

# The Research Base for *The Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (OLAI)* and *Oracy Instructional Guide*

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## Introduction

*Reading and writing float on a sea of talk.*  
J. Britton

Language acquisition and the development of literacy are inseparable and have been the subjects of published research since the latter part of the nineteenth century (Cattell, 1885) and the early part of the twentieth century (Huey, 1909). In 1972, Chomsky identified stages of language development linked to reading achievement. Reading and writing are language activities, so it is vital for teachers to have a clear understanding of how language develops. Teachers should know and be able to identify the most common structures of English, understand how these structures are acquired, and how to use the results of assessment to link language and literacy instruction (Clay, 1991; Gentile, 2001; Pransky & Bailey, 2002/2003).

Measuring oral language acquisition when literacy is taught is critical because testing and retesting children without evaluating their growth in language and incorporating the results in teaching both limits and can damage their motivation to learn (Halliday, 1973; Smith, 1985).

Children learning to speak English as a second language (ELL), or whose oral language development lags behind other children of the same age, benefit from more than one measure and one approach to identify their strengths and needs in language acquisition and literacy (Fillmore, 1979; Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991; Droop & Verhoeven, 2003).

*The Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (OLAI)* is an informal, repeated measures assessment that provides teachers, in a short period of time, information related to the most common language structures children control in their expressive speech. It helps identify stages of linguistic development for instruction.

The OLAI allows children multiple and different

opportunities to demonstrate what they control and know. Teachers can link the results to explicit language and literacy instruction for each child or group of children to engage them in meaningful instructional conversations. These interactions form the basis of learning to read and write and reading and writing to learn in school (Goodlad, 1984; Cazden, 1988; Gentile & McMillan, 1992; Goldenberg, C., Reese, L., & Gallimore, R., 1992; Goldenberg, 1993; Clay, 2001).

## Development of *The Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (OLAI)*

The OLAI was developed as the result of the author's forty years of teaching, studying the research, observing hundreds of classrooms and tutorials, and documenting the way ELL children and those with low language development learn and are taught to read and write (Cummins, 1981; Krashen, 1991; Gentile, 1997).

The OLAI was designed to provide teachers with key information based on an assessment whose results can be used to help ELL children and those with low language development achieve literacy and stay in school (Ralph, 1988).

The inventory is not intended as an assessment for every child. Children need evaluation when their stage of language development creates a barrier to learning and interferes with their ability to communicate and comprehend (Grant & Wong, 2003). Many factors can contribute to the need for special attention to language and literacy development. Children acquire language at different rates. Some children may require referral for other services, but they still need to learn to read and write (Healy, 1991).

The inventory was constructed after analyzing almost 2,000 "stories" dictated and written in English by sixty first-grade children during their first thirty half-hour lessons in early intervention (Reading Recovery™).

Five English sentence structures appeared most frequently:

1. Simple Sentences
2. Sentences containing prepositional phrases
3. Sentences containing two phrases or clauses linked by a conjunction
4. Sentences containing two phrases or clauses linked by a relative pronoun
5. Sentences containing two phrases or clauses linked by an adverb

An analysis of frequency of the language structures used in the stories revealed significant differences between the stories of children who successfully completed the program in the scheduled twenty weeks and those who did not. All five sentence structures appeared consistently and in greater numbers in the dictation and writing of children who completed the program on schedule.

These children frequently composed transformed sentences in their first thirty lessons, while children who did not complete the program in the scheduled time rarely used transformed sentences. Four sentence transformations were identified:

1. Negative statements
2. Questions
3. Commands
4. Exclamations

Children who did not complete the program on schedule used more than twice as many simple sentences in their stories and repetitively used one or two structures. They occasionally expanded sentences in the first thirty lessons, using prepositional phrases beginning with *in* or *on*, but their stories showed significantly less complexity and variation.

In addition to the analysis of stories from dictation and writing in early intervention lessons, the author conducted an extensive examination of approximately 500 first-grade children's writing journals. According to their teachers, 300 of those children were reading and writing at or above grade level. The remainder were reported to be below grade level in reading and writing.

The writing journals of children who read and wrote at or above grade level were frequently illustrated and captioned, using a variety of complete sentences. Those sentences contained the same five common language structures and four sentence transformations that had been identified in the writing journals of

children who successfully completed the early intervention literacy program.

By contrast, the writing journals of children reading and writing below grade level contained drawings captioned by strings of letters, single words, phrases, and some simple sentences. Their use of simple sentences demonstrated the same pattern as the children who did not complete the early intervention program on schedule. They used only one or two structures repetitively (Gentile, 2001).

Clay (1991, p. 38) said:

If children have been slow to acquire speech or have been offered fewer opportunities to hold conversations (for many reasons) there can be limitations in the grammar they control, which might mean that they have difficulties with comprehending oral and written language. Such children may not have control of some of the most common sentence structures used in storybook English and therefore are unable to anticipate what may happen next in the sentences of their reading texts.

Control of these structures has typically not been evaluated in school or used to inform literacy instruction because the way children acquire the "most common sentence structures" of English is assumed to occur naturally over time.

For children who enter school having to learn English as a second language, or those struggling to acquire language, time spent in school without targeted intervention does not promote language and literacy competence. Reading and writing instruction alone does not accelerate their oral language learning.

Effective, targeted intervention can create a direct connection and an explicit curriculum that links language and literacy development. See Gentile L. M. (2003), *The Oracy Instructional Guide*, Carlsbad, CA: Dominic Press).

Loban (1976, p. 79) said:

Power over language increases through the successive development of control over meaningful forms. The order presumably will be conditioned by the requirements of a particular situation as well as by the successful combinations already mastered by the speaker. No precise formula can be imposed on this development of language power, but an accurate description

should reveal order and pattern rather than obscure accident. Through research the relative stages of growth may be determined for individual children, and baselines charted for more effective instruction for all children.

The OLAI establishes a baseline. It may be used to measure change over time in children's control of language structures and sentence transformations. Results can be applied to develop targeted, effective language and literacy instruction where the teacher employs an explicit curriculum centered on talk and text.

The National Reading Panel Report (2000, p. 35) stated:

Young children learn word meanings through conversations with other people, especially adults. As they engage in these conversations, children often hear adults repeat words several times. They also may hear adults use new and interesting words. The more oral language experiences children have, the more word meanings they learn.

## Theoretical Framework and Components

The structure and content of the OLAI are based on the long-held theories of language development in the seminal work of Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963), Jerome Bruner (1983; 1986; 1987), Marie Clay (1983; 2001), Jim Cummins (1979; 1984; 2000), Walter Loban (1963; 1976), Frank Smith (1975; 1977), and Gordon Wells (1985; 1986). These researchers' theories form the design for an effective assessment and instructional model.

### Component I: Repeated Sentences and Sentence Transformations

The repeated sentences component has several purposes. It is one way to identify the language structures a child controls as well as the ability to listen, follow directions, and respond. Component I reveals whether a child has mastered the relevant syntactic structure and if the sentence exceeds the child's memory span (Droop & Verhoeven, 2003). It also reveals whether a child can detect the changes in meanings that occur when a speaker uses the same words in a different tone of voice to alter the meaning of a sentence. This recognition signals a level of linguistic control that occurs through the prosody of

language, i.e., the sound structures of intonation, pitch, emphasis or stress, and juncture. Finally, this component establishes a relationship between the teacher and the child of joint attention to a specific task (Bruner, 1983).

Clay, (1983, p. 10) said:

An analysis of the responses a child gives to a set of sentences carefully ordered for difficulty yields a detailed description of his control over oral language. When a child fails, he usually repeats the difficult sentence in a way which indicates the structures over which he has control.

While repeating sentences is one aspect of measuring a child's control over the structures of language, it is limited in that it does not employ the functions of language, i.e., to communicate a child's thoughts, feelings, and intentions (Keenan, 1977; Wells, 1985).

Smith (1995, p. 430) noted:

Language to a child always has a use, and the various uses could provide the child a clue to the purposes underlying differences among utterances. A child soon ignores sounds that do not seem to make a difference. There is, in fact, a powerful mechanism in all children preventing them from wasting time on sounds that they cannot make sense of, that do not appear to have a purpose; that mechanism is boredom. Even if the strangeness of the sounds initially stimulates their interest, children will not continue to pay attention to sounds that do not make meaningful differences. That is why they grow up speaking language and not imitating the noise of the air conditioner.

There are additional reasons to go beyond repeated sentences when measuring oral language acquisition (Gentile, 2001):

1. Some children have the ability to listen and memorize what they hear as a stream of sounds and accurately reproduce the sounds, even though they do not understand the meaning.
2. Repeating sentences does not always measure the ability to independently control the common structures of language necessary to clearly communicate thoughts, feelings, and intentions.
3. Some children are inhibited by having to repeat exactly what is said to them and consequently do not demonstrate their full range of ability.

## Component II: Story Reconstruction and Narrative Comprehension

Story reconstruction and narrative comprehension is conducted through collaborative interactions that give the child more freedom and flexibility to respond. The child listens to a story read by the teacher while looking at corresponding picture frames. The child uses imagery, language, and background knowledge to interpret the pictures. Then the child reorganizes the pictures to create and tell a story. Constructing a story line provides an opportunity to measure independent language production and comprehension in a meaningful activity (Wells, 1985; Bruner & Haste, 1987; Paris & Paris, 2003).

Wells (1986, pp. 151-157) said:

Stories teach children the sustained meaning-building organization of written language and its characteristic rhythms and structures. Through listening to stories children see context built up through the structure of words, not as in oral language, simply through references to immediate surroundings; all the clues from which a child constructs meaning lie in the words. Such meaning building prepares them for the less contextualized language that teachers use and is associated with children's later ability to 'narrate an event,' describe a scene and follow instructions. More importantly, it is directly related to children's own inner 'storying' which they use to create meaning.

Many children begin school with poor narrative skills (Feagans, 1984), and they are likely to struggle in school because a great deal of emphasis is placed on language-based activities (Roth, 1986). The "narrative mode" is a cognitive foundation by which children "learn how to mean" to make sense of their world (Bruner, 1986; Pressley, 1996). Narrating a story prompts children to identify an established sequence: a beginning, a middle, and an ending. ELL children, and those whose oral language is not well-developed, must control the most common structures of English to follow a story line (Clay, 1983) and engage in conversations to narrate thoughts, feelings, and intentions.

For example, in the sentence: "We were playing hard at the park," a child may understand the vocabulary terms *playing* and *park* but not have a relevant or meaningful "semantic field" attached to them (Bernhardt, 2003). Vocabulary growth in preschool

and early elementary grades is essential. Children's knowledge and understanding of the "linguistic side of language," (Bernhardt) i.e., syntax, spelling patterns, plurals, inflectives, pronouns, and verb conjugations, supports their ability to extract and construct meaning from narrative.

This knowledge and ability also helps them respond to others' needs and requests or emotional reactions.

Paris & Paris (2003, p. 40) said:

In this view, narrative competence is a fundamental aspect of children's comprehension of experiences before they begin to read, and it helps children map their understanding onto texts. The importance and early development of narrative thinking may be one reason that elementary classrooms are dominated by texts in narrative genre (Duke, 2000).

Children have to learn to listen, attend, and talk about as well as construct stories and interact with teachers to interpret narrative. These interactions lay the groundwork for the language development and responses children need to make to read and process expository texts.

## Component III: Picture Drawing, Narration, and Dictation

In this component the child draws a picture and tells a "story." Drawing is a precursor to learning to write (DuCharme, 1996). Drawing demonstrates visual perception, visual discrimination, spatial organization, and patterning, all of which are important in learning to read and write (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Schwartz, G. 1986, Brookes, 1986).

Language acquisition is directly connected to action. This component requires joint attention to something in the outside world, making a transition from action to speech as the child communicates thoughts, feelings, and intentions related to a drawing. Joint attention or "workable intersubjectivity" is at the core of scaffolding children's language development, talking about text, and helping them make sense of the way the world works (Bruner, 1983; Bruner & Haste, 1987).

This component also provides an opportunity to dictate and write about a picture after the drawing and narration are complete. If the child is unable to write anything independently, the teacher and child can

share the task or the teacher can write what the child has to say under the drawing, read it, and then ask the child to read it (Ashton-Warner, 1963; Nelson & Linek, 1999).

Writing and reading dictated text is an important part of oral language assessment because it signals whether or not a child can use the written representation of language to get to meaning and make predictions.

Smith (1975, p. 305) said:

Prediction through meaningfulness is the basis of language comprehension. By prediction I do not mean reckless guessing but rather the elimination of unlikely alternatives on the basis of prior knowledge. The child predicts that a limited range of relationships is likely to occur between language and its setting or within the language itself. If there is no meaning to be found, there can be no prediction, no comprehension, and no learning. But, to repeat, before meaning can assist a child in learning to read, there must be the insight that print is meaningful.

Writing challenges children to use their knowledge and concepts about print and looking at print strategies in several different ways (Edelsky, 1981; Clay, 1991; 1995; Reutzel, 1995). One is the ability to segment sounds in words and write what is heard in sequence (Good, Kaminski, & Smith, 2001). Elkonin (1971) recognized the importance of children beginning to examine the language they speak through writing the sounds of words, words themselves, and sentences. He stressed the need for a child to attend to hearing sounds in words as a preliminary step to becoming literate.

## Component IV: Information Processing and Critical Dialogue

Reading, analyzing, and interpreting informational text requires additional skill beyond reading stories containing dialogue or narrative. Component IV evaluates a child's ability to interact with a teacher to process expository text, using conversational and academic language by engaging in both an instructional conversation (Goldenberg, 1993) and a critical dialogue (Gentile & McMillan, 1992).

In this component the child looks at several pictures from an expository text and listens as the teacher reads. Then the teacher asks the child to answer several "extrapersonal" questions to make a critical

analysis of the text and "intrapersonal questions" to make a personal interpretation.

The language structures a child uses to answer analytical (extrapersonal) and interpretive (intrapersonal) questions related to expository text provide teachers with powerful information for instruction. To be successful in school, children must learn to make both types of responses to expository text (Goodlad, 1984).

1. A critical analysis requires the child to uncover facts, identify and explore main ideas, and establish the "truth" or logic of information as it is presented by an author. These meanings are generally embedded in the text.
2. A personal interpretation asks the child to express thoughts, feelings, opinions, questions, and applications related to the ideas and information in the text. These meanings are "embedded" in the child, invoke background knowledge and experience, and make fewer demands on memory.

These tasks may be especially difficult for ELL children and those who struggle with language development, because many of them have not had the range of life experiences needed to process academic text. They have not attained a certain minimum "threshold level of proficiency" in their oral language acquisition (Cummins, 1976; 1986). This means they may lack a broader base of academic, text-based language structures. They also may not have an understanding or recognition of a wide range of vocabulary, i.e., sight vocabulary, tricky and unfamiliar high and low frequency words, and difficult, important, and colorful words (Sokmen, 1997; National Reading Panel, 2000).

Children have to be able to read and write expository text to participate in content area *instructional* conversations, write reports, or succeed on tests. Learning how to process information for academic purposes is the cornerstone of reading and writing to learn in school.

Each of the four components of *The Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (OLAI)* has a unique role in helping to identify a child's stage of language acquisition for instruction.

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## The Five Stages of Language Acquisition Identified by the OLAI

- Stage I:** Uses one- or two-word responses, some phrases, and short simple sentences. Understands some simple sentence transformations, i.e., negatives, questions, commands, or exclamations.
- Stage II:** Uses phrases and complete sentences with limited prepositions, i.e., *in/on*. Understands and uses some simple sentence transformations, i.e., negatives, questions, commands, or exclamations.
- Stage III:** Uses complete sentences with varied prepositions. Understands and uses expanded sentence transformations, i.e., negatives, questions, commands, or exclamations.
- Stage IV:** Uses complete sentences with varied prepositions and conjunctions. Understands and uses variations of sentence transformations, i.e., negatives, questions, commands, or exclamations.
- Stage V:** Uses complete sentences with varied prepositions, conjunctions, relative pronouns, and adverbs. Understands and uses more complex sentence transformations, i.e., negatives, questions, commands, or exclamations.
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The rapidity with which most children gain control over these language structures, and the order in which they occur, vary with the amount of time they spend and the experiences they have had talking and working with adults (Watts, 1948; Hunt, 1965; O'Donnell, Griffin & Norris, 1967).

**Caution:** *The OLAI should never be used to screen children out of a program or exclude them from participating in balanced literacy instructional activities. Its purpose is to inform instruction by helping to identify children who need systemic intervention in their language and literacy development in order to succeed in school. It is a useful adjunct to other assessments and programs.*

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