Creating A Language Rich Environment

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Abstract

A language simulative environment in the early years helps a child to learn a language meaningfully and helps the mind to form correct images of his/her environment. It influences ones personality. One of the most important tasks for children in the first five years of life is the development of language. Children have vast individual differences in vocabulary and oral language development and they enter early care settings with these language bases. Early educators and adults in the child's surrounding can meet this challenge by providing language-rich learning environments.

*L*anguage is crucial to young children's development; it is the essential key for learning, communicating and building relationships with others as well as for enabling children to make sense of the world around them. In the first five years of life, the evolution of communication can be divided into three periods. The first period begins at birth when infants communicate through their cries and gazes. Although these early communicative behaviours are not intentional, they set the stage for later intentional communication. In the second period, from six to eighteen months, infants' communicative engagement with adults becomes intentional. Infants in this period can coordinate their visual attention with another person regarding objects and events. In the third period, from eighteen months onward, language becomes children's primary means of learning and communication. For instance, pre-schoolers can engage in conversations, use language for self-control and have the capacity to negotiate verbally.

> **"Reading aloud with children is known to be the single most important activity for building the knowledge and skills they will eventually require for learning to read."**
>
> *- Marilyn Jager Adams*

Stages of Language Development

Language is closely associated with learning the sounds on one hand and memory on the other. It is a form of communication which helps a person to convey his needs and thoughts to others. Since speech is a complicated skill, babies use simpler forms of speech which are called pre-speech forms of communication. The ways used by a child to communicate are:

Crying: Soon after birth children communicate their needs by crying. The louder he cries the greater is his need. Around the third month the sound of the cries begin to change.

Cooing: The second stage starts at the age of about three to five months. Cooings are made possible by the functional change in the use of vocal cords and larynx, allowing the infant to produce a greater variety of sounds.

Babbling: The third stage of vocal development (five to twelve months) is characterized by an even greater variety of speech sounds. The child begins to end some of his utterances with rising as well as falling sounds. They are typically limited to a single syllable at a time.

Gestures: Gesture or action is a form of communication which is a substitute of speech. A child communicates through pointing or nodding his head.

Speech: The fourth stage of vocal development (after nine months) is characterized by the beginning of patterned speech. The development of speech requires the child to master the four skills pronunciation, comprehension, vocabulary and sentence formation.

Language acquisition involves Social, Psychological, Cognitive, and Linguistic factors. Acquisition takes place in the speech community of the language spoken. It is often natural, without much focus on form. Krashan (1976a) regarded acquisition as spontaneous internalization of rules and formulas. It is a social process. It is interpersonal and is performed by individuals in the social environment by collaborating, supporting the learning process and able to enhance learning through cooperation and sharing.

Need for a language simulative environment:

The nervous system stores images and memories as perceived by the relationships to known material which can then be evoked without a preceding stimulus. Example, the

word 'rattle ' has an image, which the child has to perceive, recognize the sound it makes, enjoy the movement of this rattle, explore the material by playing with it , associate the word to the object. This involves mental activities like memory, perception, recall, association and recognition. We can justify that the word is acquired only when the child is able to use the word in the right context at the right time giving the correct meaning. Vocabulary continues to expand from the perception of new materials in relationship to known material. The stimulation in the child's environment is to provide rich vocabulary to the growing child. If vocabulary is introduced without action or contact of an object remains empty and life less.

Acquisition is a continuous association between stimulus and response, followed immediately by confirmation of correct response by an adult in the child's environment. This will result in the formation of the habits needed for placing sounds and words in appropriate arrangements. Chomsky (1968) says words and language serve as an instrument of free thought and expression. A simulative environment helps a child to increase his /her vocabulary.

Language development is a continuous process. During infancy, stimulation is based on the social/affective relationships with family members. Communication starts from day one. As children grow, stimulation and dialogues need to support the child's understanding of his/her world and provide the necessary foundation for literacy.

Language blossoms in an environment that is:

Respectful - The child is seen as a person who can communicate routine information and can understand and learn complex communication.

Real and Meaningful - Communication is authentic, not artificial. The child's interests and natural curiosity are used as language content.

Nurturing - Language is presented within a zone of proximal development. This means that the family accepts and supports the language of the child. Families also gently challenge the language of the child and stretch his/her use of new vocabulary, complex language and abstract ideas. This means that language is not only about the present, but includes discussion about things that are not in the room and that has happened in the past and will happen in the future. Complexity and range of purposes for using language is modeled and the child is encouraged to use language for a wide variety of functions (play, pretend, negotiate, complain, question, answer, describe etc.).

Responsive - A family follows a child's lead. They respond naturally and map language into communicative attempts the child initiates.

Strategic - Language is flexible and incorporates a variety of strategies to encourage communication and expansion (expectant pauses, rephrasing, adding a gesture for clarification, changing modes or languages to clarify meaning, using manipulatives to support understanding or maintain attention).

Constant - The child is immersed in language in routines, for new and exciting events, to relive fears or confusion, to explain what is happening now, to explain what will happen, for commenting, sharing, discussing, problem solving etc.

Guiding - Language is used to advocate and provide guidance. Children learn how to solve problems and think through options with their friends and adults.

Social - Children have numerous opportunities to interact with a wide variety of communication partners at home and in the community.

Complete - The child is provided with fluent language models.

Emotional - A family uses language to communicate their emotional availability. This provides the child with words to label and discuss feelings.

Thought Provoking - The most wonderful aspect of language is to communicate and stimulate thought. The world is an amazing place and is full of surprises. Children need the opportunity to talk about the "whys" and "hows" of their environment.

Language plays a formative role in the development of a child's personality and abilities. It acts as a strong base, for shaping the child's perception of the world, interests and capabilities. This makes it imperative to provide the young child with language rich environment.

Building a language rich environment

Building a language rich environment is about using every opportunity to use language, to interact, share a focus, talk and take turns. It is also about building a nurturing environment, giving children love and affection and building their self-confidence. And finally, it is about building a learning environment, creating a place where love, language and learning can all take place together.

It is important to be aware of the level and complexity of the language used by adults when they are around young children. Think about their age and how much language they use. A young child will generally understand more words than he uses in speech. A milestone chart can be used to have a broad idea of the level of children's language. When children are developing along normal lines, think about the level of language that can be used. For instance, if long sentences are used while talking to a two and a half year old child she will not understand as she is able to follow

only short instruction containing two key words. If the child does have difficulty in understanding, it is important to use key words, more intonation and gestures or point at objects while saying the words.

When talking to a child, try to talk about things that are in context or that the child can see, so they can use these things as a reference. Talk slowly and emphasise on the key words if they are in a sentence and use lots of intonation to help emphasize the meaning. Give the young child more time to respond than an older child or an adult. Younger children may need a little longer to process an adult's speech and formulate an answer of their own. This is even more important if the child has difficulties acquiring language. If a child has language difficulties, or receptive language delay, limiting words, giving lots of time to process language and using lots of gesture is essential.

Teachers can help sustain natural language development by providing an environment that is full of language development opportunities. Here are some general guidelines for teachers, parents and other caregivers:

- Understand that every child's language or dialect is worthy of respect as a valid system for communication. It reflects the identities, values and experiences of the child's family and community.

- Treat children as if they are conversationalists, even if they are not yet talking. Children learn very early about how conversations work (taking turns, looking attentively, using facial experiences with conversing adults).

- Encourage interaction among children. Peer learning is an important part of language development, especially in mixed-age groups. Activities involving a wide range of materials should promote talk. There should be a balance between individual activities and those that nurture collaboration and discussion, such as dramatic play, block-building, book-sharing, or carpentry.

- Parents, caregivers, teachers and guardians are the chief resources in language development. Children learn much from each other, but adults must converse, question, listen and respond for language development and growth in the child-care centre or classroom.

- Continue to encourage interaction as children come to understand written language. Children in the primary grades can keep developing oral abilities and skills by consulting with each other, raising questions and providing information in varied situations. Every area of the curriculum is enhanced through language, so that the learners are hardly ever silent.

Building a Print Rich Environment

In a well-established and well-organized classroom, there should be print everywhere! This does not negate the fact that visual picture of classroom schedules, rules, etc are critical to the social and emotional development of the children. However, words should be placed next to any visual clue to help the children understand about print.
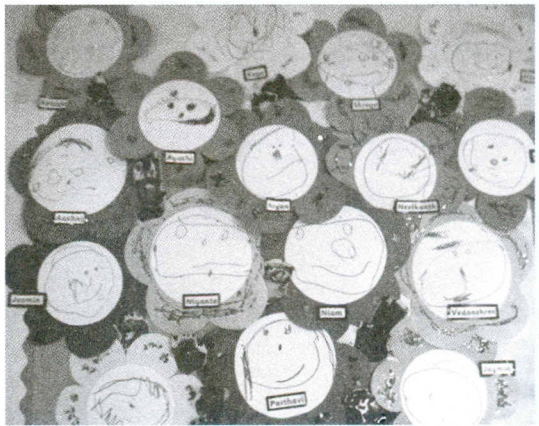

Name tags on art work

Ways to create a print-rich environment:

Posted Letters: There should be at least two alphabet charts posted in every classroom. These charts should be at the eye level of the children. Items posted above the child's line of sight are decorations.
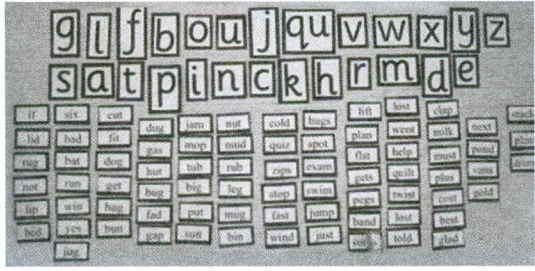

Word Chart

Name Tags: The names of the children are one of the best ways to teach about print. A child's name should appear at least four to five times throughout the classroom. Attendance cards, labels on clothes, shoes, water bottles, lunch boxes, apron hooks and name puzzles are just a few possible ways to display each child's name.

Label Objects: Every part of the classroom from the doors to the books should be labeled. Block shelves, listening centers, writing tables and group areas should all have written labels indicating the word that best describes that area. Each word should be accompanied by a picture of the item as a visual reminder about the word.
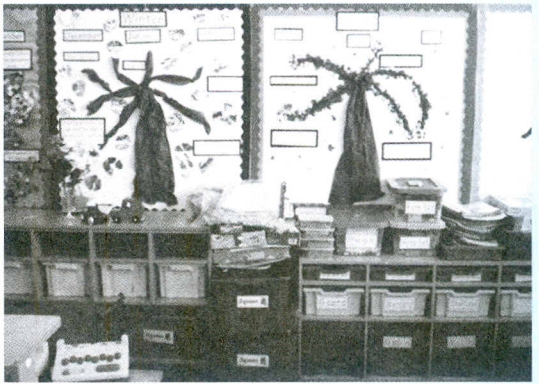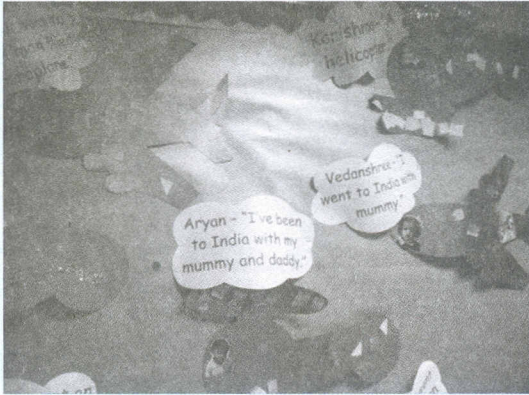

Labeled objects

Teacher to Write: Teachers should look for every opportunity to model print for the children in the group. The children should be able to observe the teacher writing simple words and short sentences about something

related to the topic of the day. She should say the words and talk to the children while writing.

Teachers note 'How I spent my holidays!!'

Classroom Library: It is recommended that each classroom should have at least 4 books per child available at all times. Because of limited funding, most classrooms do not own that many books. Books should be rotated so that the children are continually exposed to different stories and forms of print. It is also critical that children have access to stories that have been read to the group. Stories being read to children do not always

Classroom Library

accomplish literacy support unless there is a discussion about the story and the children can revisit the story whenever they would like. This will maximize the literacy experience.

Writing Centre: Early childhood classrooms should always contain a writing centre. While these centers will eventually help in the development of handwriting, for younger children they are critical for the development of fine motor skills and learning about print.

Writing Centre

Systematic Explicit Instruction

Research on reading insists that even in pre-school teachers should be systematic and explicit in their support of literacy skills. What this means is that a teacher should have a plan and systematically introduce literacy skills during classroom activities. Skills should not be left to chance or for the teacher to take care of the next year.

When a teacher makes use of activities that have been specially designed to incorporate several language skills simultaneously (such as listening, speaking, reading and writing), they provide their students with situations that allow for well-rounded development and progress in all areas of language learning. Children's language abilities are strengthened when they grow up in language-rich environments. 'Language-rich' simply means there are interesting conversations, stories and explanations, as well as books, newspapers and writing materials. Most early childhood services know they need to provide a language-rich environment, but the foundations laid in a child's family home are critical to their later achievement in early reading and writing. The goal of promoting literacy in the early years is not to get children reading and writing, but to enhance their confidence in the skills that are the foundations of literacy.