The nuts and bolts of building oral language in the classroom - with Jocelyn Seamer

Triple R Teaching Podcast #196

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. In today's episode, I'm interviewing Jocelyn Seamer. She's a former teacher, tutor, and school leader who works with schools and teachers to help them improve instruction, particularly in structured literacy. She is an author, a podcast host, and much more.

I know you're going to get a lot out of this conversation about oral language. Oral language is tricky to pin down, so we kind of go a little bit all over the map as we talk through specific ways to build oral language across the grades. No matter what grade you teach, I think today's episode will be helpful for you. Just know that towards the end, I summarize a lot of what we talked about.

I had a little bit of a recording glitch. I'm not sure what happened, but the first minute or two of Jocelyn's recording did not record, so when you hear her talk, she kind of starts mid-sentence. She's introducing herself, and she's talking about an experience with a child to talk about how she realized it was so important to make sure everyone received this strong structured approach. I apologize for that little blip, but after that, everything goes nice and smooth. Enjoy, and here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome Jocelyn. Thank you so much for being here. You were one of the people that I reached out to years ago when I was first learning about the science of reading and structured literacy and trying to let go of some things that I was really struggling with. In fact, I wrote a book recently and I put your name in the acknowledgements because you're one of the people that was very kind to be willing to talk to me even though we did not know each other.

I've learned a lot from you. I've read a lot of your work and I've also taken some of your course work on your website, and one of the things that I love is when you talk about oral language.

I know that's a really hard thing to pin down and we all know it's important, but many people are unsure how to build oral language without replicating balanced literacy.

We've talked about separating the baby from the bathwater, but like you just said before we hit record, you have to know what's the baby and what's the bathwater, so let's talk today about building oral language.

Before we do that, I would like you to introduce yourself and talk about how you got to where you are. I know you have quite a background.

Jocelyn Seamer:

...and I met one particular student and he was in year two with a dyslexia diagnosis, and he looked like a perfectly intelligent child to me. Unfortunately, he had just not had the instruction he needed, so I thought, "I wonder if I can help. He certainly can't do any worse." He'd come from another school to the school that I was volunteering in and then later worked in.

I just worked with him and saw the power of when you give children the skills and knowledge they need, the power of that in their life.

From there, I went into private tutoring and I had thirty children coming to the house every single week. I thought, “Well, this is a bit silly because if I was your classroom teacher, we would just be doing this as your standard practice in the classroom and you wouldn't have to spend all this other time and your parents wouldn't have to be here with you as well.”

I ended up teaching in remote schools in the Northern Territory. There were lots of times in the middle of the desert, so 120 kilometers of dirt road and a couple of hours of highway driving to get to a supermarket, and so very much the social justice aspect was strong there for me as well. If we can support the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised members of our community to learn to read and write, then their life is empowered and they can take full advantage of the world around them.

I had varied roles in a number of different areas. I've been a school leader, been a teaching principal in small schools, I was an assistant principal in a larger school, and then the opportunity came up for principalship, and I said that was not for me because curriculum and literacy is very close to my heart, and at the core of all of that is inclusive practice.

So in 2020 - what a great year - I took the leap and I left school, not because I didn't like schools anymore, but because I wanted to make a bigger impact. For the last four years, I've been helping people through a range of ways from professional learning to school coaching and consultancy to writing a book. I have programs, we have online memberships, there’s a whole range of ways.

I think ultimately every teacher wants to know that they're doing a good job for students. Every teacher wants to feel good about the work they do and they want to have impact. Having that really practical lens to apply to this whole thing is a part of my focus.

Research is important, we have to understand the frameworks and the theories and what constitutes good research, we talked a little bit about that before recording today, but we also need to know how to bridge that gap.

Everyone's trying to do that and that's absolutely where my focus is. How do we help people take action that gets real results on the ground for students without overwhelming teams and without making teachers cry because it all just feels too big?

I think low variance instruction also leads to low variance planning and preparation, so we can reclaim our life a little when we when we're a bit more structured.

But one of the things I'm really big on is let's not take the teacher out of the equation, because no program developer, no resource developer, you and I included, knows the students in that teacher's class.

We don't know the students in your class, teachers, *you* know them. *You* are the one looking them in the eye, you're seeing what their reaction is in the moment. You understand the students who, through social-emotional needs, you can push a little bit, and the ones you need to nurture a little more.

I think we need to be really mindful that we're not losing - and this is going to sound really soppy, but I feel quite strongly about it - that we're not losing the heart-to-heart connection between teacher and students when it comes to learning. Programs and resources are tools, but it's the teacher who makes instruction happen. The teacher is the professional in the space.

Now, we don't know more than the research does. We can't say, “Well, my personal belief is,” or “My experience says this, so therefore I'm going to disregard robust research.” That's not how it works. But when it comes to the application and making sure teaching happens, it's the teacher who needs to be empowered, who needs their capacity built to use those robust tools really well. We cannot take the teacher out of the equation. As Anita Archer says, and I'm still convinced I'm going to be her when I grow up, “We can't take the *teach* out of the *teaching*.”

I think there's a really nice harmony to be reached between research, resources, and what happens on the ground, so that's where my focus is these days.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, and that's a really good caution because as we try to apply the science of reading, there have been over-corrections in different areas. One of those could be letting go of the balanced literacy idea that teachers know their students best, so they're going to make all the instructional decisions and create their own programs.

Now we can understand those programs are useful for many reasons. Number one, they save the teacher's sanity and save them a lot of time and effort. But like you said, the teacher is an important part of the equation and just reading a script and not paying attention to the students in front of us helps no one. Yeah, there's a balance there.

I like that you provide so many helpful resources for teachers and bite-sized things. I know if anyone here, especially Australians, have listened to your podcast, you do that very well.

One thing I loved listening to you talk about was oral language because I find that is a tough thing for teachers to wrap their brains around, so let's go into that today.

I did have a membership in your online program for about a year or so to learn from you, and you had a really good module about oral language. I'd like to talk about some of the things that you shared there.

First of all, we often leave oral language behind when we're talking about "The Big Five." I know you've talked about "The Big Six" because we want to not forget about oral language. Why is it important, and why do teachers have to think about that when teaching reading?

Jocelyn Seamer:

Well, firstly, The Big Six. Whether you as individual listeners, or your school, talk about The Big Five or The Big Six, you're right.

The sixth came from a woman named Deslea Konza from Western Australia here in Australia. She wrote a paper about why we should have The Big Six. In Australia, we often add oral language as the sixth.

But I'm going to talk today a little bit about why we need to be a little cautious. We don't want to separate it out and compartmentalize oral language from everything else, because there's that lovely quote from James Britton. I don't think this is the exact quote, but this is how it's been shared over and over, "Reading floats on a sea of talk."

That doesn't just go for reading, that goes for everything. Another way to put that is, if you can't say it, you can't read it or write it. Having worked in schools where we've got 95 plus percent of students that have English as an additional language and English is not spoken at home, that is just so evident.

It's not just for those schools that we have to have this message. Statistically, two children in every classroom have an undiagnosed developmental language disorder. Some teachers will be listening to this saying, "Only two?!" depending on the population of students they work with and economic background and socioeconomic status of families. It's a help, absolutely, but it does not prevent language difficulties if the child has a language difficulty.

Oral language is the foundation of all literacy, and it's absolutely necessary to understand it for inclusive practice.

You mentioned that it's a tricky area to pin down and I agree. When I was writing my book, I was trying to formulate a definition of oral language which was actually quite difficult because there are different perspectives on it.

Where I kind of landed was that it was this interconnected network of things that includes things like vocabulary, syntax, pragmatics, morphology, phonemic awareness, and there are a couple of others. Articulation comes into that as well. It can be difficult to pin down. But also, there's not just one thing that leads to oral language development.

The other thing that's tricky about it is that if we think about the work around biologically primary and biologically secondary skills and knowledge, oral language is biologically primary in terms of conversational speech and the way we interact with each other.

For all of us, the way we have acquired language is really unconscious. It just happens. We learn new vocabulary and we learn new language structures without really without conscious thought. It just happens because we're hardwired for that sort of learning.

When we're then asking, "How do we support that in our students?" It's not a linear path, if that makes sense. There are lots of things that interact.

The connection between oral language and literacy comes through our old favorites, and I'm calling them "old," but in terms of the theories that we draw on. Linnea Ehri's sight word phases is one of them. She talks about how in order to move from the full alphabetic phase into the consolidated phase, children need to know what a word looks like, what it sounds like, and what it means.

Building spoken vocabulary and helping children engage with language in context is, I think, one of the most effective ways to build those components of knowing what it sounds like and knowing what it means.

Meaning comes through interacting in different contexts with words, whether that's written or spoken or both, and hopefully it's both.

Then of course, we've got the Simple View of Reading, which is that really elegant formula of the language comprehension times the decoding gives us reading comprehension.

From a critical standpoint around research, we know that oral language is primary, and it needs to be a huge part of what we do. But we also need it for simply being human, for being able to advocate for yourself, being able to express ideas, being able to listen to others and have discourse, not just about what we did at recess and lunch, but for learning and ideas and things that are important to you. Oral language helps us build so many different capacities.

School has a role to play in that and home has a role to play in that, and if we can get everyone sort of on the same page and doing their bit, then kids are much better set up for success in the long term.

Anna Geiger:

I think one of the reasons it's hard for teachers to pin down is because it's one of those unconstrained skills, right? Your oral language continues to grow throughout your lifetime. We know what to teach for phonemic awareness. We know what phonics skills we have in our program. But for oral language and vocabulary and building knowledge and things like that, the sky's the limit and that can make it hard to know where to go with it.

I think it's really useful for teachers to have oral language routines in their classroom, and you talk about a lot of those. Maybe we can talk about some ways that teachers can intentionally build opportunities for building oral language and then how to do it within those routines.

One thing you talk about, that lots of teachers do already, is partner talk. Can you talk to us more about when you might do that and best practices and things like that?

Jocelyn Seamer:

Yeah, absolutely. I think in the move to explicit teaching, there's a bit of a misconception, or we can slip into this without being conscious of it, where the teacher talks a lot and students are just responding in small snippets to what the teacher says. There are times when that's appropriate, like you might be having a 10-minute review and that's sort of back and forth and back and forth.

But sometimes we forget the importance of students talking, and partner talk is a great way to do that, and it's a common practice that people have.

I think we've all made the mistake at one time or another, guilty as charged, that thinking that because we said something and students have heard it, that then they understand it and they can reproduce it. The bit we're missing is the students *actively* engaging with the language.

Vocabulary is a perfect example of this in terms of vocabulary instruction when we're being explicit and intentional about it.

I really love Beck, McKeown, and Kucan's writing on this. They talk about that the point of vocabulary instruction is to have students use language in meaningful contexts. That's both orally and then also in writing.

Guided partner talk, facilitated by the teacher can help that. It can help the students have practice using that vocabulary in context.

I've got a little example here that I've prepared to have a practical viewpoint on it. You can combine the partner talk with what I call I Say, You Say.

For example, if we're teaching about the word, select, I would point to myself as the teacher and I would say, “The word select means to choose. Select means to choose.”

I would point to the students and they would repeat, “Select means to choose.”

I would say, “Select means to choose.”

Then they would say, “Select means to choose.”

Backwards and forwards and backwards and forwards two or three times, because we all know the children who I affectionately call the “off with the fairies” kids, and they're looking out the window or they're thinking about something else, and if you say it only once, then they've missed it. They say, “Oh, something's happening I should pay attention to! I don't know what it was, but okay, I'll nod and smile.” So backwards and forwards.

Then we can provide examples. Somewhere along the line we'll say, “The color I will select is…” while I’m pointing to myself.

Then the students will say, “The color I will select is…” backwards and forwards.

Then I'll say, “Talk to your partner. Tell your partner the color you will select.”

Here we want to make sure they're speaking in sentences. We want them saying, “The color I will select is blue. The color I will select is green,” or whatever it happens to be.

We've used partner talk as an extension of the teacher-led work. It really is the gradual release of responsibility.

If we think of our oral language work through the lens of the explicit teaching model and that gradual release of responsibility, we can't go wrong. We unpack it, we model and deconstruct, we provide the example in that we have a bit of joint construction and supported practice.

Where partner talk comes in is the supported practice piece, but be cautious everyone, because we move on from that way too quickly. We do it once, the students responded, and then we leave it.

What's better is to have fewer words we're going to focus on and have students talk with a partner about using this word across contexts. If we're in math, "The strategy we will select is...," or "I will select this tool to measure this angle," or whatever it might be, that's for the older grades obviously.

Take the words and the language structures we want the students to use and present it and build it into multiple opportunities across the day and across curriculum areas, so they're getting multiple touch points. From there they start to generalize the meaning and then they can internalize it and then they can use it.

Partner talk is really powerful because it also gives agency, and the students get some choice in what they're going to say within the structure of what you've laid out.

Anna Geiger:

I like how you talked about how this is useful in upper grades as well. I think sometimes it might feel like the oral language is the domain of the primary teachers or the preschool teachers, but we need to be building this across the grades by giving kids opportunities to answer questions and complete sentences to a partner because with a class of 25 they can't all answer us.

It also requires everyone to be participating.

You mentioned something like that we often move on too quickly. Is there anything else to avoid or common pitfalls when doing partner talk?

Jocelyn Seamer:

We have to recognize who are the students who need more support in this area. I'll call it being data-driven, but it doesn't mean you have to have a test on everyone.

You know that you have these students who struggle with language, so they may be an English language learner or they may have a formal diagnosis of a language difficulty, they may have autism, or they may not have any diagnosis, but your observation interaction tells you, "Okay, I'm not sure they're quite there in terms of the language." Have them sit in proximity to you so that you can carefully monitor their interactions and partner them with a stronger language user.

With reading, what we'll often do is partner students together who are reading the same complexity of text that they are reading. That works, and that's good. But in oral language, switch it up. Put a stronger language user with a weaker language user because we're hardwired to learn from people around us.

Even if the student with the language challenge is repeating what their partner says, they're getting a strong language model and they're having the opportunity to engage there.

Partnering intentionally and not just sort of letting those children sit on the periphery of the group where they sit there and they don't say anything the whole time because you can't get to them. Be really mindful about who needs more intensity and make sure that they get it.

On the issue of the middle years and upper elementary, and even into high school... Thinking back to the biologically primary versus secondary. Conversational language is biologically primary, academic

language is not, so there's an element of oral language development that is about becoming familiar with language structures of academic writing. That's not just vocabulary but it's syntax and all of those things. Those things will not develop on their own or are unlikely to develop on their own just with exposure.

The oral language piece there is really about helping children build those skills, but also increasing the discourse that happens, really sharing substantive ideas with each other. The older they get, the more that can happen because they have more knowledge to draw on and they have more to say.

Anna Geiger:

When I think about doing this with very young kids, like preschool or kindergarten, I found it helpful to give them a sentence starter.

I was reading a book recently, and it was called *Henry's Awful Mistake*, where there's a duck and he breaks things in the house, and then the water floods the whole house. We were talking about, "I think Henry will..." before we turned to the next page. They all used that, and that really helped them to get started.

As kids get older, are there different scaffolds to pull in, like to use this particular vocabulary word? What are things to do to help middle grade and upper grade kids who maybe are developing normally with oral language but still need more support to get those conversations going?

Jocelyn Seamer:

I think many of the supports are really quite similar. They probably will just need them for a shorter period of time. Things like cloze sentences can be handy for students who struggle in the written form, but that would be for students who have a particular need.

I think exposure and engagement with high quality text is important for every grade, all the way from preschool through the end of high school. Good quality text is so important.

There was a study done where the researchers looked at the frequency of words, the complexity of words, and the number of words in children's literature, and found that the average children's picture book contains more complex vocabulary and more words in general than an average adult television show. Literature is a beautiful source of stretch for students in language.

One of the things that was said to me as an early career teacher teaching in a remote context here in Australia with all of our students who hardly spoke any English at home was to choose a text to study that linguistically sits just a little bit higher than the most capable students in the class.

Without stretch, there's no learning. If we're only exposed to the language we already know, then we're not building anything.

In the upper years, and as children get older, be really mindful that you can stretch them in the text department.

One of the problems that leveling gave us was this perception that we have to find the level of the student and then we find the level of the text and we match it and there's no evidence to support that at all. What there *is* evidence to say that if the text is more complex than the child could handle on their own, then that's where we're going to get growth.

On my podcast I did a series called Research to the Classroom about dyad reading, D-Y-A-D. There's heaps of research about dyad reading, so listeners can go and look that up. They specifically looked at what text will help them.

When we're able to access text, we have these beautiful positive knock-on effects into language because as teachers we can't teach all of the words. There comes a point when vocabulary builds through the text that students are reading themselves.

We know that fewer and fewer children are reading these days, unfortunately, because of screens and that's another whole conversation, I think, so we need to facilitate that in the classroom.

Use beautiful, rich text, and in the early years it's the same thing. We can be really selective about the text that we use. Some books are fun books to read before lunch or a quick read before home time, but they're not rich literature. While decodables are great for practicing lifting words from the page, they're not rich literature either.

We have to be intentional about surrounding children with these rich literature experiences so that they're able to access all those language structures. Then put the supports in such as the partner talks, such as the joint construction of writing about that thing, and really breaking our language down into different components and focusing on them almost one at a time in a way and building up.

I think that's one thing that our whole language colleagues understood was the complexity of language and how the English language works. Some of those older texts can be great to dip into to help us understand how our language is constructed, because many of us have not been taught about the difference between a phrase and a clause and how they are used and all of those things.

We can work on breaking things down into small chunks, working on them one at a time, building it up, embedding it, getting it to be fluent, and then we teach the next thing.

Anna Geiger:

You're saying that we can elevate oral language by choosing texts that will challenge our students, so that we actually have something interesting to talk about.

The next thing we had in our list to talk about was questioning. Of course, the questions we ask can lead to good conversation. Can you talk about what teachers should keep in mind when they're planning questions for texts they're reading to their students or with them?

Jocelyn Seamer:

Yeah. And I'm going to come back to Isabel Beck and Margaret McCowan, and this one was with Cheryl Sandora as well in their book, *Robust Comprehension Instruction with Questioning the Author*.

One of the things they talk about in that book which is just absolutely amazing is the difference between a question and a query. A question has a preconceived answer in mind, and literal questioning just to make sure the students are with you is great. But a query is more open-ended and prompts thinking. Some people call those wonderings, and it's probably the same thing.

Another thing they talk about, which I thought about my own practice and thought, "Oh, wow, I was doing that wrong for so long," was that we give the answer away in the question we ask.

If we ask a question like, "Tell me how John felt when he saw the dog," or "When the dog was chasing him, how did John feel?" You actually probably could have a good guess that if the dog's chasing you, you're probably going to be scared, so the child probably has a 50/50 chance here of answering that question without ever understanding the text.

If the question was, "What was John's response to the dog?" That's very different because you have to have understood the text.

Questioning is really important to get children thinking, and we, in the questions we ask, are often asking questions that are not text-dependent, so children can guess.

Then we also ask the questions in a way that leads to a one-word answer. We've all been hearing about open and closed questions forever and a day. This is not new.

When you're working with your colleagues to plan for instruction, challenge each other around what sort of thinking do we want children to do as a result of this interaction? If we're keeping everything too closed and we're not encouraging them to think about things, then we're probably not in the right direction.

The other thing is we're the ones as the teachers who do all the asking, but how about we get children to ask some questions?

Anna Geiger:

I'm going to go back to the first thing you said. That is very interesting. I really had not thought about that before. Even though it feels like it's a text-dependent question, because the answer is something that you could kind of figure out without reading the text, you're really not finding out if they understand the text. That makes me think of a lot of questions I have for my decodable books that I think I need to go back and look at those again. That's a really good tip.

You also mentioned having kids ask questions. Maybe you can talk about *how* teachers can do that, because we know that asking questions, self-questioning, about a text is a useful comprehension strategy, but how do you get kids to do that and understand how to do it?

Jocelyn Seamer:

There's a lovely matrix that we can use to create scaffolds for children's question asking, and our own question asking as well. In this matrix, down the left-hand side of the matrix, it says, “what, when, where, which, who, why, how.” At the top of the matrix, it says, “is/does, has/was/did, can, should, would/could, will, might.” I'll give you a copy of that matrix so that you can share that with your listeners.

The simplest question is “What does?” or “What did?” That's a very literal question. What did she have for breakfast?

The most complex question is, “How might?” That asks us to think of new possibilities.

Then there's all these combinations in between.

A matrix like this can really help teachers set up the scaffolds for those question starters that you can have children start to ask questions with.

But there's a really important thing we have to remember in this. You can't ask good questions if you don't have knowledge of the text and of the ideas that are in the text. Actively building consciousness of the events of the text, of the characters, setting, all of the implications, and building vocabulary when we're dealing with the text, all of that's really necessary.

Otherwise, we're giving students this surface-level interaction with the text, but we're not giving them a depth of understanding to be able to ask the great questions to start with.

We have to spend, I think, more time in a text than perhaps we typically have been. We've been basing English instruction on text for the longest time, this is not a new idea, but spending a good three or four weeks in one single text, that may be quite different.

It doesn't mean you're only reading the text and doing an activity on the text every day; that would get incredibly boring.

But giving children enough time to build a depth of understanding and be able to really interact with the text well is critical if we're going to get them to speak about the text and ask questions about the text to a high level, and if we're going to make that inclusive.

Anna Geiger:

Maybe you can talk to us about the purpose of having students ask questions about the text. Are they asking these to themselves? Are they asking a peer? Is this to help them remember what's in there, help them process it, or just a checking of knowledge? What exactly is the purpose, and what does it look like?

Jocelyn Seamer:

Yes, to *all* of that, all of those purposes. When it comes to thinking about what's the evidence base here, we know that there are a number of comprehension strategies that are evidence-based, that research shows lead to strong comprehension outcomes. Questioning is one of them. That's all the way back from the National Reading Panel Report that questioning is identified. So yes, it does improve comprehension.

It also gets students ready to start writing, and this is even in our kindergarten children. They may not be writing yet, but they can produce an oral text. They can orally respond and produce an idea about a text.

When I say writing, I guess I'm thinking about representing and engaging with the text.

There are two elements of that, of actually writing, as they get older and they develop all the transcription skills. There's the transcription, putting pencil to paper, being automatic in handwriting and spelling and all of those things.

The other idea is ideation. That's the other part. That's where questioning really comes in. If you want children to write about something, they have to have something to write about. You can tell them what they're going to write about, but that's not nearly the same as them actively engaging in asking questions and answering questions.

The question asking, them generating questions, that they're then going to have their piece of writing answer, particularly in non-fiction writing, is a way for them to organize their thoughts and more successfully get it down onto the paper.

We'll often as teachers give them questions, but we often don't get *them* to ask the questions. We want repeated practice of having them ask questions.

The first time you do this, teachers, expect that there may be crickets in the room and that what the students produce will not be necessarily sophisticated. But as you repeat it, as you're persistent, consistent, and insistent about this, write those three words down, listeners, if you've got a pen nearby. As you engage with the students in that way, they will come to develop it.

And if you're asking them to do something and they're looking at you blankly and they just can't do it, then you have to be the model. Go back to the explicit teaching model. We start with modeling, deconstruct, and joint construction.

In joint construction, make sure everyone's involved. We want full participation, and that's where whiteboards and that sort of thing can come in.

Anna Geiger:

I was with a third grade class recently and we did ReQuest. We read a text together, I think we chorally read it, and then I had to put my copy away and they asked me questions about it, and I had to be able to answer without looking - which showed me that I'm not always paying attention to what I'm reading!

Then it was my turn to ask them questions, and they had to figure them out.

That was very effective, and they were trying to stump me, and having them having to look at the text and figure out a question that would test someone's knowledge of it was actually building their comprehension of it. I can see how doing that with a partner could be useful.

Another thing I've read about is in a text structure lesson, you could ask them a question about it after you've studied the paragraph or the passage. Then they could ask a partner about it, and then they can look at it, think of a question to ask themselves, then turn it over and answer the question without looking. Then if they can't remember, they turn it back over.

Questioning is a way of studying. We know that's useful.

Anything else you want to share about questioning before we move on to the next thing?

Jocelyn Seamer:

As you were describing your experience I was thinking, isn't what you've described the heart of engagement? When we're talking about engagement, we're talking about active thinking and being there in the moment and really attending.

Engagement is not just about fun, although okay sometimes we can have fun, but Miss Jocelyn's number one rule at school is there's no having fun. Just joking, but I do say that to children and they're not quite sure what I mean.

But it's the heart of active engagement which our cognitive neuroscience friends who help inform our instruction, that's what they tell us is absolutely critical. That's what information processing theory tells us is critical - active engagement, rehearsal, practice with it.

Questioning is this vehicle to engagement and it has a whole lot of positive impacts on language, on thinking, on writing, and on comprehension obviously.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, thanks for bringing that up because that's true. Often when we write engaging, we mean fun. It is fun to be learning, not in the same way as a party, but what you're saying is that we want kids to be participating and this type of activity can bring that about for everybody. Thanks for clarifying that.

Something else you mentioned in your courses was talking about a stimulus, like a picture or something. Can you talk about how a teacher might include a routine like that and what that would look like?

Jocelyn Seamer:

Yeah, the stimulus is the concrete example that we can connect with. I'm not sure if you in the U.S. have this same activity, but teachers smile nostalgically in Australia when I talk about, “Do you remember when we used to have a pillowcase, and we would put items from the classroom into the pillowcase?”

Then you would describe it or something would happen with the items, and they'd be secret items and it would be part of the classroom routine.

I'm not sure if you have an equivalent version that people used to do and perhaps that has dropped off. I think what we understood in that, and maybe it was unconscious, but what we were getting out of that was we were creating this way for children to really connect mentally with the thing.

Particularly with students who have English as an additional language, we assume that because we understand them conversationally, that when we speak, they understand the words we're saying. But if you're talking about something that's not firm in their spoken vocabulary and in their understanding, that makes it incredibly difficult for them to engage with the word.

The stimulus can be a real object, it can be an image, it can be a short clip, but it's something concrete that makes meaning. We're coming back to the centrality of meaning in this work.

Explicit teaching in literacy is not the barking at print business where we don't attend to meaning. Meaning must be there.

For me, a stimulus is about focusing attention, making sure that from a comprehension perspective every student is with me.

Also, when you've got that, it's much easier to orally segment and blend words that are in your spoken vocabulary. It's much easier to be fluent when you know the vocabulary. There's a huge link for me between vocabulary and the stimulus, which is one of those things that really makes things real for the students.

One of the structures that a teacher colleague of mine introduced me to was this idea called SCUMPS. You have a hidden object, whatever you're hiding it in is fine. The SCUMPS stands for size, color, use, material, parts, and shape. When you're describing the object for the students, they're not seeing it, but you're describing it according to those categories, and they have to put that together.

That's an oral language activity. That sort of categorization and bringing things together is something that I'm sure speech therapists and pathologists will recognize as being important for the early language development.

Then the students can take those categories of size, color, use, material, parts, and shapes and use that as the basis for their own description, whether that's oral or oral and then writing. Always, always, always talk before we ask students to write. That can help them build their capacity.

It's much harder to do if you say, "Imagine a red train in your mind." That's a much more difficult thing to do than if you've got an actual stimulus.

You can, as a stimulus, use a page from a decodable text, for example, and you can have a talk about it and build meaning, and then you can do some shared writing based on that.

Here's the other thing about a stimulus. It can also be puppets. If you want children to retell stories, which is such an important skill in early oral language development, puppets are a beautiful stimulus. It doesn't have to be fancy; it can be some printouts on a paddle pop stick or a pop stick.

You know, these are all the things we used to do. We used to take the favorite story and make little puppets and have the children sit there and interact with each other and retell the story with the stimulus.

The physical supports the linguistic, and I have no research evidence for that. If anyone knows of any, please share it with me. But my observation as a teacher is that something physical in the space helps to prompt the language and helps students make meaning connections, which helps everything build.

Anna Geiger:

Can you explain how talking about a stimulus is something teachers can build into their day?

Jocelyn Seamer:

It needs to be built in to your teaching routines. One of the goals is to make every lesson a language lesson, and I mentioned the caution about not compartmentalizing oral language on its own.

But on the flip side, it's equally true that if you don't schedule it, it won't happen. We all have the best of intentions. "Oh, I'll just pop that in here. I'll make sure I do it," and then it doesn't happen because the classroom is a really busy place and teaching is a cognitively demanding job.

What I would encourage teachers to do is when they're planning either on their own, or better yet with colleagues, look at what you already have in place. Where can you value add with one of these routines as a regular part of your teaching? When you're working with a rich text, how can you include questioning? How can you include oral retail with a physical resource? How can you include book talk? How can you include the scaffolded sentence structures?

The same goes for any area across the curriculum. It's about making every lesson a language lesson and making oral language and the use of language a core of what we do, because that will facilitate everything else.

It's not a one and done. It needs to be repeated.

Don't leave it to chance. Don't leave it to when I remember. Have a look and see where can you piggyback on the structures you already have in place to value add with an increase in some oral language structures within your day.

Anna Geiger:

Building on what we've already talked about, when I'm planning my lesson, reading or some other subject, when can I build in partner talk? How can I scaffold their answers? How can I support the kids who are struggling with this? How can I build in vocabulary that we've already learned? How can I ask questions using that chart that are going to challenge my students? Although we know literal questions have their place as well, but how can I challenge them? How can I give them opportunities to ask each other questions, or to ask me questions? How can I bring in a stimulus that's physical that kids can see and what questions can I prepare to lead a discussion about that?

Then we're going to talk about one more thing which I really loved from your coursework and that was a daily shared writing procedure because it was very much oral language based. This was for primary grades, I believe. Maybe you can talk to us more about that and how that looks in the classroom?

Jocelyn Seamer:

Sure. I'm not sure what it's like in the US, but here in Australia, there's this huge focus on using PowerPoints.

People are creating PowerPoint presentations for everything, and they're saying to themselves, "Well, we need to see a sentence," so they're typing the sentence onto the slide and then they're flashing the slide.

Okay, that might get you a bit of a shortcut because some of the tension that sits in including all of this is, how do I fit everything in? When the time is so limited, how do I fit it all in? We'll come back to that point.

But my point about the PowerPoint is that in doing that, we are forgetting about the power of shared writing and modeled writing. While it's really tempting just to pop the sentence on the slide and be done with it, we're missing the bit where we are providing the opportunity for the supported practice.

I'm going to come back to the explicit teaching model once again. That shared writing experience, which I think that you can have all across the grades because the complexity of what you'll be writing will increase. That's where the difficulty increases. We're not going to keep writing simple sentences in grade nine when we can already do that. We need to increase the expectation.

That sits in the joint construction with the supported practice. But the mistake in joint construction I used to make was I would say, "We are going to write a sentence. Who can tell me what we'll write about?"

One student in the front puts their hand up and I call on them and they tell me we're going to write about puppies or cats.

I say, "Oh yes, let's write about the cat. Who knows what word we can use to describe the cat?"

Four students would put their hands up and I would select one of them.

Now that's not joint construction. That is two students and I having a chat about a sentence that we might write. How do I know what everyone else is thinking?

I'm sharing this, not because I'm some sort of miracle worker who has never made these mistakes. These were the exact things I used to do until one day I said, "Oh, okay. I've learned a little bit more about full participation and I can see I'm not doing it." When you know better, you do better.

The difference between typically what we've done as a joint construction and what I would encourage now is, if you're looking purely at transcription, then you're just going to decide.

This links to your early years decodable work. When you're trying to reinforce the patterns that you're teaching in the context of sentences and help children build capacity, you would decide.

Perhaps the sentence is, "The cat is big." Then you have that back and forth I described earlier where you point to yourself and say, "The cat is big."

Then you point to the students and they repeat you, and you do that a few times.

This is brilliant for children with English as an additional language or who have a language difficulty because they've got this repeated modeling. "The cat is big. The cat is big. We all know what the cat is. Tell your partner, what's the sentence?"

Now we're stepping back a little bit and they have to tell their partner, "The cat is big."

"Great. Now what we're going to do is write that together. Everyone, what's our first word?"

Then hopefully they say, "The," and if they don't then you repeat your backwards and forwards until they've got it.

You use that and you point out we need a capital letter at the start, and this is one of our high frequency words, or whatever you call it in your school.

"What's our next word?"

"Cat."

Now we have an opportunity to reinforce phonemic skills here because instead of just writing cat, you can have them help you sound it out. All the children together are saying /k/-/ă/-/t/, but don't just do it once, do it three times /k/-/ă/-/t/, and again /k/-/ă/-/t/. They're getting that repeated practice in phonemic skills, but then you're doing the most critical part with the phonemic awareness, you're linking it to graphemes immediately because you're writing it on the board.

You're proceeding that way through to the end of the sentence. This is a highly structured, highly scaffolded version.

Then you cover that up, and you say, “It's your turn to write, students.”

Now, ideally, I’d like them to go back to their desk. We have a little rhyme here, “One, two, three, four, are my two feet flat on the floor? Five, six, seven, eight, is my back up nice and straight?” We want good posture for writing.

They go off to their desk and they write, “The cat is big.” Because they've been a part of co-constructing it, everyone's been involved, they are much more likely to be successful.

Then you show it to them and you mark it together. “Check, did you get a capital letter? Did you put your full stop?” It’s very heavily guided.

If the focus was language production about a rich text we were reading, then I would pose a query. The query might be, “How did the boy feel about the dog?” I would do a little think aloud, “Well, in the story, the boy, John, encountered a dog in the street. Everyone, talk to your partner, how did John feel about the dog?”

Now we're facilitating a discussion because everyone's talking about it. Then you'll give them a moment to talk and you'll monitor the conversation that happens.

Then you come back to the front and you say, “Okay, now I'm going to call on my non-volunteers, no hands up please.” However you manage that, you manage it, whether it's pop sticks or you just call their name or whatever.

You call them and then you take their ideas. You might say, “He was scared of the dog.”

Now you've got your backwards and forwards where you say, “John was scared of the dog.”

Then the other children all say, “John was scared of the dog,” so the children who didn't get that, who didn't make that connection, or who were maybe talking about the latest movie they saw at the movies instead of talking about the book and what you'd asked them to, we're bringing them in and we're making sure they've got the knowledge.

Then we say, “Well, why was John scared of the dog? Talk to your partner again, why was he scared of the dog?” It's dialogic, if I can use that word.

Then you repeat the process and someone will say, “Because the dog was chasing him.”

Now you've got, “John was scared because the dog was chasing him.”

You can take that process that I just described for the joint construction of the sentence and use that.

If we're just practicing transcription, you have the sentence pre-prepared. If you're responding to a text or you want deeper thinking and idea generation, there's talk with your partner about what the ideas will be, but you are ultimately formulating the sentence.

Anna Geiger:

Do you write that big long sentence too?

Jocelyn Seamer:

Assuming they can. For a kindergarten class whose transcription skills were not there, no, that's the end of the writing. They may draw a picture and talk with their partner about that picture. They're still interacting with representing in the way that they can. You might have a couple of students who can

sound out John and dog and run, and they're going to do that. That's fine. What they write matches their current level of transcription. We can't expect writing of children who can't form letters yet.

Anna Geiger:

Basically you're talking about potentially responding to a text, whether that's a decodable text that they've read or a text that you've read to them, then you're forming a sentence together orally.

If it's a sentence that you plan to have them write to practice phonics skills, it's maybe something you've prepared in advance.

If it's something where your focus is more vocabulary or sentence complexity, then you're going to form it together, or maybe do a sentence expansion activity. You'd be asking questions from them maybe as you're writing it, and if you get to words that they can help you with, you'll stop there and have them count the sounds as you write it.

Then, depending on the age and grade, they can go back and write it. But of course, like we said, if they're beginning kindergarten, we're not going to ask them to painfully copy every letter.

Jocelyn Seamer:

And there's little virtue in copying because it's such a passive task.

If children need to copy, let's be honest, their letter formation is likely poor or weak. All they're doing is this painful exercise in trying to form letters that they don't know how to form.

While children are building transcription skills, it's a much more valuable experience that they just draw a picture. And if they can't draw, give them pictures to stick on a piece of paper, or whatever adjustment is needed to enable that student to engage. You may be teaching year one and two and even three, and have children with cognitive disability in your classroom who need this sort of adjustment.

The point is engagement with the text and representing in the way that they can, and then they can add to it.

In the example using the text about the dog and John, if you have students in your class who could write you four or five more sentences about that particular scenario, let them do it. It will probably take them the same amount of time to do that, as it would take some students just to write the sentence on the page. Everyone works for the same amount of time. The length of text they produce and the type of text they produce is dependent on their transcription.

Anna Geiger:

I like that, having a plan in mind for how I'm going to support different students in doing this.

I was in a kindergarten room at the end of this last school year, and we were writing a sentence in response to a text. I had most of the sentence prepared, but there were a few words I wanted them to write themselves. I had some kids, like one little boy who was doing nothing. He was just looking off into space until I got over to him, whereas other kids had done this quickly.

I like having a plan in mind for the kids who are doing well, or who are completing it, where you could say, “Could you write one more sentence on the back?” or “Here's another sentence for you to write.” Understanding that for other kids, it's going to take them just as long just to complete the bare minimum. It’s a really good idea.

We talked at the beginning about how oral language is not just a thing we plug in; it's woven through. This is a really good example because we're doing so much. We're certainly building in vocabulary and comprehension, but we're also building in reviewing phonemic awareness and phonics, and yet we're also building in that talk.

As much talk as we can build into our day, intentionally, is going to help our students grow in oral language.

Jocelyn Seamer:

Absolutely, and I mentioned earlier the tension about time and the worry that we can't fit everything in. Sometimes in skipping these sorts of things... There will be teachers listening saying, "I love the idea of all of that, but I only have 52 minutes for my literacy because that's what my school's given me, and they've told me I have to do other things, so what do I do?"

I think part of the answer is to do less and do it better.

I have this vision in my head, and stick with me everyone, it's a little strange.

In my head, the teacher is riding a horse, and you're leading the students on a journey and some of the students are far ahead, and you're calling out, "Just don't go too far, make sure I can still see you!" Most of the students are walking around you and that's fine, but you have some children who are dangling off a rope from the back of the saddle, and they're sort of being dragged through.

You may all reach the destination at roughly the same time, but did all of the students keep up? No, they didn't because we're dragging them.

Now in the tension about fitting so much in when we go faster to get it in because we have to tick the boxes for curriculum, more and more students end up dangling off the back of the horse by the rope. We're leaving more and more of them behind, and what that means is even the ones who walked, we probably pushed them a little hard, we didn't give them enough consolidation time.

Now we're back to information processing theory which tells us that we have to repeat and refine, repeat and refine, and interact with something many times to build fluency and get it into our long-term capacity.

When we rush because we're trying to do too much, we don't give appropriate consolidation time. Then the next time we go to revisit that part of speech or that vocabulary or that sentence structure, we ask questions of the children and say, "Remember when we learned about verbs?"

And they look at us and say, "What's a verb?"

We have just worked really hard, and we've worked them really hard, and two weeks later, they don't remember what it was that we did because we've rushed.

Give yourselves permission, school leaders, yes, I'm talking to you as well, give yourselves and your teams permission to do a little less and do it better because that will accelerate and deepen learning in the long term because you're not having to come back and start from scratch every single time you want to visit a particular area of instruction.

There's so much *doing* that happens. I think we're best served flipping that thinking to how much *learning* is happening and what are the conditions that we need to create to enable learning and then we just do that.

Anna Geiger:

Excellent, you share a lot of wisdom. I'm sure we could talk for a long time. We talked a long time before we pressed record!

I would definitely encourage teachers to check out your work, including your book and your website. It's good to be on your newsletter because you share a lot of really good information, and also your podcast as well.

Is there anything else you want to alert our listeners to?

Jocelyn Seamer:

No, I think that's about it.

There's one thing that I hope that my work does for people and that's help keep Mildred at bay.

Mildred is the voice in your head, whatever it's called or whatever it looks like, that says "You're not doing enough. You're not clever enough. You're not doing as good a job as you think you should be. Don't you know everyone else has it worked out?" You look at the teachers around you and they all look like they you know have no problems and all of their ducks are in a row. It's just you and Mildred, and Mildred's giving you a hard time.

I want to encourage you to be kind to yourself, to give yourself permission to meet your students where they're at, to do what makes sense and use research-informed practice as the vehicle for that.

It really will help if you just let go of the stuff that you're doing because you think you should, versus the things that are going to really help you concisely and simply get your students where you need them to go.

Anna Geiger:

Thanks so much for joining me today. I really appreciate all the wisdom that you shared, especially because as we said, oral language is a tough one. I think you've got a lot of practical things that teachers can take into the classroom. Thanks again for joining me.

Jocelyn Seamer:

My pleasure. Thanks for having me, Anna.

Anna Geiger:

You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode196. Talk to you next time!

Closing:

That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.