

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment in the EYFS

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The language of teaching



Effective use of language

How we use language is a key element of teaching and learning. It is about achieving a balance, not a constant barrage of language, but language used in thoughtful and considerate ways, whilst recognising the importance of silence and saying nothing.

Children do not need to experience a constant onslaught of inane questions, e.g. 'what colour is that', the child knows you are merely testing them, knows you know the answer, the child is probably thinking why am I being asked that? This type of question serves no purpose and often just interrupts the child's flow of thinking and is pointless. So, how should language be used as an effective support to teaching?

- For the youngest children use simple language, reflecting their use of telegraphic speech and use single words in context, as they are quick to process and understand
- Remember if you ask a child a valid question, they need time to process. First recognising they have been asked a question, then considering the response to the question and finally putting the words together to be able to answer it.
- Use gestures and body language to support use of language for the youngest children and those with EAL
- Consider the use of statements, which can be supportive of what a child is doing and can also be provocative, and supportive of critical thinking and analysis
- Remember less is more and children often need silence and relative peace to process their thinking and ideas and do not want to be interrupted by questions or suggestions from an adult
- Use language to remind children of what they have done before, to support them making links.

The ability to explore and use language opens up a whole new world to children enabling expression of thoughts, feelings and ideas. We need to provide ample opportunities and time for children to explore and experiment with language in their play and specific planned experiences. Equally we need to reflect on the types of language we use to broaden their understanding and vocabulary.

Definitions of language

1. **Speech:** an organised set of sounds which make up words. Sometimes we talk about articulation.
2. **Expressive language:** This is using words and sentences to communicate our feelings and ideas.
3. **Receptive language:** We use this term to describe listening and understanding what is said to us.
4. **Non-verbal language:** This is where we use gestures/ facial expression, body language to communicate. In children non-verbal communication is seen in their play and social interactions.

Language and play dough

A group of pre school children are with a practitioner making play dough.

P: 'what have we used so far?'

CH: 'flour, salt, powder paint, oil'

P: 'what is missing?'

CH: 'water'

P: 'Jack can you go and fill this up to half way'.

Jack goes off with a jug and returns...

J: 'is this half full'

C2: 'no'

P: 'is it in the middle?'

J: 'yes'

P: 'not too near the top, not too near the bottom, so it is half full as it is in the middle'.

There are different types of language we can use for children at different development stages and circumstances to be supportive of learning.

Considering these types of language helps to reflect on what we say and how we can best support language appropriately for the individual child. It is easy to forget just how significant the way we say something can be for a child as they develop their language skills.

Helping children to talk

Self-talk

Here the adult is labelling what they are doing, describing and demonstrating and talking in the context of an activity, e.g. "I'm changing your nappy."

This enables children to make connections between words and actions, labelling in their minds and as these words are repeated to them, the understanding and word definition becomes secure. In the example given to consolidate understanding the practitioner needs to reinforce the word nappy, showing the child, so they can make a clear and specific link.

Parallel talk

In parallel talk you describe what the child is doing. As you interact with the child you comment on where the child is playing, what the child is playing with and possibly what the child is doing.

This doesn't mean a running commentary, but carefully considered language to identify key elements of what the child is doing e.g. actions or naming an object. There needs to be silence and pauses between what the adult says to enable the child to process and assimilate. The child may then repeat words that the adult has said, or simply just store away the vocabulary to build on at a later time.

Repeat

After listening carefully to a child, you repeat what the child has said. Repeating is effective because it clarifies what the child has said, serves as an acknowledgement, is very supportive of the language/words the child uses, and often keeps children talking because it acts like a question and indicates that you're interested in what they have to say. Repeat can also be useful when you are not absolutely sure what a child has said, by repeating you are clarifying if you have understood.

Restate

Sometimes children make mistakes when communicating. When a child makes a language error, you can repeat what they said in the correct form without drawing attention to the error. You are modelling correct language in a positive manner that helps communication and is supportive of grammatically correct language. The child can then reflect and process your use of language, as part of their evolving understanding.

Expanding

This is responding to a child, by saying something to expand and develop their thinking. A child might comment about what they are doing e.g. 'I'm building a castle' and the practitioner responds 'a castle, I wonder what your castle will look like when it is finished?' This can then perhaps get the child to consider and think about the process of building their castle, their plan and how they will know when it is finished.

Encouraging ideas

Encourage children to articulate their solutions and ideas by asking them how they solved something: by describing what they will do and what they did; and by asking them to help you. The last strategy is particularly valuable because it indicates your respect for their ideas and solutions to problems. 'How can I...?', 'How can you...?', 'What did you...?'

Open-ended questions

Questions that have more than one right answer, or ones that can be answered in many ways are called 'open-ended' or 'divergent' questions. These questions stimulate more language, respect the diversity of solutions, affirm children's ideas, support independence and encourage creative thinking. 'How can we make pink paint?', 'What do you need to play in the water?', 'How many more do we need?', 'What happened to...?'

Case study Encouraging language

After a painting activity a practitioner is helping a child of 16 months to get dressed. She shows the child the pile of clothes 'are these Emily's?' The child nods and the practitioner responds, 'what do we put on first?' The child takes her socks out of her shoes and gives them to the practitioner, she puts them on. The practitioner holds up her dress, 'is this Emily's dress?' The child nods and then first the practitioner puts on an all in one vest with poppers. The child says 'pop' and the adult repeats 'pop', as she closes the poppers. The practitioner then holds up the dress and says 'Emily's dress' and puts it on her. The practitioner says to the child, 'turn around so I can do up the button', she repeats turn around as she turns the child around.

Teaching, learning and language

The practitioner is engaging in conversation with the child using simple language. The questions used are easily understood and the practitioner responds to the non-verbal answers. The practitioner responds to the language the child uses 'by repeating' and she uses action to reinforce the term 'turn around'. This exchange is supportive of embedding key vocabulary, the child is a partner with the practitioner in the exchange and her contribution is valued.

Case study The power of silence

Teaching through modelling and silent support

Outside, three older babies are playing in the water tray. There are dolls in soapy water in the tray with very large spoons, flannels and sponges. The practitioner models using the spoons to scoop and dribble water over the dolls. Two children copy her actions, there is no language just silent support and modelling of repeated actions. One child scoops up some water and walks and pours it onto the garden, he returns to the water tray and continues to explore the soapy water using the large spoon and sponge. He then scoops up water and takes it and puts onto one of the plastic tricycles. He returns to the water tray and lifts a flannel out of the water and watches the water dripping from the flannel. The practitioner says to him 'it is dripping'.

Learning taking place

The practitioner did not bombard the children with language and questions, but gave them the space to make their own discoveries. She modelled an action which was copied by the children and one child extended further by transporting the water and dribbling in other places. Observing the child's fascination with the dripping water, the practitioner used language in that instance to give a name to what the child was watching. Children need the space to think and process their observations, to enable connections and links to be made in their brains, and information to be stored. This was enabled by the practitioner in this scenario as, by remaining mostly silent, she was giving the children that space and time.

Case study Language at story time

A practitioner is reading a story to a group of pre school children. The children are listening with rapt attention and respond to elements of the story with 'huh', 'ouch'. The practitioner puts emphasis on key words/phrases in the story, e.g. 'bright green' and the children spontaneously repeat phrases from the story 'uh oh', indicating involvement and enjoyment. At points she waits for the children fill in with what is next: P 'and' Children 'abracadabra'. The practitioner also uses facial expression to help convey the story.

Learning to have fun with language and enjoy the sounds of language from enthusiastic practitioners is essential. It encourages children to be curious and want to explore and experiment with language.



The use of statements

As previously mentioned, the use of statements can be an extremely effective language tool. Statements give the child the choice as to whether or not they wish to respond. At the same time they acknowledge what the child is doing and if used appropriately and sparingly they can be supportive of learning and act as a stimulus to thought and ideas. Statements require some reflection and thinking and aren't as easy to think of as questions. Here are some examples.

Activity	Example statements
A cooking activity	'The sugar has disappeared into the butter.' 'The flour is floating into the bowl.' 'You are mixing all the ingredients.'
A collage activity	'You have made a pattern.' 'You are sticking very carefully.' 'Glue sticks things.'
Looking at plants that have grown	'They look different' 'They have grown'
Painting	'Swirls of colours' 'The colours are merging'
Den building outside	'This is a secure structure.' 'It looks cosy.' 'Your idea has worked.'
Looking at a picture or non fiction book together	'Oh' 'Interesting' 'I can see so much'

The key is variety, using language to match the situation and the development stage of the child. What will work best here? Should I use language or would it be better to remain silent? How can I use language to support acquisition? How can I use language to develop learning and extend thought? How do you adapt your language to meet the children's needs?

It is easy to get into a rut or a habit in relation to the language we use with children.

Characteristics of effective learning

These reflective practice questions from the positive relationships descriptor of the Characteristics of Effective Learning in *Development Matters*, can help us to consider carefully our use of language and its breadth.

Playing and exploring:

What adults can do (positive relationships)

- Play with children. Encourage them to explore, and show your own interest in discovering new things. Ensuring we do not take over by directing and over talking but allowing the children to guide the play and interact from their lead
 - Help children as needed to do what they are trying to do, without taking over or directing. Give careful and considered suggestion for the child to contemplate
 - Join in play sensitively, fitting in with children's ideas. Join in if they invite, ensuring they take the lead and that you are merely a participant
 - Model pretending an object is something else, and help develop roles and stories. This can be done through mimicking, using an object to represent something using appropriate language, especially with the youngest children. The development of roles and stories can be through discussion and the use of props
 - Encourage children to try new activities and to judge risks for themselves. Be sure to support children's confidence with words and body language. Be an onlooker, providing support and minimal words as necessary, so the child can think and reflect
 - Pay attention to how children engage in activities, - the challenges faced, the effort, thought, learning and enjoyment. Talk more about the process than the product. Observe and then discuss and comment on what they did and their choices
 - Talk about how you and the children get better at things through effort and practice, and what we all can learn when things go wrong.
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- ### Active Learning:
- #### What adults can do (positive relationships)
- Support children to choose their activities – what they want to do and how they will do it. Remind them of what they have done before, enable choice, encourage them to consider how they might do something
 - Stimulate children's interest through shared attention, and calm over-stimulated children. Demonstrate an interest in what the child enjoys and likes
 - Help children to become aware of their own goals, make plans, and review their own progress. Describe what you see them trying to do, and encourage children to talk about their own successes. This might begin with parallel talk for the younger children, progressing to discussion and reflection, through carefully considered questions
 - Be specific when you praise, especially noting effort, such as how the child concentrates, tries different approaches, persists, solves problems, and has new ideas
 - Encourage children to learn together and from each other.
 - Set up opportunities for collaborative work together and support children as they move through the social stages of development in play, particularly from solitary play, to parallel, to associative
 - Children develop their own motivations when you give reasons and talk about learning, rather than just directing. Discuss processes and set challenges.

