

## Intersecting Research With Classroom Practice

# Language: The Vehicle That Drives the Curriculum

By Lydia H. Soifer, PhD

Language is an enormous, multi-faceted gift. Yet, its immense value is all too often taken for granted. Skilled use of language is one of a teacher's greatest, most valuable, and potent tools, if it is well and wisely used. In fact, language is the vehicle that drives the curriculum. Teachers must use language as their primary means of teaching content. The content itself, concepts, facts, hypotheses, analyses, observations, inferences, nuances—from every aspect of history, to each domain of science, math, and literature—all are shared and reflected upon via language, whether heard, spoken, read, or written. Virtually all school content is language based and mediated. As you read and reflect upon this, you are using language to do so!

In general, when the word language is heard, we tend to think about a specific language: English, Spanish, Hindi, Danish. "How

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many languages do you speak?" is a frequent question. Yet, people are often unaware of the enormous complexity, flexibility, range of ability, and potency that either empower a communicator with robust language skills or inhibit a child with weak language skills.

"Language is code, whereby ideas about the world are represented by a conventional system of arbitrary symbols for communication" (Bloom and Lahey, 1978) was a revolutionary redefinition of language. It helped conceptualize language in all its components: from sounds into words, from words into sentence structures, to knowledge of words and their representation of facts, actions, concepts, thoughts, and feelings—as well as when and how they may or may not be used—to the wide range of reasons and contextual variations in which language is used for communication.

### Language and Early Literacy Development

The development of language and the crucial skill for which each of its components, the content, the use, and the form, (as conceptualized by Bloom and Lahey) beginning at birth, lay the foundation for literacy. Language is an active, rule-governed process. Recent research has demonstrated that the pattern adults use to address babies is common across cultures (Haskins Lab, Yale University). The impact of the exaggerated intonation patterns we

affect when speaking to babies and the emotions expressed through them are part of the foundation of language and communication.

Language is both aural (heard and interpreted) and oral (spoken and communicative). Babies begin to store the sounds and intonation patterns of the language to which they are being exposed. While they do not have the motor control in the small muscles of their mouths to make the sounds, babies are collecting, organizing, and storing those sounds and the meanings they are intended to communicate. In essence, talking to babies prepares them to learn to read! It is a first step in literacy development that evolves into all the different reasons for which we communicate and aspire to comprehend, from hearing and telling stories, to listening to books and reading them with the intent to understand and learn, to writing for a range of purposes, from thank you notes to doctoral dissertations. The depth and complexity of language cannot be overstated.

The miraculous acquisition of language happens naturally for most children and is largely taken for granted as a normal developmental process. Acquiring the basic components of a first language happens rather quickly. This is an important consideration. Too often a parent concerned about a child's language acquisition is told, "Don't worry. He'll outgrow it," without being told what it is and when it will be outgrown. The accumulation of deficits in language acquisition happens very quickly and has significant implications for school performance and success.

### Levels of Language Learning

Learning the different levels of language meaning (language content) and use continue to evolve over many years as children are taught and learn more about the world as coded into their language system, but the basic foundations are established early and quickly. Moreover, as adults, parents and teachers have little reason to actively reflect on the language they choose to employ when talking to children.

It is so that learning to talk is child's play! Play for children is quite different than it is for adults. Play for adults is a leisure time activity, a means of relaxing. Interestingly, as an example of the complexity of language, play is a multi-meaning word. Playing tennis is not the same as playing chess. Playing the piano is not the same as idiomatically playing with someone's emotions. For

children, play is a thinking, planning, problem-solving, mentally flexible, socially dynamic means of experiencing, understanding, and manipulating the world around them. As in most of a child's early years, language is the thread in the patchwork quilt of child development.

### Challenges to Language Learning

For some children, however, the acquisition of language is not an easy, natural experience. The process of language learning is a complex neurological, cognitive, experiential, and emotionally based process. Add to that temperament and personality style, and the image of "Who is this child?" (Soifer, 2006) manifests as a means of thinking about the learning needs—cognitively, attentionally, academically—and the personality style of each youngster. Early identification of aural and oral language development impediments and impairments is essential, given the role of language in learning. Delays and differences in language acquisition that reduce the rate and efficiency of mastery require facilitation and remediation by a highly-trained language pathologist, many times in coordination with a special educator, who work with both the child and caregivers. Given that school interventions can begin in preschool, it is essential to appreciate the significant difference between the process of remediation and accommodation, modification, and support provisions and services.

### Classroom Language Dynamics: The Effective Teaching Model

The Effective Teaching Model, an aspect of Classroom Language Dynamics (Soifer, 2013), trains and empowers teachers to think about both the content and the skills they are teaching. To do so, a teacher must consider and plan accordingly the answers to What am I teaching? How must I teach it? Why must I teach it this way? The answers to these essential questions are predicated on the learning needs of the children in the class. One aspect of this methodology is a focus on what language is used, how it is used, and why it must be used in that way. In school, a register or level of language is used that is referred to as instructional. It is specific to academic environments from preschool through high school and beyond. Instructional language is often grammatically complex, employs content-area words, directs attention and behavior, and makes queries to which teachers may often know the answer. Different than everyday language, which is familiar and more informal, instructional language can be challenging for children who struggle with language processing, or the interpretation and intent of what is being said.

### Language of the Classroom

A strong example of classroom language use is questioning. Questions are asked in the classroom for a multitude of purposes, from insuring engagement ("Are you listening?") to determining comprehension from the basic ("Where was the treasure hidden?") to obtaining insights into comprehension ("How did you know that the dog did not like mushrooms?"). Questions are more frequently asked within classroom settings than in everyday interactions. Further, from an interpersonal perspective, in everyday language a "correct answer" is not rewarded or acknowledged in the same

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manner as in a classroom setting. Questions can and should be asked at different levels of intellectual and linguistic demand according to the needs of the child who is being queried. For example, *why* and *how* questions demand a higher level of thinking and language to comprehend what is being asked, as well as the demand to locate, retain, integrate, and formulate responses. *What* and *where* questions impose a more modest challenge cognitively and linguistically. Yet, while teachers can adapt the level of questioning according to the need of the student, it is also possible to prepare children to understand higher-level questions by "sandwiching," or rephrasing a higher-level question. For example, "Why did the children think it was important to tell the teacher what happened?" can be rephrased as "For what reason, did the children want to tell the teacher what happened?" Then, as a "sandwich," the first form is repeated before expecting a response. It takes virtually no additional time but is a cognitive-linguistic technique that can make a huge difference in a child's interpretation of meaning. Further, the use of vocal emphasis, stressing key words, alerts the child to key words or phrases. Moreover, grammatical parsing or phrasing of the question provides children with memory or language processing weaknesses additional time to capture, retain, and understand what has been heard. Thus, the question posed would be presented as follows: "Why...did the children...think it was important...to tell the teacher...what happened?"

Another aspect of language about which teachers must be fully apprised, the potency of which is often underestimated, is what is commonly called vocabulary. It is important to note the difference between vocabulary, the words you know, and lexicon, what you know about those words in your vocabulary. One may know a great number of words but not be able to use them facilely or

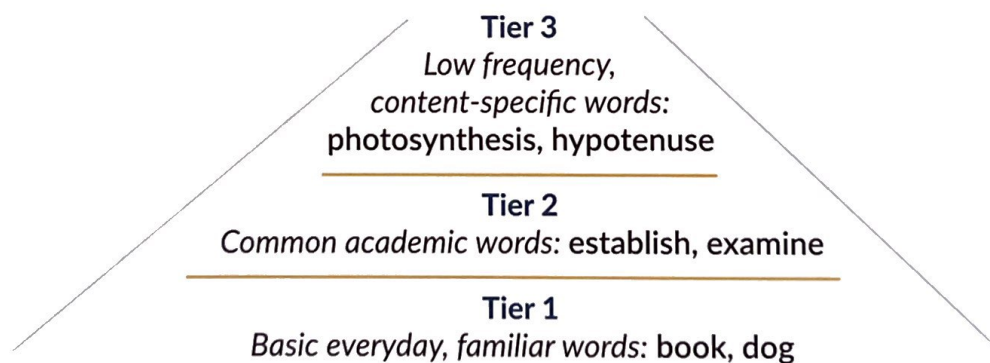
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appropriately. Vocabulary knowledge has been widely discussed in the work of Beck and McKeown (2013), who skillfully identified the three tiers of vocabulary knowledge. Less familiar, subject-specific vocabulary can pose greater challenges for students with weaker language systems. Moreover, access to words or word retrieval can pose a challenge to students and impact their classroom participation, written language, and social interactions.

There are numerous techniques for enhancing vocabulary exposure and use that can be so very delightful to children, helping them feel that they have the power of language. One technique that can be taught throughout the school years is introducing “big kid” words to three- and four-year-olds by using synonyms for everyday words such as “big” or “nice,” and then charting each time a synonym is used by the child, with them adding a star next to the synonym to track how often it is used. Teaching children the concept of a semantic continuum is always an appealing way for youngsters to learn new words. Envision a line of words representing size, from microscopic all the way to gargantuan. Perhaps they are written to reflect their relative size, so that the children have a multisensory exposure. Thus, rather than saying, “It was a big surprise”, *enormous* or *monumental* can be substituted, reflecting the size and impact of the emotion, as well as enriching the communication.

When we reflect on the nature of a school day, we can see the richness and complexity of the language that connects us as learners and educators. The components of language and how they are consciously presented by teachers to students—from classroom routines; to acquisition of new knowledge; to its use in speaking, understanding, reading or writing; to the words used; to the grammar and phrasing presented; to the expectations for the nature and quality of questions and answers; to all aspects of academic and social interactions—are essential to appreciate and respect that talking is not teaching. Most importantly, we must understand that language is the vehicle that drives the curriculum.

### Isabel Beck's Three Tier Model of Vocabulary



### About the Author

Dr. Lydia Soifer is a language pathologist with over 45 years of experience in clinical and private practice, as well as university teaching. As a parent educator, teacher trainer, and staff developer, she specializes in the role of language in the development of children's learning, literacy, behavior, and social-emotional development. Classroom Language Dynamics ©, the teacher training program Dr. Soifer designed, is used in a variety of school settings to empower teachers and invigorate learners of all kinds.