Oral language skills in the early years

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Purpose of the review

The importance of oral language skills as a foundation for learning and development is well documented. The development of language skills rests on a subtle interplay between the input the child receives and the skills the child brings to language learning. Children who, for a range of reasons, enter school with reduced competence in oral language are at a disadvantage. This review aims to:

- Outline the importance of oral language skills in the early years
- Provide an overview of the oral language skills which are developing in the preschool child
- Examine the evidence to support particular types of language inputs and the role of the organisation of early years settings
- Identify criteria for designing and evaluating language intervention packages
- Indicate the key components of an early years language support package.

Background

Oral language skills are often considered a straightforward part of the child's early developmental repertoire: a competency that naturally emerges for a child who is embedded in an appropriate linguistic environment. This process is thought to be so straightforward that when children enter school they are presumed to be reasonably competent in oral language use (production) and understanding (comprehension). Additional support is only indicated when there are delays or difficulties in acquisition. Understanding the processes that underpin successful language development provides a framework for the curriculum and for supporting children with delays and difficulties.

The importance of oral language

Language is an integral and interrelated aspect of the child's social and cognitive development. There is increasing evidence that the nature of children's oral language skills has a significant impact on their ability to access and benefit from the conventional school curriculum (Torgeson, 2000). Difficulties or delays with language are likely to affect other aspects of development. For children who reach school with only a rudimentary vocabulary and the elementary understanding of grammatical forms, difficulties in comprehension and expression occur. Reduced vocabulary size is associated with later literacy and educational achievement (Dockrell et al., 2007; Wells, 1986), and problems with reading comprehension have been linked with poor language skills (Oakhill, 1982; Stothard & Hulme, 1995). Moreover there is increasing evidence that difficulties with language skills may impact on a child's ability to interact with peers and adults (Bishop, 1997).

Causes of language delays and difficulties

Reduced oral language skills can result from a range of causes. Some children will not have received sufficient exposure to the language used in school contexts. This may occur because of reduced exposure in the early years or because the language of school is not the child's primary language. Other children may struggle with acquiring the language system as a result of developmental difficulties. For some the double jeopardy of disadvantage and developmental difficulties will compromise their developmental pathways.

Children experience significant differences in the amount of oral language input they receive (Clarke-Stewart, 1973; Hart & Risley, 1992; 1995; Wells, 1986) and socioeconomic indices are related to differences in the amount of time spent talking with children (Hart & Risley, 1995). Children from economically deprived backgrounds are at considerable risk of language delay (Locke, Ginsborg, & Peers, 2002). Other groups of children may be placed at risk because of the interaction between their own skills and experiences and the educational context into which they enter. For example many children in the UK for whom English is a second language may not be provided with the appropriate opportunities to develop their English language skills and consequently may suffer from underachievement. These difficulties have often been linked to relatively "low levels of English fluency as the children enter the education system" (Hutchinson et al., 2003). Thus children developing in different linguistic and cultural contexts may experience barriers in meeting the demands of the mainstream curriculum. Yet, the use of a specific oral language register is fundamental to becoming literate in school (Pelligrini, 2002). Developmental difficulties also often compromise the language system. Some children experience difficulties which are primarily related to language which cannot be explained by lack of experience, general ability or hearing difficulties (Bishop, 1997; Leonard, 1998). They form a sizeable group of the preschool population (prevalence rate of 7.4% at school entry (Tomblin et al., 1997). Children with other developmental difficulties, including moderate learning difficulties, also can experience language delays which are more varied than would be expected on the basis of their other skills (e.g., Volterra, Capirci, & Capelli, 2001). The majority of children experiencing language delays and difficulties will be found in mainstream early years settings (Lindsay et al., 2005). Thus, there is a continuing need for staff to be sensitive to children's language competencies, skilled at supporting oral language and aware when systematic attempts to support oral language difficulties are not effective (see discussions about response to treatment/intervention, Fuchs, 2003; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003).

Oral language as a foundation skill

The language system serves a number of quite diverse purposes. Primarily it is a system of representations. As a representational system it allows us to represent and interpret the situations and contexts in which we find ourselves, represent our wishes and negotiate social situations, represent our ideas and knowledge to the others and provide a medium for developing and refining our own ideas. Thus, oral language provides the basic infrastructure that supports the development of a range of cognitive and social processes. Delays or difficulties in the development of oral language constitutes a risk factor for other aspects of academic and social development.

Oral language and literacy

Oral language difficulties in the preschool years compromise successful literacy acquisition (Aram & Nation, 1980; Catts, 1993; Wilson & Risucci, 1988). A strong language base is required for reading (NICHD, 2005; ECCRN, 2002). It is therefore not surprising that children who experience difficulties with oral language frequently experience difficulties with literacy. By corollary many poor readers also experience difficulties with oral language. Recently Catts, Fey, Zhang and Tomblin (1999) estimated that as many as 50% of poor readers have language deficits that go beyond phonological processing. These problems include difficulties with expressive and receptive vocabulary and syntax or wider problems with comprehension of text and inference. Thus there are clear links between oral language and literacy, although the nature of these relationships maybe complex (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). In the developmental phases prior to literacy and during the initial phases of literacy acquisition explicit support for the development of oral language skills is advocated. The key question is which oral language skills should be targeted and how should these be targeted?

The importance of phonological skills as a key factor in word decoding is now firmly established (National Reading Panel, 2000). In contrast the importance of other language competencies, such as grammar and morphology, and the ways in which these support reading is more complex (Roth et al., 1996; Scarborough, 1989; Schatschneider et al., 2004). Early studies indicated that the links between language and reading were indirect, such that vocabulary was seen as the basis for acquisition of phonological knowledge during the preschool period and phonology (not vocabulary) was assumed to underlie the acquisition of reading (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). These conclusions are challenged both by evidence from older children, who while competent at decoding show poor comprehension skills, and recent longitudinal studies, highlighting the importance of oral language in early reading. There is increasing evidence that children with normally developing decoding skills but poor reading comprehension skills exhibit difficulties in other areas of the language system (Bishop & Adams, 1992; Messer, Dockrell, & Murphy, 2004; Nation & Norbury, 2005; Stothard & Hulme, 1992). These data illustrate the ways in which oral language skills can differentially influence literacy development. Sentence and text comprehension are both affected by children's oral language skills and their general verbal ability (Snow et al., 1991; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Early reading skills are related to both early language and phonemic knowledge (NICHD, 2005; Poe, Burchinal, & Roberts, 2004) and it is the contribution of a broad range of oral language skills that contribute unique variance to predictions of reading competence (NICHD, 2005). Results of studies in literacy (NICHD, 2005) and language (Tomblin & Zhang, 2006) are highlighting the importance of the interrelated nature of oral language skills. There is therefore a need for both a comprehensive assessment of language skills in the early years (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2005) and the creation of interventions which develop these diverse skills in an evidence based fashion (Dockrell, Stuart, & King, 2006).

Oral language and social emotional competence

Language also serves a fundamental role in interpersonal contacts, relationship formation, regulation of interactions, and the socialisation of children (Cohen, 2005). The relationship between social and emotional competence and language ability appears to be reciprocal: language serves to support social interactions and social

interactions provide a context to further develop linguistic skills. These skills are supported by interactions with adults and peers where opportunities for establishing and practicing language skills, role modelling, and offering feedback are provided (Gallagher, 1999; Windsor, 1995).

Peer acceptance and sociometric status ratings are also related to communicative competence in both school aged and preschool children; with conversational skills influencing peer acceptance in children as young as three (Kemple, Speranza, & Hazen,1992). These skills include the ability to initiate conversation appropriately, contribute to ongoing conversations, communicate intentions clearly, present more positive than negative comments, and make adjustments in communication to suit the listener's needs (Brinton & Fujiki, 1999; Dodge et al., 1986; Gallagher, 1999). Difficulties in these areas are linked to behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (Cantwell & Baker, 1987; Cohen et al., 1998; McCabe, 2005; Toppelberg & Shapiro, 2000). A study of three year olds in the late 1970s pointed to the high comorbidity of language delay and behaviour problems, 59% of the language delayed children experienced behaviour difficulties compared to only 14% of the non-language delayed children (Richman & Stevenson, 1977; Richman, Stevenson & Graham, 1975; Stevenson & Richman, 1976; 1978). These findings have been corroborated by a number of subsequent studies (McGee & Silva, 1982; Silva, 1980; Silva, Williams & McGee, 1987).

Conclusion

There is increasing evidence that early oral language skills are a fundamental stepping stone for children's development. One of the main effects of poor oral language skills will be on children's ability to develop adequate literacy skills. In addition there will be more general effects on other aspects of the curriculum and in children's developing social and emotional competence. Early language environments provide a unique opportunity to enhance (or hinder) language development.

What are the key early language milestones and key language features?

The language system is composed of a number of subcomponents that are important for effective understanding and communication (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2005). These include phonology, lexicon, grammar, and pragmatics. The key elements of the language system are presented in Table 3.1 (for a detailed discussion see Hoff, 2004). Details of phonological processes are documented in detail of a range of texts and will not be discussed in detail here.

Table 3.1
Key components of the language system

Language skill	Definition	Elaboration
Phonology	The ability to discriminate and produce the various sounds of the language system	Also involves the rules for combining sounds in spoken language. Speakers of English, for example, know that an English word can end, but not begin, with an "-ng" sound.
Lexicon (vocabulary)	Individual words that are understood and produced	Words are made up of morphemes. These are the smallest units of meaning, paper is one morpheme but papers is 2 "paper" + "s".
Grammar (syntax)	Rules that enable us to combine morphemes into sentences and understand sentences or phrases.	Syntactic rules become increasingly complex as the child develops. From combining two morphemes, the child goes on to combine words with suffixes or inflections ("-s" or "-ing", as in "papers" and "eating") and eventually creates questions, statements and commands. This also allows for the possibility of combining several ideas into one complex sentence.
Pragmatics	Ability to speak appropriately in different situations.	Includes greeting, informing, demanding, promising, and requesting; adapting or changing language according to the needs or expectations of a listener or situation; appropriate use of nonverbal signals in conversation: distance between speaker and listener, facial expressions, and eye contact.

		Pragmatic aspects are often culturally determined.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is central to comprehension and content learning. It is easy to take for granted that words mean something, but children learning language have to work this out for themselves. They have to isolate sound patterns from the stream of language that they hear and link that sound pattern to an object or event in the world around them. Most children say their first word around their first birthday. This is the beginning of a life long process of vocabulary acquisition. During the preschool years vocabulary expansion is focussed around the development of a wide range of concrete object names and action words. This is supplemented by the use adjectives and adverbs that describe objects and qualify verbs.

Vocabulary acquisition is facilitated when children are actively engaged in a task (Elley, 1989). Such active engagement needs to be complemented by the occurrence of complex words (Wiezman & Snow, 2001) and appropriate syntactic structures (Hoff & Naigles, 2002), which can support the children's hypotheses about the intended referent of a novel term. In addition to lexical development specific features of the oral language input can also support grammatical development. For example an important determinant of verb use by young children is the specific pattern of verb use in the input they receive (Theakston et al., 2001).

Grammar

Vocabulary growth is intimately related to grammatical development (Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2005). Children typically move from producing one-word utterances to two word utterances by the age of two. Grammatical development from this point in development can be considered in two different ways: length of utterance and organisation of words and understanding of grammatical morphemes. In terms of utterance length there is a steady increase of about 1.2 morphemes a year such that the average 3 year old produces sentences with 3.5 morphemes whereas for the average child the mean length of utterance will not reach 6 morphemes until sometime after their fifth birthday.

Children's early utterances are free of inflectional morphemes. Inflections such as the plural morpheme -s on nouns and the progressive morpheme -ing and the past tense morpheme -ed on verbs are acquired during the preschool years. Although much of a language's grammar is acquired in the preschool years a number of grammatical forms are not fully mastered until the school years. As well as constructions such as the passive these later acquired language skills include specific verb phrases and a range of clause structures (Scott, 1988).
Specific features of the oral language input support grammatical development. The expansion of children's utterances into well-formed equivalents and recasting of children's utterances into other grammatical forms enhances grammatical competence and the specific pattern of verb use. Adults often model correct grammatical forms directly contingent on child errors (Saxton, 1995) and this is thought to be more effective in improving the grammaticality of child speech than adult models which are *not* contingent on child errors. These immediate corrective

inputs also last over longer periods of time (Saxton, 1997; Saxton, Backley, & Gallaway, 2005). Direct contrasts of this kind offer the child two critical pieces of information. First, they inform the child what *is* grammatical, and, second, they reveal to the child that their own selection is ungrammatical.

Narratives

As children become more competent in their use of grammar and as their vocabularies expand they begin to create narratives. Reading ability is directly related to the ability to generate narratives (Snow & Dickinson, 1991). Narrative involves the communication of interrelated ideas about characters, their goals, their actions, and the outcomes of these actions. They are thus sequences of clauses that link together to mirror the sequence of events to which they relate. More complex narratives also include explanations of why things have occurred and to do this children typically make use of complex syntax. Younger children are likely to retell the events in a story while older children relate events using temporal links. Narration represents a developmental bridge from the familiarity of oral language to the decontextualised and formal demands of written language. Although narratives are common in children's communicative environments, they are challenging to produce. The child needs to be able to move from the interchange of conversation to the ability to reflect on the needs of the listener and the language necessary to produce the narrative. As such the demands of narrative production make it a particularly challenging linguistic task for children with language delays and difficulties (Liles, 1993; Roth & Spekman, 1986; Scott & Windsor, 2000).

Conclusion

Oral language is composed of a number of strands. Many of these skills are being developed and consolidated during the preschool period. The skills should be evident in the ways in which language is assessed (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2005) and in the focus of early years pedagogy. These skills will form the basis for future language development, the ability to access the curriculum and developing literacy skills.

The need for oral language support in the early years

Current understanding of language development has moved towards an account of language learning that is based on an interactionist perspective. There is now increasing evidence that the amount of oral language input received can have a marked effect on children’s oral language skills (Chapman, 2000). The importance of the relationship between input and acquisition holds across a range of contexts. There is, for example, a strong and highly statistically significant relationship between parental vocabulary use and language acquisition in bilingual children (Pearson et al., 1997). Input affects the rate of development and this is a factor that can be altered in interaction and schooling. Thus a basic prerequisite for any child is that they are systematically exposed to oral language in developmentally appropriate interactive contexts. However, amount of input, on its own, is not sufficient to ensure appropriate development. The nature and quality of the language input impact on the child’s subsequent oral language development. Oral language input to the child typically contains many potentially corrective responses (e.g., Bohannon & Stanowicz, 1988; Chouinard & Clark, 2003; Demetras, Post, & Snow 1986; Farrar, 1992; Furrow et al., 1993; Hirsh-Pasek, Treiman, & Schneiderman, 1984; Moerk, 1991; Morgan, Bonamo, & Travis, 1995; Penner,

1987; Post, 1994; Strapp, 1999). These corrective inputs provide a tool for supporting and developing children's expressive and receptive language. Another important feature of the input to enhance linguistic development is to match the adult's input to the child's own communicative intentions (Cross, 1977). Thus there is a general consensus that talk that is *child-centred* (i.e., talk about what a child is doing), *semantically contingent* (i.e., talk that refers to the content of what the child has said) and *embedded in familiar interactive routines* or scripts, are some of the features of adult input that promote children's language development (Rice & Wilcox, 1995). Such activities enhance learning and avoid intensive drill and practice on isolated skills (Assel et al., 2007).

Reading provides an opportunity to expose children to a range of linguistic features. There has been a long standing belief in the importance of reading to children with a growing awareness that the talk around the reading is as important as the reading itself. When at risk children are involved in stories as a social interactive process improvements are recorded in narrative language. Importantly these effects are specific to oral language and do not generalise to prereading skills (Morrow, O'Connor, & Smith, 1990). This is further evidence that oral language skills need to be targeted directly if specific improvements are to be achieved (see also Kaderavek & Justice, 2004).

Reviews of the effects of specific interventions in clinical settings and specific programs in educational settings provide mixed results. A review of 61 studies examining the effects of clinical interventions for language learning disabled pupils found positive results but no specific treatment advantages (Nye, Foster, & Seaman, 1987). Further a meta analysis examining the effects of 25 studies demonstrated an overall positive effect of speech and language therapy for children with expressive phonological and expressive vocabulary difficulties (Law & Garrett, 2004). The evidence for expressive syntax difficulties was more mixed. The authors argue that there is a need for further research to investigate intervention for receptive language difficulties. They also point out that there is a large degree of heterogeneity in the results, and the source of this variation requires further investigation. Effectiveness ratings for Early Childhood Education programs in general are mixed and the impacts on oral language development difficult to pinpoint (What Works Clearinghouse). Of the packages examined in the What Works review no discernable effects for oral language were evident for the following packages: words and concepts, direct instruction and curiosity corner while potentially negative effects were evident for phonological training. In contrast mixed effects were evident for interactive shared book reading and book reading while positive effects were evident for dialogic reading. These results are consistent with small effects noted for oral language interventions in a wider review of oral language programs (NELP, 2007). The research literature now provides practitioners with evidence based principles about ways of supporting oral language in the pre-school years. However, the evidence base to substantiate specific programs or approaches is equivocal. The knowledge accrued has not been transferred systematically and effectively to early years settings.

Language in the preschool classroom

Preschool settings are dominated by teacher talk (Perry, Colman, & Cross, 1986) and this talk has been criticised as being overly directive and unresponsive

(McCathren, Yoder, & Warren, 1995), often focussing on procedural or management information. Teacher input that constrains behaviour and dominates turn taking is associated with restricted and less complex language use by the children (Girolametto et al., 2000). However, in quality early years settings (EYS) children can demonstrate gains in receptive and expressive language skills (McCartney et al., 1985). A key element is teacher-child interaction (Girolametto et al., 2000). In an early study by Tizard, Cooperman, Joseph and Tizard (1972) there were significant correlations between both the frequency of 'informative' staff talk and the frequency with which the staff answered the children and the children's language comprehension scores. Low-income children who attend high quality child care have improved reading skills and this is related to the impact of the setting on the children's early language and cognitive skills. Moreover, there is evidence to indicate that the quality of care is differentially more important for language development for children of disadvantaged backgrounds (Burchinal et al., 2000). The role of teacher talk and the conversational style of the teacher is moderated by a number of variables including the organisation of the settings (Zani & Emiliani, 1983), the activities that the children are engaged in (Cooper, 1979; Girolametto et al., 2000; Kontos, 1999; O'Brien & Bi, 1995) and the size of the group of children working with a teacher (Pellegrino & Scopesi, 1990). If the primary focus in the early years is on the overall organization of the activities, teachers can adopt an interactional style that is characterized by the frequent use of questions, especially closed ones, which tend to guide the child's behaviour. In contrast where there is a more flexible organization, a style characterized by the greater use of expressions of opinion or emotion, children can participate more freely in the interaction that occurs. In a study comparing different organizational structures Zani and Emiliani (1983), demonstrated that in more programmatic nurseries the children rarely initiated conversations but limited themselves to answering the adult's questions, and sometimes they did not even do that. In contrast when teachers used comments and prompts instead of direct questioning, children tended to intervene more spontaneously and contribute to the interaction with more original pieces of language, language that expressed their own thoughts. The possibility of engaging in these interactive sequences is influenced by the size of the group; the larger the group the less linguistic production and the simpler the structure of the utterances that occur (Pellegrino & Scopesi, 1990). Smaller groups can allow for different patterns of language exchange and the presence of an adult in small group situations can support these exchanges (O'Brien & Bi, 1995).

Effective early years oral language interventions?

As we have seen language is a complex skill which places considerable cognitive demands on the young child. The settings in which children are learning and developing have the potential to support this development. Valid and reliable interventions in preschool settings should be based on an understanding of a) the children's personal and social contexts; b) the processes involved in language acquisition; and c) a rigorous evaluation of the efficacy of the intervention. We have already outlined the language processes that need to be considered in a theory driven intervention and referred to evidence supporting particular forms of oral input. Any study should report the factors that guide their decisions on the target of an intervention. However, early years settings vary across a range of dimensions (Sylva et al., 1999; Sylva et al., 2004; Mathers, Sylva & Joshi, 2007). It is necessary to establish which key features are necessary to support oral language development

in which contexts. This focus complements larger scale studies supporting the effectiveness of early years settings for other domains (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). There are a number of recent small scale studies that speak to the importance of particular approaches or activities within the UK. However, reasonably sized, reliable and valid evaluations of targeted language interventions in early years settings are limited generally and lacking in the UK.

Identifying valid and reliable effects of interventions is problematic; methodological and statistical issues are paramount. To identify an intervention-specific effect it is important to have both a control group and a 'realistic' comparison group (Pressley & Harris, 1994). Moreover, within the skills measured, a distinction needs to be drawn between specific effects and general effects. Obtaining positive effects on the specific variables and no effect on the general or untargeted variables permit confidence that the positive outcomes are not due to Hawthorne or other general effects (Campbell & Stanley, 1966).

For the majority of children some change will occur in test performance in the absence of any targeted intervention, hence the need for control and comparison groups. In addition analysis must control for this by considering gain scores. Scores can be analysed in a number of different ways (Dockrell & Law, 2007). Without statistical analyses which consider both the significance and the size of the effect we cannot be sure that the results are reliable. They could occur by chance.

Practitioners

An important consideration in any intervention needs to be the knowledge base of the practitioners who will implement the package and their current working context. There has been a general emphasis on the need for more training in oral language for practitioners (Campbell & Halbert, 2002). Nonetheless, models of service delivery for language problems highlight the importance of collaborative skills including team planning and teaching (Thronebury et al., 2000) and teachers typically believe that teaching in classrooms is the most appropriate approach to support children's oral language followed by specific supplemental teaching though there is a general awareness that pupils' oral language skills will also be developed from interaction with peers (Beck & Dennis, 1997).

How this actually works in practice is less clear. Interventions are more likely to be implemented if practitioners believe pupils will benefit (Dartnow & Castellano, 2000). There is thus an important element of providing materials with are acceptable to staff and are based on evidence. Yet it appears that there is a lack of awareness of need for specific instructional goals that can be supported by the use of a well detailed curriculum (Assel et al., 2007). Adaptations to specific packages are also common. There is a need to examine specific features which are altered (Dartnow & Castellano, 2000) to ensure the effectiveness of the remaining components of any intervention.

Working with children who experience language delays can be challenging. Children who struggle with expressing views or ideas need to be carefully supported to both develop their language and to acknowledge their contributions. Levels of experience impact on the ways in which oral language is supported. Experienced practitioners are more sensitive to the context, responsive to the child and provide more frequent

examples of natural learning environments (Raab & Dunst, 2004). They are also more able to provide direct teaching for children with problems (Smith et al., 2004). Packages designed to change or enhance teacher behaviours to effect improved child learning usually require professional development. Three reviews of research studies carried out by Cordingley and colleagues (Cordingley et al., 2003; 2005a; 2005b) concluded that sustained, collaborative continuing professional development (CPD) as described in Joyce and Showers (1988), and Day (1999) is the most effective for changing teacher behaviours and impact on learners. They describe the desirable components as:

- the use of external expertise linked to school-based activity
- observation and reflection
- an emphasis on peer support, acknowledging individual teachers' starting
- points and factoring in processes to encourage, extend and structure
- professional dialogue
- scope for teacher participants to identify their own CPD focus
- processes for sustaining the CPD over time to enable teachers to embed
- the practices in their own classroom settings

(Cordingley et al., 2005a, p. 13)

Cordingley et al. emphasise that all the studies in their reviews cited correlational evidence between components of effective CPD and positive outcomes and that causation cannot therefore be established without further research. However, Bolam and Weindling (2006) carried out a systematic review for the General Teaching Council and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers of twenty CPD research studies published from 2002 to 2006. They consider that the weight of evidence from the Cordingley studies, in particular, but also from some of the other studies in their review was sufficiently robust to inform CPD initiatives.

CPD can no longer be seen exclusively as attendance at short workshops. To be effective it must provide opportunities to reflect on practice, engage in dialogue, be based in actual work with students and provide opportunities for peer observation, coaching and feedback. Other professionals in particular, medical and paramedical professionals seem to put high value on opportunities for detailed discussion with a focus on practical cases.
Bolam and Weindling (2006, p. 2)

Evidence base

There are four different research approaches to examine the efficacy of oral language interventions: single case studies, intervention for a target group with no control or comparison group, interventions for a target group with a matched control group which receives no special input and interventions where there is both a control group and a comparison intervention group. The latter provide evidence of specific intervention effects while other approaches speak to change but typically provide little information about the components of the intervention that may be effective.

Single case studies with appropriate baselines have demonstrated the efficacy of enhanced milieu teaching in preschool settings (Kaiser & Hester, 1994; Ostrosky & Kaiser, 1995). The use of milieu teaching approaches have also been supported for

children with lower levels of language (Yoder et al., 1995). Enhanced Milieu Teaching is a behavioural method which is based on naturally occurring environmental events as well as following a child's lead of interest. It incorporates a set of prompting strategies that are brief and positive in nature, carried out in children's natural environments, and intended to support their language production skills. Yoder et al. (1995) demonstrated that older children responded better to conversational scaffolding – expansions and an adult talking about an activity. These data suggest that different interventions may be appropriate for different language levels but as the study contained no control group it is difficult to generalise from these results.

Control groups have been used in a number of studies lending support for intervention effects. Data from Hadley and colleagues provide some evidence of the positive effects of a 'language enforced curriculum' (Hadley et al., 2000) and there is tentative evidence for the support of an enrichment package (Riley, Burrell, & McCallum, 2004). A more structured approach where children worked in dyads/triads provided evidence for improvement in children using exchange games (Smith & Fluck, 2000).

Two British studies that we identified have used both control and comparison groups. A comparison of a language rich environment with direct teaching revealed an effect only for direct teaching on a receptive language measure (Bickford-Smith, Wijayatilake, & Woods, 2005). Dockrell and colleagues (Dockrell, Stuart, & King, 2006) compared group activities involving explicit language input, with a story reading in groups and a control group. After controlling for oral language at the beginning of the study the results indicated that both language interventions had some effect for measures of language comprehension and sentence length but the larger and wider effects were for the explicit language teaching activities.
These results need to be interpreted with care as a large American study, with sufficient power and clearly specified package, highlighted the importance of the setting in which the intervention was occurring as a significant factor in efficacy (Assel et al., 2007). The UK studies have not been sufficiently large and controlled to address the importance of the early years setting for implementing effective oral language packages.

While these studies are indicative of some positive effects generalisations are limited by a range of methodological and practical problems. For a number of the interventions it is difficult to establish what the theoretical underpinnings of the intervention were and what actually happened (e.g., language rich environment - Bickford-Smith, Wijayatilake, & Woods, 2005; and enrichment package - Riley, Burrell, & McCallum, 2004). The failure to specify the details of the intervention limits the replicability of the study and the potential for generalising to other practice settings. Moreover all the UK studies are based on small sample sizes with studies carried out over a relative circumscribed time scale (Bickford-Smith, Wijayatilake, & Woods, 2005; Riley, Burrell, & McCallum, 2004). Thus it is unclear whether the failure to note language specific effects can be explained by a lack of power, the context of the intervention or the limited time frame during which the intervention occurred. It is also likely that the studies may have suffered from implementation problems when fidelity was not reported. Difficulties posed for the staff in organising the children into groups to receive support have been reported (Dockrell et al., 2006). Poorly specified teaching approaches have also been reported in a number of

contexts (Barnett, 1995). In a large study of children with developmental language delays attending 26 preschool classes few instances of structured language activities were noted (Schwartz, Carta, & Grant, 1996). Teachers did not implement a language rich environment in one of the studies (Bickford-Smith, Wijayatilake, & Woods, 2005) and the ability of staff to sustain a package without support was not clear. Dockrell et al. (2006) noted a reduction in intensity following termination of their program following the intervention phase despite the fact that the staff were pleased with the efficacy of the program. The long term effects of the early language interventions require further systematic examination.

Conclusions

In sum the evidence to support early years oral language pedagogy is based on experimental studies of both typical developing children and those experiencing language delays. These studies provide clear indications about the ways in which oral language should be supported in EYSs. Data that these approaches can be successfully transferred to EYS provides preliminary evidence that language development can be enhanced, with the greatest impact recorded for children's receptive language. It is possible that longer term interventions will be required to support improvements in expressive language. However, these conclusions require three important caveats. Firstly, within, the UK context there is a dearth of evidence on the effects of specific language interventions across settings and populations. Secondly the time scale of both the interventions and the time length of the evaluations raise important issues about the intensity of the interventions and maintenance of change. Finally, the evidence about the ways in which practitioners implement the interventions requires further scrutiny. Such results point to the importance of a large scale, theoretically driven intervention package in early years settings.

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