



Paving the way to school success: The role of decontextualized language

By Lauren Lowry
Hanan SLP and Clinical Staff Writer

When you work with preschool-aged children, the focus is on the here-and-now and setting goals that will help them immediately. It's hard to think ahead about all of the skills they will need in the future when we have these children for a limited time. We know we need to help them improve how they express themselves in their everyday lives with family and peers, but can we also help them develop sufficient communication abilities to achieve their academic potential? Ultimately, we want children to become competent readers, learners, and thinkers (Uccelli, Demir-Lira, Rowe, Levine, & Goldin-Meadow, 2018).

For academic success, children need to become proficient in **academic language**, which is the language used for learning at school and in academic texts. While academic language appears to be a malleable skill, interventions with older children have not yielded promising results (Uccelli, Demir-Lira, Rowe, Levine, & Goldin-Meadow, 2018).

Researcher Paolo Uccelli and her colleagues from Harvard and the University of Chicago suggest that intervention may need to start much earlier, and that early precursors of academic language need to be identified. In their recent study, they looked at whether children's decontextualized language predicts their later academic language proficiency (Uccelli et al., 2018). If so, encouraging parent-child conversations rich with decontextualized language may pave the way to children's later success at school.

Why might decontextualized language predict academic language?

Academic language and decontextualized talk share many similarities. Before we can talk about what they have in common, however, we first need to define each one individually.

- **What is academic language?**

Academic language lies at the opposite end of a continuum with casual, colloquial language. Academic language is much more formal and involves more complicated vocabulary and sentence structure. A constellation of skills are needed for proficiency with academic language.

Academic language involves the ability to:

- Connect ideas
- Break down morphologically complex words
- Understand complex sentences
- Organize and structure argumentative texts (with a thesis, arguments, examples, and a conclusion)
- Interpret writers' viewpoints
- Understand metalinguistic vocabulary (words that refer to thinking, reasoning and discussion, such as "generalization" or "hypothesize")
- Identify definitions
- Track references to participants and themes throughout a text

(Uccelli et al., 2018; Uccelli & Phillips Galloway, 2016; Uccelli, Phillips Galloway, Barr, Meneses, & Dobbs, 2015)

Problems with academic language proficiency is one of the primary reasons students struggle with understanding and learning from text (Uccelli et al., 2018).

- **What is decontextualized language?**

Decontextualized language develops during children's third year, and is used to construct narratives about past or future events (e.g. "We went to the park"), provide explanations (e.g. "I got my sweater because I'm cold"), or engage in pretend play (e.g. "My teddy bear is hungry") (Uccelli et al., 2018). This differs from the contextualized language observed in children's conversations prior to age two, which centres around objects, people and events that are present in the child's physical environment. Here are some other things to know about decontextualized language:

Decontextualized language...

- increases sharply between 14-42 months
- involves a greater degree of linguistic precision than contextualized talk as it doesn't rely on the immediate physical surroundings
- contains more diverse vocabulary and complex morphosyntactic structures
- predicts children's later vocabulary and narrative skills

(Uccelli et al., 2018)

- **What do academic language and decontextualized talk have in common?**

- they are both used to discuss non-present entities or abstract ideas
- they are more lexically diverse and structurally complex than other types of language (e.g. colloquial or contextualized language)
- they both predict literacy skills such as reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and narrative skills

- they use language as its own context, without relying on the physical surroundings as a context, or on cues such as pointing to referents in the immediate environment

(Uccelli et al., 2018)

Because of these similarities, there's reason to believe that early experiences with decontextualized language may promote later academic language skills. Uccelli et al. (2018) explain that while not all decontextualized language is academic (e.g. the language used for pretending) and not all academic language is decontextualized (e.g. explaining a science experiment while conducting it would involve the here-and-now rather than academic language), there are so many parallels between these two skills that there may be a link between them.

Study: Early decontextualized language predicts academic language

Uccelli and her colleagues studied 42 typically developing children who came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in the Chicago area. They were assessed when they were 30 months and then again when they were 12 years old. The researchers chose 30 months because this is the age when children usually begin to use decontextualized talk. All of the children were raised in monolingual English homes.

At 30 months, the assessment included:

- videotaped interactions in the home with the primary caregiver during everyday activities. Parents' and children's utterances were transcribed, and their quantity of talk was measured via the total number of word produced (word tokens). Any examples of decontextualized language were noted, including narratives, language to pretend, and explanations.
- formal assessment of children's receptive vocabulary and syntax comprehension

At 12 years, the assessment included:

- evaluation of the children's academic language proficiency via the CALS-I (Uccelli, Barr, Dobbs, Phillips Galloway, Meneses, & Sánchez, 2015). This instrument assesses the skills listed in the text box above about academic language.

Findings

The following were the outcomes of the study:

- There was great variability in children's 30 month receptive vocabulary and syntax
- There was great variability in the proportion of decontextualized utterances for both parents (from none to 16% of utterances) and children (from none to 33% of utterances). For the majority of the children, decontextualized talk was noted in 5% to 18% of their utterances.
- Children's academic language scores at age 12 showed great variability, ranging from the 13th to the 99th percentile
- Many variables were correlated with children's later academic language scores, including family SES, parent and child proportion of decontextualized utterances, child word tokens, and child receptive vocabulary

(Uccelli et al., 2018)

Next, the researchers conducted several regression analyses to determine the unique contribution of decontextualized language to academic language. They controlled for the variables above that were correlated with academic language, and found that:

- **children who used a larger proportion of decontextualized talk at 30 months had stronger academic language abilities at age 12**, even after controlling for family SES (which accounted for 31% of the variance), parents' use of decontextualized talk, number of child word tokens and receptive vocabulary. This

means that it wasn't just how much the children talked or how many words they understood that predicted academic language, but rather how much decontextualized language they produced themselves.

A second regression analysis was conducted to address the fact that parent and child decontextualized language are interdependent in early conversations. At this young age, narratives, explanations, and pretense are co-constructed between parent and child across several conversational turns (Uccelli et al., 2018). So the researchers measured the impact of the product of both parents' and children's decontextualized talk at 30 months. After controlling for SES, word tokens, and child receptive vocabulary, Uccelli et al. found that:

- **the combined variable of parent/child decontextualized talk at 30 months significantly predicted academic language at age 12**

What do these findings mean?

These findings indicate that:

Children's use of decontextualized talk at 30 months is a precursor to their academic language proficiency at age 12 (Uccelli et al., 2018)

This finding remained valid even after controlling for SES and a variety of language variables, including the parents' use of decontextualized language.

Uccelli and her colleagues highlight that it's through early, scaffolded conversations with parents that children are able to produce decontextualized talk. In light of current efforts to close the "word gap", they explain that solely emphasizing vocabulary development may be too narrow a focus, and that a complementary focus should include consideration of ...

"what types of parent-child conversations prepare children to become proficient in academic language and reading comprehension" (Uccelli et al., 2018, p. 12)

They suggest that:

"...encouraging parent child co-construction of narratives, pretend play, and explanations, making sure that these practices are implemented in ways congruent with a family's cultural patterns, may be promising ways to intervene" (Uccelli et al., 2018, p.12)

Helping parents and educators use decontextualized language

Fortunately, parents' use of decontextualized language is malleable and can be increased through intervention (Uccelli et al., 2018). Furthermore, research has shown that increases in parents' use of decontextualized talk results in increases in children's own decontextualized talk (Uccelli et al., 2018 referencing Leech, Wei, Harring, & Rowe, 2018). Helping parents and educators increase their use of this type of talk has been incorporated into many of our Hanen programs.

Decontextualized talk, the Hanen way

In order to make the term "decontextualized language" more accessible for educators and parents in our Hanen programs and resources, we talk about it as the language we add to build understanding, or the "the language for thinking and learning".

Educator-focused programs

In our educator-focused programs, the connection between the “language for thinking and learning” and later academic success is highlighted. For example, it’s introduced in ABC and Beyond™ with the following statement:

“The ability to use language to think and learn is developed during the preschool years and is fundamental to the development of literacy and success at school” (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2010, p. 49)

Decontextualized language is promoted in these programs in the following ways:

- **In ABC and Beyond™, educators learn about using the “E’s and P’s” to promote decontextualized language** – these include Explain, Experiences, Emotions, Evaluate, Predict, Problem-solve, Project, and Pretend. An efficacy study of the ABC and Beyond™ program (Girolametto, Weitzman & Greenberg, 2012) showed that, compared to a control group, educators who participated in the program learned to use more decontextualized language. Furthermore, as the educators increased their use of decontextualized language, so too did the children in their classrooms.
- **In Learning Language and Loving It™, educators are encouraged to use decontextualized language by “Extending the topic” during conversations** – this involves informing, explaining, talking about feelings and opinions, projecting, talking about the future, and using language for pretending.

Programs and resources for parents

- **In It Takes Two to Talk®, parents of children at the Combiner stage learn to “Add Language to Build Understanding” with decontextualized language** - parents of children who are combining words and understanding here-and-now language are encouraged to introduce decontextualized language into conversations. They do this by talking about events in the recent past and near future, as well as providing simple explanations, talking about feelings, and using language to introduce new ideas during pretend play with their child.
- **I’m Ready!™ introduces decontextualized language while reading books to encourage children’s thinking** – the “E’s” and “P’s” are simplified for parents as “Double E, Double P”. They are encouraged to connect the story to their child’s **Experiences**, to **Explain** why things happen, talk about how to solve the **Problem** in the story, and to help their child **Predict** what might happen next.

While promoting decontextualized talk may not always be on our radar with young children with language delay, we need to remember that it develops early in typical development (starting at around 30 months). This type of talk builds children’s comprehension, extends their thinking, and ultimately helps them succeed in school. By helping parents incorporate decontextualized language into their conversations with their children, we can set children on the path to school success early on.

If you’re interested in reading more about helping preschoolers acquire decontextualized language, you may be interested in our articles:

- *Promoting ‘Academic Talk’ in Preschoolers*
- *Going Beyond the Here and Now during Interactive Book Reading*

We also have articles for parents on this topic:

- *Moving beyond the “here-and-now”: Using language for thinking and learning*
- *Children Develop Language for Thinking and Learning*

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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.

For more information, please visit www.hanen.org.

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