Promoting “Academic Talk” in Preschoolers

By Lauren Lowry, Hanen SLP and Clinical Writer

With so many goals to work on with preschool children with language impairment, can we really take on another one?

Well, according to Anne van Kleeck (2014) the answer is...yes. In her recent article in the American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology, van Kleeck urges speech language professionals to consider addressing not only “casual talk”, but also “academic talk” in their work with preschool children. Before I go any further, let’s clarify the difference between these two language registers:

**Casual talk** (CT): Language that is used during daily life in order to maintain relationships and accomplish everyday tasks (sometimes referred to as “social talk”)

**Academic talk** (AT): Language that is used when engaged in teaching and learning which allows for the transmission and display of ideas and knowledge (sometimes referred to as “classroom discourse”)

While a growing body of research has examined academic talk (AT) in school-aged children, this work has rarely been extended to preschool children. Furthermore, while scholars are starting to suggest ways of teaching AT to children at risk for academic underachievement, this work is not yet part of mainstream elementary school practice (van Kleeck, 2014). This may be why many speech language professionals don’t directly target AT in their work with young children.
POLL

Do you directly target academic talk in your work with preschool children?

- Yes
- No

If you responded above that you do not target AT directly, the work of van Kleeck may convince you to incorporate AT as a goal for preschoolers. But as you read on, you may also discover that you do address some features of AT in your practice already, especially if you use some of the strategies from I’m Ready™ (Greenberg & Weitzman, 2014) or ABC and Beyond™ (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2010).

The difference between CT and AT

Put simply, the differences between CT and AT are reflected in why, how, and what we talk about:

- **Why we talk**
  - CT helps us obtain information, accomplish daily tasks, and maintain relationships. Questions are usually genuine requests for information.
  - AT functions to help children build knowledge. Questions are posed to test children’s knowledge and thinking.

- **How we talk**
  - CT makes use of simple vocabulary and syntax, and turn taking is quite balanced
  - AT employs rare and technical vocabulary (e.g. Tier 2 and 3 words; Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002), more complex syntax, and turn taking is less balanced (teachers do most of the talking)

- **What we talk about**
  - CT topics centre around people, objects, events and opinions with personal relevance

© Hanen Early Language Program, 2015.
This article may not be further copied or reproduced without written permission from The Hanen Centre®.
• AT topics are general and known and accepted by the wider, educated public in the culture. For example, a general (AT) topic would be bears, their habitat and food sources, whereas a personally relevant topic in CT would be a bear that a child saw while camping with his family (van Kleeck, 2014).

(van Kleeck & Schwarz, 2011)

Another way to frame the differences between AT and CT is according to the prevalence of features within two broad categories: social-interactive features and cognitive features.

○ Social-interactive features

These features affect the rules for participating in interaction and the degree of formality that is required, including:

• the degree of autonomy given to children – in Western culture, autonomy is encouraged in both AT and CT

• whether children are expected to verbally display their knowledge or thinking – in Western culture, children are expected to engage in some extent of “verbal display” (answer “test questions” for which the adult knows the answer), but this is much more prevalent in AT than in CT

• who controls the topic of conversation – the topic in AT is generally controlled by the teacher, whereas the topic control in CT is usually shared by participants

• the degree of formality – CT is informal and AT is more formal

○ Cognitive features

The cognitive processes required for AT and CT differ. These include:

• how much social and physical support are available to derive meaning - CT has more support, AT is decontextualized

• the generality of information - CT is specific and personal, AT is general

• the precision of concepts - AT involves more precise and detailed concepts than CT

• the type and level of reasoning involved - AT involves logical, coherent narratives (“topic-centred narratives”) and reasoning about abstract topics involving higher level inferencing. CT involves narratives that are loosely linked and episodic (“topic-associative narratives”) and reasoning at a lower or literal level.
- the level of metacognitive and metalinguistic skill required - higher level in AT
- the degree of confidence in information – there is less accountability required in CT, whereas in AT, the information has to be credible

(van Kleeck, 2014)

**Linguistic features of CT and AT**

The different social and cognitive features of the CT and AT registers give rise to specific linguistic features that differentiate them (for a complete list, see van Kleeck, 2014):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linguistic features of CT:</th>
<th>Linguistic features of AT:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o simple, high-frequency vocabulary</td>
<td>o less familiar vocabulary (Tier 2 &amp; 3 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o shorter, morphologically simple words</td>
<td>o longer, morphologically complex words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o less lexical diversity</td>
<td>o greater lexical diversity &amp; content words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o nouns refer to people, places, things</td>
<td>o nominalization (turning verbs into nouns, such as “destruction” or “development”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o verbs represent actions with identifiable agents performing those actions</td>
<td>o abstract concepts can perform actions (e.g. “photosynthesis converts energy from sunlight to chemical energy”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o locative “there” (“There are my glasses”)</td>
<td>o existential “there” (“There is a great deal of debate regarding...”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o more contractions, personal pronouns, appreciative markers (“wow”, “sure”)</td>
<td>o fewer contractions, personal pronouns &amp; appreciative markers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o variety of sentences (declarative, interrogative, imperative)</td>
<td>o mainly declarative sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o more active sentences</td>
<td>o more passive sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o shorter sentences</td>
<td>o longer sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o less explicit language</td>
<td>o more explicit language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o more literal language</td>
<td>o more inferential language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o genuine questions</td>
<td>o test questions (verbal displays)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o less mental state talk</td>
<td>o more mental state talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o less informational load, more redundant</td>
<td>o greater informational load, more concise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o less topic elaboration</td>
<td>o more topic elaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o topic-associative narratives</td>
<td>o topic-centred narratives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How culture and SES influence CT and AT

- **Culture**

Many of the social interactive and cognitive features (and therefore linguistic features) of these language registers are influenced by cultural values and practices. Western cultures tend to be more individualistic and therefore value independence, personal achievement and self-determination (van Kleeck, 2014). These cultures encourage more autonomy and choice during interactions with children, and expect verbal displays of the children’s knowledge and thinking. On the other hand, more collectivist cultures - like many culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) groups in the US - value interdependence with others, social reciprocity and obedience (van Kleeck, 2014). As a result, these families may expect children to learn via quiet observation and they may not test their children via verbal displays.

When children from CLD groups begin school, their lack of exposure to certain elements of the mainstream AT register may put them at risk for difficulties with AT. This can result in difficulties participating in classroom discussions, problems with learning to read, and also negatively affect children’s personal and social identities and teachers’ perceptions of them (van Kleeck, 2011).

- **Socioeconomic status (SES)**

Children’s exposure to certain elements of AT can also be influenced by their parents’ education and socioeconomic status (SES). Research has shown that interactions between preschoolers and mothers with higher education and/or SES have language features that overlap with those prevalent in AT, such as greater sentence complexity, longer mean length of utterance, more elaborated language, discussions about complex concepts, and decontextualized language (van Kleeck, 2014). van Kleeck (2014) reports that:

“the more education a child’s mother has, the more likely she is to use a school-like or academic register with her child at home, even when engaged in everyday living activities” (p. 725)

Therefore, preschoolers with parents with less education and children from CLD backgrounds may arrive at school at a disadvantage, relatively unfamiliar with the type of language used in the classroom. If a child also has a language impairment, this only compounds the problem.
How to work on AT

While we might think that we need to address everyday CT with the children on our caseloads before we worry about AT, these two language registers actually develop in tandem. Therefore, van Kleeck (2014) urges SLPs not to wait until a child’s CT is firmly established before targeting AT. Instead, “both registers should be a focus of intervention from early in language development” (van Kleeck, 2014, p. 727). She further recommends focusing on the underlying social or cognitive features of the AT register rather than targeting specific linguistic features, as the linguistic features will arise naturally when addressing the social or cognitive features.

- **Making AT explicit**

One important way to promote the AT register is to raise teachers’ awareness of the features of AT so that they can make AT explicit in their classrooms. van Kleeck & Schwarz (2011) suggest that teachers can explicitly explain the AT features required before engaging in an activity. For example, a teacher might say “Because we are in school, I’m going to ask you some questions I already know the answer to. This helps me know if I’m doing a good job teaching you. If you don’t know the answer, that’s ok. Maybe someone else will know the answer”. Teachers can also explain how children can make an educated guess when they are unsure of an answer, saying something like, “Sometimes you might not know the answer, but you can think about what the answer might be and let us know what you are thinking” (van Kleeck & Schwarz, 2011, p. 34).

- **Think alouds**

Teachers can use “think alouds” to demonstrate the thought process involved in some aspects of AT. For example, a think aloud which demonstrates how to think of an answer to a question might be: “I wonder who this book is going to be about? I am going to use the front cover to look for hints to guess who it’s about...” (van Kleeck & Schwarz, 2011, p. 34). Teachers can also use think alouds to model how to make a guess, such as “There’s a picture of a bear and a bird on the cover, so maybe the book is about one of those animals”.

- **Use meaningful activities to promote AT**

van Kleeck (2011) recommends that children be taught about AT while engaged in meaningful activities in which AT is required, such as book sharing and show and tell:

  - **Show and Tell**

Sometimes also known as “sharing time”, Show and Tell involves the child discussing personal experiences with the class via a narrative that is often guided by the teacher through comments and questions. By guiding the child’s narrative, the teacher essentially guides the child’s CT into a register that is closer to AT.

© Hanen Early Language Program, 2015.  
This article may not be further copied or reproduced without written permission from The Hanen Centre®.
However, teachers may not always be aware of the specific demands and features of AT, or the fact that many children arrive at preschool without experience with topic-centred narratives. Therefore, Show and Tell may result in the teacher constantly interrupting the child’s narrative in an attempt to re-frame it in the AT register. van Kleec & Schwarz (2011) suggest that the teacher can explain the AT requirements of Show and Tell to the children before they begin, saying something like “When you talk about your special rock in school, you may quickly tell us why it is special to you, but then we also want to talk together about what kind of rock it is, and what that kind of rock is like. That way, we can use your special rock to learn about lots of rocks. I’ll help you by asking you some questions as you tell us about your special rock” (p.33).

- Book sharing

Sharing books both in preschool and at home offers a good opportunity to model some of the features of AT. In fact, van Kleec & Schwarz (2011) point out that book sharing in middle-class, educated families directly mirrors academic talk, as parents ask children to engage in verbal displays to demonstrate their knowledge or thinking. van Kleec (2014) suggests using book sharing as a time to introduce decontextualized language, questions and comments, deeper discussions, topic-centred narratives, and metacognition (“Who remembers what this book is about?”).

How this fits with our Hanen strategies

Many of the strategies we talk about in our Hanen programs fit very well with the idea of encouraging AT with preschool children, both at preschool and at home. Once children develop some language skills, we begin to switch the focus from learning to talk, to talking to learn (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002). In our educator-focused programs, we talk about “extending the topic” by modeling explanations, opinions, talking about the past and future, projecting, and using imaginative language. This type of language taps into some of the cognitive features of AT, such as decontextualized language that involves reasoning about abstract topics and inferences. In It Takes Two to Talk™, we encourage parents of children at the Combiner stage to start building their children’s understanding via explanations, predictions, and descriptions. This too provides language modeling which shares features of AT.

The type of vocabulary used in AT is the type of vocabulary that parents and educators are encouraged to model when they “Shoot for the SStaRS” in I’m Ready™ (Greenberg & Weitzman, 2014) and in ABC and Beyond™ (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2010). This strategy helps parents and educators highlight more complex (Tier 2 and 3) vocabulary and connect these new words to the children’s own experiences.

Finally, the kinds of conversations and language we encourage during book sharing in all of our programs with children who are combining words mirrors the type of language used
in AT. van Kleeck (2014) suggests using books as an opportunity to model decontextualized language and promote inferential language. In *I’m Ready* and *ABC and Beyond*, parents and educators are encouraged to use questions, comments and think alouds to help children think more deeply about the story. By providing explanations, talking about problems in the story, predicting what might happen, and connecting the story to the child’s own personal experiences, parents and educators expose children to linguistic features that are found in the AT register.

**Conclusion**

van Kleeck’s (2014) closing message is that SLPs “add a focus on AT to the other areas of school readiness we endeavor to begin fostering during the preschool years” (p. 738). We can support teachers by raising their awareness of the differences between CT and AT, and identifying which children may be struggling with the AT register. By sharing some of the strategies in *ABC and Beyond* and encouraging teachers to be more explicit about AT, we can bridge the transition from CT to AT for these children. And while we certainly don’t want parents to abandon their use of CT with their child, we can support their use of decontextualized language and deeper discussions during book sharing so that their child arrives at school with some experience with AT.

**References**


