Assessment of Oral Language and Early Literacy in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature Review

Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework

Danielle Anzai, Sandra Knowles, Dan Cloney, Pam Munro-Smith & Pru Mitchell
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Citation

Anzai, D, Knowles, S, Cloney, D, Munro-Smith, P & Mitchell, P 2021, Assessment of Oral Language and Early Literacy in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature Review, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, Melbourne.
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The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) guides early childhood professionals in their work with children and families. It sets out eight Practice Principles that provide a foundation for achieving the five nationally agreed Early Years Learning Outcomes of the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Australian Government 2009).

The VEYLDF’s five Learning and Development Outcomes for children from birth to eight years connect the Learning Outcomes from the Early Years Learning Framework to the first three levels of the Victorian Curriculum Foundation–10 (VCAA 2017a). This reflects the evidence that children continue to develop rapidly throughout the first eight years of life, and benefit from continuity in their learning experiences during this time. The five Outcomes help early childhood professionals to plan for and assess children’s learning and development and also provide a common language to support collaborative approaches between early childhood professionals and families. The five Learning and Development Outcomes are:

1. Children have a strong sense of identity.
2. Children are connected with and contribute to their worlds.
3. Children have a strong sense of wellbeing.
4. Children are confident and involved learners.
5. Children are effective communicators.

This literature review is part of a series of reviews designed to assist Victorian early childhood professionals to implement the VEYLDF.

The primary focus of this review is supporting early childhood professionals to monitor children’s progress in relation to the Outcome: Children are effective communicators, in particular that children are effective oral communicators. As the Outcomes are closely related, this review may also assist in monitoring progress towards other Outcomes. For example, children’s ability to communicate is closely associated with their sense of wellbeing and identity, and helps with confidence in learning, while the development of expression (a key component of oral communication) expands children’s ability to connect with and contribute to their worlds. Early childhood professionals are, therefore, encouraged to read this review with children’s holistic development in mind.

The VEYLDF also includes eight Practice Principles to guide evidence-based practice:

1. Reflective practice
2. Partnerships with families
3. High expectations for every child
4. Respectful relationships and responsive engagement
5. Equity and diversity
6. Assessment for learning and development
7. Integrated teaching and learning approaches
8. Partnerships with professionals.

This series of reviews focuses primarily on the Practice Principle: Assessment for learning and development. The series’ relevance extends across the other principles as well, reflecting the integrated nature of early childhood practice.
Executive summary

This literature review is one of a series of reviews to support Victorian early childhood professionals to assess children’s learning and development in relation to the five Learning and Development Outcomes in the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF). This review focuses on the Outcome: Children are effective communicators, and specifically on children as effective oral communicators. Focussing on the development of oral language and early literacy in the early years, this literature review sets out to provide a resource that will equip early childhood professionals with the knowledge to identify and assess children’s progress in oral language and early literacy development.

Section 1 defines oral language and early literacy, and describes the key components of the Outcome: Children are effective communicators that relate to oral communication:

- Children interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes.
- Children engage with a range of texts and get meaning from these texts.
- Children express ideas and make meaning using a range of media.

This focus on oral language underscores its importance in early literacy and in children’s right to expression. Strong oral language skills predict children’s success in life. The ability to communicate effectively is key to learning. Oral language competency also underpins children’s transition to literacy, particularly reading.

Oral language is a priority area of knowledge and informed practice for all early childhood professionals.

This review defines the types of oral language practices as functional, conversational and narrative:

- Functional communication involves language used in day-to-day situations, such as greeting someone, asking for something, giving an instruction or apologising.
- Conversational communication is a sustained exchange of ideas between two or more people that extends beyond functional communication and may involve developing concepts or shared ideas.
- Narrative communication involves giving a continuous account or sequence of connected events or experiences, for example retelling a story.

This literature review proposes a model (see Figure 1) that reminds early childhood professionals that each type of oral communication has both expressive and receptive modes. Expressive communication is the use of verbal or non-verbal communication to express one’s needs or ideas to another person. Receptive communication is the comprehension of what is being communicated by another person.

The second part of this model emphasises the importance of oral language in providing a strong foundation for literacy, including the development of reading and writing.

Table 2 shows the four skills of communication that are particularly important to the domain of oral language and early literacy: vocabulary, language structures, language pragmatics and comprehension.

This table provides a practical classification of oral communication skills that early childhood professionals can reference when planning opportunities for children.
Section 2 explains the principles for assessing children as effective oral communicators. In assessing children’s oral language and early literacy, educators may have questions about how to select appropriate measures, administer assessments, interpret the results, and translate their findings into planning and communication to parents. The following six principles of assessment in this review can support early childhood professional assessment practice:

- Assessment has a defined purpose.
- Assessment addresses established constructs of learning.
- Assessment enables early childhood professionals to describe a trajectory of development.
- Assessment includes children’s own reports or expectations of their knowledge, skills and abilities.
- Assessment is valid, reliable and fair.
- Assessment involves the child’s community and informs professional partnerships.

Section 3 identifies a range of tools available to support early childhood professionals in their assessment of children’s oral language and early literacy. A matrix shows how the tools selected for this literature review address each of the oral communication strands of vocabulary, language structures, language pragmatics and comprehension.

Section 4 describes the following 10 assessment tools in more detail.

- Assessment of Literacy and Language (ALL)
- Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) Pre–K
- Every Child a Talker (ECaT)
- Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDIs)
- Narrative Scoring Scheme (NSS)
- Pragmatic Language Skill Inventory (PLSI)
- Preschool Language Scales, 5th edition – Australian and New Zealand Language Adapted (PLS-5-ANZ)
- Test of Language Development – Primary, 5th edition (TOLD-P:5)
- Test of Narrative Language, 2nd edition (TNL-2)
- Wiig Assessment of Basic Concepts (WABC).

This review concludes by bringing together the findings to discuss how early childhood professionals can apply these findings in their practice, and what future work is needed for the development of high-quality assessments to support measurement of children’s oral language and early learning.
Introduction

The VEYLDF sets out the broad areas of children's learning and development that educators support through their professional practice. To successfully support children’s learning and development in these outcome areas, it is essential that educators understand what growth looks like and how to collect evidence of their contribution to that growth.

This literature review focuses on the Outcome: Children are effective communicators. Throughout this review, communication is considered specifically in terms of children’s oral language and literacy from birth to eight years of age. After defining and describing the components of oral language and its development in this age group, the review examines a set of tools that are available to educators and that can be used to assess children as effective oral communicators.

This literature review has been written to support professional learning for a range of qualified early childhood professionals, and to promote an increased awareness of the importance of oral language for all children. It follows the structure of other literature reviews in this series and sets the discussion of assessment within the context of the VEYLDF and the rights of the child.

This literature review restricts its focus to the description and assessment of oral communication. Beyond highlighting the links between oral language and emergent literacy, it does not deal with the equally important process of learning to read, that is, the ability to decode and read words. There are many frameworks available for teaching and understanding this area of literacy in those educational contexts where it is most relevant: the early years of school.

Why focus on oral language?

Oral language is important in early or emergent literacy. Two reasons, in particular, support this focus.

Firstly, children have a right to freedom of expression, which is enshrined in Article 13, of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified by Australia in 1990. In order for a child to exercise this right, they must have the requisite language skills ‘seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds’ (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA] 1989). The preschool child’s primary means of self-expression is likely to be verbal.

Secondly, strong oral language skills and good quality early language teaching predict a child’s success in life. Language, and the ability to communicate effectively, is key to a student’s capacity to learn in general ways (Munro 2011), as well as in formal schooling (Houen et al. 2019). Recent research concerning children in preschool and the first years of school supports the notion of oral language competencies underpinning children’s transition into literacy (Hay & Fielding-Barnsley 2012; Munro 2011).

Seminal theories and studies of reading describe an inextricable link between early language development and later reading achievement (IOM & NRC 2015). Variations in oral language ability account for differences in reading comprehension, and are more significant than age, non-verbal ability, or non-word reading (Nation & Snowling 2004). Oral language is a foundational element that ‘must be understood if teachers are to maximise the opportunities of all children to become independent readers’ (Konza 2014, p. 2). Supporting children to develop oral-language skills is a priority for all early childhood professionals.
Section 1: How are children defined as effective oral communicators?

The VEYLDF describes the development of children’s communication from gestures and sounds to language and conversations. Three of the five key components of the Outcome: Children are effective communicators relate to oral language, and these will form the basis of this review:

- Children interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes.
- Children engage with a range of texts and get meaning from these texts.
- Children express ideas and make meaning using a range of media.

The remaining two key components of this VEYLDF Outcome are about children’s understanding of how symbols and pattern systems work, and their use of information and communication technologies. These key components are beyond the development of oral language and warrant their own literature review.

There are a number of ways to describe the place of oral language and literacy within the overall development of communication in young children. The previous overarching communication literature review in this series, by Verdon et al. (2018), presents oral communication as one of three modes of communication: oral, written and multimodal, as shown in Table 1.

The two columns in Table 1 remind us that effective communication has both expressive and receptive modes. **Expressive communication** is the use of verbal or non-verbal language or communication to express one’s needs, wants or ideas to another. **Receptive communication** is the comprehension (or understanding) of what is being communicated by another person. Both receptive and expressive modes are essential in the development of oral language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Receptive</th>
<th>Expressive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oral</td>
<td>Listening/comprehension</td>
<td>• Talking (language, speech sounds, fluency, voice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Singing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>• Handwriting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Spelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Typing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Drawing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multimodal</td>
<td>Looking (for example, receiving sign language or pictures)</td>
<td>• Signing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Gesturing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Representing ideas digitally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Using a voice output device</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the Victorian Curriculum English F–2, the oral language mode is referred to as speaking and listening. In the early years of school there is particular emphasis on the formal and informal ways oral language is used to convey and receive meaning.

Speaking and listening involves development and demonstration of knowledge about the appropriate oral language for particular audiences and occasions, including body language and voice. It also involves the development of active-listening strategies and an understanding of the conventions of different spoken texts (VCAA 2017b).
Communication practices

The ability to make meaning, to understand and to be understood is the overriding purpose of communication. While there are a ‘potentially infinite number of functions’ (Thwaite 2019, p. 53) of oral language, this review considers the practices of oral language and early literacy as the model illustrates (see Figure 1). This model categorises the types of oral communication practices in three ways: functional, conversational and narrative.

**Functional** communication involves language used in day-to-day situations, such as greeting someone, asking for something, giving an instruction or apologising.

**Conversational** communication is a sustained exchange of ideas between two or more people that extends beyond functional communication, for example chatting with a friend, negotiating an outcome or discussing what to do next during play.

**Narrative** communication is a continuous account of connected events or experiences. A narrative may be real or imagined.

Each of the three types of oral communication practices has both a receptive and an expressive mode. For example, functional communication involves being able to express one’s needs, and the ability to understand another person’s request.

In keeping with the focus on oral language, the model shows the importance of oral language and early literacy as the foundation for the development of reading and writing (literacy).

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**ORAL LANGUAGE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional</th>
<th>Conversational</th>
<th>Narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Receptive and Expressive</td>
<td>Receptive and Expressive</td>
<td>Receptive and Expressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can understand requests and express my needs</td>
<td>I can understand and use social and conversational language</td>
<td>I can understand and use narrative language and structures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**LITERACY SKILL DEVELOPMENT**

I have a strong foundation of oral language skills from which to develop reading and writing

---

_Figure 1 Oral language and early literacy practices and skills_
This model provides a practical classification of oral communication that early childhood professionals can reference to ensure children have the opportunity to develop skills across these three core types of communication practices. With functional communication positioned on the left side in the diagram, it may be tempting to view this as a horizontal progression, with the value of each practice increasing with the maturity of the child. This is not the case. In fact, conversational communication features very early in an infant’s development, and children who experience books and songs from birth demonstrate receptive appreciation of narrative stories and songs. This indicates the value of early childhood professionals understanding each of these practices from the earliest ages, and incorporating functional, conversational and narrative communication practices into their programming and assessment.

Detailed description of the importance of functional, conversational and narrative communication follows, to encourage early childhood professionals to think about how children might demonstrate progress in each of these practices.

**Functional communication**

**What is functional communication?**

Functional communication involves verbal and non-verbal communication used in day-to-day situations, such as asking for something, or giving or receiving an instruction. It is outcome-oriented communication, in which the goal is to 'transmit an intended meaning (informational and/or persuasive) accurately and effectively, and in which communication is merely a means to an end' (Chandler & Munday 2016, n.p.). Functional communication is also referred to as instrumental communication.

There are several elements of communication: what a person communicates, how they express it and how others receive that communication. A child who is an effective functional communicator can understand requests made of them and can also explain their own needs in a way that is understood and accepted by the other person. Functional communication often begins as gestures, such as pointing, and develops into the expression of single words and then the connection of a few words, and so on. Functional communication is largely foundational, in that it is the expression of basic wants and needs that we as humans are most motivated to learn. However, it continues to be relevant as a child’s oral language develops. The child learns to follow instructions (and to sequence several at a time), as well as context-specific language that serves particular purposes.

Eye contact is an important component of communication, as is joint attention, which is a particular skill that involves directing someone’s attention with eye contact and gestures and/or language in order to share a moment with that person (Akhtar & Gernsbacher 2007). Soon after birth, a child learns to respond to a person, trying to gain joint attention by following the other person’s gaze. Children gradually begin to initiate joint attention, perhaps pointing to a toy and gazing at an adult to get them to look at the same toy. As children get older, they will use verbal cues to get this attention, such as ‘look’ or ‘what’s this?’ By the age of three, children are usually competent at gaining and maintaining joint attention from adults and other children (Growing Early Minds 2020). This is a vital skill for developing social communication and cognitive skills.

**Functional communication** is a term used in a specific way by specialists working with children who have communication impairments, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder. Functional Communication Training is an intervention aimed at reducing a child’s challenging behaviour. It involves identifying the triggers for the behaviour, then intentionally teaching a socially appropriate communication response to replace that behaviour (Gerow et al. 2019). Note that the assessment of children with disability, and research relating to programs of this type, is beyond the scope of this literature review.
Why is functional communication important?

From an early age the expression of wants and needs is essential to a child’s wellbeing. Parent–child interaction plays an important role in early language development, due to the child’s desire to communicate their needs and wants, and the motivation to imitate and experiment with language (Scull & Bremner 2013). For a young child, not having their needs understood is a source of frustration that can often lead to challenging behaviour (Gregg 2017). Toddlers with better language skills have been shown to express less anger at four years of age, with one study observing that a child’s ability to self-regulate during a waiting task was linked to their ability to ask for support or to distract themselves with self-talk or counting (Roben et al. 2013).

A study by McCormack et al. (2010) investigated preschool children’s feelings about their difficulties when communicating. The study found that, in most cases, the child did not see themselves as having a speaking problem but that the problem was the listening skills of others.

Wellbeing is also an important part of functional communication, specifically, keeping a child safe from harm. Knowing what the word ‘stop’ signifies, for example, is necessary for safety. As children develop and grow, their understanding of other key words serves a similar purpose, such as ‘stop, look and listen’ for road rules.

As a child gets older, functional communication develops to include specific technical concepts and vocabulary required for everyday living, such as numeracy (evident when they ‘demonstrate an increasing understanding of measurement and number using vocabulary to describe size, length, volume, capacity and names of numbers’ [VCAA 2017(a)].

How can early childhood professionals support and assess functional communication?

Children’s oral communication is particularly influenced by the modelling of other people in their lives. Early childhood professionals contribute directly to children’s language development simply through their routine interaction. It is essential in the early stages of children’s oral language development to encourage children to use words, phrases and gestures that express their needs, and to support their ability to understand and follow requests. Increasing basic and context-specific vocabulary greatly supports children in their functional communication skills.

All adults engaging with very young children can model effective functional communication. This may include intentional use of facial expressions and gestures, demonstrating functional language for specific purposes, and encouraging children to clearly finish their words or sentences themselves, rather than rushing in to finish for them.

The importance of functional communication is evident in everyday life and in the routines of an early childhood setting. In fact, studies reveal that most of the language interactions children have with adults are generally of a functional or basic quality, such as giving directions and providing information (Franco et al. 2019). There will, however, be variations in the quality of adult talk that children experience in early childhood settings (IOM & NRC 2015) and it is important that early childhood professionals extend the quality of their communication both within and beyond functional communication.

Research shows that preschool children demonstrate higher levels of literacy achievement in the following years when they have preschool teachers who actively develop students’ language skills by modelling the use of more sophisticated vocabulary, engaging children actively in talk about books, and using more complex syntax (Dickinson & Porche 2011; Paatsch & Nolan 2020).
These findings underscore the importance of the other two elements of the oral communication model in Figure 1. The model highlights the more complex communication practices of conversation and narrative, and encourages early childhood professionals to increase their focus on planning for quality interactions (Franco et al. 2019; Tonge et al. 2019).

The Raising Children Network provides simple strategies for quality interactions in communicating with babies and toddlers. Evidence for Learning has oral language resources, including tip sheets, for enhancing the quality of oral interactions with young children:

- Creating spaces for children's talk
- Curious about questions
- Keeping the conversation going.

The Every Child a Talker project has inspired a set of posters about ways to promote quality oral interactions.

Conversational communication

What is conversational communication?

Communication involves both understanding and expression. This is most perfectly illustrated in conversational communication where multiple participants engage in sustained and reciprocal exchanges about a shared topic. Conversation is a communication practice in which the primary focus, or a key aspect, is ‘the relationship between the participants’ (Chandler & Munday 2016, n.p.). Conversation is also referred to as conversational discourse, or dialogic communication.

Some of the key features of conversational communication include:

- dialogue – a sustained exchange that extends beyond a simple initiation–response–evaluation pattern. It features a series of topically linked exchanges (DET WA 2013)
- interactivity – the sharing of ideas in an organic, non-scripted way that cannot be controlled by one participant (DET WA 2013)
- progression of ideas – in which the dialogue builds rationally on the participants’ ideas in order to ‘promote and improve shared understandings of a topic or theme’ by, for example, using linking words or explicit references to previous comments (DET WA 2013)
- sustained shared thinking – in which participants work together to solve a problem, clarify a concept or evaluate an activity (Siraj-Blatchford 2010).

Infants and adults engage in conversational communication long before a child can use words. These very early conversations are two-way, sustained exchanges in which each participant smiles, vocalises with expression, pays attention to the other’s action and responds, often copying what the other does.

Why is conversational communication important?

Developing skills in conversational communication is an important developmental task of early childhood. Children use conversation in functional communication because they can get their needs met. However, conversational communication must go beyond this if children are to make connections and learn new concepts. The VEYLD Illustrative Map for Communication (VCAA 2017a) reinforces these two important aspects of conversational communication in developing children who:

- are independent communicators and initiate Standard Australian English and home language conversations, and demonstrate the ability to meet the listener’s needs
- interact with others to explore ideas and concepts, clarify and challenge thinking, and negotiate and share new understandings.
When the child is involved in a conversation, they benefit when the other person is responsive, the conversation is sustained and the other person repeats or confirms the child's language and then elaborates on it: using language in context (Atkins-Burnett et al. 2010). Conversation plays a central role in the construction of experience and knowledge (Innes 2017). If participants in a conversation contribute knowledge, ideas, arguments and experiences, this can develop and extend each person's understanding and lead to sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford 2010).

Factors contributing to the development of oral language skills include child-to-child conversation through imitative play interactions, and the frequency and quality of educator–child language exchanges (Cabell et al. 2015; Wasik & Hindman 2011).

How can early childhood professionals support and assess conversation?

The principal way teachers can support young children's language is by engaging in conversation that is rich and sustained, and 'by enhancing their own dialogue, questioning and talk with children' (Beatson 2019, p. 74). Researchers observing interaction patterns in early childhood settings noted that children had more verbal interactions with their peers than with adults, and that very few of these child-to-child conversations were sustained for more than two turns. These children's language interactions with teachers were also of a basic or functional quality rather than complex (Franco et al. 2019).

Research shows that teachers' use of high-quality language is linked to individual teacher's differences in language and literacy skills. High-quality oral language environments are those in which 'children are not only exposed to complex and varied language, but that engage children in sustained conversations, provide opportunities for exploration and expression (for example, using gestures, words and sentences) and allow them to communicate their thoughts, feelings and ideas' (Houen et al. 2019, p. 4).

Further studies of child and adult conversation in early childhood settings indicate that conversations in which educators use elicitations (drawing out further details from the child) and extensions (adding new information) are positively associated with children's vocabulary gains. Cabell et al. (2015) identify important areas to increase educator–child engagement that include multi-turn conversations, child-initiated conversations and improved educator use of conversational strategies. By providing conversational structure and support, early childhood professionals can direct their conversations with children from the contextualised (here and now) to the decontextualised (extended beyond the immediate moment), thereby promoting literacy learning (Scull & Bremner 2013).

These findings challenge early childhood professionals to notice and compare the balance of functional and conversational communication that occurs currently in their practice, and to investigate ways of increasing opportunities for rich conversations between adults and children. One researcher found that nature-based early childhood programs provided opportunities for inquiry, theorising, questioning and conversation. They theorised that adults appeared to 'slow down' in this environment, which allows for time for language opportunities, conversation and sustained shared thinking. They also noted the possibility of space for children to develop private talk or to create their own language (Beatson 2019). Early childhood professionals in other settings might consider how these findings could inform the creation of spaces to encourage conversation in their environment.

Conversations also provide opportunities for early childhood professionals to learn about a child's oral language skills. Observation of a child's conversation is the basis of a number of assessment tools and research studies. Observing conversations can help to understand a child's ability to use pragmatic features of oral language, such as turn-taking
and initiation. It also provides an ‘authentic’ way to assess auditory comprehension, based on a child’s responses to questions (Curenton et al. 2019).

Narrative communication

What is narrative communication?

A narrative is defined as ‘a story of events, experiences, or the like, whether true or fictitious’ (Macquarie Dictionary 2020). Narrative communication refers to a type of language and structure in the form of the extended discourse that appears in most books (Konza 2014). Narrative communication contrasts with conversational communication, being a continuous account of connected events or experiences. As a child listens to stories and recounts them, whether real or imagined, they begin to understand and use narrative language and structures. The type of ‘book’ or ‘documentary’ language that children learn through exposure to quality texts is significantly different to the conversational and functional language they are exposed to in everyday communication and provides opportunities to increase their knowledge of vocabulary and sentence structures.

Why is narrative communication important?

Using and understanding narrative language and structure is critical for the development of listening, reading comprehension and written composition skills (Konza 2014). Oral language development that is focused on a variety of quality texts provides the foundation for the development of these skills. Children’s receptive and expressive oral language skills are developed through listening to a quality text being read aloud and discussing that text. Discussions about quality literature expose children to abstract language and concepts uncommon in adult–child conversations and improve their capacity to interpret and talk about a wide range of concepts and ideas that arise in texts (Anderson 2016). Children are exposed to a wide range of concepts and ideas when they are read to and encouraged to talk about different types of texts. Texts should broaden children’s view of the world through fiction and non-fiction narratives that cover a broad range of topics, diverse cultures and gender roles.

These text-based discussions also expand children’s ability to use and understand the broader, richer vocabulary and more complex syntax that they are likely to encounter in quality texts. Narrative is the predominant form of oral communication that children work with in the early years of schooling. For example, Victorian Curriculum English Foundation Level Literacy: Interacting with Others includes:

- listen to and respond orally to texts and to the communication of others in informal and structured classroom situations using interaction skills, including listening while others speak
- deliver short oral presentations to peers, using appropriate voice levels, articulation, body language, gestures and eye contact.

As children progress in school, ‘the cognitive and linguistic demands on the reader are increased in more complex texts which require knowledge of less familiar words and language patterns’ (Chall & Curtis 1991, p. 351). There is further research that supports an association between children’s knowledge of narrative structure and phonological awareness (Hipfner-Boucher et al. 2014). Results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that students who are read to when they are young tend to have higher PISA scores at age 15, regardless of socio-economic differences (Anderson 2016).

As well as hearing narrative language, children need to be developing their own expressive narrative skills by telling stories, recounting events and presenting what they know to others. The ability to tell a coherent narrative predates and predicts successful adaptation to school literacy (McCabe & Rollins 1994) and leads to better understanding of the techniques used in narrative (Anderson 2016). These include the basic structure of ‘beginning, complication and resolution’, and the
successful use of details and vocabulary to create effect. Children practise these techniques in their own oral storytelling. From about 22 months of age, children may start recalling past events with assistance. Between the ages of three and five years they develop longer personal stories and retell texts, fantasies and play-based narratives (McCabe & Rollins 1994). This all helps to solidify their understanding of narrative, leading to a stronger foundation in comprehension.

How can early childhood professionals support and assess narrative communication?

Participation in shared reading experiences is well associated with children's language and literacy outcomes (Pentimonti et al. 2012). Reading to children on a regular basis and from a variety of texts is an essential part of building their foundational literacy practices, and further support can be offered through the quality of the interactions between children and early childhood staff. The Young Learners' Project identified different approaches to questioning from an analysis of shared book reading sessions 'to determine the opportunities teaching questions prompted for children's use of extended language' (Raban et al. 2012, p. 29). Further scrutiny of the evidence revealed the questions that offered the most substantial opportunities for children's extended talk and more complex language use. The findings were similar to those of other studies that show closed questions were less likely to build oral language facility or literacy skills (Konza 2011).

This research suggests that children’s oral language skills benefit when early childhood professionals are encouraged to understand different perspectives on literacy development, to identify ways in which they can be reconciled, and to reflect on their own practice in light of this knowledge. If early childhood professionals expand their ‘repertoire of practice’ to involve children in a wide range of communicative contexts, they will extend their language use and learning (Paatsch et al. 2019). Adopting an approach to questioning that extends children's talk and encourages deeper thinking is an important part of this.

McCabe and Rollins (1994) highlight several issues related to assessing narrative communication in preschool children. Identifying a two-year-old child who is not yet as capable as their peers, in terms of the length, syntactic complexity, and pronunciation accuracy of their spoken language, is important for mitigating later reading issues. However, they found there were no developmentally appropriate narrative assessment tools that allowed assessment to occur at this young age. They point out that children develop the skills in retelling a personal event before they develop the skills involved in making up a story. Therefore, assessment that asks children to generate a story from a set of pictures must take this into account. They also found that during the story recount assessments, children will resist telling the assessor the same story twice, which means different story prompts are needed each time.

Recent work comparing children’s retellings of video or televised content with that of traditional storybook narratives indicates that children recounted video content in richer detail. A possible reason given for this finding is that processing and encoding visual content may be cognitively easier for children (Crawshaw et al. 2020).

Box 1 Sources of quality texts

Resources for finding and selecting quality texts to use with young children.

- Premier's Reading Challenge booklist
- The Children’s Book Council of Australia Early Childhood Notable Books of the Year
- Literacy Teaching Toolkit for early childhood
- The children's librarian at your public library
- Australian Children’s Television Foundation teaching resources
Communication skills

The purpose of this literature review is to identify and describe tools that early childhood professionals can access and use in their setting to measure children's oral language and early literacy development. The three categories of language practices (functional, conversational and narrative) shown in Figure 1 and discussed thus far provide a clear, readily understood model that can inform everyday early childhood practice. However, this is not the way that assessment tools are typically constructed. Tools are more likely to assess established language constructs or strands, than the specific communication practices described thus far.

There are four strands of communication that are particularly important to the domain of oral language and early literacy: **vocabulary**, **language structures**, **language pragmatics** and **comprehension**. These concepts may already be familiar to educators. They are considered here in the context of oral language and early literacy and will be used as the assessment constructs for the tools reviewed in Section 4. Table 2 shows how oral communication might be mapped to both the three categories of language practices from Figure 1 and the four communication skills. These examples are also coded as either expressive (E) and/or receptive (R).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
<th>Functional</th>
<th>Conversational</th>
<th>Narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge and use of familiar vocabulary (E &amp; R)</td>
<td>Use of social etiquette, for example: greetings, please (E)</td>
<td>Book language (E &amp; R)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language structures</th>
<th>Functional</th>
<th>Conversational</th>
<th>Narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using language structures appropriately, for example:</td>
<td>Using language structures appropriately, for example:</td>
<td>Using language structures appropriately, for example:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• using simple repetitive sentence structures relating to needs and wants (E)</td>
<td>• language for providing explanations (E)</td>
<td>• language for providing opinions and explanations (E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• combining words into sentences and threading sentences together (discourse meaning) (E)</td>
<td>• language for agreeing or disagreeing (E)</td>
<td>• a range of sentence structures appropriate to the story (E)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language pragmatics</th>
<th>Functional</th>
<th>Conversational</th>
<th>Narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conveying needs in non-verbal manner, for example:</td>
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<td>Using listening strategies, for example:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• pointing (E)</td>
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<td>• non-verbal cues (R)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Understanding context-specific functional commands, for example</td>
<td>• directing attention and other non-verbal indicators of engagement (smiling, nodding) (R)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• stop, look, listen (R)</td>
<td>• asking questions (E)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comprehension</th>
<th>Following instructions (R)</th>
<th>Identifying and staying on topic (E)</th>
<th>Inferring and reflecting (E &amp; R)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asking and answering questions that indicate understanding (E)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• recounting or retelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• providing opinions and explanations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• relating the ideas to personal experience or other contexts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Vocabulary

To support their oral communication as they grow, children need a range of vocabulary appropriate for an expanding set of contexts. Vocabulary refers to both the breadth and depth of a child’s ‘personal word bank’. Also important is whether the child uses vocabulary that applies best to particular situations or practices. Early childhood professionals will note children’s developing vocabulary skills by observing the following:

- How many words (and types of words) can the child use to make themselves understood, or to retell or describe an event?
- Do the words they use reflect different levels of complexity and the context?
- Does the language communicate a want or need, as required?
- Does the child use informal words appropriate to conversational contexts, as well as more formal language common to storytelling?

Table 3 lists examples of children’s use of vocabulary mapped to functional, conversational and narrative communication. Again, these examples are coded as either expressive (E) and/or receptive (R).

### Table 3 Examples of children’s use of vocabulary in oral language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
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<th>Conversational</th>
<th>Narrative</th>
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<td>Book language (E &amp; R)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why is vocabulary important?

Vocabulary is essential for a child’s engagement with the world. A limited personal word bank restricts a child’s ability to express their thoughts or to comprehend what they hear. Children develop a rich vocabulary when they are involved in a range of language-rich environments and are given explicit opportunities to hear and practise new words. Children who are ‘surrounded by, and included in, rich and increasingly complex conversations have an overwhelming advantage in vocabulary development, in understanding the structures of language, and in tuning into the sounds of English’ (Konza 2014, p. 156). Put simply ‘the more often adults use particular words in conversation with young children, the sooner children will use those words in their own speech’ (IOM & NRC 2015, p. 109).

A rich vocabulary is essential in developing comprehension from the earliest years (Graves 2006; Hairrell et al. 2011; National Reading Panel 2000). Children must know the meaning of almost all words in a text (at least 95 per cent) to interpret its meaning. This has implications for educators’ choices of shared reading material and the grouping of children. Vocabulary appears to be more important than grammar or short-term memory in supporting the ability of four- to five-year-old children to make inferences (Silva & Cain 2015). By Year 2, children with larger vocabularies read words more accurately (Snow et al. 2014), and even stronger relationships between rich vocabularies and good comprehension emerge in later years when students read more complex texts (National Early Literacy Panel 2008; Senechal & LeFevre 2002). Children who enter school with lower vocabulary scores tend to come from environments where they hear fewer different words per interaction, hear more commands than prompts and questions, and have less interactions with adults (Hart & Risley 1995).

A rich oral vocabulary and accurate pronunciation are also important for developing phonological and phonemic awareness as key
elements of learning to decode. Listening to rhymes, alliteration and texts that play with the sounds in words supports the development of these skills. The correlation between oral language and the development of phonological awareness has been widely reported, providing evidence that decoding skills are supported by vocabulary, syntactic and semantic understandings (Konza 2014). When reading with a child, the ideas being discussed also play a role and conversations should be meaningful and engage the child. The quality of these interactions with children is particularly important to children’s vocabulary growth. One study with preschool children suggests that teachers’ intentional talk during reading has ‘a longer-lasting effect on the children’s language skills than the frequency of the teachers’ reading to the children’ (IOM & NRC 2015, p. 109).

Ensuring children are involved in extended conversations and discussions about texts is not all that is required to support and improve vocabulary. Conversations should be targeted at the appropriate language level for the child’s ability, while still posing some challenges. Children should be having interactions with ‘better language users’ (Konza 2014, p. 156), provided the language is not so challenging that they understand very little. It is helpful for adults to recognise that children’s misuse of words is part of the process of language acquisition. Educators giving a calm response to model the correct use of a word helps children learn about its meaning, pronunciation and use.

There are numerous strategies by which children’s vocabulary development can be supported, including the modelling and practising of new words. By extending on words the child has used, and promoting their use in different contexts, early childhood professionals are promoting the idea of vocabulary as a network of meaning. Munro (2011) suggests, ‘when you say or hear words in a message, you usually can’t help but think of related words. The words that you hear stimulate other words that are linked to those words in your vocabulary’ (p. 5). This also positions vocabulary within the grammatical and syntactic structures that are an integral part of oral language development.

**Tools for assessing vocabulary in the early years**

Many tools for assessing oral language assess vocabulary to some degree, as words are the foundational blocks of oral language. The scope of assessing vocabulary is broad and can be done in several ways, including the constrained method of naming picture cards, counting how many words are spoken in a given timeframe or observing the sophistication of the vocabulary used in a given environment. All aspects contribute to a better understanding of the complexity of oral language as both a skill and as a means of communication, and the role that vocabulary plays. Table 4 highlights tools that educators can use for assessing vocabulary. These tools are described in detail in Section 4.

**Table 4 Tools for assessing vocabulary in early childhood**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools for assessing vocabulary</th>
<th>Expressive and/or receptive</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of Literacy and Language (ALL)</td>
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</tr>
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<td>E &amp; R</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>E &amp; R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool Language Scale-5 Screening Test (PLS-5 Screening Test)</td>
<td>E &amp; R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test of Language Development-Primary: 5th edition (TOLD-P:5)</td>
<td>E &amp; R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiig Assessment of Basic Concepts (WABC)</td>
<td>E &amp; R</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Language structures

Language structures includes syntax (how words are ordered to make meaning) and grammar (the rules around sentence structure). Children are best supported in the development of their literacy skills when language structures are considered according to range and purpose. Early childhood professionals will note children’s developing skills related to language structures by observing the following:

- Does the child string words together into phrases and sentences?
- Do they adjust sentence structures to suit the purpose? That is, can they shift between the informal structures appropriate for conversation and the more formal structures of storytelling?
- Is the child developing knowledge of a range of complex sentence structures to help them comprehend stories that are read aloud?

Table 5 provides some examples of children’s use of language structures that early childhood professionals can look out for.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language structures</th>
<th>Functional</th>
<th>Conversational</th>
<th>Narrative</th>
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<td>• language for agreeing or disagreeing (E)</td>
<td>• a range of sentence structures appropriate to the story (E)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why are language structures important?

Alongside developing a rich vocabulary, children need knowledge of and experience in using a wide variety of language structures, most notably the grammar and syntax but also the morphology (meaningful parts of words and word tenses) appropriate to different contexts (IOM & NRC 2015). This occurs from the earliest stages of language development, as studies have shown that toddlers separate a stream of speech into grammatical units before the age of two years (Hawthorne & Gerken 2014) and children put words together into sentences and begin to use the rules of grammar well before preschool. These structures are learnt largely ‘unconsciously, as children combine words into phrases and sentences’ (Konza 2014, p. 156).

As with vocabulary, language structures are needed to communicate clearly, to comprehend, and to engage in discussions. Not only do children need to understand the vast majority of words for comprehension, they also need to make sense of the grammatical and syntactic structures in which these words are delivered. Having a rich word bank is not enough on its own. Studies have shown that situations arise where children can understand individual words in sentences, but not the way in which the words are communicated, that is, the syntactical structures in which the words appeared. In one study, children with poor comprehension spoke in short phrases or simple sentences when they had a great deal to contribute, suggesting a problem with
expression and reception of grammatically complex language (Daly 2015). Interacting with people whose language is more advanced than their own is also important for children’s knowledge of different language structures, as ‘syntactic understanding develops for most children through conversation with adults and older children’ (IOM & NRC 2015, p. 110).

Also important is ensuring these interactions take place in a range of contexts. The structures commonly used in texts that children are being read, and in the discussions about these texts, are likely to be more complex and sophisticated than those used in everyday conversations. As Konza (2014) writes, ‘an understanding of grammar is important because children’s familiarity with complex sentence structures helps them comprehend stories read aloud to them and that they later read themselves’ (p. 156).

Children also need to become familiar with morphemic changes to words, which they will learn gradually, and for which misuse is a normal part of language acquisition (IOM & NRC 2015). Explicit understanding of morphemes (the smallest linguistic part of a word that cannot be further divided) and syntax can assist children in the structuring of their ideas, as they become familiar with the rules that can be applied in different contexts. Morphemic and syntactic knowledge ‘helps children order the words and phrases in their sentences to convey and to change meaning’ (IOM & NRC 2015, p. 110).

Tools for assessing language structures

Interview-style tools better support assessment of language structures, as they are constrained by questions and tasks that tend to allow for only one correct response. From the list of tools in Table 6 that early childhood professionals could use for assessing language structures, the only observational tool is the Every Child a Talker (ECaT). This tool applies scores when the specified language structures are spontaneously observed in a natural environment, rather than in a standardised setting that can be compared to a norm-referenced group (although the indicators would be research-based).

Both ways of assessing language structures are relevant but the observational tool requires more expertise in oral language structures and is susceptible to individual interpretation. The standardised tests significantly reduce this risk but the scope of assessment is narrower and may exclude some children from being able to participate fully and show their skills because they are not part of the cultural or linguistic cohort for whom the tool is designed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools for assessing language structures</th>
<th>Expressive and/or receptive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of Literacy and Language (ALL)</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every Child a Talker (ECaT)</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool Language Scale-5 – Australia and New Zealand Language Adapted (PLS-5-ANZ)</td>
<td>E &amp; R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test of Language Development – Primary, 5th edition (TOLD-P:5)</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Language pragmatics

Language pragmatics, also known as language conventions, refers to the cultural and social contexts that exist when communication is taking place, including intent, speech patterns, movement and expectations. This includes the non-verbal communication required for interactions, the ‘facial and body language as well as words, such that infants recognize positive (and negative) interactions’ (IOM & NRC 2015, p. 108).

Early childhood professionals will note children’s developing skills related to the social context of language pragmatics by observing the following:

- Is the child using gestures to communicate needs when they don’t have the words?
- Do they use listening strategies and ask questions appropriate to context?
- Are they showing signs of engagement?

Language pragmatics can be a more elusive part of communicating, dealing as it does with the underpinnings of conversation, such as how something is said, the intentions of the speaker, the relationship between participants and any cultural expectations (Marasco et al. 2004). Understanding the conventions of interactions as they relate to purpose will greatly support children in their oral language development.

Early childhood professionals can better gauge children’s contextual understanding of an interaction by asking whether the child knows why the communication is taking place. Table 7 lists some examples of children’s use of language pragmatics.

Table 7 Examples of children’s use of language pragmatics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language pragmatics</th>
<th>Functional</th>
<th>Conversational</th>
<th>Narrative</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Conveying needs in non-verbal manner, for example:</td>
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</tr>
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<td>• pointing (E)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Understanding context-specific functional commands, for example:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• stop, look, listen (R)</td>
<td>• smiling and nodding (R)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking questions (E)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**Why are language pragmatics important?**

Children communicate more successfully when they:

- comprehend the purpose for the interaction
- have clear intention in what they say
- are familiar with the verbal and non-verbal cues commonly associated with the relevant context.

Most research has focused on the lexical, grammatical and semantic aspect of child-directed speech, while there has been less investigation of the role of pragmatics (Pan et al. 1996). The communicative interactions of very young children almost always involve gesture and directed gaze, as well as language (Moore et al. 2013). Pragmatics begins from the earliest stages of comprehension. Oral language facility ‘builds an understanding of the pragmatics of the English language: the rules for appropriate communication in different situations and for different purposes’ (Konza 2014, p. 156).

Children’s ability to engage in discussions can be affected by a variety of factors, and they cannot be expected to stay focused on the same topics in the same way. They benefit from being involved in extended discourse because it allows them to practise maintaining an exchange and to become familiar with the types of pragmatics common in lengthier discussions. This could include providing an explanation or telling a story themselves (Konza 2014).

Seminal research suggests that communicative intent plays a fundamental role in many interactions, particularly with young children, and is therefore central to cognitive development (Moore et al. 2013). A child’s oral communication is influenced by their purpose and intended audience (Scull & Bremner 2013) and there is evidence that growth in communicative intent is the source of growth in syntax and lexicon (Pan et al. 1996).

One study of communicative intent found that three-year-olds could understand someone’s intention to communicate, even without signals such as eye contact or pointing. Instead, they used inference and other visual or sound cues (Moore et al. 2013). Studies highlight the importance of understanding intention as part of early cognitive and language development, in particular the role that intention plays in identifying children who have problems with social communication (Moore et al. 2013).

**Tools for assessing language pragmatics**

The pragmatics of language are equally as important as language structures, but they are generally more difficult to assess. Not everything communicated in social settings is always readily absorbed. Elements of the assessment tools in Table 8 remind early childhood professionals to monitor children’s understanding and use of pragmatics. Most tools for assessing language pragmatics are observational tools that direct the person administering the assessment to look for specific words, behaviour and gestures, and to use a rubric to indicate current levels and track growth. The PLS-5 Screening Test is one example of a standardised tool, although its scope is narrow, and measurement of pragmatics is only a small part of it.
Table 8 Tools for assessing language pragmatics in early childhood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools for assessing language pragmatics</th>
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<td>E &amp; R</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comprehension

Comprehension refers to the ability to understand, at a cognitive level, the meaning of a message that can be conveyed through facial expressions, gestures, movement, voice or written text (or any combination of these). Knowing these indicators can lead to better support in developing children’s comprehension skills.

A child’s understanding of a text may be demonstrated through discussion or it may be better considered together with their language proficiency and communication skills in a one-to-one situation, or with a specified task (such as retelling a story). Some children may find that drawing, or other form of art, as a first response helps them to focus and organise their thoughts. Children also need to know how to effectively participate in discussions, take turns, contribute and collaborate, as well as how to listen and learn. The ability to present ideas to a group and to persuade others are also important oral language skills that depend on comprehension (Anderson 2016).

Table 9 Examples of children’s use of comprehension in oral language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comprehension</th>
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<th>Narrative</th>
</tr>
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</table>

Why is comprehension important?

Meaning-making is at the centre of all communication and developing the comprehension ability of students is generally understood to be an essential education goal (Callow 2016; Förster et al. 2018). Most interactions, particularly in everyday conversation, offer opportunities to clarify understanding through prompting, asking questions and reading non-verbal cues. There are more complexities involved when it comes to the comprehension of texts, and meaningful discussion about quality texts with appropriately challenging content is an essential part of developing comprehension skills. In the preschool years, ‘listening to stories and becoming familiar with how print works… helps children bridge the gap between the oral (informal) language they hear at home,
and the more literate language they will hear at school’ (Konza 2014, p. 155).

Once children become familiar with the main ideas and vocabulary of a text, they benefit most from discussions about the meaning of the story, in particular discussions that focus on more abstract ideas, such as describing character, predicting events and making comparisons between aspects of the text and their own life. These meaningful conversations that support their reading comprehension later on are often referred to as the ‘iceberg’ of literate practices. They have mostly been unseen but underpin what children bring with them to formal schooling contexts (Anderson 2016). There are many avenues for children to express their comprehension, particularly of ‘heard texts’. The cognitive skills related to textual understanding are a highly complex area involving a number of integrated processes (Conley & Wise 2011; Kendeou et al. 2016; O’Reilly et al. 2014).

Children’s comprehension skills can be demonstrated through a variety of actions or activities, such as:
- retelling
- summarising key ideas
- providing interpretations
- explaining ideas
- asking questions
- relating texts to personal experience
- identifying unknown vocabulary
- recognising text features
- considering how language is used
- recognising and identifying familiar elements of different text types (Oakley 2011).

Almost all these actions require expressive oral language skills. While there are some tasks (such as drawing) and verbal cues that can provide insight into children’s understanding, comprehension can only be communicated if children have the vocabulary and language structures to support it.

### Tools for assessing comprehension in the early years

To some extent, all assessments that involve asking questions or giving instructions are incidentally measuring comprehension. However, the scoring of an assessment will not directly reflect this overall skill and will focus on specific aspects of comprehension, such as answering questions about a story that has just been read to the child. Each tool listed in Table 10 partially aims to assess children’s comprehension through observation or structured interview. Observational tools with rubrics that capture the scope of language and literacy skills in various situations beyond the structured interview can be valuable learning tools for early years professionals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools for assessing comprehension</th>
<th>Expressive and/or receptive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of Literacy and Language (ALL)</td>
<td>E &amp; R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) Pre–K</td>
<td>E &amp; R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every Child a Talker (ECaT)</td>
<td>E &amp; R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool Language Scale-5 Screening Test (PLS-5 Screening Test) – Australia and New Zealand Language Adapted</td>
<td>E &amp; R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test of Language Development – Primary: 5th edition (TOLD-P:5)</td>
<td>E &amp; R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiig Assessment of Basic Concepts (WABC)</td>
<td>E &amp; R</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How does oral language and early literacy relate to executive function?

Executive function is a critical domain-general cognitive skill and, as such, contributes to most skills that children develop. It relates to the ability of children to hold onto information, set goals, plan how to achieve them and persist until they are achieved. An accepted definition of executive function is that it ‘involves remembering and applying information, regulating impulsive behaviours, persisting in tasks and being able to adapt to different rules or circumstances’ (Phair 2019, p. 41). A detailed description of executive function can be found in *Assessment of Children as Confident and Involved Learners in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature Review* (Cloney et al. 2019, pp. 11–12), where the following three skills define the scope of its use in that literature review:

- **Working memory** (or short term memory), which involves being able to hold onto information for immediate use – think of a series of digits like a phone number.
- **Inhibition control** (or self-control), which involves deliberately suppressing attention (and subsequently responding) to something, such as ignoring a distraction, stopping an impulsive utterance, or overcoming a highly learnt response (Zelazo et al. 2016, pp. 2–3).
- **Cognitive flexibility** (or mental flexibility), which involves being able to suppress impulsive or learned behaviours in context or to filter distracting sensory input while deliberately focusing on the salient information.

Executive function precedes the development of many skills, including oral language and literacy. Before children can respond appropriately to an instruction, they must have the lower-order skills that facilitate the ability to hear discrete parts of speech, hold onto that information and use it in meaningful ways. At the earliest stages of development, this may be using gestures or expressions to convey meaning in context (pre-verbal communication). For older children, this means being able to listen to a story, hold onto key information to comprehend the narrative and form a relevant opinion or engage a peer in conversation.
How does oral language and literacy relate to other VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcomes?

Children’s learning and development is holistic. There are a number of different aspects of children’s development that are changing, often rapidly. As children’s vocabulary and conversation skills are growing, so too are other developmental areas described by the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcomes.

During early childhood, there is rapid and overlapping development of language, cognitive, physical, social and emotional skills, but it is not a homogenous process. Children may grow rapidly in one area but more slowly in others. One developmental domain may require skills to develop in another area before they can emerge. Consider the general cognitive skills children require to pay attention, hold onto information and filter out distraction before they can comprehend complex language and narrative. It is important for educators to recognise that holistic development means progress in a set of discrete but related skills. An important part of an educator’s practice is to differentiate these outcome areas and discern where children’s strengths can support their development in other areas. Educators can then target their practice at the level of the child, understanding that the child’s zone of proximal development is different in each outcome area (Vygotsky 1978; Wertsch & Tulviste 1992).

Oral language and literacy are intrinsically linked to social and emotional development. Competencies such as behavioural regulation, empathy and social interaction require an individual to have a communication system in order to appropriately express emotions and support their social needs (Squires & Bricker 2007). Children’s conversations are embedded in social contexts, as they form relationships, negotiate conflict and develop intrapersonal skills such as emotional regulation. As the VEYLDF states: ‘Children’s wellbeing, identity, sense of agency and capacity to make friends is connected to the development of communication skills, and strongly linked to their capacity to express feelings and thoughts, and to be understood’ (DET 2016).

Children’s ability to acquire vocabulary relies on memory and metacognitive skills to consider in what context new and crystallised language might be used and for what purpose (Cloney et al. 2019). Children who are confident and involved learners ‘will be confident to question, converse, ask, try and take risks and theorise, in order to develop a good understanding of language’ (Beatson 2019, p. 75).

Oral language is also an important component of a child’s connection and contribution to their world and can be considered within the model of ever-widening circles of the child’s world shown in Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model for child development (1979). A child’s earliest communication develops within the family circle, widening to their community which includes friends, neighbours, early childhood education services, school and other children’s services. In this phase they are developing the skills required to be effective communicators in the wider world.
Section 2: Principles for assessing oral language and early literacy in children

This section sets out principles for assessing children as effective communicators, with a focus on oral language and early literacy. These principles also guided the selection and evaluation of tools in Section 4, and the development of the criteria against which the tools were reviewed.

Effective assessment of communication requires a clearly defined purpose. Educators typically use assessment to establish the oral communication skills demonstrated by children and to generate evidence of their growth. A health professional or speech therapist may use assessment to decide if a child has reached a key milestone, or whether they are vulnerable and require additional support.

The priority for this series of literature reviews is to identify tools that Victorian educators can use in early childhood education and care services. The usefulness of these tools is dependent on several factors such as:

- the cost and resources needed to access and use the tools
- the training required to use them well
- the availability of support resources to help educators use results from the assessment to plan experiences that build children’s oral communication skills.

Figure 3 illustrates the intersection of criteria that guide the evaluation, selection and use of an assessment tool. These criteria are constant for assessment tools across the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcomes, and the assessment principles in this section are also relevant to assessment of other Outcomes. In keeping with the focus of this series, these principles relate primarily to assessment by early childhood professionals for the purpose of determining and tracking an individual child’s level of functioning to inform planning for the next stage of development. In some cases, an assessment may be useful in alerting an educator to potential developmental differences that might signal the need for a referral to other professionals.

![Figure 3: Overview of assessment principles](image-url)
Assessment has a defined purpose

The purpose of assessment will guide decisions about which assessment tool and broad principles or approaches to use. For example, longer assessments with a deeper focus are appropriate when educators want to know with confidence what a specific child can do (and what they are likely to be able to do next). If an educator, however, wants to know more about a more-specific skill set, or take a quick snapshot of the abilities of a group of children, then a shorter assessment or the collection of less-detailed evidence may be warranted. At other times, the educator chooses an assessment for a specific purpose, for example to complement the screening or diagnostic tools being used by a health professional or to provide evidence useful across a transition (for example, using the same tool that is being used in the preschool room as a child prepares to transition out of the toddler room).

Therefore, the assessment should be fit for purpose. The time and effort it takes to undertake assessment should not be a burden and the results should address a specific goal that has been decided before doing any work.

Assessment addresses established components of communication

This principle sets out the importance of ensuring that any kind of assessment of children’s oral language and early literacy addresses constructs that have been established in the literature to be valid components of oral language and early literacy. For this review, these include the skills of oral vocabulary, oral language structures, oral language pragmatics (or conventions) and oral comprehension. Different facets of oral language and early literacy require specific assessments. Even when an assessment measures a valid domain of communication, an educator should only select that assessment if it matches the domain for which they are trying to generate evidence. An educator should not choose a tool that assesses comprehension of a narrative text if they want to assess a child’s conversational skills.

This principle also recognises that the domains of communication may be correlated with one another, and that children may demonstrate different strengths and opportunities for growth in different constructs within the different skills of oral communication.

Assessment enables early childhood professionals to describe a trajectory of children’s oral language and early literacy development

Effective assessment describes children’s progress on a continuum of development, enabling educators to collect evidence of current knowledge, skills and abilities, and to plan for the next stage of development. Thus, assessment is not only descriptive, but it contributes to advancing teaching and learning.

Oral communication is multifaceted, and each element may require specific assessment. Importantly, children may advance in one subdomain but struggle in another. Educators with a strong understanding of the development of oral communication can use this knowledge about a child’s strengths to support their development in other areas of the domain. Children’s language skills and oral communication practices also develop rapidly. It can be of more value for educators to assess a child’s progression at a broader trajectory level than to record a myriad of minor oral communication milestones.
Assessment includes children’s self-assessment or expectations of their knowledge, skills and abilities

Engaging children in discussions about their own expectations of their oral communication is an effective approach to teaching and assessment. This is particularly worthwhile when assessing children as effective oral communicators because it can provide another authentic demonstration of a child’s development in functional, conversational and narrative oral communication practice. It also triangulates traditional assessment results and supports open feedback and an understanding of strengths and weaknesses.

Assessment is valid, reliable and fair

A valid assessment tool measures what it says it measures. A reliable tool produces valid results consistently and across different contexts. This principle typically means that it is empirically validated and demonstrated to be reliable, and does not disadvantage children because of their main language, cultural knowledge, age or ability level.

This is a particular concern in assessing oral language and early literacy because vocabulary, language structures and pragmatics are language-specific skills. It is not always feasible to administer an assessment in a child’s most familiar language or mother tongue. Where this cannot be accommodated, educators must be aware that when measuring a child’s oral language in a less-familiar language, the results may not reflect the child’s progress in communication skills but rather their competence in a second (or even third) language.

Oral language may also be assessed across different modalities, for example story books, conversational tasks and interactions with technology.

Assessment involves the child’s community and informs professional partnerships

Effective assessment involves collecting evidence from the child’s family and, in some cases, other health professionals. This includes engaging in rounds of discussion about the educator’s own assessment and evidence of growth (for example, to highlight inconsistencies in findings, perhaps due to context and differences in understanding), including ensuring the same domains of communication are being assessed. If an assessment is measuring valid constructs, educators will be able to communicate their evidence with other practitioners, such as a speech pathologist.
Section 3: Matrix of tools for assessing children’s oral language from birth to eight years

This section identifies and describes a set of tools for assessing children’s development as effective communicators, with a specific focus on oral language to support emergent literacy. This set of assessment tools represents the range of key components of oral communication, as well as a range of ages, and the tools are applicable for a range of early childhood contexts. The tools selected for this review focus on assessment to support teaching that will foster learning and development, learning and teaching and, to a lesser extent, assessment for identification of disability. The list avoids tools that have limited availability or that have qualification requirements that would make them unavailable to a typical educator or teacher.

Table 11 presents tools that can be accessed and/or administered by early childhood professionals to assess children’s learning.

Table 11 Oral language and literacy assessment tools summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool</th>
<th>Age range (years)</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Area assessed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0–3</td>
<td>3–6</td>
<td>6+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of Literacy and Language (ALL)</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) Pre-K</td>
<td>•</td>
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<tr>
<td>Every Child a Talker (ECaT)</td>
<td>•</td>
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<td>•</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDIs)</td>
<td>•</td>
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<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Scoring Scheme (NSS)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tool</td>
<td>Age range (years)</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Area assessed</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0–3</td>
<td>3–6</td>
<td>6+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Parent/Carer</td>
<td>Child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>Language structures</td>
<td>Language pragmatics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic Language Skill Inventory</td>
<td>•</td>
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<tr>
<td>Test of Narrative Language: 2nd edition (TNL: 2)</td>
<td>•</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wiig Assessment of Basic Concepts (WABC)</td>
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Section 4: Evaluation of existing tools for assessing children’s oral language and literacy

A review of tools for assessing oral communication and literacy in children aged from birth to eight years found the tools fall into two categories. The most common category includes commercially available, standardised tools that focus heavily on short, repetitive tasks, such as naming pictures, early alphabet letter–sound recognition and retell, and produce results in the form of numerical scores. These tools do not accommodate more complex tasks, such as extended conversations, using vocabulary in natural speech and the ability to follow the pragmatics of oral language interactions.

The importance of language pragmatics, that is, the ‘rules’ that children learn to follow and adapt to suit the functional, social and more formal environments of oral language, is well-recognised in both education and speech pathology. However, researchers struggle to design sufficient tools to measure it. According to Marasco et al. (2004), ‘because of the nature of pragmatics, it is almost impossible to construct a standardized test that accurately captures the essence of social communication. Past attempts at doing so have resulted in tasks that actually assess underlying linguistic or cognitive skills rather than true social communicative functioning’ (p. 2).

The second, smaller category covers assessment tools that have been developed through research or government initiatives, which results in a variety of ways to gain access to the material. These tools tend to include the language pragmatics aspect of oral communication in their scope and are largely observational. The benefit of the informal discussion and observational structure is that the child is being assessed in an environment that is likely to better reflect their everyday interactions. The results can be presented in several ways but usually include detailed developmental descriptions that are helpful to guide judgments about individual children.

However, because these tools are not standardised, there is a greater onus on the educator to be well-trained in observation and how to apply and interpret scoring schemes.

It is also important to remember that, if a child performs well in the expressive element, these tools measure only their fluency and articulation (and to some degree, inadvertently, their level of self-confidence), not what is necessarily occurring cognitively. A child who expresses themselves poorly is not automatically indicating they have poor comprehension of the question asked of them but may be facing additional ‘hidden hurdles’, such as being from a second-language background, unexposed to conversation exchanges or extremely reserved.

The list of the tools in this section represents a selection from both categories.

Assessment of Literacy and Language

The Assessment of Literacy and Language (ALL) (Lombardino et al. 2009) measures oral language and emerging literacy in children from three to seven years of age. It was developed in the United States and was aligned to that country’s national initiative supported by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001).

Instrument description

The ALL testing process begins with a detailed questionnaire for carers and is followed up with two screening tests (‘initial indicators’) for children. Each initial indicator test takes 10 to 15 minutes and measures two strands:
emerging literacy and oral language. There is a unique set of Initial Indicator tests for the three American grade levels in this age range (preschool, kindergarten and Grade 1).

It assesses six skills:

- spoken language
- phonological awareness
- alphabet knowledge
- print awareness
- fluency
- comprehension.

Each of these skills links to a series of ‘diagnostic subtests’ that are designed to detect disorders by drilling down for further analysis. For example, a low result in the skill of spoken language in the kindergarten-level initial indicator will link to the kindergarten-level diagnostic subtest that assesses these skills:

- basic concepts
- receptive vocabulary
- word relationships
- listening comprehension
- parallel sentence production.

The diagnostic subtest takes up to 45 minutes to administer. Low results in these subtests can then lead to further diagnosis using a set of ‘criterion-based subtests’ that are only up to 5 minutes long and are designed to detect clinical behaviours. Data collected from the questionnaire and test populates a report that profiles strengths and weaknesses across the two domains.

Discussion

The ALL tool is norm-referenced and its test–retest reliability was reviewed with a cohort of 104 children who had already been identified as being potentially ‘at-risk’ in their language and literacy abilities. Although the data showed good measurement of reliability, this means that for children who are not ‘at-risk’ the tool provides no further diagnostic details of their abilities. Therefore, the tool’s accuracy in identifying children who have no difficulties is very high. Four types of student profiles generated after testing can flag a deficit in:

1. spoken language
2. emergent literacy
3. a combination of both
4. a weakness in both, which is likely the result of lack of exposure rather than a potential learning difficulty. This profile means an early childhood professional can introduce activities to address gaps in children’s experience.

The diagnostic subtests are also norm-referenced; however the next level of criterion subtests is criterion-referenced with a cut-off mark to measure ability. Although the tools do not measure the scope of skills that are present in children who are not at-risk (and so cannot track them longitudinally), its strength lies in its accuracy of detecting problem areas and providing reasons. This is very useful when implementing differentiated learning or determining when specialist intervention is needed. The technical report is freely available and describes in detail the tasks and the tool’s reliability (Lombardino et al. 2009).

Resources

- Assessment of Literacy and Language
- ALL Technical Report

Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Pre–K

The Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) Pre–K tool (Smith et al. 2008a, 2008b) is a multifaceted interview and observational tool that incorporates all elements that contribute to language and literacy development from the layout of the room, educator knowledge and management, curriculum alignment and child interactions. This edition is aimed at children attending preschool centres (assumed to be from three to six years old).
Instrument description

The instrument is essentially a set of descriptive rubrics of rating levels from 5 (exemplary) to 1 (deficient) for a total of 19 items across five sections:

- Classroom Structure
- Curriculum
- Language and Literacy
- Books and Book Reading
- Print and Early Writing.

All items are created through the lens of improving language and literacy. The rubric for Language and Literacy includes:

- discourse climate
- opportunities for extended conversations
- efforts to build vocabulary
- phonological awareness.

To complete the rubrics it is recommended that observations are made over a total duration of 1.5 to 3.5 hours specifically during the following times: free choice and play; book reading, mealtimes, arriving and departing and other instructional sessions.

Discussion

ELLCO Pre–K is a low-cost tool that is available to everyone. Although it is designed for early childhood centres, there is an alternate version available for people operating home-based childcare.

The tool is built on the assumption that language develops in an environment that is conducive to providing opportunities for meaningful interactions. This means that the role of the educational professional is critical. Three of the four assessable areas in the Language and Literacy section (Discourse Climate, Opportunities for Extended Conversations and Efforts to Build Vocabulary) are more likely to occur spontaneously during natural interactions (that can then be guided and extended) than the more purpose-driven method of building phonological awareness.

Although the ELLCO is not a standardised tool, it has been used widely for research into language development and its effectiveness was measured in a study by Xu (2012) using standardised measuring tools across five centres and 250 three-year-olds. The ELLCO rubrics were scored once at the beginning of the semester and then once at the end and all five sections showed significant improvement, with the Language and Literacy scale being stronger than the General Classroom Environment scale. There was also a noticeable improvement in instructional practices. Some participating services went on to adopt ELLCO as a professional development tool for planning and curriculum integration after the study in addition to using it as a measurement of children's language development.

Resources

- ELLCO Pre–K kit, ordered through bookstores (ISBN 9781557669476)
- Excerpt from ELLCO Pre–K User’s Guide
- Assessing your early childhood program’s literacy practices with ELLCO, recorded webinar

Every Child a Talker

Every Child a Talker (ECaT) (DCSF 2008) is a tool developed in England as a national response to concerns over high levels of language impoverishment. It can be administered to children from birth to five years of age and targets improving the skills and expertise of educators first, so they are better able to recognise and support the development of young children’s oral language skills (McLeod 2011).

Instrument description

The ECaT includes two tools. One is for the educator to reflect and evaluate their knowledge and practice in the area of oral language in early childhood. This strengthens their ability to successfully implement the second tool, which assesses the types of
everyday interactions the child is having. This makes it different from other assessments that tend to focus on structured interviews with test material prompts and questions. The tool is scored using a rubric across four bands:

- listening and attention, including facial expressions and gestures that signal this
- understanding (receptive language), including appropriate verbal and non-verbal responses to instructions that are in natural speech
- speaking (expressive language), including vocabulary, grammar and sequencing events
- social communication, including using language to form friendships and understand other perspectives.

The rubric assesses the four bands at six overlapping age ranges (birth to 11 months, eight to 20 months, 16 to 25 months, 22 to 36 months, 30 to 50 months and 40 to 60-plus months). This structure allows educators to compare the child’s chronological age with their developmental stage and to be able to identify those who may be ‘at-risk of a delay’ in skill development, those who are ‘as expected’ and those who are displaying skills ‘above expectation’. There are two assessment levels to each band, ‘emerging’ and ‘secure’. Guidelines recommend that the rubric be applied about three times a year and it takes about 5 to 20 minutes per band.

Discussion

ECaT was trialled in 2008 in more than 50 preschool networks across England as part of a significant national initiative. Some of the support documentation for educators, including the rubrics, are available online rather than in a commercially available kit. The tool is not a standardised measurement that produces a set of scores like other oral language assessments. Its strength lies in the ongoing tracking of development so that progress can be viewed even when it does not align with the chronological age expectations. This ‘growth mindset’ considers success in terms of the progress each student makes, or the ‘distance travelled’ (Masters 2016, p. 4).

Documentation for the tool is explicit in its expectation that educators improve their own personal and pedagogical knowledge in oral language so they can create communication opportunities with children as well as accurately scoring observations in the rubric. A research article by McLeod (2011) explored this aspect and explained that the tool’s success lies in the ability of educators to maintain critical and objective reflection of their own personal values and the cultural expectations of the children they teach. Oral language skills improve when the process is recognised as a ‘two-way street’ (expressive and receptive), and a feature of this tool is that it highlights the important role that the educator plays in this process.

As ECaT does not provide standardised scoring and reporting, its effectiveness and impact on both educators and children over time will likely need to be measured by another standardised research tool. A PhD study of ECaT provides a critical analysis of the tool and its possible influence on disposition towards languages in England (Rojas-Bustos 2018). This analysis of its practical application in the classroom suggests that the large cohort of children from non-English speaking language backgrounds was not fully considered in the initial rollout, thus having implications on the cultural and social aspect of language pragmatics.

Resources:

- ECaT rubric
- Every Child a Talker video

Individual Growth and Development Indicators

The Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDIs) tool (University of Kansas n.d.) tracks a child’s growth from six months to 3.5 years across four strands: Communication,
Movement/Motor, Social and Problem Solving. The Early Communication Indicator (ECI) strand specifically measures expressive language through gestures, sounds and words. The four strands are scored and reported separately, which means it is possible to use just the communication strand.

Instrument description

The ECI strand consists of a single, short play task that the child engages in with a familiar adult for six minutes while the administrator observes and scores the play. The general outcome of the ECI is 'Using gestures, sounds, words, or sentences to convey wants and needs or to express meaning to others' (University of Kansas n.d.). There are two constructs assessed to measure achievement in this general outcome:

1. Pre-linguistic communication (key skills: gestures and vocalisations)
2. Spoken language (key skills: single words and multiple words).

The toys that are used for the play task are widely available from stores. A second adult acts in the role of administrator and observes and scores the interaction between the first adult and the child as they play. Training in administering the tool and scoring is a mandatory part of purchasing the kit and can be done online. The first adult does not need to be trained but will need to be advised by the administrator to follow certain protocols.

Although the tool is designed to track growth, there is no explicit information given on how frequently to administer the play task. However example reports of the ECI show that every month from zero to 40 months is listed indicating that the interval can be as short as one month. The longest interval example is three months.

Discussion

The IGDI's ECI strand is an interesting hybrid of the two categories of tools being reviewed in this Literature Review. It aims to recreate an informal play based setting for the child and is available to anyone willing to undertake the brief induction training, yet it is a standardised test that generates reports with scores and graphs, rather than developmental descriptions. The main method of scoring is to tally the number of times the four assessable key skills (gestures, vocalisations, single words and multiple words) appear in the six-minute play session. The scoring sheets are available on the IGDI's website via a free login. Although this may appear as an overly simple method, the ECI is backed by a substantial body of research, as it is often used by early childhood researchers in their fieldwork. The website also acts as an information hub and provides access to all the relevant ECI documentation and detailed definitions of the key skills in the contracts prior to any purchase and training.

Once the child reaches 40 months (three years and four months), the IGDI offers two additional tools: MyIGDI, which covers the preschool period of 3.5 years to 5 years; and Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS), which covers KG–3 according to the American school system. MyIGDI moves away from aspects of oral language and focuses on early literacy skills such as phonics and letter recognition. The DIBELS operates predominantly as a reading measurement tool that can be used to screen for potential delay and difficulties.

Resources

• IGDI's FAQ
• IGDI's Toys Needed
• MyIGDI
Narrative Scoring Scheme

The Narrative Scoring Scheme (NSS) was developed in 2010 by a team of researchers who aimed to ‘create a metric that documents the range of skills required for school-age children to effectively tell a coherent and interesting story’ (Heilman et al. 2010, p. 156). NSS can be administered to children from five years old and measures a broad scope of criteria beyond traditional narrative rubrics.

Instrument description

NSS is structured around *Frog, Where Are You?* (Mayer 2003), a picture book with no text. The child goes through each page and tells the story, making the administration of the tool straightforward and time efficient. An educator can record the session and use the recording to apply the scoring rubric, which has seven criteria:

- Introduction (setting, character introduction)
- Character Development (details of main and side-characters)
- Mental and Emotional States (vocabulary used to describe emotions and thoughts)
- Referencing/Listener Awareness (consistency and clarifiers throughout the story including pronouns and proper nouns)
- Conflict/Resolution and Event/Reaction (presence or absence of these aspects and their quality in progressing the story)
- Cohesion (sequencing of events and transitions between events)
- Conclusion (conclusion of the final event and entire story).

Each criterion is scored on three levels – proficient, emerging or minimal/immature. The tool is freely available and there is a free online training course for Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts (SALT), the software and database used to develop the NSS. This data can be used to compare the individual’s results with other children in the same age-group.

Discussion

The level of linguistic complexity required to plan and present a narrative in oral form is significant. It requires the combination of all seven NSS rubric criteria, which research has shown emerge in the preschool years and develop slowly through to adulthood (Berman & Slobin 1994). Oral narrative skills are also a strong predictor of whether a child will need literacy intervention support in the future (Heilman et al. 2010).

In addition to the commonly assessed aspects of narrative language, such as syntax and grammar, NSS also measures the importance of abstract language, such as metalinguistic verbs (describing the act of talking, such as ‘said’ and ‘told’) and metacognitive verbs (describing the act of thinking, such as ‘decides’ and ‘knows’). Although use of this tool requires training, this process can provide valuable learning for educational professionals, as the crucial elements of the rubric are explained and demonstrated.

Heilman et al. (2010) concluded that NSS ‘is a robust measure of children’s overall oral narrative competence and … the unique relationship between lexical diversity and the NSS confirmed that a special relationship exists between vocabulary and narrative organization skills in young school-age children’ (p. 154).

Resources

- NSS Scoring Guide
- Self-paced online training
Pragmatic Language Skill Inventory

The Pragmatic Language Skills Inventory (PLSI) (Gilliam & Miller 2006) is an American observational tool specifically designed to measure language pragmatics through different types of context-specific interactions. It can be administered to children from five years of age.

Instrument description

The PLSI is an easy-to-administer tool that takes five to 10 minutes. An adult who knows the child well completes a 45-item inventory based on the child’s language characteristics in their natural environment. It is norm-referenced from a cohort of 1175 children aged five to 12 years, and produces data that gives scaled scores and percentile ranks. The tool is widely used among both educator and special education professionals. It is available for purchase and comes with a comprehensive examiner’s manual.

The tool measures types of interactions across three subscales:

- Personal (including initiating conversations, using gestures and asking for help)
- Social (including turn taking and knowing when to talk and when to listen)
- Classroom (including using figurative language and slang and maintaining the topic).

The PLSI can be used to identify potential language disorders by using its cut-off scoring system. It can also be used to monitor progress and set goals in pragmatic language development.

Discussion

The PLSI tool is one of the few tools in language pragmatics that provides data in the form of percentile ranks and scaled scores, rather than descriptive rubric levels. The three subscales were created based on a ‘conversational code of conduct’, a concept that was introduced by Bates (1976) and outlines the rules of communication:

- cooperation
- telling the truth
- relevance of content
- wanting to listen
- providing the right amount of background information
- being unambiguous
- matching your language to your audience.

The social significance of these seven rules is clear and having them provided in the PLSI structured format can be a useful resource for education professionals.

The tool is also widely used by educators working with children with disability, such as those who are hard of hearing, and those on the autism spectrum.

Resources

- Pragmatic Language Skill Inventory kit

Preschool Language Scales, 5th edition – Australian and New Zealand Language Adapted

The Preschool Language Scales, 5th edition – Australian and New Zealand Language Adapted (PLS-5-ANZ) (Zimmerman et al. 2013) screens six areas of language and speech in children from birth to seven years 11 months of age. It is predominantly used as a tool to identify babies and children at risk of language delays or disorders, and to support their referral to specialists.

The PLS-5-ANZ is available to educators after undertaking a short training course. It is not to be confused with the PLS-5, a clinical version only available to speech pathologists.
Instrument description

The PLS-5-ANZ takes five to 10 minutes to administer and is largely observational for babies, moving to an interview process with prompts when used with older children. The tool assesses six areas of speech and language:

- language
- articulation
- connected speech
- social/interpersonal communication skills
- fluency
- voice.

These areas are assessed within the three constructs of emerging interaction, comprehension and expression. Example outcomes from a three-year-old’s interview include:

- recognises action in picture
- understands negatives in sentences
- names a variety of pictured objects
- uses plurals
- produces one four-to-five word sentence.

As the tool is essentially a screening test for diagnostic purposes, the tasks within the six areas are scored as either pass or fail. The child must pass all six areas to not be considered at-risk in some aspect.

Discussion

PLS-5-ANZ is based on a research study conducted in 15 early childhood education and care centres in north-west Sydney, specifically to determine the test’s efficacy with children from a Mandarin-speaking background (Ren et al. 2016). Ninety-six children from Mandarin-speaking backgrounds who had already successfully passed a language screening test in Mandarin were selected to participate. There were two interesting results related to this particular tool.

Just under 30 per cent children passed the PLS-5-ANZ benchmark (that is, a pass in all six areas) and just over 70 per cent failed at least one area of the assessment. This is largely because the tool has a stronger focus on the ability to pronounce words correctly and fluently than it does on the meaning and purpose of discourse. Many children were unable to clearly pronounce the final consonant in some words (for example, dog) even though they could receptively and expressively communicate the word. The inability to pronounce some final consonants has implications for testing other areas, such as plurals and other grammatical structures.

The researchers also compared the number of pass results against the number of months each child had spent in an education and care centre and found there was a correlation: the longer the time spent there, the higher the pass rate. These two findings provide important information for all early childhood educators when administering any of the tools or using professional judgment.

Resources

- PLS-5 ANZ kit and video

Test of Language Development – Primary, 5th edition

The Test of Language Development – Primary, 5th edition (TOLD-P:5) (Newcomer & Hammill 2019) was developed in the United States of America. Like its counterpart, the Assessment of Literacy and Language (ALL) (Lombardino et al. 2009), TOLD-P:5 is a diagnostic tool aimed at identifying children at risk of language delay, and is appropriate for children aged between four and eight years and 11 months. It has more breadth in its oral language scope than ALL and does not include emerging literacy.

Instrument description

The TOLD-P:5 assessment takes 30 to 60 minutes to administer and is available in paper form or online. The child is given a picture book and the educator asks a series of
questions about the content that constitutes six core sub-assessments:

- **picture vocabulary** – measures understanding of the meaning of spoken words (semantics, listening)
- **relational vocabulary** – measures understanding and ability to orally express the relationships between two spoken words (semantics, organising)
- **oral vocabulary** – measures ability to give oral definitions to familiar words that are spoken by the interviewer (semantics, speaking)
- **syntactic understanding** – measures ability to comprehend the meaning of sentences (grammar, listening)
- **sentence imitation** – measures ability to recite back sentences just heard (grammar, organising)
- **morphological completion** – measures ability to recognise, understand, and use common morphological forms (grammar, speaking).

The scores from these subtests are then grouped and reported in two main domains of oral language: semantics and grammar (listening, organising and speaking) and overall language ability.

**Discussion**

TOLD-P:5 is heavily focussed on measuring expressive language and language structures, which is a good precursor to early reading and writing. It is also able to reliably identify language delays and document progress for those children experiencing difficulty. As the nature of the interview is semi-formal and does not allow for any scope of discourse outside the set parameters, the tool will not provide good indicators for language pragmatics or deeper levels of comprehension.

TOLD-P:5 has been considered a reliable measurement of language development since the 1980s (Novoa & Lazarus 1988). The 5th edition updated the normative data to improve reliability across gender, race and ethnicity with a representative sample group of 1007 children in North America.

**Resources**

- **TOLD-P:5 kit**

**Test of Narrative Language, 2nd edition**

The Test of Narrative Language, 2nd edition (TNL-2) (Gillam & Pearson 2017) measures narrative oral language skills specifically in the context of the comprehension (receptive language) and production (expressive language) of storytelling. It can be administered to children from five years old, however the second edition was trialled with a larger normative group (with more children at each age level) that included four-year-olds.

**Instrument description**

TNL-2 is designed to measure three types of narratives: a script, a personal narrative and a fictional narrative. There are six tasks in total – three for comprehension and three for production. The test session takes about 15 to 20 minutes to administer, and the child may take breaks if needed. The recording is then heard or viewed multiple times as part of the scoring process, which takes 20 to 30 minutes. This tool requires the administrator to have minimum qualifications and training in special education.

The administrator first models, telling a story with or without picture prompts, and then asks a number of comprehension question, including inference-based ones. The child is given a new picture prompt in a similar format and asked to create their own story.

The tool has four purposes:

- To identify the presence or absence of narrative and/or social pragmatic issues.
- To identify a discrepancy between narrative oral comprehension and oral production
- To track progress as a result of intervention
- To be used as a measurement tool for research studies.
Discussion

This is an American tool. One of the picture prompts is set in a fast-food restaurant and is referred to as the ‘McDonalds’ story, although the branding is not obvious. Australian assessment tools generally do not include brand names. The cultural and commercial context may be something to consider before using the tool in a classroom.

The raw scores generated from the tasks are converted to scaled scores and percentile ranks that help compare results with the normative group of around 1300 students. The authors acknowledge that the normative data cohort did not include the following groups:

- children from non-English speaking backgrounds
- children who are deaf or hard of hearing
- children with speech difficulties.

This design is partly intentional, as one of the tool’s purposes is to determine the presence of language disorders. However, if the student is from a non-English speaking or significantly different cultural background, this may produce misleading results.

This tool also incidentally tests working memory in the tasks where students are asked to recall the story they have just heard without visual or verbal cues. It would be prudent for the educator to monitor if there is a difference in the child’s retelling skills when administering the other recall tasks that are supported with visual clues. This would thus indicate that the difference may be cognitive-based rather than language-based. Special education or psychology qualifications are required to purchase this assessment.

Resources

- TNL-2 kit

Wiig Assessment of Basic Concepts

The Wiig Assessment of Basic Concepts (WABC) (Wiig 2008) is an American tool that evaluates expressive and receptive oral language through the testing of basic concepts. There are two levels available: the first level is for children aged two years and six months to five years and 11 months, and the second level is for children aged five years to seven years 11 months.

Instrument description

This tool is essentially a picture book that is read aloud to the child from a script provided in the administrator’s manual. As each page of the picture book progresses the narrative, instructions and questions are asked throughout for the child to answer. Across the two levels there are 113 basic concepts tested that can be grouped into seven categories:

- colours and shapes
- size, weight and volume
- distance, time and speed
- quantity and completeness
- location and direction
- condition and quality
- sensation, emotion or evaluation.

The concepts are tested in related pairs. Firstly, an instruction is given to point to, for example, the ‘big bear’ in the picture (receptive language). The administrator will then point to the small bear in the picture and say, ‘and this bear is …’, which acts as a prompt for the child to say ‘little’ (expressive language). Administration of this tool takes 10 to 15 minutes for both levels.

Discussion

The creator of this assessment has authored an extensive list of similar tests and intervention programs. This tool was selected for review because it addresses receptive and expressive language in a setting that is more familiar in an early childhood education context (shared reading of a book) and is accessible to
early childhood professionals and carers without the need for clinical certification. Both the administration and scoring system are easy to understand and the simplified features do not detract from the instrument’s reliability.

It was trialled with a representative sample of 1200 American children and scored very well. When reviewing these tools it was found that the WABC assesses similar skills and correlates to another reliable tool called the Boehm Test of Basic Concepts-3 (2001). However, the WABC was judged to be a better measure of receptive and expressive oral language because of the testing of relational vocabulary instead of arbitrary standalone concepts (McGregor 2007).

Resources

- WABC kit
- Wiig Assessment of Basic Concepts by Elisabeth Wiig video
Summary

Through this review there is a consistent finding that oral language development underpins all literacy skills, including academic skills that become a focus later in school settings. A child’s ability to use oral language effectively influences all areas of their life, including their sense of self, their relationships with others, their ability to learn and their academic success (Shiel et al. 2012).

The set of skills and practices underpinning effective oral communication are complex, and the way young children master vocabulary, language structures, pragmatics and comprehension skills remains an ongoing study. Early childhood professionals have an important role in this process of oral language development by providing children with a language-rich environment that intentionally develops children’s functional, conversational and narrative communication.

The review identifies measurement tools that address components of oral language and that are appropriate for use in early childhood settings. When selecting tools, early childhood professionals can be guided by the principles of assessment outlined in Section 2, and should also note the following specific challenge relating to the assessment of oral language. Tools that are developed and normed with English-speakers tend to include content that is geared towards a specific cultural perspective. This can produce misleading results for children who do not speak English as their first language or who do not participate in the same cultural practices, as they may not recognise the visual and oral prompts in interview-based tools. Observational tools are likely to elicit more accurate data for these children, particularly if they are observed in an environment that allows them to interact naturally.

It is a reality that the tools available to assess oral language and early literacy tend to be designed to identify deficits. As a result there is more information provided on those children who cannot perform tasks than on those who can. It is important to identify children at risk of delayed development as early as possible. It is also important to support and extend development of oral language skills for all children.

This review focuses on tools that are available to educators to use in their settings. Many tools not covered in this document were excluded because they require professional registration as a psychologist. This highlights a challenge in effective assessment in early learning settings – many of the assessments that have gone through the most rigorous validation processes are not available for use by early childhood professionals in their day-to-day practice.

The principles set out in Section 2 should be read as an aspirational set of principles for the development of new assessments in addition to a framework for selecting an appropriate assessment for today. In particular, it is clear from this review that there is much work to be done to build a common understanding of what oral communication is and what progress looks like within each practice and strand from earliest emergence of basic skills to higher-order skills. This would allow educators to refer to a common learning progression to understand where a child is in their learning and would support them to build children’s skills iteratively over time. Further, such advancements would allow practitioners to seamlessly join aspects of children’s development across major transitions where disjoints are currently observed.

Ultimately the focus for early childhood professionals is on instructional use of oral language and early literacy assessments. If the purpose of assessment is to inform instructional activities, these tools provide direction for early childhood professionals in ways to assess children’s oral communication and should be helpful in guiding judgments about each child’s progress towards becoming an effective oral communicator.
Glossary

**Agency**: Having a sense of autonomy and being able to make choices and decisions, to influence events and to have an impact on one’s world.

**Cognitive**: The mental processes involved in gaining knowledge and comprehension.

**Cognitive flexibility**: Human capacity to adapt mental processing strategies in the face of new conditions, to switch between different concepts, to think about multiple concepts simultaneously, or to think about something from another perspective. With working memory and inhibitory control, it is a key element of executive function.

**Communicative intent**: What the communicator intends, or means, by their communication.

**Comprehension**: The ability to understand language and non-verbal cues.

**Construct**: A construct is a theoretical idea, such as a quality or attribute that, while not directly measurable, can be assessed if broken down into observable properties.

**Contextualised language**: Language centred on what is happening in a particular setting – in the ‘here and now’.

**Conversation**: Verbal interaction between two or more people.

**Criterion-referenced assessment**: Assessment that measures a child’s performance against a set of criteria or standards.

**Decontextualised language**: Language that is extended beyond the immediate moment, such as narratives about past or future events.

**Dialogue**: An alternative term for conversation, or the verbal interaction between two or more people.

**Early childhood professionals**: Includes, but is not limited to, maternal and child health nurses, early childhood practitioners who work directly with children in early childhood education and care settings (educators), school teachers, family support workers, preschool field officers, inclusion support facilitators, student support service officers, primary school nurses, primary welfare officers, early childhood intervention workers, play therapists, health professionals and teachers working in hospitals, and education officers in cultural organisations.

**Elicitation**: Prompting a person with the aim of drawing out additional details from their response or narrative.

**Executive function**: A specific set of attention-regulation skills involved in conscious goal-directed problem solving. These skills include cognitive flexibility, working memory and inhibitory control.

**Extension**: A form of response that extends a child’s utterance by modelling adult grammar and/or adding new information.

**Fairness**: Being equitable in the treatment of others, including considering a learner’s characteristics and experiences that may advantage or disadvantage them in any particular assessment.

**Expressive communication**: The use of verbal or non-verbal language or communication to express one’s needs, wants or ideas to another.

**Functional communication**: Language used in day-to-day situations such as greeting someone, asking for something, giving an instruction, or apologising. It is sometimes referred to as instrumental communication.

**Grammar**: The system or ‘rules’ of a language.

**Inhibitory control**: The process of self-control that enables a person to purposefully ignore a potential distraction, and to modify their response. With working memory and cognitive flexibility, it is a key element of executive function.
**Joint attention:** A child and adult’s coordinated attention to each other and to a third object or event.

**Language pragmatics:** The cultural and social contexts that exist when communication is taking place.

**Language structures:** The way language is structured, in particular the areas of syntax (how words are ordered to make meaning) and grammar (the rules around sentence structure).

**Metacognitive verbs:** Verbs that describe the act of thinking, such as ‘decides’, ‘thinks’ and ‘knows’, showing that a person is able to describe the thoughts, feelings and perspectives of themselves and others.

**Metalinguistic verbs:** Verbs that describe the act of talking such as ‘said’ and ‘told’.

**Metaplay:** Explanatory out-of-role comments made during imaginary play that are used to negotiate roles and manage the game.

**Morphemes:** The smallest linguistic part of a word that cannot be further divided.

**Narrative:** A story or description of a series of events, spoken or written.

**Norm-referenced assessment:** An assessment that measures a child against an average.

**Oracy:** Level of competence in oral communication.

**Oral communication:** The exchange of information through spoken word.

**Oral language:** The skills and knowledge required for speaking and listening.

**Quality interactions:** Interactions that have a certain level of complexity involving use of diverse words, an increased number of words spoken in an exchange, and the structural difficulty.

**Receptive communication:** The comprehension of (or understanding) what is being communicated by another person.

**Reliability:** An assessment’s ability to produce valid results consistently, across contexts.

**Screening:** Using an assessment tool to identify a particular set of conditions.

**Standardised assessment:** An assessment that is standardised across all children being assessed.

**Sustained shared thinking:** When two or more participants work together to solve a problem, clarify a concept or evaluate an activity.

**Syntax:** The way in which linguistic elements are put together to form phrases, clauses and sentences.

**Texts:** Things that are read, viewed, listened to and created in order to share meaning. Texts can be print-based, such as books, magazines and posters or screen-based, for example internet sites and DVDs. Many texts are multimodal, integrating images, written words and/or sound (EYLF 201).

**United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989):** A human rights treaty that sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children.

**Validity:** Level of assurance that an assessment tool in fact measures what it claims to measure.

**Vocabulary:** The words in a language.

**Working memory:** The ability to hold and manipulate distinct pieces of information over a short period of time. With cognitive flexibility and inhibitory control, it is a key element of executive function.
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