

# **Communication and Language Teaching and Learning in Primary School Classrooms: Lessons from Theory, Research and Practice**

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has completed a new language curriculum for children aged four to eight years. This development brings a renewed and welcome focus on the relationship between language and schooling and provides fresh opportunities for enquiry and discussion as to how to support communication and language teaching and learning for a diverse population of children. Two fields of knowledge, from different areas of the language literature, provide particular insights in this regard. In the field of language acquisition theory and research, a dominant position has emerged on the nature of language acquisition and development. In the field of research on the relationship between language and school achievement, there is an established position on the nature and quality of language knowledge required within a curriculum. In this article, each of these positions from these differing areas of the literature is explored and analysed and it is argued that they each contribute to informing an inclusive and relevant practice. In the final section of the article, two examples of language teaching and learning are presented and analysed. The examples are drawn from practice and research in the Irish context and they illustrate the exploration, in practice, of the research positions outlined in the article.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

When we look to the research literature for direction on effective language teaching and learning, we find two particular positions, from different fields of knowledge within the wider language literature, which offer important insights for inclusive and relevant classroom practice. The first position is drawn from the field of language acquisition theory and research. It relates to how children acquire communication and language skills and provides a basis for an inclusive

view of language acquisition and development. This perspective provides critical insights which can inform how teachers assess the communicative competence of the diverse groups of young language learners in schools and how they plan for learning outcomes and choose appropriate teaching strategies. The second position is drawn from research on language knowledge and school achievement and identifies key areas of language development which should be the focus for teaching and learning in primary schools. In terms of their primary focus, these two positions address differing aspects of language acquisition and development. However, they are compatible in their underlying principles and each can make a critical contribution to informing curriculum content and pedagogy.

## **LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND DEVELOPMENT AS A CONTINUUM OF LEARNING**

Within the field of language acquisition theory and research, the dominant view is that, from infancy, language emerges through adult-child interactions in a complex process in which physiological, cognitive and social factors are at play. This position is described in the literature as an emergent view of language acquisition and development. It has been most strongly articulated in the work of MacWhinney (MacWhinney, 1999, 2004, MacWhinney & O'Grady, 2015) and has wide support across the literature (Hollich, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2000; Tomasello, 2009) including the literature on intervention for children with communication and language delays and impairments (Warren & Abbeduto, 2007). While it is grounded in a social/interactive view of language development which credits both child and adult with key roles in the acquisition process, the emergent view has brought a renewed interest in the nature of the child's contribution. It emphasises the influence of the child's developmental status - unique biological, cognitive and social profile - on the communicative context and seeks to understand how this influence mediates, or is mediated by, the quality of adult input (Shatz, 2009). This perspective highlights individual difference and circumstance and allows for a developmental trajectory where variation in children's developmental profiles includes variation in rate and progress of language acquisition and development.

Individual difference in acquisition of the language system is now widely referenced in the literature (Saxton, 2010; Owens, 2012). For children with typical development, the research shows wide variation in onset time and rate of development of all of the critical components of the language system: word comprehension, production, combinations and sentence complexity (Owens, 2012). In addition, research by Bates and her colleagues, beginning in the nineties, provides detailed knowledge of the variation that exists across the population of

early language learners including children with language delays and impairments (Bates, Dale & Thal, 1995; Bates & Goodman, 1999; 2001). One of the most significant outcomes of Bates's research is the finding that most of the variations observed in children with atypical language development represent extensions of variations observed in children with typical development. This position is affirmed in a recent article by Leonard (2014) in which, writing about children with specific language impairment (SLI), he describes them as having exaggerated rather than qualitatively different language profiles and he describes their language abilities as falling on the weak end of a language ability continuum (p.45).

Taken in sum, the theoretical and research positions outlined can be interpreted to mean that young children learning language are on a continuum of development, with the variations in their progress along that continuum being influenced by the interaction between their child characteristics and the quality of adult input. Here we have the theoretical and empirical basis for presenting communication and language development, within a curriculum, as progression along a continuum of learning, a trajectory of development that all young children acquiring communication and language will follow, albeit with varying rates of progress and levels of achievement. A continuum provides for a significant step forward in teaching and learning in that it gives us an inclusive way of thinking about communication and language development and a framework for inclusive practice.

### **Application to Practice**

As a frame of reference within a curriculum, a continuum supports practice at a number of levels: It is a source of information about the trajectory of language development and can raise awareness among teachers about variation in children's levels of competence and rates of progression. It provides reference points for making initial assessments of children's levels of communicative competence and for gauging the range and diversity of ability and need in any class group. It is also a guide for planning differentiated teaching and learning and for assessing on-going progress.

This way of considering language acquisition and development in practice makes a tangible contribution to the inclusion debate. It is consistent with, and is an application of, the position on inclusive practice proposed by Norwich & Lewis (2005). Their position is that, in inclusive classrooms, we can privilege the individual learner within a commonality of needs approach. A language continuum allows teachers to identify, plan for, and monitor the individual child as he/she progresses along a general trajectory of development. It is an inclusive construct providing for wide individual variation within a common framework. In

a further step forward for practice, a continuum provides a basis for collaboration between class teachers and teaching and learning support teams and for the differentiated teaching for children's individual and common needs which is the basis of collaborative work.

## **NARRATIVE AND EXPLANATION IN THE LANGUAGE CURRICULUM**

The second position for discussion is drawn from the research literature on language and school achievement and the essential point here is that an early years language curriculum must have a strong focus on developing children's skills of narration and explanation. The consensus in the literature, over a long period of time, is that school achievement requires a level of linguistic competence which goes beyond the everyday language of conversation (Halliday, 1993; Bruner, 1996; Snow, Tabors & Dickinson, 2001; Snow, Porche, Tabors & Ross Harris, 2007; Cummins & Man, 2007; Snow, 2014). Educational knowledge is concerned with concepts which are more specialised and more abstract than common sense knowledge. Accordingly, children need to be brought to conscious and deliberate knowledge and use of the kinds of vocabulary and grammatical structures and the range of language uses which carry the more complex meanings required for academic learning. Children need explicit instruction in what is described in the literature as the language of discourse or academic language (Halliday, 1993; Schleppegrell, 2004; 2012; Snow & Uccelli, 2009; Snow, 2014; Uccelli, Barr, Dobbs, Galloway, Meneses & Sánchez, 2015).

### **Discourse Skills or Academic Language**

Discourse requires that children go beyond the word or sentence to produce several utterances, or to engage in several conversational turns, to build a linguistic structure such as a fictional or factual narrative or account, an argument or an explanation (Hickman, 2003). In addition to having the vocabulary and sentence structure to carry the topic, children must develop specific discourse skills such as understanding how to regulate the flow of information across utterances and how sentences relate to each other and extend meaning while maintaining a coherent and cohesive structure (Hickman, 2003). The language of discourse is a literate language requiring different forms of expression to those of everyday conversation. Snow (2014) identifies specific features as including: displaying subject knowledge using subject specific vocabulary and the ability to talk about complex ideas, hypotheses and abstractions. The language forms required include sophisticated vocabulary and grammatical elements such as the use of the embedded clause and passive voice.

These kinds of oral skills are closely aligned with the language of written texts and oral proficiency with discourse skills, or, academic language, and has long been associated with comprehension of the written texts children encounter at the upper end of primary and in second level schooling (Snow & Uccelli, 2009; Bailey, 2007; Schleppegrell, 2004; Snow 2014). There is an established body of research which associates comprehension difficulties in older struggling readers, and in children acquiring a second language, with lack of knowledge of oral discourse skills (August & Shanahan, 2006; Lesaux, Kieffer, Faller & Kelley, 2010; Nagey & Townsend, 2012).

### **The Emergence of Discourse Skills in Adult-Child Interaction**

#### *Decontextualized Language and Emergent Discourse*

We know from research on the relationship between language and learning that discourse skills begin to be developed in early childhood and are rooted in the child's growing awareness of how to use language for different purposes in different contexts (Halliday, 1993; Painter, 1999; Snow, Tabors & Dickinson, 2001; Resnick & Snow, 2009). By the time they come to school, children with typical development can be expected to understand how language is used for the exchange of information (Scheele, Leseman, Mayo & Elbers, 2012). They will have had experience of using language to display knowledge to another, for example, by recounting an event to an adult who was not present at the event.

Through this kind of adult-child interaction, children come to understand two critical aspects of how language functions as a communicative system: Firstly, they come to see themselves as what Halliday (1993) characterises as tellers and knowers; having information and being conscious of their potential to create a state of knowing in another by relating that information to them. Secondly, when children engage in recounts and anecdotes which do not depend on shared experience with the listener, the language they use necessarily moves towards a more context independent style. They are recreating the experience for the listener and relying on language to communicate the meaning. In this sense, both the meaning and the language are decontextualized; not tied to the immediate context and not reliant on the visible or concrete aspects of experience.

We know from the literature on facilitative styles of adult-child interaction that, in supportive contexts, children are helped with these constructions by an adult who has shared knowledge of the experience; someone who knows the story and who scaffolds the child's retelling (Painter, 1999; Tabors, Beals & Weizman, 2001; Dodici, Draper & Peterson, 2003; Scheele et al., 2012). This is done through prompting the child on relevant content but also by prompting with words and phrases and by recasting the child's utterances to help construct the meaning in a

way that is explicit and coherent for the listener (Clarke, 2014). This style of adult–child linguistic interaction has been identified as a kind of early apprenticeship in using decontextualized language and one of the ways in which adults induct children into discourse (Halliday, 1993; Painter, 1999; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Hoff, E. 2006; National Research Council, 2010).

### **Developing Young Children’s Discourse Skills in Primary School**

There is a renewed emphasis in the literature on the need for structured approaches to language teaching and learning with an explicit focus on developing discourse skills or academic language (Snow & Uccelli, 2009; Snow, 2014; Uccelli et al., 2015). There is an equal emphasis on the need for these structured approaches to be in place in preschool and early primary school classes (Justice, Mashburn, Hamre & Pianta, 2008; Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Schleppegrell, 2012; Scheele et al., 2012).

#### *Developing Communicative Relationships*

Drawing from the body of research now available, we can identify the key features of communication and language teaching and learning for the early years of primary school. Because we know that language emerges and develops through adult-child interaction, we need a conscious and deliberate focus on engaging children in communicative relationships and on developing their knowledge and understanding of their roles as listeners and speakers/communicators. In this regard, teachers will meet children who are at varying points of development along the continuum of learning. Many children will come to school with a developed understanding of communicative relationships (Clarke, 2014) but equally, many children will depend on structured teaching to initiate them into listener-speaker/communicator roles.

#### *Variation in Knowledge of Vocabulary, Structure and Discourse*

Within communicative relationships, the focus will be on continuing children’s acquisition of the vocabulary and grammatical structures of the language with an explicit focus on developing discourse skills. In this aspect of development also, teachers will meet children who are operating at a range of points along a continuum. Across the classes, from junior infants to second, there will be a majority of children with similar if varying levels of competence and children who are further along the continuum in terms of size and quality of vocabulary, knowledge of topics and ability to use language to display this knowledge at complex and abstract levels. Equally, there will be children whose development has been compromised by particular social/environmental or biological circumstances or by a combination of these. These children may have poorly developed

vocabularies and little experience of structuring coherent sentences to present information beyond the demands of minimal everyday conversational exchange (Schleppegrell, 2012). Children acquiring English as a second language will have a developed understanding of both the communicative and the symbolic functions of language from their first language acquisition and the challenge will be about acquiring new forms of a new language (Tabors, 2008). Across the year groupings also, there may be a minority of children who will have a significant language delay or impairment. These children may yet have to move beyond one or two word utterances or may need concentrated teaching to enable them to achieve joint attention with the teacher and to begin to engage in a communicative relationship.

The challenge for teaching and learning is to achieve the differentiation required to match children's levels of competence. However, the need to focus on children's skills as listeners and speakers/communicators and to enable them to acquire the meaning-carrying words and sentences of the language system is common to all children. Equally, children have a common need to be enabled to have a voice and to be inducted into ways of constructing and displaying knowledge in narratives and accounts.

## EXAMPLES FROM RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

A critical factor in the implementation of a curriculum is the pedagogic knowledge and skills of teachers. In this section, examples from practice and research with young children in two Irish primary schools are presented. The examples illustrate an exploration of the relationship between the use of particular teacher talk strategies and children's development of vocabulary and sentence structure while constructing and presenting descriptions, narratives and accounts.

### Example 1

The first example is from fieldwork with a group of six children in a special school. The writer was in a teaching role and worked with the children on a weekly basis during one school term. The children are seven and eight years old and have a moderate general learning disability. In this sequence, individual children are supported by the teacher in describing a soft toy to the group.

*Paul: he...he wearin' glasses and he (his) stripy t shirt*

*Teacher: Oh yes, did you hear everyone? Paul says, Tiger is wearing his sunglasses and his stripy t shirt. I wonder, why is he wearing sun glasses?*

*Paul: 'cos ...'cos it's too shiny*

*Teacher: Oh yes, that's why because the sun is shining and it might hurt...?*

*Nicola: He (his) eyes*

*Teacher: Yes Nicola, the sun might hurt his eyes*

*Tony: Yeah, he don (don't) wan (want) hurt he (his) eyes.*

### **Analysis**

In this short extract from a longer sequence, the focus is on expanding the children's vocabulary and building sentence structure in a context which requires the individual child/speaker to construct information and present it to the listeners. The teacher uses talk strategies of affirming the speaker's contribution; cueing the listeners to what has been said and maintaining joint attention with the speaker; recasting the utterance to model appropriate vocabulary and full sentence structure; cueing the children for repetition of the recast forms and chorusing with them to support their attempts at more elaborated utterances. She also introduces the possibility for explanation. In the children's responses, we see the listeners' engagement with the topic and their contributions to it. The full sequence shows how, together, the children and teacher constructed an account including a small narrative sequence, an explanation and a prediction. This account was recalled, rehearsed and presented to other audiences.

### **Example 2**

The second example is from a research study conducted in a primary school in Dublin which had a band one *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS) designation (McGough, 2008). A range of teacher talk strategies was used to support young children's listener-speaker/communicator skills along with developing vocabulary, structure and range of language use while constructing and presenting accounts and narratives. In this sample from the study, the teacher/researcher and a group of four year old children are using a familiar song as a model for constructing a new song on a similar theme. The original song was about an elephant and describes his characteristics. In this song, the subject is a lion and the children construct a range of new descriptors:

*Nessa: Hey, hey Mr. Lion...*

*Researcher: Oh! Here's the lovely new song. Sing it again Nessa. Hey, hey Mr. Lion.*

*Nessa: Your hair is very long*

*Researcher: Your hair is very long. Yes, we could say that. Will we call it his hair or will we call it his..?*

*Jennie: Mane*

*Researcher: Yes, your mane (stressing target word) is very long. What else will we say about him?*

*Nessa: You have a bright nose*



*Jennie: Your eyes are shining bright*

*Researcher: Oh! That's' gorgeous! Hey, hey, Mr. Lion, you have a bright nose and your eyes are shining bright. Will we sing this lovely song for the other children? I wonder, what else could we say? What do you think Cathy? (Prompting by shaking the lion's tail)*

*Cathy: ha tai (have tail)*

*Researcher: Oh yes Cathy! We almost forgot about his tail. Sing with me*

*Cathy, Hey, hey Mr. Lion, you have a tail (stressing the sentence structure)*

*Cathy: (chorusing with Researcher) Hey, hey miter ion (Mister Lion) you ha a tai (have a tail).*

*Karen: You have a shaky tail and you roar*

*Researcher: Oh Karen! That's great! He does roar doesn't he? Remember in our story, the lion had a mighty roar?*

*Kevin: He roars in the Zoo*

*Researcher: Yes he does, Kevin and in our story, he was roaring his mighty roar in the..?*

*Kevin: Jungle*

*Researcher: Can I sing that part? You have a shaky tail and you roar your mighty roar in the jungle and the zoo.*

## **Analysis**

In this communicative context, supported by the adult talk strategies, the children constructed a new account, in the form of a song. This became the class song allowing for frequent repetitions and modelling of the linguistic forms. The song provided opportunity for new vocabulary including specific target items such as *mane, mighty roar, jungle*, and it required the children to sing out the sentences they had composed. In structuring the account, children contributed at various levels. Jennie constructed a complete sentence with sophisticated vocabulary influenced by the earlier, familiar song and Cathy who had a phonological difficulty and serious level of language delay, contributed an appropriate item of meaning which the researcher then recast as a more complete sentence.

The adult strategies in use here are: prompting for contributions and for explicit vocabulary; extending the topic; affirming speakers' contributions and cueing the listeners to attend to them and to maintain joint attention with the speaker; recasting and extending the children's utterances; modelling appropriate structures and chorusing with individual children as a means of scaffolding their utterances.

## **Theory and Research in Practice**

The short extracts of teacher-child talk show the possibilities for initiating children into the styles of language use identified in the literature as supportive of discourse

or academic language. The extracts show the use of differentiated teacher talk strategies (McGough, 2008) to support the children in using topic specific vocabulary and more elaborated structures while conforming to the conditions of discourse by contributing over a number of turns and using language for a range of purposes to build a linguistic structure (Hickman, 2003). In preparing for presentation to an audience, the children are also having the opportunity to develop their understandings of themselves as tellers and knowers (Halliday, 1993) and the opportunity to grow in awareness of how language is used for the exchange of information (Scheele et al. 2012). They are also being challenged to move towards a more context independent and autonomous style (Hoff, 2006). The extracts also illustrate the variation in the children's levels of language competence and, in keeping with Norwich & Lewis (2005), they show how the children's common need for command of the language system, and individual need for differentiated teaching and learning, can be accommodated within an inclusive framework of language goals and an inclusive repertoire of teaching strategies.

## **CONCLUSION**

Analysis of dominant positions in the theory, research and practice of communication and language teaching and learning is timely with the advent of a language curriculum for young children in primary schools. In this article, the concept of a language learning continuum and the importance of discourse skills have been analysed and discussed. Theoretical and research positions on these aspects of language acquisition and development have particular relevance for curriculum content and pedagogic practice. Here, the dominant positions on each of these aspects have been analysed in terms of their relevance to the nature and quality of language teaching and learning and potential contribution to inclusive practice. Examples from practice and research in the Irish context are included to illustrate the possibilities of using a range of teacher talk strategies, in a differentiated way, to support children with diverse communication and language abilities and needs in developing discourse skills. Such a repertoire is a good fit with a continuum of learning and serves the need for an inclusive pedagogy which is another critical aspect of inclusive practice.

It is to be hoped that issues of practice will receive due consideration in the coming months as the implementation of the new language curriculum comes into sharp focus. In this article, relevant levels of achievement for a diverse population of language learners and teachers' knowledge of language pedagogy have been identified as among the critical issues to be considered.

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