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How Does The Use Of Adult-Child Conversations Affect The Oral Language Development Of Pre-K Students

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HOW DOES THE USE OF ADULT-CHILD CONVERSATIONS AFFECT THE ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT OF PRE-K STUDENTS

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Art in Education

Hamline University
Saint Paul, Minnesota
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In the Pre-K classroom, there are many opportunities during the school day for interactions between the teacher and the student. A teacher might be giving directions for completing an art project or reminding a child to clean up toys. A child might be explaining what happened over the weekend or asking if the class is going to the playground that day. The teacher and child may be trying to figure out what happens when you roll a ball of play-doh down a ramp made of blocks. Does the way a teacher approaches interactions with students make a difference? Are there strategic ways to approach these interactions to develop students’ oral language skills?

It has been quite a few years since I first heard that children develop their oral language skills when they engage in back and forth conversations with an adult. This study seeks evidence to support that idea. The desire to use practices in my Pre-K classroom that promote oral language development has led to my research question.

My research question is, *How does the use of adult-child conversations in the classroom affect the oral language development of my Pre-K students?* In my research, I want to discover the outcomes for students when teachers engage in regular conversations with students. In this chapter, I will provide a rationale and context for my research, explore oral language in Pre-K, and describe my experience in education.

Personal Journey
Before I went into teaching, I graduated from college with two majors, French and International Relations. I usually tell people that I have never used either of those majors in my work experience, but the truth is that French has informed my teaching. Learning another language has helped me work with children that are learning English, even as their first language. I understand what it is like to need support in order to communicate ideas.

One of my first jobs after college was working as an assistant preschool teacher in Head Start. I worked with three to five year olds at one center during the school year and a few other centers during the summer. As an assistant teacher, I was not informed of the curriculum. I got my information about what to do by observing the teachers and the other assistant teachers. I noticed that one of the directors would come into the classroom from time to time. On one of these occasions, she came in and started to talk to a few children about the Fourth of July. She told them that the Fourth of July is our country’s birthday, explaining in a way that the children understood, and proceeded to elicit conversation from the children. I noticed that the interaction was engaging for the children. I would come to learn a lot more about interactions with children when I made the decision to go into elementary education.

**Elementary Education**

After working for Head Start, I went back to college to get my Elementary Education teaching license through a post-BA program. My first teaching job was teaching third grade in a public school. Later, I taught English Language Arts to Kindergarteners through fifth graders in a private, French school. In my experience teaching elementary grades, I noticed that reading books aloud exposed children to sophisticated language and a variety of vocabulary words. During small guided reading groups, the children were able to practice using words in conversation that we encountered in the books they were reading.
As I was taking courses for my K-12 Reading License, I learned about the importance of oral language acquisition for a child’s success in reading. At the time, I was teaching second grade and used a district adopted, oral language curriculum. The students would tell what they saw happening in a picture, and I would ask questions so that the students would expand their language. I was excited that the district acknowledged the importance of oral language. My interest in this topic continued to grow as my students were engaged in conversation, responding to each other, and expanding on what a peer had said. The conversations seemed to provide space for building language.

**Oral Language in Pre-K**

When I started teaching Pre-K, I felt that I should be addressing the oral language skills of my Pre-K students but was not sure how to do this. Shortly after I started teaching Pre-K, I discovered SEEDS, Sensitivity Encouragement Education Development of Skills through Doing and Self-Image Support, a professional development program for early childhood educators (SEEDS Quality Interactions, 2017). The program aims to help children develop the skills needed to enter Kindergarten. At a Pre-K meeting, some of the other Pre-K teachers talked about a SEEDS training they had completed a few years earlier. They shared a practice called Strive for Five, in which the teacher attempts to engage a child in at least five conversational exchanges. At a later date, our supervisor gave the rest of us a binder with SEEDS documents, including a page that mentions Strive for Five. I occasionally looked through my binder wondering what to do with it. I wanted to implement Strive for Five in my Pre-K classroom, because it seemed like a tool that would help children communicate.

Inspired by the Strive for Five framework, I tried to have conversations with each of my students on a regular basis, while trying to be mindful of an ongoing back-and-forth. However, I
felt rushed, which resulted in not being able to listen carefully to my students or model language for them during our conversations. What motivates me to look into the conversations taking place in my classroom is that I think I can have an impact on my students’ oral language development and their later success in reading and writing.

**Context of the Study**

I teach Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) in a public elementary school. I teach a half-day morning class and a half-day afternoon class five days a week. English Learners, general education students, and students on Individualized Education Plans make up the student body in my classroom. I work with two Early Childhood Special Education (ESCE) teachers, a special education paraprofessional, and a regular education paraprofessional. A Speech Language Pathologist and an Occupational Therapist provide services to some students outside of the regular classroom.

As a Pre-K teacher, I question how to best spend instructional time. I am not always sure how to prioritize the expectations coming from various sources such as colleagues, administrators, and other decision-makers. For example, I feel pressure from Kindergarten teachers to push my students academically. Kindergarteners in our school district are expected to read at a certain level by the end of Kindergarten. It has become an unofficial expectation in our school district that Pre-K students be able to identify the names and sounds of all of the letters of the alphabet by the end of Pre-K.

At the same time, I sense disapproval from early childhood special education teachers and veteran early childhood teachers in regard to teaching academic skills to Pre-K students. In our Pre-K teacher meetings, we have debated about how much time our students should spend playing and developing social-emotional skills in relation to learning academic skills.
In my school district, to ensure that children are learning social-emotional skills, the department of Early Childhood and Family Education (ECFE) and the department of Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) have adopted the Pyramid Model, created by two federally-funded research and training centers, the Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children (TACSEI) and The Center for the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL). At the Tier I level, I am expected to create a supportive classroom environment, build responsive relationships with students, and maintain open communication with families. At the Tier II level, I need to provide targeted social emotional supports to students and explicitly teach about feelings, problem solving, and friendship skills. At the Tier III level, for students with challenging behaviors, I track incidents, implement intervention, and create individualized behavior plans. District coaches supported by TACSEI and CSEFEL observe me in the classroom and evaluate my fidelity to the Pyramid Model.

Along with the expectations mentioned above, as a Pre-K teacher, I am expected to plan instruction and assessment based on the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress, Minnesota’s Early Learning Standards for Birth through Kindergarten (ECIPs). The ECIPs contain learning standards in the areas of Approaches to Learning, the Arts, Language Literacy Communications, Mathematics Cognitive, Physical and Movement, Scientific Thinking Cognitive, Social Emotional, and Social Systems Cognitive (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017). For me, it is a challenge to balance all of the areas of the ECIPS and to base my instructional decisions on evidence, not on hunches, habits, or what someone has told me to do. Just in the areas of Listening, Understanding, Communicating, and Speaking in the ECIPS, there are many possibilities of what it might mean to teach and assess the knowledge and skills implied.
The ECIPS include the following indicators for children aged four to five years old. In language comprehension, child understands the meaning of words and phrases (receptive) and uses those words and phrases to communicate effectively (expressive); follows directions that involve two or more steps; and responds to increasingly complex prepositional directions, such as beside, around, and next to. In social conversation, child meaningfully engages in talk with others to express feelings, wants and ideas; negotiates, shares, plans, and solves problems with others; and asks and answers questions to seek help or get information. In vocabulary and syntax, child understands word order and grammatical rules; uses sentences that express logical relationships between concepts; uses increasingly specific words to name objects and their features and functions; and shares information about experiences, people, places, and things in sequence (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017). All of the standards and indicators sound important, but it sometimes seems impossible to reach all of them.

The problem is not knowing how to provide balanced learning opportunities for my students while giving them opportunities to develop their oral language. Even if I did feel that it was possible to reach all of the standards, I do not always know how to facilitate the children’s learning of the skills and knowledge. I cannot say that I use teaching and assessment practices proven to be effective or that I am using practices that are working well for the students with whom I work. If I do not scrutinize my hunches and habits and the expectations coming from different sources, I will not know if what I do in the classroom is helping to develop my students’ oral language.

**Significance of the Study**

I see this question of language learning in my classroom from a sociocultural perspective. I believe that learning happens in social contexts and that learning in the Pre-K
classroom is possible because of the interactions between individuals. Just as the children and adults with whom I work are a part of our classroom community, they are part of other discourse communities, such as their families and various ethnic or linguistic communities (Gee, 2014). The different influences and abilities of my students are assets to our classroom and bring value to the learning that takes place. I believe that various forms of language should be celebrated, not only those of dominant, white culture.

I am biased towards giving oral language a lot of attention in the classroom, because I believe oral language is valuable. I believe it is important, at any age, to be able to communicate with others. From my experience in teaching Pre-K, preschool children need language in order to learn and use the social emotional skills involved in playing with peers and getting along in the life of the classroom. The ECIPs include social emotional skills such as expressing feelings, wants, and ideas with others; negotiating, sharing, planning, and solving problems with others; and asking and answering questions to seek help or get information. Language development and social emotional development seem to me to be interdependent. I also believe oral language development is important for building reading and writing skills and that children need to be able to understand and speak the words that they will read and write. As a Pre-K teacher, I see children building a language foundation for present and future literacy development.

In the field of early childhood education, it is important for teachers to know how to prepare young children for communicating, reading, and writing. Instead of guessing or waiting to be told what to do, we need to look at the research and be aware of any gaps in the research. If the literature supports the claim that oral language in early childhood supports social emotional development, literacy development, and other development, it is important to know the evidence-based practices that support children’s oral language development.
For me, it is important to feel like I am being effective as a teacher. With all of the expectations placed on me as a Pre-K teacher, I want to make the best use of the time that I have in the classroom with students. It is important to me to provide opportunities for my students to learn language while they are learning other content and skills. I believe it is possible to help my students develop their oral language skills, but I need more research-based direction on how to do this. Specifically, I want to look at the effectiveness of conversations in the classroom for promoting oral language development.

In my research, I am interested in investigating the connection between literacy and oral language and the connection between social-emotional development and oral language. My literature review includes research on teaching vocabulary, teaching syntax, quality of teacher-student interactions, and closeness of teacher-student relationships.

**Conclusion**

This chapter served to provide a rationale and context for my research, background on oral language, and my experience in education. The role, assumptions, and biases of the researcher were discussed. In my research, I hope to answer the question, *How does the use of adult-child conversations in the classroom affect the oral language development of my Pre-K students?*

In Chapter Two, I review the literature relevant to oral language development. Chapter Three describes my Capstone Project, and Chapter Four consists of my reflections on creating my project.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to discover if one-on-one conversations between teacher and student can promote growth in Pre-K students’ oral language. The study examines the use of conversations as one practice out of a set of practices used to promote oral language development. The goal is to identify changes in students’ oral language resulting from adult-child conversations in the Pre-K classroom regardless of topic, activity, or context. The question I would like to answer is, How does the use of adult-child conversations in the classroom affect the oral language development of my Pre-K students?

Research on children’s oral language development is significant to the field of early childhood education because of the implications for teaching practices. Empirical evidence can inform researchers, parents, child care providers, and educators on how children develop language. Researchers have studied the effects of adult input on children’s expressive and receptive language in the classroom. They have also explored practices in the field of speech-language pathology. Speech-language pathologists use a variety of practices with children that have developmental delays or disabilities. Other studies have examined the language interactions between children and their parents.

There is limited research on conversations, specifically, in the preschool classroom. I have not found any research on SEEDS, a professional development program for early childhood educators, or a practice from SEEDS called Strive for Five, in which the teacher attempts to engage a child in at least five conversational exchanges. SEEDS stands for Sensitivity Encouragement Education Development of Skills through Doing and Self-Image Support and
aims to help children develop the skills needed to enter Kindergarten. I was interested in
discovering more about SEEDS and Strive for Five, because other Pre-K teachers in my district
have been trained in SEEDS and I have a binder of SEEDS documents in my classroom.

It would be important to show empirical evidence that supports the effectiveness of Strive
for Five from SEEDS, especially if a district has invested in training for teachers and the early
childhood department encourages teachers to use it. It would also be important to determine if
practices used by speech-language pathologists effectively promote oral language development
in typically developing children within the preschool classroom setting.

This chapter provides an overview of the literature on oral language development and
defines the components of oral language. It discusses the significance of oral language research
in early childhood education as oral language development relates to literacy and social-
emotional development. This review includes empirical studies relevant to oral language
development in children around four years of age, many of which took place in preschool
classrooms. I chose to review research that pertains to children of the same age as my students
and to the same setting as my classroom setting. I excluded studies on practices used by speech-
language pathologists, because those practices seem to occur in a one-on-one clinical setting.
The literature review addresses vocabulary instruction, syntax instruction, quality of teacher-
student interactions, and closeness of teacher-student relationships. In this chapter, I offer my
perspective based on research findings in early language development.

**Oral Language**

Roskos, K., Tabors, P., and Lenhart, L. (2009) define language as a verbal system
consisting of words and rules for organizing and changing words. They describe five components
of oral language: semantics, syntax, morphology, phonology, and pragmatics. Semantics pertains
to the meaning of language, including vocabulary, while morphology pertains to the meaning of parts of words, such as prefixes and suffixes. Syntax refers to the way words form sentences, also called grammar. Phonology comprises the speech sounds in language. Pragmatics is the way language is used in social contexts. The terms receptive vocabulary and receptive syntax refer to understanding words and sentences when heard, while the terms expressive vocabulary and expressive syntax refer to speaking words and sentences (Roskos et al., 2009).

**Oral Language and Literacy**

One reason for an emphasis on oral language in early childhood education is that the research shows a connection between oral language development and later success in literacy. The 2008 National Early Literacy Panel stressed that oral language is one ability that predicts later growth in reading, writing, and spelling (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009). Foorman et al. (2015), Dickinson et al. (2014), and NAEYC (2009) claim that oral language skills are correlated with reading comprehension.

Lonigan and Shanahan (2009) state that the 2008 National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) outlined eleven variables that predict later literacy achievement for preschoolers and Kindergarteners: alphabet knowledge; phonological awareness; rapid automatic naming of letters or digits; rapid automatic naming of objects and colors; writing letters and one’s name; the ability to remember spoken information for a short period of time; concepts about print; print knowledge; reading readiness; oral language, including vocabulary and grammar; and visual processing. They define later literacy achievement as decoding, reading comprehension, writing, and spelling outcomes. The 2008 NELP report says that oral language plays a bigger role in later literacy achievement when measures include grammar, the ability to define words, and listening.
comprehension than when measured using only vocabulary knowledge (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009).

Foorman, B., Herrera, S., Petscher, Y., Mitchell, A., and Truckenmiller, A. (2015) conducted a study to determine if the oral language of kindergarteners, first graders, and second graders affected their reading comprehension. In kindergarten, syntax, vocabulary, and phonological awareness were predictors of listening comprehension (Foorman et al., 2015). In grades 1 and 2, vocabulary, syntax, and decoding fluency were predictors of reading comprehension (Foorman et al., 2015).

Dickinson, D. K., Hofer, K. G., Barnes, E. M., and Grifenhagen, J. F. (2014) claim that language ability in the early childhood years is strongly associated with later language ability and that by the primary grades, language is the strongest predictor of reading comprehension.

The 2009 Position Statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) emphasizes that vocabulary and other aspects of oral language are important predictors of children’s reading comprehension. The position statement includes, “All the domains of development and learning—physical, social and emotional, and cognitive—are important, and they are closely interrelated. Children’s development and learning in one domain influence and are influenced by what takes place in other domains” (NAEYC, 2009, p. 11).

**Oral Language and Social Emotional Development**

Another reason for the emphasis on oral language in early childhood education is the connection to social-emotional development. Social-emotional development includes the child's experience, expression, and management of emotions and the ability to establish positive and rewarding relationships with others (Cohen, 2005). Multiple studies demonstrate that language
plays a significant role in social-emotional development (Robertson & Weismer, 1999; Cohen, 2005; Hartas, 2012; Clegg et al., 2015).

Cohen (2005) discusses the detrimental effects of language impairment on children’s mental health and school success. Robertson and Weismer (1999) add that speech therapy for toddlers with speech delays can improve their language skills and, in turn, their social emotional skills. Investing in children’s oral language development has benefits for years to come, as children’s language skills are connected to their ability to interact with others, deal with their emotions, and self-regulate (Robertson & Weismer, 1999; Cohen, 2005; Hartas, 2012; Clegg et al., 2015).

Robertson and Weismer (1999) evaluated the social emotional skills of toddlers with delayed language development utilizing the Socialization Domain of the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales. The researchers divided the toddlers into an experimental group that received speech therapy sessions twice a week, over twelve weeks, and a control group that did not receive speech therapy (Robertson & Weismer, 1999). Children receiving speech therapy showed significantly greater changes in their social emotional skills, such as problem solving, regulating emotions, and getting along with others, than the children that did not receive speech therapy (Robertson & Weismer, 1999).

Clegg, J., Law, J., Rush, R., Peters, T. J., and Roulstone, S. (2015) studied the impact of expressive and receptive language at two and four years of age on behavior and social functioning at age six, using a general population-based cohort of children born to mothers in England in the early 1990s, called the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC). To collect data on language skills, the researchers used the following measures: the Reynell Developmental Scales, developed by Reynell in 1977, which assesses receptive and
expressive language skills; the Bus Story Test, developed by Renfrew in 1997, which assesses expressive language; and a questionnaire based on the Macarthur Communicative Development Inventory, developed by Fenson and colleagues in 1993, in which the mother rated her child’s expressive and receptive vocabulary and expressive grammar (Clegg et al., 2015). The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, developed by Goodman in 1997, completed by the mothers, provided data on the behavior and social functioning of the children in the study (Clegg et al., 2015). To adjust for effects of age and intelligence, the researchers tested children using the Wechsler Pre-School Scale of Intelligence for Children, developed by Wechsler in 1989 (Clegg et al., 2015). The study revealed that expressive language at age two and receptive language at age four made a moderate but important contribution to behavior and social functioning at age six (Clegg et al., 2015).

Hartas (2012) analyzed a longitudinal study affiliated with the Millennium Cohort Study in England to examine the relationship between children’s social emotional development and language development between the ages of three and seven years.Teachers rated the language and literacy skills of their students on a questionnaire using the Likert scale; parents rated their children’s emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems, and pro-social skills with the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Hartas, 2012). The study concludes that a child’s language abilities influence teachers’ and parents’ perception of behavior and that children’s language abilities are important for peer interactions in the early years and in elementary school (Hartas, 2012). Hartas (2012) points out that children with poor speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills are associated with high teacher ratings of negative behavior. He maintains that classrooms should support the development of social-emotional, language, and literacy skills (Hartas, 2012).
Cohen (2005) declares that language competence is critical for school readiness and for psychosocial and emotional adjustment. According to Cohen (2005), approximately half of preschool and school-aged children, in Canada, referred to mental health services and special education have language related disabilities, and even mild language impairments can affect development. He emphasizes that language and social-emotional development are interrelated (Cohen, 2005).

**Vocabulary Instruction**

Some of the research in oral language development has focused on vocabulary instruction. The findings show that vocabulary growth is linked to instruction that allows children to apply targeted vocabulary (Whitehurst et al., 1994; Marulis & Neuman, 2010; McLeod & McDade, 2011; Dunst et al., 2012; Loftus-Rattan et al., 2016). McLeod & McDade (2011), Dunst et al. (2012), and Whitehurst et al. (1994) argue that story reading, accompanied by conversation, promotes vocabulary growth in children. However, Marulis & Neuman (2010) and Loftus-Rattan et al., (2016) claim that children learn vocabulary by applying it during activities, for example, after a book reading.

A meta-analysis by Dunst, C. J., Simkus, A., and Hamby, D. W. (2012) determined the effectiveness of various characteristics of story reading and retelling on toddlers’ and preschoolers’ vocabulary, story-related comprehension, and expressive language. Standardized tests, such as picture naming, tested children’s receptive and expressive vocabulary, while children’s retellings indicated story-related comprehension and expressive language (Dunst et al., 2012). Dunst and colleagues (2012) found that story reading raised children’s vocabulary, story-related comprehension, and expressive language when three to six characteristics of story reading were present. The most effective characteristic was relating the story to the child’s
interest or personal experience (Dunst et al., 2012). Other effective characteristics included introducing the story, rereading the story, prompting child responses and elaborations, requesting predictions, supporting child retelling, asking open-ended questions, and using visual aids or manipulatives (Dunst et al., 2012).

A meta-analysis of vocabulary instruction used in Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten classrooms found that vocabulary instruction had a significant impact on language development (Marulis and Neuman, 2010). Marulis and Neuman (2012) define the measures used in the studies as either standardized tests of global language development or as tests of targeted words. No specific intervention worked better than others, but explicit instruction was associated with larger effect sizes than implicit instruction (Marulis and Neuman, 2010). In explicit instruction, the teacher provided students with explanations or key examples of targeted words and follow-up practice with the words; in implicit instruction, the teacher used targeted words without intentionally stopping to teach the meaning of the words, for example, while reading a book (Marulis and Neuman, 2010). Even brief doses of explicit, vocabulary instruction were associated with large effect sizes, suggesting that children best learn the meanings of words when the teacher provides definitions or examples of the words and the opportunity to practice using the words (Marulis and Neuman, 2010).

Loftus-Rattan, S. M., Mitchell, A. M., and Coyne, M. D. (2016) compared the results of incidental, embedded, and extended vocabulary instruction during storybook reading with preschoolers. Loftus-Rattan and colleagues (2016) describe the study’s three types of vocabulary instruction as follows. In incidental instruction, the adult simply read the story without any special attention to the targeted words; in embedded instruction, the adult asked the children to listen for the targeted words, gave the definition of each targeted word, and asked the children to
repeat the targeted words; and in extended instruction, the adult included the same components as embedded instruction but added activities with the targeted words after the book reading (Loftus-Rattan et al., 2016). Their study replicated other studies and resulted in similar findings as the other studies (Loftus-Rattan et al., 2016). Extended instruction had the greatest impact on children’s vocabulary as discerned by a test on the targeted vocabulary and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT), created by Dunn and Dunn. Loftus-Rattan and colleagues (2016) report that scores from extended instruction were significantly higher than scores from incidental and embedded instruction. There was not a significant difference between scores from incidental instruction and scores from embedded instruction. The research indicates that the most effective way for children to learn new vocabulary from read-alouds is to introduce the new vocabulary and engage children in activities involving the new vocabulary (Loftus-Rattan et al., 2016).

Whitehurst, G., Epstein, J., and Angell, A. (1994) assessed the receptive and expressive language of four year olds in response to a dialogic reading intervention administered at school and at home. The teacher engaged in dialogic reading with a group of four children, three to five times a week, at school, and families engaged in dialogic reading, at least three times a week, at home. During dialogic reading, the child and adult share a reading experience in which the adult uses strategies such as asking open-ended questions, prompting the child to respond, and expanding the child’s responses (Whitehurst et al., 1994). The combination of at-home and classroom-based dialogic reading increased children’s receptive vocabulary, as measured with the PPVT, and children’s expressive language, as measured with the Expressive One Word Picture Vocabulary Test and the expressive subscale of the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities (Whitehurst et al., 1994). Classroom-based dialogic reading, by itself, did not provide sufficient one-on-one language interactions for children to make language gains (Whitehurst et
McLeod and McDade (2011) claim that repeated readings of books enrich language development. In their research, they compared children’s understanding of targeted vocabulary words in two book reading scenarios: a repeated reading scenario and a single reading scenario (McLeod & McDade, 2011). In the repeated reading scenario, the adult read a book to a group of children over three occasions with targeted words appearing once in the book. In the single reading scenario, the adult read a book once with targeted words appearing three times in the book. In both scenarios, the adult introduced the book, followed the children’s interest, and sometimes asked questions or invited reactions but did not direct attention to the targeted words or use any specific interactive techniques. After the book reading, in both scenarios, the researchers assessed the children’s understanding of the targeted words with a picture vocabulary test and found that children learned more words from repeated readings than from a single reading of a book (McLeod & McDade, 2011). McLeod and McDade (2011) conclude that repeated readings of a book provide more opportunities for children to build understandings, participate in conversation, practice language, and observe good language modeling than in a single reading of a book.

**Syntax Instruction**

Some of the research around oral language development has focused on children learning syntax. Various studies affirm that adult language modeling is essential for children to develop syntax (Nelson et al., 1973; Huttenlocher et al., 2002; Logan et al., 2011). Others agree on the importance of adult language feedback on children’s development of syntax (Nelson et al., 1973; Logan et al., 2011).
Nelson, K. E., Carskaddon, G., and Bonvillian, J. (1973) researched adult responses to children’s incorrect use of syntax during conversation. They divided the preschoolers involved in the study into three groups. In the first group, the adult recasted a child’s incorrect sentences maintaining the same meaning and some of the same words from the child’s sentences. In the second group, the adult replied to an incorrect sentence with a new sentence while adding a different meaning or different words. In the third group, the adult did not address incorrect sentences (Nelson et al., 1973). Nelson and colleagues (1973) assessed the growth in the preschoolers’ complexity of spoken sentences, or expressive syntax, over thirteen weeks with a sentence imitation test and four other tests of child’s utterances. Children in the recast group had advanced more on all five linguistic measures by the end of the experiment (Nelson et al., 1973). The researchers suggest that the children in the recast group were best able to learn new syntax, since the adults maintained the same meaning in their responses as the children’s initial utterance, revealing the impact of language feedback on children’s expressive language. (Nelson et al., 1973).

Huttenlocher, J., Vasilyeva, M., Cymerman, E., and Levine, S. (2002) examined the relationship between children’s comprehension of syntax and teachers’ speech in forty preschool classrooms. The researchers transcribed one hour of recorded teacher speech from the classroom and analyzed it for the complexity of sentences. They tracked children’s average growth in syntactic comprehension, or receptive syntax, over the school year by asking children to listen to a sentence and point to the corresponding picture. Classrooms in which the teacher spoke more complex sentences were significantly related to children’s growth in syntactic comprehension (Huttenlocher et al., 2002). This finding points to the importance of adult language modeling on children’s language development (Huttenlocher et al., 2002).
Logan, J. A. R., Piasta, S. B., Justice, L. M., Schatschneider, C., and Petrill, S. (2011) conducted a study in fourteen preschool classrooms to determine if daily attendance in a high quality preschool classroom predicts expressive, syntactic language growth. The researchers assessed the quality of the preschool classroom with three domains from the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS): Emotional Support (positive climate, regard for student perspective, and teacher sensitivity); Classroom Organization (productivity, behavior management, instructional learning formats); and Instructional Support (concept development, quality of feedback, and language modeling). The study evaluated the syntactic complexity in children’s expressive language through a parent survey and recordings of children’s spontaneous speech (Logan et al., 2011). Testers recorded ten minute samples of children’s spontaneous language, transcribed the samples using the Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts software program, and analyzed the transcriptions with the Median Upper Bound Index measure of syntactic complexity. Only daily attendance in high quality preschool classrooms was associated with growth in expressive syntax (Logan et al., 2011). The researchers offer the explanation that enriched language-learning environments promote achievement (Logan et al., 2011). Analysis of children’s spontaneous speech seems to be an authentic measure of receptive and expressive language skills, because it represents what a child understands and says in a natural, classroom setting (Logan et al., 2011).

**Quality of Interactions between Teacher and Child**

It has been widely observed that the quality of interactions between teacher and child is important to language development (Girolametto & Weitzman, 2002; Justice, Mashburn, et al., 2008; Downer et al., 2010; Cash et al., 2015). Justice et al. (2008) and Downer et al. (2010) evaluate adult-child interactions through the lens of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System
Girolametto and Weitzman (2002) compare classroom settings when analyzing adult-child interactions. Cash and colleagues (2015) emphasize the role of teacher knowledge in adult-child interactions. Research on the quality of teacher-child interactions has implications for the ways teachers respond to and support children, arrange the learning environment, and plan for instruction (Girolametto & Weitzman, 2002; Justice, Mashburn, et al., 2008; Downer et al., 2010; Cash et al., 2015).

In a study of early childhood classrooms, Justice, L. M., Mashburn, A. J., Hamre, B. K., and Pianta, R. C. (2008) observed the quality of language and literacy instruction using the three domains of CLASS and teachers’ fidelity in implementing a language and literacy curriculum, for which teachers had received professional development, using the MTP-LL Implementation Checklist (Justice, Mashburn, et al., 2008). Many teachers received high ratings on fidelity to curriculum implementation, but few teachers received high ratings on delivery of high quality language and literacy instruction, which proves that it is possible to implement a language curriculum while failing to provide high quality language instruction (Justice, Mashburn, et al., 2008). Justice, Mashburn, and colleagues (2008) note that the preschool teachers in the study lacked in their use of evidence-based practices for promoting language gains such as modeling advanced vocabulary, repeating and extending children’s utterances, and asking open-ended questions. They stress that high quality language instruction entails dynamic exchanges, conversational input, and linguistic responsiveness, none of which can be scripted (Justice et al., 2008).

Downer, J., Sabol, T. and Hamre, B. (2010) explain that previous analysis using CLASS has only drawn conclusions about teacher support within the same domain as student outcome. They provide within-domain examples: 1) Emotional support results in increased social-
emotional competence of preschool and Kindergarten students. 2) Organizational support, such as classroom management, results in improved self-regulation of preschool and Kindergarten students. 3) Instructional support, such as meaningful conversations with children, results in higher language and cognitive function of preschool and Kindergarten students (Downer et al., 2010). However, Downer and colleagues have uncovered evidence for cross-domain associations between teacher support and student outcome. Cross-domain association is strongest for emotional support; emotional support is linked not only to social-emotional competence but also to language and cognitive development and self-regulation (Downer et al., 2010).

Girolametto and Weitzman (2002) examined the effect of setting on caregivers’ responsiveness and on children’s expressive language during interactions. Their research tracked three types of responses used by caregivers: child-oriented responses, interaction-promoting responses, and language-modeling responses. All three types of caregiver responses were significantly correlated with preschoolers’ language production, as measured by number of utterances, different words, and multi-word utterances during the interactions (Girolametto and Weitzman, 2002). Interactions in a playdough setting resulted in more child talk and more caregiver responsiveness than in a book reading setting (Girolametto and Weitzman, 2002).

Cash, A. H., Cabell, S. Q., Hamre, B. K., DeCoster, J., and Pianta, R. C. (2015) researched whether Pre-Kindergarten teachers beliefs and knowledge about language and literacy affect students’ learning in language and literacy. Teachers completed an online questionnaire related to their beliefs about the importance of language and literacy skills and the Knowledge about Language and Literacy Skills questionnaire, created by Hamre and Justice in 2007, in which they categorized skills by language/literacy domain. The Pre-Kindergarten students completed the PPVT for receptive vocabulary assessment; the Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of
Achievement, created by Woodcock and colleagues in 2001, for expressive vocabulary assessment; and the Test of Preschool Early Literacy, created by Lonigan and colleagues in 2007, for emergent literacy assessment. In this study, teacher knowledge predicted learning while teacher beliefs did not (Cash et al., 2015). Specifically, Pre-Kindergarten teachers’ knowledge of language development predicted gains in expressive vocabulary skills in Pre-Kindergarten (Cash et al., 2015). Cash and colleagues (2015) comment that a teacher’s ability to observe and categorize children’s skills by language domain is an important indicator for promoting learning.

**Closeness of Teacher-Student Relationship**

Various research findings establish that close teacher-student relationships increase students’ language skills (Burchinal et al., 2002; Justice et al., 2008; Spilt et al., 2015). Children possessing more advanced language abilities develop closer relationships with their teachers through more communication; this communication helps these children to make more gains in their language abilities (Justice et al., 2008; Spilt et al., 2015). Justice et al. (2008) and Spilt et al. (2015) are consistent in the view that language competence fosters close relationships and that close relationships foster language competence.

A study by Burchinal, M. R., Peisner-Feinberg, E., Pianta, R., and Howes, C. (2002) measured children’s receptive language skills and the closeness of relationships with their teachers at different points between preschool and second grade. The researchers quantified receptive language skills with the PPVT, academic skills with tools such as the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement, and the closeness of relationships with the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale created by Pianta. The study concluded that a close student-teacher relationship predicts better receptive language skills for children of color (Burchinal et al., 2002).
Furthermore, receptive language is one of the best predictors of academic competence during the early elementary years (Burchinal et al., 2002).

A study by Spilt, J. L., Koomen, H. M. Y., and Harrison, L. J. (2015) illustrates a correlation between Kindergarten students’ receptive language skills and the closeness of teacher-student relationships in Kindergarten. The study utilized the PPVT and other language tools for assessing children in the Kindergarten cohort of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. Parents answered interview questions, teachers completed the Student Teacher Relationship Scale-Short Form questionnaire, and parents and teachers completed the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. This study supports the argument that close teacher-student relationships increase students’ language skills (Spilt et al., 2015). Spilt and colleagues (2015) conclude that a bi-directional association exists between language competence and closeness of teacher-student relationships; language competence fosters close relationships, and close relationships foster language competence.

Justice, L. M., Cottone, E. A., Mashburn, A., and Rimm-Kaufman, S. E. (2008) explored associations between children’s language skills, temperamentally based attributes, and relationships with teachers in preschool. In this study, teachers completed the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale-Short Form and the Child Behavior Questionnaire, created by Rothbart in 1996, on students’ temperamentally based attributes. Testers administered the Fluharty Preschool Speech and Language Screening Test, created by Fluharty in 2001, to assess children’s receptive and expressive language and the PPVT to assess children’s receptive vocabulary. This study detected that shyness in children is negatively associated with closeness in the teacher-student relationship, with the interpretation that shy children do not initiate or sustain conversations with the teacher (Justice et al., 2008). Anger is also negatively associated with closeness in the
teacher-student relationship, but a child’s ability to communicate about feelings of anger mediates conflict in the relationship (Justice et al., 2008). Like Spilt and colleagues (2015), Justice and colleagues (2008) found that children with more developed language, namely more vocabulary knowledge, had closer relationships with their teachers. Their research also attests to the bi-directional association between language competence and closeness of teacher-student relationships (Justice et al., 2008).

Some of these studies used questionnaires completed by parents or teachers to rate children’s social-emotional competence, language use, and other factors. Teachers filled out questionnaires about the relationships with their students and their use of practices in the classroom. I question the accuracy of questionnaires because of the subjectivity involved in answering questions. Since the people completing questionnaires have different perceptions, I would guess that there is a certain degree of error when comparing the responses on questionnaires.

**Conclusion**

Many studies in this literature review used the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) as a measure of oral language growth to show the impact of an instructional practice. The PPVT measures receptive vocabulary which is one part of a child’s oral language. Some researchers used results from this test to claim growth in oral language without addressing other components of oral language, such as expressive vocabulary, receptive syntax, and expressive syntax. Results using the PPVT could overestimate or underestimate a student’s global oral language skills, because it is a narrow measure of oral language skills. Other researchers rated children’s expressive language on the children’s retelling of stories, which seems to give a better picture of a child’s actual language development.
From the studies on oral language development that I reviewed, I conclude that teachers should be intentional in their conversations with children. During conversations, a teacher should model language, ask open-ended questions, recast and extend children’s utterances, exhibit responsiveness, and give children the chance to use new vocabulary. Emotional, instructional, and organizational supports and close relationships with teachers can have positive effects on students’ oral language and academic outcomes. A teacher that is knowledgeable about oral language development can increase children’s oral language in various contexts.

The desire to help my students build their oral language skills led me to study oral language development in relation to adult-child conversations. I implement key ideas from the literature review in my project. The website I created for my project is based on the idea that conversations with an adult promote growth in children’s oral language. Through the website, I incorporate the idea that oral language development is important for other areas of child development such as social emotional development and literacy development. The website illustrates that close teacher-student relationships foster language development and that teachers can build close relationships with their students through the use of conversations. In Chapter Three, I describe my project that aims to answer my question, *How does the use of adult-child conversations in the classroom affect the oral language development of my Pre-K students?*
CHAPTER THREE

Project

Introduction

Over the last four years, while teaching Pre-K, I have looked for ways to support my students’ language, literacy, and social-emotional development while working to address all of the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress, Minnesota’s Early Learning Standards for Birth through Kindergarten (ECIPs). In my literature review, my goal was to better understand oral language development and to answer the question, *How does the use of adult-child conversations in the classroom affect the oral language development of my Pre-K students?* For my Capstone project, I hope to create a website that helps teachers promote growth in children’s oral language.

It is important to examine oral language development, because children’s language skills are connected to literacy achievement (Foorman et al., 2015; Dickinson et al., 2014) and social-emotional development (Robertson & Weismer, 1999; Clegg et al., 2015; Hartas, 2012; Cohen, 2010). The research shows that vocabulary and syntax instruction, classroom interactions, teacher responsiveness, language modeling, and teacher-student relationships make a considerable difference in children’s language growth (Huttenlocher et al., 2002; Justice et al., 2008; Logan et al., 2011; Spilt et al., 2015; Loftus-Rattan et al., 2016). Conversation is important for oral language development, as it strengthens relationships between the teacher and students and plays an important role in the interactions mentioned above.

Not only do early childhood teachers need to know that oral language development is important but they need to know how to promote oral language development in children. With so many expectations placed on teachers, teachers need to focus their efforts on practices that result in positive outcomes for children. The purpose of this project is to create a website that is
informative and that helps teachers plan for conversations with their students. This chapter will include the project’s target audience, a description of the project, related theories and learning standards, the rationale for the project, and a timeline for project completion.

Setting

The suburban school district where I teach has sixteen elementary schools, four middle schools, three high schools, and one alternative high school. The total number of students in the district is approximately 18,000. Out of these students, 11% are Asian, 9% are Black, 7% are Latinx, less than 0.5% are Native American, and 73% are White. Thirteen percent of the students in the district receive special education services, and one percent have Limited English Proficiency. Nineteen percent of the student population receive free or reduced lunch. The elementary school where I teach has 480 students in grades Pre-K through fifth grade. I teach a morning section and an afternoon section of Pre-K, with a maximum of 18 students in each section, in one of the district’s elementary schools.

Target Audience

The target audience consists of early childhood educators such as Pre-K teachers, preschool teachers, and childcare providers. The website will target teachers and childcare providers that are looking for ways to promote growth in children’s language, literacy, and social-emotional development. Teachers and childcare providers in different states could benefit from the information and tools on the website.

Project Description
The website will provide information and tools for teachers to use. I plan on using the website to offer information about teaching practices based on research and sociocultural theory. The website will highlight research findings on the benefits of conversation between teacher and student. On the website, I will define terms such as oral language, semantics, vocabulary, pragmatics, phonology, morphology, and syntax.

One teacher tool on the website will be a form for planning regular conversations with students. The form allows teachers to decide how often to meet with each student and to plan for specific learning targets. A second tool will be a form for parent communication. A third tool will be a student information sheet for recording student likes, names of siblings, and other information that a teacher can use to initiate or expand conversations with students. A fourth tool will be a template for note-taking during or after conversations, as shown in the table below. Forms are also used for formative assessment. The website will have a list of tips for how to build relationships with students with an explanation that, through intentional conversations with students, teachers build close relationships with students. The website will have links to other information on the internet such as the Minnesota Department of Education website.

Table I. Note Taking During or After Conversations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note-Taking During or After Conversations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area of classroom/materials involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What child was doing prior to interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How interaction/conversation was initiated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How interaction/conversation ended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic(s) of conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of conversational exchanges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample of words heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample of sentences heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies used by teacher/Student’s response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-ended questions:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model vocabulary/syntax:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other observations:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Guiding Questions:**

How has the child’s receptive and expressive language changed? What was difficult for the child? What did the child do successfully?

I will present my project to a group of colleagues in class. During the presentation, I will demonstrate the use of the website by asking my colleagues to visit the website on their personal devices. I plan to direct my colleagues to different features of the website, asking them to access information or tools. In addition, I will post guiding questions and excerpts from my literature review, either on a poster or on a PowerPoint presentation.
Rationale

Since teaching oral language is not something that can be scripted (Justice et al., 2008), a website allows for the flexibility a teacher needs to personalize conversations for all students. A website allows teachers to choose the tools that work best for them and for their students. Anyone can access the website to find information, based on research and theory, related to children’s oral language development.

Theory

Sociocultural theory states that learning happens in social contexts. From this perspective, Vygotsky (1978) stated that “...human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (p. 88). Learning is possible because of the interactions between individuals. According to Vygotsky (1978), “Language arises initially as a means of communication between the child and the people in his environment. Only subsequently, upon conversion to internal speech, does it come to organize the child’s thought, that is, become an internal mental function” (p. 89). Social interactionism, a language acquisition theory, is based on the idea that language forms through social interactions. The child learns language through interactions with a more competent other, such as a parent or other adult (Culatta et al., 2013). The information and tools I will provide on the website are based on the perspective that children’s learning and language acquisition occur through interaction with others.

Learning Standards

Early Childhood Indicators of Progress, Minnesota’s Early Learning Standards for Birth through Kindergarten (ECIPs) inform the content of the website that I will create. The ECIPS,
the learning standards used in early childhood education settings in Minnesota, are aligned with the Minnesota Academic Standards for Kindergarten. A number of components from the ECIPS address oral language development. The following table illustrates the Kindergarten Readiness (4-5, K-Readiness) components of the Language, Literacy and Communications domain (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016).

Table II. Language, Literacy and Communications Domain of ECIPs

| Component: Listening and Understanding; Receptive Language. | Subcomponents: L1 Language comprehension: Child understands the meaning of words and phrases (receptive) and uses those words and phrases to communicate effectively (expressive). | K-Readiness Indicators: L1.13 Follows directions that involve two or more steps, and L1.14 Responds to increasingly complex prepositional directions, such as beside, around and next to. |
| Communicating and Speaking; Expressive Language | L2 Social conversation: Child meaningfully engages in talk with others to express feelings, wants and ideas. L3 Vocabulary and syntax: Child understands word order and grammatical rules. | L2.11 Negotiates, shares, plans, and solves problems with others. L2.12 Asks and answers questions to seek help or get information. L3.14 Uses sentences that express logical relationships between concepts, L3.15 Uses increasingly
specific words to name objects and their features and functions, and L3.16 Shares information about experiences, people, places, and things in sequence.

Timeline

Table III. Timeline for Capstone Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content expert feedback</td>
<td>May-July, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create website and write Chapter 4</td>
<td>June and July, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewrite/Revise</td>
<td>July-August, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete all pieces of the Capstone</td>
<td>Beginning of August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roundtable presentation of project</td>
<td>August 8, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apply the project</td>
<td>2017-2018 school year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Assessment of Project Effectiveness

I will assess the effectiveness of the website by getting feedback from other early childhood teachers that use the website. I will also assess the website, myself. I may look for or create a rubric that aids in the assessment. When other Pre-K teachers in my district and I use the website, we will be able to assess the relevance of the information, the usefulness of the tools, and the ease of navigating the website.

Conclusion
Chapter three described the Capstone project, the target audience, related theories and learning standards, the rationale, and the timeline for project completion. Chapter four will consist of a reflection on the creation of the Capstone project.
CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection

Purpose of the Project

My research question is, *How does the use of adult-child conversations in the classroom affect the oral language development of my Pre-K students?* I created a website to share the research and theory on oral language development and to help early childhood teachers plan for conversations with their students. The website is also a tool for me to use in my classroom.

The purpose of my website is to raise awareness of the benefits of one-on-one conversations and close relationships on oral language development. I want to share what I learned about the impact of oral language development on literacy and social emotional development. My website offers teachers guidance in developing close teacher-student relationships and planning one-on-one conversations with students. The documents on my website allow teachers to put the research findings into practice right away, since they will not have to spend the time making their own documents. The website could affect instructional decisions made in classrooms.

The website is also a resource for my own teaching, as I work to apply the findings from my literature review in my classroom. I hope to continue referring to the research and theory on my website to inform my instructional decisions. The research-based documents that I created will help me plan conversations, assess students, build relationships with students, and communicate with families. These practices will allow me to evaluate the effectiveness of conversations on the oral language development of my students.

My website aims to provide information on the research and theory related to oral language development and to help teachers plan for conversations with their students. I look
forward to learning more about how adult-child conversations in the classroom affect the oral language development of my students.

Summary of Literature Review

I reviewed research that addressed oral language in the Pre-K classroom. I wanted to find empirical studies on the effectiveness of one-on-one, adult-child conversations for promoting oral language development. However, I found that there was little research on one-on-one conversations. I chose to review the literature on oral language development pertaining to literacy, social emotional development, vocabulary and syntax instruction, interactions in the classroom, and teacher-student relationships. I included studies related to children around the same age as my students, from the age of preschool to Kindergarten.

The literature revealed that oral language is important for the development of social emotional skills and literacy development. A child’s language skills in the early years play a part in their later abilities in reading comprehension, decoding, writing, and spelling (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009; NAEYC, 2009). Low language skills are correlated with mental health problems, a greater likelihood of placement in special education, and negative perceptions of children’s behavior on the part of parents and teachers (Cohen, 2005; Hartas, D., 2012).

A number of studies focused on vocabulary and syntax instruction. Studies show that children learn vocabulary most effectively when the teacher defines or gives an example of the targeted vocabulary, the adult engages children in conversation, and children apply vocabulary in a follow-up activity (Loftus-Rattan et al., 2016). Teacher modeling of complex syntax results in students developing better receptive syntax (Huttenlocher et al., 2002). Recasting children’s utterances in order to correct their use of syntax leads to growth in expressive syntax (Nelson et al., 1973).
The literature also revealed that oral language development is influenced by the quality of interactions and relationships between teacher and student. A teacher’s knowledge of language instruction plays an important role in interactions with students (Cash et al., 2015). Researchers attribute gains in children’s oral language competence to teacher-student interactions that entail language modeling, responsiveness, and dynamic conversational exchanges (Logan et al., 2011). Furthermore, close teacher-student relationships are important for oral language development, and the more a student talks with the teacher, the more language progress the child will make (Spilt et al., 2015). These findings imply that the use of conversation can facilitate growth in children’s oral language competence.

**Project Description**

My website provides information and resources about using conversations to develop students’ oral language. It includes the following pages: Home, What is oral language?, Research, Sociocultural Theory, Resources, Teacher Forms, and References. First, the Home page tells the purpose of my website and the research-based principles related to using conversations in promoting oral language development. The page entitled What is oral language? defines oral language, the components of oral language, and the terms expressive and receptive language. The page on sociocultural theory explains fundamental concepts of learning and language in the theory. On the resources page, there is a list of renowned organizations in the field of early childhood education with links to their websites. The resources page also contains tips for developing close relationships with students and building children’s vocabulary and syntax. On the Teacher Forms page, teachers can download the planning form, the student information form, the conversation notes form, and the family communication form. Teachers can use these forms to plan for regular conversations with student in the classroom. The
Research page cites studies on oral language, literacy, social emotional development, and close teacher-student relationships. Last, the References page lists the references I cited on the website. The reader can easily access information and resources, navigate between pages, and return to the homepage from any other page.

**Limitations of the Project**

In this section, I will discuss the limitations of my website. I then will explain how the website platform I chose influenced the final product of my website. Finally, I will describe the process I used and the challenges that occurred during the creation of the website.

A limitation I foresee with the implementation of my website is that the presentation is more casual than academic. People might look at my homepage and think that it does not look professional. A perception that the website is not professional might deter people from looking into the content of the website.

I luckily had the opportunity to use a template provided on the Wix.com website. At the same time, my design choices were limited to that template. When I chose the style for each section on a page, I could not change the font size or the placement of paragraph, titles, and photographs. The short passages I composed are good for keeping the reader’s interest but allow for little detail outside of the main points. I chose to leave out parts of my literature review in order to minimize the amount of text to what I considered appropriate for a website. Another limitation of my website is that I used only text and photographs on my website; I did not use any visual representations such as picture symbols, graphs, or diagrams. The visuals of children, free photographs from Wix.com, bring back the reader to children as the focus. Although, conveying my message through additional modes such as tables and graphs might have more impact on the reader.
I began the process of creating my website by trying different formats and features on Wix.com. This was my first time creating a website, besides my teacher website on Google Sites. I chose a format for presenting a school project. Since Wix has a large selection of free photographs, I used photographs of children to guide the format while keeping the text brief. I started with the content I deemed high priority from my literature review, some of the findings related to oral language, literacy, social emotional development, and relationships. Next, I added theory, definitions of oral language, and the teacher forms I created. I designed the homepage last, because I was not sure what I wanted it to include. Towards the end of my website creation process, I decided to add the purpose of the Capstone and principles that are based on the research I reviewed to my homepage.

I faced some challenges while creating the website. I was not familiar with Wix.com and that made the process slow. It was a challenge to figure out what I should post on the website, and I debated about which topics from my literature review to include. I did not want to overwhelm the reader with too much information or make the site difficult to navigate. I was concerned that if I wrote passages that were too brief, I would overgeneralize or misrepresent the data. The teacher tools that I created, such as the planning forms, were not directly researched but backed with research. I was unsure if I could refer to these tools as researched based. Although, if I had posted a tool that someone else created, there would still be the question of the research that supported it.

**Implications of the Project**

In this section, I will discuss the implications of the project. First, I will address the ways in which my website addresses my research question and the gaps in research. I will then predict the impact my website will make on teachers. Lastly, I will explore future research topics.
My research question is, *How does the use of adult-child conversations in the classroom affect the oral language development of my Pre-K students?* The website I created answers this question by presenting theoretical background and research findings on oral language development. My website addresses the gap in research on conversation by directing teachers to research findings on practices that share elements of conversation, such as vocabulary and syntax instruction, high quality classroom interactions, and close teacher-student relationships. Based on theory and research, the website provides tools for implementing the use of conversations to promote oral language growth. For example, teachers can find tips and tools for how to build close relationships with students, plan for conversations in the classroom, gather information about students, track conversations with students, and communicate with families. These tools allow teachers, including me, to evaluate the effectiveness of conversations in the classroom.

If I could change my research question, I would ask the question, *How does talk in the classroom help students learn science and social studies content?* I would investigate children’s learning in relation to our units of study, science and social studies objectives, guided learning activities, and materials in the classroom. I would focus on the connection between talk and knowledge construction.

One implication of my website is that it may raise awareness of oral language development. If teachers know how to use the power of conversations, interactions, and relationship building, they may use more effective language teaching practices in the classroom. This, I hope, will result in enhanced language learning for preschoolers. This implication is supported by a study cited in my literature review in which Pre-Kindergarten teachers’ knowledge of language development predicted gains in students’ expressive vocabulary skills (Cash et al., 2015).
A second implication of my website is that it may save teachers time. Since the forms are already made, teachers do not need to use their time creating their own forms. Teachers can start immediately implementing a system for conversations in the classroom. When they have immediate access to the necessary tools, they might be more likely to use the instructional practices. Teachers will then have the time to assess the effectiveness of conversations on their students’ oral language development.

A third implication is that my website may bring clarity to the debate over what to teach in preschool by focusing on a balanced approach. My website portrays the perspective that all domains of child development are important. In other words, teachers can trust the early learning standards (ECIPS) to guide our teaching in the different domains of child development. At the top of my website’s research page, I included a quote from the NAEYC on developmentally appropriate practice. “All the domains of development and learning—physical, social and emotional, and cognitive—are important, and they are closely interrelated. Children’s development and learning in one domain influence and are influenced by what takes place in other domains" (NAEYC, 2009). I included the quote, because it illustrates the comprehensive nature of early childhood education.

**Author's Reflection**

In this section, I will tell how I grew and what I learned about myself during the Capstone process and how my graduate studies have influenced my future plans. During the Capstone process, I learned to take the time to critically review literature. I discovered that I have a hard time slowing down to focus on research, because I get caught up in the immediacy of lesson
planning, setting up materials, and so on. I have found that research does take time but can have important, long-term benefits.

In the future, I would like to continue to research my inquiry questions by reading peer-reviewed articles. I have learned the importance of using primary sources over secondary sources to inform my teaching so as to not rely on someone else’s interpretation of data. When I read books on teaching, in the future, I would like to look more closely at the research behind the author’s claims. I may search for empirical studies to compare with the books I read.

The Capstone process has also taught me that writing about the literature made it possible for me to talk about it. I had originally planned on carrying out action research for my Capstone and emailed my district’s director of Teaching and Learning Services in regard to the paperwork involved. He emailed me back asking if I thought that my Capstone topic aligned with our district’s commitment to standards-based instruction. While composing the reply to him, I went back to the literature I had read. I cited some of the major points and quoted a couple of sources. It was nice to have that research to back up what I was telling him, and he appreciated it. I noticed that after writing that email message to him, I was better able to talk about those points with other people.

In the future, I would like to be able to refer to research from my literature review and to other research. I want to be able to accurately talk about research findings with other teachers and administrators, whether we are collaborating during a staff meeting or having lunch in the staff lounge. Summarizing and synthesizing through writing made me understand and remember the research, and it seems that not only researching but also writing is an important part of teaching practice.
I would like to enhance communication with families by expanding my Google teacher website to include work from my Capstone project. During the school year, I normally use Google site to inform families about classroom happenings and SeeSaw to inform them of their children’s progress. I could enhance that communication by letting families know why we do certain activities in the classroom. Information on my Capstone project website, such as the list of principles based on research, would help to communicate the reasons behind our classroom activities.

**Conclusion**

My website supports the idea that bodies of knowledge are constructed. I included photographs of children writing, drawing, painting, building with blocks, running, playing, and exploring nature. The photographs on my website convey the message that children construct language knowledge as they construct knowledge about the world around them.

My website recognizes that learning is a social process. On my website, I provide an explanation of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory which states that learning is possible because of the interactions between individuals. I also provide tips for building close relationships with children such as listening to and responding to children during conversations and creating a supportive classroom environment. My website includes families as part of the classroom community, for example, through the family communication form. The family communication form emphasizes to families that I, the teacher, know and value their child.

My website is based on the perspective that each student’s home culture is an asset to the classroom community and that there is not only one correct form of English. The resources on my website guide teachers to practice teacher-student conversations while supporting the self-worth of all students. By offering a variety of ways to build relationships with children and to
support their language development, my website honors children’s differences. My website encourages teachers to individualize learning for children by working in the child’s zone of proximal development. Students may have different comfort levels with their teacher; some students may require more time or different approaches when it comes to building relationships. The supplemental forms I offer teachers allow them to customize their plans for conversations with students. My hope is that the teaching practices I share on my website affirm the cultural background and home languages of all students.
Appendix A

Website link - capstone project

Appendix B

Screen Shots of My Website

CONVERSATIONS: PROMOTING ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN PRESCHOOL

PRINCIPLES

Based on research:

- Oral language development is important for social-emotional and literacy development.
- Conversations with an adult promote growth in a child’s oral language.
- Close teacher-student relationships foster language development.
- Teachers and students build close relationships through conversations.

In my Pre-K classroom, I noticed that as my students played, learned, and gained independence, they were building a foundation in language.
WHAT IS ORAL LANGUAGE?

Definition of oral language: A verbal system consisting of words and rules for organizing and changing words (Resnik, K., Tabor, P., & Lember, L., 2009).

Components of Oral Language

- Semantics: the meaning of language, including vocabulary
- Morphology: the meaning of parts of words, such as prefixes and suffixes
- Syntax: the way words form sentences, also called grammar
- Phonology: the speech sounds in language
- Pragmatics: the way language is used in social contexts

Receptive language - comprehending
Expressive language - speaking

SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

Learning

Learning is possible because of the interactions between individuals (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) stated that “...human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (p. 68).

The Zone of Proximal Development

Learning activates mental processes that a child is not yet capable of using independently but is capable of using with the assistance of an adult, creating the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). “The zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

Language

A child learns language through interactions with a more competent other, such as a parent or other adult (Culotta et al., 2013). “Language arises initially as a means of communication between the child and the people in his environment. Only subsequently, upon conversion to internal speech, does it come to express the child’s thoughts that he has become an internal speech.”

Research on Social-Emotional Development

Social-emotional development includes the child’s experience, expression, and management of emotions and the ability to establish positive and rewarding relationships with others (Cohen, 2005).

In a study of children with delayed language development, toddlers that received speech therapy showed significantly greater changes in their social emotional skills than toddlers that did not receive speech therapy (Robertson & Weismer, 1999).

Clegg, J., Law, J., Rush, R., Peters, T. J., and Roulstone, S. (2015) discovered that children’s expressive language at age two and receptive language at age four contributed to their social functioning at age six.
**Research on Teacher-Student Relationships**

Justice, L. M., Cottone, E. A., Mashburn, A., and Rimm-Kaufman, S. E. (2008) found that preschoolers with more advanced receptive and expressive language skills had closer relationships with their teachers.

Splitt, J. L., Koomen, H. M. Y., and Harrison, L. J. (2015) found that Kindergarteners with more advanced receptive language skills had closer relationships with their teachers.

Research shows that there is a bi-directional association between language competence and closeness of teacher–student relationships; language competence fosters close relationships, and close relationships foster language competence (Justice et al., 2000; Splitt et al., 2015).

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**Research on Literacy Development**

The 2009 Position Statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) emphasizes that vocabulary and other aspects of oral language are important predictors of children's reading comprehension.

The 2008 National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) report outlined eleven variables that predict later achievement in reading and writing for preschoolers and Kindergarteners: alphabet knowledge; phonological awareness; rapid automatic naming of letters or digits; rapid automatic naming of objects and colors; writing letters and one's name; the ability to remember spoken information for a short period of time; concepts about print; print knowledge; reading readiness; oral language, including vocabulary and grammar; and visual processing (Lorigan & Shanahan, 2009).
WEBSITES

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning
http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)
http://techstone.com/classroom-assessment-scoring-system-class/

Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota’s Early Learning Standards
http://education.state.mn.us/MDH/index.cfm?event=early/ipl/

International Reading Association
https://www.reading.org

National Association for the Education of Young Children
http://www.naeyc.org

Record of Oral Language: Observing Changes in the Acquisition of Language Structures
http://www.heinemann.com/products/ed7479.aspx#fulldesc

Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children
http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu

CONVERSATIONS. PROMOTING ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN PRESCHOOL

TEACHER FORMS
HOW TO
develop close relationships with students

- Plan for regular, one-on-one conversations with students.
- Set up activities conducive to conversations.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Listen.
- Be responsive.
- Get to know your students personally.

CONVERSATIONS: PROMOTING ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN PRESCHOOL

HOW TO
build children’s vocabulary and syntax

- Read books aloud to children.
- Introduce vocabulary by giving examples and/or definitions.
- Engage children in conversation while reading books with them.
- Plan follow-up activities that require children to apply vocabulary.
- Model language for children.
- Recast and extend children's speech.
REFERENCES


http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/early/ind/


**REFERENCES FOR IMAGES**

Images on PowerPoint presentation were retrieved from Unsplash.com and Wix.com.

All images on website were retrieved from Wix.com.