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Supporting Early Childhood Students' Communication Skills Within The Classroom

Emma Creger
Hamline University

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SUPPORTING EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS

WITHIN THE CLASSROOM

Emma Creger

Hamline University

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Primary Advisor: Patty Selly
Content Reviewer: Elizabeth Sarsfield

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Through working in an early childhood education program since 2011, I have
learned that a student's first experience with school often comes prior to enrollment in
kindergarten. Students within these programs are typically between the age of two and
a half and five years old. Brown (2014) states, "the skills and behaviors that develop
early serve as the base for later competence and proficiency" (p. 35). This stage of
childhood development is crucial for student's success. It is during this period in a
child's life that they are developing the foundational skills for all future learning.

Throughout a typical school day in an early childhood program, students are
presented with numerous opportunities to communicate. Unfortunately, at this age
children often lack the speech and language skills needed to effectively communicate.
Although children may lack the skills needed to effectively communicate, their skills
may fall under typical norms. When this is not the case and delays are significant,
students may qualify for services with a Speech and Language Pathologist (SLP). But
what about the students who are not eligible for these services? How can teachers best
support these students within the classroom? This question is what has led to my
research project.

My research question is, *What teaching strategies are recommended for early
childhood teachers to implement into their practice to support all students'
communication skill development?* The goal of this exploration is to identify effective
strategies for early childhood classroom teachers to reference and utilize when
supporting their students' communication skills. This information will be accessible
via a website for anyone who is interested. At this stage in the project, communication

skills will generally be defined as receptive language and expressive language. The state department of education, where the project is being developed, defines receptive language as understanding the meaning of words and phrases and expressive language as using those words and phrases to communicate effectively.

In this chapter, I will describe my personal journey, share my professional experience working in the education field, describe the importance of play-based learning in an early childhood setting, and specify the significance and context for my research.

Personal Journey: Background Experiences that Contribute to My Interest in the Development of Communication Skills

While I was growing up, my mom worked in various schools as a Speech and Language Pathologist (SLP). Ever since I can remember, I wanted to follow in her footsteps and become an SLP as well. In 2011, my senior year in high school, I was part of a work-study program where I would take classes in the morning and work in the afternoon, all while earning my required credits. This was my first job working at a local private school in their preschool program as an assistant teacher. Following my graduation from high school in 2012, I attended college and received my Bachelor's Degree in Communication Sciences and Disorders with a minor in Early Childhood Education in 2016.

From volunteering with my mom at her school, to working in a preschool setting for several years, I witnessed the struggle many families endured to get their children qualified for speech and language services. There were various occasions where children were having difficulties communicating and presented needs that could be met with the assistance of a Speech and Language Pathologist, however did

not qualify because their needs fell in the range of "developmentally appropriate." This means that the student still has time to develop these sounds without professional interventions. The problem with this is that there is a potential risk for long-term effects. Researchers for the Encyclopedia of Public Health capitalize upon the importance of early intervention when they state:

"The purpose of early intervention is to enhance the capabilities and development of young children with special needs in the areas of learning, communication, movement, coordination, and social skills. The underlying philosophy of this program is that it is best to intervene early to address developmental problems in order to capitalize on the rapid learning period of early childhood and to possibly minimize the potential long-term effects of a disability" (Wiley & Cory, 2013, p. 2).

When free services through the child's school district are not available due to ineligibility, early intervention speech therapy services can be sought through private means, including clinics and rehab facilities. Unfortunately, many families are unable to afford private therapy due to lack of medical coverage or expensive co-pays. Given my volunteer experience at my mom's school working with two and three year olds with special needs, it was clear there was a better way for me to reach these students who otherwise would not receive early intervention services until later in their schooling career. In 2017 I returned to school to pursue my Elementary Education teaching license in order to marry my earlier educational and work experiences.

Professional Journey: Elementary and Early Childhood Education

Upon completion of my Elementary Education teaching license in 2018, I was presented with an opportunity to complete my student teaching abroad in Europe.

This was an experience that opened my eyes to the fact that far too often schools that are not state-funded do not have access to full-time SLPs. This in turn meant that SLPs were not available to offer suggestions and strategies to teachers to support students within their classrooms. While teaching in Switzerland, our school did not have access to an SLP. I found myself using several strategies that I had learned throughout my undergraduate schooling. Seeing the lack of resources available for teachers to utilize, helped to foster the idea for my capstone project of creating a resource in the form of a website.

Upon completion of my teaching licensure in 2018, I accepted a position as an early childhood educator in a private school. My class consisted of 21 three and four year olds. I was excited for the opportunity! I was particularly interested in my students' communication development.

During unstructured play time, I was able to help facilitate conversations between students who otherwise would not have had the communication skills to express their thoughts and feelings to one another. For example, if two students were struggling to share a toy, I may ask the student who entered play last if they would like a turn with that toy when the other child is finished. If the student replies that they do, I would provide them with the sentence structure, "May I have a turn when you are finished?" for them to use to ask the other child for a turn. After the student has used the sentence structure with their peer, I would then pose the question to the child playing with the toy, "when you are finished playing, who are you going to give that toy to?" By facilitating this conversation, I am able to help students practice their expressive and receptive language skills. Many times, these opportunities for language communication facilitation occur during play activities.

Early Childhood Play-Based Learning

When I started teaching preschool in 2018, my approach was to provide a play-based education. A play-based preschool curriculum is a less structured curriculum that provides students with opportunities to learn through student-centered play activities. The play-based curriculum used at our school is created and developed by teachers within our program. For example, students may be playing at the sensory table filled with sand, colored gems, colored bowls and tweezers. When the students are using the tweezers to sort the colored gems into their corresponding colored bowl, they are developing fine motor skills as well as cognitive sorting skills. In addition, this approach to teaching and learning offers numerous opportunities for students to develop expressive and receptive language skills. For example, the student may need to ask another student to pass the green bowl so that they can place their green gem inside. Through this student-centered approach to teaching, teachers and teaching assistants within the classroom are able to directly interact with students to facilitate conversations between one another.

When discussing the benefits of play-based learning in an early childhood setting, Doris Bergen, PhD, (2018) states that "young children's play is valuable for strengthening many developmental areas, not only those related to specific academic skills" (p. 3). Additional developmental areas that are strengthened as a result of play-based learning include, but are not limited to, social-emotional and communication skills. By providing a play-based learning environment within my classroom, I have witnessed my student's relationships with one another strengthening. When students possess effective communication skills it promotes conversations between peers. I am encouraged to continue with this play-based

philosophy when I see relationships strengthened with the use of communication and believe that educators can have an extremely positive impact on their students' ability to be effective communicators.

Context of the Study

I teach preschool in a private school which educates students from Preschool through 8th grade. My full-day class meets five days a week and is made up of 21 three and four year old students. My classroom team consists of a full-time assistant as well as an afternoon assistant. I also work alongside six other preschool teachers within our program. We meet daily to support one another and share classroom strategies.

Parents often ask questions regarding their child's academic development but seldom ask about their child's communication development. As a result, we spend a lot of time educating parents about the importance of communication and language development and how this is addressed through our play-based curriculum. Preschool teachers are held accountable by the Early Learning Standards for Birth through Kindergarten and follow the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs) created by the state in which the school is located. The learning domains included in the ECIPs are;

1. Social and Emotional Development
2. Approaches to Learning
3. Language, Literacy and Communications
4. The Arts
5. Social Systems: Cognitive
6. Physical and Movement Development

7. Mathematics

8. Scientific Thinking

(Department of Education, 2017)

Within each of our play-based lesson plans, my colleagues and I are expected to make sure each of the activities that we plan are supported by ECIPs that are age appropriate for the group we are working with. The ECIPs include five age ranges between birth and age five with skills that are typically observed during each developmental age. For my classroom, I follow the ECIPs pertaining to students aged three and four years old.

When focusing on the domain of language, literacy and communication, ECIPs (Department of Education, 2017) define language comprehension as the child understanding the meaning of words and phrases (receptive) and using those words and phrases to communicate effectively (expressive). When looking at the ECIPs (Department of Education, 2017) standards related to language communication for children aged three to four years old, children are expected to respond to direct questions and follow simple directions; and point to or place objects before, after, above, and below based on verbal cues.

According to the ECIPs (Department of Education, 2017) standards in social conversation, the child meaningfully engages in talk with others to express feelings, wants and ideas. For children aged three to four years old, they are expected to continue conversations with comments or questions. In vocabulary and syntax, the child understands word order and grammatical rules. For children aged three to four years old, they are expected to; use short sentences to share information about experiences, people, places and things; use increasingly precise adverbs such as

quietly, loudly, quickly; use more new and precise words; and correctly use some past tense and irregular verbs (go, went, gone). Each of these standards and indicators hold their own significance and importance within the classroom by providing teachers with the skills and strategies to target these are crucial to their communication success.

While educators are well versed in state standards, they often lack the specific strategies needed to effectively support student's communication development. Most public schools have access to an SLP to help facilitate this development. However, private schools have limited access and would benefit from a website of readily accessible resources.

Significance of the Study

According to Hazen and Black (1989) "Communication is the foundation of social interaction, the essential means through which people initiate and maintain social relationships" (p. 867). My colleagues and I discuss this often and concur with this claim. We understand the importance of supporting students' language and communication skills within preschool classrooms and the need for accessible strategies to provide this support.

Given my background and passion for students' language development, this is often my focus throughout the day. I have witnessed the benefits that effective communication skills bring to a child's life. As Hazen and Black (1989) indicated, students need to communicate with their peers to build relationships with one another.

Being an early childhood educator, I understand the power of having a plethora of strategies to use to help promote student's expressive and receptive communication. Each student is unique, consequently, some strategies will prove

more effective with one student versus another. If teachers do not already have experience using these strategies, it is imperative to provide an accessible, centralized resource to reference. Communication skills are prominent in almost every aspect of a child's life. More importantly, this is the stage in a child's life where teachers lay the foundation for future learning. It is important for educators, such as myself, to provide as many opportunities as we can for students to practice their communication skills.

In my research, I was interested in gathering examples of activities and strategies recommended by experts in the field of Speech and Language Pathology to use by teachers to support student's expressive and receptive communication skill development. In addition to my literature review, I engaged in several conversations with local Speech and Language Pathologists to identify strategies that are effective in a school setting, which will be discussed in Chapter Two. Furthermore, Chapter Two, will explore factors that impact how students acquire language.

Conclusion

By sharing my personal journey, professional experience, and the importance of play-based learning in an early childhood setting, this chapter provided a rationale and context for my research. The purpose of my project is to create a website of effective strategies to support educators when asking, *What teaching strategies are recommended for early childhood teachers to implement into their practice to support all students' communication skill development?* By creating a website of strategies for teachers to access, educators will be able to pick and choose strategies to meet the individual needs of the students in their classroom.

In Chapter Two I explore how students acquire language and the factors related to the differing rates. Additionally, Chapter Two explores a wide range of

strategies to effectively teach students expressive and receptive language communication skills. Chapter Three describes my Capstone Project, and Chapter Four consists of my reflections on creating my project.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

The question, *What teaching strategies are recommended for early childhood teachers to implement into their practice to support all students' communication skill development?* has led me to this capstone project. The purpose of this project is to create a professional development website resource for early childhood teachers to utilize when working with students needing additional receptive and expressive language communication support. The research in this chapter initially examines how students acquire language, while addressing various factors related to differing rates of language acquisition. Following language acquisition, the research will; study receptive and expressive language, its importance in the communication system, receptive and expressive language delays, as well as supporting receptive and expressive language strategies.

Language Acquisition

When discussing the term language acquisition, researchers including Yang (2002), describe the process as, "how language develops over time" (p. 14). This is a process that varies depending upon the child. Some children acquire language quickly, while other children take longer to develop their language skills. This section will provide an overview of language acquisition and the various theories as to how children acquire their language skills. The second part of this section will provide an awareness of considerations for differing rates of language acquisition.

Language is a complex topic and there are varying opinions on how children acquire language. Bates and Goodman (1999), Chomsky (1957, 1965a), Crain and

Lillo-Martin (1999), Elman et al. (1996), Lindner and Hohenberger (2009), and MacWhinney (2004) discuss that the way that children develop language skills has been a well debated topic in the field of cognitive science for numerous years. The primary approaches that are often discussed include; the nativist approach, constructionist approach, behaviorist approach, and the social-interactionist approach (Owens, 2000; Vukelich, Christie and Enz, 2002).

Nativist approach. This approach is also referred to as the generative approach. Chomsky (1965b), de Villiers (2001), Lenneberg (2001), Wexler (1998, 2003) and Yang (2002) explain the nativist and generative approach to language acquisition as one where children are born with the skills needed for human language. The nativist approach reduces the importance of the contribution of the child's environment in regards to language development (Kaderavek, 2011) and instead, according Vukelich, Christie and Enz (2002), assume children are born with "an inborn capacity to learn language" (p. 17). Nativists believe that these pre-programmed language rules and principles regarding spoken languages are the key component for language acquisition, whereas theorists who have studied the constructionist approach believe the opposite.

Constructionist approach. The constructionist approach to language acquisition contrasts the nativist approach. Christiansen and Charter (1999), Goldberg (2006), MacWhinney (2004), Reali and Christiansen (2005), and Tomasello (2005) argue with other theorists to state that children develop language skills based upon the environment that they are exposed to. Chomsky (1965a) continues to explain that children's language skills are developed based on conversations that they hear. These can be conversations that children are a part of as well as conversations and utterances

that they overhear. Through repeated interactions, children will begin to make connections between the language they hear during social interactions and the appropriate language framework that is typically used. Owens (2000) explains that as children are beginning to make these connections, they are able to "generalize rules to construct more abstract linguistic constructions in their mind" (p. 43). By linguistic constructions, the author is referring to children's grammatical complexity. Once this skill has developed, children are then able to begin to create their own new utterances. In addition to the constructionist approach, theorists who have studied the behaviorist approach also agree with the importance of the child's environment playing a significant role in the child's language development.

Behaviorist approach. According to Vukelich, et al. (2002), "the behaviorist view suggests that nurture – the way a child is taught or molded by parents and the environment – plays a dominant role in children's language development" (p. 16). Classical and operant conditioning are typical strategies that are used throughout this approach (Vukelich et al., 2002). Classical conditioning, for example, is when every time the baby is offered a blanket, the adult will name the object as a blanket. After an abundant number of times where the adult is identifying the object, the baby will begin to learn that the square shaped piece of cloth is called a blanket.

As for operant conditioning, behaviorists advocate that babies progressively develop expressive language skills through reinforcement, following the imitation of frequently heard words and sounds (Vukelichet al., 2002). When children are consistently rewarded for this action, they will begin to make concrete connections between the word and the object. Behaviorists believe this to be true, whereas social-interactionists have a differing theory as to how children acquire language.

Social-interactionist approach. According to Kaderavek (2011), "Social interaction theory is based on the principle that communication interaction plays a central role in children's acquisition of language" (p. 19). Social interactionists do not believe that children acquire language solely based upon their environment or their inborn capability to learn language, but rather a combination of the two approaches. Vukelich (2002) and her colleagues state that theorists who support this form of language acquisition, "emphasize the importance of the infant's verbal negotiations or 'verbal bouts' with caregivers" (p. 17). Piper (1993), continues to explain that the "negotiations" between the child and the caregiver occur because the caregiver recognizes the importance of the deliberate vocal outputs as being intentional. If a child verbalizes a word that an adult is unable to recognize, the two will negotiate back and forth to determine the meaning of the child's utterance. The negotiation may be the adult asking whether the child is trying to say a word that sounds similar to the child's utterance, or with the use of a gesture, such as a point to a physical object. With adult support, children are able to develop their communication skills to become more competent communicators. However, even with adult support, students may have underlying explanations for their slower rate of language acquisition.

Factors Related to Differing Rates of Language Acquisition

Through a comprehensive review of the research literature for this capstone, five factors were identified that can influence the rate of language acquisition (Vukelich, Christie, & Enz, 2002). The five include;

- gender
- socioeconomic levels
- cultural influences

- medical concerns

- congenital language disorders

Vukelich, Christie, & Enz (2002) report that although children typically develop language in a expected pattern, "there are several factors that could modify the rate of normal language production" (p. 31). Each of the factors will be discussed separately in the following literature review.

    Gender. People often question whether boys or girls develop language fluency and proficiency earlier. Owens (2000) states that "observational research consistently reveals that a majority of girls talk earlier and talk more than the majority of boys" (p. 31). One explanation for this difference frequently falls upon the role of nurture. Owens (2000) discusses the consistent experimental research that supports the theory that adults treat infants differently based on their gender.

    Adults are more likely to cuddle a female baby, coo at the child, and participate in lengthy direct conversations with them (Owens, 2000). Whereas with male infants, Owens (2000) explains that adults typically engage in bouncing or wiggling behaviors, but are not as likely to engage in sustained face-to-face conversations with the infant. Additional studies have reported that in general, mothers tend to talk to female infants more than males (Cherry & Lewis, 1978; Halverson & Waldrop, 1970). The extra language stimulation that females receive from their mother proposes the likelihood that language exposure is somehow related to language acquisition (Huttenlocher, 1991).

    Regardless of a child's gender, the family that the child is born into can strongly affect their language development skills. As Huttenlocher (1991) previously mentioned, the amount of language exposure that a child receives is related to

language acquisition. A high level of language stimulation is typically the case for children living in middle to upper socioeconomic families, however differs for children living in middle to lower socioeconomic environments.

Socioeconomic levels. Several studies have been conducted concerning differing rates of language acquisition in regards to socioeconomic status. Studies administered by Hart & Risley (1995), Morisset (1995), as well as Walker, Greenwood, Hart & Carta (1994), all bring attention to the differing rates of language acquisition and the levels of language proficiency in low and middle socioeconomic families. As a result of these studies, it has been determined that children, particularly males, who were raised in low-income environments, developed expressive language communication skills at a slower rate than children from middle-income homes (Vukelich et al., 2002).

A possible explanation for the slower development of expressive language communication skills may be due to the differing number of child and parent interactions. Researchers Betty Hart and Todd Risley (1995) studied various children's interactions with their respective family members during the pivotal years of language development. Their results indicated that by age four, children from professional families have heard 40 million words, children from working class families have heard 30 million words, and families of low socioeconomic status have heard 10 million words. Clearly children from professional families have been exposed to a substantially higher amount of words compared to children from low-income families who are often on welfare. Not only are the amount of utterances spoken to a child important, but the quality of the utterances is crucial for the expansion of children's language. Huttenlocher, Waterfall, Vasilyeva, Vevea, and

Hedges (2010), support this claim when they state that "variations in language input, notably differences in the syntactic structures caregivers use, affect children's language growth" (p. 18).

Children who interact with their parents more frequently have additional opportunities to develop their communication skills with competent communicators. However, children from low-income families have fewer experiences to hold similar conversations and often as a result acquire language at a slower rate. In addition to varying socioeconomic levels within different families, the amount of interaction between children and their parents often is dependent upon cultural norms which heavily vary depending on the culture.

Cultural influences. It is important to bring attention to the fact that spoken language is viewed differently depending upon the culture. Some cultures recognize the significance of infants' verbal attempts, whereas other cultures do not place much importance upon the vocalizations (Vukelich et al., 2002). According to Broesch and Bryant (2015), "observations of Americans indicate that mothers speak directly to infants (even a few days old) and engage in face-to-face interaction, often interpreting movements and behaviors as intentional. This is in sharp contrast to what is observed in Western Samoan parent–child interactions where infants are not spoken to for social engagement and their behaviors are not treated as social acts" (pp. 2-3).

The differences between varying cultures' usage of infant-directed speech was also addressed in a study conducted by Farran, Lee, Yoo, and Oller (2016). The study concluded that when comparing a group of Lebanese Arabic-speaking mothers and a group of American English-speaking mothers, the results revealed that "between the two language groups was the higher rate in Utterances per Minute of infant-directed

speech of the Lebanese as opposed to the American mothers" (p. 10). One possible explanation for discrepancy between the cultures can be due to the fact that some cultures capitalize upon children's receptive language skills, and expect children to listen while adults converse (Vukelich et al., 2002). While there is a difference in adult-child interactions depending upon the culture, medical concerns do not discriminate.

   Medical concerns. Language acquisition typically is developed through interactions with individuals who effectively communicate. When children experience hearing deficiencies, they are unable to make sense of all aspects involved with spoken language. One common issue that many children are familiar with is otitis media, more commonly known as an ear infection. Vukelich, et al. (2002) all warn us that if an ear infection is left undiagnosed or untreated, the child runs the risk of "significant language delays and speech distortion" (p. 33). Therefore, children who experience these medical concerns often also struggle to make concrete connections between spoken word and proper sentence structure. These medical concerns, in addition to congenital language disorders, will initially require intervention from a medical professional before being referred to a Speech-Language Pathologist for interventional support.

   Congenital language disorders. Language acquisition is a process that children develop naturally over time. Unfortunately, children with congenital language disorders experience a weakened capability to acquire language (Vukelich et al., 2002). The authors continue to explain that two of the most common congenital language disorders include disfluency and pronunciation. Disfluency disorders are when children stutter on words and are unable to speak at an appropriate rate. When

children experience this type of disorder, it is important for parents and teachers to be patient with the child and be as supportive as possible.

Children may also experience articulation difficulties, which are included in the pronunciation branch of congenital language disorders. When this occurs, students are unable to produce speech sounds correctly. This may be due to oral cavity malformations, partial loss of hearing (temporary or chronic), or brain trauma (Vukelich et al., 2002). Students who exhibit characteristics of either disorder should be assessed by a Speech and Language Pathologist to determine if the deficiency warrants any interventional therapy.

In conclusion, there are several different theories that attest to how children acquire language as well as factors that can affect the rate in which a child learns to use the language. These are life-long skills that individuals will use on a daily basis. As children are learning to understand language they are developing their expressive and receptive language skills.

Receptive Language: Definition and Relationship with Communication Process

The state department of education where the project is being developed defines receptive language as understanding the meaning of words. Before individuals are able to use language effectively to communicate with one another, they must first understand the language. This section will provide an overview of receptive language and its importance in the communication process.

Owens (2000) describes that in the communication process, receptive language communication refers to the way that an individual processes the information that is being spoken to them and turns it into meaning. The author continues to explain that as an individual auditorily receives a message from another

speaker, they first have to process and decode the message before determining how to appropriately respond. This is a process that an individual typically performs spontaneously rather than through thoughtful planning.

In a study conducted by Corriveau, Goswami, and Thomson (2010), it was determined there is a correlation between preschool students' auditory processing skills and early literacy skills. "Logically, if an individual's auditory processing is compromised, accurate reflection upon the sounds in words will not be possible, resulting in impaired phonological processing" (Corriveau, Goswami, & Thomson, 2010, p. 370). Not only do receptive language delays affect an individual's ability to understand language, but it is also connected to later developing skills such as literacy.

Language comprehension is the core of receptive language competency. If an individual is unable to process the message that is being communicated to them, there will be a conversational breakdown, resulting in the inability to successfully converse. The language comprehension process involves a combination of auditory processing and language decoding. Owens (2000) describes the auditory process as being concerned with the nature of the incoming auditory signal, whereas the decoding process as being one that considers the representational meaning and the underlying concepts. These two processes work together to help the listener understand the message being communicated. Unfortunately, often times when the two processes do not coincide with one another, there is a receptive language delay.

In the classroom, the teacher may call a student's name before giving them the direction to go to the bathroom and instead of following the direction, the child looks at the teacher with a blank stare. It is clear that the child has heard the message

because they looked at the teacher when their name was called prior to giving the direction, but cannot seem to connect what they have heard with a concrete meaning. Such continued behavior may indicate that the student suffers from a receptive language delay.

Receptive Language Delay

Owens (2000) describes children with receptive language delays or disorders as individuals who often hear parts of what the speaker is attempting to communicate but not the whole message. This is due to one's processing speed at which they are able to decode the messages that are being communicated to them. When an individual has a slower processing speed, it is more challenging to keep up with speech input. This frequently results in frustration from all parties involved. The listener becomes frustrated because they are unable to understand the message being communicated to them and the speaker becomes frustrated because the student is not following the direction being given. Only when there is an understanding from the speaker that the listener needs additional time to process, is some of the frustration able to dissipate.

J. Creger (personal communication, November 1, 2018) describes how a child can only be diagnosed as having a receptive language delay by a certified Speech-Language Pathologist. Creger notes that when Speech-Language Pathologists are evaluating an individual for a receptive language delay, they are often looking for the child's ability to follow simple-step directions, understand spoken messages, as well as the effort it takes the child to organize their thoughts. In my experience, even though an official diagnosis typically comes from a Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP), classroom teachers may notice discrepancies in a child's understanding of

language compared to his or her peers and can use strategies within the classroom to help facilitate communication development prior to a diagnosis. When students either do not have a diagnosis from an SLP or do not qualify for interventional services, classroom teachers can use various strategies to support their students' receptive language communication.

Supporting Receptive Language Strategies

For some students, whether diagnosed with a delay or not, receptive language communication is extremely difficult. Students hear the message that is being communicated to them but either do not have, or have yet to develop the skills required to comprehend the message. This section will provide various receptive language strategies that teachers can implement within their early childhood classrooms to support their students' receptive language communication skills. It is important to note that many of the strategies are ones that have been implemented and tested by certified Speech-Language Pathologist professionals, who have first-hand experience using the given strategies with students.

Visual supports. In a recent discussion with a professional in the field of early childhood development (J. Creger, personal communication, November 1, 2018) it was discussed that students who struggle to process the message being communicated auditorily, often benefit from a visual support. This is beneficial for students because it makes concepts that may be abstract to their minds, more visually concrete. Visual pictures, visual daily schedules, visual task charts and "First, Then" visuals are just a few of the several ways that visual supports can be utilized in the classroom. Hodgdon (1995) explains that "visual supports are those things we *see* that enhance the communication process" (p. 7). She continues to explain that "visual

supports are an integral part of the communication circle, enhancing effective receiving, processing, action and expression" (p. 7). In general, a visual picture intervention strategy occurs when a picture or a physical object that is used to represent the spoken word. For example, if the teacher is asking the student to go to the bathroom, they will show them a picture of a toilet and repeat the word, "bathroom." These visuals help to reinforce the verbal instructions that are given by the classroom teacher.

Additionally, visual supports can be in the form of a daily schedule. From my personal experience working in a preschool classroom, I have witnessed students who struggle to understand verbal communication, thrive with the use of visual cues. To capitalize on this strength, a teacher can provide a visual schedule to increase understanding for these students. To implement this strategy in the classroom, the teacher will display a list of the daily tasks in the chronological order that they will occur throughout the day. The daily tasks will be displayed in the form of pictures accompanied by written text. Through my professional experience, I have seen that not only do these visual pictures ease some of the anxiety that students with receptive language delays often experience, but it also supports students' literacy development.

Similarly, visual supports can be in the form of a visual task chart. This is when the teacher displays the process of a task to a student in the form of pictures. For example, if a student is getting ready to go outside, the teacher would present them with visual pictures in the order in which the student should put on their outdoor clothes. The first picture in the sequence would be of a coat, then a hat, followed by a picture of mittens. This strategy is beneficial to students with receptive language

delays because students can take the time that they need to look at and process the information regarding the picture in order to perform the required task.

When directives are presented verbally and with a picture cue, students are typically more successful compared to when instructions are exclusively given verbally. This is because once spoken language directives are given, students who struggle with receptive language skills are not given adequate time to process the information before it is gone. Hodgdon (1995), brings attention to the fact that, "visual stimuli can provide non-transient messages that exist for the length of time it takes the student to process the information" (p. 15). Therefore, with a picture, even though the spoken directive is no longer present, the picture cue is still there to offer support.

Lastly, visuals supports can be in the system of a "First ___, then ___" visual. This receptive language intervention strategy helps students to understand the sequence of various tasks. For example, if the teacher is instructing the student that they need to go to the bathroom before they will be able to play with toys, the teacher would present the student with the "First ___, then ___" visual. This visual would say, "First bathroom (picture of a toilet), then toys (picture of toys)." A child who struggles with receptive language communication will be able to look at the pictures and process that they first need to go to the bathroom and then will be able to play with toys. Furthermore, visual supports can be beneficial for classroom teachers to use when offering students structured choices during an activity.

Structured choices. Following several discussions with professionals (E. Sarsfield personal communication, November 11, 2018) who specialize in the Speech-Language Pathology field, it was discussed that a common receptive language

intervention strategy that is used within the classroom is giving students structured choices. Sarsfield defines structured choices as the teacher providing the student with two appropriate choices that would both be acceptable options. Hodgdon (1995) supports this receptive language strategy and states that making a "selection from several choices provides immediate reinforcement and is an effective way to teach pointing and requesting, even for students who display little communicative intent" (p. 50). Depending upon the severity of the delay, the classroom teacher can decide how many choices to provide to the student.

Structured choices can be utilized throughout several different aspects of a student's day. Professionals within the field of early childhood development and Speech and Language Pathology described the issues students with receptive language delays experience when asked a question. Being asked a question means that the student needs to process the message that was communicated to them, in addition to needing to formulate a response. By providing the student with a structured choice, the student now only needs to decide between two objects instead of needing to independently formulate their own response. This is crucial for these students because when a teacher offers structured choices, it helps to ease some of the anxiety that the student may feel when trying to respond. It also helps to offer a visual for the student to help process the message. When the teacher is asking the student if they would like an apple or an orange for lunch, they would physically show the student the two different fruits and let them choose which one that they want. The student's response could be through a verbal output or a gesture. The gesture may be in the form of a point or motion towards the desired item. Additionally, this process is helping to

model appropriate responses to teacher-initiated questions, by allowing students to independently respond.

Modeling parallel talk. Kaderavek (2011) recommends parallel talk be used with students who struggle with receptive communication skills because they often also struggle to organize their thoughts in order to form sentences. Kaderavek (2011) describes parallel talk as a form of modeling where the teacher talks and the student listens. In parallel talk the teacher uses simplified language, shorter sentences and less complex syntax that are consistently redundant (Kaderavek, 2011). During this form of modeling, the student is not expected to verbally respond, but instead by listening is able to form concrete connections between the linguistic structure of the sentence and the language target. When the child and the teacher are looking at a picture of a baby, the teacher will use redundancy when they say, "*I see a baby. The baby is small. The baby is crying. The baby is hungry!*" The inclusion of a reference to baby in every sentence is an example of what Kaderavek (2011) means by redundancy. This strategy is beneficial to students with receptive language delays because the simplicity of the statements makes it easier for the students to make sense of the meaning behind the message being communicated. In addition, when verbal words do not suffice, the teacher may add physical sign-language gestures to accompany the words to offer students additional support.

Sign language. Sign language is known as a form of communication that does not require any verbal speech output, but instead uses physical hand gestures in order to portray meaning. J. Creger (personal communication, November 1, 2018) describes that while typically sign language is used with hearing impaired individuals,

it can also provide communication opportunities for hearing individuals as well, specifically people with communication disorders.

Teachers can easily use this strategy when working with the students in their classroom. The teacher will teach students the sign language gestures for "more," "all done," "eat," "drink," "bathroom," "help," as well as "stop," which are frequently used words within the classroom. This strategy is beneficial for students with receptive language delays because by teaching students basic signs, they are able to make connections between gestures and words. McNeil, Alibali, and Evans (2000) report that "reinforcing gestures are an effective scaffold for children's comprehension of complex spoken messages because they guide comprehension toward the meaning of the spoken message" (p. 143). This is similar to the use of visuals in the sense that it is giving students multi-modal forms of communication strategies. In addition, teachers can provide a hand-over-hand physical model to help students learn how to produce the signs independently.

Physical model. When students are struggling to understand a verbal message from an individual and a picture does not suffice, a physical model can be beneficial. For example, if a teacher is instructing a student to put their toys in the basket and the student is not understanding the message, the teacher can use a hand-over-hand model and place their hand over the student's to physically show them how to put their toys in the basket. As the teacher is doing this, they will continue to give the verbal instruction, "put in." This physical movement accompanied by the verbal instruction is helping to make a concrete connection between the verbal message and the physical action that is needed to be taken to complete the task.

This strategy is beneficial to students because it is helping to train their muscle memory in order to understand the message that is being communicated to the student verbally as well as physically. Czekalski (2000) explains muscle memory as being "the ability of specific muscles to function in a manner that will ensure a smooth, automatic performance" (p. 35). By consistently providing physical models, the teacher is enhancing the student's muscle memory development as well as building familiarity through routines by providing the student with the skills to later perform the skill independently.

Building familiarity through routines. Vygotsky (1978) provides a rationale for teachers on how to support students when learning classroom routines. He reports that initially a learner completes a task with the support of a more skilled participant, but with repeated opportunities, the learner internalizes underlying concepts and learns to perform the task independently. Vygotsky's ideas highlight effective ways to teach classroom routines, which are an integral part of most classrooms. Common habitual routines in a classroom setting often include morning meeting, or an end of the day routine. Regardless of when the routines take place, it is an opportunity for students to build understanding through repetitive practice. For example, the teacher may have the same morning gathering routine where the students listen for a specific song indicating that they need to find their color card and then locate the corresponding colored spot to sit on. Once all of the children have found their prospective places, the students then listen for their color to be called signalling them to place their color card in the mini bin.

Routines such as this are beneficial for students who struggle with receptive language comprehension because as noted by Vygotsky (1978), "Through repeated

experiences of this type, children learn covertly (mentally) to plan their activities. At the same time they enlist the assistance of another person in accordance with the requirements of the problem posed for them" (p. 29). As the child continues to practice these skills, the level of scaffolding needed to effectively perform the task can be gradually faded. In other words the repetition of these routines helps to build understanding for what is to come next. In this example, initially the student may have not understood the teacher's verbal instruction to put their color card in the mini bin that the teacher was holding, however after engaging in the process repeatedly daily, the student now knows what is expected of them when their color is called.

This repetitive experience also correlates with an increase in a child's expressive language skills. According to Butler, et. al. (2010) "Students need strong instructional opportunities to build their personal warehouse of words, to develop deep levels of word knowledge, and acquire a toolbox of strategies that aids their independent word acquisition" (p. 7). Once students have acquired the language through countless exposures, they are better equipped with the skills to use the language successfully.

Expressive Language: Definition and Role in the Communication Process

The state department of education where the project is being developed, defines expressive language as using words and phrases to communicate effectively. An individual's ability to successfully communicate with others is dependent upon these crucial expressive language skills. This section will provide an overview of expressive language and its importance in the communication process for early childhood students. The second part of this section will offer insight into expressive language delays that are often seen during the developmental years in early childhood

students. An additional section will provide seven expressive language strategies that teachers can implement within their early childhood classrooms to support their students' expressive language communication skills.

"The competent communicator is able to conceive, formulate, modulate, and issue messages and to perceive the degree to which intended meanings are successfully conveyed" (Owens, 2000, p.11). One step in being a competent communicator is being able to auditorily listen to a message, decode it, and then formulate a response. This is when an individual's expressive language skills come into play.

Owens (2000) explains expressive language as the transmission of thoughts into verbal outputs to convey meaning, which is required to formulate a response into a sent message. It is important to recognize that messages sent to another person while communicating can be in various forms, including gestures, verbal words, or facial expressions (Sussman 1999, p. 17). In other terms, expressive language, when communicated verbally, is how one generates words into a systematic order to create meaningful utterances.

It is essential for individuals to have adequate expressive language communication skills in order to effectively communicate with others. This is because for an individual to communicate their needs, they need to be able to express themselves. As stated earlier, Sussman (1999) reminds us that expressive communication is not only in the form of verbal utterances, but also includes gestures and facial expressions. An individual may not have the words to tell you that they have injured their arm, but are able to communicate their discomfort by crying and pointing to the injured part of their body. This communication may not be verbal, but

effectively communicates the need of the individual. It is important to note that there are several different ways to expressively communicate, however, some are more socially appropriate than others (Sussman, 1999, p. 20). When students struggle to expressively communicate with others, there may be an underlying expressive language delay.

Expressive Language Delays and Supporting Language Strategies

Children with expressive language delays or disorders often exhibit differences from their peers in any one of the following areas; limited vocabulary, shorter than average sentences, and inaccurate sentence structure (E. Sarsfield, personal communication, November 11 2018). When teachers notice these discrepancies between the struggling student and their peers, the teacher often refers the student to be evaluated by the Speech-Language Pathologist. Once the student is evaluated, they potentially will qualify for support services. While awaiting the evaluation, which can take an extended period of time, there are several strategies that teachers can implement within their classrooms to help support their struggling students' expressive language communication skills.

In my eight years of working with early childhood students, it is apparent that expressing their thoughts to convey meaning can be quite challenging for young children. I have observed students knowing what they want to say, but who are unable to communicate their thoughts through gestures, verbalizations, and facial expressions. This section will describe six expressive language strategies that teachers can implement within their early childhood classrooms to support their students' expressive language communication skills.

Daily routines with predicted responses. My teaching colleagues and I are quite routine oriented when it comes to schedules within our classrooms. When a classroom routine occurs frequently throughout the school day or week, students are able to make concrete connections between the daily routine and the expected response that will be asked of them. For example, this strategy occurs when a teacher creates the routine of singing a "Good Morning" song to their students at group time and goes around the circle to have each of the students introduce themselves. With repeated practice, the students will be able to anticipate that when the teacher sings the phrase, "*Who are you?*" and points to the student, that they are expected to respond with their name.

A student could indicate their name in a variety of ways, such as responding in the form of a gesture – pointing to themselves, verbal output – saying their name, or a picture – physically show or point to a photo of themselves. This strategy of repeating a routine is beneficial for students with expressive language delays because when they produce frequent phrases or engage with frequent gestures during consistent classroom routines, they are able to anticipate the response before they are asked.

Picture exchange communication system (PECS). Sussman (1999) explains that PECS was developed by Lori Frost and Andrew Bondy, as a system that teaches students to request items by giving the teacher a picture of the item in exchange for the tangible object. This strategy is beneficial for students with expressive language delays because when students are engaging with PECS, they are developing "symbolic thought" (Sussman, 1999, p. 51) by making concrete connections between how pictures, similar to words, can represent tangible objects. According to Frost and Bondy (1994), the PECS developers, "Children using PECS are taught to approach

and give a picture of a desired item to a communicative partner in exchange for that item" (p. 3). For students with an expressive language delay PECS is a strategy that can be used consistently throughout the day.

During breakfast time, the teacher will show the students what is being offered for breakfast and then ask the student what they would like to eat. The student using PECS will then request a banana by giving the teacher the picture of a banana. In exchange for the picture, the teacher may verbally model a sentence structure to the student by saying, "*I want a banana, please*" and then give the student the banana. This strategy is another way to communicate without the use of verbal outputs by the student, but offers an effective mode of communication through the use of a visual support.

Visual supports. Visual supports are inclusive of anything that a person can see and as Hodgdon (1999) explains, can be in the form of, "body language, objects, and printed matter of any kind" (p. 15). Visual supports also referred to as visual aids, help to mediate and support communication interactions between students and whomever else is involved in the conversation (Hodgdon, 1995). While in the classroom, a teacher may use a picture, one form of a visual support, or a sentence stem with a student to help facilitate sentence expansion and the use of word combinations.

Examples of sentence stems that are typically in the form of visual picture cues mimic a common sentence form, such as "I + want + _____" or "I + like + ____." Another common sentence stem is related to negation by using sentence stems such as "I + don't + want + _____" or "I + don't + like + ____." In this situation the student will place a picture cue in the blank space at the end of the physical sentence

stem, the teacher will then verbalize the sentence while point to each word as she reads.

The value of visual supports according to Sussman (1999) is that once students become more familiar with this process, they may become more interactive and no longer require a teacher to vocalize the sentence. Instead, the child will begin to point to and vocalize the sentence independently. This is beneficial for students with expressive language communication difficulties because it helps them to organize their words into concrete sentences. In addition to visual sentence stems to help students organize their words, students often also benefit from verbally modeled sentence structures.

Modeling sentence structures. Frequently when students struggle with expressive language communication skills, they are not able to formulate words into sentences with appropriate structure and complexity. Students who possess verbal communication skills in addition to students who are physically able to form words but unable to organize them into sentences, commonly benefit from teacher-modeled sentence structures. For example, if a child snatches a toy from a peer instead of asking for a turn, a teacher will facilitate a conversation between the two.

According to Finneran, Leonard, and Miller, (2009), "Sentences that model the target syntactic structure should reduce the sentence formulation demands on the children when they generate a sentence using the same syntactic structure" (p. 274). In the situation of a student not asking for a turn, the teacher will provide a sentence structure so that the student can appropriately request a turn with the desired object. One possible sentence structure that would be modeled by the teacher would be "*Can I please have a turn when you're finished?*" For students who do not possess a

complex vocabulary, the teacher may simplify the sentence structure to, "*My turn, please?*" Either of these sentence structures will provide the student with the tools they need to communicate their wants and needs with their peers. In addition to modeling sentence structures, teachers can also ask students open-ended questions to give students an opportunity to expand their response to the question.

    Asking open-ended questions.   Asking children questions keeps them engaged in a conversation (Sussman, 1999). Typically yes/no questions do not offer opportunities for answer elaboration and therefore Sussman (1999) recommends "wh" questions as a more productive option to foster expansive expressive language communication. "Wh" questions include "Who?" "What?" "Where?" and "When?" questions (Sussman, 1999, p. 125). When teaching students appropriate responses to "wh" questions, Sussman (1999) suggests that by modeling these questions and their answers consistently in routines, students will start to make connections and ultimately understand. By providing the answer before expecting the answer from a student, they are able to make concrete relationships between the question and the desired answer or response.

    Sarsfield (personal communication, November 11, 2018) highlights how in addition to providing the answer before expecting the student to produce the answer, it is crucial to understand the importance of a pause. When a teacher pauses, it is allowing the student to pick up on the social cues and produce the desired behavior independently. For example, the teacher will start by saying to the student, "*Where is the ball? In the box.*" The teacher will then repeat this phrase several times, showing the student that the ball is in fact in the box. After repeating the phrase, the teacher will begin to add a pause between "*Where is the ball?*" and "*In the box.*"

As the teacher continues to repeat the phrase, they will gradually continue to increase the duration of the pause each time. As the teacher is pausing, Sarsfield (personal communication, November 11, 2018) notes that the goal of the strategy is to have the student use their expressive language skills to communicate to the teacher that the ball is in the box. This communication may be performed through the use of verbal outputs or a gesture where the student points to the box. Both the verbal output and the gesture will be accepted by the teacher as an acceptable mode of communication.

However, if the teacher knows that the student possesses the verbal communication skills to express their thoughts, the teacher may request the student to verbalize their response or provide the student with a sentence structure to use (Sarsfield, personal communication, November 11, 2018). In situations where the student does not have the skills to verbally answer the question, the student may use sign-language gestures to express their response.

Sign-language. Sign language is a tool that can be beneficial for a student's receptive language communication as well as their expressive language communication. McNeil, Alibali, and Evans, (2000) state that "when gestures accompany a spoken message, they often reinforce the accompanying speech, in the sense that they convey the same semantic content as speech" (pp. 132-133). By associating a specific word with a gesture, students have the ability to communicate with their actions without the need of verbal outputs.

As explained in the previous section regarding receptive language communication strategies, when teachers are working in the classroom, they may teach students the simple signs for "more," "all done," "eat," "drink," "bathroom,"

"help," as well as "stop," which are frequently used words within the classroom. Instead of the teachers using the signs to help students understand the message, the students will now have the opportunity to use the signs in order to communicate their needs. Iverson and Goldin-Meadow (2005) state that "meanings that lend themselves to visuospatial representation may be easier to express in gesture than in speech" (p. 370). If a student is eating a snack and is still hungry, they will use the sign, "more" to communicate their request to their teacher for additional food. This strategy is not meant to replace the use of spoken word, but instead offers nonverbal students an opportunity to experience the power of communication. Hodgdon (1995), reports that "some nonverbal students have begun to talk after being taught to produce manual signs" (p. 20). As a result, sign-language has created the ability to bridge the gap between manual gestures and spoken word. Furthermore, sign-language can also be utilized when teachers are engaging students in turn-taking activities.

Engage in turn-taking. Students who do not have the expressive language communication skills to converse with others, often need encouragement to practice these skills in a non-judgmental environment (E. Sarsfield, personal communication, November 11, 2018). Sarsfield, who is a Speech-Language Pathologist and Early Childhood Special Education Teacher, states that this interaction typically starts by taking place between an adult and the child while participating with a highly engaging toy that lends itself to turn-taking. When the teacher and the student are playing with a shape sorting toy, the teacher will say, "*My turn*" and put one of the shapes inside its proper hole. The teacher will then hold out a shape towards the student and provide wait time to allow the student to request a turn. If the student does not request a turn, the teacher will model, "*My turn*" The student will then be able to request a turn

through verbal output, gesture towards the object, sign-language gesture, or pointing to themselves, which would all be acknowledged as acceptable expressive communicative responses.

As the student becomes more proficient in their turn-taking skills while engaging with a teacher, the teacher will begin a process called Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR). Clark (2014) states that the GRR model is a four-part process that mirrors the Vygotskian theory that concrete learning is a process that develops through ample practice and teacher prompting.

Clark (2014) explains that the first stage in the GRR process is known as the "*I do it*" stage, where the teacher demonstrates and models the desired behavior. The second stage is where the guided instruction takes place and is called the "*We do it*" stage. During this time the teacher guides students through the behavior with several prompts and support. The third stage encompasses collaborative learning and is referred to as the "*You do it together*" stage. During the time, the teacher engages with a group of students and facilitates the desired strategy among them. The final stage requires students to practice the strategy independently, known as the *"You do it alone"* stage (Clark, 2014).

The GRR process can be seen in this turn-taking strategy when the teacher first models the behavior to the student, before requiring the student to engage in the behavior themselves. Following the first two steps, the teacher then will facilitate the turn-taking behavior between the student and a peer. As the students continue to engage with the behavior, the teacher will start to decrease the amount of prompts and modeling support until the student is able to complete the task independently.

In conclusion, when teachers notice discrepancies between their student's communication skills, there are several different effective teaching strategies that they can implement within the classroom to elicit students' receptive and expressive communication. The following chapter describes my Capstone project, supporting research theories, the setting, target audience, and the timeline for the completion of my project. Chapter Three will ultimately describe how these strategies are compiled into a stand-alone online resource for teachers to utilize on a daily basis.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Introduction

Over the past eight years, working within the preschool field, I have

consistently searched for strategies to implement to support my student's expressive

and receptive language communication skills within my classroom. Throughout my

literature review, my intent was to better understand expressive and receptive

language communication and to answer the question, *What teaching strategies are*

recommended for early childhood teachers to implement into their practice to support

all students' communication skill development? For the purposes of my Capstone

project, I will be creating a website for educators using wix.com. This is a stand-alone

resource which will provide educators with a place to find developmentally

appropriate teaching strategies to use with students who need additional

communication support.

When using this resource, it is important to understand the communication

process and the role of expressive and receptive language. Owens (2000) states that

"The competent communicator is able to conceive, formulate, modulate, and issue

messages and to perceive the degree to which intended meanings are successfully

conveyed" (p. 11). Without adequate expressive and/or receptive language

communication skills, there will be a communication breakdown.

To counteract the need for adult interventions when communication

breakdowns occur, teachers need to begin to teach their preschool students sufficient

receptive and expressive communication development. This chapter will include the

project overview, research support, the project's setting and target audience, the

project description, and a timeline for project completion.

Project Overview

   I will be creating a website for teachers using wix.com. This is a stand-alone

resource which will provide educators a place to go to find developmentally

appropriate strategies to use to support their students expressive and receptive

communication development within the classroom. With my background knowledge

in marketing, I will be able to create a user-friendly resource with appropriate use of

color, font, white space, navigation, use of images, etc. for teachers to utilize.

   In addition to my research regarding effective website design, I will also have

the opportunity to capitalize on my past experience creating websites. In addition to

my undergraduate degree, I have a minor in Non-Profit Marketing Communications.

With this degree, I had the opportunity to take advertising courses, where I learned

how to effectively use digital marketing tools, such as websites. This background will

be extremely beneficial for the completion of my Capstone project.

   Upon completion of my degree and completion of the project, I will create a

Google Form that will provide me with feedback regarding the website's

effectiveness. There will be one Google Form that only my colleagues will be able to

access, and then an additional form that will be open for the general public to access

and provide feedback regarding how the resource can continue to be improved. It is

important to note that this is a resource that will be updated regularly with additional

expressive and language communication strategies for preschool teachers to

implement in their classrooms.

Research Support

Chapter Two of my paper begins by addressing how individuals initially acquire language. The second section of Chapter Two discusses receptive language, its importance in the communication process, delays that are often presented during the early childhood years - why strategies are needed to be used in the first place - and strategies that support students' receptive language communication skills. The final section in Chapter Two discusses expressive language, it's importance in the communication process, delays that are often presented during the early childhood years – why these strategies are used – and supporting expressive language communication strategies that can be used within the classroom.

The communication process is one that requires both receptive and expressive language skills. As stated previously, Owens (2000) brings attention to the fact that "The competent communicator is able to conceive, formulate, modulate, and issue messages and to perceive the degree to which intended meanings are successfully conveyed" (p. 11). Receptive language refers to the way that an individual processes the information that is being spoken to them and turns it into meaning. To simplify, language comprehension is the core of receptive language competency.

In addition to receptive language, expressive language is also a crucial component of the communication process. Once an individual is able to auditorily listen to a message and decode it, they are ready to formulate a response. Owens (2000) explains expressive language as the transmission of thoughts into verbal outputs to convey meaning. It is essential for individuals to have adequate expressive language communication skills in order to effectively communicate with others.

Setting

This project will be taking place at a private school for students from preschool to 8th grade. There are 421 students who attend the school. Of these students, 3% are Hispanic/Latino, 2% are African American, 4% are Asian, 3% identify as Other, 83% are Caucasian and 4% are two or more races. At the school, there are 66 total staff members and typically 17-21 students in each class. In my preschool class, I have a total of 21 students. Because the students have varying schedules, on any given day I have between 16 and 18 students in attendance.

The school where I am employed is an independent, tuition-based school. Although many families can afford their own tuition, our school has a 100% acceptance rate and has the ability to provide financial assistance and scholarships to families who are unable to pay the full tuition. In addition to being a choice school, the preschool program uses a play-based curriculum, which is where students develop social, emotional, and cognitive skills through play experiences.

Twice per year, students within the early childhood program are formally assessed using a program created progress monitoring tool regarding their social/emotional development, play habits, large motor skills, fine motor skills, cognitive development and communication skills. Students are assessed in the fall shortly after entering into the program and then again in the spring to gage growth throughout the year. During each assessment period, teachers provide each student with three individualized goals to focus on. These goals range from increasing the student's fine motor skills, to increased flexibility when communicating with peers. Upon completion of the students' individualized assessments, parent-teacher conferences are held to discuss the results and to address any concerns that the teacher or parents may have regarding their child.

Target Audience

This project is aimed at early childhood educators who are working with preschool-aged students. The strategies suggested within this project will be beneficial for students who struggle with receptive and expressive language communication skills, in addition to typically developing students who are continuously developing their communication skills with one another. The long-term goal of this project is to provide effective communicative teaching strategies to support students' communication skills.

Project Description

The receptive and expressive communication strategies that are included within this project are intended to be taught within an early childhood classroom setting. The provided website will define expressive and receptive language, as well as highlight several different expressive and receptive language communication teaching strategies. On the website, I will differentiate between receptive and expressive communication teaching strategies.

The strategies do not follow a specific pattern, but instead serve as a resource of compiled teaching strategies that have been known to be effective by Speech-Language Pathologists when supporting students' communication development. It is also important to note that because all students learn differently, one strategy may work for one student and not for another.

Timeline

Content expert feedback/revisions	January, 2019
Design the website	February, 2019
Creating the website/write Chapter Four	March, 2019
Rewrite/Revise	March-April, 2019
Completion of Capstone project	April, 2019
Submit Capstone project for assessment	May, 2019

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed my Capstone project, research theories, the setting, target audience, and the timeline for the completion of my project. The next chapter will reflect how I plan to complete my project and provide insight into answering the question, *What teaching strategies are recommended for early childhood teachers to implement into their practice to support all students' communication skill development?*

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Purpose of the Project

My research question is, *What teaching strategies are recommended for early childhood teachers to implement into their practice to support all students' communication skill development?* For the purposes of this project I created a website to provide various receptive and expressive language communication strategies for early childhood educators to utilize within their classrooms. This website is a resource that will be regularly updated with additional communication strategies.

The purpose of my website is to provide educators with an easily accessible resource for supporting students' communication development. The website highlights commonly used strategies that have been studied by well-known researchers and implemented by local Speech and Language Pathologists (SLP) within early childhood classrooms. Each strategy highlighted on the website is accompanied by a description and a video or photos showing how it can be used within the classroom. By compiling all of the information that I have gathered from conversations with SLPs in addition to my literature review, into a website, it allows me to demonstrate the strategies in various forms including written descriptions, videos, audio and photos.

The long-term benefits for this project are abundant. Teachers will no longer need to search for these supportive communication strategies as several will now be available in one central location. Early childhood educators, myself included, will be

able to use this resource to support our teaching on a daily basis. By implementing

these practical teaching strategies, I look forward to seeing how my students'

communication skills develop over time.

Summary of the Literature Review

For my literature review, I reviewed countless journal articles pertaining to

language acquisition, the communication process, receptive language, and expressive

language. My goal of reviewing these types of articles was to better understand the

communication process as well as to gather examples of activities and strategies

recommended by experts in the field to elicit student's expressive and receptive

communication skills. Originally, I struggled to find extensive research in support of

this and relied heavily upon conversations with local SLPs to identify strategies that

are effective in a school setting. Thankfully, with some encouragement from my

academic advisor, I was able to reframe my search topics to find more specific

content.

The literature revealed how a child's receptive and expressive communication

skills are essential for their development. In a study conducted by Corriveau,

Goswami, and Thomson (2010), it was determined there is a correlation between

preschool students' auditory processing skills and early literacy skills. "Logically, if

an individual's auditory processing is compromised, accurate reflection upon the

sounds in words will not be possible, resulting in impaired phonological processing"

(Corriveau, Goswami, & Thomson, 2010, p. 370). Knowing this, it is crucial for

educators to provide their students with as many opportunities to develop these communicative skills within the classroom on a daily basis.

Additionally, the literature review brought light to the various forms of receptive and expressive language. Although many perceive expressive language as being meaningful verbal utterances, Sussman (1999) reminds the reader that expressive communication is not only in the form of verbal utterances, but also includes gestures and facial expressions. These findings imply that it is important for educators to take this information into consideration when working with their early childhood students who potentially do not yet have the skills to create meaningful verbal utterances.

Project Description

For my project I have created a website for early childhood educators to utilize, in order to promote their students' receptive and expressive communication skills. My website includes a compilation of different receptive and expressive language communication strategies. This digital resource includes; Home, Receptive Language Strategies, Expressive Language Strategies, and Feedback. First, the Home page provides a description of the website in addition to an explanation of receptive and expressive language strategies. Visitors on the website can then click on the "More Info" button to bring them to the corresponding page with either receptive or expressive language communication strategies. The page titled Receptive Language Strategies, again states an explanation of the topic. Following the explanation, there are six receptive language strategies listed, accompanied with a title, a short

description and a photo. When the photo or title of the strategy is clicked, the viewer

is brought to the corresponding page which then contains a full description of the

strategy along with a video of the strategy in use. These same actions occur when the

Expressive Language Strategies page is clicked. The last page is the Feedback page.

This page contains a link to a survey for users to complete. The survey is ten

questions long and asks the viewer to evaluate various aspects of the website from the

likelihood of them using the strategies presented, to the ease it took them to find what

they were looking for. Using the results from each of the surveys, I will be able to

determine the effectiveness of the digital resource and modify as needed.

Limitations of the Project

In this section I will provide the limitations of my website. I will then discuss

the website builder in which I chose to create my website. Lastly, I will explain the

challenges I encountered while putting the website together. I plan to receive feedback

from individuals utilizing the digital resource and will need to ensure that I am using

that information to modify the website to maximize the resource's effectiveness. One

limitation I anticipate is keeping up with the demand of continuously adding

additional resources to my website. I foresee this task as being time consuming and

hope to keep up with it as best I can, while teaching full-time.

I was, however, able to use a website builder that I am familiar with from a

previous website design course I took during my undergraduate career. Wix.com

provides the option to choose between blank websites where you are able to start from

scratch, or a template with pre-programmed colors, fonts and layouts. For the sake of

time, I chose one of the templates to create my website. Nevertheless, I did find myself straying away from the template's pre-programmed layout and personalizing them to my liking.

When choosing the style for each of the different pages on the website, I wanted to make sure that it was as "user-friendly" as possible. I tried to make the website easy to navigate and condensed the descriptions of each of the communication strategies so that the reader could spend more time implementing the strategies in their classroom rather than reading about them on my website. Additionally, videos, photos, and audio clips are used to give an accurate representation of effective strategy implementation. The videos were filmed in my classroom and feature early childhood educators and SLPs. The photo resources included pictures taken in my classroom, as well as photos found through the large free photo database provided by Wix.com.

While reflecting upon this process, I faced one significant challenge while creating my website. There were several different instances where I would edit pages of my website and then the next day, all of my edits would be gone. I understand that technology is often out of our control, however it was extremely frustrating. I was concerned that I would need to find a different website builder to use to complete my project. Thankfully, I was able to problem solve and use multiple computers to complete the project.

Implications of the Project

In this section, I will address the implications of my capstone project. First, I will discuss how my website addresses my research questions. Next, I will predict the impact that the strategies provided on my website will have for early childhood teachers. Lastly, I will explore forthcoming research topics.

My research question is *What teaching strategies are recommended for early childhood teachers to implement into their practice to support all students' communication skill development?* The digital resource that I have created in the form of a website answers this question by providing several different strategies for early childhood educators to implement within their classrooms to support their students' receptive and expressive communication skills. By providing educators with a variety of strategies, they are able to select the strategies that will work for their individual students. For example, one student may benefit from visual pictures whereas another student is more successful with the use of a physical model paired with a verbal command – it is all dependent upon the student's individualized learning preferences.

One implication of my website is that it may raise awareness of the importance of teacher support when considering a student's communication development. Teachers who are knowledgeable in these effective teaching practices are better able to support their preschool students. In turn, communication empowers people. It is a tool that helps people to advocate for not only themselves, but others as well. When teachers are able to support this development in younger children, they are able to get a jump start on the process of self-advocacy.

A second implication of my website is that it may reduce the need for specific professional development seminars regarding the implementation of communication strategies within the classroom. We know that educators are already stretched for time. With the use of this digital tool, teachers are able to access the strategies when it is convenient to them. Additionally, with all of the strategies located in one easy to use central location, teachers are spending less time searching for effective teaching strategies and instead are spending more time implementing the strategies within their classrooms.

Potential Future Research

The topic of communication is one that is complex and there is so much about the process that has yet to be researched. This includes language acquisition as well as how individuals effectively use their communication skills. Further research regarding language acquisition could include exploration of how various cultures acquire language. Additional research could focus on determining why some children have speech delays while others do not. Research could also focus on determining why some children have language delays while others do not.

Further research could also focus on whether some communication teaching strategies are more effective than others. Is it solely based upon student preference, or are there additional factors stimulating the effectiveness of various teaching strategies? Once this topic has been researched further, I would also propose researching ways for teachers to easily determine which language teaching strategies to use rather than using a trial/error method. This research would be beneficial for

educators when choosing which strategies to use with their students and most importantly would save time, allowing additional time to be spent implementing the strategies with the students.

Author's Reflection

This project has become very near and dear to my heart. I began this project because of my passion for communication development and my profession as an early childhood educator. I learned the importance of communication at a young age from my mom being a Speech and Language Pathologist, and have found so much joy being able to turn my passions into this capstone project.

I have always enjoyed writing, however found this project to be a challenge. Having multiple professors throughout the process in addition to several different peer editors and a content expert all looking at my project was slightly overwhelming at times. Even with the great stress that this project brought on, it has been really rewarding watching it all come together. When researching, it was encouraging to read several articles that all aligned with my project. I often found different studies that complimented each other nicely and in turn helped to support my writing. From countless edits of my paper to numerous read articles, I have found myself to become a better writer and researcher.

In the future, I would like to share my website with other early childhood teachers to help enhance their teaching practices regarding communication. This is a life-long skill that is crucial for children to learn how to use effectively at a young age. We as early childhood educators have a responsibility to create the foundational

building blocks for learning within these young children to set them up for educational success in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter discussed the purpose of my project, a recap of the literature review, a more thorough project description, limitations and implications of the project, as well as potential future research to enhance the topic. This project has impacted me professionally as well as academically. I now have teaching strategies that I am already implementing with my students, in addition to writing and researching skills that will support me in future academic settings.

The purpose of my website was to provide educators with a central location to access receptive and expressive language strategies to use with their students to support their communication development within the classroom. It is important to note that my website is based on the perspective that every child can develop successful communication skills when they are provided with the appropriate support and tools to do so. I believe that with the proper support every child has the ability to become an effective communicator.

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APPENDIX A

Let's Talk Website

https://emmacreger.wixsite.com/letstalk

<u>Homepage</u>

Receptive Language Strategies

Structured Choices

Structured Choices is defined as the teacher providing the student with two appropriate choices for the child to choose between. Structured choices can be utilized throughout several different aspects of a student's day.

When a student is asked a question, it means that they need to process the message being communicated to them, in addition to needing to formulate a response. By providing the student with a structured choice, the student now only needs to decide between two objects instead of needing to independently formulate their own response. This is crucial for these students because when a teacher offers structured choices, it helps to ease some of the anxiety that the student may feel when trying to respond.

EXAMPLE:
During meal time, the teacher can ask the student, *"Would you like milk or water?"*

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Modeling Parallel Talk

While **modeling parallel talk**, the teacher uses simplified language, shorter sentences and less complex syntax that are consistently redundant. During this form of modeling, the student is not expected to verbally respond, but instead by listening is able to form concrete connections between the linguistic structure of the sentence and the language target.

EXAMPLE:
When the child and the teacher are looking at a picture of a baby, the teacher will use redundancy when they say, *"I see a baby. The baby is small. The baby is crying. The baby is hungry!"*

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Sign Language

Sign language is known as a form of communication that does not require any verbal speech output, but instead uses physical hand gestures in order to portray meaning. When using this strategy within the classroom, the teacher will use a sign accompanied with a verbal word when giving the student a direction.

This strategy is beneficial for students with receptive language delays because by teaching students basic signs, they are able to make connections between gestures and words.

EXAMPLE:
When it is time for the student to clean up, the teacher will utilize the sign "all done" while also offering a verbal direction, "When I count to 2 toys will be all done. 1, 2, toys are all done." Each time the teacher says the word "all done" it will be accompanied with the sign.

Frequently Used Sign Language Signs in the Classroom

Frequently Used Classroom Signs:
- Help
- Stop
- More
- Bathroom
- Eat
- Drink
- All Done

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Physical Model

Physical Models can be described as a physical "hand-over-hand" movement performed by a teacher to model a specific behavior that they are asking the child to perform.

This strategy is often beneficial when students are struggling to understand a verbal message from an individual and a picture does not suffice.

EXAMPLE:
If a teacher is instructing a student to put their toys in the basket and the student is not understanding the message, the teacher can use a hand-over-hand model and place their hand over the student's to physically show them how to put their toys in the basket.

When teachers are performing this type of modeling, they continue to give a verbal instruction, such as, "put in." This physical movement accompanied by the verbal instruction is helping to make a concrete connection between the verbal message and the physical action that is needed to be taken to complete the task.

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Familiar Routines

Routines are an integral part of any classroom that you will step foot into. When students are learning these routines, initially the learner completes a task with the support of a more skilled participant, but with repeated opportunities, the learner internalizes underlying concepts and learns to perform the task independently.

EXAMPLE:
The teacher may have the same morning gathering routine where the students listen for a specific song indicating that they need to find their color card and then locate the corresponding colored spot to sit on. Once all of the children have found their prospective places, the students then listen for their color to be called, which will signal them to place their color card in the mini bin.

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Expressive Language Strategies

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COMMUNICATION NEEDS

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Daily Routines with Predicted Responses

Daily Routines typically take place at the same time each day. When a classroom routine occurs frequently throughout the school day or week, students are able to make concrete connections between the daily routine and the expected response that will be asked of them.

EXAMPLE:
This strategy occurs when a teacher creates the routine of singing a "Good Morning" song to their students at group time and goes around the circle to have each of the students introduce themselves. With repeated practice, the students will be able to anticipate that when the teacher sings the phrase, "Who are you?" and points to the student, that they are expected to respond with their name.

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Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)

Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) was developed by Lori Frost and Andrew Bondy, as a system that teaches students to request items by giving the teacher a picture of the item in exchange for the tangible object.

This strategy is beneficial for students with expressive language delays because when students are engaging with PECS, they are developing symbolic thought by making concrete connections between how pictures, similar to words, can represent tangible objects.

EXAMPLE:
During breakfast time, the teacher will show the students what is being offered for breakfast and then ask the student what they would like to eat. The student using PECS will then request a banana by giving the teacher the picture of a banana. In exchange for the picture, the teacher may verbally model a sentence structure to the student by saying, "I want a banana, please" and then give the student the banana.

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74

Asking Open-Ended Questions

Asking open-ended questions keeps students engaged in conversations. Because yes/no questions typically do not offer opportunities for answer elaboration it is recommended to use "wh" questions as a more productive option to foster expansive expressive language communication.

"Wh" questions include:
- "Who?" questions
- "What?" questions
- "Where?" questions
- "When?" questions

When teaching students appropriate responses to "wh" questions, it is suggested that by modeling these questions and their answers consistently in routines, students will start to make connections and ultimately understand. By providing the answer before expecting the answer from a student, they are able to make concrete relationships between the question and the desired answer or response.

EXAMPLE:
For example, the teacher will start by saying to the student, *"Where is the ball? In the box."* The teacher will then repeat this phrase several times, showing the student that the ball is in fact in the box. After repeating the phrase, the teacher will begin to add a pause between *"Where is the ball?"* and *"In the box."* to give the student an opportunity to pick up on the social cues and produce the desired behavior independently.

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Sign Language

Sign Language is a tool that can be beneficial for a student's receptive language communication as well as their expressive language communication. By associating a specific word with a gesture, students have the ability to communicate with their actions without the need of verbal outputs.

EXAMPLE:
Students will be taught simple signs that are frequently used within the classroom. The teacher will begin by modeling the sign for the student. Once the sign has been established, the students will now have the opportunity to use the signs in order to communicate their needs.

Frequently Used Sign Language Signs in the Classroom

Frequently Used Classroom Signs:
- Help
- Stop
- More
- Bathroom
- Eat
- Drink
- All Done

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Engage in Turn-Taking

Turn-taking often initially begins by taking place between an adult and the child while participating with a highly engaging toy that lends itself to turn-taking. The teacher will model taking a turn before asking the student if they would like a turn. As the student becomes more proficient in their turn-taking skills while engaging with a teacher, they can then begin to utilize these skills when engaging with their peers.

EXAMPLE:
When the teacher and the student are cooperatively doing a puzzle, the teacher will say, "My turn" and put one of the pieces in the correct place. The teacher will then hold out a puzzle piece towards the student and provide wait time to allow the student to request a turn. If the student does not request a turn, the teacher will model, "My turn." The student will then be able to request a turn through verbal output, gesture towards the object, sign-language gesture, or pointing to themselves, which would all be acknowledged as acceptable expressive communicative responses.

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Feedback

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Feedback

This is a website that will be updated frequently as I encounter additional receptive and expressive language strategies. Please follow the link below to the short 10 question survey. This survey will provide me with additional feedback regarding how useful the strategies are as well as the usefulness of this digital resource. Thank you in advance for your support in the development of this collaborative resource.

Feedback Survey

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