RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Supporting Dual Language Learners' Language Development Using Relevant Teacher Talk during Playtime

Judy Hicks Paulick

University of Virginia

Oral vocabulary is an important component of children's preliteracy development. Free choice time (FCT) provides a space for teachers to model oral language and engage with children about topics that are of particular interest to children. The researcher studied English immersion classrooms of dual language learners that were higher- and lower-scoring on the CLASS instrument, examining the amount and sophistication of teachers' talk. Teachers in the higher-scoring classrooms provided more exposure to talk, more sophisticated talk, longer interactions, more discussions, and fewer directives than teachers in the lower-scoring classrooms. This research has implications for the preparation of Head Start teachers, particular with regard to facilitating FCT and engaging with children during play. The researcher provides suggestions for supporting teachers to engage with children during this important time of day.

Keywords: play, vocabulary development, teacher development, free choice time

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

A teacher approaches a pair of preschoolers who are playing with trains, trucks, and tracks on a rug during free choice time (FCT). She notices one of the children—a native Spanish speaker who is learning English—lift the bed of a dump truck and deposit a few Lego blocks in a pile next to the road the two have created. The child looks up at the teacher and smiles. In this moment, the teacher has a variety of choices regarding how to enter the play. Similarly, she has choices about the language she uses. And while, "Wow! What are you working on?" is likely to gain her entry into the play, a differently-worded, "I notice you just emptied the bed of your dump truck!" not only gains entry, but also serves to model relatively sophisticated language.

Oral language development during preschool is related to language outcomes in elementary school (NICHD ECCRN, 2016; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002), and children from lower-income families tend to enter school with lower scores on language assessments (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). FCT is the time of day when children, engaged in activities of their choosing, are uniquely primed for language learning. When teachers engage in discussions with children so that the children and adults share a joint locus of attention, those discussions support

children's language development (Clark, 2003; Dickinson & Tabors, 2002). In other words, as long as teachers are being sensitive not to disturb or derail children's engagement, FCT is an ideal time for teachers to be developing children's language.

While some Head Start programs offer bilingual instruction, most programs provide English immersion. For young dual language learners, who make up nearly a third of Head Start students nationwide (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2015), FCT provides unique opportunities for language development that include the following: being able to listen and observe language (Tabors, 2008) while still engaging in robust play with peers, engaging in one-on-one conversations with adults who can provide some home language support (Espinosa, 2010; Author, 2013), and having the time and space to practice language in a low-stress environment (Garcia & Jensen, 2007). Even when teachers are not able to engage in sophisticated discussions with each child during FCT, this unique block of time offers a variety of opportunities for language development.

While current observation tools like the CLASS (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008) focus on the quality of teacher-child interactions more generally, they do not focus in particular on the words teachers are using. The current study builds on the research on the CLASS, providing additional measures of classroom quality during FCT in an effort to understand the range of teacher talk across classrooms during this time of day. The researcher examined variability in the amount, sophistication, and intent of teacher talk. The researcher asked: *In classrooms with FCT that scored higher or lower on the CLASS, how does the talk that children are being exposed to differ in terms of amount, sophistication, and type?*

STUDY DESCRIPTION

For this study the researcher conducted (1) a quantitative analysis of the amount and sophistication of the words that the teachers used when talking to or with children during FCT; and (2) a qualitative examination of transcripts of the teacher talk to identify the type of talk teachers were using with children during FCT.

The four focal classrooms in this study—English immersion Head Start preschool classrooms in one Head Start district in Northern California—were the two highest and two lowest scoring classrooms for the "Instructional Support" dimension of the CLASS (Pianta et al., 2008) within a larger sample of 16 classrooms. The researcher observed and recorded six full blocks (averaging 35 minutes apiece) of FCT in each classroom from September to December, with an average of ten days between visits. All of the teacher talk was transcribed.

The words the teachers spoke were counted. The counts determined the "words per minute" and the "rare words per minute" for each lead teacher. "Rare" words were based on the word list from a 1982 study by Moe, Hopkins, and Rush, who found that a mere 309 words accounted for approximately 80% of children's spontaneous oral language. Any words not found on that list were classified as "rare," although those words tended to be quite common words—often adjectives, slightly less common verbs, or somewhat specified nouns—rather than particularly esoteric words. In the literature on vocabulary development, these would be akin to tier 2 words with some tier 1 words mixed in rather than tier 3 words (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013). For both the words per minute and the rare words per minute scores, ANCOVA analyses accounted for covariance within teachers and compared the lower-scoring and higher-scoring classrooms.

Next, the teacher talk was coded for intent. Each transcript was broken into utterances, and the utterances were divided into interactions, with an interaction defined as a teacher engaged with a child or small group of children with a joint locus of attention. Each interaction was coded as "direct," "inform," "question," (Gest et al., 2006) and/or "discuss." Interactions that included more than one type of intent received multiple codes.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of teacher language were found to be different between the classrooms that scored higher and lower on the CLASS.

	Total minutes	Total words	Total rare words
Visits to lower-scoring classrooms (N = 12)	420	21,391	4,826
Visits to higher-scoring classrooms (N = 12)	398	32,878	7,355

Table 1. Words spoken by teachers

Table 1 shows that across approximately the same number of minutes, the teachers in the lower-scoring classrooms spoke considerably fewer words and considerably fewer rare words. Since exposure to words is related to language outcomes, this discrepancy across classrooms may be important. It may be important to support teachers in using more talk with and around children during FCT and relatively more sophisticated talk.
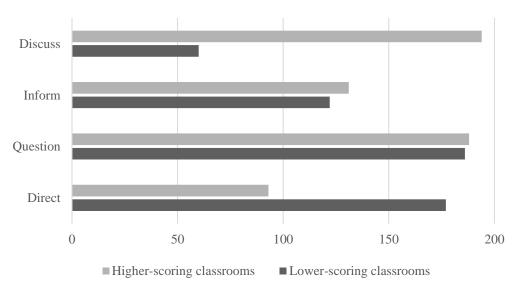

Figure 1. Numbers of interactions across classroom quality

Figure 1 illustrates the findings about the type of the language teachers were using with their students. There were more than three times as many interactions with discussions in the higher versus the lower-scoring classrooms, and just shy of half as many interactions with directives. Numbers of interactions with close-ended questions and information were approximately equal across the two types of classrooms. Although many interactions included both close-ended questions and discussion, interactions that included both directives and discussion were rare. In other words, although the researcher is not saying that a directive-free preschool classroom is ideal (or would even be possible), it was rare in this sample to find interactions that were both directives and discussions. It seems to be somewhat of a zero-sum game, whereby a preponderance of directives precludes time for discussion. In other words, too much of FCT taken up by brief, directive interactions may detract from the sustained discussions that are more likely to develop children's language.

In the highest-scoring classrooms in this study, the teachers were talking more, including more sophisticated words, than in the lower-scoring classrooms. Likewise, in the highest scoring classrooms, considerably more of the interactions with children were sustained and could be classified as discussions. On the other hand, in the generally lower-scoring classrooms in the study, many more of the interactions were brief and directive.

Overall, children in the higher-scoring classrooms were getting exposure to more talk and more sophisticated vocabulary from their teachers than their peers in the lower-scoring classrooms. In light of this finding, the researcher has some suggestions for early childhood teachers and teacher educators.

- Teachers need to be aware of the opportunities for hearing and producing talk that they are providing children during FCT, particularly given how ripe this part of the day is for children's language development.
- Teachers may require training regarding how to enter play in ways that do not disrupt or derail the play.
- Teachers may also require training regarding how to incorporate appropriately sophisticated words into their talk.
- In this study, many directives during FCT were associated with fewer discussions. It may make sense to encourage limiting directives during FCT by setting expectations prior to this block of time.
- Not surprisingly, in classrooms where more words were spoken by teachers, more sophisticated words were spoken by teachers. It may make sense to encourage more, but thoughtful, talk by teachers during FCT.
- Teachers from classrooms that were higher-scoring on the CLASS seem already to be providing relatively richer linguistic environments for students. It may be helpful to engage those teachers in supporting teachers who are struggling with this aspect of instructional support.

CONCLUSION

Research indicates that children from low-SES families are likely to have smaller vocabularies than their more advantaged peers (Carlo, August, McLaughlin, et al., 2004; White, Graves, & Slater, 1990), and children who do not develop strong oral language skills during the preschool years fall behind their peers with regard to literacy development, even before entering kindergarten

(Biemiller, 2006; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Therefore, it is vital that children have exposure to strong models of oral language early and that they have opportunities to develop their own oral language. All Head Start teachers should have access to training in how to support oral language development across the preschool day and during FCT in particular, including learning how to engage children in discussions and how to model relevant, interesting vocabulary use for children.

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