

Catherine Snow: Building Language Knowledge

Jan Greenberg: Catherine, I am delighted to be sitting here with you and having a conversation about the Head Start Early Learning Outcome Framework, or ELOF, as it relates to the language and literacy domain. And so, to get started, I'd like you to introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your background and current involvement in work around language and literacy for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Catherine Snow: I am Catherine Snow. I'm on the faculty at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. And my career started, actually, with an interest in language and, in particular, how adults talk to children and whether that did have any relationship to children's language acquisition. I've also done a fair amount of work on bilingual development and second-language learning in young children, as well as older children, and the relationship between oral-language skills on the part of children and their literacy development.

So, one of the things that we know, very generally, about successful literacy learners is that they are typically also successful users of oral language, that children with large vocabularies, children with more developed narrative skills, with better grammar, are likely to have no trouble learning how to read. And children with more limited vocabularies and more immature language skills at school entry are likely to have some difficulty learning how to read.

Jan: Okay. So, actually, now building on what you were just saying, we know that the ELOF helps to establish what children should know and be able to do in preparation for success in school, later school, and in life. So, can you talk to us about any important findings from current research that would help our understanding of what children should know and do in the area of language and literacy—thinking about infants, toddlers, and preschool children?

Catherine: Thinking about infants, the very beginnings of communicative language, it's important to recognize, I think, how central communicative intent is as a marker of good, on-time language development, that 10 month olds, 12 month olds, 14 month olds are often using gesture rather than recognizable words or they're often engaging in back-and-forth games that might have no real language in them, but, nonetheless, the gestural and interactive capacities are evidence that the children understand face-to-face communication, that they can express their own communicative intents. And that's a sign that their language development will proceed apace once they start learning oral forms, once they start learning words.

There's been a huge amount of focus in recent years on the so-called vocabulary gap, the 30 million-word gap, the much greater exposure to language that children in some high-resourced families have and that children in less-resourced families don't have. I think, personally, that that is a misrepresentation of the issue or the problem. I don't like to think about a 30 million-word gap. I like to think about a very large knowledge gap. Because it's not really that we should be teaching kids words.

And it's understandable, if we focus in our communications to practitioners on the 30 million-word gap, that they then move into a, "Oh, teach vocabulary, teach vocabulary!" kind of response, which is, frankly, a mistake. Parents whose kids are learning language normally are not thinking about teaching vocabulary. They're thinking about communication. They're thinking about answering children's questions, reading books with them, having conversations with them, explaining things to them. And in the process, the children have the opportunity to acquire a lot of information about what things are called and how you talk about interesting phenomena and how you explain life, why you need to do things, and how the world works. And of course, in the process, they also learn a lot of vocabulary.

But vocabulary is really, in a sense, the epiphenomenon here. It's the knowledge, the concepts, that are most important in the children's development. And that's part of the reason why, I think, we need to emphasize that it isn't vocabulary in English that predicts long-term good outcomes for young children from non-English speaking homes. It's vocabulary in their native language because that's a signal that they have acquired knowledge in their native language, which is then a very strong basis for adding some new labels on top. The knowledge base is what predicts long-term good outcomes, not the vocabulary in any particular language.

Jan: That's a really, really, good point and something that I think people will be interesting in hearing and thinking about. And so, kind of thinking about—'cause I think that's an important principle that teachers and family childcare providers and home visitors who are working with parents would want to keep in mind as they are working with children. Are there other important guiding principles or concepts that they should keep in mind in thinking about supporting children's language and literacy development across that spectrum and progression?

Catherine: Well, another very, very basic principle is that kids are more likely to learn language and content in the process of talking about things they are interested in. So, the 3-year-old boy who loves dinosaurs is likely to accumulate knowledge and language very rapidly if given the opportunity to go to the library and take out 25 dinosaur books and have those read to him and develop that as a domain of expertise—and is much less likely to develop strong

language skills or build up a complex representation of a conceptual domain if he's only given books about ponies or princesses, right?

So, I think acknowledging that many children have domains of real interest and curiosity and responding to those domains—which, of course, is something that parents can do more easily than providers in group settings. But providers in group settings can do it to some extent, too, by individualizing their classroom libraries to the interests of kids, by developing little discussion groups around these topics that two or three of the children might be interested in. So, responding to children's preferred topics and interests is, I think, one way of really speeding up language acquisition.

Jan: Any guiding principles or concepts around the literacy part, around books, and about beginning mark-making that they could be keeping in mind as they're working with children?

Catherine: Sure. Children, of course, are interested in communicating in writing as much as they're interested in communicating orally, and they often engage in emergent spelling or using drawings or self-invented symbols to represent what they want to write. And that's all absolutely normal and worth promoting, worth supporting.

I think it's, of course, fun for a lot of kids to learn the conventional alphabet. [Chuckling] It's not fun for all kids to learn the conventional alphabet, and I personally am not too worried if 3 year olds don't know the alphabet. They are almost certain to learn it by the time they get to kindergarten. And it isn't, after all, that huge a task—26 letters, two forms per letter perhaps. Kids can manage that in a relatively short period of time once it becomes important to them to do it. And trying to teach kids something they're not interested in—which is another way of saying not ready to learn—it could divert time that might be much better spent responding to whatever it is they are interested in learning, like getting those books about dinosaurs read, for example.

So, I think one of the big challenges of having early childhood and through primary education is allocating the time invested in particular topics or domains of learning to the size of the task. If you think about letter knowledge—small task. Doesn't require huge amounts of time. Think about phonological awareness.

Again, it's a relatively small task. If you start with 5-year-olds and give them 20 minutes a day for 6 weeks, they've got it, right? You don't need to start this at age 3. You don't need to keep it going through third grade. But the big tasks are the knowledge-building tasks and building the language that helps children represent, access, and remember that knowledge. Those are the tasks that we need to be spending a lot more time on, I think.

Jan: Catherine, thank you so much for taking the time to share such helpful guidance on ways early childhood educators can help the young children they serve meet the milestones laid out in the ELOF around language and literacy. You've provided a really important frame to guide us in this work. You're reminding us that this is not so to speak an academic exercise that requires formal teaching about letters and vocabulary words, but about the importance of building on children's natural interests, what they want to learn and read and write about, and by creating language rich environments at school and at home. Thanks again for your time and sharing your expertise.

The Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, birth to 5, shows the continuum of learning for young children. It provides us with information about what children should know and be able to do in preparation for school and beyond. For more information, visit the ELOF page on the ECLKC.