Effective learning environments in preschools

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Effective learning environments in preschools

by

Emily Marie Worthington

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Human Development and Family Studies

Program of Study Committee:
Gayle J. Luze, Major Professor
   Kere Hughes
   Carla Peterson

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2008

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CHAPTER 1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

It is projected within the next ten years more than 50 percent of all students in kindergarten through 12th grade will be English learners (ELs; Gray & Fleischman, 2004-05). In addition, the number of children in preschool has increased by more than 50% within the last ten years (IES, 2008), especially since this is where many children learning English are first exposed to English. Thus, it is important to examine and consider some current practices in preschool settings.

Thesis Organization

In the face of the rising number of ELs and an increase in the total number of children in the school system, it is necessary to consider the teachers’ readiness to teach these children. Therefore, in the first paper, an overview of research and recommended practices for preschool classrooms is presented. Three main elements of effective learning environments are discussed. The first is the classroom environment; it is the most basic element that is necessary for all children to function and learn optimally regardless of the children’s linguistic backgrounds. The second important element that will be discussed is teachers’ understanding of language development. The final element consists of teaching strategies that can be used to communicate with children and to foster language acquisition and development in all children, but especially in ELs. Unfortunately, these elements lack a strong and solid research base. Most of the information known about these elements is from education experts who have based their recommendations on personal observations and experience. There is a need to understand what is recommended so they can be examined by future research.
The second paper describes a study about the frequency with which teachers use six teaching strategies that can affect children’s engagement levels during large group times. The six teaching strategies were chosen based on research and recommended practices as facilitating learning at various ages and settings. The level of engagement was also considered in preschool children since when children are not engaged, it is suggested they are not learning as much of what is being presented (McGarity & Butts, 1984). In addition, the children’s first language is also considered as it may play a role in the effectiveness of the teaching strategies and in the level of engagement. Based on these variables, the study was conducted to determine if the use of six teaching strategies are predictive of engagement, regardless of the children’s first language during large group time in Head Start classrooms. Since engagement is linked to achievement it is essential to identify specific teaching strategies that positively influence engagement (Gandara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003).

References:


CHAPTER 2. FUNDAMENTALS OF EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR ALL CHILDREN

Abstract

This article is a comprehensive review of both evidence-based and recommended practices for preschool environments. Specifically, emphasis on how the elements of classroom environment, aspects of language development, and teaching strategies can best be used to teach English learners. Understanding the significance of effective learning environments is essential as the number of English learning children in the school system, especially in preschools, is increasing. More research is needed to determine how the physical classroom environment and teaching strategies can be utilized to create the optimal learning environments for all children.

Introduction

Within the next ten years it has been estimated that more than 50 percent of all students in kindergarten through 12th grade will be English learners (ELs; Gray & Fleischman, 2004-05). In the 2005-2006 school year there were approximately 5.5 million EL students in the school system nationwide (NCELA, 2007). In Iowa, during that same school year, there were over 17,000 EL students (Iowa Department of Education, 2007). The number of ELs in the Iowa school system has more than doubled in the last ten years (Iowa Department of Education). Similarly, the number of ELs in preschools nationwide has increased by almost 190% during the decade between 1990 and 2000 (National Council of La Raza, n.d.). More recently, in the 2004-2005 school year, Head Start had almost 10,000 children enrolled in Iowa (Iowa Head Start Annual Report, 2005). Given the increasing number of ELs in preschool settings, it is probably in
such settings that many ELs first experience an English-only or predominant environment.

In the face of the rising number of ELs and the number of children in the school system, it is necessary to consider the teachers’ readiness to teach these children. Unfortunately, recent research indicates most teachers are not prepared to work with and teach families and children from diverse backgrounds (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 1999 54% of teachers had children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in their classes. In a similar national survey, in 2001 only 27% of teachers felt they were well prepared to teach children from limited English backgrounds. This survey did not provide information about the ability of these teachers to communicate in a non-English language. In another national survey of teachers in 1999, 26% said when working with children from limited English backgrounds, they greatly needed information on how to help the children (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999).

In a time when the number of children learning English is rapidly increasing, it is important to step back and consider classroom practices. It is especially important to consider preschool settings as the number of children in preschool has increased by more than 50% within the last ten years (IES, 2008), and it is very likely that children who do not know English are first exposed to English in preschool settings.

Thus, three elements of preschool classrooms are worth considering. The first is the classroom environment which is composed of the arrangement of the room, the diversity of the children, daily routines, creating a language rich environment, and learning areas. The classroom environment is the most basic and necessary element for
all children to learn effectively. The second element is teacher awareness of some of the elements of language development. These include, creating phonological and phonemic awareness, facilitating the transfer of skills from one language to another, expressing value of the children’s first languages, and understanding the sequence of language acquisition in ELs. These are skills that all children will need to have upon entering elementary school and they will continue to develop as they progress through the school system. The final element of the classroom is teacher awareness and use of various teaching strategies that have been identified to be helpful to communicate with ELs and help them develop their English language skills and knowledge.

Classroom Environment

It is important to consider the classroom environment as children spend a considerable portion of their day in a classroom. Four factors have been suggested as key to a quality environment for young children, especially ELs (De Bruin-Parecki, 2008; Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007), all of which are described in detail below. First, the overall classroom arrangement should be engaging and interesting to the children, providing the children with opportunities for learning and interaction, while simultaneously reflecting the children’s diversity and needs. A second essential factor of the environment is expressing value and acceptance of diversity and of all children. Another important element is providing a consistent routine for the activities during the day. A final factor in the classroom environment is creating an environment that is rich in language.
Classroom Arrangement

There are many recommendations for setting up an appealing environment to promote learning and interaction between children and adults (DeBruin-Parecki, 2008; Feeney, Christensen, & Moravcik, 2006; Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Wellhousen & Crowther, 2004). It is suggested the environment be set up to provide ample opportunities for learning and movement between the different areas in the classroom, reduce the number of distractions, and to provide organization for the children’s play opportunities (Greenberg & Rodriguez). Materials in different learning areas (dramatic play, literacy, blocks, etc.) should be appealing to and age appropriate for the children. The materials and learning areas should also be accessible to all children regardless of disability or language difference. The materials, learning areas, (for example including books about people from various cultures and backgrounds; plastic play food could include items from various cultures-play rice and stir-fry) and environment (for example posting pictures of people from multiple cultures and backgrounds) should reflect the diversity of the children in the classroom.

Expressing Value and Acceptance

Expressing acceptance and value for diversity of all the children in the classroom is important. When a child feels valued, he or she is more likely to feel comfortable and be motivated to be involved and engaged in classroom activities (Gersten & Jimenez, 1998). Gersten and Jimenez suggest several ways teachers and adults can express acceptance of the children. They recommend the classroom environment contain and reflect an understanding of the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the children. For example, having books in multiple languages and about objects and events that occur in
various cultures and locations in the world in different learning areas in the classroom. Displaying the children’s work, including artwork, shows that the teacher values the children and their work efforts. By displaying students’ work, the teacher is expressing to the children and families that everyone made a contribution and that the students’ contribution was a positive addition to the classroom environment. A final recommendation is to convey acceptance and value through frequent interactions with all the children. Through interactions the teacher is expressing and demonstrating that everyone has something important to say and contribute to the entire class and to each other. Providing opportunities for the children to interact with other children and adults who speak the same first language, if possible, and with children who speak only English is another way of expressing value for the EL’s first language (Restepo & Gray, 2007).

Another method of expressing value and acceptance of diversity is for teachers who do not speak the children’s first languages to learn and use basic words from those languages (Barrera, 2005; DeBruin-Parecki, 2008; Gersten, 1996; Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Markham & Gordon, 2007; Quinones-Eatman, 2005). When teachers use basic words in the children’s first languages, they are expressing to the children and the family that their culture is appreciated and valued (Barrera; DeBruin-Parecki; Quinones-Eatman; Tabors, 2008).

Expressing value and respect of diversity is considered developmentally appropriate (Kostelnik, Sodeman, & Whire, 2007); however, there has been no research tying the expressions of respect for other cultures to specific child outcomes. Kostelnik and colleagues state children should learn about others when they are young, because even before the age of three, children begin to compare others in their environment to
themselves. The authors provide several recommendations for incorporating diversity within the classroom. The first suggestion to support diversity is to present materials and activities that represent different cultures, ages, abilities, lifestyles, and non-stereotypical gender roles. The second suggestion is to help children realize the impact their words and actions have on others, such as discussing how a comment made another individual feel. They recommend the teacher and adults in the classroom need to model acceptance for diversity and differences.

Consistent Routines

Providing consistent routines is recommended by various educators (DeBruin-Parecki, 2008; McCromick, Loeb, & Schiefelbusch, 2003) since a routine permits ELs to blend in with the rest of the class without needing to communicate directly to their peers or teacher (Tabors, 2008). Consistent routines permit the children to focus on the language being used and on subject content being presented instead of trying to determine what is happening around them (De Atiles & Allexsaht-Snider, 2002). The use of consistent routines also allows the children to prepare for the next activity (McCormick, Leob, & Schiefelbusch). Through consistent routines, the children are able to participate based solely on their knowledge of what the activity is about and what activity comes next, since they have experienced the activity and routine before in the previous days and months. When a new EL joins a classroom, the child is required to learn the language used in the classroom and the routine and rules for each activity that exist within the classroom.

A predictable daily schedule of activities has been recommended (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 2007). The authors suggest a predictable schedule helps with
transitions from one activity to another and provides a sense of continuity from day to 
day. Any changes to the daily routine should be communicated to the children as a means 
of helping them prepare for the change.

Language Rich Environment

Creating a language rich environment is an essential part of creating an overall 
environment that encourages and promotes learning (Gersten & Jimenez, 1994). De 
Atiles and Allexsaht-Snider (2002) suggest labeling objects and area around the 
classroom in the children’s first languages and in the dominant language, usually English. 
Another recommendation for creating a language rich classroom is to have an assortment 
of print and language materials (in both the children’s first languages and in English) 
available to the children, such as books, writing supplies, and books on tape or CD 
(Green, 1997; CLAS Early Childhood Research Institute, 2001). The language materials 
should provide engaging experiences for the children to use to experiment with the 
various modes of communication: listening, reading, writing, talking in English and in 
the first language (Green; CLAS Early Childhood Research Institute). Labeling areas and 
objects in the room is another way of incorporating written language in the environment.

A language rich environment is also created when children have opportunities to 
have books read aloud. When children are read to, they are learning new vocabulary and 
print awareness (Gersten & Jimenez, 1998). Research has indicated when an adult and 
one child read a children’s story together, the child comprehends more of the story than 
when the child is part of a group listening to a book being read (Wasik & Bond, 2001). It 
is possible the increased outcomes for one-on-one reading are because the adult is able to 
tailor the reading pace to meet the child’s ability, point out and explain what is happening
in the pictures to help engage the child in story, and the adult is able to pause and explain unfamiliar words or to answer a question the child has about the story. These researchers also found that when an adult reads to a child, it leads to greater vocabulary retention, especially when the adult asks the child about the story using open-ended questions.

Incorporating rhymes, poetry, and chants are methods of encouraging children to experiment with language (Gersten & Jimenez, 1998). Using songs, poetry, rhymes, chants, and finger plays are recommended as developmentally appropriate practice (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 2007). These activities support and enhance language and literacy acquisition in children (Kostelnik, et al.). In a research review, Moss and Fawcett (1995) state that the repetition often found in songs, rhymes, and finger plays facilitates children’s awareness of the language structures being used. They note these activities also increase children’s awareness of the components of meaning and sounds in the words being used. These skills are important as children begin to read as they sound out the letters in unfamiliar words (Moss & Fawcett). However, they did not address how these activities can be used with children from diverse linguistic backgrounds and how these activities affect ELs’ English acquisition and development.

**Learning Areas**

**Literacy area.** Having a designated book area in the classroom is one method for providing children with opportunities to interact with books and printed language (Gersten & Jimenez, 1998). In this area children are able to look at books on their own or have an adult read to them. Children learn new vocabulary and print awareness when an adult reads to them (Gersten & Jimenez, 1998). In a research review, Justice, Pence, and colleagues (2005) discussed the important of multiple readings and exposure to the same
books. They noted when children experience multiple reading sessions of the same book, they are more likely to acquire and retain expressive and receptive vocabulary. It was also noted multiple readings or exposures to the same books provides children with a sense of familiarity of the book content, which creates a sense of confidence in their prereading skills and reinforces their confidence in their prereading skills. During reading activities with an adult, the adult is able to facilitate the children’s awareness of print. According to Justice, Pence, and colleagues adults provide instruction about print when they read to children and reference the print on the page, for example tracing the words with their finger. Helping the children developing confidence in their prereading skills is important as the children begin to understand the concept that words and letters carry meaning.

*Quiet area.* It is suggested a “quiet area” be provided for children to have a place for them to go to rest and engage in a quiet activity, such as sitting and watching, looking at book, or completing puzzles (Gordon & Browne, 2004) to get away from a more physically active activity. Providing a quiet area is recommended as a developmentally appropriate practice (Kostelnik, Soderman, & White, 2007) since more active activities can be emotionally and physically demanding and quiet areas provide children with the option and opportunity to take a break. It is also recommended that areas should be created to provide EL children with a “safe haven”, an area that the children may engage in a quiet activity that does not require interacting with others (Tabors, 2008). Tabors suggests safe havens include items such as Legos®, small construction activities, puzzles, and playdough, that will provide the EL with a sense of independence, and feeling comfortable and competent, and engaged.
Summary

Creating a stimulating classroom environment is important as children spend a considerable portion of their day in a classroom. Four factors have been recommended that create a quality environment for young children, and especially ELs (De Bruin-Parecki, 2008; Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007). The overall classroom arrangement should be engaging and appealing to the children providing them with opportunities for learning and interaction, while reflecting and valuing the children’s diversity and needs. It is important to have a consistent routine during the day. Finally, it is essential to create a learning environment that is rich in language.

Elements of Language Development

Considering the increase in the number of children learning English at young ages, an awareness of important language skills for all children and second language acquisition is necessary. Specifically, it is important for teachers to be knowledgeable of the developmental sequence of English as a second language so they can facilitate communication and language acquisition during the preschool years.

Language Skills

Phonological skills. Phonological skills and phonemic awareness, understanding the sounds of the language, have been found to be a major predictor of later reading ability (Lesaux & Siegel, 2003; Uchikoshi, 2005). Reading difficulties experienced in elementary school are often attributed to a lack of oral skills, or verbal fluency, in EL students. Lesaux and Siegel conducted a three year study of reading development in English speakers and bilingual speakers beginning when the children were in kindergarten. They found English speaking children outperformed ELs in oral
proficiency, and verbal fluency and mastery of communicating in English; however, both groups of children performed similarly in word recognition tasks (Lesaux & Siegel). Another study found reading ability in EL’s was more closely tied to the children’s understanding the sounds of the language (phonological processing skills) than to their ability to speak the language (oral proficiency; Gottardo, Yan, Siegel, & Wade-Woolley, 2001).

Considerable research has documented a positive transfer of phonological awareness and processing skills (Dickinson, McCabe, Clark-Chiarelli, & Wolf, 2004; Durgunoglu, Nagy, & Hancin-Bhatt, 1993; Wang, Park, & Lee, 2006), rhyming skills (Gottardo, Siegel, Yan, & Wade-Woolley, 2001), and vocabulary knowledge (Ordonez, Carlo, Snow, & McLaughlin, 2002) from the child’s first language to a second language. A positive transfer of decoding (letter and word recognition) and reading skills in older children has been identified when the two languages are alphabetically similar, such as Spanish and English (Dickinson, McCabe, Clark-Chiarelli, & Wolf; Proctor, August, Carlo, & Snow, 2006) and dissimilar, such as Chinese and English (Gottardo, Yan, Siegel, & Wade-Woolley; Wang, Park, & Lee). Teachers can help with ELs’ transfer of skills by identifying common cognates (words that look and sound similar from two languages and have similar meanings), focusing on individual letter sounds that are similar and unique between the languages, and drawing attention to words that rhyme when working with children.

Narrative skills. Narrative skills are another important aspect of language development in English speaking and EL children. Narration is a form of decontextualized communication (not about the here and now, but about something
Abstract or not present) that involves telling a story but also expressing the meaning attached to the events in the story (Uchikoshi, 2005). Narrative skills have been linked to the acquisition of literacy skills and of communication skills that are decontextualized (Gutierrez-Clellen, 2002; Uchikoshi). Narrative skills vary by culture, ethnicity, and social class (Dart, 1992; Peterson, Jesso, & McCabe, 1999; Silva & McCabe, 1996; Uchikoshi). Silva and McCabe note all children need to develop narrative skills since it is tied to later literacy skills. However, they point out students who are ELs have often grown up with a home narrative style which is often culturally different from what is expected by teachers. Tabors (2008) and Uchikoshi suggested teachers can foster narrative skills by asking open-ended questions of children to help them develop narrative skills, especially questions following or preceding reading a book. Teachers can also promote children’s narratives during a show-and-tell or sharing time when children are able to discuss personal experiences (Peterson, Jesso, & McCabe; Uchikoshi).

Conversation skills. Conversation skills, also referred to as discourse skills, are important for all children to develop (DeBruin-Parecki, 2008). Conversation skills center around the ability to use decontextualized language, DeBruin notes developing these language skills may be particularly challenging for ELs since decontextualized language does not involve communicating about things or objects that are present in the immediate environment, which an EL could point to if the child did not know the word the object is referred to as. Thus, decontextualized language demands the speakers have a large vocabulary with which to one can refer to objects and people that may not be immediately present.
Engaging in conversations helps children, especially ELs, gain fluency in English (Restrepo & Gray, 2007). When ELs engage in conversations with teachers or English speaking peers, they have an opportunity to experiment with their developing English language skills. It is through trying new communication skills that are both correct, and gets the child’s point across, and incorrect and leads to the child receiving corrective feedback, that children learn the ways to appropriately use the new language. Talking and interacting with every child on a daily basis is considered a developmentally appropriate practice (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 2004). While this recommendation may seem absurd and common sense, the authors note it is easy to unintentionally overlook the children who demand less of the teacher’s attention, such as children who are quieter, more self-sufficient, or who are ELs.

*Children’s First Language*

Research has shown a family’s first language influences English learners’ reading ability in elementary school (Carlo, et al., 2004; National Center for Education Statistics, 2008; Wang & Geva, 2003). A national survey of families and children that spoke a non-English language found that children who spoke Spanish or an Asian/Pacific Islander language as their first language exhibited more difficulty speaking English than children whose first language was Indo-European or another language (National Center for Education Statistics). The survey report did not discuss the role the parents’ level of education has on children and how that may affect the children’s English acquisition. Research by Wang and Geva indicates children’s fluency in their first language is a predictor of successful second language acquisition. This is based in part on the findings discussed earlier regarding the transfer of vocabulary, phonological processing skills,
alphabet or print similarities, decoding skills, and other skills. For example, when the two languages are alphabetically similar, there will be cognates (words that look or sound similar in two different languages that have the same or similar meanings) that will transfer from one language to another (transfer of skills, decoding skills are required, and phonological processing skills). DeBruin-Parecki (2008) notes it is important to encourage the continued use and learning of the family’s first language so the child may reap the benefits of having a command of two languages. She also notes maintaining the family’s first language will have positive outcomes regarding the EL’s future academic and cognitive development. The continued use of the first language is also tied to the EL’s ability to establish and maintain his or her cultural identity and have the necessary communication skills to be able to communicate with immediate and extended family members, who may not learn the second language of the EL (DeBruin-Parecki).

It is considered developmentally appropriate practice to encourage the use of the children’s first languages rather than expecting all children to learn and use English only (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). These authors also recommend supporting the children’s use of their first languages in the classrooms. Research on immigrant families across the United States with young children in the school system has indicated when children learn two languages at the same time, one language often suffers and is usually the EL’s first language (Fillmore, 1991). The author notes when unequal development and acquisition of both languages occurs, gaps in the EL’s vocabulary skills in each language develop.

*Elements of Language Development in ELs*

There are typically three stages ELs progress through as they learn a second language (Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007). The first stage is the silent or nonverbal period
which is followed by using telegraphic and formulaic speech, and the final stage is fluid language use in the second language.

The silent or nonverbal stage is a time of observation and listening for the ELs as they begin to recognize the sounds and gain an understanding of the new language, without engaging in verbal communication with others in the environment (DeBruin-Parecki, 2008; Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007). It may take several months or longer for the EL to progress from the silent period to the next stage (DeBruin-Parecki; Greenberg & Rodriguez). During these months, ELs may use gestures, pointing, sounds lacking in meaning or other nonverbal methods to communicate with others in the classroom (DeBruin-Parecki; Greenberg & Rodriguez). During this stage, teachers can narrate what the children are doing as it provides another opportunity for them to hear the language (Greenberg & Rodriguez). Teachers can also use the words they have learned from the children’s first language to encourage verbal interactions between the ELs and the teacher and the other children (Greenberg & Rodriguez).

The second stage, using telegraphic (i.e., using content words, usually nouns or verbs, without the function words, prepositions, adjectives, etc.) and formulaic speech (i.e., using word formulas such as phrases) is used to communicate with others (Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007). An example of telegraphic speech is, “Me sandbox” to express being in the sandbox or to express wanting to go to the sandbox. An example of formulaic speech is, “I want (or wanna) go” to express the desire to leave or go to another area. In this stage, it is normal to hear mistakes (i.e., saying runned instead of ran) in the EL’s language use (Greenberg & Rodriguez). These mistakes are a normal part of learning a language and its grammar and patterns (Gleason & Ratner, 2009). During this
stage, teachers can narrate what the children are doing and expand the ELs’ utterances (Greenberg & Rodriguez) since it provides the children opportunities to hear the language.

The final stage, fluid language use, has two different aspects when discussing ELs’ ability to communicate. In this stage, an EL is typically identified as being fluent and able to carry on a conversation with an English speaker without difficulty (Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007). At this point ELs sound like native speakers in social settings and conversations and they are often mistaken as having fully acquired the language when they have mastered the social language and but have not mastered the academic language (Greenberg & Rodriguez). There are two different vocabularies ELs must master to be successful in school, social and academic English (Greenberg & Rodriguez). Social English, or conversational English, does not typically take much time for ELs to master as it has lower amounts of vocabulary use (Greenberg & Rodriguez). The second vocabulary type required is academic English; it is the language used in textbooks and in the classroom, thus, more complex and typically experienced by older ELs and not in preschool (Greenberg & Rodriguez). Research has indicated fully mastering academic English can take between five and seven years (Thomas & Collier, as cited by Greenberg & Rodriguez). During this last stage, teachers can provide the children with endless opportunities to hear and use both types of vocabularies, social and academic (Greenberg & Rodriguez).

Summary

Young children develop phonological, narrative, and conversation skills, which are important for later reading and academic success. An awareness of second language
acquisition and the impact learning a second language can have on the first language is necessary. It is important for teachers to be aware of the developmental sequence of English as a second language as they facilitate communication and language acquisition during the preschool years.

Teaching Strategies

A number of teaching strategies are discussed below. The use of an assortment of teaching strategies has been recommended by various experts (DeBruin-Parecki, 2008; Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Tabors, 2008) to use with all children, especially with ELs. However, there has been limited empirical research documenting the benefits to all children’s learning from using these teaching strategies and the usefulness of these strategies when working specifically with EL students. These strategies were chosen because they are recommended by various professionals to use with children, especially those who are learning English, and also because there is some research suggesting potential benefits from using these strategies with all children (DeBruin-Parecki; Greenberg & Rodriguez; Tabors).

Using Contextual Language

Contextual language is communicating about the here and now, about what is occurring during an activity, the order of daily activities, or what the teacher is expecting the children to do next (i.e., “Sophie is going to look out the window and tell us what the weather is like outside.”). Using contextual language is also important for helping children understand and acquire language (Gleason & Ratner, 2009). Using contextual language is highly recommended by several educators when teaching ELs (Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Tabors, 2008). It is suggested using contextual language with English
learners allows them to focus on the immediate situation or event and attach words in the new language to what is happening. However there is no research supporting the use of contextual language in preschool classrooms.

**Using Repetition**

Teachers repeating new vocabulary words is commonly cited by education experts and researchers (Facella, Rampino, & Shea, 2005; Restrepo, & Gray, 2007; Carlo, et al., 2004) as one of the most important aspects for helping EL students learn English. Repetition of vocabulary can occur in many ways, such as repeating a word a number of times during an activity or conversation, singing the same song every morning, counting, or saying the alphabet. Repeating selected vocabulary words provides opportunities for English learners to practice their emerging language skills (Facella, et al.; Tabors, 2008). In turn, repetition and practice leads to mastery of vocabulary (Restrepo & Gray). Recommended professional practices suggest teachers try to use words that are seen in print (i.e., during story time, posted in the classroom) and are heard frequently, thus helping the ELs become familiar with the words and understand their meaning (Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Restrepo & Gray, 2007). It is through seeing and hearing words multiple times across multiple activities that leads to an understanding and mastery of the words by ELs (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Restrepo & Gray, 2007).

Engaging in routine activities is another form of repetition. During routine activities children are presented with the same or very similar phrases and words, which are often repeated during the activity and across days (Ferrier, 1978; Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2004). Ferrier states, from her observations, routine activities are highly
contextualized, describing the current situation or event, such as the seating arrangement or to indicate it is a specific child’s turn to talk. Tabors (2008) and Cameron (2001) also point out when activities are done in a consistent routine, children learning English are better able to predict and be prepared for the upcoming activity. Routine activities that occur during preschool are large group time reading a story, small group time, snack time, free play, outside play, and transitions.

*Providing Word Definitions*

When teachers define new words, children learn and understand those new words (DeBruin-Parecki, 2008). This strategy has not been well studied in preschools or in conjunction with young English learners. Much of research on teaching children new vocabulary words is embedded in research about reading comprehension and how the size of a child’s vocabulary affects his or her reading fluency and comprehension (Anderson & Kulhavy, 1972; Gipe, 1978-79; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). In a study of English speaking third and fifth graders, Gipe found providing contextual definitions (e.g., using common, simple words in the definition to provide an understandable definition) of target vocabulary words resulted in the greatest amount of word acquisition and retention. In a meta-analysis of vocabulary acquisition, based on various teaching methods (association, comprehension, generation, and context), Stahl and Fairbanks found using both a definitional teaching method (providing the students with a definition) and the contextual teaching method (using the vocabulary word within a typical context in which the word is likely to be used or heard) led to the best comprehension and vocabulary acquisition of the targeted vocabulary.
Providing definitions and explanations is recommended as developmentally appropriate (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 2007). Kostelnik et al. suggest, through definitions and explanations, children build on their existing knowledge by incorporating new information, (i.e., the name of an animal), and by participating in social routines (i.e., going to a restaurant, going to a doctor). Explanations are by their very nature contextual since the explanation is expanding on the topic of conversation or the focus of attention (Kostelnik, et al.). They promote learning, they recommend providing definitions and explanations that are related to children’s experiences and interests.

*Asking Questions*

Asking questions has been identified as an effective teaching strategy for learners of all ages (Rowe, 1974; Tobin, 1980; 1987). For middle school age children, the use of questions during a lesson has been found (Otto & Schuck, 1983) to result in greater retention of the information presented. Morine-Dershimer (1985) found when teachers ask more questions children become more involved in the discussion, which leads to increased achievement. In a study of kindergarteners, Senechal, Thomas, and Monker (1995) found when teachers asked questions during story reading, children with smaller vocabularies had more opportunities to hear new words and practice retrieving those new words from their memories. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research for the support of using questions as an effective teaching strategy, especially with children learning English as a second language. However, when teachers increased asking questions with more wait time following a question (allowing children more time to think before being asked to respond) there was an improvement in child outcomes (Rowe, 1974).
Asking open-ended questions is considered developmentally appropriate to facilitate children’s learning (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 2007). It is recommended the questions asked be “purposeful, thought provoking, clear and brief” (Kostelnik, et al., p. 45). When questions incorporate these recommendations, it leads to greater attention and learning (Kostelnik, et al.). These authors suggest questions should be asked that will ascertain children’s level of understanding and not asking about what they do not know.

*Providing Wait Time*

Providing sufficient wait time to students of all ages has been shown to benefit their achievement (Gilbertson & Bluck, 2006; Rowe, 1974; Tobin 1980; 1987) and leads to increased length of discussion about the topic (DeTure, 1979; Fagan, Hassler, & Szabo, 1981; Rowe, 1974). According to Ellsworth, Duell, and Velotta (1991), a wait time of 3 to 5 seconds is the ideal length for teachers to wait for a response from students. Providing sufficient wait time is recommended as developmentally appropriate practice when teaching young children (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 2004). It is suggested that when the teacher responds to the children without providing wait time, children may interpret the response as indicating the teacher is impatient and unwilling for them to think through the question and answer (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren).

Based on the longitudinal research of elementary students, Rowe (1974) found there were 10 beneficial student outcomes to increased wait time. The first two benefits were an increase in the length of responses from the students, as well as an increase in the number of appropriate responses. The third benefit was a decrease in the number of times students failed to respond to a question. The fourth benefit was students were less hesitant in responding to a question. The fifth and sixth outcomes were an increase in the
amount of time spent thinking about the question and an increase in student to student discussion in place of teacher-directed show and tell. The seventh benefit was that responses were well thought out and based on information learned in previous lessons. Eighth, students ask more questions and show increased curiosity and interest in the topic. The ninth benefit was more students responded, especially those who required more time to think about the question and formulate an answer, to a question. The last beneficial outcome was a decrease in the amount of disciplinary actions required by the teacher toward the students. It is of little surprise other researchers have also found increased achievement and performance of students when they are given longer wait times (Gilbertson & Bluck; Tobin, 1980; 1987). However, there is little research indicating the same benefits and outcomes for students who are ELs. The one study that included ELs and examined a sight reading task, indicated most of the students benefited from an increase in wait time from 1-second to 5-seconds following a teacher prompt (Gilbertson & Bluck).

**Using Gestures**

The use of gestures, including facial expressions and directed gaze, has been recommended by multiple professionals as an effective teaching strategy to use with learners, but especially with ELs (DeBruin-Parecki, 2008; Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Tabors, 2008). According to Tabors, teacher use of gestures while communicating provides the children learning English another clue to understand what is being talked about and referenced. While there is no research examining use of gestures with ELs, in a study of preschool children who watched a taped lesson during which the teacher used gestures, Valenzeno, Alibali, and Klatzky (2003) found these children learned more than
their peers who viewed the same lesson without gestures. In another study comparing the difficulty of a message being conveyed to three different age groups, McNeil, Alibali, and Evans (2000) found preschoolers were able to comprehend the less complex messages when gestures accompanied the message. However, they found when the preschoolers were presented with a complex message along with gestures, the gestures did not facilitate comprehension. Thus, the difficulty level of the message being communicated influences the comprehension and understanding of the message by young children when the message is accompanied by gestures. These results generally indicate that the use of gestures may be important to increasing communication comprehension of ELs; however, research is needed to examine the level of assistance gestures provide in increasing ELs’ understanding of communication interactions.

**Modeling Language Use through Extension and Expansion**

Extending and expanding children’s communication attempts are considered to be beneficial teaching strategies to use with children who are learning a language or struggling in their language development (Gleason & Ratner, 2009; Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Tabors, 2008). Extending language occurs when the teacher or adult correctly rephrases an utterance made by a child (Gleason & Ratner). For example, a child says, “Me going home” and the teacher rephrases, “You are going home”. Expanding occurs when the teacher or adult includes more information in their rephrasing of what the child had initially said (Gleason & Ratner). For example, a child says, “Me car” and the teacher replies, “You have the blue car with a squeaky wheel”. The use of extending and expanding during conversations between an adult and child is highly
recommended (Gleason & Ratner; Greenberg & Rodriguez; Tabors); however, there is a lack of a supporting research base in regards to ELs.

Using Visuals

The benefits arising from the use of visuals (pictures, illustrations, icons, letters, etc.) as a teaching strategy lack a research base. However, the use of visuals is recommended by several experts (Facella, et al., 2005; Gay, 1996; 2002; Gray & Fleischman, 2004-05). Visuals provide multiple opportunities for children “to process, reflect on, and integrate information” (Gersten & Baker, 2000, p. 463) presented in a story since the spoken language is fleeting in comparison to a visual representation of the same material. Gay, (2002) recommends, using visuals in a broad array of ways, such as pictures of individuals, icons, images, and symbols, to teach children. De Atiles and Allexsaht-Snider (2002) suggest using labels around the classroom on objects and areas in the children’s first languages as a visual strategy. Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson (2003) suggest pictures are invaluable as they provide immediate feedback on the validity of what was just read for children, especially those who are struggling with their reading ability and comprehension. However, the authors point out that when the text and the pictures are not providing the same message, the student’s ability to correctly understand what was read is hindered. Beck and McKeown (2001) also highlight the dangers of students relying on the pictures to understand the text. They suggest that children may pay more attention to the pictures and ignore the text thus leading to a misinterpretation of the story. DeBruin-Parecki (2008) notes that books should be chosen carefully, so the text and pictures are presenting the same information because books, especially pictorial books, are usually among the first books children “read” to themselves. Thus, it would
seem from the above recommendations the use of visuals can be and is helpful to children struggling to understand a story but teachers should find books that provide the same message through the use of text and visuals.

*Using Songs and Music*

The use of music is common in preschool classrooms, and several educators note that musical instruction is linked to children’s school achievement and overall learning (Dickinson, 1993; Warner, 1999; Weinberger, 1999). Yet, there is little empirical research suggesting the use of music and songs are in fact linked to achievement and learning (Eisner, 1998). In a review of the benefits of music education in school settings, Weinberger discussed two studies that indicated music education influenced student reading ability. He noted when children received direct musical instruction on musical tones and pitches and the flow of the melody, the students performed significantly better in reading achievement. In a similar recommendation by a music educator, Warner noted musical education can lead to improved vocabulary acquisition. She suggested music promotes children’s knowledge about their environment and academic subject content. According to Pica (as cited in Wellhousen & Crowther, 2004) music is one method of motivating students to communicate and share with their peers about their culture. Pica also noted music is linked to increased student attention span and listening skills.

*Adjusting Speech*

Adjusting speech occurs in several ways, slowing the pace of the conversation and using shorter and simpler sentences. This teaching strategy is suggested by educators and researchers when instructing children who are ELs (DeBruin-Parecki, 2008; Gersten, 1996; Markham & Gordon, 2007). Gersten and DeBruin-Parecki recommend using a
slower pace and simple sentences as these modifications ensure that the children understand and comprehend the message or information being conveyed. De Atiles and Allexsaht-Snider (2002) also suggest when speaking more slowly and using simplified language, to be conscious of not distorting or changing the meaning of what is being said. 

Providing Feedback and Comprehension Monitoring

Educators recommend providing clear and immediate feedback to ELs when they make a mistake in their speech or indicate an incomplete understanding of the topic (Gersten, 1996; Markham & Gordon, 2007). Markham and Gordon suggest when ELs require feedback, it creates an opportunity to fill in the gaps of their understanding of the topic being discussed. Gersten provides a list of recommendations for teachers to provide feedback to their students. Most important, is to focus on meaning and not on the sentence structure or misuse of sentence structure. He notes feedback should be given frequently and in a way children can comprehend the correction if the children are to benefit from the correction. He recommends teachers allow the EL students to respond in their first language, when appropriate, and to be aware and sensitive to common issues when a child is acquiring a second language, such as experiencing a silent period (when they are not verbally responding to others in the classroom).

Using Manipulatives

There is no published research on the use of manipulatives (toy animals, plastic letters, counting bears, etc.) as a strategy to help ELs. It is likely manipulatives are considered visual aids and therefore do not warrant a separate category. However, it is possible visuals and manipulatives elicit different behaviors and types of learning from children. For example, with a picture, the child is only able to look at it and imagine what
the item might feel like or move, such as what a puppy’s fur feels like. With manipulatives, children are able to feel the object and make the object perform a function, such as move the toy’s legs to indicate walking, or to line up the bears to visually realize how many are four bears. One educator considers the use of manipulatives important because they create an immediate visual connection for all learners (Schifini, 1994). Rea and Mercuri (2006) believe manipulatives provide children with a physical mental image. They note manipulatives help children understand and mentally visualize abstract concepts, such as what is a tower. Gersten and Geva (2003) also point out that using manipulatives is one way of teaching content to children who are learning English. For example, during an autumn nature lesson in a preschool or kindergarten, the teacher could bring in different leaves to discuss the different types of trees and the shapes found in the leaves (i.e., triangle, curved line, scallops, etc.) the different colors of leaves (i.e., red, orange, brown, purple, yellow, etc.). To expand on the autumn lesson example, the teacher could bring in different vegetables that are harvested in the fall (i.e., corn, gourds, pumpkins, apples, etc.). All of the above objects could be brought into the classroom for the children to see and touch, which also provides opportunities to teach tactile learners in their preferred learning method. Using manipulatives can make the language comprehensible and engaging to the students (Walqui, 2006). The presence and providing opportunities for children to use manipulatives is considered developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). These authors suggest a wide variety of manipulatives that are real, concrete, and related to the children’s interests should be available for children’s experimentation and use.
Learning Basic Non-English Words

It is highly recommended that educators learn basic words in the children’s first languages, such as ‘hello’, ‘food’, and ‘bathroom’ (Barrera, 2005; DeBruin-Parecki, 2008; Gersten, 1996; Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Markham & Gordon, 2007; Quinones-Eatman, 2005). It is suggested that through the use of basic words, children and teachers are able to have a very minimal conversation (Greenberg & Rodriguez; Tabors, 2008). De Atiles and Allexsaht-Snider (2002) suggest when teachers learn basic words they are becoming a role model of language learning for the ELs. It is suggested when the teacher uses basic words, the children and teacher are creating a meaningful connection from which further language acquisition and learning will stem (Quinones-Eatman). It is also suggested through the use of basic words, the teacher is expressing to the children and the family that their culture is appreciated and valued by the teacher (Barrera; DeBruin-Parecki; Quinones-Eatman; Tabors).

Summary

The strategies described have been recommended by various professionals to use with children, especially those who are learning English, and have a research base suggesting benefits when used with all children (DeBruin-Parecki, 2008; Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Tabors, 2008). However, there has been little empirical research confirming the benefits to children’s learning from using these teaching strategies and the value of these strategies when teaching specifically EL students. More research is needed about the effectiveness of each of the strategies used independently and the effect of various combinations of strategies.
Conclusion

As the number of EL children rises, it is important to seek out methods for creating effective learning environments for them, while at the same time, keeping in mind the needs of native English speaking children. Several elements of preschool environments that can promote and facilitate language acquisition and development in preschoolers that have been researched and recommended by researchers and educational experts were discussed. Three elements are necessary for children to develop their language skills. The most basic element is the classroom environment which includes the arrangement of the room, creating different learning areas such as a quiet area and literacy area, creating and maintaining a consistent routine, and expressing acceptance and value for all children. The second element is having an understanding of the elements of language acquisition and development which is indispensable when helping to nurture children’s language development. This element includes the phonological skills, narrative skills, conversation skills, and the first language of the children and how these intertwine and facilitate during and for language development. Finally, the last element, it is important to be able to use effectively teaching strategies that can help facilitate communication between children, especially ELs, in the classroom. The teaching strategies described have been heavily recommended by professionals and often the strategies lack a strong research basis that ties the use of the strategy to achievement or later academic skills and success.

Further research and awareness is needed to more fully understand how the different elements intertwine to nurture and promote language development in all children, but especially in ELs. The different aspects of the environment that nurture and
foster language development warrants continued research and observation to determine how the environment arrangement, different learning areas, expressions of respect and appreciation for cultural and linguistic diversity affect later language development and achievement. Continued research examination is needed to understand and recognize the role the children’s first languages play in the acquisition of a second language and how learning a second language affects the first language development, and what this implies for family communication. Further research and observation is also needed to fully understand the value and benefits that arise from using these strategies for all children and those learning English. However, what is most important, is to search for methods that will help all children reach their potential by inspiring and strengthening their language skills. As Ludwig Wittenstein once said, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (as cited by Wardhough, 2006, p. 219).

References:


CHAPTER 3. EFFECTS OF TEACHING STRATEGIES ON HEAD START PRESCHOOLERS’ ENGAGEMENT

Abstract

This study examined teachers’ use of six teaching strategies during large group time and the effects of the strategies on children’s engagement in 30 Head Start classrooms. Sixty preschool children were observed; half of the children were learning English and the other half were native English speakers. An observational tool (Preschool Engagement and Teaching Strategy Assessment) was developed for the study. Of the six teaching strategies, only one, use of gestures, was found to significantly predict children’s engagement. More research is needed to determine if other teaching strategies not examined in this study influence children’s engagement, especially ELs’, and if teachers modify their use of teaching strategies during the school year in accordance with the children’s language development.

Introduction

Within the next 10 years it has been estimated that more than 50 percent of all students in kindergarten through 12th grade will be English learners (ELs; Gray & Fleischman, 2004-05). In the 2005-2006 school year there were approximately 5.5 million EL students in the school system nationwide (NCELA, 2007). In Iowa, during that same school year, there were over 17,000 EL students (Iowa Department of Education, 2007). The number of ELs in the Iowa school system has more than doubled in the last ten years (Iowa Department of Education). Similarly, the number of ELs in preschools had increased by almost 190% during the decade between 1990 and 2000 (National Council of La Raza, n.d.). More recently, in the 2004-2005 school year, Head
Start had almost 10,000 children enrolled in Iowa (Iowa Head Start Annual Report, 2005). Given the increasing number of ELs in preschool settings, it is probable that many ELs first experience an English-only or predominant environment in such settings.

It is important to understand how teachers make their instruction meaningful and comprehensible to ELs while helping them learn English language skills. Therefore, it is necessary to learn what teaching strategies preschool teachers use during their instruction that have been shown to influence child learning. Various teaching strategies have been recommended by researchers and professionals to use in the classroom to facilitate learning. From these recommended strategies, six different teaching strategies (creating contexts for learning, using questions and gestures, modeling language use through extensions and expansions, providing sufficient wait time, and using visuals) were chosen to be examined in this study since there was in most cases a strong empirical base for the use of these strategies (Gray & Fleischman; Rowe, 1974; Tabors, 2008) and were most often recommended by educational experts (DeBruin-Parecki, 2008; Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Tabors, 2008). Along with the six teaching strategies, engagement levels of the ELs and English speaking students in the classroom were examined, as engagement has been linked to achievement rates (McGarity & Butts, 1984). Since achievement is linked to engagement and the achievement gap between ELs and their English speaking peers persists, it is essential to identify specific teaching strategies that positively influence engagement (Gandara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003).
Teaching Strategies

Various teaching strategies have been recommended (DeBruin-Parecki, 2008; Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Tabors, 2008) to use with all children, especially with ELs. However, there is limited empirical research documenting the benefits to children’s learning when these teaching strategies are used and the usefulness of these strategies when working specifically with EL students. The following six teaching strategies are recommended by multiple authorities and researchers, yet it is important to learn how these strategies affect children’s engagement since this affects their academic achievement.

Creating Contexts for Language Learning

For this study, creating contexts incorporated three distinct teaching strategies, using contextual language (discussing the here and now, what is present), repetition, and defining words and concepts, since all three focus on making language meaningful to children. Contextual language is communicating about the here and now, about what is occurring during an activity, the order of daily activities, or what the teacher is expecting the children to do next (i.e., “Sophie is going to look out the window and tell us what the weather is like outside.”). Using contextual language is also important for helping children understand and acquire language (Gleason & Ratner, 2009). Using contextual language is highly recommended when teaching English learners (Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Tabors, 2008). It is suggested using contextual language with English learners allows them to focus on the immediate situation or event. However there is no research supporting the use of contextual language in preschool classrooms.
Teachers repeating new vocabulary words is commonly cited by education experts and researchers (Facella, Rampino, & Shea, 2005; Restrepo, & Gray, 2007; Carlo, et al., 2004) as one of the most important aspects for helping EL students learn English. Repetition of vocabulary can occur in many ways, such as repeating a word a number of times during an activity or conversation, singing the same song every morning, counting, or saying the alphabet. Repeating selected vocabulary words provides opportunities for English learners to practice their emerging language skills (Facella, et al.; Tabors, 2008). In turn, repetition and practice lead to mastery of vocabulary (Restrepo, & Gray). Recommended professional practices suggest teachers try to use words that are seen in print (i.e., during story time, posted in the classroom) and are heard frequently, thus helping the ELs become familiar with the words and understand their meaning (Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Restrepo & Gray, 2007). It is through seeing and hearing words multiple times across multiple activities that leads to an understanding and mastery of the words by ELs (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Restrepo & Gray, 2007).

Engaging in routine activities is another form of repetition. During routine activities children are presented with the same or very similar phrases and words, which are often repeated during activities and across days (Ferrier, 1978; Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2004). Tabors (2008) and Cameron (2001) point out when activities are done in a consistent routine, children learning English are better able to predict and be prepared for the upcoming activity. Routine activities that occur during preschool large group time can be singing songs, discussing the weather, counting, and reading a story. Ferrier also states, from her observations, routine activities are highly contextualized, describing the
current situation or event, such as the seating arrangement or that it is a specific individual’s turn to talk.

When teachers define new words, children learn and understand those new words (DeBruin-Parecki, 2008). Much of the research on teaching children new vocabulary words is embedded in research about reading comprehension and how the size of a child’s vocabulary affects his or her reading fluency and comprehension (Anderson & Kulhavy, 1972; Gipe, 1978-79; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). In a study of English speaking third and fifth graders, Gipe found providing contextual definitions (e.g., using common, simple words in the definition to provide an understandable definition) of target vocabulary words resulted in the greatest amount of acquisition and retention. In a meta-analysis of vocabulary acquisition, based on various teaching methods (association, comprehension, generation, and context), Stahl and Fairbanks found using both a definitional teaching method (providing the students with a definition) and the contextual teaching method (using the vocabulary word within a typical context in which the word is likely to be used or heard) led to the best comprehension and vocabulary acquisition of the targeted vocabulary. This strategy has not been well studied in preschools or in conjunction with young English learners.

Asking Questions

Asking questions has been identified as an effective teaching strategy for learners of all ages (Rowe, 1974; Tobin, 1980; 1987). For middle school age children, the use of questions during a lesson has been found to result in greater retention of the information presented (Otto & Schuck, 1983). Morine-Dershimer (1985) found when teachers ask more questions children become more involved in the discussion, which leads to
increased achievement. In a study of kindergarteners, Senechal, Thomas, and Monker (1995) found when teachers asked questions during story reading, children with smaller vocabularies had more opportunities to hear new words and practice retrieving those new words from their memories. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research for the support of using questions as an effective teaching strategy, especially with children learning English as a second language.

Providing Wait Time

Providing sufficient wait time to students of all ages has been shown to benefit their achievement (Gilbertson & Bluck, 2006; Rowe, 1974; Tobin 1980; 1987) and leads to increased length of discussion about the topic (DeTure, 1979; Fagan, Hassler, & Szabo, 1981; Rowe, 1974). According to Ellsworth, Duell, and Velotta (1991), a wait time of 3 to 5 seconds is the ideal length for teachers to wait for a response from students. Based on the longitudinal research of elementary students, Rowe found there were 10 beneficial student outcomes to increased wait time. The first two benefits were an increase in the length of responses from the students, as well as an increase in the number of appropriate responses. The third benefit was a decrease in the number of times students failed to respond to a question. The fourth benefit was students were less hesitant in responding to a question. The fifth and sixth outcomes were an increase in the amount of time spent thinking about the question and an increase in student to student discussion in place of teacher-directed show and tell. The seventh benefit was that responses were well thought out and based on information learned in previous lessons. Eighth, students ask more questions and show increased curiosity and interest in the topic. The ninth benefit was more students responded, especially those who required
more time to think about the question and formulate an answer, to a question. The last beneficial outcome was a decrease in the amount of disciplinary actions required by the teacher toward the students. It is of little surprise other researchers have also found increased achievement and performance of students when they are given longer wait times (Gilbertson & Bluck; Tobin, 1980; 1987). However, there is little research indicating the same benefits and outcomes for students who are ELs. The one study that included ELs and examined a sight reading task, indicated most of the students benefited from an increase in wait time from 1-second to 5-seconds following a teacher prompt (Gilbertson & Bluck).

*Using Gestures*

The use of gestures, including facial expressions and directed gaze, has been recommended by multiple professionals as an effective teaching strategy to use with learners, but especially with ELs (DeBruin-Parecki, 2008; Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Tabors, 2008). According to Tabors, teacher use of gestures while communicating provides the children learning English another clue to understand what is being talked about and referenced. While there is no research examining use of gestures with ELs, in a study of preschool children who watched a taped lesson during which the teacher used gestures, Valenzeno, Alibali, and Klatzky (2003) found these children learned more than their peers who viewed the same lesson without gestures. In another study comparing the difficulty of a message being conveyed to three different age groups, McNeil, Alibali, and Evans (2000) found preschoolers were able to comprehend messages when gestures accompanied the message. However, they found when the preschoolers were presented with a complex message along with gestures, the gestures did not facilitate
comprehension. Thus, the difficulty level of the message being communicated influences the comprehension and understanding of the message by young children when the message is accompanied by gestures. These results generally indicate that the use of gestures may be important to increasing communication comprehension of ELs; however, research is needed to examine the level of assistance gestures provide in increasing ELs’ understanding of communication interactions.

*Modeling Language Use through Extension and Expansion*

Extending and expanding children’s communication attempts are considered to be beneficial teaching strategies to use with children who are learning a language or struggling in their language development (Gleason & Ratner, 2009; Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Tabors, 2008). Extending language occurs when the teacher or adult correctly rephrases an utterance made by a child (Gleason & Ratner). An example is, a child says, “Me going home” and the teacher rephrases, “You are going home”. Expanding occurs when the teacher or adult includes more information in their rephrasing of what the child had initially said (Gleason & Ratner). For example, a child says, “Me car” and the teacher replies, “You have the blue car with a squeaky wheel”. The use of extending and expanding during conversations between an adult and child is highly recommended (Gleason & Ratner; Greenberg & Rodriguez; Tabors); however, there is a lack of a supporting research base.

*Using Visuals*

The benefits arising from the use of visuals (pictures, illustrations, icons, letters, etc.) as a teaching strategy lack a research base. However, the use of visuals is recommended by several experts (Facella, et al., 2005; Gay, 1996; 2002; Gray &
Fleischman, 2004-05). Gay (2002) recommends using visuals in a broad array of ways, such as pictures of individuals, icons, images, and symbols, to teach children. De Atiles and Allexsaht-Snider (2002) suggest using labels around the classroom on objects and areas in the children’s first languages as a visual strategy. Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson (2003) assert pictures are invaluable as they provide immediate feedback on the validity of what children just read, especially those who are struggling with their reading ability and comprehension. However, the authors point out that when the text and the pictures are not providing the same message, the student’s ability to correctly understand what was read is hindered. Beck and McKeown (2001) also highlight the dangers of students relying on the pictures to understand the text. They suggest that children may pay more attention to the pictures and ignore the text thus leading to a misinterpretation of the story. DeBruin-Parecki (2008) notes that books should be chosen carefully, so the text and pictures are presenting the same information because books, especially pictorial books, are usually among the first books children “read” to themselves. Thus, it would seem from the above recommendations the use of visuals can and is helpful to children struggling to understand a story but teachers should find books that provide the same message through the use of text and visuals.

Engagement

Engagement can be defined as watching the teacher or fixing one’s attention on the teacher or book being read, verbally communicating either as responding or answering the teacher or a peer, nonverbally communicating through gestures and pointing, and listening (McCormick, Noonan, & Heck, 1998; Raspa, McWilliam, & Ridley, 2001). There is considerable research on engagement of children of all ages in
various school and childcare settings (Berry, 2006; McCormick, Noonan, & Heck; McWilliam, Scarborough, & Kim, 2003; Qi, Kaiser, & Milan, 2006; Raspa, McWilliam, & Ridley; Ridley, McWilliam, & Oates, 2000).

Researchers have found when children are engaged, regardless of if the children are paying close attention or barely paying attention, they exhibit higher levels of achievement and learning (McGarity & Butts, 1984; McWilliam, Trivette, & Dunst, 1985). McWilliam and colleagues, found when children were engaged, both actively and passively, for longer periods of time, they have increased opportunities for learning. McWilliam and Casey (2008) found that child engagement led to the development of thinking and reasoning skills and increases in the number of interactions with the teacher and peers. In a study of middle school and high school students during science classes, McGarity and Butts found when the students were more engaged during the lesson they had higher achievement.

Unfortunately there is a lack of research documenting the benefits of engagement for preschool EL children on their development of language skills, academic achievement in preschool, and later in school. There no research indicating how engagement affects achievement and language development for children learning English. There is also no research examining how children’s, especially ELs’, engagement is influenced by the use of teaching strategies during large group times or times when the teacher is presenting a lesson or material.

Research Questions

This study is exploratory as there is little information about the classroom experiences of ELs. Therefore, the research questions were designed to explore the
frequency of various teaching strategies preschool teachers used in classrooms with ELs. In addition, the research questions examine the relationship between teaching strategies and child engagement. Four research questions formed the basis of this study:

1) To what extent are preschool teachers using six teaching strategies (creating contexts, using questions, providing wait time, using gestures, modeling language, and using visuals) during large group time in the classroom?

2) Do teachers’ use of different strategies change with the proportion of English learners in the class?

3) What specific teaching strategies or combination of teaching strategies are related to overall child engagement (regardless of the first language of the child) during large group time?

4) How does the use of teaching strategies predict the engagement levels of ELs and their English speaking peers?

Method

Participants

Thirty Head Start classrooms serving children ages 3 to 5 that had at least one EL student were recruited from across the state of Iowa. Approval to conduct this study was granted by Iowa State University Institutional Review Board. Classrooms were recruited through the directors and administrators of the various sites. Upon receiving agreement from the administrator, the policy council was contacted for their approval. Following approval from the policy council, the administrator contacted the teachers in their district who had ELs in the classroom to determine if the teacher was willing to allow an observation of their teaching during a large group time. If the teachers were willing to
permit an observation, the researcher contacted the teachers individually to schedule a 
convenient day and time to observe.

Of the 30 teachers who agreed to permit the observation, all were female, of 
Caucasian decent, and spoke English as their first language. However, several of the 
teachers were either able to have a limited conversation in a second language or 
considered themselves to be fluent in a second language. All of the classrooms had at 
least one aide, and several classrooms had two or more aides. No information was 
gathered about the linguistic abilities of the aides or their roles in the classroom. Fourteen 
teachers taught half-day classes (two preschool sessions each day) and the remaining 16 
teachers taught full-day classes. (See Table 1 for more information on the teachers.)

Information about the teacher was gathered using a survey (PETSA Teacher 
Survey, see a copy of the form in Appendix A). There were 9 questions about the teacher, 
such as length of time teaching, education level completed, what languages the teacher is 
able to speak. According to the survey, the teachers had been teaching for an average of 
12 years with a range of 1 to 35 years. A little over a third of the teachers spoke a second 
language. Of the teachers who attended college, almost half of them majored in education 
and 70% of the teachers hold a B.A. or higher.

The survey also included 7 questions about the children in the classroom, such as 
how many children speak English as their first language, what are the non-English 
languages that are spoken by the ELs in the class. From the survey, it was determined a 
little over half of the students spoke English as their first language. Of the children who 
spoke a non-English language, almost 90% of the children spoke Spanish. According to 
the teachers’ reports, almost 80% of the English learners had either an excellent or good
understanding of spoken English and about 75% of the ELs were able to communicate in English at a level considered excellent or well by the teachers.

Detailed information about the children in the classroom was not gathered as that would have required parental consent from every parent in each of the classrooms in which an observation occurred. It was unlikely all parents would consent to allow information gathered about their child. Also, the amount of time required to obtain the parental consents would have delayed the completion of the study.

Table 1

_Teacher and the Children in the Classroom Demographics_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
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<th>Range</th>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years experience teaching</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1-35</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak second language</td>
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<td>37</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
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<td>Range</td>
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<td>Mean</td>
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<td>0-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
<td>0-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
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<td>0.5</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>0-6</td>
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<td>With disabilities and EL</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>0-3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Measures

*Preschool Engagement and Teaching Strategy Assessment.* An observation protocol was created for the study, Preschool Engagement and Teaching Strategy Assessment (PETSA; Worthington, 2008). It was created after an exhaustive review of the literature on six teaching strategies (creating contexts for language learning, asking questions, providing wait time, modeling language use through extension and expansion, and using visuals) that spanned over 50 years of research on the positive outcomes when used with English speaking children and adults and, when possible, non-English speaking children and adults. The assessment was also based on informal observations in university-based preschool classrooms. During the observations, the researcher observed if the teachers used the six strategies during large group time to foster the children’s engagement. Following the review and observations, the assessment was based on the empirical research that had strong positive outcomes for children when the strategy was used.

The observation tool measured the use of the six teaching strategies by preschool teachers during large group time, as well as the engagement of a target child and peer. The six teaching strategies were recorded based on definitions that arose from the literature review (PETSA Scoring Definitions, see a copy of the form in Appendix B). Creating contexts for language learning was defined as using words repeatedly over several sentences or utterances, defining a word, and using contextual language. The next two strategies were asking questions and providing sufficient wait time. Sufficient wait time was defined as waiting a minimum of 3 seconds after asking a question for a response before repeating the question or rephrasing it. Providing sufficient wait time
was also recorded if any child in the classroom responds within the 3 seconds following a
posed question. Using gestures, the fourth teaching strategy, was defined as using facial
expressions, nodding, pointing, and shrugging. It also included exaggerated facial
expressions that indicate feelings appropriate for the given situation. This teaching
strategy did not include the use of sign language because sign language is a separate
language. The fifth teaching strategy, modeling language through extension and
expansion, was defined as any extension or expansion on a child’s utterance or concept
being discussed by the teacher or class. The final teaching strategy, using visuals, was
defined as any visual aid, such as a picture in a book or hanging on the wall, an object
used as a prop, a white board, that the teacher points to or shows to the children.

The occurrence of the six different teaching strategies was recorded using partial-
interval time sampling, with intervals of 15 seconds. When a teaching strategy occurred
at any point during any of the intervals, it was recorded. While any of these strategies
could occur more than once in each partial-interval time interval, only the initial
occurrence was recorded. (PETSA Recording Sheet, see a copy of the form in Appendix
C.)

Also during the observation, target child (EL student) and peer (non-EL student)
engagement was recorded. The target child was chosen based on a short observation prior
to large group time during which time the observers listened to and watched the child to
determine how fluent the child appeared to be in English. If a child did not appear to
actively engage in English verbal interactions with other children or used a non-English
language, the child was selected to serve as the target child. If the child appeared to be of
a quiet nature, the observers watched to determine how the teacher interacted with the
child; for example, if the teacher modified how she addressed the child (i.e., slower speech rate) to complete a task or to begin transitioning to the next activity, the child was selected to serve as the target child.

The two children were selected to be of the same sex (i.e., two boys or two girls) and of apparent similar activity levels. Child and peer engagement was coded after each teaching strategy interval for 5 seconds. A child was engaged when he or she was visually fixed on the teacher or book, communicating with the teacher, non-verbally communicating with the teacher (i.e., pointing), or listening. A child is unengaged when he or she is staring into space (i.e., not watching the teacher), wandering around the classroom or group, crying, or interacting in any way with a peer that would be disruptive or participating in aggressive behavior.

Reliability. Inter-rater reliability was assessed for 33% (10 observations) of the total observations. Two graduate students who had a history of doing preschool observations completed the reliability observations. During training they reached 85% overall agreement. During the observations for the study, the average reliability was 93% with a range of 88% to 99% for the teaching strategies portion. For the engagement portion, the average reliability was 87% with a range of 63% to 100%.

Procedures

Once consent was obtained from the various Head Start locations and teachers, a brief observation occurred before the beginning of the large group time. The brief pre-coding observation lasted between 5 and 15 minutes depending on the amount of time needed to transition between activities and if any needed changes to the normal routine had been made by the teacher. During the pre-coding observation, two children were
randomly chosen for the engagement portion of the coded observation. The target child, an EL, was chosen first based on how he or she verbally interacted with the other children and the fluency of the EL’s English during the interaction. If the child did not appear to actively engage in any verbal interactions or used a non-English language, the child was chosen to serve as the target child. However, as the observations occurred at the end of the school year, it was difficult at times to identify an EL who did not engage in any English verbal interactions. In the instances when it was difficult to determine which children came from non-English speaking homes, the ethnicity of the child was also considered; this was helpful as data from the teacher surveys indicated most of the ELs in the classroom were from Hispanic or Sudanese backgrounds. Once the target child was selected, a child of the same gender and of similar activity level was chosen.

Large group time was chosen for several reasons. Primarily, almost all preschool classrooms include a large group time during the day. Large group was also chosen because most group times are more structured than other activities, such as free play or snack time, and it is during large group time that teachers are more likely to expect the children to be paying attention to them while they present a lesson or read a book than during other activities. For this study, the teachers could spend their large group time doing what would normally occur during large group time for their class. For example, the activities that were observed included: singing songs, reading a book, talking about the weather and calendar, and a science/nature lesson.

During the observation, the observer remained outside of the classroom group, such as sitting in a chair or on the floor behind the circle of children in a location where the faces of both of the selected children could be seen. During the reliability
observations, it was sometimes difficult for both observers to see both of the children due to the classroom arrangement. Each observer was provided with a timer to maintain accurate interval lengths. During reliability observations, both observers were provided with timers and they were started simultaneously so the coded intervals were the same between the two observers.

Results

Research Question 1

The first research question, to what extent are the six teaching strategies being used during large group time, the six teaching strategies were observed for frequency of occurrence during large group time. Frequencies of the strategies are presented in Table 2. More than one teaching strategy could have occurred during each time interval observed. All of the strategies occurred across the classrooms except modeling language use. Modeling language use was not used by 18 of the 30 teachers, was used one to two times by 10 teachers. The remaining two teachers used the modeling language strategy frequently during the observation. However, teachers differed on the frequency of the use of each strategy. On average, teachers used the creating contexts and visual strategies over 50% of the time during large group time. Modeling language use was used the least, about 2% of the time. The remaining teaching strategies were used between 30 and 40% of the time during large group.

Research Question 2

For the second research question, do teachers’ use of different strategies change with the proportion of English learners in the class, analysis using an ANOVA found no
Table 2

*Frequencies of Use of the Six Teaching Strategies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Range</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Creating contexts</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>54.09</td>
<td>19.95</td>
<td>9-91</td>
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<td>Asking questions</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>38.71</td>
<td>17.19</td>
<td>8-66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing wait time</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29.19</td>
<td>14.43</td>
<td>4-62</td>
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<td>Using gestures</td>
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<td>33.02</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling language</td>
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<td>6.93</td>
<td>2-51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using visuals</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>52.51</td>
<td>24.14</td>
<td>2-93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

differences in the use of teaching strategies with varying proportions of ELs (See Table 3).

The proportion of ELs in each classroom was divided into 3 groups, high (range of .65 to .87% were ELs), medium with (range of .35 to .50% were ELs), and low (range of .6 to 29% were ELs) based on the information provided in the teacher survey. Differences may have occurred in the frequency with which a teacher used a specific teaching strategy, however, as only the initial strategy occurrence was recorded in an interval, higher frequencies of a particular strategy were possible. The teachers in the classrooms were unable to share with the observers which children were learning English and those that were English speakers for confidentiality reasons. Therefore, it is also possible that no differences were found across the proportion of ELs because no specific information was gathered about the children who were observed and their first languages.
Three teachers were selected, each representing classrooms with the three different proportions of ELs to show the variations in teaching strategy use (See Table 4). All three teachers were female, Caucasian, held a B.A. or B.S., and spoke English as their first language. In one classroom (Classroom A), there was a high proportion of ELs to non-ELs. There were three different languages the ELs spoke as their first language, Spanish, Chinese, and Laotian. During the observed large group time, the class participated in singing several songs and discussing the calendar. During the observation, the teacher used creating language contexts the most frequently, 91% of the time and used modeling language the least, 4% of the time. In classroom B, there was an almost equal proportion of ELs to non-ELs. Two different languages were spoken by the ELs as their first language, Spanish and

Table 3

*Analysis of Variance for Classroom Proportions of ELs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between groups</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Asking questions</td>
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<td>.339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing wait time</td>
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<td>.970</td>
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<td>Using gestures</td>
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<td>.471</td>
<td>.629</td>
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<tr>
<td>Modeling language</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using visuals</td>
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<td>.135</td>
<td>.874</td>
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</table>
Table 4

*Classroom Case Studies based on Proportion of ELs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<th>Classroom B</th>
<th>Classroom C</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Songs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class size</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of non-ELs</td>
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<td>16</td>
</tr>
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<td>Number of ELs</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean percent of creating contexts</td>
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<td>24</td>
</tr>
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<td>Mean percent of asking questions</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean percent of providing wait time</td>
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<td>Mean percent of using gestures</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
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<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of time teaching preschool</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vietnamese. Throughout the large group the class took turns playing charades for their classmates to guess the action or word. During the observation, the teacher used questions the most frequently, 32% of the time, and did not use modeling language. In classroom C, there were more non-ELs than ELs and Vietnamese was the child’s first language. For the entire large group time, the class sang songs. During the observation,
the teacher used gestures most frequently, 44% of the time, and did not use modeling language. Based on these three classrooms and teachers, many differences surface in how often the teachers used a particular strategy when the large group activity is similar and when the proportion of ELs in the class varies.

*Research Question 3*

For the third research question, what specific teaching strategies or combination of teaching strategies are related to child engagement during large group time regardless of the first language of the child, a Pearson correlation was used. Engagement scores for each child observed were computed by finding the mean of all the time intervals the child was engaged and dividing by the length of the observation. Correlations between the strategies used and the children’s engagement are reported in Table 5. Correlation analyses were run on each strategy with children’s engagement, followed by analyses of all possible combinations of two strategies. Correlation analyses were also run with combinations consisting of three teaching strategies. Correlations between the six teaching strategies and child engagement are reported and one combination of two strategies as all other possible combinations of teaching strategies were not significantly related to child engagement. The use of two teaching strategies were significantly related to child engagement; the use of gestures ($r = .403; p < 0.05$) and the combined use of gestures and creating contexts strategies ($r = .361; p = 0.05$). These results indicate that when teachers used gestures and a combination of creating language contexts and gestures, children were more highly engaged than when the teachers used the other teaching strategies.
Table 5

*Correlations of Teaching Strategies and Classroom Engagement across Language*

<table>
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<td>.320</td>
<td>-.091</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>.843**</td>
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<td>.413*</td>
<td>-.080</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Using gestures</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>-.088</td>
<td>-.034</td>
<td>.780**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Modeling language</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>-.110</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Using visuals</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>-.007</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Creating contexts &amp; using gestures</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* * Denotes a significant correlation at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). ** Denotes significant correlation at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
There was a high level of correlation between several of the teaching strategies. The use of questions and providing wait time were highly correlated ($p < .01$) with each other. This correlation is not unexpected as providing wait time would not occur unless the teacher asked questions. Also, when the two strategies, use of gestures and creating contexts, were combined it was strongly correlated ($p < .01$) with the two separate strategies, use of gestures and creating contexts. This correlation is not unexpected as the two separate variables are combined to create a new strategy. The lack of correlation between the other teaching strategies indicates they are measuring distinct teaching strategies and that multicollinearity (amount of similarity between at least two variables) between teaching strategies is not an issue.

*Research Question 4*

For the final research question, how do the teaching strategies used by the teacher predict the levels of engagement for ELs and their English speaking peers, a linear regression analysis was used to determine the contributions of the teaching strategies on the children’s engagement when their first languages were considered. The analysis used the teachers’ mean teaching strategies scores, which were calculated by adding all observances of each teaching strategy and dividing by the length of the observation (several observations did not last 15 minutes), to examine the effect on the engagement scores for both language groups (ELs and English speaking children; see Table 6). The six teaching strategies were entered into the regression analysis since it was not known if any or what teaching strategy was predictive of children’s engagement. The children’s first languages were also entered since it was possible there could be a language difference for the effectiveness of the teaching strategies on engagement. Combinations
of teaching strategies were not included in the analyses as in the correlation analysis since only one teaching strategy combination was significant at the alpha level 0.05. It seemed unlikely that teaching strategy combination would remain significant in the regression analysis since the level of significance was raised to minimize the effect of data overlap.

Table 6

*Regression Analysis for Teaching Strategy Use and Language Differences on Engagement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SEB</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language spoken by the child</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.043</td>
<td>.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating contexts</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.118</td>
<td>.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking questions</td>
<td>-.238</td>
<td>.278</td>
<td>-.231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using gestures</td>
<td>.389</td>
<td>.144</td>
<td>.377*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling language</td>
<td>.186</td>
<td>.352</td>
<td>.073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing wait time</td>
<td>.451</td>
<td>.312</td>
<td>.368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using visuals</td>
<td>.040</td>
<td>.103</td>
<td>.055</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* * Denotes a significant relationship at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

There was an overlap in the exposure to the teaching strategies in relation to the children’s engagement levels; children were observed in pairs, so each member of the pair experienced the exact same teaching strategies at the same frequency. As a result, it was impossible to determine which teaching strategy or strategies had greater influence on engagement levels for each member of the pair (target and peer) when the first language of the children was considered. To correct for this potential problem, the minimum level of statistical significance sought for these analyses was increased as is
recommended when a portion of the observations are correlated to each other (Stevens, 2002). However, this precaution was unnecessary as there was only one significant predictor of engagement regardless of first language differences.

Only one of all the teaching strategies, use of gestures, significantly predicted ($p < .01$) children’s engagement when the children’s first language was considered. This result was not unexpected as in the previous analyses the use of gestures was the only significant teaching strategy relating to engagement. However, it was surprising that only one teaching strategy had an impact on engagement when the children’s first languages were considered.

The effect size for the regression model was calculated. There was an effect size of $R = .193$ and an adjusted $R = .084$ indicating 19% and 8% respectively, of the variance in engagement levels is explained by the teaching strategies and language differences. The effect size analysis indicates there was not a substantial difference between the frequency of teaching strategies used and the children’s first languages on their engagement.

Discussion

The teachers’ use of six selected teaching strategies was examined using an observational format. While all teachers used each of the strategies, they differed in the frequency with which they used the strategies. The proportion of ELs in the classrooms did not appear to change the type and level of teaching strategies used during large group time. Children, despite language differences, appear to be engaged at similar levels regardless of the teaching strategies they experienced. It is possible no differences were found in engagement levels of the children as they had already received instruction in
English for the majority of a school year. It was difficult to determine if use of any of the teaching strategies positively or negatively affected engagement since all the children, regardless of first language, were highly engaged throughout the entire observation. These findings suggest that when the children are highly engaged they are able to attend to the language being used and thus, being able to understand and learn what is being presented by the teacher. This is consistent with the findings McWilliam, Trivette, and Dunst (1985) who found when children were either actively or passively engaged, for longer periods of time they have increased opportunities for learning. It is important for finding methods of increasing engagement levels as this affects the number of opportunities children have for learning, which in turn is associated with greater achievement rates (McGarity & Butts, 1984; McWilliam, Trivette, & Dunst).

Teachers most often used the strategies, creating language contexts and using visuals, during large group time and very rarely used the modeling language strategy. The use of gestures during large group time in preschool settings is a significant predictor of engagement among children as a group and across languages. It is possible this specific strategy was significant and not the other strategies since use of gestures was one of two strategies that was not language-based. Thus, perhaps the underlying influence of the amount of English required to understand the other strategies (creating contexts, asking questions, providing wait time, and modeling language) was not a prerequisite for understanding gestures. The ability of children to understand and appropriately respond to gestures may be a function of gestures crossing linguistic and language-based barriers. Thus, the use of gestures is a beneficial and helpful teaching strategy for all children regardless of their linguistic background. This corresponds to the findings of McNeil,
Alibali, and Evans (2000) who found English speaking preschoolers were able to comprehend messages when gestures accompanied the message. They found when the preschoolers were presented with a complex message with gestures, the gestures did not aid comprehension. It is possible the messages presented by the preschool teachers in this study did not present complex messages and that the gestures aided comprehension and understanding.

This was a ground-breaking study to begin to determine if recommended teaching strategies are beneficial for ELs, and examining children’s engagement during large group time. Very little prior research has been done in preschool settings focusing on ELs and how teachers modify their teaching to assist these children learn English and adjust to an all-English environment.

**Limitations**

The study has several limitations. The first limitation is that the ELs were not specifically identified by the classroom teacher; therefore, the observers were required to determine which children were ELs and English speakers. Thus, some of the children chosen by the observers may not have actually been ELs. As most to all of the children in the classroom had received instruction in English for an entire school year, they may have acquired sufficient English to sound like a typical preschooler who is acquiring language skills and knowledge. Another limitation is that there were very small numbers of ELs who did not speak Spanish as their first language. It is possible children from non-English and non-Spanish backgrounds respond differently in their engagement levels to the other teaching strategies observed. A third limitation is that all observations occurred in Head Start classrooms. Including preschools that were not associated with Head Start
may have revealed different frequencies of use of the teaching strategies. Another limitation is that only 30 teachers were observed. It is likely if a larger number of teachers were observed more or different teaching strategies it may be more predictive of engagement. It is also probably if a series of observations of the same teachers occurred, differences would be identified in the frequency they use the teaching strategies and would capture a clearer understanding of what strategies are typically used when an observer is not present. A final limitation is all of the observations occurred in a single state rather than several different states. It is possible different states have different opportunities for ELs while they are in preschool and there may be different standards that must be met by Head Start teachers in other states than what was observed in Iowa.

Achievement Gap

In a time when the number of children learning English is rising across all grades, especially in preschools, it is important to find methods for fostering their acquisition of English and diminishing the achievement and performance gaps that exist between ELs and children fluent in English. English learners have lower achievement and performance rates compared to their English speaking peers in (Abedi & Gandara, 2006; Gandara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003; Rumberger & Gandara, 2004).

The achievement gap between Hispanic children compared to White or Euro-American children is typically the gap that is addressed by educators and policy makers. According to NCES (as cited by Proctor, Dalton, & Grisham, 2007), children of Hispanic decent compared to all other ethnic and minority groups in the U.S. have the lowest rates of achievement and attainment in school. In a review of student achievement, Xu and Drame (2008) noted ELs often perform significantly below the grade averages in reading
and math and more much more likely to be placed in special education. However, there have been recent decreases in the achievement gap between Hispanics and other ethnic groups (Haycock, 2006).

The achievement gap between ELs and English speakers exists and persists for several reasons. According to Abedi and Gandara (2006), one of the main reasons for the achievement gap between these two groups is the complexity of the language used for and during assessments is often not what the ELs experience in the classroom. In their study, Abedi and Gandara noted when the linguistic complexity of the assessments was reduced, ELs performed better while still providing valid test results. In their review of California schools Rumberger and Gandara (2004) also found the teachers of English learners were more likely to be unable to communicate with the child and his or her family and had limited information about the child’s previous learning. As a result, the teachers relied heavily on test results that may not provide an accurate portrayal of what the child is capable. Rumberger and Gandara also noted students learning English are much more likely to have teachers who have emergency credentials; therefore, the students make little to no gains in their achievement and performance when compared to their English speaking peers who are more likely to have credentialed teachers and smaller class sizes. As a consequence, English learners as a group have lower achievement rates during their entire schooling.

Several suggestions have emerged about how to combat and reverse the achievement gap between ELs and their school peers. Haycock (2006) suggests the quality of teachers’ education and pre-teaching preparation needed to be revisited. She states the achievement gap in the students’ performance is linked to the quality of the
education and teaching they receive. The National Center for Education Statistics (2001) stated that only 26% of teacher participated in professional development training for working with children with limited English proficiency and 41% of teachers participated in training for working with children from diverse backgrounds.

Xu and Drame (2007) take a different perspective and recommend that teachers need to be aware of and understand the different evidence-based, developmentally appropriate practices that have been developed for working with children from diverse backgrounds. They continue by stating teachers need to understand and utilize strategies for fostering first and second language acquisition and make appropriate accommodations for children from diverse backgrounds until the children have a solid foundation in the language. The current study provided a starting place for creating a researched basis for the different teaching strategies that are recommended as developmentally appropriate practice by professionals and educators. While, many of the recommended teaching strategies were not predictive of engagement during large group time, it provided an opportunity to explore how often teachers use these teaching strategies which indicates their awareness and their level of comfort in using them during large group time.

**Implications and Future Directions**

There is a need for more research examining what facilitates and fosters ELs’ language acquisition and development. This research is critical for ELs in preschool settings, as it is likely in preschools that these children are first exposed to English. More research is needed to determine if these six teaching strategies, creating language contexts, asking questions, providing wait time, using gestures, modeling language use, and using visuals, and other teaching strategies are helpful in communicating and
teaching ELs and during which activities or settings they are most helpful. As researchers and educators prepare for an increased number of children learning English, it is essential to search for the best methods and strategies for helping them and all children reach their potential despite first language differences.

References:


CHAPTER 4. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

General Discussion

As the number of children learning English rapidly increases, it is important to examine and understand some current practices in preschool settings. It is essential to consider preschool settings as the number of children in preschool has increased dramatically within the last ten years (IES, 2008). It is also very likely that children who do not know English are first exposed to English in preschool settings.

As the number of EL children rises, it is important to seek out methods for creating effective learning environments for them, while at the same time keeping in mind the needs of native English speaking children. Several elements of preschool environments were discussed that can promote and facilitate language acquisition and development in preschoolers that have been researched and recommended by researchers and educational experts (DeBruin-Parecki, 2008; Greenberg & Rodriguez, 2007; Tabors, 2008). The most basic element is the classroom environment which includes the arrangement of the room, creating different learning areas, creating and maintaining a consistent routine, and expressing acceptance and value for all children. The second element is having an understanding of the elements of language acquisition and development which is indispensable when helping to nurture children’s language development. Finally, the last element, it is important to be able to use effectively teaching strategies that can help facilitate communication between children, especially ELs, in the classroom. The teaching strategies described have been heavily recommended by professionals and often they lack a strong research basis that ties the use of the strategy to achievement or later academic skills and success. This study was ground-
breaking in that it examined the affect of six different teaching strategies on children’s engagement when considering their first languages.

The study found during large group time teachers most often used the strategies, creating language contexts and using visuals, and used the other strategies less frequently, especially the modeling language strategy. It was found the use of gestures is a significant predictor of engagement among children as a group and across languages. It is possible this specific strategy was significant and not the other strategies since use of gestures was one of two strategies that was not language-based. Perhaps the underlying influence of the amount of English required to understand the other strategies (creating contexts, asking questions, providing wait time, and modeling language) is not a prerequisite for understanding gestures. The ability of children to understand and appropriately respond to gestures may be a function of gestures crossing linguistic and language-based barriers. Thus, the use of gestures is a beneficial and helpful teaching strategy for all children regardless of their linguistic background. This corresponds to the findings of McNeil, Alibali, and Evans (2000) who found English speaking preschoolers were able to comprehend verbal interactions and communications when gestures accompanied the message.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research and awareness is needed to more fully understand how the different elements of effective learning environments intertwine to nurture and promote language development in all children, but especially in ELs. There is a need for more research examining what facilitates and fosters ELs’ language acquisition and development. This research is critical for ELs in preschool settings, as it is likely in
preschools that these children are first exposed to English. Continued examination is needed to understand and recognize the role the children’s first languages play in the acquisition of a second language and how learning a second language affects the first language development, and what this implies for family communication. Finally, there is a growing need to understand how teachers can effectively teach all children, but especially ELs as they pose a challenge to teachers who often lack training and adequate preparation to teach ELs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001).

As researchers and educators prepare for an increased number of children learning English, it cannot be underscored how essential is it to study and search for effective teaching methods and strategies that can facilitate and promote children’s learning and development. It is especially important to find effective teaching methods for ELs that can help them and all children reach their potential as tomorrow’s educators and leaders, regardless of their first languages. While searching for the best means of helping all children, it is important to inspire and strengthen their language skills. As Ludwig Wittenstein once said, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (as cited by Wardhough, 2006, p. 219).

References:


APPENDIX A. PETSA TEACHER SURVEY

About the children in your classroom

1. How many children do you have in your classroom whose first/primary language is English? _______ children.

2. How many children do you have in your classroom whose first/primary language is NOT English? ________ children.

3. What languages are the first/primary languages spoken by the children who do not speak English? On the blank, please indicate how many children speak that language as a first language.
   a. Spanish  ________
   b. Sudanese ________
   c. Bosnian ________
   d. Arabic ________
   e. Hmong ________
   f. Chinese ________
   g. Vietnamese ________
   h. Laotian ________
   i. Other ________ What language(s)? ___________________

4. For the children who are learning English, how many of these students would you rate as having an EXCELLENT understanding of English? ________
   a. A GOOD understanding of English? ________
   b. A FAIR understanding of English? ________
   c. A POOR understanding of English? ________
5. For the children who are learning English, how many of these students would you rate as having an EXCELLENT ability to communicate in English? ________
   a. A GOOD ability to communicate in English? __________
   b. A FAIR ability to communicate in English? __________
   c. A POOR ability to communicate in English? __________
6. How many children do you have in your classroom who have special needs (i.e., a speech or language disability, a developmental delay, etc.)? ________ children.
7. How many children who are English learners are also children who have special needs? __________

About you

8. What gender are you? Female Male
9. How many years have you been teaching preschool? __________
10. If you have taught other grades than preschool, what is the total length of time you have been teaching? ________________ years.
11. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
   a. High School
   b. GED
   c. A.A. or A.S.
   d. B.A. or B.S.
   e. M.A. or M.S.
   f. Ph.D.
12. If you attended college, what was your major?
   a. Early Child Development
b. Child Development

c. Early Childhood Education

d. Education

e. Other _____________________________

13. What is your first/primary language? ___________________________

14. What other language(s) do you speak?
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

15. Which of the following best describes your racial group? (circle one)
   a. White (Caucasian)                      f. Middle Eastern
   b. Black or African American             g. Biracial/Multi-racial
   c. American Indian or Alaska Native     h. Hispanic
   d. Asian                                i. Other ______________________________
   e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

16. Is there anything else you would like to add or share?
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

___________
APPENDIX B. PETSA SCORING DEFINITIONS

Preschool Engagement and Teaching Strategies Assessment

Teaching strategies are observed using a partial interval time sample. Child engagement is also observed using a partial time sample. Observational coding lasts for 5 minutes and then the observer has a break of 1 minute before coding again. The observation begins when the children are seated (typically in a large circle) around the head teacher and when the teacher has moved from transitioning the children from the prior activity to needing to sit quietly and participate in group time. Since the assessment is concerned with teaching strategies, only large group time led by the head teacher should be observed.

The ID is the identification number assigned to each classroom. Data Collector refers to the name of the person conducting the observation. The Reliability line is for referencing whether the observation is for reliability purposes.

Once the large group time has started, the observer should start a timer that counts up in seconds and immediately begin observing and coding for the desired teaching strategies. Teaching strategies are observed for 15 seconds and then engagement of two children is observed for 5 seconds before returning to observing for teaching strategies. The numbers above the grid are the start times, in seconds, that the observer is to switch between observing for teaching strategies and child engagement.

Teaching Strategies
The letters, C, Q, G, M, W, and V (along the left column) refer to the 6 different teaching strategies used by the head teacher that are being observed. The teaching strategies are observed for 15 seconds. A check mark is place in the corresponding box when the strategy occurs any time during the 15 second interval. Note: strategies may occur more than once during that interval, but only the initial occurrence of that particular strategy is recorded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Teaching Strategy</th>
<th>Inclusions/Exclusions</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Creating context</td>
<td>Includes repetition of particular words, placing the word(s) in context, and defining the word(s)</td>
<td>1. “The word dangerous means that something is not safe.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. “A penguin is a kind of bird that lives where it’s really cold.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>Asks</td>
<td>About the books or the topic</td>
<td>1. “What do you think…?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter</td>
<td>Teaching Strategy</td>
<td>Inclusions/Exclusions</td>
<td>Examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| G      | Gestures          | Includes exaggerated facial expressions that indicate appropriate feelings given the situation; excludes sign language | 1. Shrugging  
2. Nodding head  
3. A sad face with lip protruding and hands near the eyes to suggest tears |
| M      | Modeling language use | Includes extending and expanding on a child’s utterance and/or asking the child to repeat part of what was extended/expanded to them | 1. “Yes, that’s the red car next to the blue piece of paper. Can you say, ‘the red car’?”  
2. “Yes, it’s raining outside. That means we would get wet if we went outside.” |
| W      | Wait time         | A pause of at least 3 seconds between the presentation of a question and clarification from the teacher or another statement from the teacher | 1. “What do you think (child’s name)? (1…2…3…) “I think it’s….”  
2. “Does anyone remember what we talked about yesterday in large group? (1…2…3…) “Remember it had something to do with….” |
| V      | Use of visuals    | Includes pictures in book(s) read aloud or props/objects | 1. The teacher holds up a 3D plastic horse.  
2. The teacher holds up a picture and shows it to the children. |

**Engagement**

The symbols +/-, T, and P refer to the children’s engagement. A plus sign (+) is placed in the appropriate box to represent the child (either the target child or peer) was engaged during the 5 second observation and a negative sign (-) is placed in the appropriate box to represent the child (either the target child or peer) was unengaged during the same 5 seconds. The letter T refers to the target child. This child is an English learner. This child should be identified by the teacher prior to the beginning of the observation. If this is not possible, the observer should arrive early to the classroom (approximately 30 to 60 minutes) to observe the children playing or involved in another activity to ascertain the children’s English fluency. The letter P refers to a peer, who is not an English learner. This child should be identified in the same manner as described for the target child. The
peer should be of the same gender as the selected target child (i.e., if the target child is a boy, then the peer chosen should be a boy).

A child is engaged when any one of these behaviors are observed:
  Visual fixation (e.g., eyes on the teacher, the book)
  Verbal communication (e.g., initiating or responding/answering the teacher; not a peer)
  Non-verbal communication (e.g., pointing, showing)
  Listening (e.g., looking, nodding)

A child is NOT engaged when any of these behaviors are observed:
  Staring into space (e.g., away from the teacher, the book)
  Wandering (e.g., not sitting in his/her spot in the circle)
  Crying
  Aggressive behavior or interacting in any way with a peer
## Preschool Engagement and Teaching Strategies Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID:</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Data Collector</th>
<th>Reliability: Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

|     | 0    | 15  | 20   | 35  | 40  | 55  | 0    | 15  | 20   | 35  | 40  | 55  | 0    | 15  | 20   | 35  | 40  | 55  | 0    | 15  | 20   | 35  | 40  | 55  | 0    | 15  | 20   | 35  | 40  | 55  | 0    | 15  | 20   | 35  | 40  | 55  | 0    |
|-----|------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|------|
| C   | T    | T   | T    | T   | T   | T   | T    | T   | T    | T   | T   | T   | T    | T   | T    | T   | T   | T   | T    | T   | T    | T   | T   | T   | T    | T   | T    | T   | T   | T   | T    | T   | T    | T   | T   | T   | T    |
| Q   |     |     |      |     |     |     |      |     |      |     |     |     |      |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| G   |     |     |      |     |     |     |      |     |      |     |     |     |      |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| M   |     |     |      |     |     |     |      |     |      |     |     |     |      |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| W   |     |     |      |     |     |     |      |     |      |     |     |     |      |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| V   |     |     |      |     |     |     |      |     |      |     |     |     |      |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
|     |     |     |      |     |     |     |      |     |      |     |     |     |      |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |

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