



From “Teaching Language” to “Using Language”: Approaches to Early Childhood Language Education in Authentic Communicative Contexts

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ABSTRACT: The essence of language lies in communication and interaction. When language activities in preschools are primarily confined to a one-way question-and-answer pattern of “teacher questioning and children responding,” children may have opportunities to respond to teachers’ questions, but they may not have sufficient opportunities to experience and use language in authentic contexts. Therefore, early childhood language education should not focus solely on the teaching of vocabulary, sentence structures, or linguistic knowledge. Rather, it should return to children’s lived worlds and provide opportunities for them to use language naturally in authentic and meaningful contexts through interactions with teachers, peers, and their surrounding environments. In such contexts, children can use language to express ideas, negotiate meanings, ask questions, respond to others, and share experiences. In other words, early childhood language education should move from “teaching language to children” toward “enabling children to use language.” In this approach, language becomes a genuine means through which children understand, communicate, and participate in their everyday worlds. Therefore, to realize an approach to early childhood language education that “moves from teaching language to using language,” educators can focus on four dimensions: context, interaction, activities, and the teacher’s role. The emphasis is not on increasing the number of language-learning activities, but on creating meaningful everyday contexts in which children need to use language, want to use language, and have genuine reasons to use language. To further develop this perspective, this article examines approaches to early childhood language education in authentic communicative contexts, with particular attention to the shift from “teaching language” to “using language.”

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1. INTRODUCTION

The essence of language lies in communication and interaction. Language is not merely a system of vocabulary, grammatical structures, or linguistic knowledge; it is fundamentally a means through which individuals communicate, construct meaning, and participate in social life. If language activities in preschools primarily remain within a one-way question-and-answer format of “teacher asks, child answers,” children may have opportunities to respond to teachers’ questions, but they may have limited opportunities to initiate communication, negotiate meaning, and use language for authentic purposes. From a sociocultural perspective, children’s language development is closely connected to their interactions with more knowledgeable others and peers within meaningful social contexts (Halliday, 1975; Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990; Shih, 2024, 2025, 2026a, 2026b). Therefore, early childhood language education should not focus solely on the teaching of vocabulary, sentence structures, or linguistic knowledge. Rather, it should be situated within children’s lived experiences and everyday social contexts, where language is used purposefully to accomplish meaningful activities (Halliday, 1975; Wells, 1999). Through interactions with teachers, peers, and their surrounding environment, children can use language to express ideas, negotiate, ask questions, respond to others, and share experiences. Such interaction provides children with opportunities to learn language through actual language use rather than through decontextualized linguistic instruction (Bruner, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, early childhood language education should move from “teaching children language” toward “enabling children to use language,” allowing language to become an important tool through which children understand the world, express their experiences, build relationships with others, and co-construct meaning. This perspective is consistent with a functional view of language, which emphasizes what people do with language in social contexts rather than language as an isolated body of knowledge. To realize this shift from “teaching language” to “using language,” the key is not simply to increase the number of language-learning activities, but to transform the ways in which children use language and the conditions that support such use. First, early childhood language education should begin with children’s lived experiences and create authentic contexts involving genuine communicative needs. Such contexts can motivate children to use language because they have something to say, questions to ask, or ideas to express. Learning that emerges from meaningful activity and social participation can provide richer opportunities for children to develop language than instruction that is detached from their everyday experiences (Halliday, 1975; Rogoff, 1990; Wells, 1999). Second, language activities should move beyond the teacher-directed “question-and-answer” pattern toward two-way or multidirectional interactions among children and between children and teachers. Such interactions provide children with opportunities to listen to others, express their perspectives, respond to different ideas, negotiate meanings, and collaboratively solve problems. Dialogic interaction is particularly important because children develop language not only by receiving linguistic input but also by actively participating in communicative exchanges. Third, language should be naturally integrated into play, exploration, picture-book reading, creative activities, everyday events, and peer interactions rather than being confined to isolated language-learning activities. Play and other meaningful activities provide contexts in which children have genuine reasons to communicate and opportunities to use language for multiple purposes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bruner, 1983; Mercer, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990). In this sense, language learning becomes embedded in children’s broader experiences of participation, exploration, and social interaction. Finally, teachers should shift their roles from transmitters of linguistic knowledge to facilitators who create communicative contexts and provide scaffolding for children’s language development. Through questioning, responding, extending children’s ideas, and modeling language use, teachers can support children in moving beyond what they can accomplish independently toward more sophisticated forms of communication. The teacher’s role is therefore not simply to correct children’s language, but to create conditions in which children can actively participate in meaningful communication. Therefore, moving from “teaching language” to “using language” does not mean rejecting the learning of vocabulary, sentence structures, or linguistic knowledge. Rather, it

involves reconsidering how such linguistic knowledge can be meaningfully connected to children's lived experiences and authentic communication. Children do not simply learn language first and then use it; rather, they develop linguistic competence through participating in meaningful communicative activities and using language for authentic purposes (Bruner, 1983; Halliday, 1975; Vygotsky, 1978; Thieme et al, 2022; Wood et al., 1976). Meaningful early childhood language education should therefore enable children to need to use, want to use, and actually use language, making "using language" an essential pathway to "learning language." To further develop this perspective, this article examines approaches to early childhood language education in authentic communicative contexts, with particular attention to the shift from "teaching language" to "using language."

2. APPROACHES TO EARLY CHILDHOOD LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN AUTHENTIC

Communicative Contexts

2.1 From "Teaching Language" to "Using Language"

Traditional early childhood language education often places greater emphasis on what should be taught, such as teaching children vocabulary, sentence structures, print recognition, responses to teachers' questions, and story retelling. These language activities are important for helping children develop vocabulary, understand linguistic forms, and build foundational language skills. However, when children's language learning is primarily confined to instructional patterns such as "teacher modeling-child imitation" and "teacher questioning-child answering," language may come to be viewed as knowledge that children need to acquire and master rather than as a tool for understanding the world, expressing experiences, and interacting with others. From a sociocultural perspective, language development does not occur solely within the individual but is gradually constructed through social interaction and participation in cultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, early childhood language education should emphasize the functions of language in authentic social interactions rather than focusing exclusively on the acquisition of linguistic forms. A child's ability to produce vocabulary accurately or construct grammatically complete sentences does not necessarily indicate an ability to use language effectively in authentic communicative situations. Language development involves not only linguistic forms, such as vocabulary, syntax, and phonology, but also children's abilities to understand communicative contexts, express intentions, respond to others, and adjust their language use according to different situations (Snow, 1999). From the perspective of pragmatic language development, children gradually learn when, with whom, and for what purposes language should be used through actual interactions with adults and peers (Ninio & Snow, 1996). Accordingly, early childhood language education needs to move from "teaching language" to "using language," shifting its central concern from how much language children know to whether they can use language to communicate with others, express ideas, understand different perspectives, negotiate meanings, and construct shared understandings. Moving toward "using language" does not mean rejecting the teaching of vocabulary, sentence structures, print, or other forms of linguistic knowledge. Rather, it involves reconsidering the functions and purposes of such knowledge. Children learn vocabulary so that they can describe their experiences; they learn sentence structures so that they can express their thoughts; they encounter print so that they can understand and participate in literacy practices in everyday life; and they engage with stories so that they can share perspectives, discuss characters, express feelings, and construct meanings with others. This perspective is consistent with approaches to early language and literacy education that emphasize embedding language and literacy within meaningful social interactions and children's everyday experiences (NAEYC & IRA, 1998; NAEYC, 2020). In other words, linguistic knowledge should not be regarded as the endpoint of language learning but as a means through which children communicate and participate in everyday life. From this perspective, what needs to change in early childhood language education is not merely the format of instructional activities but also the underlying understanding of the nature of language learning. Language serves communicative, expressive, and social functions, and children develop language abilities through participation in joint activities with others (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1983). Therefore, children should have

opportunities to use language in situations that involve authentic purposes and meaningful experiences. For example, children may discuss with peers how to construct a house during block play, express their needs to teachers during daily routines, explain their perspectives and negotiate with peers during conflicts, or introduce their own artwork during sharing activities. Language use in such situations is not merely an expression of language competence; it is also a process through which children participate in social interaction, develop interpersonal relationships, and construct meaning collaboratively (Rogoff, 2003). Moreover, within an “using language” approach, teachers should not function merely as transmitters of linguistic knowledge but as facilitators and supporters of children’s language interactions. Through responsive interaction, language expansion, reformulation, and the extension of children’s utterances, adults can provide richer linguistic input and create more opportunities for meaningful communication (Girolametto et al., 2003). Particularly during child-initiated play and everyday activities, teachers who are sensitive to children’s communicative intentions can use open-ended questions and elaborative responses to extend conversations and support children’s language development. In this way, language learning can become naturally embedded in children’s ongoing experiences and activities (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). Therefore, the shift from “teaching language” to “using language” represents more than a change in instructional techniques; it reflects a broader shift in the conceptualization of early childhood language education. At its core, this shift involves transforming children from recipients of linguistic knowledge into active users of language; teachers from transmitters of linguistic knowledge into designers of communicative contexts and supporters of dialogue; and the classroom from a place for practicing language into a lived environment in which children can use language, interact with others, and construct meanings collaboratively (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003). Accordingly, an important educational proposition can be advanced: Children do not necessarily learn language first and then use it; rather, they gradually learn how to understand, express, communicate, and live with others through the meaningful use of language in authentic contexts. This perspective suggests that the ultimate goal of early childhood language education should not be limited to developing children who can speak, read, and write, but should also include nurturing children’s ability to use language to express themselves, understand others, respond to differences, solve problems, and participate meaningfully in social interactions. Thus, the shift from “teaching language” to “using language” represents not merely a change in teaching methods but a fundamental reconsideration of the purposes and practices of early childhood language education.

The teacher-directed “question–answer–evaluation”(Initiation–Response–Evaluation, IRE) interaction pattern serves certain instructional and organizational functions in early childhood language education. However, when it becomes the dominant form of teacher–child linguistic interaction, children’s language use may be constrained by teachers’ predetermined questions, expected answers, and evaluative criteria. As a result, children may have fewer opportunities to initiate conversations, ask questions, express their own perspectives, and negotiate meaning with others. Early childhood language education should therefore gradually move beyond interaction patterns in which teachers primarily control the direction of classroom discourse toward open-ended, extended, reciprocal, and multidirectional dialogue, positioning children as active participants in linguistic interactions (Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1999).

For example, when a child says during a leaf-rubbing activity, “This leaf looks like a rhinoceros beetle,” the teacher could simply respond, “Yes, it does,” causing the conversation to end with the teacher’s evaluation. Alternatively, the teacher could extend the dialogue by asking, “Why do you think it looks like a rhinoceros beetle?”, “What else do you think it could look like?”, or “Which part of the leaf makes you think of a rhinoceros beetle?” Through such open-ended and elaborative questions, children are encouraged not only to express their ideas but also to explain their reasoning, describe their observations, connect their experiences to everyday life, and listen and respond to the perspectives of their peers. In this process, the teacher’s role is no

longer simply to determine whether children's responses are "correct." Instead, through questioning, responding, extending, and scaffolding, teachers support children in developing brief utterances into more elaborated descriptions and ideas. Such interactions transform language from merely a tool through which teachers transmit knowledge and children respond to questions into a medium for thinking, expressing, negotiating, exploring, and co-constructing meaning (Bruner, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1999).

Therefore, teachers' questions should gradually shift from "seeking the correct answer" toward "promoting children's thinking and expression." The educational value of dialogue lies not in how many questions teachers ask, but in whether children are provided with meaningful opportunities to speak, think, listen, respond, and co-construct meaning. In other words, early childhood language education should move beyond asking whether "the teacher asks good questions" toward asking whether "children are genuinely given opportunities to use language." This represents an important transition from "teacher speaks, child responds" to "teachers and children speak together, explore together, and co-construct meaning."

3. CONCLUSION

The essence of language lies in communication, interaction, and meaning-making. Accordingly, meaningful early childhood language education should move beyond a narrow emphasis on vocabulary, sentence structures, literacy, and writing toward creating authentic contexts in which children can actively use language in their everyday lives (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Halliday, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1999). This article has argued that the shift from "teaching language" to "using language" represents not simply a change in teaching techniques, but a broader reconceptualization of the purposes and practices of early childhood language education. From this perspective, language education should be grounded in children's lived worlds and organized around meaningful opportunities for communication and social participation (Rogoff, 1990; Wells, 1999). The four dimensions discussed in this article—authentic contexts, dialogic interaction, meaningful language-related activities, and the teacher's role—provide interconnected directions for this transformation. Rather than relying primarily on teacher-directed questioning and predetermined linguistic outcomes, educators can create situations in which children have genuine reasons to communicate, express ideas, ask questions, respond to others, negotiate meanings, and share experiences (Bruner & Watson, 1983; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Language-learning areas can likewise be transformed from spaces for storing instructional materials into environments that encourage reading, storytelling, play, symbolic exploration, writing, and peer interaction. Such environments can provide children with opportunities to develop language through meaningful participation and interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990). Children's literature can further provide rich contexts for linguistic, emotional, imaginative, and value exploration, allowing language to become connected with children's broader experiences of living and learning (Bruner, 1986). Through stories and dialogue, children can relate fictional experiences to their own lives, interpret characters' perspectives, and construct meanings through interaction with texts and others. In this sense, children's literature should not be treated merely as a tool for teaching vocabulary or linguistic forms, but as a meaningful medium through which children experience language, imagination, emotion, and meaning-making. This perspective also requires a reconsideration of the teacher's role. Teachers are not merely transmitters of linguistic knowledge or evaluators of children's language performance. Rather, they are designers of communicative environments, facilitators of dialogue, and providers of appropriate scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976). Through listening to children, extending their ideas, asking open-ended questions, and responding meaningfully to their expressions, teachers can create conditions in which children become active users of language rather than passive recipients of linguistic instruction (Wells, 1999). Ultimately, moving from "teaching language" to "using language" does not mean abandoning the teaching of vocabulary, literacy, writing, or other linguistic knowledge. Instead, it means reconnecting these forms of knowledge with children's authentic experiences and communicative purposes (Halliday, 1977; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

Children do not simply learn language first and then use it; rather, they develop linguistic competence through using language in meaningful social and cultural contexts (Bruner & Watson, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, the goal of early childhood language education should not be limited to enabling children to “know language,” but should include enabling them to need to use language, want to use language, and actually use language. In this sense, language becomes more than an object of learning. It becomes a means through which children understand themselves, communicate with others, explore their surroundings, participate in social life, and construct meaning within their lifeworlds (Rogoff, 1990; Wells, 1999). The movement from “teaching language” to “using language” therefore represents a shift from language as a subject to language as a medium for living, learning, communicating, and meaning-making. This shift provides an important direction for rethinking early childhood language education, particularly in the context of Taiwanese preschools (Ministry of Education, 2017; van der Wilt et al, 2019; Ye & Shih, 2021).

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