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A Comparative Study of Teacher Utterances in Head Start Classrooms

By Denis G. Newman, PhD; Hela T. Radford, PhD; and Mary Anne Nerliccio, PhD

Head Start, the most enduring program from President Lyndon Baines Johnson's war on poverty, is celebrating its 38th anniversary this year. Ironically, 2003 is also the beginning of the School Readiness Act, which is seen by many educators as the dismantling of a 40-year commitment to at-risk preschoolers in the United States (ADVANCE, 2003). The act establishes new goals and standards that focus on quality and teacher experience, while allowing an eight-state volunteer pilot program that detractors say will give underfunded states license to experiment with a proven program, to the detriment of the students who need this kind of help.

The early 1960s are remembered as a time of great optimism for the Head Start program. Waldman (1990) described Head Start as "the one Big Government social program everyone is allowed to like" (p. 48). Greenberg (1990) recalled how Sargent Shriver "ebulliently imbued" others at the Office of Educational Opportunity with the belief that millions of middle class people were ready to throw themselves into the task of "eradicating poverty in their backyards" (p. 45).

Head Start was touted as education's answer to the problems of the poverty class (Zigler & Styfco, 1994). It has grown to more than 2,400 programs nationwide, serving more than 920,000 preschool-aged children, or 60 percent of eligible children. Its annual budget is $6.6 billion (Angelo, 2002).

Alas, poverty has not been eradicated, and it has been reported that the children nurtured through Head Start programs have not shown anticipated academic gains (Gallagher, 2000; Meier, 1978; Washington Monthly, 1989).

The population served by Head Start is more diverse. In an address to the National Head Start Association this year, Sen. Christ Dodd reported that 250,000 of the children served by Head Start do not speak English as their first language. More than 70,000 children in the program have a speech or language delay, and 20 percent of the Head Start population have witnessed or experienced violent crime or domestic violence.

In the area of early childhood, the critical need remains to assure that poor children come to school prepared to learn (Uffen, 2002). As a result, Head Start programs remain a permanent part of the educational landscape, identified as a major vehicle through which learning and school readiness can be accomplished and reauthorized by Congress with expanded program standards regarding literacy, language and numeracy.

It is appropriate to review Head Start programs periodically to evaluate their effectiveness in giving low-income children and non-English background children support in language acquisition as language skills undergird all other achievements, including general literacy, mathematics and science. Whether or not Head Start programs truly provide children in lower socio-economic levels with an academic or social head start is still a controversial issue (Dodd, 2003; Waldman, 1990; Sigler & Styfco, 1994; Hood, 1973). A report from the Silver Ribbon Panel sponsored by the National Head Start Association suggested future research efforts explore such issues as effects of quality variables, particularly those related to staffing (Greenberg, 1990).

In an effort to identify important linguistic variables that might emerge as influential in determining the success of preparing young children for the school experience, we chose to investigate the language used...
by Head Start teachers as they verbally interacted with children in their classrooms.

Considerable data are available that indicate teachers generally monopolize language activities in their classrooms. For example, Dunkin and Biddle (1974) point out that "teacher talk" dominates the typical classroom both in frequency and in amount. Cazden (1988) estimates that teachers usually talk two-thirds of the time in the typical classroom. An important variable to study would be the quality of these verbal utterances.

Little data exist relative to the type of verbal statements Head Start teachers use in their classrooms. We wondered whether these teachers tend to facilitate or impede child language development by the way they use language in their classrooms.

In one of the few studies that shed some light on qualitative features of language, the target populations were teachers in traditional preschool programs and teachers of children enrolled in special education programs (Lynch, Widley & Johnson, 1988). The teachers tended to discourage language interchange with children by monopolizing language activities and asking narrow questions—answered with one or two words—that limit children's verbal output.

We wanted to analyze the language behaviors of Head Start teachers and compare them with language activities of teachers described by Lynch et al. The question we posed was how do the language behaviors of Head Start teachers compare with the behaviors of teachers investigated in that study.

Random samples of 12 classes were selected from 120 classes in the North Florida District Head Start Program. Four of the classes were situated in a rural area, and seven were located in urban areas. The 200 children enrolled in the dozen classes resided in low socio-economic communities. The children, ages 3-5, attended classes one-half day a week. The mean number of children per classroom was 18 (range=13 to 20), the mean number of African American children per classroom was 14.63 (range=4 to 19), and the mean number of white children was 1.9 (range=0 to 9).

All of the teachers were women. Eleven were African Americans, and one was white. Their teaching experience ranged from one to 22 years. Prerequisites for obtaining a teaching position were a high school education and participation in the Head Start training program. Teachers were expected to attend biannual workshops designed to meet their needs based upon assessment data. Among the topics covered were appropriate learning activities, behavior management, child development and effective teaching strategies. All of the teachers were required to follow activities as outlined in the Head Start guidelines (Hubbell, 1983).

Once every two months a consultant to the Head Start program visited each classroom for at least an hour. The purpose of this visit was to provide assistance to the teachers, answer questions, and offer suggestions to improve the program. During the visits to the 12 selected programs, a 24-year-old female consultant placed a miniaturized tape recorder in her lap as she sat near the teacher who conducted the group discussion session. The consultant had obtained permission to record the session, but the teachers were unaware which session would be recorded. The mean length of the 12 sessions was 19 minutes (range=17 to 20 minutes).

During the early morning discussion sessions, teachers usually sat in a chair in front of and above the children who were seated on a rug. During this time, the teachers presented their lessons, which typically consisted of calling roll, identifying the date, reviewing dates of children's birthdays, reviewing addresses and phone numbers, describing the weather, singing, listening to phonograph records, reading stories, presenting new information, and/or reviewing information given in previous classes. The activities presented during all 12 observation periods conformed to this format.

Within two weeks following each recording, the consultant prepared a written script of the session. A second observer prepared a script from the first two minutes of each session and compared it with the original script. Agreement between observers was 100 percent.

These transcripts formed the basis for determining the teachers' language usage. The six-utterance classification scheme that Lynch et al. adapted from Flanders (1970) was used to classify each teacher's utterance. The classification scheme consisted of the following categories:

- provide information,
- provide directions,
- provide a positive statement,
- provide a negative statement,
- ask a broad question, and
- ask a narrow question.

We added a seventh class in order to include unclassified utterances that did not fit into any of the six categories.

An utterance was defined as a word or group of words used to express a single idea or concept. For example, the statement "Tuesday comes after Monday" was scored as one utterance (information category). The statement "Wind, good, give him a big hand" was scored as two utterances: positive statement and direction category. The
A Chi-square analysis was used to determine whether the utterances spoken by the teachers differed in the relative distribution from those uttered by those studied by Lynch et al. The analysis yielded a significant difference between Head Start teachers and the special education early childhood teachers \( \chi^2(5) = 116.8, p < .001 \) as well as the teachers in traditional private nursery schools \( \chi^2(5) = 141.1, p < .001 \).

In an examination of the data comparing the utterances by teachers of special education programs and teachers in traditional nursery school programs with teachers in the Head Start program, the largest differences appeared in the number of broad questions asked and the number of negative responses given. While the Head Start teachers asked far fewer broad questions \( (M=45) \) for Head Start teachers compared to the means of the other two teacher groups, \( M=123 \) and \( 145 \), the Head Start teachers provided far more negative responses \( (M=122) \) than the special education teachers \( M=63 \) or the teachers of traditional preschool programs \( M=39 \).

The other outstanding difference occurred in the area of giving directions. Head Start teachers devoted far more utterances \( (M=267) \) in the giving directions category than did the teachers of special education groups \( (M=223) \). Only a slight difference was noted in this area when the number of utterances of Head Start teachers \( M=367 \) was compared with the number of utterances given by teachers in the traditional preschool program \( M=343 \).

Lynch et al. used the term “verbal dominance” to characterize the language behavior of the teachers they studied, who used a linear rather than a reciprocal instructional approach. That expression appears to be quite appropriate to describe most utterances used by the Head Start teachers we studied.

Cazden (1988) feels reciprocal instruction or real discussion in the classroom is quite rare, and the teacher’s use of frequent questioning techniques and the fast pace of lesson interactions foil discussion in the classroom. According to a research review by Labercane and Hunsberger (1991), teachers are somewhat more likely to suppress than to facilitate the use of oral language in the classroom. Almost universally, teachers ask questions to which they invariably know the answers. There is little attempt to engage children in discussions that stimulate creative communication that includes decision-making, risk-taking and imagination (Hood, 1973).

This lack of effective communication exchange between teacher and children was a good characterization of the verbal interaction in the Head Start classrooms we studied. There seemed to be little enthusiasm or excitement in the verbal exchanges between the children and teachers.

The central theme of Head Start programs should be aimed at encouraging children to participate in active learning, exploration and involvement rather than academic tutoring, Greenberg (1990) maintains, writing, “Where, sadly, our society seems almost always to bog down is between the tiny model project and its large-scale replication” (p. 51).

This discrepancy is seen clearly in the samples of language interaction between Head Start teachers and children discussed here. While the Head Start philosophy recommends intellectually stimulating, mind-expanding, nonacademic play and projects, very few of these activities were observed in the child-teacher language interactions in the Head Start classrooms we observed.

It was surprising to find such a large percentage of narrow questions (25 percent) asked by the Head Start teachers in this study and how few broad questions were asked (3 percent). Thirty percent of the utterances by the special education teachers in the Lynch et al. study consisted of narrow questions, the researchers found, and the traditional early childhood teachers asked narrow questions in 21 percent of their utterances. The data from teachers in the Head Start program resemble the data found in the traditional education classes more closely than the data recorded from the traditional early childhood classes. Broad questions were asked by the special education teachers 6 percent of the time and by the traditional teachers 7 percent of the time.

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time. If children are asked broad or open-ended questions only 3 percent of the time, it would be similar to the condition Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984) called a “verbal strait jacket.” At times this appeared to be an apt description of the teacher-child interaction we studied.

Whitehurst, Falco, Lonigan et al. (1998) trained parents of 21- to 35-month-old children from middle socioeconomic status families to increase their rates of asking open-ended questions. When incorporated by the parents of young children, this behavior and others show an increase in the expressive language behavior of their children, the researchers found.

We strongly recommend teachers of Head Start children be encouraged to reconsider their roles as language facilitators in the Head Start program. Clearly, providing information is an important function teachers must perform; but perhaps even more important is the teacher’s ability to use naturalistic language exchange and other scaffolding strategies to engage Head Start children in increased periods of talking with the experience of high-quality engagement.

It would be interesting to ask the two teachers in our study who asked almost as many broad questions as all the other teachers combined why they used this verbal strategy. If it can be determined this questioning technique yields a positive effect on the children, perhaps teachers who use these questioning techniques could be trained to conduct workshops for their peers.

McBride and Schwartz (2003) studied the effects of teacher training that used activity-based intervention during instruction of students in early childhood special education. Increases in the rate of instruction were not noted until teachers had received training on specifically how to organize and implement instructional trials using a discrete trials method, they reported. The researchers surmised instruction can be related to how teachers organize and conduct an instructional trial. The teachers used hands-on practice, coaching and individual feedback with their students in special education. Specific, targeted instructional objectives were selected and planned. Interestingly, this strategy is related to how curriculum is aligned and presented by regular and special education teachers in the public school arena. It is critical to note that staff development issues also must focus on factors that influence how teachers plan for instruction and remediation.

## References


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