

Language In the Classroom

During this essay we will discuss the expected development of pupils entering the 9-12 focus cycle and evaluate the different ways in which teachers and classroom assistants can support language and speech development whilst understanding the importance of a high quality language environment.

As new children enter your cycle, adjustments to the environment may need to be made, new presentations may need to be prepared to meet the individual needs of a child entering a specific cycle. Diagnostic assessments are a great way to decide the ability levels of the child. These informal assessments can be conducted in a variety of ways. They may include discussions, written pieces, guided or shared reading tasks and observations made by the director. This diagnosis is crucial to determine the ability level of any given child within the class. They help the director when making decisions on items such as grouping, text choice and the planning of differentiated tasks. It may also help when selecting materials required to meet the needs of a specific child.

As with all other KLAs, differentiation is crucial within any program when striving to allow all children the chance to reach their full potential in literacy. Tasks should be targeted towards children's ability and not their age. Peer support groups in literacy can expose the older, more experienced children to leadership roles whilst allowing the younger children to learn from their older peers. This can help boost the confidence of the older groupings, whilst building trust and a sense of belonging to the entire class.

It is also important for a director to continuously assess the ability of the children in the classroom through ongoing observations and note taking. This not only allows the director to adapt the pedagogy to meet the needs of the evolving dynamics within the classroom, but also allows the director to reflect on his or her teaching methodology and make changes where necessary. A sound knowledge of the Australian Teaching Standards along with the Montessori Curriculum is also important as the director makes changes to their programs and lessons.

Montessori believed that solid foundations were the key to developing concrete language skills. She divided this preparation into two areas. *Preparation of the mind* and *preparation of the hand*. Preparation of the mind starts in the early years of a child's educational journey, with songs, games and rhymes which help children to develop good phonological awareness, as well as print awareness when exposed to the written text. Preparation of the hand enables children to develop the skill of fine motor techniques. Games such as jar opening, or manipulating a cotton ball allow a child to build skill in this area and ultimately enable them to control a pencil or pen.

These early skills and practices allow children to navigate towards expressing their inner thoughts on paper and ultimately move towards what Montessori called *authorship*. We expect that once in stage 3, children should have a good grasp of this skill and should be able to express their thoughts and ideas in their own words, using detailed metalanguage for others to read, thus reaching an established level of authorship. However, As Lillard

(1972: 122) explains, *“She did not devise a method for teaching reading, nor did she think it wise to decide upon a particular time when children should begin to read.”*

This philosophy makes it very difficult to put an exact time when children should be able to read and write, but with the implementation of the sandpaper letters and miniature environments in cycle one, we can assume that the foundations for reading and writing are set during this time, and are fundamental if a child is to reach a high level of authorship by stage 3.

Throughout her work, Montessori continuously stresses the importance of the classroom environment and as we focus on a child’s development in literacy, we see that the environment plays a crucial role. To maximize the effects of language development, the classroom should be rich in vocabulary and literature. Children should be exposed to new words on a regular basis and be encouraged to use them where possible. It is common knowledge that during the Victorian era, classrooms were expected to be silent and this was seen as the perfect environment to learn. Thanks to research by Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, and that carried out by Montessori herself, we now know that a classroom filled with voices, technical vocabulary and social/educational language are actually the perfect environment for literacy development, and this was something that Montessori focused on.

“He should not be kept apart from social life even as a tiny infant, but included in all the family does. He should be talked to and listened to with patience and interest.” (Lillard 1972: 112)

When children use technical metalanguage in its contextual form, they tend to be able to express themselves more articulately. One tactic for the encouragement of the use of verbal language is to pair children up whilst delivering activities. Once a presentation has finished, children can be paired up and asked to discuss the next step in their learning before they put pencil to paper. Even though the children may be operating at different levels of ability, this verbal correspondence may help them to develop a higher level of language and expression. *“One child may have precocious language skills from his beginning months. Another does not. Yet, both may develop into thoughtful, expressive children who write and read well.” (Lillard & Lillard 2003: 175)*

The strategy of verbalising thoughts in groups or pairs allows the children to reiterate the presentation in their own words, listen to each other’s understanding and therefore helps them move closer to the concrete understanding that we as teachers strive for. Once they have verbalised it, it is then time to move to the written form, but only if the presentation and the prepared follow up work are differentiated and targeted well.

Another strategy for increasing the vocabulary of the children in your focus group is to read ahead in the chosen texts of the class you are teaching. A group of children may be reading a chosen text during the week. The text will likely have a selection of words that may need defining by the group. In preparation to the children reading the next chapter, the director can preempt the words he or she feels the group may struggle with and deliver these words prior to the children reading. These words can then be placed on vocabulary boxes, spelling activities or activity cards and the children encouraged to use them as much as possible throughout the week.

Children should be encouraged to speak to each other and to the adults in the room and, where possible, use the key vocabulary for the week.

Reading a novel together as a class on a weekly basis is a great way to encourage language development. Firstly, as a class you are all reading the book together so even though we may all be reading at different levels, for that moment in time we are all equal. The teacher models the reading and stresses the importance of intonation, pace and tone of voice. The children are encouraged, but not forced to read aloud to the class if they wish. Once the confidence of the class lifts, the number of children wanting to read aloud will increase. Once the weekly shared reading is over, follow up work can be planned where groups, or pairs, get together to discuss the vocabulary, re-read the chapter or investigate the book through a variety of comprehension tasks. In this case, even the children who are struggling with their reading and comprehension will be able to follow the text and listen to the story whilst being exposed to the language. Simply listening to the text can help develop the speech and therefore the overall language ability of the child.

“In some way, the hearing organs are connected to the mysterious seat of mental life where the child’s language is evolved in the depths of his unconscious mind.” (Montessori 1988: 105)

The importance of the adult is to model the reading style and technique and to make sure that informal follow up discussion happens continuously as the class moves towards the next reading. Modelling tasks and planting the seeds that will grow into concrete understanding of concepts is something that Montessori often stressed in her methodology.

“When liberating the child from our personal influence, we place him in an environment suited to him and, in contact with the means of development, we leave him confidently to his own intelligence.” (Montessori 1991:151)

There are many strategies for encouraging the use of language in the classroom and these are just a few, however, the importance of a language friendly classroom where vocabulary, reading and discussion are encouraged are places where children will gain most exposure to the literacy skills that we as teachers want them to use freely. The role of the adults within the room is to model the techniques used when reading, speaking and writing, but also to provide platforms where the children can produce samples of work that reinforce the techniques taught.

In conclusion, it is crucial that the environment be rich in language whilst providing an arena for children to have the freedom to develop at their own pace. They must be given the opportunity to verbalise their thoughts and absorb the rich language provided in the classroom. The director must model how the language is to be used and then allow the children to manipulate these examples to suit their educational needs. The specifics of where and when a child should be able to read and write depend on the individual and may fluctuate depending on the social and educational maturity of the individual.

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