

# Rich Environments for Language Competence and Narrative ability in Early Childhood Development Settings

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**Abstract:** *This study explored how early childhood development (ECD) teachers create rich language environments in early childhood development settings. Information from literature, research reports and practices were analysed in order to establish how rich language environments can be created in ECD settings. Data was analysed using theme identification methods to solicit emerging issues. It was found that rich language environments can be attained in ECD settings via nine broad ways. The ways identified included: recognising language needs and characteristics of young children; setting daily goals for vocabulary, grammar and phonology; designing activities that meet planned language goals; ensuring frequent child-to-child and adult-to-child meaningful communication; and use of well-resourced learning centres. The analysis also established that regarding creation of rich language environments in ECD centres the following strategies should be practiced: involving young children in language walks for exposure to diverse aspects of language content, form and use; allowing young children to be active language explorers and seekers; letting children interact with language models; use stories, songs, rhymes, drama, and play; lastly, designing and delivering developmentally appropriate daily language plans. The study recommended that in Zimbabwe, there is need for trained ECD professionals with expertise to plan quality rich language environments.*

**Keywords:** Language, language-rich environment, early childhood development, preschool, young children

## 1. Introduction

It is a universal truth that children are primed to learn language from birth. From the first-time mother and child gaze into each other's face after nativity, young children learn the meaning of smiles, laughter and frowns. The dyadic reactions of the mother and baby are the first conversations of a long and eventful life as a human language user. The gift of language makes young children human beings and it is the foundation for learning and development in all domains. Use of language in communication – both verbal and written among young children on their own and children with adults helps to establish positive relationships which serve as the foundation for emotional, social, physical, cognitive, health and literacy development (Rosenkoetter and Knapp-Philo, 2006). Experience shows that young children who do not practice a lot of talk may have problems learning to read. Broad language abilities such as narrative knowledge, semantics, syntax, morphology and vocabulary play a significant role in predicting early literacy abilities. It is imperative to note that spoken language provides more than a basis for reading. It provides a foundation for wisdom to learn. It is further observed that young children's verbal language abilities are the most significant predictors of later literacy competence (Strickland and Riley-Ayers, 2006). Contrary, young children without good verbal language skills and large vocabulary tend to fall behind in grades three and four. The following key fundamental questions in creating rich language environments guided the study:

- Do young children in early childhood development centres have strong language and literacy skills?

- Do educators in early childhood development centres collaborate in setting up a language-rich language curriculum and environment?

At this point it is essential to define key terms that were used in this discourse.

## 2. Defining Key Terms

**Early childhood development:** Early childhood development (ECD) is an education programme that caters for the development of the whole child from age zero to eight years. UNESCO (2005) refers to early childhood development as programmes that offer a purposeful and structural set off learning activities, either in a setting or institution (nursery, preschool and primary school). ECD can be viewed as a non-formal child development programme. Consistently, early childhood development is viewed by Gordon and Browne (2017) as group settings deliberately intended to affect developmental changes in children from birth to eight years. Usually, ECD programmes bring communities together to address the basic needs of young children and families (Pence and Evans, 2008). Within the early childhood development sub-sector is the ECD B class. It is a class of young children aged between four to five years attached to a primary school which would then proceed to Grade One the following year (Mutambudzi, 2011, Mugweni et al, 2012).

**Preschool:** The term preschool is commonly used to describe organized development activities for children of two to five years of age (Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs, 1986: iii). Similarly,

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Kruger and du Toit (1991) and Mugweni (2012) view a preschool child as the child from two to five years. Therefore, the term preschool refers to a deliberate setting prepared for the education of children of two to five years. Preschool relates to or is intended for a child between infancy and school going age. It is an educational programme targeted to young children before they attend formal primary school. In preschools, young children combine learning with play in a programme run by professionally trained adults. Children are most commonly enrolled in preschool are between the ages of three and five, although those as young as two years can attend some schools. Preschools are different from traditional day care in that their emphasis is learning and development rather than enabling parents to work or pursue other activities (Hendrick, 1993). In Zimbabwe, it is normal for children of two to six years to attend preschool. Hence forth, a preschool is intended for the early years of childhood that precede the beginning of infant school.

**Language:** Language is a form of communication, whether spoken, written or signed, based on a system of arbitrary symbols (Santrock, 2005). It is a method of communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way (Justice, 2004). Language is a set of tools that all human beings use to communicate their thoughts and feelings with one another (Justice, 2004). It is essential for children’s full participation in society as speakers, listeners, readers, and writers. Language is understood as a shared system of symbols with structures, and meanings that are accepted and unconsciously known by those who use it (Feeney et al, 1991). It is a cornerstone of every culture, and a vehicle by which people communicate ideas, information and emotions to one another (Justice, 2004). Similarly, Gordon and Browne (2017), assert that for the developing child, language is the ability to express oneself using the four language competencies – listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is both receptive (listening, understanding, responding) and expressive (pronouncing, vocabulary and grammar). However, language itself has no natural content. Thus, when ECD teachers provide instruction in language, they teach skills and tools of communication in meaningful contexts (Mugweni, et al, 2012).

**Environment:** Gordon and Brown (2011) define environment as the sum of the physical and human qualities that combine to create a space in which young children and adults work together. Accordingly, environment in early childhood development refers to all the conditions that offer young children’s surroundings and the people in it.

**Preschool environment:** A preschool environment is viewed as all the conditions that affect the surroundings and young children in it (Seefeldt and Barbour, 2000). Environment is also the sum total of the physical and human qualities that combine to create space in which children and adults play together (Feeney, Christensen, and Moravcik, 1991). Consistent with the definitions, environment is the content teachers arrange, an atmosphere teacher create; and

a feeling they communicate to the children (Chapman, 2000).

**Language-Rich ECD Environment:** A language-rich early childhood environment implies circumstances and objects surrounding a child which enables him or her to acquire language easily. It is an environment which emphasises learning language experientially, freely and naturally through direct communication with adults and peers (Allen and Cowdery, 2001). A language-rich preschool environment is one in which young children are exposed to deliberately and recurrently high-quality verbal input among peers and adults. It is an environment in which adult-child verbal interactions are characterized by high levels of adult responsiveness (Justice, 2004). The five key elements of this definition are in its explicit references to (a) exposure, (b) deliberateness, (c) recurrence, (d) high-quality input, and (e) adult responsiveness. It should be noted that a philosophy about oral language influences the choices that ECD educators make in structuring the physical environment of the classroom, designing daily lesson plans, and interacting with children (Justice, 2004)

**Language Needs and Characteristics of Young Children**  
Having defined the key terms, what follows is an outline of the language needs and characteristics of the preschool child. Language development in this context refers to a child’s ability to understand what is said to him or her and to express oneself (Mugweni, 2012). By about age four, a preschool child loves new words and likes to make fun with words (Bredenkamp, 1997). The child can speak although he has grammar and articulation errors. He or she asks questions and has a short concentration span. Table 1 below shows milestones in early language development and literacy.

**Table 1:** Milestones in early language development

Milestone	Age (months)**	Milestone	Age (years)**
Responds to bell	1-1.5	Says 3 words other than Dada or Mama	1.5
Laughs	2.5	Combines 2 different words	2
Vocalizes (not crying)	1.5	Points to 1 named body part	2
Squeals	3.5	Names 1 picture	2.5
Turns to voice	7.5	Follows directions	2.5
Says Dada or Mama (nonspecific)	9	Uses plurals	3
Imitates speech sounds	10	Gives first and last name	3.5
Says Dada or Mama (specific)	12.5	Comprehends cold/tired/hungry	3.5
		Comprehends prepositions	4
		Recognizes colours	4
		Defines opposite analogies	5

Adapted from Landers (1990:5)

### 3. Theoretical Perspectives of Language

Language-rich environments in early childhood development emphasize young children's acquisition of language through their interactions with both peers and adults. An emphasis on social interaction as a route to language gains is consistent with the social-interactionist developmental theory (Mugweni, 2012). Social-interactionist perspectives view language acquisition as a socio-biological process in which both innate biological predisposition and frequent, sensitive verbal input are critical for supporting language growth. The "socio" part of the equation includes "frequent, relatively well-tuned, affectively positive verbal interactions," which are considered a critical locus of support in early language acquisition (Chapman, 2000: 43).

The perspective emphasizes the importance of socially embedded, mediated interactions with more knowledgeable conversational partners as a critical developmental mechanism for young children (Justice, 2004). Within such interactions, the more knowledgeable partner, such as the teacher, fine-tunes her verbal input to scaffold the child's communicative engagement and gradual movement toward more independent levels of linguistic skill (Saracho, 2015). Social-interactionist accounts are useful for interpreting the differences in language acquisition in individual children that appear to be mediated by variations in quality and quantity of language input. Much research has indicated that individual differences in maternal and other caretakers' verbal input can explain the wide variation in the rate of children's early language growth and later language outcomes, thereby lending support to social-interactionist accounts of language acquisition (Chapman, 2000: 43; Gordon and Browne, 2017).

Justice (2004), for instance, studied mother-child interactions for 39 preschool children living in poverty and found a strong negative correlation between the amount of time that children spent playing alone and their expressive and receptive vocabulary skills. Reciprocally, strong positive correlations were observed between the rate of maternal one-on-one vocal responses to young children and their vocabulary skills (McCarthy and Houston, 1980). Similar patterns have been found when examining young children's oral language skills and their interactions with such other caregivers as preschool teachers and day-care providers. The rate of ECD caregivers' use of techniques that are viewed as characteristic of "conversational responsiveness" such as, imitations, labelling, and expansions; can explain variation in young children's language productivity in terms of the amount of language fashioned by children, as well as their vocabulary and grammar use (Chapman, 2000: 4).

### 4. Materials and Methods

A desk research methodology was used in this study. Desk research was found to be very effective and quick (Prachi, 2008). Most of the basic information could be easily

solicited. An exploration was undertaken to analysis data from literature, research reports, and teacher practices in order to establish the how rich language environments can be created in ECD settings. The data was analysed using theme identification methods to solicit emerging issues.

### 5. Results and Discussion

Among others the study found that rich language environments can be attained in ECD settings via nine broad ways. The ways identified included: recognising language needs and characteristics of young children; setting daily goals for vocabulary, grammar and phonology; designing activities that meet planned language goals; ensuring frequent child-to-child and adult-to-child meaningful communication; and use of well-resourced learning centres.

In contemporary ECD classrooms, language growth is supported by setting daily goals for vocabulary, grammar, phonology, and pragmatics; by designing activities that meet these goals; and by ensuring frequent child-to-child, child-to-adult, and adult-to-child meaningful communication (Justice, 2004). Everyday activities of all sorts, accompanied by interesting talk with a lot of new vocabulary play an important part in young children's language development (Dickson and Tabors, 2001:330). Since oral language is a child's ability to understand and use spoken, written words and sentences, young children begin to develop these specific oral language abilities in homes and early childhood development centres. In a rich language environment at an ECD centre, children are given more time to interact and talk than adults (Roskos and Neuman, 2002). Multiple situations and ways are created for children to communicate and act out their stories.

#### Developing the Physical Space for Facilitating Language Competence

The physical environment of a classroom has a coercive power over the quality and the quantity of young children's oral language experiences (Roskos & Neuman, 2002). The environment mediates the language that the teachers and children use. In creating language-rich preschool classroom environments, the physical environment must provide ample supports for facilitating children's exposure to diverse aspects of language content, form, and use. Two key supports that the team must explicitly and carefully consider are how to organize the space and how to obtain props and materials. In organization of space, Roskos and Neuman (2002) have identified four key attributes of spatial arrangements in classrooms that researchers believe can facilitate language learning and use. First, the classroom should be organized to emphasize open space. Second, specific areas should be clearly identified throughout the classroom (such as library, dramatic play area). Third, a variety of materials should be available to children, particularly materials that encourage creativity and problem-solving in language use.

These materials should be clustered conceptually (Landers, 1990). Fourth, authentic, functionally complex dramatic

play settings should be available in each classroom. Examples include an airport, a grocery store, a miniature classroom, and a restaurant. Chapman (2000) effectively argues that dramatic play settings should be rotated daily (or at least weekly) to provide young children with rich opportunities to learn about diverse aspects of their communities. Particularly, of importance in developing language-rich preschool environments are literacy-related artefacts, as well as real world props and materials (Hendrick, 1993; Saracho, 2015). Literacy related artefacts are materials that are associated with written language. They include, for instance, writing tools (pens, pencils, and crayons), writing media (envelopes, paper, and cardboard), and various types of printed materials (menus, signs, books, recipes, maps, and newspapers). Language-rich preschool environments emphasize children's acquisition of language through their interactions with both peers and adults.

Literacy-related artefacts encourage children to use language at an abstract, meta-linguistic level and to view language as an object of scrutiny. Literacy-related artefacts also help children make connections between oral and written language. Storybooks, a literacy artefact that should be widely available and readily accessible in every language-rich preschool classroom, provide children with an endless supply of familiar and unfamiliar linguistic forms, content, and use (Stebbing, 1999; Mugweni, 2012).

Real-world props and materials are authentic tools that children use in their play to represent life outside the classroom (Justice, 2004). Exposure to these props and materials, particularly with adult mediation, helps children learn new words, develop schematic representations of community activities, and apply background knowledge to new learning situations. Real-world props should be rotated regularly to provide children with maximal exposure to new linguistic concepts.

Seefeldt and Barbour (1986) argue that at the age five, a preschool child loves stories, poetry and singing. Some children can be talkative, curious, eager to learn facts and they can express feelings verbally. In their studies Gordon and Brown (2017) observed that some preschool children recognize letters and pretend to read and write (Landers, 1990). This evidence shows that the preschool child is an active language explorer and seeker, a characteristic which warrants the provision of a linguistically rich preschool environment.

How preschool children acquire language depends on the theory one believes in. On one hand, the Skinnerian/Behavioural Theory postulates that children acquire language through imitation and conditioning of experiences. On the other hand, Chomsky's theory contends that children have an innate bio-grammar called a "Language Acquisition Device" (LAD) (Sprinthall and Sprinthall, 2011). Like Chomsky theory, Lenneberg maintains that, language development is biologically determined, and that the onset is regular and consistent with children of all cultures (McCarthy and Houston, 1980;

Saracho, 2015). Contemporary theorists like Bruner take an interactive view on language acquisition. He argues that both Skinner and Chomsky's theories apply in explaining how children learn language. To Bruner, the Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) and a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) are both influential in a child's mastery of language learning (Sprinthall and Sprinthall, 2011).

Studies carried out by Piaget and Vygotsky have helped to understand the relationship between children's cognitive growth and language development. Piaget cited by Feeney et al (1991) propounds that children develop language during concept formation, but experience is important. On the same note, Vygotsky argues that children learn language as an interaction between innate-maturation and the stimulation of social experience. Bruner's opinion of Language Acquisition Support System views that adults act as informal guide in supporting and fostering language learning. Similarly, in his theory on "modelling" or observational learning, Bandura championed the value of learning by means of imitation (Landers, 1990). Furthermore, seminal work by Hamilton and Stewart (1977) reveals that children in preschool add to their vocabulary by imitating the language of other children.

On the same note, Landers (1990), contends that the process of language development involves young children learning without formal instruction. Therefore, in such a context the teacher's role is to create a conducive rich linguistic environment. Similarly, theories about a biological basis of language should not be interpreted to mean that children are born with a language they will speak (McCarthy and Houston, 1980; Saracho, 2015). While the ability to acquire language has a biological basis, the content of the language vocabulary is acquired from the environment, which includes other people as language models (Morrison, 2011). Therefore, language development depends on an environment that facilitates talk between young children and adults, and between children and children.

This view by Morrison provides evidence that optimal language development ultimately depends on the nature of interaction with language models. A child left alone to his innate devices (like the wild Boy of Aveyro) cited in Giddens (1994), will not learn the language as efficient as a child brought up in a linguistically rich environment. Bernstein, cited in Haralambos and Holborn (2000) argues that young children who are brought up in a linguistically deficient environment develop a restricted code (little is made explicit), while those brought up in a linguistically rich environment develop an elaborated code (explicitly verbalizes many of the meanings). Therefore, the preschool teacher's aim is to promote the development of an elaborated code. It is significant that the establishment of a rich linguistic preschool environment is necessary.

In the opinion of Gordon and Browne (2017), a rich linguistic environment are the conditions, activities, experiences, the total physical and human qualities that

combine to create a space in which young children develop their language, that is, the ability to understand what is said to them and to express themselves. McCarthy (1980) in Saracho (2015) argues that a rich linguistic environment promotes acquisitions of language skills in both children to enlarge their vocabulary and use language meaningfully. Similarly, in the opinion of Seefeldt and Barbour (1986), a rich linguistic environment includes both the physical setting and the interpersonal setting. Physical setting implies equipment, materials, and management facilities available, routines, scheduled activities and experiences that promote language development (Hendrick, 1993).

Bredenkamp (1997) contends that the interpersonal setting, number and nature of teachers in an ECD centre, act as language models. The type of interactions in the setting including the classroom arrangement also contributes to a rich linguistic environment. Furniture arrangement can facilitate children's participation in art activities, and it can also enable children to describe their art experiences peers (Landers, 1990). Learning centres are also part and parcel of the linguistic environment (Mugweni, 2013). The set up and the activities that take place at learning centres should be those that enrich the environment. Dodge and Colker (1992), suggest different activities that can be carried out to enrich the linguistic environment for language development. At the Block Area, a preschool teacher may have paper, markers, and tape available for children to make signs for block constructions. Also, a teacher may hang pictures of buildings with words at young children's eye level.

At the House Corner, Dodge and Colker (1992) suggest that a preschool teacher may include books and magazines for young children to look at, "read" and talk about. The teacher may also introduce uses of print like shopping lists, receipts, and letters. When playing with toys, a preschool teacher may invite children to describe what they are making, reinforce children's vocabulary, and names of colours, shapes and sizes. At the Art centre he or she may invite young children to dictate stories which go with the art work and share books about famous artists. During sand and water play, children may be encouraged to talk about how sand and water feel.

In the view of Dodge and Colker (1992), a Library or Book Corner gives young children opportunity to expand their language. Teachers should encourage children in the library area to read stories to each other, listen to stories and rhymes on audio-tapes, and listen and tell stories. Teacher should also provide props such as stuffed animals and puppets for use by children during dramatization of stories. To enrich the linguistic environment during music and movement teacher should incorporate poetry, children should also be encouraged to use instruments for playing and producing sounds read in stories (McCarthy and Houston, 1980). During outdoor play children should be encouraged to talk about a lot of things in their environment.

Similarly, Hendrick (1993) purposes that in linguistically rich environment children learn to talk as they are listened to. The teachers listen to children, they pay attention to what they say and pay attention to children's effort to communicate. Teachers give children real experience to talk about. Children's language task is based on concrete real-life experiences (Justice, 2004). For example, let children discuss about planting seeds, or about things that float and sink before and during the experience. In the opinion of Justice (2004), these experiences encourage conversation between children. Piaget (1983) cited in Sprinthall and Sprinthall (2011), views such "discourse" and exchange of opinion by children and teachers as an effective means of facilitating the acquisition of language. On the same note, (Justice, 2004), argues that encouraging young children to talk has many benefits, ranging from teaching them to use words to negotiate disagreements in place of physical attack, to providing them with effective social skills. During conversations and dialogues with preschool children teachers need to relax and see young children as their partners. When talking with preschool children teachers should prolong the conversation as long as they can; and use good conversation starters like. "Did you see anything good on television last night?"

Similarly, Bredenkamp (1993) proposes that in a linguistically rich early childhood environment, children are provided with many opportunities to see how reading and writing are useful before they are instructed in letter names, sounds and word identification. An abundance of these types of activities is provided to develop language and literacy through meaningful experience such as listening to and reading poems and stories; taking field trips; dictating stories; observing classroom charts and other prints in use. Participating in dramatic play and other experiences requiring communication such as informal talking with teachers and peers; and experimenting with writing, drawing and painting; enhance and promote preschool children's language acquisition.

Use of open-ended questions and elaborated statements promote children's language development. Gordon and Browne (2011) posit that in rich linguistic environment children become active participants in their own language learning. They use imitative and productive speech. Developmentally appropriate practice encourages that children should be involved in group discussions and be encouraged to ask questions (Bredenkamp, 1993). Overall, the ECD linguistic environment setting should be a laboratory for preschool children's language development.

In a rich-language environment transitions and routines offer children opportunities to use language. Also, during group or circle times language intensive activities such as finger plays, songs, and stories strengthens young children's articulation skills. During circle time children also get opportunities to express themselves when they discuss the daily news and events taking place (Landers, 1990). When children report on what they did earlier in the day they gain experience in listening and speaking. In the opinion of

Feeney et al (1991), a rich preschool linguistic environment is gentle, and supportive to children's language needs.

A library centre staked with a variety of children's books and puppets is essential in an ECD language rich classroom (Mugweni, 2013). Books in such a rich preschool environment should be attractively displayed, suitable for children's developmental level, colourful with many pictures. The books should be written in big and bold texts for young children to see clearly (McGee and Richgels, 1996). In a preschool, a well displayed and situated library centre lures young children to open books. As a result, the children develop viewing, speaking and reading abilities. Use of puppets at a library centre allows young children to tell stories found in children's literature. In a contemporary ECD rich language environment there is need to have a computer centre (Mugweni, 2013). A computer centre with developmentally appropriate language activities enhances young children's development of audio-visual and narrative skills. Consistently, a computer centre with appropriate software for young children, printers, compact discs (CDs) and earphones is rich in language development (McGee and Richgels, 1996). In such a computer centre, young children watch different films and stories, listen to rhymes, songs, and stories; play language games and sing along nursery rhymes and songs (McGee and Richgels, 1996).

To create rich linguistic environments, preschool teachers need to focus on the content of the language (Morrison, 2011). That is learning names of things, learning to speak in sentences, and how to use and understand language. Morrison (2011) suggests the following guidelines for promoting young children's language acquisition.

According to Morrison (2011) teachers of young children should: -

- Note that conversations are building blocks of language development, so that young children become partners in the communication process.
- Be attentive, caring and enabling adults in order to stimulate and encourage children's language growth.
- Use children's names when dealing with them to personalize the conversation and build self-identity.
- Use a variety of means to stimulate and promote language acquisition including: stories, songs, drama, games and play; as well as, giving children many opportunities to interact verbally with other children and with teachers.
- Note that young children learn language through feedback, consequently, there is need to converse with children about what they experience in their daily interactions in different contexts.

From this discussion it is evident that a rich ECD linguistic environment is child centred. It is one whose children understand the goals of learning, take pride in their growing abilities in communication and self-confidence. These preschool children are pleased with their developing competence and confidence in articulating ideas, opinions, feelings and questions. In such an environment, there is an

atmosphere where the emphasis is on the positive and encouraging children to communicate in different ways.

In the Zimbabwean context, teachers in most ECD settings aim at creating linguistically rich environments. But there are certain constraints like lack of financial support and material resources, as well as lack of trained human resources. In some situations, there is lack of availability of enough space because most preschools in Zimbabwe are housed in church buildings, old houses, unused primary school classrooms, urban council halls and in rare situations under a tree (Mugweni, Mutemeri and Ganga, 2012). However, through improvisation activities and donations from Non-Governmental Organisation and interested parties, the language learning environments can be effective and conducive to positive language acquisition. From this discussion it is evident that a linguistic rich preschool environment promotes children's language acquisition, both the receptive and expressive aspects.

On the contrary, a linguistically deficient preschool environment is a cause for concern, because it inhibits the child's ability to acquire language (Hallahan and Kaufman, 2003). It leads to limited vocabulary and restricted language pattern. Therefore, preschool teachers should aim at creating a rich language environment in their school for the benefit of the child's positive language growth. This can be achieved through designing daily language plans for use in rich-language ECD environments. Below is a sample of a daily language plan for use in classrooms.

#### **Daily Language Plan: Sunshine ECD Centre**

Date: 10 December 2018

Teacher: Prof. R. Mugweni

#### **Objectives**

During the learning activity learners will be able to:

- 1) Understand and use labels associated with clothing (content).
- 2) Comprehend and use plural forms (form).
- 3) Ask questions to peers, care-givers and the teacher (use)
- 4) Ask for help when needed (use)

#### **Learning activities**

- 1) During circle time, the young children will take turns asking one another or the care-giver to identify their favourite clothes.
- 2) During circle time, children dressing puppets and dolls talking about each piece of clothing.
- 3) During dramatic play, a shopping store will be set up so that children can shop for clothes.
- 4) During art, the children will paste articles of clothing (felt) on pictures of themselves

Adapted from Justice (2004:43)

Since a preschool language-rich environment emphasises the importance of speaking, viewing, reading and writing, it should be deliberately and recurrently exposed to high quality verbal input among peers and adults. There is need to foster functional communication through planning activities and experiences that build young children's

functional language abilities in interaction and self-regulatory learning (Jalongo, 1992). In essence, ECD teachers should have recurrent conversations to teach each child and to encourage children to communicate their feelings, ideas and opinions through story-telling, drama and role playing. Consistently, ECD teachers in a rich language environment make informed choices about the language, words and grammar they employ during interaction with young children. The language used should be polite, appropriate and taking note of the needs and interests of the child.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, it has been observed that engaging in authentic conversations with all young children throughout the day in early childhood development centres is important for creating language-rich environments and facilitating language development beyond the word level. If children have many chances to use and see objects, pictures, letters, as well as hear sounds and words, they develop language competence naturally and happily (Stebbing, 1999). Hints identified as helpful in creating a language rich ECD context include conversing about young children's books, songs, rhymes, stories, pictures, field trips, language nature walks, and daily experiences. The need to use children's interests as a basis for dialogue; speaking courteously to young children; recognising spontaneous opportunities to talk with each child informally; listening attentively to children's conversation, use consistent verbal, non-verbal cues, use of real situations and real objects, pictures and simple written messages; and show affection and genuine interest in all children is critical for young children's positive language development.

From the findings of the study it was recommended that in Zimbabwe as a context of child development, there is need for trained early childhood development professionals with expertise to plan quality rich language environments which foster positive language development in young children.

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