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ENHANCING NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING PRESCHOOLERS’
EMERGENT LITERACY SKILLS
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This article considers a number of issues associated with the teaching of English to preschoolers from non-English speaking backgrounds. It proposes that these children’s first language should be incorporated in the development of early literacy and associated resource materials, along with parental involvement in the emergent literacy process. More particularly, the article considers theoretical and practical issues involved in the design and use of picture books to facilitate the acquisition of English by preschool children with limited English proficiency. The children in the study were found to value the books highly and spent more time with these resources than with other books. The findings were that the children were stimulated to produce more complex language when the books were being read and were highly motivated to read them with their peers and parents.

PROBLEMS IN LEARNING A SECOND LANGUAGE

Traditionally it was assumed that if preschool children from non-English speaking backgrounds were placed in an environment where the language of instruction was English, these students would learn to speak English with little or no difficulty. Too often, this assumption has been shown to be unfounded. Consequently, there has been considerable debate regarding how to best prepare children from other-language speaking backgrounds for formal schooling (Brice & Roseberry-McKibbin, 1999; Cheng, 1996). This is an issue within a larger debate concerning early intervention. As Homel, Elias, and Hay (2001) note, there is a growing consensus that appropriate early learning experiences can facilitate children’s language, social and cognitive development. The passage from home and preschool to school is recognized as an important transition point in the life of the child. In particular, it has been proposed that children’s oral language skills developed in the preschool, underpin the emergence of formal literacy skills. For many children from non-English speaking backgrounds, however, entry to school and beginning reading are frequently confusing experiences (Roseberry-Mckibbin & Brice, 2000). The children are confronted with unfamiliar vocabulary and syntax, unfamiliar routines, unfamiliar tasks and an unfamiliar language of instruction. This can result in negative outcomes for the child (Schiff-Myers, Djukic, McGovern-Lawler, & Perez, 1993).

From the parents’ point of view, the school culture and its practices may be equally unfamiliar and they may be unsure of how to assist their child to become ready for school and to take part in its activities. Importantly, it must be recognized that non-English speaking children may come from very diverse

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backgrounds. Even if they are from the same country, the children and their families often have very different social, economic, cultural and linguistic histories.

The parents have two major issues to deal with. On the one hand, it is important to the parents that the first culture and its language are maintained. On the other hand, they are eager for their children to succeed in an education system that reflects different cultural attitudes and values and teaches the curriculum using an unfamiliar language of instruction. In these circumstances, young children whose proficiency in their first language is not yet well developed often go through a 'silent period' as they encounter the problems of learning a second language. Indeed, delayed development or even language loss can occur in the first language when young children are faced with learning a second language (Schiff-Myers et al., 1993). Importantly, the learning of a second language before the primary language is fully developed may lead to confusion between the languages.

TEACHING ISSUES

Frequently, the regular teacher in the mainstream classroom is confronted by the reality of teaching a standard curriculum, with its linked assessment benchmarks, to children with diverse profiles of language and cultural experiences. One of the difficulties faced by the teacher concerns the choice and development of appropriate resources and teaching strategies to meet the varying needs of the children. The need is for resources that are compatible with the children’s language levels and reflect the diversity of socio-cultural settings of the children and their families. Further, there is a growing awareness of the advantages of cooperation between parents and school on the child’s educational progress. For example, children’s early language and literacy development has been shown to benefit from programs that stress the importance of parents reading with their children (van Kleeck, Gillam, Hamilton, & McGrath, 1997).

In terms of the issues described above, this paper describes the development and use of a set of resources and procedures to enhance non-English speaking preschoolers’ emergent literacy skills. The resources were developed within the framework of a language intervention program that aims to facilitate the child’s transition from preschool to the first years of formal schooling. The program is in the early stages of implementation in preschools with a high proportion of non-English speaking students.

THE INTERVENTION

The intervention has two major strands. The first is the provision of a communication/language program and the second is the development and extension of home-school community links. A major aspect of the communication/language program has been the production of developmentally and culturally appropriate resources. The reading material has been designed to serve two purposes: to stimulate children’s use of language and to encourage parents’ involvement in the early literacy development of their children. It is
aimed at facilitating joint reading interactions between adults (parents and teachers) and children, and between children and their peers. The books are pictorial in nature and were produced using a digital camera, computer and a colour printer. An important advantage of this approach is its cost effectiveness. Apart from the ‘set-up’ costs (digital camera, computer and colour printer) these language books are relatively inexpensive.

The picture books are of three types. The first is concerned with each child’s personal activities and experiences in the preschool. The second focuses on the child’s out-of-school educational experiences such as visits to farms. The third illustrates basic concepts, such as “same” and “different”, “more” and “less”. Although the books are of three general types, any book could be used for a variety of purposes. For example, a child’s personal activity book might be used to discuss color or shape, or to introduce a discussion on seasons of the year and appropriate dress. Again, out-of-school activity books can be used to discuss the temporal structure of activities using such terms as before and after.

The results of formal and informal language assessment provided a profile for each child. For example, one of the instruments used in the profiling stage of the project was the Preschool Language Assessment Instrument, PLAI (Blank, Rose, & Berlin, 1978). The test measures the language demands placed on the child by the teaching/learning situation. These demands can be understood as involving four different levels of abstraction. For example, at the lowest level the child is required to respond to language concerning salient perceptions (e.g., to the question, what is this). At the higher levels of abstraction, language demands involve reflecting upon or restructuring perceptions (e.g., the question, what do you think will happen if …). The formal and informal assessment outcomes provided the teachers with important information for planning and implementing a developmentally appropriate language curriculum for each child. For example, the greater proportion of the teacher’s talk during language lessons might be pitched at the child’s current PLAI level and the remainder (perhaps 30%) at the next developmental level. That is, the teacher’s language is neither too easy nor too difficult for the child. Rather, the teacher’s language is at an appropriate, instructional level at which (s)he models language at the next level of conceptual complexity. Such a balance of easy and difficult teacher talk facilitates the child’s participation in dynamic language-enhancing dialogues that may occur in small group daily activities or planned individual lessons. Their successful participation in these social interactions increases the likelihood of the children talking with other adults and other children.

Results of the child’s formal and informal assessment also guide the design and content of the books. For example, a book prepared for a child at the earliest stages of abstract language use (e.g., the identification of objects) might contain pictures of the child with various objects accompanied by text introducing the object names. Where the child is in the early stages of learning English, the teacher, the child and the child’s parents are all involved in the composition of the text. The involvement of the child’s parents and the use of the first language are considered to be important motivational factors. As others have pointed out, there is a danger of the loss or regression of the first language or dialect if the
child does not perceive it to be as prestigious as the language being taught in the formal context (Schiff-Myers, 1993; Langdon, 1989).

To guard against the possibility of first language regression because of any perceived lack of status, the development of the reading books was designed to involve the parents and the use of the first language. Through an interpreter, the child, the teacher and parent discussed the content of the picture and negotiated written text in keeping with the child’s language abilities and the function(s) for which the picture is being used. The social interaction involved in such oral discussions of the proposed text provided the child with personally meaningful demonstrations of the relationships between oral language and its written form and functions. The simple sentences were then written beneath the pictures in both the first language and English. As indicated above, this dual representation of the text was aimed at maintaining the prestige of the child’s first language and encouraging the parents’ involvement in the children’s reading activities.

Many of the pictures are based on the children’s own activities such as visits to the farm and the day-to-day activities of the preschool. The pictures can be flexibly combined to create stories, or used to illustrate basic concepts being taught. In this way, the language program is designed in terms of the child’s individual language needs and personal experiences.

Results to date from parent-teacher interviews and teacher reports reveal that the children are highly motivated to read this material by themselves, with peers and with their parents and teachers. Using these books in particular, the children spend more time on early literacy activities and produce more complex language during these reading interactions with their parents and teachers. Such natural and informal oral interactions provide ideal opportunities for adults to facilitate the children’s language proficiency in socially and culturally meaningful contexts. Importantly, teachers working with the preschool families have reported that non-English speaking parents have shown higher levels of confidence in their interactions when reading these books with their children. The parent’s familiarity with the language of the text, and the children’s success on the task both contribute to this result. In its current form, the program serves as a means of building stronger links between home and school: the activities of parents and teachers acting in concert to enhance the children’s language proficiency.

REFERENCES


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