Reprinted with permission, from Teaching and Learning in the Early Years*, David Whitebread and Penny Coleman, 4th edition 2015*

Chapter 7

'Listen to my idea!'
Communication and language in the early years

Nancy Stewart

Some very young children swim confidently in the sea of language around them. They can listen attentively to a story, understand a question posed to them and – perhaps even more importantly – pose their own question clearly in their minds. They verbally negotiate different points of view in play, and explain their own ideas in some detail. Their skilful use of language will underpin their learning across all areas of an early years curriculum. For early years educators, supporting all children to develop such rich communication and language should be high priority.

Crucial elements of language development have already taken place by the time a child enters a nursery or school. We are born to be communicators, with the earliest roots of language laid down even before birth and then fostered within early interactions with caring and attentive people. A newborn baby recognises the voices of its parents following months of hearing the muffled sounds of speech in the womb, and in the early days of life prefers listening to the human voice over all other sounds and already recognises the rhythms, tunes and vowel sounds of their native tongue compared to other languages. Babies also instinctively seek out eye contact and gaze at faces with rapt attention. These inborn patterns of behaviour support rapid connections with the people who provide the care and attention a baby needs, and lead to a phenomenal amount of learning about communication and language during the early years of life.

But while babies are primed to develop language, not all children receive the opportunities in rich communication environments that enable them to learn crucial skills. A famous study of language use in the home (Hart and Risley 1995) estimated that by the age of three children in language-rich families had heard over three times as many words as in low-talk families, as well as eight times as many encouraging comments from their parents. Unsurprisingly, this gap in language experience showed up in children's vocabulary and amount of talk by the age of three. Recent UK research (DfE 2011) confirms not only the differences in children's early communication and language experiences, but also the impact on their later learning. The quality of a child's communication environment – over and above the socio-economic factors which are associated with levels of language development – was found to predict a child's expressive vocabulary at age two. And children's language development at age two was seen to be very strongly associated with their success on entering primary school.

Many learning opportunities involve talk, so it's easy to see why being able to communicate effectively with words underpins success at school. The important area of literacy clearly rests on a base of spoken language, since reading and writing are essentially the recording and retrieval of language into and from a printed format. If children have a limited vocabulary or difficulty in comprehending complex sentences that are said to them, they will struggle to obtain meaning from what they read. If they cannot use talk to put ideas into words to recall an event, tell a story, or explain their thinking then their skills as writers will be similarly limited.

The importance of early communication and language, however, goes far beyond its link to literacy. Language supports children's social development, and interacting with others is a

central plank of how we learn. Children need to be able to talk about their feelings, ideas, intentions and strategies in order to make friends, and to be confident contributors in a social scene. Emotional regulation is also enhanced when feelings are put into words. Children whose language is well-developed as toddlers, for example, are better able to cope with feelings of frustration and anger at the age of four (Roben 2012). Across all areas of learning, children benefit from a richly developed vocabulary, such as using mathematical language confidently. They also need to draw on the particular role of language in enabling us to be good thinkers – to hold abstract ideas in our minds, to pin down a concept, to follow a logical train of thought and to consider how to solve problems in all areas of learning.

From communicating, to using language

We communicate in many different ways, and only some of these involve language. Facial expressions, gestures, sounds, signs, actions, drawing, and music can all send a message about feelings, intentions and ideas. The crucial point about communication is that it involves transmitting something from one mind to another, so it always requires a receiver of the message who interprets what has been expressed to make a meaning in their own mind.

Language is a uniquely human, sophisticated, symbolic way of communicating. It rests first of all on understanding that we can have an exchange with others, so the more experience children have of the many forms of communication the more readily they will add language to their repertoire. When babies and young children recognise that someone is tuning into and responding to the signals they send, it stimulates renewed interest and enthusiasm for communicating. There is no point in sending out a message if no one is listening. This is why the early 'chat' with babies, copying each other's sounds and facial expressions in a back-and-forth 'conversation', is such an important precursor to developing language. The baby may not understand what you are saying – though there is evidence that by six to nine months babies are already building understanding of words (Bergelson 2011) – but they will be picking up the rhythms of social turn-taking in a call-and-response fashion.

Babies and young children also need to hear plentiful models of talk. As you chat about what you are doing, simply narrating everyday activities, the child not only has plentiful opportunity to hear the particular sounds used in the language but also picks up the rhythms and intonations of phrases and the structures of different types of sentences. As well as living in a sea of language about what is happening in the here and now, songs, the lilting repetition of nursery rhymes, and the language of books also provide strong language models that support children to tune into language.

It is important that this rich language experience is available to children early in life. The developing brain is particularly sensitive to language sounds in the first years of life, and while we are born able to become fluent speakers in any language we gradually lose our early sensitivity – so that if we learn a new language later in life we would never speak like a native. If you've ever listened to a speaker in another language and tried to work out how many separate words were spoken, or tried to repeat accurately what was said, you will appreciate the complexity of the job facing young language learners.

Spoken language enters our ears as a steady stream of sound rather than neatly broken into words, and the child has to learn to pick out the syllables from the rhythm, and to notice individual sounds and combinations of sounds which signal where syllables and words start and stop. Since everyone's voices are different, the ways they say the same word are not exactly the same. In order to tune into language and notice patterns in the sounds, the listening baby's brain needs

to ‘chunk’ similar sounds and begin to consider a particular range of sounds to be the same. At the same time, the brain gradually loses the ability to discriminate other sounds not used in the language. This process needs a lot of examples to work from, and the more opportunity to hear language used, the better phonological awareness develops.

Children also need to develop the ability to produce speech sounds, and to use the voice with controlled pitch and volume. This complicated skill also requires practice, and babbling babies and young children playing with voice sounds are developing control over the production of air to generate sound, which is then shaped by all the muscles of the tongue, mouth, lips. Very young children may be understood most of the time by people who know them well, but often sound unintelligible to others. By the time they are three years old most children will be generally understood by unfamiliar people, but typically some of the more difficult speech sounds and blends of consonants are not fully mastered until a child is five or six years old. It is important not to confuse the clarity of speech with a child’s language development – the mechanics of the sound production is less important than the ability to use language well, and children can be made self-conscious and become reluctant to speak if adults focus on the sounds instead of what children are saying to us.

Then, with everything in place – with a child enjoying warm and responsive interactions with others, listening to and perceiving the sounds of language around them, and purposefully producing voice sounds – the child moves into using language. This enormous feat requires the mental ability to symbolise, to understand that a word which is no more than a random set of sounds, totally unconnected from what it refers to, can stand for an object (‘cat’), an action (‘run’), or an abstract idea (‘more’).

It takes two

This leap into language depends on another mental ability which develops in the first years of life. We can only understand words once we begin to recognise that someone else is using the language code to mean particular things, so we will be able to understand each other. We have to move beyond our own awareness to understand something about the mind of other people. Knowing that other people have a different mind and know and think differently from ourselves is known as theory of mind, and some aspects are not likely to be in place until a child is four years or more. But the early understanding of the point of view of others is crucial to developing language.

At first babies can pay attention to only one stimulus at a time – perhaps to an object, or to the intriguing face of someone who is making interesting noises and expressions. Once children begin to be aware of the awareness of the other person, they can engage in episodes of joint attention. At this stage a baby or toddler will look where someone has pointed, and the adult can supply the word for the object that is pointed out. The next stage is where the child takes charge by using eye gaze and then finger pointing to direct the attention of the adult, checking back to see whether they are looking. It’s almost as if the child is saying, ‘And what is that? Tell me about it!’ Studies consistently find that children who spend more time in episodes of joint attention in the first and second years of life develop larger vocabularies, and are more successful in their later learning. So we come back again to the importance for language learning of the adult who interacts with the child, stimulating their attention, providing the words, and responding readily to the child’s signals.

Children are learners with inborn developmental patterns which spur them onward. But in all areas of development and learning the dimension that an adult brings to a child’s experience can either enhance or limit how well the child progresses. The influence of another person is never

stronger than that seen in the quality of the adult's behaviour as a communication partner. Language develops in the context of interaction, so the adult's skill in using strategies which support talking together is crucial. Just as it's not possible to learn how to play the piano just by listening to great pianists, learning to use language well is not just about listening to others – you have to have a go for yourself. Sadly, too often talk in early years settings and schools is centred around the adult who does most of the talking and steers the discussion, with the child primarily cast as the listener or expected to supply the words the adult is looking for. In this situation, children are missing out on practice at finding the words to express their own ideas and thoughts. Adults need to be expert listeners, in order to support children to become effective speakers. There are also particular strategies that skilful adults can employ to offer appropriate scaffolding of children's early use of language, to model and support the next stage.

When we seek to understand and support children's developing language, there is a tendency to focus our attention on the expressive language a child uses. But what a child says is actually the end result of groundwork in other areas, without which effective language use will be limited. Adults can be a positive influence in each of these aspects, so understanding the foundations of language and providing the conditions for each element to develop is necessary in order to support all children as well as to give target support to children who are having difficulty.

Listening and attention

In order to take part in communicative exchanges and to learn about the sounds and words of language, children need to focus their attention and listen. During the first years of life children develop the ability to purposefully focus their attention rather than being distracted by any new stimulus, until eventually children can listen effectively even while they are occupied with something else – for example, they can continue building a model while being involved in a conversation. Until that point, there are many ways to support children to focus their attention in order to listen.

To support children's listening and attention, set the scene by reducing unnecessary visual and sound distractions. To create a communication-friendly environment, practitioners use calm colours, avoid over-exuberant displays, turn off background music or TV, and ensure there are quiet spaces available for talk.

Skilful adults also interact in ways which support listening and attention. First of all, establishing contact for communication is key. Adults need to be face to face with the child, on the child's level. From about six months onward, children pay close attention to reading adults' lips to help them focus on the specific sounds being made. At all ages it is easier to maintain focus on communicating with someone who is facing you rather than someone who towers over you or turns away, talking at you while doing something else. For children who are not able to focus their attention easily, using the child's name to gain their attention before speaking to them prepares them to listen. Using a lively voice, gesture and facial expression also supports children to listen, which is why adults instinctively use a higher-pitched, lilting voice when speaking to babies and small children. In a group situation it is helpful to supplement calls to attention with sound signals such as a bell, and visual signals and clues.

Activities can be arranged to support listening and attention. Working one-to-one or in small groups supports listening far more than large group sessions. High-interest activities set the scene and enable children to focus. Specific activities give practice in listening and attention, such as games that include listening and waiting for a signal, like peek-a-boo, Jack-in-the-box,

ready-steady-go, Simon says, and activities that involve careful listening such as a listening walk, passing sounds around the circle, copy my sound, listening to voices on tape.

Children learn through imitating, so it is important for adults to model being a good listener. Adults can also explicitly draw attention to good listening, including looking, and thinking about what you hear. Children can be encouraged to listen to each other, for example reminding them to look at the speaker: 'Let's all let Cara see our eyes, so she knows that we're listening.'

Understanding

Children's comprehension of spoken language is often given little direct attention, perhaps because knowing exactly what a child understands isn't easy. A child's difficulty with understanding language can easily be masked in the early stages, since it is possible to rely on other forms of communication. Children can gather quite a bit from the context, from gestures, from facial expressions and from what they see others doing, even if they don't understand the words or can't follow the whole sentence. Any concerns about a child's understanding can be checked out by asking them to follow instructions at an appropriate level (for example, without giving clues through gestures say 'Where's the ball?' to a two-year-old when looking at a picture of a few objects; or 'Get some scissors and then come to the blue table' to a four-year-old). Once we are aware of a child's level of comprehension, we can pitch our language at the right level for the child so they aren't left behind in discussion and can take part effectively.

Children's receptive vocabulary – the set of words which they understand – develops before they begin to use the words to talk. At this early stage, language becomes an exceptional means to unlock the door to more powerful thinking. Imagine you are a baby using your senses to explore a straw hat. You feel its rough texture, you hear the scratchy sound it makes when you bend it, you see its golden colour and perhaps even taste it. You find it has similarities to the wicker ball in your treasure basket. But the adult tuning into your exploration in an episode of joint attention highlights the word 'hat', using it several times in a clear way. So what is 'hat' – rough, scratchy, golden? Later you encounter a red, woolly object that the adult also labels 'hat, but it has no sensory information in common with the object already associated with 'hat'. Then the connection dawns on you, and you recognise that what they have in common is their function, the fact that they both go on your head. You have been lifted out of the here and now of sensory knowledge, and given a tool to grasp an abstract idea. You can also begin to play with this idea in imaginative ways, since it is not tied to the physical world. You can now put a cup on your head and say 'hat!' You are on your way to being an abstract, flexible, creative thinker.

Words help children to understand categories, and to think carefully about what does and does not define belonging. Why is every man not called 'Daddy'? Why is the four-legged furry creature with a tail and a bark not called 'cat'? Descriptive words such as 'big', 'heavy', and 'fast' sharpen children's awareness of comparing different features, while using richer tier-two words – such as 'galloped', 'thundered', 'scampered', 'darted', 'zipped', 'sprinted' – will help children think of running with greater discrimination. Words for emotions help children to identify and begin to understand the waves of feeling 'angry', 'sad', 'excited', 'worried', and so on.

Language comprehension also requires the ability to make sense of the way words are put together in phrases and sentences. The order of words makes a difference to the meaning, so 'Tommy chased Becky' is the opposite of 'Becky chased Tommy'. Understanding the way more complex sentences are built to combine ideas, using structures involving 'if', 'and', 'but', 'then', 'because', is essential to follow a train of thought.

Hearing a rich vocabulary and different kinds of talk – everyday chat, discussion and negotiation, poems and rhymes, narrative and nonfiction texts – is crucial for children to continue to develop their understanding of words and sentences which is a precursor to being able to use these themselves.

An effective technique to support children's understanding is to simply describe what babies and children are showing interest in and what they are doing in their activities, which helps them to link objects and actions to words. In making this running commentary, it is important to follow the child's lead and to use language on the right level for the child. In general, children will be able to grasp the meaning of sentences that are one word longer than those the child uses themselves. So pre-verbal children need to have one word highlighted among the more general commentary provided, by repeating and emphasising the single word to help it to stand out for the child. A child who uses single words is ready to understand two-word phrases, emphasised by your intonation and stress. Again, using a lively voice and supporting what is said with visual clues – gestures, objects, pictures, or signs – supports comprehension.

It takes several seconds for children to mentally process what they hear and make sense of what you might mean, so don't rush on too quickly. Leave pauses, and use repetition of key words and phrases to give the child time to process the language.

The meaning of new words becomes clear to children when the word occurs repeatedly, in different contexts, so a focus on new and interesting words will help adults to look for chances to use it. For example, a child may choose a 'shiny' star to glue on their collage, and later there may be opportunities to describe the doll's shiny eyes, or how the bucket looks shiny when it is wet. Providing real objects and props for children to handle which reflect what they hear about in stories, and for them to use to re-enact stories, will also help make the link between a new word and its meaning.

Expressive communication

We come now to considering the child as message-giver, rather than message-receiver. It's important to understand this area of communication and language broadly to cover all aspects of a child's expressive communication, and not just to think about 'speech' which refers to the production of sounds, or even to talk alone. Some children with particular needs may never speak, but can learn to express themselves effectively using signing or other alternative or augmented methods.

Children can be effective communicators from the beginning, and can use sounds and gestures to communicate their needs, feelings, and interests. A baby several months old who lifts his arms when he sees a parent is saying, 'I want to be picked up,' and a baby who points is saying, 'Look at that' or perhaps 'I want that.' It's up to the responsive adult to do the required work to meet the communicating child in the middle and work out the message.

Toddlers rapidly begin to use single words, and by about age two begin to put words together into two-word sentences. Children use the rules of the language they have discovered: for example, they use word order correctly so they say 'dog get ball', not 'ball get dog'. They also show that they are forming general rules about language, and apply them by analogy to other words – so children who say 'sheeps' or 'goed' are showing good logic about how the language works. When a child make mistakes in language usage, rather than correct it directly adults can acknowledge what the child says, but then use the correct form so the child notices the difference: 'Yes, there are two sheep,' or 'Oh, they went, did they?'

One of the ways language becomes a powerful tool for children is through talking aloud to themselves. This private speech, where they narrate their own activities, is an important way that children begin to become aware of their own thoughts and regulate their own behaviour. Beyond all the practical uses of language, such as asking for what they want, children can move into many more sophisticated purposes which support their thinking and learning. They ask questions to seek information or explanations, they recount an experience or create a narrative which helps them to make sense of their experiences, they use talk to pretend and so develop their imagination and flexible thinking, they describe plans and so become more purposeful in their intentions, they give explanations which help them to think things through. Children can begin to use emerging talk for such rich purposes, when adults support them well by tuning into and responding to the child's communicative intentions.

A shorthand description of the conditions that support children's developing language use is: *Someone to talk to, and something to talk about.* The listener is someone who is interested, and also is skilful in supporting language growth. Having something to talk about requires a learning environment that stimulates a response, through fascinating resources and involving experiences.

The physical space of the learning environment that supports children to talk will have features of good early years provision, such as open spaces that children can use flexibly, accessible resources that are clearly marked and can be combined in different ways, inviting book areas, role play areas, comfortable light, limited noise, smaller intimate spaces. The outdoor environment should equally be organised to support communication – early years practitioners who improved their outdoor environments have sometimes been surprised to hear the rich and purposeful talk that bursts forth from some children who have communicated very little indoors.

The role of the adult as the communication partner, however, is both more subtle and more powerful than the environment. It can be relatively straightforward to plan and organise a physical environment. But how we communicate with others is a personal style that includes long-established habits. Developing skills of effective interaction may require critical awareness of how we respond to children and the degree of respect and real fascination we demonstrate for establishing a two-way communication. It may mean changing a view of the adult as the leader in children's learning, to seeing the children as active thinkers who are engaged in their own learning and benefit from sharing the process with the adult as a partner.

Communication partner

Expert communication partners are aware that almost everything is a communication and language opportunity. Although there are times where a child's silent concentration should be valued and not interrupted by adult talk, the adult can still be taking note of the child's interest to talk about after the moment of intense concentration has gone. Most often a companionable interaction can be a language learning experience and adults who keep that in mind will be strong supporters for children's developing talk.

Talking with children in ways which support their language development begins with being a good listener. This means tuning in to all the ways children communicate, and responding to the child's gestures and expressions as well as what they say. It requires making the effort to try to understand the child's intentions, ideas and feelings which are being expressed, rather than jumping to conclusions or steering the exchange to where the adult wants it to go. Ordinary conversation about what the child is interested in is the ideal ground for supportive language

exchanges. When the adult follows the child's lead by talking together about the child's current activity or preoccupation, the child is motivated to try to put ideas into words.

When the adult offers a comment or question, it is essential to then give the child time to think rather than rapidly following up with a question or statement that cuts off the child's train of thought. It since it can take several seconds for the child to process what was said, consider their answer, form it mentally into words, and then give a verbal response. Maintaining an interested expression while waiting patiently will give the child encouragement to put their thoughts into words.

Closed questions with limited choice of response clearly mean the adult is leading, and offer children little room to express themselves. Even open questions, however, can put the adult in charge of the agenda. In a balanced conversation, nobody likes to feel they are responding to a barrage of questions. If you ask me 'What is that piece going to be?' when actually I'm interested just in the process of gluing pieces into the spaces on my page, I am not encouraged to engage with you. If instead of a question you make a comment, such as 'That piece looks a bit wrinkly,' I might respond 'It will fit here, though. I can press it flat in this space.' In general the 'five-finger' rule is a good guide: offer four comments (fingers) for every question (thumb).

Within the conversation, adults can offer children a bridge to the next level by expanding just beyond what the child currently does. This sort of language support is in line with Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development. By acknowledging the child's comment and reusing it in an expanded form, the adult pitches a model at just the right level for the child to begin to assimilate it. Here are some examples of **expansions**:

Child: 'Big bus'
Adult: 'Yes, it is a big bus. It's a big red bus.'

Child: 'We go shops. Me and Grandma.'
Adult: 'Oh, you went to the shops with Grandma.'

Rather than directly drawing attention to language errors either in pronunciation or grammar, **recast** the child's comment in the correct form. This immediate contingent model helps children to notice the error and make the correction without discouraging their efforts to talk. For example:

Child: 'Look at that heckilopter.'
Adult: 'The helicopter's blades are zooming around!'

The adult also has a role to play in encouraging children to talk for many different purposes – to recount, to explain, to negotiate, to tell stories, to wonder. As well as providing opportunities for each of these in the continuous provision and routines, specific language learning activities can be planned. Some activities have been found to be particularly effective in building children's expressive language, such as dialogic book talk where a book is used not for a literacy purpose, but as a prompt for children to discuss their own thoughts and responses to the book. Other approaches include talking tables or conversation stations, both planned opportunities for children to have one-to-one or one-to-two discussions about things that interest them.

Partnership with parents

However rich a communication environment a setting can provide, it is much more effective when it builds a joint approach with parents. Some settings share top tips for interaction, boxes of

resources to encourage conversation at home ('chatter boxes'), or story sacks, and enjoy joint activities focussed on play and talk. The many ways of building parent partnerships can make an enormous difference to children's outcomes when focussed specifically on communication and language both at home and in settings.

Toddler talk

A day nursery linked to a children's centre established a baby-toddler environment, where the linked spaces provided more room and enabled continuity of key person who remained with a child up to the age of three. The close relationships that developed enabled the key person to be sensitively aware of children's early communication.

One day the practitioners had brought into the setting a few coloured helium balloons for the children to play with. Luke, aged 17 months and just steady on his feet, was enjoying holding onto the ribbon of one of the balloons, and shaking it vigorously up and down. Sharon, his key person, said, 'Shake. Shake,' and copied his action. Luke smiled broadly and shook even harder. Suddenly the ribbon slipped from his grasp, and the balloon floated rapidly to the ceiling. He looked at Sharon with an expression of surprise and alarm. She mirrored his look of surprise, and said, 'It's gone **up**! **Up**!', as she gestured upward with her arm. Luke reached upward toward the balloon, but the ribbon was beyond his reach. 'It's up high! Shall we get it?,' Sharon asked. 'I'll reach **up**.' When she stood to reach it, Sharon saw that the end of the ribbon was just out of her reach. She stretched and said as she looked at Luke, 'Oh, no, it's way **up high.** I'll have to jump.' She jumped and caught the ribbon, which she handed to Luke. He held it a moment and then let it go again, grinning and pointing up. 'Ah,' said Sharon, acting surprised. 'It's gone **up**!' Luke started bending his legs and suddenly lifting his trunk – like a jump without his feet leaving the ground. 'Shall I jump?' asked Sharon. '**Jump!**' she said as she retrieved the balloon again. This sequence was repeated a few more times, and Luke began joining in with the word 'Jah!' and doing his version of a jump. Later Sharon noticed that as Luke played with a toy digger he paid close attention to how he could move the claw arm, and she commented on what he was doing while taking the opportunity to use key words in this new context: 'Oh, it goes **up**. And down. And **up**. And down.'

The setting planned time every day for nursery rhymes in key groups. Each key person had a bag containing finger puppets linked to familiar songs, and children were invited to choose the puppet for the song they wanted to sing. Staff were aware that the repetition helped the children to become familiar with language and to try out in song phrases that they would not manage otherwise. Sharon decided to add The Grand Old Duke of York to their familiar songs, and Luke took part eagerly in bobbing up and down. The setting didn't use taped versions of songs which could not allow any adjustment for the children's pace, so instead the staff always sang the songs, watching for children's responses and encouraging them to join in where they could. Sharon took the opportunity to slow down and emphasise the words 'up' and 'down'.

The next week another child brought a balloon from their birthday to the nursery, and Sharon was delighted when Luke looked at her and said, 'Jah!' as he made his linked movement. 'Yes,' Sharon said, 'we **jumped** for the balloon!' And she joined in with Luke, jumping and saying, '**Jump, jump**!'

From moons to balloons

Nursery children had been singing ‘Hey Diddle Diddle’, and looking at the illustration of the rhyme in a big book. What follows is a discussion drawing on their experiences, theories and interests, where children listen to each other and put their own ideas into words. Their teacher was interested in the importance of dialogue among children, and developing her skills in supporting thinking conversations. She used strategies of open questioning and referring back to children’s ideas, encouraging them to extend their thinking. It is notable that the children responded to each other, without the adult mediating each contribution.

A discussion among Nursery children aged 3-4, following singing ‘Hey Diddle Diddle’

Millie I went in my caravan in night time once, and I looked up at the moon…it made my eyes swell.

Olivia On Saturday I saw the moon. We were still at Grandma’s house. It was round and none of it was half. *(comparing with the crescent illustration in the book)*

Tom I didn’t see the moon.

Adult Can cows really jump over the moon? *(reflecting on the illustration)*

Jasmine No, ‘cos the moon’s not real.

Fin Cows can’t fly. Cows haven’t got wings so they can’t fly. Birds have wings.

Charlie One time Mummy and Daddy and Ned and me went in the car in night time from Nana’s.

Adult What is the moon? *(If not real, then what is it?)*

Louis It’s round, it’s a circle.

Charlie Sometimes it goes like that *(draws a crescent moon in the air)* with a pointy bit at the end.

Olivia I think the moon might be round. I think it’s made from golden.

Fin The moon is right high up.

Adult What is it made of? *(expand on theory of ‘made from golden’)*

Millie Gold!

Tom Soft…soggy soft.

Ben Hard, just hard.

Boo I think it’s made of water.

Charlie Tiny water.

Ben No! It’s made of silver…silver yellow.

Tom I haven’t got a clue!

Adult Why does it change shape? *(Refer back to circle/crescent)*

Charlie I know ‘cos every day sometimes it changes shape.

Louis ‘Cos it turns to a circle and it turns to a long shape.

Ben When it's winter days it changes shape.

Tom 'Cos it does… it's that much skinny.

Adult How did it get there? *(Offering a new question to consider)*

Ben It stays up there and it's till night time and in the morning time the clouds cover over it.

Charlie Sometimes I see the moon in the morning time.

Louis Me too!

Boo I got a caravan, and I got into bed and opened the curtains and I saw the moon and it was orange.

Jasmine I just saw the moon when it was light.

Boo I think a bird lifted it up.

Ben If the bird put it up there it would fall down! It stays up there and in the morning it disappears…'cos maybe when it's autumn it disappears.

Louis You know, it comes up by the high hill, 'cos the sun comes up by the high hill, too.

Ben Space men can fly and buttlerflies. I know how we can get up… if Buzz Lightyear was near!

Louis I have a better idea, use a parachute with fire.

Ben No. 'cos a parachute goes down, down, not up and up!

Louis I know how we get there – a rocket!

Tom With a spoon and fork and a pumpkin, the pumpkin has to jump on to the spoon and fork and fly to the moon.

Charlie Wallis and Gromit went to the moon. They made a real big rocket…

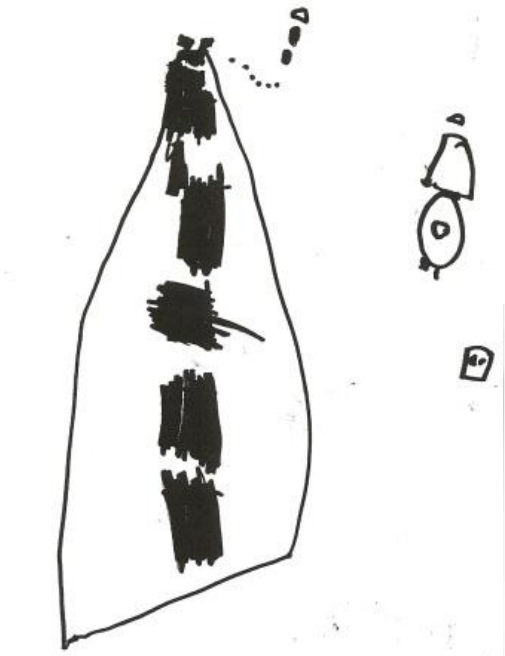
Millie No! they made a big rocket and painted it orange and lived in it.

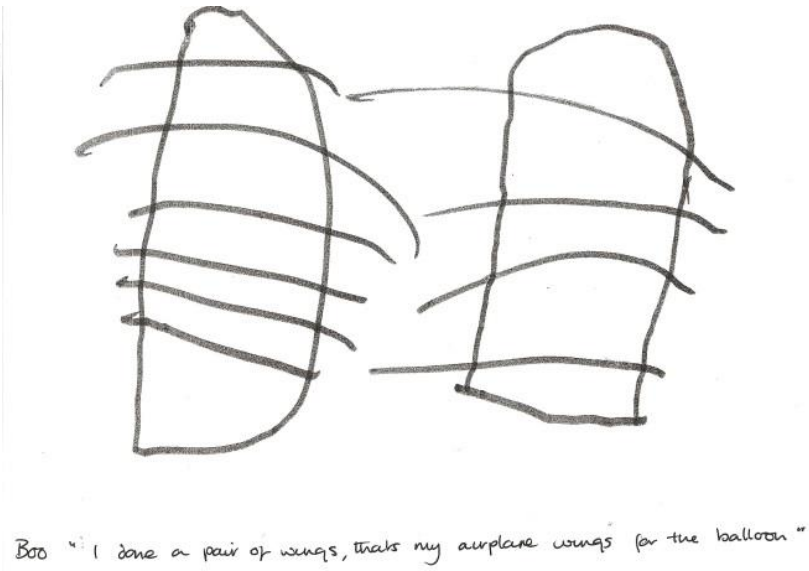
Charlie No!...I was saying..

Ben I know you need a rocket. You go to the airport to get a plane, but the plane doesn't go to the moon, it goes to a city. You have to go to the rocket landing place. I know – we could go up in the air if we made something.

Louis If we had metal we can make a rocket and I can drive a rocket, 'cos do you know, little boys can drive rockets.

In subsequent sessions the teacher continued to re-offer to the children strands of their previous conversations. She opened the next conversation with 'I've been thinking about flying. I wonder, what things can fly?' From there the discussions over a period of two weeks ranged through rockets, birds, wings, how to make something that would fly, and finally exploring the jet propulsion of a released balloon and whether they could find a way to make it fly straight. The children drew pictures of their ideas, helped them to be clear about their thinking as they attempted to put their thoughts into words. The drawings were annotated with the children's comments so they could revisit these to support later discussions.





Reviewing learning in a reception class

A reception class had an extended session of child-initiated activity each day, with open access to a richly resourced indoor and outdoor environment. As they were setting off the children were asked to describe briefly what they were going to do, with many following up on the previous day's activities with other children. The teacher said to a few children, 'I would like you to review for us today.' One of these was Thomas, who was returning to his work on making a ship. The teacher circulated among the children, dipping in here and there to join in. With a group of girls who were building towers from cartons outside, she asked whether they would also like to review today and they said they would.

Thomas had a stick as a mast for his ship, which he wanted to tie to the sides of his ship. He had cut several lengths of string, but when he tried to tie them on he found they weren't long enough. The teacher asked him first to describe the problem.

'It's not long enough,' Thomas said. 'But I held it up and measured it.'

'Why do you think that might be?' asked the teacher. 'Why isn't it long enough now, when it was long enough when you held it up?'

Thomas considered carefully, and then said, 'Because the tying used up the string.' His teacher encouraged him to talk about how he might work out the right length to cut his strings, to include extra for tying.

An hour later the class gathered before lunchtime for review time. In twos and threes children stood up to demonstrate and talk about what they had been doing. When it was Thomas's turn he first showed his ship with a brief description. The teacher then asked the children, 'Is there anything you want to ask Thomas about his ship?' The children were used to asking questions about the process, since this had been consistently modelled by the teacher. They asked Thomas: 'Did you have any problems when you were making it?', 'Why did you decide to use that wood?', 'Are you going to change anything on your boat?', and Thomas replied appropriately to each of their queries.

References

Hart, B. and Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

DfE (2011) Investigating the Role of Language in Children's Early Educational Outcomes, www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RR134.pdf

Roben, C., Cole, P.M., and Armstrong, L M (2012), 'Longitudinal Relations among Language Skills, Anger Expression, and Regulatory Strategies in Early Childhood', *Child Development* 2013 84:3:891-905.

Bergelson, E., and Swingley, D. (2011) 'At 6–9 months, human infants know the meanings of many common nouns', Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, doi: 10.1073/pnas.1113380109 February 13, 2012: http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2012/02/07/1113380109.abstract

Further reading

Dockrell, J. E., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S. and Lindsay, G. (2012), *Developing a communication supporting classrooms observation tool,* Department for Education, Research Report DFE-RR247-BCRP8.

Dockrell, J. E., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S. and Lindsay, G. (2012) *Guidance On Completing Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool*, http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/cedar/better/cscobsvtl/guidance.pdf

Wasik, B. and Bond, M. (2001), 'Beyond the Pages of a Book: Interactive Book Reading and Language Development in Preschool Classrooms', *Journal of Educational Psychology* 2001, Vol. 93, No. 2, 243-250.

Bond, M. and Wasik, B (2009), 'Conversation Stations: Promoting Language Development in Young Children', *Early Childhood Education Journal*, Jun 2009,36:6:467-473.

Every Child a Talker materials: Guidance for consultants and lead practitioners, http://www.foundationyears.org.uk/category/library/national-strategies-resources/page/3/