Fostering Language and Literacy Learning: Strategies to Support the Many Ways Children Communicate

How can educators facilitate young children’s communication? Four intentional teaching strategies—share personal stories, foster peer cross talk, vary group structures, and engage children in recording and representing their ideas—are described here.

Early literacy instruction is receiving increasing emphasis. Many teachers of young children recognize that skills such as identifying and forming letters and practicing oral language skills are important (Helm & Katz, 2010). At the same time, teachers also report feeling pressure to focus on intensive drill and practice of isolated skills such as letter recognition (Jeynes, 2006). Framing early literacy learning as direct instruction of isolated skills typically results in a very narrow approach to learning to read and communicate clearly.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children’s (NAEYC) 1998 position statement on learning to read and write recognizes that children in early childhood programs are increasingly diverse in their backgrounds, experiences, and abilities. In contrast to a narrow approach, NAEYC recommends a broad range of language and literacy experiences be provided for young children in early childhood programs. Young children display a variety of language and literacy abilities: They create stories, build things, create art, move, and engage in pretend play in ways that communicate ideas (Koralek, 2011).

Many Learners, Many Literacies

As a field, early childhood education has developed a richer understanding of the relationship between culture and development. At one time, development was talked about in terms of linear stages that all children progressed through in the same way. For language and literacy learning, this suggested that children would need to know all their letters and letter sounds before they could engage in reading and writing activities.

In contrast, more recent research in culture and development indicates that children learn routines, rules for interaction, and rules for the kinds of behaviors that are considered appropriate or inappropriate through their participation in the life of the family and community (Barrera & Corso, 2003). Therefore, although children may progress in some similar ways, the particular kinds of knowledge and skills they have at a particular age vary based upon their experiences.

Through interactions in the socio-cultural activities of their early education communities, children develop both language knowledge and “social knowledge of how language is used in particular social situations” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 18). For example, because of their experiences, some children may be good at responding to adults’ questions that require them to name or label things (e.g., “What color is that?”). Others may be good at responding to analogy questions, (e.g., “What is that like?”) (Heath, 1982).

A range of literacy experiences creates a meaningful context.

This article identifies ways teachers of young children can provide a range of language and literacy experiences and creates a meaningful context for explicit language and literacy instruction. It begins with a discussion of the relationship between culture and development that has informed recent understandings of early literacy.
Although children display a multiplicity of communication skills, many adults who work with young children remain fairly static in their expectations for children (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). As a result, when children display communicative competencies that do not correspond with expected behaviors, their actions may be misinterpreted as problematic or as a lack of language ability.

For instance, some children may talk while others are talking, rather than waiting for their turn to speak. Teachers may interpret this as off-task behavior or an inability to listen to others. In contrast, Au (1980) found that overlapping talk was a part of the ways Hawaiian children interacted in their home communities, and was a valued skill in the social life of the community.

As another example, teachers may expect children to “use their words” to express their feelings. Yet in Park & Cheah’s (2005) study, Korean mothers viewed sharing and helping others as more important than controlling emotions. Emotional expressions, such as crying, might be viewed as an appropriate and healthy way for children to express feelings. From this perspective, the “using your words” approach may be seen to pre-empt a child’s ability to physically express emotion.

The field of early literacy has undergone significant transformation in what is regarded as literacy. A multiple literacies perspective provides teachers with strategies for building upon children’s diverse communicative competencies (Narey, 2009). For example, young children possess abilities in

- story-telling,
- drawing,
- building and constructing objects, and
- pretend play

that can be capitalized upon (Egan & Ling, 2002). This expanded definition of language and literacy values children’s culturally acquired resources for making and communicating meaning to others.

The schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, helped bring children’s “hundred languages” to the attention of early educators. By providing children with opportunities to represent ideas in many ways, children show that they understand something about symbolic thinking; that is, they grasp that an object or symbol might stand for something else. A block might represent a vehicle; a circle drawn on a page could signify a wheel. Symbolic thinking is a cornerstone of meaningful literacy (Gallas, 1994). From this perspective, acquiring knowledge of isolated skills, such as letter recognition, is just one small part of a bigger literacy picture (Narey, 2009).

**Support the Many Ways Children Communicate**

Teachers who wish to provide the kinds of experiences and interactions that support children’s language and literacy learning through explicit instruction engage in intentional planning and thinking. These teachers

- create delineated spaces,
- select engaging materials intended to provoke children’s expression, and
- provide children with the opportunity to make choices.

After this stage is set, teachers engage in thoughtful interactions with children in ways that help them clarify and extend their thinking and expression.

In this section, vignettes drawn from a preschool program are presented as contexts for illustrating specific strategies early childhood educators can use to support the many ways children communicate. These teachers were influenced by the project approach (Katz &

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**Table 1. Key Terms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Unspoken and deeply embedded values about how the world should be; how people should act and interact; what they should do and not do; and when, where, how, and with whom they should do it (Barrera &amp; Corso, 2003).</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communicative Competence</td>
<td>The social, cultural, and linguistic knowledge required in order to successfully participate in a particular community (Saville-Troike, 1989).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiple Literacies</td>
<td>An expanded understanding of early literacy that takes into account children’s diverse communicative competencies. Visual, graphic, and physical forms of meaning making (such as drawings, photographs, video, maps, works of art, stories, pretend play, movement, song, and dance) are all considered literacy practices (Collins &amp; Griess, 2011).</td>
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Chard, 2000) as a framework for facilitating in-depth study of a topic. Therefore, the vignettes provide examples of the ways opportunities for communicating were integrated into an exploration of vehicles.

**Connect to Personal Experiences**

Adults in early childhood programs often ask children closed-ended questions that simply require naming and labeling (e.g., “What color is this?”). Teachers likely can recall many times when children started to tell a story in response to this kind of information question. When children responded with some other type of information, an uninformed adult’s response may have been to redirect them (“We’re not talking about that now”) or to see this as evidence that the children do not comprehend the topic or recall information well.

There seems to be a tendency to be dismissive when children start to tell their stories, yet that is when they are using language most fluently, as shown by this vignette.

A group of 3 and 4 year olds are gathered in the carpeted meeting area. The children first listened to a big book about vehicles. In order to connect to the children’s background knowledge about the topic and to create a situation in which the children used language and listened to others, the teacher then told a story about what happened when she needed to take her car to the repair shop (a technique called provocation). This conversation ensued:

**Carson:** What was wrong with it? Did it run out of gas? That happened to my grandma once. Yeah, ’cuz her car stopped and she wasn’t looking at her gas gauge and it was down on “E.” She had to walk.

**James:** When my dad got a new car he put gas in it.

**Carson:** You know what? When I was...went to Wisconsin...you know how...I lived so far away.

**Samantha:** I went in the car to Wisconsin, too! I drove in my van with my mom and my dad and my little brother. We have a new van.

**Kiya:** And we’re getting a new van.

**Samantha:** Our new van is a little bigger.

**Isabelle:** One day my car, my car, my-my-my-car got broken and then my Dad went to get the Nissan.

Telling personal stories is an example of the kind of experience that fosters young children’s language and literacy learning. Children’s resources for learning are rooted in the everyday experiences of their cultural communities. By providing opportunities for personal storytelling, adults are more likely to help children draw upon their existing knowledge and expand it (Genishi & Dyson, 2009).

Help children clarify and extend their thinking and expression.

High-quality oral language experiences in preschools include “building background knowledge, and [then] listening to others talk to understand and comprehending what they say” (Morrow, 2005, p. 10). To do this, the teacher in the vignette here purposefully encouraged children’s personal stories. She told a story of her own, and invited children to tell their stories.

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When aiming to foster children's talk, ask open-ended questions that connect to children's personal experiences and have a variety of possible responses. That strategy increases the richness of language use.

**Encourage Peer Cross Talk**

A frequently used discussion prompt in early childhood programs is to ask children a question and call upon individuals to take turns reporting. A familiar prompt for such discussions is to ask something like, “What is your favorite (part of the story, object, etc.)?”

Typically, children are expected to listen quietly as, one by one, their peers respond. Adults often observe that children seem to have difficulty listening to others under these circumstances. They may interpret this to mean that the children are not yet ready to participate in discussions that require them to listen to others. At the same time, adults often express the desire to prepare children for this kind of language structure, which is so highly valued in later school experiences.

Understandings of the relationship between culture, language, and literacy indicate the need for adults to provide an array of language structures that both capitalize upon children's diverse competencies and address various learning goals (Cazden, 2001). Watch for the cross-talk in this lively exchange among children.

The teacher and children were preparing for a field trip to the fire station next to the preschool. Time was planned for children to talk to a firefighter as part of the trip. The teacher was helping children formulate questions to pose, and acting as a scribe to record their questions.

Brian: Why do they have small cars, too? Why don't they just have big trucks so more people can fit in?

Teacher: What do you think? [Invites the group to pose possible answers to Brian's question]

Issac: Because for the fire chief—no one else needs a small car.

Kara: There's not enough trucks. They use small cars.

Carson: To get there.

Jayla: Yeah, so they can drive somewhere.

Brian: Well, the fire truck is red--

Carson: --Because they need to get to the building. To get there fast--

Joey: --In the truck they can go fast.

Teacher: So Carson and Joey think the truck is for getting there fast.

Joey: And they can change the lights to green. There's a little knob. It's OK, they always fix the knobs.

Carson: And it's red.

When interacting with groups of young children, there may be occasions when a traditional raise-your-hand-and-take-turns talking structure is fitting (e.g., if the goal is to check children's individual recall of factual knowledge). There may be other times when alternative formats, such as one that encourages peer cross talk without raising hands, is warranted (e.g., if the goal is critical thinking and language development).

**Invite children to talk with each other.**

Au (1980) described the ways educators in Hawaii utilized culturally appropriate strategies because they resembled talk story, a way of talking common in the children's community. In talk story, multiple speakers had status equal to the teacher-nominated speaker. The early childhood educator provided occasions when children
were invited to talk with others and at times, voices overlapped. Creating situations that invite children to talk with each other rather than only responding to the teacher fosters increasingly complex communication.

In contrast to posing a general question and asking for individual responses, the teacher in the vignette here encouraged children to hypothesize possible answers to a question related to an authentic purpose, in this case an upcoming field trip. She asked the children, “What do you think?”

Young children benefit from opportunities to talk with peers. Given such opportunities, the teacher can observe growth in the number of exchanges between children in talk about the same topic. This enables children to demonstrate their increasing capacity to listen to and communicate ideas to others.

Vary Group Participation Structures

Circle times can be “high-demand” situations for children (Tabors, 2008). Teachers may recall meeting times in which they have seemed consumed simply with getting and keeping children’s attention. Most of the talk is focused on redirecting children’s behaviors (e.g., “Eyes on me,” and “This is listening time”).

If fostering language and literacy learning is a goal, then varying participation structures is often a useful strategy. Whole-group meeting times and choice times require different kinds of communication skills. Intentionally shape and use these formats in order to maximize language learning.

Charlie joined the group during a whole-group meeting. He leaned forward as the teacher read aloud from the big book about vehicles, appearing to study the illustrations. During the reading, he said a few words in Korean (his native language). In the discussion that followed, Charlie appeared distracted. He continuously moved, shifted position, or put his arms around his knees and rocked back and forth.

The discussion lasted about 5 minutes, and then the teacher drew the children’s attention to the planning board that displayed images of the choices for activity time. Charlie pointed to the image of painting. He and the other children had prior experiences with painting with brushes and other objects.

Connecting to the interest in vehicles and anticipating that the children would be curious about the textures, lines, and patterns they could create, a teacher provided paint, trays, paper, and toy cars. She helped them get started, and then recorded their comments while working.

Charlie: Zrooom. Grrrrrr. (He shows Zach how he moves the car).

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Zach: Yeah, that makes your paper get paint on it!

Carrie: When I roll the wheels, the paint gets there (under the car).

Carrie: I’m making a race. All sorts of colors.

Zach: Well, I’m making green.

Sophia: I’m making orange.

Aimee: How do you like my road? It’s got two colors in it.

Charlie and Michael begin playing with the cars as they make marks. They talk together in Korean.

Tsai and García (2000) studied a multilingual preschool classroom. They noticed that children who were learning English as a second language were engaging in behaviors during whole group meetings that were perceived to be problematic (e.g., talking to each other in their native language while the teacher was talking). Two participant structures were identified in the classroom.

• In orchestra structure, such as center times, children had
opportunities to speak in English as well as their home languages.

- In theatre structure, such as teacher-led whole-group activities, the teacher delineated speaking roles and forms.

Tsai and García concluded that appropriate participation during the theatre structure wasn't clearly understood by the children. They recommend that teachers explicitly teach second-language learners how to participate in various structures. For example, children may be provided more time to work in the orchestra structure, and be provided explicit instruction and rehearsal in participating in relatively shorter theater-structure time periods.

Effective programs for children who are linguistically and culturally diverse “recognize that children can and will acquire the use of English even when their home language is used and respected” (Tabors, 2008, p. 178). In the vignette here, Charlie seemed distracted during the part of the meeting time in which the teacher delineated speaking and listening roles. Strategies such as

- keeping a regular routine,
- using a child’s name, and
- creating situations where all children can respond to repetitive prompts

help create more low-demand situations that help language learners make sense of the meeting structure.

In contrast to circle time, choice time offered “safe havens” where Charlie could choose to engage in various ways (Tabors, 2008). He manipulated objects, created sound effects, and used non-verbal expression as well as using his home language. In addition, the thematic connections and integrated approach of the curriculum helped support Charlie’s engagement and increased the use of language of the “here and now,” that is, language use that surrounds objects and images on hand (p. 93).

Children benefit from explicit instruction and practice in whole-group and choice-time participation structures, and by starting with shorter whole-group meeting times that gradually increase in length. Heightened awareness of the differences in orchestra and theater structures helps adults build upon children’s linguistic capabilities rather than focusing only on perceived deficiencies.

Engage Children in Recording and Representing

In early childhood programs, it is not uncommon to hear an adult refer to children’s drawings as “masterpieces.” This may be because teachers are concerned that too much intervention will impede children’s creative expression. However, in the vignette that follows, the teacher treated children’s drawings much differently.

A teacher and a small group of children took clipboards, paper, and pencils outdoors to draw the teacher’s car from direct observation. The teacher aimed to encourage
children to look very closely and record what they observed. To do this, she connected to previous discussions: Children had talked about types of vehicles (cars, vans, and trucks) and named some parts of vehicles (wheels, horn, lights).

Anticipating that drawing a whole car would be challenging, the teacher asked questions to guide the observation and drawing: “What do you notice about the wheels? How will you draw their shapes?” The children saw circles and rectangles. The teacher reminded them how to make curved lines and straight lines by demonstrating.

She then cued, “OK. There are lots of things to notice here. How will you start your drawing?” As the children drew, she pointed out things she noticed about their work: “I see you drew straight and curvy lines.” She observed that some of the children commented and some dramatized or gestured the motions of the steering wheel as they drew. They all made marks on the page (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).

The teacher took photographs of the car and children while drawing. She planned to build upon this experience by inviting children to refer to their drawings and photographs in order to tell a story of their experience. The teacher anticipated suggesting that they refer to their drawings and photographs in order to plan and create a large, three-dimensional construction of a car for dramatic play.

Placing focus specifically on drawing as a form of communication, Eubanks (1997) defined children’s drawing as a unique symbol system containing both expressive and receptive elements. Drawings require “the creation of visual symbol systems, the making of marks or objects that communicate ideas” (p. 31). Viewing drawing as a mode of communication in this way involved explicit instruction and specific feedback (e.g., “I see you drew straight and curvy lines”) rather than general praise.

As with oral language, children have varied cultural experiences with print and symbol-making. Dyson (1986) referred to young children as “symbol-weavers” and referred to experiences such as the one illustrated in the vignette here as “drawing events” (p. 381). Some children use action, movement, and dramatic elements such as sound effects as they draw. Others focus on careful use of space on the page, concerned with formal elements such as line and shape. Dyson concluded that the diverse ways children weaved together images and talk helped them to make connections between the written and spoken word.

Cultural perspectives on literacy learning shed light on children’s abilities to “read and write messages even before they control the conventional symbol system” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 86). Further, because there are variations in children’s ways of weaving together talk, movement, and drawing, children benefit from opportunities to produce texts in a variety of ways.

Early childhood educators “create invitations that offer children...
many reasons to want to read, write, and engage in symbolic representation through their play and image-making” (Curtis & Carter, 2003, p. 150). In the vignette, the children’s approaches to drawing varied. Some children focused on just one part of the car and created very detailed records that including copy-writing. Others emphasized the motion and circular shape of the wheel.

The teacher then used children’s drawings and her photographs as references for constructing a car in the dramatic play area. This strategy extended the literacy experience by providing opportunities for children to

- refer to their own drawings in terms of the meanings they express,
- incorporate new words and vocabulary,
- create stories, and
- engage in complex dramatic play.

The children added labels and signs to enhance the car construction play. Connecting their drawing, construction, and play “adds validity and importance to what the children are doing” (Gronlund, 2010, p. 116) and provides additional opportunities for children to display and build upon their communicative competencies. In this way, children’s representations are valuable forms of expressing meaning.

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Understandings about the relationship between culture, development, and early literacy suggest that children have an array of diverse communicative competencies that can be recognized and built upon in order to foster language and literacy learning. Early childhood educators can intentionally plan language and literacy experiences that build upon and extend what children already know and can do (Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2009).

The vignettes in this article highlighted several ways young children’s capacities—to tell stories, make connections to personal and first-hand experiences, engage in peer cross talk, and record ideas through drawing and constructing dramatic play environments—comprise a multitude of ways to communicate.

Awareness of the cultural nature of children’s development informs early learning: “Children from all communities need and respond to a wide range of curricula and practices” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 3). In contrast to a narrow approach that emphasizes drill and practice of isolated skills, this broader approach to early language and literacy embeds explicit literacy skills instruction within meaningful contexts. In this way, teachers of young children foster increasingly complex engagement in language and literacy learning.

References


in the South.

**Fostering Language and Literacy Learning**

**About the Author**
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Emma’s Rug

Emma receives the gift of a fuzzy white rug when she is an infant. As she grows, the rug becomes the inspiration for her art. She is a gifted artist, and this gains her recognition and awards. One day, her mother washes the rug. This is greatly upsetting to Emma, who feels she has lost the source of her ideas. She withdraws and stops creating art. In the end, however, she finds inspiration within herself.

This book is rather abstract and would probably be most appropriate for kindergarten and/or early elementary. The major concepts are that artists are inspired by the world around them and everyone has talents.

Classroom Ideas!

**LITERACY:** The rug is referred to as “her TV,” her use of a paintbrush is described as “like a maestro’s baton.” Discuss what children think these figures of speech mean.

Choose books about art and artists such as *I Ain’t Gonna Paint No More*, *Linnea in Monet’s Garden*, *The Art Lesson*, and *The Squiggle*. Ask older children to write or draw about their unique traits and abilities.

**DRAMATIC PLAY:** Children help set up an art museum with roles of docents, exhibit curators, teachers, students, museum visitors, and other jobs. Encourage families to take a child-led tour.

**SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL SKILLS:** Discuss Emma’s changing emotions. Why does she stop making art? Ask children to act out appropriate emotions for imaginary situations. Discuss connections between events and feelings.

**SCIENCE:** Experiment with colors and color-mixing using paints or color paddles. Take nature walks during which children sketch their impressions and observations. Research and make representations of exotic animals.

**ART:** Expand the art center to create an atelier based on the Reggio Emilia philosophy. Set up a class art museum. Watch the segment in the movie “Pollock,” about Jackson Pollock, in which he is inspired by dripping paint—and encourage children to discuss where artists get ideas.

**MOVEMENT & MUSIC:** Draw, paint, or move to classical music such as “The Four Seasons” and “Carnival of the Animals,” or play lively jazz for contrast.