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# Talkin' Oracy and SVR

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# A Warm wELLcome for Language Learners

Kristin Lems

## About This Column

This is the third article for the new *IRCJ* column focusing on English language learners (ELLs). We rotate among four column writers, and I am the author for this fall issue, the first of the new academic year. In the past two issues, the authors have talked about culturally responsive literacy assessment and the foundations of second language acquisition. In this article, I want to share with you the notion of *oracy*, broadly composed of the skills of listening and speaking, a reading model that puts oracy front and center, and oracy's role in the academic success of ELLs.

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## Talkin' Oracy and SVR

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You may not have heard of *oracy* or the Simple View of Reading before, but I hope that they will be good new additions to your teacher toolkit. Sticht and James coined the term *oracy* in 1984 to serve as a complement to the term *literacy*. Over the years, literacy in the United States had come to be synonymous with reading and writing—both silent activities. Sticht and James sought to reframe oral skills as critical elements of literacy learning. They called oracy a learner's "reading potential," explaining that words learned orally will be accessible to read and understand once the learner can easily decode them. When you think about it, it makes sense intuitively. It is a lot easier to read when you know the meanings of the words you are decoding than when you must first decode them and then stop to figure out what they mean.

Biemiller (1999) points out that children start learning the meanings of spoken language within the first year of life, and they acquire thousands of words in their home language before they begin their first day of formal education. Children learn to understand words

through interactions with caregivers and family members—especially older siblings, and through innumerable small daily transactions. By the time they enter school, they have a large repertoire of vocabulary—both spoken vocabulary and, even more importantly, listening vocabulary in their first language. This can help set the stage for academic success.

Around the same time that the term *oracy* was coined, a reading model called the Simple View of Reading (SVR) emerged. Gough and Tunmer (1986), two psychologists, characterized reading as the product of decoding and listening/language comprehension or, put as an equation,  $R = D \times LC$ . They had worked with children struggling with reading and realized that there were at least three distinct kinds of struggling readers. The first reader might be strong in decoding skills but weak in reading comprehension, which we sometimes call *word calling*; the second reader might be strong in language comprehension skills but weak in decoding, which was sometimes labeled *dyslexia*; and the third reader, who was weak in both decoding and language comprehension, could be considered a reader with possible processing or cognitive problems.

SVR separated the nonprint-based language skills from word recognition skills and suggested

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that language comprehension be viewed as “everything that remains when decoding is not a factor” (Lems, Miller, & Soro, 2017, p. 66). Once decoding is accounted for, reading comprehension becomes about general and specific understanding of language, which, as a shorthand, we can call oracy. Language comprehension includes listening comprehension, conversations and discussions, background knowledge, metacognitive skills, and other traits. This configuration of reading allowed phonics and word recognition to be cordoned off from the other aspects of reading to examine what is still there while decoding is imperfect or in progress.

SVR did not catch on with reading researchers, probably because it came from outside the reading field and seemed to oversimplify a process which is incredibly complex and varied. Also, in the great reading debate of that time, SVR may have been seen as downplaying the importance of phonics, which is not at all the case. However, over time, SVR came to be cited in many studies about the role of listening comprehension, sometimes called *oral language comprehension*, in reading.

For example, in 1993, Dymock found that native English-speaking middle school students with good decoding but poor comprehension skills also had low scores on listening comprehension assessments. This led her to conclude that “once a child has become a good decoder, differences in reading ability will reflect differences in listening ability” (p. 90). In a metastudy done in 2014, Garcia and Cain analyzed 110 studies of native English-speaking children that examined the relationship between decoding and reading comprehension. They found that listening comprehension had a significant positive effect on reading comprehension. Their literature review noted, “Readers with poor listening comprehension skills are likely to have poor reading comprehension” (p. 76).

SVR has even been used in research about the reading of students with Down’s syndrome. Roch and Levorato (2009) found that

differences in the reading proficiency of 23 1st graders with Down’s syndrome and 23 typically developing 1st-grade students could be explained by the differences in their listening comprehension scores, even though the students with Down’s were as good or better at decoding than the typically developing students.

SVR picked up widespread support as a theory useful in interpreting the progress of second language learners and, in particular, English language learners (ELLs). Recently, VerHoeven and van Leeuwe (2012) researched components of reading and listening comprehension among native speakers of Dutch and Dutch language learners and found more confirmation for SVR. The word decoding and listening comprehension skills were correlated with their reading comprehension abilities throughout the primary grades. However, although the word decoding of the two groups was pretty much equal, the Dutch language learners remained below the native Dutch speakers in reading and listening comprehension.

In a study of Spanish-speaking English language learners, Royer and Carlo (1991) found that the students’ English listening comprehension, assessed in 5th grade, was one of the strongest predictors of their English reading comprehension in 6th grade. Carlisle, Beeman, and Shah (1996) documented that English listening comprehension and quality of vocabulary definitions could account for more than half of the variance in reading comprehension scores of teenage Mexican ELLs. There is even research that college students speaking African-American Vernacular English as a first dialect had listening comprehension scores on a retired TOEFL test that resembled those of English as a Second Language (ESL) students who took it (Pandey, 2000), which suggests that listening comprehension practice might benefit dialect speakers of English as well as ELLs.

It was my own doctoral research that got me interested in SVR. I recorded 232 adult ELL students, all with high school diplomas from their

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native country, reading a one-minute English passage (Lems, 2006). I calculated their words correct per minute and compared those scores with their scores on a written exam which could be considered a valid measure of their reading comprehension. My hypothesis was that their oral reading fluency would be significantly correlated with their reading comprehension score as is the case in so much research on first language English-speaking children. I coded in some other measures, including the scores on their listening comprehension test and their oral interview scores, basically because they were available. Imagine my surprise when I found that the strongest correlation, and in fact the only strong correlation, was between the students' listening comprehension scores and their silent reading comprehension scores! This surprise led me to go back and explore research about the contribution of listening comprehension to silent reading comprehension in ELLs, and that's where I found the Simple View of Reading.

A lot of teachers would love to be able to devote less time to decoding. As you surely know, teaching children to decode fluently in English can be a real pain—it takes years to develop, and it may require special interventions because of the tricky orthographic structure of English. Quite simply, it takes longer to learn to read and write English than other languages. In fact, a carefully controlled study comparing the decoding of children from ten European languages, including English, revealed “profound delays in the development of simple decoding skills in English” (Seymour, Ero, & Erskine, 2003, p. 160), requiring about two more years of education to get to the same reading proficiency level as children from other European languages.

Biemiller (1999) points out that it takes average English-speaking students until 7th or 8th grade to be able to read the words they can understand orally. It is surely even a longer time frame for ELLs. Therefore, we need to make sure children keep developing their oracy even when their English decoding is in development,

whether they are learning decoding as native speakers or as ELLs. The way we can do that is through oracy practice. Oral activity is doubly important for ELLs who are both learning to crack the code of English decoding while also attaining thousands of new English words and learning to produce them for various purposes. Good teachers cannot just watch oracy unfold all by itself; we need to incorporate it into our daily lesson plans.

It is common for teachers to frame vocabulary development as learning the meaning of words students encounter in print, or learning to use more academic vocabulary in writing. For ELL students, however, vocabulary development needs to have an additional dimension: building listening vocabulary.

Listening comprehension, unfortunately, is not “transferable” between languages. It is language-specific. No matter how strong we may be in listening and language comprehension in our first language, it does not confer any advantage in listening comprehension in a new language. This is unlike the well-documented benefit learners receive for reading in a new language when they have strong literacy in their first language. Although some ELLs are surely exposed to English in communicative settings outside of class, teachers must make the assumption that their ELLs are starting from scratch in their English listening comprehension when they enter the school room door. The annual ACCESS test, in conjunction with other measures such as interviews and teacher observations, can also document the listening comprehension level of students, but it should serve only as a floor.

## **Oracy Activities**

You may already be doing oracy activities in class but may not have labeled them as such. For example, holding a morning meeting is an oracy activity. Pondering a question in Think Pair Share format is an oracy activity. And even a teacher-centered oracy activity can help build

listening comprehension—for example, giving a clear description of a procedure that will be used in the classroom such as where writing portfolio folders will be kept and how they will be used. All of these things help build the listening vocabulary of ELLs.

In addition to what is already in place, intensive listening activities can help children figure out the meanings of new words, the sounds of English, where words divide in the stream of speech, and how words are spelled.

A traditional spelling test can be repurposed into a dictation test in which students write sentences they hear, rather than just individual words. For students who need scaffolding, you can write a line for each of the words in the sentence on the board, like the game “Hangman” but with words instead of letters. For example, you would say the sentence, “There are three forms of matter,” and then write six lines on the board, which the children can fill in on their own paper.

Another intensive listening activity is transcribing a song. Get the class into small groups and have each group transcribe the words to one of the verses of a song as you play it several times. After students write their own versions, they compare notes with others in their small group, come up with a version they all agree on, and write the verse on the board for the rest of the class to see. After that, the teacher should pass out a clean copy of all the lyrics and play the song one more time.

Songs can build oracy more generally as well. Kim Theodore, an ESL teacher at Hawthorne School in Wheaton, Illinois, formed a choir with her ELL students in 1st through 3rd grades called “CLEF” or “Children Learning English Fluency” (Figure 1). They learn and perform songs at Hawthorne alongside the band and orchestra. This is a “harmonious” way to build up oracy while placing ELL children in an important role in the cultural life of the school.

All students, especially ELL students, benefit from a strong daily diet of instructional conversation. Instructional conversation can

**Figure 1. The CLEF Club at Hawthorne School**



be defined as “planned, goal directed conversations on an academic topic between a teacher and a small group of students” (Doherty et al., 2003, para 6). When students take part in instructional conversation with a teacher over time, they will transition to being able to do it with each other. Take an inventory of your own speech in class. Are you clearly intelligible? Do you use academic language in a natural way, inviting students to try it out as well? Do you use Tier Two and Tier Three words as appropriate? Do you provide enough repetitions of new words and phrases that students will become familiar with the words?

I often listen to the NPR news show *All Things Considered* when I am in my car in the afternoons and, as you may know if you live near Chicago, most of the show is broadcast two times so that we hear the same show at 6:00 PM that we heard at 4:00 PM. It just so happens that I sometimes hear both the first and the second broadcast (I know, that’s a disgusting amount of time to be in a car!), which means I hear the same stories twice in a row. I never cease to be amazed at how much I missed the first time through! It makes me realize that a second chance at listening to the same spoken text can truly be a revelation. If that is true for me, it is certainly true for those learning English as a new language. You might try using a prerecorded story, or mystery, and play it through two or three times. Students can answer a simple set of questions as they

listen, or they can be asked to write or tell a summary of what they heard.

In our distracted and distractible society, focused listening and conversation is just as precious as focused reading or writing. It is a wonderful thing to provide that gift to our students!

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