

Thinking About the Way Children Use Language

Kathy H. Barclay, Ed.D.

Professor

Department of Curriculum & Instruction
Western Illinois University
One University Circle, Macomb, IL 61455
United States of America

“If children cannot master the fundamentals of language during their preschool years, they are greatly at risk for educational achievement, particularly for reading skills. Furthermore, their limited verbal skills affect their social skills. It is difficult for a youngster to win an argument over a desired toy if he or she cannot negotiate verbally” (Rice, p. 25).

Language development relies heavily upon the active and supportive assistance of adults (Love et al, 2002, 2005). Parents and teachers must be sensitive to factors affecting the language development of their children, and aware of each individual’s specific language abilities. As children develop, they display many interesting features of their language and begin to use language in varied ways (Gleason, 2005). Their learning is social, and they come from families or social groups where the language they have acquired has its own “rhythm, tempo, and volume level, their own amount of communication and interchange” (Genisi & Dyson, 2009, p. 4). Although the ability to speak well is viewed as a positive characteristic in the United States, individuals in some cultures may think less positively of someone who talks a great deal (Resnick & Snow, 2009). These and other language differences present among children in a given classroom or school, have a tremendous impact upon children’s ability to learn to speak, using a more formal classroom discourse.

Expectations for language use in the kindergarten and primary grades, as determined by state and school district standards, typically include such benchmarks as using the correct form or irregular verbs, speaking in complete sentences, subject-verb agreement, and use of personal pronouns (Moats, 2004). Seldom are seen benchmarks regarding the meaning and function of children’s language, despite the fact that “talking a lot” is cited as an important habit of speaking for children to develop in the preschool and primary years (Resnik & Snow, 2009). Genishi and Dyson (2009) point out that “few classrooms and curricula...allow children either the time or space to learn about or through language in a way that they choose or that enables them to utilize what they already know” (p. 7). Even in the best schools, children are very seldom provided ample opportunities for extended, interactive conversations (Resnik & Snow, 2009). In *Speaking and Listening for Preschool Through Third Grade*, a publication developed as part of the New Standards project, Resnik and Snow share knowledge and skills children should acquire relative to oral communication. In their book, these researchers talk about the need for children to have “‘air time’—opportunities to talk—and ‘ear time’—the attention of fluent, responsive adults—to develop oral language skills” (p. 5).

The New Standards, a joint project of the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh and The National Center on Education and the Economy, include three standards for speaking: (1) habits, which is defined as: talking a lot, talking to one’s self, conversing at length on a topic, and discussing books; (2) kinds of talk and results genres, which includes: narrative, explaining and seeking information, getting things done, and producing and responding to performances; and (3) language use and conventions: rules of interaction, word play, phonological awareness and language awareness, and vocabulary and word choice. Seen throughout these standards and accompanying indicators is a strong emphasis on development of functional language skills and abilities. Over twenty years ago, Halliday (1985) identified seven functions of language use exhibited by children (see figure one). While these functions are not models of language acquisition, they are educationally relevant in that they reflect the ways that language serves a wide range of needs for children from all cultural and linguistic groups. Halliday cautions that much of a child’s “...difficulty with language in school arises because he is required to accept a stereotype of language that is contrary to the insights he has gained from his own experience” (2002, p. 50).

Similarly, Pinnell (2002), in reflecting upon work by Cazden, John, & Hymes (1972), points out "Research for at least the past decade supports the idea that function and meaning are the most important, and probably the most neglected, concerns of parents, researchers, teachers, and others who must make decisions about the assessment and development of young children's language" (p. 111).

Insert figure (1) about here

Listening attentively to children allows teachers to not only discern language use, but also to gather further insights into the child. As Halliday asserts, "The child's understanding of what language is, is derived from his own experience of language in situations of use" (2002, p. 53). He reminds us that children see all language as meaningful; an important notion considering that many times adults undervalue and seek to reduce children's use of personal and interactional language within the classroom context.

Analyzing Children's Functions of Language.

In her research, Riojas-Cortez (2000) found that although teachers unanimously agreed that many children "lacked language skills" they were unable to explain what they meant by this and how they knew that children were lacking those skills. Riojas-Cortez posits that "the problem may be that some teachers do not know how to identify the language skills that presumably most children lack" (p. 8). Systematic observations of each child in several different settings in the classroom, as well as in formal and informal activities in other areas of the school, center, or home, can provide helpful information for assessing and supporting children's language use. I asked several preschool and kindergarten teachers to conduct systematic observations of the functions of language used by one or more children in their classroom. They each used a simple observation record adapted from Pinnell (2002) for assessing and monitoring individual children's language competence. Analysis of the observation records completed for each child was then used to determine the extent to which the child demonstrates effective use of each of the functions of language.

As can be seen from the examples in the figures shown below, the child's name and age, as well as the time, setting and activity in which the child exhibited one of the functions of language, are recorded on the form (all student and teacher names are pseudonyms). The child's exact words are then recorded on the form under the corresponding function. Some teachers prefer to use a tape recorder and later transcribe and categorize the child's language. Figures Two and Three include notes for a teacher's observation of two children. As can be seen from the information in Figure Two, the child successfully used instrumental language to gain entrance into the block play area. Several instances of regulatory language were noted as this child began to direct the play of two other children in that area. Also seen was use of the imaginary function as the children decided to arrange the blocks into a castle, which precipitated a movement into the dress up area for princess clothing. Noticeably lacking from this observation period was the use of interactional language, which is not uncommon considering that many children this age are just beginning to develop skills of conversation which involve turn-taking and an exchange of information and ideas.

Insert figure (2) about here

In the next example (see figure three), we see evidence of a child who appears to be well on the way to becoming an effective communicator. She is able to use language to express needs and wants (i.e. ketchup for her hamburger); to control, or regulate, the behavior of others (i.e. "Stop making that noise"); to interact with others in an appropriate way (i.e. "Which one do you want?"); and to share personal thoughts and information (i.e. "Look at my new shoes," and "My mom made those. They don't have nuts.") At the same time, additional observations are needed to determine her ability to use the imaginative and heuristic functions.

Insert figure (3) about here

An important part of this assessment is the teachers' reflections about their own practice. In discussing these observations with me and one another, one teacher stated, "Most of this child's verbal communication appears to be aimed at herself, rather than at trying to communicate with other people. She often mumbles to herself, and when others speak to her she rarely responds with anything other than one or two word responses, and makes no attempt to carry on a conversation." In discussing her plans for supporting this child's language development, the teacher commented: "As her use of language is so limited, I believe we should begin by focusing on developing her use of interactional language. I think this area could provide a springboard for developing the other functions. In addition, I believe it is vital for her to learn how to establish a relationship with her peers and learn how to communicate with them."

To accomplish this, this teacher discussed pairing the child with another child who uses the interactional function well. Sitting in a relaxed setting with these two children, the teacher planned to model interactional language by engaging the other student in a conversation. She will then try to engage both children in the conversation, through use of open-ended questions related to a topic of interest. Following the recommendations of Rice (2002), she will paraphrase what the target child says, providing simple elaborations and continuing to interact in a conversational manner. These teachers frequently reported observations of the instrumental and regulatory functions. As one teacher shared, "Mareka knows how to get what she wants and how to get people to do what she wants. In my observations she was continually saying things, such as: "I want another blue crayon" "Give me a drink," and "Let me put it on the stove." She also readily directed the behavior of others. For example: "You should put the pan over there," and "You need to color this way." Another teacher mentioned a child whose volume and pronunciation improved dramatically when she was using the regulatory function. This was a child with very limited interactive language skills and who responded to conversational attempts by peers with only one or two word responses.

Representational or informative language, wherein one shares factual information about a topic, is typically observed in classrooms where children are led to conduct more in depth explorations of a theme or topic. As children discuss both fiction and non-fiction books read aloud, and gain new knowledge about the topic through a wide variety of hands-on experiences, they benefit from opportunities to share this knowledge with others. These sharing times serve to promote the informative language function. Heuristic knowledge is the language of interest, curiosity, and problem solving, and is critical for academic learning. Several teachers commented on the lack of heuristic language used by many of the children they observed. In discussing her observations, a teacher noted: "I was surprised to see a low amount of heuristic language used by this child. This made me think about the activities and opportunities I am providing for my students to talk, wonder, and question...." Her suggestions for strengthening the heuristic language not only for this child, but for others in the class, included turning some areas of the classroom into less structured "investigation" corners, creating science centers where children can use magnifying glasses, beakers, sand and canisters, and allowing children to work in groups on small projects. She also discussed the possibility of creating real problems for children to solve with peers, and ways she could prompt discussion and inquiry through open-ended questioning and opportunities for children to investigate their environment.

Although imaginative play was typically observed by the preschool teachers with whom I conversed, to support children's use of imaginative and interactive language, Pinnell (2002) suggests creating situations that naturally elicit imaginative responses, such as providing props and dress-up clothes for use in story re-enactment and dramatic play. These recommendations are supported by researchers such as Pellegrini (1986) who consider the language used by children during dramatic play as indicative of the types of language required in school. As children organize for and participate in dramatic play activities, they practice the oral, social and cognitive skills involved in sequence of events, storytelling, information seeking and giving, inquiry, and so forth. Through their language use and shared knowledge they are also exhibiting their cultural and linguistic repertoires (Riojas-Cortez, 2000).

Summary

The existence of a strong relationship between spoken language skills and subsequent reading and behavior development is supported by research (Catts, et al, 1999; Resnik & Snow, 2009; Tomblin et al, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Although some teachers may have concerns regarding the amount of time it may take to observe one child several times and in a variety of settings, after completing and reflecting upon their observations, the teachers with whom I worked reported that the assessment gave them important insights into not only a single child, but also to the language experiences they are providing for all of the children in their classroom. Tomblin (2006) states: "As children enter school, they are expected to use these newly developed language skills as tools for learning and increasingly for social negotiation" (p. 58). Careful observation and reflection upon children's functions of language use provides teachers, and parents, important information to use in planning subsequent language opportunities and experiences for children.

References

- Catts, H. W., Fey, M. E., Zhang, X. & Tomblin, J. B. (1999). Language basis of reading and reading disabilities: Evidence from a longitudinal investigation. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 3, 331-362.
- Cazden, C., John, V. and Hymes, D. (Eds.). (1972). *Functions of Language in the Classroom*. NY: Teachers College.
- Gleason, J. B. (2005). *The Development of Language* (6th Edition). Boston: Pearson, Allyn & Bacon.
- Halliday, M.A.K., & Hasan, R. (1985). *Language, context, and text: aspects of language in a social-semiotic perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1973). *Explorations in the functions of language*. London, Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M.A.K., (1975). *Learning how to mean*. London: Edward Arnold,
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1985). *Spoken and written language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (2002). Relevant models of language. In by B. M. Power and R. S. Hubbard (Eds.) *Language Development: A Reader for Teachers* (2nd Ed.) (pp. 49-53).
- Love, J. M., Kisker, E. E., Ross, C., Schochet, P. Z., Brooks-Gunn, J., Paulsell, D., et al. (2002). *Making a difference in the lives of infants and toddlers and their families: The impacts of Early Head Start*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.
- Love, J. M., Kisker, E. E., Ross, C., Constantine, J., Boller, K., Tarullo, L. B., et al. (2005). The Effectiveness of Early Head Start for 3-Year-Old Children and Their Parents: Lessons for Policy and Programs. *Developmental Psychology*, 41, 885-901.
- Pellegrini, A. D. (1986). Communicating in and about play: The effect of play centers on preschoolers' explicit language. In G. Fein & M. Rivkin (Eds.), *The young child at play: Reviews of research*, Vol. 4, p.79-91. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Pinnell, G. S. (2002). Ways to look at the functions of children's language. In by B. M. Power and R. S. Hubbard (Eds.) *Language Development: A Reader for Teachers* (2nd Ed.) (pp. 110-117).
- Rice, M. L. (2002). Children's language acquisition. In by B. M. Power and R. S. Hubbard (Eds.) *Language Development: A Reader for Teachers* (2nd Ed.) (pp. 19-27).
- Riojas-Cortez, M. (2000). Mexican American preschoolers create stories: Sociodramatic play in a dual language classroom. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 24(3), p.
- Tomblin, B. (2006). Literacy as an outcome of language development and its impact on children's psychosocial and emotional development. *Encyclopedia of Language and Literacy Development* [Online]. Available: http://literacyencyclopedia.ca/pdfs/Literacy_as_an_Outcome_of_Language_Development_and_its_Impact_on_Children's_Psychosocial_and_Emotional_Development.pdf
- Tomblin, J. B., Zhang, X., Buckwalter, P. & Catts, H. (2000). The association of reading disability, behavioral disorders, and language impairment among second-grade children. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines*, 41, 473-482.

Figure One

Functions of Language (Halliday, 1973, 1975)

- **Instrumental: Satisfying needs** (“I need a crayon.”)
- **Regulatory: Controlling behavior of others** (“Give me the crayon.”)
- **Interactional: Engaging with others** (“Do you want to color with me?”)
- **Personal: Expressing individuality and personality** (“I like red best.”)
- **Imaginative: Expressing creativity or imagination** (“I’m drawing a whole world full of only red people and things.”)
- **Heuristic: Exploring the world and building knowledge** (“I wonder why I got orange when I mixed the red and the yellow?”)

Figure Two
Functions of Language Use Observation Form: Example One

Student Name & Age: Shalonda, 4.3

Time: 12:30 p.m.

Setting: Preschool classroom

Activity: Center time (block play)

LANGUAGE FUNCTION EXAMPLES

Instrumental

"I want to build, too."

_Regulatory

"You get the blocks."

"Put them here."

"You are in my spot."

Interactional

Personal

Imaginative

"It's a castle for the princess." "Look, I'm a princess."
(Children get "princess" clothing from dress-up area and then return to block area to resume their play.)

Heuristic

Informative

Figure Three
Functions of Language Use Observation Form: Example Two

Student Name: Mandy, 4.6

Time: 11:45am

Setting: Informal, whole group

Activity: Lunch in classroom

LANGUAGE FUNCTION EXAMPLES

Instrumental

"I want some ketchup."

Regulatory

"Stop making that noise or I'll tell on you!"

"Melissa, you are suppose [sic] to sit here with our class."

Interactional

"Which one do you want?" (talking about cookies)

Personal

"Look at my new shoes."

Imaginative

Heuristic

Informative

"My mom made those (points to the cookies). They don't have nuts."