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Talk

Key themes

We can only learn to talk or sign if we are with other people.

Language and making meaning go together. When we do not understand the words we use, we are held back in our learning. This is why learning words empty of meaning does not remain with us.

We learn to talk most effectively when we are not feeling under pressure to perform. Then we can think straight, and the words come tumbling out. It is the same for children and adults. We need to be with people who are interested in our efforts to try to put ideas, thoughts, feelings and relationships into words or signs. When people are sensitive in the way they do this, everyone begins to talk in ways which lead to deeper conversations. We ponder on the what, why, when and where aspects of our lives. We begin to muse and ask questions. We make more of our experiences of life. We develop our learning together.

Oscar Wilde (in Pinker, 1995: 19) is quoted as remarking that 'It is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught'. A theme of this book is that we need to develop learning carefully, and that this requires great skill and sensitivity from adults. The best teaching is often indirect, and those observing may not realize it is happening because it is so subtle. Sophisticated and skilled teaching of this kind is often not appreciated by those who do not understand the complexities of learning.

Pinker (1995: 56) sees language development as what he calls a 'discrete combinatorial system'. This means that the language system in our brains can make infinite use of finite media. Grammar and speech sounds form the finite media. These can be formed into infinite combinations in the different languages of the world.

Rich language develops out of shared experiences with those who know how to talk fluently. Steels (2002: 2), working with robots at the SONY Computer Science Laboratory in Paris, has come to the view that language: 'particularly in its earliest phases, develops out of shared experiences, and so has to be grounded in the real world. In other words there has to be something to talk about.'

In no way does Steels suggest that the robots are learning language as humans do, but he does believe that language and meaning co-evolve. The two are intimately linked. Karmiloff-Smith (1992: 69) points out that children are both problem-solvers and problem-generators. She, like Steels, argues that children put enormous effort into meaning-making. They invent language as well as take in the language spoken to them.



'It's roundy, roundy. Look'

At Greengables, two girls are experimenting with oil and paint in the water tray. They chat to each other about what is happening. 'Mine's going round – and round – and round.' 'So's mine. Look. Look at mine. It's roundy roundy. Look.'

The rules of grammar

Steels (2002: 2) looks at the development of spoken grammar in a different way from many linguists. 'It's no frustrating set of rules to be used rigidly and to be grammatically correct. It's purely to help us to understand.' Like Whitehead (2002), he sees language as constantly evolving, with words changing their meaning, new words emerging and others fading, but also with the rules and grammar changing too.

He believes that Chomsky has a static view of language, with fundamental rules of grammar common to all languages and hardwired into the brain. Steels's work with computers which talk to each other and make meaning together raises some of the age-old arguments about how human language develops. Are linguistic rules and sounds encoded in the brain and genes, as Chomsky suggested? Or is it simply a matter of learning the rules, as the behavioural psychologists, such as Burrhus Frederic Skinner, thought? He did not think it was useful to theorize about mental states that could not be observed. It looks as if the answer is neither.

Instead, language is a complex interaction, through which babies from birth begin a lifelong process of what Calvin (1996: 88) calls 'intelligent guessing', as we communicate with ourselves and others and generate ideas. Intelligent guessing helps young children to listen to words and grammar and make sense that way. Intelligent inventing of language, using what they hear as best they can, helps them to speak. Speaking and listening go along together and help each other.

Developing language by talking and listening

Developing as monolinguals, bilinguals or multilinguals

Babies meet the huge challenge of having to find out what language is about. Children who are born with profound hearing loss or with complex needs have an even greater challenge in front of them. However, once babies and children have worked out how to invent language and crack the codes of different languages, a whole new world of opportunity opens up.

Whitehead, some of whose grandchildren are bilingual, explains the pleasure of seeing how children reveal what they understand about language as they become emergent speakers. Bilingual children regularly switch from one language to another, and they mix the two languages. They are certainly not demonstrating muddled thinking when they do this. Instead they are

showing us some very effective strategies they are using to build bridges from one language to another.

Trying out language

It is important that children are encouraged to try out a new language, or indeed their developing first language, free from pressure, without too much public attention. We have seen that as adults we have an important role to play in the way we have conversations with children singly or in small groups. Huge groups, when children are herded together, are not relaxed places for language or any other kind of learning. Indeed, language is inhibited and discouraged in such settings.

Children will talk more readily with one other interested, sensitive person, or sometimes, when appropriate, in small groups, where they feel safe to contribute, and where they do not have to constantly wait for the chance to speak. They can watch others speak, listen more easily and join in when they feel safe to do so, knowing their attempts to speak will be encouraged, and that no one will rush them, speak for them, criticize any errors or mock them.

'Sevcan (4 years old) is a relatively new pupil from Turkey, who spoke no English when she came to St. Francis School. She takes the mop to the hall area to "clean" it. The pail is by her foot, having no water in it. She uses her imagination. Sadman has lifted the brush and pan to help her. He is also learning to speak English.' (Lamb, 2001, narrative observation)

The children are communicating through play, non-verbally. They are free from pressure in making a story together, which will encourage them to try out words and phrases in English.

First words and phrases

Children do not talk in a vacuum. They need people to talk with, and interesting things to talk about. Their first words are about the people they love and important objects, such as drinking cups, spoons, pets, push-chairs or favourite toys. Both the people they talk with and the objects of their world reflect the cultural context in which they are growing up or visiting.

According to Mandler (1999), one of the first words children speak in the US is 'gone', but adults tend to miss what the child is trying to say. Instead they celebrate when children say 'Mama' or 'Dada'. She suggests that understanding of language and space develop together. The word 'gone' is the child's attempt to describe what is happening to the biscuit that falls off the

high-chair, as it moves from one part of space to another.

We can see that children are learning through the senses and movement, alongside developing language and the episodic memory system, and they begin to remember the words long-term. Of course, children remember and invent words which make meaning about their feelings, relationships and ideas.

Cultivating talk

Vygotsky (1978: 118) makes the distinction between ‘cultivating’ and ‘imposing’ learning. Adults tend to talk at children. What they need to do is to talk with them, if they are going to cultivate language so that it develops richly.

Talking with young children is thus very much like playing ball with them. What the adult has to do for this game to be successful, is first to ensure the child is ready with arms cupped, to catch the ball. The ball must be thrown gently and accurately so that it lands in the child's arms. When it is the child's turn to throw, the adult must be prepared to run wherever it goes and bring it back to where the child really intended it to go. (Gordan Wells, 1987: 50)

Sensitivity to what the child says

Anna Freud always believed that the best educators of young children do not require the children to follow them. They follow the children, and see each as an individual within a group.

Modern speech therapists like Manolson (1992) agree. She stresses the importance of allowing children to lead conversations. She thinks it is important for adults to share the moment with a child, and in doing so, to add language and experience. This means we need to avoid talking ‘for’ children because we are in a hurry. We need to tune into what the child is trying to say, or is saying without words. Then we find out how children feel and what they are thinking.

Manolson (1992) encourages adults to work in the following ways.

- Be face to face, and not to loom over children. (Bend the knees, get down on the floor, lie on your tummy, sit on the floor and give the child a chair.)
- Show that you are listening by echoing the baby's sounds, or by repeating what they have said. It's a flower, yes, a beautiful yellow flower.

- Interpret by guessing what the child has said if it is unclear, and use a questioning tone, or explain that you don't understand gently and encourage the child to keep trying different ways to communicate until you understand. Oh. You bumped your head. It hurts, does it? Rub it to help it stop hurting.
- Be a good turn taker. You cannot have a conversation unless you take turns with the child.
- Keep the conversation going. Tune into the child's non-verbal communication with you. Expand what you talk about.



When adults are sensitive to children's interests, children want to be with them

The last item, keeping the conversation going, is a real challenge to adults working with children to support their language development in ways which are right for each child. Some children have their own ideas, and are not eager to share them. Some love to talk to you. Some children are shy, while others, for one reason or another, have become withdrawn. Some chat away as they go, but do not pause to really engage in a good chat about something they will focus on.

Having interesting experiences to talk about

At Children's House, Nickie is sewing. He is supported in this by the staff member. She gets down to his level, and really listens to him as he tries to explain that the thread is tangling. She shows him that he needs to go in one side of the material and come out the other side. He needs her to keep reminding him of this.

She does not overwhelm him with too many teaching points. She focuses on one. She has chosen to talk about this with him because he has shown her and tried to tell her that this is his frustration. In this way, she helps him to succeed. He keeps going, with her support, and is free to choose his design. They discuss the choices he (not she) makes, as they go chatting along together.

Asking children questions

Asking children questions is a hazardous business. Questions only help language development and the development of shared sustained thinking and conversations if the adult genuinely wants to know the answer, and is sincere. Most questions we ask children are not of that sort.

Manolson (1992: 21) suggests that appropriate, sincere questions might:

- help children to anticipate. What next? What if? What now?
- allow children to choose and decide. Do you want to paint or to use the clay?
- extend a child's thinking. What's happening? How does it work?

One of the first people to take a long deep look at children's questions was Nathan Isaacs (in Isaacs, 1930: 291) the scientist husband of Susan Isaacs. He looked at the 'why' questions of four-year-olds. He had the emphasis right. Questions are only useful to children in developing their learning if they act as a starting-point for further investigation. They are a hopeless waste of time and energy when they become a way for adults to indulge in question-and-answer sessions. When questions are authentic, and act as a beginning of some kind of investigation, they are a valuable way of making conversations rich.

Questions from adults often become part of a power relationship (sometimes called hegemony) in which the adult holds all the power. When this happens, the adults ask questions to which they know the answers, and dismiss the children's questions, musings and queries as off-task.

Questions helping us to get in touch with other people's minds

The first year or so of life is typically spent developing some key words and phrases which help children to 'exchange meaning' and begin the 'complex business of getting two minds in contact', according to Whitehead (2002: 4). Once these are used spontaneously by the child, and recognized by family or carers and used with consistency, an explosion of language usually follows. 'What?' is followed by questions about when, where, how and why.

Questions helping children to see reason

We have seen that children are concerned from the start with words and talk about events in space, but the questions which develop from about two years of age show us that they are also fascinated by time, the reasons for things and what causes what to happen, because time as well as objects, space and reasons affect the way people act.

Learning to talk is as emotional as it is intellectual. Where Mummy has gone, when she will return, and why she went are events full of feeling. The investigations around answering these questions show how we can help children to face, deal with and manage their feelings if we support their thinking and help them to understand and talk about things in an intellectual way. 'Knowledge is continually restructured and revised in the light of experience.' (Goswami, 1998: 281)

Questions do not have to be attached to question marks. Saying 'I wonder', 'What if', 'Supposing' are other forms of question which also open up investigation and reflection for children.

Encouraging children to question

The best help adults can give to children is to help them to begin to ask their own questions, and to share their investigations and thinking through the 'shared sustained conversations' identified by Siraj-Blatchford (2002) as so important in developing learning.

At the Castlebrae family centre Christopher observed June, the nursery nurse, making the bread. 'What you do, June?' On being told that she was making bread for snack, he said, 'Me help you'. He followed instructions and kept a small piece of dough to make a roll for himself. (observation by Lyn Tarlton)

Through the question he asks June, Christopher knows about what will happen to the dough. He can move away from the present and into the future: bread. This knowledge helps him to bring more understanding to what needs to be done with the dough, now, in the present.

First-hand, real experience is vital for the development of language. Sharing experiences together cultivates language, because it is through real experience that children begin to make sense of their learning and to understand what people are saying to them. In Chapter 7, we shall look in detail at the way that children learn through their senses and through movement.

How adults are crucial

Unless children have real experiences which help them to understand the meaning of what people say to them, they do not speak and develop their talk. They depend on adults and other children in this. Adults are crucial in giving them added information.

When a child finds a bead that shines and shows it to us, we can share the moment by talking about it with him or her. A child will be eager to listen and take part because we are adding information about the bead. If the child drops the bead, we can say, 'Oops, did you see it bounce?' This adds vocabulary in a real situation. He or she will probably want to make it bounce again, and you can talk about it together. If the child then begins to throw the bead, you can say, 'It's fine to bounce the bead on the floor, but if you throw it, it might go in someone's eye, so I can't let you do that.'

Extending the conversation – increasing the vocabulary

Children can only increase their vocabulary if they are with people who offer them new words during the conversation.

- Naming. That's a car.
- Emphasizing the key word. That's a *car*.
- Explaining. Daddy goes to work in the car.
- Talking about feelings. You like going in the car, don't you?
- Describing. That car is very dirty.

- Pretending. Let's push the chair and pretend it's a car.
- Talking about what you did yesterday, or in the recent past.
- Talking about the future. Tomorrow we are going to Grandma's house in the car.

All the time that we are talking with children, we are using gesture, body language, facial expressions and other kinds of non-verbal communication. In this way we show children how we feel as we shake our head to say 'No'.

Some thoughts for an adult who wishes to support children's language development would be:

- If I say something, will you notice?
- If I say something, will you reply?
- Will we want to say more to each other?
- What will we talk about?

As we saw above, what we talk about with children is of deep importance. There is nothing like a really fascinating conversation between people, when each can contribute and develop their thoughts and feelings about something which interests everyone. Siraj-Blatchford et al. (DFES, 2002) shows that 'shared sustained thinking' and conversations make a huge contribution to the learning of young children (and probably throughout our lives). Children with a narrow vocabulary at three or four years of age are at a disadvantage as readers and writers, or in managing their own behaviour at the end of primary school.

Being cut off from talking with others is a major setback. It occurs, for instance, when people have strokes and lose speech; are unable to speak the language of others; and are isolated from others.

Rich language gives richness of quality in thinking, understanding, managing feelings, socializing and relating to others, and in the sense of embodiment.

In practice

- Do you take the time to talk with children? When you are rushing about focusing on the organizational side of the work, you might not be stopping to think why you are here. Remind yourself that you are here to make children's lives as rich as you can.
- When children approach you, do you get down to eye level with them, and listen and say something worth saying back, or do you just make a quick, polite reply and move on quickly?
- Do you follow up conversations with children? 'You know you showed me the model aeroplane you made, and I said it reminded me of a bi-plane, well, I found one in this book.'
- Do you follow up what interested a child, or do you follow up what interested you? You might find that you help children to learn more if you begin with what the child finds fascinating.
- Do you find that when you help one child to learn by following his or her interest, it spreads and gathers in other children?
- Do you find that when your observations of children are used to inform the planning you do with colleagues, your plans are much better, and everyone enjoys learning more?

Further reading

- Clarke, P. (1992) *English as a Second Language in Early Childhood*. Victoria, Australia: Free Kindergarten Association.
- Rice, S. (2001) 'Luke's Story', *Early childhood Practice: The Journal for Multi-Professional Partnerships* 3(2): 60–8.
- Whitehead, M. (1990) 'First Words. The Language Diary of a Bilingual Child's Early Speech', *Early Years* 10(2): 3–14.
- Whitehead, M. (2002) *Developing Language and Literacy with Young Children*, 2nd edn. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.