

Session 1: A framework for describing language

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Section 3 The conventions of language

Aim of this section is to examine the rules or conventions users used to communicate. Successful language users know and apply a range of conventions both to frame up how they will speak and to understand what other language users mean. These conventions allow us to understand each other and to make ourselves understood.

3.1 *The types of conventions we use to communicate*

Have participants discuss situations in which they had difficulty comprehending what others said. Ask them to identify the aspects of the communication situation that contributed to the difficulty. Collate and list their responses. These may include a difficulty:

- deciding the words that were being said, perhaps because they were being said without clarity or because they were unfamiliar,
- comprehending the sentences because of the way they were formed, or the order of the words, or
- combining the sentences to ‘get the drift’ of the message.

A cause of language difficulty is an inadequate knowledge of the use of rules or conventions for forming or structuring language.

We said earlier that successful communicators use various rules or conventions for saying words, for linking words into sentences and linking sentences into stories, descriptions or conversations. The conventions of language are the rules that language users use to:

- combine sounds into words so that they can hear spoken words, comprehend words they hear and can say words that listeners will understand,
- combine words into sentences when speaking and to unpack sentences when listening,
- combine sentences into discourse when speaking and to unpack discourse when listening.

The commonly used terms for these three types of conventions are

- Phonological conventions for combining and analysing the sound patterns in spoken language.
- Grammatical or syntactic conventions for forming sentences by arranging or structuring words and parts of words and for analysing sentences spoken by others.
- Genre or discourse conventions for organising sentences into comprehensible discourses.

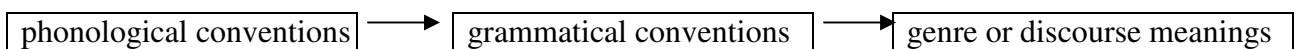
In this section we examine how communicators use conventions to produce and to understand each type of meaning. We will ‘unpack’ the C aspect in ICPALER using these three aspects. The differentiated components of the conventions are the unshaded parts in the following diagram:

		expressive	receptive
the ideas being communicated	single words		
	single sentences		
	discourse		
	its topic or theme		
the conventions, rules they are using	phonological conventions		
	grammatical conventions		
	genre conventions		
the purpose for communicating			
the ability to learnt to use language and confidence using it			

Ask participants to suggest two or more examples of each convention shown in the conversation. Examples are

Phonological conventions	Tom pronounced correctly several words. ‘We’, ‘new’, ‘doggie’ and he understood what Miss Brown intended when she said “called”
Grammatical conventions	Kath showed she knew how to form sentences by arranging words and word parts when she said “No, it didn’t die. It just shaked and Mum towelled it.” Will showed he knew how to analysing sentences spoken by others when he responded to what Kath said with “Gee, did it get drowned?”
Genre or discourse conventions	Tom showed that he understood discourse meanings when, towards the end of the conversation, he was still on track by saying “We gave him a ball and he bited it and made a hole.”

The pathway we will follow to examine the conventions are



3.2 Phonological conventions

All of the speakers in the conversation above said the same sound pattern to refer to a particular idea. They all understood what

- Tom meant when he said “doggie” or
- Kath meant when she said “falled in our pool”.

They all knew and could also say the sound pattern that referred to each idea.

The conventions we use to combine sounds to make spoken words is referred to as the phonology of the language. This is one of the conventions we use when we speak so that we can understand each other.

It is shown in the unshaded part of the model opposite.
In this section we ‘unpack’ the phonological conventions component of the C or conventions aspect.

This is the unshaded part of the model:

		E	R
the ideas	single words		
	single sentences		
	discourse		
	its topic or theme		
the conventions	phonological conventions		
	grammatical conventions		
	genre conventions		
the purpose			
ability to learnt			

We know that many young children have difficulty saying words accurately and comprehending the words said. What do communicators need to know about how words are said in order to communicate effectively? Have participants discuss the conditions necessary for this.

- 1 To say words accurately, speakers need
 - to know the sound patterns for the words and
 - to do the actions needed to produce the sound patterns (that is, to articulate them).
- 2 To comprehend accurately words heard, speakers need
 - to know the sound patterns for the words and
 - to receive the sound patterns (that is, to perceive them).

Learning and storing the sound patterns that make up words requires phonological knowledge. Phonology refers to the different categories of sounds in a language. This includes the separate sounds and how they are combined to form syllables and words.

Whatever the source of the problem, these speech inaccuracies may be due either to

- (1) articulatory causes; that is, disorders in doing the actions to produce speech. They may, for example, have particular speech disorders. Differences in how children move their buccal cavities, tongues, lips, for example, can influence how they speak.
- (2) phonological causes; what the child has learnt and now knows about sound patterns and how they are combined and used is inadequate. This refers to the knowledge about sound patterns children have stored in memory – their phonological knowledge. These can be due to
 - the slower development of particular speech patterns. Although most children learning English learn sounds in much the same order, some children learn particular sounds more slowly than peers.
 - the speech that they have heard earlier in their environments; the particular sound patterns may be learnt from others. The sound patterns the children are using may for example, be used in their home and family environments. Also, these patterns may restrict the extent to which accurate English sound patterns can be learnt.

- specific difficulties learning and storing knowledge about how words are said. The children may have auditory or hearing difficulties that affect how accurately they hear the sound patterns. They may also have difficulty storing the sound patterns in memory and thinking about them in the required ways,

Kath mispronounced *mornings* as *morgins* and Will pronounced *drowned* as *drownded*. Both mispronunciations could be due either to

- what the children had stored in their memories about the sound pattern that makes each word or
- their ability to do the actions necessary to say the word, that is, make their mouths, tongues, etc. move in the appropriate ways.

The sound patterns young children are first learning are new to them. To give participants an insight into how we store unfamiliar spoken information, have them listen to the following ‘pseudo sentences’. Have one participant read out one string of sound patterns at a time and ask the other participants to repeat it immediately and then after a minute. Have them record the number of sound patterns they recalled correctly in each string.

- (1) *He ftuued himself without even mpqying what he rwv on.*
- (2) *Vko was too zrttled about the ecmg to gplra his dcvji.*
- (3) *Just as he gjojtied quving on the hsffo jdjoh, the cfmm on the tupwf sboh to tbz the ujnfn was up.*
- (4) *Hesbo to the pwfo and qffsed through the xjoepx.*

Repeat this for the following strings.

- (1) *He futted himself without even ploxing what he riv on.*
- (2) *Kov was too zattled about the cemg to plarg his cib.*
- (3) *Just as he goijted quving on the shoff hojhd, the facmm on the tupf hosb to taz the junfn was up.*
- (4) *He osb to the powf and qeffsed through the jopxxe.*

Have them discuss

- 1 what they needed to do to store and recall each sound pattern, the comparative difficulty of storing and recalling each pseudo word. How did the two types of sound strings differ?

Set 1	Set 2
<i>Vko</i>	<i>Kov</i>
<i>zrttled</i>	<i>zattled</i>
<i>ecmg</i>	<i>cemg</i>
<i>gplra</i>	<i>plarg</i>
<i>dcvji</i>	<i>cib</i>
<i>ftuued</i>	<i>futued</i>

- 2 the difficulty of storing and recalling each pseudo sentence.
- 3 the difficulty in saying each pseudo word, even though they knew how to say each sound in the word.

Discuss what these tell us about how sound patterns are learnt and stored.

Languages differ

- in the sounds that make up the language (that is, how the speech production mechanism is used to make sounds)
- in how they ‘put sounds together’. In English, some sounds are more likely than others to follow a particular sound than in other languages.

Children’s capacity to learn sound patterns develops gradually. What they learn at any time builds on what they already know. Sometimes when learning to say some sound patterns, they simplify or reduce the complexity of the sound patterns by omitting or deleting some sounds. In fact adults do the same when learning unfamiliar sound patterns. Some of these ‘simplify by omitting’ patterns are shown in the following

- (1) children delete /l, r, w and j/ when they follow another consonant in words such as blue or bread. The children may say ‘bue’ or ‘bed’.
- (2) children delete /s/ when it precedes a second consonant in words such as “spoon” (“poon”), “step” (“dep”) and “swung” (“wung”). At this point in their development, the children could say ‘s’ but only in some phonological contexts.

Many children, as a part of regular language development, show speech behaviours consistent with the phonological cluster reduction rules.

Another aspect of sound development is how young children learn to use stress and intonation patterns in sentences. This is called the prosody of a sentence. The focus in this section is not so much on why to use stress patterns in sentences; this is discussed in a later section examining our purposes for using language. Our focus here is more on how children learn to use it.

Ask participants to reflect on how they use stress and intonation patterns in sentences they say. They can say sentences to describe one and two event situations with and without stress patterns. They can also experiment with saying the sentence as a question and as an imperative by changing the stress and intonation pattern.

Participants can identify the types of stress and intonation patterns they commonly use in their teaching. These can be collated and discussed. It should be noted that the focus here is not on the meaning associated with the use of stress pattern, that is, the message or intention the teacher is intending to convey. This will be covered in the pragmatic aspect of language. Instead the focus here is on how sentences are frequently intoned or stressed.

Ask participants to recall instances of how young children use stress and intonation. Many may recall children over-emphasising the stress they use. It is as if they are learning to ‘finetune’ their use of stress to the situation. Generally young children may misuse stress and intonation patterns in sentences they say.

Participants can also reflect on how well young children detect stress patterns in the speech of others. Again, the focus here is not on what young children understand about why speakers use stress and what it is intended to communicate, but rather, their ability to recognise differences in stress patterns. Changes in stress and intonation patterns are used consistently in classroom contexts by teachers and children to communicate. Children who have difficulty recognising these changes will be seriously disadvantaged in their learning.

3.3 Grammatical conventions

We noted earlier that speakers use rules to form sentences by arranging words and parts of words in particular ways.

The conventions we use to do this so that we can understand each other is referred to as the grammar of the language.

It is shown in the unshaded part of the model opposite.

In this section we ‘unpack’ the grammatical conventions component of the C or conventions aspect.

		E	R
the ideas	single words		
	single sentences		
	discourse		
	its topic or theme		
the conventions	phonological conventions		
	grammatical conventions		
	genre conventions		
the purpose			
ability to learnt			

3.3.1 Grammatical conventions in the conversation

In the conversation earlier, each of the speakers showed they were developing an awareness of word order as a convention we use to communicate. First, they formed sentences by arranging words in an order to communicate their intentions:

- Tom arranged some words to describe the ball his doggie had.
- Miss Brown arranged some words to ask the question *What’s its name?* and to give the instruction *Tom, tell us more about your new dog.*
- Kath said *“It just shaked and Mum towelled it.”* If she had said *Mum just shaked* or *it towelled Mum* she would have communicated a different idea.

Second, each of the listeners uses grammatical rules to unpack and interpret what they heard and what they hear others say. Tom showed in his responses that he understood both the question and the instruction. All of the children made responses that were consistent with using the order of words to understand the sentences said by others.

It should be noted here, however, that one cannot for certain say that they did use these rules. When they heard Kath say *Our dog ... falled over our pool*, they probably knew that it was more likely that the dog would fall in the pool than for the pool to fall over the dog. It may have been enough for them to hear the separate ideas to be able to comprehend what happened. To see if they were using word order, it would be necessary to see if they interpreted a sentence like *“The girl hit the boy”* differently from *“The boy hit the girl”*.

There are various types of grammatical errors in the earlier conversation. One type of error involved using incorrect work order or using inappropriate words, for example:

- Kath’s sentence, *“Our dog was ran quick”* is incorrect grammatically. It would have been correct on this criterion if she had said *Our dog was running quickly* or *Our dog ran quickly*. Tom said *“Daddie put the inside ball.”* instead of *“Daddie put the ball inside.”*
- Tom also showed a grammatical error when he said *“... and he bited it and made it a hole”*. It would have been correct grammatically if he had said *“and made it a hole in it”*. The listeners seemed to understand these sentences.

A different type of error was made by all of the children; they misused the verb ending 'ed' by applying it to verbs that in English don't use it. Tom said "*We finded...*", Kath said "... *falled over...*" and "... *Daddie gotted...*" and Will said "... *drownded?*" These errors are morphological. We noted earlier that morphological conventions involve having agreement between various words. What they need to learn is that there are exceptions to some of the language rules we use.

Language users have a set of grammatical rules for arranging the units of meaning to communicate an intention to others and for analysing what others intend to say. The conversation earlier shows how an awareness of these rules gradually emerges.

3.3.2 Types of grammatical conventions

Prior to the emergence of a mature understanding of the grammatical conventions, children show, in their language approximations to these. These are illustrated in the conversation, as noted earlier.

Grammatical conventions that gradually emerge in the language of young children include knowing how to

1. use verb tense appropriately to indicate when an event occurred, for example, "I walk", versus "I walked", "I was walking" or "I will walk".
2. use the 'bound morphemes' such as 's' to show the plural forms of nouns, -ed to show the past tense of weak verbs, and -ly to show adverbs, for example, to say *He walked slowly* instead of *He walked slow*.
3. use the appropriate personal and / or possessive pronouns such as 'us' or 'they', for example, to say "*They gave it to me*" instead of "*Them gave it to me*."
4. use words from various grammatical categories correctly, for example, to say "*What did he do?*" instead of "*What he do?*"
5. use sentence templates and word order correctly.
6. use the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives "*We had the bestest time.*" and "*It was worsser than that.*"
7. use the correct preposition to indicate either the relative position of two or more items or the temporal link between two or more events.
8. refer to obligation, for example, "*you must*", an inference, for example, "*I could*", probability, for example, "*I may*" and possibility, for example, "*I might*"

Have participants reflect on their experiences with young children’s language and identify examples of each of these conventions gradually emerging. They can use the following chart to describe what misuse in each case might ‘look like’ and identify examples of the mis-use from their experiences.

the grammatical convention	what the misuse in each case would ‘look like’	examples
use verb tense appropriately to indicate when an event occurred	The person says the present tense when the past tense was intended	<i>He give it to me a bit earlier</i>
use the bound morpheme ‘s’ to show the plural forms of nouns		
use the bound morpheme ‘-ed’ to show the past tense of weak verbs		
use the bound morpheme ‘-ly’ to indicate an adverb		
convert adjectives to comparative and superlative forms		<i>We had the bestest day It was worsen than that</i>
use words from various grammatical categories correctly	Add words incorrectly to sentences or omit necessary words from sentences	<i>Why you do that for? Why for he went?</i>
use words in the correct order		
use the correct preposition to indicate the relative position of two or more items	Uses words such as ‘inside’, incorrectly in two ways; (1) uses an incorrect preposition or (2) uses it in an incorrect position in a sentence.	<i>Daddie put the inside ball.</i>
use the correct preposition to show the temporal link between two or more events		
use the appropriate personal pronouns such as ‘us’ or ‘they’		
use the appropriate possessive pronouns such as ‘mine’ or ‘yours’		
refer to obligation (I must), inference (I could) and probability (I may)		

3.3.3 *We use grammatical conventions automatically*

Most mature users of a language use its grammar relatively automatically. We apply the rules or ‘grammatical templates’ with ease across all situations. Young children do not use grammar in this way. They are moving gradually to this position.

To help participants develop an awareness of how they use grammar, ask them to repeat verbatim each of the following sentences. Some are correct and some have grammatical errors.

- (1) *The sedan was already out of control as it raced directly towards the blocking flats.*
- (2) *Cate put her stand on the coat too fastly and it toppled over causing damage on the wall.*
- (3) *Racing to board the launch the captain slipped on the damp pier and broke her knee.*
- (4) *The witness’ voice trembled then fell quiet, causes the judge to call an adjournment.*
- (5) *Con pulled on the fish off the hook too quick and incurring a cut deep to his hand.*
- (6) *The guard what is sleeping made it will be easier for burglars to get in the building undetected.*
- (7) *The work place had been stressful and unpredictable over the duration so that by his birthday his blood pressure had reached a critical level.*

As they recall each sentence, tick the words recalled correctly. Which sentences were more difficult to recall? What role did grammatical inaccuracies play? What does this tell us about how we use grammar?

Suggest that participants, in small groups, invent three grammatically incorrect sentence-like word strings that a second group can analyse to discover the grammatical error.

Every language has various conventions or rules for combining ideas and taking them apart. These are its grammar. Speakers need to know these rules to communicate with each other.

3.4 *Genre conventions*

Not only do the speakers use conventions or rules for linking words in sentences. They also use conventions for linking sentences into larger text units such as stories, recounts, explanations or descriptions.

What evidence is there in the conversation that the children could comprehend and use conventions to link the sentences into the conversation as a whole? To look for this, how did they show that they could link ideas across sentences?

The speakers / listeners

- knew that the ‘*it*’ when Miss Brown asked *What’s its name?* was Tom’s new dog.
- knew that when Will was asking about *...did it get drowned?* he was referring to Kath’s cat.
- knew the convention of staying on the topic and said sentence ideas that fitted with it.

Speakers use a range of techniques for maintaining the cohesion between a set of sentences. These include:

- the use of sentence connectives and ties such as “On the other hand...”, “As well”, “... too”, “Then ...”

- the use of topic sentences when speaking and listening; these sentences link the following sentences to a common theme.
- the use of a brief introduction that charts the direction of the sentences.
- the use of pronouns, noun pro-noun agreement conventions across sentences, verb-tense agreement across sentences.

Young children frequently display an awareness of the need for discourse conventions but have not yet mastered them. They may, for example, use “... *and then...*” to link a sequence of sentences into a discourse. In recounting an experience they may not, for example, sequence the ideas in terms of an effective story schema. They may not, for example, mention the context and the main people in the recount at any point.

Participants can reflect on their experiences of young children’s recounts. They can develop a set of behavioural criteria for assessing the use of discourse conventions in their spoken language. The criteria should be useful for identifying students’ comprehension of these conventions as well as their use in expression.

3.5 Review of the types of conventions used in a spoken communication and their implications for literacy learning

The purpose of this section is to review how some of the conventions used in spoken communication are used. Young children need to learn these conventions and to automatize their use of them. Teachers need to understand the acquisition and the role of the conventions in early language development and how they can use this development to prepare language profiles for individual children and to monitor their early language progress.

Ask participants to suggest examples of each type of convention, in the language use of students, who they have taught. They can use the following chart to record the language ability of students and to compile their language profiles.

conventions being communicated	receptive language	expressive language
phonological		
grammatical		
genre		

What is the relevance of an examination of the conventions used in language for literacy learning? Ask participants to reflect on this link. We noted in the introductory section that this link is indicated in many research studies. Participants can reflect on

- earlier experiences in which they have observed links between the students’ ability to use the various types of conventions, for example, individual students’ knowledge of phonological conventions and their reading ability.
- how conventions used in oral language are matched by conventions used in written text, for example, links between punctuation and pauses in spoken language.
- how they might identify the conventions used in the written texts they expect students to read and those they expect students to use in the texts they write.

- how they might investigate directly these links in their teaching, for example, for a topic they were teaching, whether teaching explicitly the relevant grammatical form assisted their students to comprehend text or to write about the ideas. Does participation in directed oral language activities about particular conventions, prior to reading a text, assist their students to comprehend it? Similarly, does a consolidation –review discussion following the reading of a text, assist students to recall the convention on later occasions?

Similar links can be investigated for students engaging in writing activities. Does directed teaching of a language convention, in an oral language activity, prior to writing a text assist their students to use it? Similarly, does a consolidation – review discussion following the reading of a text, assist students to edit their text?

In section 4 we will examine the purposes of language.