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ABSTRACT

This speech, presented at the 1977 meeting of the World Organization of Preschool Education (OMEP), proposes that the preschool linguistic environment determines language facility, which affects later school and work success. The normal course of communicative ability is traced. It is proposed that although most children, in and out of preschool, learn to speak effortlessly and naturally, the preschool is able to favorably affect the type of linguistic environment and therefore the child's facility with the language. Research on children's use of language is examined, specifically, the child's role in language development. Findings are discussed in terms of language learning programs. (SB)

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W a r s z a w a 1977

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CHILD LANGUAGE: OLD SHOE OR MAGIC SLIPPER

The fact that we are gathered here from every corner of the world and yet we are nevertheless hopeful of communicating with each other, tells us something about what it means to speak a language. It illustrates the confidence in our desire and ability to exchange views - the unique gift of humans. And yet in another way the language we speak separates us from one another and that is why we need translators to decode my speech and relay it back to you in several new encoded forms. There are many other cultural differences which separate us, such as local food, national dress and the wine of the country - all of them very attractive to the visitor. But language is a cultural difference which goes much deeper because it is through language that many other cultural norms are transmitted. And in addition language allows us to surmount barriers of time and distance, to think abstractly and to communicate to each other our subjective experience - in short it is in a sense through language that we become human.

It is not that the young child has to await the onset of language before he can interact with his environment in a unique-

ly human way. Already in his first year of life he has become aware that the world is made up of people and non-people - he does not cry or signal to the dog when he wants his food! He learns that people in the person of members of his family, have plans and intentions towards him, and that he in turn can involve them in his plans and intentions. The nine month old can signal when he wants to be lifted up, put down, left with an adult or rescued from them - all without a word of speech. And when language begins to emerge in the second year of life it will be to serve primarily the network of interactions that the child has been using successfully for months. And the language that he does pick up will have less to do with the language that the adult is repeating to him, perhaps over and over again, and more to do with the language that can help him in his own problems and needs. A good example of this is a study which examined the first fifty words of vocabulary acquired by eighteen month old infants. It was found that the word for diaper (or nappy) never appeared, although all the children wore them and presumably had their diapers changed four or five times a day: but the words for shoe, sock or other footwear frequently turned up, because it is these parts of clothing that the child himself has struggled to pull off, or more infrequently, to put on (Nelson, 1973). There is a well known line from one of the most famous and loved of English children's stories, where one of the characters (a moralising Duchess) advises Alice, the

girl heroine to "Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves". For those of you who speak English there is, of course, a double resonance here, but the literal meaning represents wise advice for all early language programmes; namely, speech will reach a child only if it relates to that little bit of the world that he is currently interested in and concentrating on. If the child is working at a problem, or understands a situation, if it makes sense for him, then the words he hears at this time will be listened to, perhaps imitated, filed away and brought out when required.

And little bits of the world are slowly beginning to make sense to the child. As well as knowing the people he smiles and talks to, and those he doesn't smile and talk to, (indeed in a bilingual home in for example my own country, he knows those he speaks English to and those he speaks Irish to,) he is also making sense of the world of objects as well as of people. Objects have a permanency even when they are out of sight, they can be made to bang into each other, you can make them do what you want, but when it comes to your mother you have to ask or cajole her into doing what you want and she might say 'No'. and the child's capacity to request or command others, to refer to things present or absent, past or future is mirrored in the structure of language in the categories of action words, tense, mood, negation and all the other categories which grammar has revealed for us. It is not of course by chance that the child finds to hand a lan-

guage which handles the operations recently acquired to carry out his interactions with the environment. Rather language matches the child's needs, because language was created out of these same needs, to serve the purposes of our first ancestors. All known languages have such meanings signalled in their structures and accordingly the child slips into language as into an old shoe - an old shoe which might well become a magic slipper. For as well as giving him the tools to handle his own mental operations and social relations, it offers at the same time the possibility of treading in the footsteps of his cultural predecessors.

But the very fact that children can slip into language with such apparent ease can be misleading. Why, we might ask ourselves, when the vast majority of children both in and out of preschool learn to speak, why should the preschool educator concern herself at all about the process of language acquisition, let alone plan strategies and programmes for language enrichment? The answer lies in the fact that although every child picks up some language code effortlessly and naturally, the particular <u>type</u> of language code he slips into will depend on his linguistic environment at that time. In some cases the language code he picks up will remain tied to the minimal functions of serving the child's daily needs and steering him through life - in other words it will remain the old shoe; in others it will do all this but do it with clarity and precision which will not only make for success in school and later in work, but will become the key to open

for him the thoughts of the great men and women of science and literature of today and yesterday - the magic slipper. We now know that this depends to a large extent on such factors as socio-economic circumstances, parental attitudes and level of education of the mother in the home. But we also know that it might well depend on the type of early education that is available to supplement the home. In so far as we in early education are convinced that our task is to break through the cycle of deprivation of poorly educated mother and minimally educable child we are aware that the preschool language programme is <u>where</u> it will be done and our own level of competence and knowledge, the key to <u>how well</u> it will be done.

Some recently published work on an experimental preschool programme in a disadvantaged area with a history of high educational failure suggests one of the ways in which this can in fact come about. In the evaluation of this eight year project (Kellaghan , 1977) parents of the children in the programme were asked if their experience of having their child in the preschool programme had helped their relationship with the child. About half of the parents said that this relationship had improved and most often they attributed this to the child's increased verbal facility. The children had learned new words which had made it easier for the parent to communicate with the child - the preschool experience had apparently provided topics for conversation. One is surprised

to find that parents and children living their lives out under the same roof would need to be provided with conversational themes. But there are many human interaction processes where language is superfluous. The every day biological processes of eating and sleeping can be carried out and supervised by the parent with a great deal of efficiency and even affection, and yet with the minimum of language. And what there is of language commentary may often be a one-sided set of terse instructions from the parent to child, with an almost total lack of what we call dialogue, that is a conversation between two people who take turns in speaking, enlarge, extend, agree or disagree with the previous comment and then yield the speaker's position to the partner for further comment. To engage in dialogue with the child about the names of more and more kinds of things, to perceive their properties, compare and classify, to create imaginary and hypothetical situations, to relate events in time and space, to discuss the happenings of a familiar story, to talk about how one feels - all of these and many others which form the basis of a good preschool language programme, might also, I would suggest become topics of conversation to take back home and to try out with your mother as well as your teacher. Perhaps in giving the child these things to take home with him, we are also giving the parent, perhaps for the first time an opportunity to try out alternative uses of language.

That the child may be the one to trigger off the conversation

and push the adult into dialogue is a realisation that is only beginning to dawn and one whose implications we have yet to exploit. A recent English study reveals to us just how active and initiatory children can be. (Wells, 1977). When the spontaneous speech of four year children in their own homes was recorded, in circumstances in which neither the mother or child knew when they were being recorded it was found that the child initiated speech to the mother twice as often as she initiated speech to him. This finding, from a most important study has caused all of us to think again about whether we teach language to a child or whether we set up a situation to let the child teach himself.

Once the to and fro of real dialogue has been established, it provides the scaffolding for the child to try out new speech interaction patterns. In my own university we are currently examining child/adult conversation to see the uses the child puts it to. Here is an example of a three year old child showing active forward planning, a planning which is revealed when the adult does not say the "lines" he has mentally written for her. (Silke, 1977).

	Will I read this?
Yes please	
(child pretending to read)	O.K. there's no monkeys
Is there not?	
	no, say why is there not
Why is there not	
	cause, cause they're only Jane and Peter.

The question "Is there not" asks only for a "Yes" or "No" answer, whereas questions in English which begin with "wh" ask for a detailed reply, which in this instance, the child had already prepared, and intended to deliver. This is just one of many examples from our tape recordings of a child, not merely initiating speech but also structuring the form of the dialogue, a dialogue in which the child is the leader and the adult the follower. And this same child shows some irritation when the adult follows too far behind. The conversation has been going along happily for some five or six minutes with both partners actively engaged in passing the ping-pong ball of conversation to and fro, when the adult's attention wanders off, only to be brought back sharply by the child.

	(child looking at picture book)	what is that, said the cow, Betty
mm		what said that brown cow (what did the brown cow say?)
mm	(answering his own question)	oh, them birds, brown cow (they are birds, said the brown cow)
mm		well don't speak to me like that well I'm not your friend oh, you better not.

The child having embarked on a happy and successful dialogue had no intention of letting the adult withdraw. He knows that there is as little sense in a one-sided conversation

as there is in a solo game of tennis!

In summary then we might look again at our language programmes in the light of the evidence of the child's own aotvity, and the unavoidable conclusions that, given the opportunity to establish a confident and happy adult/child dialogue, the child will guide his own language learning. He will and should lead the adult, in both setting up and maintaining the pace, and given such a set up, will proceed to try out language patterns and struotures and gain experience in as it were writing longer and longer programmes of speech. Such a child requires conversational reaction and of course attention and adult interrogational methods, in which the adult asks the questions hoping to bring the child along his road, are very likely to be unproductive and unhelpful with regard to the child's speech patterns, and, one would suspect, even the child's listening skills.

But of course such principles can only be put into effect with the young child who has an established pattern of dialogue. For the child who has not yet reached this stage or the child who has reached it with parents, but not yet with the preschool teacher, we must look to the prinoiples outlined at the beginning of my talk. Once again we can see that the answer does not lie in even more adult talk to the child. Language is not something "out-there" which we have to pour into the child so that it finishes up inside him. Rather it is something a child will slip into if it is

around when he has real problems to solve. Only in so far as the skilled speaker (the adult) and the apprentice speaker (the child) are working together in mutual problem solving will this take place.

Early educators have a special responsibility to the child in his language acquisition because they are with the child during the period of language acquisition. One could go so far as to say that it is the central task of their vocation. Such a task entails standing guard over the child's initiation into his mother tongue as well as recognising and compensating for any deficiency which might arise. The successful accomplishment of this entails more than a passive or even respectful observation of the child's acquisition process, but rather a careful monitoring of this orderly, if rapid, development. Detailed knowledge of the norms of language development plus the construction of strategies for enrichment programmes is not an easy task. Nor can the teacher depend on any sets of work books or educational games to assist her. The answer rather lies in a scheme of knowledge which the educator must carry about in her own head; this plus a positive commitment to the efficacy and value of the work she is doing. But the value far exceeds the difficulty. In today's world the power of the spoken word has been reinforced by the marvels of technology, and through the medium of such wonders as satellite broadcasting, it has acquired a more compelling force as well as a world wide audience.

We cannot afford to have large sections of our population inarticulate or incapable of critically evaluating the words of others. We cannot run the risk of a literate élite. Our greatest need today and in the years ahead is for citizens who can separate facts from their interpretation, truth from wishful thinking, objective knowledge from feelings and attitudes and real human and social needs from the manufactured desires foisted on us by commercial interests.

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