
Learning the Art of Language

~ Janene Ping

*Our challenge is to create a new language,
A new sense of what it is to be human.
It is to transcend not only national limitations,
But even our species isolation,
To enter into the larger community of living species.
This brings about a completely new sense of reality and of value.*

~ Thomas Berry

When we behold a newborn child, we witness the wisdom of the cosmos working. The young child has an instinctual will that, if protected and cared for with love, gifts them with healthy growth and an awakening individuality. Very young children, at one with the life forces all around them, live in union with the physical world. This is a time of grace, supported by the devotion of the caregiver. During the first seven years, the child's consciousness gradually awakens in their "I" being. Open sensory communion with the cosmos transforms into spoken language as a mode for this communion. Spoken language, at first, lies within the infant's cries of need and joyful vocal sounds. Speech, modeled by those surrounding the child, is at first intuitively comprehended. As percept becomes accompanied by concept, communication as spoken word begins.

Communication is both a skill and an art. Georg K  hlewind, in *From Normal to Healthy*, writes of speech as a sacrament of communion that enables us to overcome isolation. It holds the power of the *logos*—power to create, and embody a life of volition. Many religious traditions hold vows of silence as part of a cleansing ritual and caution us to bring consciousness to how we use words. In Buddhist tradition, there must be three gatekeepers that guard the portal of speech: the first to ensure it is true, the second to ensure it is kind, and the third to ensure it is necessary. The biblical story of the Tower of Babel is a cautionary tale of what can happen when we lose the ability to use speech as a tool for comprehension and clarity.

As we travel further along the road of technological communication, we are increasingly surrounded by words and sounds disconnected from actual human beings, and we are far removed from these ancient Wisdom teachings. How do truth, kindness, and relevance live in the communications we receive today? In our wider experience of culture, communications are amplified and technologically dispersed through the air; we listen to AI generated words, and the spoken word is overridden by text-message slang and abbreviations that can lead to misunderstanding. We have too much information that is unsubstantiated and disconnected from our own experience, and thus truth is difficult to discern.

In building a foundation for language and literacy skills, the youngest years are a time for speaking the language of the cosmos, and reading the book of nature as it lives in the world. This is revealed in nature within and nature without, through the experience of one's own body, connected relationships with others, and the manifestation of life surrounding us. To best serve the young child's innate capacities for learning, healthy, true sensory experiences and loving connection with others are essential. These build security within, trust in the world, and support the child's intelligence to unite with engaged volition.

When I receive children in the kindergarten, they are already individualistically attuned to the realities of their world. In reverence, I seek to discover the mysteries of this individuality. Are they comfortable in their bodies? Are their senses attuned and integrated?

How do they connect with the world and with others? How does the learning modality of imitation live within them? How do they listen and speak within various relationships they encounter? This inquiry gives me an intimation of how I can meet their developmental and educational needs. Although individual needs require adaptation, the following teaching practices have helped me in working with all children:

- To strive to be fully present with each child, seeing them and hearing them with attuned attention.
- Slowing down speech. The average adult speaks between 160 and 170 words per minute, while most children between the ages of five and seven can process speech at a maximum rate of 124 words per minute.
- Accompanying words with meaningful context and gesture to assist vocabulary comprehension.
- Creating a curriculum that supports listening skills and is rich in music, verse, storytelling, and puppetry to model and build language skills.
- Positive affirmation of the child's learning capacity, supported by the teacher's loving presence, collaboration with parents, and developmental resources.

WECAN has published many rich resources for new material, which offer a variety of styles and best practices. To learn new material, begin slowly and learn each piece thoroughly to build a solid set of tools to aid your work.

Increasingly, as I meet the children born of this 21st century, it is clear that the profound importance of allowing nature's universal wisdom to work through a slow and healthy beginning in the earliest years is not well understood, nor easily accomplished. Thus, in the healing art of Waldorf education we need to create a learning experience where this is possible; support of hearing and listening skills is key. Following are some practices that I have incorporated into my work with young children to help them develop capacities in this area.

- Seasonal circle time every day. The rhythmical practice of repeating opening and closing verses, exploring seasonal poems, and singing with

others is one of our most valuable tools to help the child's vocabulary comprehension living in context to time and place. Meaningful gesture, humor, and adaptation to social behaviors and circumstances support the child's emotional and social intelligence. Daily immersion in this activity is the best support for the way young children learn.

- Building quiet times into the schedule of the day helps the child to learn self-regulation. In my work with children, I encourage quiet during storytelling, rest, painting and other arts, and meal times. Once you encourage this culture with positive affirmation of achievement in this skill, it becomes easier to maintain. These times balance others, equally important, where freedom to play and speak (sometimes loudly!) reigns.
- Along with the traditional telling of fairy tales and nature stories by adults, we can give children a space to tell stories. When I established a practice of quiet meal times, to help ensure children were able to focus on eating and didn't end up hungry afterward, these became a space for storytelling. At our quiet meal table, children who have finished eating can raise a finger if they wish to tell a story, and when they are called and begin, we all listen carefully. This works well for the older kindergarten children.
- With younger nursery-age children, the teacher may tell a story or finger play during this time. Once, at the table, after a destructive tornado had raged through our region the night before, a child raised a finger and when called, asked, "Did you hear about the big tomato that went through town last night?" I learn so much about the children and their sense of self and the world during this time!

Here are some playful games that support listening and language arts skills:

- ☞ **Clapping games** done to chants or songs, with claps marking syllable distinctions, are wonderful activities to help children listen to how words work. We also play with the tapping of rhythms. In my kindergarten, we have a gnome circle in which, at one point, the children and I play "rock" music (reportedly, this is the gnome's favorite). Each

child takes two round stones from a basket. The leader of the band plays a short rhythm with the stones, and the children then repeat that “song” a few times. Then a new leader is chosen and the game repeated.

- ☞ **What Is That Tune?** - Whether whistling, humming, or playing on the recorder flute, I create the tune of one of our circle songs, and the children listen and tell me which song it is.
- ☞ **Little Bird** - In the forest, we try to sing the birds’ song back to them after we have listened to it completely. Sometimes the birds engage in musical conversation!
- ☞ **Little Tommy Nibble Mouse** - “Little Tommy nibble mouse, lived in a little house - there came a little bee, who said three times - Buzz, buzz, buzz!” One child is chosen to be the mouse and kneels with head bowed in the center of the carpet while a silk scarf is placed over them. Another child is called to be the bee and stands behind them. When indicated, the bee buzzes three times and the first child tries to guess which friend is behind them.
- ☞ **Phonemic Awareness** is a crucial first step towards the development of literacy skill and can easily inspire simple listening games for the kindergarten-age child. The ability to recognize and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) within spoken words helps the child identify letters. It is important for developing later reading and spelling activities. Games that involve the identifying of first or last sounds in a word, and segmenting words into individual sounds, as in rhyming games, help the child on the path to literacy.
- ☞ **Phonemic Transition Games** - When calling children who are waiting to go out to play or come in to snack, the teacher says, “All of the children

whose names begin with the “sssss” can now skip to the yard!...” Always speak the sound of the letter, rather than just its name. This can also be done for sounds at the end of names.

- ☞ Children like to play with **silly rhyming sounds** that playfully mix up the words to well-known nursery rhymes. How many variations to “Little Bo Peep” can you create?

There are so many ways to explore the support of language and literacy education for the young child! One of my favorites is telling folk tales from many lands, nature stories, and legends. The human brain is primed to learn through story. For centuries the oral tradition of storytelling not only helped the child develop language; it also communicated the moral ethics of a culture. Fairytale metaphors awaken children to the dangers and blessings of the world through universal, archetypal images. When combined with puppetry arts, there are endless opportunities for helping children develop listening skills, supporting the development of imagination, and understanding language in meaningful contexts. They are inspired to become storytellers and to process life experience through play. When we enter this field of creativity and play, we attune to the child within us, as well. ♦

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