Chapter 1

The Oral Language–Reading Connection in Young Children

When Mr. Frost's 7-year-old son asked him, "How did you learn to read, Dad?" Mr. Frost paused for a long time and finally replied with, "I cannot say for sure, but perhaps I just picked up books around the house and started looking at them, or perhaps I followed along while your Grandma sat next to me and read the words on the pages."

Many of us cannot recall when or how we learned to read. Our memories do not take us back to a time before we began reading, and so it is difficult to describe, even from our own experiences, the path to becoming a reader. This may not be the case for individuals who learned to read later in life, because the challenge of sounding out words likely remains fresh in their minds.

School psychologists, in particular, are expected to have a strong understanding about child development and human behavior, and they are likely to be approached about developmental and behavioral issues that are academically related. The majority of school psychologists and others working in a consultant role (with the exception of reading specialists) know very little about how reading develops and therefore cannot answer many questions regarding developmental expectations of children at various ages and grade levels.

The process of becoming literate occurs for most children long before they walk into a school building. Among several precursors of reading development is oral language. Oral language, and its link to developing reading skills such as oral vocabulary, narratives, syntax, and semantics, are discussed in this chapter. Critical foundational skills, such as phonological awareness, concepts about print, alphabetic principle, and reading comprehension, are discussed in Chapter 2.

ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

During circle time, Miss Smiley, a preschool teacher, was talking and asking the children questions about birds, and to her amazement, 3-year-old Maria responded with the names of many different types of birds, where they typically lived, how they obtained food, how they cared for their offspring, and why they migrated from one place to another. How might this happen?

Oral language development is one of the most critical precursors to developing literacy skills with ease (Mol, Bus, & de Jong, 2009; Nation & Angele, 2006). Oral language develops as young children communicate with others through listening and speaking. Reading and writing are essentially alternative forms of communication that are dependent on oral language development. However, acquiring oral language is not a guarantee that children will become proficient readers, even though oral language is related to reading performance (Hill & Launder, 2010; Scarborough, 1998). This may especially become evident as children progress in the elementary grades and find reading challenging because they lack general knowledge for understanding complex text structures (Reese, Suggate, Long, & Schaughency, 2010). Many educators view oral language as a naturally developing skill, but they view reading and writing as skills that need to be taught. Certainly, reading and writing are skills that need to be taught, but so does oral language, in a sense, as it does not develop as naturally as one may envision. Oral language development most likely begins in the home when children have the opportunities to observe, listen, and use language to communicate with others. Three critical components of oral language development are vocabulary, syntax, and semantic structures.

Oral Vocabulary

Developing vocabulary means acquiring knowledge of the meaning of individual words. Children's word knowledge deepens over time as they engage in language and literacy-rich activities (Beck & McKeown, 2007). Young children receive and interpret language that they hear before they are able to express it through speech. Thus, their receptive vocabulary is four times larger than their expressive vocabulary (Jalongo & Sobolak, 2011). Most young children experience the highest rate of vocabulary growth in their preschool years (Farkas & Beron, 2004). By the time children reach the age of 4, they have accumulated about 42 million words if they reside in high-income households, compared with 13 million words if they reside in low-income households (Hart & Risley, 2003). With regard to speaking vocabulary, many children speak about 10,000 vocabulary words by the time they enter kindergarten (Childers & Tomasello, 2002). Byrnes and Wasik (2009) broke these figures down by days, weeks, and years and indicated that young children should speak approximately 5 to 6 new words per day, 38 new words per week, 2,000 new words per year, and 10,000 words by age 6. These figures are not representative of children from low-income families, who have been exposed to limited oral language experiences. For instance, second-grade children with strong vocabulary know about 4,000 to 8,000 more word meanings than their peers with weak vocabulary (Biemiller, 2004). At the completion of high school, higher achieving students know at least four times as many words as lower achieving students (Hirsch, 2003). This disparity suggests

that disadvantaged students are not accumulating vocabulary at a rate that is comparable to their advantaged peers.

Initially, very young children make one-word utterances, and as their vocabulary grows, they use more complex sentences to express themselves. Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2005) described three tiers of vocabulary words for school-age children. Tier 1 includes words that are already in most children's oral language repertoires. Examples are "desk," "chair," and "lamp." These words require little instruction time because they can be pictured and labeled. Tier 2 includes words that convey ideas or feelings rather than objects. Examples are "nervous," "contradiction," and "assertive." These types of words are widely used in mature conversations and are found in printed texts, so they require considerable instruction time. Tier 3 vocabulary includes words that are specific to content areas such as science, math, or social studies. Examples are "atom," theorem," and "molecule." Time for instruction and judicious review on these types of words should be allocated, as these concepts may not be easily acquired or recalled later because they are not widely used in conversation or printed texts.

Before children enter first grade, they acquire vocabulary in the home and in early childhood education settings such as preschool. Through a meta-analysis of the effects of vocabulary instruction on oral language development in young children, Marulis and Neuman (2010) found that vocabulary instruction positively influenced children's oral language development (specifically, intervention effect sizes of 0.88 and a gain of 1 standard deviation from pretest to posttest on vocabulary measures were obtained). In particular, these researchers reported stronger effects for explicit forms of instruction (i.e., deliberately explaining word meanings and providing key examples) over implicit forms of instruction. However, they found that instruction that combined explicit with implicit ways of teaching vocabulary had larger effects on children's oral language than either of the methods alone.

Vocabulary instruction should not only be taught using a combination of explicit and implicit forms of instruction, but it should also be taught purposefully (Biemiller, 2001). Goldstein (2004) offered the following purposeful, embedded ways that an early childhood educator can promote vocabulary for young children with special needs:

- The teacher uses self-talk while she is performing an action.
- The teacher verbalizes an action while the child is also performing and verbalizing that action (i.e., parallel talk).
- The teacher expands on the child's statements by rephrasing them in a slightly more complex way.
- The teacher elaborates on the child's statements by rephrasing them and adding information.

Young children with a well-developed vocabulary find it easier to gain meaning from words when they encounter them in print for the first time (Morgan & Meier, 2008). This is especially the case for printed material found in pre-primer and primer-level books, as many of the vocabulary words found in those books are in most children's oral language repertoires (McCormick, 2003). Vocabulary is related to phonological decoding (being aware of the different letter-sound associations within a word) and reading comprehension. For instance, with regard to phonological