Educator, literacy enthusiast, facilitator and now author Jannie van Hees wants to unlock the power of oral language in New Zealand classrooms. Her recently published book, Expanding Oral Language in the Classroom, fills a gap in texts available to New Zealand teachers on how to develop language skills and give children a voice in the classroom.

Jannie says the key to developing children’s oral language is evident when you compare children in the classroom to the environment and conditions of children outside the classroom. “Children outside the classroom are frequently engaged in elaborate dialogue and are participants in two-way exchanges of thinking, ideas, knowledge – with peers and siblings, and with adults. Somehow, these optimal conditions need to be more closely mirrored in the classroom.”

Through her research and work in schools – particularly in low decile schools, Jannie observes far too many controlled classrooms that do not offer enough opportunities for children to experience rich language use in the classroom.

“If classrooms are not focused on effective ways to expand both the opportunities and means to engage in oral expression in the classroom, then children are disempowered to a great extent.”

“Whether in junior or senior classes, what is evident is that classrooms are most often not optimal in terms of engaging children in rich, dialogic talk - talk that expands and enriches, talk that demands of the children thinking and giving children a voice in the classroom.”
precision of expression, talk that involves each and every child in oral expression throughout the multiple teaching and learning moments of the day.”

When children express their ideas and knowledge, great insights are had, says Jannie. “If we are not opening the window on children’s amazing brains and amazing concepts, what a delicious feast we’re missing out on.” She admits that expanding oral language in the classroom is one of teaching’s biggest challenges but it is also one of the most important.

There is increasing research evidence which points towards limitations in oral language, including vocabulary and concepts limitations, as key contributors to hiccups in the development of children’s literacy. “Strong oral language and extensive vocabulary is the means to being a deep level comprehender of written text, and being able to effectively write” says Jannie. These concerns were underlying motivators for Jannie’s book which journeys into the nooks and crannies of teaching practices, so that children become increasingly enabled to engage in enriching dialogue and oral expression.

Jannie’s writing journey was spread over two and a half years. It began when the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) awarded her the Beeby Fellowship in 2005. She began writing in February of 2005 and has found the exercise both challenging and rewarding.

The resulting book is a practical, applied text essential for student teachers and practising teachers alike. It is divided into two parts. The first part is underpinning the theory, or what Jannie describes as “the landscape of expanding on language in the classroom”. The second part of the book is devoted to attending to classroom interactional patterns to give opportunities to children’s expression and use of language, rather than simply listening to the teacher. It also explains how to address the linguistic expansion of children’s oral expression. The contents of the book are based on actual classroom and lesson examples and Jannie’s personal and professional experiences.

“As I wrote, teachers and children journeyed with me as I dipped into my years of teaching experiences. And so in that respect, I always had company, settings, characters, a plot to write. The book is very practical but it’s also not a minimalist answer.”

Jannie says the feedback she has received recognises the user-friendliness of her book and relevance to classroom practice. “If you’re a teacher trainee I think it’s pivotal to read in order to become effective as a teacher. And for teachers it’s absolutely a must because we have so much work to do in order to open up children’s voices in the classroom. It is my hope that the contents of this book make a difference to many classrooms, many teachers, and ultimately to many children. If it does, then the time and energy put into its writing and shaping has been worth it.”

Jannie is currently undertaking doctoral studies at the Faculty of Education. She is also the Project Director and Facilitator in the English Language Assistant Professional Development programme with Team Solutions, with approximately 20 participating schools in Auckland. The programme involves six one-day workshops, which aim to help teacher aides and coordinating teachers in schools develop core understandings and practices for teaching language effectively. This programme will be expanding throughout the North Island in 2008.

Expanding Oral Language in the Classroom is available from the New Zealand Council for Educational Research website at www.nzcer.org.nz for $44.