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Robyn Ewing , Jon Callow , Kathleen Rushton
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The importance of language in our lives

> The surest sign of whether our nation has a soul is whether it cherishes *all* of its children . . . Unless there is serious commitment to upholding *every child's birthright to acquire the educational and personal foundations for a full and satisfying life*, we fail the first test of any civilised community. That involves doing justice by the most vulnerable among us, our children. (Vinson, 2010, p. 73, *our emphasis*).

The central importance of quality early childhood education in a child's first eight years in shaping his or her future chances in life has not always been given the attention it deserves in western societies. This book aims to develop our understanding, knowledge and skills about the language and literacy development of young children. As Ruqaiya Hasan (1991) so eloquently reminded us almost three decades ago, our language and literacy is integral to who we are and how we make our way in the world. There is no question that all children have the right to be cherished and supported as they learn to make sense of their worlds and communicate with others. It is of great concern to us that it is often the children who are in the most vulnerable circumstances who are deprived of rich and educative language and literacy experiences and opportunities.

Grounded in current language and literacy research and practice, this book represents our serious commitment to the need for every child to have the best opportunities to develop rich language and literacy skills to equip them for the complexities of 21st-century living. The book begins with an exploration of how children learn how to make sense of their world, how to mean and, in doing so, how they learn to talk as a precursor to learning to be literate. The impact of diverse socioeconomic, ethnic, language and cultural backgrounds on young children's identity, language and literacy learning is also highlighted. As *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework* (2009, p. 13) reminds us:

> There are many ways of living, being and knowing. Children are born *belonging* to a culture, which is not only influenced by traditional practices, heritage and ancestral

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> knowledge, but by the experiences, values and beliefs of individual families and communities. Respecting diversity means within the curriculum valuing and reflecting the practices, values and beliefs of families.

This book honours the many and often complex histories, cultures and languages of families reflected in their different stories, traditions and lifestyles. It acknowledges the diverse ways of knowing, being and becoming in the world today and at the same time the uniqueness of every child.

A number of principles, premises and themes that we believe are critical to language development and learning underpin this book. These include:

- enabling children to learn and develop their language(s) and literacy skills which should be a partnership with parents and caregivers wherever possible – trusting relationships are central!
- enhancing and encouraging the ongoing development of children's already rich imaginations, inherent creativity and problem-solving skills
- embedding creative arts processes (including drawing, painting, designing, dancing, dramatising, singing and making music) will enhance language and literacy learning
- providing access to children's literature and authentic informative texts in all their forms should be a cornerstone of every early childhood context/setting (and indeed across every level of education)
- offering adequate time and resources to play represents 'serious work' for young children and is essential for language development and literacy learning
- giving children multiple opportunities to explore a broad and inclusive world view will help them reflect on how the diversity of cultures and approaches enrich our lives
- developing dispositions such as empathy, flexibility, confidence and resilience will help children flourish in a world of ever-accelerating change, conflicts and dilemmas
- applying productive learning methods where children are engaged and motivated and having fun
- liberating literacy methods from the idea that it is a single global skill acquired once in a lifetime using a 'one size fits all' instructional recipe. ALL children must be able to engage in, understand and analyse an ever-increasing range of ways to apply multiple communication modes.

We have written this book explicitly for early childhood teachers and caregivers as well as interested parents and family members. It includes a range of scenarios and vignettes drawn from our research and based on authentic individual or composite experiences. The included language experiences, strategies and activities focus on the needs of children ranging from birth to eight years of age in a diverse range of early childhood (home, long daycare, preschool, playgroup, family daycare and Foundation to Year 2 – F–2 – school) contexts and settings. The book closely aligns with Australia's first national early years framework for early

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childhood educators – the *Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF,* 2009; available at www.education.gov.au/early-years-learning-framework) and the *Australian Curriculum* (available at www.australiancurriculum.edu.au). The *EYLF* particularly emphasises play-based learning and the importance of communication and language. It aims to provide a framework that will ensure all children can be assured of the best start in life. *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum* (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2010, p. 16) states that the general capability of literacy involves: 'listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts, and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts.' Literacy therefore is critical across all key learning areas and must be understood and developed alongside the other curriculum capabilities (numeracy, information and communication technology, critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, ethical understanding and intercultural understanding) and the cross-cultural priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia and sustainability.

The chapters are sequenced so that the book intentionally starts with language learning in the earliest years. They explore key theoretical ideas about how young children begin to make meaning from the moment they are born as they learn to talk, listen and interact with those around them. Subsequent chapters present the pedagogical knowledge required to guide young children's learning of language and literacy practices. These chapters explore a number of important areas, including Aboriginal perspectives, the role of quality literature in teaching reading, understanding words and images in picture books, the value of storytelling and writing as well as digital literacies for young children. Within each chapter, informal, scaffolded and more formal experiences appropriate for early years contexts are included together with helpful resources for the early literacy classroom.

We have particularly focused on examples from the Australian context but have referenced pertinent international research and we believe the book is certainly relevant for international audiences. Where possible the book briefly considers some of the relevant histories and controversies that have dominated language and literacy learning over our years in the field. All chapters, however, provide educators with easy access to a range of experiences, materials, media, as well as places to question and reflect. Key concepts are defined and are supported by suggested further reading and references. It is not necessary to read the book in a linear fashion: the reader is invited to read particular chapters that are of interest to them in whatever order. Many of the theoretical principles are relevant more broadly, and suggested experiences and activities can be easily adapted for older age groups.

Enabling young children to have the time, resources and, where appropriate, the scaffolding (explained in Chapter 2) and explicit teaching, to engage in imaginative play, exploration, storying, creating, questioning, reflecting as they come to understand multiple ways of meaning-making is one of the most important gifts adults can provide. We hope this book contributes to providing that gift for children.

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Further reading

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CHAPTER 2

Learning how to mean: Dimensions of early language development

This chapter explores the wonderful way that young children start to make meaning of their worlds, understand their environment and communicate with others from the very moment they are born. It initially and briefly discusses the nonverbal ways that babies and toddlers use to communicate their feelings and needs before they learn to talk and then explores the early development of language in those critical three years. It provides a snapshot of several theories about language learning and explains why a sociocultural approach can help us understand how children learn their mother tongue and the implications for parents, caregivers and educators. It also reflects on how learning the mother tongue helps children learn how to become part of a particular culture and community.

Anticipated outcomes for the chapter

After working through this chapter you should be able to:

- discuss the way young children begin to make meaning of their world from birth
- recognise that learning language means learning about culture and community
- understand how babies and toddlers begin to communicate their feelings nonverbally
- appreciate the importance of the first three yeas of life in the early development of a child's language
- explain the implications of a sociocultural approach to language learning for parents, caregivers and teachers.

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SCENARIO: A NEW BABY

The birth of a child is a wondrous occasion and there are many different cultural and religious traditions and rituals associated with welcoming a baby into the world.

New baby Samuel has arrived safely and is warmly welcomed by his proud parents and extended family. From the very moment of Samuel's birth, his parents and all of those who meet him talk to him as if he understands everything they say. Samuel is already a meaning-maker: he is immediately part of the conversations as if he can respond to each comment. This seems to be a common practice in many cultures. In Australia the initial conversation might include the following kinds of comments:

> Welcome little one!
> I can see ten tiny fingers and ten tiny toes.
> Aren't you a beautiful boy?
> Look you have your father's dimple on your chin and your mother's tiny ears . . .
> Let's wrap you up so you're nice and warm.
> Are you ready for a bath?

Samuel is on a lifelong journey to make sense of who he is in the world around him although his first three years will be critical for his *language* development. Whether there will be a naming ceremony, a baptism, christening or blessing, a circumcision, a feast or whether he will be confined to home for the first 40 days of his life, Samuel's parents have already begun to share the power of words with him.

Figure 2.1 A first-time grandmother and her new grandson communicate with each other just hours after his birth

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Introduction

Last year there were nearly 300,000 babies born in Australia, which is one of the most diverse nations in the world. According to the 2011 census almost 75% of Australian families also identify with an ancestry other than Australian and 2.5% of the Australian population identify as indigenous (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Since the end of World War II nearly 750,000 refugees have been resettled from Eastern Europe, Asia, Central America and the Middle East and Africa. Today Australians speak over 200 languages and nearly 61,000 Australians speak one of 50 indigenous languages. The most popular languages other than English include Chinese, Italian, Greek and Arabic.

Have you ever wondered what your life would be like without language? As humans we use language to organise, describe and represent ourselves and our worlds. Words become an integral part of who we are. We use language to ask for what we need, to think about and make sense of events that happen to us and to others, to speculate and ask questions and to dream about new possibilities. Once we learn to talk it seems that words are always with us. Language shapes our thought just as our thoughts rely on language. Whether thought precedes language or language comes first is an age-old debate – a 'chicken or egg' issue!

Babies are born as curious and creative beings, intuitively sociable and immediately 'seeking affectionate relations with companions' (Trevarthen & Delafield-Butt, 2014, p. 3). From the outset they are ready to experiment and are keen to make sense of the world around them. They begin to communicate with their parents, caregivers and extended families as soon as they arrive in the world. Most babies, toddlers and young children who grow up in a language-rich and stimulating interactive environment seem to learn to talk effortlessly. And, despite being the most complex learning a child will do, learning to talk seems to happen naturally for most children, without any formal teaching.

This chapter introduces some key features of language learning in the first few years of life. Many of these features are elaborated in subsequent chapters. It also discusses how learning language is at the same time about learning to be in any culture. Three aspects of learning language are embedded in this discussion: learning our first language (or mother tongue) as distinct from learning another language; learning *through* language; and learning *about* language. The importance of the way we talk to babies and young children and treat them as meaning makers using rich language is also explored.

What enables learning of our first language?

There are physical, environmental and social dimensions of learning to talk as the child's brain and body develop at a rapid pace in those first months and years. It is important to note from the outset that the child is innately social with the capacity and desire to engage with and learn from interaction with others.

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SCENARIO: ROSINA

First-time mother Rosina underlines this immediate shared communication when she speaks of the eye contact and exchange of meaning she remembers as her baby daughter was delivered:

> When my doctor put her on my stomach, her beautiful blue eyes looked directly into my eyes. They were quite piercing actually and seemed to say 'I'm here! We have a lifetime ahead of us.' And I remember feeling that we had just shared a very powerful moment. I will never forget it.

Rosina's assertion is controversial. While there are more research studies that demonstrate that a fetus can recognise his or her mother's voice (Nagy, 2011) and that newborns can respond to the expressions of others and imitate these within minutes of their birth (such as Meltzoff & Moore, 1997; Trevarthen & Delafield-Butt, 2014), these findings conflict with older and more established beliefs that infants cannot be so aware of others at such an early age.

Neuroscientific research regularly and frequently helps develop more understanding of how the brain works. The detailed timed observations made possible by increasingly sensitive recording technology have also been extremely important in developing our understanding of language learning both in utero and in that first year after birth. Trevarthen and Delafield-Butt (2014), however, trace our understanding of the making of shared meaning to the work of psychologist James Baldwin in the 1890s. Baldwin observed what he described as the repetitive or circular movements that babies made. Babies repeat movements of their arms and legs, head and eyes many times. Similarly they touch things over and over again and vocalise the same sounds repeatedly (1894). A Russian neurophysiologist, Nikolai Bernstein theorised that the brain assembles or synthesises the different components of an action into a mental image or pattern. These repetitive, circular motor actions or 'embodied movements' (Trevarthen & Delafield-Butt, 2014, p. 1) develop into repetitive cognitive processes or **schema** as the child grows and develops. A movement or a thought tends to be repeated and, when successful, is retained and further developed with variations over time.

Schema A pattern of thinking or cognitive structure that helps us represent or organise an idea or relationship or way of doing something.

Close study of video recordings of newborns have demonstrated that they try to imitate simple vocal sounds in those early hours of being in the world. They may even repeat their imitation to provoke another response from the adult (Nagy & Molnar, 2004). Babies quickly grow adept at signalling their feelings and needs and, soon after, their intentions to their family and caregivers and, later, to the growing community they move within. Their desire to engage through movement to respond

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to the playful attentions of others is called 'languaging' (Maturana et al., 1995). They will soon smile when spoken to and make cooing noises to indicate pleasure. Some parents are able to discern different ways their child cries to communicate their different needs. Right from the beginning then, young children will listen and respond to talk, to changes in tone and rhythm and any expressive accompanying facial expressions or hand movements. The caregiver should take every opportunity to respond through expressive gestures, words, singing and play. Such shared exchanges or **protoconversations** 'nourish the infant's vitality and imagination' (Trevarthen & Delafield-Butt, 2013) and are an early foundation for a child's future self-confidence.

Protoconversations An interaction or exchange between a baby and a parent, caregiver or older child where meaning is communicated before the baby starts talking. It will be comprised of gestures, sounds and words.

Learning to talk

Just as blind and deaf Helen Keller coined this phrase when learning the sign for water for the first time in 1936, young children discover with delight that 'everything has a name'. They very quickly learn thousands of words and their meanings and, as Cassirer (1944) suggested, this marks their desire to understand and make sense of their world. It seems miraculous to those of us who observe their insatiable enthusiasm for learning. Parents and caregivers thus have an enormous responsibility to nurture this curiosity.

Interestingly, despite their place of birth, most babies develop language in a similar way. The process moves from recognising that crying will attract attention to stringing sounds together (babbling—'nannannannan') from about three or four months old. At about the same time they will laugh and show enjoyment in ritual fingerplays, action songs and dances (for example, 'Round and Round the Garden Like a Teddy Bear'; 'Liangzhi Laohu' (Mandarin, 'Two Big Tigers'); 'All the Children Sing'; 'San Ttoki' (Korean, Mountain Rabbit); 'Open Shut Them, Open Shut Them'; 'Hokey Pokey'; 'Punchinello'). They will be able to follow the instructions for these games, clap their hands on demand and ask questions through gestures. Games like peekaboo will also be fun with the child gradually taking more initiative and responsibility for the playing of the game.

Renowned linguist Michael Halliday's work on children's development of **protolanguage** shows clearly that children are very deliberate meaning makers at this time in their development. He closely studied the development of his own child, Nigel, and demonstrated that by about nine months he had developed protolanguage, a set of simple gestures with sounds to help him make meaning with close family members. Because a child's parents, siblings and caregivers know the child so well, the tones used in these sound-and-gesture combinations make sense and they can discern whether the child is asking for something, interacting with them socially, questioning, imagining or informing. Halliday's book *Learning How to Mean* (1975) is an important landmark for our understanding of how young children learn the 'meaning-potential' of words.

Protolanguage A set of sounds that are usually accompanied by a gesture that a young child puts together to represent the beginning of learning to talk.

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Protolanguage is discussed further in Chapter 4. Many children are beginning to learn individual words alongside their protolanguage, usually 'mumma' and 'dadda' (interestingly there are lots of similarities in these words across many languages but sounds not featured in a particular language tend to fade away in the child's repertoire). By about 18 months of age, two- and three-word sentences are frequent (such as 'Ronnie Donald!' as the child points to the well known symbolic 'golden arches' or 'More ice-cream, Mummy?' as the child holds up their bowl.)

During the second year, a child will learn and understand the meaning of lots of words. They will be able to name and demonstrate parts of the body and everyday things like 'shoes' and 'juice'. From about thirty months onward, there seems to be what has been described as an explosion of words. Many of these words become questions about what, why and how things work. They begin to have conversational exchanges, mastering the idea of turn-taking in these interactions. With growing confidence some children will provide a running commentary of what they are seeing and doing at every moment: 'Look at me! I'm flying!' 'There's a ment-mixer'. By three years of age, most children can tell a story, especially if it is co-narrated with another person supporting them.

There are a number of useful websites that provide helpful sequences that can be a guide for the **speech** and language milestones progress that most young children will make in learning their mother tongue over the first three to five years. See The Australian Parenting Website as an example. It is important, however, to remember that the approximate age assigned to every set of milestones is only indicative and that each child is unique. Each journey into language brings its own experiences. Each language itself has its own nuances.

Speech Talking through the coordination of our tongues, lips, jaw, lungs and voice box to produce recognisable sounds.

Similarly, young children also come to terms with how **grammar** works in their mother tongue almost effortlessly. They seem to absorb word order and how to string words together. The next section will discuss this in more detail.

Grammar A set of rules about a particular language.

The relationship between meaning and language structure

Developing an understanding of how a language is structured, its rules or grammar, also seems to happen easily for most children from about the age of two. Grammatical principles in some languages are very complex yet children grasp things like word order and the use of different kinds of clauses quite quickly. Often children will apply a grammatical rule logically to find there is an exception ('We goed to the zoo'; 'I bringed my teddy'). They also demonstrate their creativity in inventing new constructions ('I'm all by my own'). There is much discussion about how quickly children learn the lexico-grammatical complexities of their mother tongue). Theories of language learning derive from behaviourist, innatist and social constructivist foundations and are briefly defined below.

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