A Basic Look at Back-to-the-Basics of Language and Literacy Development: A Dual and Natural Process

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This article takes us back-to-the-basics of language development and learning to read. Four toddlers teach us how language and literacy development experiences begin. These toddlers portray how language development and reading development can become dual processes. The author observed these four toddlers through 120 hours of daily, morning activities in a Head Start classroom in the Southwest.

Introduction

This article takes us back-to-the-basics of language development and learning to read. Four toddlers teach us how language and literacy development experiences begin. These toddlers portray how language development and reading development can become dual processes. The author observed these four toddlers through 120 hours of daily, morning activities in a Head Start classroom in the Southwest.

The teacher in the toddler room was very experienced and knowledgeable about child care and providing for the needs of each child. She always communicated with each child using terms of endearment, and she proceeded in creating an environment of trust, safety, and language and literacy experiences.

The book nook in this classroom contained both English and Spanish books. When the teacher read to the class, she almost read books written in English. When the toddlers browsed, they handled books written in both English and Spanish.

Established Data

Language development begins during infancy with babies acquiring language in a natural way (Smith, 1985). Before babies begin to speak words, they are acquiring lots of language. Their first speech is babbling, but even though they don’t pronounce quite accurately, they understand what some words mean. Frank Smith asserts that they join the spoken-language club. They acquire the language that is spoken in their spoken-language club. No one consciously teaches it all to them. They “pick it up” from their families and any other people who may be a member of their particular language club.
When we hear such expressions as, “I can’t learn a second language,” or “I can’t learn to speak French,” research supports that those expressions are true. One does not “learn” a second language competently; one “acquires” it (Krashen, 1981).

According to Asher (1982), any natural language—including sign language of the deaf—can be acquired through a natural approach. He called his approach TPR (Total Physical Response). It is patterned after the way a child learns his first language. Parents speak and the child responds in a physical response such as smiling, laughing, turning, walking, reaching, sitting, running, etc. Speech does not emerge immediately in response to these physical responses, but after many months the child utters words as simple as “mommy or daddy”. Although speech does not emerge immediately, the child is internalizing speech and how the language works. Eventually the child begins to talk. The child’s speech is far from perfect at this point, but continuous babbling brings confidence and risk taking is easier.

The four toddlers that I observed were becoming members of the spoken-language club while they creatively milled about playing, eating, reading, and producing language together each day. They imitated and repeated after each other. They also repeated after the teacher. They babbled, squeaked, squalled, screamed, and pointed in order to make themselves heard and understood.

Frank Smith (1987) also wrote that there is a literacy club that children join. When children see reading as the construction of meaning, they join the literacy club. They can pick up reading habits from the people in their families and school. The four toddlers were being introduced to the literacy club by their teachers. Seeing and hearing the teacher read to them helped them to become interested in reading.

The territorial terrain of literacy is a winding path that becomes straight and narrow as the learners reach milestones along the way. An expansion of literacy begins within one’s self and is influenced by pedagogy. An example: “A baby learns to pull himself/herself up from the floor while holding on to a sturdy object. An adult notices this self-foundation effort and encourages the behavior to continue. Soon the child makes a step away from the object and the adult calls this walking and encourages this walking by standing afar off and reaching for the child. The adult is teaching the child to walk by building upon the self-foundation—effort—that came from within the child. The child remains interested in learning to walk. Self-confidence is born, and the child learns to walk within a short period of time” (Welch, 2007, p. 123).

**Toddlers’ Portraits**

As I entered the toddlers’ classroom, early one Monday morning, the toddlers had not yet arrived. While the teacher and I were communicating about my visits, suddenly, I heard voices in the hallway. I stood at the classroom door and observed each toddler’s arrival. The four toddlers that I observed arrived with their parents, one after the other. On this first day, I did not know their names, so I describe them as follows:

A petite female toddler cried and clung to her mother as she and her mother walked toward the classroom. She milled around...
the classroom with tears in her eyes. A solidly built male toddler walked in front of his mother and waved goodbye to her as he entered the classroom. He approached the toy box, changed his mind, and grabbed the big ball. Another female toddler ran down the hallway and slid, feet first, into the classroom. She immediately began to look for a particular toy in the toy box. A quiet male toddler moved slowly away from his mother’s arms and reluctantly entered the classroom. He strode to the book nook and began looking at books. I came to know these four toddlers at the Head Start Center as Emma, Ryan, Liliana, and Noel.

For the next twenty days, six hours a day, I observed these toddlers as they creatively played and interacted with the teacher and with each other. Their primary language, Spanish, could be heard emerging while their second language, English, was not far behind. They were also being introduced to schooling at these early ages of three and four. My observations included arrival time, classroom playtime, diaper change time, lunchtime, outdoors playtime, creative language experience time, and naptime.

Each toddler had his and her own style of language even though they were in the same spoken language club (Smith, 1995). Some produced language without much effort and in a smooth tone while others made crying, whining and sometimes banging noises in an effort to make others understand them. For example, Emma who was born prematurely and was much smaller than the other children, even though she was the oldest, calmly spoke in a soprano tone with few gestures. I heard her say, “Telephone, hello” with somewhat of a smile on her face. Ryan was husky, self-assured and stern. He spoke in an upcoming baritone voice that had no surround sound. I usually heard him say, “Mine!” Liliana on the other hand spoke with vigor. I heard her say “My chair, eeeeeeeeh” with a raspy alto voice and a look of ownership on her face. Noel was the quietest of the four. He only spoke if there was a special need to speak. I often heard him say “Sleepy.” Soon after he uttered the word, it was naptime, and he quickly fell fast asleep while the other three were being coaxed to lie down.

Emma’s language development is in tune with her physical development. She protected herself from the tumbling and the rough play of her peers. She would move away from them, and sometimes she would hover by placing her arms around her body. It seemed that her language matched her personality. They both were calm and serene. Ryan’s language development seemed self-assured, and his body is solid, stern and upright. Liliana on the other hand was aggressive in play and her language was aggressive in tone. She was the leader in the spoken language but not in the literacy club. Noel also has a stern upright body, but his language development is not frivolous.

Each also had his and her own type of language. Emma whispered; Ryan squawked; Liliana squeaked, but Noel remained silent which is also a language. All of these types will turn into English or Spanish, or both English and Spanish. Their final language product will be Standard English and Spanish if they remain in the United States school system. If they change clubs before their language is fully developed, they will become a byproduct of the club in which they join and remain.
The teacher spoke to these toddlers in English and Spanish. However, Noel’s mother asked the teacher to speak to him in Spanish. Emma, Liliana, and Ryan responded to both English and Spanish. Even though Noel was addressed directly in Spanish, he heard and responded to the English that was spoken in the classroom. His responses, however, were imitations of the other toddlers.

Just as there was a spoken language club in this classroom, there was a literacy club. Emma rarely picked up a book. When she was summoned to the book nook, she sat and looked at the pictures as the teacher read the book. She did not have the patience to be read to for an extended period of time. She would take the book out of the teacher’s hand and start thumbing through it and giving names to the pictures.

Ryan also rarely picked up a book. He too, just as Emma, paid attention to the pictures as the teacher read. His attention span was very short while he was at the book nook. He grabbed for the book from the teacher’s hand. When the teacher resisted his grab, he found something else to do, including getting up and walking away from the book nook. Liliana had a high interest level for the books. She squirmed while the teacher read, but it was obvious that she was listening to the story. I believe that her squirming was her anxiousness to see inside the book because she immediately reached for the book after the teacher finished reading.

Noel was the leader of the literacy club. He would wander away from the group and find a book in the book nook. He would open the book and read silently, occasionally orally saying what he saw, but for the most part he was silent. His attention span for reading was longer than it was for playing.

Concerning attention span, eating held the toddlers’ attention span longer than any other activity. While eating, much language was produced. Breakfast, lunchtime, and snack time began when the summon call “nosotros comemos” was announced by the teacher. The toddlers then scrambled for an ideal chair, but after that ideal chair was claimed, it remained ideal for only a moment. Very quickly another ideal chair was found, and the game continued until the teacher intervened and brought chairs with binders. After everyone was seated, the cups were filled with juice while the onlookers slammed the plates and repeated names of food after the teacher. Then the plates were filled and the eating began with the hands more so than with spoons.

This daily, natural language experience gave each toddler a repertoire of words for mealtime at home and at school. The teacher created other language experiences during their school day. The toddlers built, climbed, blew bubbles, created figures with play doe, etc. All of these language experiences have developmental purposes as well as language development opportunities.

Each activity, except eating, lasted only from five to eight minutes. Then, it was nap preparation time. Carts were opened and sheeted. Each child knew his or her bed and reluctantly approached it or avoided it. Noel, however, embraced his, but for most of the toddlers, the language of naptime was received negatively and seldom repeated and imitated. Naptime language was matched with squalls that meant “No”. Then the shaking and coaxing by the teacher began. Eventually and suddenly, all were silent.
My morning observation periods were over and I left, each morning amidst the silence while the teacher was quietly moving around the room preparing it for the awakening of her precious students. The afternoon would bring another diaper change time, creative playing, snack time, and anticipation of parent arrival for the ride home. Because of my observation periods, I went back to my classroom armed with more wisdom about reading and language development. I could also support my finding in my research study.

**Pedagogical Implications**

When teachers get an opportunity to teach language and literacy, and dual language learners, the scenarios and portraits of the toddlers in this study can be a reminder of how language acquisition and reading development can be dual processes. More research is needed in order to establish data about the effects of oral language and literacy being acquired simultaneously.

Research supports that a reciprocal interactive approach to instruction where teachers participate in genuine dialogues with students helps students to acquire language and literacy skills (Berman et al, 1995; Cummins, 2000; Doherty, Hilberg, Pinal & Tharp, 2003; Wenglinsky, 2000). We know that second language acquisition has its roots in first language acquisition and that both languages can be acquired (Krashen, 1981; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Smith, 1984). The formative years are ideal times to begin acquiring both languages and also literacy. The spoken-language club of these toddlers included both English and Spanish. They seemed to be accepting both in a positive way.

Asher & Price (1967) suggest that children and adults experience the thrill of immediate understanding when teachers implement TPR—Total Physical Response—in the classroom. Lessons should be designed to represent a natural atmosphere. Learning experiences should be the same as the learner experiences in a social or educational setting. For example: cooking, dining out, conversations, working, etc.

This head start school was preparing these toddlers to enter kindergarten and society with a level of development that was appropriate for their age. The impact that this early age intervention had upon the children was a researchable field. The personal knowledge and experience that I have gained from the 120 hours that I spent in the Blue Room at the head start school formed the framework for my research of language and reading development.

The different styles of beginning reading development that I observed enhanced and supported the findings in my research study, *Reading as a Struggle: Challenged Readers Making Meaning from Texts* (Welch, 2009). Six adolescents all spoke of how they began to read and how they became interested in reading at a young age. These observations also had implications for research that will indicate the impact that early Head Start programs have on social skills of children because according to Bakhtin (1981), language is social and requires a dialogic orientation. The children at this early Head Start program had opportunities to socialize together through play, communication, and schooling.
References


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