Talking in School
Using Conversational Language to Support Learning in Young Children

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What is Conversation?

• Socially positive
• Spontaneous, not scripted
• Participants share their own ideas
• Participants talk when they want to
• Does not contain drills or quizzes
• Participants actively try to engage others

Hart and Risley studies

• Betty Hart and Todd Risley:
H & R Findings

- Children’s long-term academic achievement is associated with their experience conversing with adults during the first three years of life.

- *Specific ways* that adults speak to children within the context of everyday activities can build or inhibit their language growth during the early childhood period.

Additionally . . .

- Children from families living in poverty are more likely to have poor or limited conversational experiences than children from middle-class families.

- By the time a child reaches 3 years of age, children from more talkative families may have heard up to 30 MILLION words, while children from less talkative families have heard about 10 million.

Hart and Risley Take-Aways

- Young children’s language develops across all cultures and languages based on their everyday experiences, not planned activities.

- It is conversational language that most strongly supports vocabulary and academic growth.

- The Vocabulary Gap persisted and grew at least until children reached age 9.
How did the talkative parents fit so many words into their children’s lives?

- Continued to talk beyond what was necessary for daily functioning;
- Stayed and played with their children for an extended period of time;
- Talked about a wider variety of topics, allowing and responding to topic shifts;
- Used approximately 20,000 words per day.

Talkative adults also . . .

- Used more compound sentences
- Used more auxiliary verbs, especially in requests and instructions
- Did not plan conversations, but let them evolve naturally from the context of the child’s play, interests, and environment.
- Allowed more topic shifts

Teachers Making a Difference

- **Storytelling in Pre-k** facilitated better comprehension of stories and better ability to narrate events in kindergarten and beyond
- **Explaining** the meanings of new/rare words led to stronger acquisition of overall vocabulary

(Dickinson, D. and Tabors, P. *Beginning Literacy with Language*. Baltimore: Brookes, 2001.)
Teachers’ Conversations

• When pre-k teachers incorporated *conversation* into book-reading, children
  – Used new and rare words more frequently and spontaneously
  – Engaged in higher-level thinking
  – Used a wider range of grammatical structures

The Don’t List

• Many teachers discussed books with a 3-part strategy:
  – They asked a question
  – A child responded when called upon
  – The teacher evaluated the response as being right or wrong

• This strategy inhibited children’s higher-level thinking!! Questions asked by the teacher focused on knowledge and memory for facts, rather than a deep response to literature.

Conversation and Processing

• Children from lower SES groups have less experience with conversation, less exposure to a variety of words, and slower overall language development.

• By age 24 months, a child from a low SES home is likely to demonstrate *language processing* ability similar to that of a more privileged child of 18 months.

(Studies by Anne Fernald)
Adult Language Features that Facilitate Language and Vocabulary Growth

• Rare words
• Information/explanations
• Storytelling
• Extended time pretending
• Long sentences/compound sentences
• Instructions in the form of questions
• Positive affect
• Guidance of behavior
• Child choice

Features that Inhibit Language and Vocabulary Growth

• Simplified vocabulary
• Short, simple sentences
• Use of only necessary language to meet needs
• “Speak when spoken to” rules
• Directive language (telling what to do)
• Repetition and drill of words
• Negative or punitive forms of discipline

Risk Factors Related to Poverty

• Caregiver depression
• Limited parental education
• Lack of preparation for parenthood
• Stress or trauma within home environment

(factors found in various studies to be associated with parents talking less to children)
Summary:
Adult talk facilitates …

• Knowledge of more words
• More rapid acquisition of new words
• More rapid processing of language
• Ability to interpret and follow instructions, in various formats
• Development of grammatical skills
• Higher-level thinking

What if . . .

• We transformed our classrooms into more talkative environments?
• We learned the language-facilitative behaviors identified in studies and applied them to classrooms throughout the entire day?

Observations within our program

• Large gains in vocabulary comprehension, based on PPVT-4 standard scores
• Almost all children learned to produce compound sentences by mid-year (in pre-k)
• Behavioral issues could often be resolved without punishments or exclusions
• Children more often were declassified from special education services
Prioritizing conversation
throughout the day

• Mealtimes
• Writing activities
• Learning Centers:
  – Dramatic Play
  – Blocks
  – Science Center
• Book-reading
• Movement activities
• Arrival and dismissal

[video of table conversation]

5 Modes of Conversation

• Vocabulary
• Information
• Storytelling
• Imagination
• Affirmative Response
Goals for Adults

• To understand the positive effects of adult-child conversation
• To focus on adult input to children
• To increase the range of styles and topics of adult-child conversation
• To incorporate purposeful instruction and intellectual challenge into conversations with children throughout the day

Goals for Children

• To expand their ability to converse about a wide range of topics
• To build their comprehension and vocabulary skills
• To become more engaged in using and experimenting with language
• To learn to use long sentences, tell stories, and give information without being prompted

Conversations that emphasize vocabulary and information...
[video of shared book-reading]

Apple Trees [audio]

Incorporating conversation into storytelling
Examples of conversations focused on imagination...
Example of affirmative responding . . .

[video of affirmative responding in pretend play]

What can we talk about in school?
Conversation with writing
[video]
Incorporating Talk into Learning Activities: Beyond Pre-K

- ELA
- Writing
- Social-Emotional Learning
- Science
- Social Studies
- STEM