

How can less able children's language development be supported through learning opportunities in the outdoor area together with quality interactions with adults?

Orchard Primary School, EYFS Phase

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of adult's narration of child initiated play together with the use of intentional vocabulary, and to evaluate the impact on children's language and communication skills development. In each participating class six children were identified and chosen to be part of the study. Throughout the research period participating adults narrated children's play in their preferred outdoor areas of learning which was followed by the introduction of intentional vocabulary.

Carol Hayes stresses that "practitioners need to better understand the value and importance of helping children to develop their ability to receive and comprehend language, and see that they can have an important role in this process. Listening is a vital skill which sets the basis for all other language development, and you can assist this by valuing a child's attempts to listen and comprehend and also to demonstrate what 'good' listening really is and the circumstances under which it can be enhanced."

The findings of the study show that all the children had a significant improvement in communication skills and language development which is evident in the final assessment. Narration of the play helped with improving children's confidence in general and in listening and communication skills specifically. Participating adults also improved their use of intentional vocabulary and questioning skills.

Introduction

Orchard is a three form entry primary school in the London borough of Hackney, providing education for children between the ages of three to eleven. The proportions of pupils from minority ethnic groups and those who speak English as an additional language are higher than the national average. The proportion of pupils eligible to receive the pupil premium is also higher than average. Of the pupils arriving the overall starting point is low.

In EYFS, one of the prime areas of learning is Communication and Language. The statutory framework from September 1st 2021 states that *“there is a new focus on early language and extending vocabulary, with more examples on how to imbed and develop vocabulary skills across all 7 areas, because this improves child development in a broad curriculum.”*

The Reception baseline results (Fig. 1) showed that 23% of Reception children were on track in the communication and language area of development which is significantly below what is expected of that age. During further observations held in autumn term it was discovered that children were lacking basic communication skills.

Communication and Language	Baseline	Autumn
	23%	29%

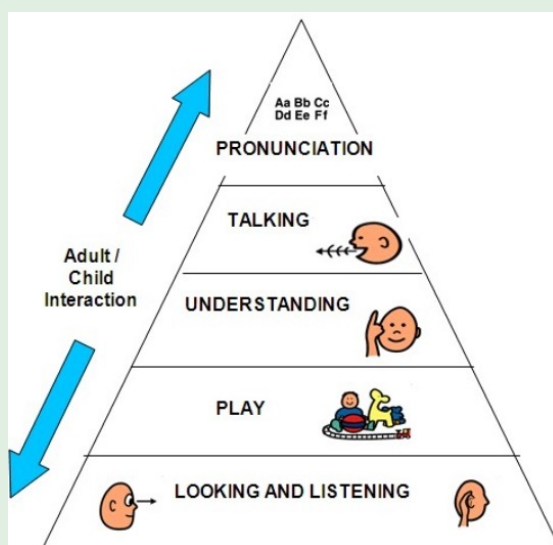
Fig. 1 Reception baseline assessment

Language development is something that occurs naturally, and an outdoor environment can help stimulate this process. Associating actions with words is a vital tool towards helping children learn how to communicate. The adult’s task in this process is to provide a basis for children to start from. This can be achieved by narrating child initiated play. This should be done in an unthreatening manner as an overstimulating approach may lead to reluctance in participation from children. The use of narration should lead to children subconsciously mimicking the vocabulary used by adults and start incorporating the newly taught vocabulary in their own conversations. This is a vital skill in life as children being able to understand and communicate their thoughts and feelings freely, leads to better achievements in their further learning.

The three areas of outdoor learning that were identified to be the preferred areas by children taking part in the study were the sand area, water area and mud kitchen. This is not surprising as children who have limited vocabulary and communication skills tend to choose practical, hands-on activities. Children with limited communication and language skills normally feel a lot of pressure when talking in front of peers and adults. However, during free play and with adults overlooking, children are able to express themselves fully. Both the narration tool together with intentional vocabulary and children’s willingness to explore the areas of learning will form a foundation for further language development as children begin to connect their actions with words. Moving onwards, this will lead to children beginning to understand the fundamental aspects of holding a conversation.

Becky Poulter Jewson and Rebecca Skinner explain how we learn language through the use of a communication pyramid (Fig. 2), *“the communication pyramid is a helpful visual for us to use when we are thinking about what skills we need to focus on with a child who is struggling to communicate. As we can see from the model we wouldn’t prioritise focussing on speech sounds if a child is struggling to focus their attention and listening skills.”*

Fig. 2 Communication Pyramid



They also suggest that “creating an inclusive, kind, and wonderful space to be educated in is something you do with the children. It is created through their eyes. You use your skills to add provocation, comments, and quality interactions. By all means paint your own picture alongside a child, using comments and authentic body language to show you are really engaged, this could enable the child to see that you value the time to just be alongside them.”

Research Process

The research project was coordinated and led by the EYFS phase leader and supported by the Reception class teachers.

The study group consisted of 18 children from across the Reception year group. The expected level for an average child entering Reception in September is either 3-4 Secure or Reception Emerging. The study group children were assessed at baseline in September in all areas of learning and it was found that they scored lowest in the Communication and Language area of development, scoring one or two levels below what is expected, (Fig. 3).

	Baseline
Child A	3-4 Emerging
Child B	3-4 Secure
Child C	3-4 Emerging
Child D	3-4 Secure
Child E	3-4 Developing
Child F	3-4 Emerging

	Baseline
Child A	3-4 Emerging
Child B	3-4 Secure
Child C	3-4 Secure
Child D	3-4 Developing
Child E	3-4 Secure
Child F	3-4 Secure

	Baseline
Child A	3-4 Secure
Child B	3-4 Emerging
Child C	3-4 Emerging
Child D	3-4 Developing
Child E	3-4 Emerging
Child F	3-4 Emerging

Fig. 3 Baseline assessment for study group

After the research question was created and the action research process outlined, the EYFS leader delivered the training to all participating members of staff. The importance of narration of play including the use of intentional vocabulary was stressed. The communication pyramid (Fig. 2) was explored to enable practitioners to understand the right steps to take when facilitating the play for the children.

The next stage of the action research required adults to observe where the participating children spent majority of their free flow time. The preferred areas of learning were identified as the sand area, water area and mud kitchen. The participating adults then began focussing their attention on those areas by narrating – describing actions of child-initiated play – using intentional vocabulary (See Appendix 1) without encouraging children’s involvement in the conversations. This was done with the intention of building trustful relationships between adults and children. To achieve this, it was agreed that adults would play alongside the children, therefore making them appear less intimidating. At this stage adults would mimic the children’s play with the addition of intentional vocabulary in different scenarios created by the children (see Appendix 2).

The next stage of the action research process required adults to provide the children with a problem and narrate the child's thought process into solving it. This was done through the use of questions and intentional vocabulary. Adults were creating both planned and spontaneous scenarios that prompted a child to start describing what they were doing. This created a base for children to begin to understand the social rules of play and communication while still relying on adults to support them with this. Over time the reliance on adults dropped as children became more confident in their use of basic communication skills e.g. naming some of the processes, equipment and actions they were using throughout their play, (see Appendix 3)

Regular check ins with teachers during phase meetings were held to ensure the process is up and running as well as coming to an agreement about the next steps of the process. It allowed the phase leader to evaluate the study as it developed, adapting the method to ensure best results if any issues were noticed. For example, during unforeseen weather conditions, which meant using the children's preferred areas wasn't possible, teachers carried on narrating the preferred play within the classroom. Consequently, the intentional vocabulary was introduced in most areas of learning across EYFS, (see Appendix 4).

The spring assessment showed that the taken approach was working as there was progress in all students since the baseline assessment at the start of the year, (Fig. 4).

	Baseline	Spring
Child A	3-4 Emerging	3-4 Secure
Child B	3-4 Secure	Reception Developing
Child C	3-4 Emerging	Reception Developing
Child D	3-4 Secure	Reception Developing
Child E	3-4 Developing	Reception Emerging
Child F	3-4 Emerging	Reception Emerging

	Baseline	Spring
Child A	3-4 Emerging	Reception Emerging
Child B	3-4 Secure	Reception Emerging
Child C	3-4 Secure	Reception Developing
Child D	3-4 Developing	Reception Developing
Child E	3-4 Secure	Reception Developing
Child F	3-4 Secure	Reception Developing

	Baseline	Spring
Child A	3-4 Secure	Reception Emerging
Child B	3-4 Emerging	Reception Developing
Child C	3-4 Emerging	Reception Emerging
Child D	3-4 Developing	Reception Emerging
Child E	3-4 Emerging	3-4 Developing
Child F	3-4 Emerging	Reception Emerging

Fig. 4 Spring assessment for study group

In the final stage, during the first half of the summer term, adults continued to actively narrate child initiated play, allowing and encouraging children to utilise their improved vocabulary alongside their actions. Adults had to note and assess the communication level and vocabulary children use in their play. If noted that children preferred to give one word answers, adults were required to ask questions that included the intentional vocabulary. Children were consequently prompted into responding with answers including the vocabulary offered by the adult in the questions.

The final assessment in the summer term found that all participating students had improved their communication skills, confidence and ability to hold spontaneous conversations with peers and adults. Out of all students participating in the study 67% reached the expected level by the end of Reception, (Fig. 5).

	Baseline	Spring	Summer
Child A	3-4 Emerging	3-4 Secure	Reception Emerging
Child B	3-4 Secure	Reception Developing	Reception Secure
Child C	3-4 Emerging	Reception Developing	Reception Secure
Child D	3-4 Secure	Reception Developing	Reception Secure
Child E	3-4 Developing	Reception Emerging	Reception Secure
Child F	3-4 Emerging	Reception Emerging	Reception Developing

	Baseline	Spring	Summer
Child A	3-4 Emerging	Reception Emerging	Reception Secure
Child B	3-4 Secure	Reception Emerging	Reception developing
Child C	3-4 Secure	Reception Developing	Reception Secure
Child D	3-4 Developing	Reception Developing	Reception Secure
Child E	3-4 Secure	Reception Developing	Reception Secure
Child F	3-4 Secure	Reception Developing	Reception Secure

	Baseline	Spring	Summer
Child A	3-4 Secure	Reception Emerging	Reception Secure
Child B	3-4 Emerging	Reception Developing	Reception Secure
Child C	3-4 Emerging	Reception Emerging	Reception Developing
Child D	3-4 Developing	Reception Emerging	Reception Secure
Child E	3-4 Emerging	3-4 Developing	3-4 Secure
Child F	3-4 Emerging	Reception Emerging	Reception Developing

Fig. 5 Summer assessment for study group

Findings

This research helped to unlock the level of knowledge adults possess when narrating child initiated play. This led to trainings designed to improve the questioning skills of participating adults as well as improving their understanding of adult level of engagement within the play.

During the research process adults strengthened their understanding of when and how to be engaged with children by looking at the behaviour's children display to gauge an understanding of whether they are prepared to hold a conversation. This ensured that the conversation interested and benefitted the child's confidence and language development.

The use of intentional vocabulary in the research process greatly benefitted and complimented all areas of learning and was used by adults both in and outside the research setting. Using intentional vocabulary within questions led to the adult - child interactions becoming more purposeful and allowing for children to develop their answers.

The introduction of intentional vocabulary enabled children to develop language needed to describe the processes they used to achieve the final outcomes. Intentional vocabulary introduced during the research process has become a vital aspect of everyday interactions for children both with peers and adults.

The narration skill adults acquired throughout the research process hugely benefitted not only the participating children but the whole Reception cohort. This led to a significant improvement in communication skills and language development that is evident in the final assessment, (Fig. 6).

Communication and Language	Baseline	Summer (Final)
	23%	75%

Fig. 6 End of year assessment for all Reception children

Conducted research unlocked the treasure of an adult being an irreplaceable tool that children require to develop their confidence, interaction skills, listening skills and language. The research displays strong evidence that the sooner in an academic year the strategies are implemented, the greater the level of progress achieved by the end of Reception.

Comparing the data from this academic year to last academic year it can be seen that the starting point for this years children is significantly lower than last years children. Despite this, the overall improvement this academic year is higher. This is strong evidence that implementation of the new strategies and adults being a narrator of play has had a great impact on children’s language development, (Fig. 7).

Communication and Language	2021 – 2022		2022 – 2023	
	Baseline	Summer	Baseline	Summer
	40%	83%	23%	75%
Overall Improvement	43%		52%	

Fig. 7 Comparison of data

Impact and Conclusion

Whilst the evidence concludes that not all of the children who participated in the research process reached the end of year expected levels, all participating children made significant progress in speaking, listening and language. The research showed that the new skill of narrating play together with the use of intentional vocabulary that adults acquired, led to higher quality adult – child interactions on the daily basis. This therefore led to greater development of child language and interaction skills.

This may not be obvious to everyone, but through the use of outdoor play children can develop their levels of socialisation and self-expression more freely. The role of an adult is to navigate children’s imagination by exploring and expressing new vocabulary, creating and facilitating role play scenarios and being a voice for children’s thoughts. This approach enables children to understand how others use and manipulate language, and how it is different to their own. Consequently, this establishes a foundation for their use of language in the future.

References

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- Carol Hayes, *Language, Literacy & Communication in the Early Years*, First published by Critical Publishing Ltd (2016)
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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Intentional Vocabulary in key research areas of learning

	Intentional Vocabulary			Intentional Vocabulary			Intentional Vocabulary				
Water Play	Beaker	Drain	<i>For some children:</i> Water	Sand Play	Spade	Fill	<i>For some children:</i> Sand	Mud Kitchen	Utensils	Sift	<i>For some children:</i> Kitchen
	Funnel	Measure	Wet		Mould	Push	Dry		Recipe	Melt	Water
	Droplet	Trickly	Cup		Build	Sprinkle	Dig		Stir	Consistency	Mud
	Pour	Slippery	Splash		Sieve	Full	Put		Pour	Measuring	Mix
	Scrub	Shallow			Pour	Empty			Boil	Mixing	Smell
	Strain	Sink / float			Scoop				Whisk	Combine	Touch
	Stir	Transfer							Weigh	Decorate	
	Spray	Fill							Grate	Ingredients	

Appendix 2 – Outdoor play scenarios

<p>Scenario 1 - Building sandcastles.</p> <p>Child A is in the sand area building a sandcastle. The teacher begins to build a sandcastle alongside Child A. The teacher mimics all the steps Child A takes and narrates what they are doing, 'I use a spade to pour the sand in the bucket' 'My bucket is full' 'I turn the bucket over' 'I pat the bucket with a spade' 'I lift the bucket'</p>
<p>Scenario 2 – Making a cake</p> <p>Child B is making a cake in the mud kitchen. The teacher joins child B to also make a cake. The teacher narrates the steps they take, 'I need a baking tray' 'I weigh the flour' 'I add water and eggs' 'I mix the ingredients' 'I bake my cake' 'I decorate my cake' 'I eat my cake'</p>
<p>Scenario 3 – playing musical bottles</p> <p>Child D is filling up the bottles on the washing line and attempting to play music by tapping the bottles with a spoon, the teacher joins child D 'I put the funnel in the bottle' 'I use a beaker to pour the water' 'This bottle is full' 'This bottle is empty' 'This bottle is half full' 'Now I can tap the bottles with a spoon.'</p>

Appendix 3 – Stages of language development

	Spring 1	Spring 2	Summer 1
Child C	'Sandcastle'	'I make sandcastle. I need a bucket'	'Pour the sand into the bucket, pat on it and turn it over.'
Child E	No speech	'Water' 'Apron' 'Float' 'Wet' 'Sink'	'Duck is in the water, it is floating.' 'Splash' Splash Splash
Child F	'I make a cake'	'I mix eggs and flour and put it all in a tray and in the oven like a gingerbread man.'	'This is my cake and I put sprinkles on top and pour melted chocolate. I have five candles because I'm five.'

Appendix 4 – Intentional Vocabulary in further areas of learning

Intentional Vocabulary			
Construction	Build	Design	<i>For some children:</i> Positional language links—on top, next to
	Sort	Construct	
	Group	Measure	
	Join	Connect	
	Slot	Evaluate	
	Plan	Improve	
	Slot	Collaborate	
	Balance		
Intentional Vocabulary			
Small World	Act	Talk	<i>For some children:</i> Tell a story Naming resources e.g. animals
	Pretend	Narrate	
	Imagine	Perform	
	Create	Group	
	Imitate	Sort	
	Represent	Experiences	
	Props	Story Language	
	Setting		
Intentional Vocabulary			
Malleable	Roll	Thread	<i>For some children:</i> Pat Splat
	Pinch	Texture	
	Twist	Sculpt	
	Squeeze		
	Stretch		
	Cut		
Intentional Vocabulary			
Creative	Join	Shade	<i>For some children:</i> Cut Paint Colours Names of resources e.g. pens
	Print	Blend	
	Press	Outline	
	Squirt	Combine	
	Texture	Technique	
	Sketch	Stick	