Session 1: A framework for describing language

John Munro

Aim of this section:

- to equip teachers with a framework for understanding the language use of young children.

- to identify the major aspects of language.
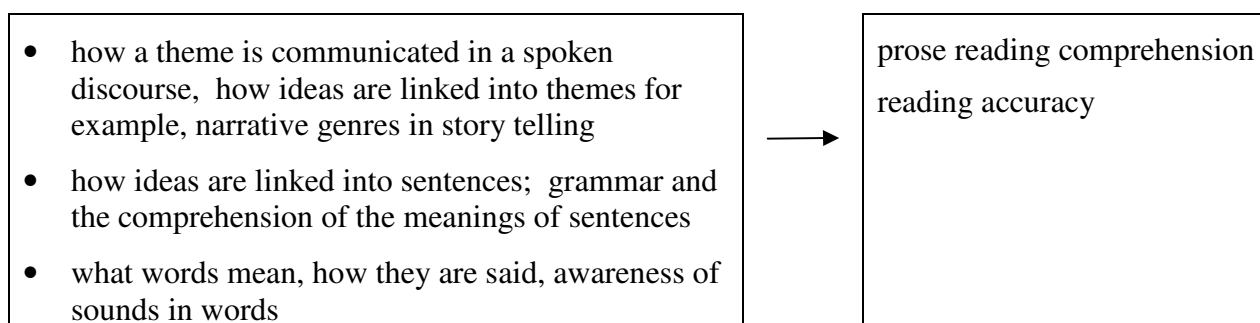
1. A framework for analysing language use

1.1 Language as a key foundation to students' ability to learn

Why this focus on children's oral language? It is because language and the ability to communicate effectively is a key foundation to students' capacity to learn in most general ways. A better developed knowledge of language and how it is used means a greater capacity to learn and to manage and direct one's activity as a learner.

This is shown clearly in the link between specific aspects of language knowledge and literacy learning.   Research has shown that children's literacy ability is linked with their knowledge of

- how ideas are linked into discourse and organised in terms of themes or topics,

- how ideas are linked into spoken sentences,   their comprehension of sentence propositions and grammatical knowledge,

- word meanings and how these are linked in networks, and

- phonological and phonemic patterns.

These links are shown in the following diagram:

- how a theme is communicated in a spoken discourse, how ideas are linked into themes for example, narrative genres in story telling - how ideas are linked into sentences; grammar and the comprehension of the meanings of sentences - what words mean, how they are said, awareness of sounds in words	prose reading comprehension reading accuracy

In addition, readers use a range of strategies to comprehend the text they read. These strategies are used with sentences, paragraphs and whole texts to achieve the outcomes.   They are language-based and used initially in the context of listening comprehension. They include:

- paraphrasing and contextualising sentences and questioning them,
- consolidating and summarizing what has been read, backtracking / reading ahead /within and across sentences to link concepts,
- predicting, anticipating, inferring various types of ideas and feelings,
- detecting the general theme of the message by scanning or skimming text, selecting key words, and
- detecting the attitudes and the disposition of the writer in a text.

• telling one's self what was said, asking and answering questions in oral language contexts • consolidating and reviewing what has been said, • predicting, anticipating, inferring in spoken language contexts • detecting the general theme of a spoken message • detecting attitudes and the disposition of speakers	• paraphrasing and questioning sentences • consolidating and summarizing what has been read, backtracking / reading ahead /within and across sentences to link concepts • predicting, anticipating, inferring various types of ideas and feelings • detecting the general theme of message by scanning or skimming text, selecting key words • detecting attitudes and the disposition of the writer in a text.

Further, many of the metacognitive and self-management strategies used by readers have their origin in reading and listening contexts. Again these strategies are language-based, in that they are used as 'self talk' or 'inner language'. Readers use them to:

• frame up reasons or purposes for reading a text, plan how they will read,
• monitor how their reading is progressing, take corrective action if necessary, decide when to re-read, self-correct, how they use what they know at each level,
• review, consolidate and self-question what they read, and
• organize the information gained from reading to fit their purposes for reading.

• frame up a purpose for speaking and or listening • monitor a spoken dialogue such as a conversation, • review and consolidate what has been said • use what was said to inform one's subsequent activity, for example, carry out spoken instructions.	• frame up reasons for reading a text, plan how one will read, • monitor how their reading is progressing, take corrective action if necessary, • review, consolidate and question what they read, • organize the information gained from reading to fit one's purposes for reading.

More generally, oral language is used to manage and direct all aspects of classroom life. The management and direction of classroom activities is via language means. Children communicate with each other orally. Their capacity to do this influences their social interaction skills, their self confidence and self image. They use their language capacity to assemble a dynamic and changing world view and their place in it.

1.2   A conversation between some five year olds and their teacher

Participants in the group listen to some scenarios of groups of 4-5 year olds talking, for example

1   about their pets
2   about a set of pictures
3   about their favourite toy or food.

Following each scenario the participants unpack different aspects of communication by analysing aspects of the language used as follows: they

• pretend they are peer-aged old friends in this class and continue the conversation. *Your goal is to contribute to the conversation using language similar to that used by the students. Work out what you would say.* Record the responses.

• reflect on what they needed to do to continue the conversation. *What do you need to do to work out what you would say?   What did you need to know and do*? Collate and list the responses.

Scenario 1: In the first scenario the participants identify what each communicator needed to do and to know in order to participate in the discussion.   Each participant can focus on one of the students.

Tom:	*We finded a new doggie.*
Miss Brown:	*What's he called, Tom*?
Tom:	*Woofa*
Kath:	*Our dog was ran quick. It falled over our pool. Daddie gotted him out.*
Will:	*Gee, did it get drownded?*
Kath:	*No, it didn't die. It just shaked and Mum towelled it.*
Will:	*Our dog got three puppies. We call her Tess.*
Miss Brown:	*Tom, tell us more about your dog.*
Tom:	*It is red and brown.*
Miss Brown:	*Does Woofa have any toys?*
Tom:	*We gave him a ball and he bited it and made it a hole. Daddie put the inside ball.*
Kath:	*Our dog barks all the time. He wakes me in the morgins.*

Scenario 2: In the second scenario the participants identify how each communicator linked what she/he says with what other speakers say and do.   Again each participant can focus on how one of the students adjusts her / his communication to that of others.   The focus here is on how people adjust what they say and how they say it, to achieve their purpose for communicating.

We are sometimes less 'tuned in' to explicitly noticing this aspect of language use.   An example of this is a child who repeats and rephrases what she /he says or what they said to indicate a sense or urgency.   The child may say, with rising volume and intensity,   "I want it.   Mummy, can I have it, please, please".   The child's mother, also communicating for a purpose, may say "Not now, dear" and then, with a firmer tone, "I told you no".

Scenario 3: In the third scenario, the participants infer what the interaction between a particular speaker and others suggests about how the speaker wants to be seen. Continue to focus on one of the speakers and ask the question "What is the child really wanting to say by how she /he speaks and listens.

In the mother-child exchange above, you could infer that the child was wanting to persuade her or his mother to provide something and adopts a 'polite begging' role. The child may be wanting to convey "Look, I'm worthy of it because I am a polite child and I know you are in control". The mother adopts an increasingly controlling, managing role and may want to convey to her child "I am in charge at this time".

Communicators also show this is how they listen to others. Listening attentively to what is being said is sending a different message from interrupting a speaker, or doing things that suggest that the listener doesn't value what is being said. Again, the alternative listening behaviours may suggest differences in how the listener values the speaker or what is being said. Participants can infer what a listener's verbal and nonverbal behaviours during a communication indicate about the message the listener intends to convey. They can note how, in a small group situation, a communicator may listen in different ways to different people in the group.

1.3   What each communicator needed to do and to know in order to take part in the communication.

Lead the discussion towards identifying the following two key ideas:

1.   Each communicator needs to comprehend what was said, at least in part, by others and to express a message, for example, to speak and /or nod.

| speaker B | | speaker A | | speaker C |
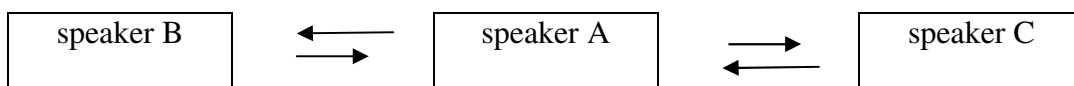
Introduce the terms 'receptive' and 'expressive' language. Collect and list other synonyms and phrases for these terms.

receptive' language capacity	'expressive' language capacity
comprehend	produce
listen	say

2.   Each communicator needs to think about

- what was being said; the ideas being communicated.
- how it was being said, how five year old friends would say it.
- why you wanted to say it; your purpose for communicating.
- how they learn to do these things and believe they could use them successfully.

Lead the group to integrate the two aspects into a chart and use it to describe the conversation as a whole.

	expressive	receptive
the ideas being communicated		
the conventions, rules they are using. How do they use these?		
the purpose for communicating (their's and others').		
how you learnt how to use language and how confident you feel about doing them		

Lead participants to infer what the conversers knew about the various aspects of communication. To guide this you could asking the following questions:

- what ideas are being communicated?
- how is this done? (what conventions or rules)
- why are particular ideas being communicated?
- what do those involved know about communicating? How willing are they to do this?
- how well is communication produced or expressed?
- how well is communication received?

You can look for these aspects of language in the conversation.

1.4   Develop this framework to analyse any instance of language use

Lead participants to examine how they can apply this framework to analyse any instance of language use. Have two pairs of participants act out coherent conversations. Apply the framework to describe each.

Review the six types of questions we can ask of any instance of language communication. Introduce the **ICPALER** mnemonic to describe the framework and to assist participants to remember each aspect of language use:

- **the ideas** communicated; **I**
- **the conventions** used to do this: **C**
- **the purpose** for which we communicate; **P**
- **the ability to learn** how to use language: **AL**
- **the expressive aspect** of the communication; **E**
- **the receptive asp**ect of the communication; **R**

The ICPALER mnemonic can also be used to assist teachers to remember each aspect of language use.

Revisit the chart used earlier to describe the conversation. How could the group use it in their classrooms to:
- understand and monitor language use and the language needs of students and groups?
- identify the language demands of the teaching used?
- identify areas that need to be targeted in teaching?

	expressive	receptive
the ideas being communicated		
the conventions, rules they are using		
the purpose for communicating		
how you learnt to do these things and how confident you feel about doing them		

1.5   *Link the ICPALER framework with other frameworks for describing how individuals communicate*

Guide participants to see how the ICPALER framework is similar to other frameworks for describing how individuals communicate.   Encourage them to describe and pool what they know about how various professional groups, such as speech pathologists and developmental psychologists, describe language.

Lead participants to see how the frameworks differ in

*   where they recognise categories or identify different aspects of speech and language.
*   in the extent to which they discriminate between various aspects of language.
*   the terms they use for particular aspects; different professionals may use different terms for the same aspect
*   how they define a particular aspect, for example, terms such as 'syntax', 'syllable' or 'semantics' are given different meanings by different professionals.
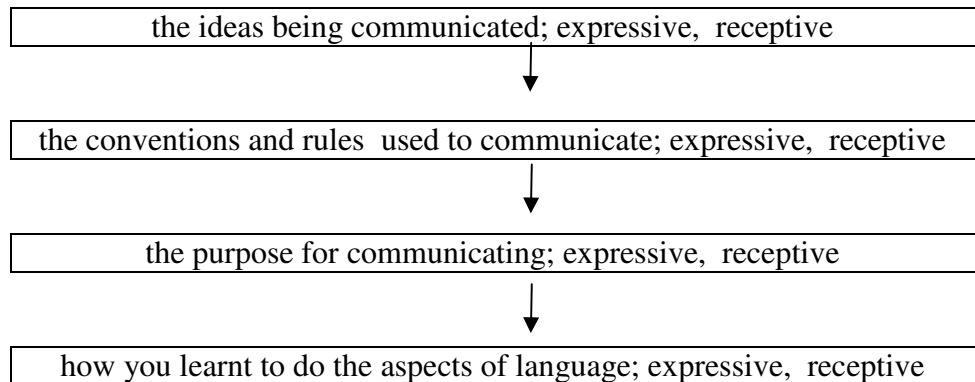
 One framework used widely identifies three dimensions of language:

(1)   the content of the language; this refers to the meanings or the semantics of language. Two main aspects are one's knowledge about individual words (conceptual knowledge) and the relationships between them.

(2)   the form or 'shape' of the language.   This refers to the system of conventions speakers use to communicate and includes the set of sounds and words and the rules for combining them to form phrases and sentences, that is, its syntax

(3)   its use, that is the functions of language, the ways in which it is used, that is, the pragmatics, its relation to everyday contexts.   This includes how we use language in both social interpersonal contexts (for example, to attract attention or to obtain information) and for personal functions (for example, to problem solve and think aloud). It also includes how we use language in various contexts, for example, how a person's communication is related to what has been communicated earlier, the audience and social context, both linguistically and nonlinguistically.

The ICPALER framework is used here because of the ease of its applicability and use in the work of educators and schools. It is useful for participants to discuss and evaluate this position and to reflect on how different professions 'draw the boundaries' between aspects of language.

1.6   A pathway for studying oral language use

We can use the ICPALER framework to plan a pathway to further examine oral language use. The pathway will help to un-pack each aspect in turn. As each aspect is analysed, the framework will be differentiated.   The pathway is as follows:

the ideas being communicated; expressive, receptive

↓

the conventions and rules used to communicate; expressive, receptive

↓

the purpose for communicating; expressive, receptive

↓

how you learnt to do the aspects of language; expressive, receptive

At each step in the pathway we will examine various components of each aspect. This will lead to the aspect being differentiated. Participants will be encouraged to

- reflect on how the aspect will be displayed by young children,
- the implications for monitoring language use and how the aspect can be used to decide the language needs of students and groups,
- identify the aspect of language in the teaching used, and
- identify how the aspect can be targeted in teaching.

In section 2 we will initially examine the types of ideas or meanings communicated.