

## **Assessing children's oral storytelling in their first year of school**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses some findings from a small-scale investigation of the assessment of young children's oral narrative skills that was conducted in three primary schools in London, UK. Effective early language and literacy teaching with children from diverse backgrounds such as those in London depends on having articulated knowledge about children's skills (McNaughton 1995). A particularly important area is that of narrative skills since the ability to narrate and report is a vital skill for future academic success and is highly correlated to later fluency in reading (Beals and DeTemple 1993; Dickenson and Snow 1987). Teachers need to have sufficiently detailed descriptions of their pupils' language skills and this is especially important where populations are diverse. A procedure, developed and used extensively in New Zealand, exists for increasing teachers' knowledge of their pupils' language skills on entry to school. This story retelling activity (Tell Me) lends itself to use in the normal course of classroom teaching and is the focus of the present study.

### **INTRODUCTION**

A number of researchers have explored the centrality of storying in our lives. Wells, for example, writes 'To try to make sense, to construct stories, and to share them with others in speech and in writing is an essential part of being human' (1987 p.222). Bruner (1990) maintains that we are driven by narrative and Barbara Hardy (1977) describes narrative as 'a primary act of the mind' as it is invented by life and we experience life as narrative. Narrative has its own important role in the intellectual and emotional development of children and 'many believe passionately that stories are the most important means by which individuals come to know the world and their place within it' (Riley and Reedy 2000 p.67).

Sharing story and picture books has received considerable attention from researchers since this is the child's main literacy experience prior to starting school when the formal task of learning to read and write begins. The benefits of reading stories as a socially created, interactive activity are well documented (Heath 1982). Furthermore, Wells found a strong positive relationship between story reading and success in reading throughout the primary and secondary school.

Research has indicated that very young children seem to have a knowledge of story

and its conventions. Engel (1995), for example, has proposed a five phase theory in which she argues that, right from the start, 'mothers tell stories about themselves and invite their children to participate in these stories'. Young children spend a great deal of time and energy in collaborative story telling [give appropriate reference]. By the time they are six, children will have a wide repertoire of stories about themselves that can extend from oral to written versions. They will have heard all kinds of stories told to them by their parents, friends and teachers.

Carol Fox's work is significant in linking the concept of narrative with children's competence as readers. Her analysis of the oral storytelling of young children aged from three and a half to six years traced the influences that written stories had on their own spontaneous productions (1983, 1988). Fox found that for some of the children she studied, books were used much more often than personal experience in their story monologues.

Primary schools have traditionally placed considerable emphasis on the development of children's narrative skills in writing. However, fewer opportunities appear to exist for children to invent and re-tell stories orally (Harrett and Benjamin 2005). There is a close relationship between children's oral language skills and their ability to use written language effectively to serve their own purposes, particularly in writing (Lindsay and Dockrell, 2002\*\*\*check). Not only are there benefits in developing oracy but because spoken and written language are interdependent, the development of literacy will also be enhanced. Goodman and Goodman write 'Written language development draws on competence in oral language, since, for most learners, oral language competence reaches a higher level earlier. As children become literate, the two systems become interactive, and children use each to support the other when they need to' (1979 p.150\*\*\*check). Jones (1988), for example, demonstrated how oral storytelling could go through a process of drafting — an important skill for later literacy activities.

Children arrive at school with a wide range of rich but highly idiosyncratic knowledge about literacy. [\*\*\*include example to indicate variation in exposure to listening to stories] Researchers have shown that literacy practices vary considerably in different communities (Gregory 1996; Heath 1983) and that in some the oral tradition is stronger than reading aloud. The extent to which teachers capitalize on these understandings and enable children to progress, through appropriate teaching and closely matched activities, varies considerably and depends upon careful assessment.

The *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (DfEE/QCA 2000) identifies six areas of learning. The document recognises the importance of developing spoken language as a key starting point for learning in pre-school settings and the reception year. The term Foundation Stage is used to describe the phase of education from a child's third birthday to the end of the reception year. The early learning goals contained in this document set out what most children are expected to achieve by the end of the Foundation Stage. Teachers in the UK working within the Foundation Stage are required to complete a Foundation Stage profile for each child. The profile forms a record of the child's progress in relation to the six areas of learning. Within each area of learning, a number of early learning goals are identified. Several of the early learning goals for the Communication, Language and Literacy area of learning relate to children's narrative development: '... make up their own stories...', 'Use talk to organise, sequence and clarify thinking, ideas, feelings and events', 'Retell narratives in the correct sequence, drawing on language patterns of stories' and 'Show an understanding of the elements of stories, such as main character, sequence of events, and openings...'.

Narratives are important predictors of later language and literacy achievements. Effective early language and literacy teaching therefore depends on having articulated knowledge about children's skills (especially those children from diverse backgrounds). Teachers working in Reception classes in the United Kingdom would benefit from an assessment that increases their knowledge of their pupils' language skills in particular their ability to narrate beyond the scope of the current Foundation Stage profile.

The teaching of language and literacy in the UK has benefited from several initiatives that originate from New Zealand (NZ) (for example, Reading Recovery and guided reading). In New Zealand a procedure exists for increasing teachers knowledge of their children's narrative skills on entry to school. The assessment, known as Tell Me, was developed by Stuart McNaughton of the University of Auckland. This story retelling activity forms part of the NZ School Entry Assessment (SEA) (Ministry of Education, 1997) that is conducted within eight weeks of starting school. In addition to assessing children's narrative skills, the School Entry Assessment also includes tasks designed to assess children's \*\*\*mathematical skills.

The present study seeks to examine and review the usefulness of the NZ SEA Task in

the UK setting for assessing children's narrative skills during their first year of school. It also seeks to compare the scores from this practitioner-orientated assessment with a general language measure through the use of a formal standardised psychological assessment.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The sample for the study consisted of 24 children (and their teachers) from three primary schools serving deprived, multicultural areas of London in the United Kingdom. The participants were a sub-sample of those children taking part in an intervention study designed to develop children's oral skills in particular their ability to narrate. The children were assigned to the study on a random basis. The majority of the children taking part in the present study had English as an Additional Language (EAL) and among this small sample of children over 10\*\*\* languages were spoken. All the children in the study began their Reception year in January 2004. The children were assessed during this term and then one year later when they were in Year 1 (5-6 years).

### **Measures**

The following assessments were used:

- 1) Tell Me - New Zealand School Entry Assessment (SEA) Story Telling Task (Ministry of Education, 1997)

The class teachers administered this assessment task and their views about this assessment were sought via an informal interview. Teachers were asked for their views regarding ease of administration, quality of texts used, how applicable they considered the assessment to the UK context and the usefulness of the assessment information.

- 2) Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (CELF) - Preschool (Wiig *et al.*, 1992)

This published standardised test for expressive and receptive language is commonly used both in clinical practice and for research studies. In the present study researchers administered this psychological assessment tool as it provides a reliable and robust measure of the children's oral language skills.

Both assessments are described in detail below.

- 1) Tell Me - New Zealand SEA Story Telling Task (Ministry of Education, 1997)

The activity has two phases (familiarisation and assessment). Before undertaking the assessment phase, teachers are instructed to carry out the activity three times to

familiarise children before formally assessing them. The assessment procedure involves a Collaborative Reading step and a Retelling step which together take 15-20 minutes.

During the collaborative reading, an unfamiliar, specially written book is read with the teacher. The teacher supports the child's listening and talking through questions or comments on events, characters, activities and setting, and responds to extend and clarify the child's participation. At the end of the reading the teacher asks the child three specified questions and the child's responses are then scored for *Comprehension* (C) and noted on a supplied record sheet.

Children are then asked to retell, using the book, by telling another child or group of children what the story was about. Teachers can prompt to support the child's retelling. The teacher scores oral language in the following areas: *Sentence Structure* (SS), *Vocabulary* (V) and *global judgments* in terms of Organisation (O), Description/Expression (D/E) and Content (Con).

*Sentence Structure*: During the reading of the first double-page spreads of text and illustration, the teacher listens specifically to the child's sentences and scores these for their degree of complexity.

*Vocabulary*: During the reading of the second two double-page spreads the teacher listens specifically to the use and range of vocabulary. This is also scored for degree of complexity.

*Global Judgments*: The teacher also listens to other features of the child's language and makes judgments on:

Organisation - The degree to which the story is sequenced with explicit links for the audience to follow is sequenced with explicit links for the audience to follow.

Description/Expression: How well the elements of the story are described and expressed for the audience.

Content: In this dimension teachers judge the accuracy of the child's retelling by assessing how many of the main points of the story were covered.

With the exception of the *Comprehension*, these dimensions are scored as basic (1), plain (2), developed (3), or no response (0).

Teacher judgements for each dimension are added together to provide a total score (maximum = 18).

## 2) CELF- Preschool (Wiig *et al.*, 1992)

The CELF-Preschool assessment is designed to provide measures of both receptive and expressive language skills in the areas of phonology, syntax, semantics and memory and word finding and retrieval. The test aims 1) to assist in the identification of children with language disabilities, 2) to provide a differential diagnosis of the areas of weakness and 3) to identify areas for follow up for language intervention. The test is designed for use with children aged from three to six years and assesses a range of receptive language and expressive language skills. Receptive language refers to what is heard or understood and expressive language refers to what is said or articulated.

The six subtests were administered to each pupil, three assess receptive language and three assess expressive language. The subtests are:

### *Receptive Language*

The following three subtests evaluate receptive language:

#### 1. Linguistic Concepts (LC)

This subtest evaluates a child's ability to comprehend directions that:

- contain early acquired linguistic concepts such as 'either ... or' and 'not'
- involve quantifiers and ordinals such as 'some' and 'first'
- increase in length from one- to three-level commands.

#### 2. Basic Concepts (BC)

This subtest assesses a child's knowledge of modifiers. It can be used to evaluate a child's ability to interpret one-level oral directions that contain references to:

- attributes (e.g. understanding of 'cold', 'dry', 'alone', 'hard')
- dimension / size
- direction / locality / position
- number / quantity
- equality (e.g. understanding 'same' and 'different').

#### 3. Sentence Structure (SS)

This subtest evaluates comprehension of early-acquired sentence formation rules. It evaluates a child's ability to comprehend and respond to spoken sentences that increase in length and structural complexity.

## *Expressive Language*

The following three subtests evaluate expressive language:

### 1. Recalling Sentences in Context (RSC)

This subtest evaluates recall and repetition of spoken sentences. It is in the form of a story and children are required to recall and repeat lines from the story. As the story progresses, the number of morphemes, syntactic complexity and number of prepositions in each item increase.

### 2. Formulating Labels (FL)

This subtest examines a child's ability to name pictures that represent nouns and verbs (referential word knowledge / naming).

### 3. Word Structure (WS)

This subtest evaluates a child's knowledge and use of early-acquired morphological rules and forms.

## **ANALYSIS**

The analyses is divided into three sections:

Section 1 focuses on the children's NZ SEA task scores and CELF scores at the beginning of their Reception year.

Section 2 focuses on the children's NZ SEA task scores at the beginning of their Reception year and one year later.

Section 3 examines the teacher's views about the usefulness of the story telling task.

### **Section 1: Children's scores at school entry**

This section examines the assessments of five children in their first term and all attending the same primary school.

#### *NZ SEA task*

The NZ SEA story retelling task (Tell Me) was conducted using one of the specially written books. *Bernard O'Brien's Tooth* is the shortest and simplest of these books according to the test developers. It tells the story of a child's tooth that proves particularly difficult to extract.

Table 1\*\*\* below shows the children's scores for the NZ SEA task. Three of the children have scored 2-3 on each subscore indicating that these five-year-olds have used language very competently in this activity. The other three children's scores indicate some less developed language areas particularly in relation to Comprehension which is assessed by the teacher at the end of the collaborative reading.

Table 1 Tell Me / Ki Mai Assessment Task (story retelling activity)

	C (/3)	SS (/3)	V (/3)	O (/3)	D/E (/3)	Con (/3)	Total Score
Mustaq	1	2	1	2	2	3	11
Tarik	1	2	2	2	2	3	12
Natalie	1	1	2	2	2	2	10
Mason	2	2	2	3	2	3	14
Adwaa	3	2	2	2	2	3	14
Ayanna	3	3	3	3	2/3	3	17/18

\*\*\*should Natalie's SS score be 2 rather than 1 and her Content score 3?

#### CELF Scores

The children's CELF scores at school entry are shown in Table 2\*\*\* with two of the children scoring less than a standardised score of 85. A score of 85-110 is described in the CELF-Preschool manual as being 'within the average range'. Four of the six children have English as an additional language. Mustaq, Tarik and Adwaa have Bengali as their first language while Natalie's first language is Chinese.

Table 2 CELF Test Scores

	Total Standard Score	Receptive Standard Score	Expressive Standard Score
Mustaq	70	64	79
Tarik	84	89	84
Natalie	90	91	86
Mason	92	86	96
Adwaa	92	97	86
Ayanna	102	93	102

Table 3\*\*\* below indicates the children's scores on the CELF subtests. The results

indicate that Mustaq had particular difficulty with three of the subtests (Linguistic Concepts, Formulating Labels and Word Structure) in which he achieved fewer than half the available marks. Natalie obtained the lowest score for the Word Structure subtest. Ayanna obtained the highest scores in all three of the subtests for expressive language (Recalling Sentences in Context, Formulating Labels and Word Structure).

Table 3 CELF Test Scores

	LC (/20)	BC (/18)	SS (/22)	RSC (/52)	FL (/40)	WS (/20)
Mustaq	9	12	14	37	2	8
Tarik	16	14	19	33	18	10
Natalie	14	16	17	40	25	2
Mason	16	13	17	37	19	14
Adwaa	15	17	19	33	20	11
Ayanna	14	17	18	43	26	17

\*\*\*Need to add commentary - relate CELF scores with SEA scores

## Section 2: Children's progress as assessed by the NZ assessment task

This section draws on assessments from a different primary school in the study from those in the previous section. In order to assess the children's progress the NZ assessment task was administered at the beginning of their Reception year and one year later.

### NZ SEA task

The NZ SEA story retelling task (Tell Me) was conducted using one of the specially written books. *Great Times with Great-Grandad* tells the story of a child visited by his Great Granddad and how his feelings towards him change. The first person narrative presents an interesting challenge (see Appendix 1\*\*\*). This section focuses on two of the children's assessments (collaborative reading and retellings of this story). Each area of language assessed is examined in relation to the task's assessment structure and comparisons are made between the two versions produced by each child in their retelling of the story.

Child 1: Athiqa (first language -Urdu)

In the collaborative reading Athiqa gave only one correct response to the three

comprehension questions on both occasions that the assessment task was administered.

Athiqa's retellings of *Great Times with Great-Grandad*

- Page 2 (text) After Great-Grandad fell over in the shower and broke his leg, the people at the hospital put his leg in plaster. Now he's come to stay with us. Mum and Dad cook his meals. They take him to the toilet. They're too busy to play with me. I want Great-Grandad to go!
- Retelling 1 Man fell over in the bath. Then she got doctor. He wants her dad.
- Retelling 2 Great Grandad slipped in the bathroom and mum and dad was looking after him and the boy was sad. Mum and dad have to make Grandad the food. He couldn't make it. First he could, now he can't because he got broken leg.
- Page 4 (text) I took Great-Grandad a cup of tea. I accidentally spilled some on his pyjamas. "Say I did it, Sam," he grinned. "They won't tell me off."
- Page 5 (text) Great-Grandad gave me one of his ginger biscuits. He let me dunk it in his tea. The biscuit tasted all sweet and sloppy.
- Retelling 1 She said, 'I want to bring his tea. She put sugar in the tea'. She mixed it with a spoon.
- Retelling 2 Then the boy bring Grandad a cup of tea with two ginger biscuits but it falled by accident on grandad's pyjamas. Then two ginger, dad let him have one ginger to eat and dad had one as well. And he said to dad, 'Can I put one in tea?'

(Add commentary about child's developing sentence structure)

first retelling - short simple sentences with ideas linked by 'and' or 'and then'. Some description

second retelling - sentences include several ideas or events; clearly related clauses and phrases

- Page 6 (text) Great Grandad showed me the tattoo on his arm. It's a blue snake with red eyes, and it twists around a dagger. Amazing!
- Page 7 (text) Then I showed Great Grandad the scrambler bike I ride to school. He told me about the horse he used to ride to school. Neat!
- Retelling 1 Dad showed his shoe. Then she went out with the baby boy.
- Retelling 2 Then Grandad told his tattoo. It gotted red eyes and blue colour for

	his body and the boy went to school on his bike and dad used to go on his horse.
Page 8 (text)	Mum let me off drying the dishes so I could talk to Great-Grandad. Choice!
Page 9 (text)	Great Grandad let me draw pictures of monsters all over his plaster. Awesome!
Retelling 1	Then she going in the horse [house]. Then she was writing. Then she was talking to her dad. Then she made all of it – all around.
Retelling 2	There... they was talking. There they was talking about the leg and mum was... washing the cupsand then boy wried on Grandad's leg. And Grandad was laughing.
Page 10 (text)	Sometimes Great-Grandad calls me "Rob". That's Dad's name. "I'm Sam, not Rob," I tell him. But I don't mind really. When Great-Grandad's leg gets itchy, I reach my hand inside his plaster and scratch. When he wants a cup of tea, I bring it with two ginger biscuits.
Retelling 1	Dad said, 'Whatever you like to make'. Then she sat in the chair.
Retelling 2	When the boy finished Grandad was laughing and the boy was happy. The Grandad was touching the boy's head.
Page 12 (text)	Mostly we just talk. I've learned heaps about Great-Grandad. I want Great-Grandad to stay!
Retelling 1	They was talking.
Retelling 2	Mum and dad was laughing and grandad was happy and the boy was happy.

(Add commentary about child's developing vocabulary)

first and second retelling - labels, limited set of descriptive words

(Add commentary about child's ability to make global judgements)

organisation

first retelling - limited description of events - mainly described what she had seen in the pictures

second retelling - used linkages such as 'then', gaining confidence in developing a storyline

description / expression

first retelling - very little description of events and characters apart from the first four pages

second retelling - provided detail, needs to develop expression

content

first retelling - story didn't link - unaware of the main points of the story

second retelling - described episodes involving the characters and identified some main points

Athiqa's scores for the various language areas are shown in Table 4\*\*\*.

Table 4 Athiqa's Tell Me / Ki Mai Assessment Task scores (story retelling activity)

	2004	2005
Collaborative Reading		
Comprehension (/3)	1	1
Retelling		
Sentence Structure (/3)	2	3
Vocabulary (/3)	1	2
Global Judgments		
Organisation (/3)	1	2
Description / Expression (/3)	1	2
Content (/3)	1	2

See Appendix 2\*\*\* for Athiqa's scores on the CELF assessment. Her scores in this assessment indicate improvements in every area of language with the exception of the Basic Concepts where Athiqa's score remains the same.

Child 2: Asiya (first language - Tami)

Asiya gave one correct response to the three comprehension questions when the NZ task was first administered. On the second occasion she gave two correct responses to these questions.

Asiya's retellings of *Great Times with Great-Grandad*

Page 2 (text)      After Great-Grandad fell over in the shower and broke his leg, the people at the hospital put his leg in plaster. Now he's come to stay

	with us. Mum and Dad cook his meals. They take him to the toilet. They're too busy to play with me. I want Great-Grandad to go!
Retelling 1	Great-Grandad broke his leg.
Retelling 2	He broke his leg in the shower. Then he went to the toilet. The boy is sad.
Page 4 (text)	I took Great-Grandad a cup of tea. I accidentally spilled some on his pyjamas. "Say I did it, Sam," he grinned. "They won't tell me off."
Page 5 (text)	Great-Grandad gave me one of his ginger biscuits. He let me dunk it in his tea. The biscuit tasted all sweet and sloppy.
Retelling 1	He fall down.
Retelling 2	The boy spilt the tea on the grandad's pyjamas. The boy was kind. The boy was kind. The boy let grandad give him one ginger biscuits.

(Add commentary about child's developing sentence structure)

first retelling - unconnected labels for objects, actions, events and characters

second retelling - short, simple sentences with ideas linked by 'and' or 'and then'. Some description

Page 6 (text)	Great Grandad showed me the tattoo on his arm. It's a blue snake with red eyes, and it twists around a dagger. Amazing!
Page 7 (text)	Then I showed Great Grandad the scrambler bike I ride to school. He told me about the horse he used to ride to school. Neat!
Retelling 1	A knife.
Retelling 2	Grandad got a tatoos in his arm. The snake is blue. The snake has a red eye. The snake is blue. The boy went to school with the bike and grandad went to school with the horse.
Page 8 (text)	Mum let me off drying the dishes so I could talk to Great-Grandad. Choice!
Page 9 (text)	Great Grandad let me draw pictures of monsters all over his plaster. Awesome!
Retelling 1	He draw the pictures on leg.
Retelling 2	Mum was cleaning the dishes and the boy and grandad was talking. And the boy was drawing monsters fishes on grandad's plaster. Grandad is laughing because its tickling his leg.
Page 10 (text)	Sometimes Great-Grandad calls me "Rob". That's Dad's name. "I'm Sam, not Rob," I tell him. But I don't mind really. When Great-

Grandad's leg gets itchy, I reach my hand inside his plaster and scratch. When he wants a cup of tea, I bring it with two ginger biscuits.

- Retelling 1 They have a talk.
- Retelling 2 And the boy's making grandad's leg better. Grandad is smiling and loads of pictures in grandad's plaster.
- Page 12 (text) Mostly we just talk. I've learned heaps about Great-Grandad. I want Great-Grandad to stay!
- Retelling 1 Different kind of pictures.
- Retelling 2 Everyone is happy. Everyone is smiling. The boy wanted grandad to stay.

(Add commentary about child's developing vocabulary)

first retelling - labels, nouns, pronouns and verbs

second retelling - labels, limited set of descriptive words

(Add commentary about child's ability to make global judgements)

organisation

first retelling - events not linked - uses very limited vocabulary

second retelling - unlinked picture by picture / page by page, some evidence of some episodes / ideas being connected to develop a storyline. However, needs to develop use of linkages

description / expression

first retelling - limited descriptions of pictures and characters

second retelling - described events and characters, identifying some emotions

content

first retelling - identifies one main point but found it difficult to retell the story

second retelling - identified two main points - that the boy is sad at the start and that by the end he wants Great-Grandad to stay

Asiya's scores for the various language areas are shown in Table 5\*\*\*.

Table 5 Asiya's Tell Me / Ki Mai Assessment Task (story retelling activity)

	2004	2005
Collaborative Reading		
Comprehension (/3)	1	2
Retelling		
Sentence Structure (/3)	1	2
Vocabulary (/3)	1	2
Global Judgments		
Organisation (/3)	1	1
Description / Expression (/3)	1	2
Content (/3)	1	2

See Appendix 2\*\*\* for Asiya's scores on the CELF assessment. Her scores in this assessment indicate improvements in every area of language.

### **Section 3: Teachers' views about the NZ assessment task**

Teachers' views about the NZ assessment task were sought via an informal interview.

*Great Times with Great-Grandad* by David Hill

This story, according to the teachers' notes, 'tells how the narrator was at first disgruntled with the arrival of his great-grandad with his leg in plaster. However, as different episodes occur, Great-Grandad proves to be great company and a welcome companion after all. The first-person narrative presents an interesting challenge, but the child's growing sense of discovering a kindred spirit is readily appealing, the vocabulary familiar, and the time sequence helpful. The illustrations reflect the warmth of the theme' (page 23).

The reception teacher considered the book to be a difficult story for children entering the reception class in January and this view was supported by the Year 1 teacher who administered the assessment one year later. The following issues were thought to effect comprehension:

- interest level - some of the children did not find the story particularly appealing and this resulted in loss of interest.
- there was not a close match between the text and the accompanying illustrations.
- events mentioned in the story did not relate to children's own experiences and therefore they found it difficult to identify with the main character in the story. Few children were aware that a broken leg is put in plaster and people often personalise

their plaster with drawings and writing. Furthermore, children were unaware that the presence of the plaster would cause itching. This was difficult to explain the children.

- unfamiliar vocabulary (tattoo and dagger on page 6, Scrambler bike on page 7, choice! on page 8, Awesome on page 9). Few children were familiar with the term 'Great-Grandad so the reception teacher referred to the character as Grandad instead.

The assessment was also fairly time consuming to learn to do and repeating the assessment with children in the same class acting as the audience (as suggested in the teachers' notes) was problematic. The reception teacher circumnavigated this by asking the child being assessed to retell the story to a friend (or puppet). The Year 1 teacher remarked that she was not hugely confident in marking the assessment (regarding nuances of language) and both teachers thought it might be helpful for two people to work together initially (in order to reach agreement over scoring). [reliability issues] Both teachers felt that with further experience of administering the test, they would 'get better at knowing what to record'.

The two teachers were however positive about the actual assessment despite the above reservations. The test itself took about twenty to thirty minutes to administer. Both teachers remarked that it had provided some really useful insights into the children's oral language abilities. The reception teacher, for example, remarked that one boy's (Aulon) retelling had changed entirely her expectations of what he was actually able to do which was not matched by what he did in the classroom. The assessment gave the children an opportunity to say more than they would normally be able to do in a group or whole-class situation. Both teachers considered it useful for the child to retell the story to one of their peers (in addition to the teacher).

## **DISCUSSION**

This study was designed to examine and review the usefulness of the NZ SEA Task in the UK setting for assessing children's narrative skills during their first year of school.

Several principles of assessment of young children were important in the development of the NZ task that are consistent with early years practice in the UK:

- Assessment should be child centred
- Assessment should take place in a meaningful context

- Process is as important as product
- Assessment should be useful to teachers
- Assessment should be grounded in research
- Assessment should be unobtrusive

There has been considerable recent interest in the role of formative assessment. Black and Wiliam have argued that this kind of assessment 'is at the heart of effective teaching' (1998 p.2) and that there is a firm body of evidence to support this. Strengthening the practice of formative assessment produces significant learning gains (Black and Wiliam 1998 p.3). Early oral language abilities are strongly linked to the development of emergent literacy skills and achievement in reading (Dockrell \*\*\*). However, talk can be difficult to assess making it difficult for teachers to describe a child's attainment and progress accurately. In the present study the NZ assessment was administered at the beginning of the child's first year at school and then one year later. This enabled the teacher to identify progress that has been made. The assessment had not originally been intended to be used in this way and there was a tendency for the more advanced readers to want to read the print (rather than retell the story in their own words) during the second assessment.

According to Black and Wiliam, 'a good test can be a learning as well as a testing occasion' (1998 p.12). As the NZ assessment manual states '... the information can contribute to decisions about a child's strengths and needs and assist in planning to provide suitable challenges or address particular concerns' (p.28).

Previous research (Gilmore 1998, MacDonald and McNaughton 1999) has found the NZ assessment task to have high validity and reliability. This indicates that the procedure can provide useful information for teachers on narrative aspects of language. Given that the ability to narrate and report is a vital skill for future academic success and is highly correlated to later fluency in reading it is important to examine ways in which teachers can use the assessment information from the NZ assessment task to make their teaching more effective.

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## APPENDIX 1

Text: *Great Times with Great-Grandad*

- Page 2            After Great-Grandad fell over in the shower and broke his leg, the people at the hospital put his leg in plaster. Now he's come to stay with us. Mum and Dad cook his meals. They take him to the toilet. They're too busy to play with me. I want Great-Grandad to go!
- Page 4            I took Great-Grandad a cup of tea. I accidentally spilled some on his pyjamas. "Say I did it, Sam," he grinned. "They won't tell me off."
- Page 5            Great-Grandad gave me one of his ginger biscuits. He let me dunk it in his tea. The biscuit tasted all sweet and sloppy.
- Page 6            Great Grandad showed me the tattoo on his arm. It's a blue snake with red eyes, and it twists around a dagger. Amazing!
- Page 7            Then I showed Great Grandad the scrambler bike I ride to school. He told me about the horse he used to ride to school. Neat!
- Page 8            Mum let me off drying the dishes so I could talk to Great-Grandad. Choice!
- Page 9            Great Grandad let me draw pictures of monsters all over his plaster. Awesome!
- Page 10           Sometimes Great-Grandad calls me "Rob". That's Dad's name. "I'm Sam, not Rob," I tell him. But I don't mind really. When Great-Grandad's leg gets itchy, I reach my hand inside his plaster and scratch. When he wants a cup of tea, I bring it with two ginger biscuits.
- Page 12           Mostly we just talk. I've learned heaps about Great-Grandad. I want Great-Grandad to stay!

## APPENDIX 2

### Athiq'a's CELF Test Scores

	2004	2005
Receptive Language		
Linguistic Concepts (/20)	11	16
Basic Concepts (/18)	15	15
Sentence Structure (/22)	16	20
Expressive Language		
Recalling Sentences in Context (/52)	21	27
Formulating Labels (/40)	5	21
Word Structure (/20)	5	12

### Asiya's CELF Test Scores

	2004	2005
Receptive Language		
Linguistic Concepts (/20)	13	17
Basic Concepts (/18)	11	18
Sentence Structure (/22)	14	22
Expressive Language		
Recalling Sentences in Context (/52)	35	40
Formulating Labels (/40)	19	30
Word Structure (/20)	8	13