

Rural Northern Canadian Teachers' Discoveries about Young Children's Oral Language

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Abstract

Kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers collaborated with university researchers in an action research project aiming to find ways to support young children's oral language. Analysing video data of children's interactions during play, we worked together to create an observation tool that allows teachers to focus on ways in which children use language to carry out social purposes. In this paper, we report on teachers' discoveries about the wide range of social purposes which children carry out using language, and their use of an observation framework that captures the pragmatic aspects of children's language while engaged in play. Our research has implications for all teachers who wish to learn more about observing and supporting children's oral language use.

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At home, in school, and out in the community, children interact with friends, family and community members, using their growing vocabularies and understandings of the ways that words are put together. Through these interactions, children learn new words, and use language to do many things, such as develop relationships, make requests, provide information, and express their needs or desires. They learn about the world and about cultural expectations for interacting with particular people in particular contexts (Halliday, 1978). Children become socialized to the routines of each situated activity and "learn the ways of talk and thought embedded in that activity" (Boyd & Galda, 2011, p. 7). As they develop understandings about sounds, meanings and constructions of the languages spoken in their communities, they are also acquiring the understandings and skills that are foundational to literacy (Owocki & Goodman, 2002; Resnick & Snow, 2009). The process of expressing ideas through words to communicate with others in clear and understandable ways leads children to further organize their thinking and reflect on their experiences (Barnes, 1975/1992). Additionally, children use talk to "build constructively and critically on each other's ideas" (Littleton & Mercer, 2013, p. 296), serving to expand and refine their understandings.

Researchers (e.g., Cazden, 2001; Fassler, 2013) and curriculum developers (e.g., Department for Education, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006) agree that classroom interactions should build on the oral language that children bring from their home and community lives. Finding ways to achieve this goal is the focus of our large-

scale project, which brings researchers together with educators in northern rural and Indigenous communities across four Canadian provinces. A branch of this project emerged in response to teachers expressing their need for an observation tool that might help them capture what their students do with language during typical classroom play and small group interactions. As reported elsewhere (Peterson, Eiszadeh, Rajendram & Portier, submitted), participating kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers collaborated with us in a branch of the larger research study involving the video-recording of children's interactions during dramatic and construction play. Through inductive analysis of children's utterances in their play interactions, we developed codes and categories of children's oral language use, and determined a wide range of purposes for which children use language in their play. Teachers then worked with us to develop a tool, *Observing Children's Use of Language (OCUL)*, drawing on the categories created in the analysis of children's utterances.

In this paper, we introduce the observation tool, which focuses on children's "*communicative competence*, or the understanding of how to use language to communicate" (Boyd & Galda, 2011, p. 4—italics in original). Further, we asked participating kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers, working with five- and six-year old children, from three of the rural communities to incorporate this observation tool into their typical classroom practices. We report on their discoveries in terms of these research questions:

1. How do teachers use the *Observing Children's Use of Language* tool?
2. What do teachers discover about young children's oral language, and how do they use the information?

Theoretical Framework

Socio-Linguistic View of Language

As young children talk and interact with others, they are not only learning the language of their culture and community, they are learning *through* language and learning *about* language (Halliday, 2004). Our research is based upon a view of language as a meaning making or semiotic process, whereby the act of participating in language learning and language use engages young children in "learning the foundation of learning itself" (Halliday, 1993, p. 93). Through language interactions, children are immersed in recreating and learning the expectations, relationships and values of their cultures. Through the social relationships of talk, children make sense of the world, and discover the words, sentences, meanings and purposes necessary for independent thought (Vygotsky, 1962). When given opportunities for authentic talk in classrooms, children learn how to use talk to tell stories, imagine, provide rationales, hypothesize, explore, evaluate and re-evaluate, all vital cognitive processes for carrying out literacy practices.

Oral Language and Literacy

Children's oral language supports their construction of meaning in reading and writing (Dickinson et al., 2003). Research has identified important relationships between oral language and literacy in children's interactions before entering formal school settings (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1999; Heath, 1983; Tizard & Hughes, 1984; Wells, 1981), and later when attending school (e.g., Barnes, 1975/1992; Boyd & Galda, 2011; Wells, 1999). Through their interactions with others, children also learn social expectations about language use across contexts and develop the understandings of language that they will

bring to reading and writing (Resnick & Snow, 2009). Recognition of the importance of oral language to children's literacy is found in literacy research (e.g., McKeown & Beck, 2004), and is evidenced in Canadian provincial language curricula (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 2014) and American state curricula (National Early Literacy Panel, 2009).

Literature Review

This paper presents the findings from an action research study that is situated within a much larger multi-year project taking place across northern rural communities in four Canadian provinces. The overall goals of this larger project are to co-create research-supported approaches and practices that will support young children's oral language and writing in Canadian northern rural and Indigenous communities, and in the process, take steps to develop teaching capacity in these communities. The study presented in this paper extends from participating teachers' requests for classroom oral language observation tools and from the view that classroom language assessments can and should include a focus on children's competencies in oral communication (Hymes, 1974). Further, in keeping with the larger project's objective, we considered how children's oral language might be observed and assessed in ways that are responsive to particular play contexts of the classrooms of participating communities. Our research is based on a recognition that northern rural and Indigenous classroom contexts have been marginalized in educational research (Burton, Brown, & Johnson, 2013). Our own classroom experience and research shows that researchers and educators should not assume that practices and tools developed for and used in southern urban Canadian classrooms are necessarily appropriate for northern Canadian contexts. Our literature review synthesizes relevant work in the fields of play and oral language, oral language assessments and in professional development of educators in rural communities.

Play and Oral Language

Our large-scale research project focuses on supporting children's oral language use in play contexts. Classroom dramatic play contexts, defined by Smilansky (1968) as the activities where children engage in pretend roles, offer ideal opportunities for children to engage in a wide range of communicative experiences (Whitebread, 2010). Some Canadian provincial curriculum and supporting documents, notably in Ontario, make reference to the importance of oral language to play, the role pretend play serves in language development, and how language serves to extend play into other contexts (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 2014). Varied language use has been documented in research, specifically in the dramatic and block play. These authentic play contexts can offer more information about children's language abilities than that gained solely from standardized tests (Pellegrini, 1986).

In our own studies of northern Canadian rural and Indigenous children playing in dramatic and construction/material play settings, we found that classroom dramatic play contexts provided spaces where children created narratives with a theme or storyline related to the centre and its props, and engaged in "real talk" as defined by Boyd and Galda (2011). For the study reported here, these dramatic play scenarios provided the contexts for teachers to implement the observation tool.

Oral Language Assessments

Our systematic review of hundreds of research articles on oral language assessment showed that children's vocabulary is the predominant feature assessed. Of the tests focusing on vocabulary, the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, Fourth Edition* (Dunn & Dunn, 2007), a one-on-one test requiring children to provide labels for pictures, is the most frequently used test. Another predominant branch of oral language assessment research involved the analysis of children's narrative retellings. Because the data gathered from retellings provide continuous text to analyze (as children can tell lengthy "stories"), researchers can assess more features than vocabulary assessments are able to assess. Some researchers (e.g., Justice et al., 2006) assessed children's narratives in terms of what they called "productivity" (e.g., total number of words; the total number of T-units, which are combinations of clauses), and structural complexity (e.g., mean length of T-units expressed by number of words and morphemes; number of coordinating conjunctions).

Many oral language assessment practices (e.g., Clay, 2007; Crevola & Vineis, 2004; Dunn & Dunn, 2007) involve children in a one-to-one context with an adult (e.g., a teacher or a speech-language pathologist) removed from the settings where children typically interact with others and naturally use language to communicate and express themselves. Administration of these assessments involves asking children to repeat sentences and/or verbally label pictures.

Some widely available tools have been designed to assess the social *purposes* of children's language use (e.g., Dickinson, McCabe, & Sprague, 2003; Scholastic, 2001), although many of these focusing on a child's interaction with an adult who asks questions or initiates the conversation. With our interest focusing on children's *peer* interactions, two studies are of particular relevance to our research. Studies by Tough (1976) and Corsaro (1986) involved contextualized assessments of children's oral language. Both researchers created classification guides for assessing children's interactions in dramatic and construction play settings. Tough (1976) found that children used language for a number of purposes, and years later, Corsaro's (1986) research resulted in some similar language purpose categories.

With an understanding that oral language is of significant importance to literacy development, we have responded to the requests made by teachers for observation and assessment tools that capture children's authentic use of language within the context of their typical interactions and community/school settings. Keeping in mind the larger project goal of developing ways for teachers to support their students' oral language development, our aim was to develop a "formative" assessment tool that could be easily used by classroom teachers while they observed their students in the context of typical classroom dramatic and collaborative play, and might serve to inform the decisions that they make when modifying learning activities for their students. This paper reports on how teachers responded to the use of this tool.

Rural Teachers' Professional Development

Although rural communities face many of the same educational challenges as their urban counterparts, they have some unique challenges. Rural schools often have more difficulty than urban schools recruiting and retaining teachers, particularly experienced teachers and teachers with specialties. As a result, rural schools often have a higher turnover rate, a lower rate of students who complete postsecondary degrees and more

young and inexperienced teachers than urban schools (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006; Corbett, 2007; Dadisman, Gravelle, Farmer, & Petrin, 2010; Howley & Pendarvis, 2003; Storey, 1993). School leaders recognize the need to mentor the many new and inexperienced teachers who teach in rural schools, yet it can be difficult to provide this support because of the physical distance between schools in rural districts (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006). Ongoing professional development opportunities with vital practice and feedback components built into them are especially challenging to provide because of the geographic isolation of northern rural and Indigenous schools (Clarke, Imrich, Surgenor, & Wells, 2003; Hansen, 2009).

The work of teachers in northern Indigenous and rural schools is enhanced through the positive relationships that are often found among community members and the schools. Teachers and students often live close to each other in their communities, so school “initiatives often attempt to entwine academic, social and community-building activities to foster citizenship and to create learning opportunities relevant to the lives of students and the community” (Wallin, Anderson & Penner, 2009, p. 70). However, because many teachers leave after only a few years of teaching in a community, they do not always establish close connections with the community and, in turn, community members are often wary of new people, knowing that they may only stay a short while (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006). When teachers who have stayed are asked why they have remained in their teaching positions within the small communities, they note that relationships have played a key influential role, specifically the supportive relationships with principals (Murphy & Angelski, 1996). Principals can foster beneficial relationships with colleagues and take steps to organize training, support and mentoring for young teachers. In Australia, steps have been taken to address this at the policy level, to encourage teachers to collaborate with one another to develop their own learning and take steps to address the professional isolation that rural teachers sometimes experience (Swift, 2010).

Researchers have also called for initiatives to address the rural-urban gap in access to professional development opportunities and models of delivery (e.g., Stockard, 2011). Our large scale action research project is taking important steps toward offering extended community developed professional development models and practices to support oral language and writing development efforts in rural primary classrooms. The smaller research cycle reported here involved rural teachers working collaboratively together to develop a practical classroom assessment tool that has potential (as discussed below) to contribute to a teacher’s own understanding about children’s oral language uses in relation to the daily classroom learning activities. It is important that the results of collaborative action research conducted in rural schools, particularly northern rural and Indigenous schools, be widely disseminated to provide alternative perspectives to curriculum, research and practice that tend to be urban-oriented (Corbett, 2014).

Background to the Development of the Observing Children’s Use of Language (OCUL) Tool

Collaborative Action Research Project

In action research, teachers select and examine topics that interest them based upon the issues they have identified within their own classrooms (O’Connor, Green, & Anderson, 2006). Action research helps educators familiarize themselves with current research and work toward finding ways for this research to meaningfully impact their own

classroom practices. This process spirals over time through several iterations of planning, implementing changes, data collection, analysis, and reflection (Creswell, 2008). These spiralling cycles emphasize self-reflection with the goal of fostering improvements in practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). Action research aims to collaborate with educators so that new practices are built upon what the teacher already knows about their classroom, community and students (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Thohahoken, 2011) and new theories are modelled from the practices within local contexts (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009).

With this in mind, over a school year, we (two university researchers) met regularly with the participating rural teachers to collaboratively plan, develop, implement and reflect on new teaching approaches that address our collaboratively created research questions about children's oral language and writing. For one cycle of this iterative process, the teachers implemented and tested the OCUL tool, and worked out how this might be used and managed in their particular classroom contexts with their particular students.

Approximately every six weeks, from October through June, we visited the participating students in their classrooms, met individually with each teacher during their planning time, and then met with all the teachers together after school. At these times, we reflected with the teachers on the classroom video and writing data that they had collected during the time between our visits and discussed possible new approaches to supporting the children's language and writing. During the intervening weeks, the teachers tried the new approaches. As with other documented action research practices (McAteer, 2013), we (researchers and teachers) used the video data to assess how well the approaches supported children's learning and then refined or designed new approaches in the ongoing cycle of data collection, analysis, and refinement of practices.

During one of the six-week cycles in the middle of the school year, the teachers used the OCUL tool, for assessing their students' communicative competencies. During the first year of our larger research project, we had created this tool collaboratively, organizing language use categories into an observation sheet that they could use and test in their classrooms.

Research Context and Participants

This study was conducted in rural communities in the far north of a western Canadian province. Eagle Hills (all names are pseudonyms) is an industrial center based on the abundant natural resources in the area. Within a 30-minute drive of Eagle Hills are Aspen and Deerview, two agricultural-based working class communities. These three communities range in population from 400 to 6000 residents. Of our six participants, two are kindergarten teachers in their third year of teaching, while the other kindergarten teacher and the three Grade 1 teachers have between 13 and 30 years of teaching experience. All teachers are female except for Marcel, a Grade 1 teacher (all names are pseudonyms). Class sizes range from 8–32 students who speak English as their mother tongue.

Developing the OCUL Tool

To develop an oral language assessment tool, during the first year of our larger research project, we used 81 video-recordings taken by the teachers of their students' talk and analyzed how the children used language in their dramatic play and other collaborative activities. Our inductive analysis methods took place over several months. The video

recordings were transcribed and then read through by the researchers who conducted a descriptive analysis of the function and type of each utterance that was made by the children. From these descriptions, we developed 37 initial codes and then used these codes to re-analyse many of the transcripts. Any discrepancies between us were discussed and codes were refined and categorized. Two doctoral students then joined our process and we used the refined codes to analyze an extensive transcript together, again comparing our coding, making minor adjustments, and clarifying the wording of our codes. We grouped the codes into categories and used several more transcripts as reliability checks before bringing our analyses to the teachers. Together we discussed these categories and codes, combined two of the codes and made very minor changes to the wording to clarify meaning. Our analysis revealed that children used language for six language purposes (categories): playing with sounds, satisfying their own needs, directing others, expressing disagreement, getting along with others, and creating, connecting and explaining. Once we arrived at our final version of the categories and codes, the teachers worked with us to design a format for the *Observing Children's Use of Language* tool (see Figure 1).

	Playing with Sounds	Own Needs	Directing
	Playing with sounds/words to accompany actions or feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describing own actions • Asking for assistance or information • Asserting ownership of object or space • Attempting to get others' attention • Expressing need or desire • Asserting own role • Seeking affirmation Expressing emotion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Telling or suggesting what a peer should or should not do • Assigning a role to others Persisting or convincing others
Tally			
Quotes			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejecting storyline, topic or role • Correcting peer's behaviour or showing disapproval • Rejecting help, advice or object • Excluding peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inviting collaborative action • Negotiating to get object or turn • Offering or accepting help or advice • Complimenting peers • Accepting peer's correction • Showing interest by asking or answering questions • Affirming the storyline or topic • Being polite 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning what to do or talking through problem • Drawing conclusions about situation • Giving information, explaining or elaborating • Giving rationale for actions or suggestions • Narrating real-life events while playing • Asking questions to make connections or elicit explanations • Adding to the storyline or topic • Introducing a new narrative or topic
Tally			
Quotes			

Reflections

Figure 1. Observing Children's Use of Language (OCUL)

Learning to Use the OCUL Tool

Together, we planned a process for determining how useful the tool might be for teachers to gather information about their students' communicative competencies, possible contexts for how they would use the tool, and ways to make the tool use manageable during everyday classroom activities.

Once we were all satisfied with the tool, we watched a 10-minute video clip of four children in a dramatic play center, filmed in one of the participating kindergarten classrooms. We recorded and discussed our observations, and then repeated the process with another video clip to provide the teachers with further experience in using the tool. We developed a six-week implementation plan, whereby each teacher decided how they would observe students using the tool: one student at a time; several focal students over time; or, all the children within a small group.

All children were observed during dramatic or collaborative play activities. Each teacher planned to try one observation method for three weeks and then switch to another method. They based their plans on the specific needs and students in their own classrooms. Since we could only fly into their community to visit at the end of the six weeks, we arranged a web-conference mid-way through the cycle.

The template for the tool shows the broad categories of language use (in bold type in Figure 1) with the specific language use codes listed underneath (in small print in Figure 1). The teacher referred to these codes as examples of what children in their classrooms might say and to guide them in the meaning of each language use category. The tool was designed so that teachers could simply tally the number of times that focus children used language within each of the broader categories, and write down examples of specific utterances in the larger spaces. Once teachers have familiarized themselves with the tool, they could use the alternate format that simply lists the six categories (see Figure 2). A copy of the first template with the specific codes could be kept for reference as needed.

	Playing with Sounds	Own Needs	Directing	Disagreeing	Getting Along	Creating, Connecting & Explaining	Teacher's Reflections
Name:							
Contexts:							

Figure 2. Observing Children's Use of Language (OCUL)

Teachers' Use of the OCUL Tool: Data Collection and Analysis

To determine how teachers used the OCUL tool and information gathered from it, we analyzed the six teachers' notes and tallies on their OCUL forms. The teachers kept a log sheet to track which days that they were able to incorporate the assessment into their classroom practices and the number of minutes that they carried out their observations of the focus children playing.

Halfway through the research cycle, at the end of week three, we set up a web meeting to reflect on the process and progress to that point. We took notes and audio recorded the teachers as they shared their experiences using the OCUL tool and as everyone responded to each other's ideas. At the end of the six-week cycle, we visited each teacher to conduct interviews, asking the same questions that we asked at the mid-way web meeting:

1. Tell us about your experiences using the tool. How are you using it, in what contexts are children interacting and for how long do you tend to observe a child or children?
2. What kind of information are you getting? How are you using this information?

As with the development of the OCUL tool, we followed an inductive meaning-making process to identify patterns and consistencies in the teachers' observations and experiences (Patton, 2002). The results of our analysis are described below.

Findings

Teachers' Assessment Practices

The teachers recorded and analyzed the children's interactions at dramatic play centers and while the children were playing with blocks and other creative and construction materials. They also used the oral language assessment tool during small group settings when children were engaged in formal curriculum activities, such as collaborative writing and brainstorming, making patterns with pattern blocks, using an iPad to learn literacy skills, and word game centers. They all chose to either focus on different children (one-at-a-time) in different small group activities or track one child across many activities. Figure 3 shows how one teacher recorded observations on an OCUL form.

Name(s) [Redacted] Dates May 9-13

	Playing With Sounds	Own Needs	Reflections
Tallies			- This was a good grouping - lots of give and take in conversation and also a good final product. - each student had time to share ideas no monopolizing of task.
Quotes	"aaaarr" (dragon sound) "psshsh" (fire sound)	"can you cut it out I can't" "I want to colour the dragons tail" "I need the crayons" "Give me the paper" "That's mine"	
	Directing	Disagreeing	This was a good cooperative activity. All students were engaged and absorbed in the task.
Tallies			
Quotes	"Let's make a dragon with fire balls and fire breath and fire all over"	"I don't want red." "I want a big dragon" "Our dragon has to be green" "dragons are green"	
	Getting Along	Connecting & Explaining	
Tallies			
Quotes	"we can both pick powers" "what powers do you want"	"I have a dragon game at home" "The game has fire balls and fire air and fire cannons"	

Context: Create a dragon with magical powers or skills (working in partners) This was a student requested activity. Students in the entire class wanted to try this activity.

Figure 3. Adrianna's Notes Using the OCUL

Our observation template provided space for teachers to tally the number of verbal utterances and record the verbal utterances made by a child, however, the teachers said that when they observed the children's interactions, they only had enough time to either document some examples of what the children said or tally the number of children's utterances within each of the six categories. They found that it was not possible to do both while observing children and managing the class. Three of the teachers, Marcel (Grade 1),

Polly and Lila (kindergarten), tried writing as much of what the children said as they were able to record in each observation period, and then later went back to code and tally the students' utterances. The other teachers also tried recording the children's utterances for their first few observation periods, but then changed their practice to tallying the utterances within each of the categories and recording an occasional quote from a student that they wanted to remember as a particularly good example of one of the uses of language. On average, across all of the participating teachers' observations, they used the OCUL for 10-15 minutes at a time, ranging from 3.5 to 30 minutes per observation.

Teachers' Use of Information Gathered: Learning about Individual Children

Using the OCUL tool provided opportunities for teachers to get to know their students in new ways, such as how they solved problems when interacting with peers, how they applied their conceptual learning from formal instruction, how they used new vocabulary, and their articulation of speech sounds. The value of small collaborative group work, in offering opportunities for children to talk and develop their ideas, was reinforced for Marcel (Grade 1). He told us: "I feel like I've learned a lot more about my students ... just through the conversations, because they're being given opportunity to discuss ... to speak freely and comfortably with their peer group."

One of Adrianna's (Grade 1) focus students was a high-needs child, who had an Individualized Program Plan (IPP) developed for oral language. She used the information gathered from her OCUL observations during meetings with this child's parents to inform them about his progress. She and Polly (kindergarten) shared her observations with the speech-language pathologists who worked with two of the children they chose to observe. The OCUL tool gathered information about how children use language in real-life social contexts, and the teachers found that their observations provided rich information about the children's language that the speech-language pathologists were unable to gather during their one-on-one formal assessments.

Polly (kindergarten) and Kahli (kindergarten) found that use of the tool gave them a picture of the group dynamics involving their focus students who had been identified with speech and language delays. Kahli said that she learned that one student, who had been identified as having a social-communication delay, was talking more than she had thought when he was playing with peers at a building center. Sometimes this student surprised Kahli by using language to get along with others, as well as language to express his own needs. She also observed that: "He was right on the edge of playing . . . He doesn't add to the story or add to the play, but he's there."

Lila (kindergarten) and Marcel (Grade 1) talked about what they discovered about language use of the English Language Learners they chose to focus on in their classrooms. As Marcel recorded the students' language uses, he was pleasantly surprised to find that Jay, an ELL student, was using English in many different ways, and that other children were helping Jay develop his English language use by demonstrating how to rephrase something that was said or by helping to clarify what Jay had said so the rest of the group understood. Similarly, during Lila's observations of one focal student, Trivien, as he played at the construction centre, she heard him explain a problem he was having with a bridge he was building. Lila recorded direct quotes of his language that she later used to assess his IPP goals. She explained that it was valuable to have evidence that students were "generalizing what they are learning in one-on-one settings to conversational settings with

their peers . . . they're taking it a step further." She also used the oral language information she gathered when reporting to Trivien's parents about his learning.

Janice (Grade 1) documented her observations of individual students' use of language while they engaged in collaborative literacy and mathematics activities, as well as during block play. She decided to use the information that she gathered to hold short 'on the spot' conferences with children to provide immediate feedback about their oral language uses. She told us about a group of students who tended to get into disagreements when they were constructing with blocks. After observing many instances of disagreements, she drew from the specific language uses in the *Getting Along* category of the OCUL (e.g., take turns), and intervened in their play to give them some examples of what they could say and do. Janice said that she "noticed a big improvement in their behaviour and how they're working with their peers . . . developing some strategies for when there is a disagreement." Based on her observations, she also told us stories about some English Language Learners and a First Nations student in her class becoming more involved in small-group activities after she had her one-on-one conferences with them. In these conferences, Janice provided examples of ways in which they could participate with others using language to carry out specific purposes, as in the *Getting Along*, *Directing* and *Creating, Connecting and Explaining* categories.

Teachers' Use of Information Gathered: Modifying Teaching Practices

The teachers found that, in addition to observing and assessing the children's language uses, the OCUL tool helped them assess the learning activities that they had created to engage students in collaboration with their peers. In many cases, the teachers made modifications to their teaching practices after reflecting on what they were observing using the OCUL tool.

The teachers said that their overall goal was for students to use language for a wide range of purposes. Through their use of the OCUL tool, they assessed the value of their classroom learning activities in terms of whether they provided spaces for children to use language for purposes that included as many oral language categories as possible. During our six-week implementation cycle period, Adrianna (Grade 1) had a student teacher working in the classroom with her. They both used their observations and the OCUL coding to assess the usefulness of various classroom activities to foster children's talk—both the quantity and the range of functions of their talk. Adrianna gave an example of a collaborative math activity that involved problem solving using paper clips. She noticed that the children in every group used language for their own needs (e.g., asserting ownership, asking for help) and for disagreeing (e.g., rejecting advice, choosing not to share). She felt that the students were not using language to explore math concepts in the way that she had intended. Adrianna used her OCUL observations to reflect on how she would set up the activity differently next time.

Adrianna also changed her method for grouping students after having used the OCUL tool for six weeks. She said, "I'm more mindful of groupings now so that some of the really strong oral language learners don't monopolize the entire conversation and my not-so-strong students fall to the background."

The value of collaborative play for encouraging children's talk and providing spaces for children to learn from one another was reinforced for the kindergarten teachers who already implemented play-based programs, and a welcome discovery for the Grade 1

teachers, whose curricula did not typically encourage time for play activities. Lila (kindergarten), for example, said that her observations supported some of what she knew about oral language and play, but was sometimes pulled away from: “Children pick up so much language from each other and learn from each other. And I know that, in theory, but there are all these things that I need to be teaching that take time away from that time when they could just be talking and teaching each other.” Similarly, Marcel (Grade 1) was delighted to discover just how creative the children’s ideas could be when they were collaborating to write. He said that he would continue to plan extended collaborative projects next year, as he “really noticed . . . just how important oral language is in Grade 1.”

Janice (Grade 1) added a construction materials centre to her literacy rotation centres after using the OCUL tool. She gave a rationale for modifying her teaching practices: “I really noticed a difference in the language. They use more categories of language use when they get to do more of that free play and experiment with items . . . there’s more diverse language when they have that free time, and a lot more language, too.” Her observations through the OCUL form gave her ideas about how she could “tie the construction play into some of the other curriculum activities.”

Conclusions and Implications

Our findings have implications for all teachers who wish to learn more about how their students use oral language and how effective particular classroom learning activities are for fostering children’s language growth. Through the use of the OCUL template, the teachers found that they could easily gather useful information in as little as four minutes at a time spent focusing on how individual or small groups of children were using language during typical classroom play-based activities. The more the teachers used the tool, the better they became at identifying their students’ language strengths and the types of language uses they might encourage in individuals or through various activities. Rather than using the OCUL tool to draw conclusions or make final evaluations about their students’ oral language competencies, the teachers used it to learn more about the strengths and needs of individual students and inform the feedback they gave to students and parents, and to modify and shape further learning activities. Through using the OCUL tool and referring to the oral language categories and codes, the teachers also developed their own understandings of children’s oral language use in relation to what they knew about their students and communities (Thohahoken, 2011).

This aspect of language is a much-needed area of professional development as noted by researchers in previous studies (McIntyre & Hellsten, 2008) and by the teachers participating in our collaborative action research (Peterson, McIntyre & Forsyth, 2016). In addition, these rural teachers were engaged with colleagues from different schools and grade to pursue their own professional development and provide guidance and feedback to one another based on the discoveries and learning in their own practices. This model of collaboratively creating and implementing new practices helps teachers develop close connections to their colleagues, an element cited by rural teachers as vital to their positions (Murphy & Angelski, 1996; Swift, 2010). To address the need for classroom support in rural school districts, our next steps will be to work with these teachers to develop professional development models that will help them bring their practices and

understandings to other teachers in their districts (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006; Clarke et al., 2003; Stockard, 2011).

Through both the tallies and notes capturing student conversations, the teachers gathered useful information about how their students used language and how their classroom activities engaged students in peer interaction and collaboration. Their observations were informative to colleagues, especially speech-language pathologists, and to parents, offering contextual examples of a student's language competencies as well as areas to develop. The OCUL tool sometimes served to reinforce expectations of how a student was using language with his or her peers, and other times, showed language uses that surprised teachers. The teachers found that their OCUL notes could be used to provide immediate feedback and support to individual students in the classrooms, as well as examples to share with parents in discussions and on report cards. The teachers' observations and reflections showed us that "assessment" tools can take the form of less formal observation forms, and can capture children's typical peer interactions within various classroom contexts (Boyd & Galda, 2011).

The OCUL, a tool developed collaboratively by teachers and university researchers and based on children's language use in typical classroom activities, gave teachers ideas about how they might shape their programs and activities to encourage a wide range of language uses with their students. As intended in action research (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009), the teachers were able to confirm which of their classroom activities fostered the important sharing and building upon of ideas (Littleton & Mercer, 2013), which activities could be adapted to elicit more collaboration, and which student groupings were beneficial for student talk. In addition, the OCUL tool gave teachers support in adding play-based collaborative activities to their literacy programs, as they had gathered and could share evidence of the range of student language use during these activities. The tool was also easy for the teachers to implement with the variety of activities across their classrooms—activities that they each developed to meet the specific needs of their students in their communities. We feel that the feedback provided by the OCUL tool can give teachers a portrait of their students' language uses and be used create classroom play opportunities relevant to their community lives (Wallin, Anderson & Penner, 2009).

Our findings also suggest that this tool may be easy for other classroom teachers to implement. The phrasing of the OCUL categories and codes were shaped by classroom teachers to be understood by classroom teachers. In addition, learning to use this observation tool did not take a great deal of time and the teachers' understanding of the categories developed as they used it. As the teachers in our study pursue ways to bring their action research findings to their colleagues, further study will provide us with opportunities to observe how responsive the language use categories and observation tool can be for educators working in a wider range of Canadian northern rural communities, and to teachers who were not necessarily part of the development process.

Regardless of whether teachers use the OCUL or another tool that they develop or select from available commercial resources, it is important that teachers take time to observe children while they are interacting in play and other collaborative, small-group activities (Owocki & Goodman, 2002). These observations not only provide information about students' language use and conceptual learning that can be used to guide further teaching and reporting to parents and education professionals, such as speech language

pathologists, but also about how learning activities contribute to children's language growth. Teachers' own professional learning is enhanced in the process.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to participating teachers and students and to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for funding this research.

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