LANGUAGE &
COMMUNICATION
in Primary Schools

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CHAPTER 1

EARLY LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT
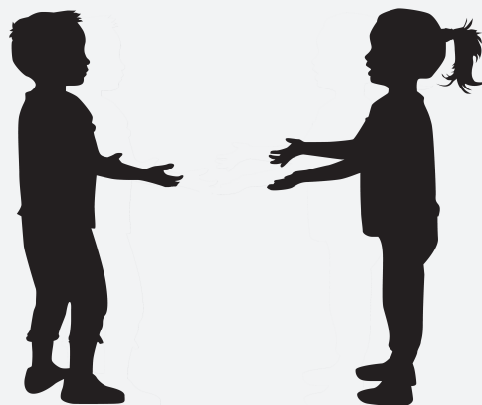
Children spend many hundreds of hours in primary school learning to read and write. But by the time they start school, they have already largely mastered spoken language, a far more complex and challenging undertaking, and they do this without formal teaching and in their earliest years. It is a remarkable achievement. They learn to produce speech sounds clearly enough to be understood; they learn thousands of words; they combine those words in unlimited ways to convey meaning; and they learn to adapt their language to different situations. How do they do it? This chapter will outline children's early language development and also how it can be supported effectively in the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Theories of language development

Early behaviourist theories about how children acquire language (Skinner, 1957; Bandura, 1977) suggested that children learn to talk through imitating

the language around them. Adults' positive responses encourage children to repeat what they hear, reinforcing the learning. Examples of children doing just this can be heard all the time: it can be quite unnerving for a teacher of young children to hear children playing schools and accurately reproducing the teacher's pet phrases. However, this theory does not explain children producing language they have never heard and which is not reinforced, such as the regularised verb forms which are common among three and four year olds – 'I goed', 'I wented', 'I eated'.

Chomsky's (1971) theory of a *language acquisition device* proposed a very different view from the behaviourist one. He suggested that all children are born with an innate capacity for language which allows them to make sense of the language they hear all around them, and see patterns and rules in it which they can then apply. The two views come together in the *social interactionist view* held by theorists such as Bruner (1986), who suggested that while children are active language learners, constantly working out for themselves how language works, they are supported in this by adults who provide a rich language environment and adapt their own language to meet the child's needs. Families may, for example, adopt children's own words for objects: Meg, aged two, called babies' dummies *plugs* and duvets *lids*, generalising according to the function of the objects, and the rest of the family used these words for some time. This support and encouragement begins long before children are actually talking; adults speaking to babies as if they can understand and as if their responses can be understood was considered by Murray and Trevarthen (1986) to be very important in motivating children to communicate. The desire to communicate is extremely strong in most children, and this matters because there is a huge amount to learn in order to become a skilled language user.

Strands of language development

Learning to talk involves different sets of skills and knowledge, which were described in the DfES training materials *Communicating Matters* (2005) as *strands*. This way of looking at language is useful in getting to grips with what is involved in language development, and in assessing and supporting that development. The four strands identified are:

1. Knowing and using sounds and signs (phonological development).
2. Knowing and using words (vocabulary development).
3. Structuring language (syntax).
4. Making language work (pragmatics).

The phrase 'knowing and using' can be seen as a reference to another way of looking at language – *receptive language* (what we take in and understand) and *productive language* (what we actually say). These in turn can be aligned with the Early Learning Goals for the end of the Early Years

Foundation Stage (DfE, 2014), where the goals for listening and attention and for understanding map on to receptive language, while the goal for speaking relates to productive language. The distinction can be useful as children's receptive language will always be ahead of their productive language, as is true, of course, of all language users: we all understand vocabulary and constructions which we would not be able to use successfully. We tend to be more aware of productive language, naturally, and it is important if we have concerns about a child's language to note whether these relate to productive language alone or both productive and receptive.

Parents will often describe their children as 'late talkers' or 'early talkers'. While even deciding what constitutes the milestone of a child's first word is difficult, it is true that there is wide variation in terms of the rate of children's language learning, and the age at which, for example, they begin to combine words. It is important also to note that language does not always develop uniformly across all four strands. A child may have a wide vocabulary and use complex grammatical constructions but not be able to produce a number of speech sounds, for example. However, accepting that wide variation is to be expected, it is still useful to have a picture of what can be seen when in terms of development in the four strands, in order to have some understanding of whether a child's language development is delayed in one or more strands. The following table provides an overview.

	Phonology	**Vocabulary**	**Syntax**	**Pragmatics**
6 months– 2 years	Babbling includes a growing range of sounds and increasingly reflects the patterns of the language heard.	First words are recognised at around a year; production always lags behind but by 2, children may use around 100 words, although individual variation is huge.	Single words are used to convey different meanings, such as statements and requests. Word combination usually starts when children have 50–100 words.	Young babies respond to adult communication and take turns in interactions, making eye contact, smiling and vocalising. By 2, children answer simple questions.
2–4 years	Sounds are usually heard but not always produced correctly, and as a result some words are only recognisable to parents and carers, and even those close to the child will not understand everything that is said.	The rate of learning increases to about 10 words a day.	Appropriate word order begins to be used, and questions, imperatives and negatives are used. Connectives are increasingly used to express a range of meanings.	Children can start and maintain conversations. They give basic recounts of events and tell simple stories, but often crucial information is omitted or unnecessary information is included because they do not recognise the needs of the listener.

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	Phonology	Vocabulary	Syntax	Pragmatics
4–6 years	Children continue to refine production of speech sounds. They can 'hear' rhymes and use vocalisations in play. A few sounds may still cause difficulties (e.g. l, s, r, v, z, ch, sh, th) and some may be ordered wrongly in words, e.g. aminal for animal, hostipal for hospital.	Vocabulary continues to increase, with more specialised words, politeness terms and the language of reasoning, e.g. might, because. Understanding of word meaning becomes deeper, e.g. multiple meanings, effect of context.	Constructions become increasingly sophisticated.	Children are able to recognise the listener's perspective and clarify misunderstandings. They modify their language to suit the social setting. Language is increasingly used in conjunction with other modes of meaning making, e.g. playing, drawing, constructing.

At four years old, on school entry, most children:

- use language which is largely correct;
- use many connectives;
- use language for many purposes;
- give connected descriptions of recent events;
- retell stories, but do not always distinguish fact from fantasy;
- ask challenging questions;
- internalise talk in play;
- talk in role;
- talk themselves through a new task;
- are learning social language (please, thank you, sorry, etc.).

Each of the four strands will now be considered in more detail.

Phonological development

Children need to be able to hear the separate sounds, or phonemes, in words, and to produce them. English is a phonologically complex language, with (depending a little on regional accents) 20 vowel phonemes, such as /aw/ and /ai/, and 24 consonant phonemes, such as /f/ and /ch/. The consonant phonemes can be combined in 49 different clusters at the beginning or end of syllables, including clusters of three such as the cluster at the beginning of 'straight'. Children take a long time to learn to produce all the English phonemes accurately in all positions in words. Their early speech is full of

phonological simplifications such as 'bo' for 'ball', 'guck' for 'duck' and 'bikkit' for 'biscuit'. This can make their speech difficult to understand. Difficulties producing sounds are likely to last longer than those related to hearing, so that by the age of four there are still some sounds which children often find difficult, such as /l/, /ng/, /t/ in the middle of words such as bottle, /z/ at beginning of words, /zh/ and /ch/. Even five year olds may still pronounce /th/ as /f/ and /r/ as /w/. However, it is worth noting that some mispronunciations, and even mis-spellings of words, may be a result of mis-hearing the words, so that *windowsill* might be pronounced *windowsilve* and *beautiful* be spelled 'broowtfl'. In addition to the complexities of the sound system of English, the language also has complex and inconsistent stress patterns: consider which syllables are stressed in the word 'medicine' and which in the word 'medicinal', for example.

Vocabulary development

Children need to learn to recognise, understand and produce words and phrases. Vocabulary significantly affects language comprehension, and is one of the most significant predictors of educational success (Feinstein and Duckworth, 2006) and the variation by school starting age is huge: Waldfogel and Washbrook (2010) compared the vocabulary of children from affluent backgrounds with those from poor backgrounds, and found that the gap in vocabulary development was about 11 months, far larger than for other cognitive skills. Vocabulary development can usefully be seen as involving not only breadth – the number of words known – but also depth – clarifying and developing understanding of the meaning of words already known. Children begin to understand that some words have more than one meaning, as can be seen in the following example, where a four year old is looking at a book with an adult.

> Adult: What kind of bird is it, do you know?
> Child: No, you tell me.
> Adult: It's a robin.
> Child: A robin – that's a funny name.
> Adult: Why?
> Child: Cos my friend is called Robin, and he's not a bird!

Other words depend on context for their meaning: children need to understand that a big rabbit will be much smaller than a small elephant, for example. Children also need to develop their understanding of more abstract

words such as those connected with causality and possibility; for example, at five years old they still do not understand the relative likelihood of 'possibly', 'probably' and 'definitely', and even by the age of nine only 80 per cent of children can discriminate between them successfully (Hoffner et al., 1990).

Structuring language (syntax and morphology)

Children need to be able to combine words in order to communicate more complex meanings than can be conveyed by single words. They have to learn the rules that govern how words can be combined into sentences; for example, basic word order in English is subject, verb, object (e.g. The boy ate the apple), but this is not the case in all languages. From single words children start to combine two words, often using words such as 'more' and 'no' in combination with many other words. Utterances become longer and longer, particularly once the word 'and' begins to be used, and grammatical complexity also increases, with a wider range of connectives used to express more sophisticated meanings, and increasing ability to express negatives and ask questions.

As well as developing syntax – putting words together in the right order to express ideas – children begin early on to develop an understanding of morphemes – parts of words which carry meaning. So a root word such as 'pick' can be altered in meaning by the addition of the past tense ending –ed or the prefix 'un'. Roger Brown's (1973) classic study of the language development of three children, confirmed by later studies, showed that grammatical morphemes tend to appear in the same order, with, for example, the –ing verb ending (eating, running) appearing first, at somewhere between 19 and 28 months, and the –s plural ending (apples, socks) at between 24 and 33 months. Other morphemes such as irregular verb forms (e.g. she has, he does) and contractions such as *I'm happy* and *She's eating* may not appear until around the age of four.

Pragmatics

Children need to recognise that language varies in different social situations and for different purposes, and to be able to produce language appropriate to the context. Four year olds, for example, modify their language when talking to younger children, using simpler vocabulary, shorter sentences and a higher tone. Also by the age of four, language may be used deliberately to shock. By five to seven years, the peer group becomes more important; children may alter their accent to fit in with school friends, for example. They develop more sophisticated ways of gaining attention, and begin to understand indirect commands such as 'Who can be ready first?' or 'It's a bit of a mess in here'.

Factors affecting early language development

When children arrive in nursery or the Reception class, their early experiences may have been very different. Some children will have heard huge amounts of spoken language, much of it directed at them, from birth onwards. They will have had adults making sustained efforts to communicate with them, listening and responding sensitively. They will have talked about the past and the future as well as what was going on at the time. They will have shared books, rhymes and songs, on a daily basis or even many times a day. They will have had regular opportunities to interact with other children. There will have been many shared first-hand experiences, which they will have talked about beforehand and during the experience, and which are recounted and discussed many times afterwards.

The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project (Sylva et al., 2004) found that the home learning environment was more significant than socio-economic factors such as parental income, occupation and level of education in terms of children's learning. The home learning environment was described as parental involvement in activities such as reading to children, sharing songs and rhymes with children, playing with letters and numbers and visiting the library. This is a very important finding in the light of the correlation between family income and vocabulary referred to earlier: it suggests that while wealthier families are more likely to provide a good home learning environment than poorer families, the money itself is not the crucial factor but rather simple shared activities which cost nothing. Early Years practitioners have an important role in encouraging all families to provide these activities for their young children.

While it is evident that the wide variation in terms of children's language skills on school entry is affected by their experiences at home, it would be wrong to assume that schools will always offer children from less advantaged homes a better environment for language development. Two key studies in the 1980s, comparing home and school, first raised issues about the different language experiences provided by school and home, and suggested that the differences between home and school were far greater than those between different homes.

Home and school

Gordon Wells' (1985) large-scale longitudinal Bristol study suggested that even in the most disadvantaged homes the language support offered to children was better than that which they received at school. Tizard and Hughes (2002) studied four-year-old girls, half from relatively advantaged homes and half from relatively disadvantaged, who were recorded at home and nursery. They contrasted the rich, sustained conversations at home, in

which children questioned, debated and reasoned, with the much more limited interactions with nursery staff. Both studies suggested a need for continuity as children moved from home to school, with schools focusing far more on the collaborative meaning-making that was such a feature of talk at home. Wells advocates more one-to-one interaction and less time in large groups as one way of achieving this. Of course, it is possible that in the 30 years since these studies were carried out there have been changes either in the home or the educational setting, or both. Wells (2009) has suggested that the increase in numbers of families with young children where both parents work outside the home might have changed the picture. Changes in Early Years practice, with a greater emphasis in many settings on child-initiated activity rather than teacher-led, may also have altered the situation.

The following transcript is an example of the kind of talk at home which Wells, and Tizard and Hughes, noted. Alex, aged three, is talking to his father about how babies are born. Emma is his younger sister.

> Alex: How did the doctors get Emma out?
> Father: Oh! Emma came out by herself; the doctors just watched. Yes.
> Alex: Why did the doctors watch?
> Father: They were just there to help if they were needed.
> Alex: How did Emma come out?
> Father: She was born out of Mummy's tummy.
> Alex: Yeah. How did be born out of she's tummy?
> Father: Well, there's a special place for babies to be born from, and that's how she was born.
> Alex: I really think she got out – got out by magic.
> Father: By magic? Yes, that's a good way to get out, isn't it?
> Alex: Did you say magic?
> Father: Mm, sort of baby magic.
> Alex: I know how to get out – they – squeeze tummies off.
> Father: Aha.
> Alex: How did they put Mummy's tummy back together?
> Father: Aha – er well it takes time; it goes back into the right shape again, doesn't it?
> Alex: But how does – no, you tell me how – er – the tummy goes back on.

Father: Well, the tummy never comes off really. Emma just comes out of a special hole, and then the tummy gradually gets smaller and smaller. Do you remember when Mummy's tummy was big?

Alex: Yeh. Well – well an actually Emma fitted pointing up – we fitted pointing up, the babies did actually… then by the time we was big was – was Emma anxious in Mummy's tummy?

Father: Emma was quite small when she was born.

Alex: Er – how – how does the – which was the special way to get Emma out?

Father: How – how do you think Emma came out?

Alex: Ha! Um – I – I know how Emma get – Emma came out of Mummy's toes!

Father: Out of Mummy's toes?

Alex: Yeah.

Father: Yes, that's a good idea.

Alex: Er Emma – er – I've got an idea – there – there were buttons on Mummy to get Emma out.

Father: There's a button on Mummy?

Alex: Yes.

Father: Oh.

Alex: There's a button, and then we came out. There were two buttons – there was actually there's four buttons.

Father: Four buttons?

Alex: Yeh.

Father: And that lets Emma out?

Alex: Yeh – button let Emma come out.

In this short extract from a much longer conversation, Alex plays a full part in the conversation. He talks as much as his father does: his mean length of utterance (the number of words in each turn) is 9.1 while his father's is 8.6. He chooses the topic, and we see him exploring ideas: he has several theories about how babies are born – the squeezing off of the stomach, the toes theory, the buttons theory and magic. He asks his father a number of questions – significantly more than his father asks him – and is not always satisfied with the answers he receives. He speculates and reasons, and also shows awareness of the thinking process: 'I really think…', 'I've got an idea…'. The extract exemplifies both the astounding progress that is made in language in the first years of life,

and also the huge importance of adult support. Both of these themes will be returned to and developed in following chapters; the challenge for Early Years practitioners is to provide language support of this quality within their settings.

Supporting language development in the Early Years Foundation Stage

Auditing provision

The notion of communication-friendly environments has become increasingly important in recent years, as part of the response to concerns about children's language development. In comparison with many homes, Early Years settings are not the most promising of environments for supporting language: the size of the setting, the noise and bustle, the number of children, and the number of adults, who may have difficulty getting to know individual children well when they are responsible for a relatively large number of children over a relatively short time (3–5 hours a day for possibly only one school year) – all of these factors may cause difficulties. It is important therefore to review provision and ensure the setting is as communication-friendly as possible.

The national Every Child a Talker initiative (2008–2011) provided valuable audit tools for settings. It suggested that staff look for 'talking hot-spots', where children, or children and adults, seemed to engage most readily in talk. These could be places but also times in the daily routine. Did children talk most in corners of the setting or larger spaces? Did they talk most at snack time or during child-initiated activities? 'Cold-spots' were also worth noting: what places and times seemed to inhibit talk? This knowledge could then be used to enhance provision. For example, many settings began to provide dens and small, secluded corners where children seemed more confident to talk. Seating in the outdoor area – a circle of tree stumps, for example – might significantly enhance the amount of talking that took place outside. There might be more conversation at snack time if children sat around a small table at a time of their own choosing, rather than all together on the floor. The Every Child a Talker programme also advised practitioners to audit children, both as groups and as individuals, to see when and where they engaged in talk. Adult perceptions of what goes on may be very different from the reality, and it may be that some children tend to choose activities where adults are less present and sustained talk is more difficult, such as physical play outdoors, while others tend to gravitate towards adults and monopolise conversation. Since the latter are likely to be the ones who find talk rewarding, because of the rich language experience they have at home, it

is possible that the children who most need language support in their early years setting are least likely to get it, unless staff recognise this and take action.

It is also useful to audit noise levels in the setting. Background noise can affect concentration and language learning, particularly for younger children and for those with some level of hearing impairment: glue ear, for example. Again, it may be that there are noisy areas (which some children may shun) and noisy times. Soft furnishings can help to reduce noise levels, and there needs to be consistent reinforcement of expectations in relation to voice levels – the 'quiet indoor voice' as opposed to the 'playground voice'.

Adult language with young children

Most adults' language is markedly different when they talk with young children. Whether consciously or not, they adapt their language to the needs of the child in a variety of ways. These include:

- using shorter utterances;
- using a restricted vocabulary, with an emphasis on words referring to common objects, actions and activities, and relatively few adjectives and adverbs;
- marking the ends of sentences by pauses;
- speaking more slowly – typically at half the speed of adult-adult talk;
- using many repetitions;
- emphasising words important to the meaning;
- using simpler syntax and morphology, with verbs usually in the present tense, and fewer conjunctions;
- focusing talk largely on the current shared context.

In the Early Years Foundation Stage, it is important that all practitioners modify their language appropriately in order to support the children's language development. This means that they do need to be conscious of making the adaptations listed above, while at the same time ensuring that they do provide challenge – for example, by introducing and teaching new vocabulary.

Purposes for talk

A communication-friendly environment is not just a physical environment: it also includes the experiences provided for children and interaction with adults. Interesting resources and activities should stimulate talk. Visits and

visitors provide shared experiences which are often talked about long after the event. Children need reasons to talk, whether this is to ask for or give information, give orders, persuade, entertain. Think how persistent they can be when asking for a treat: 'pester power' shows language very much in action – or consider how acute children's hearing is when adults are talking about things the children are not supposed to know about. The following example shows a child demonstrating a huge step forward in language, in response to a real need to communicate.

Elizabeth, aged four, had significant language delay and had never used question words. When she left the nursery with a nursery nurse for a small group activity elsewhere in the school, the adult set off in a different direction as the usual room was not available.

> Elizabeth: Us going a wrong way.
> Adult: [who would normally have provided an explanation] Yes.
> Elizabeth: [pause] Why... us going a wrong way?

When planning activities it is important, therefore, to think carefully about what opportunities for talk will be offered. Tasting different fruits, a common activity in Early Years classrooms, may be very enjoyable but asking children to think of words to describe the fruit does not seem to have any real purpose from the child's point of view. The children do not have an extensive vocabulary to help them distinguish between the taste of a mango and the taste of a kiwi fruit, and indeed many adults would find this difficult. Also, the activity does not require more than brief responses – 'nice', 'sweet', 'yummy'; compare these to Alex's conversation with his father.

Planning for language development

It is important that all children, but particularly those whose language is less well developed, participate regularly in small group activities with a focus on language. Many of these are likely to focus on narrative – for example, telling or retelling stories, perhaps using props, puppets or small world toys. Role play is also likely to involve the development of narrative. Where the role-play theme is one which the children may not be very familiar with, it is important for adults to model not only possible scenarios but also language associated with the scenario. Chapter 6 looks in more detail at planning issues.

Case study   The Talking Time project

Dockrell et al.'s *Talking Time* project (2006) addressed concerns about the oral language skills of children entering school. An observational study in 12 inner-city nurseries showed that the best language support occurred in adult-led small group activities, but that many children did not choose to participate in such activities. The project involved training staff to lead regular small group sessions with a focus on developing language through creating narratives using role play, picture books or photographs. Staff were asked to avoid asking direct questions or following an inflexible script, or making children repeat what was said. All children participated in two 15-minute group sessions a week, in small groups of four to six, with a range of language levels in each group.

The progress of children in the project was compared with a control group where there was no intervention and a group receiving a story-reading intervention. The study showed that the structured language activities did improve children's language, but they did not catch up with age-related expectations. The improved quality of adults' language with children was generalised from the Talking Time activities to all interactions, but staff perceptions about language development and the children's level of language were not altered. The research team emphasised the importance of practitioner knowledge about language development and the need to plan regular language-focused small group activities for children at risk of entering school with delayed language skills.

Supporting vocabulary development

Vocabulary is crucial to learning. The links between vocabulary and reading comprehension are well established, but children with limited vocabularies are likely to have difficulties with language comprehension generally, and where a child at home may ask about unfamiliar words, children at school will either try to work out the meaning of words they hear from the context, sometimes successfully but sometimes not, or may come to expect not to understand a proportion of what is said to them, and as a result to be less engaged with their learning. Of course, this is true of adults as well; we are often reluctant to ask about words or acronyms we do not understand, even when this interferes with our wider comprehension.

Key vocabulary is often identified in planning, but thought needs to be given to selecting the words to be taught, and the strategies for teaching. It is important first to check that the children do not already know

the words. Of course, it may well be that some children do and others do not, but no teacher would want to feel that children who have developed a wide vocabulary at home do not have opportunities to continue to extend it at school. Second, the words should be considered in the light of possible future use. If a word is so specialised that it is likely only to be used in relation to a specific topic, children may not have the opportunity to consolidate their knowledge and understanding of it by using it after the topic has ended. When a book is shared with children, thought should be given to which words in it should be a focus of vocabulary development, and when. Rather than interrupt the reading of a story to explain a word, for example, it may be pre-taught (shown and discussed beforehand) or discussed afterwards, when children can use the context of the whole text to guess what the meaning may be – a useful strategy.

Strategies for teaching words should include introducing the word in a meaningful context and planning carefully how to explain it. Many definitions given spontaneously in the classroom make no sense unless one already knows the word. The word should be repeated several times when it is first introduced, and then presented, if possible in different contexts, over the next few days. Children will often need to hear a word many times before they feel confident to use it in their own language, which is the ultimate goal. Adults should model an interest in words: 'That's a funny word!' 'That's a very long word.'

Talking with young children: good practice tips

There are many simple strategies which are likely to encourage children to talk and support their language development. It is useful to film or record yourself talking with children to get a realistic picture of how effectively you do this. Often it can be a shock to realise how little talking the children do, and how all our attempts to encourage them to speak, such as asking questions, seem to have the opposite effect from the intended one. Points to remember are:

Speak clearly. Particularly where children have some level of hearing loss, it is important to enunciate words clearly. This will slow your speech down, which is also beneficial.

Talk less. The children, rather than you as a skilled language user, need opportunities to talk.

Initiating talk. Choose carefully when to try to initiate a conversation. Your well-meaning question may be an unwelcome interruption for a child who is deeply engrossed in an activity. Watch and wait before you

say anything. If possible, allow the child to initiate the conversation rather than doing so yourself.

Get down to the child's level. Imagine how it must feel to have a conversation with someone twice your height. Focus on what the child is doing or looking at.

Gain attention before you begin to talk – for example, by saying the child's name.

Take turns. Be an equal partner in the talk, as you would expect to be with an adult. Both partners have the right to initiate topics and close the conversation. Do not interrupt the child's turns.

Select your starter. Avoid asking display questions to which you already know the answer, and which in any case are likely to prompt only very brief responses. Consider other initiations such as offering a comment or using starters such as 'I wonder why…?' If you are genuinely interested in what the child is doing, or what they think, it will be much easier to find something to say to get the conversation going.

Wait time. Give children time to respond. They need to process what you have said and then think about their response. Talk should be unhurried. Teach children that silence is acceptable and is often thinking time. Do not rush to fill silences; often teachers jump in while children are still formulating their thoughts.

Listen carefully to what children say. Often children are misunderstood or interesting remarks are ignored because adults are thinking more about their own part in the conversation than the child's contributions. Give yourself thinking time.

Clarify. If you do not understand what children are saying, ask them to say it again. If they repeat it and you still do not understand, ask them to show you. Some children will make every effort to get you to understand, as with Ruby who repeated 'back room keener' several times, when her teacher could not understand, and then returned to it later in the conversation, finally succeeding by replacing the phrase with 'hoover'. Other children quickly become frustrated or upset at their inability to communicate effectively.

Do not correct young children's grammar or pronunciation. It suggests that you are less interested in what they say than in how they say it, and that does not encourage communication. It is also remarkably ineffective: children will often go on saying 'I goed', 'I taked' and so on until they are ready to use the irregular but correct form. It is interesting to note that parents generally correct matters of fact but not language: for example, 'I ated it all up!' 'No, you haven't; there's lots left in your bowl.'

Use recasts of what children say in order to model correct pronunciation and grammar unobtrusively: for example, 'I splashing!' 'Yes, and I'm splashing too!'

Use expansions of what the child has said to model more complex grammar and new vocabulary: for example, 'I splashing!' 'Yes, we're both splashing in the puddle, aren't we?'

Use contrastive language to develop vocabulary: for example, 'It's muddy water, not clean water.'

Talking in sentences. Don't demand responses 'in full sentences'. In adult conversations many responses are not in grammatically complete sentences, but they give all the information that is required – indeed, often a full sentence would sound rather odd: 'Where did you put the shopping?' 'I put the shopping in the kitchen.'

Accept non-verbal responses. A shake of the head, a laugh or a shrug may communicate the child's meaning very effectively. Pushing a child to respond verbally may be counter-productive as it appears to devalue the child's non-verbal communication.

Final thoughts...

It is fascinating to observe young children's language developing, but in order to ensure the best outcomes, teachers in the Early Years need to have a good understanding of that development and of their role in supporting it, and a constant focus on language in all their interactions with children.

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