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THE IMPORTANCE OF ORAL LANGUAGE IN LITERACY AND THE IMPACT ON THIRD-GRADE STUDENT WRITING

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ABSTRACT

THE IMPORTANCE OF ORAL LANGUAGE IN LITERACY AND THE IMPACT ON THIRD-GRADE STUDENT WRITING

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Writing is the highest developmental skill in the acquisition of literacy skills and a skill that is not easy to teach in the classroom. If students are unable to verbally express an idea, they are even less likely to be able to express it in writing. The pattern of students lacking ability in writing is one that has been tracked through the National Assessment of Education Progress in 2011 with 72% of fourth graders performing below the level of proficient (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). This study was designed to look at the daily use of an oral language routine in the classroom that contained a focus on naming, describing, and listening to a story and answering simple and complex questions and practicing the retelling of the story and its direct impact on students' writing ability. The researcher tracked 42 English-speaking third-grade students in two different elementary schools in a large urban district in Texas. In this quasi-experimental study, the researcher administered the Test of Written Language-4th edition (TOWL-4) to the students, followed by the training and implementation of an oral language routine for the treatment classroom. At the end of a 3-month period, the researcher again administered the TOWL-4 to all students participating in the study and analyzed the results of the pre- and posttests using descriptive statistics and paired samples *t* tests to check for measured growth within the control group and the treatment

group. The results support that the use of structured oral language in the classroom on a daily basis yielded higher results for writing ability, with the biggest student gains in spelling, writing logical sentences, and story composition. The implications for this study include increasing teachers' awareness of the need to engage students in structured oral language practice through organized and planned lessons and how this exposure can expand students' vocabulary and background knowledge to increase their literacy abilities in writing.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to Stuart, Jeremy, and Emerson Peck to thank you all for your love and inspiration. I am made aware daily of how incredibly lucky I am that you are my people. I would also like to dedicate my work to Neuhaus Education Center as you welcomed me as a parent, then as an educator, and now as a team member. We are a powerful force as we work toward our mission of literacy success for all. And last, to Oliver. Your greatest assets as a super mutt include listening and napping on the blue chair next to my desk.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"If they cannot say it, they cannot be expected to write about it." These words escaped my mouth in a quiet murmur of disbelief and frustration in response to a professional development meeting designed to help teachers prepare students for the upcoming state-mandated fourth-grade writing assessment. The scores from previous years were disheartening and trending downward. The pattern of students lacking ability in writing has been tracked through the National Assessment of Education Progress, as in 2011 results showed 72% of fourth graders performing below the level of proficient (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). The State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) annual tests from the Spring of 2017, 2018, and 2019 showed 37%, 39%, and 35% of fourth-grade students had writing scores below the minimum (Texas Education Agency, 2021b). There was much lamenting among the teachers at this professional development meeting about how little students knew in reference to the given writing topics and how preparing students from a large urban school district to write about how to grow corn seemed like an insurmountable task. The students did not have the context, oral language, or background knowledge to make the topic their own. It was almost as if the educators attending this professional development session had started to accept the fact that their students were just not good writers. After this disparaging professional development experience, I decided to make it my personal quest to find a more positive way to approach writing in my own classroom. I scanned through my career as an educator and the reverberating commonality was that every student I had ever taught, from those in honors courses to severely learning-disabled students, seemed to struggle with writing.

I returned from the professional development with a resolve to approach writing with more intentionality in my classroom. I noticed the act of verbally walking students through simple activities in structured oral language (e.g., naming, describing, and listening to a story; answering questions; and retelling the story) as well as brainstorming out loud while asking students to use complete sentences made a positive impact on their writing. When I explored these exercises orally, especially just prior to a writing activity, students' depth of knowledge and understanding of vocabulary became more apparent in their writing products. The usual disdain for writing started to diminish and students began taking risks in their writing, such as by using powerful words such as "gigantic" instead of "big" or "abysmal" instead of "bad" because these words were becoming part of their inner voice. Educators must help students put empowering words into their vernacular by providing them opportunities to practice and use their oral language in the classroom. My goal in conducting this study was to ultimately demonstrate that if students can verbally express their ideas, they are better able to transcribe them onto paper.

In beginning to think about research in the area of oral language, it is important to understand that oral language has been established as a prerequisite to reading acquisition (Lawrence & Snow, 2010). The research is thick with the message that structured oral language skills in early literacy programs will lead to students having stronger literacy performance in later years. Lawrence and Snow (2010) went on to say that "skills in oral language are crucial to participating in instructional interactions that will lead to effective learning of vocabulary and comprehension skills" (p. 320). My study is unique in that it

reflects a developmental step past comprehension to look at the impact of intentional oral language practice in the classroom on students' writing abilities.

To understand how the skill sets of oral language and writing ability might be related, it is important to look at the research conducted by Johnson and Myklebust (1967) in organizing a ladder of language acquisition. Oral receptive language (or listening to gain information) happens first, followed by acquiring oral expressive language, or the ability to speak in order to communicate. The third step is written receptive language, or the ability to read to gain information, and the final step, and the hardest developmentally, is written expressive language, which is the ability to write. My project is based on the idea that students need to strengthen their oral receptive and expressive stages of acquisition, especially in the elementary grades, to be able to move to the highest level of communication, which is writing. This area of literacy research is underrepresented in the current educational journals and needs to be addressed.

Statement of the Problem

Oral language has been established as a prerequisite to reading acquisition (Lawrence & Snow, 2010). It has been studied as an important method to ensure that students cultivate high levels of comprehension (Kim, Park, & Park, 2015), but less is known about the link between oral language and writing ability. The major research findings have shown "oral sentence generation contribute[s] directly to written sentence generation" (Connelly et al., 2012, p. 279) and "oral narration precedes the development of written narration" (Arfé et al., 2016, p. 509). Putting a structured oral language practice into place in a classroom and then monitoring students' writing progress can enable the tracking of any impact on students' writing ability. Establishing a link between

using daily oral language practice in the classroom and improvements in writing transcends research into practical classroom practice.

Theoretical Framework

Studies with an emphasis on oral discourse within the classroom and its impact on writing ability have been grounded in cognitive theories, in which learning is positioned as an active and constructive process. According to the cognitive perspective, humans process information by forming mental representations of information and "applying cognitive processes to them [mental representations] which in turn, can result in the creation of new mental representations" (Mayer, 2012, p. 85). Knowledge is continually built based on personal experiences and hypotheses of the surrounding environment. In building a base of oral language and world knowledge, a student must first be exposed to new vocabulary and access their world knowledge in a continuous cycle of construction and reconstruction. Vygotsky (1962), through his cognitive development theory, stated social interaction precedes development and learning from other members of society as engaging in social interactions is what leads to continual knowledge building (Burkholder & Pelaez, 2000). Vygotsky believed adults in a society foster children's cognitive development in an intentional and systematic manner by engaging them in challenging and meaningful activities. This fits with my work in that students need to be able to express ideas via oral discourse, potentially during intentionally led teacher discussions before they can move further with their knowledge and capacity to continually construct relevant vocabulary and skills such as writing. Language can play a powerful role in shaping thought (Vygotsky, 1978). In starting with constructs as simple as naming and describing everyday objects such as clothing or kitchen utensils, students can find their

voice to progress into the next phases of learning. Seminal research in the area of tracking student development of writing skills, which includes the importance of oral discourse (Arfé et al., 2016; Connelly et al., 2012; Lawrence & Snow, 2010), links back to Vygotsky's paradigm within the evolution that happens in writing from the prewriting or brainstorming phase of a written piece to the final version. Working through and understanding the phases of writing reflects the mental process of the student and therefore allows the educator to understand all the pieces to address in the classroom to enhance student writing (Graves, 1994). The goal of this study and the conceptual framework, as grounded in cognitive theory, was to understand further how structured oral language practice can have a positive impact on students' writing abilities.

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to look at the impact of implementing structured oral language practice daily in the classroom on students' writing ability. Students enter school with myriad experiences and language, and thus our job as educators is to ensure every student has access to activities designed to build their oral language and world knowledge. Students need practice in oral language activities, as these skills are the foundation of reading and writing. If we can better understand the connection between structured oral language and writing, then it will prove that the addition of structured oral language curriculum in the classroom will be easy to implement and can improve student scores and abilities in the communication system of writing. Vail (1996) stated "students do not get language from reading; they get reading because of language" (p. 86). Evaluating, trading, and taking pride in words come as students are starting to practice with their home language and build their inner voice, which is where, according to

Vygotsky (1962), a "thought becomes fused with language and thereafter they develop together" (p. 12). I designed this study to extend this theory of the importance of oral language in the classroom and explore the impact it can have on students' writing ability.

Oral language is prominent throughout the existing research on essential tools for literacy success, including being named one of the foundational skills uncovered by the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) that correlates to later student literacy success. The goal of this research was to make the connection between oral language and writing, and more specifically to promote the idea that oral language, when practiced regularly in the classroom, has a strong correlation to improved students' writing abilities. In the examination of current research, there is a pronounced need for a study using the theory-based application of oral language in literacy classrooms.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this quasi-experimental research study:

1. Will using explicit structured oral language practice with students daily in the classroom have an impact on their overall writing skills?

   Hypothesis: There is a strong relationship between a third-grade student's oral language exposure and practice in the classroom and their writing ability.
2. Can structured oral language curriculum, practiced with fidelity 5–10 minutes a day in third-grade classrooms over the course of 3 months, improve student writing in the areas of vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, logical sentences, sentence combining, contextual conventions, story composition, or overall writing scores?

Hypothesis: Third-grade students who have been exposed to a daily oral language curriculum over a 3-month period will have a statistically significant increase in one or more areas of vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, logical sentences, sentence combining, contextual conventions, story composition, and overall writing scores as opposed to their counterparts who do not receive daily oral language practice.

Definition of Terms

Oral Language

Oral language is the system through which we use words to express ideas and knowledge and is made up of at least five key components that include phonological skills, pragmatics, syntax, morphological skills, and semantics (Moats, 2000). These components are necessary to communicate and learn through conversation and social discourse to lead to increased overall literacy skills. Moats (2000) went into detail to explain each piece of this skillset in that phonological skills are the awareness of sounds in words, such as rhymes and syllables, whereas syntax refers to the use of grammar and word order in sentences. Morphology is looking at words and understanding the individual word forms and parts that carry meaning. Pragmatics refers to the social use of language and semantics, or vocabulary, is the definition or meaning of words in phrases.

Structured Oral Language Curriculum

The skills listed above in the general definition of oral language are translated into structured oral language skills that can be practiced and rehearsed in the classroom through age-appropriate processes, as witnessed in the oral language curriculum teachers used in my study. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) has

compiled a list of children's typical development of skills in the areas of listening, talking, reading, and writing (Owre & Brennan, 2021) that are known to be best practices for kindergarten through fifth grade. The curriculum used in this study mimicked those ideas as seen in detail in the next paragraph.

Structured oral language in this research was tied to the idea that there was a specified part of each day during which teachers spent 5–10 minutes on activities that promote oral discourse to increase background knowledge, categorization skills, world knowledge, inferencing, and strategic thinking skills. This explicit daily skill work included naming, describing, listening to an oral story, and answering questions about the story and then the students practicing the skill of retelling the story. Foorman et al. (2015) used oral language in their study to mean listening comprehension, syntax, and vocabulary, which are variants found within each of the skills students were working on within this scope of research. A sample unit of study within the structured oral language curriculum is explained during the discussion of the treatment protocol.

Naming

This activity includes starting with very broad topics and then going to more narrow choices to build student knowledge about topics such as clothing, kitchen items, pets, animals, and others. Implementing the naming activity in the classroom is a totally oral activity, meaning that nothing is written down, and it is teacher led. Teachers use scaffolding as needed for their students, with things like pictures or real objects, to help enhance student knowledge and discussion about items.

Describing

This task is a specific way to address how to describe an item, such as a pair of cowboy boots, a stapler, or even a horse. First, the students name the item to be described and then discuss categories into which the item would fit, followed by listing attributes of the item. Attributes should include all of the sensory items (e.g., color, touch, taste, feel, etc.) and include adjectives and describing words that can lead to a final practice of comparing that item to something else while using similes and metaphors.

Listening to a Story and Answering Questions and Retelling of the Story

Kim, Park, and Park (2015) looked at listening comprehension and oral retelling as pieces of a larger puzzle in their examination of discourse-level oral language skills as related to reading comprehension. For the purpose of this study, students practiced their listening comprehension skills while listening to a story and then answered questions about the story. The questions ranged from simple to complex. The teacher modeled the retelling of the story to incorporate the important vocabulary words from the story and then students practiced the retelling with a partner.

Writing Development

For the purpose of this study, writing development was taken from the vantage point of trying to uncover the steps of growth a student must go through in order to become a competent writer. In my review of the existing literature, I visit the research done by Hayes and Flower (1980) as they gave credence to oral language in writing as they saw it emerge during the prewriting and transcription phases of writing development. If we were to focus on planning before writing happens, we would see a writer generating ideas, organizing thoughts, and setting goals, which would mean

accessing their oral language abilities in order to build their writing abilities, which served as the foundation of this research to connect oral language practice to writing.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Theoretical Framework

Britton (1983) stated "reading and writing float on a sea of talk" (p. 11), which supports the idea that language plays a powerful role in shaping thought (Vygotsky, 1978). In Vygotsky's philosophy, language plays a central role in the theory of human cognitive development. Language can play many roles in a person's development that include shaping their overt behavior as well as influencing their covert behavior, such as thinking and mind-mapping tasks. Language has been defined as a psychological tool that shapes other mental functions while at the same time being shaped itself according to society's needs (Kozulin, 1990). This fits into the cognitive theory framework and the tenet that assessing and valuing words occur as students are starting to practice with their home language and building their inner voice, which is where a "thought becomes fused with language and thereafter they develop together" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 91).

Oral language holds an important role in literacy development as first detailed by Chomsky (1965) as an integral part of the theory of language development. This review covers oral language in terms of theory but then also in practical application and the existing research that focused on student "patterns of performance across measures of morphosyntax, vocabulary and semantics in relation to receptive and expressive measures" (Connelly et al., 2012, p. 281). This review provides a deeper look into different definitions of oral language in classrooms and the measures used to see student progression in certain forms, such as semantics.

In addition to looking at the definitions and measures of oral language seen across research studies, I will delve deeper into the development of writing as seen in the

literacy research to balance the importance of oral language as embedded in the skills hierarchy to be a capable writer, especially in the lower grades. Hayes and Flower (1980), in their cognitive process theory of writing, stated oral language emerges during the prewriting and transcription phases of development. This matches Vygotsky's (1962) idea that thinking is a process learned from the verbal community and learning to think is no different than language acquisition or other socially learned behavior.

The next formidable task is to connect oral language practice in the classroom to student writing in previous research. We start with the understanding that oral language has indeed been deemed an important piece of reading acquisition (Lawrence & Snow, 2010) and also has a strong link to higher levels of student comprehension (Kim, Park, & Park, 2015), but there is less research on the link to students' writing ability. Spencer and Petersen (2018) did find students have the capability of learning oral language constructs that are transferable to written language. Thought and language were seen by Vygotsky (1962) as two interacting spheres where speech is involved in most thought and thought is involved in most speech. The goal of this study and the conceptual framework, as grounded in cognitive theory, was to understand further how oral language practice can have a positive impact on students' writing abilities.

Research on Oral Language

The critical role of oral language in literacy development has been a research focus for many years. Children typically enter school with a varying amount of oral language and world knowledge, as per the experiences they have had in their homes (Hart & Risley, 1995; Weisleder & Fernald, 2013). Any gaps in oral language students possess upon entering school can remain as gaps in their development throughout their schooling

years (Juel et al., 2003) unless they receive scaffolded instruction that meets them where they are to help them obtain higher levels of confidence in that specific area. In looking at oral language in terms of general literacy development, early researchers defined language as an early tool for communication that does not need to be explicitly taught as it innately develops, but as children grow the ability to move into higher-level communication and conversation depends on growth in the following domains: phonology, semantics, syntax, morphology, and pragmatics (Honig, 2007). Chomsky (1965), through the theory of language development, posited that language is hard-wired in the brain and, no matter the language or early environment, is part of our very DNA to be able to communicate via speech. As baby babbles turn to clear and concise speech, the sounds of the letters and words, the words and grammar used, and the formal and informal tone of speech start to carry meaning in everyday life through family, school, and any other social situations. Honig (2007) stated that children enter kindergarten with a vocabulary of roughly 14,000 words. The ability to harness and build on what students bring into the classroom is important to the continued development of all students in the area of literacy skills. Beck and McKeown (2007) stated that working to increase and practice vocabulary involves providing students with endless opportunities to continue to use and grow their vocabulary through varied contexts in the classroom. This is where researchers started to take a closer look at the importance of oral language, sometimes stated as "vocabulary use," and its connection to comprehension (Hirsch, 2003; Kim, Al Otaiba, & Wanzek, 2015; Kim, Park, & Park, 2015; Lawrence & Snow, 2010).

In moving from developmental theory to practical application in the classroom, the definition within the extant literature shifted to one that fits closely with my study.

Connelly et al. (2012) used the labels of oral language and language skills synonymously in their study to refer to "patterns of performances across measure of morphosyntax, vocabulary and semantics in relation to receptive and expressive measures" (p. 283). Kim, Al Otaiba, and Wanzek (2015) used the general measures of vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, and sentence memory to look at students' oral language skills. Peterson et al. (2016) took an even more broad approach and stated "oral language skills are those that involve listening in order to communicate with others" (p. 16). Kim, Park, and Park (2015) described discourse-level oral language skills as listening comprehension and the oral retell of narrative texts. Arfé et al. (2016) chose to look at the constructs of naming and sentence comprehension to measure students' oral language abilities.

Spencer and Petersen (2018) gathered teachers' feedback about their practice of using oral language skills in their classrooms with a particular focus on teacher modeling, retell, individual retell, and team generation. To empower students to be confident writers, they need access to constructs of oral language they can practice daily as part of their oral discourse. The structured oral language curriculum on which teachers were trained and used daily in the treatment group in my study incorporated the following pieces: naming, describing, listening to a story and answering simple and complex questions, and then retelling the story, all while practicing using complete sentences.

Research on Writing Development

Abraham Lincoln (1836) stated "writing, the art of communicating thoughts of the mind through the eye, is the great invention of the world" (p. 12). Many argue that writing is the pillar of communication in society. In order to understand where oral

language fits into the development of writing, it is important to first understand the process of becoming a writer.

Juel et al. (1986) drew on the norms established by Hayes and Flower (1980) and created a model entitled the simple view of writing that showed writing as a function of two skills—ideation and transcription. Ideation refers to brainstorming and organizing the text as the student writes, whereas transcription means the physical act of writing. Juel et al. (1986) found oral language is explicitly linked to the phase of ideation, which is then used to capture transcription, which is related to writing for children in the early elementary grades.

The not so simple view of writing was proposed by Berninger and Winn (2006) and involves three parts: transcription, text generation, and executive functioning. These three clusters, in comparison to the simple view of reading, tend to underscore the importance of self-regulation, attention, and working memory. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) created the knowledge-telling model, which showed children's early writing is focused on a knowledge-telling approach. Simply stated, the writing products students produce encompass what students know about the topic, otherwise known as content knowledge, and the genre in which they are writing.

The principal definition of writing development as deemed relevant for this research project was developed by Hayes and Flower (1980) as they presented groundbreaking evidence supporting their cognitive process theory of writing; this work moved the field away from thinking only about writing happening in stages into the realm of understanding the broader processes that need to happen for successful writing. There are three major elements within this model: the task environment, the writer's ability to

use their long-term memory, and the writing processes. The hierarchical phases that fall into the writing processes include the writer planning before writing, next moving to transcription and text generation during writing, and then review after writing. If we were to focus on the writer planning before writing happens, we would see a writer generating ideas, organizing thoughts, and setting goals, which would mean accessing their oral language abilities, including vocabulary, and academic and content terms. During the transcription phase, the writer must be able to harvest and incorporate text generation that includes oral language, world knowledge, word choice, cohesion, and self-regulation. The last step in the writing process, according to Hayes and Flower (1980), is reviewing. This step involves the writer evaluating their work to determine whether their goals were achieved and engaging in revision to determine whether there is a need to elaborate or make changes to word choices. Oral language emerges during the prewriting and transcription phases (Hayes & Flower, 1980). In my own approach to working with students over the years, as stated prior, I have found that if a student cannot say it, they cannot write it. Therefore, I contend that if we can expose students to oral language in an explicit way, such as through structured, daily mini-lessons and practice, we will see a positive impact on their writing. In reviewing these models of developing writing, it is evident that oral language plays an important role in every theoretical model of writing that has been presented. The research shows oral language is a necessary part of the writing process, so now I focus on their connection.

Research on Oral Language and the Connection to Writing

We know and understand that oral language has been established as a developmental necessity in order to gain access to reading (Lawrence & Snow, 2010) and

has been deeply studied as an important link for students to have in order to achieve high levels of comprehension (Kim, Park, & Park, 2015), but less is known about its link to writing ability. The major research findings have shown "oral sentence generation contribute[s] directly to written sentence generation" (Dockrell et al., 2019, p. 82) and "oral narration precedes the development of written narration" (Spencer & Petersen, 2018, p. 573). Putting a structured oral language practice into place in a classroom and then monitoring students' writing progress enables educators to track whether there is truly an impact on students' writing ability. Establishing a link between using a structured oral language curriculum and improvements in writing transcends research into practical classroom practice.

Some studies have linked oral language to writing ability, though none contained a focus on the premise of daily structured oral curriculum practice leading to an increase in writing ability. Dockrell et al. (2019) reported there is preliminary evidence that "oral sentence fluency supports written text generation over time and across languages" (p. 82). Connelly et al. (2012) stated "writing bursts are highly associated with linguistic skills" (p. 285). Bursts are the number of words produced at one time before a break is needed to think about what information should come next. Their findings, as they applied to adults, showed "those with greater oral language experience produced longer and faster writing bursts than those with less oral language experience" (Connelly et al., 2012, p. 286).

Kim, Park, and Park (2015) looked at models of writing and found the following skill sets seem to contribute to writing for those who are developing their writing skills: transcription skills, oral language, executive function (primarily working memory), self-regulation (attention), and content and discourse knowledge. This backs up Hirsch's

(2003) findings as he looked at using immersion in a topic to build oral language and vocabulary with his own students. He noticed a remarkable discovery as he watched his students over many years and their growth in writing. Student growth in composition improved when more time was spent on a topic, as students had the ability to talk about and increase their depth and breadth of knowledge about the topic. They were given the time to talk about the topic before writing. Hirsch stated:

> The organization of their papers got better, their spelling improved, their style improved, and their ideas improved. Why? When the mind becomes familiar with a subject, its limited resources can turn to other aspects of the writing process, just as in the reading process. (p. 27)

This supports the importance of Peterson et al.'s (2016) study that included interviews of teachers about their experiences with oral language and writing. Many participants highlighted the importance of using oral language to support writing. First-grade teachers explained it well by saying, "We do a lot before we write; we always do all the talking first" (p. 17). The study results in general showed setting up spaces in classrooms for children to interact while they write helps them to generate content for their writing and rehearse ideas before they write.

A Gap in the Literature

There are only a handful of research studies on the application of an oral language curriculum in the classroom. Dockrell et al. (2019) conducted a study to further understand the problems experienced by struggling writers and stated "oral sentence generation contributed directly to written sentence generation" (p. 84). They designed their study to identify the writing measure that best discriminated struggling writers from

their peers, and the proximal and distal factors that contributed to their performance. The performance of 96 students with a mean age of 10 years, 4 months, with 39 independently identified as struggling writers using a norm-referenced standardized test, was examined at word, sentence, and text levels. Findings showed written sentence generation was the most specific measure to identify struggling writers, which could be predicted by oral sentence level skills and handwriting fluency.

Spencer and Petersen (2018) cited previous researchers, saying, "Although oral and written narration are strongly associated, the development of oral narration precedes the development of written narration" (p. 574). What this means is that students have the capability to learn oral language constructs that are transferable to written language. Spencer and Petersen looked at four first-grade students who were exposed to oral narrative instruction in six sessions separate from their classroom instruction that were spread out over a 2-week period. All students but one showed meaningful improvement in story writing and continued to produce narratives above baseline after the conclusion of the 2-week period.

In their study of 97 Korean-speaking first-grade students, Kim, Park, and Park (2015) examined the relations of discourse-level oral language skills (which they classified as listening comprehension, oral retell, and the production of narrative texts) to written composition. In their study, the researchers looked at oral retell and listening comprehension but did not examine the full scope of implementing a daily classroom practice that included using naming and describing with student discourse-level oral language skills. Their findings showed general discourse-level oral language skills and the underlying listening comprehension and oral retell are important for reading

comprehension, though they did not reach conventional statistical significance in relation to writing quality.

Peterson et al. (2016) had an interesting finding in their qualitative research study of 36 primary teachers in four Northern Canadian provinces, with interview responses indicating the teachers were very honest and admitted they did not know how to teach oral language. Many of the teacher participants identified a greater need for knowledge and teaching approaches to encourage children to use oral discourse in a range of contexts within the classroom. In my research, my goal was to establish a teaching protocol for oral language that can be taught explicitly in 5–10 minutes daily and across content areas once teachers understand the concept of incorporating the constructs of oral language into their daily routine. The gap in the literature surrounding oral language practice in the classroom and the impact on third-grade student writing is a void that deserves exploration and analysis.

Research Measures Used

I found it quite fascinating to look at the different measures used to score oral language skills and writing ability, as they are as varied as the definitions of oral language that are currently being used in the research. Spencer and Petersen (2018) looked at story grammar and language complexity and combined them to get a composite score for their study participants. Arfé et al. (2016) looked at writing at the word level, sentence level, and spelling. For oral language, they looked at lexical retrieval and receptive grammar. Dockrell et al. (2019) looked at expressive vocabulary, receptive vocabulary, and oral sentence generation. Kim, Al Otaiba, and Wanzek (2015), in studying students' oral language skills, looked at vocabulary, grammatical knowledge,

and sentence memory. I feel all of these measures are a close representation of the constructs as I envisioned them for my study, but the closest study in terms of measures used was the one conducted by Kim, Park, and Park (2015) as they looked at student written composition, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, oral retell and production, word reading, handwriting fluency, and spelling. I used the Test of Written Language–4th edition (TOWL-4) as developed by Hammill and Larsen (2009), which measures vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, logical sentences, sentence combining, contextual conventions, and story composition. I looked at the individual scores as well as combined them to generate a composite score to gauge student growth.

Conclusion

The important findings in this literature review reflect how early writing is seen to build on the development of oral language and transcription skills, according to Berninger and Winn (2006) and Kim, Al Otaiba, and Wanzek (2015). This lays the groundwork for understanding that incorporating oral language in a more structured classroom practice can have an impact on student writing. In looking at the existing theories of writing development, oral language has proven to be important during the prewriting and transcription phases (e.g., the theory of developmental writing by Hayes & Flower [1987]). In each successive study, oral language was found to be important for student achievement in at least the beginning phase of brainstorming and also in the text generation phases.

Major research findings have shown "oral sentence generation contribute[s] directly to written sentence generation" (Dockrell et al., 2019, p. 82) and "oral narration precedes the development of written narration" (Spencer & Petersen, 2018, p. 578). In

looking at the definitions of oral language in research, the field has not reached consensus as to how to operationalize this term. Current research correlates with bits and pieces of the definition used in this dissertation, but there is no perfect match.

The broad understanding of oral language, according to Moats (2000), is that it is a system of spoken words to communicate that comprises at least five key components that include phonological skills, pragmatics, syntax, morphology, and semantics. These components are necessary to communicate and learn through conversation and social discourse to lead to increased overall literacy skills, with my research specifically designed to look at the impact on student writing. The more concrete operational definition of structured oral language curriculum moves these components into explicit daily skill work that includes naming, describing, listening to an oral story, and answering questions about the story and then practicing the skill of retelling the story. The two research studies that had the closest definitions to mine were those of Kim, Park, and Park (2015), where the researchers described discourse-level oral language skills such as listening comprehension, oral retell, and the production of narrative texts, and Arfé et al. (2016), who chose to look at naming and sentence comprehension to measure students' oral language abilities.

What is currently missing from the research is more specific information as to which specific oral language constructs can be connected to written language in the classroom. If we can start to identify exactly which pieces of oral language are known indicators of good teaching practices, that will lead to more competent writing, which is something that can be translated to the classroom setting to help all students. In my research, I looked at certain constructs of oral discourse (i.e., practice of naming,

describing, listening and answering questions to a story and retelling and speaking in complete sentences) to determine their impact on student writing in third-grade classrooms. A 5- to 10-minute structured oral language practice is a tool all teachers can use to improve student writing.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Methods and Procedures

The research paradigm I used in this study was constructivist because the use of oral language daily in a classroom was intended to address the problem of finding ways to create more competent writers. In this study, I investigated third-grade general education students, as third graders are in the typical developmental writing window where they can write an essay with a simple thesis statement, examples and supporting details, and a thoughtful concluding sentence. They are building competent skills in the writing process, such as research or brainstorming, planning, organizing, revising, and editing, with an eye on grammar, punctuation, and spelling, according to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Grade 3 (Texas Education Agency, 2021a). I measured student proficiency through the pre- and posttest screening measures administered to students in a treatment group who were exposed to structured oral language curriculum and those in a control group who were not exposed to the curriculum. My goal, which originated in reflecting on my last 15 years of classroom practice and experience, was to conduct a data-driven study to show statistical evidence of student growth in writing after explicit exposure to classroom oral language practices.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this quasi-experimental study:

1. Will using explicit structured oral language practice with students daily in the classroom have an impact on their overall writing skills?

   Hypothesis: There is a strong relationship between a third-grade student's oral language exposure and practice in the classroom and their writing ability.

2. Can structured oral language curriculum, practiced with fidelity 5–10 minutes a day in third-grade classrooms over the course of 3 months, improve student writing in the areas of vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, logical sentences, sentence combining, contextual conventions, story composition, or overall writing scores?

   Hypothesis: Third-grade students who have been exposed to a daily oral language curriculum over a 3-month period will have a statistically significant increase in one or more areas of vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, logical sentences, sentence combining, contextual conventions, story composition, and overall writing scores as opposed to their counterparts who do not receive daily oral language practice.

Research Design and Data Analysis

The purpose of this quasi-experimental study was to examine whether structured classroom oral language practice, when implemented daily for 5–10 minutes, would have an impact on student writing. The independent variable in was the treatment of structured oral language curriculum in a third-grade classroom. My decision to work with teachers on the idea of explicit oral language in the classroom stemmed from the idea that if a student cannot say it, they cannot write it. Showing a positive response to daily exposure of oral language in the classroom meant there would be a return of productive and significant gains in students' writing abilities.

To study the impact of daily structured oral language on the writing abilities of third-grade students, I implemented a quasi-experimental design with a nonequivalent control group (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which follows the model shown in Figure 1. I

chose this design to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between my independent variable (i.e., structured oral language curriculum) and dependent variable (i.e., impact of the intervention on student writing as measured by the TOWL-4). There was no random assignment of individuals as the subjects were assigned to groups based on non-random criteria, that being their classroom. The experimental Group A and the control Group B were selected without random assignment. Both groups took a pretest and posttest, and only the experimental group received the treatment. The treatment in this design was a structured oral language curriculum that was implemented for 5–10 minutes daily in the third-grade classroom in the experimental group.

Figure 1

Quasi-Experimental Research Model With a Nonequivalent Control Group Design

Group A: O ---------- X ---------- O

Group B: O ---------- O

To answer Research Question 1, I administered the TOWL-4 (Hammill & Larsen, 2009), a norm-referenced, comprehensive diagnostic test of written expression. To look at the overall progress of the students in the treatment group versus the control group, I conducted a paired samples *t* test on the pre- and posttest data to check for measured growth within the control group and growth within the treatment group, taking a close look at means and standard deviations and any areas of growth with a higher standard deviation.

For Research Question 2, I also administered the TOWL-4 (Hammill & Larsen, 2009). I ran a paired samples *t* test where the data were paired through pre- and posttest matched data. Each student's pre- and posttest were scored to check for measured growth

by examining the means and standard deviations with those furthest from the mean showing higher growth. There was an assumption of a normal distribution, and the outcome variable was interval/ratio. The purpose of running these data was to look for differences between the sets of data and compare the two means of the effect size to reveal whether the treatment was successful in boosting students' writing scores. I conducted all data analysis using SPSS.

Reliability and Validity of the Research Design

The research design had two possible threats to internal validity: history and study attrition (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). History was a potential threat to the internal validity of this study because of the amount of time that passed during the study, as it was conducted during a global pandemic that affected the different campuses in different ways. Due to COVID-19 protocols, schools were on rather independent schedules, even though they were in the same school district, based on their number and rate of infections. One of these schools, the treatment school, did have an extended weekend of an additional two all-remote learning days because of their higher numbers of infection, whereas the control school did not miss those two additional days. Study attrition followed the same line of thinking in that students were, and continue to be, in a volatile situation during COVID-19 and the economic and personal impacts on families are causing a higher than usual percentage of student attrition (up to 20%–22% on both of these campuses). This is higher than normal based on recent years prior to COVID-19.

A concern surrounding external validity, again due to COVID-19, was the interaction of history and treatment (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The results of this research were time-bound and took place during a time of inconsistency of learning in the

classroom so the idea that these exact results can be replicated is daunting. The reliability of this research design was controlled by the consistency of the test administration and scoring of the TOWL-4 (Hammill & Larsen, 2009).

Population

The population in the study consisted of third-grade students from two public schools in a large urban district. Both schools, at the time of this study, were similar in socioeconomic status as over 98% of their students qualified for free or reduced lunch. These particular schools were chosen because of their similar performances on the STAAR state test. With 51% (Campus 1) and 59% (Campus 2), both were classified as "approaching grade level for reading" per 2019 released data. Campus 1 demographics included 94% African American, 3% Hispanic, and 1% each of White, Asian, and multi-race. Additionally, 6% of the student population qualified for special education programs and less than 5% of the student population was classified as English language learners. Campus 2's demographics included 77% Hispanic, 19% African American, and 3% White. Additionally, 8% of the student population qualified for special education programs and less than 28% of the student population was English language learners, based on the time of this study. The schools were similar in size with a range of 700–800 students enrolled in pre-kindergarten through Grade 5. Campus 1 and Campus 2 were both implementing the Scott Foresman: Reading Street as their English language arts (ELA) curriculum for third grade as mandated by the district and campus leaders. The experiment consisted of a one-way, two-group design to determine the effect of daily oral language curriculum on writing skills. The third-grade students were drawn from non-

ESL classrooms and the only criterion was that they needed to currently be enrolled in third grade.

This was a quasi-experimental study in nature because one school and its students within were chosen to be the control group and the other school and its students within were, by default, chosen to be the treatment group. The inclusion criterion for these classrooms was that the students needed to be English speaking with the only exclusion criterion being that the students needed to be currently enrolled in third grade. The number of participants in the study was 21 on each campus, for a total of 42 students taking part in the study.

Sample

The sample was 42 third-grade students selected through convenience sampling. These students represented the larger population of third-grade students in a large urban district. The students who were chosen on these elementary campuses were enrolled in the third-grade classes that were used, as based on the administration's willingness to participate in this research study.

Instruments

Treatment/Intervention Protocol

The oral language curriculum, developed by Dr. Suzanne Carreker (2003), was practiced daily by classroom teachers was provided to the teachers with training and prepared units of study to use in their classrooms. I provided teachers a 1-hour training that occurred during 30 minutes of their planning period over 2 consecutive days, which consisted of understanding how to use the curriculum and strategies in their own classroom. A manual with 21 units that contain specific activities, such as naming,

describing, listening to a story and answering simple and complex questions, and practice in the retelling of the story, was given to the teachers. Figure 1 is a sample unit of study.

Figure 2

Sample Oral Language Unit

Unit 3: Animals	
Day 1 **Activity 1: Naming**	Teacher leads students through naming animals: 1. Let's name animals 2. Let's name animals that we see on a farm 3. Let's name animals that we see in the zoo 4. Let's name animals that live in the jungle 5. Let's name animals that live in the ocean
Day 2 **Activity 2: Describing**	(Teacher needs pictures of a horse and a zebra) First, the teacher shows a picture of a horse and leads students through the discussion of: 1. Name of animal 2. Name categories/groups that a horse belongs in (farm animals, work animals, animals you can ride, etc.) 3. Function of a horse – what is it used for? (ride it, farm work, etc.) 4. Color 5. Size 6. Then the teacher shows the picture of a zebra and asks students to compare the horse to the zebra. 7. Students compare the colors, sizes, and functions of these two animals.
Day 3 **Activity 3: Listening to a story and answering questions**	(The teacher needs a picture of a snake, bird, rabbit and puppy) The teacher reads a story entitled *Abdul's Birthday Present* from the manual and uses the pictures as an anchor chart for students and then asks simple and complex questions about the story. Teacher can ask students to speak in complete sentences to answer, even using sentence stems that a student can fill in if necessary.
Day 4 **Activity 4: Retelling the story**	1. The teacher models the retelling of *Abdul's Birthday Present* using the pictures from the prior day and using complete sentences. 2. Students retell the story with a partner 3. Students take turns retelling the story at least 2 more times as a whole class, with a different partner or with the teacher

This oral language curriculum from Neuhaus Education Center was originally designed to be part of a full Orton-Gillingham curriculum that includes phonology,

decoding, encoding, fluency, and oral language and listening comprehension with roots in structured literacy practices to serve as a remediation program for students who have been diagnosed with a reading disability, namely dyslexia.

I focused my research on isolating the structured oral language piece of the remediation lesson and turned its implementation practice into the general education classroom to gauge its potential impact on other literacy skills, namely student writing. The treatment was carried out in daily practice for 5 to 10 minutes in the classrooms during the students' ELA block. I conducted an informal check-in with the teacher every other week to observe a live oral language lesson (virtually during this COVID-19 time) to check for fidelity of the program. I served as a nonparticipant observer during this time and did not use this information as part of the data set, but rather as casual observation to speak on the fidelity of use.

TOWL-4 Assessment

I administered the TOWL-4 (Hammill & Larsen, 2009), a norm-referenced, comprehensive diagnostic test of written expression, as the pre- and posttest measure. The TOWL-4 features two forms (Form A and Form B), each of which represents conventional, linguistic, and conceptual aspects of writing. There are seven subtests, and five (vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, sentence logic, and combining sentences) use a contrived format and two (contextual conventions and story composition) use a spontaneous format. The issues of sensitivity, specificity, false positives, and bias have been addressed through the test creation and manual (Hammill & Larsen, 2009).

The TOWL-4 *Examiner's Manual* presents evidence to support the reliability of the assessment. Coefficient alpha values are provided for each subtest at different ages

and grades. These showed internal consistency for most subtests (.72–.96) and for composite scores (.82–.96). Test–retest reliability was mostly within acceptable ranges (93% rounded to .80 or above). Interscorer differences fell within acceptable ranges (.80–.99). The information presented shows the TOWL-4 has reasonable internal consistency and test–retest reliability, with the exception of a few subtest scores in the .71–.75 range.

The TOWL-4 *Examiner's Manual* provided support for the content validity by providing a detailed description of the test format and content. A rationale for the specific content of each subtest was provided. The TOWL-4 was normed on a sample of 2,205 students across 17 states during the period of 2006 to 2007. These four demographic sites across 17 states were chosen by the authors as representative regions of the United States based on "geographic region, gender, race, ethnicity, household income, education level of the parents, and disabling condition" (Hammill & Larsen, 2009, p. 56).

The pretest was the first step in this research study and took place prior to training the treatment group teachers. The test was administered by the teachers in person for materials management as I proctored via a virtual platform to give instructions and enforce time limits as necessary during the test. The posttest took place at the end of treatment and prior to dismissal for summer break, about 3 months after the pretest.

Procedures for Collecting Data

I was responsible for the collection of all data. Both participating schools were in a hybrid teaching model, with students and teachers in the classroom and those with underlying conditions or possible exposure learning remotely. With COVID-19 protocols in place, I used a remote function to proctor the test via Zoom. Pretest and posttest data forms and pencils were dropped off at the two schools. During a Zoom meeting, the

classroom teacher passed out the supplies (test booklets and pencils) with me overseeing the classroom. Students were prompted to put their first name and last initial and their student identification numbers on the testing booklets. Then the students followed my directions as I led them through the TOWL-4 (Hammill & Larsen, 2009) testing protocol as prescribed in the *Examiner's Manual*. When the testing was complete, teachers collected all test booklets and deposited them into a file folder for me to pick up at the end of the day from the school office.

I made an Excel spreadsheet with the participants from each school and assigned each student a random ID number to protect their privacy as the tests were then passed along to a third-party, independent grader. The grading of the tests was done by a third party who had no known knowledge of these schools, the teachers, or the students who attended them. This third-party volunteer graded the booklets based on carefully reading and reviewing the samples contained within the *Examiner's Manual*. She did this in a volunteer role and received no compensation for grading the assessments. The testing booklets were kept in a secure location until my research was finalized and then were shredded. The anecdotal observation forms were kept in the same manner and were destroyed along with the test booklets. All data entered were totally anonymous and kept on a secure server with limited access. I used my own SPSS account to run the data analysis and reports.

Data Analysis

To answer Research Question 1, I administered the TOWL-4 (Hammill & Larsen, 2009), a norm-referenced, comprehensive diagnostic test of written expression. I looked at the overall progress of the students in the treatment group versus the control group, and

therefore I ran the data using a paired samples *t* test to check for measured growth within the control group and growth within the treatment group, taking a close look at means and standard deviations and any areas noted for greater growth.

For Research Question 2, I used the data acquired from administering the TOWL-4 (Hammill & Larsen, 2009). I ran a paired samples *t* test where the data were paired through pre- and posttest matched data. Each student's pre- and posttest were scored to check for measured growth by examining the means and standard deviations with those furthest from the mean showing gains and serving as proof that the oral language curriculum was successful in helping third-grade students improve their writing abilities. There was an assumption of normal distribution, and the purpose of analyzing the data was to look for differences between the sets of data and compare the two means of the effect size.

Conclusion

In an attempt to change the current downward trajectory of students' writing ability, I designed this study to look at the implications of teachers providing a daily oral language lesson of 5–10 minutes to students to build and strengthen their oral language skills. Student performance data from a control school versus a treatment school, using the TOWL-4 (Hammill & Larsen, 2009) with third-grade students, allowed me to analyze the impact of structured oral language curriculum on students' writing skills. If oral language instruction is indeed shown to positively affect students' writing skills, this will give educators and policymakers the idea that we are missing a link to help students be more confident in their language development and therefore their writing abilities.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of using structured oral language practice in third-grade classrooms on student writing. More specifically, the overarching questions guiding this quasi-experimental study included:

1. Will using explicit structured oral language practice with students daily in the classroom have an impact on their overall writing skills?
2. Can structured oral language curriculum, practiced with fidelity 5–10 minutes a day in third-grade classrooms over the course of 3 months, improve student writing in the areas of vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, logical sentences, sentence combining, contextual conventions, story composition, or overall writing scores?

This chapter includes a review of the data, treatment, and hypotheses, followed by descriptive statistics as an overview of the study sample and an overview of the results. An in-depth look at the quantitative data follows with a dive into the pre- and posttest scores for the treatment and control groups for the following skills: vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, logical sentences, sentence combining, contextual conventions, story composition, and subtest totals as well as composite score totals.

Data, Treatment, and Hypotheses

There were 42 third-grade participants in the study, with 21 students in the control group and 21 students in the treatment group. The treatment group received 5–10 minutes of structured oral language curriculum daily during the 3-month protocol. As seen in Table 1, the treatment group included nine male and 12 female students, and the control group included 11 male and 10 female students. All of the participants were English-

speaking students who were attending in-person learning during the Spring 2021 COVID-19 protocol.

Table 1

Third-Grade Participants

	Gender		
	Male	Female	Total
Treatment	9	12	21
Control	11	10	21
Total	20	22	42

For the pre- and posttest, I used the TOWL-4 (Hammill & Larsen, 2009) to assess student knowledge in the following seven areas of literacy, as well as calculated each student's subtest and composite scores. The following is a brief description and example for each subtest within the TOWL-4 (Hammill & Larsen, 2009).

- Vocabulary: The student writes a sentence that incorporates a given word (e.g., a student is given the word "ran" and then writes a sentence using that word, such as "I ran up the hill").
- Spelling: The student writes sentences from teacher dictation.
- Punctuation: The student writes sentences from teacher dictation, using the proper punctuation and capitalization rules.
- Logical sentences: The student is given an illogical sentence and must take steps to make the sentence have proper meaning (e.g., the student is given "John blinked his nose" and the student can change it to "John blinked his eye").

- Sentence combining: The student compiles numerous short sentences into one grammatically correct written sentence (e.g., the student is given “John drives fast” and “John has a red car,” which the student can combine into “John drives his red car fast”).
- Contextual conventions: The student writes a story in response to a given picture. Points are earned for satisfying specific requirements such as punctuation, spelling, and grammatical conventions, which includes sentence construction and noun–verb agreement.
- Story composition: The student’s story is evaluated relative to the quality of its composition using vocabulary, plot, prose, development of characters, and interest to the reader.
- Subtest total: The student’s scores from the seven above subskills are combined to give a subtest total score.
- Composite score: The results of all seven subtests, looking at spontaneous and contrived formats, are combined to form the composite score according the TOWL-4 *Examiner’s Manual* (Hammill & Larsen, 2009).

As we are diving into the study results, I would like to revisit my research questions to build optimal understanding and reverence for the overall idea that oral language practice in the classroom can, and did, have a significant impact on student writing. Regarding my first research question, I expected that the growth of overall literacy (measured by pre- and posttest composite scores on the TOWL-4) would be higher for those in the treatment group compared to the control group, which leads to my first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: There is a strong relationship between a third-grade student's oral language exposure and practice in the classroom and their writing ability.

For my second research question, I expected that the treatment group would have higher scores in all subtest areas (i.e., vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, logical sentences, sentence combining, contextual conventions, story composition, and overall writing scores) after their 3-month exposure to explicit daily oral language curriculum. This led me to my second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Third-grade students that have been exposed to a daily oral language curriculum over a 3-month period will have a statistically significant increase in one or more areas of vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, logical sentences, sentence combining, contextual conventions, story composition, and overall writing scores as opposed to their counterparts who do not receive daily oral language practice.

Descriptive Data

Table 2 yields the results of the data analysis using an independent samples *t* test on the control and treatment groups' pretest scores to determine whether there were any existing significant differences between the groups before treatment was administered. The results showed that for every subtest, subtest total, and composite score, there was no significant difference between the scores of the treatment and control group. This is relevant information because it demonstrates that the treatment and control groups were starting at the same point in the study for fair comparisons in terms of growth.

Table 2

Independent Samples t Test Results for Pretest Between Sample Groups

Variable				*t* test for equality of means		95% confidence interval of the difference	
	t	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference	Lower	Upper
Vocabulary	.26	40	.80	.14	.56	-.99	1.28
Spelling	1.49	40	.15	.91	.61	-.33	2.14
Punctuation	.30	40	.77	.19	.64	-1.10	1.48
Logical sentences	.80	40	.43	.67	.84	-1.02	2.36
Sentence combining	.30	40	.76	.19	.63	-1.09	1.47
Contextual conventions	1.26	40	.21	.62	.49	-.37	1.61
Story composition	-1.12	40	.27	-1.09	.97	-3.06	.87
Subtest total	.46	40	.65	1.62	3.50	-5.45	8.69
Composite score totals	.39	40	.70	1.33	3.46	-5.65	8.32

Analysis of Quantitative Data

To answer Research Question 1, I administered the TOWL-4 (Hammill & Larsen, 2009) in an effort to look at the growth and overall progress of the students in the treatment group versus the control group. I used a paired samples *t* test on the pre- and posttest data collected to check for measured growth within the control group and the treatment group, taking a close look at means and standard deviations and any areas of growth with a higher standard deviation.

Tables 3 and 4 display the descriptive statistics for the paired samples *t* test conducted to compare the pre-composite and post-composite test scores on the TOWL-4

for the control and treatment groups. The numbers here are negative because when running in SPSS, it is calculating the equation of (Pre-score - Post-score). The significant *t*-values still indicate these differences are statistically significant. Among those participating in the control group (n = 21) as seen in Pair 1, there was statistical significance between their pre-composite scores from April 2021 (M = 76.43, SD = 13.47) and their post-composite scores from June 2021 (M = 88.57, SD = 13.03); t = -9.36, $p \leq .05$, CI_{95} [-14.85, -9.36]. Among those participating in the treatment group (n = 21) as seen in Pair 2, there was statistical significance between their pre-composite scores from April 2021 (M = 75.10, SD = 8.31) and their post-composite scores from June 2021 (M = 103.57, SD = 8.94); t = -15.70, $p \leq .05$, CI_{95} [-32.26, -24.69]. Therefore, we can reject the null hypothesis that there would be no difference in the pre- and post-composite scores between the control group as well as reject the null hypothesis that there would be no difference in the pre- and post-composite scores between the treatment group.

The results indicate that though both groups grew in their writing abilities, the treatment group increased their writing abilities more than the control group. The composite scores of the treatment group increased 28.48 points on average compared to an increase of 12.14 points in the control group. These results indicate the students who were exposed to this daily structured oral language curriculum were able to achieve higher writing scores at the conclusion of the study.

Table 3

Comparison of Pre- and Post-Composite Scores for Treatment and Control Groups

Paired samples test									
		Paired differences							
					95% confidence interval of the difference				
		Mean	Standard deviation	Std error mean	Lower	Upper	*t*	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Pre-composite and post-composite scores: Control group	-12.14	5.94	1.30	-14.85	-9.36	-9.36	20	<.001
Pair 2	Pre-composite and post-composite scores: Treatment group	-28.48	8.31	1.81	-32.26	-24.69	-15.70	20	<.001

Table 4

Means of Pre- and Post-Composite Scores for Treatment and Control Groups

Paired samples statistics					
		Mean	*N*	*SD*	Standard error mean
Pair 1	Pre-composite scores: Control group	76.43	21	13.47	2.94
	Post-composite scores: Control group	88.57	21	13.03	2.84
Pair 2	Pre-composite scores: Treatment group	75.10	21	8.31	1.81
	Post-composite scores: Treatment group	103.57	21	8.94	1.95

Tables 5 and 6 show the results of running an independent samples *t* test on the growth of composite scores (measured by the difference between pre- and posttest composite scores) between the treatment and control groups. This enabled me to see the growth the students in each group made from the pretest to the posttest during this 3-month study. This analysis directly tested whether the growth in scores of the students in

the treatment group was significantly higher than that of those in the control group as was suggested by the results presented in Table 3. The purpose of analyzing these data further was to test whether there was statistical evidence that the mean difference between these two groups was significant and the growth of the average student in the treatment group was indeed higher than that of the average student in the control group. There was statistical significance shown in looking at the difference in their post-composite scores and their pre-composite scores in the control group (M = -12.14, SD = 5.94) and the treatment group (M = -28.48, SD = 8.31); t = -7.33, $p \leq .001$, CI_{95} [-20.84, -11.83]. This shows the change in composite test scores was significantly higher for students who were exposed to the daily structured oral language curriculum.

Table 5

Independent Samples Test

				t test for equality of means		95% confidence interval	
	t	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference	Lower limit	Upper limit
Difference of the composite scores	-7.33	40	<.001	-16.33	2.23	-20.84	-11.83

Table 6

Difference of the Composite Scores (Post – Pre)

Difference of the composite scores	Sample groups	*N*	*M*	*SD*	Standard error mean
	Control	21	-12.14	5.94	1.30
	Treatment	21	-28.48	8.31	1.81

For Research Question 2, I analyzed the data collected from the TOWL-4 (Hammill & Larsen, 2009) and analyzed the student results as paired through pre- and posttest matched data. Pre- and posttest scores for each sample group were analyzed in

SPSS to check for measured growth by examining the means and standard deviations with those further from the mean showing higher growth. The purpose of the data analysis was to look for differences between the sets of data and compare the two means of the effect size to provide a clear indication of whether the daily oral language curriculum classroom practice had an impact on student writing.

A look back at Table 2 reminds us of the relevance of running an independent samples *t* test to show that there were no significant differences between the scores of the treatment and control groups, meaning the starting point for both of these groups was at the same place when the research study began. Table 7 shows the nine variables tested using the TOWL-4 (Hammill & Larsen, 2009) along with their means in order to compare them to their pre- and post-assessments and the difference between them. This check on growth between the control and treatment groups provides a window into the subskills that were affected the most during the study. This table shows all subtest scores increased after exposure to the structured oral language curriculum. The growth shown is quite remarkable in that the control group grew an average of 1.78 points in each of the seven subtest skills and the treatment group showed an average growth of 4.22 in the same seven subtest skills. There was growth within each variable for both the control and treatment groups, with the treatment group showing the greatest growth in the pre- and posttesting in the following variables: spelling (4.81), logical sentences (5.09), story composition (6.24), and overall composite scores (28.47). In the control group, the same variables tested in the pre- and posttest yielded the following results: spelling (1.52), logical sentences (1.91), story composition (3.05), and overall composite scores (12.14). This stands with my second hypothesis in stating that third-grade students who have been

exposed to a daily oral language curriculum over a 3-month period will have a statistically significant increase in one or more areas of vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, logical sentences, sentence combining, contextual conventions, story composition, and overall writing scores as opposed to their counterparts who do not receive daily oral language practice. There were statistically significant data to reject the null hypothesis that third-grade students who have been exposed to a daily oral language curriculum over a 3-month period would not have an increase in one or more of the subtest areas as part of the TOWL-4 assessment.

Table 7

Descriptive Look at the Means of the Variables in Control and Treatment Groups

	Control			Treatment		
	Pre-	Post-	Difference	Pre-	Post-	Difference
Vocabulary	5.19	7.10	+1.91	5.05	8.38	+3.33
Spelling	6.19	7.71	+1.52	5.29	10.10	+4.81
Punctuation	6.90	8.38	+1.48	6.71	10.52	+3.81
Logical sentences	6.71	8.62	+1.91	6.05	11.14	+5.09
Sentence combining	8.18	8.57	+0.39	8.00	9.95	+1.95
Contextual conventions	5.24	7.43	+2.19	4.62	8.90	+4.28
Story composition	7.24	10.29	+3.05	8.33	14.57	+6.24
Subtest total	45.67	58.10	+12.43	44.05	73.57	+29.52
Composite score	76.43	88.57	+12.14	75.10	103.57	+28.47

Table 8 conveys the results of the screenings to determine whether there were differences between the various test scores from the treatment and control groups. It is important to evaluate the results to see that for every test there was a significant difference in the posttest scores of students in the treatment group versus those in the control group. The negative *t*-values are there because SPSS analyzed the calculation of

(Control - Treatment). The significant *t*-values still indicate these differences were statistically significant, and, in this case, the negative value indicates the mean of the treatment group was significantly higher than the mean of the control group for each of these tests. These results show students in the treatment group scored higher on every test after being exposed to the structured oral language curriculum treatment and that all but one of these differences (Contextual Conventions, which was significant at the 0.10 level) were statistically significant at the .05 level. This matches with the descriptive results of the data in Table 7 to further legitimize the descriptive overview of the mean comparisons. These results show students who were exposed to structured oral language scored significantly higher on the TOWL-4 subtests than students in the control group and suggest that the treatment was indeed successful.

Table 8

Independent Samples t Test Results for Posttests Between Sample Groups

Variable	*t* test for equality of means					95% confidence interval	
	t	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference	Lower limit	Upper limit
Vocabulary	-2.12	40	.04	-1.29	.61	-2.51	-.06
Spelling	-3.79	40	<.001	-2.38	.63	-3.65	-1.11
Punctuation	-3.51	40	.001	-2.14	.61	-3.38	-.910
Logical sentences	-3.80	40	.001	-2.52	.67	-3.87	-1.18
Sentence combining	-2.36	40	.023	-1.38	.59	-2.57	-.20
Contextual conventions	-1.68	40	.100	-1.48	.88	-3.25	.30
Story composition	-3.61	40	<.001	-4.29	1.19	-6.69	-1.88
Subtest total	-4.40	40	<.001	-15.48	3.52	-22.63	-8.33
Composite score totals	-4.35	40	<.001	-15.00	3.45	-21.97	-8.03

These strong results hold the value and importance of using oral language, as introduced in the classroom as a structured oral language curriculum, and what that can mean in terms of increased literacy skills, especially in the development of the higher-order skill of writing. Chapter 5 serves as a vehicle to support and extend the previous research and look to future research to build on the important connection between a student's exposure to structured oral language practice and their writing ability.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Implication of Findings

This study was born out of curiosity because of what I saw and experienced in my own classroom—that if students had explicit practice in structured oral language, then their writing abilities seemed to improve. I saw evidence that if students had the chance to rehearse, brainstorm orally, and talk about upcoming writing subjects, their writing became increasingly colorful and rich. When students had a chance to orally retell a story, then the story structure, vocabulary, and flow became part of their vernacular and therefore part of their skillset. In this study, I looked at two very similar third-grade classrooms in two elementary schools within the same public school district, both using the same language arts curriculum as the heart of their ELA block, and added the component of a structured oral language curriculum to one classroom to determine whether it would increase students' writing abilities. I discovered proof that what I saw in my own classroom was indeed real and that it could be replicated across other classrooms.

The goal was to show whether increasing students' writing ability could really be as simple as practicing naming, describing, listening to a story and answering questions as well as practicing retelling that story for a mere 5–10 minutes a day. If we can better understand the connection between classroom oral language and classroom writing, then the prescribed remedy can be a rather easy fix in that the structured oral language curriculum can be implemented within the classroom setting and improve student scores and abilities in the communication form of writing. Finding the power and value of words is something students start to learn as they practice and find their voice. I based my study

on the lens of cognitive theory because learning is a very active and constructive process. Humans, by their very nature, learn as they form mental representations of information and continually build upon those when new learning is added (Mayer, 2012). Processing information by forming mental representations is at the heart of allowing students to talk about a particular topic, subject, category, or object through explicit structured oral language curriculum before writing about said topic. Through the continuous cycle of construction and reconstruction, students are adding to their knowledge and growing in their thought processes that can translate into stronger overall writing skills. Burkholder and Pelaez (2000) believed social interaction and verbal rehearsal are the keys to creating a space for continual knowledge building. According to Vygotsky (1962), there is a place in our developmental pattern where "thought becomes fused with language and thereafter they develop together" (p. 12). My study pairs perfectly with Vygotsky's cognitive development theory in the idea that social interaction precedes development and learning from other members of society, as in this case it is educators who are scaffolding this learning. Engaging in social interactions leads to continual and cyclical knowledge building and overall language and literacy skills. As we expose students to new vocabulary and access their world knowledge to continually grow their basic knowledge base, it will show in the increased development of their writing abilities as shown in this research study. This study extended this cognitive development theory to push the importance of oral language in the classroom and the impact it can have on students' writing ability.

Language indeed plays an important role in shaping thought (Vygotsky, 1978), and that was the foundation of the research questions in this quasi-experimental study.

My first research question positioned me to detect whether there was growth in students' writing ability by asking: Will using explicit structured oral language practice with students daily in the classroom have an impact on their overall writing skills? In answering this question through my data analysis, I found the treatment group had statistically significant growth within every writing subtest skill, which included vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, creating logical sentences, combining sentences, writing within contextual conventions, overall story composition, and overall scores that were given in a subtest total as well as scaled composite scores.

I designed my second research question to discern whether the treatment curriculum used in this study would, simply put, be successful. My second query posed the following: Can structured oral language curriculum, practiced with fidelity 5–10 minutes a day in third-grade classrooms over the course of 3 months, improve student writing in the areas of vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, logical sentences, sentence combining, contextual conventions, story composition, or overall writing scores? The major finding to arise out of my second research question was that the implementation of a structured oral language curriculum for 5–10 minutes a day in the classroom was indeed successful at boosting students' writing scores, as shown in the results of the treatment group versus the control group.

Relationship to Prior Research

Chomsky (1965), through the theory of language development, posited that language is hard-wired in the brain and, no matter the language or early environment, it is part of our genes to be able to communicate via speech. Researchers defined language as an early tool for communication that does not need to be explicitly taught as it innately

develops, but as children grow, the ability to move into higher-level communication and conversation depends on the growth of all domains of language that include phonology, semantics, syntax, morphology, and pragmatics (Honig, 2007). Beck and McKeown (2007) stated working to increase and practice vocabulary involves providing students with endless opportunities to continue to use and grow their vocabulary through varied contexts in the classroom. This supports my study in that practicing structured oral language curriculum regularly in the classroom gives students vast opportunities to share what they know and continually add to their knowledge.

Oral language has been established as a prerequisite to reading acquisition (Lawrence & Snow, 2010) and has been studied as an important link for students to have high levels of comprehension (Kim, Park, & Park, 2015), but very little is known about this advanced link to writing ability. The major research findings have shown "oral sentence generation contribute[s] directly to written sentence generation" (Dockrell et al., 2019, p. 82) and "oral narration precedes the development of written narration" (Spencer & Petersen, 2018, p. 573). This research extrapolated from those models of writing to include students having oral language as part of their transcription skills (Kim, Park, & Park, 2015), self-regulation when writing, as well as their content and discourse knowledge. This has been proven true in my research as well so I can systematically support and extend the previous research, especially the research done by Hirsch (2003), where he explored the idea that if students are immersed in a topic and allowed to grow their knowledge and vocabulary prior to writing about it, their growth in writing will be remarkable.

Oral language was described as a prerequisite for writing according to Hayes and Flower (1980) when they intimately describe the need for oral language in all phases of writing, including the planning phase where students must be able to plan, generate ideas, and organize their thoughts about their writing project. During the writing, or transcription phase, a writer must draw on their oral language foundation to bring together their world knowledge with their word choice, cohesion, and self-regulation as they are composing. My research clearly showed evidence that the advancement of story composition was one of the biggest gains that was made out of all of the subtest skills in the treatment group. Oral language is a key ingredient for students to become successful writers, and that was proven in this research as after exposing students to a 5- to 10-minute structured oral language curriculum, students increased all of their skills in writing, particularly in the areas of spelling, writing logical sentences, story composition, and overall composite scores.

My research fully supports and extends the current research on the topic of using a structured oral language curriculum to help students increase not only their vocabulary, but also their writing abilities. My hope is that I pushed the thinking to extend beyond linking oral language practice to vocabulary and to see the positive impact it can have on every stage of literacy development for students, but especially in the area of writing.

Limitations of the Research

This research design had two possible threats to internal validity: history and study attrition (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). History was a potential threat to the internal validity due to the time of the study (April to June 2021) on different campuses as this study occurred during a global pandemic. During the 3 months of this study, schools were

in COVID-19 protocols, meaning that even though these schools were in the same school district, they had independent schedules based on the number and rate of infections happening in their immediate community. There was no way to secure what was happening externally with events even though they were just a few miles apart, as each school was operating with a bit of autonomy to best serve their students at that moment. Study attrition followed the same line of thinking in that students were, and continue to be, in a volatile situation during COVID-19 and the economic and personal impacts on families are causing a higher than usual percentage of student attrition (up to 20%–22% on both of these campuses). Students dropped out of the study at a high rate because I could only test the students who were present in school during this hybrid model of classroom operation. The total population goal was originally 100 students on both campuses, but the reality during this time was 42 students on both campuses. One other limitation of the study was the difference in populations, as one campus included 28% of English language learners and the other campus had a 5% population of English language learners. For both campuses, I tried to compensate to make sure language was not a factor in the testing so it was preliminarily decided that I would work with teachers who did not have second language learners in their classroom, which was granted by the principals of both schools.

A concern related to external validity, again due to COVID-19, was the interaction of history and treatment (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The results of this research were time-bound and took place during a time of inconsistency in learning in the classroom. The reliability of this research design was controlled by the consistency of the test administration and scoring of the TOWL-4 (Hammill & Larsen, 2009).

Threats to statistical conclusion validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) for this study included random irrelevancies in the setting and random heterogeneity of respondents. For random irrelevancies, it would be wise to recognize that the teachers and students were distracted by the COVID-19 protocols in their schools. From April to June of 2021, schools were providing a hybrid model of instruction and schools looked and felt different. There was plexiglass around all of the student desks and everyone needed to take their temperature upon arrival and wear a mask for the entire school day. Because of all of these conditions, there was also a threat to the statistical conclusions due to random heterogeneity of respondents. It is unknown whether the population I ended up testing was a true representation of the student population as the schools were following COVID-19 protocols, which included hybrid learning. Was this sample skewed more toward struggling learners who happened to be in the classroom versus the students currently on grade level or above in their current work? This testing was only done with the students who were in the classroom at the time of the pretest and posttest. I know I was limited to the third-grade population that was present for both the pretest and the posttest, which was 21 students on each campus.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations to other researchers would be to focus on clarifying the definition of oral language in the field so there is a consistent message when we speak about oral language as it applies to the developmental hierarchy of literacy skills as well as a working definition that would apply to the skills and strategies that foster oral language development in the classroom. Researchers need to define and study both facets to strengthen the common verbiage when this topic is discussed in the field. Previous

researchers defined oral language in their own way to meet their specific goal of research (as I did in this study as well) and having commonalities in the research would clear confusion and help everyone in the field to think collectively moving forward under one umbrella term. The hope is that this topic will gain traction and a similar, yet larger in scale, study will happen to explore the impact of practicing oral language skills in the classroom on student literacy skills. The ultimate goal of this work would be to make this a true stepping-stone to translate a structured oral language curriculum into the classroom. Establishing this link between using a structured oral language curriculum in the classroom and growth in student writing can transcend research and find a place in the pace and flow of a classroom setting.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Peterson et al. (2016) interviewed 36 primary teachers in Canada who admitted, very honestly, that they did not know or understand how to teach oral language. They identified a need for knowledge and strategies to encourage their students to use oral language in a range of contexts within their classrooms, especially before a writing assignment. There needs to be more oral language strategies embedded inside of the writing curriculums sold to school districts and writing curriculum standards need to be written into the Common Core or individual state knowledge and practice standards. This will only happen after larger research projects are conducted that can push forward the need for this specific classroom instruction. We are well aware of student shortcomings in writing, as according to the last NAEP from 2011, 72% of the fourth-grade students in the United States are performing below the level of proficient in writing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

Practitioners need access to quality professional development that can help them understand the importance of oral language in both areas—that of the acquisition of developmental skills within the broad scope of literacy skills and the direct link to growth in students' writing ability if students have the chance to rehearse the topic and apply those skills in their writing. As a classroom teacher, I saw first-hand the results of setting up students for success in writing by engaging in simple oral language activities daily. Now there are quantitative data to robustly support that this theory has merit and fills a gap and desperate need in our classrooms.

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