
The Rationale and Operating Principles for a Language-Focused Curriculum for Preschool Children

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The need for a language-focused curriculum (LFC) was established in Chapter 1 of this book. We wished to establish a setting for language intervention that was appropriate for preschool children, adhered to the principles of children's language acquisition, followed developmentally appropriate practice with regard to children's social and cognitive development, ensured that children with specific language impairment (SLI) were educated in a least restrictive environment (LRE) and were not singled out for special treatment, and recognized that parents are important participants in the intervention endeavor.

As we worked to create this setting, the greatest challenge came in specifying the details. The literature pointed in the direction of establishing an environment that was likely to activate children's language acquisition, rather than train language one skill at a time. It was also the case that the ordinary
preschool classroom was unlikely to be effective for the children with SLI. So, there needed to be particular techniques and principles introduced into the classroom curriculum that served to focus on language acquisition. It was necessary to develop a model of language intervention that accommodated these goals.

CONCENTRATED NORMATIVE MODEL OF LANGUAGE INTERVENTION

The model that guides the language-focused curriculum is called a concentrated normative model (CNM), which is summarized in Table 1. The normative focus of the CNM is addressed here first, followed by a discussion of its concentrated features. The normative aspects of this model reflect a commitment to an approach that emphasizes the commonalities across children and the strong potential of young children's developmental momentum. This has several effects. One is that language intervention is conducted in a naturalistic early childhood classroom setting, much like other preschool classrooms. The second is that the methodology draws heavily on existing normative models of language acquisition. The descriptive information in the normative literature about children's language acquisition provides essential markers for expected linguistic and communicative milestones. Furthermore, the normative literature illuminates underlying mental mechanisms and processes instrumental to language acquisition and suggests ways in which a child's interactions with other speakers can influence and facilitate language acquisition. Third, in keeping with the normative emphasis on the importance of a child's home as a context for language use, participation of families in the language intervention program is vigorously encouraged. Fourth, it is recognized that although language acquisition is intimately associated with a child's emerging social and cognitive competencies, it is at the same time a distinctive domain of aptitude. Furthermore, this domain may need special attention for a significant proportion of young children, if they are to meet the normative expectations for participation in kindergarten.

The concentrated aspects of the CNM recognize the distinctiveness of language as a developmental domain and the need to provide two

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<tr>
<th>Concentrated aspects</th>
<th>Normative aspects</th>
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<td>Concentrates on language in the classroom</td>
<td>Emphasizes commonalities across children and strong potential of the developmental momentum</td>
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<td>Generally emphasizes the centrality of language in the curriculum</td>
<td>Allows for intervention in the classroom</td>
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<td>Uses special techniques to draw children's attention to targeted linguistic forms</td>
<td>Is consistent with normative models of language acquisition</td>
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<td>Provides planned redundancy</td>
<td>Emphasizes the participation of families</td>
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<td>Recognizes that language is a distinctive domain of development</td>
<td>Recognizes that language teaching requires special emphasis</td>
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forms of concentrated emphasis on that domain. One is the recognition that language and communication skills permeate most of an early childhood curriculum. Although there is widespread recognition that children need to develop language skills during the preschool years, it is also the case that language skills are often overlooked as a specific part of a child's preschool experiences. 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 second sense of concentration is the need to highlight specific language skills in order for children to notice the differences between linguistic forms, as well as the functional uses and outcomes of communication. This highlighting can come in several ways. One is the use of special techniques for drawing a child's attention to targeted forms as the teacher uses them or as the child produces them, such as focusing on key contrasts in linguistic forms, repeating what the child says, moving a new word to the end of the sentence, or pronouncing a word in an emphatic, or highly stressed, way. The other way is to provide planned redundancy, so a youngster can hear past tense markings or new vocabulary items, over and over again in interesting ways. Thus, a concentration on language, its role throughout the early education curriculum, and the need to highlight specific instances, especially for some children, is a natural complement to the normative focus, in order to maximize a youngster's developmental momentum. At the same time, these techniques of concentrating on language provide a language-enriched environment that is qualitatively, as well as quantitatively, different from the language input that a child is likely to experience outside of the classroom.

The concentrated normative model aligns well with current educational policy initiatives (cf. Chapter 1). This chapter provides some background information for implementation of the CNM in preschools, and then moves into some of the particular features of the Language Acquisition Preschool (LAP) classroom. The initial section highlights current developments in early intervention and the importance of language acquisition as a developmental achievement of the preschool years. Next are sections that describe children's language acquisition and the condition of specific language impairment. These are followed by a description of the children enrolled in LAP. The chapter concludes with the principles that guide the implementation of the CNM in the LAP classroom.

**ENHANCING LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**

The best source of information about naturalistic interactive techniques for the enhancement of language acquisition is the literature describing the ways in which caregivers speak to their children. There is a bit of a paradox here, in that such techniques may not be necessary for activating the language acquisition process for most children. At least the cur-
rent conclusion is that, for most children, there is no "correct" or "necessary" way for adults to adjust their speech to them, beyond the requirement of talking with them in the course of everyday events. At the same time, it is also the case that certain features of language input can enhance language acquisition. Although such ways of adjusting talk to children are usually not necessary, they can facilitate the rate of language acquisition. These features of language input, then, can serve as the basis for the development of specific interactive techniques for language instruction.

In the development of the LFC, we were guided by reports of features of parental input that are thought to promote children's language development. Among them are the following:

- Child-centered talk (i.e., talk about what the child is doing)
- Semantically contingent talk (i.e., talk that repeats content in the child's utterances)
- Talk embedded in familiar interactive routines or scripts, such as book reading (Butler, 1984; Lieven, 1984)

We enlarged upon these techniques considerably and developed new ones (e.g., focused contrasts) in order to highlight specific linguistic distinctions. These techniques are described in detail in Chapter 4.

We were further struck by the similarity in what was reported as effective for typically developing children and what was advocated for children learning English as a second language (cf. Tabor, 1987). Accounts of second language learning emphasized that language proficiency is best developed in supportive contexts that supply cues necessary for comprehension. Thus, optimal talk to children who are learning English is that which is understandable, interesting, and/or relevant, and provided in sufficient quantity. A "here and now" orientation is helpful, as is the use of contextual information. Other helpful techniques are adults' modification of interactions by means of devices such as self- and other-repetition, confirmation and comprehension checks, and clarification requests. All of these techniques have been advocated as good practice for intervention with children who have language impairments.

There was reason, then, to expect that the development of a language-facilitating classroom setting that would be of benefit to children with SLI would benefit children learning English as a second language as well, and vice versa. Furthermore, our intuitions were that these youngsters could bring complementary characteristics to the classroom. The second-language competence of the children learning English as a second language would help draw attention to the arbitrary conventions of language, which would help children with SLI in their ability to focus on language as a system of communication. Conversely, the children with SLI would have better English skills than the non-English-speaking children, although less complex than typically developing children, so the children with SLI could serve as useful language models. Furthermore, the simplified input appropriate for each of these groups and concern about comprehension processes would be suitable for both groups.
Thus, our consideration of the children to be enrolled in the classroom was guided by our consideration of the normative language acquisition literature, and our development of the concentrated normative model of language intervention. This led to the mix of children in the classroom described in Chapter 1.

**LANGUAGE INTERVENTION**

The language-focused curriculum (LFC) and the associated CNM led to a departure from conventional language intervention techniques. Conventional approaches emphasize carefully constructed language drills and speech practice sessions conducted by an adult with an individual child (or sometimes with a small group of children with SLI). In response to the emergence of a focus on pragmatics in the normative literature appearing in the 1970s and 1980s, there has been heightened recognition of the need to incorporate social uses of language in clinical settings, but this is often done in individual therapy sessions, in which an adult and child “pretend” to enact play sessions or conversations.

The effectiveness of the traditional methods, particularly with young children, receives a mixed report (cf. Fey, 1986; Leonard, 1981). On the one hand, it is possible to establish new skills in the therapy settings. Children learn how to label things, how to put plural affixes on nouns or tense markers on verbs, or how to pronounce selected words. On the other hand, often there is very little carryover of the newly trained skills to the actual conversations the child has outside the therapy room, with peers or adults of the “real world” (Hart & Rogers-Warren, 1978). The challenge, then, is to develop instructional methods that are meaningful for a child and are likely to be of immediate use in real-world conversational settings.

Our approach was to bring the setting to the child, instead of asking a child to imagine relevant contexts. Intrinsic to the setting are other children, who serve as playmates, conversational partners, models for language use, and sources of feedback on the effectiveness of communication.

Such inspiration is apparent in other models now available. For example, there is exploration of a whole language approach to preschool intervention (cf. Norris & Hoffman, 1990, 1993) and there are curricular materials that emphasize a social/cognitive approach in the classroom setting (cf. Bricker, 1993, for younger children; Weitzman, 1992, for preschool-age children). What is special about the LFC as formulated here is the adherence to the CNM, with an emphasis on the LRE requirements of IDEA, and the need to specify individualized education programs (IEPs) for each child. Also, what is noteworthy here is that the LFC was implemented and evaluated in a real classroom setting. Thus, in this volume the description of the LFC is accompanied by formal evaluation of the short- and long-term effectiveness of the LFC, documentation of the social interactions of children in the classroom, and description of replications of the LFC in settings beyond the LAP classroom.
To summarize, there are multiple advantages of a classroom-based language intervention program (see Table 2): 1) the program can be carried out in a way that is congruent with a concentrated normative approach; 2) such an approach is consistent with an LRE service model; 3) this approach is naturally attuned to a child's interests and social motivations for the use of language; 4) such programming allows for a meaningful, high-focused language curriculum, with naturalistic opportunities for redundancy, repetition, and practice; 5) it affords an opportunity for rich social interactions and the use of language in socially useful ways; and 6) this approach eliminates the need for an extra level of instruction to establish generalization. Language teaching contexts are embedded in real-world interactions.

The Language Acquisition Preschool serves as one possible instantiation of an LFC. There will surely be others to follow, which is a welcome state of affairs. What is needed are intervention settings suitable for particular children, in particular communities, with particular configurations of staff talents and resources. Variations in implementation are likely. A few such examples are provided in Chapter 11.

OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES FOR THE CONCENTRATED NORMATIVE MODEL

Implementation of the CNM was guided by a set of principles drawn from the normative language acquisition literature, from what is known about preschool children with speech and language impairments and effective language therapy, and from what is understood about recommended practices for early childhood intervention. These principles are presented here as a way of highlighting some of the main themes that will be elaborated upon in the chapters that follow. These principles can be summarized as follows (cf. Table 3).

Language Intervention Is Best Provided in a Meaningful Social Context

The most effective way to provide language intervention is by finding a meaningful social context. By “meaningful social context” we mean that the children use their language skills to interact with children and adults in a naturalistic manner, where the conversational intent and communicative needs and discourse outcomes are real. The children use their verbal skills to understand what the teachers say, to request assistance or make comments, to squabble over toys, and to role play in the dramatic play center. This means that when they successfully negotiate posses-

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<th>Table 2. Advantages of a classroom-based language intervention program, utilizing a language-focused curriculum</th>
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<td>1. Can be carried out in a way that is congruent with the concentrated normative model (CNM)</td>
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<td>2. Is consistent with a least restrictive environment (LRE) for intervention</td>
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<td>3. Is naturally attuned to a child's interests and social motivations for the use of language</td>
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<td>4. Allows for a meaningful, language-focused curriculum with naturalistic opportunities for redundancy, repetition, and practice</td>
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<td>5. Affords opportunities for rich social interactions and socially useful language</td>
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<td>6. Eliminates the need for an extra level of training to establish generalization into spontaneous language use</td>
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Table 3. Operational guidelines for the concentrated normative model

1. Language intervention is best provided in a meaningful social context.
2. Language facilitation occurs throughout the entire curriculum.
3. The language curriculum is rooted in content themes.
4. Language intervention begins with the child.
5. Verbal interaction is encouraged.
6. Passive language learning and overt responses are encouraged.
7. Children's utterances are accorded functional value.
8. Valuable teaching occasions can arise in child-to-child interactions.
9. Parents are valuable partners in language intervention programming.
10. Routine parent evaluations are an integral part of the program.

...ision of a favorite toy, they have achieved a real payoff as a consequence of effective use of speech and language. Conversely, if their speech and language impairments limit their social effectiveness, they develop alternative strategies, as they are moving toward greater competencies. There is no need to simulate conversational interactions or to assume some sort of a difficulty gradient. The children are able to guide their own participation in meaningful social situations.

Language Facilitation Occurs Throughout the Entire Curriculum

There is no special “language time” in a classroom following the CNM. The opportunities to learn how to communicate are not artificially carved into 30-minute blocks. Instead, opportunities to model appropriate language forms, and to encourage youngsters to use new words or linguistic structures or sounds, are woven into the flow of ongoing events. These opportunities involve the use of specialized language interaction techniques, as reported in Chapter 4.

The Language Curriculum Is Rooted in Content Themes

The use of content themes is a standard way to organize an early education curriculum that lends itself nicely to a language-focused program. The designation of a theme allows for a common topic of reference, use of key vocabulary items, and the opportunity to provide planned redundancy in content over a few days' time. Children thrive in a certain amount of familiarity of routines and planned activities. When they know what the theme is, they can communicate about that topic, can plan for the next day's activities, and can develop more abstract cognitive representations of the given content area. Language, then, is embedded in the concepts and notions relevant to a particular theme, where meanings and words can become aligned.

Language Intervention Begins with the Child

A child's attempt to communicate starts with something of interest to the child, in a context with functional value for that child, as a means to communicate an idea, need, or want, or to respond to a conversational partner, to keep alive the linkages of interpersonal connectedness that can be achieved by successful communication. The best language intervention occurs when the adult interactions can be woven seamlessly...
into the child's discourse in a way that draws attention to targeted linguistic forms, without becoming obtrusive, making the child self-conscious, or demeaning the child's self-esteem.

These are the same features of successful interaction with adults. So, perhaps this principle can be rephrased as "language intervention begins with a person." The difference is that children's agendas are sufficiently different from adults', so that it often requires a bit of retraining for adults to learn to think again along the same lines as children.

The implementation of such a principle also follows some standard adult conventions for interaction. If the child determines the topic of conversation, it is a good sign that the topic is of interest. The adult, then, can try to follow up on the child's topics. Just as overt correction in public places is demeaning to an adult, children also seem to be put off by correction of their attempts to communicate when they are in the midst of an interaction. Another way in which there is similarity between children and adults is that children will be more likely to converse with adults who are good listeners, who wait until it is their turn to speak [thereby honoring the rules of a good conversation], and who regard a child's attempt to communicate as meaningful and socially valid.

Such an approach assumes that children can construct new pieces of their linguistic system if they are allowed the opportunities, and if there are appropriate redundancies and ways of highlighting the parts of the grammar, sound system, or vocabulary that are just within reach. This seems to be the case for children with SLI, children learning English as a second language, and typically developing children.

Verbal Interaction Is Encouraged

The most fundamental technique for developing language skills is to increase the opportunities for use. As children practice their newly developing skills, they have occasion to improve their accuracy and to reap the intrinsic benefits of successful conversational interactions. They can tell the teacher what happened at home last night, successfully negotiate for a toy or a turn at a game, or take a turn playing the role of the cashier at the fast food restaurant. Achieving this objective is clearly related to the principle that language intervention begins with the child. It is hard to imagine a successful language intervention preschool in which the children are sitting quietly while the teacher does all the talking.

Passive Language Learning and Overt Responses Are Encouraged

Complementary to the principle of encouraging verbal interaction is that sometimes children, especially children with SLI and children learning English as a second language, seem to need opportunities just to observe, to watch and listen as conversations flow around them. If there is sufficient redundancy and routine in settings to allow them to infer meanings and thereby align meanings with linguistic forms, they can begin to build their language comprehension in this way. Just as adult second language learners can benefit from observational opportunities, a time to "soak up" language, so can youngsters.
In adults' eagerness to teach children, they often behave as if the way to ensure learning is to ensure an immediate response. In the most inappropriate forms, this can begin to look like the old-fashioned 'I say—you say' drills. Anyone who has experienced these knows that they have limited value as a way to teach language. Such relentless insistence on immediate responses is not only tiring to the learner, but it also lacks conversational validity. It violates the assumption of meaningful interaction and of valid conversational intent. Because almost all children do follow the impulse of their intentions to communicate, they will do so when they are ready and appropriate occasions are presented.

**Children’s Utterances Are Accorded Functional Value**

If children’s utterances are treated as meaningful attempts to communicate, they are more likely to achieve that status. Although this principle is embedded in the previous comments, it merits explicit mention. This principle is especially important with regard to children who have SLI or who are learning English as a second language. The initial utterances of these children in a classroom setting may have a tentative quality or limited intelligibility. Thus, it is especially important that adults recognize these early attempts and accord them a social value by responding to their content rather than their form.
Valuable Teaching Occasions Can Arise in Child-to-Child Interactions

Children’s interactions with each other are meaningful contexts for emerging communication skills. It is one thing for a teacher to regard a youngster’s comments as having communicative value. It is something of a much higher value when a child can initiate a conversation with a peer and have a successful exchange of comments, or, better yet, a successful negotiation about a play activity.

The development of peer interaction skills requires practice, opportunities to try them out. At the same time, preschool children have a deserved reputation for being blunt about their preferences for peer partners, and in the real world give-and-take of play interactions they can ignore or reject each other’s advances. A certain amount of this rejection seems to be the stuff of childhood play interactions, and children seem to accept it readily.

However, if children with SLI and children learning English as a second language become overly dependent on teachers, they will lose out on opportunities to try out their skills. Therefore, it is important that teachers recognize occasions when peer interactions can be encouraged, albeit in a naturalistic manner.

This principle can be illustrated by comparison to a basketball team. In order to play on a basketball team, an individual must learn how and when to pass the ball to other members of the team. This learning takes place in the context of interactions among the team members. It is not enough to practice one-on-one with the coach, or to pass only to the coach when the team is practicing. In the course of learning how to pass in the middle of a game, sometimes the ball will be dropped or the pass will be stolen, but it is nevertheless crucial for a novice player to have experience in attempting to pass. In the same way, for children to learn how to carry out interactions with their peers, they must have the opportunities to practice the techniques with the other members of their social team.

Parents Are Valuable Partners in Language Intervention Programming

The essential contributions of families and home settings have been recognized in federal legislative guidelines for special education services. IDEA stipulates that services for infants and toddlers (up to 3 years of age) must include the development of individualized family service plans (IFSPs). The IFSP is to be determined in collaboration with family representatives. Thus, family members are recognized as integral parts of the service delivery and implementation system.

In a similar fashion, parents are included in programming for school-age children with disabling conditions. (School-age is defined as 3–21 years of age.) In IAP, as in other service settings, parents are represented in the planning of the required individualized education program (IEP) that guides the development of program goals and activities for each child.

The point to be made here is that, for maximal effectiveness, parental participation should permeate all aspects of intervention planning.
In short, the better informed the parents are and the more opportunities for them to provide feedback about their child, the more likely that there will be a synchrony between a child's home environment and that of the classroom. The goal is to make it as easy as possible for a child to move from the verbal interactive contexts of the classroom to that of the home and back. Redundancy and repetition of key concepts, linguistic frames, targeted word meanings, and key sounds or special words are desirable ways to maximize the establishment of internalized rules and representations that are likely to generalize across settings. This can only be achieved by close cooperation between the home and the school.

**Routine Parent Evaluations Are an Integral Part of the Program**

Parents do the evaluating in a CNM-based program; they are not the recipients of evaluation. There are multiple ways in which parental feedback can be sought, and LAP incorporates some of these possibilities. This form of consumer satisfaction information allows for a validity check on the curriculum, which is essential to programming based on the principles of meaningfulness, relevance to immediate communication needs, and children's needs.

**FORMULATION OF INTERVENTION GOALS**

Although the LFC and related CNM have what may be characterized as a holistic approach to language intervention, neither denies the value of identifying individual components of communicative competence that can be targeted as intervention goals for an individual child. Just as linguists have found it useful to partition language into components, so interventionists can focus on certain aspects of a child's communicative system in order to identify targeted goals for intervention. This is in contrast to certain interpretations of a whole language approach that argue for a nondivisible approach to language (cf. Norris & Hoffman, 1993). The CNM assumes that, with the goal of enhanced competency, certain language skills can be identified, targeted for special emphasis, and then monitored for change. It is also quite likely that change in targeted components of language also brings change in other aspects. Thus, there is likely to be a spreading effect, in that any partitioning of language is a somewhat artificial exercise, given that the components of language are intricately associated with each other. The value of targeted, discrete goals is that they allow for a shared sense among the interventionists as to the linguistic forms and functions to emphasize and contrast for an individual child. Such shared goals are essential for the coordination of efforts of the adults in the classroom and the collaboration with parents or other caregivers outside the classroom.

In summary, the language-focused curriculum advocated here is based on a concentrated normative model of language intervention and follows a set of operational guidelines for implementation in a language-focused curriculum. The specific techniques and curricular materials are described in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. The parent component is described in Chapter 8.
REFERENCES


