



Talking the talk

When a child starts school at five years of age, their worlds of saying and doing expand exponentially. In order for children to thrive and reach their full potential as learners, their ability to express themselves in the classroom is essential. Their competency in oral expression is intrinsically linked to their cognitive development and is vital for their future learning.

Recent research by Jannie van Hees, specialist in linguistics and pedagogy, and teacher educator at the Faculty of Education, reveals that five and six-year old children in low socio-economic schools in New Zealand start school with significant gaps in their vocabulary and expressive competency in English compared to same age peers in higher socio-economic schools.

While there are developmental and environmental factors affecting each student's on-entry ability to express themselves in English, Jannie believes the classroom environment has the greatest potential, outside the home and family, to provide the quality and quantity of interaction and oral expression that children need to exponentially expand their English language resources to support their ongoing learning and development.

Her doctoral study, using leading-edge video analysis software together with a focused professional development intervention, has shown that when teachers pay explicit attention to optimising patterns of interaction and oral expression in the classroom, students increase their language resources markedly and their expressive potential is enhanced.

"If children can't competently and confidently express themselves, and are not given multiple opportunities to express in the classroom, teachers can't know what students know and understand, or what they think," says Jannie. "Children need a rich environment of expressive interaction where they are gifted language alongside being able to frequently try out language. It is paramount that we, as educators, look at how we can optimise the classroom environment so that children's potential to use and acquire language is nurtured, supported and developed."

In New Zealand, children in socio-economically advantaged

communities generally start school with a working vocabulary of 6,000 or more words in English. They have well established and age-appropriate language resources that enable them to understand the language of the classroom and to express their meaning orally. Jannie notes that based on evidence, children from low socio-economic communities start school with a receptive and expressive vocabulary of fewer than 3,000 words in English and, as a result, have great difficulty expressing their ideas fluently and coherently in English. This places considerable constraints on their ability to fully engage and participate in the classroom and effectively transition into literacy.

Jannie's study involved a series of assessments and in-depth video observations, taken before and after a professional development intervention, in Year 1 and 2 classrooms in four low socio-economic schools in Auckland – a total of 80 students and four teachers.

"If we (teachers) don't view and analyse our lessons, we miss critical realities about what is occurring in the classroom," says Jannie. "Using video analysis allowed me to examine pedagogical 'habitus of practice' and analyse its effects on learning, and on students' participation and expression. I wanted to gain insights into such critical questions as, 'What is the effect on students' expressive potential when teachers do most of the talking?' and



‘What happens when the teacher asks a lot of questions?’”

Each of the 80 students was assessed to identify their interactional, expressive and communicative behaviours in class, using the CombiList. Based on teacher observations, the CombiList rated each child on each of 16 expressive and participatory criteria. An overall best fit was found for each student – either Yes, Sometimes or No.

“Currently, assessment of children’s oral expression tends to be largely impressionistic,” suggests Jannie. “There is no tool or rubric that is used consistently in and across schools to specifically identify students’ expressive and participatory behaviours in the classroom. The CombiList has huge potential as an easy-to-use tool that schools can use to identify the expressive and participatory behaviours of each child and the class as a whole.”

Jannie randomly selected twelve case study students for close tracking in her study – one Yes, one Sometimes and one No from each of the four classes. A number of self-generated oral texts produced by each case study student were video recorded and analysed and a vocabulary assessment, using the British Picture Vocabulary Scale (BPVS), assessed each students’ receptive (listening) vocabulary.

The initial BPVS analysis of the case study students’ vocabulary resources revealed 10 of the 12 students had a significant gap in vocabulary when compared to the expected average for students of their age. “Five students were 10-17 months below and five students were as much as 20-27 months below,” says Jannie. “These five and six-year old students had the vocabulary resources of three or four-year olds.”

At the heart of the study were the video recordings of three ‘typical’ lessons in each of the four classrooms. Using four cameras, one camera on each of the case study students, and one on the teacher and the class, Jannie recorded each 30 minute lesson. Using human behaviour software, she micro-analysed the videos captured before the intervention to identify the interactional and language patterns operating in these classrooms and to ascertain how closely these aligned with optimal first language acquisition conditions.

“The results revealed that the case study students were expressively constrained in the classroom environment,” says Jannie. “Many of them didn’t have the opportunity to express orally and were not effectively scaffolded by the teacher to enhance the child’s existing competencies.” She notes that students’ responses in class tended to be “few, minimal in length and grammatically simple, with teachers doing much of the talking and not providing optimal conditions for students’ quality and quantity of expression.”

The four teachers in the study then participated in a series of professional development workshops designed to provide theoretical and practice knowledge about optimising classroom conditions to enhance the quality and quantity of students’ expression. The workshops were broadly divided between linguistic and interactional theory and practice. “The emphasis was on the teacher paying explicit attention to the how, what, when and by whom, of expression in the classroom,” Jannie explains, “with the overall aim being to align teacher practice with identified optimising conditions for language acquisition and use.”

After the intervention the classroom teachers spent a term implementing what they had learned. Jannie then reassessed the students and video recorded three more lessons in each of the four classrooms. With this she was able to make comparisons and examine the effects of the changes made by teachers to the interactional and expressive patterns in each of the classrooms and the impact this had on the quality and quantity of students’ oral expression and participation behaviours and levels.

Her findings revealed that when teachers implemented changes that optimised conditions in the classroom, students expressed more frequently and their expression was more extension and more grammatically complex. Students more actively and meaningfully engaged and participated in dialogue and expression throughout each lesson, and increasingly:

- Took time to think and prepare to speak.
- Initiated and sustained talk and communication.

- Took turns to express frequently and confidently in pairs and a large group.
- Expressed more fully, with greater grammatical complexity, richer vocabulary and enhanced content details.
- Engaged in more frequent interactions, communication and conversation with others.
- Improved their listening to others’ expression and responded accordingly.
- Sought to know and express more.
- Expressed with more relevance and meaning.
- Developed confidence to lead the way and topic at times.

“In one lesson, for example, where students and the teacher were co-constructing a narrative, a student who had barely participated previously, was now highly active expressively with frequent interactions which were effectively guided and prompted by the teacher,” says Jannie. “The student became increasingly confident, fluent and contributory. At the end of the lesson she was able to retell the narrative without support or prompting – it was amazing to see and hear.”

Jannie believes that at the earliest possible point, schools need to have more information about a child’s ability and capacity to express. “It is critical that we identify what a student’s current expressive resource base is as early as possible when they start school,” she says. “Through careful examination of what goes on in the classroom we can begin to understand how, when and why students engage, participate and express, and the effects of what we say and do as teachers has on this.”

“Given that children are in class six hours a day, five days a week, 42 weeks of the year, expressive and interactional conditions in the classroom need to be as optimal as possible in order to make significant in-roads into minimising the ‘infamous’ long tail of underachievement. With a mindset and pedagogical shift by teachers, students who enter school expressively constrained can move ahead in leaps and bounds”.