CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF
Oral Language Support

The Oxford Education Deanery

How do we support oral language development in early years education?

Young children learn language best when they are involved in back-and-forth interactions and engaged in conversations with others. To support language learning, adults are responsive to the child's non-verbal and verbal language and make space and time for communication. They model rich language and thinking, and plan experiences that motivate children to engage in conversations. They chose conversation topics that are meaningful, engage children in extended conversations, and are sufficiently complex to support language and thinking. To extend a child's language skills, adults build on the child's language skills and plan where to take them next. In early years settings, all adults in the team get involved, and working with parents is essential to support language learning in the wider context.

Language Friendly Physical Environment
Assessing and Adapting Language
Language Rich Experiences
Curriculum Planning
Working With Others

Linguistic stimulation
Conceptual challenge
Back-and-forth conversations
Interactional support
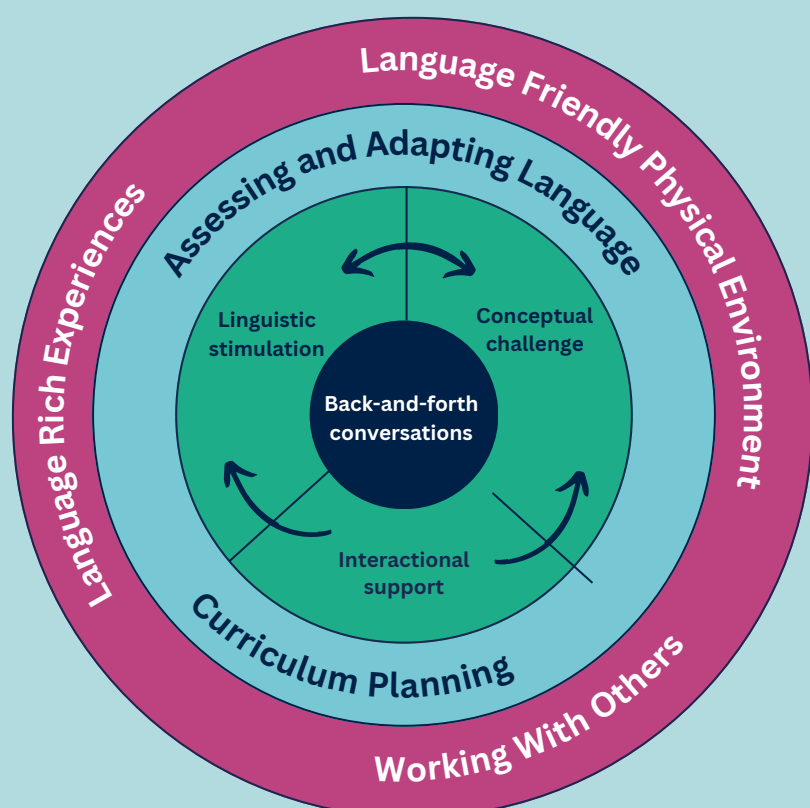
"Children need to engage in more extended discourse that displays both increasing linguistic sophistication and conceptual challenge with age."
Meredith Rowe & Catherine Snow

"The best way to develop language is to provide rich experiences and then give children the language they need to talk about those experiences."
Sandra Mathers

"In communication supporting environments, the physical environment provides support for facilitating children's exposure to diverse aspects of language"
Julie Dockrell

"High-quality interactions are more likely to take place when: practitioners notice what children know and can do, and respond accordingly"
Ofsted, 2023

BACK-AND-FORTH CONVERSATIONS
In the early years, children develop language by being involved in interactions with others. From non-verbal communication to back-and-forth conversations – it is the involvement in extended turn-taking that best supports young children's oral language development.

ASSESSING AND ADAPTING LANGUAGE
To be effective in helping children develop new language skills, topics of conversations have to be interesting and meaningful to children, conceptually within the child's level of understanding, and linguistically tailored to the child's language level.

INTERACTIONAL SUPPORT
To support children's involvement in interactions, adults make children feel comfortable; they recognise, acknowledge and respond to what children are engaged in and communicate; they show that they are listening, and they encourage children to talk.

CURRICULUM PLANNING
Effective language support relies on careful and deliberate curriculum planning that supports planned and incidental language supporting interactions. Adults think about what children know and can do, what they want them to learn, and which techniques will best support their learning.

LINGUISTIC STIMULATION
The most effective way for adults to model language is to adapt the language they use when interacting with individual children so that it is sufficiently rich in vocabulary and grammar to build on and extend the child's language skills.

LANGUAGE RICH EXPERIENCES
Experiencing enough planned and incidental interactions with adults secures the learning educators intend. Educators therefore need to engage children in activities across contexts that help to introduce and embed vocabulary and language structures. This should include oral storytelling and discussions during shared book reading.

CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGE
Focusing conversations on interesting and sufficiently complex topics helps to extend conversations and supports the linguistic complexity of the language that is used. Importantly adults model and support rich language and the development of abstract thought by asking children to pretend, describe and explain, to reason and speculate.

LANGUAGE FRIENDLY PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT
The language learning environment has to facilitate children accessing language input, and resources that will help to engage them in language rich experiences. Elements to consider are the space, layout of the room, visual displays, the level of distractions and noise, and books and resources for play.

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WORKING WITH OTHERS
Language supporting interactions don't take place between one educator and an individual child – the whole team in an early years setting, and other people in the child's life (most importantly the parents) are involved, and by working together they can best a child's support learning.

Key Sources

Mathers, S. (2022). Overview of language learning principles.

OFSTED (2023). Best start in life part 2: the 3 prime areas of learning.

Rowe, M. L., & Snow, C. E. (2020). Analyzing input quality along three dimensions: interactive, linguistic, and conceptual. Journal of Child Language, 47(1), 5–21.

Dockrell, J., Bakopolou, I., Law, J., Spencer, J., Lindsay, G. (2010). Developing a communication supporting classroom observation tool.

For more information:
bit.ly/OxEduDeanery

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Which research and audit tools currently exist to measure the quality of language support in early years settings and classrooms?

And what is the current UK guidance on language supporting practices in early years settings and classrooms?

Below are some key documents the researchers Ereky-Stevens, Gardner, Sylva and Lindorff identified when carrying out a review in 2023 to inform the development of a self-report questionnaire for early years practitioners and educators.

EARLY LANGUAGE SUPPORT
Research and Audit Tools

Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool
(Dockrell et al., 2012)

Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised
(ECERS-R; Harms et al., 1998)

Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Curricular Extension to ECERS-R
(ECERS-E; Sylva et al., 2001)

Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-Being Scale for 2-5-year-olds provision
(SSTEW; Siraj et al., 2015)

Teacher Interaction and Language Rating Scale
(Girolametto et al., 2000)

Observing Language Pedagogy Instrument
(Mathers et al., 2022)

Communication Friendly Environment Checklist
(ICAN & The Communication Trust)

The Early Years Communication Commitment Review Checklist
(ICAN & The Communication Trust)

Early Years Setting Audit for a Communication Friendly Environment
(Early Years Alliance, 2011)

EARLY LANGUAGE SUPPORT
Guidance Documents

Supporting you to meet curriculum requirements for communication and language
Help for Early Years Providers. Department for Education, 2023

Approaches and practices to support communication and language development in the early years
Education Endowment Foundation, 2022

Developing young children's knowledge and skills in communication and language
OFSTED, 2023

Development Matters. Non-statutory curriculum guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage
Department for Education, 2023

Non-statutory guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage
Early Years Coalition, Early Education, 2021

Supporting children with speech, language and communication needs
Guidance for practitioners in the Early Years Foundation Stage.
Department for Children, Schools and Families & ICAN, 2008

Resource library for educators
Info pages on how to support children facing challenges with talking and understanding words.
Speech and Language UK, 2023

Language development in the Early Years
National Education Union & Speech and Language UK, 2023

Speech and language support for 0-3s
Training to support children's language and learning.
Elklan, 2023

Speech and language support for 3-5s
Training to support children's language and learning.
Elklan, 2023

For more information:
bit.ly/OxEduDeanery

LangQuest-EY: Assessing Practitioner Confidence in Using Language Supporting Practices

The statements below describe practices that support young children's language development in preschool settings.

How confident are you that you can use these strategies routinely to support the language development of all children in your group?

Rate your degree of confidence by putting a circle around a number from 1-7 using the scale given below.

e.g. | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 ④ 5 6 7 | Highly confident

MY CONFIDENCE: Engaging Children in Conversation and Extending Their Language

I can ...

EXAMPLES OF WHAT YOU CAN DO

1 Continuously respond to each child in ways that make them feel listened to

e.g. stay face-to-face, seek eye contact, take time to listen, praise and show enthusiasm for what the child expresses

Rate your degree of confidence: | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Highly confident

2 Show that I understand; reflect back what the child communicates

e.g. confirm and repeat what the child has said (the child says 'rain', you say 'Yes, it's raining outside today')

Rate your degree of confidence: | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Highly confident

3 Prompt multiple turns to keep conversations going

e.g. comment, explain, ask questions, and add ideas related to the child's play

Rate your degree of confidence: | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Highly confident

4 Pause expectantly and often during interactions with children

e.g. give children time to think and respond; adapt your waiting time to the communication skills of individual children

Rate your degree of confidence: | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Highly confident

5 Ask Wh- questions appropriate to the child's level

e.g. for lower language levels, start with more concrete questions (What) and progress to more difficult, abstract questions (When, Why)

Rate your degree of confidence: | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Highly confident

6 Build on children's own expressions, words and sentences to extend the language they use

e.g. expand what the child has said by adding words and ideas to offer a more complete or complex model (the child says 'baby cat', you respond 'Yes, it's a little kitten! It's playing with a ball')

Rate your degree of confidence: | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Highly confident

7 Paraphrase what children say to improve the language they use

i.e. model the correct way of saying the sentence (e.g. If the child says 'Look at those sheeps', respond 'Yes, there are lots of sheep')

Rate your degree of confidence: | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Highly confident

8 Encourage children to link their current experiences to previous activities or stories

e.g. say 'We also had some snow last week. What did we do outside?'

Rate your degree of confidence: | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Highly confident

MY CONFIDENCE: Planning for Language Everywhere

I can ...

EXAMPLES OF WHAT YOU CAN DO

9 Get children at all levels of language skills to communicate with me throughout the day

e.g. join in with the child's play, use non-verbal invitations, provide feedback, use a mix of questions and comments

Rate your degree of confidence: | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Highly confident

10 Plan to provide rich and interesting experiences that motivate all children to talk

e.g. after sharing a book/story about the arctic, provide hands-on opportunities to explore ice and discuss

Rate your degree of confidence: | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Highly confident

11 Link learning and language across activities and areas of learning

e.g. plan follow-up activities to revisit and extend conversations and topics (build a bridge with blocks to play 'Three Billy Goats Gruff'; pretend to 'slither', 'gallop' or 'wriggle' like the animals seen in the zoo)

Rate your degree of confidence: | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Highly confident

12 Create spaces for children to listen and communicate

e.g. cosy areas for story time, book reading and role play; a quiet low-distraction area for focused language led activities and conversations

Rate your degree of confidence: | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Highly confident

13 Select resources that encourage children to practice using their new words and language repeatedly

e.g. prepare objects, pictures and photographs to talk about (vegetables to taste, smell and feel; puppets and story sacks for children to replay story themes)

Rate your degree of confidence: | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Highly confident

MY CONFIDENCE: Practicing and Modelling Words and Sounds

I can ...

EXAMPLES OF WHAT YOU CAN DO

14 Define and explain new words before starting a topic or book and during conversations

e.g. provide clues for word meanings, particularly for children with lower language skills (use pictures when introducing words, label actions or emotions)

Rate your degree of confidence: | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Highly confident

15 Use complex and interesting words

e.g. chose words that are not used by children every day, vary the words you use

Rate your degree of confidence: | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Highly confident

16 Encourage children to pay attention to the initial sounds in words

e.g. play 'I spy game phonics' with beginning sounds in words

Rate your degree of confidence: | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Highly confident

17 Model word rhymes and encourage children to make their own

e.g. sing the verses of 'row, row, row the boat'; use pictures to ask children to complete animal rhymes (fox in a box)

Rate your degree of confidence: | Not at all confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Highly confident

I can ...

EXAMPLES OF WHAT YOU CAN DO

18 Assess children's language development, develop learning plans tailored to each child, and monitor their progress

e.g., consider children's speaking and listening skills, and whether they are age appropriate

Rate your degree of confidence:

Not at all confident	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Highly confident

19 Involve parents regularly when assessing children's language development

e.g. talk to parents about their observations of their child's language skills and needs, including a focus on English and home languages (EAL)

Rate your degree of confidence:

Not at all confident	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Highly confident

20 Refer children appropriately for specialist support

e.g. know when to flag up individual children to relevant language professionals (SLT etc.)

Rate your degree of confidence:

Not at all confident	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Highly confident

21 Plan for children's progress with other practitioners

e.g. as a team, identify children not meeting developmental norms and plan how to support them

Rate your degree of confidence:

Not at all confident	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Highly confident

22 Provide information and activity ideas to help parents to support their children's language development

e.g. send home carefully selected books for book sharing, provide resources and ideas that link to topics and activities at preschool and show to the parent what their child did in preschool

Rate your degree of confidence:

Not at all confident	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Highly confident

MY CONFIDENCE: Supporting Narrative Skill Development

I can ...

EXAMPLES OF WHAT YOU CAN DO

Invite children daily to talk about the content of a shared book or experience

e.g. talk about who is involved, prompt more detailed descriptions and explanations (questions to predict what might happen next, etc

Rate your degree of confidence:

Not at all confident	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Highly confident

Encourage children to recall, retell or make-up stories at their level

e.g. prompt children to verbally recall the key elements of a story, to create stories through acting

Rate your degree of confidence:

Not at all confident	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Highly confident

MY CONFIDENCE: Choosing Language Supporting Strategies Adapted to Each Child

I can ...

EXAMPLES OF WHAT YOU CAN DO

23 Adapt my communication to ensure that all children understand

e.g. use gestures and visual clues, pronounce words clearly, adapt your pace, check for understanding

Rate your degree of confidence:

Not at all confident	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Highly confident

24 Give extra support if a child has difficulty initiating conversation or responding

e.g. rephrase language or adapt questions, interpret and articulate what the child is trying to say

Rate your degree of confidence:

Not at all confident	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Highly confident

25 Offer challenge to children appropriate to their language level

e.g. use comments or closed questions for children with lower levels; ask open questions or support inferencing for children at higher levels

Rate your degree of confidence:

Not at all confident	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Highly confident

26 Model and scaffold language that is slightly above a child's level

e.g. take the child's language to the next level by introducing new or complex words and more complex sentence structures

Rate your degree of confidence:

Not at all confident	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Highly confident

27 Prompt children to use language that is at a higher level

e.g. get children to describe or explain their actions, experiences or emotions, or to make predictions

Rate your degree of confidence:

Not at all confident	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Highly confident

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Please find the questionnaire in A4 format here

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD