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Erin E. Flynn

Portland State University, flynn2@pdx.edu

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Language Rich Early Childhood Classroom: Simple But Powerful Beginnings

Erin Elizabeth Flynn

Erin Elizabeth Flynn is an Assistant Professor of Child and Family Studies at Portland State University, Portland, OR, USA; e-mail [flynn2@pdx.edu](mailto:flynn2@pdx.edu).

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**Abstract**

This article highlights research exploring the benefits of small group storytelling as a way to promote rich language in early childhood classrooms. Using the storytelling of children from a preschool classroom serving lower SES children, the collaborative affordances of story circles are explored. Results show that small group storytelling engages children in ways of using language associated with literacy learning. When storytelling, children use language in extended, multi-clause turns, relaying what happened in another context. Story requires children to communicate what happened as well as the interpersonal significance of events. Small group storytelling also gives children a chance to practice diverse genres of story and variations in forms of meaning-making. The aim of the article is to help teachers appreciate the powerful uses of language present even in children's seemingly simple stories.

### Language Rich Early Childhood Classroom: Simple But Powerful Beginnings

[Teaser Text] Promoting language development in the early years may be easier than is often imagined: small group storytelling creates strong foundations by engaging children in simple, but powerful uses of language.

[Pause and Ponder]

- How can teachers be sure children are using rich language in crowded classrooms?
- Children have diverse strengths, interests, and ways of using language. How can teachers encourage all children to use language in the classroom?
- What opportunities do you provide for children to use language in extended turns? How can you use storytelling in your classroom to encourage children to use more extensive language?

Often in our early childhood centers and elementary schools, the quiet classroom is valued as a space for orderly, productive work. The image of students silently working, engrossed in the task at hand fulfills many of our expectations about how children should learn. In this quiet study, new skills are practiced and mastered.

As seductive as the image of the quiet, productive classroom can be, there is something fundamental missing from classrooms that lack a busy, even noisy hum. What the quiet classroom often lacks is a language rich learning environment. Language rich learning environments provide opportunities for children to use and to hear language in the kind of extended turns associated with language learning.

A growing body of evidence shows that too many of children's early classrooms are missing the quality of language needed for language learning (Dickinson, 2011; Dickinson & Tabors,

2001; Smith & Dickinson, 1994). For example, over a third of state funded preschools showed low levels of instructional quality, especially in terms of the language teachers used to provide responsive feedback and support for conceptual understanding (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007). Further, teachers have been shown to ask too few open-ended questions which invite extended language use from children (Justice et al., 2008).

The absence of rich language is especially common in classrooms serving children of lower socioeconomic status (SES). For example, in kindergarten classrooms serving lower SES students, children were less likely than their more affluent peers to have intentional, systematic, or sophisticated exposure to language (Wright & Neuman, 2014).

Early childhood classrooms need to become laboratories for language. To meet this goal, teachers must make extended language use routine. Story circles, a routine, collaborative storytelling activity, support and promote language use. Though the language produced in young children's stories seems simple, students' stories show evidence of the kind of sophistication connected to known language learning practices.

### **Story Circles: Making Rich Language Routine**

One consequence of the quiet classroom that lacks a language rich environment is that preschool and kindergarten classrooms miss opportunities to give children a strong foundation for literacy. Teachers cannot assume that students use and hear rich language in the classroom. Instead, they need to plan ongoing ways to engage children in the kind of language associated with literacy learning.

Storytelling is a powerful way to make using literacy-focused language routine. Story circles, a weekly, small group activity, give children the chance to use language in protected

turns. Story circles consist of four or five children who meet once a week to take turns telling stories. In story circles, each child takes a turn telling a story in response to a brief prompt: “This is a story circle. In story circles, you can tell a story about anything you want.”

Story circles are a child-led activity which derive their power from the thoughts and interests of the classroom children. The role of the teacher is to model storytelling by telling his or her own brief story in the very first story circle and to facilitate by helping children take turns and listen attentively to others. Teachers should not correct children’s use of language because story circles leverage students’ ability to learn from one another.

### **Story Circles Elicit Specialized Ways of Using Language**

Storytelling requires specialized ways of using language, ways that are closely associated with learning language needed for literacy (Dickinson & McCabe, 2001; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; National Early Literacy Panel, 2009). On the surface, preschool children use language in simple and everyday ways in story circles. The danger of this impression is that teachers can take for granted the importance of providing opportunities for children to tell their own stories because the sophistication of children’s language is not immediately apparent.

A closer look at the stories produced in story circles reveal many of the specialized ways of using language related to literacy, including language that:

- relays events removed from the immediate context;
- communicates an experience and its interpersonal significance;
- is used in extended turns, including the use of syntactically complex utterances; and,
- approximates known forms of story including variations in ways of telling story.

The following examples come from a larger study of story circles in preschool classrooms serving lower SES English, Spanish, and Ukrainian speakers. All student names are pseudonyms.

### **Relaying Experience in a New Context**

Hearing and using language which relays events removed from the immediate context has long been recognized as a necessary preparation for literacy (Demir & Rowe, 2015; Dickinson & Tabor, 2001; Rowe, 2013; Smith & Dickinson, 1994; Snow, 1991). Often referred to as decontextualized language, language which relays events in a new context is related to vocabulary learning. Children exposed to this type of language demonstrate greater word knowledge than their peers in classrooms with less talk about what is not immediately present (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Rowe, 2013).

When children use language to relay events in a new context they must also attend to the needs of their listeners who have not shared the experience, a central skill for storying experience. At a minimum, children must provide enough information for their listener to understand and imagine what has been relayed. They must orient the listener with contextualizing information.

Alejandra and Tereza, two children who participated in story circles, employed two distinct strategies typical of more advanced storytelling to aid understanding. The first strategy is to announce what you intend to tell about as a way to ready the listener for what is to come. The name for this storytelling device is an abstract.

Tereza told a story about her mother who does “everything,” using an abstract to aid understanding. She began her story by saying (commas mark places where the child paused; periods mark full stops), “Today, I’m going to tell a story about my mom.” Alejandra followed suit,

saying, “This story is about my sisters.” In both instances, the children made an explicit statement about the topic of their story. In doing so, they employed a common storytelling device and demonstrated an awareness of the need to use language in special ways to help a listener understand what occurred in another context.

The second strategy used by the two young storytellers was to orient the listener to events by indicating the time, place, and participants of interest. In storytelling, this device is called an orientation. Orientations situate the story’s events in a context so that the listener can understand the circumstances of events.

The two storytellers employed the common storytelling device of an orientation as a way to establish the context for events in their stories. Alejandra began her second story with the orientation: “One time, I go to my grandma’s house.”



Tereza responded with a similar orientation: “Um, I go to my grandmom, and to, in Ukraine.” Contextualizing events in this way is an essential feature of story and a necessity of relaying events removed from the immediate context.

It can be easy to overlook the value of talking about things that are not immediately present in the classroom environment, but the research is clear: Opportunities to talk about events in a new context matter for language learning and for developing literacy skill.

### **Communicating an Experience and its Significance**

Storytelling involves telling about an experience and the interpersonal significance of that experience (Bruner, 1986; Labov, 1972). Storytellers are always seeking to communicate what



happened and why it matters. This often occurs by the storyteller conveying what they think and feel, giving the story its emotional content, but also revealing the point or purpose of the telling.

The storytelling device through which a storyteller conveys the interpersonal significance of a story is called evaluation. Evaluation can be a direct and explicit statement of thought or feeling like when Alejandra said, “I love my sisters.” Or, it can be interspersed throughout the story through adverbs and other intensifiers like changes in tone, repetition, and exclamatory statements.

This more subtle, interspersed form of evaluation occurs in a story Tereza told about her mother. She used her language to emphasize the point that her mother works so hard and does so much. For example, she said, “She always clean ups, makes food, and doing everything in the kitchen.” Tereza used the adverb “always” repeatedly in her story as a way to convey the frequency of her mother’s labor. She used a series of verbs - “cleans up,” “makes food,” “doing everything” - to convey the enormity of all that her mother does. In the final sentence, she used repetition to emphasize and summarize her story about her mother, saying “She’s always cleaning up and doing stuff.”

In each instance, the children practiced telling about what happened and how they think and feel about what happened. Alejandra’s story is significant because it is about her sisters whom she loves. Tereza marveled at her mother and how much she does in the home. In another story, Diamond played a “cool game,” and relayed how she had gone to many good places to play. Because the listener has not experienced the events, the storyteller must not only set the context for what has occurred, but effectively communicate the emotional significance so they can guide the listener to a shared understanding.

### Speaking in Extended Turns

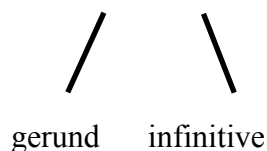
Children learn language when they have opportunities to use it in extended turns and to elaborate on ideas (Dickinson, 2011; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1991; Snow & Beals, 2006; Weizman & Snow, 2001). Further, when children hear longer, more complex utterances it supports language learning (Huttenlocher et al., 2002). For instance, when teachers and parents use more syntactically complex language, the children they care for use and understand more syntactically complex language (Huttenlocher et al., 2002; Justice et al., 2013).

Speaking in extended turns and using syntactically complex utterances is important because children use context cues, including cues provided from sentence structure to learn new words (Naigles & Hoff-Ginsberg, 1998). Familiarity with diverse syntactic forms predicts language comprehension, and is ultimately related to reading comprehension (Vellutino et al., 1991).

Syntactically complex sentences include multi-clause sentences and sentences which include more complex verb forms (Huttenlocher et al., 2002; Justice et al., 2013). Syntactically complex sentences can take many different forms. For instance, in Tereza's story about her mother, she used three different types of syntactically complex sentence constructions:

- 1) a gerund with an infinitive,

“Today, I’m going to tell a story about my mom.”



- 2) a main clause and dependent clause,

“My mom is staying home, cause Victor is too little.”

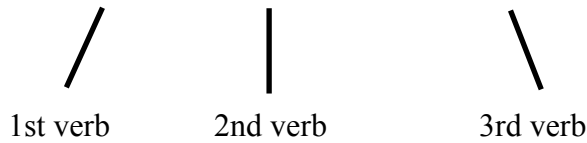


main clause

dependent clause

3) a coordinated clause with a single subject, but multiple verbs.

“She always clean ups, makes food, and doing everything in the kitchen.”



Compared to a more simple sentence construction like “I love my sisters,” syntactically complex utterances package more information together. This is why syntactically complex utterances are thought of as a denser, more sophisticated form of language, the very type of language needed to successfully navigate written texts.

### **Approximating Known Forms of Story**

Young children’s simple beginnings with language show how even young children can practice the specialized ways of using language needed for literacy. For example, the children’s stories approximated known forms of story used by elementary school children (Martin & Rose, 2008) and adults (Plum, 2004; Rothery & Stenglin, 1997). Familiarity with known forms of story, or genres, is necessary for skillful reading and writing (Kress, 1994) as is the ability to tell stories in canonical ways (Bliss & McCabe, 2008; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

One known form of story is a recount. Recounts are stories which unfold as a series of events (Martin & Rose, 2008; Rothery & Stenglin, 1997). A common form for recount stories is for the author to orient the listener to events, to cast experience as a series of events or actions, and to conclude by reorienting the listener, referring back to the beginning of the story in some way.

Alejandra told a story about a visit with her grandmother that is a good approximation of a recount type story. The story began with an orientation which establishes the context: “One time, I go to my grandma’s house.” Then, the story unfolded as a series of events: Alejandra goes to sleep; she watches television; her dog rests. Finally, the story ends with a kind of natural conclusion in which Alejandra returns to her own home.

Another known form of story is an observation. Observations are stories which unfold mostly through description, feeling almost frozen in time (Martin & Rose, 2008; Rothery & Stenglin, 1997). A common form for observational stories is for the author to orient the listener to events, to cast experience primarily through description, and to conclude by commenting often through the use of evaluation which conveys the author’s thoughts or feelings.

Tereza practiced telling an observational type story in a description of her visit to her grandmother. Tereza began her story with an orientation: “Um, I go to my grandmom, and to, in Ukraine.” Then, she relayed an action - “And in Ukraine, I was playing with my cat.” - before describing the cat and her garden in Ukraine: “And he was wery black, like a, like a dark spy. And, um, I got my own garden in Ukraine. And I got. There, I got a lot of berries. And strawberries, blueberries, everything.”

Tereza concluded with a small evaluative statement in which she used the adverb *even* to emphasize all that the garden contains: “And even we got, a little bit of, onions.” This ending is not the kind of more extended comment that one might find in mature storytelling, but it does serve the function of reinforcing Tereza’s point about the quality of the garden.

Casting experience in expected forms extends beyond known genres of story to include variations in ways of using language. Research into young children’s storytelling shows that

children's ways of using language derive from and are supported by experiences in the home and broader community (Heath, 1983; McCabe, 1997; Miller, Chen, & Olivarez, 2014). For instance, children have been documented using thematic links in a more topic associating style (Champion, 2002; Michaels, 1981), telling stories in brief, almost haiku like stanzas (Minami, 2002), and telling stories that emphasize people and place, giving a feeling of being deeply rooted in context (McCabe, 1997).

For example, Diamond told a story about the larger theme of going places to play. Her story unfolded in four distinct thematically linked episodes commonly used in topic associating stories. Each new episode was signaled through a change in context by orienting the listener to a new location.

Each new context was linked to the larger theme of playing introduced in a classmate's story and continued by Diamond in her story orientation: "(Episode 1) When I was a little girl, I liked to play with my mommy. Um, we go to the park. And we both go on the slide. I go on her lap. And I was one. (Episode 2) We went to a little place. And it was like for big kids, but you can go with a little kid. If you have them with you, with a grownup. (Episode 3) And um, and then I went to Chuck E. Cheese. And there was a cool game. (Episode 4) And um, and then I went to go to Key Lime Cove. And then I went to a waterfall. The end."

Though the episodic, thematic linking employed in stories like Diamond's can go unrecognized as a sophisticated form of meaning-making, the implicit associations and nonlinear storytelling technique are a highly valued, viable way to communicate experience (Bliss & McCabe, 2008; Cazden, 1988; Michaels, 1981). It is important for teachers to be aware of these types of meaning-making alternatives when children story their experience.

In hearing variations in forms of story, children become exposed to a broader range of meaning-making strategies, productively building on the diversity of the classroom. In this respect, Diamond did not just practice using language in ways that aligned with more mature forms of storytelling, she modeled language use for her peers. This type of modeling leverages the affordances of multilingual, multicultural classrooms as children have the opportunity to hear longer, thematically linked, and detailed stories like Diamond's.

### **Story Circles Foster Collaboration**

In preschool classrooms, children can make simple beginnings using language in story circles. Story circles are particularly effective contexts for language use because in story circles children:

- model ways of using language and storytelling topics;
- become motivated to keep sharing their experiences;
- provide encouragement to other children;
- uncover their shared and unique experiences through the conversational quality of the story circle; and,
- support the use of variations in storytelling.

Next, we will see how children's interaction in the story circle highlights the potential of story circles for literacy-focused language development. The first example shows how children who prefer to wait or to quietly listen find support to use language in story circles by recounting the storytelling of Alejandra, a four year old Latina whose home language was Spanish, and Tereza, a five year old Ukrainian American whose home language was Ukrainian.

Notably, the teacher did not intervene in the story circle. Instead, the teacher's task is to select children who can productively learn from one another. In this case, Alejandra, a younger, Latina was paired with Tereza, a child Alejandra routinely played with who was older and demonstrated stronger language skills in the classroom. Strategically pairing children leverages the affordances of peer-based learning, shifting the teacher's role to listening and monitoring for progress over time.

### **Modeling Language**

In Alejandra's first story circle she quietly listened as the other children in her group told stories about their families. One participant told a story about a little girl who fought with her family. Tereza told a story about her baby brother who acted "so silly." When it was Alejandra's turn, she declined to tell a story.

The next week, Tereza told a story about her mother who takes care of the home: "Today, I'm going to tell a story about my mom. My mom is staying home, cause Victor is too little. And mommy's all, doing all the home work. She always clean ups, makes food, and doing everything in the kitchen. She's always cleaning up and doing stuff."

Alejandra responded by telling about important members of her own family. She said: "This story is about my sisters. I love my sisters. Um, at my house her play con me. That's all." Though brief, Alejandra made a simple beginning for using language in the classroom. She did so by telling a story based in her own experience and responsive to the stories of her group mates.

Alejandra was buoyed by the contributions of her group members who, in the early weeks, shared stories about their home life - playing with the family dog, a mother who does

“everything.” The other children modeled ways of using language and storytelling topics for Alejandra. In this way, story circles are supportive chances to use language because Alejandra did not need to invent her contribution. Instead, she looked to her own life and to the stories of her classmates for guidance.

### **Motivating Telling More**

Even a reluctant storytelling turn can lead to more opportunities to use language. Alejandra expanded on her simple beginning after her story circle turn ended. As the circle dispersed, she told the teacher, “I have two sisters at my house with me. My two sisters. One is half eight. (Holds up seven fingers.) The other is six. (Lowers one finger.)” Later that day at lunch, Alejandra talked about her sisters again, this time describing how she played dolls with them at home.

Simply having the invitation to tell about her life experiences was enough to encourage Alejandra to consider the classroom a space to talk about what was important to her. In this respect, the value of a protected space for language is that it creates opportunities for children to showcase what they know, motivating children to say more both within and beyond the story circle activity.

### **Providing Encouragement**

In the third week, Alejandra’s group members continued telling stories that reflected their life experiences: recounting a day at the park with the family puppy, retelling the *Three Little Pigs* fairy tale, remembering a tearful separation from one’s mother. Just like in the first week of storytelling, Alejandra quietly listened and declined to tell her own story.



In the fourth week, Alejandra initially again declined her turn. One of the other children in her group, Adriana, a four year old Latina, encouraged Alejandra. She referred to a doll that Alejandra was holding in her arms saying in a cooing voice, “Oh, come on. Tell the little baby a story.”

Alejandra acquiesced, saying: “One time, I go to my grandma’s house. But I go sleep. Um, then I go, um, I see the TV. Um, con my grandma. And then, our dog go to sleep. And then, I go to my house. I’m all done.” Alejandra again drew on the support of her group members. This time through a direct act of encouragement. As a result, she was able to tell a more expansive story, saying more than in her previous turn.

### **Uncovering Shared and Unique Experiences**

Even simple beginnings like Alejandra’s make a positive contribution to the classroom discussion. Tereza told the next story, responding to Alejandra’s account of a visit to her grandmother’s house to watch television. Tereza described her own visit to her grandmother, saying: “Um, I go to my grandmom, and to, in Ukraine. And in Ukraine, I was playing with my cat. And he was wery black, like a, like a dark spy. And, um, I got my own garden in Ukraine. And I got. There, I got a lot of berries. And strawberries, blueberries, everything. And even we got, a little bit of, onions. I am done.” In this instance, Alejandra did not just draw on the support of her classmates to tell a story, but her own storytelling served as a source of inspiration for a group member’s story as the two exchanged accounts about visiting with their grandmother.

The exchange of stories in the story circle has a conversational quality as the young children discovered their shared and unique experiences. Children like Alejandra and Tereza demonstrated their capacity to listen, comprehend, make connections, and respond in kind. In doing so,

they drew on each other's strengths, modeling language for each other, and building on the efforts of their group members.

### **Supporting Variations in Storytelling**

Story circles support children positioning themselves in relation to the social world of the classroom, and in this case the multiple ethnic and linguistic identities present, by providing a protected space for children to practice using language to communicate experience, and in communicating experience, to navigate their place in the multicultural classroom.

The conversational quality of story circles supported children telling stories in ways that reflect variation in ways of using language. For instance, just as Alejandra described watching television "con my grandma," children in this sample used code switching in their stories switching between their home language and English. English was the language most prevalently spoken in the classroom.

For example, Martin, a four year old Latino child whose home language was Spanish, told a story which began, "Um, my dad bought me a fire engine and trains." In the ensuing story, Alex, a five year old whose home language was Ukrainian, told a story that began in Ukrainian and ended in English. He said: "я пішов магазину (I went to the store). And, and, and mommy have a choo choo train. And let me play this choo choo train. All day."

Alex responded to and extended the ideas begun in Martin's story, picking up ideas about the purchasing of toys, trains as an item of interest, and even a parent as a central figure in making play with toys possible. He did so by using the language available to him, keeping the conversation in story going. Alex drew on the language norms of the classroom, connecting with

Martin over shared interests, while aligning himself with the children in the classroom who spoke a mix of Ukrainian and English in play in the classroom.

Using the story circle as a space to connect over ideas, the children were freed to use diverse forms of story such as a topic associating style, a documented form of storytelling amongst African American storytellers (Champion, 2002; Michaels, 1981; Hyon & Sulzby, 1994). For instance, Maricruz, a four year old Latina who spoke Spanish, told a story about when, “Me and my mommy were playing in the park.”

Diamond, a five year old African American girl who spoke English as her home language, responded to and developed Maricruz’s theme the next week: “When I was a little girl, I liked to play with my mommy. Um, we go to the park. And we both go on the slide. I go on her lap. And I was one. We went to a little place. And it was like for big kids, but you can go with a little kid. If you have them with you, with a grownup. And um, and then I went to Chuck E. Cheese. And there was a cool game. And um, and then I went to go to Key Lime Cove. And then I went to a waterfall. The end.”

Just as in the storytelling of Alejandra, Tereza, Martin, and Alex, Diamond made a direct connection to the ideas raised by a circle-mate, telling a story that began with similar ideas of playing, “with my mommy,” and being at the park. Diamond expanded on these initial ideas, elaborating on other places and types of play.

Seminal research shows that teachers are not always prepared for and supportive of variation in ways of using language, especially ways of using language drawn from outside European American language traditions (Michaels, 1981; Cazden, 1988). However, the children

readily exchange stories that drew on varied and distinct ways of using language, modeling diverse possibilities for storying experience.

### **Promoting Language in the Classroom**

The first step to supporting children's literacy-focused language development is to engage children in extended uses of language. Talk about things beyond the immediate classroom environment. One easy way to do this is to tap into children's experiences in their lives outside of school, storying experience beyond the classroom walls.

Remember, story circles are easy to use. Simply, strategically organize children into groups of four or five. Tell a brief example story in the very first story circle to model the activity. Help children take turns. Listen carefully to children's ideas and monitor their progress using language. Have children meet in their story circle groups once a week so that children can build an ongoing dialogue over time.

Story circles bring the ideas, interests, and relationships that are important to students to the center of classroom life, allowing these ideas to animate learning in the classroom. Capture these interests by audio recording story circles, noting important and repeating themes in children's stories. Audio recorded stories also offer a quick and easy way to collect language samples from students and measure their progress over the course of the year.

To extend children's language learning through storytelling you can build on children's initial oral stories through writing development activities. For instance, type children's stories, allowing children to draw illustrations and make small books. This offers children an opportunity to develop a sense of "what it means to be a writer" (Ray & Glover, 2008, p.3), connecting orally telling stories with producing written texts.

Using children's thoughts, feelings, and ideas as a foundation for classroom learning allows teachers to support children in concentrated study of valued themes. Further develop children's ideas through classroom studies that draw on common and compelling story circle themes. For example, Alejandra's, Tereza's, and Diamond's stories offer rich potential for social studies lessons about neighborhoods, families, or even all-about-me activities.

Stories like Tereza's description of her garden in the Ukraine can be used as inspiration for a science study on gardens. Such a study might include growing a classroom garden, reading informational and fictional stories about gardens, and participating in classroom cooking activities that include garden vegetables.

Promoting language development in the early years may be easier than is often imagined: position young children as authorities with valuable knowledge, create a protected space for extended use of language, develop a culture of thoughtful listening, and maintain an appreciation for the value of diverse forms of language. Story circles create a strong foundation by engaging children in seemingly simple, but powerful uses of language.

[Take Action!]

1. Organize children into small groups of 4 or 5, considering children's strengths and areas in need of further support.
2. Incorporate story circles into your weekly routine, dedicating at least one day for small group storytelling.

3. Audio record and listen to children's stories, noting valued themes and prominent ways of using language.
4. Build on children's stories through either a writing activity or a thematic study based on their ideas and interests.
5. Reflect on the opportunities for children to use language in extended turns in the classroom.

Be sure to engage each child in an extended conversation this week.

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