Creating a Language-Focused Curriculum for Preschool Children

Mabel L. Rice


The furniture in the preschool classroom has been moved aside to make way for the rows of chairs that are now filled with the families of the children. This is the end-of-the-semester performance, a special event when the children perform. Afterward, there will be a potluck luncheon, with food prepared at home and brought to share with classmates and teachers. The food is appealing, but the real attraction is the children. When the audience arrived, they slipped into chairs as close to the front as possible so they could see their child, and their children could easily see them and the pride and encouragement that beams from their faces during the performance. Many brothers and sisters are present as well and they, too, want to be sure to have a good view.

The restless and self-conscious rustle of waiting steps as the row of little children files into the front of the room, sandwiched between a teacher in front and a teacher at the rear, who gently guide the children to their designated places in front of the row of chairs along the stage. A little boy veers a bit out of line as he greets his little brother who toddled from the front of the audience to be near him. The parents’ cameras and videocameras click and whirl to capture their child’s entrance. Some children walk with confidence and poise, others adopt a shy posture, and a few just openly stare back at the audience. At 3–5 years old, these youngsters have yet to learn about public posturing. They are charmingly themselves, without artifice or guile. They are also, for the most part, all dressed up. Al-
though the staff and parents are dressed casually, obvious care was given to how the children were dressed. Some of the children are wearing funny hats or odd-looking capes, which, as the audience learns later, are really pretend animal hoods and the costumes of Good Guys or Bad Guys, for the skits to follow. The ethnic diversity evident in the group is worthy of a United Nations classroom, with children from China, Korea, Yugoslavia, Colombia, and India mingled with white and African American children. What seems most striking is their common demeanor, the ways in which they are all children, and the ways in which all of their families exhibit pride in their very existence.

The program begins with an introduction by the teacher. Next, the children warm up with a song, "The Eensy-Weensy Spider Went Up the Water Spout," and they all move their arms and hands to pantomime the words. Some children sing in big voices, some in small voices, some just mouth the words, and some just stand and watch. All options seem to be equally suitable, depending on the child. Then the program moves to the hard part. The children enact one of their favorite stories, Are You My Mother? Each child has a part in the play. Each child gets to say something, although some of the children the spoken part is minimal, consisting of a single word, such as "No," or making an animal noise, such as "Moo." The important thing is that for that brief moment, the center of the stage and the center of the audience's attention is on that child. Parents beam through the moment, even if the child's voice is too small to be heard clearly. The execution is not as important as the occasion. The program is wrapped up with another song, and then the children's favorite thing, the LAP cheer, "Give me an L! L! Give me an A! A! Give me a P!, P! What does that spell? LAP! What? Say it a little louder. LAP! Yeah!" The children yell out the LAP cheer, and then move to join their families who give hugs and compliments for their performance.

The staff in the back of the room never tire of these performances, although they are a regular feature of the Language Acquisition Preschool (LAP). In many ways, they capture much of the motivation for LAP. The occasion highlights the ways in which children have common interests and needs, although the children actually vary in a fundamental way. Although it is not discernible to most of the audience, some of the children have impairments in language aptitude, so that they are quite delayed in their mastery of the communication skills that serve as the social glue for interactions with peers, adults, and family members. The language limitations of the international children and their families are obvious in that they are learning English as a second language. Some of the international children are relatively comfortable with English after some time in LAP, whereas others are obvious beginners. The language limitations are less obvious for the local children whose language learning is effortless. Of all the children, it is the children who are having difficulty learning English as their first language who are quite likely to end their careers as public speakers when they leave LAP to begin kindergarten. In the future, even in elementary school, the opportunities will go to children with proven verbal ability. In a society that places a premium on verbal competency and high achievement as criteria for public performance, children who are unintelligible, or who are awkward in their sentence formulations and word choices, are seldom chosen to perform. In fact, children's verbal capabilities upon school entry affect many aspects of their subsequent academic experiences.

The opening vignette begins our story of the Language Acquisition Preschool with an end-of-the-semester performance, a performance in which all of the children participate, as do the families and the staff. What is striking in this scene is that it is a very "normal" activity for a preschool classroom; public performances, especially those intended for
appreciative parents, are not out of the ordinary for young children. What is somewhat less usual about LAP’s performance is the mixture of students and the fact that all children participate. Even in preschool settings there is a tendency to select the children with the best verbal skills for the speaking parts. What is quite unusual about LAP is the rationale that underlies this scene, the previous experiences that set the stage for the event, and the ways in which the children, parents, and staff come to interact together in ways that enhance children’s speech and language abilities.

This chapter presents the reasons that the Language Acquisition Preschool was established and describes the participants—the staff who have developed and carried out the language-focused curriculum (LFC) of the preschool classroom and the children who have experienced it. The reason for LAP’s existence begins with recognition of the importance of preschool experiences in preparing young children for school entry, and the ways in which language acquisition is an important precursor for academic preparation. That topic is addressed below. A brief description of how the Language Acquisition Preschool came to be established and its primary objectives are then outlined. This chapter also contains descriptions of the children who have been enrolled in the preschool and the professional staff who have carried out the preschool’s objectives. Finally, the chapter concludes with a preview of the subsequent chapters.

EARLY INTERVENTION: PREPARATION FOR SCHOOL

For All Children

Children’s readiness for school is a matter of national concern. In 1991, President George Bush focused attention on preschoolers when he announced his six goals for U.S. schools. The first goal was that by the year 2000, all children will come to school “ready to learn.” This goal was immediately endorsed by politicians, educators, and other citizens. Its worthiness was appreciated and carried forward by the Clinton administration, which entered office in 1994. PL 103-227, the Goals 2000 Education America Act of 1994, has as its first goal that children will be ready to learn upon school entry. It is widely recognized that in order for children to succeed in school, they must have the appropriate language, social, and cognitive skills to serve as a foundation for the opportunities and challenges of the school setting. Across the United States, states and communities are developing blueprints for action, mobilizing efforts to prepare children for school entry.

In what ways are children currently not ready to go to school? A timely report answers that question. In the 1980s, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching launched a study in which, among other things, it conducted a survey of more than 7,000 kindergarten teachers. When teachers were asked what problem most restricted school readiness, the majority of teachers responded, “deficiency in language.” This problem was named more frequently than emotional maturity, general knowledge, and social confidence (Boyer, 1991).
Language as a Key to Learning

The teachers' concerns reflect the fact that language is a key to learning. This is so for several reasons, which are summarized in Table 1. One of these reasons is that a child who does not understand what the teacher says is unable to follow instructions. This child will be vulnerable when the kindergarten teacher says, for example, “All of you who put your things away neatly and quickly can line up by the door.” He or she may not understand the embedded clause, “who put your things away neatly and quickly.” Instead of putting away his or her things, the youngster may immediately go to the door. In this case, the teacher may perceive the child as misbehaving instead of misunderstanding.

A second reason is that much of classroom teaching is conducted by verbal description and direction. If children cannot follow this information, they will be unable to encode it correctly and store it in memory for later application to new learning.

A third reason is that youngsters with language impairments have limited resources for demonstrating their knowledge and explaining their reasoning. For example, if their vocabularies are limited they will be less able to participate in naming activities or in describing their experiences.

A fourth reason that language is so important for school entry is that language skills are strongly related to subsequent reading skills (Snow & Tabors, 1993). Children who have strong language skills are at a marked advantage for the transition to literacy, which in turn serves as a central tool in formal instruction.

A fifth reason is that language is vitally important for communicating the expected rules for classroom behavior. If children do not understand the rules for talking in the classroom, they may speak out of turn, speak too loudly, interrupt other children, or “talk back” to the teacher. These behaviors, in turn, may be regarded as socially inappropriate. In addition, these children may be unable to explain why they seem to disregard the rules of conduct.

Finally, a sixth reason is that language ability is central to the ability to establish friendships with other children. The development of social relationships with other children is an important achievement of the early childhood period. Children who are unable to establish friendships with their peers have a poorer prognosis for successful educational experiences (Parker & Asher, 1987).

Table 1. Why language is important for children in classrooms

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<td>Language skills serve as a precursor to the development of literacy skills.</td>
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Problems with Language Readiness

There are numerous ways in which children can have problems with language readiness. Some children whose language is not ready for kindergarten may have limited school-related vocabulary, nonstandard dialects, or unusual conversational patterns; however, they may be able to acquire these expected competencies readily on their own. In contrast, other children may show a delay in language acquisition that is significantly below the expectations for their age. It is not always obvious to which group an individual youngster may belong. These distinctions require careful individualized assessment by a trained speech-language pathologist. Preschool children identified as having speech or language disorders are eligible for special services, which are mandated under the auspices of Part B of PL 101-476, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Unfortunately, speech-language pathology services are not widespread. In a survey conducted by Wolcyr et al. (1994), 45% of Head Start programs, 51% of public school prekindergarten programs, 17% of public school kindergartens, and 92% of community programs reported that they did not employ a speech-language pathologist, even on a part-time basis. Inclusive programs were more likely than noninclusive programs to employ speech-language pathologists.

For Children with Language Impairments

The language impairments of children can occur in combination with other disabilities, or exist as a sole source of impairment (cf. Rice & Schuele, 1994). Other disabilities likely to have language impairment as a concomitant condition are hearing disability, mental retardation, and socioemotional disorders. In addition, a sizeable number of children seem to have language impairments despite otherwise typical developmental milestones. These children can be difficult to identify. They can blend with a group of preschool children and yet have significant problems with language acquisition. These children are the major focus of the LAP curriculum; they are described in further detail below.

For some time it has been recognized that language impairments are a prevalent type of disorder in the preschool years. Of the preschool children who received special education services in 1986 (the most recent year for which categorical data are available at the national level), 69% were categorized as having language impairments (Office of Special Education Programs, 1988). This would include children whose language impairments are secondary to other disorders, as well as those for whom the language impairment is primary.

There is clear reason, then, to believe that early language acquisition is a crucial area of school readiness across the range of children's aptitudes. Readiness concerns apply to children who are capable of learning but not attuned to the language demands of the traditional classroom setting, as well as to children struggling to acquire language skills. Although there is widespread recognition that children need to develop language skills during the preschool years, language skills are often overlooked as a specific part of a child's preschool experiences. In fact, some
of the leading early childhood curriculum books do not even mention language development as a specific developmental goal (e.g., Bank Street Curriculum [Mitchell & David, 1992]), or, if language development is mentioned, it is treated as a matter of cognitive or social development. Our perspective is that the area of language warrants special emphasis, which need not be at the expense of the other traditional curricular goals and can be interwoven into many aspects of the curriculum. This special emphasis will be beneficial to all preschool children, but especially so for children with language limitations.

THE NEED FOR A LANGUAGE-FOCUSED CURRICULUM

Our intent in establishing the Language Acquisition Preschool was to provide a language-focused curriculum (LFC) that pervaded all aspects of a preschool classroom in a way that integrated language enhancement activities into the general activities designed to prepare children socially and cognitively for the transition to kindergarten. This classroom, we believed, could facilitate language acquisition for children whose language competencies were unfolding according to normative expectations, and for children whose language milestones were lagging behind or who were learning English as a second language.

Some related developments were available to guide us in this design. One was the growing recognition of the value of naturalistic contexts for language learning and intervention. This is evident, for example, in the activity-based curriculum developed by Bricker (1993). This curriculum is designed for children from birth to 3 years of age, a time during which language emerges from simple play activities. Its locus on simple acts of communication, first words, and simple sentences places it at a developmental level earlier than that of preschool classrooms, which typically include children ages 3–5 years whose language skills are beyond that level. From a language intervention perspective, beginning in the late 1980s there has been increased awareness of the value of language intervention in naturalistic settings (cf. Norris & Hoffman, 1990; Weitzman, 1992). The available writings offer general characterizations of desirable settings for language intervention although the particulars are not well specified. Such language intervention programs are often implemented with a group of children with language impairments, without other children in the group.

What we set out to do with LAP was more particular. Our criteria are summarized in Table 2. We wanted to highlight that all preschool children can benefit from activities to enhance their language acquisition, insofar as children with better verbal skills are better prepared for school entry. We believed that attempts to enhance language acquisition require adherence to the principles of children's language development and must be consistent with how children use language in their spontaneous utterances. We preferred a classroom curriculum that would adhere to many of the time-honored practices for the preparation of children for school entry. In particular, we wished to provide instruction within the context of developmentally appropriate practice in early
Table 2. Criteria for a language-focused curriculum for language intervention

1. The curriculum should be designed for all preschool children to benefit from activities to enhance their language acquisition, insofar as children with better verbal skills are better prepared for school entry.
2. The curriculum should adhere to the principles of children’s language acquisition.
3. Many of the time-honored practices for the preparation of children for school entry should be followed, along with developmentally appropriate practices with regard to children’s cognitive and social development.
4. Care should be taken to ensure that children with speech and language impairments are educated in a classroom with their typically developing peers in the least restrictive environment (LRE).
5. Programming staff should ensure that children with language intervention needs are not separated from the group in ways that highlight their limitations; therefore, children should not be identified for individual therapy sessions outside the room.
6. Parental involvement should be recognized as an important component of any efforts to develop children’s language, social, and cognitive skills.

childhood curricula, in which the instruction was appropriate for levels of preschoolers’ cognitive, social, and motivational functioning [see Richarz, 1993, for discussion].

We wanted to ensure that children with speech and language impairments were educated in a classroom with their typically developing peers. This is stipulated by IDEA in the requirement that services be provided in a least restrictive environment (LRE). We wanted to ensure that the children with language intervention needs were not separated from the group in ways that highlighted their limitations; therefore, children were neither identified for individual therapy sessions nor removed from the group for instruction. Finally, we recognized that parental involvement is an important component of any efforts to develop children’s language, social, and cognitive skills.

A program that met these criteria would constitute a language-focused curriculum. Because there was reason to believe that an LFC would be an effective approach to early childhood intervention and none was available, we set out to develop and evaluate such a program.

ESTABLISHMENT AND MAINTENANCE OF
THE LANGUAGE ACQUISITION PRESCHOOL

The Language Acquisition Preschool was established in 1985, with funding as a 3-year demonstration program provided by what was then the Handicapped Children’s Early Education Program of the Department of Education (Award #G008630279). LACP subsequently received financial support from the University of Kansas and the Kansas Early Childhood Research Institute (OSEP Award #HO24U80001). From the outset, LACP has been affiliated with the University of Kansas and has served three major objectives: 1) to provide services to young children, 2) to be a training site for the development of practitioners in speech-language pathology and early childhood intervention, and 3) to facilitate research. In this volume, we highlight the first and third objectives. Initially, LACP was designed as a service delivery system with feasibility for local school systems. As of 1994, LACP is incorporated into the local community’s service
delivery options for children with speech and language impairments. LAP's LFC (see Table 2) has also been implemented elsewhere (as described in the final chapter of this volume). We regard this transition from the university to the local school system and replicated implementations elsewhere as important indicators of the ecological validity of the LFC and of LAP. In short, the LFC is a viable clinical service delivery model with documented program effectiveness (see Chapters 9 and 10).

THE CHILDREN ENROLLED IN LAP

The LAP classroom meets on a half-day basis, 4 days a week. One class meets in the morning, another in the afternoon. The maximum enrollment is 21 children in each class. The children are evenly distributed across three groups: 1) children with speech-language impairments; 2) children who are learning English as a second language; and 3) children who are developing within the range of normative expectations for speech and language, cognitive, and social development. In the classroom, there is variation according to ethnic identity and parental social class. Children may enter the class at any time, although we prefer to enroll the children with speech and language impairments as close to age 3 as possible. Because these children are enrolled when they are identified as needing intervention, some have been enrolled as late as during the summer prior to their entry into kindergarten that fall.

It is important to note that fully a third of the children in each class are typically developing. This mixture of children is crucial, in that it provides, at any one time, many children who are possible conversational partners who can illustrate the targeted patterns of speech and language, and do so in the context of ongoing play activities. This means that there are children in the classroom for the language-learning children to identify with and emulate. We believe that this mixture constitutes the best example of LRE for language acquisition and intervention.
The children targeted for enrollment in LAP are youngsters who meet conventional clinical criteria for diagnosis with speech and/or language impairment. This group neither represents the entire caseload of speech-language pathologists, nor encompasses all children with clinically significant speech and language problems. The LAP classroom does not include children with significant intellectual impairments, hearing loss, and sociobehavioral problems. The selection of this group allowed us to test the LFC with a sample of children who, although far from homogeneous, are less diverse than a group including children who have associated impairments. An additional reason for these enrollment specifications was that it was possible to study program outcomes as a function of speech-language limitations, relatively independent of cognitive, social, or severe perceptual limitations. Almost all of the available literature about similar intervention programs is concerned with children with multiple disabilities, and in those cases it is not possible to determine which of the findings are attributable primarily to communication impairments and which are attributable to other factors. Finally, it was possible for us to have a set of selective criteria because, in our community, appropriate alternative preschool placements are available. Thus, a decision not to enroll a child in LAP did not present us with the ethical problem of denying needed clinical services to children.

As the LAP program has matured, it has been adapted in other settings. Some implementations are described in Chapter 12 of this volume. In other settings, a broader definition of eligible children has been used with less stringent exclusionary criteria. Thus, it seems that the LFC framework is applicable beyond the group of children with whom it was developed, and who are described in detail here.

**Children with Specific Language Impairment**

The criteria that we have followed for enrollment of children in LAP are such that all of the youngsters with specific language impairment (SLI) would qualify for educational services in the public schools of our state. A discussion of the nature of their speech and language impairments is provided in Chapters 2 and 5. The criteria for enrollment include inclusionary as well as exclusionary considerations; they are as follows:

1. All of the children are between 3 and 5 years of age.
2. All of the children demonstrate levels of intellectual ability within or above the normal range, as measured by the Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children (Kaufman & Kaufman, 1983).
3. None of the children demonstrate clinically significant difficulties with social or emotional development.
4. None of the children demonstrate a physical or visual impairment.
5. All of the children pass a hearing screening for typical levels of acuity.
6. All of the children demonstrate clinically significant difficulties in speech and/or language development.

Children are identified as having SLI if they meet at least two of the following criteria:
1. A clinically significant impairment in receptive vocabulary, as evidenced by a score 1 or more standard deviations below the mean for their age on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test--Revised (PPVT--R) [Dunn & Dunn, 1981] 
2. A clinically significant impairment in language skills, as evidenced by a score 1 or more standard deviations below the mean for their age on the receptive and/or expressive portion of the Reynell Developmental Language Scales–U.S. Edition [Reynell & Gruber, 1990] 
3. A clinically significant deficit in expected sentence length, as evidenced by a mean length of utterance (MLU) below the predicted range for their chronological age [Miller, 1981] 
4. A clinically significant deficit in grammatical development, as evidenced by nonmastery of at least two age-appropriate grammatical morphemes [de Villiers & de Villiers, 1973] 
5. A clinically significant deficit in speech skills, as evidenced by a low percentile score on the Goldman-Fristoe Test of Articulation (GFTA) [Goldman & Fristoe, 1986], and limited intelligibility of spontaneous speech 

Children Learning English as a Second Language 

There is another group of children who have communication limitations and who offer many parallels to the children with SLI, but who do not have SLI. These are children learning English as a second language (ESL). These youngsters are appearing in the public schools in ever-increasing numbers as a consequence of the flood of immigrants to the United States during the 1980s. A current estimate is that, nationally, there are 3.3 million children with limited English proficiency [Hakuta, 1993]. Educators have struggled with how to implement language-appropriate instructional programs. Although few generalizations can be drawn, one that is noncontroversial is that second language teaching is most effective in the early stages of language acquisition [cf. Chapter 6; Tabor & Snow, in press]. Furthermore, if children learning English as a second language can be well on their way to mastery of English by kindergarten, they will be better prepared for school entry. Introduction of English to non-native speakers in preschool programs is a desirable way to develop new language skills in a naturalistic and meaningful context [Tabor & Snow, in press]. Thus, there is a need for effective preschool language facilitation for children learning English as a second language, as well as children with SLI, if all children are to be “ready to learn” when they begin kindergarten. 

The children learning English as a second language were included in the LAP classroom as a way of evaluating the effectiveness of the LFC for these children and the children with SLI. Children for whom English is a second language also were thought to add positively to the program in two ways. First is that they would add to the cultural diversity. The children’s home countries and home languages were diverse and literally represented a worldwide distribution. Second, their language diversity would help establish a metalinguistic awareness of the forms of language, and the fact that there is a certain arbitrariness about language.
One must speak English, not Japanese, in order to be understood in the classroom. One must be intelligible, and one must use words in the expected ways. Thus, there could be a naturalness in the focus on linguistic forms and repetition of targeted structures if some of the children in the classroom were obviously learning a new language.

The children learning English as a second language who were selected for enrollment in LAP met the following criteria:

1. Ages 3–5 years
2. Native language other than English
3. Recent arrival in the United States, with little or no previous exposure to the English language or American culture
4. Scores within the normal range of performance on the Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children (Kaufman & Kaufman, 1983) (To allow for some cultural acclimation prior to testing, the test is administered during the second semester of enrollment.)

Typically Developing Children

Approximately one third of the children who attend LAP are native speakers of English and are exhibiting typical patterns of language development; these children are drawn from the community. They meet the first five criteria specified above for children with SLI. It is important to note that there is a balance of children, such that fully one third of the children in the classroom are developing language in a typical fashion. We have also, whenever possible, included children from ethnic minorities within the group of typically developing children.

LAP'S PROFESSIONAL STAFF

LAP's core professional staff consist of a classroom teacher and a full-time classroom aide. The teacher for the period of time reported in this volume is dually certified in early childhood education and in speech-language pathology. If such a dually certified teacher is not available, it would be possible, with some minor modification, to implement the LFC with a collaborative arrangement of an early childhood educator and a speech-language pathologist. An additional staff member is the family services coordinator, who is responsible for the liaison between the children's caregivers and the classroom (see Chapter 8). For much of the history of LAP, there have been two co-directors who have been responsible for the funding and the research aspects of the program.

OVERVIEW OF THIS VOLUME

The chapters in this volume describe the language-focused curriculum that was developed during the initial phases of implementation of the Language Acquisition Preschool and report what has been learned during the years of its implementation. The book provides a rationale for the approach used, describes the guiding principles of the LFC and how it is implemented, reports its use with children and families, and analyzes its ef-
fectiveness in enhancing children’s speech and language skills. Included are findings from the classroom that reveal the ways in which young children’s language competency interacts with their social development, and what happens to the children as they leave the program and enter school.

The development of the LFC was based on what is known about children’s language acquisition and language impairment; this information is summarized in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, a concentrated normative model (CNM) of the technology of language intervention, which characterizes the framework underlying the language focus of the curriculum, is described. The ways in which the CNM influences the LFC are laid out in operational guidelines for the design of a classroom-based intervention program. The specific techniques for implementation of the LFC are then described in detail in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. In Chapter 7, findings are reported about the ways in which verbal interactions and social relationships among preschoolers are influenced by their language competencies. Chapter 8 describes the parent component of the LFC. The speech and language outcomes at the immediate conclusion of children’s participation in LAP are described in Chapters 9 and 10. Long-term outcomes, when children are in elementary school, are described in Chapter 11. Finally, in Chapter 12 are descriptions of clinical settings in which the LFC has been replicated outside of the LAP classroom. As a whole, these chapters constitute a report of what happens to children when they are enrolled in LAP, the subsequent changes in their speech and language performance, and the long-term outcomes of their preschool experiences.

REFERENCES


