How to support oral language development - with Kim Lockhart

Triple R Teaching Podcast #223

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of The Measured Mom website. Today I'm interviewing Kim Lockhart, a second language special ed teacher with Orton-Gillingham training who teaches in a French immersion school in Canada.

She and I discuss oral language. She shares the different elements of oral language, how we can tease out all the different pieces, why it's important to give attention to all of those, and how to do that, whether you're teaching children learning a second language or children working with their first language. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome, Kim!

Kim Lockhart:

Thank you! Thank you very much for inviting me.

Anna Geiger:

I'm really glad to finally meet you. I see lots of your work, your comments, and the things that you do in your classroom on X, which are wonderful.

I'm excited today to talk to you about oral language, but before we do that, could you talk to us a little bit about who you are and where you are now in education?

Kim Lockhart:

Absolutely. I have been teaching in the classroom for exactly 24 years, which is crazy. I graduated from a wonderful program called a concurrent education program where I was taught and trained on how to teach in the regular classroom.

Then after having my children, I became a special education teacher where I was given the role of helping children with reading and writing difficulties. I was tasked with teaching them how to read, but I learned very, very quickly that just because I had this fancy new title and had these new responsibilities, my training was exactly what it had been as a classroom teacher. My training hadn't changed.

So I sought to do my Masters of Education, and I learned the research on what is needed for reading and writing proficiency, and that inspired me later to do my Orton-Gillingham training which taught me the application of the research in classroom practice. I've really married the Master of Education with the Orton-Gillingham to know how to teach children how to decode words.

Essentially the focus was on decoding and word recognition skills, but the caveat was that I was teaching in a second language school. I was teaching French second language learners, so I had to adapt that explicit, systematic instruction, which is the Orton-Gillingham approach. It's that systematic instruction of the letter-sound correspondence, and I had to teach it in French.

Really the main takeaway is it is an approach, not a program. I was using that explicit, systematic approach to teach students in French immersion how to decode the words in French. That was just the catalyst for learning more about decoding instruction.

I am now very passionate about teacher training and making sure that teachers who are currently in faculties of education here in Ontario, but also across Canada… That teacher training programs are teaching not necessarily the Orton-Gillingham approach, but the importance of explicit, systematic instruction in letter-sound correspondence, as well as the importance of explicit instruction of *all* elements of the reading and writing process. That exposure alone is not just enough.

I really am trying to help dispel this myth that learning to read and write is a natural process like learning to speak and understand spoken language, but also integrate the importance of oral language in faculties of education because I feel like that has been a missing piece.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, and people talk about The Big 5 - phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension - but oral language is typically not listed within that group, even though we know it is supremely important for both word recognition and comprehension.

I think the tricky part there is that we know that language is something we can learn naturally, and *yet*, kids benefit from instruction in oral language. Those are some of the things we're going to talk about today.

How would you define oral language?

Kim Lockhart:

In simplified terms, oral language is a form of verbal communication or spoken communication. That includes being able to speak with spoken words, being able to listen, taking in those spoken words through the ears and hearing that spoken language regardless of the language, but also understanding that communication.

I actually started my teaching career, 24 years ago, in Monterrey, Mexico where I was teaching at an American International School. It was called ASFM, the American School Foundation of Monterrey. It was the absolute best professional experience I could have ever had because I was not just a teacher, but I was a learner too. I was trying to learn Spanish, and through learning another language I came to realize very quickly that it is not easy.

We have to dispel this belief that learning spoken language is easy. Yes, it's a natural process, but just because something is natural doesn't mean it's easy. For example, I was taking Spanish lessons, and my Spanish teacher said, “Nos vamos!” I heard her. I listened. I heard her. I could say, “Nos vamos,” but I didn't necessarily understand what it meant.

That's what I'm finding in my current practice as a French second language teacher. Kids can repeat what I'm saying, and they can hear what I'm saying, but that doesn't guarantee that they *understand* what I’m saying.

My experience teaching in Monterrey, Mexico and learning a third language really developed my own teaching practice of not making assumptions.

When it comes back to that oral language piece, we have to ensure that students have a strong oral language foundation because written text is really just a printed version of spoken language, and if kids don't have that solid oral language, spoken language, foundation… Really they're just converting text to

speech sounds or speech sounds to text, and so we need that oral language to communicate knowledge, like what I'm doing with you right now. We need it to give directions, to ask questions for understanding and clarification, and then of course to tell stories and those narratives and that beautiful storytelling.

It really, I think, is an underestimated piece in the puzzle of reading and writing.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, and I think what makes it so hard is there isn't a scope and sequence for oral language necessarily, like an easy thing roadmap to follow in terms of do this first and do this second. I think because it's not so easily laid out, we're not always sure how to help teachers build oral language, so that's what we're going to talk about today.

I know in your situation you teach French immersion, but these strategies are important no matter what situation you're in. Can you get us started talking about how we can support oral language for children, whether or not it's in a second language?

Kim Lockhart:

Okay, we can think about Scarborough's Reading Rope, or we can take it back a notch and think about the Simple View of Reading. When we think of reading, we think of someone opening a book, looking at the text, reading the text, understanding the text, and having this wonderful enjoyment or joy from reading.

But what the Simple View of Reading did (and also Hollis Scarborough's Reading Rope) was it teased out the pieces of the reading process.

I think if we look at oral language, we think of it as this simplified definition that I just gave you. But if we tease it out, like we did for Scarborough's Reading Rope, it includes instruction of vocabulary and understanding those spoken words. It includes syntax, how to form a sentence correctly.

As I mentioned, I did teach in Montorrey, Mexico for three years, and I learned very quickly that the syntax in Spanish is a little bit different than the sentence structures in English. In English if I say, "I am hungry," I have my subject and my predicate. "I am hungry." But in Spanish the syntax is different. You can drop the noun and you say, "Tengo hambre."

When I first went, I'd say, "How do I say 'I?'"

They're like, "You don't need to say 'I.'"

So I thought, "Well, how do they know *who's* hungry?"

Well, it's because the verb reflects the noun, so you just say, "Tengo hambre."

The syntax structures differ between languages. In English, I would say, "I am hungry." I don't just say, "*Am* hungry!" But in Spanish, you say, "Tengo hambre" and the "tengo" reflects the noun, so they know it's me.

We can't assume that students have knowledge of those sentence structures, especially if they are multilingual learners and they're coming from a different language, because the syntax may be different and the order of words may be different.

Also the phonology is an important piece in oral communication which is the production and recognition of sounds in spoken language. In the simplest terms, if I say the word "pat" and you drop the /p/, what's left? "At."

This is a skill that is cross-linguistic, so unlike syntax where the syntax structures may differ between languages (like Spanish where you don't have to say the noun whereas in English you *do* have to say the noun), the phonology and those phonemic awareness skills are cross-linguistic.

So if I say the word "bateau" in French, and you drop the /b/ what's left? "Ateau." If I say "boat" and you drop the /b/, it's "oat."

Those are skills that are cross-linguistic, but not all of the other components of oral language are cross-linguistic.

The other component that we need to not assume kids have, because I think the landscape of education has changed so much, is pragmatics. By pragmatics I mean the social use of language.

I met my mom the other day at The Cheesecake Factory, and she was taking my younger daughter to see a Shakespearean play. My mom said, "Sophie, are you looking forward to seeing the play?"

My daughter said, "What? I mean… Pardon, Nana?"

I heard her correct herself and she looked at me like, "Sorry mom," because when she's with her peers, she says, "What?" But when she's with Nana, she says, "Pardon, Nana?"

I was so proud of her for doing that, but not all students realize that the way you speak on social media and the way you text and the way you snap friends should be a less formal means of communication. Whereas written communication is a more formal means of communication.

But if kids don't know that "pardon" is a more formal way of saying "what," then that's not going to be reflected in their written language.

Then the other piece is discourse, which is the ability to organize your thoughts in a logical sequence for storytelling. We often think of it as beginning, middle, and end, and not just being scattered and all over the place. We can really sort of predict what a child's written output is going to be like, sometimes, by the way they speak.

A lot of what I've been sharing with you today is in a very structured, organized way because my brain has been trained to think in that structured way. But we have to teach kids to be structured in that manner because a lot of the time their oral language is reflecting in their written communication.

Anna Geiger:

I appreciate you talking about teasing it out. That's a really helpful way to think about it.

So knowing all of that, all those pieces of oral language, now what? What do teachers do with it?

They say, "Okay, so I know that my students have to understand sentence structure and they have to know the vocabulary, but how do I make this a part of my teaching?"

Kim Lockhart:

Okay, so this is where I bring in that second language lens. I think we have this myth or misunderstanding that oral language is something that the human brain is wired to do, so all kids should be coming in with strong oral language skills.

But we have been through a pandemic. We have seen kids in school where they're not allowed to have physical proximity to each other, and they're being taught with a teacher with a mask on, so they haven't been able to see what the mouth, lips, teeth, and tongue are doing when they're pronouncing spoken sounds.

We need to kind of try and leave our assumptions at the door. I think what we need is more of a focus on language in the classroom more than ever before.

I want to be careful what I say, but I don't think families are necessarily having dinners together at night. My family's the same! We're always running off to a basketball practice or to horseback riding or to something and missing those family time dinners where you take turns speaking and you say, “How was your day, Mia?” Then Mia tells me about her day. Then we pause and say, “Sophie, how was your day?” and she speaks.

Kids don't necessarily know turn-taking when it comes to conversation, and they don't necessarily know how to be good listeners, so I think we need to model that in the classroom. You can have a talking stick or a popsicle stick. I have a magic wand. The person with the wand does the speaking and then everyone else does the listening.

It’s that explicit instruction around oral language, and not assuming that kids know the vocabulary coming into the classroom like maybe previously they did.

I also think we need to have more of an emphasis on vocabulary development because when I was raising, well I still am raising our kids, but when the kids were really, really little, we used to read them a bedtime story at night every night. Now what do we do? We're on Netflix. I think family traditions have shifted a little bit and rather than doing “family story time,” we're doing “family movie night.”

We also can't assume that all parents and caregivers *can* read to their kids because, let's be honest, they're products of a broken system. We can't ask parents to read to their child at night if we have failed *them* in the education system.

So I think we need to make sure that we are doing lots and lots of read alouds in the classroom, and really pulling out that Tier 2 strong academic vocabulary that is going to grow their vocabulary. Then when they come to a text, they understand the vocabulary in written text because, like I said, written text is a more formal communication of spoken language.

Just to sort of summarize all this, one of the best quotes that I have ever seen when it comes to the connection between oral language and the reading and writing process was from David and Meredith Liben's book *Know Better, Do Better*. There wasn't a visual, and I have since created a visual. They said that if we think of the breathing cycle, inhaling is equivalent to reading and listening because you're taking it in. When you inhale air, you're taking it in. That's what reading is. You're inputting information. When you're listening, you're inputting information. Then the exhale is the putting out of information, which is writing and speaking.

We can't expect kids, especially multilingual learners, to be speaking in another language, whether it be English or in French, if we haven't inputted that information yet. We need to make sure, as teachers of multilingual learners, that we are giving them the vocabulary they need so that they can *use* it. That is expressive and receptive language. We need to build their bank of receptive language and then help them convert that receptive language bank over to their expressive language.

If kids are working independently in their groups and we're hearing way too much of their home language, maybe it's because we haven't given them enough input, so their output is going to be very weak. We need to strengthen that input, give them that language, and give them opportunities to use that language, otherwise the output is going to be limited.

I like that inhale-exhale cycle and its analogy with the reading and writing process.

Anna Geiger:

One thing you mentioned was the importance of reading aloud to kids, which we know is important, but I think sometimes in the science of reading conversations that gets left out a little bit. We want to make sure that we remember that that is a very research-backed practice as well as dialogic reading where you're actually having conversations about what's being read. Teachers can plan in advance what words are going to pick out and talk about. Then in the moment you might realize, "I don't know if they know this word," and you just explain it off the cuff.

Then also, remembering that when we have students engaging in oral language activities, we may need to teach things that we didn't think we needed to teach because the world has changed and because of the oral language development that may have been stunted in some ways during the pandemic. It was a while ago, but those results are still, I think, hanging on for some kids.

When we think about, like you said, that many families aren't eating dinner together or they may be like us where we eat dinner together, but usually one kid's running off to go do something. We have to eat fast because this one has to leave and a lot of it's just functional. We're not necessarily having conversations, or screens have really taken over our lives compared to when you and I were kids.

It's not to blame parents or anyone, but it's just to realize the world has changed and we have to be conscious of that in the classroom. We don't want to assume that they know how to take turns even, or know how to start their sentences. I think there's so much to be said for sentence starters and stems in these oral language situations.

You talked about, I can't remember the word you used, but something about giving them the right input with the language you're trying to teach so that they use it. Of course we could apply that to English as well. Can you give some examples of what you mean by providing those inputs?

Kim Lockhart:

Well, again, I like to give a personal story to something. Last year I was teaching on the west coast of Canada, just north of Seattle in Vancouver, and there is very much a strong appreciation and respect for the indigenous lands. I was trying to learn some of the indigenous language that was native to that area.

My class, who were from the province of British Columbia, were trying to teach me some of the vocabulary. I was motivated, and I was listening, and I was so engaged - all those things we want our learners to be, and they were teaching me how to say "welcome," "thank you," and "hello." Three vocabulary words.

We had five days together, and I'm embarrassed to say by the fifth day, I couldn't remember those words. I tried to say "welcome" when they came to the classroom, but I didn't say it correctly and it was embarrassing and it was humiliating. But it was also very, very eye opening that just because I heard it and I had repeated it, it hadn't stuck. Every day for five days these three words were repeated to me, I repeated them back, and on the fifth day I couldn't use them independently.

What helped, however, was seeing the written form. Once I saw the written form, even though the alphabetic system is different, it helped me remember and retain those three words.

Just hearing the words "welcome," "hello," and "thank you" in the indigenous language was not enough to make them stick. What helped me make those words stick was seeing the written printed form of those words, so when I was trying to remember them, I could picture those letters, even though the letters and correspondence was different. It helped me remember them.

I think when we are teaching vocabulary, we need to connect those words to a pictorial representation so kids have that visual.

In French, and I see it right here, is a tree. In French, the word is “arbre.” When we say “arbre,” you hear it, but seeing A-R-B-R-E and hearing the pronunciation and how the R might be a little bit different in French than English, and then seeing a pictorial representation is going to help that word stick better instead of just hearing the word without seeing its visual representation, or its orthography, which is the spelling of it.

I think when we are in the classroom, and I really do believe that every classroom… There's no such thing as a regular classroom anymore; every classroom is a multilanguage learner classroom and every classroom is a special education classroom. No more do we have homogenous classrooms. Even if you never had special ed training, or even if you've never had ELL or EAL training for multilingual learners, you are going to be at one point the teacher of dyslexic students, the teacher of students with dysgraphia, and the teacher of multilingual learners.

We need to make sure that we prepare teachers, “regular classroom” teachers, to be specialists as well. We need to give them these tools such as how to teach vocabulary, the visual representation, the orthography, because there are no longer specialized classrooms for these students, and we all know that strong Tier 1 is really what students need. Fifteen minutes in small group is not enough to make sure that these students are proficient enough to understand and speak and read and write in another language.

Anna Geiger:

We've talked about doing interactive read alouds which you plan in advance and you teach the vocabulary and discuss the text.

We've talked about being more intentional in student conversations, situations where you've allowed conversation for students, like teaching them how to take turns and things like that.

You've talked about teaching vocabulary and especially having a printed version available of the word, so even if you're reading a book and you stop to teach a word, you can just jot it up on the board as you're mentioning it.

Are there any other tips you want to share?

Kim Lockhart:

Well, coming back to the read aloud, I think we have misconstrued what the science of reading means. I think three years ago now, Ontario released the OHRC's Right to Read report where we emphasized the importance of phonemic awareness and phonics.

Unfortunately, we've let the pendulum swing, so teachers are now thinking, “Oh, science of reading and OHRC's Right to Read report, we need to make sure we teach phonemic awareness and phonics!”

But what I'm seeing in the data is kids don't understand these words that they are decoding and reading.

We have to remember that the Simple View of Reading is two distinct buckets. One bucket is word recognition, and yes, that was a missing piece. But I think now with UFLI and with all these other wonderful resources, we're doing an okay job at teaching kids to decode, but unfortunately, we have dropped the ball on that language comprehension bucket of the Simple View of Reading, and that includes all of those sub-elements that I was referring to earlier.

A read aloud, when taught with intention, doesn't mean just reading aloud, because again, exposure alone is not enough. When we use read alouds as a vehicle for teaching syntax, vocabulary, grammar,

and more formal communication (because we're going to see more formal communication), then students are going to improve their language comprehension. This is really going to help our students who are multilingual learners, who are learning a second language, as well as our students with DLD which is developmental language disorder, or language impairment.

We want to make sure that we are not doing just UFLI in our literacy block. UFLI is great, but kids also need to understand the words they're reading at a more sophisticated level than they can decode. We need to make sure that we are teaching students both the decoding and word recognition skills, but also language comprehension. I think the best vehicle for doing that is through read alouds.

Dr. Molly Ness is a wonderful researcher who has dedicated her career to supporting teachers, and her wonderful book, *Read Alouds for All Learners*, comes with free templates. It's on the Solution Tree website. You can download these free templates - one is for nonfiction and the other one is for fiction. I love these, and they're also not a template that you have to fill in every single day because these read alouds should be taking place over the course of several days. It's not like every single night they have to fill in this template, but it's a guideline for a 5-, 10-, sometimes even a 15-day read aloud if it's a novel or a chapter book. It really outlines all of the elements that need to be taught through a read aloud.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you for sharing that. I know that this could be a very long answer based on what you share on X, but I know you have lots of resources you love. Are there any other ones that you'd really recommend to people who are listening?

Kim Lockhart:

Well my go-to book, and I've never actually spoken to her in person, is by Elsa Cárdenas Hagan. She is the author of *Literacy Foundations for English Learners*. Even though I am not technically a teacher of English language learners, the approach applies to FSL learners, French second language learners. Everything in that book is golden if you are the teacher of students who are learning an additional language. I love that book and I really want to drive home that you don't have to be the teacher of English language learners because these strategies, these approaches, and this research applies to students of any new additional language.

Also, I think it's really important to note too that in this book, she doesn't just talk about the five pillars that are in the NRP report, but she really focuses on those foundational oral language skills, which I think has been the missing piece for a long time.

Anna Geiger:
Well, thank you very much. Are there places people can find you?

Kim Lockhart:

Yes, you can find me on X and I am also on Facebook. Facebook is a little harder to find me on because I have a group and it's called Resources & Support for Educators & Families of FSL Students. It's not just for French immersion students, but that is sort of my community of people. I am on Instagram and my handle is @mmelockhartlds. People sometimes think my first name is Madame, but my first name is Kim. My name is Kim, but my students call me Madame Lockhart. I'm on Instagram and X, and I'm also on Blue Sky. Again, MME Lockhart, Madame Lockhart.

Anna Geiger:

Well, thank you very much. I'll get those links from you and put those in the show notes that people want to reach out to you. It was wonderful meeting you, Kim, and learning from you. Thanks so much for joining me!

Kim Lockhart:

Thank you for having me.

Anna Geiger:

I highly recommend following Kim on social media. She has loads of practical resources, she shares good ideas, and I love that she sometimes shares little video snippets of her teaching in her classroom. You can find all that in the show notes at themeasuredmom.com/episode223. Talk to you next time!

Closing:

That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, themeasuredmom.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.