Conference Reports:
CREATING POSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS THAT PROMOTE LISTENING AND SPEAKING

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- Responding to the cultural and linguistic needs of children
- Fostering a sense of belonging
- Encouraging listening and speaking
- Setting up the environment to reflect diversity
- Strategies for supporting children’s talk
- Individual and small group experiences
- Outdoor play
- Dramatic and role play

Language

Language is the most powerful tool of any human being. It is undeniably the greatest asset we possess. A good grasp of language is synonymous with a sound ability to think. In other words language and thought are inseparable. Vygotsky (1986)

Fostering a sense of belonging

- For young bilingual children early experiences need to reinforce their identity and self-esteem.
- The new environment is often a very strange and confronting place, quite different from the home environment that the children have come from.
- The people around them look different, speak in a different language, act in new ways and demand new ways of behaving and responding.
- Children need to feel confident in themselves and their families. They need to experience a ‘sense of belonging’ in the new environment.
- Early experiences need to reinforce the connections with the family and other community members

Positive self-esteem

Staff in the early years have a vital role to play in ensuring that bilingual learners develop a positive self-esteem. A positive self esteem comes from being acknowledged and appreciated for who and what you are, this includes acceptance and acknowledgement of race, class, ethnicity, religion, language and ability.

It is essential that children have emotional security if they are to grow up as confident healthy people who can take responsibility for themselves and others.

Who are the children we work with?

‘… our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and other children.’ Loris Malaguzzi

Who are the children we work with?

‘The majority of three and four year old children from Ethnic Minority backgrounds starting in the nursery or school with little or no English have an effective and well established first language. Clarke 2000

Who are the children we work with?

‘Children like Nazma and Naseem present a challenge to schools because their language use and their socialisation and cultural experience in and beyond the home, do not match the norm which teachers expect to be able to build on’. Drury 1997

Socio-cultural perspectives

Socio-cultural theory, largely inspired by the work of Vygotsky, can be characterised by the central claim that children’s minds develop as a result of constant interactions with the social world – the world of people who do things with and for each other, who learn from each other and use the experiences of previous generations to successfully meet the present demands of life.

Learning that leads development

- Interactions between people involve using, adapting and mastering cultural tools
- Learning takes place through active participation in purposeful, collaborative activity
• Participants contribute differently based on their existing expertise
• They take over and transform for their own use, the skills, values and dispositions that they find effective in the contributions of others. (Vygotsky)

Opportunities for interaction
• the lack of experience of children learning English as an additional language, with the culture and language of the nursery or school can inhibit access to opportunities for interaction.
• opportunities to participate in activities and conversations are determined by the way children position themselves with others

Toohey (2000, 2001)

What do children need?
• A sense of place in the family, community and early childhood
• Quality programs that build a sense of community
• Creative, safe and nurturing spaces
• Access to quality teaching/learning environments that foster mutual respect, trust and concern
• Access to a socio-cultural environment that takes account of their needs and interests
• Time for settling in, exploration, reflection, tranquillity,
• To be listened to and respected
• A sense of enjoyment and love of life
• Opportunities for positive interactions with other children, staff and community

What do children need?
• The ability to express themselves in a variety of ways
• Independence and openness for learning
• The ability to create solutions to social conflict
• To learn to relieve tension and express emotions in positive ways
• To value diversity
• To tolerate being uncertain and realise that there is not always a right answer
• To weigh up possible consequences and evaluate consequences after acting

• To negotiate and make a choice or decision together

What do children need from adults

Adults who
• understand their cultural and linguistic background
• accept their efforts at communicating
• take time to listen to what they are saying
• honour the contributions that children bring from home
• promote their positive self esteem and identity
• encourage them to be self-directing
• promote lifelong learning
• are committed to children’s rights and social justice
• encourage them to feel they have the power to change things

Programs in the early years should:
• Provide children with a sense of belonging and security
• Enable children to work at their own pace
• Foster pride in the children’s cultural and linguistic heritage
• Encourage children to express their feelings in a safe and secure setting
• Provide a structure that encourages children to explore, experiment, and make decisions as they play together
• Encourage children to achieve success
• Allow children to experiment within safe boundaries
• Allow children to work at their own pace
• Offer children consistent limits

Language as social practice
Practices are ‘ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values and power relations’. (Lave and Wenge)

Classrooms need to be sites of practice- rather than sites of linguistic transaction. Language learning needs to be seen as social practice. Emphasis is not on production of increasingly more complex English- better formed and more varied sentences- but on the ability to take part in interaction. (Toohey 1996)
Importance of listening
• Listening is a collaborative process, it requires active participation of adults, children, and parents.
• Adults need to take time to listen to children
• Children need to develop skills in listening to staff and to other children.

Importance of listening
• Listening is being open to differences and to valuing others points of view.
• Listening to children ensures that their point of view is taken into account, it gives meaning and value to the speaker.
• Listening to children legitimises the learner, makes them visible and enriches both the listener and the speaker.

Carla Rinaldi (2002) Reggio Emilia

Modelling good listening skills
• model good listening habits by getting down to the child's eye level;
• concentrate on what the child is saying, knowing when to listen and when to talk;
• create a positive environment where background sounds or music is eliminated so that children can focus on listening;
• ensure that all children can be heard - this may mean explaining to others that everyone needs to have a turn.
• make directions and instructions implicit and check that the learner has understood what you said;
• plan listening activities and games based on the children's level of development, interests and experiences and supported with real objects and pictures;

Modelling good listening skills
• use strategies to increase active listening, such as restating (“who can tell me what I need to do before we do a painting?”); summarizing (“What did we do when we went on the excursion?”), reflecting (“if you could…”) and self assessment (“Tell us…)
• provide a variety of games and activities where the focus is on listening (eg music, singing games, audio tapes and sound and picture recognition);
• use simple songs, rhymes and raps regularly to encourage listening for pleasure;
• read and tell a wide variety of stories and involve the children as much as possible in patterned responses. Support stories with props and visual materials;
• Encourage the children to dramatize the story or illustrate the story with puppets

From a community of practice perspective, children in kindergartens are actively engaged in negotiating their identities and access to participation and resources in the variety of communities of practice operating there. The extent to which any participant can speak any particular language is involved in their identities, practices and access to resources, but in some communities does not seem to be the most important factor. Toohey 1996

Continued use of the first or home language
• Support the parents in understanding the role of the first language as a foundation for English as an additional language
• Provide bilingual books for children to take home
• Encourage parents to visit the nursery and read or tell stories to children in their first language
• Use bilingual audio tapes and CDs
• Utilize bilingual staff. Group bilingual children together for activities in their home languages.
• Learn a few words and greetings in languages other than English
• Learn songs in languages other than English.

Strategies to support children in the non-verbal period
• Provide visual clues to children in group times, pictures, real objects, puppets and photos etc.
• Encourage children to respond with non verbal language
• Acknowledge children’s individual needs and interests
• Provide good models of language for children to hear
• Read stories that have predictable story lines.
• Play picture lotto games where children can take part without spoken language
• Sing songs that have actions to support involvement
• Provide positive reinforcement for minimal efforts
• Understand the differences between the 'silent period' and the nonverbal period

Encouraging oral language development

For a teacher to talk and a learner to learn, both partners need to use talk and joint activity to create a shared framework of understanding from the resources of their common knowledge and common interests or goals.

Talk is the principal tool for creating this framework.

Encouraging oral language development

Children need:
• Classroom environments that are cognitively and linguistically stimulating
• To develop shared understandings of activities in which they are engaged
• Exposure to varied vocabulary.
• Opportunities to be part of conversations that use extended discourse
• Participation in joint activity to create a shared framework of understanding
• Opportunities to ask questions, recall, and reformulate within joint activities

Encouraging communication

• Plan a mixture of large and small group times
• Build on children’s interests and experiences
• Support children’s learning with visual materials
• Support children’s play on an individual or in small groups through paired activities such as ‘dolls house’, ‘block play’
• Encourage minimal efforts at using English
• provide positive reinforcement

• arrange the environment to encourage children to talk, interact, to explore and to engage in socio-dramatic play;
• model, rephrase and extend the children's language rather than focusing on errors.
• establish rules for listening and talking
• encourage children to listen and respect others
• encourage any attempts by the learners to communicate
• Strategies for supporting children’s talk
• Establish safe environments where children can develop a repertoire of language and build on this
• Provide opportunities for children to hear appropriate language forms, such as conventions for politeness, talk between adults etc
• Pair children with good language models during routine times and for small group work
• Provide opportunities for children to use language in decontextualized contexts
• Read progressively more complex stories with descriptive language- encourage participation by learners
• Encourage children to make up stories or describe past events
• Encourage children to order and retell
• Expand and elaborate children's conversations using scaffolding techniques

Setting up the environment

• Flexible and open –ended periods of time for children
• Easy transitions from routine times to play
• Easy negotiation of the environment by children
• Opportunities for two children to play together
• Spaces for small groups or play alone
• Quiet retreats and privacy for children
• Active participation by adults where appropriate
• Freedom to play without adult intervention
• Floor space to encourage groups of children to play together
• Space for physical activity- indoors and outdoors
• Spaces for music and movement
• Spaces for self-expression and creativity.
Using natural materials

- These materials provide opportunities for open ended play as there is no ‘right way’ to use them.
- Opportunities exist for children to develop their language skills in both their home languages and English as they improvise with the materials.
- Staff can scaffold children’s play and extend the language by discussing the nature and origin of the materials and by developing children’s ideas for using the materials.
- Props that are purchased or made, such as plastic and wooden figures, animals and insects can be reused endlessly.
- Children in the developed world have too much exposure to plastic toys and will benefit from alternatives in wood, material, wool and materials from the garden and nature.
- Materials, toys and artefacts purchased from shops which promote the products of developing countries provide a wide range of culturally diverse materials.
- Use recycled materials to create interesting areas that will stimulate children to ask questions and develop dramatic play.
- Natural materials such as shells, sand, leaves and seed pods can be used to supplement play.

Consider using the following:

- Cloth and fabrics (Indian, Asian, Turkish, African) – velvet, silk, cotton, wool, Hessian, ribbon, lace
- Natural materials – sand, gravel, shells, twigs, pinecones, leaves, feathers, grasses, bark, flowers, seed pods
- Dolls – knitted, sewn, rope, ethnic, wooden
- Teddies- felt, woollen, knitted, small bears from craft shops
- Animals – wooden and plastic
- Blocks – wooden offcuts from cabinet makers and joineries
- Vehicles – wooden, miniature, metal
- Boxes – chocolate, cereal, biscuit
- Household – corks, bottle tops, cotton reels, jewellery box, IKEA
- Cane and woven baskets, bowls and containers.
- Treasures from overseas

Individual and small group experiences

Small spaces to facilitate:

- Cooperative play
- Communication
- Imagination
- Language development
- Development of positive self esteem
- Opportunities for open ended play
- Respect for others and their ideas
- Development of concentration

Outdoor play

- Provide a variety of activities outdoors
- Provide enough equipment so that sharing is not a problem
- Provide a variety of small group or individual activities
- Children find water a calming relaxing experience.
- Warm water can be used in winter with all ages.
- Water provides sensory as well as science experiences

Free play or choice time is the ideal opportunity for children to engage in pretend talk, a type of extended discourse that predicts stronger language and literacy development.

Teachers need to be skilled at extended discourse to provide powerful supports for children’s oral language.

They need to have the knack of engaging children in conversation and fine tuning the balance between talking and listening to the children.

References


