RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Milieu Language Strategies for Children Learning English

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This research to practice paper summarizes a study on milieu language strategies implemented by Head Start teachers during center time, a time when children could choose what learning center to be at, such as dramatic play, reading books, sand table. The milieu strategies were effective at increasing verbal interactions between the child learning English (ELL) and the teacher.

The number of children attending Head Start who are learning English as a second or multiple language (ELLs) is nothing new. Given current enrollment rates, at least 30% of children in Head Start are from homes where English is not the primary language (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2013). With the current enrollment rates and future projections, it is likely that the number of children who are ELLs in school systems is going to continue to increase in the coming years (Garcia & Jensen, 2009). How to best serve and educate these young children who are ELLs will most likely be an ongoing concern.

Most educational programming in Head Start and elementary schools is conducted in English and it is often in a preschool environment that children who do not speak English first encounter an English-dominant environment (Jones, 1993). Since most educational programming is conducted in English, children who are ELLs will develop mixed levels of proficiency and language skills in both English and their first language (Jones & Fuller, 2003). One consequence of mixed levels of language proficiencies, children of limited to no English speaking backgrounds are more likely to be placed in special education or remedial classes because of their perceived lack of language skills and abilities when in fact these children bring significant language knowledge and skills with them from their first language (Baker, 2006; Valdes & Figueroa, 1994). However, teachers are often at a loss to know how to appropriately communicate and teach children whose first language is not English (NCES, 2002; Valdes & Figueroa, 1994).

Consequently, it is essential to find teaching strategies that teachers of all grades, but especially of those teaching preschool, can implement to appropriately communicate and teach

children who are ELLs. In the process of teaching and communicating with children who are ELLs, teachers need to be able to foster the language growth and development of these children. It is imperative that effective language strategies be found that can be used at the preschool level to reap the greatest benefits for children who are ELLs and help work toward reversing the cycle of academic underachievement among children and youth from non-English speaking homes.

In a recent study of Head Start teachers, many teachers reported they had a limited number of effective strategies they could use for communicating with children learning English as a second language (Worthington, et al., 2011). The research of Hart and Risley (1995) can be extrapolated from the homes of young children to classrooms. Hart and Risley (1995) found that when children's environments, regardless of socioeconomic conditions, were filled with conversations and verbal interactions, the children's language and vocabulary knowledge and skills increased. The same could be stated for classrooms, when children are surrounded by quality conversations and verbal interactions, their language skills are impacted.

Engaging in conversations helps children, especially children who are ELLs, gain fluency in English (Restrepo & Gray, 2007). When these children engage in conversations with teachers or English speaking peers, they have an opportunity to experiment with their developing English language skills. It is through trying new communication skills that are both correct, and get the child's point across, or incorrect and leads to the child receiving corrective feedback, that children learn the ways to appropriately use the new language. Talking and interacting with every child on a daily basis is considered a developmentally appropriate practice (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 2006). While this recommendation may seem like common sense, the authors note it is easy to unintentionally overlook the children who demand less of the teacher's attention, such as children who are quieter, more self-sufficient, or who are ELLs.

Based on the importance of conversation skills, researchers have begun looking for possible language development strategies that will be effective with children learning English as a second language. One promising language-based teaching strategy is milieu language strategies. Milieu language strategies have been found to foster the language growth and use in children who have language delays (Hancock & Kaiser, 2002; Kaiser & Hester, 1994; Yoder, Kaiser, Goldstein, Mousetis, Kaczmarek, & Fisher, 1995). Children with language delays and children learning English as a second language have similar language needs, such as the need to be able to communicate with those around them, express needs and wants, and learn social communication skills, such as turn taking. These strategies have not only been shown to be effective, but to be learned easily by parents and teachers serving children in several different types of programs (Hancock & Kaiser, 2002; Kaiser, Hancock, & Nietfeld, 2000; Kaiser, Ostrosky, & Alpert, 1993). The strategies can be implemented within the context of ongoing classroom activities and with various classroom curricula. Milieu language strategies may benefit children learning English as a second language when implemented by their teachers to promote language growth and acquisition of communication skills that are crucial for school success and communicating with others.

Milieu Language Strategies

There are four different milieu language strategies: model, mand-model, time delay, and incidental teaching. The foundation for teacher-child interactions is based on environmental arrangements and joint attention. These strategies were originally developed by Hart and Rogers-Warren (1978) and have been further defined and conceptualized by others, including Kaiser,

Hendrickson, and Alpert (1991), Warren, Yoder, and Leew (2002), and Hancock and Kaiser (2006). Environmental arrangement is based on two ideas: there are interesting materials in the classroom which the child is interested in and that some of these materials are out of reach of the child.

Model, the first milieu strategy, occurs when a teacher focuses on the interesting object the child has. The teacher provides a simple verbal model, a statement, regarding the object. When the child provides a correct response to the teacher's model, the child is praised and the utterance is expanded, if the object is out of reach, the object is given to the child. If the child provides an incorrect or no response to the teacher, the teacher repeats the model, up to three times while giving the child time to respond each time, and the child is given the object after the third model.

The second strategy, mand-model, is used when the child is highly interested in an object and in obtaining it and the teacher feels the child is likely to be able to respond correctly to the teacher. The teacher provides a mand, either a complex question or statement, to the child regarding the objects. If the child responds correctly, the object is given, if not, the teacher repeats the mand up to three times unless the child is losing interest and then the teacher provides a model, which is less complex and gives the child the object.

The third milieu strategy is time delay and occurs when the teacher deliberately does not respond immediately to the child's request or typical utterance in order to encourage the child to communicate with the teacher. There are eight ways in which a teacher can create a time delay situation: the first two are model and mand-model, previously described, sabotage in which the child is directed to a task requiring materials that are not within reach, violation of expectations occurs when the teacher deviates from the typical routine to do something silly instead, protestation is when the teacher does something the child does not like to encourage the child to protest about it, such as offering glue when the child wants a pencil, difficult materials occurs when the child is presented with a task that requires assistance from the teacher and the child is encouraged to request assistance, multiple parts occurs when a child is presented with a multi-step task but does not receive all the necessary materials to complete the task, and finally, choice making is when a child is non-verbally presented a choice between two options and the child has to verbally indicate a choice. All of these situations are designed to encourage the child to ask for assistance.

The fourth milieu strategy is incidental teaching and is the most linguistically demanding for the child. This strategy is used to teach the child a complex language skill, such as conversational turn taking about the interesting object, or to improve the child's speech intelligibility. Any of the above described situations is used as a starting point for this strategy.

Findings from the study

The nine children in the study all showed signs of language growth when the teachers used milieu language strategies with them. Children who were ELLs showed gains in expressive and receptive language skills on the Bracken Basic Concept Scales Receptive and Expressive (Bracken, 2006) as well as the Picture Naming Individual Growth and Development Indicator (IGDI; University of MN, 2006). The children had moderate to high effect sizes for the amount of language acquired during the study. The children who were native English speakers also increased in their language skills during the study. The results indicate that the strategies were successful with the children who were ELLs as they had the steepest language growth

trajectories. The children who were ELLs still lagged behind their native English speaking monolingual peers in terms of expected age-equivalency language use and knowledge, but they made gains in their English skills. These results indicate that language-based teaching strategies are helpful in increasing conversational language use in children who are ELLs.

Implications for Practice

There are several implications for practice which emerged from the results of the study. The first implication for practice is recognizing that research from other fields regarding teaching strategies can be applied to new contexts and settings. It is important to realize that each child has unique characteristics that will influence the outcome of teaching strategies and that not all children are alike, thus, not all teaching strategies will be effective for all children. Milieu language strategies provide a systematic framework for increasing the language expectations of children's language use in a positive interactive manner.

Another implication for practice based on the study is the challenges that preschool teachers face teaching young children who are ELLs. It can be challenging to juggle the learning needs of all the children in the classroom. It is important to know the "why" behind the recommended use of teaching strategies and to be able to see how the strategies impact the children's learning. Thus it is also important for teachers to be able to flexibly and purposefully choose which strategies to use with a child based on the known and desired outcomes afforded with those specific strategies. Consequently, teaching young children requires on-going learning and self-reflection to be able to meet all the needs of all the children in the classroom.

TABLE 1
Milieu Language Strategies and Examples

Strategy	Definition	Adult Skill	Examples
Interesting Materials	Materials and activities that children enjoy.	Knows child toy/activity preference. Good observation skills to discriminate child interest.	Complete toy/activity preference list for each child. Consider putting toys together in "fun" ways like the farm animals and shaving cream or race cars and water.
In View, Out of Reach	Placing some desirable materials within view but out of reach of children.	Makes a physical environmental plan of how toys/materials can be in the child's view and out of reach or limiting the number of toys available.	Put toys in see-through plastic bins or Ziploc bags on a shelf taller than the child.
Difficult Materials	Creating a situation in which children are likely to need adult assistance.	Accurate assessment of child's fine/gross motor and self help skills. Ability to be able to watch child "struggle" without always doing it for the child.	Toys that have zippers/ buttons, that are windup, pieces are kept in child proof containers.
Multiple Parts	Providing small or inadequate portions of preferred materials/toys	List of preferred materials with multiple parts.	Legos, blocks, potato head, cars and trains, play-doh, pegs, puzzles, bubbles, one chip or cookie instead of the entire bag.
Sabotage	Not providing all of the materials children will need to complete a task or otherwise preventing them from carrying out an instruction.	List of child's preferred tasks/ activities and how each can be adapted/sabotaged so the child may need to communicate about it.	Quietly removing a coloring marker while the adult and child are coloring together that the child is not using, not putting shovels at the sand table
Protest	A situation in which a child wants the adult to stop doing something.	Ability to identify tasks which child finds frustrating and translate components of that task into play context.	Something that the child likes to do by himself but not something that is "mean" or the child finds particularly upsetting (like tickling). Examples might be offering a glue stick instead of a pencil, or one book instead of another.
Silly Situations	A situation the adult sets up that violates a child's expectations or that the child experiences as silly.	Ability to know what makes child laugh, knowledge of child's cognitive understanding of "absurd", and openness to having fun and being silly.	Putting the potato head parts (like glasses and mustache) on adult face. Wearing the child's hat, socks, shoes. Putting child's hat on pet or stuffed animal.
Choice Making	A situation in which the child is given an opportunity to make a choice between two or more activities or objects.	Assessment of choices that will be meaningful to the child within the context of routines or play, knowledge of child's target language level.	Choices about drinks, food, toys, games, play location, music, books, where they sit.

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