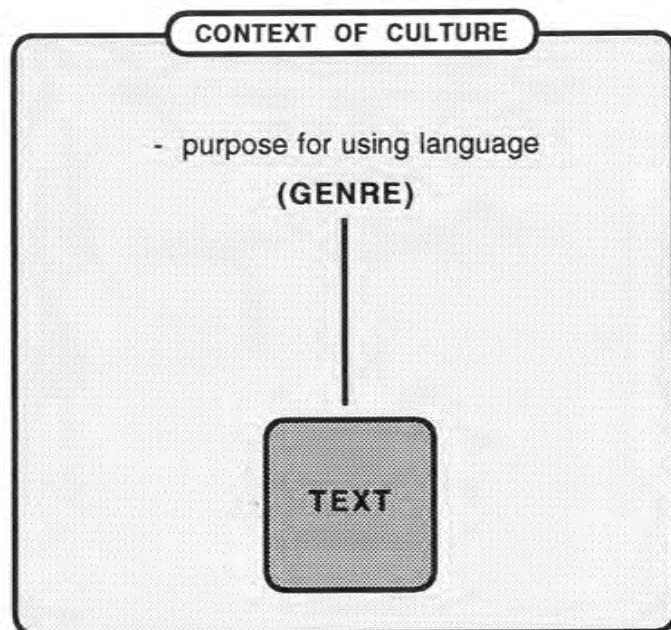


Figure 3.1 The relationship between a text and its cultural context

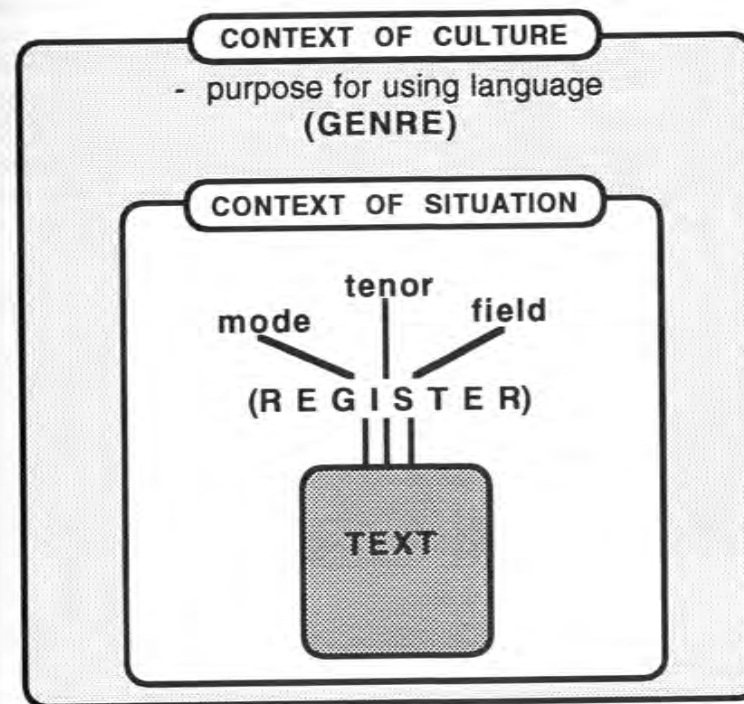


Figure 3.2 The relationship between a text and its situational context

Let us look at each of these register variables separately.

The Mode

In order to assess oral texts, we need to know more about the nature of oral language. We can imagine oral texts as ranged along a continuum. At one end we find the language of face-to-face interaction. Often this interaction accompanies some sort of action. This sort of language would be encountered when a small group of pupils is carrying out a science experiment. As we distance ourselves from the action, we have the opportunity to look back and start to order our thinking. The texts become increasingly organised and coherent the further we move towards the other end of the continuum. Typically, at the reflective end we find written texts, but we might also find highly planned, mentally rehearsed oral texts such as formal debates and speeches which have been written to be read aloud.

Because the audience were not present at the experiment, the speaker has to fill in the details and the text starts to become more 'lexically dense', that is, it contains more content words. This puts a greater strain on the listeners as they try to process the content while the text is being uttered, but because of the loosely flowing nature of this sort of text, the processing demands are not too high. Fillers such as 'um . . .' and 'er . . .' allow the speaker time to organise his/her thoughts and allow listeners time to think about and react to what is being said.

The teacher might then ask the pupils to go away, do further research, take notes, order them coherently, and then come and make a tape-recording of their prepared talk, explaining the principles underlying the results of the experiment. We are now getting towards the reflective end of the continuum. The onus for constructing the meanings is now completely on the individual. He/she has had the time to reflect on the experience, to decide what to include and how to organise the text. Because he/she cannot assume that the listener to the tape has shared the context, all the relevant information needs to be inserted. The text becomes denser. All reference must be internal to the text itself, no longer to things or actions in the surrounding physical context. The text must be self-sufficient. The pupil has also been able to do research, to draw connections and to make generalisations. The text has therefore become more abstract. It is a crafted, well-organised, dense piece of language. The careful structuring should make it easier for the listener to follow, but the density of information might make heavy demands on the listener's processing capacity. (If the text were written, the audience would have time to consider the meanings at their leisure. With a spoken text however, the listener has to keep up with the speaker.)

Paula: We had to make a pendulum that would swing 60 times in a minute. First we got a string, some plasticine and a stopwatch . . . and a ruler. There were two ways we tried to measure the pendulum — first by changing the length of the string and secondly by changing the amount of plasticine . . . the weight. When the string was 75 centimetres long it took 57 centimetres to get 60 swings. Then we kept repeating the experiment and changing the length and the weight, but we couldn't get the velocity exact. We think that the longer the string is the longer time it takes.

What implications does all this have for learning and for assessment?

The sort of language at the action end of the continuum tends to promote a more interactive, inquiring, exploratory sort of learning. It provides a forum for the exchange of ideas, information and opinions. It enables us to try out our thoughts on others while they are in the formative stage. It encourages collaborative learning, where the meanings are created jointly. It isn't concerned with being explicit and well-formed, and so can be nimble and efficient.

Language at the reflection end of the continuum by comparison appears to be ponderous and long-winded. It is typically a more solitary activity, where the learner is forced to come to grips with the developing understandings without the immediate support of others. In the process of structuring the text, researching and revising, the writer starts to fill in the gaps in his/her knowledge — often unnoticed in the hurly-burly of oral interaction. The reflection allowed at this end of the continuum enables the learner to make connections between ideas and to shape these ideas into a coherent text, drawing all the threads together in a deliberate and 'synoptic' way.

Children coming into school will have had extensive experience at the 'action' end of the mode continuum. They generally will lack experience with constructing more reflective oral texts and will need assistance in dealing with the demands they make. Ideally the classroom program would enable them to exploit the learning potential of both interactive and reflective modes and would provide necessary support as they move from one end of the continuum to the other. (See Chapter 9 for further discussion of the mode continuum.)

And what of listening? As we have already noted, attention in the last couple of decades has centred on language as interaction, not separating out listening and speaking as discrete skills. This does not mean however, that we shouldn't focus our attention when appropriate on speaking and listening as different dimensions of the oral mode. Recently, teachers and researchers have become interested in the demands of the production of sustained monologue (or the extended turn) and its role in learning. Little has been said however, of the comprehension of oral language and how we can assess it.

How do we assess a pupil's listening ability? Listening comprehension is often overlooked as it is so difficult to tap into. It is not visible or audible as with writing and speaking. How do we know what a pupil is comprehending? In certain situations we can gain an approximate idea of the pupil's understanding by observing whether he/she can follow spoken instructions, or whether he/she can produce a drawing or dramatic rendering of a story which illustrates his/her comprehension, or whether he/she can produce a flow-chart representing the sequence of an explanation, and so on. Other assessment strategies usually involve the use of spoken or written language to demonstrate comprehension. We could ask pupils to retell a story they have just heard, or to take notes during a radio broadcast, or to summarise a discussion. (The difficulty here of course, is that we then also become involved in the assessment of the pupil's ability to express comprehension in speaking or writing.)

Just as the demands on the speaker differ as we move along the mode continuum, we could surmise that demands on the listener would also differ. Taking part in oral interaction consisting of mainly short turns would

require an ability to 'listen in order to respond', to monitor the flow of the interaction and make split second decisions about what to say, when to intervene and how to take a turn. Listening to an extended turn would involve trying to grasp the overall meaning (not simply utterance by utterance as in interaction), monitoring the structure of the monologue and how the meaning is developing, identifying certain signals which indicate the organisation of the ideas and deciding what are the main points and what is subsidiary.

Listening comprehension remains a complex and underdeveloped area of assessment.

The Tenor

We have seen how a text will vary according to the mode adopted in any particular situation. A text will also vary according to the social relations (tenor) in the situation, that is, the relationship between speaker and listener (or between reader and writer).

Coming from the home context, with its relatively restricted range of relationships, the child entering school needs to extend his/her capacity to cope effectively with a growing repertoire of relationships:

- how to join in the schoolyard play?
- how to interact with peers in groupwork in the classroom?
- how to relate to the class teacher
 - on a one-to-one basis?
 - in a group situation?
 - in a whole-class context?
- how to relate to other teachers and executive in the school?
- how to talk with other adults who visit the school?

At the most obvious level, the language used in these different contexts will differ in terms of formality. When dealing with the school principal, there might be an expectation that the language will be relatively formal. When speaking with the class teacher, the tenor might be more consultative. With certain peers, a casual tenor might be adopted, and with closer friends, an intimate tenor. In assessing a student's language, we would need to consider whether the student is able to adapt his/her language to the tenor demands of the particular situation. In doing so, we would not be aiming at the imposition of social niceties, but rather we would be ascertaining the extent to which the pupil is developing flexibility and subtlety in the way they interact with a variety of people.

Relationships with others is not only reflected in the level of formality. It might also refer to the extent to which the speaker consciously attempts

to monitor the audience's understanding, interest and involvement in the unfolding message. Janet White calls this, 'Orientation to Listeners' and points out that:

One of the important characteristics of successful communication is that speakers orient to listeners and do not just talk at random or outside the eye contact of their interlocutor . . . So the category of 'Orientation to Listeners' refers to those aspects of the speaker's performance which take into account the needs and requirements of the listener.

(White 1991, p. 5)

Some of the markers might include eye contact and direction of gaze, posture and gesture, pausing to ensure that the listener is keeping track, tempo or speed of delivery, verbal assertiveness, using stress and intonation appropriately, audibility, pace and inserting cues to remind the listener of the progress of the discourse ('Let's go to the next point . . .', 'Now for the important part . . .', 'I now want to make three points . . .').

This might mean, for example, learning how to temper bald generalisations with more tentative language — 'perhaps . . .', 'maybe it could . . .', 'if I tried this, it might . . .'. (This 'hedging' language is referred to as 'modality')? It might also involve the development of a wider range of ways of expressing opinions. Rather than the all-pervasive 'It was excellent' or 'It was boring', we might encourage different shades of meaning, and perhaps request justification of opinions.

The social roles of language users will also influence the language choices. These roles are usually concerned with status and power. The role of child and pupil (as opposed to adult and teacher) is typically associated with lack of power and control. This is particularly so when we consider factors such as gender, ethnicity and social class. Research has shown how female pupils are generally disadvantaged in classroom discourse, with the boys monopolising the teacher's attention and dominating the talking in groupwork. Pupils from certain ethnic groups and of low socio-economic background often have difficulty in tuning into the discourse of the classroom. They might not know how to identify significant markers in the teacher's language which should alert them to what is regarded as important and to behavioural expectations. Their home language might not 'fit' with the middle class, Anglo language of schooling.

Ultimately our goal should be to enable the pupils to participate in classroom discourse from a position of power and to recognise how language is used to manipulate and control. An ability to listen critically is at the heart of the democratic process. As future voters, jurists, or representatives of interest groups, students need to be able to judge or present a spoken case, to recognise emotive language and arguments that are specious or selective. (Cox 1989, 15.7)

In assessing oral language in terms of tenor, our main concern should be the extent to which the language of the classroom enables

effective learning to take place. If the pupil feels inhibited, powerless or threatened, then it is unlikely that he/she will be able to exploit the opportunities to learn in the oral mode. If students are to 'have a go', take risks and make public their embryonic understandings, they need the security of supportive relationships. If they are to develop into independent learners, they need to be given increasing responsibility for their own learning. This involves teachers constantly monitoring the role they themselves play at any particular time — when is it appropriate for them to take on the role of expert? of guide? of consultant? of fellow-researcher? When to lead? When to support? When to withdraw?

Recent studies have examined the dynamics of small group interaction and how the language of the group facilitates or hinders learning. Researchers have analysed the discourse in terms of the turns taken:

- Who initiates the topic?
- How is the topic developed?
- Who asks questions? What type of question?
- How does it further the exploration of the topic?
- How does the topic change?
- Are these tangents fruitful? (By which criteria?)
- How do participants get into the conversation?
- How is a turn passed to another participant?
- How are misunderstandings repaired?
- Is tolerance shown towards less confident participants?
- How are they encouraged to take part?
- Who dominates the conversation?
- Is this a positive or negative factor?

If the teacher joins the group:

- How does the interaction change?
- Who now asks the questions?
- Who now offers suggestions and opinions and makes judgements?
- Do the pupils address the group or the teacher?
- Are they seeking approval or genuinely exploring the topic?
- Are they willing to display their ignorance and tentativeness in front of the teacher?
- How does the teacher provide guidance where necessary without taking back control?

The success of the interaction in terms of learning outcomes is heavily dependent upon the roles assumed in the group and the relationships among participants.

For someone to assume dominance is not necessarily a bad thing. It can help the group make progress. Too dominant a contribution can, on the other hand, close down the tentative, exploratory clarifying of thoughts and ideas which is one of the features of successful group work. It can happen of course that power struggles develop, or one member of the group is used as a scapegoat. Opinions may sometimes polarise. On the other hand, the group may be so eager to reach agreement that issues are not fully thought through, or difficult aspects of the topic are swept under the carpet.

(Carter (ed.) 1990, p. 10)

By looking at the relationships in the group, the roles the various participants play and the language resources they employ for interacting, we are able to get an idea of the potential for learning within the group. Of course there are always those who prefer to remain silent, who simply observe others as they interact. How do we assess these pupils' interaction strategies? We might need to ascertain whether the silence is due to factors in the environment — do the other participants inhibit participation through their sarcasm, their intolerance or their desire to dominate? We might also need to look at the pupil's perception of learning. There are those who are unwilling to expose their ignorance and to take risks. Non-participation might also be due to different cultural values or to a lack of interest in the topic. In our assessment of oral interaction we need to be conscious of these, and other, possibilities. While we need to be sensitive to pupils' preferences, we also need to ensure that all pupils are able to participate productively in oral interaction as an important aspect of socialising and learning. We might need to ask ourselves questions such as:

- Is the pupil silent in all contexts?
- Would a change in context promote participation (e.g. placing the pupil in a different group or with a trusted partner; raising the class' awareness of positive group dynamics)?
- Is the silence the result of a genuine choice on the part of the pupil, or due to a lack of linguistic resources/interaction strategies?
- Does the pupil understand the value of oral interaction in the learning process?
- Is the non-participation due to lack of motivation? a low self-image? What can be done about this?
- Does the pupil have a sufficient understanding of the topic/task to be able to contribute or even ask relevant questions?

The Field

The employment of the oral mode in the learning process and the establishment of supportive tenor relationships are important features of the classroom context. But they don't tell us what sort of learning is taking

place. Pupils can become clever at utilising their interaction skills without necessarily developing an understanding of the topic in hand. We therefore need to consider the third register variable — the subject-matter or field.

In primary school contexts, children will be using language to make sense of the world. Through language they learn to construct their understandings of how the world works — the natural world, the technological world, the social world and the world of the imagination.

Oral language plays an important part in developing these fields of knowledge. In the early stages, the pupils use it to attach labels to things and concepts, to make their observations ‘sharable’, and to voice their misconceptions and difficulties. Through language they are able to bridge the gap between the known and the unknown, between the past and the present, to rework new information with existing understandings, and to shunt between the particular and the general.

We need to be able to monitor how the pupils’ understanding of these different fields is developing. When we are assessing our pupils’ control of language, we might ask questions such as:

- Is the pupil’s breadth of vocabulary adequate to deal with this field?
- How does the pupil use language to express the ideas and concepts related to the field?
- Can the student use the necessary language to express the relationships between ideas (e.g. comparing, contrasting, exemplifying, classifying)?
- In a scientific text, is the pupil beginning to use the technical terminology appropriately and with understanding?
- In a literary text, is the student able to create rich imaginary worlds through language?

We can see in the following transcript of small group interaction, how the pupils’ understanding of the field (explaining how we hear) is still at the exploratory stage, and yet they are starting to make important connections:

Katrina: Well, it goes . . . the sound goes through the hole in your ear . . .
 Peter: . . . your earhole . . .
 Katrina: . . . and then it goes to your brain.
 Peter: You’re a brain!
 Sara: Yeah but we’ve gotta say how it gets there.
 Katrina: Where’s the diagram? . . . See . . . Look . . . It’s gotta go . . .
 Sara: . . . along the ear canal . . .
 Katrina: . . . but first . . . what about the . . . this here . . .
 Peter: The ear!
 Katrina: But what part?!
 Sara: The outer ear.

There are of course the inevitable lapses into apparent irrelevancy. Some of these tangents can lead to profitable avenues of exploration. Others are dead ends. The group needs to tread the fine line between, on the one hand not tolerating any deviation from the set topic, and on the other hand wallowing in trivia.

In this sustained monologue taped at a later stage, we can see how the pupil’s control over the field is coming together:

Katrina Well, first the soundwaves are collected by the outer ear and then they go along the . . . um . . . ear canal and make your eardrum vibrate and then the vibrations are passed along by these little bones and then they hit the co . . . co . . . cochlea . . . that twisty bit . . . and it changes them into signals which go to the brain.

Framework for the Assessment of Oral Language

Let us now apply our knowledge of genre and register to develop a possible reference framework for assessing children’s oral language. We cannot simply list a series of all-purpose criteria because as we have seen, the criteria used will need to relate to the particular context of the text. We will therefore suggest the frameworks shown in Figures 3.4 to 3.7 as a starting point to draw up a set of task-based criteria relevant to the context in question.

GENRE
● Does the pupil have control of a wide range of oral genres? e.g.?
● In this assessment task, for what social purpose is language being used? e.g. recount, debate, procedure, interview, problem-solving, explanation
● Is this a genre with which the pupils are already familiar?
● How predictable is the schematic structure of this genre?
● What stages might you expect it to move through?
● Was the purpose achieved?
● Was the text structured appropriately to achieve its purpose?
● Were any essential stages omitted?
● Could any of the stages have been developed more effectively?

Figure 3.4 Framework for establishing task-based criteria for assessing genre (continued on p. 86)

- Did the text display language features typical of the genre? (e.g. past tense in a recount; generalised participants in an explanation; imperatives in a procedure)
- Does the pupil demonstrate difficulty in comprehending the genre? (e.g. following directions/instructions; understanding the issues and arguments in a debate; following the storyline of a narrative; getting the gist of an explanation?)
- Suggestions for follow-up

Figure 3.4 (continued)

MODE

- Where would this text fall on the mode continuum?

ACTION

*Face-to-face interaction/
dependent on physical
context*

Unplanned

>>>>>> extended turns

REFLECTION

*Planned extended
turns/independent
of physical context*

- Is the language used appropriately according to its place in the continuum?
 - relatively unpredictable with little editing of ideas
 - ‘first draft’ language
 - participants can request clarification if necessary
 - lexically sparse
 - reference to physical context (‘this’, ‘here’, ‘it’, ‘up there’)
 - language reflecting the ‘here-and-now’
 - more control of direction
 - more sifting of the relevant from the irrelevant
 - loose structuring of idea
 - some monitoring of need of audience
 - lexically more dense
 - high control of text
 - text tightly organised
 - anticipates and is attentive to needs of audience
 - lexically dense
 - text is cohesive within itself and self-sufficient
 - possibly more abstract language
- Is the pupil able to exploit the learning potential offered by different points on the mode continuum? (i.e. exploratory learning through to reflective thinking)
- Is there any evidence that the pupil is having difficulty comprehending oral language?

Might this be due to the density and abstractness of texts at the reflective end of the continuum (e.g. some teacher monologues)
- Suggestions for follow-up

Figure 3.5 Framework for establishing task-based criteria for assessing mode

TENOR

Orientation towards others (roles and relationships)

- Is the pupil able to participate effectively in an increasing range of contexts (e.g. with interactants of different background, gender, age, status, and with audiences of different sizes – whole class, small group, one-to-one)?
- In interactive contexts, is the pupil willing
 - to participate readily and constructively in the joint negotiation of meaning?
 - to productively assist in the development of understandings?
 - to share information and offer opinions?
 - to suggest a course of action or a line of enquiry?
 - to take risks? to approximate? to reveal misconceptions, doubts, uncertainties, problems?
 - to modify point of view or concede a case when necessary?
 - to initiate topics? to change topics?
 - to ask questions? Of whom? What sort of questions? With what outcome?
 - to encourage the participation of others?
 - to value and respond in a constructive way to the contributions of others?
 - to challenge the contributions of others in a helpful way?
 - to facilitate the group interaction and help repair breakdowns?
- In extended turns
 - does the pupil know how to maintain a neutral tenor when appropriate?
 - does the pupil know how to use language to engage the audience when appropriate?

e.g. use of personal pronouns (‘we’, ‘you’); use of tag-questions (‘... , don’t we?’); use of persuasive language? use of rhetorical questions; use of imperative (‘Think about it!’)

 - does the pupil effectively employ communication strategies appropriate to the audience? (e.g. intonation, enunciation, speed of delivery, body language, facial expression)
 - does the pupil maintain an appropriate degree of formality depending on the audience?
- Orientation towards the subject-matter (opinions, feelings, tentativity)
 - In expressing opinions, does the pupil employ language which is able to convey fine distinctions, rather than clichés and generalisations? Are opinions justified?
 - Does the pupil use modality to indicate tentative understandings? (e.g. perhaps, might, should, could, rather, some . . .)

Figure 3.6 Framework for establishing task-based criteria for assessing tenor (continued on p. 88)

- Is the pupil able to listen critically in order to identify emotive language, unsubstantiated assertions, selective quotations, and so on?

Evidence?

- Suggestions for follow-up?

Figure 3.6 (continued)

FIELD

- How does the pupil's grasp of the understandings/ concepts/ principles being developed in this task increase as he/she moves from exploratory language to more reflective language?

- What evidence is there that the pupil's range of vocabulary is increasing sufficiently to cope with the demands of this field?

- Is the pupil demonstrating understanding and appropriate use of any technical terminology associated with this field?

- Is the pupil able to use language appropriately to indicate the logical relationships between ideas e.g. language for:

showing causality, justifying (e.g. so, therefore, because)
 reasoning, hypothesising, speculating (e.g. if . . . then; what if . . . ?)
 predicting (it's going to . . .)
 inferring (e.g. on the basis of this evidence . . .)
 analysing (e.g. what are the main issues here?)
 comparing/contrasting (e.g. this also has . . ./this is different)
 classifying (e.g. this belongs to . . .)

- Is the pupil having difficulty comprehending extended turns? Might this be due to an underdeveloped knowledge of the field?

- Suggestions for follow-up?

Figure 3.7 Framework for establishing task-based criteria for assessing field

These questions set out in Figures 3.4 to 3.7 are by no means exhaustive and you might want to add to them as you become more experienced in analysing oral texts.

PUPIL SELF-ASSESSMENT

When we engage in assessment it is more than a simple matter of the teacher making a judgement and recording it. Rather, the primary purpose of assessment should always be to inform and enhance the teaching and learning that takes place in the classroom. In order to do this, we need to be explicit about what we value. We need to spell out the criteria used for making our assessments. Most importantly however, the pupils themselves should be aware of the criteria for evaluation of their use of language. If these criteria are not revealed, then not only is it inequitable, but it is unlikely that the pupils can become independent learners, capable of assessing their own progress.

It is difficult enough for teachers to articulate what they regard as 'good oral language', let alone expecting pupils to develop such criteria. The following case study illustrates how one teacher, Mrs D., embarked on such a project.

Mrs D. was keen for her class to understand how we learn through oral language so that the pupils could readily exploit this resource in their group work. Or as Howe puts it:

Helping pupils to become more aware of how they and others have been using language and how they've been interacting together can be a powerful ingredient, I'd argue, in helping pupils become more proficient, confident and flexible language users and participants in discussion. If pupils can be brought, through reflection to appreciate the way that the talk has helped to move their thinking on, then they will be more likely to enter into future discussion with a positive sense of the worth of the activity . . . It can be useful to help pupils to see the sorts of 'ground rules' operating in discussion by encouraging them to look back on a discussion of their own and consider the dynamics that were at play — those that were working in favour of the discussion, and those that were working against it.

(Howe 1988, p. 102)

She planned that together they would identify the characteristics of successful small group interaction and from there develop criteria for evaluating their own use of oral language for learning.

While they were engaged in carrying out an experiment into the effect of electric current on a magnet, Mrs D. videotaped one of the groups. The following is a transcript of part of their interaction:

- | | |
|---------|--|
| James | Why does the needle move? |
| Belinda | Because instead of attracting it detracts and moves away from it. |
| Josh | It's moving . . . it's moving towards the electric current because electric- |

- ity can influence the poles because . . . because magnetic poles is like electricity.
- Belinda But it went away from the electricity . . . electrical current.
- Tina Yeah it did. It went away.
- Josh No, but the electrical current sent it bonkers making it spin faster and faster. There's . . . It's influencing . . . you see . . . there's . . . there's a magnetic pull between north and where the electrical wire is . . . If you put it on the north side it might not make much movement . . . I dunno . . . But . . . Now try this . . . See — it doesn't make much movement. Put it on the south.
- Martin It doesn't make much movement either. Hang on — maybe you're not meant to put your fingers actually on the . . . um . . .
- Tina Metal.
- Martin . . . metal.
- Josh Oh, that wouldn't make much difference.
- Belinda . . . because all the electricity is going to you.
- Martin Yeah — it's just starting to move if you take your hand off the metal.
- Tina Yeah, take your hand off the metal.
- Josh It's going away. Now it's coming again.
- Tina It's spinning.
- Josh Now the reason why it spins . . .
- Tina You write it.
- Josh [as he writes] The reason why it spins or stays still is because there's an even force between the electrical current and the north pole . . .
- Tina Can you understand him because I can't!
- Josh It can't decide which way to go, in other words.

That afternoon, Mrs D. showed the class excerpts from the video. They discussed whether the group were in fact using oral language profitably to learn. The class felt that overall the interaction had been successful, but couldn't state why. Mrs. D. then stopped the video at certain points and asked for their reactions to specific incidents:

- Teacher Tell me how you think you are using language for learning here?
- James We were using it to investigate.
- Tina We can use it for making suggestions to people.
- Belinda And for giving instructions — like Tina said, 'Take your hand off the metal.'

[They watch more of the video]

- Teacher What were you doing there, Josh?
- Josh I was trying to build on Belinda's suggestion.
- Teacher That's right. That's one way we learn in spoken language — we can help each other by adding to what they're saying.
- Josh Yeah, like extending your idea.
- Belinda And he was also explaining.
- Josh But you didn't understand my explanation!

- Teacher But you were trying to give reasons — you kept saying 'because'.

[They watch more of the video]

- Teacher What were Josh and Belinda doing there?
- Belinda Arguing!
- Teacher Do you think that's a good way of learning?
- Belinda Sometimes.
- Josh . . . swapping ideas.
- Teacher . . . and challenging each other to think again. A good argument forces people to say what they mean and get it clear in their own heads.

[. . . more video]

- Teacher What were you doing there? — 'If you put it on the north side it might not make much movement . . . I dunno'.
- Josh Predicting. Asking a question to see what would happen.
- Martin Predicting and then finding out.
- Tina Having a go.
- Teacher And another word that's like predicting is 'hypothesising' — 'what might happen if . . . ?'.

[Video again.]

- Teacher What was he doing then — 'Now try this.'
- Tina Giving instructions.
- Teacher What was Martin doing? — 'Maybe you're not meant to put your fingers on . . .'
- Martin I'm suggesting. And before that we were comparing what would happen between north and south.

[Video]

- Teacher What were you doing there?
- Tina Telling him to try something else.
- Belinda And we were saying what we saw happen.
- Tina Yeah, making observations.

[Video]

- Teacher What did you mean when you said 'Can you understand him cause we can't!'
- Tina Asking him what he meant.
- Teacher We could say you were wanting clarification — so if you don't understand something, you can use language to ask. And that way, Josh had to say it in a clearer way — and maybe that helped him to work out his own ideas a bit better.

As they identified the ways in which they were using oral language in the learning process, the pupils wrote them down on a piece of butcher's paper. From here they developed a list of criteria for effective group interaction and exploration:

- asking questions;
- making suggestions;
- giving helpful instructions;
- sharing ideas and information;
- making observations;
- asking what someone means;
- explaining;
- giving reasons;
- comparing;
- building on each others' ideas;
- swapping ideas;
- predicting and hypothesising;
- having a go.

This list remained on the wall and other criteria were added to it as they explored further their learning in the oral mode. As they watched other groups on videotape, they began another list of instances which detracted from learning:

- not letting others have a turn;
- asking silly questions;
- being bossy;
- getting too far off the track;

and so on.

The pupils were now in a position to recognise the characteristics of effective and ineffective group interaction and could apply these criteria to their own use of language.

Mrs D. had been surprised at the children's ability to reflect on their language use. Following this experiment, they negotiated criteria for other uses of oral language — debates, morning news, delivering a message to another teacher, conducting school assembly, holding interviews, and so on. Each time they discussed what constituted a positive outcome and set about identifying those aspects which contributed to this outcome. In this way, both teacher and pupils were learning about language and how it works and at the same time developing a shared understanding of how to assess their own language in order to constantly improve.

TEACHER SELF-ASSESSMENT

It is not only pupils who should be encouraged to engage in self-assessment. The teacher is also a major participant in the discourse of the classroom and controls the context of that discourse. It is generally very

revealing for a teacher to videotape the class in action and to analyse his/her own participation. The following questions, adapted from Dwyer (1989), might serve as an initial guide as to what to look for:

- Who controlled (and how) the classroom discourse? The amount of talk? The content of the talk? Who was to speak? And when?
- Who did most of the talking? Why?
- During class discussions, did I give the children sufficient time to formulate their thoughts or did I cut them off?
- Did I perceive emerging opportunities or did I miss them because I was relentlessly pursuing 'my' objectives?
- Did the children understand my terms/language? Did I attempt to meet their needs?
- Particularly in the case of children of non-English speaking background, did I repeat when necessary, paraphrase, summarise, check whether they comprehended?
- Did I value children's contributions? Did I display a genuine interest in the content of children's talk?
- Who initiated questions? Were they open or closed (yes/no)? Were they genuine questions or just for display?
- Would any child have felt very pleased/uncomfortable/unfairly singled out/embarrassed/hurt?
- Did I use sarcasm or disparaging remarks? With what effect?
- To whom did I distribute approval/disapproval? What did I approve/disapprove?
- How often did I comment on aspects of children's language? What aspects? With what effect?

CONCLUSION

Program Evaluation

Finally we need to make sure that the insights gained from our assessment feed back into the curriculum and that we are constantly evaluating the effectiveness of the learning program.

The following are simply a few suggestions as to the sorts of things you could look for:

- Do you explicitly encourage pupils to value talk? to recognise its role in learning?
- Has the class discussed the importance for learning and personal development of a supportive environment and how they might contribute to this?

- Are opportunities to experience success built in to the learning program?
- Does the program provide opportunities for the development of oral language across the mode continuum, across the curriculum, with a variety of interactants and in a range of genres?
- Does the program include real purposes for talking and for listening which can serve as assessment points?
- At what points in the program can I hand over to the pupils responsibility for their own learning and for running their own classroom? (e.g. drawing up their own 'rules' for group interaction; conducting morning news sessions; chairing discussions; making announcements; conducting games; developing drama presentations; organising interviews; acting as peer tutors; being the computer expert; encouraging them to make decisions about who they need to consult with and when; and so on.)
- Does the physical layout of the room facilitate productive oral interaction?
- How does the size and composition of groups affect the interaction?
- What provision is there for children with special needs (e.g. pupils of non-English speaking background, hearing impaired pupils) to develop their interaction skills?
- What opportunities do NESB pupils have to converse and learn in their mothertongue?

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CASE STUDIES

Eric (Age 6)

In the context of the home, Eric has developed familiar patterns of interaction with his family and a close circle of friends. With the transition to school, however, it is taking him a while to adjust to a different set of relationships. He is no longer the sole focus of attention. His needs aren't immediately obvious and catered for. He has to negotiate new friendships in the playground. He has to develop new ways of interacting in a large class group. He has to learn how to adopt a variety of roles in small groupwork. The following excerpt is typical of Eric's interaction strategies:

Eric is participating in a discussion with three of his classmates. The group is brainstorming possible research questions in order to write a report on funnelweb spiders: [Eric looks unsure about the task and sits back while the others start negotiating how to approach it.]

Kristy:

I know a question. What colour are they?

Eric:

That's what I was going to say.

Tim:

Do they have ears?

Kristy:

You can't really tell. You can't really see the ears.

Belinda:

Where . . . where do they live?

Tim:

Yeah, their habitat.

Eric:

What they do at Christmas!

Tim:

Um . . . How they have babies.

Eric:

Do they get divorced?

[At this point the others start ignoring Eric so he tries to gain their attention by drumming on the table with his ruler.]

Belinda:

Cut it out Eric!

Eric:

Make me! I can if I want. You're not the teacher.

The following is an extract from some fieldnotes made by Eric's teacher regarding his oral interaction:

As a classroom participant in small group contexts, Eric does not really seem to 'come into his own'. He does not engage productively in negotiations and discussion (this seems to be consistent with his participation in whole group lessons on the mat, where, too, he does not seem to be engaged). Eric needs to develop both the strategies for and the willingness to participate in and contribute to group interactions, as his participation and learning may then be enhanced. When he requires assistance, he seems unable to do so clearly; on a different occasion, I observed Eric build trains by placing assigned books end to end and making 'choo-choo' noises instead of completing the set task, as he did not know what to do, and he did not know how to request assistance in a specific way.

Steven (Age 9)

Steven's teacher was keen that the children in her class should be able to operate effectively in a range of situations. Many children at this age have not had much practice in making a phonecall. So when the children were organising an open day for the parents, she arranged (having first advised the parents!) for the children to invite the parents personally using the phone. Each class member rang the parents of one of the other children.

When making a phonecall, the caller needs to be familiar with 'the genre of the phonecall', i.e. the stages a typical call would go through, in this case something like:

- greeting
- identification of caller
- purpose for the call
- details of arrangements
- farewell

The caller also needs to be confident of what they are going to say (the field), of how to interact with the receiver of the phonecall, depending on their relationship (the tenor), and of the special constraints which talking on the phone presents (the mode). The mode (or medium) often causes difficulty for young children who find it hard to adjust to the fact that even though oral language is being used, the speaker and listener do not share the same physical setting, so the speaker needs to fill in a lot of information for the listener.

The following are transcripts of two of those phone conversations.

(i) Steven

- Steven: Hello, Mrs C. I'm Steven, from Jodie's class.
 Mrs C: Hi, how are you.
 Steven: Um ... I'm okay. I'm ringing to invite you to our class open day and I'm wondering if you can make it?
 Mrs C: That sounds nice, Steven. When is it?
 Steven: It's on Wednesday at 10 a.m.
 Mrs C: Good, but what about the baby? Is it okay to bring her?
 Steven: Yes, that would be fine. Mrs R. is also bringing her baby. Some of us are going to look after the young ones.
 Mrs C: What sort of things will be happening, Steven?
 Steven: Well ... we ... we are going to have a display of all of our work through the year and ... um ... show you around the school. We've also made some cupcakes for morning tea ... and coffee.
 Mrs C: That sounds interesting. I'll see you there.
 Steven: Good. See you.
 Mrs C: Thankyou for ringing. Bye.
 Steven: Bye.

(ii) Peter, one of Steven's classmates, made a similar phonecall:

- Peter: Hello.
 Mrs G: Hello. Who is it?
 Peter: Peter.
 Mrs G: Hello Peter. What can I do for you?
 Peter: ... There's an open day.
 Mrs G: Yes?
 Peter: ... um ... Do you want to go?
 Mrs G: When is it, Peter?
 Peter: ... um ... Wednesday.
 Mrs G: What time?
 Peter: ... I dunno.
 Mrs G: That's okay. I can find out. Yes thanks, Peter. I'd love to come.
 Peter: Okay.

Slavica (Age 11)

In the playground with friends Slavica is outgoing and talkative, joining in the conversations with great enthusiasm. With some friends she uses English and with others she will switch to Macedonian. In the classroom however her confidence starts to fade. In small group work she will listen intently and occasionally contribute but is reticent to initiate topics or sustain an exchange. In class discussion she rarely volunteers and if called upon will give a minimal response in a soft voice. Presenting in front of the class is an ordeal and whenever possible, she will read directly from prepared notes.

The following animated recount was recorded as she told a small group of friends about her recent trip to Macedonia:

'When I went back to Yugoslavia it was all strange because the streets . . . the streets like . . . they weren't like ours . . . and um . . . they . . . they didn't have drinks like us and I wasn't used to the food at first and I didn't eat but like later I liked the food. No robberies can happen or nothing like that. It's not like here like bad. They say like that this is a bad place and things like that. Over there everyone was going out late at night like for walks in the . . . um . . . mall. It's not like here where like everyone's afraid to go out. And they've got like . . . And they make their own bread . . . yeah, there's this big oven thing in the village and . . . um . . . you put your dough stuff on this wood thing and push it into the . . . ah . . . oven but if they're like rich enough they might buy their own bread. And the school is different like they do speak Australian . . . some people can . . . but we spoke Macedonian all the time . . . and they just had like . . . in kindergarten they learn you how to do maths starting in kindergarten and plus and division . . . and like they have fun and they sing songs and they . . . um . . . they asked me to describe Australia and they go 'we wish we could come there' . . . cause it's real expensive there . . . like it's lots of money like you go . . . not like here you go and buy bread for . . . maybe about a dollar like that but over there it's about two dollars just for bread'

Unlike the spontaneous talk above, the following prepared presentation was recorded when Slavica's class gave speeches to the school on 'why I should be elected school captain':

'1 . . . I think I would be a good school captain because . . . ah . . . firstly I am good with the kinders and like they always come to me for help and . . . ah . . . secondly I get on good with everyone and I'm not bossy and thirdly . . . I've forgot . . . oh yeah . . . I know all the rules so I can help the little kids. I hope youse will all vote for me.'

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

Activity 1

Look back at the transcripts provided of Eric, Steven and his classmate, and Slavica (pp. 95, 97, 98) Remember that they are spoken language written down so it would be a good idea to read them out loud in order to get a sense of how they sound.

a) Draw a line representing the mode continuum and place each of these texts at a point on the continuum. Justify your decisions with reference to particular features of the texts.

b) In about a paragraph each, write your impression of the children's use of oral language in these contexts, backing up your opinion with examples from the texts. (Of course, it is difficult to say much on the basis of a transcript — you really need to know much more about the context and aspects such as facial expression, intonation, clarity, hand gestures, and so on.)

c) How might the insights gained from these transcripts feed back into the curriculum? That is, if you were the teacher of Eric, or Steven and his classmate, or Slavica, how might you modify the classroom context and the teaching/learning program in order to assist these learners to become more proficient in their use of oral registers?

Activity 2

As a group, identify a context within which you would be using oral language to achieve a particular purpose (e.g. a group activity; a seminar presentation; a tutorial session).

Referring to the framework for assessing oral language suggested in this chapter, draw up a list of possible criteria for effective oral language use within the context identified.

While your peers are engaged in the selected oral activity, use the criteria you have outlined (and others which might occur to you) to evaluate their use of oral language.

Share your evaluations and discuss the usefulness of the criteria.

PORTFOLIO TASKS

Portfolio Task 1: Observing Oral Language Use

Find an opportunity to closely observe your case study subject (or indeed any primary pupil) for an extended period of time. Take field-notes on the pupil's use of oral language in a variety of contexts, e.g.:

- listening to the teacher;
- interacting with adults;
- participating in group activities;
- in the playground;
- at the canteen;
- in the home if feasible.

Write down whatever you observe about the child's use of oral language, e.g.:

- Can he/she use oral language for various purposes?
 - getting needs met?
 - expressing a point of view?
 - asking questions?
 - sharing information?
 - recounting events?
 - negotiating relationships?
- Is he/she confident in interacting with others?
- Does he/she listen attentively?
- Is there evidence that he/she doesn't always understand when spoken to?
- Does he/she adjust his/her language to suit different contexts?
- Does he/she speak a language other than English? When? To whom?

Portfolio Task 3: Guided Observation

Arrange for your case study subject to re-tell a story. (See 'Re-telling', pp. 43, 172, 292)

Tape the re-telling and then analyse it using the framework on p. 101. On the basis of your notes, write a description of the pupil's oral language proficiency in this context.

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4

ASSESSING EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Joan MASON

Monitoring children's literacy development in the early years is one of the major responsibilities of infant teachers. Knowing what to look for as indicators of successful development or as warning signals for 'at risk' learners requires a great deal of experience, skill and knowledge. Joan Mason in this chapter introduces you to some of the understandings about early literacy development which will help you focus your observations more closely.

INTRODUCTION

Many people believe that children begin to learn to read and write only when they start school. Most children certainly do begin to read and write conventionally during the first year or two at school, but this accomplishment cannot be considered separately from earlier experiences that play a key role in their literacy learning and development. Reading and writing, like other aspects of children's language and cognitive development, have long histories that reach back well before they begin to produce adult-like behaviours.

There is a considerable amount of evidence to support the view that children learn written language through social mediation in much the same way as they learn spoken language. Children learn spoken language through listening to and observing others and through interaction with the people around them. During interaction, they test, refine, and practice their language in the context of trying to make their meanings clear. They receive feedback and reinforcement from those with whom they are communicating. They learn to use language in different ways, depending upon the situation, the content, and the person to whom they are speaking.

In a similar way, they learn about written language through operating on the understandings they have gleaned from their observations. However, there is a big difference in the amount of conscious help children need from adults in learning to read and write when compared with learning to talk. When children are learning to talk, the people around