Preschool Teacher Talk: How Much Complex Syntax is in There?

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INTRODUCTION

Preschool classrooms offer a rich learning environment that can promote language skills necessary for literacy. Preschool teachers play a critical role in providing language input and models for the students. Much of the language emphasis in preschool classrooms is on vocabulary (e.g., what teachers say and books read to children). Language competence encompasses much more than vocabulary. Syntax, specifically complex syntax, may be just as important as vocabulary.

Proficiency in complex syntax allows children to engage in verbal dialogue and to comprehend high-level text that is critical to learning (Jackson & Roberts, 2001). Complex sentences contain two or more clauses.Clauses are joined within a single sentence through coordinate (e.g., and) or subordinate (e.g., because) conjunctions or through embedding (e.g., I know what you did). Bloom, Tackell, & Lahrwy, 1984; Dunn, Greenbaum, Learn, & Stankiewicz, 1995).

Our work with complex syntax production in spoken language samples has focused on determining different complex sentences and syntax. Sentences are clearly the unit of written language, but utterances are the unit of spoken language. In spoken language, dependent clauses can be produced in full sentences or in coordinate clauses. The main or independent clause is part of the utterance.

In our lab we have identified 13 types of complex syntax which account for more than 95% of complex syntax produced by young children (Huttenlocher et al., 2002, 2008; Lahey, 1984; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985). The bird ate when he landed. Birds flying in the air are neat. I know what he eats. I want to watch. I wanna watch the bird.

METHODS

Data Analysis

Analysis of language samples for complex syntax and teacher talk function was coded in Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts (SALT; Miller & Chapman, 2010). The first author prepared initial transcriptions and coding, which were then checked by the second author. Disagreements were resolved by consensus. Descriptive statistics were calculated for each participant.

RESULTS

Table 1: Complex Syntax Types (Schuele, 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complex Syntax Type</th>
<th>Total Number of Utterances</th>
<th>Percent of Total Utterances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reduced Infinitive</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embedded Infinitive</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinate Clause</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teacher 1: Art

Teacher 2: Dramatic Play

DISCUSSION

On-average only 23% of Head Start teachers’ utterances included complex syntax. The two teachers overwhelmingly used instructive types more than any other type of complex syntax. When high syntax was also explored, there was little difference between the art and dramatic play activity.

The two Head Start teachers used five different types of teacher talk function. For Teacher 1 these included: (a) ask for an action, (b) controlling, (c) explaining, (d) giving information, and (e) true question. Most of Teacher 1’s complex syntax utterances were asking for an action (14 utterances). Teacher 2’s teacher talk functions included: (a) ask for an action, (b) explaining, (c) giving information, (d) rhetorical question, and (e) true question. Most of Teacher 2’s complex syntax utterances were true questions (9 utterances).

Overview, these preliminary findings suggest that the language input available to Head Start children is limited in terms of complex syntax. Our observations of these samples indicated that teachers are focused on the completion of the activity and controlling student behaviors, and therefore, are missing opportunities to provide language input to their students. Our next step is to analyze additional teacher data from two cities (Cincinnati and Nashville). If these preliminary findings are representative of our entire sample, we would argue that Head Start teachers need to provide more diverse complex syntax input in order to provide input that might influence the development of preschool children from low SES families (Vadasy et al., 2008).

Future Directions:

• Complete analysis of teacher samples from two cities.
• Analyze complex syntax production in pre-pro samples of teachers who participated in a study to diversify vocabulary used in teacher talk.
• Compare teacher talk in classrooms of preschool educators with varying educational backgrounds and with varying child characteristics.
• Consider implications of findings for enhancing the preschool classroom language environment.

REFERENCES


ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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