



Preschool classroom transitions: Lost time or language opportunity?

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Imagine a typical day at a preschool. The children are busy playing with playdough, and suddenly the teacher announces that it's time to clean up and line up at the door for outdoor play. A flurry of activity ensues as the children and their teachers work to tidy up one activity and begin something else. We refer to these moments between activities as "transitions".

Now imagine some of the things that the teacher might say during this transition. Perhaps she might say things like:

"Line up please"

"We have to wait for Emma"

"Please don't push Liam"

"Shhhhh!"

"Don't forget your hat"

It's a lot of work to help a room full of preschool children move from one activity to the next, and there is potential for the teacher's talk to become directive and limited in lexical diversity, as in the examples above. Transitions are often seen as challenging times that should be kept brief and to a minimum to avoid behaviour problems and disruption. In fact, it has been recommended that transition times be reduced in order to improve preschool classroom programming (Farran, Meador, Christopher, Nesbitt, & Bilbrey, 2017).

While the majority of research has focused on how teachers talk during specific activities during the preschool day, very little attention has been paid to teacher talk during transitions. A new study by Ryan, Bailey, & Grace (2019), investigated if there was potential during transitions for conversation and academic language learning. This study compared teachers' language during transitions in two preschool classrooms with language observed during other classroom activities to determine if transitions could be a source of extended conversation related to academic and decontextualized topics.

Study: Rethinking the role of transitions between activities in early childhood settings

Ryan et al. (2019) studied two preschool classrooms:

- Classroom A was located in a state-funded preschool serving low-income families which emphasized academic school readiness and explicit early literacy instruction.
- Classroom B was located in a university-based preschool serving primarily middle and upper-middle income families, and was grounded in social constructivism (social constructivism is based on Vygotsky's theory of the importance of social interaction for cognitive development) (Moore, 2011).

The study was not designed to provide a contrast between these somewhat diverse classrooms, and specifics about their programming was not provided. Rather, the authors' intent was to provide some variety in their samples of transitions (Ryan et al., 2019). Both classrooms included 25 children between the ages of four and five, and the lead teachers in both classrooms had similar years of experience.

The researchers defined transitions as moments when the whole group of children were expected to end their current activity and shift to a different activity at the teacher's request, such as transitioning to circle time, outdoor play, or snack. They also included activities that were used with a transitional purpose in mind, such as independent reading time that was used in both classrooms after meals to occupy children who finished eating earlier than others. They did not include transitions that occurred for a single child (e.g. when one child needed to use the bathroom).

Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to analyze data acquired via videotaped recordings of an entire programme day (between 2.5 – 3 hours). The following features of teacher talk were coded:

- **Amount of teacher talk** (number of words and utterances)
- **Rate of speech** (words and utterances per minute)
- **Syntactic complexity** (average mean length of utterance (MLU))
- **Lexical richness** (percentage of sophisticated vocabulary)
- **Conversational balance** (the ratio of teacher utterances relative to child utterances, as well as the ratio of the teacher's mean length of turn (in utterances) relative to the child's mean length of turn). A higher rating on these measures indicated that the teacher had a predominant role in conversations.
- **Functions of teacher talk** (whether it was a directive, a closed- or open-ended question or request, or other)
- **Extended conversation** (defined as sustaining a topic for 5 or more teacher turns). Topics were also coded as either child-initiated or teacher-initiated.

The characteristics of teacher talk were analyzed within each transition, and then all the transitions as a whole were compared with the rest of the daily activity settings. Excerpts of extended conversations during transitions were also analyzed to look for examples of discussion of academic concepts, such as discussions about words and their meanings, decontextualized or inferential topics, or topics that focused on concepts related to reading comprehension, writing, math, science or social studies.

Results

- **Both classrooms spent almost a third of their day in transitions**
- Overall, the language used by teachers during **transitions was less lexically diverse** (less sophisticated vocabulary) than other activities in both classrooms
- **The teacher took more conversational turns during transitions in Classroom B** than during the other activity settings
- **Other features of teacher talk were not significantly different between transitions and the other activities during the day** (e.g. amount, rate of speech, syntactic complexity, functions of teacher talk, and extended conversations)
- **There was great variability in the amount and complexity of teacher talk during individual transitions** (they were much more heterogeneous than the rest of the activity settings during the day)
- **Shorter transitions** (less than three minutes) **were characterized by a poorer language experience for children** (high number of teacher directives, low lexical diversity in teachers' talk, no extended conversations, low student participation)
- **Longer transitions** (more than three minutes) **were characterized by a richer language experience for children** (lower rate of teacher directives, greater lexical diversity in teachers' talk, higher conversational balance between teacher and children)
- **The first transition of the day featured the most teacher questions** (perhaps because teachers enquired about the children's activities during the previous evening at home)
- **In Classroom A, there were 16 extended conversations during transitions** – 10 of these exchanges focused on content that promoted children's language growth
- **In Classroom B, there were 8 extended conversations during transitions** – three of these exchanges exposed children to academic concepts and provided the opportunity for language growth

Using transitions as opportunities for language growth

One important finding of this study was that children spent a significant portion of their day (approximately a third of their time) transitioning from one activity to the next. If transitions are regarded as lost academic time, then educators are likely missing many opportunities to enrich children's language learning and academic growth. While suggestions to reduce transition time are generally aimed at preventing behaviour problems and directive language, Ryan et al. demonstrated that transitions that are longer than three minutes actually provide great opportunities for conversation and extended thinking. So, while minimizing the amount of short transitions during the day could be helpful, having some longer transitions that provide opportunities for this type of language growth can be very useful.

Ryan et al. (2019) noticed that quite disparate transitions can be used to engage children in conversations that provide opportunities for language learning, as well as reinforcement of academic concepts introduced during previous structured teaching moments. They provided examples of extended conversations that happened during two different transitions:

- One conversation occurred during the morning drop-off. It involved decontextualized language (e.g. the teacher predicted when the rain would stop by saying "I *think* it will stop by the time we go outside") as well as a discussion involving sophisticated vocabulary as she described that a very light rain is called a "drizzle".
- A conversation during the transition to snack time involved a discussion about horizontal versus vertical lines as the teacher dismissed children to the snack tables according to the types of lines on their clothing.

In both of these conversations, teachers used questions and comments to engage several children in the conversation and turn these transitions into teachable moments.

Ryan et al. (2019) suggest that these longer conversations that are driven by shared experiences facilitate academic language development, and that their results show that “academic language teaching is not limited to formal instructional moments” and that “transitions...offer children the opportunity for decontextualized uses of language” (p. 22, 23).

The authors recommend that professional development for early childhood educators should include information on how to capitalize on the impromptu exchanges that occur during transitions as well as how to intentionally plan for relevant academic discussions during these moments.

Making Hanen happen during transitions

In their discussion about professional development to enhance teacher talk during transitions, Ryan et al. (2019) propose a framework that involves group instructions and individual coaching with video feedback in order to examine the ways teachers use transitions for extended conversations. They cite a study by Milburn, Girolametto, Weitzman & Greenberg (2014) about the ABC and Beyond™ program as an example of how to use such a framework to promote conversations in preschool classrooms. While this study used the context of shared book-reading to promote conversations, Ryan et al. (2019) propose that this same framework (of group instruction and individual video feedback) can be used for the context of classroom transitions.

While transitions aren't a distinct session topic during the educator-focused Hanen programs (*Learning Language and Loving It*™ and *ABC and Beyond*), information about using these moments as language-learning opportunities is woven throughout the programs. Transitions are one of the many contexts teachers are encouraged to think about as opportunities for extended conversations, decontextualized language, and sophisticated vocabulary. Janice Greenberg, the Director of Early Childhood Education Services at the Hanen Centre, describes the strategies in *Learning Language and Loving It* and *ABC and Beyond* as “pocket strategies” that teachers can carry around in their “back pocket” to draw upon whenever there's an opportunity to apply them on the fly. Transitions are an excellent time for teachers to put these “pocket strategies” into action.

Conversations that develop during transitions can also be used to reinforce a variety of early literacy concepts such as print knowledge. The examples below come from the *ABC and Beyond* guidebook, and illustrate how to use the transition to outdoor play as an opportunity to create a print-rich environment that can be referenced as sunscreen is applied and hats are collected:





Based on the results of the Ryan et al. study and the amount of time preschoolers spend transitioning between activities, it makes good sense that transitions are highlighted in *LLLI* and *ABC and Beyond* as important language-learning opportunities:

- Teachers are encouraged to reflect on the more directive role they tend to play in transitions and how this limits opportunities for conversation and learning.
- Teachers also consider altering their activity schedule to allow more time for transitions to occur. This aligns with the Ryan et al. finding that longer transitions are more beneficial for learning.
- Teachers learn language-facilitating strategies that can be applied throughout the day with individual children and groups during transitions as well as in more structured classroom activities.
- A change in perspective on transitions— from being busy times when children move from one activity to another to opportunities to draw upon “pocket strategies” that promote conversation, focus on decontextualized language, introduce new vocabulary and highlight early literacy.

Making the most of the time spent at preschool every day is ideal for children’s growth and development. By looking at transitions as teachable moments instead of lost academic time, educators will have many more opportunities during the day to engage children in conversations that enrich their language, promote early literacy and extend their thinking.

References

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About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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