Scholars in the Sandbox:
Academic Talk with Preschoolers
Anne van Kleeck, PhD
UTD Center for Children and Families
UTD Callier Center for Communication Disorders
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Two preschool oral language registers
a. Casual talk:
 i. An integrated set of co-occurring language features important for carrying out everyday affairs — having relationships with others and getting the business of everyday living accomplished
 ii. Skills in this register are strong in ALL preschoolers (except small % with language disorders), including those from culturally (ethnically, racially, and socio-economically) and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds who have parents with lower education levels
 iii. Measured by spontaneous conversational language samples
 iv. Skills in this register do NOT predict later academic achievement
b. Academic talk:
 i. An integrated set of co-occurring oral language features important for academic success in general, and for reading comprehension in particular – language used to transmit, display, & build knowledge and understanding
 ii. Skills in this register
    1. Strong in preschoolers whose parents have higher education levels
    2. Weak in children whose parents have lower education levels (many CLD children)
 iii. Measured by formal, norm-referenced language tests
    1. Strong performance by preschoolers whose parents have higher education levels
    2. Weak performance in preschoolers whose parents have lower education levels (many CLD children)
 iv. Strongly predict later reading comprehension, and academic performance more generally
    1. Generally very good for children whose parents have higher education levels
    2. Generally poorer for children whose parents have lower education levels (many CLD children)

van Kleeck, A. (2014). Intervention activities and strategies for promoting academic language in preschoolers and kindergartners. *Journal of Communication Disorders, Deaf Studies & Hearing Aids,* 2; 13 pages (open access doi: 10.4172/2375-4427.1000126)

van Kleeck, A. (2014). Distinguishing between casual talk and academic talk beginning in the preschool years: An important consideration for speech-language pathologists. *American Journal of Speech Language Pathology, 23,* 724-741. doi:10.1044/2014_AJSLP-14-0032

van Kleeck, A. (2015). The academic talk register: A critical preschool oral language foundation for later reading comprehension. In A. DeBruin-Parecki A. van Kleeck, & S. B. Gear (Eds.), *Developing early comprehension: Laying the foundation for reading success*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes (pp. 52 – 76).

Table of features distinguishing between the Casual Talk and Academic Talk Registers

	Casual Talk: CT	Academic Talk: AT	Ways of Using More AT in Classroom
Social-Interactive Features			
Rules for participating in interaction (recognizing cultural variation)			
Degree of independent thinking and self-direction encouraged	Little encouraged in many culturally & linguistically diverse (CLD) families Independent thinking encouraged in more mainstream culture families	Lots of independent thinking encouraged	Teachers ask questions that encourage child's independence as a thinker and that give child choices and a say in what he or she will do (e.g., *What do you think? What would you like to do?*)
If/how children display what they know	In CLD families, children may not be asked display knowledge and skills via language or by other means Verbal display of knowledge encouraged in more mainstream families	Frequent requests for children's verbal display of: 1. Already acquired knowledge 2. Thinking	Teachers explains that they will ask questions they already know the answer to, but in school, the children should tell the teachers the answer anyway to help the teachers see if they are doing a good job teaching Teachers explain that they will ask the children to tell what they are thinking, even when they are not sure of the answer; Teachers provide a "think aloud" of their own thinking when the children unable to answer these kinds of questions
How you participate in the interaction	In CLD families, children often not encourage to initiate and engage in conversations with adults. In more mainstream culture families, children often encouraged to initiate conversations with adults and to direct where the conversation goes; Contributions to conversations are spontaneous. In more mainstream culture families, contributions to adult/child conversation are quite balanced.	Teacher typically controls the topic and class required to "stick to the topic" Teachers often select which child will be allowed to answer question Teacher often does a lot of the talking, but children's learning is best if they are frequently engaged in discussion	Teachers able to gently hold children to the current task and topic via Teachers have good behavior management skills; children know what their role is regarding how to behave and talk during any given activity Teachers engage children in discussion frequently and work to help all children in class feel comfortable contributing
Degree of formality	Less formal (e.g., words & phrases such as *kid, kitty, gonna, y'all, ain't*)	More formal.	Teacher introduces "fancy" synonyms (e.g., *dine* for *eat*, *infant* for *baby*)

	More frequently used, simple, familiar vocabulary	More unfamiliar words that often wouldn't be used in everyday conversation.	Teacher clearly defines and uses "Tier 2" vocabulary (e.g., consequence, demonstrate, *directions*, *ignore*, *opposite*, *represent*, *sequence*, *accurate*, *pattern*)
	More words conveying emotional attitude (e.g., Wow, Cool, Gee, Really? Oh no! You're kidding!)	Fewer words conveying emotional attitude	

Cognitive Features

  Content

Generality of information	Specific, personally familiar, personally relevant objects, animals, people, places, actions, & events discussed for practical purposes	General information: general characteristics & qualities of categories of objects, animals, people, places & events to build scientific knowledge (less personally familiar & relevant)	Teacher engages in discussion of general kinds of information (e.g., how shadows are formed, seasons, weather, farm animals, growing plants, dinosaurs) Teacher sometimes reads information books in addition to story books
Precision of concepts	Don't have to be very precise with ideas "Fuzzy" terms are frequent (e.g., *sort of*, *something like*, *thing*, *do*, *there*, *this*)	Precise concepts increasingly required Use more precise academic vocabulary (Tier 3 vocabulary)	Teacher ties Tier 3 specialized vocabulary to lessons on specific topics (e.g., lesson on volcanoes might include *crust*, *mantle*, *magma*, *lava*, *igneous rock*)

  Reasoning

Type	Allowed to "ramble" and very loosely connect topics while conversing; Called "topic-associated" narratives	Careful, logical, sequenced, lengthy discussion & narratives Required to "stay on topic" and keeps things logical and in correct sequence (linear); Called "topic-centered" narratives	Teacher frequently elaborates on children's answers to questions or contributions to discussion Teacher has children retell stories and retell logical sequence of steps in activities and events they have experienced. Teacher gently guides children back to the topic if discussion goes too far afield
Level	Basic level reasoning more frequent – talk about & report on specific & familiar things (describe, discuss specific events)	Higher-level reasoning; Less concrete; inferencing Use language to explain,	Teacher frequently uses vocabulary related to thinking (e.g., *wonder*, *think*, *guess*, *believe*, *agree*, *suppose*, *imagine*, *know*, *decide*, *forget*, *remember*, *understand*, *comprehend*, *confuse*, *predict*, *compare*, *concentrate*,

	problem solve, categorize, talk about cause & effect, hypothesize, predict, summarize, categorize, generalize, compare, contrast, describe, define, justify, analogize, give examples, evaluate, interpret, & synthesize	*aware, analyze, assume, anticipate, contradict, generalize, evaluate, infer, research, conclude, doubt, plan, realize, summarize, estimate)* Teacher frequently asks higher level questions during book sharing and other activities requesting that children explain, predict, problem solve, infer emotions and thoughts of others, define, etc. Teacher provides frequent "think alouds" to provide model of his or her won reasoning.

Position in relationship to information

Psychological: Reflecting on cognitive processes & on language ("meta-" skills)	Reflection of this nature is rare in everyday contexts	Reflecting on cognitive processes (e.g., how to remembers things, if one is comprehending) & language (e.g., focusing on sound units in words); "meta-" skills	Teacher discusses strategies for cognitive processes such as remembering (e.g., *What could we do to try to remember what this story is about? Maybe we could look at the pictures to help us?)*
Attitude: Degree of confidence	Not as necessary to be careful about level of confidence in information conveyed	Express degree of confidence in information conveyed (possibility, probability Typicality Certainty	Teacher models using words (particularly in his or her "think alouds") that convey degree of confidence in information being conveyed (e.g., *maybe, certainly, likely believe, think, know, wonder, guess, doubt, seem, believe, think, might)* Teacher provides gently corrective feedback to incorrect child responses, and also acknowledges correct responses
Physical: Degree of context support	Often talk with people who know the child well and can "fill in" information not stated or not well-stated More talk is about people, places, objects and events that are right there in physical context	Less support from context, both in terms of talking less about things immediately present & in terms of others not sharing a lot of experiences and hence background with you More talk is about physically non-present things or about more abstract things	Teacher frequently shares books with children Teacher sometimes discusses things not in the immediate physical context (past, future, or imaginary events, or things that cannot be directly seen –germs, planets, igloos)