

TEACHING
LANGUAGE
and LITERACY
in the
EARLY YEARS

Second Edition

Diane Godwin
& Margaret Perkins

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Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent

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For Alan
and
For Ben

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Introduction

Why this book?

This book was written as an attempt to point the way to good practice in early years work. The teaching of language and literacy is one which hits the headlines and we wanted to help students and other adults working with young children to access easily the relevant research and to see what that research means in practical terms in an early years setting. This book makes no claims to full coverage of all the areas; it acts as an introduction and at times indicates possibilities of further reading and reflection.

Who is this book for?

This book is written specifically for those who are preparing to work in an early years setting and want to know how to implement the requirements of the Foundation Curriculum (QCA 2000) with particular reference to language and literacy. It is also for those who may have been working with young children for some time and want to find out what current thinking is on language and literacy teaching and learning. It is also for anyone who loves young children, who loves observing them as they begin to make sense of the world around them and wishes to know more of the processes that are going on.

There are a variety of contexts in which very young children begin their education and the terminology used in the book reflects that variety. We talk about classrooms, settings and nurseries; we mention teachers and adults. In all cases what we say can be applied in any context.

What will this book do?

It is hoped that in this book we have shown that theory and research have a direct impact on practice and that effective practice comes from a knowledge and understanding of relevant research. We believe strongly in the notion of the 'reflective practitioner' as one who is continually seeking to improve practice. Those working with young children must not be mere technicians but must have a firm understanding of the ways in which young children learn and the ways in which we can best teach them.

Who wrote this book?

This book is written by two people who between them have many years of experience of working with young children in playgroups, private nurseries, nursery classes and reception classes. We have both taught students preparing to be early years teachers and have worked with teachers who wished to improve their practice. We both have a passionate belief in the importance of language and literacy, believing that language is central to the learning process, that young children come into the early years setting as experienced learners with a lot of expertise in language and that it is our responsibility to make that knowledge explicit and to extend and develop it in order to empower children to be critical and reflective citizens of the future. Above all, this book arises

from our love of young children, our joy in being with them, observing them, talking and playing with them and learning from them.

In what context was this book written?

As we write this second edition, the world of early years education has changed. The House of Commons Select Committee Report on Early Years (DfEE 2001) raised the profile of early years enormously and its effects are still being worked out in practice. The long list of recommendations (55 in all) serves to stress the importance of this time in children's lives. They include a recommendation that there should be national targets for training and that in the long term the DfEE should 'foster the creation and development of a ladder of training for early years practitioners which could lead to a graduate qualification equivalent to that of qualified teachers' (Para. 97). There is now government funding for all four-year-olds and a significant number of three-year-olds and there is an increasing recognition of the important influences early years experiences have on later life and learning. Early years partnerships have established useful contacts between settings where good practices are shared. The Desirable Learning Outcomes have been revised and elaborated and are now the Early Learning Goals (QCA 1999).

The foundation stage begins at age three and finishes at the end of the reception year. At the time of writing, there is consultation about moving baseline assessment to the end of the reception year, thus recognising the inclusion in the foundation stage of five-year-olds. The foundation curriculum is a requirement for all settings which receive grant funding for the education of children aged three to five. It is organised into six areas of learning, one of which is described as communication, language and literacy. Stepping stones show what needs to be done during the foundation stage in order for children to achieve the early learning goals by the end of the reception year. The guidance to this curriculum is provided to help practitioners plan 'learning experiences of the highest quality, considering both children's needs and achievements and the range of learning experiences that will help them make progress. Well-planned play is a key way in which children learn with enjoyment and challenge during the foundation stage' (QCA 2000: 6–7).

Alongside this is the National Literacy Strategy Framework of Teaching Objectives. Since its inception in 1997 the National Literacy Strategy has changed much about the way literacy is taught in primary schools and has given practitioners a new vocabulary for talking about literacy learning. The teaching objectives for the reception year are not broken down into termly units as are other years, but clearly state what must be taught at word, sentence and text level. This has to be placed by practitioners alongside the early learning goals. Teachers are confident now in adapting the 'literacy hour' format for their own purposes and we shall be exploring this in the text. Guidance suggests that in the reception year, shared and guided reading and word level work should be taught 'from an early stage' and a full literacy hour should be in place as soon as possible but at least by the end of the summer term. Practitioners need to try and synthesise this with the emphasis within the foundation stage on play and the need for a curriculum which is appropriate developmentally.

It is in this context of an increased expectation of direct instruction and more whole-class work that the age range of many nursery and reception classes has changed. The introduction of the nursery voucher scheme in 1996 meant that settings containing

four-year-olds were required to register and be open to inspection. This resulted in many schools taking younger children into their reception classes in order to take advantage of the vouchers and, despite the abandonment of the voucher scheme, the situation remains where some children enter the reception year in September of the year in which they are five. Some of these children are only just four and so it is vital that the learning opportunities and resources provided are appropriate for them. Those working in early years settings need to resist the pressure to embark on more formal decontextualised teaching before the children are intellectually and emotionally ready.

Alongside all this is the issue of baseline assessment. From 1998 it has been a statutory requirement for local education authorities to have a baseline assessment scheme in place. The assessments are made during the first few weeks of the reception year when children are getting used to a new setting and a new social group and so it is important that the form of assessment allows children to show what they can do, understand and know; consequently it needs to take place over a period of time. The Association of Assessment Inspectors and Advisers (1997) identifies one of the purposes of a baseline scheme as being to 'support the introduction of children to the National Curriculum Programmes of Study, as and when appropriate'. The introduction of the foundation stage, and the inclusion of the whole of the reception year within this, emphasises this point even more and, as we have already said, there are thoughts of moving baseline assessment to the end of the foundation stage. Early years practitioners must resist any pressure to modify the curriculum to introduce inappropriate activities too soon. It is hoped that this book will show that effective teaching and learning can take place within a setting where the children's existing knowledge is valued and where play is at the centre of the curriculum. It aims to show how effective teaching and learning can be achieved within a context of play and advises caution against too much formal teaching of young children.

How is this book structured?

Most of the chapters are written to the same structure. The first section briefly defines terms and introduces the relevant parts of the Early Learning Goals. Secondly, we look at what children actually do; observation is one of the most important skills an adult working in the early years can possess and we want to stress that our starting point is always the children and their naturally observed behaviours. We then go on, in the third section, to look at what research can tell us, using research evidence to explain and question what the children do.

The next three sections help the practitioner to take these understandings and relate them to practice. We look at play, focused activities and the environment. In each of these sections we outline some practical things that can be done in most settings.

The seventh section considers the planning, assessing, recording and reporting cycle, and each chapter looks at a different aspect to build up skills and understanding.

The final chapter does not follow the structure of the others and serves as a drawing together of all that has been said beforehand – hence its title, 'Play: Making the Whole'. It is about play, and the importance we give to play is because we see it as underpinning and fulfilling all that has gone before. It has been said many times before, but is worth repeating, that play is the work of the young child and as such should hold a dominant position within any early years setting, as it does in this book.

1: Talk

Defining terms

This chapter has been written with a view to placing language development firmly in the context of social and cognitive development. The Early Learning Goals state that language development is marked by the ability to 'use talk to organise, sequence and clarify thinking, ideas, feelings and events'. A feature of good practice is where 'talk is valued in the setting and they [children] are encouraged to want to communicate'.

These statements form the foundation for discussion as we look at children's development as language users where talk is seen as an act of meaningful communication and the company the child keeps is fundamental to his learning. We look at the pattern of the early development of talk and the factors which affect this development.

What children do

We are going to organise our discussion of language development using 'talk to organise, sequence and clarify thinking' and 'talk as a medium for learning' as a framework.

Talk to organise, sequence and clarify thinking

This sets language firmly in the context of social interaction where communication is paramount. Language development is 'helped by unconscious invitation, it is stimulated by the response of others and speech becomes clearer in the necessity for communication' (Wilkinson 1965).

The term 'Oracy', used to denote speaking and listening, was coined by Andrew Wilkinson in 1965, and we introduce it here as it is used widely in educational environments where practitioners are keen to promote the status of speaking and listening to that attained by reading and writing. He provided this model which introduces two dimensions of language: the production and the reception:

	PRODUCTION	RECEPTION
ORACY	SPEAKING	LISTENING
LITERACY	WRITING	READING

This gives us an interesting alternative to the way we are used to categorising language in education. The National Curriculum defines the aspects of English as speaking and listening, and reading and writing. This divides the English curriculum into two parts – oracy and literacy. Had the authors of the National Curriculum chosen to follow a production/reception divide we would have aspects entitled 'speaking and writing', and 'listening and reading'. There is an attraction to this in that it brings to the fore the similarities between oral and written communication. Think about this for

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a while; how many similarities can you find between speaking and writing, and listening and reading? Perhaps you said that both speaking and writing are about communicating to an audience and both require awareness of the needs of the audience, to have their attention engaged, for example. Most children know implicitly that they must gain the attention of those they wish to talk to and this knowledge can be a powerful support in their learning about writing. Similarly, most children know that there are occasions when they must attend carefully to what is being said to them. The knowledge that the child has accumulated in learning to talk will provide him with a powerful support when learning to read.

Have you ever thought about what it is you do when you are talking? Ingram (1993) considers the analysis of a conversation between friends over lunch. You and your partner know how to take turns, but there is much more to it than that.

- Did you know that you give signals to indicate when it is your friend's turn to take over the conversation and that he does the same, so that you rarely speak over one another?
- Did you know that if you don't want to speak you might 'back channel'; you say simply 'yeah' or 'ah' in exactly the space your partner has left for you, and give the conversational ball back to him?
- Did you know that if you want to move the conversation on you might 'override' your partner by speaking the same words in parallel, thereby bringing the subject to a close or indicating that you know that bit?
- Did you know that, if you need time to think about what you are going to say next you will avert your gaze, and when you are ready you will gaze at your partner?

Ingram mentions many more similar cues which we use effortlessly but which, when analysed, reveal the complexity of the conversational interchange. 'It took two years to analyse forty minutes of conversation, and ... of 264 smooth exchanges in the conversations [they] analysed, 261 were preceded by one or more of these signals.' The point being made here is that we all learn to make and respond to these signals without any explicit instruction. So how do we know that? What is it that makes us able to do it? What would you say in answer to the question, How did you learn to talk?

Your reply will almost certainly make reference to other people, your social environment and significant people who welcomed you into their speaking world. But what did they do that encouraged you to join in?

Perhaps it went something like this:

- You were born into a family where relationships were established and where the members of the group shared many experiences such as shopping together, watching television and celebrating birthdays. This shared context meant that your parents, siblings and other close friends and relatives were able to treat you on more or less equal terms regarding the topic and style of communication, and then to encourage you to greater competence.
- You were not always included directly, of course, but when you were, your conversational partner will have modified her own speech to make sure that you each were following what the other was saying. At other times you will simply have heard others talking between themselves in a variety of different ways, e.g. arguing,

questioning, planning, discussing, explaining. In this way you, the learner, received many models of talk.

- From the moment you started to take interest in the world you will have begun to realise that talk is important; everybody was doing it, everybody was using it to communicate and build relationships.

So, your family and friends gave you reasons to talk and many examples of talk, but you were not just the recipient of their efforts. You soon learned that your very first sounds could get things done, could direct others, could communicate pleasure or discomfort. From then you quickly learned to deploy and develop your linguistic skills, and to this day you continue to develop as a speaker and listener in a variety of different communities that accept you as a participant, and where social interaction is fundamental to your continuing growth as a language user.

The story could be different. We could identify factors which might discourage and inhibit talk. We feel less able to talk when:

- other people ridicule the way we talk, maybe by laughing at our accent or dialect;
- we don't know the other members of the group we are in, or we think they know more than we do;
- it is clear the other person is not listening, or has no interest in what we are saying; or
- we are shy.

There are many reasons why we might choose not to talk, and that is a valid choice of course. But how many times have you wanted to take part yet have been silenced by any of the above? Many of my students nod in agreement when I recall my own frustration at school, when the teacher asked a question and I was too nervous to answer even though I was right. I suppose I was afraid I might make a mistake; perhaps I thought others would laugh at me; perhaps I lacked confidence.

Factors which support language learning

Confidence is a key factor in children's language and learning development. Barrs *et al.* (1991) put forward 'five dimensions of learning' that help us to be more discriminating when we are observing language and learning. The authors point out that they are interconnected and support each other, and although the publication was written with the English National Curriculum Key Stages 1 and 2 in mind, it has much to say about language learning in general. We refer to it here because the five dimensions (confidence and independence; experience; strategies; knowledge and understanding; and reflectiveness) can all be traced through the Early Learning Goals. For example:

Confidence and independence

'Interact with others, negotiating plans and activities and taking turns in conversation' (p. 48).

Experience

'Use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences' (p. 58).

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Strategies

'Use talk to organise, sequence and clarify thinking, ideas, feelings and events' (p. 58).

Knowledge and understanding

'Extend their vocabulary, exploring the meanings and sounds of new words' (p. 52).

Reflectiveness

'Sustain attentive listening, responding to what they have heard by relevant comments, questions or actions' (p. 6).

The Early Learning Goals in their entirety are examples of children's growing knowledge and understanding. Language development is influenced by all of the above and, therefore, when planning for or assessing children's language development we should give them careful consideration. We may think, for example, that we have set up an opportunity for a child to 'interact with others', but if the child lacks confidence then it is possible that the outcomes reflect this rather than his ability as a language user. Language development does not happen in isolation. It happens when the climate in which the child operates is supportive to the child. For example, when:

- feeling confident with the people he is talking with;
- having a rich background of experiences which he can share with others;
- actively and enthusiastically exploring and experimenting with new ideas, and using the expertise and contributions of others;
- being able to talk with others about his world and what he thinks and feels about it; and
- being invited by others to look back on an event or experience and to learn from it.

We have chosen to describe here aspects of the learning environment which emphasise the social nature of language learning. Other people matter; the people the child talks to will have an effect on the child's own language and learning. The adult in the early years setting has significant effect and, therefore, considerable responsibility. Part of this responsibility is to convey to the children that talking and listening are the most important ways of communicating and that they are powerful instruments for learning.

Multilingual children

Before children enter the early years setting they will already be able to communicate and learn through language, although the language they use will not necessarily be English. One of my most significant learning experiences was having a discussion with a five-year-old boy in a North London school. He told me that he could talk in seven languages and read and write a little in two. I was particularly impressed by the way in which he could compare and contrast his several languages. He could talk about talk as if he could see it, and I knew that this ability was significant in language awareness. His multilingualism was a positive support to knowing about language.

How do you feel about children who have a different way of talking? Perhaps a different accent, dialect or language? Did you know that 70 per cent of the world's population are bi- or multilingual? Inevitably, many of the children we work with will be learning in more than one language, so how can we provide experiences which

enable them to use what they know, and which reflect the multilingual society in which we live? We can begin by:

- encouraging children to talk in their preferred language when they find it gives greater support to effective communication and learning. Children whose first language is not English already have considerable knowledge of one language system which they can transfer and use in the mastery of English. We can support them by 'building on children's experiences of language at home and in the wider community by providing a range of opportunities to use their home languages, so that their developing use of English and other languages support one another' (p.19). They have also developed strategies for learning in one language which may well serve them better in certain situations. Multilingual children are not children with learning difficulties;
- inviting people who share the child's language into the setting. In this way children will be encouraged to continue developing competence in their home language as well as English, thereby retaining their multilingualism; and
- valuing their language and their culture by providing resources, displays and activities which reflect their experiences and histories.

The Primary Language Record was recommended to the National Curriculum Council as a model for the assessment of children's development as language users and we recommend it here. The authors embrace languages other than English and give us an insight into the needs of learners of English as a second language: 'In learning to use a second language children generally move through development phases that mirror those they moved through in learning a first language' (Barrs *et al.* 1998: 20).

Phases of language development

Most texts dealing with child development describe the first five years of a child's life as one of rapid learning where children learn to master the complexities of talking in an environment of supporting and sharing. There is a clear pattern to the child's language development in any language, and it can be described briefly as follows:

In the child's first year she produces sounds such as cooing and grunting. This babble becomes strings of sounds with intonation. If you have ever heard a child 'conversing' this way you will probably have been surprised and delighted at the strength of her commitment to what is being 'said'. If the child is a stranger to you then you are unlikely to understand what she means because the words are not recognisable, they are pre-communicative. Should you know the child, however, you may well be able to interpret her utterances and respond appropriately. Knowing the child and the context make it possible to have meaningful exchanges using her individual form of language. You may find it interesting to know that some call this pre-communicative talk 'jargon'; it is a special language understood by the members of a close community.

Usually, in the child's second year the first 'words' appear, although they may still be unrecognisable to the wider audience; however, those closer to the child begin to see that the child uses them consistently and regularly to represent the same or similar meanings and can confidently interpret on the child's behalf. The same adult can also initiate another into the child's language use. Sometimes the adult will respond using the child's actual words and at other times the adult will feed back the conventional words, thereby modelling correct forms for the child to adopt. In many interactions, where adult and child negotiate meanings, the child enters a transition phase where

his conventional spoken vocabulary grows from around 20 words at 18 months to 200 words at 21 months. Your mathematics will tell you that this is a growth rate of approximately 15 words each week. This rapid rate of acquisition accelerates to around ten new words a day until the child of three has a vocabulary of 1,000 words, and at five has around 5,000 words.

When a child has a vocabulary of only a few words, then the possibility of joining these words together exists. At around 18 months the child begins to utter simple sentences and demonstrates another rapid growth in his linguistic abilities. In putting words together in the correct order the child's awareness of grammar develops, and by three years of age he will be producing many three- or four-word sentences. At this point most adults and other children find they can understand, and conversation becomes more conventional. 'By the age of five children from all cultures understand and use most of the grammatical rules of their language, communicate effectively with peers and adults and demonstrate inventive ways of expressing themselves with words' (Smith and Cowie 1988: 241).

We have used the adjectives pre-communicative, transitional and conventional because we want to establish the links between oracy and literacy. Later we will use them again in relation to children's early writing, which exhibits a similar pattern of development.

Using talk as a medium for learning

Just as oracy and literacy are dependent upon one another, so, too, are linguistic and cognitive development. Vygotsky (1962) suggested that 'speech in infancy is the direct antecedent of thinking at a later stage'. When children engage in conversation they are developing their knowledge of grammar and extending their vocabulary, but when they talk to and for themselves (from three to seven years of age),

speech takes on a dual function and, in due course, develops differentially; conversation becomes more effective as communication, while monologue or 'running commentary' (speech for oneself) changes in what is virtually the opposite direction ... speech for oneself becomes internalised and continues to operate as the genesis of thought, perhaps moving through the stages of inner speech to verbal thinking and thence to the most elusive stage of all – thought itself. (Brindley 1994: 261)

Have you ever seen a child making such a running commentary? If you have worked or lived with young children you must have seen many examples of this. But you may not have connected this with thinking or conceptual development. We will return to Vygotsky's work later. In the meantime we hope this gives you a taste of the theoretical thinking which makes the link between language and thought, and that you can see how the vocabulary and grammar acquired during conversation can feed and enhance the monologue children employ when they are 'talking to themselves' or pre-thinking.

Conceptual development, with language, begins when the child starts to interact with the world and the people in it. From the moment a child is born the adults around begin to induct her into the social community she has joined. The adult smiles, tickles, tut-tuts, scolds, laughs, talks, sings, frowns and the child touches, tastes, smells, gasps, cries, smiles, jiggles, writhes and laughs, in a complex process of learning about the way things go 'around here'. Ask any parent and they will tell you that the child is not