

Speaking English with Children: The Benefits of the Spoken Word

Miriam T. Black

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Child Development, English Language Teaching
幼児教育、児童発達、英語教育

Abstract

As young children learn to use their mother tongue they are simultaneously developing key mental abilities and uniquely human behaviors through increased language use. Therefore, children's interaction with adults using speech is crucial in their development. This is also true for a preliterate child when learning to use a second language such as English. Drawing upon the work of the Russian neuropsychologist Alexander Luria, how a teacher can influence children's development using speech will be explained. This information is then used as the rationale for the creation of a new university class for Early Childhood Education majors in Japan, *Speaking English with Children*.

1. Introduction

Evidence from the field of Child Development shows that as young children learn to use their mother tongue through interaction with others, they are simultaneously developing their abilities to think and take action in new ways (Luria, 1961, 1981; Luria & Yudovich, 1971/1956; Vygotsky & Luria, 1993/1930). Furthermore, the younger the children are, the more they will focus on the immediate situation and the language spoken with them, not the written word. Therefore, children's interaction with adults using speech is crucial in their development. This is the same for a preliterate child when learning to use a second language such as English.

In this article, some key aspects, according to the Russian neuropsychologist Alexander Luria (1902-1977), of the relationship between increased language use in young children and their mental and behavioral development, and how a teacher can influence this, will be reviewed. Then this information, or rather, these benefits of the

spoken word are used as rationale for a new university class for Early Childhood Education majors in Japan, *Speaking English with Children*.

2. Language use and young children's emerging mental abilities

To illustrate the development of some of these key mental abilities and uniquely human behaviors in young children, and their relationship to increased spoken language ability, I will draw upon Alexander Luria's work. Luria was a contemporary of Jean Piaget, and a student and colleague of Lev Vygotsky until Vygotsky's death in 1934. Luria then went on to further Vygotsky's theories and found experimental evidence of the relationship between increased language use, mental development, and emerging new behaviors in young children (Luria, 1961, 1981; Luria & Yudovich, 1971/1956). Luria continued to confirm and became able to more clearly describe aspects of this intricate relationship between language, thinking, and action, through decades of observing and diagnosing thousands of people at various levels of development with different kinds of brain injury. Because of his understanding of this relationship, he was able to create unique, effective plans of rehabilitation for people to overcome their deficits, often involving language in specific ways (Luria, 1966). Therefore, Luria provides a stronger, more comprehensive view based on neuropsychological and physiological evidence than either Piaget or Vygotsky of how increased language use by young children, which is facilitated by adults, allows them to think and behave in new and increasingly complex ways, and highlights the deficits that arise when these language abilities are absent.

In this section, three of these ways will be briefly described. These are, (2.1) how words come to both isolate significant features of objects and also generalize features enabling young children to create new mental connections that free them from having to deal with objects only in the here and now, (2.2) how speech helps young children to inhibit responses and regulate their behavior in order for them to take more purposeful, voluntary action, and (2.3) the role of self-speech in making plans and problem solving.

2. 1. The isolating and generalizing functions of language

It can be clearly seen how a spoken word functions to substitute for or designate a particular object, action, or property that a person is at that exact moment perceiving.

In young children's development, though, use of words is also the beginning of their formation of a system of connections, both particular and general, with which they can then analyze an object and express any of its features, properties, and relationships without having that object directly in front of them. With words, concepts can be created and exist in their own minds to further define, organize, categorize, or explain relationships between various examples of things and situations that are experienced. Words do not merely represent the world, but enable humans to go beyond the limits of their direct perception, and perform mental tasks, such as adding the numbers 34 and 268, independently of what is being immediately perceived (Luria, 1981, pp. 37-41).

One example of this is the function of isolating the salient characteristics of objects and then being able to see similarities between that object and other objects with like characteristics. For example, if I say the word *chair* it may denote one particular object immediately in front of my eyes that usually has the distinguishing features of legs, a back, and a seat upon which one person can sit. These are the significant characteristics that differentiate it from a stool or a sofa. Thus, these defining features that make it a chair are isolated. At the same time it is also a word that can refer to a general category of all objects with this set of isolated characteristics. Thus, the word *chair* also generalizes. The child may later learn that a chair belongs to the category of *furniture*, or may be grouped together in one's mind with other objects made out of a certain material such as wood. In this way, the word *chair* is a mental shortcut of sorts because it can be used in this general sense when it is not necessary to explain which chair is required or any unique features of the particular chair referenced. People often only need to say, "Bring me a chair," to be clearly understood in this general way without having to say, "Bring me a thing that usually has legs, a back, and a seat upon which I can sit."

From the results of the investigations of Luria and his colleagues, a certain progression of steps children go through as they come to create these new mental associations and categories has been demonstrated. In short, for infants or toddlers who can show some understanding of an adult's spoken language by making a physical response, their responding is at first quite confined by the characteristics of a specific situation, not the object. For example, for an infant of 6 or 7 months old, factors such as the position in which the child was placed, the person who spoke the word, if the word was accompanied by a specific gesture or not, and if the word was pronounced

with a specific intonation, all needed to be consistent for the infant to respond by reaching toward the object that was named (Luria, 1981, pp. 48-49).

It may seem though, that toddlers around 2 years old or so know the meanings of words such as *cat* and *cup* by successfully choosing the correct object from several in front of them when told, "Give me the ____." This is not exactly the case. If the child is asked again and the item asked for has been replaced with another object, but one that has a significant feature of the original object, the child will reach for that instead. For example, in one case a child was asked to give the investigator the teddy bear, but as that item was not one of those present, the child picked up a soft glove. This was the only item available with any of a teddy bear's features. Likewise, when toddlers first begin to speak, they may use words purposefully, but use the same word to mean different things in different situations. At this stage the use of the word is strongly dependent on what they are at that moment perceiving and doing (Black, 2015; Luria & Yudovich, 1971/1956). Luria interprets this to indicate:

that at a given stage of a child's development the word does not yet possess a stable object reference. In the early stages of development, a word signifies only a certain feature and does not necessarily signify the coordinated set of features which characterize the object. (1981, p. 49)

By young children's third year of life this kind of behavior is no longer observed. A 3-year-old will very seldom confuse familiar things such as *cup*, *dog*, *cat*, or *car* with other objects. However, these words do not yet have the same meaning for them as they would for a child of seven or an older, literate student. Luria uses the example of the word *store* to illustrate this. For the youngest child the word may evoke merely an affective response, as a store is a place where the child can get something pleasant such as cookies or candy. Preschool-aged children will have a concrete image of a store as a place where things are bought and sold, and perhaps a particular store they are familiar with may come to mind when they hear the word. However, for an older student, though the object reference remains stable, the word *store* will probably not evoke the image of any one particular store, but instead abstract associations and concepts will arise. These may include economic systems, systems of exchange, categories of stores, etc. Thus, through different stages of human development the

“meaning” of a word is constantly being redefined and with this, psychological processes also change. Throughout a child’s development meaning becomes more stable, more deeply associated with other words, and less dependent on any one particular situation or experience (Luria, 1981, pp. 50-51).

It is through interaction and communication about objects and actions in the immediate situation from which the young child first begins to understand and use language. Nevertheless, Vygotsky and Luria's point is that at the same time these initial interactions using language are taking place, new psychological abilities are also beginning to form. The young child can and does learn to use new words and phrases by talking with other children. However, it is the skilled, mature user of the language, often a teacher, who is best placed to interact with children in specific ways using speech to point out these significant details, make these generalizations, help them categorize new information, and widen and strengthen these new mental associations.

2. 2. Speech and the development of voluntary action

Luria was not only interested in finding the origins of psychological functions such as the development of abstract concepts and systems of associations as described above, but also the origins of voluntary action in young children. The reader might not have thought about it before, but for an infant or toddler of up to around 2 years old, it is not at all an easy task to stop a physical response immediately after starting it, to inhibit a habitual action and make another movement instead, or stop doing an action upon an adult’s verbal command. Luria and his colleagues describe behavior at different stages that children from 18 months to 3 years old go through in becoming able to regulate their own actions (Luria, 1961, 1981; Vygotsky & Luria, 1993/1930). These stages are influenced first by the speech, such as a command, of an adult, and later by the child's own speech.

Luria and his colleagues devised special methods to investigate the nuances of the developing influence of the toddler and young child’s understanding and use of speech on their actions. Typically, the child held a rubber bulb in his or her hand, and would squeeze it in response to a verbal command or another signal. Next, in front of the child was placed a panel of different colored lights. More complex commands such as to respond to a signal (a light being turned on), or respond to one but not the other of two different signals (only the yellow light, not the blue light)

were given. Data of the frequency, duration, and strength of the child's squeezing actions were recorded in relationship to the onset of the light being turned on or off or a command being given by the investigators.

In brief, for the youngest children of around 18 to 24 months old, when merely told to, "Press! Press! Press!" the bulb in hand, the adult's verbal command set forth a wave of squeezing movements, that often became even stronger when the child was told to stop or, "Press *only* when I tell you!" This indicates that at these early stages, children do make physical responses to verbal commands, but these commands usually only initiate and further stimulate, not inhibit this responding. At this stage it appears that it is the volume of the voice, not the meaning of the words spoken that is the stimulus for responding.

Then children of 2 years old who could master responding to a basic command were given a conditional instruction such as, "When the light is on press, but don't press when it is off." These children could memorize and repeat the verbal command but could not execute it. Instead, when the light came on they would either stare at the light but not press or press without looking at the light. Children of 3 years old had more ability to coordinate the onset of the signal and their movement, but this was still unstable.

Often the signal of the light initiated uncontrolled movement. This occurred to an even greater degree when 2.5-year-old children were asked to differentiate between signals. This time the instruction was, "When you see the yellow light, press, and when you see the blue light, don't press!" Children of this age could memorize, repeat the verbal command, and demonstrate that they understood the instruction, but they too had much difficulty following it. When any light flashed, no matter the color, a squeezing response was initiated. Thus for the young child, understanding the adult's verbal instructions did not necessary mean they could also apply them to their actions.

The investigators then wondered if the child's own speech could help produce a differentiated response. The children were told to say the word, "Yes!" for the condition in which they should press and, "No!" for the condition where they should refrain from squeezing. At first they produced the wrong verbal responses to the signals. Then, when they could match the verbal responses consistently with the different signals, they produced a motor response for both situations. Luria notes that this is an interesting paradox, as the child not only did not stop squeezing while at the same time saying

the words such as “No!” or “Don’t squeeze,” but also sometimes continued to squeeze the bulb even harder (Luria, 1981, p. 99). It is only from after the age of three that children were able to coordinate their responding or inhibit their responses consistently based on such verbal instructions (Luria, 1961, pp. 26-62, 1981, pp. 96-100).

This information can help teachers understand young children’s behavior and how, in particular, children around 2 years of age may be able to understand language spoken to them, but not yet be able to control their actions based on what they are told to do. For example, young children should not be punished for continuing an action, such as reaching for something, when told to, “Stop!” as they might not yet be able to coordinate their actions to the meaning of commands. Experience with adults using commands while interacting with children in games and other activities, and especially ones that have children make a differentiated action in response to various commands, strengthens this emerging coordination between speech and movement (see also Black, 2010).

2.3 Self-speech in making plans to take purposeful action and problem solving

Some investigators in the field of Child Development such as Piaget (1959/1926) have concerned themselves with answering questions about the development of children’s thinking, such as at what age a young child can or cannot imagine the perspective of another person (see also Wimmer & Perner, 1983). Finding answers to these questions about children’s thinking takes shrewd investigative skill, as young children may not yet understand the investigator’s spoken question or the situation presented in the same way as an older child or adult would. They may also respond verbally in a way that is logical to them, but not what the investigator has expected. In fact, there is now evidence that young children may be able to do such mental tasks earlier than previously observed, when the investigation is designed differently (Bloom & German, 2000; Donaldson, 1978; Scott & Baillargeon, 2017). Though it may be still disputed *when* children are first able to perform these psychological functions, there is much evidence that once a child is able to more consistently demonstrate they understand and respond to spoken language and speak themselves, certain higher psychological functions such as making plans to take purposeful action and problem solving, are strengthened and expanded (Luria, 1961, 1981; Luria & Yudovich, 1971/1956; Vygotsky & Luria, 1993/1930).

In particular, there is the presence of self-speech in preschoolers documented by Vygotsky (1962/1934) in some of his early investigations. In these investigations, he would give children aged 3-5 years old a task such as tracing a picture, but unobtrusively create some impediment. This could be that the pencil would break or there was no thumbtack to secure the picture. Vygotsky observed that when faced with such a difficulty, young children would begin to talk aloud, though no one else was in the room. They tended to first describe the setting, next state the difficulty, and then begin to plan a possible solution.

Some features of this speech are that at first it is seen in expanded form. For example, the children would say things such as, "Look, the paper has come off!" or, "Where am I going to find a pencil?" As the child matured, this kind of speech became more abbreviated, then more quietly spoken or whispered, and in another year or two it seemed to completely disappear. However, though it was not audible, it had instead changed in form to what Vygotsky called inner speech. Neurophysiological evidence of this was later found by different investigators and by using various methods. This evidence was then collected and explained by A. N. Sokolov (1972) in his comprehensive book on the subject. For example, in his own investigations, Sokolov found, among other things, physiological evidence of weak electromyographic (EMG) responses in primary school children's lips and larynxes when they were thinking of how to solve a problem. Thus, from many investigators since Vygotsky there is strong evidence that self-speech does not disappear, but instead changes in form to inner speech as he predicted. In addition, Luria found that since inner speech is condensed, it allows a person to identify the problem and find a correct solution more quickly than by speaking aloud which is slower, because inner speech is a mental act. Inner speech also can be expanded into full spoken language as needed, as an outline of a lecture provides the framework for a person who has already learned the material to give a complete talk on a topic (Luria, 1981, pp. 104-108).

The point for the teacher working with preschool-aged children is that these kinds of higher mental acts first appear as overt speech and then become condensed and performed within the mind, not vice versa. Therefore, behavior that is the result of this higher-level planning and problem solving is not seen to this degree in children, who for whatever reason have not learned to use language, though they may have no brain injury or malformation (Luria & Yudovich, 1971/1956; see also Black,

2015). It is important that young children have opportunities to use self-speech and that teachers arrange situations where its use by children is encouraged and can be developed. Such activities can include planning for and expanding dramatic play, for example.

3. Rationale for and content of the class *Speaking English with Children*

For elementary school students, the abilities to read and write a language cause other major psychological developments in their thinking and make taking new action possible. However, preliterate young children must first be able to use language in the basic ways explained above before it makes much sense for them to learn to read and write, quite abstract representations of language. From the evidence above, it can be seen that the foundations of these mental abilities are initially rooted in the preschool child's interaction with adults using speech. It should be clear then that one of the important skills an early childhood educator or childcare worker needs is to be able to interact with young children using speech effectively to forward the child's development.

The importance of speaking with young children to aid them in their development has been recognized and has been a main focus in curriculum design in many countries in the field of Early Childhood Education in programs such as the UNESCO award-winning *Tools of the Mind* curriculum (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). This also can be seen in materials such as the LEAP BC™ *Hop Activity Card Set* (Decoda Literacy Solutions, 2017) prepared to help parents support language development and literacy in their children, and in the *SNAP* (Stop Now And Plan)® program (Child Development Institute, 2016) for 6 to 11-year-old children with behavioral and mental health issues, for example.

Furthermore, these mental skills dependent on language develop to various degrees in all human beings, thus the teacher skill of purposely speaking with young children in certain ways to further their development is not confined to any particular cultural situation or language being learned. Therefore, when asked to design a new English elective class for third and fourth year Early Childhood Education majors at a university in Japan, focusing on speaking skills, and especially those that students will use in their future work with children when using both Japanese and English, would seem most useful and beneficial to them. The target students are those who desire to continue to improve their English skills and who hope to work in some setting with

children where the ability to speak English with them would be necessary, such as in an “international preschool” in Japan. Thus, the new class *Speaking English with Children* has two main learning objectives: 1) to raise students’ ability to effectively communicate in spoken English, and 2) for students to gain greater knowledge and experience of how to interact effectively with young children using spoken language to further those children in their development.

The next step in developing the class was to decide on the tentative content and the sequencing of the activities. The classroom activities to be introduced targeting students’ speaking skills should be ones that can be incorporated into the usual play and habitual activities of young children. As in the natural sequence of one’s mother tongue development and use, the adult first uses language with the child in ways that have immediate relevance in the situation, often initiating interaction, simultaneously using speech and gestures. Thus, the child’s first use and understanding of speech is a rather spontaneous reaction to or imitation of adults’ behavior and words. As young children begin to initiate interaction themselves through speech, the activities become more dialogic in nature, with questions and answers often being exchanged.

Then, as children become more fluent, these interactions take on a more monologic nature for them. Here the role of the teacher becomes that of a guide, helping the children use more precise vocabulary, and modeling the use of words and phrases when helping them expand their own speech and practice new forms of it. This can be done through activities such as the re-telling of stories and events, imagining future action, expanding role-play situations, describing what they are doing and thinking, and encouraging the use of self-speech to solve difficulties.

In choosing activities for inclusion in the syllabus, the second objective should also be kept in mind and each activity should be explicitly connected with furthering children’s mental abilities. For example, activities such as reading picture books while pointing out details of the pictures and asking the child questions about them, games where children have to pay attention to certain details such as “I Spy,” or ones where children need to group objects according to categories such as the activity “One of these things is not like the others” from the long-running children’s educational television show *Sesame Street*, can be used to help children build new mental associations and create abstract categories. There are also many activities that practice coordination between speech and action for children at different stages of

development. In these games children are required to respond or refrain from responding with some movement to an instruction. Such games include variations of “Red Light, Green Light” (Black, 2010), “Simon Says”, and some Total Physical Response (TPR) language learning activities.

As this class will not be first taught until AY 2019, there is still time to collect, select, and trial new activities. In this way, the activities that best match the university students’ level of spoken English, their understanding of young children, and their future needs as childcare workers can be selected and refined.

4. Conclusion

Being able to use language to think in ways such as those outlined in the second section of this article are uniquely human skills. Because of this, human beings are able to pass down valuable information to others orally or through writing. The psychological skills, which Vygotsky and Luria saw evidence of being rooted in and connected to speech, can help people to imagine, plan, and take original action. These skills can help people recognize not only the differences, but also similarities between people and situations that might not always be so readily apparent. Having a greater awareness of one’s own behavior and ability to adjust it to the situation can allow people to not merely react automatically in situations to which they have already been socially conditioned, but also pause to see each situation more clearly, plan, and take purposeful action. This may contribute to having greater empathy toward other human beings and feeling less threatened by those who are different, but wish one no harm (Black, 2011a). These are the benefits of speech.

Therefore, a third, more covert learning objective of the *Speaking English with Children* class is for the university students taking it to gain a greater awareness of their own use of language and how it affects their thinking and actions (Black, 2011b). Through students’ greater understanding of this in themselves, they may be better equipped to help the children they care for use language in ways that will help those children in their development. The new class, *Speaking English with Children*, will be an opportunity to investigate this educational theme further.

References

- Black, M. (2010). Kodomo no gengoshyuutoku to seishin hattatsu ni ataeru otona no eikyō [The adult's influence on young children's acquisition of language and the development of their mental processes]. In *Shisei gaku nenpou 2010, Touyou eiwa jogakuin daigaku, Shiseikan wo manabu [Annual of the Institute of Thanatology 2010, Toyo Eiwa University, Learning different views of death and life]*. (pp. 139-164). Yokohama, Japan: Lithon.
- Black, M. (2011a). Empathy. *Toyo Eiwa Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 28, 57-75. Retrieved from <http://id.nii.ac.jp/1093/00000222/>
- Black, M. (2011b). Language, mental development, and the study of life and death/ Kotoba no shiyō to seishin hattatsu (Bi-lingual). In *Sei to shi wo meguru ningen gaku*. (pp. 40-65). Yokohama, Japan: Touyou eiwa jogakuin daigaku kyōiku-sho hentai iinkai.
- Black, M. (2015). The necessary conditions for first language learning part 1: A. R. Luria's investigation of twins. *Toyo Eiwa University Graduate School Journal*, 11, 11-22. Retrieved from <http://id.nii.ac.jp/1093/00000461/>
- Bloom, P., & German, T. (2000). Two reasons to abandon the false belief task as a test of theory of mind. *Cognition*, 77, B25-B31.
- Bodrova, E., & Leong, D. (2007). *Tools of the mind: The Vygotskian approach to early childhood education, 2nd ed.* Columbus, OH: Pearson, Merrill, Prentice Hall.
- Child Development Institute. (2016). *The science behind SNAP®*. Retrieved September 23, 2017 from <https://childdevelop.ca/snap/about-snap/science-behind-snap>
- Decoda Literacy Solutions. (2017). *LEAP BC™ Hop activity card set*. Available: <http://www.decoda.ca/resources/rsc-child-family/leap-resources/hop/hop-activity-card-set/>
- Donaldson, M. (1978). *Children's minds*. London: Fontana Paperbacks.
- Luria, A. R. (1961). *The role of speech in the regulation of normal and abnormal behavior* (J. Tizard, Ed.). New York: Pergamon Press.
- Luria, A. R. (1966). *Human brain and psychological processes* (B. Haigh, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Luria, A. R. (1981). *Language and cognition* (J. V. Wertsch, Trans.). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Luria, A. R., & Yudovich, F. (1971). *Speech and the development of mental processes*

- in the child*. (O. Kovasc & J. Simon, Trans.). Middelsex, England: Penguin Education, Penguin Books, Ltd. (Original work in Russian first published in 1956 & 1957).
- Piaget, J. (1959). *The language and thought of the child, 3rd ed.* (M. Gabain & R. Gabain, Trans.). New York: Routledge. (English translation first published in 1926).
- Scott, R., & Baillargeon, R. (2017). Early false-belief understanding. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 21*, 237-249.
- Sokolov, A. N. (1972). *Inner speech and thought* (G. Onischenko, Trans.). New York: Plenum Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1962). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (Original work in Russian first published in 1934).
- Vygotsky, L. S., & Luria, A. R. (1993). *Studies on the history of behavior: Ape, primitive, and child* (V. I. Golod & J. E. Knox, Trans.). London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. (Original work in Russian first published in 1930).
- Wimmer, H., & Perner, J. (1983). Beliefs about beliefs: representation and constraining function of wrong beliefs in young children's understanding of deception. *Cognition, 13*, 103-128.

Speaking English with Children: 言葉の利点

ミリアム T. ブラック

幼い子供が母語を使えるようになる際、言語使用の増加に伴い、同時に、その基幹をなす知的能力や人間に特有の行動も発達させている。故に、話す行為を通じて大人と交流することは、彼/彼女らの発達において重要である。このことは、読み書きがまだできない子供が英語のような第二言語を使えるようになる際にも当てはまる。本論文では、ロシアの神経心理学者であるアレクサンドル・ロマノヴィッチ・ルリヤの見解を基に、若い児童の言語学習と知力及び行動発達との関係、そしてどのように教師がこの関係に好ましい影響を与えることができるのか、その重要となる点についての説明を試みる。この内容は、日本の大学における幼児教育専攻の新しい科目創設に向けて、その理論的根拠としてその後活用できるものである。