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Talking in Class: New entrant teachers' beliefs about oral language

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ABSTRACT

While oral or spoken language is a primary medium for teaching and classroom communication, there is an absence of literature that relates to the beliefs teachers have about oral language. This study aims to document and discuss seven teachers' beliefs about oral language. To do so, the recording and transcription of the teachers' beliefs about the development of children's oral language, including the strategies and programmes used to assess and promote it in new entrant classrooms, is undertaken. Later, following a period of reflection, each teacher outlines the changes or affirmations to their earlier beliefs, assessments, programmes or teaching strategies that they have considered or implemented. While this study documents the teachers' beliefs, it also discusses them in light of their implications for teaching and learning. In particular, the findings suggest the emergence of a literacy paradigm that includes reading, written and oral language, and within which the teachers view oral language primarily as a conduit to the promotion of reading. Although the teachers discuss how the engagement of learners with and through reading is actively promoted, oral language and its potential to engage five-year-olds in classroom communications, meaning making and learning is not promoted.

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In order to understand the role of oral language in the classroom, this thesis highlights the importance of acknowledging and considering the classroom practitioner's paradigm. Seven highly skilled and dedicated teachers shared their knowledge and beliefs in this project and I wish to acknowledge them with gratitude and respect as part-authors of this project. It was their stories, their experiences and their thoughts that formed the matrix of this study. Without their participation and enthusiasm, their narratives and their responses, this study would not have been possible. Each teacher took time and shared a small vista of their professional landscapes, which allowed us a momentary view of their individual beliefs, thoughts and feelings about oral language and its development on one particular day at one particular time. Possibly, those same phenomena that they shared have long since been discarded, reviewed or reconsidered. As I listened to the beliefs and thoughts shared by each teacher, I, too, was challenged to meet and confront my own beliefs about oral language and its role in the new entrant classroom.

This learning journey would never have been possible without the wisdom, advice, guidance and support of many very special people. In particular, I wish to acknowledge the support of my husband, Peter, and sons, Hugh and Angus. I would also like to record my indebtedness and thanks to all those wonderful past and present colleagues, including the Massey University library staff, who have assisted me along the way. I have not included their names here as some have asked not to be named, and others for fear that one may be omitted inadvertently. I do, however, hope that

each of them will accept this as a personal acknowledgement.

Special mention must also be made of the guided journey afforded by my supervisor Professor Joy Cullen, and co-supervisor, Brian Finch. I recall that, prior to being assigned a supervisor, I was asked to submit the name of the person/s I would like to be approached. I replied that I would be grateful for anyone who would be kind enough to have me! I thank Joy and Brian for their compassion and acknowledge my good fortune. Both Joy and Brian have ensured that I charted the journey, reviewed the map and explored new and challenging mental landscapes and horizons. A record of part of that journey is recounted and represented in the pages that follow.

Shona McDonald

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2.1 Elements of speech and oral language structures

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TRANSCRIPTION KEYS

...	Words deleted
(word)	Definition/meaning making
(<i>kupu</i>)	Maori language
" <i>Word</i> "	Voice of participant/s including captured conversations
[word]	Researcher's transcript addition/s
<u>word</u>	Spoken emphasis
<i>word</i>	Quotations from texts including non-research participants

GLOSSARY

<i>Ako (Maori):</i>	The unified co-operation and symbiotic relationship of teacher and learner undertaking an agreed task that acknowledges the concept that when you teach you also learn.
Assessment:	The process of obtaining evidence of students' achievement or competence and/or the act of interpreting or describing students' achievement.
<i>Awhina (Maori):</i>	Assist or benefit
Decibel (dB):	A logarithmic unit of sound intensity or sound pressure (1 decibel is the faintest audible sound).
Decile:	A ranking given to schools in New Zealand based on statistical information that seeks to reflect the socio-economics of each school's catchment area.
Discourse:	The dialogue and discussions that occur during conversation.
New entrant classroom:	A reception class in New Zealand schools where five-year-old students are traditionally placed.
Intonational contour:	A speaker's ability to add meaning using pitch and emphasis.
Ipsative assessment:	A student evaluates their performance against their previous performance.
Makaton:	A language programme that includes a signing system.

Oral language:	The receiving, making, constructing and transmitting of meaning to others using the spoken word.
Oracy:	The ability to hear, speak and use language for specific purposes in particular contexts (a term attributed to Andrew Wilkinson, 1965).
Reading recovery:	A research-based 1-1 teaching procedure aimed at preventing reading and writing difficulties.
Register:	The range of words, phrases and sentences, utterance choices and language styles that enables a speaker to meet the expectations or needs of a listener – a spoken genre.
Spoken language:	To receive, make, construct and deliver meaning to others using the spoken word.
Text:	A coherent complex of words, messages, signs or symbols that are written, printed or transmitted.
Tomorrow's schools:	A self-managing initiative developed in 1988 for New Zealand schools aimed at reforming education administration.
Vernacular:	The form of spoken language used by a particular group.
<i>Whakawhanaungatanga (Maori):</i>	The process of establishing relationships in a Maori context.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Classrooms are places where teachers and students communicate. Their communications are usually facilitated through spoken, written, gestural or assistive means. However, when teachers and students attempt to transfer or clarify meaning within the classroom, it is predominantly their spoken language that plays a unique and important role. Whether as an individual or as a class group, collective classroom communications require learners and teachers to make and take meaning from one another. Kougl (1997) reminds us that as we live in a communication age: *Communication in the classroom matters more now than ever before because the Information Age is redefining the meaning of knowledge, learning, and teaching and the importance of oral communication skills* (p3).

Origins of the research

The main purpose of oral language is to communicate meaning and to make and take meaning from what others say. Dating from the time of Socrates over twenty centuries ago, oral language has been the primary medium of teaching and learning. Teachers and students have engaged over the centuries in communicative interactions that have involved more than just a transfer of information. Every time a teacher communicates with students and vice versa, each and all become involved in complex exchanges of meanings and interpretations. Today, classroom communications are dependent on who talks to whom, when and how. Oral language is pivotal to

communication and the educational process because it enables students to develop and use concepts to understand and communicate with others. As Long (2000) notes: *Language depends on, and is the basis for, learning and memory, as well as general thinking abilities* (p188).

In particular, I would argue that as students in New Zealand move from the early childhood sector to the new entrant classroom, the communicative transitions that they are required to make to access compulsory education at age five, set important frameworks for later learning. However, the literature indicates that oral language and its development and role in the classroom has, in comparison with reading, been largely neglected.

My interest in spoken communication has arisen not only through my work as a speech-language therapist, but also in my work as a teacher within the early childhood, compulsory and post-compulsory sectors of education. Most recently, as a resource teacher of learning and behaviour, my particular interest in the discourse of the classroom and the influence that a teacher's talk has on students' language, learning and behaviour has been renewed.

Central to this project are the beliefs that new entrant classroom teachers recount about oral language and the roles that oral language plays within and between individuals in the new entrant classroom. Do teachers believe that in new entrant classrooms the primary medium for talking, teaching, learning, meaning making and classroom communications is oral language? What teachers believe about oral or

spoken language and the assessment and development techniques they employ individually and collectively to assess, remediate and accelerate students' oral language and its development within the classroom appears to have received scant attention from researchers. Why is that?

Do teachers believe that the primary mode of language is speech or do they consider writing and reading to be a primary mode of language? Justice (2004) suggests that individuals need to consider carefully what the primary mode of language is and consider the probable time they developed speech versus when they were reported to have developed reading and writing. If a new entrant teacher believes in the primacy of spoken language in the new entrant class setting, then they might also consider that it performs a pivotal role in linking the cognitive and social domains within and between learners. However, in contrast, if a teacher believes the primary mode of language is reading and writing, then they might be less likely to ascribe a role to oral language that links the cognitive and social domains within and between all learners, including the class teacher.

Since 1970, a small group of educational researchers, generally with backgrounds in the area of linguistics, have highlighted the role of talk as a tool for learning within the classroom (Barnes, Britten & Rosen, 1971; Cazden, 1988a; Flanders, 1970; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). However, it would appear that what happens within the classroom in terms of teacher-student language or classroom discourse has received little attention and has remained relatively unchallenged over the years. Why is this so?

Invariably, students within the compulsory sectors of education are required to demonstrate their learning and undertake classroom instruction through oral responses and within a verbal communication system that each teacher establishes. However, the form and content of the oral language register or 'teacherese' that each teacher establishes appears to have received little research attention in New Zealand. While the linguistic proficiency of a five-year-old differs in its form, use and content to that of older students, the transitions in communicative use and understandings that a five-year-old is required to make are, I believe, challenging and noteworthy for learning. Tayler (1992) elaborates on this when he talks about language as the major medium of the classroom.

Language and the communicative context in which language exists is the essence of any learning experience. Language not only reflects covert thinking about one's role, but also reflects those factors which teachers and pupils consider important in relating to others. Language is the major medium through which teaching and learning is conducted... (p123).

The importance of understanding teachers' beliefs about spoken language in classrooms may be central to controlling and improving learning and behavioural outcomes. For example, the way teachers communicate in class may influence the way student's learning progresses. *A teacher who monitors his or her own language in the classroom is in command of a powerful medium of professional self development (Tayler, 1992, p141).*

Teacher talk has interested several researchers, including Mercer (2000), who studied the classroom talk of teachers in several countries. What he noted was that whatever the country, language or culture, teachers use the same traditional conversational teaching techniques of recapitulations, elicitations, repetitions, reformulations and exhortations. Others also identified the unique conversational behaviour that teachers employ, namely telling pupils what to talk, when to talk and how well they have talked (Edwards & Mercer, 1987; Stubbs, 1983). While teaching techniques that utilise spoken language remain a teacher's main tool of trade in the classroom, we know little about the assumptions or beliefs that teachers hold about oral language.

It is acknowledged that students develop the ability to communicate orally not from dictionaries, but from others. If schools wish to enhance and develop the oral communication of young students, Mercer (2000) contends that:

An adult has to make careful judgements about what a child understands at any one point in time, to base their communications with the child upon these judgements, and adapt the kind of intellectual support they give the child to take account of their developing knowledge and understanding. If they do so systematically while engaged in joint activity with the child, the adult can enable the child to make progress which they would not have been able to do alone (p139).

Do teachers go about making careful judgements about a child's oral language and promote its development in a systematic way? The theories and practices espoused by Mercer (2000), and the earlier theories of Vygotsky (1962) and Bruner (1990), clearly link language development with learning. This project hopes to highlight whether classroom teachers subscribe to such theories.

Of particular personal interest have been the varying beliefs that teachers have expressed informally about what is or isn't oral language, how they facilitate its development in the classroom and the importance or otherwise they assign to 'talking in class.' It was a remark made last year by a teacher that provided additional impetus for this project and caused me to reflect on the importance of teachers' beliefs. June (pseudonym) said: "*Oh no, I don't do oral language in my class because Mary is working with them in the morning - she takes them for oral language not me.*" I thank June for her remark as it made me think about the importance of teachers' beliefs and, in particular, beliefs held about oral language.

In the past ten years, interest in the language of the classroom has had a strong literacy focus, although as MacLure (1992) points out, even a simple verbal communication requires all sorts of abilities, ranging from the linguistic and intellectual to the interpersonal, cultural and emotional. While five-year-olds may have an impressive array of knowledge and expertise when they enter school, they still have a long way to go in developing those abilities. It is important to acknowledge that such abilities are usually accomplished when they are acting and talking with each other and adults (Mercer, 2000). Through talking, students establish the conditions

necessary for meaning making. As they make and take meaning from others and the world around them, they continue to practise, refine, transform and shape their tool-kit of oral language to meet ever-changing communicative and learning needs.

While meaning making and meaning taking are essential features of oral language, how teachers believe they promote spoken language within their class and what strategies or programmes they use to do this is less clear, as are the changes to existing beliefs about oral language in new entrant classrooms that might occur following a period of review or reflection. While the central role that teachers can play as change agents is now acknowledged, there is also growing awareness that teaching practice can be influenced by the beliefs that a classroom teacher holds. If we are to examine and consider assisting student's oral language development and the discourse of the classroom, then it would seem paramount that we begin by first seeking to understand and acknowledge the classroom practitioner's paradigm.

Purpose of the study

The aim or purpose of this project is to gain insight into what beliefs teachers have about oral language and its development in new entrant classrooms. However, in order to promote the oral language development of five-year-olds, their teachers' beliefs about the nature and purpose of oral language need to be ascertained. This project involves three phases:

- The first, to document seven teachers' beliefs, experiences and perceptions of the nature and purpose of oral language, including its assessment and

promotion in the new entrant classroom.

- The second, to establish whether each teacher's beliefs, opinions and ideas show evidence of change following a period of review or reflection.
- The third, to narrate the themes, to make meaning from them, and then to reflect, review and consider the issues and implications of the documented material.

The research puzzle and problem

In a classroom of five-year-old students, spoken language presents as the all-pervasive primary medium for teaching, learning and classroom communications, although little research into the beliefs, theories or practices that teachers have about student's spoken language and its development has been undertaken.

The research questions

- What beliefs about the nature and purpose of oral language are held by new entrant teachers?
- How do teachers believe they assess a five-year-old student's oral language and facilitate its development?
 - When asked to undertake a reflective assignment, do teachers confirm, challenge or modify their beliefs about oral language?

It is hoped that with an understanding of the complexity and interrelatedness of teachers' personal experiences, beliefs and practices, a greater understanding about teaching, learning and meaning making in the new entrant classroom will result.