Chapter 6
Let's Get Talking: Communication, Language and Literacy in the Early Years

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Abstract This chapter offers knowledge and understanding of how, why and what to promote for optimum language learning situations in early childhood education and care. It demonstrates how early years teachers, practitioners and families in England encourage and promote communication, language and literacy for babies and young children. The chapter reveals how studying and promoting young children's language development can be an exciting journey. The chapter addresses multilingual aspects as many practitioners work in ethnically diverse settings.

Keywords Communication • Early language development • Emergent literacy • Bilingual learners • Story and storytelling • Rhyming • English as an additional language • Pedagogy • UK policy • Practitioner role • Partnership with parents • Playful literacy

Introduction

This chapter offers knowledge and understanding of how, why and what to promote for optimum language learning situations in early childhood education and care (ECEC). It demonstrates how early years teachers, practitioners and families in England encourage and promote communication, language and literacy for babies and young children. The case studies and scenarios are based on real families interacting with practitioners in a variety of settings. It also reveals how studying and promoting young children's language development can be an exciting journey.

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The chapter contains multilingual ideas and activities as many practitioners work in ethnically diverse settings which constantly have to adapt to support different intakes of children and families. Key aspects addressed are:

- Babies as effective communicators exploring first steps into language and literacy
- The language and values of home impacting upon young children's learning
- High-quality opportunities for communication between adults and young children in early years settings
- Young children taking the lead in conversations
- The importance of stories, storytelling and books in young children's everyday experiences
- Playful early literacy experiences to promote reading and writing

Language Is the Key!

Competence in oral language and communication is crucial to young children's development. It is the essential foundation for learning, for communicating and building relationships with others as well as for enabling children to make sense of the world around them (Brock and Rankin 2008). Adults' roles in promoting language and communication in young children is of the utmost importance and should be of high interest and concern of parents, carers and families, as well of course, for early years practitioners and educators. In recent years young children's linguistic competence has also become an interest and concern for policymakers in the UK.

The importance of parents and carers to their child's early language cannot be overemphasised – they are the key influences in young children's language and literacy development. Children develop language from birth, and their progress depends on warm and positive interaction in safe, stimulating environments. Children learn most effectively through being involved in rich experiences, exploring their environment, interacting, talking and playing with adults and other children. Adults need to join in their play, both talking, listening and promoting two-way conversations with the children, taking into account their interests and previous experiences. This needs to occur with families in the home, with carers and with educators in pre-school settings as well as with teachers in the early years of schooling. Knowledge about how young children acquire language and develop into competent talkers and thinkers is *key* to good practice and those educating young children should be well qualified and well informed. It is therefore essential that all practitioners are able to develop, establish and articulate their professional and practical knowledge about early language development to stakeholders such as parents and policymakers. Practitioners also need to develop positive relationships with parents and carers and promote anti-discriminatory practice to meet children's needs in terms of ethnicity, culture, religion, home language, family background, special educational needs, disability, gender and ability (Power and Brock 2006). They should record observations of children's play, learning and language achievements to determine if provision is high quality, and

both children and their families should be involved in these processes (Brock and Rankin 2008). Studying and promoting young children's language development can be such an exciting journey!

Early Language Development

> Communication, language and literacy are areas of study that continue to produce new research findings and stimulating theories, and certainly justifies regular review and reappraisal. (Whitehead 2010: xiv)

As Whitehead (2010) asserts it is crucial that early years practitioners continually review theories from linguists, trends in linguistic research and policy decisions in order to make informed decisions about their practice. Research in the field of developmental psychology shows that the interactions which occur between young children and their carers are important. They not only promote close relationships and early language development but also contribute to children's intellectual development. Young children acquire language through significant others in their immediate environment, through responding to sounds, sentences and experiences expressed by their parents, family and other carers (Brock and Rankin 2008). From the moment they are born, babies begin to be language users through absorbing, listening, imitating and practising these sounds, gestures and facial experiences, and their responses are reinforced by the significant others. Linguistic patterns regarding language and communication begin to emerge, as babies try so hard to make sense of what is happening around them. Gradually they learn to reproduce sounds and words and establish an understanding of how language works, the structure and grammatical sense of putting these sounds and words together. With exposure to language, every child will acquire a sophisticated symbol system to serve her communicative needs, gaining an understanding about her own particular language.

Many children will acquire more than one language, sometimes two or three at the same time, sometimes one after another. Young children grow up in a variety of linguistic and sociocultural experiences, in worlds where their first language may not be the national language, in families that are promoting their heritage language, as well as the host country's language, or where signing may be the first or additional language. There are an infinite variety of patterns of language use and each new experience, each new word or new way of expressing something extends children's language skills in some way. Humans use rules in conjunction with words which enables 'infinite generativity' – the ability to produce and understand an infinite number of utterances from a finite amount of words (Atchison 1998). Such is the power that language offers to children, and such is the power they have over it (Brock and Rankin 2008). Children will undoubtedly understand more than they can express and demonstrate the meaning of in their everyday language use. By the age of 5, a child's language is firmly in place with a vocabulary of several thousand words. It is evident that the opportunity to hear and use language for a wide range of purposes, audiences and contexts directly affects the rate and expertise of children's future language development.

Becoming Communicatively Competent

> Opening up the world of knowledge and understanding and finding there is lifelong satisfaction in communicating with and without words, and in reading and writing, also equips children for survival in a fast-developing global world economy where the future is known and unknown. (Bruce and Spratt 2011: 13)

Babies born with the propensity to be sociable, particularly with their carers, and the beginnings of language are in early conversation or 'proto-conversation' in everyday routines and play. Parents and caregivers scaffold language and learning (Bruner 1983), and they act as facilitators of language through their participation and activity – children desire to communicate and develop their socio-cognitive skills and this drives their language development. Children become familiar with routines of communication and can gradually take more initiative – children learn language through using language (Tomasello 2003). Thinking about what others are thinking is one of the most important things humans can do – understanding intention and emotional reactions impacts on every social encounter.

Discourse is the language used in conversation – how people make meaning and how meanings are socially constructed – so that expressing them is effectively a kind of social practice (Widdowson 2007). Central to the discourse-making process are the interlocutors or conversationalists and their efforts to make and interpret meanings through speaking *and* listening to each other. Communicative competence is the ability to create appropriate meanings which the receiver will process and which correspond to the norms of use of that language community. Through watching, listening and participating, young children subconsciously learn the conventions and routines of turn taking. This may differ according to sociocultural assumptions and expectations – children will acquire the pragmatics of a language through observing others, both adults and other children. Children understand more successfully when the task is set in a meaningful context, and this supports their understanding and encourages them to abstract the experience and encode it in language. Additional contextual and linguistic support, often referred to as 'scaffolding', can enable young learners to complete a task successfully without being denied cognitively challenging work. Wells' (1987) longitudinal study entitled the Bristol University Language Development Programme followed the development of a representative sample of children from their first words to the end of primary school. The researchers recorded many examples of language used in naturally occurring settings in homes and at school. The research showed the active role that children play in making sense of the world around them and in mastering communication. The original study was inspired by Vygotsky's (1978) work, and the findings indicated the importance of the sociocultural context.

Young children are therefore active meaning makers (Wells 1987, 2009) and what they say offers a window into their thinking. Young children are not only acquiring vocabulary, they are also learning about concepts and trying to make sense of the world. It often sounds as though they are getting things wrong, but careful listening can enable adults to see how children are interpreting what is going on around them. Language enables us to negotiate or renegotiate our

understanding – language and thinking processes must interact in order for intellectual development. Sociocultural theory is the study of how children learn through social situations, being embedded in their immediate environment and society, shaped by relationships, norms and cultural expectations of that community (Vygotsky 1978). How adults and children interact is crucial in the co-construction of language and learning.

> Oscar at 17 months old is already an expert communicator with his first 15 words and he can communicate both his presence and his needs quite clearly to adults. He is very social and waves, calling 'Hiya' not only to family but to anyone he meets whilst at the park, on the train or in a restaurant. His use of 'Wow!' is full of intonation and meaning and his daycare key-worker related how he used this on his first visit to the toddler outdoor play area. 'More' and ta' were his first words and these are self maintaining and enable him to get the food, toy or action he wants. He connects gesture and words very effectively for example when he is looking for the 'cat' stretching his arms out, palms upwards questioning 'where?' He has just learnt to use 'Mummy' strategically, so that she stays with him whilst he goes to sleep. He appropriately uses 'aaaaww' empathically to show love and affection and 'quack quack' and 'woof woof' as he interprets the noises of the animals he sees.

My grandson Oscar is already applying some of Tough's (1976) communication skills of self-maintaining, interactional, directive, orienting, empathic and imaginative. Tough developed cognitive and social aspects of language from Halliday's (1975) functions of language:

- Regulatory: language used to influence behaviour of others; persuading and requesting other people to do things
- Interactional: language used to develop social relationships
- Personal: language used to express personal preferences and identity of the speaker; the 'Here I am!' function
- Representational: language used to exchange information
- Heuristic: language used to learn and explore the environment, questions and answers or the kind of running commentary that accompanies children's play
- Imaginative: language used to explore the imagination that may accompany play or arise from storytelling

These communication skills and functions of language can still be useful for practitioners in today's settings, to help them monitor that children are using a range of language for a range of purposes. Tough's (1981) research in the UK found that *disadvantaged* 3-year-olds used language to focus experience and monitor activities, whilst *advantaged* 3-year-olds used language for reasoning, predicting events and creating imaginative projects. Tizard and Hughes' (1984) study of complex usages of language in the spontaneous conversation of 30 4-year-old girls, their mothers and their teachers, at home and at school, found significant social class differences, as working-class girls' language style changed more between home and school than that of the middle-class girls. Tizard et al. (1983) discuss the findings from their research in relation to Labov's (1972) research with black children in US cities. He argued that verbal deprivation was a myth and that it was the work of educational psychologists attempting to discover the reasons of poor

performance of children in schools from a perspective of disadvantage or defect. These two historic studies remind us that care needs to be taken in claiming early disadvantage and this is particularly the case at the present time in the UK. A new proposal is that 2-year-olds are going to be subjected to a language test. This very early intervention seems to be from a disadvantage perspective that may not take individual children's maturation, development, gender and developing bilingualism into account. However, Tickell (2011: 28) argues that 'extending the free entitlement to disadvantaged 2-year-olds means that more children, and their families, will benefit from access to early years services and therefore support for language development from an early age'. She recommends that 'the Government investigate urgently how the development of children's English language skills can be effectively supported and assessed' (Tickell 2011: 28). It can be seen that the importance for young children's early language development for later educational success is now being recognised by the UK government.

UK Policy

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfCSF 2008a, b, c) was introduced in England as a 'single quality framework' for children from birth to 5 to meet the diverse needs of all young children. The EYFS was developed around key themes, principles and commitments, and the curriculum was focused on six areas of learning – personal, social and emotional development; communication, language and literacy; problem solving, reasoning and numeracy; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development; and creative development. Language and communication contributes to all these six areas, key to learning and understanding and so crucial for young children's development. A review of the EYFS will lead to a new framework to be introduced in September 2012 which will emphasise three 'prime' areas of personal, social and emotional development; physical development; and communication and language. Tickell (2011: 5) states that these are 'particularly important for igniting children's curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, and for building their capacity to learn and to thrive'. The role of practitioners is obviously crucial to ensuring that communication and language receives a high profile based on appropriate and effective knowledge and understanding.

In 2010, the Coalition government in the UK has stated that they would build the capacity for children, families and communities and that they recognised the family as being a huge untapped resource. They aim to continue with the Sure Start Children's Centres in disadvantaged areas, with services targeted to work more effectively to remove barriers for vulnerable families. The poorest young members of society will be particularly supported and 130,000 disadvantaged 2-year-olds will receive 15 h a week of free nursery education, building on the pilot schemes introduced by New Labour (Brock and Rankin 2011). Low socio-economic status does not mean low aspirations, but it is more likely that there are barriers to achieving them (Hirsch 2007). The gap in attainment is evidenced in Feinstein's (2003)

research which found that children from high socio-economic status at 22 months overtook the children from low socio-economic status as their age increased at 40 months, 5 years and 10 years of age. This was further substantiated by the Sutton Trust (2010) funded report which showed that children in the poorest fifth of families were already nearly a year behind children from middle-income families in vocabulary tests. This research by Waldfogel and Washbrook (2010) indicates that children's educational achievements are strongly linked to parents' income and therefore a key barrier to social mobility.

There is no doubt that communication is the key life skill for every child – for them to achieve at school, make friends and be successful in later life. Yet there are still many children starting school in the UK (normally at the age of four) without the extended vocabulary and communication abilities which are so important for learning and for making friends. According to Lindsay and Dockrell (2002), an estimated 1 in 10 children have some speech and language difficulty in one or more areas: receptive/expressive language; phonology, the sounds that comprise speech; grammar, the rules of sentence construction; and pragmatics, the use of language. Their research found that children living in areas of disadvantage are more likely to have language delay. The Bercow Report (DfCSF 2008a, b, c) examined the situation of language extreme consequences of communication problems for children and young people in the UK, examining the problems caused by language delay, language disorder or limited vocabulary. The New Labour government response in 2009 was to fund a £52 million package, £40 million of which was a programme of training and supporting the pre-school workforce in speech and language development and needs. The Every Child a Talker (ECAT 2008) programme was developed to strengthen children's early language development through promoting developmentally appropriate, supportive and stimulating environments for children to enjoy, experiment and learn language. Dedicated early language consultants were trained to work with practitioners in targeted early years settings, with a childminder or at home with their parents. Speech and language therapists and language consultants were involved in ECAT that provided support materials, promoted activities for specific language development and advised careful observation and monitoring of children's language development through audit and analysis of current early language provision.

Practitioners' Roles

Potter (2008) states that age development in the early years predicts later child outcomes and that whilst it is vital to establish communication enabling environments in early years settings, there are significant challenges in doing so. When Potter and Hodgson (2007) analysed language tape-recorded conversations between nursery nurses and children, they found that staff began two thirds of all conversational turns. Such findings are worrying because for children to become better communicators, it is very important that they have frequent experience of starting conversations. This is

because when children take the lead, they are likely to talk more and use their language more creatively than if they are simply responding to what adults have said. Potter and Hodgson (2007) undertook a longitudinal study of quality of play settings in Northern England, using (Harms et al. 2005) *Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scales* (revised). They found that the lowest scores obtained were in the area of 'Language and Interaction'. They then delivered a training course for practitioners, which focused on getting the practitioners to use a range communication enabling strategies. The practitioners were taught to think about developing children's vocabulary, their own physical positioning and the personalities of the children in a group. The use of prompts such as pauses, comments, playing alongside and positive replies in their conversations with children were promoted, and their use resulted in the adults changing the way they interacted with children in important ways. The adults began to use more pauses and ask fewer questions and the children started more interactions and led more conversational turns. As the adults used longer pauses, this gave the children more time to think about what they had heard and to find the words they needed to reply or begin a new turn in the conversation. The practitioners were advised to monitor the number of communication opportunities available to children in different situations and the nature of adult interactional strategies being used.

Practice and Pedagogy

Educators of young children need to think about their practice and provision, and this includes examining their pedagogy and how they promote children's learning in early years settings. Pedagogy encompasses the principles, theories and practice that underpin practitioners' knowledge; social interactions, observations and assessments; awareness of the child's level of learning; and provision and organisation of materials, space and routines (Brock et al. 2009). The Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002) project findings demonstrated the most effective pre-school practice and the importance of adult-child interaction. The findings indicate that the more effective settings have well-qualified staff who are able to match curriculum and pedagogy to children in order to promote cognitive challenges and 'sustained shared thinking' (SST). Children's talk should be stimulated through SST where children are engaged in meaningful discussions which involve co-constructing meaning and understanding. This requires supporting children talking, thinking things through, rationalising their ideas and engaging in problem solving in intellectual ways. SST should occur in both teacher-initiated group work and freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities, where there is a balance of adult-led and child-initiated interactions and play. Directed teaching should occur alongside interactions which guide, but do not dominate, children's thinking. Effective practitioners plan for optimum language opportunities for young children through play activities through:

- Modelling appropriate language and matching it to activities and experiences
- Promoting specific vocabulary and opportunities to use, repeat, understand and consolidate it
- Contextualising learning through play, first-hand and active experiences, using practical resources, visual support and other children
- Getting the children actively involved in talking and doing
- Encouraging socio-dramatic play and role-play opportunities
- Praising, encouraging, asking questions and interacting verbally with children
- Creating an atmosphere of fun where children want to participate

Practitioners need to plan and provide opportunities for 'good talking' to take place. Drawing a room plan and noting where the talking 'hot spots' are and drawing a timeline that lists everything that happens during a setting's day are valuable ways of monitoring effective language activities.

Supporting Bilingualism in the Early Years

More children in the world grow up bilingual than monolingual and speaking more than one language actually comes naturally to young children. Cunningham and Andersson (2003) report that while international research documents the successes and difficulties of parents developing their children's bilingual competence, the advantages of being bilingual or multilingual are immense and include:

- Enhancing self-esteem
- Enabling communication with extended family and friends
- Developing knowledge about how language operates
- Supporting cognitive flexibility and ability to learn more languages
- Enhancing problem-solving and analytical skills

Code switching is the ability to use more than one language during communication through substituting a word or phrase from one language with a phrase or word from another language. Code switching may be syntactically, semantically and phonologically appropriate and can occur between sentences (intersentential) or within a single sentence (intrasentential). This can be seen in the following extract:

Nusrat: Did you stay in hospital?
Wajid: Yes.
Nusrat: Yes. I can remember you went to the hospital.
Wajid: You, you, er went to the hospital
Nusrat: I went to the hospital to see you didn't I?
Wajid: Yes.
Nusrat: You had a drip on your arm.
Wajid: Yes, ai thai see na *(Wajid points to his right arm)*
Nusrat: On your arm.

Wajid: Yes, I had a teeka, peena nee na sa dud, halley chadur laprey aim see na. *(Yes I had an injection, couldn't drink the milk, I could only hold the scarf.)*
Nusrat: Kerey chadur? *(Which scarf?)*
Wajid: Apni chadur, apni hadur, apni bed a kaul carana na scarf. *(My scarf, I take it to my bed.)* (Brock and Rankin 2008: 38)

This example demonstrates how fluent Wajid aged 3 is in Punjabi and how he is learning English and able to code switch between the two languages. It can be seen how important it is that Nusrat scaffolds Wajid's language and how they have shared meaning making and are able to reflect on and discuss their established relationship, personal history and past experiences (Brock and Rankin 2008). Kenner and Hickey (2008) provide another example of code switching where a 2-year-old is offering an 'ice cream' to his English-speaking mother and 'glace' to his French-speaking grandmother. There are several interesting studies in the UK that have examined the nature of families supporting heritage language. These include Jessel et al.'s (2004) intergenerational research exploring the relationships of grandparents and grandchildren; Papatheodorou's (2007) research promoting playful, interactive learning activities with parents and children in a Greek community school; and Brooker's (2002) research with Bangladeshi families on their children's transition to school. Conteh and Brock (2011) argue that bilingual learners in the early years need particular kinds of 'safe spaces' for success in language learning and that the key to providing these is in the relationships that are constructed between learners and their educators. Brooker's (2002, 2003) work shows that 'safe spaces' for bilingual learners need to be places where all their learning experiences, in home, community and school, are recognised and valued. Positive home-school links need to continue throughout the early years and into school with educators recognising and valuing the diversity of ways in which parents support their children at home (Conteh and Brock 2011).

English as an Additional Language

Many young children enter school at an early stage of learning English as an additional language – either through being newly arrived into an English-speaking country or because families have promoted their heritage/first language within the home environment in order for them to gain fluency in this before learning English. It can take up to 2 years of additional language learning to acquire basic interpersonal communication skills – the ability to use language to socialise and manage discourse in conversational situations – but it can take between 5 and 7 years to acquire cognitive academic linguistic proficiency, the ability to use language in more demanding academic, problem-solving and literacy activities. Cummins' (1984, 2000) common underlying proficiency is the interdependence of cognitive and literacy skills. Second language acquisition is a complex process, and in order for a first language to be truly additional, it needs to be maintained, encouraged and valued (Conteh and Brock 2006). Young bilingual children need to feel that their first

language is valued, as it is a main constituent of their thought processes. They need an environment where they can practise, explore, think and talk aloud in both their first language and the targeted additional language.

Young bilingual children may:

- Be very communicative at home and yet reticent in settings
- Use their first language in diverse situations within their families
- Have a good level of understanding of concepts in their first language
- Expect adults to understand them when they use their first language

Young bilingual children may not understand every word, not follow long sentences and get tired more easily. They may have difficulty in processing in the additional language and, even when the input is understood, have difficulty in communicating back in the additional language. They may choose to be silent until they feel competent or even feel insecure and so 'opt out' deciding not to talk, or even listen, if they feel overly pressured. Practitioners need to:

- Be very aware of own language use and show children how to use language to communicate.
- Exploit previously used language and so activate children's prior knowledge.
- Use oral strategies through talk and interactive questions.
- Connect first language to additional language.
- Consider pace, allowing time for children to think, consolidate and translate.
- Ensure children understand before progressing.
- Integrate speaking and listening to reading and writing.

The benefits of supporting bilingualism are immense, as it enhances children's self-esteem, enables communication with extended family and friends, develops knowledge about language and supports cognitive flexibility and ability to learn more languages (Brock and Conteh 2011). Practitioners need to consider how they provide for first and additional languages in their setting and how to capitalise on support they can receive from young children's families in order to achieve maximum benefits.

The Importance of Stories, Storytelling and Books in Young Children's Everyday Experiences

Bookstart, run by the national charity Booktrust, was the first national baby book-giving programme in the world. Wade and Moore (1998) introduced the idea of Bookstart in 1992 in Birmingham with 300 babies and by 2001 there had been over one million Bookstart babies. Bookstart operates through locally based organisations by giving a canvas bag to every new baby. The bag contains baby books, advice booklets for parents on sharing stories and an invitation to join the local library. The aim is that every child in the UK should enjoy and benefit from books

from as early an age as possible and the Bookstart bag is given to parents by their health visitor at the 8-month health check. Wade and Moore (1998) found that Bookstart babies were six times more likely to be library members and their parents were more confident about reading to their children. Some parents may have limited literacy skills, but they can be encouraged to look at the pictures with their child and talk about the illustrations (Brock and Rankin 2008). Anderson and Svensson (2008) explored the reading behaviours of 10 young competent nursery and reception children involved in the national Bookstart evaluation study – Bookstart: Planting a Seed for Life. This research examined the children's attitudes to reading, their responses to selected texts and their understanding of early phonological and letter knowledge. The researchers also interviewed the parents in order to discover the home literacy events that shaped these young children's reading competences. They found that this group of young readers, from different socio-economic groups, were reading in advance of their peers.

You can never begin to share books and read to children too soon – in fact very young babies soon develop their love of books and stories even before they are able to understand the words or see the illustrations clearly.

> James loves books and from the age of three months he has been able to handle them and turn pages. At the age of 14 months he can now sit for twenty minutes at a time with an adult, listening to stories and pointing at the pictures. Again intonation is important – as the more an adult uses in the reading the more active listening James does. Animal stories are his favourites and he points to the different animals saying 'daddy' – which is his word for all mammals and male adults at the moment – he knows the difference but is at the stage of over generalisation in his vocabulary use.

This scenario of my grandson hopefully will, in the future when James goes to school, demonstrate Makin's (2006) findings that shared book reading in families is strongly linked with successful school literacy and thus with identity, the belonging and participation in literate societies. She demonstrates that from an 'emergent' perspective, literacy is recognised as beginning from birth. Whitehead's (2002) case study of the process of sharing picture books with a child in the first 3 years of his life at home with parents and visiting grandparents captures the rich detail of the experience through Dylan's unique responses to picture books from a developmental emphasis, reflected in the month-by-month observations.

Reading stories to children is thought to be *the* most important activity for their successful future reading capabilities on entry to school. Well's (1987) research in the Bristol literacy projects involved audio taping the language use of 128 young children aged 15 months and then 39 months in their family lives. The tape recorders were placed in the children's homes and captured the conversations that the children naturally engaged in throughout the two and a half years. The results showed that the quality of young children's early language experiences could vary greatly. The team tracked the children in their sample as they entered formal schooling and found that the impact of these early 'story' experiences made a difference to the children's capability in school, in their literacy achievements (Brock and Rankin 2008).

Practitioners know that reading stories to children is obviously worthwhile, but there is a wealth of value gained more than just hearing a story. As children listen, participate, retell and respond, they are creating stories in the mind and this 'storying' is one of the most fundamental means of making meaning (Wells 2009). Experience of stories promotes language development, develops understanding of the world and the people in it and enriches imagination. Children love to listen to, and to read, stories they like over and over again. They enjoy familiar themes unchanging and the same ending always occurring, paying attention to words after they have discovered what happens (Meek 1991). They use the prediction, sequencing, repetition and text/illustration correlation promoted in a story. Children have a natural impulse to tell stories as a means of making connections between what they are learning and what they already know (Wells 2009). Children's metacognition in action can be seen through their story repertoires, and observing children's story-play can provide a window into their thinking – their meaning making – their knowledge about language and their self-regulation and decision making. Fox's (1993) research is both fascinating and complex as she writes about her detailed analysis of young children's story-play repertoires. The following examples from young children's everyday play show the influence that certain stories have had on them:

- Holly stamps her foot as Red Riding Hood after
- Carmen as a wicked stepmother chants 'Mirror mirror on the wall'
- Katie wears a shawl 'I'm the poor, poor peasant woman'
- The 'Tiger came to tea' often at Melissa's house
- Jed – 'If you don't wear a collar you get taken to the pound'
- Theo's obstacle course – 'Get on my back and I'll carry you' – storying the Gingerbread Man. (Brock and Rankin 2008)

Here are some useful examples of how to promote different purposes of language:

- 'Shadow-tell' stories for children to both listen attentively and participate in the telling, feeding the language back.
- Model language through story whilst using props.
- Use different versions of stories and create alternative endings.
- Offer the words to repeat and expand upon.
- Provide 'hot-seating' opportunities for children to get into role through a 'large' cardboard model of a 'shy' Elmer to enable the children to speak directly to him.
- Enable children to empathise with 'Farmer Duck' who does all the work (Brock and Power 2006?).

Story sacks (Griffiths 2011) contain the storybook, models of characters and practical objects from the story. These are so valuable to lend to parents so that they can become involved in storytelling, role-playing, reading and using the language of story with their children whilst handling the characters and props. A range of stories from different cultures and backgrounds should be developed in each setting. Sargent's (2008) *Little Book of Story Bags* contains a wealth of ideas of how to create and use story bags to enhance storytelling for both practitioners and parents. Practitioners can encourage parents to:

- Make reading a high priority and to be role models through reading for themselves.
- Make it an enjoyable and sharing time and providing quality time for reading.
- Involve all members of the family in reading with babies and young children – including siblings and grandparents.
- Show that it's important for everyone to read, including for different proposes and in different places.
- Involve their children in accessing a wide variety of story, picture, rhyming and information books and join a library to help make this possible.

Rhyme, rhythm, sound and song are very important elements of learning a language and they are also routes into developing phonemic awareness. MacLean et al. (1987) found that the number of nursery rhymes known by pre-school children predicted later reading success. Rhyme and song should be a natural event in young children's lives and practitioners should transmit this to parents. Most parents will naturally sing, rhyme and story with their children, but practitioners can ensure that parents understand the importance through creating resources and providing information. One children's centre created song and rhyme bags containing playful resources and laminated song cards for 'Five Little Ducks', 'Dr Foster Went to Gloucester' and 'Twinkle Twinkle' for parents and children to borrow and sing at home. These bags contained visual and malleable resources to support children's learning of the songs and rhymes and to also extend the adult's repertoire. Writing out familiar rhymes, laminating and hanging them from a mobile, makes them accessible to adults and parents working in or visiting a setting. Recognising that James at 21 months was making hand gestures for 'Wind the Bobbin Up' and Oscar at 23 months was singing 'Tommy Thumb' whilst in the bath enabled grandma to sing with them and build on the work started in their ECEC settings. One nursery created pulley systems to pull 'Incey Wincey Spider' up the spout and 'Hickory Dickory Dock' mouse up the clock. The practitioners were matching the words of the traditional nursery rhymes to physical actions and in doing so promoted fine and gross motor movement to enable children to become totally involved in the language and rhyme.

Partnership with Parents

Partnership with parents is important for all ECEC settings – as parents' involvement with their children's early literacy experiences has a positive impact on their children's reading performance and is the key to young children's future literacy achievement and educational success (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). Research has repeatedly shown that one of the most accurate predictors of a child's achievement is not only parental income or social status but also the extent to which parents are able to create a home environment that encourages learning and communicates high, yet reasonable, expectations for achievement (National Literacy Trust 2011).

This recent review from the UK's National Literacy Trust Research Review entitled *Literacy: A Route to Addressing Child Poverty* demonstrates that parents' involvement in their own literacy skills and their understanding of the hugely important role they play in developing their children's educational outcomes. Nutbrown and Hannon's (2003) research examined the family literacy practices from the perspectives of 5-year-old children drawn from areas of social and economic deprivation in an English city. This research built on Hannnon and Nutbrown's (2001) earlier work that had provided parents with ways of thinking about their own literacy and their roles with their children and how this reflected a sociocultural change in family literacy for the families. The children made more literacy progress than comparable group children not participating in the study.

Playful Early Literacy Experiences to Promote Reading and Writing

Acquiring literacy is crucial for children's educational achievement, but it is important that reading and writing should be portrayed as appealing, interesting and enjoyable. This should be promoted through a wide range of activities and experiences from the very early years. Practitioners need to be aware of what skills, knowledge and attitudes are needed to enable children to achieve competence. Without children getting a multitude of oral language, story, rhyming and song experiences, the route to literacy will be much more difficult than it needs to be.

In the UK there is an emphasis on the early acquisition of literacy skills that has caused concern amongst early years researchers and educationalists, who believe that young children are being pushed into acquiring these at too early an age. They have concerns that this causes some children difficulties, resulting in them learning to fail and so achieving a less than adequate competence of literacy as they go through formal schooling. Whilst Tickell (2011) has placed less emphasis on the acquisition of literacy in the revised Early Years Foundation Stage, there are plans to bring in reading tests for 6-year-olds in schools in England. The tests will be based on children's knowledge of synthetic phonics as a progress check to help identify children needing extra support. The government view that the 'synthetic' phonics method as advocated by Rose (2006) is the most important method of teaching children to read. A response from the UK Literacy Association (2010: 13) was that restricting children 'to an unbalanced diet, the thin gruel of a phonics-dominated approach, is a recipe for lowering standards and turning children against the written word'.

In what ways can practitioners promote literacy acquisition through playful experiences, taking care not to push children, particularly boys, too rapidly though prescriptive activities? There needs to be a balanced diet of experiences in order to maximise the ways each child can learn to read and write. A focus on developing children's speaking and listening skills will form a sound basis for future success in

reading and writing. The term 'emergent literacy' was first introduced by Marie Clay in 1966 and gradually replaced the notion of 'prereading' (Riley 2006). Most children cannot escape literacy; it permeates their environment – in their home, in nursery, on the television, in supermarkets and in the high street. Signs and notices in our highly literate environment surround us, even if literacy does not have a high profile at home and parents do not read books or newspapers. Therefore, if all children enter school with familiarity of literacy, what varies for each child is the quality of interaction with these experiences. Children can learn how to make literacy their own invention, in similar ways as that they previously learned to do with spoken language (Riley 2006: 49).

This chapter seeks to affirm how children, in order to become competent and active readers and writers, need a multitude of experiences of oral language, of talking, listening, storying, rhyming, reading and singing. These are the building blocks of literacy and make the difference as to how quickly and easily they acquire literacy (Brock and Rankin 2008). The importance of providing children with meaningful, multisensory early literacy experiences to create future success is evidenced in Whitebread and Jameson's (2005) research with children aged 6 and 7 who were asked to reproduce oral and written stories after:

(a) Hearing stories
(b) Shown stories of photocopied sheets of story characters
(c) Free play experience of story dolls and props after hearing the story
(d) Adult-modelled stories using dolls and props

The analysis of the children's written stories in the play condition of the children showed:

- More conflicts and resolutions
- Different scenarios from the original stories
- More confidence in the oral storytelling activity
- Higher-quality story writing

Fathers need to be involved in the development of their children's literacy skills and Saracho's (2007) research demonstrates how successfully a group of fathers were encouraged to read books, engaging their children in discussions about books they read. A valuable way of encouraging fathers is through appreciating both their and their young children's technology experiences. Marsh's (2004) research in a working-class community in the north of England identified the 'emergent techno-literacy' practices of a group of 44 children aged between 2.5 and 4 years of age and documents the importance of recognising these family practices in ECEC settings. As Levy (2011) argues, reading is no longer about just reading books, and young children are accessing a wide variety books, comics and digital screen texts. Becoming a reader involves developing many skills, but of key importance, as Levy's (2011) case study research evidences, is how young children view themselves as readers. There are important implications from her work for practitioners, as it presents the complex nature of reading in modern society, examining children's perspectives and dispositions to reading.

Conclusion

This chapter should have evidenced the wealth of early language and literacy practices that occur and need to be valued in both ECEC settings and young children's home backgrounds. It indicates that it is important to keep an open mind about young children's language and literacy development and not make assumptions about children's home experiences. The chapter also asserts that both the knowledge base and experience of practitioner are crucial but also that observing, monitoring, assessing and analysing are important. Observing children in an enabling environment is important as it informs the way practitioners work with children and their families (Bruce and Spratt 2011). Undertaking observations of children's communication, language and literacy activities and analysing their linguistic accomplishments and development can help ensure that they are experiencing a depth and breadth of experiences with peers and adults. Practitioners should:

- Listen to what children are saying.
- Check the practitioner's modelling of language and provision of opportunities for child talk.
- Observe what is happening.
- Analyse what it shows.
- Document future aspects for development.

'Learning Journeys' (Carr 2011) are a valuable way of documenting children's language and learning through an emphasis on dialogic talk about learning – describing how children learn, discussing what has been learnt, documenting the activities and language used and deciding what to do next. Practitioners reflect on children's dispositions and motivation through recording the narrative, i.e. telling a story of the context, relationships, concentration and persistence, using photographs and video to capture verbal and non-verbal communications The focus is on language and learning, more than on achievements, on what children are interested in and involving both the children themselves and their families. Observations should be a two-way process and parents should have a role in contributing to these. This will enable planning to be effective in following children's interests and it is also important to allow children to reflect on their own learning. Documenting learning with photographs will offer children the wherewithal for them to think and talk about what they are doing by engaging them in the narratives and dialogues.

Listening to and analysing young children's language not only promotes knowledge about their early language development, it should be an exciting adventure into their communicative competence and their thinking. At the time of writing this chapter, my grandsons' early language is beginning to explode and I am not only enjoying listening to them and in taking an active part on building their repertoire, yet I cannot help analysing what they are saying and using these examples with undergraduate and postgraduate students on early childhood education courses. I am determined to disseminate to them not only the importance of successful early language development but also my enthusiasm for field of study. My aim is to

develop the students' and practitioners' knowledge base and competence in working in partnership with young children and their parents. I hope that this has also come through this chapter for the readers of this book.

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