

Oral Language Development in Preschool: Intricate Links to Literacy

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Overview

- Major language development milestones
- Preschools' language development
 - Vocabulary
 - Mature morphosyntactic structures
- Effect of home linguistic environment
- Effect of classroom linguistic environment
 - Story book reading
 - Requests
 - Literacy Practices
 - Parent involvement
- Designing effective instruction

Learning Language

- Theories of Language Development
 - Language instinct
 - Neurolinguistic/Psycholinguistic models
 - Stimulus expectant
 - It's all learned
- Converging evidence
 - Exposure to language during the infant and preschool years is very important (Hart & Risely, 1995)

Language Development Milestones

- Children go through predictable stages of language development that are fairly universal across different languages and cultures – even modalities
- Newborn
 - Startled by noise; turns head toward sound; prefers mother's voice
 - Cries
- 1 to 2 months
 - Smiles when spoken to
 - Makes cooing sounds "oo" "goo"

Milestones

- 3 to 7 months
 - Responds differently to different intonations
- 8 to 12 months
 - Responds to name
 - Responds to “no”
 - Recognizes games and words from routines such as “peek-a-boo” and waves to “bye-bye”
 - Recognizes some words

Milestones

- 12 to 24 months
 - Says first word
 - Combines words
 - Becomes easier to understand
- 24 to 36 months
 - Emerging use of grammar
 - Productive sentence generation (mug test)
 - Length of utterances increases

Milestones

■ Preschool

- Predictable grammatical development

■ Questions

- Yes/no

- Wh-questions

- What, where, and who are understood and used first
- When, how and why emerge later

■ Passives

- “John was hit by the ball.”

- “The ball hit John”

■ Relative clauses

- Let’s eat the cake *that* I made.

- Let’s eat the cake *what* I made.

Communicative Competence

- Children acquire or learn language; they also learn how to use language appropriately
 - “You’re a turkey!”
- Routines and polite terms
 - Please, thank you, bye-bye
- Language in social contexts

Language Acquisition

- Children learn language by participating in the linguistic environment all around them.
 - They are active participants in this process
 - Home – Hart & Risley; Home/school study
 - Preschool – Home/school study; Whitehurst

Links between Language and Literacy

- Loban, 1976
 - Teachers consistently identified children as high academic achievers if they used language "with notable skill and power."
 - Children with strong oral language skills in kindergarten later became the most proficient readers and writers
- Tumner, Nesdale & Wright, 1987
 - Identified a positive relationship between metalinguistic awareness and reading proficiency
- Hart & Risely, 1995; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001
 - Babies' and preschoolers' exposure to more and to specific kinds of adult talk around them related positively to later reading proficiency

Preschool Efficacy

- Children begin school with literacy related abilities that vary widely but that are fairly stable over time (Entwisle, et al., 1997).
- *High quality* preschool experiences can make a difference (Barnett, 1995)
 - Higher achievement
 - less likely to be retained a grade
 - less likely to be referred for special education
 - more likely to graduate from high school

What is High Quality Preschool?

- Quality was consistently defined in terms of teacher-child interactions (i.e., language)
 - Storybook reading style
 - Classroom management
 - Teacher closeness and sensitivity
 - Verbal interactions included more “cognitively challenging talk”

Preschool Linguistic Environment

- Storybook Reading
- Linguistic environment – Teachers' use of requests
- Literacy Practices
- Parent involvement

Storybooks

- Studies by Whitehurst and Neuman, as well as the Home-School Study (Snow, et. al., 2000)
- Quantity and quality are important
 - Making books more available increases preschoolers' success (Neuman & Dickinson, 2001)
 - When asked when they read at home with their preschoolers, almost 60% of the parents reported that they read with their children when the school sent books home.
 - Quality is important when we consider learning opportunities

Ways of Reading

- The ways that teachers (and parents) read storybooks to young children is positively related to later language abilities in kindergarten and reading abilities in fourth grade.
- **Caution** – there is an implicit assumption in these studies that all of the children in these classrooms benefited as much as the child followed in the particular study. This may not be the case.

Why might the ways teachers read storybooks be important?

- Exposes children to “rare words”
 - video
- Provides opportunities for children to participate in analytic conversations including:
 - making inferences,
 - predictions, and
 - following directions
 - Connecting events in the book with their own experiences

Prepares children for school by teaching them how to participate in group activities that involve talking and listening.

- Children were more engaged when teachers used
 - Dramatic techniques
 - Implicit management strategies
 - Analytic conversations

- Provides opportunities for children to be exposed and to use styles and forms of language beyond what is available in conversations
- Children begin to use these forms when they pretend to read storybooks
 - Video

Links between Language and Literacy

- If we think about where preschool children are in terms of their language development...
- We begin to see how particular ways of storybook reading can facilitate language development...
- Which may, in turn, facilitate the process of learning to read and write.

Practicing Storybook Reading

- Break into small groups of four or five
- Look at the books that I have provided
- Role play how you would present the storybooks to a preschool classroom
 - Dramatic presentation
 - Use and explanation of rare words
 - Analytic conversations – predicting, relating to child experiences, identifying implications, offering opinions...

Using Requests

- 60% of teachers' utterances include requests
- 15% of children's utterances include requests
- Teachers and children use primarily
 - Yes/No questions
 - Imperatives
 - Wh-questions

Teachers' Requests

- Teachers who used many imperatives were also more likely to use yes/no questions
- In general, children demonstrated stronger end-of-the-year early literacy skills in classrooms where teachers used more wh-questions and fewer imperatives
 - Letter/word identification
 - Phonological awareness
 - Story narrative skills
 - Receptive and expressive language skills

Wh-questions

- Wh-questions were frequently used to assess vocabulary knowledge
 - Teacher (during small group): Let me see, okay? What's this at the bottom (points to a picture of a flower)?
 - Child: The roots.
- Wh-questions were also used to help children think through the current project.
 - Teacher (during small group): We have the finger-painters. What else do we need?
 - Child: Paint.
 - Child: Paint.
- Teachers also used wh-questions to guide children toward correct answers as exhibited in the following exchange.

Example

Literacy Practices

- Teachers hold different beliefs about the goals of the preschool experiences
 - Academic goals
 - Social-emotional goals
 - Family support
 - Enrichment
 - Developmentally Appropriate
 - Righting inequities
 - Intervention

Teachers' talk

- Not surprisingly, teachers' beliefs are reflected in what they talk about in the classroom
- Teachers who reported that they believed that explicitly teaching children letters and letter-sound correspondences talked more about letters and words than did teachers who reported that they thought children should "not be taught to read until first grade, kindergarten at the earliest"

Literacy practices reflected in discourse

	Example
Letter, Letter-sound correspondence, word segment	It has a T and an O and a D and an A and a Y so it does say today. Make that sound. Make that sound, that T H sound.
Word, Rhyming, writing name	All right, let's look at the word. Would you go back up there and look at that word? That's a big long word that won't even fit in here. What do you think that says? Does it look like this word?
Books, reading, concepts of print, references to the act of writing	Remember boys and girls that we take a book home to read, don't we. Should we read this? Should we see what our message says today? Tami will write you a letter to say hello so we'll have to write her a letter back.

- Teachers who made more frequent references to "letters" also made more frequent references to "words."

Interactions

- The effectiveness of the teachers' literacy practices varied by child characteristics
 - More explicit focus on letters and words was associated with higher end of the year early literacy scores – but only for children who began the year with *lower* vocabulary scores. The opposite was the case for children with higher vocabulary scores
 - For children with higher fall vocabulary scores, more frequent references to “books” was associated with *higher* spring early literacy scores. The opposite was the case for children with lower literacy scores.

Parent Involvement

- Ultimately, the home environment exerts more influence on children's achievement than the classroom environment (NICHD, ECRN)
- Those preschool programs that had specific and well designed parent programs were more successful (e.g., Head Start studies)

Implications for the Classroom

- Story book reading
- Requests
- Literacy Practices
- Parent involvement