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Supporting Children's Oral Language Development in the Preschool Classroom

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Abstract Supporting children's oral language development during the preschool years is critical for later reading success. Research shows that preschool teachers may be missing opportunities to engage children in the kinds of conversations that foster the development of rich oral language skills. Teachers hoping to support these skills can provide children with purposeful conversations that include sophisticated vocabulary, support children's interests, use open-ended questions, and employ cognitively challenging topics. In a typical preschool classroom, children spend a large portion of the day working in centers and eating meals. These non-teacher directed activities provide teachers with the opportunity to engage children in high quality, multi-turn conversational interactions. This article provides strategies and examples for preschool teachers to better support the oral language development of preschool children during these non-teacher directed settings.

Keywords Preschool · Oral language development · Conversations · Vocabulary · Open-ended questions

Mrs. Smith's preschool classroom is a bustling center of activity and energy as four-year olds travel to various centers and engage in self-selected activities. Mrs. Smith notices that Timmy has chosen to draw a picture and seems to be very involved in the process. "What are you drawing, Timmy?" she asks as she glances at the picture of squiggles and shapes. "A caterpillar eating an apple," he responds. Mrs. Smith smiles thinking about the book that she read to the class earlier that day. "Why is the caterpillar eating the apple?" Timmy looks up at her and says "Because he is very hungry." Mrs. Smith continues the conversation. "Why do you think he is so hungry?" Timmy thinks for a moment. "He has to grow wings." "That is right Timmy. He will grow wings after he leaves his cocoon. What do you think he will look like when he leaves his cocoon?" The conversation continues as Mrs. Smith asks open-ended questions about Timmy's chosen activity allowing him to respond to her questions.

What is happening between Mrs. Smith and Timmy is an example of a teacher–child conversation in which the teacher uses sophisticated vocabulary, responds to the child's interests, and extends the conversation with open-ended and cognitively challenging questions. Research provides evidence that such experiences help children to develop the prerequisite oral language skills that children need to be successful readers in years to come (Dickinson and Porche 2011). In particular, preschool oral language skills such as vocabulary and syntactical knowledge play an important role in reading comprehension (Dickinson and Porche 2011; Kendeou et al. 2009). Yet research also shows that preschool teachers often do not naturally engage children in high quality conversational interactions that build children's language skills (Cabell et al. 2015; Winton and Buysse 2005).

With some training, teachers can improve their conversations with children (Cabell et al. 2015; Piasta et al. 2012). Teachers have many opportunities throughout the preschool day to engage children in high quality, multi-turn conversations. Although there are many teacher-directed settings, in which the teacher is choosing and leading the activity, that allow for such conversations (e.g. shared book reading, circle time) non-teacher directed settings may offer a greater opportunity for preschool teachers to engage children in one-on-one or small group conversations (Gest

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et al. 2006). Non-teacher directed settings are those in which children are choosing and leading their activities. Some of these settings include time spent in various play centers and meal time. In these settings, teachers can help develop oral language skills through high quality talk and everyday conversations. The conversations during non-teacher directed settings can focus on building on children's interests; at the same time, teachers can integrate sophisticated vocabulary, ask open-ended questions, and explore cognitively challenging topics (Gest et al. 2006). In this article, we will discuss the research that supports the importance of developing oral language during the preschool years. We will also provide preschool teachers with strategies to increase high-quality conversations during non-teacher directed activities, specifically during centers and meal times. Since oral language development is important regardless of the language spoken, the strategies that are offered in this article are broadly applicable to teachers and children speaking languages other than English. Moreover, they generally require very few material resources to accomplish.

Impact of Oral Language on Reading

Developing oral language skills during the preschool years is critically important for early literacy acquisition (Kendeou et al. 2009; NICHD ECCRN 2005; Storch and Whitehurst 2002). Oral language encompasses various skill sets including vocabulary (receptive and expressive), syntactic knowledge, and narrative discourse processes (comprehension and storytelling) and has an effect on reading achievement during both the early stage of learning to decode words and the later stages of reading when the focus is on comprehension (NICHD Early Childhood Care Research Network 2005; Storch and Whitehurst 2002).

A child's linguistic environment can influence the development of oral language (Huttenlocher et al. 2002). Young children living in poverty are often exposed to a lower quantity and quality language learning environment from birth, creating a large gap between the language skills of these children and their more economically advantaged peer groups (Hart and Risley 1995). This gap has been estimated at a difference of 32 million words heard by age four (Hart and Risley 1995). Differences in early care and preschool can lead to high degrees of variability in early literacy skills. The gaps in literacy become more defined as children finish preschool and engage in formal reading instruction in kindergarten and first grade (Cabell et al. 2013; Chatterji 2006).

Yet, exposure to high quality language-learning environments during preschool can narrow this gap. Preschool teachers' use of sophisticated vocabulary and engagement of children in intellectually challenging conversations predict children's literacy skills through the fourth grade (Dickinson and McCabe 2001; Dickinson and Porche 2011).

Children living in high poverty homes can show significant increases in the size of their vocabulary knowledge when given the appropriate opportunities to learn (Wasik et al. 2006). When teachers participate in and promote active listening, provide feedback to children's language, and model rich language, children are provided with opportunities to engage in conversation and increase their vocabulary knowledge. Children tend to engage in conversations about the activities in which they've participated. When teachers use these strategies, it encourages children to elaborate on their ideas about, feelings toward, and reactions to what they have experienced (Wasik et al. 2006; Wasik and Iannone-Campbell 2012).

Language acquisition is also fostered when teachers are responsive to the child's interests and help to extend the conversations (Cabell et al. 2015; Piasta et al. 2012; Girolametto et al. 2003). Knowing the positive effects that oral language in the preschool classroom exerts on later reading outcomes makes it particularly important for teachers to find opportunities throughout the school day to engage preschool children in conversations.

Opportunities for Preschool Oral Language Development

Opportunities to engage children in conversation are abundant in a typical school day. A classroom full of 4- and 5-year-old children can be very busy, and non-teacher directed activities are ideal times for teachers to purposefully develop children's language skills. Children spend about 30 % of the day in free choice center activities and 7–14 % in meal times (Chien et al. 2010; Winton and Buysse 2005). When teachers are engaging with children, the interactions must be meaningful and purposefully support oral language development.

Unfortunately, research shows that teachers miss opportunities to support language development during these less structured times; they engage children in conversations less frequently during non-teacher directed activities than during teacher-directed activities (Dickinson and Porche 2011). Moreover, when teachers are interacting with the children during non-teacher directed times, such as centers and meal times, they tend to ask close-ended questions that elicit one word responses (Early et al. 2010). Children would benefit from multi-turn conversations during centers and meal times that include more scaffolding from the adult allowing the child to expand his or her knowledge and thoughts, including the use of sophisticated

vocabulary by the teacher (Early et al. 2010; Girolametto et al. 2003).

Centers

Preschool children regularly spend time at various centers where they will work independently or in small groups on activities that are child-directed and often appeal to their individual interests. Centers time is a great opportunity for teachers to interact with the children and foster oral language. Unfortunately, research shows that during centers, teachers account for 80 % of the talk that occurs and this talk is mostly centered on teachers' own topics (Dickinson et al. 2013). "Conversations" in this setting often involve the teacher commenting on a child's actions with very little response from the child. Teachers also tend to visit several centers in a short period of time, providing very little chance for individual conversations with children.

Children are more likely to engage in conversation when they are in smaller groups or one-on-one (Massey 2004). Teachers can take advantage of this time to discuss the children's activities, asking questions about and eliciting explanations for their drawings, creations, or play during this time. Because this expands on the child's interests, teachers can use this time to engage the child in multi-turn, cognitively challenging conversations based on their interests within a meaningful contexts.

Meal Time

Many preschool meal times are a family-style event allowing for more conversation to flow. Meal time is one of the few times during the day that talk tends to focus on children's interests and is not teacher-directed (Cote 2001; Dickinson et al. 2013). There is more opportunity for children to talk about their own topics and the teacher can engage in a more equally sided conversation, taking turns with the child.

Meal time is also an opportunity for children to engage in cognitively challenging discussions. Narrative conversations can be encouraged by asking children about personal experiences. The conversation tends to include decontextualized talk that extends beyond the "here and now" and includes talk about the past and the future (Massey 2004).

Children have more conversations during meal time when a stationary teacher is present. When teachers are stationary during meal time, instead of circulating around, children engage in conversations that include significantly more decontextualized talk (Cote 2001). Having a teacher as a conversational partner during meal time supports more decontextualized talk, which is related to a larger vocabulary (Cote 2001).

Strategies to Support Oral Language Development

Let us revisit Mrs. Smith's preschool classroom where children are busy working at centers after a class read aloud of *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows that Type* by Doreen Cronin. *Suzy and Jeff are at a station that is set up with a miniature farm, writing materials, and drawing materials. The children are moving the animals around and making animal noises. As Mrs. Smith walks by she sees that Suzy is holding a cow figurine saying things like "We want blankets." Jeff is taking on the part of the farmer and saying "No way, you don't need blankets because you are just a cow." Mrs. Smith stops by the station and asks Suzy why she thinks the cows would want blankets. Suzy thinks for a minute and says "Because the cows are cold." Mrs. Smith interjects, "I bet it is cold in the barn. Jeff, how does the farmer feel about the cows wanting blankets?" Jeff immediately replies, "He is mad and doesn't think they need blankets." Mrs. Smith says, "You are right Jeff, the farmer is really mad. The farmer is furious! Do either of you remember what furious means?" The children both shake their heads no so Mrs. Smith gives them a definition of the word furious once again, "Furious is a word we use to describe when someone is really, really mad." Suzy immediately says, "I remember now. It is like when my mom gets really mad when I am not nice to my little brother, she is furious." Mrs. Smith smiles. "That is a good example, Suzy. So in the story, Farmer Brown was furious at the cows for wanting blankets."*

Using Sophisticated Vocabulary

Because children are sensitive to language input that is directed at them and around them, it is important for teachers to increase the exposure of vocabulary in the classroom. In the preschool classroom children spend a great deal of time interacting with their peers in playful contexts that are meaningful and naturalistic to them; this is an opportunity for teachers to introduce and use *sophisticated vocabulary*. Sophisticated vocabulary includes words that may not be readily familiar to children but ones they will see and hear again and again. Children at this age have already learned many words for common and everyday items and activities. They have reached a point where they are ready to learn more diverse and sophisticated words (Rowe 2012). There is no universal answer to the question of which words to teach. A teacher knows his or her students and can choose what is appropriate for that particular classroom. In the vignette above, Mrs. Smith uses the word *furious* during a class read aloud with the children and revisits the word while the children are at their centers engaging in play. The word furious was probably

Table 1 Guidelines for best practices during centers and meal times

Guidelines	Descriptions
Use decontextualized talk	During meal times ask about future plans or past weekend events
Be stationary	Having a teacher as part of the conversation increases the amount of decontextualized talk
Take turns in conversations	Model conversations by asking questions and listening, encouraging turn taking, and providing feedback
Build on child's interests	During centers time ask about specific drawings, writings, or activities. During meal time begin a conversation about a known interest of a child
Use sophisticated vocabulary	During conversations that are child-centered offer richer words, synonyms, and antonyms based on the child's interests
Choose useful words	Extend on words from teacher-directed activities that give child-friendly definitions and are easy to understand
Build the web of knowledge	Offer familiar words in various contexts, build on known words or concepts, and provide descriptions
Repeat words	Use words from teacher-directed activities in a variety of context throughout the day and during child-directed activities
Ask open-ended questions	Questions that require more than a simple yes or no response are a great way to begin asking open-ended questions. Think of questions starting with words like how, why, what do you think or feel, etc.
Engage in cognitively challenging topics	Extend on a child's interest or previous teacher-directed activity by asking questions that promote thinking and problem solving

not familiar to all students, but is a common word that they will most likely encounter again and again. Mrs. Smith's choice to focus on this word beyond the class read aloud will increase the children's exposure to the word.

Children need to have a clear understanding of new words so it is important for the teacher to provide children with "child friendly" definitions (Beck et al. 2013). A child-friendly definition is one that is easy to explain and easy for the children to understand. The definition that Mrs. Smith gives for "furious" in the vignette is a good example of a child-friendly definition. It is easy to explain by the teacher—really mad. It is also a concept that the children are able to easily understand. Mrs. Smith had already introduced the word earlier during the class read aloud of the story and is reinforcing it with the same definition in her individual conversation with the children.

The breadth and depth of children's word knowledge impacts their vocabulary growth. Breadth refers to the number of words children know and depth refers to the way in which children know these words. The brain organizes words into a connected web of knowledge; to make this a tight web with less information sliding through depends on how many words and how well the child knows them. Teachers can help students form tighter webs of knowledge through multiple exposure to words in different contexts. A teacher can provide excellent opportunities for word knowledge growth by choosing the right words, repeating the word many times, and building off child talk. In the vignette with Suzy and Jeff, Mrs. Smith chose to focus on the word *furious* during the conversation. Suzy and Jeff were engaged in recreating a scene from the story and Mrs. Smith began asking questions about the story, reusing the word *furious*. Mrs. Smith provided a child-friendly definition and connected it to the situation in the story they read earlier in the day. Suzy added her own example from personal experience

about the word. Mrs. Smith has built off the children's interest and conversation to repeat a previously learned word. As the children continue to play at the center, Mrs. Smith could ask the children to describe what a person who is furious looks like or what kind of face they make. She could then introduce a synonym for the word furious, such as angry. By doing this, Mrs. Smith is helping the children build a tight web of knowledge connecting the new word to a previous word they know well.

The exposure to sophisticated vocabulary and conversational supports during adult-child conversations help foster a child's vocabulary (Weizman and Snow 2001). Teachers can provide children with exposure to vocabulary that is supported throughout the day in conversations and during various activities. Centers and meal times are an opportunity to support children's interests using sophisticated vocabulary and teaching new words in more naturalistic situations. Some helpful ideas to keep in mind are extending on words that are useful, these are words that the child will encounter again, words that are related to other words to help build a web of knowledge, and words that would be heard in other contexts. A word is child-friendly when it is not too difficult to give a child-friendly definition, it is a concept that is understandable, and it is interesting. See Table 1 for guidelines for using sophisticated vocabulary in conversations with preschool children and Table 2 for book suggestions to introduce vocabulary words.

Supporting Children's Interest

Children learn new vocabulary through purposeful interactions based on topics and activities that interest them (Neuman 2013). Words should be presented frequently in meaningful contexts with clear information in order for

Table 2 Children's books that provide rich language opportunities

Sophisticated vocabulary	Cognitively challenging	Children's interests
Gregory the Terrible Eater by Mitchell Sharmat (terrible, fussy, evening)	*The Way I Act* by Steve Metzger (bravery and compassion)	*Mr. Brown Can Moo, Can You* by Dr. Seuss (animals and animal sounds)
Moonbear's Shadow by Frank Asch (shadow, catch, cliff)	*Stand Tall Molly Lou Melon* by Patty Lovell (bullying, being unique)	*I Like Bugs* by Margaret Wise Brown (rhyming words and insects)
Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak (mischief, awful, wild)	*The Very Hungry Caterpillar* By Eric Carle (Life cycle of a butterfly)	*The Snowy Day The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats (snow and outdoor play)
The Wolf's Chicken Stew by Keiko Kasza (scrumptious, search, stew, prey)	*If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Laura Numeroff (consequences)	*Ms. Bindergarten Gets Ready for Kindergarten* by Joseph Slate (starting school and surprises)
Click, Clack, Moo: Cows that Type by Doreen Cronin (emergency, demand, furious)	*The Rainbow Fish* by Marcus Pfister (friendship and sharing)	*I Stink!* By Kate and Jim McMullen (trucks and funny pictures)

children to really learn new words. Discussion can build on the child's interests by scaffolding the conversation. When parents and caregivers talk about the child's focus of attention they offer vocabulary and information that deepens and widens the child's understanding (Harris et al. 2013).

Children should have some control in the topic of conversation. The teacher can interject with vocabulary, restating the statement or idea, and extending the conversation. However, when the teacher's input in the conversation constrains behavior, or takes control, and dominates turn-taking then the child will use less complex language. When the child is able to share in turn-taking and has some control of the conversation there is more talk from the child involving increased lexical diversity and complexity (Piasta et al. 2012; Girolametto et al. 2000, 2003; Massey 2004). In the vignette with Suzy and Jeff, Mrs. Smith validates Jeff's reply about the farmer being mad. She then extends on this by using the word *furious*. She encouraging turn taking by directing questions to both children and when Suzy gives a personal example about the word, Mrs. Smith acknowledges the example.

Girolametto et al. (2000) found that when teachers invited preschool students in one-to-one conversations during individual activities the conversations included more turn taking and less control by the adult. The children talked more, used different words, and had longer and more complex utterances. The children may have been encouraged to talk more because of the setting and conversation that extended their own interests (Girolametto et al. 2000, 2003).

Repetition of words in various contexts is important for vocabulary development. A great opportunity for teachers to engage in this repetition of words is during conversations that build on the child's interests. A child's web of knowledge is already partially constructed when he or she is engaging in conversations regarding a topic of interest. During this time a teacher can build on this interest and help the child tighten his or her web of knowledge. Mrs. Smith builds on the web of knowledge for the students in both vignettes. In the opening

vignette, Mrs. Smith is supporting Timmy's interests by asking questions about the drawing he chose to draw in a self-selected activity. She took turns in the conversation and let his interest guide the talk. Mrs. Smith used sophisticated vocabulary building on Timmy's interest and did not try to take control of the conversation, allowing Timmy to think about the caterpillar being hungry and having to change into a butterfly. In the second vignette, Mrs. Smith builds on the activity chosen by Suzy and Jeff using their interests and personal experience as a way to build on their understanding of the word *furious*.

Open-Ended Questions and Cognitively Challenging Topics

Teachers can use open-ended questions during conversations. Open-ended questioning can extend discussions and allow teachers to support vocabulary and encourage peer conversations (Wasik et al. 2006). These questions generally do not have a right or wrong answer so children can share their ideas and opinions freely without worrying if they are right or wrong. These questions also require children to use more than one word in their responses.

Cognitively challenging conversations engage children to participate in conversations that include explanations, narratives, and play that involves recreating events, analyzing experiences, and sharing opinions and ideas (Massey 2004). Teachers spend a great deal of time facilitating play, but the conversations that occur between the teacher and child during this play time are not always rich with cognitively challenging ideas. Engaging children in cognitively challenging conversations allows them to use decontextualized language and explore new ideas.

In the short conversation between Mrs. Smith and Timmy, she was able to accomplish asking open-ended questions and engage Timmy in cognitively challenging topics. Her use of questions that begin with "what do you think" and "why do you think" are great ways to begin

such a discussion. These types of questions allowed Timmy to think more deeply about caterpillars and butterflies while staying in his range of interests. She also used words like cocoon to reinforce the ideas that he was forming and providing richer words for his description.

In the second vignette, Mrs. Smith again asks the children open-ended questions. Her questions encourage the children to think more deeply about the story. Some of the questions include "why do you think" and "how does the farmer feel" eliciting thought provoking responses building on the children's chosen activity.

Conclusion

The development of oral language skills is critical for preschool children and the quality of language input is important. Oral language skills include vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, and narrative discourse processes that have an effect on reading achievement during early stages of decoding and later stages when the focus is on comprehension (NICHD ECCRN 2005; Storch and Whitehurst 2002). We know from research (Cabell et al. 2015; Winton and Buysse 2005) that preschool teachers often neglect to engage children in high quality conversations that effectively build their language skills. However, teachers are fortunate to have the opportunity during the school day to engage students in conversations that will help foster their language skills, specifically during non-teacher directed settings. Conversations during non-teacher directed settings, such as centers and meal time, can focus on the interests of the children, while using sophisticated vocabulary, exploring cognitively challenging topics, and using open-ended questions (Gest et al. 2006). Mrs. Smith is on her way to helping support the literacy success of the children in her classroom by incorporating all of these strategies into her conversations with them.

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Ethical standard This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent There was no data collected or study done for this paper that requires informed consent.

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