

The Teacher as Language Model

Language is a social activity. Young children learn language by hearing it being used, being engaged in using it in interactions and relationships, and beginning to mimic the sounds of the language and the words they come to associate as having meaning in their world – and being responded to (understood!). And through this process, they learn how language is used. Key to all of this is their relationships with others – particularly proficient users of the language. The rate of children’s early language growth and later language outcomes is directly related to the verbal input they receive when listening to and communicating with adults and other children, and to the opportunities and encouragement they receive to use language in those relationships and interactions. In an early childhood classroom, the teacher is an essential adult language role model. And for many English Learners, the teacher may be the primary English role model in their lives. In two-way dual language programs, similarly, the teacher may be the primary Spanish role model. Teachers need to be intentional in their language use and how they engage children in using language, and take seriously the powerful role they play in language development.

- **Teacher as Narrator/*El maestro como narrador***

This is a simple and very powerful strategy, that some people do naturally but others need a reminder to do. Think out loud. As you are doing things, describe what you are doing. As you observe things going on in the classroom, describe what you are seeing. As you are thinking through ideas, narrate your train of thought and use gestures to illustrate your words. This is a powerful way to model language use for children, to expose them to vocabulary, and provides additional opportunity for them to hear the rhythm and sound of the language. For example:

“Oh, the picture fell off the wall. I am getting some thumbtacks to hang the picture back up..... I am pushing the tacks in hard, using all my strength because I don’t want the picture to fall again. There! Now it’s back up!”

“I see Sharona and Kiran taking turns adding blocks to their tower and it looks to me like the blocks are straight and tall making a really strong tower. They are being so careful.”

- **Five Exchange Conversation: Amplification/Teacher as Language Coach / *Conversación de cinco intercambios: La amplificación/Maestro como profesor del lenguaje***

- *Preschool Foundations LS #1.1: Use language to communicate with others, speak clearly enough to be understood and use accepted language and style.*
- *SL #1: Participate in collaborative conversations about grade appropriate topics and texts, and continue a conversation through multiple exchanges; build on other’s talk in conversations by responding to the comments of others*
- *SL #3: Ask and answer questions about what a speaker says in order to gather additional information or clarity*
- *SL #6: Produce complete sentences, speak audibly and express thoughts, feelings and ideas clearly*
- *L #1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage*
- *L#6: Use words and phrases acquired through conversations, reading and being read to and responding to texts*

In a language-rich classroom, teachers engage children in conversations and use that opportunity to model language and also to extend and amplify student vocabulary. Children



need to develop skills for participating in collaborative conversations with peers and adults, and how to continue a conversation through multiple exchanges. They need to be able to ask and answer questions to get information or clarify understanding. And, they need the skills of description.

The Five-exchange conversation responds to this need. Informal exchanges are powerful opportunities for students to hear the language and to acquire vocabulary, syntax and a wider range of language options for expressing what they want to say. They are an authentic context for developing skills of conversation. In informal exchanges, the teacher can serve as a “language coach,” modeling, encouraging, probing, extending, and amplifying a child’s language – providing opportunities for the student to hear multiple options for what they want to say in correct forms authentic to the language.

The five-exchange conversation can occur in informal conversations with a child, or when a student is speaking/reporting to the group and the teacher wants to coach the student to produce more extended language and detail. These are exchanges and conversations, not lessons. The teacher uses a variety of approaches including: paraphrasing a child’s words in extended and correct forms, and asking questions to elicit more details and meaning.

- 1) Seek a child out for an exchange, or seize the opportunity when a child speaks to you. The child might voluntarily tell you something, and that is an opening to respond and extend the conversation. If a child is engaged in an activity, initiate a conversation by asking the child to tell you about what they are doing. Follow up with prompts for more detail. Amplification and language modeling and coaching should occur when opportunities present themselves.

Format:

- Teacher asks a question.
- Child responds to the question.
- Teacher repeats what the child has said, and then amplifies the statement using more complex and extended language.
- Teacher responds to what the child has said, and asks a follow up question.
- The sequence is repeated through five exchanges.

Here are several examples that illustrate how the teacher can use the exchange to serve as Language Coach:

Situation 1: *When a child says something using incorrect language forms, respond conversationally, but use the correct form. Then proceed with amplification, response and new prompt. Example:*

Student: "My bestest friend is Shirley."

Teacher: "Your best friend is Shirley. You like her better than your other friends. I have a best friend, too. My best friend is Maria. There are so many things we like to do together! What do you like to do with Shirley?"

Do not point out the incorrect form the student used, simply USE the correct form in your response.

Situation 2: *When a child says something in an abbreviated form, repeat back and affirm what they said using a more extended form and adding an additional way of saying the same thing. Then add a new prompt. Example:*

Teacher: "Which of the books that Mrs. Williams read to us in the library today did you like best?"

Student: "Brown Bear."

Teacher: "You liked Brown Bear the best."

(Then add an alternative way of saying it with additional vocabulary options).

"Brown Bear was your favorite of all of the books we read today. I love the illustrations in the book. What did you like about it?"

Situation 3: *When a child says something, ask follow-up questions to elicit more language and prompt the child to give more details. If the exchange is in English, and the child is an English Learner, gear your follow-up questions to their level. (If the child says something in Spanish, and you want to give them an English model and encourage English – or you do not have the language skills in Spanish to respond in Spanish, you can respond in English). Example:*

Student: "Veo un perro."

Teacher: "You see a dog. What does the dog look like?" or "What is the dog doing?"

Note: In a dual language program, the teacher should be using the language they are modeling during that time and seek an exchange in the target language. If the child responds in another language, this is not the time for a five-exchange conversation. Just continue the conversation as you would normally.

Situation 4: Ask open-ended questions that invite the child to respond in his or her own expressive language. Ask curiosity questions that prompt children to wonder. Ask opinion questions that prompt children to state their feelings. Model a language structure to start. Example:

Teacher: "I think that perhaps our classroom pet [a hamster] is lonely when we aren't in the classroom. What do you think?"

Or "I wonder if..."

Tips

Aim to have an amplified exchange with each child at least once a week. To keep track, maintain a list of all of the children in your class and check off names as you manage to hold the exchanges with each child.

If you cannot manage to reach each child each week, select a few that seem to engage less in conversations.

Because some young children are not yet developmentally able to maintain focus for a five exchange conversation, start with as many exchanges as they can handle. Make a note of it, and then work up over the course of the school year to more exchanges.

Notes on Teacher as Language Model
