

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Pre-K Professional Learning Podcast *The Role of Language in Early Childhood Literacy Development*

Featuring: *Dr. David Dickinson*

SPEAKERS

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INTRODUCTION:

JA: Welcome, early childhood educators. I'm Josephine Appleby, Pre-K Professional Learning Program Director for the Ayers Institute.

Today you will listen in on a conversation with Dr. David Dickinson of Vanderbilt University about the role of language in early childhood literacy development. Dr. Dickinson is the Margaret Cowan Chair in the Department of Teaching and Learning and the Associate Dean for Research and Strategic Initiatives of Peabody College. Throughout his career, Dr. Dickinson has advocated for increasing the intellectual challenge of preschool classrooms, identifying the pervasive impact of language on literacy development, and recognizing the complexity of the challenges associated with changing teaching practice in ways that result in enhanced learning.

He has authored over 120 articles and chapters. Co-authored "Beginning Literacy with Language." Co-edited six books including three volumes of "The Handbook of Early Literacy." And co-authored "Opening the World of Learning," a widely used preschool curriculum. Most recently, in collaboration with Ann Morse, he co-authored a new book, "Connecting Through Talk: Nurturing Development Through Language" published by Brooks Publishing.

Welcome Dr. Dickinson! Thank you for sharing your expertise with us today.

EPISODE BODY:

DD: Well, first of all, let me say thank you. It's a pleasure being here, and I really like having opportunities to communicate my research and the research of hundreds of other researchers to early childhood audiences. I want to have research get into the hands of people who are working with children in classrooms and to parents, because I started this whole venture of doing research in early childhood because of my desire to make a difference for the lives and lives of children who come from low income homes.

So, I started as a classroom teacher in West Philadelphia where I taught for five years. During that time, I got interested in the fact that it seemed that the children I was conversing with had different ways of using language, different access to a broad vocabulary from the children I was spending time with in the affluent middle-class suburb. So that's got me started.

JA: Okay, so you were teaching in West Philadelphia and noticed that your students had less language knowledge. Is that what you're saying?

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DD: I wouldn't say they had less language knowledge; but I would say that the way they express themselves seemed to reflect more limited vocabulary of the type that's used in schools. And they had sometimes it seemed they were having some trouble making sense of what they were reading because they didn't quite have the knowledge of what they were reading.

Well one example, I had a little girl who was very dutiful, sweet, hardworking— who somehow managed to sound out the word prairie. But she looked at me totally blank. She had no idea what she was— what that word even might be. And that's just one little example.

And so, I decided I wanted to go to graduate school and learn more about language and how its learned. And with the thought that that information would help me go back into classroom settings and help teachers be more effective.

JA: So why focus on the early years with this rather than direct vocabulary instruction in the 4th grade?

DD: There's sort of two answers to that.

First of all, when I went back to graduate school; it was the time when people were first understanding early development of language. And so, by nature of the what I was studying, I was really learning about and interested in very young children at that point 3- and 4-year-olds were considered to be old. And so, the content sort of scholarly knowledge I was acquiring had to do with early development. Even though my practical experience was more in the elementary grades.

However, as I became more aware of the problems that children were facing and of the developmental pathways for learning, it became apparent that providing support for children in those years before they enter school (and I focused on ages 3 and 4) was absolutely critical. It's the age when children are getting set on a trajectory on a pathway for later language learning so early intervention starting with children at an early age is absolutely critical particularly for language.

JA: So are there pieces of early language development. How would you describe early language development? Would you put it into categories or how would you do that?

DD: That's a hard question to answer without getting into more academic stuff than we need. I'll do it in a simple sort of way. There's the language that children acquire relatively spontaneously when they're in typical environments that involve opportunities to hear language used by adults, have conversations with adults and siblings and friends. Let's just call that sort of “basic language.” So, children are always expanding this sort of basic inter-communicative competencies and this is just ability to get through life and talk about what you're doing and what you want.

The language that is the critical sort of distinguishing feature of children who later become successful in school: I'm going to call “academic language,” although it's been called different kinds of things. That refers to the kinds of language in both vocabulary and the ways of organizing ideas and sentences and paragraphs that is specialized and particularly relevant for reading and for writing. So, the children are beginning to acquire some of that specialized academic language uses, during the preschool years and the academic language builds absolutely fundamentally on the basic language. You can't learn fancy language if you don't know basic language.

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So, the work being done with 1, 2, 3-year-olds may not include the most sophisticated things that people are calling academic language; but it's the essential grounding place for the acquisition of the more sophisticated kinds of uses of language that we're now calling academic language.

JA: So, it sounds like in early childhood, the early childhood environment teachers and family that are interacting with the child are preparing the child for learning that academic language later in life by providing them with basic language knowledge.

DD: Yes, but basic language knowledge and the ability to listen and speak and share and use language for different purposes to tell stories, to get attention, to get through life and with the kinds of everyday things that people do with language.

JA: So that is a perfect segue into my next question for you. What is the best way for early childhood teachers to foster language development in the classroom?

DD: Teachers want to be encouraging children to use language for these basic purposes I just talked about; but they also want to be providing children exposure to the kind of language they might not get in as much consistent way at home. So, one of the most powerful ways to support the kind of language that I'm talking about is by reading and talking about books with children. The reason that book reading is so powerful is both because of the language that the book provides and because of the conversations that can happen in the course of reading.

So, I'm going to just give an example here by reading just a couple of sentences out of one of Ezra Jack Keat's books "Whistle for Willy." Before I read this, I just want to say a little more what I mean about academic features of academic language. It tends to have more complex sentences. The sentences might be a little bit longer and the vocabulary might be a little bit more sophisticated than what would be used in a standard everyday conversation.

Here we have one sentence in this book. If you don't remember the book this is a boy Peter who has a dog and he wants to learn how to whistle. And he wants to whistle; particularly he wants to whistle hiding inside a curtain so that the dog can be confused and then can try to find him and all he will know is from the whistle. Okay so here's the sentence when that's introduced:

"Peter saw his dog, Willie, coming. Quick as a wink, he hid in an empty carton lying on the sidewalk."

Now that's pretty simple for two adult ears. However, that second sentence is an unusual construction. "Quick as a wink." First of all, that's not the way people talk in everyday talk. And then they say he "hid in an empty carton lying on the sidewalk." So, you've got these two clauses, quick as a wink and he hid in an empty carton lying on the sidewalk. Those are- the second sentence is pretty long. So that's an unusual sort of organized sentences. Ordinarily we use the action simple actions in describing things in simple ways. I hid in the book- I hid in a carton. I wanted to eat my breakfast. This is literary talk. Now also, this literary talk has this isn't particularly complex, but the word carton. Maybe people would hear about a carton of milk but not maybe so. That's not as common.

So, books are filled with vocabulary that is a little less common than what they're going to be using in their everyday in their everyday language. So books, as you read them, children are exposed to the language of the sentence structures, the vocabulary, and then they're forced to think about the books and talk about the books and in those conversations they have to take the words from the story and make

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mental images in their minds or they can't understand what you're saying by pointing you can't understand it by holding up an object sometimes you have to use the language and create ideas.

So, these are all more difficult uses of language and they happen just naturally when you're reading and talking about books.

JA: You're saying Read Alouds– they're really important parts in a classroom. What about a 'repeated read aloud,' reading the same book over and over again? How do you feel about that?

DD: Yes, reading books repeatedly is very important. And first one thing I didn't mention. It's not just reading any book, but trying to find books that first of all can capture children's attention; but also have reasonably interesting plots and vocabulary. Sometimes children are read books that are maybe enjoyable; but don't push them very much in terms of the language they're exposed to or the complexity of the story.

So often you choose books that are going to be a bit of a challenge for children. And then because they're a bit of a challenge, read them multiple times. So, you read the book and as you read it you talk about it. But multiple readings then gives children the repeated exposure to the sentence structures and ideas and vocabulary that are novel. And they began to be able to understand them better.

One last point. When books are read multiple times, especially with groups of children, it's important to shift the burden for telling a story from the teacher to the children. So, the first read or the second, first and secondary the teacher may be explaining things that all will look see Peter's hiding inside this carton and he thinks that Willie we won't see him. Well– wait that's something that children may not figure out on their own. So, the teacher will tell them the first reading or two, and then the third reading fourth reading she won't repeat that. But maybe she'll say, "So why can't Willie find Peter?" And then the children will have, then they'll fill in the idea, oh that he's hiding in the carton. And so, you first provide information, give children meanings of words, you explain what's happening, and then you shift it and you engage them in telling and answering it.

So multiple reads are critical both because of the practice. You hear the words and the sentences and so forth, but also you shift the responsibility for making sense of the story from the teacher to the children. So, the children begin to co-tell the story that they call it, they recall it with the teacher,

JA: So, the children need to reconstruct the story. We want the children to be able to reconstruct the story after a few reads that the teacher is leading the discussion.

DD: Right. And that can sometimes be as simple as filling in words, filling in phrases if they're repeated phrases teachers love to do that; but also being able to explain a little something happened, "Oh remember what, remember why he was doing that?" So that the children continue to sort of have opportunities to step a little bit outside the story, the words of the story and explain what's happening.

JA: You kind of talked about pulling a specific word like carton out of the "Whistle for Willie" book. How that specific vocabulary word "carton" would need to be explicitly explained and taught to the children. How would you share with teachers the importance of continuing the use of that word after the read aloud for students to remember it?

DD: When teachers are making instructional plans, which I hope everybody does, they choose a book and they usually choose a book because it fits with the theme. And in that theme, there usually will be some big ideas that the teachers are wanting to communicate to children. The book will have some vocabulary

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that touches on that theme. So, if you're reading about or thinking about growing things (now that it's spring) the book will probably talk about seeds or roots or leaves or things like that. So the teacher should or the teaching team ideally should identify oh eight or ten words that they're really going to highlight and try to do the best they can to have children begin to own those words by the time they've read that book several times and they've done their other activities in the classroom. So, the first challenge is to determine the theme and check the book. But once you've got the book, find some words that you know you're going to stop and define and you're going to come back to and then you begin to infuse those words into the classroom. And they don't only stay in the book, but they get used in other settings throughout the day.

JA: I love the way you said the words don't stay in the book. They have to be brought out of the book and into the classroom for students to experience throughout their day. And that helps contribute to the understanding of the meaning of that word.

DD: The meaning and the recollection, the ability to use it spontaneously. You want children to take the words and own them and they're going to own them if they find ways to use them and understand them.

I'll just give you an example. My co-author of our curriculum Judy Schickedanz was spending time with some children who had read the books in our curriculum the previous years and one of the words that's in that book is that curriculum is the word 'scampered.' And Judy goes outside and there's a little child pointed to a telephone pole and said, "Oh look that squirrel scampered up the pole!" And Judy said, "You know *I think I know where that child learned that word scampered*, and it was from that book." And the children had— that child had taken it on and now it was part of her vocabulary.

JA: And how would that specific example contribute to maybe that child is taking a specific standardized test six years down the road. How would that knowledge contribute to their success? In a tested literacy skill, I would say.

DD: So, assessments are dependent on children's vocabulary. So there might well be reading passages that have words that children, some children won't know because they haven't had the exposure and the your comprehension for a reading related task is going to be clearly impacted; it's going to be reduced if you don't have ready access to those words and the meanings that are associated with it. But you'll have problems with other parts of assessments possibly with math mathematics problems if there's story problems. So, the ability to take the test is going to depend on vocabulary.

Now more broadly, we simply need to be building up a repertoire of language and just ways of using language, because that's how we engage in everyday classroom activities how we understand what teachers are teaching. There's a phenomenon called the 'Matthew Effect' and that it refers to go back to the book in the Bible where it says the rich who have gain more. But the idea is if you have money already, you're going to get more and that's absolutely the case with vocabulary, as children know vocabulary then they're primed to take up the new words that are being used in the classroom by the teacher, so they benefit more from the instruction.

JA: I have to ask one more question. What would you say to teachers who are teaching Pre-K or Kindergarten to inspire them to prepare these young children for their, for our changing futures?

DD: Well the first thing I want to say to early childhood teachers is I have enormous respect for what you're doing and it's absolutely important. You're not only building children's minds, of course, you're building their hearts and their relationships with their families. So, one of the ways that occurs is through

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the language that you're using and giving the children the power to communicate their ideas and their feelings with their parents. Now to switch to a more academic way of thinking about things.

One of the things that is remarkable, is the fact that children once they have learned a word can, have been shown in my own research to be able to recall that word eight months later. And if you think about it, you know lots of words you don't know when you learned them. We're incredible at learning and remembering words. So, it's not like some facts where you have to keep back and go over them and over them. If a child has had a rich exposure to words and begin to take them on, they're going to be in that child's language repertoire for the rest of their lives.

And so, what you're doing, when you're reading books, having conversations, and you're building children's language is providing them with a reservoir of vocabulary and language using strategies that will carry them the rest of their lives.

CONCLUSION:

JA: Thank you so much for joining us.

In the conversation today, Dr. Dickinson explained the importance of language and literacy development. We hope the information provided today supports your work as you develop language rich learning environments for young children.