

How Classrooms Grow Language

Language develops through interaction, not exposure alone. Four conditions a classroom controls.

More turns, not just more talk

Development tracks conversational turns. The child talking is the child developing.

In class: After your question: their answer, your genuine follow-up, their longer answer. Three turns minimum.

Words taught like treasure

Rich vocabulary needs friendly explanation, examples from life, and repeated meaningful use.

In class: Enormous: say it, act it, find three enormous things by home time.

Stretch, then hand back

Recast the child's sentence one step richer, then let them run with it.

In class: Child: dog runned away. Adult: he really did run away, fast! Where do you think he ran?

Stories are the engine

Shared reading with talk around it carries some of the strongest intervention evidence.

In class: Same picture book three times this week: first for joy, then for words, then for retelling.

Talk-Stretching Cards

Four micro-moves that turn everyday exchanges into language teaching. For teachers, TAs and lunchtime staff alike.

Comment, don't quiz

Statements invite talk; question barrages close it down. Aim for five comments per question.

Say: "I noticed your tower has a bridge in the middle... (then wait)"

Recast, not correct

Repeat their meaning in fuller language. No 'say it properly'.

Say: "Child: him goed home. Adult: yes, he went home, didn't he. I wonder why he went early."

Expand by one

Add exactly one element: an adjective, a connective, a clause. One step inside reach.

Say: "Child: the big dog. Adult: the big, muddy dog who escaped!"

Wait longer than feels right

Some children need seconds to assemble a sentence. The silence is them working.

Say: "Count five in your head before rescuing the sentence."

What to Expect, Roughly When

Broad waypoints, not deadlines: children vary enormously. The red flags matter more than the averages.

2 YRS

Around 2

Two-word combinations, fifty-plus words, follows simple instructions.

Flag: No single words by 18 months, or no word combinations by 2 and a half: talk to SLT services.

3-4 YRS

Around 3-4

Sentences of four-plus words, questions, stories with a thread, mostly intelligible to strangers.

Flag: Speech unintelligible to unfamiliar adults at 4: refer, do not wait.

5-7 YRS

Around 5-7

Complex sentences, narrative with beginning-middle-end, language for negotiating and imagining.

Flag: Struggles to follow two-step instructions or retell a simple story: assess, support, monitor.

ALWAYS

Any age

Language disorder is common (about two per classroom) and mostly invisible. Behaviour is often its first costume.

Flag: The child who never follows instructions may not be defiant; check comprehension first.

A Language-Rich Classroom Audit

The environment side of language growth. Tick honestly; choose one gap per half-term.

Interaction

- Every child gets a real conversational exchange (3+ turns) daily.

- Adults comment more than they question.

- Recasting, not correcting, is the agreed adult habit.

- Quieter children get planned talk opportunities, not leftovers.

Vocabulary and stories

- Two or three target words per week get friendly definitions and repeated use.

- Shared reading happens daily with talk before, during and after.

- New words from stories reappear in play, displays and routines.

- Home gets one simple language activity per week, not worksheets.

Language Development: A 5-Minute Evidence Briefing

What intervention research supports, and where the claims need care.

● Intervention works, modestly and slowly

Across randomised studies, oral language interventions show real but modest effects ($g = 0.27$), with longer sustained programmes beating short bursts. There is no six-week fix for language.

● The adults around the child are the programme

Parent-implemented approaches, especially shared book reading and play-based routines, show some of the most reliable expressive-language gains. Training the adults multiplies the dose.

● Classroom talk structure matters

Dialogic patterns, inviting ideas, taking up answers, extending turns, correlate with outcomes; monologue does not. The same moves that aid attainment grow language.

● The honest caveat

The evidence base carries publication bias and weak reporting, receptive language shifts less than expressive, and milestone charts hide huge normal variation. Track individual children against themselves, refer early when flags appear.

Evidence base

Donolato, E. et al. (2023). Oral language interventions can improve language outcomes in children with neurodevelopmental disorders: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*.

Heidlage, J.K. et al. (2019). The effects of parent-implemented language interventions on child linguistic outcomes: a meta-analysis. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*.

Tao, Y., Wang, M. and Zhu, S. (2024). The relationship between teacher talk and students' academic achievement: a meta-analysis. *Educational Research Review*.