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Learning to talk, talking to learn

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We can take it for granted that by the time a child enters nursery he/she will have acquired much of the grammatical system of his/her native language, much of the sound system and a substantial vocabulary. Although there will be individual differences between children, all will have used language to express meanings, to communicate with others and to make sense of the world in which they are growing up. In using language they also learn about language, their own and the language of others.

This chapter focuses on the important role speaking and listening activities have in the life of the young child. It begins with an overview of the child's early language acquisition and the different perspectives offered by those researching language, and goes on to discuss the role of the adult in developing a child's spoken language. The complexity of the acquisition process can only be lightly sketched here, the emphasis being on the importance of interaction in learning and learning to talk. This is followed by suggestions for classroom- or home-based activities.

Language acquisition – differing perspectives

Until the late 1950s the prevailing views on language acquisition were largely influenced by behaviourism until the work of Noam Chomsky marked a turning point in theories about the nature of language and the nature of language acquisition. The behaviourists' claim that language is learned through the acquisition of linguistic

habits and that imitation of adults' speech plays an important role in learning is strongly countered by Chomsky's assertion that language is 'creative', that is, human beings produce novel utterances when they speak, rather than imitations of what they have heard before:

> The normal use of language is innovative in the sense that much of what we say in the course of normal language use is entirely new, not a repetition of anything that we have heard before, and not even similar in pattern – in any useful sense of the terms 'similar' and 'pattern' – to sentences or discourse that we have heard in the past. (Chomsky, 1972: 12)

To account for this ability to produce and understand novel utterances Chomsky claims that human beings possess an innate capacity to acquire language through the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), a mental mechanism specifically concerned with language. According to Chomsky, the adult utterances a child is exposed to are often too ill-formed and incomplete to serve as a suitable model to imitate. A child learning his/her first language will abstract rules from this rather shapeless language he/she encounters and incorporate these into his/her production/understanding of language, and will do so in a relatively short space of time.

It appears that we recognise a new utterance as a sentence not because it matches some familiar pattern in any simple way, but because it is generated by the grammar that each individual has somehow and in some form internalised. Chomsky asserts that natural languages are governed by complex rules that are not apparent in 'surface structure', the actual utterances of a language. If a child acquiring a language had to rely solely on the snatches of language heard in his/her environment he/she would not be able to abstract, and so acquire, the rules. Evidence that children do not acquire language through imitation of adults can be seen from the 'overgeneralisations' evident in their speech; for example, 'It got broked', 'She putted it on the carpet'. In one experiment McNeill (1966: 61) effectively demonstrated that if a child is not ready he/she will not be able to imitate an adult's utterance:

Child: Nobody don't like me.

Mother: No, say 'Nobody likes me.'

Child: Nobody don't like me.
          Eight repetitions of this exchange]

Mother: No, now listen carefully: say *'Nobody likes me.'*

Child: Oh! Nobody don't likes me.

If anything, an adult will imitate a child's utterance, although few sober adults would ever say 'All-gone milk' or 'I sawed two mouses'.

Chomsky's ideas on language led to important studies of children's acquisition of language in the 1960s. Evidence was provided that a child's language develops through hypothesis-testing, that is, the child is actively involved in acquiring the mother tongue, and not just a passive recipient, as some behaviourists would claim. Through testing out hypotheses the child's language develops, 'by successive approximations passing through several steps that are not yet English' (McNeill, 1966: 61). The aim of first language acquisition studies was to describe these successive approximations or interim grammars.

Research, such as that of Brown (1973) and deVilliers and deVilliers (1973), demonstrates that children follow a natural sequence of development in their acquisition of language. Although the rate of development might vary between children, the order in which language is acquired remains invariant. If we look at just one area that has been extensively studied, that of sentence structure, we can see that by the age of three or three and a half years of age, the child is acquiring complex sentence structure with the use of coordinating conjunctions such as 'but' and 'and' as well as subordinating conjunctions like 'because'. Comparative forms emerge ('this is *bigger';* 'this is *more better*') and we see the beginnings of relative clauses: 'This is one *what* Mummy got'. Over the next year or so the child will acquire many of the irregular forms of verbs and nouns and make fewer overgeneralisations in their speech. However, many overgeneralisations will persist until much later in a child's development. It is not uncommon for eight year olds to say 'I hurted my knee', for instance. Pronouns are largely acquired during this stage, auxiliary verbs such as 'can', 'will' and so on, and the beginnings of passive forms of the verb: 'I got smacked'. The creativity Chomsky mentioned as characteristic of human language is very much in evidence during this period with children producing unique utterances (Pinker, 1994).

Communicative competence

In his writings Chomsky is concerned with discovering the mental reality behind actual behaviour, at arriving at an understanding of a native speaker's *competence*. In Chomsky's view a grammar of a language is a model of the linguistic abilities of a native speaker of that language, which allow him/her to speak/understand that particular language. This is the speaker–hearer's *competence*; the speaker–hearer's

knowledge of her/his language which is distinguished from Chomsky's notion of *performance;* the actual use of language in concrete situations (Chomsky, 1965: 4).

For Chomsky, the actual use of language in concrete situations is rather untidy and not deemed worth of serious study. Others have argued, however, that language is dependent on the social context and that interaction plays an important role in language acquisition. Micheal Halliday (1976) has proposed a 'functional' view of children's language development and contends that:

> Learning language is learning the uses of language and the meaning potential associated with them; the structures, the words and the sounds are the realisation of this meaning potential. Learning language is learning to mean. (Kress, 1976: 8)

Halliday's 'meaning potential' is akin to Hymes' (1972) notion of 'communicative competence', but differs from Hymes' in that Halliday is not interested in 'the artificial concept' of competence, that is, what the speaker–hearer *knows*. His concern is with what the speaker–hearer *does* with language in sociolinguistic or functional terms.

Hymes (1972) and Campbell and Wales (1970) both recognise the limitations of Chomsky's definition of 'competence', and propose the notion of *communicative competence* as encompassing a range of ability broader than just grammatical knowledge. Campbell and Wales (1970), in a discussion of developments in language acquisition theory, define competence as:

> The ability to produce or understand utterances which are not so much grammatical but, more important, appropriate to the context in which they are made. (Campbell and Wales, 1970: 247)

'Competence' then is extended beyond exclusive grammatical knowledge to include contextual or sociolingual competence, knowledge of the rules of language use.

The importance of interaction

Chomsky's claim that the linguistic input children received from adults was 'degenerate' and not worthy of analysis, and that the only interface between input and output was located in the child's mind, has been challenged by those researchers who have examined the interactions children have with their 'caretakers'. Those who have

studied first language acquisition from an 'interactionist' perspective, like Jean Berko Gleason (1977; 2004), emphasise the contribution of external as well as internal factors to language acquisition. She argues that children do not acquire language all by themselves:

> They are not simply miniature grammarians working on a corpus composed of snatches and fragments of adult discourse. (Gleason, 1977: 199)

By examining interactions between children and their mothers (or other 'caretakers') researchers have established the existence of 'motherese', speech that is produced by an adult (or older child) in interaction with a child whose linguistic competence and cognitive development are perceived as limited. Mother's, caretaker or child-directed speech is simple and redundant; it contains many questions, many imperatives, few past tenses, few coordinating or subordinating conjunctions, few disfluencies; and is pitched higher with an exaggerated intonation (Snow, 1995; Snow and Ferguson, 1977).

Motherese varies according to the communicative demands of the situation, and even experienced caretakers cannot produce adequate motherese if the child is not present to cue him/her. Landes (1975) highlights that parents and other caretakers modify their speech in various ways until the child is at least 10 years old. From the research into motherese we find claims that the best input for a child is one step beyond the stage the child is at (Gleitman, Newport and Gleitman, 1984).

In addition to the presence of the LAD (Language Acquisition Device) proposed by Chomsky, Jerome Bruner (1983) suggests that there is also a LASS (Language Acquisition Support System). According to Bruner, adults provide a framework of 'scaffolding' which enables the child to learn. In contexts that are familiar and routinised the adult, one step ahead of the child, cues the child's responses. By providing ritualised dialogue and constraints through questioning and feedback to the child, the adult prepares the cognitive base on which language is acquired. Cazden (1983) also uses the term 'scaffolding' to refer to the adult's role but makes a distinction between vertical and sequential scaffolding. Vertical scaffolding involves the adult extending the child's language by, for instance, asking further questions. Sequential scaffolding occurs in the routinised activities adults and children share, for example during games, bath time, meals, etc. The predictability of the language used in routinised situations provides a framework for language to develop. Cazden also claims that adults

support children through providing language models, often in response to children's utterances. If a child, for instance, says 'She taked my crayon' the adult's response might be: 'She *took* your crayon, did she?' To these two aspects of the adult's role, Cazden adds a third, direct instruction. This is mostly seen in contexts where the rules of social convention apply where the child is expected to repeat a word or phrase, for example, 'Say bye bye'.

Evelyn Hatch (1978a) takes the view that the need to converse precedes the acquisition of specific language features. She writes:

> One learns how to do conversation, one learns how to act verbally, and out of this interaction syntactic structures are developed. (Hatch, 1978b: 404)

There are a number of stages in this process, beginning with attention-getting, either verbally or non-verbally. Once attention has been gained, the next task is to nominate a topic. Hatch (1978b: 407) provides an example of the two stages from the conversation of a five-year-old Taiwanese boy, Paul, with an adult:

Paul: Oh-oh!

A: What?

Paul: This [points to ant]

A: It's an ant

Paul: Ant

Paul: This

A: A pencil

Paul: Pencil

Once a topic has been nominated the conversational partner is constrained by the rules of conversation to make an appropriate response. Conversations are then built up ('vertical structures') which serve as the prototypes for the syntactic structures ('horizontal structures') which develop from them (Scollon, 1976). It would appear though, that these structures evident in the exchange between the adult and child above are not typical of child–child speech. One notable difference between adult–child conversation and child–child discourse is in the use of 'functions' (Ochs Keenan, 1983) by children. According to Ochs Keenan, 'functions' are ways of making a relevant response in conversation

through repeating, modifying or recombining elements of what the other child has said. In her study of two- and three-year-old children she found that the children made great use of sound play, songs and nursery rhymes. For instance, a child might repeat the whole of a previous turn:

Child 1:   You know why?

Child 2:   You know why? [or substitute a part of the other's utterance]

Child 1:   You know why?

Child 2:   You know what?

By the late 1970s we can see that the prevailing model of the language development process can be seen as a combination of *social* and *cognitive* characteristics which recognises, and goes beyond, the Chomskyan perspective on language. In the early stages we can see caretaker and child involved in interactions that provide a framework on which language is built. We now turn our attention briefly to some further social issues.

Deficit or difference?

In the English-speaking world there has been a tradition of negative views towards other languages and dialects, and amongst teachers, a history of prejudice towards working class non-standard speakers of English. In a study of reception teachers and headteachers Hughes and Cousins (1990) found that the vast majority held 'deficit' views of their pupils' language. These teachers made assumptions about the language spoken in the home and felt that children were arriving at school suffering from linguistic deprivation. In the 1970s language deficit views, through the work of Basil Bernstein (1960) and Joan Tough (1977) amongst others, were extremely influential and lent academic weight to language enrichment programmes such Headstart in the United States. It was in the US that language deficit models came under attack from linguists such as Labov (1972), who argued that the language of the black working class children he studied was not deficient but 'different' from that used by their middle class peers. Unlike the work of Bernstein and Tough which did not collect evidence of children's language in the home, research which actually examined language in the homes of children tended to support Labov's views. In a longitudinal study which charted children's

language development in the home and at school, Gordon Wells concluded that:

> There is no justification for continuing to hold the stereotyped belief that there are strongly class-associated differences in the ways in which parents talk with their children. Nor is there justification for forming expectations about children's oral language abilities on entry to school that are based solely on their parent's membership in a certain social class. (Wells, 1986: 140)

Where there was a difference it was not in relation to their experience in oral language, but in literacy practices that did not match those of school. Wells goes on to argue that schools may perpetuate the disadvantage experienced by administering assessment procedures that emphasise literacy skills, rather than speaking and listening. In their study of four year olds at home and at nursery Tizard and Hughes (1984) lend weight to the argument that children receive rich linguistic experiences regardless of their social background. In their research they found that:

> The conversations in the working class homes were just as prolific as those in the middle class homes. There was no question of these children 'not being talked to at home', and few signs of the language deprivation that has so often been described [...] the working class children were clearly growing up in a rich linguistic environment. (Tizard and Hughes, 1984: 8)

Tizard and Hughes also found that children had few encounters with adults in the nursery school and staff had different expectations from the children's mothers. In the United States, Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) intensive study of three communities also found that there was a mismatch between the language of the home and that of school, and that what was valued in the community was not readily valued by teachers. Heath was interested in how children acquire language and literacy as part of their socialisation into the norms and values of their community. Differing ways of using language based on the different world views of social groups meant that continuity in children's socialisation was broken once they entered school.

Talk in the early years

The ability to participate as a speaker and listener is essential to a child's linguistic, social, emotional and cognitive development in

their early years at school. Vygotsky (1962) suggests that talk plays an important part in laying the foundations for a child's intellectual ability in later life. The practice of speaking enables a child to become an active learner and to be able to explore his/her experiences and relationships. Talking is also a means by which learning across the curriculum can be developed into understanding. The introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998) and the emphasis on the raising of standards in literacy meant that the role of speaking and listening became marginalised. There was little official emphasis on the value of talk in the classroom until more recent changes have once again placed talk at the heart of the literacy curriculum (DfES 2006; DfES 2007). The teacher's role in finding ways of planning for and valuing talk is essential if children are to grow confidently as learners and thinkers.

The National Oracy Project (Norman, 1990; 1992) outlined three important aspects of speaking and listening:

1   social – how we use language to interact with others
2   communicative – how we transfer meaning
3   cognitive – how we learn through talk.

Children need to have opportunities to talk in a variety of settings in order to support their language developments in these three dimensions. These opportunities for talk need to be planned for and resourced by schools and nurseries and the adult's role in valuing talk is essential if it is not to be sidelined (Anning and Edwards,1999).

Role of the adult

If we are to enable young children to develop as speakers and listeners we need to consider our role in the process and how we act as speakers and listeners ourselves. We model the forms and functions of language in our dealings with children, their parents and other adults. If we expect children to listen to others with respect we need to model this behaviour also. This means listening to what children have to say and responding to what interests them, without interrupting or hurrying them on. As early years practitioners we need to be wary of asking too many questions and ensure we allow children time to process information and respond. An important aspect of the adult's role is to 'scaffold' what children offer, to extend and expand on their utterances. When we question children we need to include 'open' questions, which invite children to think (for example 'What

do you think about …?'; 'How do you feel about …?'), in addition to 'closed' questions which enable us to check children's knowledge and understanding (for example 'Which of these is blue?').

Good early years practice encompasses the idea of adults being participants, not just supervisors, in activities, for instance, taking on a role, in the cafe or home corner. In this way we can provide children with appropriate vocabulary in the different contexts in which they talk and help them to develop their metalinguistic awareness through talking about talk and drawing their attention to how we use language.

We need to plan speaking and listening activities to make the most of the opportunities for meaningful talk, and we need to monitor and assess the talk that takes place. In assessing children's speaking and listening, the purposes, contexts and audiences for talk have to be considered. Because talk is transient (unless we record it) it is useful to keep notes of children's talk based on our observations. For this purpose, a notebook or talk diary, in which observations are recorded, should be close at hand. In addition, occasional planned observations using a format (DfES, 2003) or a 'talk audit' (Godwin and Perkins, 1998) which specifies the purpose, context and audience, will supplement incidental observations. The following section suggests ways in which talk can be valued.

Story as a focus for talk

Interactive storytelling plays an important part in helping children to develop their expressive and receptive language in the early years. Storybooks, 'story sacks' and props provide essential visual support for children who are learning English as an additional language or who have additional needs. They also provide opportunities for children to hear, process, and practise models of language in a non-threatening way. Children learn to discuss, retell, describe and give opinions on events and characters in their favourite stories. Children also learn to use the language structures in well-known stories as a foundation for their own use of language.

Story sacks

'Story sacks' contain a storybook with objects and props for retelling the story. These can be used by adults to encourage children's language development around the story. The sacks can also contain a game around the theme of the story and a non-fiction book connected to the story. For example, a story sack based on Eric Carle's

book *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* might contain, in addition to the book itself:

- a toy caterpillar
- a selection of plastic fruit that the caterpillar eats
- a big green leaf with holes in it
- a butterfly
- food from the story (scanned and laminated so children can handle them)
- a board game about the foods the caterpillar eats
- a book about caterpillars and butterflies.

Language/story packs

Cut out, laminated pictures from well-known stories can be used to put on a story board or white board in order to tell the story. Children are invited to use these props to retell the story or make comments on characters. For example, using the book *Rosie's Walk* (Hutchins, 1968) children can make Rosie the hen walk across the yard, around the pond, over the haystack, past the mill, through the fence and under the beehives, talking through each step as they go. Using animals from the book *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do You See?* (Martin, 1983) figures of all the animals can be put on the board and the children ask each animal 'What do you see?' and decide which animal comes next in the book.

Show and tell/news time

Children are asked to talk about something they have brought to show the rest of their class or group, or something to describe something that has happened to them. The other children are invited to ask questions and make comments. Spoken news can be recorded in a 'news book' as a way of valuing the child's talk. News and comments can also be recorded into a tape recorder and played back. As a variation on this theme, a 'talking television' can be made from a box large enough to fit over a child's head. When it is 'switched on', the person on television can tell the news.

Songs and rhymes

Songs and rhymes regularly sung and spoken can encourage children's language development and their understanding of rhythm and rhyme. This is a particularly useful activity when accompanied

by actions as these give extra visual support to those children whose first language is not English or who have additional needs. Songs and rhymes can be used with props such as pictures and puppets to encourage understanding and discussion. For instance, for 'Little Mousie Brown' ('Up the tall white candlestick crept Little Mousie Brown') a finger puppet of Mousie can be made to go up the candlestick. 'Song boxes' or 'song bags' with objects or pictures relating to songs or rhymes can also be used as visual prompts to help children choose which song/rhyme they want to sing. For example, a spider for the 'Incy Wincy Spider' rhyme or a potato for the 'One Potato, Two Potato' rhyme.

Games and play

Turn-taking games encourage listening, copying, vocabulary-building, social interaction, and confidence-building. These games need adult support so that the language can be modelled and children have opportunities to practise following verbal and non-verbal cues. For example, a 'feely bag' with objects inside can be passed around a small group of children. Each child takes a turn to take something out of the bag. Depending on the level of language, the object can simply be named or commented upon. Similarly, bags of objects around a theme can be useful for building vocabulary and for stimulating talk. For example a 'baby bag' could contain a baby's bottle, nappy, dummy, teddy, rattle and so on. The objects can be handled, named and discussed at each child's level of language development.

Imaginative play with 'small world' toys, construction equipment and natural materials such as sand and water, can stimulate a great deal of talk and interaction between children. This play is particularly useful when supported by an adult who can provide a model of language for the children. For example, using wild animals in a jungle setting with logs, trees and sand, talk can centre on finding the young animals and matching them to their parents, on discussing which is the biggest or smallest animal, what animals like to eat, and so on. Adults can also simply provide a running commentary on what the child is doing for example, 'You're hiding the elephant in the sand' and allowing the child time to respond.

Magic microphone

Children sit in a circle and an object such as a stone or a microphone is passed around. The person who has the microphone or object can

speak; the others must listen without interrupting. The adult might provide the topic for discussion or the children might talk about things that have happened to them.

Shared story writing/telling

Using props such as puppets or small world figures, children can contribute to telling a story. This is recorded in their words by an adult and made into a book which can be kept in the book corner. Children can also tell a story by speaking into a tape recorder. At the end of the story it is played back and children are invited to make comments. Tapes of stories told by other adults, including other languages if the children are bilingual, can be made and used in the classroom.

Making books

Books can be made using digital photographs taken of the children engaged in various activities. A collection of these books in the book corner are always very popular with children and stimulate a lot of talk. These books are especially useful for children who have difficulties with speech and language because single words or phrases can be modelled and elicited in the books, for example, 'Qasim eating', Shazia running', 'Ryan painting'. Books can also be made using the children's own drawing and mark-making. For example, a book based upon a simple version of a favourite story, such as Rod Campbell's *My Presents* (1988), where the children have to lift a flap to see the present drawn by them underneath. Books made around the children's own heritage experiences such as Eid, a new baby or a trip to the post office can stimulate lots of talk in the classroom and nursery.

Speaker's chair

Like the 'author's chair' or 'storyteller's chair' in many classrooms, the speaker's chair allows a child to address the rest of the group about some work, a story, an opinion, news, etc. This can provide an opportunity for children to develop confidence about speaking in a group. The less vocal child is able simply to present their work and listen to others commenting. Comments can be recorded by an adult, in the child's words, and displayed on a 'talk board' or alongside the piece of work.

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Hotseating
Older children can take turns to adopt the role of a character from a book, song or rhyme and face questioning from their classmates. For example, playing Humpty Dumpty who is questioned or interviewed about his accident with questions such as 'How did you feel?', 'What happened after you fell off the wall?' and so on.

Role play
Imaginative settings like a dark cave or realistic settings such as a cafe or post office provide a stimulus for a lot of child–child talk. Children learn to re-enact situations in which they have seen adults, and add their own contributions. Use of pairs of telephones can encourage conversations between children. Adult models of language within the role play area can be important at the outset for a short time. For instance, a doctor's surgery might include talk about appointments, times, illnesses, medicine, etc. A 'talk corner' with a telephone box, a sofa with a table containing stimuli and so on serves a similar function.

Props for talk
Objects like hats, jewellery, a cloak, can stimulate imaginative talk as children take on different roles. Adults can support children's developing language skills by commenting upon the props; for example, 'My hat's got a feather', Holly's shoes are shiny'. Likewise, a 'treasure box' of interesting objects like shells, small teddies, keys, Russian dolls, feathers, and so on can engage children who often find it difficult to take part in shared attention activities by providing opportunities for talk about the 'treasure' objects. Puppets also provide a lot of stimulation for talk for even very shy children who are often prepared to talk to or through a puppet.

Other people speaking
Visitors and parents/carers can be invited in to speak to the children or tell them stories. The use of other voices, dialects and languages can enrich the language environment in the early years setting.

Using the outdoors
The importance and impact of outdoor play and experiences outside of the early years setting upon children's development cannot be

underestimated. These experiences are particularly important for the development of their social interaction skills and their understanding of their place in the world. Outdoor play offers opportunities to practise the vocabulary of movement and position. It also encourages children to develop the language of negotiation and turn-taking in their interaction with other children. Outdoors children have opportunities to build upon their social and communication skills in a very practical way. Taking part in activities, such as ring games, throwing and catching or rolling a ball, waiting for their turn to climb up the ladder, contributes greatly to their active learning of language. Outside trips to see other environments, such as the seaside, a farm, an art gallery, offer wonderful opportunities for extending children's vocabulary and to make connections between new information and their own experiences.

Listening centre

Taped stories and rhymes can be used in a listening centre where several children can listen in at the same time. The listening centre area also needs to have visual props such as the storybook to accompany the tape, puppets or small world figures to bring alive the story being listened to.

Conclusion

The activities listed above cover a range of purposes, contexts and audiences for children's talk. In planning these we need to consider these three aspects and what opportunities there might be to observe and record children's speaking and listening. We cannot assume that because children like talking and appear to us to be competent speakers that this aspect of their education can be left to develop without support. Speaking and listening skills underpin children's ability to understand the whole curriculum. As Browne suggests:

> Perhaps the most important reason for developing children's oral language is that all learning depends on the ability to question, reason, formulate ideas, pose hypotheses and exchange ideas with others. These are not just oral language skills, they are thinking skills. (2001: 7)

As early years educators we need to ensure that all children have opportunities to develop this essential tool for learning.

Suggestions for further reading 📖

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