

Creating a Language-Rich Early Childhood Classroom Environment

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Language development in early years is of significance to children's literacy development and their abilities to navigate their environment and interact with others. One way for educators to support young children's language development is to create a language-rich classroom environment. However, some teachers begin their careers with limited knowledge or experience on how to create a language-rich classroom environment (Wallace et al., 2022). This short article discusses what is a language-rich classroom environment and what strategies can be used to create a language-rich classroom environment.

What is A Language-Rich Classroom Environment?

Justice (2004) defined a language-rich classroom environment as "one in which children are exposed deliberately and recurrently to high-quality verbal input among peers and adults and in which adult-child verbal interactions are characterized by high levels of adult responsiveness" (p. 37). Five key elements are emphasized in this definition: exposure, deliberateness, recurrence, high-quality input, and adult responsiveness. Exposure means that children are exposed to language in diverse contexts and interactions both passively and actively in the classroom (Bunce, 1995). Deliberateness means that teachers are intentional when choosing the language to interact with children. In a language-rich classroom, teachers make knowledgeable choices in language use based on each child's language developmental level. Recurrence emphasizes the importance of repetition to provide children with ample opportunities to experience and acquire specific linguistic concepts in diverse contexts. High-quality input means that the language used by teachers in the classroom is diverse in terms of content, form, and use – three interrelated elements of the complex whole of oral language. Adult responsiveness refers to a teacher's sensitivity to the child's developmental stage and competencies. Girolametto and Weitzman (2002) found that robust language gains by children were associated with high levels of responsiveness by teachers, especially when teachers' responses were focused on child-initiated topics. To summarize, in a language-rich classroom environment, teachers deliberately and repeatedly choose and use language of diverse content, form, and use based on the child's developmental competencies when responsively interacting with the child.

Justice (2004) pointed out that language-rich classroom environments emphasize children's acquisition of language through their interactions with both peers and adults. This view aligns with social-interactive perspective which suggests that frequent and sensitive verbal input is critically important to children's language growth. Justice and Kaderavek (2002) also pointed out that children's engagement in socially embedded, mediated interactions with more knowledgeable conversational partners is an important developmental mechanism for children. Therefore, creating a language-rich classroom environment is much needed. The following discusses some strategies that can be used to achieve this goal.

Strategies for Creating a Language-Rich Classroom Environment

Justice (2004) shared some strategies for creating language-rich classroom environments for children, including (1) designing the physical space, (2) designing daily language plans, and (3) ensuring quality adult-child conversations.

Designing the Physical Space

Roskos and Neuman (2002) posited that the physical environment of a classroom has a coercive power over the quality and quantity of children's oral language experiences. Therefore, Justice (2004) pointed out that the physical environment in a language-rich classroom must facilitate diverse aspects of language content, form, and use. First, organization of space. Four important attributes of spatial arrangements in classrooms are considered, including open space, designated areas for different purposes (e.g., library, reading circle, dramatic play), a variety of materials organized conceptually and schematically, and dramatic play settings (Roskos & Neuman, 2002). Second, provision of props and materials. Literacy-related artifacts are of particular importance in developing language-rich classroom environments. These artifacts include writing utensils (pens, pencils, and crayons), writing media (envelopes, paper, and cardboard), and printed materials (menus, signs, books, recipes, maps, newspapers, magazines). In addition, props can be used during story reading, drama, or other activities to engage children and support them in learning new linguistic concepts.

Designing Daily Language Plans

Bunce (1995) stated that designing a daily plan with clear goals for language content, form, and use is needed to ensure an intentional and deliberate focus on language in the classroom. The daily plan serves as a road map with specific language targets that need to be addressed in planned and incidental classroom experiences for children. Daily language plans should have clear objectives and specific targets in language content, form, and use. In addition, specific classroom activities should be designed to help achieve these objectives. Justice (2002) pointed out that identifying objectives and associated activities at the start of each day can make the focus on language development deliberate and more achievable.

Ensuring Quality Adult-Child Conversations

Dickinson and Morse (2019) postulated that sensitive, responsive, and well-tuned communicative interactions can facilitate children's language development. Girolametto and Weitzman (2002) identified eight language-stimulation strategies that an adult can deliberately use when conversing with children. These strategies include waiting, pausing, confirming, imitating, extending, labeling, open questioning, and scripting. Girolametto and colleagues (2003) put these strategies into three categories: child-oriented responses, interaction-promoting responses, and language-modeling responses. Specifically, child-oriented responses are used to create and maintain a shared conversation between adult and child. These strategies include waiting and extending. Interaction-promoting responses aim to engage children in active dialogues. These strategies include pausing, open questioning, imitating, and confirming. Finally,

language-modeling responses demonstrate diverse linguistic forms, content, and uses. These include labeling and scripting. See Table 1 below for a brief description of each strategy.

Table 1

Language Stimulation Strategies

Type	Strategy	Description
Child-oriented responses	Waiting	During conversation, adult uses a slow pace, and actively listens to the child when talking.
	Extending	Adult repeats what child says and adds a bit more information.
Interaction-promoting responses	Pausing	When interacting with a child, adult pauses expectantly and frequently to encourage the child's turn-taking and active participation.
	Open questioning	Adult asks open-ended questions, including what, where, how, and why questions, to encourage the child to produce more language output.
	Imitating	Adult imitates and repeats what child says.
	Confirming	Adult responds to the child's utterances by confirming understanding of the child's intentions.
Language-modeling responses	Labeling	Adult provides the labels for familiar and unfamiliar objects, actions, or abstractions (e.g., emotions).
	Scripting	Adult uses parallel talk to describe and narrate an activity or a routine to the child.

Note. These descriptions are adopted from the works by Bunce (1995), Girolametto & Weitzman (2002), Girolametto et al. (2003), and Justice (2004).

Together, these strategies promote high-quality communicative interactions with children. They can help adults reduce directiveness and increase responsiveness and sensitivity when interacting with children, and they can also facilitate the child in producing more language that is lexically and grammatically complex (Girolametto & Weitzman, 2002; Justice, 2004).

These strategies can be used during conversations and other classroom activities, especially literacy-related activities (e.g., shared book reading or storytelling), to promote rich language output and input and facilitate children's communicative interactions with teachers and their peers. Flynn (2016) considered storytelling as a simple but powerful way to create a language-rich classroom. A storytelling activity typically consists of a few children and each child takes a turn to tell a story while others listen attentively. The teacher's role is to model storytelling and to facilitate (not to correct) children's language use or output. Such activities with supportive strategies can engage children in extended use of language in a safe, nurturing environment.

Final Thoughts

The quality of language, especially in early childhood classroom contexts, is of great importance to children's language development and early literacy development. It takes considerable effort to build a language-rich classroom environment, as it is a complex and multidimensional process

(Justice, 2004). This article discusses the definition of language-rich classroom environment and associated key elements. It also provides a few research-based strategies that can be used by teachers in the classroom. These strategies can also be used by parents or caregivers of young children in their home settings.

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