

Conversation Stations: Promoting Language Development in Young Children

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Abstract Conversations are a primary tool for language development in preschool classrooms. Unfortunately, opportunities to have meaningful conversations between children and adults may not exist in preschool classrooms, especially those that serve children from high poverty contexts. Conversation Stations were implemented in preschool classrooms to ensure that high quality, consistent conversation would occur. In a *Conversation Station*, children have the opportunity to talk, to get feedback on their language, and to have appropriate language modeled for them. The *Conversation Station* can be used as an effective activity to promote language and vocabulary development in preschool classrooms. Using *Conversation Stations* allows for language development to be systematically included in everyday experiences in the classroom.

Keywords Language development · Conversations · Vocabulary development

Introduction

Imagine you are in a classroom with 15 children under the age of five and have the opportunity to have one-to-one conversations with each of them. The conversations allow you to learn that Adam is afraid of fish; that Tamika is a great singer and loves to dance; that Alfred's joy is his new

baby sister and that Cary's favorite color is blue and her favorite food is chocolate cake. Establishing a *Conversation Station* as a designated center creates not only a special area devoted to promoting and developing language, but also gives teachers an opportunity to better understand their students.

Conversations are a primary tool for oral language development in preschool classrooms (Dickinson et al. 2003; Snow 1991; Snow et al. 1998). However, opportunities for children to talk with others and receive feedback can be limited, due to the competing demands on teachers' time and attention in the classroom. Given the important role that children's oral language skills play in their later language and literacy development, it is necessary to consider how to create consistent, meaningful opportunities for conversations to occur in early childhood classrooms in order to develop and extend language.

To ensure that meaningful conversations occur with children on a daily basis, a *Conversation Station* was instituted in preschool classrooms as a method for systematically infusing language opportunities into the curriculum (Wasik et al. 2007). In a *Conversation Station*, the teacher and children actively listen to each other, engaging in purposeful dialogue, designed to expand and develop children's language. This paper will discuss the implementation of the *Conversation Station*, which increases the possibility that conversations will occur and promotes and elevates this activity to a new level of importance.

Why is Language Development Important?

Language development is one of the most important milestones that occurs during the preschool years (Adams 1990; Dickinson and Tabors 2001). From birth to about the age of

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five, children acquire about 10,000 vocabulary words (Childers and Tomasello 2002). During this time, children begin with one word utterances and, ultimately, learn to communicate in complex sentences. Rapid and significant increases in vocabulary knowledge and in sophisticated knowledge about syntax and the semantics of language require that children be exposed to environments that are filled with numerous opportunities for conversations. The most beneficial conversations are those that include rich language, which includes sentences with more than just subjects and verbs. Rich language includes varied vocabulary and descriptive adjectives and adverbs that help describe and inform the content of the information. In addition, conversations need to provide children with feedback from linguistically competent adults who will respond to children's ideas, elaborate on their statements, and provide them with a high-quality dialogue. Without this rich language and meaningful feedback, children will not have the opportunity to receive and use helpful guidance about the content of their conversations and the language that they use, nor will they be able to practice the more sophisticated adult language that their conversation partners have modeled. Experiences that provide rich language and feedback scaffold language for children (Vygotsky 1978). Scaffolding is the joint construction of language between a child and an adult with the gradual withdrawal of adult support as children master the language.

In most instances, children's home experiences provide numerous opportunities for them to have one-to-one conversations with adults. However, for many children, especially children in poverty, language opportunities at home can be extremely limited (Hart and Risley 1995), therefore, requiring other experiences to provide the much needed language interactions. Current research indicates that high-quality preschool experiences can have a positive impact on children's language and emergent literacy skills (Barnett 2007). Specifically, the more opportunities children have to use language and receive quality feedback on their language, the more likely children are to develop rich vocabularies and more complex sentence structures (Dickinson and Tabors 2001). Within the context of the preschool classroom, however, these opportunities can be limited because of the competing demands for the teacher's attention by 15 or more children. At any given time, a preschool teacher can have four to five children surrounding her and seeking her assistance or recognition. Research indicates that opportunities to talk and use language can be even more limited for children in preschools that serve high-poverty communities, such as Head Start (Gest et al. 2006). Classroom conversations in a typical preschool setting can be limited to teacher directives and one-word responses from children (Gest et al. 2006; Wasik et al. 2007). Yet missed opportunities for conversations have grave implications,

especially for children raised in poverty, for whom preschool is often expected to compensate for learning experiences that may be lacking in the home (Barbarin et al. 2006; LaParo and Pianta 2000; McClelland et al. 2006). Thus, there is a need for implementation of a *Conversation Station* in preschool classrooms to create a designated place for language exchanges.

Book reading has been credited as a critical activity in developing children's language and literacy skills (Dickinson et al. 2003; Whitehurst and Lonigan 2003). One of the critical features about effective book reading is that it creates the opportunity for the initiation of conversations and discussions about what is being read. Justice and her colleagues (Ezell and Justice 2005; Justice et al. 2005; Justice and Pence 2005) have documented the importance of conversations during book reading that help scaffold children's language and vocabulary development.

The most effective book reading experiences were those in which the teacher asked open ended questions, therefore, promoting conversations (Dickinson 2001; Dickinson and Smith 1994; Smith and Dickinson 1994). An open ended question is one that requires more than a "yes/no" or "one word" response (Dickinson and Smith 1994). Asking open ended questions provides opportunities for the teacher to engage children in conversations and allows children to talk and use language in a meaningful way. In addition, asking open ended questions also allows children to explore the meaning of vocabulary words, the content of the story, and to interact linguistically with the teacher and other children. Through the use of this method, book reading becomes more than just reading words to children; it fosters conversations, allowing the children to explore the meaning of vocabulary words, the content of the story, and to interact purposefully with the teacher and other children. In the *Conversation Station*, teachers use the strategies of asking open ended questions to engage children in conversations and promote opportunities to use language.

Effective book reading has also been shown to provide children with opportunities to learn "decontextualized" vocabulary, which refers to words that are not typically encountered in everyday conversation. Knowing these types of words can support comprehension as children begin to be exposed to a variety of types of text and materials (Snow 1991).

Unfortunately, opportunities for rich conversations in preschool classrooms do not typically extend beyond the book reading experience and, in some instances, do not even occur during book reading (Dickinson 2001; Dickinson and Tabors 2001). Therefore, there is a great need to systematically create opportunities for dialogue to occur in the preschool classrooms. Creating *Conversation Stations* will allow teachers to purposefully use effective strategies such as asking open ended questions and using

decontextualized language beyond the book reading experience. The *Conversation Station* will support the language development that can occur in book reading and increase the probability that children will have time to talk and engage in dialogue with an adult.

Engaging children in play is another strategy that can promote conversations and develop oral language skills (Dickinson and Tabors 2001). Play is a natural activity for children and is how they learn best. Encouraging children to talk aloud while playing, describing what they are doing, what they plan to do next and communicating to classmates, provides children with opportunities to use language in a familiar and fun context. Using props during play also can encourage children's language and vocabulary development. Props that are related to books and the classroom theme that are strategically placed in centers around the room can become part of the play activity. While playing with the props, children can learn and reinforce vocabulary in a meaningful way. In addition, motivation to play with certain objects can also be the impetus for children learning the labels for words and to use language to communicate their wants.

The Role of the *Conversation Station*

The concept of a *Conversation Station* was developed and implemented as part of a language and literacy intervention in Head Start classrooms in Baltimore, MD. The goal was to make conversations a salient, routine part of the pre-school curriculum.

The role of the classroom *Conversation Station* is two-fold. First, it models the essential component of effective communication—thoughtful listening (Wasik et al. 2008). It is a strategy that is taught to young children in the *Early Learning Project*, which is a comprehensive intervention program that has been implemented and evaluated with preschool children (Wasik et al. 2008). Thoughtful listening is teaching the children to listen carefully to the speaker so that they can understand what is being said and respond appropriately to the speaker. In addition, it provides a conducive setting for children and adults to practice the art of conversation. These one-to-one adult/child conversations have allowed the teaching staff to develop and extend theme concepts, practice new vocabulary, engage children in meaningful writing experiences, and most important, learn more about the children's interests and learning.

The Role of the Teacher

The *Conversation Station* is similar to other learning centers in that it is a designated space in the classroom, and a

child can choose to participate. Likewise, children can be rotated through the *Conversation Station* as they are in other centers to ensure that all children are provided with this important opportunity. However, the *Conversation Station* differs from a typical learning center, specifically in regard to the role of the adult. During a typical center time, the teacher circulates around to the various centers, interacting with children, asking questions, and making sure that children are meaningfully engaged in tasks. When using the *Conversation Station*, the designated teacher, who can be either the lead or assistant teacher, focuses on the child or children in the *Conversation Station* to promote active, meaningful conversations.

To be most effective, the number of children in the *Conversation Station* should not be more than two at a given time. Opportunities to talk, actively listen, and have an adult thoughtfully respond to what the children are saying can be diminished if there are more than three children with an adult at the *Conversation Station* (Morrow and Smith 1990; Wasik 2008). In the initial stages of implementing a *Conversation Station*, it is recommended that the teacher work one-on-one with a child modeling how conversations can take place in this center. As the children learn how the sharing of information works during the conversation, additional children can participate in the *Conversation Station* as long as there are no more than three children in this group at one time. While one teacher is attending to the talk in the *Conversation Station*, the other teacher can continue to circulate around the room, working with the children in the other centers.

Creating the *Conversation Station*

The *Conversation Station* can be easily created by placing a portable tabletop pocket chart on a small table with at least two chairs. Clearly label the chart as the *Conversation Station*. Allow the children to help with creating and labeling this space. Establish rules about talking and thoughtful listening at the *Conversation Station* discussed below. As with other centers, explain the purpose of the center to the children. This introduction of the *Conversation Station* will help children to understand how it will work and how they will be able to take turns having special conversations with their teachers and friends.

Share an open-ended invitation with the children to talk. The chart can display this invitation through a printed sign that reads "Let's talk about..." The chart also can provide space to display the child's name and theme related vocabulary picture cards. The table can allow room for theme props, the Story Time book and writing materials that will support and extend meaningful conversations.

Child-Initiated Conversations

The *Conversation Station* can be used in numerous ways to engage children in meaningful dialogue. Throughout the day, children often have the need to share their feelings or a personal experience with a theme-related idea. However, it may not always be possible to provide the time to talk while scheduled activities are taking place or during larger group times. In addition, often a child may bring up a topic that is important to him but is not directly related to the topic being discussed at the time. For example, during book reading, the teacher may be reading a book about families that briefly mentions a puppy. One of the children responds to the picture of the puppy and wants to tell the class a story about his new puppy. To encourage an extended dialogue at this time would detract from the meaning of the story and the children's focus on important vocabulary words. Instead of stopping the child and making him feel as if what he has to say is not important, the teacher respectfully lets the child mention his puppy and then suggests that a more detailed exchange about the pet occur later during the center time at the *Conversation Station*. The teaching partner records the child's name and topic on a dry-erase message board located near the *Conversation Station* or puts it on a post-it-note on the pocket chart. This indicates that the child will be one of the first to visit the *Conversation Station* during center time.

At center time, that child is invited to go to the *Conversation Station* and talk about his new pet. The teacher can prompt, "Tell me all about your new puppy!" The teacher thoughtfully listens to what the child says and asks probing questions that allow the child to elaborate on his ideas. The teacher also asks additional questions to encourage children's talking such as, "How do you take care of your puppy?", "Tell me what your dog eats?", "What does your dog's fur feel like when you pet it?", and "How does having a dog make you feel?" to elicit additional language and ideas from the child. Throughout the day, other children's comments and ideas can be added to the message board and then discussed individually or in a small group at the *Conversation Station*.

A list of children's names can be kept by the *Conversation Station* and marked each time a child visits and has a dialogue at the center. This allows the teacher to make certain that all children are participating in this center. Children who are more comfortable talking with adults and using language are more likely to initiate visits to the *Conversation Station*. For those who are more reticent, the teacher can invite them to the *Conversation Station* and initiate a conversation about a story that was read in class, a trip that the class took, or the child's favorite activities or foods. Children who initially appear to be shy and withdrawn have opened up in the *Conversation Station* and

have shared some wonderful and enlightening information about what they know, what they like and who they are. Typically, a child spends about 10 minutes in the *Conversation Station* with an adult.

Teacher-Initiated Conversations

In addition to having children share their interests and thoughts, the *Conversation Station* can be used to develop and extend theme-learning concepts and vocabulary. Because vocabulary development is vital to overall language development, it is important to focus on children's learning and use of new words (Wasik 2006). To this end, in the set up of the center, the *Conversation Station* includes a display of the current theme vocabulary (words/pictures, props and books). The teacher can incorporate these vocabulary words in conversation with the children. This is a time in which the teacher can conduct some informal assessments of children's understanding of these vocabulary words or concepts. For example, the teacher might say, "What do you like best about elephants?" or "Tell me where a pumpkin grows," to determine children's understanding of theme related vocabulary words.

Conversation Station Guidelines

First, introduce the *Conversation Station* to your students through an engaging activity. For example, share the illustrated poem "*Mice Squeak, We Speak*" (DePaola 1997) and discuss how special it is that people are able to talk and share their ideas with each other. Tell children that the *Conversation Station* will be a place where they can come and talk about their thoughts and ideas. Create an inviting place in the classroom where children feel safe, yet actively engaged in talking and listening to important information. It is a place where learning about one another can occur. After inviting a child to join you at the *Conversation Station*, begin the exchange by asking a caring question such as, "How are you feeling today?" or "How is your day going?" or "What new things have you learned today?" In the beginning of the year, have the student identify/find his or her name card and place it on the chart (providing assistance if needed). Encourage the child to share something he or she would like to talk about. If the child is unsure, display the current storybook and ask an open-ended question such as, "What did you like best about our story?" to get the conversation started. Listen attentively to make sure that you understand what the child is trying to communicate. Try to extend the child's language by elaborating on something he said. "You said that you liked the part of the story when Goldilocks tasted baby

bear's porridge and ate it all up. Why do you think Goldilocks liked baby bear's porridge the best? This scaffolding of the conversation will allow the child to begin where he is comfortable, but continue to share and use language to express his ideas and feelings. At the end, summarize the conversation. This will allow the child to hear in the teacher's words a recount of what was said during their conversation. Be sure to model adult language with correct syntax and vocabulary use. Providing this summation gives the child repeated exposure to theme vocabulary, clarifies the message, and conveys interest in the child's ideas. This feedback supports the child's use and comprehension of the new vocabulary.

Conversation Station in Action

In order to share the experience of a *Conversation Station* in action, the following is a summary of two exchanges that took place in a *Conversation Station*. Prior to this activity, the children had been talking about airplanes and how planes travel. Their teacher had shared a Morning Message that read: *Airplanes travel in the sky. Pilots fly the plane and take passengers to faraway places.* The children and teacher discussed the message and children identified the letter "Pp", which they were working on in class. They then read the book *Amazing Airplanes* (Mitton and Parker 2005) and identified the parts of the plane.

At first, Keontay was reluctant to join his teacher at the *Conversation Station*. He shared that he wanted to do something fun. His teacher encouraged him to try it out by explaining that if he didn't want to stay he didn't have to. The teacher and the student sat down at the *Conversation Station* and Keontay quickly found his name and placed it on the board. The teacher then asked him what he wanted to talk about and Keontay responded by talking about trucks. His attention was drawn to the transportation vocabulary picture cards that were on the table. His teacher encouraged him to look through the pictures and name them. They began to talk in more detail about the trucks—counting wheels and describing their jobs. Initially, Keontay only spoke in short phases. His teacher began to expand on his comments and by the end of the conversation he shared a complete sentence about the fire truck. *The fire truck has a big hose for water.*

When they saw the picture of the airplane, Keontay shared that he didn't like airplanes. When his teacher asked him why, he said that he was afraid that they would fall from the sky. He asked his teacher if she had been in an airplane and she shared one of her positive flying experiences. They talked about the plane, using words such as "engine," "propeller," and "powerful". Keontay talked about the wings, how big they looked as he stretched out

his arms to show the size of the wings of the plane. The teacher talked about how the wings help the plane to fly and not fall.

Keontay learned more about airplanes and trucks and his teacher learned more about Keontay. She learned about some of the things that he likes about planes and, then, spoke about some of his fears. She also learned that he struggles a bit with composing more than three-word sentences. In the 10 minutes at the *Conversation Station*, the teacher was able to learn a great deal about Keontay and was able to use this information as she planned for individualized instruction for her student.

In another discussion at the *Conversation Station*, Zoe started the talking by saying that she didn't want to be in the *Conversation Station*, instead she wanted to be in the Dramatic Play center. The teacher knew that talking was difficult for Zoe and that having this opportunity would benefit her. Taking Zoe's lead about her interests, the teacher asked Zoe to tell her what she would do in the Dramatic Play center. Comfortable with this topic, Zoe proceeded to tell the teacher that she would dress up in the red evening gown and make dinner for the family. The teacher asked Zoe to tell her what she would make for dinner. Zoe replied, "Dinner!" "Can you tell me what you would make for dinner?" "Dinner!" she emphatically re-stated. The teacher realized that Zoe may not have the vocabulary to describe the food that she ate at dinner. Taking the plastic vegetables used as props, the teacher named each one. Then, she showed Zoe each vegetable and encouraged her to name them. While naming the vegetables, Zoe began to share her likes and her dislikes of each one. Zoe shared that she doesn't like carrots but she does like string beans and lettuce and that she has never tasted broccoli, peppers or cucumbers.

Zoe and her teacher continue to talk about cooking and how Zoe's mother likes to cook. Zoe was eager to share that her mom makes delicious fried fish and hamburgers. Before their conversation ended, the teacher summarized what they had talked about and invited Zoe to say the names of the vegetables aloud again. The teacher made notes regarding Zoe's vocabulary and began to think about planning a cooking activity (e.g., making vegetable soup) to help Zoe and the other children learn the names of more vegetables.

During that 10 minutes *Conversation Station* activity, the teacher had learned about Zoe's interest in cooking, which vegetables she was familiar with, and which were her favorites. Although Zoe became more verbal as the conversation moved to topics that she was comfortable talking about, such as her love of her mother's cooking, the teacher quickly realized that Zoe could benefit from many more visits to the *Conversation Station*. It is apparent that Zoe needs to hear the teacher model complex sentences and

needs to be exposed to new, meaningful everyday words to help expand her vocabulary and her language. Frequently, adults incorrectly assume that young children know the words for common objects and things in their environment such as food and articles of clothing. This misconception can impact children's comprehension of stories and everyday interactions in the classroom.

One-to-One or Small Groups in the Conversation Station

Initially, it is recommended that the *Conversation Station* be implemented with one child and one adult. This allows children to become familiar with the process and routines of the *Conversation Station* activity and also allows for the adult to scaffold the child's language. As the year progresses and as the children become more comfortable with the *Conversation Station*, two children can participate in the *Conversation Station* with an adult. This allows children to talk with one another and with the adult and also allows children to observe the language used by a peer. It also allows the children to generalize the art of conversation turn-taking and listening to a classmate and not only an adult. In our experience, limiting the number of children in the *Conversation Station* to a maximum of two children increases the opportunities that children have to talk, to observe adult speech, and to provide meaningful feedback as all participants engage in a conversation.

Suggestions for Conversation Starters

The following are suggestions for conversation starters with young children. Be patient with this process. For some children, attempting to engage in a one-on-one conversation with an adult can be intimidating, and they may tend to speak less even though the goal of the activity is to invite them to speak more. Some children, like adults, need to feel comfortable with a person before they can speak freely. Other children will be very comfortable talking but may not take the time to listen to the feedback from an adult.

Strategies such as "phone a friend" and talking to a doll or other type of inanimate object can help children become more comfortable with talking and engaging in conversations. Using a toy phone, model for children how to telephone a friend and start the conversation by describing what you see in your immediate environment to begin being comfortable with talking. In the *Conversation Station*, the teacher can pretend to be talking on the phone with the child to see if this experience makes the child more comfortable with talking and sharing his ideas.

For many children, engaging in pretend conversation is a safe way to begin engaging in dialogues with adults. Bring a doll or an action figure to the *Conversation Station* and use these props as a vehicle to begin to interact and to use language with the children. Start talking to the doll or figure and encourage the child to do the same. The teacher can even pretend to answer for the doll or figure. Modeling the language exchange that takes place during a conversation will help the child become more comfortable with talking with an adult, and also listening and responding to what the adult has to say. This can be intimidating at first, but if scaffolded in an appropriate manner, the child can learn how to be comfortable with talking and engaging in a meaningful conversation with others, which will promote language and vocabulary skills.

Summary

Developing language skills is one of the most important milestones in children's early years. Children best develop language skills by engaging in conversations with competent adults who scaffold language and create opportunities for them to learn the syntax and semantics of language as well as new vocabulary words. Providing classroom *Conversation Stations* elevates the importance of these rich verbal exchanges and supports the planned occurrence of meaningful conversations between teachers and children.

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