

Communication and Language Assignment

The contents of this assignment aims firstly to assess theories of language development with reference to an example of adult-child conversation. The second section will discuss the adult's role in language development in relation to proposed theory. In the third section we will examine how one aspect of language could be developed within an early years setting, evaluate this practice and then make reference to any further steps that could be taken.

Section 1 – Children's language development

It is generally accepted that language consists of an agreed set of symbols which enable us to communicate with members of the same culture as ourselves (Cardwell 1996). Language can be verbal, non-verbal or a combination of the two. Throughout childhood we acquire and develop language, to do this we need to have a firm grasp of the subsections, or components, of this language. Winyard (1996) states there are five main components to human language, these are phonology, semantics, grammar, pragmatics and intonation. From birth babies show the desire to communicate through the way they enjoy sharing their facial expressions, gestures and body language and pre-verbal babbling (Bruce and Meggitt 1999). As children get older they develop more complex language.

The details of an adult-child conversation were recorded and transcribed (Appendix 1), the child is six years old. The child's phonological development is not yet complete, in lines 18 and 21 T pronounces 'br' as 'bw'. It has been recognised that

until the age of six most children have difficulty pronouncing at least one phoneme (Flanagan 1994) and that children do not develop an entire range of speech sounds until they are seven years old (Hoff-Ginsberg 1997). T's use of semantics shows that he is fully aware of word meanings and is able to convey his message in a fairly adult like fashion. He also has the ability to understand what is being said to him. With reference to grammar this will be easier to discuss if we divide it into further subsections. Bruce and Meggitt (1999) suggest that the grammar of a language will usually include verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs and pronouns. We must also consider syntax, the rules that determine the way in which words are arranged. T uses a variety of verbs within this sample (lines 3, 10, 16, 22), children develop a use of verbs as one word utterances within the first stage of language development for example, 'go' or 'gone', in stage two the emergence of grammatical structure may see verbs placed after a subject for example, 'Daddy gone', and by the fifth stage children are able to use verbs confidently in longer sentences (Wells 1986). Nouns are also predominant in T's language using them to describe places (lines 9, 12), people (line 3) and objects (lines 3, 17). Clark (1979) states that the particular nouns children use are, unsurprisingly, gathered from their experience for example, names of body parts, familiar people and places. Linked closely to this is his use of pronouns which prevent him from repeating nouns over and over, and allow his sentences to flow more easily (lines 12-14). T often uses adjectives to add description to a noun (line 3), however his use of adverbs is limited, one example can be seen in line 6.

Syntax, or grammatical rules, can be seen to be fairly developed in T's language with correct word order, use of plurals (line 13) and preposition (line 3). However, there is still some over-generalisation of grammatical rules indicating his morphological skills

are not yet complete, this problem is not continuous as comparisons of lines 20 and 26 show. Theory indicates that children often have problems learning these rules as they are not used regularly in the English language and by four years old most will have disappeared (Crystal 1986). He talks in longer sentences using a range of function words between key-words, this shows the child has recognised that function words form a key part of English grammar and he can apply them to his own language. In relation to joining his conjunction range is limited using only 'and' in the sample however, this does not mean his range is not wider but the opportunity may not have arisen for him to use them. Hoff-Ginsberg (1997) says although conjunctions can be seen in the speech of three year olds a full variety may not be used until age eight. Lastly, we can see T is aware of the appropriate pragmatics for this type of communication. Looking at suggestions for pragmatic use by Dewart and Summers (1995) T falls into the appropriate categories for his age.

Section 2 – The role of the adult

With reference to language development and the role of adults some say that the child's social environment must be responsible for language development. Right from the very beginning adults play a role in the language development of children. By assuming that children want to, and have the ability to communicate, they talk to them, make eye contact, smile and play with them. Bruner (1983) provided a theory which emphasised social interaction, mainly with adults, as a basis for language development. He suggested a Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) which predisposes children to social interactions not just environmental exposure, this helps

the child to form a sense of identity and be motivated to expand their language. However, other theories suggest the processes are more intricate focussing on the ubiquitous properties of language and dialect, stating that sequences of language development are broadly similar in all societies, in other words the common features that occur in all languages suggest some part of language development must be genetic (Banyard 1996). Chomsky argued that speech sounds and meaning is not a simple association relationship, as suggested by behaviourists, but instead we need to distinguish between the arrangement of words in assertion and the logical, grammatical relationships. He proposed that humans have an innate language acquisition device (LAD) permitting children to listen to the speech of others, extract the grammatical rules and apply them to their own language (Cardwell 1996). We can see that both environmental and innate factors have a role to play in the child's development of language. The way in which adults talk to babies and young children is misleadingly labelled 'motherese', the misleading part being that it is all adults, and some older children, who talk to them in this way. This type of speech is characterised by higher pitched voice teamed with varied and exaggerated intonation (Fernald 1985).

Within the same language sample as before the adult can be seen to bring four prominent contributions to the conversation, each of which will play a part in enabling the child's speech to develop further. The first is linguistic competence, the adult shares their knowledge with the child in lines 10 and 11 giving a name to the day of the week where a particular event occurs. Secondly, during the sample, although the whole class is present, the adult remains focused on T and devotes their time and attention to him alone. She also allows him time to think about his answer to

questions (see comment after line 18). She uses child-directed speech, not in the typified 'motherese' sense as the child is six years old, but her language is clear and of a level which is appropriate for him. Snow (1986) calls these 'semantically contingent utterances'. Lastly, the adult can be seen to scaffold the child's language in lines 10 and 20, she provides him with some of the support and encouragement he needs to talk further.

The level of control the adult has over the conversation can be categorised by Wood (1986) stating five levels of, enforced repetition (being the most control), two choice questions, WH type questions, personal contribution, and phatics (being the least control). Looking at the coding in red on the sample (appendix 1) we can see the adult has a medium to high control over the conversation asking either two choice questions (lines 5, 15) or WH type questions (lines 1, 11, 24). The level of control she takes in the conversation is most probably due to the structured environment in which it is taking place and the need to manage the time they have efficiently. By changing her use of questioning the teacher may have been able to change the child's responses, and thus develop his language further. Many of the child's answers are concise, only on one occasion does he talk around the subject (lines 14-19). By using less two-choice questions and adding more personal contributions the adult may have allowed the child more chance to express his opinions.

Therefore we can see many positives and negatives, in terms of the adults role, in the conversation. It is possible to summarise that although the adult provides many key features which help to develop the child's language further there are points which

could be altered to make the conversation more productive. These need to be taken into account by early years practitioners when talking to young children.

Section 3 – Language Activity

The context of the writer is as a learning support assistant (LSA) within a nursery school under supervision of the local education authority (LEA). The school educates approximately forty children between the ages of 3 ½ and 4 ½, divided into two two-and-a-quarter hourly sessions, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon.

There is a nursery teacher/head teacher, nursery nurse and two LSA's present during each session plus one or two parents changing according to a rota. The day prior to the activity the children visited a working flour mill and the writer was interested to learn what language they had gathered from the experience, and to attempt to expand and support this language through a play activity. A plan of the activity can be seen in appendix 2. A transcript of the conversation that occurred during the activity can be seen in appendix 3.

A play activity, involving toy versions of objects the children would have encountered the day before, was chosen because of the well documented evidence for children learning language through play. Blackburne (1997) emphasises the use of play as a means of learning language. She states evidence from Steiner schools across the country, whose emphasis is learning through play, showing children in these schools achieve higher in language tests than children of the same age in mainstream schooling.

There are three main strategies that the adult uses to try to aid the children in talking about their experiences and to expand their language. The adult uses questioning as a means of discovering what the children could recall about the trip (line 8) and to assess how much language they have surrounding the topic (lines 2 and 21). This method was also used to keep the conversation on track and direct it where the adult wished (line 17). As a means of extending the children's language the adult models language (lines 27-28 and 38-39), and labels objects for the children (lines 19 and 31). As a way of general motivation the adult is seen to use some positive verbal reinforcement, as promoted by Skinner (lines 4 and 27).

During the activity the children talk freely and easily about their visit. They are able to recount, and with help from the adult, sequence the processes of turning wheat into flour. They also attempt to grind their own flour using a pestle and mortar. They answer questions directed at them by the adult and talk around the subject among themselves. The children show they have a good range of vocabulary surrounding the visit and of rotation, we can see they mention almost all of suggested vocabulary in the activity plan (appendix 2). From the activity the children were learning that the majority of the language they were using was correct, and if not there was an alternative they could use. They were also learning that there was a specific sequence of events that lead grains of wheat to become flour. They will have also been introduced to some additional vocabulary which they will have hopefully have retained for use in the future. The adult learnt that it is important to vary the strategies that they use with the children to keep the children interested. As a follow-up activity the children could use flour in baking, this would give further opportunities to re-cap

on vocabulary used in this activity and introduce even more, this could relate to what happens to the flour when it is cooked. If this activity was carried out again it would be beneficial if the adult used more positive verbal reinforcement, this seems to be limited looking at the transcript. Less structured, and more open-ended questions would allow the adult to possibly see more of the language the children had in other areas, the questions used in the activity may have channelled the children's language too specifically and not allowed their full range of vocabulary to be assessed.

Discussion

The language development of children can be seen to have both environmental and innate contributors which can be illustrated by a variety of theory, this development goes through a range of complex stages before the final grammatically correct adult-like stage is reached and this may continue beyond the early years. It seems that some form of adult interaction is vital to language development and there are various methods used by the adult to promote, scaffold and extend the child's language. Working in an early years setting the writer discovered that by giving children opportunities to speak without adult interaction it is possible to find out the type of vocabulary children have, and by including adult interaction this vocabulary can be extended further. It is important therefore to maintain a balance of situations with and without adult interaction to get the best language out of children, this should be taken into account by early years practitioners.

Bibliography

- Banyard, P (1996) *Applying Psychology to Health* London: Hodder and Stoughton
- Blackburne, L (1997) *Play is the Pivot* Times Educational Supplement
- Bruce, T and Meggitt, C (1999) *Child Care and Education* London: Hodder and Stoughton
- Cardwell, M (1996) *A-Z Psychology Handbook* London: Hodder and Stoughton
- Clark, E V (1979) *Building a Vocabulary: Words for Objects, Actions and Relations* in Hoff-Ginsberg, E (1997) *Language Development* California, USA: International Thomson Publishing
- Crystal, D (1986) *Listen to Your Child* Middlesex: Penguin
- Dewart, H and Summers, S (1995) *The Pragmatics Profile of Everyday Communication Skills in Children* NFER-Nelson
- Fernald, A (1985) *Four-month-old infants prefer to listen to motherese* in Banyard, P and Grayson, A (eds) (2000) *Introducing Psychological Research* Hampshire: Palgrave
- Hoff-Ginsberg, E (1997) *Language Development* California, USA: International Thomson Publishing
- Snow, C (1986) *Conversations with Children* in Fletcher, P and Garman, M (eds) *Language Acquisition* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Wells, G (1986) *The Meaning Makers: Children Learning Language and Using Language to Learn* London: Hodder and Stoughton
- Winyard, S (1996) *The Development of Communication – Speech and Language Acquisition* in Kersner, M and Wright, J (eds)
- Wood, D., Wood, H., Griffiths, A and Howarth, I (1986) *Teaching and Talking with Deaf Children* Chichester: John Wiley

Language Sample

T is six years old and is in his third term of Year 1. He is partaking in a weekly show-and-tell where children are asked to share news or a hobby with their classmates, he has taken part in this activity several times before. T has chosen to talk about what games he plays with his friends from outside school. The adult addressing the child is the teacher and the session is taking place in the classroom with twenty-eight other children present. The sample taken was approximately seven minutes long.

Teacher:	T is going to do his show-and-tell about what games he plays with his friends after school, what are your friends names T?		3
T	My friend Aaron lives in a big flat and my friend Hannah lives in a house just like mine.		
Teacher:	Do your friends live near your house?	5	2
T:	Yes, very close by.		
Teacher:	What do you do with your friends?		3
T:	Well, every, erm, day which is my showin' day we go there after school.		
Teacher:	Which is a Thursday, so you go there every Thursday. What do you do when you're there?	10	3
T:	Erm, sometimes, if it's nice, we go out in the garden and some other times we, erm, do some drawing. Erm, sometimes I take pictures from school which I haven't finished and do them there.		
Teacher:	Do you ever go to Aaron's flat to play?		2
T:	Yes, erm, we play in the front room and in his bedroom we like to play with toys and sometimes when I went over to stay he asked me to bwing all my Batman stuff so we could play Batman	15	
	[Teacher pauses for around 30 seconds to allow T to think]		
T:	...and his best programme is called Robot Wars which I don't know much about, I only know they battle, Joe was bwingin' loads of videos for us to watch that they had taped.		
Teacher:	What do you like to watch on telly? I think the other children	20	3

would like to know.

T: Erm, I like to watch Superman and I like to watch my telly when I come home from school, I like the Tweenies bestest. I wanted to get the Tweenie house which is a big toy but Mummy said is cost too much.

25

Teacher: Who's your favourite Tweenie?

3

T: Milo.

Plan of Language Activity

Topic	Activity	Language Functions	Language Structures	Vocabulary
Visit to a flour mill and rotation	<p>Small group with adult support:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recounting the processes used to turn wheat into flour 2. Describing some other objects that may be related to the topic of rotation 	<p>Recounting</p> <p>Describing</p> <p>Describing</p>	<p>The tractors ... The wheels ... The water ...</p> <p>Round went the wheels The flour was white</p> <p>The windmill goes round The wheels go round</p>	<p>Field Wheat/grains Farmer Tractor Combine harvester Mill Water/river/stream Wheels Round/turn Grind Flour Sacks Bread Pestle and mortar Windmill</p>

Language Sample

James and Daniel are both four years old and are in their third term in the nursery school. They are taking part in a small group play activity involving themselves and a learning support assistant (LSA). The LSA has arranged a range of toys which link in with a visit to a working flour mill that happened the day before the activity. Arranged are two tractors, a combine harvester, some grains of wheat, a wooden windmill, a pestle and mortar and a piece of door mat cut to look like a field of corn. The children have been told that the toys have been arranged in another room and asked if they would like to play with them. They do not know they are being recorded.

J = James

D=Daniel

A=Adult

J: 'There was one of these at the mill' [holds up toy tractor]

A: 'Do you know what it's called?'

J: 'A tractor'

A: 'That's right. Good boy.'

D: 'Did you go to the mill?' [addressing adult] 5

A: 'No, did you have fun?'

J & D: 'Yes.'

A: 'What else did you see?'

D: 'Big stones, going round and round, making some grass all squashed into flour.' 10

J: 'Yeah ... they went round and round and round.'

A: 'What made them go round?'

J: 'Water ...' [interrupted]

D: '... a river made this big wheel go round like this' [spins hands around one another to motion the wheel] 15

J: 'Then they put the flour into bags for bread.'

A: 'How did they collect the wheat from the fields? Can you remember?'

D: 'They cut it with a big tractor with a thing on the back.'

A: 'That's called a combine harvester.'

J: [playing with windmill] 'Round and round, look!' 20

A: 'Yes, what's that called J?'

J: 'A windmill, silly.'

D: [Pulls the sleeve of the adults jumper] 'Then the tractor took it to the mill.'

A: 'Can you see what this does?' [holds up pestle and mortar] 25

D: 'It makes those seeds [points to grains of wheat] into flour.'

A: 'Yes. Those seeds are actually the grains of wheat that were cut down from the fields.'

J: [taking the pestle and mortar from the adult] 'You bang it like this.'
[begins to bang pestle into the mortar] 30

A: 'What happens if you use the pestle, this bit [shows J the pestle], to push the grains of wheat down hard?'

J: [continues as shown for a couple of minutes, D watching eagerly]
'Flour! Look white flour at the bottom!'

D: 'Where? Oooh!' 35

A: 'What did we have to do to make the flour then?'

D: 'J squashed the wheat seeds with that bangy thing.'

A: 'So J ground the grains of wheat until they split open and flour came out. Just like those big stones were doing at the mill.'

D: 'Is there enough for a cake?' 40

A: 'I don't think so, maybe if we add some more wheat.'

D: 'It's my turn' [snatches the pestle and mortar from J]

A: 'What other things can you see on the table that goes round?'

J: 'The windmill, and the wheels on the tractor.'

D: 'There are wheels on my mums car, and on the bus.' 45

J: [singing] ‘The wheels on the bus go round and round ...’