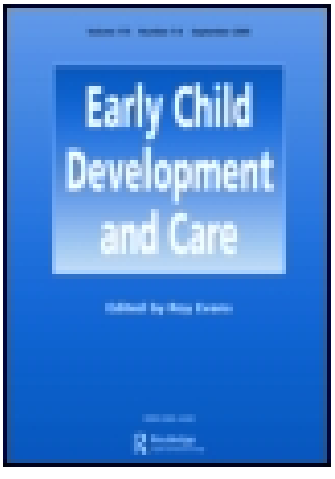

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Oral language development

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Language is a fantastic gift: it empowers humans to create new ways of speaking with, for and to others about any topic or experience. Language is a rule-governed, meaningful communication system. It is a symbol system, where a word or phrase stands for or represents something else that can be touched, thought about, seen, heard, felt, done, imagined, longed for, rejoiced or anguished about. Language can be used for many different goals, among others: to teach, to scold, to encourage, to express affection, to pray; or to deceive, to insult, to explain, to clarify, to declaim poetically, to ask for more information; or to describe a robbery, a soccer game or a love scene. Winston Churchill's magnificent oratorical eloquence was essential to galvanize Britain to withstand the onslaught of Nazi Germany during the Second World War. Other national leaders have used their oratorical powers to incite mobs to riot and kill.

Oral language proficiency with others is an awesome social skill that our ancestors developed less than 130,000 years ago. Language is also a mystery. Some years ago, Maria Montessori (1967) mused eloquently:

> Before man's arrival on earth language did not exist. And what is it? Barely a breath! A few noises strung together … It is a mystery impossible to fathom. (pp. 108–10).

Because reading and writing are so critical to positive achievements in school, the emphasis on enhancing language skills in classrooms has more frequently focused on teaching phoneme/grapheme correspondence and on strengthening reading fluency, reading for meaning and writing skills. Although in many families, 'elocution lessons' were popular a century ago, parents rarely 'teach' *oral language skills* to young children. For adolescents, in a few schools, debate societies do offer select students the chance to hone their oral skills on intramural debate teams with students from other communities.

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Most people do not believe you have to teach children 'oral language'. After all, children entering kindergarten have approximately 14,000 words in their vocabularies. In addition, some theorists, such as Chomsky (1965), believe that language is hard-wired in the brain. And indeed, children in every culture learn to speak, many times quite without adult tuition. It is impressive that children raised in a variety of physical environments learn the relationship of verbal expressions to meanings. All cultures have oral language, although not all have written language:

> Virtually every child, without special training, exposed to surface structures of language in many interaction contexts, builds for himself—in a short period of time and at an early stage in his cognitive development—a deep-level, abstract, and highly complex system of linguistic structure. (Lindfors, 1987, p. 96)

Further, research confirms that one does not have to 'teach' babies language sounds. For the first ten or so months of life, a young infant hears and can differentiate among all the sounds of all the languages in the world. Babies in Hindu families respond to differences in English sounds, and English babies respond to sound differences in Hindi. A Japanese baby clearly responds to 'l' versus 'r' as different sounds early in the first year of life, but ceases to do so before the first birthday.

Despite our innate propensity at birth to be able to learn any language, the loving caregivers who socialize babies and young children are crucial for ensuring the power to *use language as a rich symbol system* that permits humans to share meaning with one another and to advance learning. Language learning depends on genetic potential *and* on social interactions (Bloom, 2002). Long years ago in Tsarist Russia, if usurpers staged a coup to overthrow the emperor, the infant heir in line to the throne would be put in a tower with a deaf-mute caregiver, to ensure that the baby would never grow up normally or ever become a threat to the usurpers.

Children learn amazing aspects of oral language, most likely without ever realizing how much they know. Subtle social skills in oral language are confirmed very early in children's lives. This becomes startlingly evident when two preschoolers tussle over a toy. One may call a peer in loud exasperation a 'poopy-head'. When visiting, grandpa expects polite behavior and self-control from the child. 'Poopy-head' is an appellation the preschooler knows that he/she must *never* direct to grandpa! Already, in their few short years of life, parents and caregivers have socialized the child to know when and with whom they can and cannot use social epithets even when upset.

Language beginnings in early communication patterns

Although mastering a wide variety of skills in oral language is a crowning human achievement, the earliest roots of language development lie in the communicative social interactions and games that caring adults play with babies who cannot yet 'talk'. A 3-month-old baby coos with throaty, open vowel sounds. Her delighted dad, cradling Natalie in arms as she faces him, responds with a broad smile and in a style called *parentese.* He uses a high-pitched voice, loving tones, drawn-out vowels and short, slow phrases: 'You're talking! I love to hear you talking, honey. Talk some

more.' As dad pauses to let baby respond, baby stares at him and produces another throaty vowel sound with more earnest conviction. Dad's delight in her early vocalization seems to energize her determination to carry on a 'conversation' with him. This dialogue goes on for 16 cooing turns (as noted by papa who, as a developmental specialist and new father, of course has to write down his newborn daughter's accomplishment). The 'parentese' style of talking 'wires' connections in the baby's brain by sending cascades of rich chemical and electrical impulses coursing through the neurons of the brain. Such 'baby talk' is a fine way to stimulate infants' early interest in oral conversations and to focus their attention on words and dialogues.

Yet, the earliest 'dialogues' need not include vocalizations. Mutual loving gazing into each other's eyes, mutual harmonizing of a mother's ways of offering the breast and the baby's nursing style, or mutual settling into a peaceful snuggle in a rocking-chair while a parent sings to baby are other 'dialogues' that support the deep roots for later verbal mutual interactions. Decades later, these earliest dialogues blossom into intricate skills, such as intimate conversations between new lovers, or long neighborly exchanges of gossip over the garden fence or the office water-cooler, and even eloquent lectures by teachers!

Domains of oral language

As they grow, children learn aspects of the five domains of language as well as endless subtleties of high-level conversational skills. These domains are: phonology, syntax, semantics, morphology and pragmatics.

Phonemes

The sounds we produce in speaking are called *phonemes.* Babies progress from producing throaty vowel sounds, 'coos', to producing consonant clusters, such as 'dlth', and vowel combinations when only a few months old. The easiest consonants are labials, made by placing the lips together, as in 'mm' or 'bb'. Phonemes made by pressing the tongue against the upper palate, such as 'd' and 'n', are also easy. Babies then combine a consonant with a vowel sound. By about 6 months, babies duplicate these combinations to produce those phonemic combinations that prove such a delight to parents: 'mama' and 'papa' or 'dada', 'nana' (for grandma or nursey) and 'baba' for bottle or blanket. In several cultures in the world, parents often endow these early phonemes with the specific meaning of a family member: think of words for mother in other languages: 'maman' in French, 'madre' in Spanish, 'ima' (in Hebrew) and 'mat' (in Russian); and other examples include, in Mandarin, 'ma' (on the high tone, in this tonal language), signifying mother; 'babushka', grandmother, in Russian, and 'bubbie', grandmother, in Yiddish. Words for father in many languages also show this sensitivity to the early sounds that babies produce: 'apam' is 'father' in Hungarian, 'abba' in Hebrew and Arabic, 'pater' in Latin and 'padre' in Italian and Spanish.

At first, babies string together over and over the same consonant and vowel combination, as in 'bababa'. Later, they become proficient not only at these 'duplicated

babbles' but at '*unreduplicated babbling*', or *jargon*, where a variety of consonants and vowels are strung together. Listen to a baby earnestly jabbering to a caregiver—so many different vowels and consonants—in an earnest attempt to communicate! The baby is even using *stress*, *pitch* and *juncture*, called 'suprasegmental elements' of language, in this complex jargon; and the baby looks up at his/her caregiver with a puzzled expression as he babbles with pauses, then he uses an upward inflection as if he/she were asking the adult a question. Or the baby points imperiously to the toy shelf and babbles with the commanding tone that signifies she wants something right away, mystifying as the content of the command may be for the adult. From about 10 months onward, the baby uses the pointer finger as well as babbling to share wishes, events, worries and joys with caring adults.

This *joint attention* and shared regard for an activity, topic, or event is critical for boosting early conversational skills: teacher holds Ofira in her arms at the window as they both watch the bird-feeder outside, where the children have often helped to pour in birdseed. 'Look at the birdie', exclaims the teacher. Ofira grins and affirms, 't'eet-t'eet'.

How important is early babbling? Adults need to treat these early attempts at oral language with interest and courtesy. They are the babies' first attempts to use language to communicate meaning with their special adults. Yet many adults do not realize that these precursors of words are worthy of attention and adult effort to respond as the toddler struggles to share information and desires. We have much to do in society to help some loving family members realize what powerful oral language boosters they can be for children and how they can actualize their powers (see Honig, 2001).

Some young children wrestle with coordinating their tongue, lips, pharynx, larynx, palate and teeth in order to pronounce words such that an adult can understand them. They omit a difficult-to-pronounce phoneme, for example, and ask to play 'te'pho' rather than telephone. Children learn to pronounce both voiced and unvoiced pairs of consonants: e.g. 'v' versus 'f'; 'b' versus 'p'; and 'd' versus 't'. If a teacher asks children to touch their Adam's apple while pronouncing these phonemes, then the children are able to feel the vibrations for a voiced, in contrast to an unvoiced, consonant.

Sometimes children do hear the way a sound should be pronounced but they cannot yet manage to produce this phoneme:

> Standing at the goldfish tank with four-year-old Jackie, I shared his delight as we watched the fish flick their golden tails while swimming. 'Shishies', Jackie announced in delight while pointing at them. 'Pretty golden shishies', I responded enthusiastically (I was trying to find out whether he could hear but not yet pronounce the correct sound). Jackie frowned! 'No shishies, teacha! Shishies!' he corrected me, indignantly. Jackie could hear the sound of 'f' in fishes, but not pronounce it.

Some phonemes are particularly difficult for children to pronounce. A five year old may still say 'lellow' for 'yellow'. 'R' is a difficult sound for many children. Children may *substitute phonemes* even into kindergarten, as they talk about how they enjoy petting the class 'bunny wabbit!'. Sounds like 'ng' may not be mastered until 6 years of age. Some consonant clusters, as 'str' in 'street', remain difficult for children well

into the school years. Other children early on are able to produce sounds easy for adults to understand:

> While diapering Maija, Ms Kathryn heard a scream. Turning, she saw Leslie staring at another toddler who was crying. Leslie was prone to hit peers to take away a toy. 'No hitting, Leslie', Ms Kathryn called out. 'I did not hit her. I bit her', retorted Leslie, clear as a bell.

Syntax or grammar

Syntax refers to the orderly grammar rules a given language requires for the construction of acceptable sentences. Syntax rules differ for different languages. Usually, in English, an adjective precedes a noun, as in 'the white house'; adjective and noun are reversed in the Spanish 'la casa blanca'. English grammar rules do not permit double negatives. In French, however, a child quite correctly says 'Je n'ai pas d'argent' ('I don't have any money', but literally translatable as 'I don't have no money').

Since toddlers often have only two or three words to express themselves, caregivers need to be aware of what speech categories toddlers are able to use. Toddlers omit the little functional words that adult speech requires, such as 'a' or 'the', so their talk is often called 'telegraphic speech'. Yet basic grammatical categories of topic and comment and modifier are present, even in these early toddler phrases. Despite the short 'telegraphic speech' that toddlers use, they are quite sensitive to violations of grammar rules (Honig, 2001).

A researcher asked two year olds a series of questions in which grammatical morphemes were replaced with other words:

> Directed to 'find the dog for me', 85% of toddlers could point to the correct animal picture. When the phrase was 'find was dog for me', toddlers pointed to the dog 55% of the time. Only 40% of toddlers pointed correctly when directed, 'find gub dog for me'. (Honig *et al.*, 2001, p. 386)

Semantics

Children learn that concepts have semantic features and meanings. A sister is a female person and a child of the same parent. Talking about the 'bachelor's wife' will make some kids giggle. They already know that a semantic property of the term 'bachelor' refers to a man who is *not* married. Semantic understandings grow gradually. Ask a three year old whether he has a nose or toes, and he can triumphantly point to them and say their names. 'I got dat!' said one little child to me with great satisfaction! But they cannot explain what the component features of a nose are, such as where a nose is found, what is does or how it is shaped. Toddlers may not grasp the fact that two different words can have the same meaning. Talk about a moon as a crescent. A preschooler may pronounce the word after the adult, and still go on using only the word 'moon', even when the crescent sliver is clearly visible in the sky.

Deictic terms are too difficult for toddlers. Using terms such as 'this one' and 'that one' requires that the speaker becomes the point of reference from which the terms

can be understood. Thus, when speaking with young children, an adult needs to use specific terms. Saying 'put these blocks over there and those blocks over here' is frustrating for the child. Labelling long versus short blocks and specifying the exact shelf on which to store the blocks will be very helpful in gaining children's cooperation at clean-up time.

The first symbolic concepts babies learn are related to the personally important people, events and activities in their lives. Children begin to attach labels or words to those concepts. Because a small child has a limited vocabulary and even more limited powers of explanation, it is often difficult to assess a child's semantic competence, that is whether a child *really* understand what a word means (Bloom, 1990). Some tests give a clue that the child does understand the concept but does not have the adult terminology yet. Ask a preschooler where a pig lives and she may answer 'a pig house'. *Semantic transparency* characterizes that child's responses; the child has semantic competence but has not learned the special words 'pigpen' or 'pigsty' that denote a pig's residence. Ask about what we call the child of a mommy pig, and a toddler may reply 'Piggy' or 'pig baby' rather than 'piglet'. Many toddlers have already learned to add a 'y' or 'ie' ending (doggie, horsy, kitty) as the semantic symbol for 'little one'. The child clearly has the conceptual understanding of the question but not the technical terminology specific to the *lexicon* (dictionary words) of his speech community.

Semantic relations are expressed in early toddler grammatical formulations

'Telegraphic speech' categories reveal how many semantic relations that toddlers have already acquired, even when they are using just two or three words together. Adults need to listen for and use all their creative adult skills to decode the meanings revealed in early telegraphic speech:

Agent—action:	Doggy run! ('A dog is running outside the center play yard', or 'I love to play with Fido and watch him run in our yard'.)
Agent—object:	Mama shoe. ('Mama is putting on my shoe' or 'Mama is holding the shoe' or 'Mama bought me new shoes'.)
Action—object:	Eat soup. F'ow ball. ('Teacher is throwing the ball' or maybe 'I want to throw the ball'.)
Possession:	My ball! Mommy sock.
Negation:	No nigh'nigh ('No sleep time right now!')
Wishes:	Want dat!
Object—location:	Book dere. Cup table.
Action—location:	Go, Chucky-cheese. Sit car.
Object—description:	Tove hot! ('Hot stove!'). P'itty d'ess. ('Pretty dress.')
Disappearance:	Allgone juice. [comment on emptied juice cup]
Questions:	Who dat?; Whazzat?; How do dat?
Recurrence:	More tickle. More cookie.
Object—use:	Cut Kni'. ('Cut with a knife.')
Feelings:	Me yike nana ('I like bananas.')
Imperative:	Thtay dere! ('Stay there!') Daddy, up! ('Daddy, pick me up in your arms!')
Invitations/requests:	Want p'ay? ('Do you want to play?')
Entity—attribute:	Dat kitty ('That is a kitty.')

Note that the 'Why' question is very difficult for a young child to decode. A preschooler may ask an adult: 'Why', over and over, even when the adult has patiently tried to answer the 'why' question until he is weary! 'Why' is a rare example of a verbal behaviour that young children learn to say early, but their understanding of the meaning comes much later. A three year old asked her mystified father: 'Why the garage door?' Far more usual is the situation that *receptive* language (listening to and understanding words and sentences) precedes *expressive* language.

Morphemes

Morphemes are the smallest units of meaning in a language. 'Elephant', 'the' and 'bug' are words; they are also morphemes. These are called *unbound morphemes* because they do stand alone as words. Some morphemes are *bound*, and they do not stand alone. They can only be used to modify the meaning of a word. Some negation morphemes radically change the meaning of a word: 'kind' versus '*un*kind; 'comfort' versus 'discomfort'; or 'complete' versus '*in*complete'. The bound morpheme 'ing' is learned early in toddlerhood and signifies ongoing action. 'Papa s'immin me!', announced an 18-month-old girl, very pleased at being able to relate her special adventure of going swimming at a local pool with her father.

Some bound morphemes are affixed as prefixes, as in '*circum*navigate'. Some occur as word endings that change the meaning, for example, from an adjective to an adverb ('sad' versus 'sad*ly*'). Some morphemes signify an agent as the 'er' in 'teach*er*'. A kindergarten child once told me with great relish that his mom was the best 'cooker' in the world. A lovely compliment by an appreciative son, despite his not yet understanding that the word 'cook' as a noun requires no extra morpheme!

When several different morphemes have the same meaning but different phonology, they are called *allomorphs*. The rule for forming plurals usually requires adding the sounds 's' as in 'cats' or 'z' as in 'dogs' or 'ez' as in 'glasses'. However, pluralization rules for other nouns differ from the standard. 'Alumnae', 'foci' and 'fish' are examples of such rule exceptions that older children need to learn specifically through adult tuition and reading. Other sounds also used in English to indicate 'more than one', are: 'ren' in 'children', 'ez' in 'judges' and 'a' in 'errata'. All these different sounds meaning 'more than one' are allomorphs.

In some languages, such as Hebrew and Turkish, morphemes are appended to the beginnings and endings of words, for example, to represent articles such as 'the'. Some languages are highly inflected. In Latin, nouns have case endings, depending on the relationship of the noun to the verb. Thus, Virgil's splendid poem on the Trojan War, the *Aeneid*, begins: 'Arma virumque cano' ('Of arms and the man I sing'). 'Arma' ('arms') begins the sentence because a Latin speaker knows that the poet is using arms as a plural in the accusative case, and as the object of the verb 'I sing' that occurs as the third Latin word in the poem.

Similarly, a Russian child learns that noun endings refer to different cases. She learns to say not just 'stol' (the word for 'table'), but additional words such as: 'stola, stoloo, stolye', for example, in order to express the genitive, the dative and the

ablative cases in which the noun may be used. Morphemes are essential to specify meanings in highly inflected languages.

Sometimes the morphemes required for correct usage have not been used in a particular community; and children come into school and grow up using morphemes unique to their linguistic/culture group. After a conference in a southern US community, a preschool aide once asked me whether she would be getting a 'certificary' (rather than 'certificate').

Rich oral language opportunities are critical for children not only to enlarge vocabulary, but also to learn the myriad morphemes requisite in specific situations to modify words the children know. For example, children will learn that although both morphemes express a negative, in English speech one says '*dys*functional' and '*im*possible'. Switching the prefixes around is not permissible in standard English. Poets are allowed more leeway! A baby goat is called a 'kid', but in one lovely Christmas song, the composer refers to 'One goatling from the far hills, one white, white bird', among the gifts brought to Bethlehem.

Some dialects and some languages tend to omit clusters of sounds or omit morphemes that signify a specific meaning. Among children who grow up in households where Black English is spoken, plural morphemes may not be required. 'He got fi'cen' ('He has five cents') said a teenager to her friend in the grocery store as she pointed to her brother. In standard Mandarin, there are no specific morphemes as markers for the plural or the past tense. 'Haidze' can mean child or children. Yet, the Mandarin speaker easily indicates plurality or past tense by the sequenced way that spoken symbols are linked together.

Researches have established that for English language speakers, there is an orderly progression in the first 14 morphemes a child acquires (Brown, 1973):

1. present progressive inflection ('hugging');
2. prepositions 'in';
3. preposition 'on';
4. plural;
5. irregular past tense ('sang'; 'rode');
6. possessive ('Ian's hat');
7. uncontractible copula ('Right you are'; 'The giraffe is tall');
8. articles 'a' and 'the';
9. regular past tense ('played');
10. regular third-person present tense ('plays');
11. irregular third-person present tense ('has');
12. uncontractible auxiliary ('I do so want to play');
13. contractible copula ('He's a puppy'; 'I'm happy');
14. contractible auxiliary ('I'd like to play too').

In order to assess whether a child knows a morpheme and can use it correctly, Gleason (2005) developed the *WUGS test*. Nonsense syllables are used to encourage the child to state the answer. For example, the examiner shows sketches of first one and then two plump bird-like creatures, and says: 'Here is a wug. Now there are two

of them. There are two——' Can the child produce the correct plural morpheme? Or the examiner shows a stick figure whirling something on a string: 'This man likes to bod. Yesterday he——' Can the child produce the correct past tense?

Pragmatics

The system of oral social rules that children learn in order to be considered 'nice' or 'naughty' is called pragmatics. Children learn early in many families that unless they say 'please' parents will not give them a cookie. In some cultures they learn to call grandparents by honorific names. Children learn that professionals, such as medical specialists, are referred to with initial titles of respect, such as 'Dr Smith' and not as 'Johnny'. They are taught to say 'thank you' when offered a sweet or other gift.

In Japanese, a person may be required to use different words to address an employer or 'superior' compared with kin or friends. In France, a child learns to use 'tu' as the familiar 'you' word for intimate others, and 'vous' more formally. In Russian, this distinction is also strong. In Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, the passionate lover Lenski, about to engage in a deadly duel, sings of his longing for his beloved Olga: 'Ya vas lyubil' ('I loved you'). In Tchaikovsky's opera, Lenski uses the formal word 'vas' for 'you'. Yet one would expect in a tender Russian love song rather to hear the intimate word for *you* as in 'Ya tebya lyublyu' ('I love you').

Greeting and parting words often show the clear way in which children have been socialized. Older children may be taught to greet elderly strangers with the formal, 'How are you?'. To friends they may say, 'What's up?' or 'How ya doin'?'. They also learn stock phrases which are pragmatically required in certain social situations, but which the speaker may not believe, such as 'I do hope that we see each other again soon. It has been a pleasure meeting you'.

How language develops

Given the five domains of language that children must learn, how does a child acquire ever more subtle, loquacious and sophisticated oral ability?

First words

Although differences in oral language skills are evident by 3 years of age, the 'window' for normal oral language production is quite wide. Some babies say their first words before 9–10 months; others say their earliest words when nearly 2 years old. A baby tends to use a single word where an older child would use sentences. Linguists call the earliest sounds that babies seem to be using more or less consistently for a specific person or object *protowords*. If adults confirm that the infant clearly and exclusively uses that word only in a special context, or for a special object or person, then the expression may be considered a word. If a baby calls out 'num-num' and bangs on his high chair with a spoon as he sees a caregiver approaching with food and does not use that expression in any other context, we may infer that 'num-num' is the child's word for his meal. First word learning is often slow:

> I was sitting in a restaurant with a 13–14-month-old baby who had not yet expressed a word. While mom chatted with the other guests, the server brought some rolls to the table. I kept tearing off tiny bits of bread and delightedly exclaiming 'bread' as I offered delectable morsels of bread to the hungry baby in the high chair near me. After a half-hour, when I enthusiastically held out a tiny bit of the bread and asked 'Want some bread, lovey? Bread?', the baby said 'b'ead' to my rapturous delight (and that of his mom). Sometimes achieving the first word takes a lot of teaching effort!

First words are often nouns that represent familiar aspects of the infant's environment, such as foods, parts of the body (nose, eye, etc.), clothing, toys, animals and dear persons. In a northern city, snowbound and dark all winter, one baby's first word was "li" for light, which had to be turned on early every evening. Another baby, carried in mama's arms every day to visit a nearby pond and throw breadcrumbs for the ducks swimming there said her first word: 'Duh', for duck.

Many parents simplify early word learning by giving the baby an easier noun, such as 'Nana' for nursey, 'baba' for blanket or bottle, or 'pee-pee' for urine. To determine what words babies do understand and say, researchers at the MacArthur Foundation created a scale based on the presence of baby gestures (such as 'bye' or 'up'), words and phrases. Mothers completed a checklist that contained 396 words, to find out which words babies understood (*receptive vocabulary)* and which they understood and could say (*expressive vocabulary*). At 10 months, some babies understood about 11 words. The top 10% of babies understood about 154 words. By 16 months, babies in the bottom 10% understood 92 words and babies in the top 10% understood 321 words. The difference in spoken words was even greater: 180 words for the top 10% and 40 words for the bottom 10%. Yet babies do go on to become equally competent language learners. When should a teacher be worried? Experts say that if children neither understand nor say any words by 18 months, if they avoid eye contact, rarely babble, do not respond to a whisper and show little interest in baby communications, such as 'hi' or 'bye', then professional help should be sought (Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 1999).

Some infants not only have a large single-word vocabulary, but have rich meaningful associations with the words they are producing, however garbled the pronunciation:

> Caring for a 13-month-old who was not yet walking, I chose a picture-book and tried to settle on a couch to read with the little boy. The family dog kept jumping up and wanting to be petted. "Oh', I muttered, 'I wish I had a bone for you. Then I could read a book to Roy.' 'Bone?' asked the baby, looking up at me. 'Yes, if the doggie had a bone, he could chew on it and then we could read our book', I explained. Roy padded off on all four paws. He went around a corner and through three rooms. He headed for the dog's dish under the sink, purposefully picked up the leather dog bone lying on the floor nearby, held it tightly in one hand, and padded back to the room. We were able to read peacefully together. Despite using only one word at a time, Roy had a very clear concept of what a dog bone was, where it was to be found and to what use it would be put!

Vocabulary spurt

Although infants produce one word at a time, toddlers are learning 8–11 words each month. By the time toddlers have a vocabulary between 50 and 100 words, a

'vocabulary spurt' occurs—a geometric increase in the number of words said. No longer can doting parents manage to write down all the words that their amazing toddler is saying. When does this vocabulary spurt appear? Sometime during the second half of the second year of life, toddlers often demonstrate this explosive period of vocabulary growth. This *vocabulary spurt* shows a wide window of occurrence: Some children show this spurt at 14 months and some not until 2.5 years. Sometimes toddlers produce nine new words per day! And sometimes these are scatological words that the parents have been using freely up to now. When the vocabulary spurt arrives, parents may need to discontinue using swearwords that seem so salient to the toddler, who learns them from adults expressing strong emotions:

> In the days when we used record players rather than CDs in childcare, I was trying to put on a record that had a scratch, and the record would not play. With a worried face, one angelic 3-year-old explained to me earnestly: 'Teacher, weco'd player all fuck' up!'

How do advances in cognitive abilities relate to this vocabulary spurt? Researchers note that the vocabulary spurt occurs about the same time that toddlers are able to sort items into two groups, such as cars/trucks/buses versus teddy-bears and other soft animals. Piagetian theory has posited that cognitive competence precedes language competence. It seems that when toddlers can create *mental categories* of two different kinds of toys, then they are more able to label categories of objects verbally, and are more likely to exhibit the vocabulary spurt.

Overextension and underextension

Babies with single words will often use them to denote vast numbers of other items or creatures. Some young children call all men 'Daddy'. Many babies initially will call an animal by the sound the animal makes conventionally in that culture. 'Quack-quack', 'bah-bah' and 'tweet-tweet' are words that an 18-month-old English-speaking child might produce for visiting grandparents if asked to do so by parents proud of their daughter's verbal accomplishments.

Travelling with a baby in the countryside, parents become exhausted to hear their toddler call out 'Doggie' every time a cow, horse or sheep appears in a meadow. Sometimes, despite a parent's best intentions to teach the toddler that a cow is much bigger than a doggie, is eating grass, and says 'Moo', not 'woof-woof', the child may happily continue to name every animal a doggie. The child *extends* the word for one type of creature to cover many others. Yet, if asked to point to the cow in a picture where a doggie picture is also available, the toddler may point accurately. Receptive understanding precedes expressive competence. Young children create overextensions that startle a parent with poetic imagery. One toddler said 'olive' as he pointed to each round, dark eye of the family poodle:

> While living in France in a cold-water flat with our toddler, I had noticed a delay in his producing words even as I was proud of how accurately Larry understood and carried out requests made in either French or English. As I pushed the stroller over a bridge crossing the River Seine, the toddler looked down and exclaimed joyously 'Juice!'. He knew that

> juice was the liquid he loved to drink for breakfast. Here was a whole bunch of juice flowing by below the bridge!

Some *overextensions* reflect the growing power of grammatical knowledge of young children:

> Standing at the candy machine in the hallway, the preschooler waited in happy anticipation of the candy bar she would receive after putting several coins in the machine. As the tiny bar slid out, the child exclaimed with indignation to her mom: 'They highered the money and they smallered the candy bar!'

The little girl had learned that '-ed' endings were often required to express the past tense. Thus, some children may have been using the accepted past tense 'fell' imitatively. But once they understand that the morpheme '-ed' is usually required to create the past tense, they use this new knowledge to *regularize* the verb 'to fall' and the verb 'to hurt'. Having taken a tumble in the playground, a child exclaimed to his teacher: 'I fallded down and hurted myself.' Teachers need to feel proud of the learning that this 'mistake' represents. The preschooler's oral language is now reflecting *internalization* of morphological and grammatical rules, which do, of course, have so many exceptions. This internalization of rules can also be seen when preschoolers refer to 'mouses' or 'footses' instead of 'mice' or 'feet'. In this case, a *morphophonemic* change is required in English to replace the internal sound in the singular word with a different sound in order to form the plural; and, of course, for some plurals the rule is to add no extra morpheme, as for 'deer'. When preschoolers make regularization mistakes, cheerfully provide the standard English word required—but do admire the linguistic advances inherent in the young child's creative expressions!

Underextension is common in early oral language. Sometimes children will use a word to mean far less than an adult realizes. 'Doggie' to a young toddler may mean only Rex, the family dog. By 'car', the child is referring only the family's station-wagon instead of all cars. Teachers need to tune in to a child's use of words in these special ways.

Fast mapping

Fast-mapping ability means that a toddler can learn where and when to apply a newly heard name for an event or object after hearing the novel label only one time. Despite different family experiences with words, toddlers become adept at learning new words quickly:

> While living in Paris in an apartment house, I spent some days caring for Daniel, an 18-month-old grandchild who had always lived in a one-family home. As I held his hand and took him out into the hallway to take the elevator down to the first floor, I explained that we would go into an *elevator* in order to go downstairs and then outdoors to take a walk together. When the elevator came, the toddler entered with me, smiling, and exclaimed 'Abileelee' as we rode down. Later, on our return from the walk, Daniel immediately and zestfully identified the elevator as 'Abileelee' as soon as we re-entered the elevator to go back to the apartment. His command of the sounds of this new word was not very precise, but he certainly tried hard and got down pat the importance of three syllables in that new word, as well as a speedy ability to apply the new word correctly.

How do toddlers learn new words so quickly? Researchers hypothesize that novel names map to categories that are heretofore unnamed for them. They have also found that this fast mapping occurs only when the child is on the verge of the vocabulary spurt. Suppose you show a child who has reached the vocabulary spurt a new and unfamiliar toy (such as a toy eggbeater the child has never seen) and call that toy by a made-up name—such as 'Dax'. Now place three familiar toys and that one odd object in front of the toddler. First, ask the child for a familiar object such as a toy car. Say 'Thank you' and replace that familiar toy in the row of toys. Then ask, 'Now, please give me the Dax'. The toddler is quite likely to hand you the unknown toy, even though you have named it just once clearly for her. Fast mapping is an awesome skill that facilitates oral language learning for children just about the time they are reaching or have reached their vocabulary spurt.

The importance of rhymes

Babies often practice words while lying in their cots. Toddlers often create nonsense sounds that rhyme. The ability to hear and produce rhymes in oral language is a positive predictor of success in learning to read. The Dr Seuss books for children are superbly replete with nonsense rhymes of daunting, tongue-twisting complexity that rejoice a child's heart, as well as challenge the oral skills of the adult reading to that child.

Adults can play many giggly games to increase preschoolers' and kindergarten-age children's enjoyment in listening for, searching for and creating rhyming words. A teacher playing rhyming games grins and chants: 'I have a big fat cat. On her head she wears a …' The children shout out 'hat' triumphantly as the teacher pantomimes putting something on her head. *Pantomime* is a supportive technique for helping children search for a rhyme. The use of puppets helps also in promoting rhyming games.

Singing songs with rhyming couplets is another technique to facilitate rhyming skills. The English folk song: 'Mr Froggy went a courting and he did ride, um hum, um hum. /A sword and pistol by his side, um hum, um hum', has dozens of couplet verses that rhyme and the melody is easy for children to learn (Honig, 2005). A wonderful aspect of singing long narrative songs with easy-to-learn melodies is that children can themselves participate in creating new rhyming couplets. For Mr Froggy, one child created, 'Then into the feast flew Mr Moth, um hum, um hum./And he did bring the wedding tablecloth, um hum, um hum'.

Poetry adds zest to oral language learning. Children love *onomatopoeia*, when words represent the sounds referred to, as in the 'buzz of the bees'. Poetic imagery, use of dance and musical cadences present playful strategies that captivate children and extend their motivation for oral language learning (Katz & Thomas, 2004).

Different strategies in oral language learning

Researchers have noted that, by 19 months of age, children seem to adopt one of two distinct strategies for learning oral language. Nelson (1981) called one strategy

'referential' where children acquire a large vocabulary of nouns fairly early; they name objects and use language to refer to things happening around them. The other strategy she called 'expressive' where children tend more to use pronouns and repeat many formulaic phrases:

> A college student, enrolled in a course in early language development, was required to listen to preschoolers talking during play. While he was taking notes of conversations in the preschool classroom, one little girl came up and asked: 'Can you do me a favour?' The student put down his notebook and asked: 'What can I do for you?' The girl looked up puzzled and said 'Huh?'. She had learned this entire sociable phrase, but she had no idea of its specific meaning or how to respond once the kindly student answered her.

Sometimes a social phrase has been learned well but the child's command of pronunciation may make it difficult for a teacher to decode. Feeling exasperated with his teacher telling him not to snatch toys one morning, a boy started to walk out of the classroom announcing 'I fi'ta go'. This expression 'I am fixing to go' was a social phrase he had heard often at home. It took all his teacher's skill to decode his meaning and cheerfully redirect him to an interesting activity inside the classroom. Nelson (1991) has reflected that mothers of referential children speak about objects and name them more, while mothers of expressive children talk more about persons and social scenarios. Both parental strategies result in successful language learning; but teachers will want to tune into the strategy that a particular child has learned to use.

Dialect differences

Dialect differences are found in all countries. A classic example from the musical comedy *My Fair Lady*, is Eliza Doolittle's superb rendition of Cockney dialect with its dropping of 'h' sounds and its nasalizing of some vowels. 'Just you wait 'enry 'iggins, just you wait!' Eliza says angrily. After Professor Henry Higgins takes Eliza into his home and works with her, he transforms her dialect characteristics. Now she graciously converses in society by remarking, 'The rain in Spain stays mainly on the plain', with an upper-class British pronunciation.

Dialectal differences are sometimes noted as changes in phoneme pronunciation. In the southern United States, for example, 'pan' may be pronounced as a diphthong 'pay-un'. That dialect may also permit syntactic combinations not permitted in mainstream oral talk, such as: 'I hit him upside da head', rather than 'I hit him on the head'. Russian standard speech and a black English dialect permit deletion of a present-tense form of the verb 'to be' the *copula* ('he my brudder' for 'he is my brother').

Some dialects allow deletion of final post-vocalic consonants in oral language. Teachers can always ask a child to use a word he has pronounced in a sentence so that they are able to discover the child's understanding. Using his word 'bol' in a sentence, one child said, 'I ate a bowl of cereal'. Another said, 'That guy were a bol' warrior', while a third child offered: 'That guy shot with a bow and arrow.' Teachers who serve children from different dialect communities will want to ask children to use a word in a sentence such that the adult can more accurately figure out what the dialectic rule

is for that child. One professional mom whose teenager spoke a dialect at home in the Bronx told me she asked her daughter to pretend that learning standard English rules, such as agreement of nouns and verbs, was just like the girl's learning rules for Spanish, which the teenager was studying in one of her classes. This advice worked for her teen daughter!

The ability to *code switch* is very important for youngsters to learn if they speak a dialect as their first language. This is particularly urgent if some aspects of a dialect ('I ain't got no time') are marked as 'unacceptable' in the later work world or in higher educational settings. It is interesting that, in early gangster films, thugs often used dialect ('You got some money wid you?'). Their use of dialect as well as their nefarious activities confirmed that they were the 'bad guys' in that film. Youth who have learned to code switch and use accepted oral language rules in one environment and shift back into the comfort of dialect at home and in the neighbourhood have a powerful tool at their command!

Gender differences

Studies show that girls tend to talk earlier than boys:

> They reach each of the [language] milestones earlier than boys—but only by a little bit … Biological theorists argue that because girls mature earlier, the part of their brains devoted to language becomes specialized sooner. (Golinkoff & Hirsh-Opasek, 1999, p. 139)

Girls lead boys on number of words produced, number of words understood, number of words used in combinations, sentence complexity and maximum sentence length.

But perhaps socialization practices of parents and caregivers also tend to account for some of these gender differences. Researches show that girls linger longer with moms dropping them off at childcare. Boys often gallop into the playroom right away, and they may not get a chance to hear as many goodbye, loving words and parental wishes or small conversational exchanges as girls get to hear.

As preschoolers, children begin to use special ways of talking either more characteristic of males or of females, referred to as *genderlects.* For example, a girl may make an oblique request where a boy will ask directly. Boys use more vernacular than girls and they use swearwords more than girls. Genderlects are learned through socialization in families, educational settings and in playgroups.

Birth order

Parents who have had more than one child tend to have talked more to the oldest child, to whom they have given undivided attention. Thus it is understandable that first-born tend to talk earlier than later-born children. But these differences may well disappear when later-born children experience rich, personalized language interactions in their childcare classrooms. Parents can give a boost to language learning of later-born children by taking advantage of special opportunities, such as settling-to-sleep time, diapering time or bath-time to engage in extended conversational talk (Honig, 1982a, 1982b; Honig & Brophy, 1996).

Learning complex oral language rules

Complex changes occur in children's *expression of negation* from toddler to preschool age. Toddlers tend to put such a negation word at the beginning or at the end of a sentence. At a birthday party where a toddler had already seen one balloon burst by a peer, she hid her own balloon behind her back and shouted out: 'Baby balloon other bite no!' The syntax was certainly 'creative' but the semantic meaning was very clear! A toddler announced at lunchtime: 'No me want pisgetti.' But during the next few years, he learnt to transport a negation word into the body of the sentence as he politely said to his Grandma, 'No, thank you, I don't want any spaghetti'.

Older toddlers only gradually become aware that self and other terms must be switched in responding conversationally. Visiting for several hours in a childcare room, I asked a 15-month-old girl: 'Would you like to climb up in my lap and I will read you a story?' She agreed happily: 'Want to climb up on mine's lap!' (rather than saying 'your lap').

As children grow older they learn more and more complex language rules. They learn that there is an obligatory 'flip-flop' rule for pronoun–verb location in creating some questions. They then switch from saying, 'Where I can go?' to 'Where can I go?'. They also learn that, in certain circumstances, the 'flip-flop' rule is not obligatory. Sophisticated in using an embedded phrase, the older child asks a parent: 'I wonder whether I can go to play at Tamar's house after lunch?'

As they grow in oral language skills, children learn to answer a question such as 'Don't you want that candy?' with 'Yes, I *do* want that one', rather than with the toddler expression 'Want dat'. Instead of saying 'Why he dooed dat?', children learn to insert the auxiliary word 'did' and ask: 'Why did he do that?'

Children learn to *embed* 'Wh' questions in sentences such as: 'I wonder when we can go to the zoo?' Embedding is a skill that children delight in as they chant old nursery rhymes such as: 'This is the house that Jack built.' Children love chants with never-ending clauses, such as 'The bear went over the mountain to see what he could see', or the chant: 'The farmer takes a wife, the farmer takes a wife. Hi ho the derrio, the farmer takes a wife.'

Interactive play is much richer from preschool years onwards (Otto, 2002). Children now have oral language skills as well as imaginative mental skills to specify roles and activities in the play scenario. 'You be the fireman; I'll be the fire chief', says Ahmed to his friend, as they don yellow oilcloth firefighters' coats in the dressing-up area.

Many materials are available to help teachers devise interactions that enhance oral language skills (Honig, 1982a; Van Allen & Allen, 1982). Jalongo (2003) suggests that integrated approaches work best:

> A children's librarian planned a preschool story hour with a camping theme that included storytelling, story reading, singing, and watching a film. First, she rolled up brown construction paper into log shapes and decorated them with orange and yellow crêpe paper streamer 'flames'. When the children arrived, they were seated in a circle around the 'campfire'. The librarian started the session by assessing children's prior knowledge with questions such as: 'What is camping?' 'Have any of you ever been camping?' 'What are some of the things you do when you camp out?' (p. 196)

Further enriching this lesson, the teacher read several stories, including 'Bailey goes camping'; she read 'Sophie's knapsack', while unpacking a real knapsack filled with camping items.

Adults need to tune into whether oral language is elaborated or stereotyped in children's dramatic play scenarios. Some children at play frequently use words such as: 'I'm a monster and I'm gonna get you!' The other children run away with shrieks as they are chased in this stereotyped game. Teachers need to think up particularly ingenious ways to extend a child's conversational options when the child habitually engages only in rigidly scripted dramatic play scenarios or in scenarios that habitually exclude some peers. Suppose children in the housekeeping area are busy pretend cooking. As they play family roles, some children tend to exclude a socially shy or inept child from participation, with a dismissive explanation: 'You can't play. We already have a mommy and a daddy.' The teacher then enthusiastically remarks that Jerome can be the deliveryman with a special package for the family. He needs to come in so that they can sign for the package. Then, maybe they can invite him to stay for some tea and a snack. When such teacher extensions are not carried out intrusively, they support an increase in prosocial play themes while also increasing children's language and social skills.

By school age, children learn that *indirect requests* by adults have the same power and requirements as direct requests. A parents no longer says, 'Please pick up your toys', but simply exclaims: 'My, what a mess of toys all over the living room!' Children understand the meaning of this *indirect parental request* for them to clean up their toys.

Children become more sophisticated in realizing that even when two sentences sound much alike, they may be radically different in designating the subject of the action. Two typical examples are: 'Toby is eager to please' and 'Toby is easy to please'. In the first phrase Toby is the subject, and in the second, Toby is the object of others' actions and they are trying to please him.

Passives are difficult for young children and may remain baffling for years. Most preschoolers are unable to decode the passive verb form. If asked to show a 'toy car bashing the truck' or the 'car being bashed by the truck', they are likely to tune into the first noun mentioned and then take the toy car each time and bash the toy truck. School-age children become adept at transforming basic declarative kernels to create complex questions, conditionals, past and future forms, as well as passives

Chomsky's (1965) theory of *transformational grammar* posits that skills to recast sentences are hard-wired in, even as the child's mental ability matures throughout the school years. Older children become adept at taking a *kernel idea* (Chomsky's 'deep structure'), such as a 'cat chases a rat' and transforming that kernel into an awesome variety of 'surface structures' that the child can produce and understand: 'Will the cat chase the rat?'; 'Has the cat been chasing the rat?'; 'Will the rat be chased by the cat?'; 'Would the cat have chased the rat?'; 'Did the rat get chased by the cat?' ; 'Was the cat chasing the rat?"; 'Had the rat not been chased by the cat?' ; 'The rat will have been chased by the cat, won't it?'; 'Hadn't the cat chased the rat?'; 'Is the cat not chasing the rat?'; and 'Shouldn't the cat be chasing the rat?'

Over time, children not only become powerfully adept at transforming a kernel idea into a variety of grammatical forms, called *surface structures*, but also learn *transport rules*:

> Jeff saw Tabitha, a shy child, hanging about near the edge of groups of children busy playing at building garages for cars and for spaceships. He was not sure whether he had heard her murmur in a low voice, 'I wanna play'. Jeff, a warm and sociable child, called out in an inviting tone: 'Do you want to play with us?' The 'do' in that sentence had to be added to the verb 'want' and transported to the beginning in order to create the question. An admirable feat in early oral language mastery!

Children also learn to listen for confusing sentences, when a surface structure may have *more than one kernel of meaning*:

- Visiting relatives can be a nuisance. (The meaning of this sentence may refer to the activity or to the persons.)
- They are eating apples. (Persons or the type of apples may be referred to.)
- Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana. ('Flies' is a verb in one case, but a noun in the other.)

Knowledge and ability to express subtle shades of meaning and complex semantic features grow throughout the school years. While cooking with an adult, children learn that 'slicing' and 'dicing' are not the same. Dicing means that one cuts the food into tiny bits compared with slicing. Children learn more formal as well as more slang words for given actions. They learn nuanced expressions for a basic concept. Semantic distinctions for locomotion include: 'walk', 'amble', 'stride', 'shuffle along', 'strut', 'prance', 'trudge', 'hobble along', 'march', 'stroll' and the slang 'get a move on'. Children learn that they can say butter and ice 'melt' but that sugar does not melt in water. It dissolves.

Semantic distinctions are critical for understanding and successfully navigating the social world of peers and friendships. In schools, children become alert to words that are slights. They recognize and, alas, sometimes use backhanded 'compliments' that are really 'put-downs': 'Oh, you aced the algebra test? Well, we all know that nerds always do well in mathematics.'

Humour, riddles and oral language

Children create humour quite early in their language learning (Honig, 1988). Young babies, towards the end of the first year, find *fricatives* funny. Try 'fo-foo' or 'physicist' to delight an eight month old. Toddler humour is sometimes based on phonological play. A toddler grins as she murmurs: 'Oogy, woogy, poogy, shmoogy', while bouncing along holding on to a parent's hand.

A Russian psychologist reported that his two year old came in smiling and said to him, 'Daddy, 'oggies meow-meow! The father replied: 'Oh no, honey, doggies say woof-woof.' Crestfallen, the toddler tried again. On her third try, her father suddenly understood that his daughter was using her limited oral language skills to create a joke. 'Oh sure, and kitties say "bow-wow"', he said to her, with a broad grin. Understood at last, the toddler broke into happy laughter.

Young children do love the *format* of 'knock-knock' jokes. They often laugh out loud but still do not understand the meaning of the 'joke', nor how to create a 'knock-knock' joke with an amusing punch line, although they repeat the formulaic initial words.

Help children early to decode humour in oral language in order to sharpen thinking skills, as well as to add zest to oral language learning. School-age children enjoy *ricochet* words, in which the repeated element is modified: roly-poly, shilly-shally, chit-chat (Steinmetz & Kipfer, 2006).

A clever eight year old, who was overly loquacious in class, complained to me that his teacher picked on him. Then he brightened and added in a joking tone: 'She will probably even tell me that I make my 11s backwards!' A nine-year-old Australian youngster asked me whether I knew what one gets by pouring very hot water down a rabbit hole. He grinned when I gave up, and he announced: 'Hot cross bunnies!'

Adults use analogies and similes both in clichéd and in imaginative ways. A parent complains to a child: 'You are as slow as molasses!' or exclaims that 'Time sure does fly when I am very busy.' Having been exposed to a rich use of analogies and metaphors, kindergarten children may be able to enjoy jokes with simple dual meanings to be grasped, as in the riddle: 'Why did the boy throw his alarm clock out of the window?' Answer: 'To see time fly.' School-age children easily grasp a joke that represents an absurdity, such as: 'How can you make a dog stop barking in the back seat?' Answer: 'Put him in the front seat.'

Preschool children have difficulties with jokes that require specialized knowledge, such as: 'Why did the boy tiptoe past the medicine cabinet?' Answer: 'So he would not wake the sleeping pills.' They may have difficulty too understanding jokes that require pulling apart several morphemes within a word. Some jokes require the listener to become aware of the different semantic meanings of morphemes that must be considered, as in the joke: 'Why can't you ever starve in a desert?' Answer: 'Because of the sandwiches there.'

Remember that preschoolers and even kindergarten-age children may still give literal interpretations to analogies and to expressions that require a child to understand analogies and metaphors as non-literal symbols. Walking into a classroom, I spied an adorable toddler with curly hair and a round tummy. Smiling, I greeted with him tenderly with: 'Hi, bunny rabbit.' Solemnly, he replied, 'I not a bunny wabbit. I a boy.' Where a child has heard many loving expressions such as 'Sugarplum', 'Honeybunch', 'Sweetpea' or 'Pumpkin' from caregivers, a young child is more likely to have learned that these appellations are expressions of adult affection for the child and are not meant literally:

> During a home visit, I overheard Joey's mother talking on the phone to her husband. She hung up the phone and reported to her son in a disappointed voice, 'Sweetie, Daddy won't be able to eat supper with us tonight. He is all tied up at the office.' The preschooler burst into terrified tears. He obviously had visions of his beloved daddy tied up with ropes by bad robbers!

Once children have learned the power of morphemes to change words, they may well enjoy creative combinations of morphemes. Teachers can engage older youth to think of how to combine morphemes to create humorous sayings. Offer syntactically

correct constructions, such as 'disbarred' for lawyers who behave illegally and 'defrocked' for ministers of religion who do so. Then ask the children to create other categories based on the morphemic use of 'de-'. Can they think of and discuss why the following questions are absurd: can musicians be 'denoted', electricians 'delighted', dry cleaners 'depressed', cowboys 'deranged', models deposed' and tree surgeons 'debarked'?

Teachers can further engage older children in reflecting on semantic complexity by using jokes and puns and asking children to talk about what is funny and why. Here are some puns to ask older youngsters to read, discuss, explain and enjoy:

- When a clock is hungry it goes back four seconds.
- A chicken crossing the road is poultry in motion.
- A bicycle cannot stand alone because it is two-tyred.
- You feel stuck with your debt if you can't budge it.
- What is the definition of a will? It is a dead giveaway.
- The short fortune-teller who escaped from prison was a small medium at large.
- Is a pig that loses its voice disgruntled?
- Santa's helpers are subordinate clauses.
- A boiled egg in the morning is hard to beat.
- Bakers trade bread recipes on a knead to know basis.

School-age children love mischievous verses, puns, songs and sayings. They may particularly enjoy discussing the adage: 'Those who get too big for their britches will be exposed in the end.' Children may be challenged to think hard about how clever were the four brothers in business together, when they named their cattle ranch: 'Where the sun's rays meet.' Engage the class in a discussion about why a 'wise guy' and a 'wise man' are opposites.

The *Washington Post* holds a yearly *neologism* contest where readers are asked to supply alternate meanings for common words. This is a wonderful challenge for older youngsters. Can they coin new word meanings and come up with some linguistic zingers, such as these recent winners?

- Coffee—a person upon whom one coughs.
- Flabbergasted—appalled over how much weight you have gained.
- Caterpallor—the color you turn after finding half a grub in the fruit you are eating.
- Negligent—absentmindedly answering the door in your nightgown.
- Lymph—to walk with a lisp.
- Sarchasm—the gulf between the author of a witty remark and the person who doesn't get the joke.

When youngsters are allowed to change spellings slightly, as in some of the above examples, they can conjure up even more exuberant linguistic twists.

Proverbs

Elementary school age children may still have difficulty understanding the humour in jokes that require sophisticated semantic knowledge of multiple word meanings and

knowledge of historical events or human foibles. Because of limited experience, some children equally have difficulties explaining adages and wise sayings. For example the Spanish proverb: 'Quien no se aventura no pasa el mar', literally means: 'If you don't venture, you will not get across the sea.' It resembles the English proverb 'Nothing ventured, nothing gained'. Children need experience with metaphors and deeper meanings in order to be able to tell a teacher what a proverb means. Teach proverbs and talk about them with children to give a boost to their oral language skills and to their mental representation skills. In some Hispanic culture groups, *dichas* (proverbs) are frequently used to instruct children in proper social behaviours.

Teachers deepen oral language skills with older children as they challenge their students to struggle with oral explanations of philosophical sayings or thought-provoking brief selections from authors. Give out a thought-provoking quote. Ask the youngsters to come to class prepared to share examples, ideas and feelings about the quotes. Try the dark musings of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in *The Gulag Archipelago*, about life in Soviet labour camps. The author wrote:

> If it were all so simple: if only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.

How do youths feel about that message? Does it comport with their life experiences so far? How does it relate to what they view on TV, or know about world suffering and wars?

Suprasegmental elements

Adolescents enjoy jokes that require knowledge of phonological variations and several semantic meanings for the same sound. However, they can also enjoy humour that depends on subtleties of stress, pitch and juncture, which were used by babbling babies to indicate their intent at garbled narrations, question asking or imperatives. For example, one older student uses these three elements to say provocatively: 'Woman without her man is nothing!' Another student grins and retorts, 'Woman! Without her, man is nothing!' *Suprasegmental* elements, emphasized in different ways, make a vast difference in the oral presentation of this phrase and in the interpretation and belief system underlying the oral delivery!

Introduce the idea of absurdities in discussions about *oxymorons*. Choose some songs that use the contradictions inherent in oxymorons to alert children to absurdities. In the song 'I am going to Alabama with my banjo on my knee', the protagonist sings: 'It rained so hard the day I left, the weather it was dry. /The sun so hot I froze to death; Suzannah don't you cry.'

Storytelling, story reading and discussion

Teachers have scheduled oral storytelling 'show and tell' times in classrooms for generations. Korn (1998) reminds us that:

> Encouraging children to tell stories is important not only for its role in enhancing communication skills, but also for its part in helping children develop a sense of who they are as active participants in the world and as social beings in culturally significant interactions with others … Teachers can mediate young children's learning and further the development of empathic understanding by helping children distinguish between their own perspectives and those of others … Conversation in the classroom and outside, offers children opportunity to reflect out loud on their experiences and on their own subjective reactions to events, and to engage with other children's experiences as well. (p. 225)

Encouraging storytelling is particularly urgent when there are children from many cultures in a classroom. Children construct stories of who they are in relationship with family members and culturally significant others. By eliciting children's stories, teachers give a strong message that stories from every household and every culture group are welcomed:

> At the round lunch table, where hot dogs had been served, the teacher asked each child to tell about how their families served hot dogs. Tim announced proudly that his dad let him have ketchup *and* mustard with his hot dog. Jose happily reported that his mama served frijoles with hot dogs. Each child used oral language to share with the group and to affirm the cultural uniqueness of their eating experiences as well as the similarities.

Teacher Vivien Paley (1986) chooses a child daily from whom she takes dictation. She carefully writes down the child's theme and scenario. Each child gets a chance to relate his or her unique story that will be acted out later in a special place in the classroom. The child storyteller gets to choose the children who will play each character in the playlet. Such a technique promotes oral-language storytelling skills. Giving this special attention to children who are withdrawn or worried about separation from family, or unskilled at entry bids that can open up play opportunities with others, promotes not only oral language, but also enhances social skills, feelings of belonging in the group and feelings of empowerment.

Socratic questions

Using open-ended questions during conversation times with children may elicit more oral language than the use of convergent questions that just require a 'yes/no' answer or one, single 'correct' reply to a question such as: What colour is the sky?' Yet, in a study in dozens of childcare settings, over 80% of teacher questions to toddlers in childcare were convergent (Honig & Wittmer, 1982). Open-ended questions arouse children's feeling of expertise as they respond to their teachers.

These questions are particularly important for teachers of school-age children who have a special agenda, such as arousing children's awareness of important social issues. With Socratic questions, teachers encourage children to think about the difficult lives of some children who live in refugee camps, shelters for homeless families or in families without money for warm clothing or food; teachers need to draw on children's 'everyday, lived knowledge and experiences to examine issues such as poverty' (Chafel *et al.*, 2007, p. 80).

Story reading and discussion

Research evidence shows that core oral-language functions are important for later reading success (McGinness, 2006). And conversely, shared story reading with young children is an excellent way to enhance their oral language skills (Whitehurst *et al.*, 1994). In a toddler classroom, teachers read aloud the book *Hiding* by Shirley Hughes (see Rosenquist, 2002). The teachers initiated conversations to explore the vivid mental images in the book; they planned activities by drawing upon words and illustrations from the book and had the children verbally recall images and text. To extend concept awareness, they had the children act out aspects of the story. Teachers encouraged children to point out bugs hiding under leaves or squirrels hiding in the cracks of trees. In classroom talk, they incorporated new words and descriptive phrases from the story to enhance children's vocabulary development.

Socioeconomic influences in language learning

Studies over decades have shown that the number of words a child hears and how often he is immersed in the rich auditory 'soup' of language best predicts that child will have a richer vocabulary and more complex sentences by 3 years of age. Almost half a century ago, research revealed socioeconomic status (SES) differences in children's oral language. Bernstein (1964) noted that British working-class children, when asked to describe pictures, responded with a *restricted code.* They used few adjectives and adverbs, and used pronouns rather than nouns. In contrast, he reported that middle-class children used an *elaborated code*. They used a greater variety of syntactic forms and modifiers and described more about the pictures. Have these differences changed over the years?

Thirty years ago, in her observational studies in New York City, Schachter (1979) reported that 50% of the speech of low SES mothers to toddlers, but only 30% of the speech of high SES mothers, consisted of directives. No ethnic differences between black and white mothers were found. But SES differences were marked. Low SES mothers' speech had 25% 'don'ts'. High SES mothers had 10%. Educated mothers were three times more likely than low SES mothers to *respond to a prior communication of the child*.

But what if these SES differences depend on who is assessing the child or what the testing situation is like? Children may be reluctant to talk when in the presence of a strange adult, particularly if that adult is from a different social or cultural background. Also, some children are much shyer temperamentally than others.

Inuit children in northern Canada, when interviewed by fluent speakers in their own language, provided very short responses (Genesee, 2006). Their cultural mores did not make them feel comfortable speaking with strange adults, even those adults who used the children's native language.

Sensitive to just such issues, Tough (1977) studied oral language differences of three year olds from higher and lower SES families in England. Rather than using language tests, Tough recorded the children at play with a chosen companion and a

collection of interesting toys. Even under these more natural play conditions, Tough reported:

> At the age of 3 the children in the disadvantaged groups were not using language spontaneously for purposes that were already evident in the talk of the children in the advantaged groups. The disadvantaged groups showed little evidence of the use of language for: recalling and giving details of past experience; reasoning about present and recalled experience; anticipating future events and predicting the outcome; recognizing and offering solutions to problems; planning and surveying alternatives for possible courses of action; projecting into the experiences and feelings of other people; using the imagination to build scenes through the use of language for their play. (p. 169)

More recently, data from observational research carried out over several years in the homes of 42 families at different educational/economic levels confirmed with startling clarity how different the social world of language continues to be for many children living in more difficult socioeconomic circumstances (Hart & Risley, 1995). Mothers in welfare families gave many more directives to children. They talked much less to their young children (616 words per hour) compared with working-class parents (1,251 words per hours) or professional parents (2,153) words per hour. Social class differences have implications for differential development of child language power.

Further, these researchers reported that a child in a professional family received 32 positives and 5 prohibitions per hour. The working-class family provided 12 positives and 7 prohibitions per hour. The welfare child received 5 positives and 11 prohibitions per hour. Language inputs to children seem linked with emotional and motivational talk that may have impact on children's language skills and cognitive performance. The researchers speculated that such differences would impact on children's language skills and intellectual attainments well into the school years. Some decades ago, Schachter and Strage (1982) reflected that:

> Not only language but also self-confidence in one's ability to be a good learner may be influenced by these SES differences in speech patterns. Active learning requires self-confidence and faith in one's own efforts. The response style of high-education mothers would seem to support the growing autonomy and independence of the language-learning child and engender the kind of self-confidence that active learning requires. (p. 89)

Do we have evidence from research that such differences in provision of oral language actually make a difference for later child language and school achievement? A study of low-income African-American families followed the learning careers of a preschool child (24 to 42 months old) and an older school-age sibling. Successful older siblings were performing well on the *Gray oral reading test* in second grade. What were the differences in home language environments? The parents of the successful older siblings spent a fourfold greater percentage of time supplying encouragement compared to discouragement, and they gave more explanations. Older siblings with lower *Gray oral reading test* scores had received about equal amounts of encouraging as discouraging talk. In the successful families, the preschoolers produced more intelligible and longer utterances. They initiated verbal interactions significantly more with their parents. The critical nature of parent verbal input was further revealed

when the preschoolers in these low-income families were followed into the 2nd grade. Those preschoolers who were now successful readers in the 2nd grade turned out to be children who had received seven times more encouragement than discouragement. The unsuccessful readers had received 1.5 times as much discouragement as encouragement in verbal interactions that they had initiated as preschoolers with their parents (Norman-Jackson, 1982).

Does low SES mostly predict lower language and academic achievement? Not necessarily. Swan and Stavros (1973) asked kindergarten teachers to identify low-income children doing very well in the classroom. The teachers described these children as asking meaningful and appropriate questions and able to describe their experiences colorfully as well as express a noticeable sense of humour. These low-income families, as might be expected, showed the classic pattern of support for positive early child language development:

> The parents expressed a genuine interest in the children's activities and felt secure and positive about their parenting skills. They talked a lot with their children and engaged in animated mealtime conversation. (Honig, 1982b, p. 62)

This important research reveals just how critical it is to create home-visitation and teacher-outreach programs to encourage parents to enrich and encourage child oral language skills. These researches confirm that although language does depend on hard wiring in the brain, teachers and families are extremely important language partners to enhance children's ability to master high-level oral language skills.

Learning other languages

Bilingualism

Given the ever-growing needs for global commerce and communication, researchers in early childhood have puzzled over how to help children develop oral language skills in several languages. In Europe many children exchange vacation times and go to live with children in families in nearby countries. In addition, they often begin second language learning in early grades. Researchers have established that if a child learns a new language prior to about 10 years of age, then the child succeeds in pronouncing words like a native speaker. After that age, a person may be fluent, but will have difficulties with phoneme pronunciation in the new language. A French-speaking adult may be able to lecture in English, but may continue to say 'zis' instead of 'this', since the 'th' sound is not pronounced in French. An English-speaking person may never learn how to roll the 'r' to say 'ferrocarril' ('railroad') in impeccable Spanish, nor to pronounce the throaty 'ch' sound to say 'Channukah' when referring to the Jewish holiday.

Babies are easily able to learn two languages. One research revealed that when a Spanish-speaking father spent about a half-hour each day at the crib talking with baby, then that infant had a large Spanish receptive vocabulary at 1 year of age, and later on easily came to converse in both languages. Some little children do frequent *code-mixing* when brought up in two languages. They may substitute a word in one

language while speaking the second language. 'What's this?' I asked, holding up a fork to show a child from a German-speaking family. 'That's a guppel!' she announced, mixing English and German in her response. The rule for optimal dual language learning from birth onward seems to be: have one speaker use one language and another speaker use the other language so that the baby grows up with oral language skills in both languages with no trouble in figuring out which language to use with which caregiver:

> Visiting a friend in Paris, I spied her preschool-aged grandson standing at the door. That child lived with his parents in London. Mom spoke to him in French. Papa spoke only in English. The child stood there, hesitating whether to enter the room. Grandma spoke French to him. She told him that I was an American visitor who spoke English and French. The child readily came in and spoke with me in English and I told him that I knew French also and that was why I was speaking French with his French-speaking grandma. Apparently, he had felt shy. If I had been a French lady, then he had already learned that he would have had to give me a more formal and elaborate greeting!

Immersion

The importance of *immersion* as the best facilitator of second language learning has been promoted widely (Snow, 1990). Children learn about 50% of their classroom lessons exclusively in the second language. This concept is based on the technique of bilingual immersion for French and English as promulgated in St Lambert, Canada. Immersion has been adopted in Singapore to ensure early learning of English by school children. It has been adopted in China as a late immersion program (Qiang & Zhao, 2000). In Singapore, obstacles to the success of immersion programs have occurred when teachers themselves were lacking in English language skills. Teachers did benefit from training sessions that focused on enhancing their teaching strategies. When the immersion classroom teachers were taught to use *integrated thematic approaches* and *communicative language teaching principles*, then children's second language learning improved (Lim, 2004).

Teachers in schools that serve youth from many different cultures have noted that, in forming friendships, youths will use mixed patterns of language use. Rampton (1995) calls this *language crossing*. In a London school teenagers of British, Punjabi, Caribbean and Bangladeshi descent were sharing expressions in each other's languages. The youth had created a multiethnic way of talking and interacting. Their oral language crossing creativity permitted the boys to strengthen their friendships, as well as it reflected the multicultural diversity of their lives.

Language delays and difficulties

A wide variety of developmental atypicalities is associated with language delays and difficulties (Greenspan, 2001). Teachers aware of the many factors that impede oral language learning can more sensitively respond to behaviours that are baffling. Such knowledge also lessens feelings of frustration and discouragement as the adult tries

hard in individual responsive interactions to encourage oral language. Teaching sign language to children with oral language delays has been of help.

Severe retardation

Mental retardation, when severe, can result in inability to learn oral language. Dedicated teachers may use Bliss symbols (which resemble Mahjongg tiles on a stand) to teach severely retarded youngsters to recognize and use nouns. But severely retarded youngsters still have a deep struggle to learn a verb such as 'to sit', even when bodily actions and stick drawings are used to illustrate the concept.

Deafness

Some children are born deaf. When that baby looks at a toy or a kitten playing with yarn, or his older sibling building with blocks, 'he receives none of the mood music that accompanies the social experiences of the hearing baby' (Wood *et al.*, 1986, p. 22). Unfortunately, infant deafness is often missed during routine medical examinations during the first year of life, unless the baby is put in a special chamber and given a specialized hearing test.

Spencer Tracy, a famous actor of the last century, had a baby who was profoundly deaf. Yet no paediatrician had noticed the problem. The mother only realized the baby was deaf when he was about 1 year old, lying awake in his carriage on the porch. She noticed that her baby did not startle or respond at all as she was going outside to care for him and had slammed the nearby porch door with a loud bang.

Sometimes artificial amplification of speech sounds through hearing-aids may boost residual hearing for a deaf child. But beyond a loss of 55 dB, the ability to hear speech sounds and learn *oral* language is severely impaired. The child hears more vowels than consonants and adult speech will be unintelligible for the child.

Clinicians differ in their beliefs as to which systems of support are best to help deaf children learn language. Some emphasize the importance of cochlear implants that will permit interactions with hearing children. Some deaf parents do not want their deaf children to have these implants, lest the child lose intimate contact with the world of deaf culture that communicates exclusively with sign language. Whether finger spelling, lip-reading or signing, or use of all three techniques, results in more optimal learning outcomes for deaf children is still being debated.

It is important to help deaf parents understand that their normal hearing children will not learn oral language just from being placed in front of a television set. Language learning depends crucially on rich social interactions.

Hearing loss

Some children suffer *temporary hearing impairment* from repeated bouts of *otitis media*, infection in the middle ear where fluid buildup has caused blockage:

> Walking with a neighbour as we both pushed her 10-month-old in a stroller, I watched as the baby happily pulled off his socks. 'You sure know how to pull off your socks and wiggle your pretty toes', I called to the baby, barely a couple of feet in front of us. There was no bodily or vocal response at all from the baby. I quietly asked the mom about ear infections and found that her child had experienced *otitis media* repeatedly over the past months. A physician subsequently inserted drainage tubes in his ears. This made it possible for this normally born child to begin to hear and respond more to oral language; however, he still struggled with oral language in kindergarten.

Middle ear infections are likely to be more frequent for very young children attending group care. Teachers need to be alert to how oral language is influenced by these recurring infections. The children have difficulty in hearing morphological markers, such as 'ed' or plural 's' or differences in speech intonations. Harris (1990) has expressed concern that a parent, teacher or therapist will become discouraged by the child's 'inattentiveness, distractibility, difficulty in understanding speech in group settings, frequently asking for questions to be repeated, confusion with multi-stage commands, difficulty in recalling verbally presented material, and inappropriate responses to questions and commands' (p. 211).

To facilitate oral language development, Harris (1990, p. 212) recommends the following:

- Seat the child where she is in a position to see and hear the teacher or the therapist at the front of any group.
- Ensure that the child is attending before speaking.
- Encourage the child to look at the speaker.
- Check the child's understanding of what has been said.
- Encourage the child to ask for clarification.
- Where possible, provide visual aids.
- Pace the rate at which speech is delivered.
- Give the child time to interpret and respond to what has been said.
- If necessary, provide the child with a study area free of distracting noise.

Visually impaired children

Clinical research with children who are born blind shows that they too struggle to learn oral language skills. The blind child has *discrete and unrelated experiences* of sound, smell and touch, Providing tactile exploration and locomotion possibilities and responding to the child's cues from such explorations is crucial to helping language develop. This child does not have joint gaze or other communicative tools, such as pointing to get an adult to bring an object near. Teachers need to signal their presence by *touching the child and speaking.* Teachers need to *recognize the motions and location of the child's hands*, rather than seeking facial cues as one does when addressing a sighted baby.

For children with some limited vision, teachers will find it useful to use *verbal prompts* along with large colourful pictures: 'Here is a picture of a girl with a brush. She is brushing her——'.

Play games where the adult and visually limited child do not share visual information. Set up a screen between the adult and child. Provide each with a separate array of toys and objects. The child with visual difficulties can still respond to and with oral language. Suppose the adult asks: 'Do you have a comb? Please give me a comb.' The visually impaired child feels each object on her side of the screen. Then she replies, 'I do not have a comb here. Can you ask for something else?'

Autism

Autistic children have a range of difficulties. One of the most marked is a lack of interest in communicating and a lack of coordinated social behaviours with others, such as signalling an intention to a peer or adult. Autistic children exhibit stereotyped behaviours and insistence on following rigid routines. They may have oral language in infancy that diminishes over the next years. Some have *echolalia*, a repetition of words just heard:

> Working on a puzzle with a lovable 5-year-old autistic boy who was sitting comfortably on his mama's lap, I encouraged him enthusiastically, 'Show Dr Honig how you put the piece down into the puzzle.' I made a palm-down gesture to encourage his cooperation. He picked up the puzzle piece and tried hard to fit it in the square hole, while echoing: 'Show Dr Honig how you put the piece down in the puzzle.'

Echoing the speech of others, abnormalities of speech rhythms, problems of word meanings, inability to make eye contact, stereotyped prolonged body rocking and hand twirling are characteristic of some autistic children. Lengthy one-on-one social interactions and clear and exaggerated language articulation are important adult skills that enhance oral language with autistic children. Encouraging a child to move rhythmically to the familiar tunes of children's songs can be helpful.

Use of sign language has boosted language learning for many autistic children. Since many classrooms integrate children with handicaps, it is important for teachers to try a variety of communication techniques to help a child become able to socialize more positively with peers. Increase the use of rhythmic songs. Adults have a more powerful teaching tool when they help children learn songs by *combining words, movement, and melody* in order to motivate language-delayed children to want to sing and sway along to the song.

Other oral language delays

Some children have normal hearing and intelligence but are delayed in language production. Sometimes these troubles are due to muscular or neuromuscular disorders, such as cleft palate, *dysarthria* and *apraxia*. Dysarthria comes from difficulties with controlling speech musculature. Drooling, abnormal tongue protrusions, and lack of muscular coordination make pronunciation of consonant clusters difficult. In apraxia, a child has normal chewing, sucking and swallowing movements but shows articulation errors, additions, reversals, distortions and substitutions. Comprehension

may be normal. A teacher needs to be aware that the expressive language difficulties of some children, especially with consonants, may be a sign that they need a referral for assessment of possible apraxia.

Some children use oral language, but have difficulties producing initial or final sounds of words. Parents and teachers can use verbal materials in interactive language games that alert children to differences in initial and ending sounds (Honig, 1982a; Honig & Brophy, 1996). Can the child listen for the word with the different beginning sound, if you say: 'pick, pig, big, pack'?

Some children talk, but they have poorly developed understanding of the following principles of conversation.

Cooperation and topic relevance. Each member participating in the conversation should show the same general idea of the topic and the direction of the conversation. This is difficult for some preschoolers. Piaget wrote down preschool conversations in Geneva where one child talked about an owl and then the child who was presumably listening cheerfully rejoined by chattering away about her new bedroom slippers! If they are going to talk about different subjects, children gradually realize that first they have to alert the first speaker to the fact that they want to change the topic.

Speakers who have learned the rules for oral conversations take turns and wait for the other person to finish talking before taking a turn. Bloom (1993) studied the proportion of a child's utterances built on prior conversational talk. This proportion grew from 20% to 30% at 25 months and to almost 50% by the time a child was using three- and four-word sentences.

Quality and quantity. Even toddlers can describe important personal events. Loving grandparents were minding Madeleine, a toddler whose parents had gone off for a vacation trip. Auntie Terry came to visit and was conversing with the toddler. Madeleine did not yet understand what a 'vacation' is, but she enthusiastically described: 'Mama, papa up in da sky, in airp'ane.' She raised her hands way up high to describe physically what she had seen while she watched from the airport viewing platform as the plane carrying her parents had lifted off on its journey.

Description skills. Caregivers need to strengthen their support for *elaborative child descriptive language power.* If an adult asks a child what he did over the weekend and he says 'went in car', the child is providing very little and vague information. He had gone in a car with his dad and mom and siblings. They met uncles and aunts for a family picnic in a park where they all played ball, went on swings, and ate hamburgers that Uncle Jo barbecued on a grill. Although they cannot persistently question a child (the child will feel uncomfortable), adult conversational partners can encourage children to provide more specific descriptions of plans, goals and action sequences in which events important to the child occurred:

> We all got in the car. Then mama said we forgot the pickles and mustard for the picnic basket. Then we all had to wait in the car while she ran back in the house to pick those up.

How can adults help children develop this power? First, give the child undivided attention. Look into the child's eyes. Wait for the child to formulate phrases. Do not correct word pronunciations. This frustrates children. From time to time, nod and say 'uh-huh' to let the child know that you are following the details of his or her narrative. When there does seem to be a gap in the story, then use a Socratic question to encourage the child to 'fill in the gaps' ('How did your Uncle Jo manage to get the ball back when it bounced into those bushes?'). Show that you are really listening and personally interested in what the child has to say. If the child has trouble continuing, you may want to ask gently: 'What happened right after you got to the park and got out of the car?' The most important single gift a teacher gives each child is his or her personalized, genuinely interested attentiveness as well as encouragement.

Conclusion

Caregivers and teachers are crucial supporters for oral language flowering (Honig, 2001). Since the social context is so critical for rich oral language acquisition, parents and teachers need to become aware of their own understandings about how language is organized and what the different aspects of language are. These *metalinguistic* skills permit talk *about* all rules, aspects and stages of language development. They permit recognition of oral language progress as adults expand and elaborate on early speech and encourage children to develop complex and eloquent ways to express themselves.

Caregivers in families and in schools need well-honed skills for tuning into the level of linguistic complexity in each child's oral language An adult then is more ingeniously and creatively able to 'scaffold' (in Vygotsky's felicitous term) oral language activities to ensure each child's chances not only for school learning success, but for ability to flourish in negotiations in peer play, friendship patterns, multicultural understandings and team activities. Teachers strengthen children's ability to convey personal narratives. They motivate youngsters to try new ways of expressing their own personal stories in rich conversations. Alert to language levels for each child, teachers more accurately figure out how best to prepare and individualize activities and interactions. They know how to engage each child in rich conversations about that child's particular interests. They use poetry, painting, collages, song, dance and other art forms to boost oral language learning and to lengthen and strengthen children's oral language skills. At the same time as they provide precious language gifts, teachers fulfil their own specialized classroom goals as educators. They optimize children's cognitive competence even as they are advancing children's oral language learning skills.

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