A Qualitative Exploration of Early Childhood Educators' Declared Practices when Supporting Preschoolers' Oral Language Development

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Abstract

Verbal interactions between children and educators can support the language development of preschoolers when conversations are of high quality. Educators' conversations with preschoolers are known to be responsive, but they are not always sufficiently complex. Educators' talk and topics may be too simple to propel preschoolers' oral language development. Studies on professional development programs that focused on enhancing educators' use of language-supporting practices have shown inconsistent results. A better understanding of how educators use language supporting practices could contribute to the design and implementation of more effective professional development programs. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the declared practices of early childhood educators when they support the language development of preschoolers. Twelve early childhood educators were interviewed individually, and a thematic analysis was conducted. Educators' declared practices are described through five themes: (1) relationships first, (2) planning the day, (3) establishing a supportive environment, (4) encouraging children to talk, and (5) talking to children. Educators are aware of many of the strategies known to be effective in supporting early language development. However, very few of them declared using strategies that specifically support the language development of 4- and 5-years-old children. Finally, findings suggest that early childhood educators could be more cognizant of the importance of their own language regarding preschoolers' oral language development.

Introduction

Oral language plays a central role in how well children understand teachers' explanations, learn to read, and acquire the school's disciplinary content. Children who enter school with better language skills (i.e., more vocabulary, more complex sentences, richer narrative discourse) do better in school (Griffin et al., 2004; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Schooling, and more precisely teacher-students' interactions, are primarily language-based: knowledge is conveyed through verbal interactions between the student and the teacher (Schleppegrell, 2004). For example, to learn the seasons' cycle from their teacher's explanations, preschoolers need to be familiar with a specific type of vocabulary (words such as cycle, direction, affect), a specific type of syntax that is rarely used in everyday conversations (containing sentence connectors such as therefore, then, etc.) and decontextualized topics of conversation. Conversations on future or past events, absent people or absent objects are considered decontextualized (Massey, 2004). Conversely, contextualized conversations refer to events, people or objects that are currently present in the room. Children who are not already familiar with the type of language skills used in school may

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encounter difficulty learning the new words academic content they encounter.

Theoretical Framework

This study was based on the theoretical framework of academic language (Schleppegrell, 2004; van Kleeck, 2014). Once in school, children will mainly be engaged in two types of talk: casual and academic. Casual talk is used throughout the day to regulate actions and maintain relationships. It is characterized by a simpler syntax (e.g., active voice) and frequent words (van Kleeck, 2014). Casual talk refers to topics that are familiar to the children and topics are mostly contextualized (physically present in the room). In contrast, academic talk is defined as the language used by teachers when they teach (van Kleeck, 2014). Academic talk is linguistically more complex than casual talk. It is characterized by the use of complex syntax (e.g., passive voice) and rare words (e.g., evaporation, reservoir, condensation). Academic talk is generally used in conversations about decontextualized topics such as past events or complex phenomena (e.g., the water cycle).

Academic language is often not explicitly taught in school, which favors children who are already familiar with it (Schleppegrell, 2004). To help all children to succeed in school, we need to ensure that every preschooler has the opportunity to develop academic language skills. Children that have mostly been exposed to casual talk and that are not familiar with academic talk may have more difficulty adjusting to school and learning the curriculum (Uccelli et al., 2019).

Characteristics of Conversations that Foster Preschoolers' Language Development

The verbal environments in which children are immersed have a major influence on their language development, including academic language (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Hoff, 2006). Not all interactions are equal in providing language development opportunities. To best promote language development, it is essential that verbal interactions between early childhood educators (ECEs) and preschoolers be of sufficient quality (Cash et al., 2019) which means interactions must be responsive *and* challenging.

Adult–child conversations that are responsive are recognized as the most profitable type of interactions to facilitate language development (Justice et al., 2018; Massey, 2004). During a responsive interaction, adults use strategies such as being warm and receptive to encourage interaction, following the child's lead, and encouraging verbal turn-taking (Girolametto et al., 2000). These behaviors support language development because children learn better when they are active participants in conversations rather than when they listen to adults speaking (Justice et al., 2018).

In addition to responsive conversations, 4- and 5-year-old children also need to have conversations that share the characteristics of academic language, challenging their language skills (Cash et al., 2019; Massey, 2004). For preschoolers, challenging conversations entail complex discourse and involve pragmatic and cognitive skills such as: (1) explanations of how the world works (e.g., how a plant grows, how wool is made), (2) personal or fictional narratives, (3) inferential questions, and (4) decontextualized talk.

Verbal Interactions Between Early Childhood Educators and Preschoolers

The body of research on ECEs' practices that support preschoolers' language indicates that interactions between ECEs and children are usually warm and positive, thus responsive, but may be too simple, hence not very challenging (Massey, 2004). In fact, challenging conversations seem to be infrequent in early childhood educational settings (Dickinson et al., 2008; Justice et al., 2008; Massey et al., 2008; Paatsch et al., 2019). Many studies measured the quality of language interactions using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System and its three domains: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support (CLASS; Pianta et al., 2008). Instruction Support domain includes three subscales: "concept development," "quality of feedback," and "language modeling". These subscales comprise practices that are considered key for children to develop their academic language: engaging children in higher-order thinking skills, asking follow-up questions, extending students' utterances with more complex vocabulary. Unfortunately, in many countries, studies have found Instruction Support domain to obtain a low-quality score (Buell et al., 2017; Perlman et al., 2016; Slot, 2018). Another study, by Dickinson et al. (2008), used a fine-grained approach to measure verbale interaction between preschool teachers and children during block and dramatic play. Researchers recorded and transcribed teacher-children's interactions. Then, they coded teachers' use of strategies likely to foster thinking and language learning (e.g., teachings words and information, asking though-provoking questions, modeling language). Their results showed that teachers used these strategies infrequently: teaching vocabulary was rare, and modeling was almost not observed. Finally, Paatsch et al. (2019) also recorded teachers in interactions with a small group of preschoolers. Researchers coded utterances relatively to questions type (open/close) and type of talk (contextualized/decontextualized). They concluded that teachers used a high proportion of closed questions, and that decontextualized

talk was rare. These two characteristics are not very challenging for preschoolers' language development.

During verbal interactions that are responsive, but not challenging, 4- and 5-year-old children might enjoy talking with ECEs and practice what they already know. However, if ECEs introduced more complexity and added challenge into the conversations, preschoolers could develop more complex language skills and get familiar with academic language.

Impact of Professional Development on ECEs' Practices

Past research has described several professional development (PD) devices that aim to support the quality of interactions in early childhood settings (Bradley & Reinking, 2011; Hindman & Wasik, 2011). Usually, PD programs for ECEs consist of either one or a combination of components such as workshops, coaching, curriculum, and professional learning communities (Schachter, 2015). Although many studies have been specifically designed to improve ECE's use of communication and language strategies, many of them reported mixed results (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Pence et al., 2008; Piasta et al., 2020).

In 2017, Markussen-Brown et al. published a meta-analysis that included 25 studies on the effects of language-focused PD on early educators working with 3- to 6-year-old children. The authors concluded that PD had a medium effect on interactions for ECEs (standardized mean difference was 0.59 for process quality with moderate inconsistency). Regarding child outcomes, the results show a standardized mean difference of 0.21 for receptive vocabulary (small effect that approached significance). PD that had the most impact on the improvement of interactions were those that included more than one PD component (e.g., courses, coaching, curriculum), had a longer duration (in terms of number of weeks), and were more intensive (in terms of total number of hours).

More recently, a study by Piasta et al. (2020) examined the effects of a language and literacy PD that had been offered for over ten years statewide. A total of 546 ECEs working with 4- and 5-year-olds were randomly assigned either to the experimental group (30-h of workshops on language and literacy with or without coaching) or to the control group (30-h of workshops on another subject). At the end of the PD, in the spring, ECEs' instructional interactions were videotaped. Based on these videos, researchers assessed and compared groups on the quality of teachers' language practices using the *Teacher Behavior Rating Scale* (Assel et al., 2008). This scale consists of five subscales: oral language, print and letter knowledge, book reading, phonological awareness, and writing. Subscales include many items assessing instructional practices (items rated on a 4-point quality scale). Results showed that the quality of practices scores on the oral language and book reading subscales were not statistically different between the experimental and the control group. The conclusions of this study raised critical questions about professional development related to language and literacy in early childhood education. These findings suggest that to generate practice changes in ECEs' use of communication and language strategies, PD should include some specific features such as long duration and frequent coaching. However, these features are expensive, time-consuming for the staff, and require human resources with specific qualifications (Eadie et al., 2019; Early et al., 2017; Hindman & Wasik, 2012).

Some hypotheses have been put forward to explain the inconsistent impact of PD on ECEs' use of language-supporting strategies. First, verbal interactions with preschoolers happen very quickly, and to be responsive, ECEs must think of a response to a child's comment or question within a second. On the spur of the moment, it might be hard for ECEs to come up with a response that is both responsive and challenging. Second, there could be a mismatch between the everyday reality of ECEs (e.g., behavior management, hygiene care) and the use of the language strategies that have been taught during PD. For example, many programs recommend small-group activities, a context in which ECEs can be more responsive. However, Chien et al. (2010) showed that small-group settings are rare in early childhood classrooms. Specifically, their findings indicated that small-group activities comprise only 6% of children's classroom time. Even when small-group activities were suggested as part of PD, early childhood education staff "struggle to implement small groups because some children would be unsupervised" (Bradley & Reinking, 2011, p. 394). Thus, ECEs' practices are influenced by what is beneficial to language development, but also by other factors such as children's level of attention (Schachter, 2017).

The inconsistent results of PD on ECEs' use of language-supporting strategies can be viewed as an implementation challenge: research points to strategies that promote language development in preschoolers (Luna, 2017), but we do not know how to engage educators in using these strategies. As Barnes et al. (2020) suggest, the limited results of PD could be linked to our "little understanding of teachers' language practices". Gaining a deeper understanding of actual contexts (i.e., such as curriculum, policies, ECEs' actual practices, beliefs and knowledge) is critical in designing more effective interventions that can be embedded into the daily practices rather than layered on top of it (Kim, 2019).

It is essential to invite ECE voices to the table and to listen to what they have to say: How do they describe their daily reality? What are they doing to help 4- and 5-year-olds develop their language? Research to date either used videos of daily interactions to examine how frequently ECEs use

language strategies or administered questionnaires to measure what ECEs know about language strategies. To this date, little is known about how ECEs view and talk about their daily use of language strategies.

The Present Study

Because they have rarely been consulted and that it is crucial to understand how ECEs conceive their role regarding preschoolers' oral language, this study aims to describe the declared practices of ECEs when they attempt to enhance preschoolers' oral language. Our findings will contribute to the design of PD that are more effective and easier to implement in ECEs' daily reality. The present study took place in the public early childhood education system of the province of Quebec, which operates Early Childhood Centers (*Centres de la Petite Enfance*). The system is publicly funded: the cost for parents is a little under 10 Canadian dollars per day. This low cost allows children from various socioeconomic statuses to attend. In 2016, 20,9% of all children in Quebec aged 5 years or younger, attended a public early childhood center (Observatoire des tout-petits, n.d.). The Quebec government's ratio is one ECE for ten 4- and 5-year-old children per group. The usual schedule includes welcoming children one by one as they arrive with their parents, free play, snacks, outdoor play, lunchtime, story, naptime/relaxation, snacks, and free play until the parents' return at the end of the day. Our study focused on this specific setting because public early childhood centers are regulated; therefore, they function similarly.

Method

Participants' Selection

We recruited a convenience sample of early childhood educators. We mainly used social media postings on the Facebook page of the speech-language pathology department of the university of the first author and on her professional Facebook page. We presumed that 10 to 12 ECEs would be enough to reach data saturation since our study had a narrow focus that was the declared practices of ECEs regarding the preschoolers' oral language development. The only eligibility criterion was to be an ECE in charge of a group of preschoolers (4- and 5-year-olds) within Quebec's public early childhood education system, and to have a minimum of 6 months of experience in this setting.

ECEs that were interested in taking part in the study contacted the first author by email. After making sure they were eligible, a virtual meeting was planned. The 12 ECEs who participated had an average early childhood experience of 17,7 ± 4,5 years, and they had worked exclusively with 4- and 5-year-old children for 6,9 ± 3,7 years. Their average age was 41 ± 7,2. Each ECE had a technical degree from a post-secondary institution (similar to an associate degree) and two of them also had a university degree (bachelor's or master's degree). We decided to end data collection after the twelfth interview because there was evidence of data saturation: while coding the interviews 8 to 12, no new category or theme emerged from the analysis.

Data Collection

Each ECE was met once individually on Zoom. We chose to conduct individual interviews because we thought ECEs would be more open to sharing their practices with one person rather than in a focus group. Each ECE had enough time and space to thoroughly discuss their view of their practices with children.

Interviews were conducted in French by the first author, a licensed speech-language pathologist and a doctoral student at the time of the study. She did not know any of the participants prior to conducting the interviews. Since the study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, the twelve interviews were conducted by videoconference (Zoom) and were audio and video taped (total of 11h30min of interview time, average duration per interview: 58 min, range: 38–74 min).

The interview guide included seven questions (see Appendix 1). Each interview started with the same opening line: "Tell me what you do with children in your group to help develop their language." The questions were mainly open-ended and focused on the practitioners' behaviors (e.g., "You say that you sometimes act when a child is less talkative with his peers. What do you do at those times?"). Follow-up questions and rewording encouraged ECEs to give more details on their practices or to provide examples. During the interviews, we took brief notes to guide the interview process. At the end of the interview, we also used these notes to summarize and confirm what the ECE had said. When necessary, the ECE added or corrected information. Each ECE was interviewed once.

Data Analysis

The first author transcribed the interviews. Two coders [first and second authors] analyzed the data following the six phases of Braun and Clarke (2006). At the time of the study, the second coder was a doctoral student and a licensed school-based SLP. To perform the analysis, coders used the software available at their university: one coder used NVivo 12 software (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2020) and the other, QDA minor software (version 6.0.2). For the

first three phases, the coders worked independently. First, they familiarized themselves with the data while reading the transcripts. Second, they generated initial codes to represent the practices ECEs described. While labeling, the coders focused on the verb used by ECEs and tried to complete the sentence: "For ECEs, supporting preschoolers' oral language development is (reading books, asking questions…)". For example, the quotation "If we're outside and they are looking at ladybugs, maybe we'll have a chat, maybe we'll do some research, then they will ask me questions, and instead of automatically giving them their answer, I'll ask them what they think." was coded "starting a chat about children's interests", "doing a research with the children about their interest", and "asking questions".

The coding focused on the practitioners' current behaviors related to the oral language development of the children. Codes were generated throughout the analysis process. Throughout the analysis, coders wrote memos to record their reflections and questions, what they thought was important and why they coded the way they did. These memos allowed coders to follow their thinking process, stay aware of their personal biases, and support the suspension of their theoretical knowledge to properly represent what the ECEs said (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2012). All practices that were not directly related to spoken language were not coded (e.g., conflict management between children, print concept, phonological awareness).

The third step was to generate themes. Using the labels that emerged during the coding, the coders clustered the labels into themes and sub-themes according to their similarity in meaning. For example, singing songs, doing riddles, and reading books were clustered into the sub-theme "activities". At this point, the thematic map contained four themes and nine sub-themes for the first coder and ten themes for the second coder.

At the fourth step, both coders compared their respective analysis and via reflexive discussions, developed a common richer understanding of the data, embedded in their respective clinical experience and knowledge. Collaboratively, they articulated the final analysis by integrating both independent analyses into a set of themes and sub-themes that would yield a more comprehensive understanding of the data. In the fifth step, the final set of themes and sub-themes was further discussed with the third and fourth authors to ensure of the clarity of the understanding. The sixth step was to select vivid excerpts and translate them from French to English and produce this article. In order to preserve the anonymity of the participants, we used pseudonyms when presenting the excerpts.

Results

Five main themes and eight sub-themes emerged from the data analysis (see Fig. 1). The five themes were present in the twelve interview transcripts.

Theme 1: Relationships First

Throughout the analysis, this theme was found to be prevalent. It refers to the importance, for ECEs, to have a positive, trusting relationship with each child in their group. ECEs insisted that their relationships with children served as the foundation on which language practices of the four previous themes take place, which is why we placed it as an overarching theme in Fig. 1. ECEs care deeply for the children's self-esteem: they want children to feel secure with them, they want children to feel good about talking and they praise children when they talk as they linked this to the language

Fig. 1 Themes and sub-themes
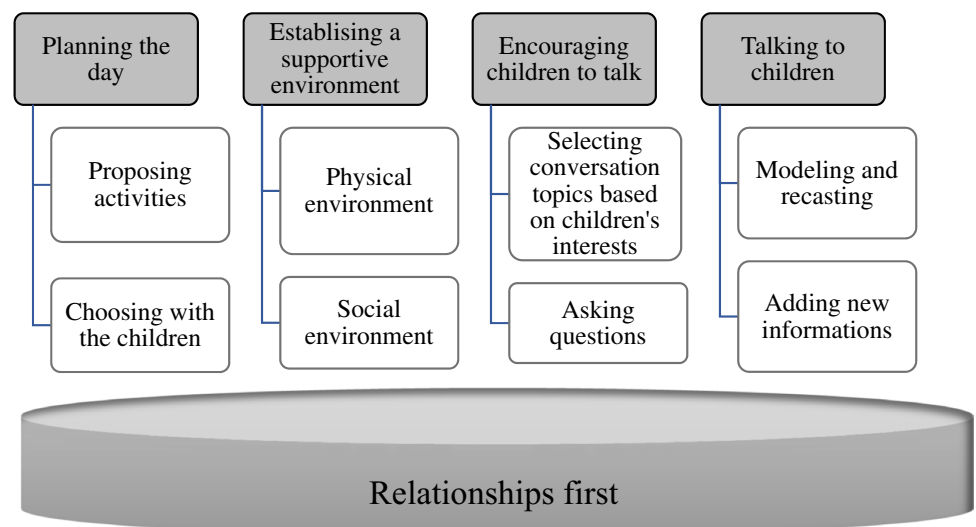
development as Lily put it: "The entire language development has a lot to do with self-esteem"—Lily. In the following excerpt, Eva explains that she presents the language exercises as games in order to protect the child's self-esteem: "I always try to be subtle so that no one feel targeted regarding a difficulty"—Eva.

When targeting language development, ECEs indicated prioritizing the protection of the trusting relationships with the child over giving support to improve communication ability. Zoey illustrates this as she let a child be off-topic during the morning chat to preserved his self-esteem: "If I tell them, uh… 'Look man, you're so off-topic' he's not gonna want to talk anymore"—Zoey.

A minority of ECEs see their trusting relationship as a stepping stone allowing them to propose activities that challenge children's language development: children presenting an object from home to their peers while standing in front of the group or children being videotaped while explaining how they did their crafts. These ECEs said that at first, children are not comfortable doing these activities. At the same time, these ECEs are confident that these challenges will not diminish children's self-esteem and ECEs persist in offering some of these activities daily. These ECEs feel they can push children's language skills further because they have a good relationship with children. Lily explains how the children get better at explaining their crafts to the camera: "At first, the child is there and he/she doesn't know how to do it. And then, the evolution! At the end of the year, I don't have to be there to help, to ask questions"—Lily.

Theme 2: Planning the Day

The theme "Planning the day" refers to the activities taking place throughout the day. This theme was divided into two sub-themes: 1) proposing activities and 2) choosing with the children.

Proposing Activities

This sub-theme included all the activities/games that promote language development according to the ECEs. All participants mentioned book sharing: many said they read every day and sometimes more than one book per day. "It is certain that we read every day before nap time; or there are books available for children at all times, on request, when they want me to tell them a story" —Olivia.

Other activities and routines used to promote language development involved songs, riddles, specialized language games focusing on sentence development or specific phonemes, snacks and lunchtime, symbolic play, and scientific experiments: "In my everyday activities, as I mentioned, we'll do morning chats, read books, sing songs"—Sara. "I'm

doing… riddles: 'I'm a little girl with a blue shirt. I wear glasses, and I have short hair, who am I?' So, they have to guess which child it is"—Jennifer.

ECEs said children listened to audiobooks, played specialized language games, or did some book reading on their own: "You have to start by showing them how to play, and after that, when I see that they are quite good at it, I let them play by themselves."—Zoey. Three ECEs also implemented conversational activities: 1) morning chats, 2) discussion around children's crafts, and 3) show and tell. The following citations illustrate these activities: "I'm doing a lot of morning chats with them. We create stories too. Sometimes, I'm starting a story and then, one of them will continue the story" —Alyson, morning chat. "I film them, for example, they'll make a drawing. It's often with their drawing or their painting. I film them and then I ask them what they did and how they did it" —Lily, discussion around children's craft. "The child stands up, well at first they're a little embarrassed […]. And it's really 'Hello, my name is [name of the child] and today I decided to bring this' and she explains why."—Naomi, show and tell.

With these activities, they offer numerous challenging opportunities for the child to develop language in chosen contexts.

Choosing with the Children

This sub-theme includes routine elements that are not specific activities. Three ECEs said that their usual routine involved letting the children's spontaneous interests guide the course of the day. In those situations, children are asked what they want to do. ECEs have conversations with the children about their goals, then assist them when they need help. The following excerpts illustrate the importance placed by ECEs on allowing children to express their personal preferences and to choose an activity by themselves:

> "And I let them choose too, sometimes, instead of me always choosing, we discuss: 'What could we do today?' and then we write down the choices, we have a small whiteboard in the room. 'Painting, ok.' And then, sometimes, we vote. And then children will list everything they want to do."—Naomi

Theme 3: Establishing a Supportive Environment

This theme encompasses the strategies ECEs implement in their group to promote conversations with children or among children. ECEs clearly expressed their wish for children to talk a lot during the day. To make that happen, they strive to

create settings that foster communication, that is, by organizing the physical and social environment.

Physical Environment

Physical environment refers to the objects, decorations, or furniture that promote language development. In their classrooms, ECEs display pictograms and pictures, and they make books available for children throughout the day. One ECE said she uses several objects to trigger conversations with children: "Each child has a picture of their family, it becomes a trigger for conversation because they'll be in the blocks area, and then, 'Ah! Look, my mother…' and then they go on about different topics."—Lily.

Three ECEs mentioned that having small tables makes it possible to have only three or four children sitting together during lunchtime and that this setting increased the amount of conversations between children: "They talk to each other. At lunch time, we aren't eleven at the same table. There are three different spaces."—Maya.

Social Environment

The social environment includes strategies involving the management of group discussions. For example, during the morning chat, ECEs use a device called "speech stick" or ask questions to a specific child in order to make sure that everyone has a chance to talk: "At the beginning of the year, I used to ask the first one who answered. Now, it's each one's turn and the other kids must not talk so that the child can tell me."—Teresa.

During playtime, ECEs mentioned that they use various strategies. ECEs can pair a more talkative child with a child who struggles with language to help the latter. Also, ECEs can join children's play to help a child talk more. Finally, ECEs said they join children's play mostly when children invite them to do so: "I am never far. I observe their play. Often, I'll approach at this moment. 'Ah! Olivia! Look at my baby' And now he's giving it to me. 'He is sleeping! Oh yes, he's sleeping."—Olivia.

Theme 4: Encouraging Children to Talk

This theme refers directly to the verbal practices of ECEs when they want to make children talk. Similar to the theme of establishing a supportive environment, many of the declared practices serve the purpose of getting children to talk (e.g., having a trusting relationship with children, using small tables, or pairing two specific children together). To get children to talk, ECEs choose conversation topics and ask questions.

Choosing Conversation Topics Based on Children's Interests

This sub-theme implies that ECEs initiate conversations on a particular topic (e.g., for the morning chat) or that they accept children's communicative attempts by engaging in verbal interactions with them. ECEs choose topics that match the children's interests or use what is happening right here and now: the emotions of a character in a book, a firetruck arriving down the street, the rain falling, etc. "My themes really come from their interests. If we're eating a snack, we'll talk about what food you like to eat the most, what food you like to eat the least."—Alyson.

Many ECEs respond to children's conversational initiatives in various contexts and activities, but in a flexible way. They discuss children's interests while they are walking outside, during lunchtime, during book sharing activities, etc.

In addition, three ECEs mentioned that they intentionally diversify topics of conversation in order to maintain children's attention and interest. "It comes back to the same things: 'I gave food to my cat. My cat…' So we made a list of some topics for discussion. Sometimes it's 'The weekend, My favorite animal.' It's the children who came up with them."—Naomi.

Asking Questions

To get children to talk, ECEs mentioned that they ask a lot of questions during specialized language games, morning chats, book sharing, etc. "We are trying to talk with the children as much as possible. 'What is it called? What are you doing? Why are you doing this?' I have pictograms and the child has to say what's on it"—Teresa. "*Seek and find* game. So we turn the card and then I ask 'what we are looking for?' Then, the child will tell me the word."—Eva.

> "When the child is getting dressed to go outside, I will ask him 'Where are you in your routine?' And then he'll tell me 'I'm on number five'. And then I say, 'What's number five'? You know, I'm always looking further. The child will say: 'It's putting on my scarf', so I say "Perfect." - Lily.

Moreover, some ECEs said that they prefer to ask open-ended questions, or questions that will get children thinking, about emotions for example. "It can be related to emotions. To practice emotions as well. 'How do you think she felt when this happened?"- Alyson.

Theme 5: Talking to Children

The last main theme refers to the verbal practices of ECEs that are not focused on getting children to talk. When targeting language development, ECEs either use language

modeling or add new information so that children can learn from the language addressed to them.

Modeling and Recasting

This sub-theme includes strategies like self-talk, modeling, and recasts. While some ECEs describe their actions while performing them, as in the following excerpt, others take their turn during an activity to provide children with an example of how to perform a task. "I explain a lot of things, let's say, in our everyday life. Example: 'Did everyone put on their sunscreen? No, you didn't. I forgot to put on my sunscreen. I'll start with my left arm."—Rachel.

Nine ECEs also mentioned using sentence recasting (e.g., repeating the child's sentence while correcting grammatical or phonological errors). When recasting, ECEs said they were very sensitive to its impact on children's self-esteem. Except for one educator, all ECEs would never ask a child to repeat correct sentences. "If a child has a pronunciation difficulty, I will recast, without necessarily forcing the child to say it again. I'll just rephrase and let it go."—Sara.

Adding New Information

The last sub-theme encompasses the explicit teaching practices ECEs use when they are interacting with children. They said that they mainly employ these strategies during book-sharing activities. ECEs purposefully use words that children do not know, which allows them to explain the meaning of these words to the children. Their teaching strategies include using synonyms, showing pictures, asking children to say the word, reading the same book several times, and relating a novel word to children's lives.

> "One child in the group went on a vacation in the South and the other children didn't know what that was. So, we talked about travels and what snorkeling was." - Alyson

In summary, to help preschoolers develop their language, ECEs' declared practices fall into five themes. The first theme, "Relationships first" describes how, for ECEs, relationships are central to all the other strategies used. Two themes regard the activities and the environment, and two other themes focus on what children and ECEs say during the day.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to describe the declared practices of ECEs' regarding the oral language development of preschoolers. Analyses of the interviews revealed that ECEs declared a wide range of practices. ECEs think about language development in terms of the following: (1) relationships first, (2) planning the day, (3) establishing a supportive environment, (4) encouraging children to talk, and (5) talking to children.

Given the fact that ECEs were asked to share their actual practices rather than choose from a list, it is likely that ECEs only declared practices they already knew about. Many of ECEs' declared practices are supported by research as good ways to foster language development in young children. ECEs mentioned many communication practices that encourage children to take part in interactions: maintaining a positive relationship with children, choosing conversation topics that interest them, and asking questions to keep the verbal interaction going. These strategies are related to "communication-facilitating behaviors" which are associated with language growth of children (Justice et al., 2018). Other ECE's declared strategies, like recasting, are also supported by research (Cleave et al., 2015).

ECEs' declared practices also went beyond communication and language strategies that are usually targeted in language-focused PD. For instance, ECEs mentioned specific activities and the organization of the environment. Some of those elements (e.g., shared book-reading, small groups discussions) are recognized as favorable settings for language-learning opportunities in various studies (Hadley et al., 2022; Turnbull et al., 2009; Wasik et al., 2016).

Language Development of Preschoolers'

In the present study, ECEs reported a range of verbal practices. Many of these practices aimed at encouraging children to talk. To a lesser extent, some practices also highlight the attention ECEs pay to their own use of language (as opposed to language produced by children).

ECEs also extended their practices to strategies not directly related to language strategies like choosing activities and organizing the physical and affective environment. Organizing the environment and offering various activities are a good start and could provide great opportunities for high-level language use (Hadley et al., 2020). However, our results suggest that ECEs did not differentiate the impact on language development between activities such as singing a song vs. explaining the meaning of a word to children. Most of the strategies described by ECEs promote casual language but not academic language specifically. As long as someone (ECE or child) was talking, our results indicate that ECEs saw activities as being equivalent in terms of their potential to promote language development.

Throughout the analysis, one practice stood out because of the high importance educators placed on it: the way relationships were the basis for language development. While responsive interactions and a strong emphasis on

relationships may make it easier for children to pay attention and participate in interaction, it is unlikely to be enough to enrich language learning, unless ECEs provide a language-rich contribution as well. To propel preschoolers' oral language and expose children to a type of talk that resembles academic talk, ECEs' should focus on using more complex syntax and rare words, using decontextualized language (e.g., narration), and talking about complex phenomena (van Kleeck, 2014). Our findings suggest that ECEs did not have a clear idea of how their own language can be the driving force behind children's language development. These findings are in line with the work of Flynn and Schachter (2017) who interviewed eight early childhood teachers and analyzed their assumptions on how preschoolers learn. The authors concluded that early childhood teachers have 'underdeveloped knowledge of children's learning' (e.g. choosing tasks that focused on repetition rather than problem solving to support children's learning). This could be due to a lack of initial training regarding knowledge of children's learning and ways to implement instruction. (Flynn & Schachter, 2017).

Our results also echo those of Degotardi and Gill (2019). They interviewed 59 ECEs working with infants (0- to 2-years-old) on their beliefs about infant language development. ECEs mentioned that building a trusting relationship with children, reading books, singing songs, asking questions, modeling and offering opportunities for children to talk are good strategies to help infants learn language. ECEs in our studies also named many of these practices and, as mentioned above, many of these practices do support language development. Comparing our study with Degotardi and Gill (2019), we observe that the results of both studies are similar although they involved children of different ages. This suggests that ECEs use the same language-supporting strategies with children under-5-year-old regardless of their age. Both infants and preschoolers can benefit from similar practices, and those could be implemented differently depending on the age of the children. At the same time, they also need age-specific strategies. For example, decontextualized talk makes language learning more difficult for infants, but it is a valuable type of talk to promote preschoolers' language development.

Academic Talk Development

Although many ECEs' declared practices are recognized as good ways to help children learn language in general, ECEs' practices might not be totally aligned with practices that support children's exposure to academic talk. Moreover, few of ECEs' strategies specifically address the linguistic needs of 4- and 5-year-olds regarding their upcoming transition to school. Two of our sub-themes, 'adding new information'

and 'asking questions' are supported by research for positively impacting 4- and 5-year-olds language development. Open-ended and inferential questions are a particularly good way for children to be exposed to and to use decontextualized language (van Kleeck et al., 2006). In the present study, some ECEs did mention asking mainly open-ended questions. However, during the interviews, when invited to provide example of the types of questions they asked, ECEs gave numerous examples of closed questions that children can answer with one word (e.g., What is this? Do you like this vegetable?).

ECEs who participated in the present study did not declare using complex sentences or practices that relate to decontextualized talk to enhance language development. This is not to say that decontextualized talk, a more challenging type of talk, is not present in their classroom, but rather that ECEs might be somewhat unaware of how important it is for preschoolers' language development. Nonetheless, activities like morning chat, snack time or deciding with the children what they will do today, which some ECEs mentioned, may include decontextualized talk (Gest et al., 2006).

These findings suggest that the goals of ECEs are for children to enjoy speaking, make fewer language mistakes, and develop the language necessary to manage social relationships (e.g. have conversations, resolve conflicts with peers, express opinions and feelings). Preparing children to understand and use academic language does not seem to be an explicit goal of ECEs. This could be explained by several hypotheses. ECEs might think it is not developmentally appropriate or that it is not their role to expose children to academic language (Marinova et al., 2020). They could believe any language acquisition is equivalent in preparing children for school and not be aware of the differences between casual and academic talk. They might also associate certain features of academic talk with the development of cognition rather than language. In that case, they would not have declared practices they use because they believed it was irrelevant to this study that focused on language.

Implications for Professional Development

The findings of the present study suggest that ECEs know the general practices that support language development of 4- and 5- year-olds. At the same time, results also show that ECEs are less cognizant of the strategies that help children develop the complex language they will need at school. At 4-year-old, most of the children have developed solid language basics and are ready to learn more complex language (Uccelli et al., 2019). Therefore, evidence-based PD should focus on getting ECEs to engage preschoolers in challenging conversations using thought-provoking questions, extended

conversations, complex sentences, explanations of rare/novel words, and information about how the world works (Hadley et al., 2022; van Kleeck, 2014).

ECEs report engaging in similar practices to those mentioned above. They are already aware of the importance of the types of questions they ask and the choice of conversational topics. These current practices are an excellent starting point and could be enhanced to move toward decontextualized and abstract conversation. This could allow new strategies to be integrated into daily practices more easily.

However, other factors could impede the implementation of these strategies. Our findings reveal that ECEs' concerns for children's self-esteem development might prevent them from using certain language-supporting practices. For example, using decontextualized talk implies that children might not be able to answer the question the first time, which ECEs could see as affecting children's self-esteem. Apart from self-esteem, frequent interruptions to manage other children in the classroom make it difficult for adults to maintain interactions (Degotardi & Gill, 2019; Dickinson et al., 2008). Finally, language is omnipresent throughout the day. ECEs talk for many reasons: to explain a change in the schedule, to discipline or to comfort the children, etc. In some cases, ECEs may choose to communicate more simply and more clearly with short sentences and common vocabulary to ensure that children understand. Hence, ECEs' decisions while interacting with children are influenced by many factors, and not only by what promotes language development (Schachter, 2017). For language-supporting strategies to be implemented by ECEs, PD should include these other factors.

Our results show that ECEs think of some language practices as concrete actions (e.g., choosing a type of activity and organizing the physical environment). This is in line with Pence et al. (2008) who compared how ECEs implemented activities and language-supporting strategies of PD. They found that ECEs implemented the activities suggested in the curriculum with greater fidelity than the strategies taught during training. This suggests that the language strategies presented during PD might be better implemented if they were associated with concrete activities (e.g., advising ECEs to discuss rare words during book reading or maintaining the same conversation topic for many turns during snack time).

Future Studies

In future studies, it would be important to get input from ECEs on PD focused on academic language development for preschoolers. ECEs could provide their appreciation of the program's feasibility, relevance, and developmental appropriateness for preschoolers. Future studies should investigate whether specific moments or activities favor challenging

conversations (e.g., during symbolic play, shared book reading) and examine ECEs' perceptions of which activities make it easier to implement language-supporting practices (Rowe, 2013; Turnbull et al., 2009).

Limitations

This study has some limitations. Social desirability may have led ECEs to declare practices they know are good for language development without really using them with the children. It is also possible that ECEs who volunteered to participate in this study were particularly interested in language development and that their practices are better than the typical ECE.

Conclusion

This study reported ECEs declared practices regarding preschoolers' oral language development. ECEs declared using many strategies that are supported by research to develop preschoolers' oral language. However, they tend to focus more on helping children express themselves and preserving their self-esteem than on increasing the complexity of their language. Consequently, children are less exposed to academic talk, which is a type of talk they will regularly encounter in school. Simple and common language may be appropriate when educators want to be well understood by all children, but it is not enough to support preschoolers' language development. Future PD could be more effective if it focused on making ECEs aware of the language complexity preschoolers need to hear while also addressing the other factors influencing ECEs' verbal interactions with children.

Appendix 1: Interview questions

1. Tell me what you do with children in your group to help them to develop their language.
2. Do you plan activities that target language development specifically? If so, can you give me an example?
3. During the day, at what moment are you targeting language development the most? What are the moments you work on language development the most?
4. What do you want to develop in children's language?
5. Do you find it easy or difficult to help children develop their language? Why?
6. Do you work with all the children in your group in the same way? Why is that? What are the differences?
7. Imagine that all your wishes can be fulfilled. There are no limits on time, money, staff, etc. In that world, are there other things you could do to help the children in your group develop their language?

Throughout the interview, as needed, the interviewer asked to elaborate with sub-questions such as:

– What is your goal with this activity?
– In this activity, how do you help children develop their language?
– During which activity do you use this strategy?

Declarations

Ethical Approval This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières.

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