

The expressive realities of 5- and 6-year-olds in low socioeconomic schools

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KEY POINTS

- A child's ability to understand and communicate well in English directly and indirectly affects how the child makes the transition to English literacy.
- It is essential to provide optimal classroom conditions for the development of young children's oral expression as an important stage in the journey towards literacy.
- However, interactional and language patterns in the classroom are typically teacher-directed and teacher-dominated, and teachers seldom engage in rich conversations with their students.
- To expand the quality and quantity of 5- and 6-year-old students' expression in the classroom, teachers need to create rich oral and expressive classroom environments.
- In this study, teachers improved the quality and quantity of students' oral expression by changing the interactional and language patterns they used in their classrooms.
- Teachers changed from initiate–respond–evaluate interactions to making elaborative responses that expand the child's message and meaning.

Many 5- and 6-year-old students in low socioeconomic schools have difficulty expressing ideas fluently and coherently in English, which impacts on their ability to participate fully in the classroom and to make the transition to literacy. The classroom has the greatest potential, outside of home and family, to provide the quality and quantity of interaction and expression these children need to expand their English language resources to support their ongoing learning. This article reports on a study investigating the realities of these students' competence and experiences in oral expression and some important findings for how teachers can create rich oral and expressive classroom environments for their learners.

A child's ability to understand and communicate well in English directly and indirectly affects how they engage with learning in the classroom and their transition to literacy. Children from socioeconomically advantaged communities in New Zealand generally start school with a working vocabulary of 6,000 or more words in English. They have well-established and age-appropriate language resources that enable them to understand the language of the classroom and help them to express their meaning orally (Moses, 2005). Evidence (e.g., Hattie et al., 2005; Goldenburg, 2001) suggests that, on average, children from low socioeconomic communities start school with a receptive and expressive vocabulary of less than half this number.

There is general agreement among experts that a child's verbal memory, receptive and expressive language, receptive vocabulary and phonological awareness are strong predictors of success and failure in reading (Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000). Perhaps even more compelling, a child needs to have effective oral language to fully engage and participate in the classroom (Christie, 2002; van Hees, 2007).

While there are many factors affecting students' ability to express themselves orally, the focus for this study was to examine the patterns of interaction and expression in Years 1 and 2 classrooms and to identify whether these patterns were the best possible for developing students' acquisition and use of English. Global research and literature suggest that the environmental conditions of the classroom do not generally support the production of the best possible quality or quantity of expression by students. For students who start school with limited language resources in English, it is critical that we identify how changes to the interactional and language patterns in

the classroom can affect and expand the quality and quantity of their oral expression and enhance their transition to literacy.

Theoretical perspectives underpinning the study

When considering the development of oral expression, it is important to consider how language is learnt and acquired. First-language acquisition research, in particular, offers critical insights. Hoff (2006) identifies key factors that affect a child's acquisition of any language. Of prime importance is that both the child and the caregiver are engaged in frequent verbal exchanges and that responses to the child focus on meaning, using grammatical structures that are in the child's zone of proximal development.¹ Talk that elicits conversation from the child promotes grammatical development. The total quantity of speech addressed to a child is related to general measures of cognitive and linguistic development. Optimal verbal exchanges between the child and caregiver provide the child with necessary in-built recycling (redundancy) and reshaping of what gets expressed by the child (recasting). Elaborative or expanding responses by the caregiver are positive predictors of grammatical development, accounting for between 18 and 40 percent of variance among children. Children who hear longer utterances are more advanced in syntactic development. The more speech heard and produced by a child, the greater their vocabulary resources. These critical factors foreground the importance of a child frequently engaging in rich and meaningful conversation with a responsive and scaffolding "other".

FOCUS ON DEVELOPING LANGUAGE

So what are “typical” interactional and language patterns in the classroom and how closely do these match the best conditions for learning language? Cazden (2001) noted that teachers have the role-given right to speak at any time and to any person, while students have restricted rights and opportunities to speak and express themselves. Teachers may frequently choose to direct the verbal traffic—a culture of raising hands and selecting someone to speak—and teachers nominate student speakers 88 percent of the time. Of the remaining 12 percent of the time, half is spontaneous, “nonlegitimate” speaking, only half of which is accepted by the teacher.

A closer examination of teacher talk shows teachers seldom engage in rich conversations with their students (Chin, 2006; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Typically, the teacher initiates, followed by minimal responses by the students, followed by evaluative feedback or further questioning from the teacher. Responses to a student are generally not elaborative and frequently do not expand the students’ oral expression and thinking to any great extent. Questioning is the second most dominant teaching method, according to Cotton (1988), with teachers spending between 35 and 50 percent of teaching time posing questions, the majority of which are closed, low-level questions.

Increasing the amount of *think and wait* time has been identified as opening up the expressive space for students (Stahl, 1990). Typically, minimal time is given to students during lessons before responses are elicited or expected. This affects the students’ quality of thinking and how well they shape and express their ideas.

In the “typical” classroom, there is almost total teacher control of topic and “the way”² (Van Lier, 1998). Van Lier argues that learners need to be given at least partial control of what gets expressed before they can experiment with what Ellis (1998, p. 156) referred

to as “language at the cutting edge of their linguistic development” and to develop “academic text structures”, that is, the language of curricula and literacy. Where there is some relinquishing of control by the teacher and where students’ ideas are given space and included more often, the quantity and quality of their expression increase.

In summary, to expand the quality and quantity of 5- and 6-year-old students’ expression in the classroom, teachers need to create a classroom environment that more closely aligns with the conditions that are optimal for language expression and acquisition. The focus for this study was to identify whether Years 1 and 2 classrooms provided these conditions for oral language expression and, if not, what changes were needed to create and sustain them.

The study

Four Years 1 to 2 classes and their teachers volunteered to participate in the study. Each class was in a different low socioeconomic Auckland school, with a total of 80 students. The study consisted of three main phases: two data-gathering phases (Time 1 and Time 2, 6 months apart) and an intervention phase which took place between the two data-gathering phases. The intervention comprised five workshops for the teachers involved, followed by teachers independently implementing what they had learnt in their classrooms for 10 weeks (one term).

Each of the 80 students was assessed by their class teacher at Time 1 to identify the child’s interactional, expressive and communicative behaviours in class using a CombiList (Damhuis, de Blauw, & Brandenburg, 2004). Based on teacher observations, the CombiList rates the child on 16 criteria related to their expression and participation in class, using a coding of *No*, *Sometimes* or

TABLE 1 THE 12 CASE STUDY STUDENTS AT TIME 1

School	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4
Students’ CombiList	Y	S	N	Y	S	N	Y	S	N	Y	S	N
Gender	F	M	F	F	F	M	F	M	M	F	F	M
Year level	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2	1	1	1
Age at Time 1	5.04	5.06	5.02	6.00	5.11	5.02	6.09	6.02	6.05	5.01	5.04	5.03
Ethnicity	Māori/ European	Samoan	Tongan/ Samoan	Tongan	Tongan/ Samoan	Samoan	Tongan	Samoan	Fijian/Indian	Fijian/Indian	Māori/ European	Tongan
Dominant home language	English	Samoan	Tongan/ Samoan	Tongan	Tongan/ Samoan	Samoan	Tongan	Samoan	Hindi/ English	Hindi/ English	English	Tongan

Yes. An overall best fit into *No*, *Yes* or *Sometimes* was then found. One case study student was then randomly selected from each of the categories in each of the four classes.

The 12 case study students ranged from new entrant/ Year 1 students to Year 2 students, and their time at school at Time 1 from 2 months to 21 months (see Table 1). Other than information about each student's ethnicity and the languages used in the home, no out-of-school data were gathered. No student was a new learner of English and all were New Zealand-born. For most of these students, languages other than English were used sometimes or dominantly in the home, which would have affected their expressive resources in English (McNaughton, 1995). This made the focus of this study—the quality and quantity of students' oral expression and acquisition in classrooms where the language of learning is English—all the more important.

At Time 1 and Time 2, each of the 12 case study students' vocabulary resources was assessed using the British Picture Vocabulary Scale (BPVS) (Dunn, Whetton, & Burley, 1997), and samples of oral text production by each student were collected. CombiList assessments were also repeated at Time 2. Three "typical" lessons in each of four classrooms, approximately 30 minutes in length, were video recorded at both Time 1 and Time 2.

The oral language samples and lesson data for six of the case study students (one *Yes*, *Sometimes* and *No* student in each of two classes) collected at Time 1 and Time 2 were selected for deep-level analysis. For these two classes, all three teacher lessons were microanalysed in parallel with an analysis of one case study student in the same lesson to gain insights into the patterns of interaction and expression in the classroom.

During the second half of Term 2, the four teachers participated in an intervention consisting of five workshops designed to provide theoretical and practice knowledge about providing optimal classroom conditions for enhancing the quality and quantity of students' expression. As part of the intervention, between each weekly workshop, the teachers were encouraged to trial what they had learnt and to share outcomes. Workshops were broadly divided between linguistic and interactional theory and practice, with an emphasis on the teacher paying explicit attention to the *how*, *what*, *when* and *by whom* of expression in the classroom. Table 2 shows the core practices considered and modelled in the workshops, which were derived from a review of the literature and applied school-based research by the researcher.

TABLE 2 TYPES OF TEACHER BEHAVIOUR MODELLED AND CONSIDERED IN WORKSHOPS

<i>Interactional behaviours by the teacher</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High levels of interaction student to student and teacher to students • Frequent opportunities to express by students • Minimising hands-up responses by students • Minimising low-level cognitive questions and initiate–respond–evaluate (IRE) response patterns • Using prompts to elicit students' expanded thinking and expression • Increased think and wait time—student and teacher • Increased opportunities for students to spontaneously express • Enhanced noticing of and engagement with language to maximise students' potential uptake • Frequent taking turns • Varied and frequent pair, group and class sharing and interaction • Sharing control of the topic and "the way" with students
<i>Language/expressive behaviours by teacher</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elaborative-style responses and talk with students • Conversational and dialogic exchanges with students • Fullness of expression within the "goldilocks zone" (zone of proximal development) of the students' expression and cognition • Necessary scaffolded input provided so students are able to expand their own expression • "Rich" vocabulary gifting • In-built recycling and revisiting • Focus on form <i>and</i> focus on meaning • Variety of text forms

The workshops aimed to align teacher practice in the classroom with the conditions identified as best for students learning and using language. The objective was to enhance the expressive and interactional behaviours of the students and to increase the quality and quantity of their expression. The goal was that, increasingly, the students would exhibit the interactional and language behaviours listed in Table 3.

TABLE 3 ENHANCED STUDENT INTERACTIONS AND LANGUAGE

<i>Students would:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • take time to think and prepare to speak • initiate and sustain talk and communication • take turns to express frequently and confidently—pairs and large group • make utterances using greater grammatical complexity, richer vocabulary and enhanced content details • engage in frequent interaction and communication with others • enhance their listening to others' expression and respond accordingly • seek to know and express more • frequently and actively take part in conversational exchanges • express in a way that is relevant and meaningful • lead the way and topic at times

Following the intervention, the teachers implemented the practices they had learnt in the workshops for one term. At Time 2 there were noticeable changes to the interactional and language patterns operating in the four classrooms in the study. The analysis of the case study students showed these changes had a direct effect on the quality and quantity of student expression.

Changes in interactional and language behaviour in the classroom

Expression by teachers

Of the two teachers whose lessons were analysed in detail, at Time 1 the utterances in one teacher's lesson tended towards lengthy and complex explanations and responses, as in this example:

Okay, I'm going to go back to the learning intention. So I am learning to name a role model in my family and now ... next thing that I'm going to do is say why ... [they are] a role model. Anybody in your family who is in your family is a role model to you. Name them, then I want you to think of three things about why they are a role model. I gave you mine, remember. Look at mine. This is my role model and I've said why she is my role model. She is my role model because I could look up to her at any time. She was hardworking, she was always busy from the time she got up to till the time she went to bed and ... (Teacher 2, Time 1)

The other teacher's utterances tended to be simple and nonextending, as in this example. The time stamps show the minimal amount of time available for students to process each utterance, many of which were questions the teacher immediately answered herself:

04:00 But what? The Triceratops. Can you say Triceratops?
 04:05 So he's looking at the Triceratops.
 04:10 Is he running fast? He's running fast so he can catch the Triceratops and have him for his dinner.
 04:18 He's going to eat it.
 04:20 He is ... Look. Look how much bigger he is? He's a very big dinosaur, isn't he?
 (Teacher 1, Time 1)

Both teachers were outside the "goldilocks zone", or zone of proximal development, of the students; the teachers' responses were generally not elaborative responses that built on those expressed by the student. However, at Time 2, the teachers had adjusted their text and responses so that students' meanings and messages were picked up and "grown" linguistically and for content, and students were encouraged to continue as co-contributors. As a result, students were more involved and active meaning-making partners.

Dialogue in the classroom

Dialogic exchanges between teacher and students, and student and student, at Time 1 were limited and limiting. Because classroom expression was strictly controlled and dominated by the teacher, students were generally uninvolved as discussion partners. There were some occasions for teacher-managed conversations in one teacher's lessons, but these were neither rich, dynamic nor sustained exchanges of ideas and thinking. Dialogic exchanges between peers were limited by the quality of the students' expressive resources and their lack of experience as dialogic partners.

At Time 2, teachers tried to stimulate collective dialogue within their lessons. The teachers responded to students' spontaneous contributions of ideas in a way that stimulated other students to also contribute, further mediating the shape and flow of linked ideas between students and teacher. Dialogue occurred more frequently, resulting in higher levels of engagement and more expression by students. There was still a long way to go before teacher-managed dialogic exchanges with students were truly rich and sustaining, but considerable progress had been made.

Collaborative expression

Unlike Ellis's (1998) "lock-step" collaborative scaffolding and task-based approach, collaborative expression as used by teachers in Time 2 lessons was more fluid and flexible. The teachers carefully guided the co-construction of an evolving oral text whereby the students' contributions were "stitched together" with the scaffolding text.

Collaborative expression and co-construction offered the students support and challenge, "hooked in" students as it was "their text", and built in needed redundancy, as in these Time 2 utterances by Teacher 2:

17:18 Help him. Api you can help him. Let's see how you can help him ... Go on Tom. I know you can do it. Who can help Timmy?
 17:34 Yes Vonyae. You can help Tom? Api, you can help Tom, I'm sure. Go on ... go.
 17:45 I'm sure you can talk, Tom. Go.
 17:50 Loudly please.
 17:52 Help ... help Tom to come up with a sentence for 'Stuck in the bridge'.
 18:10 Go Tom. You can say it as well.
 (Teacher 2, Time 2)

As a result, the quality and quantity of expression by students improved, as did their noticing of text, thus increasing the likelihood for language acquisition to occur.

Control of the way and topic

When the students were given some control of the topic and the space for spontaneous comments, they were more engaged and participatory. Expression became a partnership rather than one dominated and controlled solely by the teacher. When students' spontaneous comments were picked up and included in class talk, and when teacher and students engaged in more spontaneous dialogue alongside collaboratively co-constructing an oral text, the students made more sense of the topic in hand and this enhanced their potential to acquire language.

Questioning

At Time 1, the questioning patterns mirrored those identified in the literature as "typical", with display and inferential questions, closed and known (closed questions where the teacher either required a preferred yes/no, single-word response, or asked students to give an interpretive response but allowed only minimal expression), the most frequently occurring types. In one teacher's lessons, there was frequently a volley of questions, with no think, prepare and response space given to students between questions, as in this example:

What is this? This looks like a triangle isn't it? So they're all different sizes and different shapes. But ... what ...? Is the water filled in it right to the top? Has the water been filled in it? Yes, can it take all this water? Yes, it can take water right up to the top, isn't it? Okay. (Teacher 2, Time 1)

In contrast, in the other class, teacher questions were generally more spaced, with an expectation of a response from students. However, teacher questions were still predominantly closed, seeking a preferred or interpretive response, and student responses were expressively minimal:

10:40 Ara, what does Triceratops like to eat?
 10:47 What does Triceratops like to eat?
 10:53 Meat, I think. Tavi, is she right? What does Triceratops like to eat?
 11:02 Plants. He likes to eat plants.
 11:09 Right. Who's sitting up beautifully?

(Teacher 1, Time 1)

The students' thinking and expression were framed by the number and type of the teacher's questions, which imposed considerable restrictions on the availability of, and potential for, rich, engaging, elaborative style expression by students.

Between Time 1 and Time 2, there were dramatic shifts in questioning behaviour by both teachers. To a considerable extent, questioning served to open up students' thinking and expression rather than merely providing a framework for their thinking and expression. There were few instances of teacher-initiated questioning followed by limited student responses and evaluative feedback by the teacher. Alternatives such as using "teacher prompts, probes, and contributory statements

[which] stimulate and encourage students' thinking, expression and expansion" (van Hees, 2007, p. 114) shifted students' expression from being largely responsive and of minimal quality and quantity, to pushing them to express their own ideas and thinking. The teacher's utterances in the following lesson excerpt served as prompts to support and push students to contribute to the co-construction of a narrative text:

06:41 ... were ...
 06:50 ... started ...
 06:56 Come on. They sat ...
 07:02 ... because they ...
 07:12 ... because they couldn't go ...
 07:17 ... because they couldn't go home. Okay. Come on, let's say that again, Mele. Come on.

(Teacher 2, Time 2)

Students were stimulated to contribute and express their ideas, and these were knitted into a contributory text by the teacher.

The shift in questioning behaviour by both teachers in the study was a direct result of increased theoretical and practice knowledge, a shift in mindset and attention to other ways of eliciting the ideas and expression of students.

Evidence of student improvement after intervention

Students' vocabulary resources

Of the 12 case study students at Time 1, 75 percent had a significant gap in vocabulary age compared to the expected average for students of the same chronological age. Only three students of the 12 had a BPVS age close to, at or above their chronological age, one of whom had a 23-month advantage in BPVS age compared to her chronological age. The other two students were 2 to 6 months below their expected BPVS age levels. Of the remaining nine students, each was below by between 10 and 35 months.

The vocabulary development trajectories of the six case study students between Time 1 and Time 2 were distinctive. For example, two *No* students, both well below chronological age in expected vocabulary age at Time 1, exhibited quite different vocabulary change over 6 months. Student A made a 9+ point BPVS standardised score gain while student D made a 9-point negative gain between Time 1 and Time 2.

Language growth has been shown to go through spurts and fluctuations rather than increasing gradually and consistently (Dale & Goodman, 2005). This may offer an explanation about the unpredictable and variable nature of the BPVS scores over 6 months. The study illustrates the complex nature of vocabulary gain, challenges teachers to know more accurately the

vocabulary gap of their 5-year-olds when they start school and encourages teachers to carefully monitor the vocabulary development of each child.

Oral text production

At Time 1, of the six case study students closely analysed, two students were barely able to produce utterances of more than one or two words. Three students expressed more words, using slightly greater complexity of structure; however, none expressed with high levels of confidence and fluency. The sixth student, *Yes* on the CombiList, had rich expressive capabilities at Time 1 based on teacher information but, despite this, did not express a self-generated, independent text of any great complexity.

At Time 2, there were significant changes in the confidence, fluency and complexity of expression of the first-mentioned five students. They were able to express longer, grammatically more complex utterances with considerable fluency and confidence relevant to the context of the photo they selected to speak about.

Compare Rana's texts at Time 1 and Time 2:

- a) girl
- b) climbing
- c) up
- d) little girl
- e) there's a little boy

(Rana, Time 1)

- a) She's beautiful
- b) but she's playing by herself
- c) Dad was putting the sand into ... the castle ... and is ... girl was climbing up in the castle

(Rana, Time 2)

Her oral text production was markedly more fluent, confident, coherent and complex. The "more capable" sixth child's oral text production remained static. Her expression was only slightly more complex than at Time 1.

Expression during class lessons

At Time 1, none of the six case study students analysed in detail demonstrated optimal quality or quantity of expression. In the lessons that were examined in detail, all six students were expressively constrained—through lack of opportunity and because they were not effectively scaffolded. In one 30-minute lesson, for example, Api, a *Yes* student on the CombiList, expressed the following in the space of 5 minutes, as indicated by the time stamps:

- 04:07 ... sizes
- 04:10 And they're all different sizes
- 04:43 ... and they're different sizes
- 05:29 Yes
- 04:36 Tip
- 05:43 ... water
- 09:37 ... sun

(Api, Time 1)

Lesson response utterances by Api in this lesson were few in number, minimal in length and word count, and grammatically simple. Between the period in the lesson from 5.43 minutes to 9.37 minutes, for example, she expressed nothing; the teacher dominated the talk and topic almost totally. On the three occasions when there was an extended opportunity to express with a buddy partner, Api acted primarily as the scaffolder to her younger peer, and expressed very little herself.

At Time 2, in all six lessons analysed, the six case study students expressed more frequently and their utterances were longer and more complex grammatically as they actively and meaningfully engaged and participated in dialogue and expression throughout each lesson. In one lesson, for example, where students and teacher were co-constructing a narrative, Api was highly active expressively, her utterances extended, frequent and complex, guided and prompted by the teacher, as in this excerpt:

Api When the dog was walking across the bridge ... to go home ... his right paw got stuck in between the two piece of wood. He pulled and pulled and pulled but his paw could not ... get free.

Api, teacher, class He sat and began to ... howl.
Hoowwwl Hoowwwlll.

Teacher Oohhhhh. Let's ... Very good. Go on Api. Go on. Along came a ...

Api Along ... along came a goat.

Teacher ... with two horns ... two sharp horns, and he said ...

Api and he said, 'Move off the way, dog. I want to go home.'

(Api, Time 2)

As the lesson proceeded, Api became increasingly confident and fluent and contributed to the evolving co-constructed text. Towards the end of the lesson, she was able to retell the narrative almost totally without support or prompting.

The explicit attention given by both teachers at Time 2 to providing opportunities to speak and the means for students to make utterances of greater quality resulted in greater quantity and quality of expression by each of the case study students in each of the lessons analysed.

Summary

In this study, it was hypothesised that there would be an increase in the quality and quantity of the case study students' expression when the teacher paid attention to how they interacted with students and how language was used in these interactions. Specifically, it was hypothesised that there would be: (a) more frequent interactions with peers and teacher in all classroom situations; (b) an increase in opportunities for students to lead the way; (c) students more engaged, participatory and expressively active; (d) an increase by the teacher in

the availability of text and expression in the students' zone of proximal development; and (e) an increase in the relevance and meaningfulness of what was expressed. Under these conditions, there would be an increase in the frequency and extent of students' expression, and their expression would be of greater grammatical quality than their current competency levels would otherwise allow.

Evidence from the detailed analyses of the lessons suggests that, to a significant degree, these hypothesised effects have been confirmed. Each of the case study students progressed to a greater or lesser degree in the quality and quantity of their expression between Time 1 and Time 2. Their oral production, as measured by oral text production sample analysis, and their expression in classroom lessons, increased both in quality and quantity. While outside school and developmental factors cannot be discounted, this study strongly suggests that it was the changes to the teachers' knowledge and practice, and their explicit attention to creating optimal conditions for student interaction and expression, that were critical in making a difference in student outcomes.

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Notes

- 1 The zone of proximal development, or ZPD, is the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with help (Vygotsky, 1978).
- 2 The format or pattern of interaction.

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