

Enhancing Children's Language Development in Preschool Classrooms

Using Literacy to Target Verbal Language Goals

Reading the same book each day for a week provides children the chance to become truly familiar with a story because of the multiple readings and extended learning opportunities. Children who might be absent, distracted during story time, or have language learning difficulties are more likely to grasp story lines and key concepts enabling them to be active participants during story time. As children become familiar with stories, they learn and practice important language skills. These include being able to predict, understand causal and temporal sequences (i.e., learn story elements), retell stories, recall details, use vocabulary words in various contexts, answer more complex questions about stories, and learn new dialogue or social scripts.

Sample Week: Add different dimensions to expand the story experience and learning each day.

Day 1: Read the book. Introduce parts of book (author, title, illustrator); ask children to guess what the book might be about based on title and cover illustrations; introduce key concepts and vocabulary; read the book. Plan a hands-on art experience reinforcing basic book theme following story reading.

Day 2: Read the book with props. Ask children if they remember what the book was about. Restate title, author and illustrator. Review key concepts and vocabulary before and during book reading. Support the characters' roles and/or the sequence of events in the story in the story through the use of props (puppets, actual objects, flannel story board). Make story props available for children to reenact during free choice play or add props in drama area to extend a theme from the story.

Day 3: Read the book with children predicting simple events. Minimal support should be necessary in order for children to understand story; instead, encourage children to help tell story with simple probing questions or by using the cloze strategy. That is, when reading a predictable, familiar text, teachers provide first words in a recurring story line and encourage children to "fill in the blank" or respond to complete the line in the story. From *The Three Little Pigs*, a teacher reads and cues children with "and the Big Bad Wolf said 'I'll huff and I'll puff.....'" or "but the Little Pig said, 'Not'". Plan hands-on, extension activities following story reading time (e.g., a science experiment, written literacy activity, craft/art project).

Day 4: Children take turns reading book. Allow several children an opportunity to be "teacher" and read the story to their classmates and teacher. Minimally support children in their efforts; this should be a very fun time being "teacher." Encourage fellow classmates to help facilitate at story time.

Day 5: Children reenact book, making up own version of the story. Add movement to the story. Assign roles and provide props to make a "play" of the story.



Best Type of Book:

- Strong story plot
- Simple text
- Novel concepts
- Recurring lines
- Innovative presentation
- Imaginative illustrations
- Classic fables and stories

Wilcox, M.J., Murphy, K.M., Bacon, C.K., and Thomas, S. (2001). Improving language teaching practices in preschool classrooms. Infant Child Research Programs, Arizona State University, Tempe Arizona. <http://icrp.asu.edu>

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Encouraging Complex Verbal Reasoning

Teachers should provide children with frequent, hands-on opportunities to answer questions by using the scientific method. The scientific method teaches children first to make a guess or predict what might happen based on what they do know, then to perform an experiment following an ordered set of steps, and, finally, to talk about what happened and how it relates to the world they know. The most successful learning opportunities are related to a current class topic in which children have already acquired some basic concepts.



Goal: Practice complex verbal reasoning

- Children provide explanations, “How does that work?” “What is happening?”
- Children make predictions, “What do you think will happen?”
- Children make interpretations and judgments, “What do you think of this?” “Why did it happen?”
- Children relate and compare experiences with remote events to increase understanding, (e.g., “That’s like I saw during the storm,” “My mommy sometimes uses this when she cleans our house.”)

When: At least one time per week either in a small group or as a choice during free play

How: Through facilitating discussions during science experiments and hands-on demonstrations

Strategies:

- Ask open-ended questions
- Comment on problems and problem solving opportunities
- Describe actions as performed
- Add written language and numeracy to activity to more easily make comparisons
- Tie experience to remote events and experiences



Charting is helpful to track individual children’s predictions, outcomes, and responses. Charts provide children a visual reference to compare results, teach the significance of print, and encourage pre-reading skills when icons are used. An experiment as simple as children predicting which of three types of apples they think they will like best, tasting the three types of apples, and comparing the charted responses can be very fun and successful. The typical language children use during this type of experience is not only more complex, but significantly lengthened in average number of sentences. A teacher’s job as a language facilitator is not to do all the questioning or directing, but to encourage discussions and sharing of ideas.

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Increase The Use Of Decontextualized Language

The dramatic play area is the best center in the classroom for children to practice newly acquired language skills as well as further develop children's abilities to talk about remote events. The key to creating a dramatic play area that continually appeals to a wide range of children is very simple; the center needs to receive a "make-over" on a regular basis, becoming a different "place" with new props. Most dramatic play areas center around a familiar housekeeping theme. With minimal support, most children are able to easily assume pretend roles, use appropriate dialogue, and successfully reenact life routines (i.e., the children know how to pretend to be the mother or the sister). However, if a dramatic play area always retains a housekeeping theme, the dialogues and play routines become fairly predictable and fewer children find it appealing.



Goal: Increase the use of decontextualized language

- Children talk about objects/events beyond here and now
- Children experience extended conversations
- Children learn perspective-taking through basic social scripts for different individuals in various settings

When: In the dramatic area during free choice play

How: Teacher becomes the ultimate playmate and adopts a role during play

Strategies:

- Create interesting settings in the drama area with corresponding props and clothing.
- Develop and use scripted dialogue to model appropriate language forms and social interaction for selected scenarios.
- Model stories that provide rich detail for children so they can learn more about typical experiences in this dramatic scenario.
- Introduce vocabulary words and concepts related to play theme.
- Make ties between immediate experience and past events.
- Facilitate dialogue among *several* children, possibly indirectly assigning pretend roles for children joining ongoing play.
- Praise and comment children's language use.

Teachers can retain the magic and appeal with a regular infusion of new props, costumes, and furniture arrangements. Children find the novelty inviting and their curiosity will lead them to visit the center. Although children should initially be able to guess what "place" the dramatic play area resembles by considering the props, signs, and arrangement, their limited world experience and knowledge may not be sufficient to know how to use the props or what dialogue people might use in this setting. A teacher's responsibility extends beyond designing a fun play area. By assuming a pretend role in this setting and modeling the appropriate language through active dialogue, a teacher indirectly facilitates the correct use of the props, expands children's knowledge about this real world place, models appropriate social dialogue, and introduces new vocabulary and language forms. Teachers need to *become* the nurse in the doctor's office, the customer in the beauty shop, the owner of the flower shop, the kindergarten in the classroom, or the pet's caretaker in the veterinarian's office. There are countless possible scenarios that are appropriate for a dramatic play area. Teachers should base selections on children's interests, seasonal themes, field trips or classroom visitor experiences.

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Developing Personal Narrative Skills

Teachers and other adults use mealtimes to “socialize” and “catch up” on the children’s news of the day. During children’s early skill development, adults introduce narrative skills through modeling or telling a simple, personal narrative about a special event that occurred to them during the school day (or during a previous day). Good, clear models are essential in order to introduce children to the basic story elements and terms that help to provide structure and temporal sequence (e.g., “first,” “next,” “last”) in stories.

Adults then ask children to tell them about events during the day. The adults may have witnessed the event, but did not participate along with the child. This will provide the adults with some context in which to guide and support a child’s story attempts. For better child narratives, adults can help to provide children a focus or theme in their narrative attempts through comments about specific events or items. For example, “It seemed like you and Michael were having so much fun in block area. You were laughing so loud. Tell us what was so funny.” Or, “I saw Teacher Maria put a band-aid on your elbow. What happened on the playground?”

Goal: Develop personal narrative skills

- Children relate events with a beginning, middle and end.
- Children relate events with explicit causal and temporal sequence among events.

When: Mealtime, daily basis

How: Through being an interested, supportive communication partner during regular conversations and providing opportunities for children to practice skills during interactions

Strategies:

Model personal stories (e.g., Tell a 4-5 sentence story about what happened on the way to school or other interesting story that happened during the school day. “Guess what?! When you were on the playground, I answered the phone. It was the one of the firefighters that visited our class last week. He called to tell us that the cat that lives at their station had her kittens. She had four kittens yesterday.”

Scaffold children’s attempts by restating utterances, expanding ideas, and providing words to describe a child’s gestures (e.g., “Oh, it hurt right there!” “Your doctor gave you a shot?”).

Ask questions and make comments that continue conversations (e.g., “What happened next?” “That sounds scary!”).

Use prompts for more information (e.g., “Tell me more.”).

Teachers and adults can help children in their narrative skill development, most significantly, by first being a truly interested conversational partner. Teachers need to talk with the children at the children’s eye level and seem interested in what the children are saying. Several strategies, many of which are described previously, further improve and help scaffold the quality of children’s narratives. Again, these include restating and expanding children’s utterances and making comments and asking probing questions to prompt children to add to their stories and continue providing details.



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Facilitating Peer Interaction

The preschool years are important for the development of many skills used later in life, but some of the most valuable lifelong skills children acquire during this time are social interaction skills. No longer is the preschool child satisfied with playing quietly alongside other children or with an engaging adult. Instead he or she becomes more socially motivated and begins to reach out to other children for more involved, cooperative play.

Children do many things during their play with peers. Children practice developing language skills during peer interactions, and they are socially reinforced for their efforts.

Goal: Facilitating peer interaction

- Children increase the time they spend talking and interacting with each other.
- Children share and learn information from other children.
- Peer interactions provide children with recurring opportunities and meaningful contexts to practice newly acquired language skills.
- Strong social communication skills are critical for later school success.
- Peer models facilitate the language learning process.

When: During meal time and free play

How: Through encouraging conversation during mealtimes and recognizing opportunities to expand social interactions and include more children in ongoing play and discussions.

Strategies:

- Be sensitive to children's nonverbal and verbal attempts to join ongoing interactions.
- Direct children to communicate and interact with peers; prompt children to ask other children for assistance or directions instead of adult meeting child's needs.
- Encourage group discussion by asking questions, soliciting opinions, and sharing common personal experiences.
- Assign roles or characters during pretend play if children seem unable or too shy to join ongoing play.
- Provide opportunities and specially select activities for children to be "teachers", i.e. teach each other simple skills, "read" books to small groups, or lead a group during a cooking or science lesson by "reading" icon directions.
- Draw attention to other children in a group by making comments and overtly including them in ongoing discussions and play.
- Comment and praise children's attempts at peer interaction.
- Facilitate children's abilities to use words instead of actions when emotionally upset with other children; teach the proper vocabulary by commenting on one's own feelings and emotions of self and others.



Children serve as peer models for each other, providing relevant examples and meaningful feedback. Effective communication skills are important for children to interact with their peers and build friendships. By facilitating children's abilities to be successful in their interactions with other children, adults lay the foundation for the development of important social skills that enable children to build secure relationships with others.

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Teaching New Vocabulary Words And Concepts

Most teachers introduce new vocabulary words without much thought, i.e., they provide labels and descriptive words on a regular basis during their conversations with children. However, many teachers rely on the same methods for introducing and teaching new words and concepts, and the same words become overused. Using an expanded variety of strategies and repeating these new words in a variety of settings can teach children a more thorough understanding of the new words and concepts.

"Timing" is very important when teaching vocabulary. New words and concepts need to be introduced in a meaningful context when a child's attention is focused on an ongoing event or novel object. Providing descriptions of ongoing activities and explorations is a simple way for teachers to introduce synonyms (e.g., "Wow! Your building is getting very tall! It is so high that it is almost a *skyscraper!*") and new modifying words (e.g., "Look at the *delicate* hummingbird's egg. The egg is tiny, and the shell is so smooth. Be very careful. It is fragile so it can easily crack and break.").

Goal: Increase vocabulary

- Teachers recognize opportunities and methods to introduce new words.
- Teachers select a core set of concept words to target on a weekly basis.

How: Through using a combination of strategies, repeating new words and concepts in several contexts, and being cognizant of teachable moments to introduce words

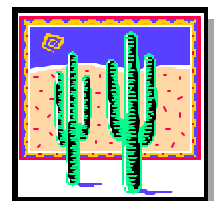
When: Initially introduce core concepts targeted to whole class during group settings; introduce appropriate vocabulary during ongoing conversations with children and while providing enhanced descriptions of children's activities.

Strategies:

- Define words verbally (e.g., "*Putrid* is when something smells really, really nasty").
- Provide examples or comparisons (e.g., "*Rough* is what your daddy's beard feels like in the morning...ouch!").
- Use concrete words to label objects and events (e.g., "Listen. That dog is not barking. It sounds like he is whining; he's *howling*").
- Use words to express relational and categorical concepts (e.g., "This kiwi is a *fruit*. So are apples. What else is a *fruit*?")
- Demonstrate concepts with appropriate words and/or props (e.g., "This is a *hoe*; you use it to scrape away the weeds in the garden like this." *Demonstrate action.*)

One simple way to introduce new words is to replace the overused complimentary words, "good" and "special," with more specific compliments (e.g., "That painting is so *colorful and bright!* It reminds me of the sunset." "You are such *responsible* helpers! I only asked you one time to stop playing and to pick up this area. Thank you.>").

If teachers plan weekly a curriculum in advance, teachers can easily expand vocabulary and concept knowledge by adopting a core set of words to incorporate on a daily basis throughout the curriculum unit in a wide range of activities. Words and concepts can be selected from story books, planned activities, general developmental curriculum, or for the purpose of preparing children for a future field trip experience. Core concept words are best introduced during group activities, but learning should not be limited to this setting.



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Promoting Second Language Acquisition

Teaching young children whose first language is not English can be very challenging, especially if a teacher does not speak or understand a child's native language. In addition to considering the general communication process, teachers need to be supportive of cultural differences, children's emotional needs, and educational guidelines.

Learning language is most successful and efficient when learning occurs in a meaningful context with teachers conscientiously providing appropriate labels and language models to describe children's ongoing actions and experiences.

Goal: Promote second language acquisition

- Children improve their understanding of English
- Children begin to communicate in English
- Children learn popular American English social routines.

When: During classroom conversations; during those classroom activities that include many visual and gestural props; and during activities highly routine in nature.

How: Teacher facilitates children's learning English during typical classroom activities.

Strategies:

- Talk to children in English about ongoing events.
- Incorporate gestures to support word use (e.g., demonstrate "under vs. over" when using these terms).
- Reduce rate of speech (i.e., speak more slowly, especially when introducing new concepts and language forms).
- Rephrase questions/comments to simplify language when message is unclear.
- Incorporate redundancy of key phrases and words in order to improve message clarity (e.g. "The first thing to do is *fold the paper* when you make your Mother's Day card. Okay, *fold your paper.*")
- Translate into first language when several attempts to communicate in English fail.
- Provide positive feedback for children's attempts to use English. (e.g., "Wow! I'm so proud of you. You used your English to ask for help!")
- Encourage children's use of English and provide opportunities.
- Repeat, expand and/or correctly restate children's attempts to use English; respond with direct contrastive models immediately following a child's utterance to help teach proper language forms (e.g., "My turn. It's *my* turn. Yes, it is *your* turn.")
- Limit children's verbal choices when ESL-speaking children are expected to respond in English (e.g., "Did you see a *big black bug* or a *blue butterfly*?")
- Target some highly repetitive, prop-laden classroom routines and activities to be conducted only in English (e.g., opening circle and toothbrushing).
- Introduce favorite English songs with instructional, functional actions and fingerplays at music (e.g., "Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" to teach body parts, "The Wheels on the Bus" to teach directional movements and common nouns).



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