Supporting Young Children’s Vocabulary Development Through Play

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Supporting Students’ Oral Language through Play


**How can teachers support students’ oral language and vocabulary in primary classrooms?**

Oral language is important for communicating desires, needs, emotions, and ideas. Children learn from an early age that talk helps them to achieve a wide range of purposes (e.g., convince a peer to take up a role in dramatic play, reassure a friend who is feeling afraid or direct a peer to move out of the way). Through interacting with others, children learn what they can do with language, as well as cultural expectations for interacting with particular people in particular contexts.\(^1\)

Talk is not only for social interaction, however. Often, half-formed ideas are clarified and extended, and new information is sorted out and connected to what is already known as children talk with others. Talk is a valuable tool for learning about the world and about relationships among the people and objects within it.\(^2\) It is also foundational to literacy. Children encounter new words and ways of using language as they talk with others. They draw on this knowledge when making predictions and inferences in their reading and when composing texts for others to read. In dramatic play, children use symbolic thinking (e.g., using a pencil to represent a magic wand) that parallels the symbolic thinking involved in reading and writing.\(^3\)

**Play, Oral Language and Learning**

Play is highly motivational and fosters children’s thinking, as children pursue their own interests, make choices and decisions (e.g., about what role to take in dramatic play, or how to put blocks together), negotiate with others, use their imagination, explore new ideas and ways of doing things, and are intellectually and physically active for extended periods of time.\(^4\) All of these thinking processes are taking place while children are talking and interacting with others.

In kindergarten and primary classrooms, thus, play offers an ideal context for children to extend what they know and can do with language.\(^5\) Vocabulary, for example, is an important component of children’s oral language that is supported through play. The more words that children know and can use at a young age, the more words they are able to learn and the more readily they will be able to read those words.\(^6\) Children actively construct meanings of words as they try out new words in play interactions. They see how others respond to their language and get a sense of the appropriateness of the words for the context. Children also encounter new vocabulary in their play, as they hear peers and adults use the words in a range of contexts. They actively engage with objects talk about and make connections that shape and refine their understanding of concepts.

Having opportunities to experience multiple uses of the words helps children to remember and create more nuanced understandings of the words.\(^7\) The same is true of children’s knowledge of syntax. Through interacting with others in play, children encounter new ways of putting words together. They have opportunities to experiment with and see how others respond to the language structures they use.

The teacher-directed lesson, where children use language to convey information, does not provide the wide range of purposes for children’s oral language that are opened up to children in their play.\(^8\) Play contexts require children to draw on their knowledge of cultural expectations
for the various play contexts (e.g., in the restaurant center, children use what they know about social expectations for making or taking menu requests or for serving others, considering the social relationships among the children involved in the play and both the inexplicit social rules of the peer culture and the explicit social rules that the teacher may have established for getting along during play)⁹.

Play settings also provide opportunities for using language to learn. Children use oral language to resolve social challenges that arise when playing, such as deciding who should be the first to use a highly desirable object in a dramatic play center, all the while engaging in collaborative problem-solving¹⁰. In order for the play to proceed, children have to consider a range of viewpoints, building on their own and each other’s ideas as a collective. Teachers’ contributions to children’s learning are also more complex than they are in teacher-directed lessons, as they must observe, listen and respond in ways that extend and build on children’s language and learning. They may enter into dramatic play, for example, by taking up roles that allow them to engage in collaborative problem-solving with children. Following the children’s lead, rather than narrowly focusing on instructional objectives, makes teachers’ interactions with children more meaningful and cognitively challenging⁸.

**Suggestions for Supporting Oral Language through Play**

Setting up play contexts to support young children’s oral language might involve the following:

- Creating centers with objects based on themes that are relevant to children’s lives (e.g., kitchen, grocery store, a bus or train, fire station, farm). It is not necessary to have the center filled with commercially-produced materials. A bus, for example, could be created by placing chairs in rows and attaching a paper plate or other object as a steering wheel.
- Creating a construction center where children make things with blocks or other materials, or a center where children create and represent things and stories with sand and objects in a sandbox. In addition to having typical objects that would typically be found in each of these centers, teachers might also introduce characters from stories that have been read during class read-alouds (e.g., putting a toy spider or pig in one of the centers and introducing them as Charlotte and Wilbur from *Charlotte’s Web*) so that the story world enters into children’s play, providing further opportunities for enriching vocabulary and the possibilities for what children can do with language.
- In primary grades, play might involve objects related to science concepts, such as magnets, seeds, or weights, scales and various solids. Teachers can introduce children to problem situations or ask children to come up with hypotheses about science phenomena. Children talk with peers and interact with the objects, using their imagination and pooled background knowledge and experience to solve the problem or generate hypotheses. For example, students who have brought seeds gathered on their way to school from various weeds, trees and other plants may be given the challenge of figuring out how the seeds are dispersed so that new plants grow in locations far from the original plant. They may experiment with various ways of moving the seeds, drawing on background knowledge, such as remember burrs stuck to their socks or seeds blowing in the wind, to hypothesize.

Teachers’ contributions to the play might involve:

- modeling new ways of thinking about situations and new ways of using language within particular contexts (e.g., at the grocery store center, the teacher might join children by
taking on a role as a grocery shopper who says, “I’m looking for mozzarella cheese to make a pizza. I wonder what I should do to try to find it in the store.” Her response to children’s suggestions could include wondering about how to carry out a suggestion and what might be the outcome if that course of action were followed, in addition to making suggestions of her own.

- listening to how children are using language, the roles they are taking up and the rules they are establishing for the play prior to joining the play setting in order to avoid taking the play in a new direction that is not where the children want to go. Listening is as important as contributing to the play because teachers want to provide as much space as possible for children to make their own connections to new information that has been introduced.

- Adapting the rich instruction model, shown to be effective in developing children’s vocabulary, to play contexts. In place of direct instruction, teachers would join the children’s play, providing many examples of the correct use of specific vocabulary. For example, at the water center, teachers might wonder aloud if objects that they or the children place in the water will float or sink, using these terms, and perhaps even the word, buoyant in appropriate ways. Teachers might invite children to create stories about the objects as they float or sink and encourage children to talk about what they’re observing as they place or drop objects into the water.

In Sum

Oral language is foundational to literacy and all learning. Teacher-directed lessons typically provide limited opportunities for all children to talk. The purpose for using language is usually restricted to providing information. Play, in contrast, offers abundant opportunities for children to interact with peers and the teacher, using language for a wide range of purposes. Children are introduced to new vocabulary and ways of using words to achieve their intentions. They engage in collaborative problem-solving, using language to learn about objects, relationships, and social and cultural expectations and practices.

References


