

Episode Title: Developing Oral Language through a Drama-based Intervention

Welcome to the Oxford Education Deanery podcast. In this series, we explore the latest research from the Department of Education at the University of Oxford and discuss the real-world implications for teachers, parents and policymakers.

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Hello and welcome to the Deanery Digest Podcast. My name is Hamish Chalmers and I'm with my colleague Doctor Faidra Faitaki. Welcome, Faidra.

Thank you very much for having me.

Faidra is going to be talking to us about some research that she did around oral proficiency among primary school learners.

So, I want to start off by asking you, Faidra, what is oral proficiency and is it the same as oracy?

So oral language tends to refer to all the skills that are associated with producing and understanding spoken discourse. So, this can comprise of vocabulary receptive and productive. How many words children understand and how many words they can produce. And therefore oral language is really important because these are the skills that children rely on before they start formal education and therefore are exposed to and taught how to read and write. This is the definition that we most commonly use when we refer to primary school children or pre-primary school children. While oracy is more of a term that we find later on in secondary education. And from my perspective it focuses more on the debating skills for example that children need. So structuring and presenting an argument. So again there is a similarity there because it's related to spoken discourse, but it's slightly more advanced skills than vocabulary for example or language comprehension.

Okay. So oral language is more sort of all encompassing around the spoken word as it were, whereas oracy skills more into sort of like the finessing of those skills into a, into a sort of a presentational kind of thing. Is that right?

Exactly. But each person operationalises oral language differently and oracy differently. So it's important to look at the definitions of these terms in every publication to ensure that you have the same point of reference as the author.

And I understand that oral language proficiency is a really good predictor of later success at school. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Exactly, yes. So if we operationalise, define, and measure oral language as vocabulary in particular. So children's receptive and productive vocabulary measured at the earliest stages of education. In other words, how much vocabulary they can use and

understand predicts their ability to learn to read later on. This means that basically, by measuring their skills at the start of school, we get an indication of how well they will do later on, because reading is very important for developing other academic abilities.

Now Faidra is of Greek extraction. And so is naturally is from the home of theatre and the dramatic arts, as it were. And so has a particular interest, is a very accomplished actor herself, and so you wanted to find out whether drama was something which we could use with children in the early years or in primary school, particularly to help develop these oral language skills. So give us an idea about how you feel that drama might help in this respect.

Yes. So thank you. First of all, I am not as good as you describe me to be. But I do have an interest in drama. And this was the spark for this project as well. Basically, I wanted to combine the two worlds. Theatre on the one hand and bilingualism and language learning on the other hand. And for me as a language learner, being involved in theatre productions at school and in general creative activities really helped my English language learning and other language learning as well. So, I really wanted to see if what had helped me could also help other children, and particularly younger children, for which I think drama is a really easy way to get introduced to language and without fear, being able to explore language a bit better.

So, we were funded by the John Fell Fund to pursue this project, which was a small scale pilot study of an intervention that aimed to explore, firstly, whether drama can be a successful tool for language learning in a primary school context, and also whether a drama can be effective in developing children's or a language skills further. So, by oral language, in this case, we do mean receptive and productive vocabulary.

Okay. And you've mentioned that bilingualism and that will speak to our population of English as an additional language learners or EAL learners in a school. Was the project exclusively about EAL? Or was it about the broader population?

It was not just about EAL learners. Obviously, every school in the UK has a percentage of EAL learners. Some schools have more EAL learners, some have fewer.

And we wanted the project to appeal to everyone because oral language is not specific to EAL learners or a problem that EAL learners have to face exclusively, even though EAL learners do struggle a bit more with the development of vocabulary in English if they speak the home language at home. This is not a problem per se, because they also have a home language that they're strong at. But it does make them a more important population to look into when it comes to oral language.

However, our project targeted at everyone in Years 1 to 3, and every child that wanted to participate in the project from this year group, regardless of their EAL status, was allowed to take part.

Okay. And just on that, I'm presuming it's just a question of exposure and opportunity to use the language. Is that what makes the difference?

Exactly. Yes. So, the EAL population is very heterogenous. Some children are born here and speak English from the get go, even though they have ancestry from a different country. Or maybe one parent speaks a different language. Other EAL learners are new arrivals. They don't have as much exposure, so their English is a bit further behind. This doesn't mean that they'll never catch up. They will. And in fact they do. And they do so even without intervention sometimes. But interventions like the one that I designed and implemented is a helpful way to speed up the process.

Okay. So tell us in a little bit of detail what exactly the study was and what did you ... you presumably you had an intervention you wanted to compare it with an alternative way of teaching to see whether there was an advantage to using drama.

Yes. So this intervention was, as I said what we did was a pilot study for hopefully a larger intervention to be conducted in the future. So it was relatively small scale. We only worked with one school and we basically created a drama club that children could sign up to. So we had about 20 children who signed up and stayed in the drama club for the duration of the project. And then we compared them, actually with a group of children that participated in other drama clubs, sorry, other clubs in the same school. So that could be swimming or dancing.

So, they were your control group? The people who weren't in the drama club.

Yes, exactly. So, this is a limitation of our study. We didn't actually observe them or conduct the other clubs ourselves because we're not swimming coaches or dance instructors. So we don't actually know what went on in terms of language development in the other groups. A more carefully controlled study would control the control groups.

But in doing that you're seeing whether just naturally over time children's oral language develops over time.

Exactly.

Yes. So basically we had children from the same school who attended the same classes. One small group of children did our drama club on top of everything else. The other children did some other activities that didn't use as much language. I can't imagine swimming involves as much language as our drama club did. And so we are exploring effectively business as usual. What would happen if the drama club wasn't there versus our drama club activities?

And what kinds of activities did you do?

So, firstly, I would like to say a big thank you to the drama facilitator that helped us design the activities. This was Emily Luisa from Collide Theatre Company. We designed two sets of activities because we had a lot of children we thought that it would be best to split them in groups of ten.

So, one group followed a text based approach. So we used Zog and the Flying Doctors... Know it well

... as our basis, and we designed some activities that were based on this text.

So, each week the children of this group would read an excerpt of the book, then they would act it out and then they would do activities like describe your day, like Zog or like the princess. So they would get into character in this way.

The other group followed a much more abstract approach that used movement as its basis. So we would work around themes rather than a book. So, a theme could be the natural elements fire, earth, wind and water. And the children, for example, would have to move like the elements or talk like the elements, then do little stories where one child was fire and the other child was water. So interact with one another and build the story from there. So the two groups had had these different activities, and then they came together on the last week for a mini showcase, as we called it, that they presented to the other group.

Nice. And what kind of outcome measures were you interested in?

And so since we measured receptive and productive vocabulary since this, these were a focal variables we used tests of receptive and productive vocabulary. We didn't have a specific list of words that we taught the children in the intervention. Obviously the children who used book, Zog, learned some words as a result and the children of the other group learned some other words as a result of the themes. But we didn't have a specific set of words to focus on. So, all the measures that we used were measures of general vocabulary ability. And that may be part of the reason why we didn't find any significant differences from baseline to the end of the project.

So in the end, you found that both groups, and also compared to those children who, doing business as usual, made similar progress in that both receptive and, productive oral language vocabulary.

Yes.

But you weren't just interested in in that measure, you were interested in more sort of how they felt about it and what their perceptions about the activities were as well?

Right, exactly. So this was the other part of the outcome measures that we used. We had interviews with the children after the drama club finished. We had observations for each session where we looked at the children's behaviour. And we tried to basically see whether they liked it and what they liked and what they didn't like, because since it was a pilot study and our aim is to do a bigger study in the future, we also needed to see what works and what doesn't from the children's and the teachers' perspective.

And so these findings are far more encouraging from our perspective, because they suggest that even though we didn't find a significant difference in terms of the numbers,

they didn't improve their knowledge of general vocabulary before and after the, sorry, after the intervention everyone enjoyed it and they all had very positive things to say about the intervention. And they loved some activities and they enjoyed coming each week and engaging and meeting new students, developing their confidence. So these are all themes that emerged from the analysis of our interview findings. And these allow us to hope that we can scale the project up in the future as well.

Yeah, that's quite ... it feels to me, someone who's not a natural thesp, it's quite encouraging that I don't ... that I could choose. That of these groups, there was a sort of a similar improvement over time. Again, taking into account that it was a small scale study. So I might be relieved to know that I don't have to, in inverted commas, do drama. But say I wanted to explore that side of myself and I wanted to become better at that. And given that the kids liked it, it seems like it would be useful to do that. What advice would ... have you produced any materials that a teacher who might be a bit kind of reticent to go down the drama route, might be able to use?

Yes. So you're not alone. Many teachers from the, the participating school, but also other teachers that we are engaging with at the moment say that they love the idea, and they're really happy to see that the children enjoyed the drama activities, but they would never, ever use drama in the classroom for various reasons, like they think it would disrupt the classroom and they would never get children back, or they just don't feel confident themselves. And there are many resources there are many resources that you can access online. But we have also designed a booklet of 15 activities that we did use as part of this intervention from both the text based group and the movement based group. And these activities form part of a booklet that you can access on the Deanery website. So I encourage all your listeners to go and have a look and see the activities.

We include also the learning goals that the activities had for our project, some variations that might help you incorporate them in your classroom, and also some quotes from the children about what they liked or disliked about these activities. There are not many dislike comments.

Excellent. Good. Okay, in the show notes we will link both to the Deanery Digest - the write up of this study, a short plain language summary of the research as well as to the booklet of activities. So any teachers out there who would like to give it a go, you will be able to do that without a problem.

I just want to finish up by thinking about what the next steps for this research would be. So you've done it as a pilot. It's a feasibility study, so it's helping you as a researcher to sort of work out what might work in a classroom setting when doing research. Where do you want to go with it now?

So, it's a bit complicated because we didn't find the significant positive results that we expected, but because of the promising results that we had from the children themselves and their views on the project, we are hoping to scale it up. There are limitations, as I mentioned, that we would like to address. For example, we are

contemplating teaching children specific sets of words and then assessing their development in terms of these words. Some teachers have offered very helpful feedback in terms of what words to target – tier two words featured in this feedback, even though these are debated now. But before we move there and to the larger scale up, scaled up study, we need to address the issue of teachers being reluctant to use drama because no intervention works if teachers are not willing to give it a go, basically. And in this project we run the activities ourselves. But in a larger scaled up version, we would like the teachers to be the ones leading this intervention.

So, before we do that, we need to find what teachers need in order to feel confident or able to implement these activities. We are looking for participants, for focus groups that will help us understand how to improve what we give teachers before we can implement this intervention.

So people can follow you on Twitter at...?

At @faidrafait.

We'll put that in the show notes as well. So if you're interested in getting involved in a project like this, then you can follow Faidra there and have information there. We will also put in a call to our Deanery newsletter. So, any followers of this podcast who are interested in getting involved in research through the University of Oxford Department of Education, then please sign up for the newsletter. When we have opportunities where we're looking for participants and people to get involved, we will put a call out there and we'd love to hear from you.

And just generally, visit the Deanery website, have a look at the work that we do. And if you're an educator who's interested in getting involved in research, and in this case in research around drama with young learners, then we'd love to see you there.

Okay, so that leads me to say thank you very much, Faidra, for joining us on the podcast today. Fascinating little study, and I look forward to seeing how it develops over the years.

Thank you very much, Hamish, and thanks to the Deanery team for spotlighting this study and all the brilliant work that takes place in the department.

Lovely. See you again.

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