

# What to Listen for in a High-Quality, Inclusive, Rich Oral Language Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten Learning Environment

*“Everyday activities of all sorts, accompanied by interesting talk with lots of new vocabulary play an important part in children’s language and literacy development.” – Dickinson & Tabors, 2001, p.330*



The gift of communication makes us human and is the foundation for learning and development in all domains (cited works by Snow et al). Interactive, two-way communication among children and among children and adults helps to establish positive relationships which serve as the foundation for emotional, social, health, physical, cognitive, and literacy development (See Rosenkoetter & Knapp-Philo, 2006 for research review). Children who do not hear a lot of talk and who are not encouraged to talk themselves often have problems learning to read. (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborne, 2003). According to the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2005), broad language abilities such as narrative knowledge, semantics, syntax, morphology and vocabulary play a significant role in predicting early literacy abilities. This large longitudinal study found that “language provides more than a foundation of reading per se. It offers a foundation for learning to learn” (p. 440). In fact, the National Early Literacy Panel found that children’s oral language abilities are among the most significant predictors of later literacy learning (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). Children without good oral language skills and large vocabularies tend to fall behind in third and fourth grade (Chall & Jacobs, 2003).



Oral language is a child's ability to understand and use spoken/signed words and sentences. Young children begin to develop these specific oral language abilities:

- Understand and use increasingly complex sentences
- Understand and use a growing vocabulary both in quantity and diversity of words
- Attend to language for longer periods of time, such as when books are read, people are telling stories, and during conversations
- Consistently respond to requests for information or action (e.g., respond to questions and follow one- and two-step directions)
- Comprehend and use language for multiple social and cognitive purposes (e.g., understand and talk about feelings, create and enact "roles, establish/ maintain relationships)
- Develop familiarity with sounds in words (e.g., listening to, identifying, recognizing, discriminating)
- Understand that people communicate in many ways, including through gestures, sign language, facial expressions and augmentative communication devices
- Use verbal and non-verbal language (gestures, devices, signs and picture symbols) to communicate for multiple purposes (e.g., to express wants, needs, ideas, feelings and to relate personal information and experiences)
- Describe experiences and create and/or retell simple stories
- Ask questions and make comments related to the topic of discussion

*Foundations: Early Learning Standards for NC Preschoolers and Strategies to Guide Their Success, NC DPI (2004)*

## **IN A RICH-ORAL LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT**

- Children:
  - Talk more than adults by describing their efforts, ideas, and creations
  - Have multiple ways to communicate
  - Tell and act-out their stories (*Paley, 2004*)
- Adults:
  - Build on children's home language and interests
  - Use positive, specific language
  - Really listen and show true interest in what children are doing and saying
  - Reflect on what children are doing
  - Encourage rather than praise



- Label children’s feelings, e.g., “your tears make me think you are sad”
- Ask open-ended, give time for processing, and build on children’s responses
- Encourage choice and rule making
- Have real conversations with each child everyday
- Share information, books, and stories
- Make sure all children have a way to communicate with words, gestures, pictures, and technology
- Use a variety of words and help children learn at least two new words everyday
- Model appropriate syntax (grammar)

### **ENGAGE IN AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONS**

Engaging in authentic conversations with all children throughout the day is important for enhancing vocabulary development and comprehension of language beyond the word level.

#### Strategies

- Converse about books, songs, stories, and experiences
- Use children’s interests as a basis for conversation
- Speak courteously to children
- Plan or take advantage of spontaneous opportunities to talk with each child informally
- Refrain from talking judgmentally about children/others to them or in front of them
- Show affection and sincere interest in children
- Send consistent verbal and non-verbal messages
- Invite children into extended conversations with peers and adults
- Listen attentively to what children have to say
- Develop skills to hold conversations with children through training, feedback, and practice

### **THE “ART” OF CONVERSING WITH CHILDREN**

An adult’s skill in carrying on meaningful and facilitative conversations with young children is reflective of how highly developed she/he is in the “Art of Teaching.” Language facilitation during play is a technique which must be developed over time. Facilitating language and higher order thinking skills must be intentionally and explicitly implemented in an implicit way during play.

Research shows that teachers tend to display “verbal domination” in their language behavior in the classroom, and that their instructional approach tends to be “linear” (e.g., one-way questions, one-way response), rather than reciprocal (e.g., open-ended questions with two or three way responses between adult and child; Dickinson, et al, 2004).

One way for a teacher to assess how he/she is doing is to have another person videotape a play session during center time. Listen for the number of times you:

- Use open-ended questions
- Describe the child's actions
- Repeat what the child said and added a little more information
- Comment on an object and described its function, size, shape, or other meaningful attribute

Reflect on the quality of the conversation, as well as the length of verbal interaction.

### **FOLLOW THE "CAR"**

Notari-Syverson, Maddox, & Cole (1999) developed a training videotape for adults to learn how to talk with children ages two-to-five as they talk together. They suggest "Following the CAR" when talking with young children:

- Comment on what the child is looking at, touching or talking about and WAIT FIVE SECONDS
- Ask questions about what the child is looking at, touching, or talking about and WAIT FIVE SECONDS
- Respond by adding a little more to the child's response

*Resources for obtaining this training video, "Language is the Key: Talking and Books" which describes the "Following the CAR" strategy, include [www.wri.org](http://www.wri.org); [www.wriedu.org/](http://www.wriedu.org/) bookplay*

### **INTENTIONALLY TALK ABOUT WORDS AND WHAT THEY MEAN**

- Don't be afraid to introduce children to interesting "big" words related to literacy, math, science, past and future events
- Point to illustrations, objects to help children understand
- Provide brief definitions
- Use synonyms (when applicable)
- Use gestures (when applicable)
- Use the word in different sentences at different times and in different contexts

*Collins, M.F. (2005)*

### **ENCOURAGE RATHER THAN PRAISE**

As humans we are encouraged to continue learning about something when another person is truly engaged in what we are doing, saying, thinking, or feeling. Saying "good job" or "I like that" does not imply that we are interested or engaged in a child's play or conversation. Many times these words signal the end of our time of engagement, rather than provoking the next level of inquiry during a learning/play event. Encouragement continues and expands the interaction and helps to sustain engagement.

The deeper we become engaged in a child's inquiry based play/learning, the more profound the impact will be on that child's understanding about the words, meanings, and social-conversational rules. There is much power in high

levels of teacher engagement and conversation; while difficult to describe, many teachers refer to these times as “teachable moments.” What we might see a teacher doing during these “teachable moments”:

- Sitting with children at their eye level, observing and engaging in their play.
- Listening to the children’s dialog about the activity and following their line of thought in the action.
- Setting up something novel in the play situation that might cause “a problem,” and then asking “I wonder what will happen...?”
- Describing the child’s actions, “Oh, I see how you’re arranging some leaves on the bench. It seems like you are arranging the leaves from largest to smallest.”
- Encouraging children to describe their feelings during situation, “That Lego just doesn’t seem to fit, boy I can see you have a funny look on your face, how does this make you feel?”
- Acknowledging children’s work and ideas by making descriptive and specific comments (not all at once):
  - Physical movement, control of tools, use of space, self-help skills in working on a project, control or expression of emotions, vocabulary to describe the product, writing associated with creations; math and science concepts, revealed self-identity, interactions

*High/Scope Education Research Foundation; Nilsen, B. (2001). Week by Week: Plans for Observing and Recording Young Children.*

## **ASSESS AND IMPROVE THE LANGUAGE RICHNESS OF THE ENVIRONMENT**

All learning environments, indoors and outdoors should have interesting, open ended material for children to explore and use for building and creating.

One strategy for increasing the quality and quantity of interactions between adults and children is for instructors, mentors, and supervisors to use environmental assessments of teacher-child interactions and conversations. Teachers and/or administrators wishing to assess and improve the “Language Richness of a Classroom” may decide to utilize a portion or all of a rating scale at the beginning and end of the school year in an attempt to measure teacher progress. One suggestion is to put a goal to “increase the language richness of my classroom” on the Professional Development Plan and then use a pre- and post-environmental language measure to document progress and inform change. Several scales that may be used as pre- and post-measures of progress are listed under References and Resources.

### **EXAMPLE HIGH-QUALITY RICH ORAL LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENTS**

- CLASS (Regard for Student Perspective) High
  - There are many opportunities for student talk and expression.
- CLASS (Quality of Feedback) High
  - There are frequent feedback loops-back-and-forth exchanges-between the teacher and students.

- The teacher often queries the students or prompts the students to explain their thinking and rationale for responses and actions.
- CLASS (Language Modeling) High
  - There are frequent conversations in the classroom.
  - The teacher asks many open-ended questions.
  - The teacher often repeats or extends the students responses.
  - The teacher often uses advanced language with students.
- ECERS-R (item 18) Exemplary
  - Staff have individual conversations with most of the children everyday
  - Children are asked questions to encourage them to give longer and more complex answers (younger child is asked “what” or “where” questions; older child is asked “why” or “how” questions)
- ELLCO (item 6) Exemplary
  - The tone of classroom conversations is positive and shows respect for children’s contributions, encouraging children to speak from their different perspectives and experience
  - Teachers listen attentively to children, encourage children to listen to each other, and deliberately foster a climate in which differing opinions & ideas are valued
  - Teachers display fairness in treatment of children from differing ability, gender, racial, and cultural groups
- ELLCO (item 7) Exemplary
  - Teachers appear to be aware of children’s oral language abilities, considering both normative and individual patterns of development in 1st and 2nd language
  - Teachers plan sufficient time for conversations. Children are systematically encouraged to use oral language to share experiences, discuss and plan activities for broader intellectual purposes (e.g., analyzing, predicting, problem solving, reflecting on learning)
  - Goals and opportunities for extended use of oral language are coordinated with goals for literacy and content area learning
  - Regular, intentional efforts are made to expand children’s vocabulary
- APEEC (item 8) Excellent
  - Many times a day, the teacher prompts children to elaborate on their initial statements.
  - The teacher has some informal conversations with children.
- ECERS-E (item 6) Excellent
  - Adults provide scaffolding for children’s conversations with them.
  - Children are often encouraged to talk to each other in small groups, and adults encourage their peers to listen to them.
  - Adults regularly use open-ended questions to extend the children’s language through talk
  - Children are encouraged to ask questions.



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Visit the North Carolina Office of Early Learning Demonstration Programs to see evidence based practices at work. <http://www.ncprek.nc.gov/DemoSites/DemonstrationProgram.asp>

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