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ABSTRACT

After experimenting extensively with a large assortment of classroom aids, e.g., blocks and rhythm instruments to stimulate the oral expression of preschool children, it was found that far less language expression resulted than had been anticipated. When those experiments which had been mildly successful were evaluated, it was decided that young children needed to learn how to look at pictures, what to look for, and what the whole and the parts of objects were called. Since learning began with perceiving, preschool children seemed to require large numbers of guided perceptual experiences in which they could see, hear, and feel the materials while their attention was being called simultaneously to the differentiating characteristics of each object. Relative success was then achieved in stimulating oral expression with such classroom materials as blocks, photographs, magnets and shapes, and a terrarium because the children's perceptions had been carefully guided toward the uniqueness of each aid as the peculiarities were labeled and discussed. These experiences seemed to indicate that all classroom materials should be introduced to young children on the perceptual level primarily as language materials in which the clues are used and reused to reinforce their context. (JF)

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STIMULATING ORAL EXPRESSION WITH PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

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Instigating this study was a certain discomfort I felt about some of the materials and methods suggested in language arts textbooks and teacher's manuals for stimulating oral expression with young children. An item which particularly interested me happens to be the one most frequently suggested for use with young children, pictures. Early childhood and primary grade teachers are exhorted to build huge collections of this type of visual aid as if the size of the picture file indicates the teacher's professional capabilities. What has disturbed me is that although I have what I think to be the most unusual accumulation of photos, illustrations, and art reproductions my displaying them prompted far less language expression than the textbooks had promised. Why this should be was one of the questions behind the study. Obviously my use of the pictures or the pictures I had selected were at fault.

At first the questions related to my picture files were thought to be a simple matter of finding the key words or key sentences which would unlock the insights of the children and produce a torrent of verbiage. My impression was that the pictures needed to be presented in a framework for solving problems and that the uncorking phrases would be those which stated the problem in such a way as to excite responses. Therefore, with all the confidence and aplomb of someone who feels he knows the answer to a problem before he knows the problem, I added to the study the misuse of other materials common to a prekindergarten classroom. The things I had in mind were the large building blocks, the rhythm instruments, and the accumulation of junk which we are pleased to call "the science corner." Since I had already covertly decided that problem solving was the key, the other three types of material were germane to the main topic of the study. The pictures, I felt, were visual only; the blocks were visual-motor; the rhythm instruments, aural-motor; and the science corner things were visual-tactile. The four were complementary to each other, and each represented an area needing exploration. Certainly the blocks, the rhythm instruments, and science things were not making much of a contribution to the development of language usage.

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Involved in the study were some of the children in the prekindergarten and kindergarten classes at the Center for Innovation in Education at the State University College at Brockport. Cooperating in the explorations were Mrs. Ellen Gilbert, the prekindergarten teacher, and Miss Sue Kinney, a kindergarten teacher. Also involved were the college students in Early Childhood Education.

As the first experiment, nine photos measuring 5" x 7" were mounted on art boards and displayed on the bulletin board of the prekindergarten classroom. The subjects of the photos were a cat, lion, zebra, snail, butterfly, toad, frog, owl, and a cardinal. The photos were hung in September before the children began school and were left up until the end of October. Supposedly forty-five children saw the pictures. At the end of the period, three of the pictures, the cat, lion, and snail were mixed in with three other similar pictures and one group of children was asked to pick out the ones that had been on the wall. The children were unable to say which three of the six had been displayed.

We tried another approach. We showed the children the nine pictures one at a time and encouraged them to talk about them. Most of the responses were one word statements which identified the animal. For instance, we held up the photo of the zebra and cheerfully asked, "What do we see here?" "Zebra!" the children yelled. Undaunted by the brevity of the language used, we came back with, "What's the zebra doing?" Silence. (The zebra was eating hay.) Next picture.

In our third attempt to stimulate conversations on the pictures we made up stories about the animals in the pictures, giving them names and calling attention to some of the animals' characteristics. We named the lion "Lazy Leo" because when the photo was taken he was lying down with his head in his paws with one eye opened and the other closed. We told the children that when we took the picture the lion slowly opened one eye to look at us and then he went back to sleep. With the snail, we called attention to its spiral shell and told the children that the snail carries his house wherever he goes. We asked if any of the children knew of another animal that carried its house with it. One child said that he had a turtle and the turtle took his house wherever he went. As for the zebra, we called attention to the stripes and asked if the animal looked like some other animals. The group immediately thought of a horse and a donkey. We put the photos of the toad and frog together and asked how the two were alike and how they were different. There was no response as to how they were alike, but the difference was noted in the coloration. The frog had spots. After going through the nine

photos, we left them out on the table where the children could handle them whenever they wished. At times we added more photos. Among them were a caterpillar, a beetle, a squirrel, and a flock of robins crowded into a birdbath. We introduced each new one with a story which called attention to some of the animal's physical characteristics rather than the oddities of the photographs. For instance, the long pointed beak of the robin was mentioned along with how the robin used it for digging worms out of the lawns. There was a noticeable improvement in the responses, although we were not fully aware of what we were doing. We had simply decided to get more mileage out of the photos and, in attempting to do so, we found ourselves calling attention to the ears of a frog, the number of toes it had on its front and hind legs, the texture of its skin, and what it eats.

At this point we felt that the experiment was trying to tell us something, but we were unable to decode the message. We thought that perhaps some of the pictures we had selected, the zebra for example, were outside the area of the children's experiences and, therefore, were of little value in prompting conversations. If that was true, then pictures relating to children and their activities would certainly prove to be of great value. With that in mind we photographed the children at play and at work in the classroom and on the adjacent playground. The photos were cropped and enlarged to make 8" x 10" pictures which excluded unnecessary foreground. We were amazed to find the number of children who refused to identify themselves in the photos. When presented with a photo that showed themselves, some told us that they did not know who the children were. When it was suggested that it was their picture, they denied it. Several of the children were observed to push the photos away as if to tell us that they wanted nothing to do with them. Those children who accepted their photos were asked to tell us what they were doing when the picture was taken. Only a very few replied. Some merely giggled. Others said, "I don't know." One child said, "I was little then." The photos in question showed the children stringing beads, riding tricycles, going down the slide, climbing the jungle gym, playing dress-up, or riding on the wooden toys.

We had taken photos of the prekindergarten children the previous year, and some were now in our kindergarten. We presented those children, who were now a year older, with their photos. The responses were considerably better. They recognized themselves and were able to identify some of their activities. With great frequency we heard them say, "I don't know what it is." We were unable to discover whether it was that they

did not recognize the material or equipment or that they did not know the name for it. While more children accepted the pictures of themselves, very few displayed any great interest in the photos of their classmates. For instance, one girl looked at the picture of a boy going down the slide, shoved it away, and said, "Ugh! That's Charley."

Thinking that perhaps a collection of neutral pictures would work better, we gathered from story books pictures of children in contact with each other. One picture showed a boy and a girl struggling over a book. Another showed two children running away from a third and younger child. We called this set problem pictures and expected the child to state the problem and tell how the problem might be solved. The questions were: "What is happening?" and "What should they do?" Six out of fourteen children saw the problem about the book, saying, "She (or he) is trying to take the book from him (or her)." None of the children could suggest a solution. Two children, a boy and a girl, looked at the picture and become very upset by what they saw. The girl said nothing, but a frown came over her face and the corners of her mouth dropped. The boy said, "I don't like it." The remaining six children simply looked and made no response. When none of the six who saw the problem in the first picture could see the conflict in the second, we abandoned the idea, taking the first two to the kindergarten to test them out there. Fifteen children saw the pictures. Thirteen identified the problem over the book. One child said that the boy and the girl were trying to tear up the book, and the remaining child offered no response. Of the thirteen who identified the problem as fighting for possession of the book, twelve thought that mother or the teacher would come. None saw the problem in the older children running away from the younger one.

Evolving out of the experiments is a theory as to why pictures fail at this age level and what function they might more properly serve. As to why the pictures failed, it appears with some certainty that children need to acquire first a certain level of sophistication in interpreting pictures. They need to learn how to look for cues in a picture, and they need a background of picture cues. What we were doing when we were asking the children to discuss a picture was requiring them to function on a high mental performance level. We were expecting them to verbalize upon concepts that had not yet been built, using cues that were not yet known. Before concepts can be articulated, the child must first have a schemata of classifications and categories so that he can have some basis for relating a stimulus to what is known. He must be able to recognize in a photograph the

equipment on the playground, he must know the name for the equipment, and he must know the words that describe what he is doing before he can discuss the photo. In the same way he must hold some schemata for, say, bird-ness in order to discuss the likenesses and differences between the pictures of an owl and a cardinal. But even before he can construct such a schemata, he needs to have a storehouse of labels for those differentiating cues. What are the labels for the cues which distinguish bird-ness? *Feathers, beaks, two legs,* and *wings* are some of them. Most important of all, however, is that the child must first perceive those differentiating characteristics in the stimulus. Consequently, these explorations seemed to indicate that we should begin on the perceptual level when working with pictures, calling to the children's attention those differentiating cues which distinguish the stimulus and supplying the labels for those cues.

Although we began early in the semester to sense that children needed to learn how to look at pictures, what to look for, and what the whole and the parts of the objects in the picture are called, we had not yet discovered the importance of perception as such. We were too much involved with our concern over the use or misuse of prekindergarten classroom materials and how such materials could provide the maximum in enriching the children's experiences. With that concern in mind we decided that we would see how long it would take the prekindergarten children to discover and put to use the blocks, the rhythm instruments, and the material in the science corner. We would deliberately not call attention to any of those things. The blocks were neatly stacked in a corner, the rhythm instruments were arranged on shelves about level with the eyes of the children, and rocks, magnifying glasses, magnets, and other related items were on a small table.

Six weeks went by and the blocks were not yet being used. The children climbed up on them and some children sat on them. But they were never taken from the corner. According to plan, Mrs. Gilbert took the children one morning to the block corner and unstacked the blocks suggesting that they build a house. She then proceeded to lay the foundation for a house. Very quickly the children got the idea and set to work. Mrs. Gilbert then left them. The children built the house complete with a doorway but without a roof. Mrs. Gilbert suggested that they might use the boards for a roof and put one in place. The children finished that.

I went to work on the science corner. While the children watched, I built a terrarium, lining the bottom with moss and using one of those small aluminum plates that frozen pies come in as a pond. I brought a live frog to school and the children

watched me put it into the terrarium. We put grasshoppers and flies into it for the frog to feed upon. We planted seeds among the moss. All the while I was doing this, the children were chattering about what was going on. They asked several good *why* questions, and every morning they ran to the terrarium to look for the frog and to see what was happening. Many of the children reported the experience to their parents. When an item or an activity stimulates the use of language outside the classroom, we may call it a great success. We felt that the success of the terrarium was due to the fact that the children had watched it come into being. We hadn't yet considered the idea that part of the success was relating to my talking about and describing everything I had put into it.

In the science corner were several magnets which did not seem to be attracting too much attention. I thought that I would "introduce" them as Mrs. Gilbert had introduced the blocks. Taking the magnets to a table where I was sure I would be noticed, I spread out some wire brads and several small nails. The children watched as I lifted with the magnet a long string of the brads. They wanted to try it, and before long they were dangling both brads and nails from the magnets. Then we thought we'd see which of the three magnets would hold the most brads. We tried it, and the smallest one, an alnico magnet, held by far the most. We then spread the brads out on a sheet of construction paper, placed the magnet under the paper, and by moving the magnet around gathered all of the brads into one pile over the magnet. We put the nails into a glass jar and placed the magnet outside. We saw that the nails clung to the side of the bottle where the magnet was. Finally we wondered out loud how many things in the room the magnet would stick to. The children ran about the room testing the magnets against everything in sight. They brought back reports about trucks, toys, jar lids, scissors, and even the chalkboard.

In the meantime, Mrs. Gilbert thought it was time to introduce the rhythm instruments. She gathered the children around the piano and showed them first how to keep time to chords she was playing by clapping hands. Then she introduced the instruments one at a time. They were of the shake, rattle, bang type. After each kind was introduced, she placed one in front of each child as the group sat on the floor. When all had been distributed, she played a march melody, and each child shook, rattled, or banged to the music. The results were very satisfying. They exchanged instruments and experimented with several others. After having been introduced to the instruments, the children discovered others on the shelves.

One other activity influenced the conclusion we reached. In our study on how to get the best use out of classroom materials, we set out to experiment with shapes. The shapes were to be a part of a bigger experiment with pictures. We gathered together artificial fruits and vegetables as follows: apple, pear, peach, orange, lemon, plum cherries, banana, cucumber, onion, carrot, and tomato. We had a member of art department paint realistic pictures of each. We began the lessons with the real fruit and vegetables, associated them directly with the artificial ones, and then tried to move to the pictures. We thought that by going from the real to the artificial and then to the pictures all of the children would be able to recognize all of the pictures. This did not prove to be so. Most of the children failed to identify correctly the peach, lemon, plum, and onion. A few failed on the pear and the cucumber. We had thought that the shape and the color of each would be so different from the others that by the time we got to the pictures those differences would be clearly understood. In presenting the real and the artificial items we told the children only the names of those they did not recognize. We made no reference to their shape except to indicate that some were round and some were not. We said nothing else about the shapes or colors simply because we thought that those characteristics were too obvious to mention. We thought that in seeing and touching the solid forms the children would discover those characteristics. The correct identification of the pictures would prove the discovery. It must be noted that the pictures were drawn to scale. As a matter of fact, the artist had literally traced the artificial objects so that the pictures were the exact size and shape of the realia.

Confronted with the failure of what looked to have been a good plan, we blundered about trying to find some step in the process that we had overlooked. We spread out the pictures on the table and placed the artificial items near the pictures. We asked the children to place the artificial ones on the picture that matched. To our surprise, the children did not perform the task too well. They went at it by a trial and error method, holding the tomato over the picture of the apple first. Apparently an image of the different shapes was not held in their minds. To test that notion, we held up the cucumber and asked several of the children who had demonstrated the ability to draw circles, squares, faces, and letters of the alphabet to draw it on the chalkboard. They could not reproduce the shape very well. One child took the cucumber from us, pressed it against the board, and tried to trace it. The other children fell in with the idea and tried to trace the apple, the pear, banana, and others. Their reproductions were fairly good considering the difficulties in trying to

follow the shape of a three-dimensional object. As I watched them struggling with the task, it occurred to me that I could make it easier for them if I were to provide for them flat shapes to trace. In anticipation of our next meeting with the children I traced the outlines of the apple, pear, peach, orange, plum, lemon, banana, cucumber, onion, and carrot onto shirt boards, cut them out, and painted the side that matched the pictures black. The reverse side I painted dark blue. The colors were for my benefit so that I should know which side to place up on the table. When I met with the children again, I held up each cutout and asked the children to find the item that matched it. They did this almost without an error. It was as if the silhouettes emphasized the outline of the objects, calling attention to the different shapes.

Part of the initial plan with the shapes was to start with the shapes of more familiar things, like fruits and vegetables, and then proceed to geometric figures. The purposes were to stimulate oral expression in the area of mathematics and to lay the foundation for interpreting pictures involving geometric forms. As with the fruit we intended to begin with substantive figures, figures that could be touched as well as seen. We therefore cut them out of hard wood three-eighths of an inch thick and five inches broad. The figures were a square, a rectangle, a circle, a triangle, a five-pointed star, and a six-pointed star. We let the children feel the square, counting for them the sides, and pointing out that the square looked the same no matter how we turned it. We did the same with the rectangle, except that we showed how the figure changed as we rotated it. Then we presented the triangle, counted the sides, and showed that it looked the same no matter on which side we stood it. Using the three figures as guides, we traced them on the chalkboard, placing one on top the other to make houses and buildings. After we felt that we had called sufficient attention to the outlines of the figures, we presented the two stars to the children and asked them to tell us about them. We had expected the children to notice the difference in the number of points. However, all fourteen of the children in the group indicated not the points but the depth of the cuts into the mass of wood. Some of the children touched the center of the six-pointed star, saying that it was bigger there. The others fingered the cuts in the five-pointed star, searching helplessly for words to communicate their ideas. One of that group said that the points were bigger.

We took the stars to the kindergarten and tried them on five of the children there. Again, their attention was drawn not so much toward the points but was directed to the mass in the center of the stars. We had asked the prekindergarten children

to count the points on the stars, thinking that their count would lead them to the clue as to how they were different. That idea proved to be wrong. The children would forget at which point they had begun their count, and they ended up with as many as eight points for both stars. The five kindergarten children counted the points accurately and made the discovery.

It appeared to us, as with the shapes of the fruits and vegetables, that the children needed to learn what to look at and what it was they were looking at. We expanded the cutouts to include an oval, a diamond, a half-circle, and a right triangle. We presented them, calling attention to the distinctive shape of each. We encouraged the children to trace them on the chalkboard and to make pictures out of them. We made pictures ourselves as models to follow. A circle became a face with squares for eyes, a triangle for a nose, an oval for a mouth, squares for ears, and the large triangle for a hat. We traced the cucumber, put legs and eyes on it, and the children called it a worm. Again we turned the shapes over to the children. We were surprised and pleased to hear some of them ask for a shape by its name. One child had traced the five-inch square on the board and told us, "I'll put two little squares inside for windows. Those are the downstairs windows. Now I'll need one up here. That's Daddy's bedroom window." We were finally getting the oral language usage we had hoped for.

In trying to evaluate the meaning behind the successes and the failures we had experienced, we thought we would analyze what we did in the successful ones and see what if anything they held in common. If there was a common element, was it conspicuously absent in the failures? Concerning the relative success in the last use of the photographs, the success with the blocks, rhythm instruments, terrarium, magnets, and the eventual development of the shapes unit, we concluded that in each we had presented the materials so that the children could see, hear, and feel them and that while we were presenting them we were calling attention to the peculiarities of each. In other words, we had guided their perceptions toward the differentiating characteristics of each while providing a label for each characteristic. In what we had thought to be discovery-through-problem-solving, we were expecting the stimuli to communicate those differentiating characteristics by their just being present. In reality, the differentiating characteristics of an object do not exist in the object as such. They exist only in the mind of the perceiver only after they are perceived and labeled. If a child doesn't know where to look at an object for its differentiating characteristics and if he doesn't have stored in his mind the labels for what he

is seeing, then no amount of third-degree grilling is going to bring them out.

From our experiences, we can say that learning begins with perceiving. If preschool education is to mean something to the children, they need a vast amount of guided perceptual experiences which calls attention to the differentiating characteristics of the stimuli and which provides labels for those characteristics.

Implications from the results of the study indicate several procedures to be followed in using visual aids for developing oral language skills with preschool children. Some of those which have already been tested by the group in this study follow:

1. Introduce all materials on the perceptual level, calling attention to the differentiating characteristics and supplying the names for those characteristics when not known by the children. The objective should be to help the children learn what to look for, how to look for it, and what that which they are looking at is called.

2. Regard all material related to math, science, music, and other endeavors as being primarily language materials and treat them as such. Children need to know the differentiating characteristics of shapes, quantity, order, sequence, and relationships before they can know the thing which is being studied.

3. Materials to be used should be selected with care. Does the item have implicit in it something of instructional value? If so, what are its instructional outcomes?

a. Pictures should not be selected for emotional reasons alone. If a picture can only incite an oh-how-cute response, it has little value.

b. Note on the reverse side of each picture the cues and the cue labels the children are to perceive.

4. Materials should not be the personal treasures of the teacher. They are pupil materials and are expendable as are crayons and paste.

a. Pictures which have perceptual values can be bound together using scrapbook sheets, which come in various sizes. Books no larger than twenty-four-pages are recommended. Only one picture should appear on a page. The picture may be labeled for the child's benefit. However, the page should show a list of the differentiating cues to be used in the dialogue. With the cues right on the page, a teacher's aide or any adult participating in the class' activities could use the pictures for educational purposes. Also, by forcing himself to state the valuable cues, the

teacher controls the contents of the books, culling out the "cute" but worthless pictures. The predetermined cues, in addition, make it possible to maintain the books in meaningful categories.

b. Many of the smaller pictures should be mounted on standard-sized boards and left unbound. Loose pictures make it possible to compare one or more for noting similarities and differences. A picture of a squirrel can be placed next to one of a cat or a chipmunk or a chicken.

c. Larger pictures, those which may decorate the wall, should be mounted on tagboard or, if a colorful border is desired, they should be glued to construction paper and then onto tagboard. The collection can be kept in folders or in side-opening envelopes. These too should be made available to the children and not stored in a file. The differentiating cues can be written on the back of each picture so that the teacher can display them to a group and call attention to the cues.

d. In using pictures for decorative purposes, involve the children in selecting the pictures. Instead of decorating the wall before the children arrive in the morning, make the decorating a class project. Let each child select a picture he wants to see on the wall. Unless the children are involved, they really will not see the pictures the teacher spends so much time gathering, mounting, and hanging. Change the pictures frequently. Have a theme in mind and let the children in on the theme. For instance, a theme could be animals, Thanksgiving, flowers, pets, children, wintertime, or trucks. The theme is a classification, and classifying is necessary to concept building. Take every opportunity to call attention to categories.

5. In gathering materials to be used for building the basic language for mathematics, organize the materials in categories. Finding the smallest of five fruit or the largest vegetable makes more sense than the smallest or largest of five unrelated items. The use of labels for categories contributes more than the word *things*.

6. As important as it is to guide perceptions and supply labels, it is necessary that the children be given the frequent opportunity to reuse those labels within some context that has meaning to them. A part of every activity should allow for the child's responses, using what he has learned. That is, the teacher does only about half of the talking. While introducing the material allow for feedback. Follow up the introduction by using the same material for stimulating oral language usage.