

BUILDING SPOKEN LANGUAGE IN THE FIRST PLANE

by Joen Bettmann

Through a strong Montessori orientation to the parameters of spoken language, Joen Bettmann makes the case for “materializing” spoken knowledge using the stimulation of real objects and real situations that promote mature discussion around the sensorial aspect of the prepared environment. She lists specific materials in the classroom that can be used to raise vocabulary through eliciting interest in the naming of things and that can be integrated into the three-period lesson, classified cards, guessing games, songs, and social language.

When one speaks a language and that language surrounds the child, Montessori tells us that absorption is global. The child drinks in language all at once in her first months of life and establishes her native tongue long before turning three. The child hears sounds before producing them and understands the meaning of words before

Joen Bettmann is a primary trainer, examiner, and consultant with the Association Montessori Internationale and has nearly forty years of Montessori experience. She is the director of training at the International Montessori Training Institute (Atlanta, GA). She serves as an adjunct professor at Loyola University in Baltimore, Maryland and sits on the Trainers' Group Committee for AMI. Joen has a BA in sociology and psychology and an M.Ed in Montessori education. While serving as the director of training of the Ohio Montessori Training Institute (Cleveland), she offered both academic-year and summer training formats. She has had training responsibilities at the Midwest Montessori Institute in Milwaukee, the Montessori Institute Northwest in Portland, Oregon, the Maria Montessori Training Organisation in London, England, and Computer Associates Corporate Childcare in Long Island, New York. She served as director of training for a three-summer course in Sydney, Australia and has given five primary courses through the Montessori Institute of Atlanta. She has extensive classroom experience in both private and public Montessori schools, especially in central city locations, and has participated in a US government-sponsored Montessori project in South Africa. Her recent work was in Tel Aviv, Israel, offering a Foundation Course in 2014/2015.

saying them. She understands word order before she speaks word order. She understands grammar structure in speech before she has any conscious thought about the “parts of speech” as being the classification of spoken language. She talks and interacts with words, either with peers or adults, before she reads and writes. In fact she must interact linguistically before she reads and writes. Conversing with others, hearing language, processing, and expressing back is fundamental to the cognition required for reading and writing. Spoken language is the ultimate indirect preparation for literacy.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE LANGUAGE AREA

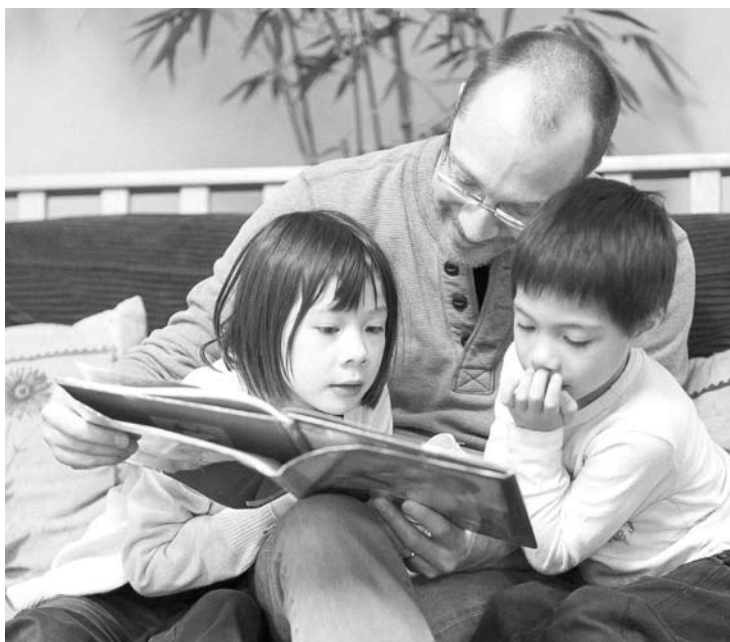
The language area is considered by many practitioners to be the most difficult, not in concept, but in delivery.

The Lack of Appeal of the Materials

With the practical life materials, the child sees the items that are familiar as tools of his culture and is eager to participate in the same manner as he sees the adult, wanting to care for himself and the environment. The sensorial materials are beautiful and attracting in their design. The child is drawn to materials for color, dimension, form, and recognition and is eager to build and interact with his hands. The math area too is exact and concise, with colored beads and charts; it is so clear to the child that he is often able to determine what presentations are next because he can follow the logical sequence of the materials. Then there is the language area, which has containers

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holding letters or words. That’s it. There is no manufacturer’s didactic delight. How common is it for children to take out a box or a pouch without a presentation as often occurs in the other areas? There is also a lack of physical representation: Many spoken language materials have no containers or boxes. Where do we find the Question Game, the Orientation Game, Oral Stories, Oral Function of Word, and Word Study Games?



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Activities Together versus Independent Work

In other areas, we present actively and then look for the moment when the child takes over and begins to be independent. How is this different with spoken language? The child *cannot* observe at a distance because the focus is on words rather than actions, and the presentations are predominantly coming from the adult rather than by peer teaching. For many activities of spoken language (and this is true for writing too) the guide and the child are partners and are involved together. The independent “work” is the child’s spontaneous application of what he experiences: the output that follows the input.

Social Interactions

Many children are missing daily interactive contact. If a small group is formed, how many children immediately stop what they are doing to come and join the activity? Their interest in social interaction and engagement is intense and obvious. They are willing to stop everything just to participate in the passionate dialogue and conversations that represent their hunger for the spoken word.

The Guide as Material

It's not that there is a lack of material or that spoken language is boring. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The only material that all of us started with before we even took training was ourselves and, specifically, our voices. What an instrument! As the infant is drawn to the mouth of the speaker, the child who comes to the *Casa*, still very close to her parents, attaches to the adult. The guide is the material with the dynamic, vital, emotive, responsive, musical language of her mother tongue and is much more attractive than something on the shelf! So with precise language, with a sensitive ear attentive to what the child shares, the guide is the *key* material, using all the richness of the prepared environment. The keys are embodied in the environment and just need our vocalization to provide "key occasions" for interactive speech. The presentations still use the practical life materials, still involve the sensorial attributes, still include card materials for discussions and three-period lessons, but they can be as alive as songs and poems. The child feels them in her soul in the same way that she feels your smile. Language is in the air, like oxygen, and the children thrive on it. We see that this is so by all the explosions and signs of normalization:

- Attachment to reality: The child links to the prepared environment by going around and naming materials in the classroom. She asks, "What's this? She tells us, "This is ____."
- Joy: The exclamations of new names heard or repetitions of the words and phrases applied to situations or physical occurrences in the indoor and outdoor environment. She walks on the line and repeats the word *parallelogram* many times. She knocks on the door and asks, "Is the bathroom occupied?"
- Love of language: profuse naming

It is common for adults to answer questions in phrases. "Where are you going?" "To the store." This kind of phrasial speaking almost reduces communication to sound bites or headlines. We have to make a conscious effort to speak in full sentences.

- Love of articulating relationships around the order of the prepared environment
- Love of following commands (obedience), as seen in the joy in caring for the environment, like watering plants upon request
- Spontaneous self-discipline

So where do we begin before considering Sound Games and then Sandpaper Letters? Some children are almost needing sound to be reintroduced as music and rhythm, so that it is sensorial only and nonverbal. The ear can be attracted to isolated points of consciousness and a unique sound can be isolated to be appreciated.

Listening Games to Prepare the Ear

- Rain Song
- Identification of Objects, Sounds of Familiar Actions
- Location of Travelling Sound
- Echo Clapping and Rhythm Sticks
- Hand bell identification
- Tiptoe Game: “Do you have _____” (Zimbabwe, reniform leaf, corduroy, cone; parallelogram)
- Rattlesnake
- Sounds of Nature

MODELS

A professor from the University of British Columbia called me recently to ask if I would consider giving a workshop to college seniors who were choosing to become educators. This professor believed that the students did not fully develop language and literacy. Her rationale was that the children must have better models; she realized how the absorbent mind works and how unprepared the teachers are.

Correct Grammar

The common dialect absorbed by the child includes a number of errors in grammar and sentence structure, and this is just mentioning oral language. Are you hearing children speak with incorrect pronouns? “*Laura and me* are going to the party” or “*Me and Laura*” as they begin sentences is a misuse of pronouns for subjects. A similar error often occurs when using pronouns for direct objects: “Susie invited *Laura and I*.” (This reappears in writing and will become remedial in reading analysis.) Have you also noticed the substitution of adjectives to be used with verbs instead of adverbs? “Come home *quick*.” (The child revisits this in Function of Word Exercises.) Many children have absorbed the pattern of ending a sentence with a preposition. “Where is the store at?” “Who is the gift from?” (Extension questions in reading analysis are the same questions used orally in the Question Game.)

Full Sentences

It is common for adults to answer questions in phrases. “Where are you going?” “To the store.” This kind of phrasial speaking almost reduces communication to sound bites or headlines. We have to make a conscious effort to speak in full sentences. We must be able to elaborate and extend our speech to enhance communication as well as to model correct sentence structures.



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VOCABULARY

In the book *How Babies Talk: The Magic and Mystery of Language in the First Three Years of Life* by Roberta Michnick Golinkoff and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, the authors relate early vocabulary levels to later reading ability and the ability to analyze and write stories. Many children spend hours in front of screens (computer and TV) instead of in social play and interacting with adults. The authors report studies that show the enormous discrepancy among socioeconomic classes with the number of words heard per hour. Experiencing more talk in the first two years of life is a key to language ability. The lack of experience in children's lives had dire consequences in subsequent language growth.

According to the observational data, the average welfare child heard only 616 words per hour, the working-class child, 1,251 words per hour, and the professional child, 2,153 per hour. Extrapolating from these figures, over the course of a year these differences between numbers become overwhelming: 3 million words of language experience for the welfare child, 6 million for the working-class child, and a whopping 11 million words for the child of professionals. (142–143)

If the first two years of life are rich in language stimulation, the differences in the size of the vocabulary and the complexity of sentence structure are evident by the age of three.

Recently, I witnessed a child who was engaged in pouring sand and water forms. The guide went over to help him. He was holding the large pitcher near the flood on the table and floor. She tried to assist him by having him put down the pitcher to be able to go get a mop. She said, "Put this on that!" He looked at her, confused and immobilized. Think about all the synonyms that can be used to expand the child's repertoire. Some of my favorite examples come from anecdotes told by graduates who took the expansion of language through modeling very seriously.

There was a child who continued to give his directress daily reports about his mother's pregnancy. He would report that he could feel the baby kicking in his mother's stomach to which she would actively listen, repeating that he could feel the baby kicking inside the uterus. This

would go on and on. Eventually one day the child came to the directress seeming quite forlorn and told her that he did not feel well. She asked what was wrong, and he explained that his uterus hurt.

The guide was about to give a lesson, to which the child responded with, "You don't need to present, I understand the technique."

A three-year-old child was sitting at the dinner table, eager to be allowed to have dessert but quite finished with his main meal. His two Montessori parents were trying to encourage him to have more of the dinner first. His response was, "Is this something we can negotiate?" They discussed it a bit more, to which he then said, "How about this as a compromise?"

Vocabulary Enrichment

At this point, I hope you see the importance, the urgency, for the early offering of words to the child. Miss Stephenson has been quoted many times for her wisdom. These three points come from her:

- Between the ages of two-and-a-half and three, 50% of the child's experience should be spoken language.
- Don't limit your focus to reading and writing. The foundation must be built first.
- What develops is the child, not language.

In *School of Names*, M.B. Goffstein states that names help the child feel comforted, oriented, and welcome so that the child is a member, belonging to the world. Mario Montessori described the importance of the word in the child's representing his discoveries, his abilities to distinguish common qualities, and to fixing a classification in his mind. He shares the experience of a ten-month-old who points to a painting and whose mother responds, "Horse." Several weeks later, in another home, the child points to another painting on the wall, and says, "Horse." The family laughs, as this happens to be the portrait of the baby's great-grandmother, not realizing that the child had attached the word he had erroneously been given for the picture frame, and thus missing his quick capacity to generalize. From "The Botanical Cards":

Memorization of nomenclature...seems to be the bread upon which his mind feeds...the name brings to the mind of the child the image of what the word-symbol stands for. One might say that these clear distinctions of objects and their names...are necessary bricks the child uses to construct his intelligence. Repetition is the mortar. (6)

Practical Life

Many children enjoy walking to the shelves where they have been shown materials and pointing to the activity that is named. They must hear the names repeatedly before they can retrieve these titles: polishing, scrubbing, weaving, baking, etc. Naming the contents of an exercise follows the naming of the activity itself. The first naming is identifying the objects used for polishing, such as mud brush, dusting cloth, applicator, shoe polish, buffing cloth, and buffer. The child who has the language can then close her eyes and proceed as a memory game, listing the items in order of their use, and then opening her eyes to check the layout created while she spoke. Include adjectives, such as types of brushes, types of metals, types of cloths. Name the *parts of an object* used in an activity, such as parts of each dressing frame (zipper, tab, teeth, slide, foot, stop). Use the names of flowers that the children have arranged (carnation, daisy, tulip, calla lilly, freesia). When naming the parts of a flower, set up a tray with tweezers available for dissecting and examining these parts.



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Sensorial Attributes: Qualities of the World

Language consolidates the experience and aids in articulating and communicating while supporting the human tendency for exactness. The child shows interest in the world of color early on. The child usually calls everything by the same color but then properly attaches the name to the quality when the experience has been solidified. The correct nomenclature offers a higher level of freedom as the term comes to represent the abstract concept and the impression is clarified or categorized. The child is provided with a retrieval mechanism; the word is his method of recall of the image. The child also gains a new appreciation for the world as the word gives clarity and articulation to the sensorial idea.

Three-Period Lessons

Static names should be used frequently to enhance vocabulary (Box 2 Colors, Geometric Figures and Solids, Leaf Names, Fabrics, and so forth). When presenting a lesson, use relative terms, such as positives, comparatives, and superlatives. The consistency of terms changing from *-er* to *-est* results in the child's absorption of this pattern and brings an ensuing delight later in word study to discover irregular changes such as *good*, *better*, *best* and *interesting*, *more interesting*, and *most interesting*. Comparatives and superla-

tives are easily incorporated into the Bring Me and Environment games (invoking the qualities of length, temperature, weight, etc.). Exploration in the Environment offers many opportunities for vocabulary enrichment, for example, in pouring exercises, “Are all beans *spheres*?” Our own measure of success is the child’s incessant hunger for words and nomenclature. We should hear “What’s that called?” about everything in the child’s environment.

Classified Card Material

Three-period lessons are a part of this activity. When using the card material, link to real objects before showing the symbolic picture so that the isolated pictures call up a recollection from previous experience. In the Conversations and Definition Game, children can play guessing games where one gives clues and the others identify the card that is being described. To reinforce vocabulary, play Who Am I. Rotation is important to continue an interesting environment for the children to explore and that is based on their interests.

ORAL ARTS: APPRECIATION AND DEVELOPMENT

These lessons are often spontaneous, although they require preparation and practice. They are most successful when they are *short* (under 5 minutes) and offered to a *small group* so that we hold the interest of the group.

Stories

By telling different tidbits to different groups, children build their repertoire of ideas so that they become storytellers and are engaged with each other. Materials in the environment that are props for stories include Art and Cultural folders, plants, pictures on the wall, flags, containers (bowls, baskets), etc.

By having a visible material as a reminder, the children can also initiate gatherings to share something of interest. Consider making placemats that have some color coordination with the continents of the world so that a story pertaining to a person or object from a particular region

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of the world has a link with the puzzle maps. Other items that have been selected in different environments include the storyteller doll (from New Mexico), a special display table or glass case (terrarium), a shawl or serape, a talking stick or a special rocking chair used by the child.

Poems

Research shows a strong relationship between rhymes and reading. Reciting poetry gives opportunities to hear language expressed in more imaginative and picturesque ways. There is a wonderful example of this on YouTube with a three-year-old reciting a Billy Collins poem titled "Litany." Poems have various beats (see Eloise Greenfield), styles, imagery, vocabulary, and emotions. Poems are like the flower arranging of spoken language.

Songs

Songs are also a way to expand vocabulary, learn about plants, animals, famous people, and to express various emotions. We can sing when we are celebrating, or when we are grieving. Songs are fast, slow, short, long, sweet, funny, etc. Songs come from all around the world. Rounds are also a beautiful way to experience harmony. Singing with a small group is also recommended.

Social Language: Grace and Courtesy

In the first plane of development, the absorbent mind is aiding the child in adaptation. Notice how appreciative the children are for these lessons as they have a strong desire to belong and be gracious. The respectful manner in which Dr. Montessori thought to offer these lessons aids social cohesion and conflict resolution. Dr. Montessori called these activities "the social lubricants" that help us to have the words to express empathy, requests, appreciation, forgiveness, and negotiations.

The question game helps develop courteous speaking skills as it offers a way to expand information when sharing an experience. For the listener, it is difficult to attend to a story if the topic changes in the middle or goes off on tangents. This activity will also aid logical thought that will additionally guide the child's writing later.

Here are some ways that courteous expressions can be practiced in the *Casa*: walking through a tight space; talking to someone at a distance; introductions of oneself, of another, of someone with a title; giving comfort; wishing someone a happy birthday. (You might say to someone who is celebrating, “I hope you are enjoying the day.” “I’m glad to know you.” “You must be so glad to be 5!” “We are glad that you are here.”) The beauty of these role plays is that they are given prior to need, or at least at a neutral moment, so that children can practice and enjoy the dramatization without feeling corrected or awkward.

To end with an inspiring example of the beauty of spoken language and all that we can do with our voices, take time to listen to Bobby McFerrin. No matter where we are in the world, we carry with us, by nature, our voice. It doesn’t come from a catalog, it’s free, and yet it is the one “material” that brings connections, intimacy, rapport, and understanding between human beings.

