

Enriching children's language experiences through collaborative effort

Sandra Morris-Cooles suggests ways we can enrich and facilitate children's language in the Montessori classroom.

In today's world even advantaged children can be disadvantaged in terms of social play and communication due to lack of parental time and interaction. Recent research through ICAN – the Every Child a Talker initiative and the Sutton Report, looks at the impact of impoverished language and social interaction on children's communicative and literacy abilities. "Being able to speak clearly and process speech and interact with others are fundamental building blocks for a child's development. Analysis shows that good communication, language and literacy at a young age have the highest correlation with outcomes in school at seven years".

So, positive social interactions in the early years are vital in enabling positive neurological connections to be made and strengthened. Obviously, the infant's first partner in acquiring language is the primary carer, and even the mutuality of early feeding can be linked to the infant's first conversation. Humans are the only mammals who feed in burst and pause, enabling reciprocal behaviours to become embedded. Babies also imitate gestures such as poking out their tongues, and screwing up their faces, from the very first days of life. Bruner's formulation of the Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) shows the importance of such reciprocity – he calls these predictable patterns of behaviour, formats, which inform all the early language games and rhymes that we play with our children. With time, the infant becomes the instigator of the activity – think of Peek-a-Boo where the child initiates the game by hiding their eyes. These formats are further evidenced in children's literature through predictable rhyming patterns and sequences, and playground games.

Many of the recommendations from the ICAN research emphasize the practitioners need to facilitate rich language experiences. Too often the language of the early years is questioning and commanding, putting young children under pressure. Tizard

and Hughes, although undertaking research in primary education, found that the teachers' language did not foster enrichment, but tended to make the children close down.

As Montessori practitioners, most of us would argue that the language within our environments is rich and flowing and we facilitate freedom of speech and interaction at all times. It is true that this is something we take as a given, but having read hundreds of observations over the past year, I have seen evidence that this is not always so. Even my second year Foundation Degree students, who are already practitioners and nursery owners, have acknowledged their own journeys in this respect, writing such things as "I shouldn't have said that", "I have done nothing but question this child" or "how could I have collaborated with the child more?"

Turning the theme of this Issue on its head, what are our challenges to meet the needs of the modern child? How do we facilitate children during this sensitive period for language?

Two linguistic aspects I would like to challenge, or at least, ask you to think

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about, are the three-period lesson and silent presentations. The three-period lesson has a value, but not if the teaching is disembedded from the child's learning. To teach the arithmetic symbols or the articles this way is nonsensical. I have done it, and can still see the puzzlement on the children's faces. It is positive to name the shapes in this way, but we should not discourage the natural naming of shapes in everyday activities – this is where the name is meaningful.

Finally, silent presentations. It can be argued they focus the child's attention, but if the child is primarily an auditory learner, as opposed to a visual or kinetic



learner, then are we not putting them at a disadvantage? Also, specifically for a second language child, language input is needed in order to make connections between words and objects and words and actions.

Most important is the link between language and cognition, and without instructing or questioning children, it is positive to show children our own thinking processes. Using monologue, which Vygotsky saw as a powerful tool of thinking, is a positive way of engaging children in a collaborative effort. For example, saying to one's self "I need to find the longest rod first." will usually elicit either a verbal or a physical response from the child showing which is the longest rod. From this simple strategy, you come to understand the child's pre-existing knowledge and, as a result, scaffold his/her learning further.

So, our challenge is to enrich children's language by analyzing what we say and how we say it. ■

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Tizard, B. & Hughes, M. (1984) *Young Children Learning*, Harvard University Press