Chapter 12
Provocation 3: Language in the School Room

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Abstract In Provocation 3, Snowling highlights the attainment gap of disadvantaged children as a growing concern made more evident during the pandemic. She notes the role of oral language in this context, which is often neglected in the curriculum. In particular, Snowling emphasises that assessing language in its own right for school entry is just as valuable as 'reading readiness'. In particular, the development of oral language is identified as important for learners of diverse language backgrounds or those who have developmental needs. Snowling also notes concerns of socio-economic demographic variables and the role of educators to teach reading and writing, and to help children build a rich vocabulary. She identifies spoken language, or 'oracy', as important in the classroom as 'literacy'. Snowling provokes readers to consider the imperative for appropriate developmental language intervention in efforts to close the social differences that have grown as a result of the pandemic.

Everyone knows that there is a social gradient in educational attainment: children from disadvantaged backgrounds do less well in school than their advantaged peers, and they are under-represented at university. This attainment gap is likely to widen as the world recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the economic downturn undoubtedly reduces the funds available for education. Moreover, outcomes will be worse for children whose parents do not speak the majority language, or do not have access to the Internet. In the face of such disruption, policy-makers will be pressed to close 'the gap'—but which gap or gaps, which interventions will they turn to for 'catch-up', and what will count as success? In this provocation I consider the often-neglected role of oral language in the curriculum, the importance of assessing language in its own right at school entry (rather than focusing more exclusively on 'reading readiness'), and the importance of evidence-based interventions.

School systems globally—arguably at the behest of government policy-makers—appear to be fixated on literacy (reading and reading comprehension) and numeracy

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(arithmetic and problem solving). What is lacking is reference to the fact that, when children enter school without a strong foundation for learning, they do less well in the education stakes. In a recent survey, we asked teachers, '*What is the most important challenge you face in supporting less advantaged children when they start school?*'. Most responded that students have problems with language and communication which make them difficult to teach. When asked, '*On what do you mainly spend your 'pupil premium' [for disadvantaged children] in the early years?*', the most frequent responses indicated that teachers funded extra support with literacy or with numeracy (and not language intervention). It could undoubtedly be argued that this response is a regrettable consequence of high stakes testing in reading and in mathematics. While screening to identify children who are slow to learn to read can be commended and even justified, it is increasingly apparent that to ignore a shaky foundation in oral language skills has longer term and wider implications.

Spoken language is the foundation for literacy, numeracy, and many other forms of learning, not least because the curriculum is delivered through language. In addition, language is important for self-regulation and attention control; the corollary of this is that children with poor language are at risk of emotional and behavioural difficulties. For many years there was an assumption that, by the time they go to school, children have a fully developed oral language system which underpins and can scaffold their learning**.** Sadly, this is not the case for all children, and there is now considerable evidence of a difference in the language skills that children from less advantaged backgrounds bring to the task of learning, compared with those from more advantaged homes. This gap is usually most visible with respect to vocabulary size, but there are also differences in the nature of talk and in the grammar used, as well as what are sometimes termed 'emergent reading skills', namely phonological awareness and letter knowledge. There are other developmental reasons for poor language too. These include neurodevelopmental disorders such as developmental language disorder (DLD), or dyslexia, and others have genetic conditions, such as Down syndrome. Without early targeted intervention, such children will not catch up. It follows then, that there should be screening for language at school entry, as has been adopted in Australia but is not yet universal practice across the world. Rather, there continues primarily to be a focus on progress in reading and in mathematics, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where multilingualism can itself cause disadvantage in school.

It falls to all educators to be aware of the issues that these demographic variables raise: they should aim to teach reading, including phonics, within a language-rich curriculum; they should ideally help children to build a rich vocabulary; and help students extend their oral and written narrative skills and to encourage good listening behaviours. In a language-rich classroom, 'oracy' is as important as 'literacy', spoken communication is as important as writing, and reading comprehension is *more* important than word reading or spelling. While phonics is a critical skill, it must be remembered that reading is a written language skill and reading for meaning depends upon good language. Here I refer to the Report to the United Kingdom Government by Sir Jim Rose (2006), where he offers the position that "reading instruction devoid

of language is not reading at all" (Snowling, 2018, para 9). Turning to numeracy—where longitudinal research is more limited—language is also a strong predictor of individual differences in arithmetic fluency, along with executive attention and number knowledge. Hence, language is required to foster mathematical achievement. Put simply, it is important to be aware that arithmetic builds on verbal skills, and mathematical problem solving requires good language comprehension.

More critically, teachers and policy-makers need to know that interventions to promote oral language skills work, what the components are, how they can be implemented in busy classrooms, and whether they can have sustained impact. While the bulk of evidence regarding 'what works' in education relates to literacy, there are now several published studies of language intervention using robust methodologies. Indeed, a systematic review and meta-analysis by Rogde et al. (2019) showed that it is possible to produce significant improvements in children's oral language skills, albeit small ones, via language intervention. The components of the interventions vary to some extent, but at the core they involve vocabulary enrichment, narrative and listening comprehension. Further, they can be delivered by trained teaching assistants, thereby reducing the burden on mainstream class teachers, noting that studies with higher-quality implementation show larger effects. Moreover, there is suggestive evidence that the effects of oral language intervention can lead to improvements in reading comprehension—a key goal of literacy development. This latter finding highlights the need for follow-up and monitoring. At the present time, few research studies have tracked children over time, but large data sets are to be found within schools and education authorities. Sharing of these data could elucidate contexts for a lot of children with poor language and spur the field to action.

The future agenda is not simple as this provocation outlines. Assessing language is more difficult than assessing literacy or numeracy where 'paper and pencil' or now, more often, digital assessments can be used. Nonetheless, apps (application software) can be adapted to reliably assess components of the spoken language system, phonological awareness and letter knowledge, and offer routes to practice and 'consolidated learning'. But then there is the question of bilingualism or multilingualism, as is often found in low- and middle-income countries. Language intervention can be delivered successfully, but how will we train those who are to deliver it in an effective manner with high fidelity, if there are large distances between training venues and there are unaffordable costs of releasing staff from schools for continuing professional development and learning? Online courses have become widespread, but there are wider questions: Who should deliver the training and to whom? Is it effective to work with families so that the home learning and literacy environment in which the preschool child is immersed can be better attuned to set the stage for learning? What we do know is that much of this will have to be virtual if we are to deliver 'at-scale'. But effective pedagogy of virtual learning is not yet established, and the problems of implementation are vast: What is the optimum length of a session, be it directed at a parent, a teaching assistant or a child? How much knowledge should be delivered top-down and how much can be left to independent learning? How can we ensure those taking part remain motivated and engaged? And how do we ensure optimum practice for consolidation? Ultimately, whatever the cost, we must develop, deliver,

and monitor interventions that close the social differences in educational attainment which may have deepened in recent months as the result of a global pandemic.

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