

# OUTCOMES IN EARLY ENRICHMENT CLASSROOMS

## **Language and Literacy: Outcomes in Early Enrichment Classrooms**

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Looking at early childhood research and early literacy intervention, it is clear that children “acquire vocabulary at an impressive rate during the preschool years;” however, if children are not exposed to, or routinely immersed in vocabulary and language, we cannot set the expectation that these children will perform at the same level as their peers with language exposure (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000). Moreover, the larger problem is that language deficits during early childhood years increase the chances of these individuals having language deficits in the future, especially in those from low-income, urban communities.

The Early Head Start (EHS) program serves as an early enrichment classroom for at-risk preschool-aged children. Speech-Language Pathologists (SLP) aim to maximize language and literacy outcomes for academic success through the “influence of early stimulating environments...that could lead to better intellectual functioning later” (Sickman & Creaghead, 2006). SLPs built upon fundamental language skills in hopes for the best academic success upon entering kindergarten and beyond.

In conjunction with an SLP faculty supervisor from the University of Cincinnati and EHS teachers, undergraduate and graduate students implanted lesson plans once a week in each of the early intervention classrooms. Each lesson lasted 20 minutes long. During the lesson plans, instructors utilized child-centered intervention approaches to demonstrate the accessibility of language and literacy-rich materials in the natural environment. The naturalistic setting allows for the opportunity for repeated practice, where “skills become more automatic and students are given ample opportunities to integrate new and old information” (The Access Center, 2007). Through dialogic book reading and facilitative play in the natural environment, children built receptive and expressive language and social skills such as following directions, requesting, and parallel play.

Dialogic book reading is an engaging activity between the students and instructor. For the instructor, it requires supplemental dialogue in addition to the existing text. For the student, dialogic book reading required expressive language skills for active participation, listening, and comprehension skills (Watkins, 2018). For example, our lesson of “The Library Book” by Michael Mark and Tom Chapin, repeated “I’m going to the library, picking out a book, check it in, check it out.” SLPs asked WH-questions to facilitate student understanding and investigation of the text. Questions such as, “Who do you go to the library with?” “What is your favorite thing

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to read about?” encourage children to explore the themes in real life. Phrase repetition allows the students to predict subsequent events and vocabulary words.

Facilitative play centers around the child as they learn communication through natural play (McClean, L.K. & Cripe, J.W., 1997). It allows for the clinician to expand upon the child’s language and actions without an explicit drill-based activity. The lesson plans utilized facilitative play in a variety of ways, including group activities and coloring pages. Using “The Library Book,” SLPs reenacted checking out library books to build following one or two-step directions. Holding two to three books in front of each student, the SLP described one of the book’s covers. The students had to decipher which book the SLPs described and select the correct one. Throughout the lesson, SLPs demonstrated errorless learning in order to instill confidence and increase learning outcomes.

In coherence to the reading theme, children engaged in a coloring book table activity as shown in Figure 1 below. During this activity, facilitative play allows children to have fun, but



**FIGURE 1**

also allows for learning new vocabulary words, using receptive and expressive language, requesting for help, and opportunity for parallel play. Parallel play not only benefits language development, but also development in other areas such as interacting with peers, freedom to express desires and feelings, and learning to share (Ginta, 2016).

Early intervention is not just important in the EHS community, but also in the education system nationwide. Parent-teacher awareness of the benefits of early language and literacy skills will greatly increase the chances of their child succeeding in the years beyond preschool. In efforts to help teachers and parents be opportunistic in teaching these skills, SLPs want to provide connections to accessible resources. Helpful resources can include referral to a Speech-Language Pathologist, library locations, children’s book suggestions, and language/literacy bags. Literacy bags would equip parents to further increase language and literacy outcomes outside of the classroom.

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