

UNIVERSITY OF
FORT HARE

Eastern Cape Education
Department

*Distance
Education Project*

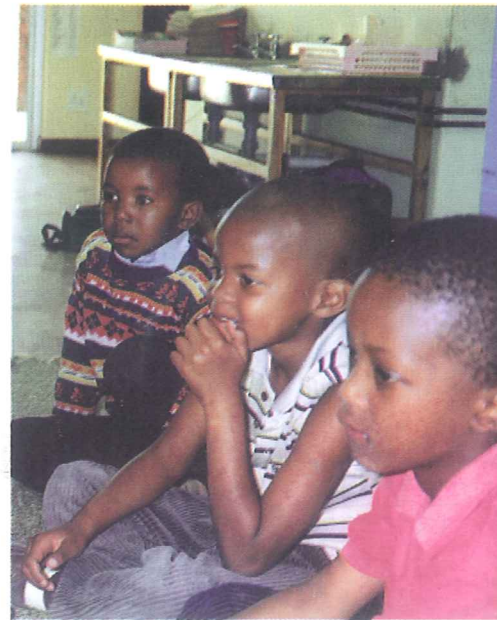


Core Learning Areas Course

Language, Literacy & Communication

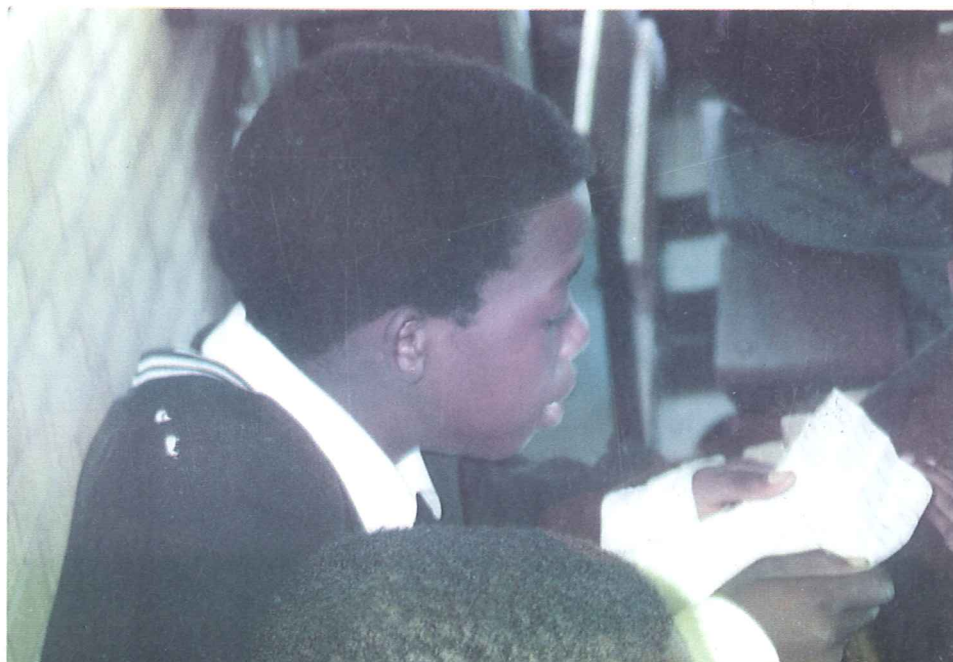
Umthamo 3

*How do we learn to
'language'?*



(Pilot Edition)

October 1999





Grade 5's and 6's recording their ideas



Grade 3's and 4's sharing their ideas

Watch any mother, any teacher, even any babysitter with a child and you'll be struck by how much of what they do is steered by notions of "what children's minds are like and how to help them learn," even though they may not be able to verbalize their pedagogical principles. (p 46)

Research on intersubjectivity begins with infant's and mother's pleasure in eye-to-eye contact in the opening weeks of life, moves quickly into the two of them sharing joint attention on common objects, and culminates a first preschool phase with the child and a caretaker achieving a meeting of minds by an early exchange of words - an achievement that is never finished. (pp 57-58)

Jerome Bruner. 1996. The Culture of Education. (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press)



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How *do* we learn to 'language'?



Introduction

In the first *Language, Literacy and Communication* umthamo we discussed body language (non-verbal communication) and the important role it plays in communication, even in the classroom. In the second umthamo in this learning area, we looked at a literature-based whole language approach in the classroom.

In this third umthamo we are going to think about how we first learn to speak. We are going to ask you to carry out some research, and to write down your theory of how **you** think we acquire spoken language.

This is really important because each method, or approach, which has been designed to teach learners to **read** and **write** language, is based on a theory of how we learn to speak. This is also true of methods and approaches to teaching learners to communicate in other languages (that is, second language teaching and learning). So this umthamo will lay a foundation for later imithamo which will consider approaches to facilitating literacy, and the acquisition of other languages.



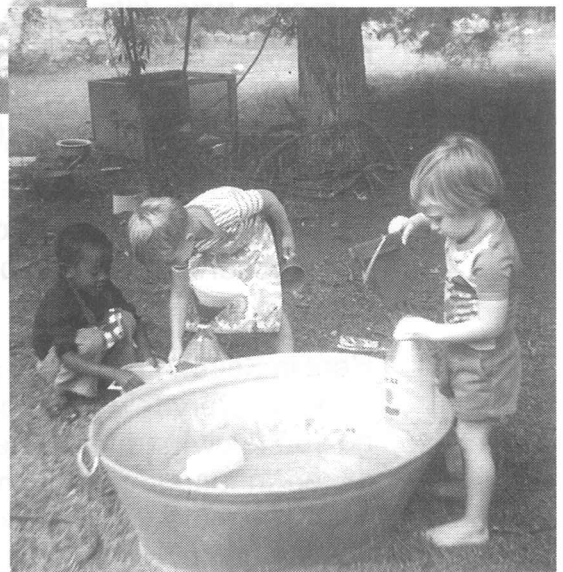
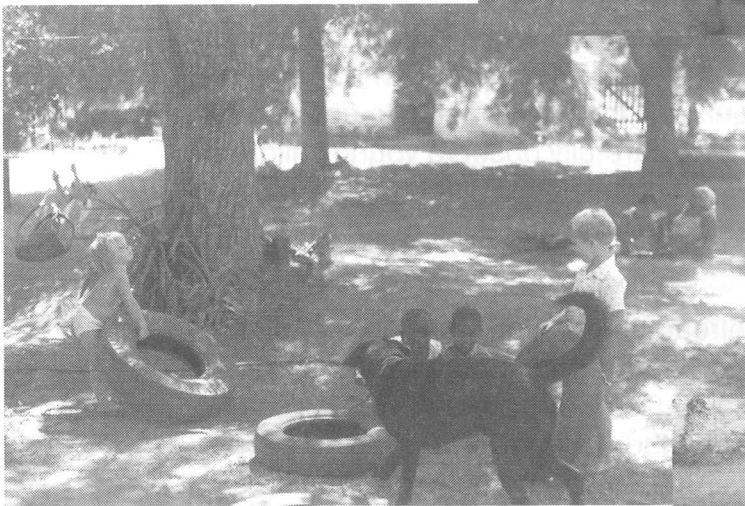
In this umthamo, we are going to ask you to start working on the Key Activity from the very beginning of the umthamo.

- We are going to ask you to collect quite a lot of data from your own research.
- We are going to ask you to collect some data from your learners' research.
- Then you will read some texts written by other people who have done their own research, and recorded their findings.
- And then we are going to ask you to write **your own personal theory** of how you think we **learn to language** (or talk).

That means that the Key Activity will cover the whole umthamo.

Each activity will be a part of the **Key Activity**. The first Activity will involve observing three very young children. In the second and third Activities you will have discussions with your own learners. For the fourth Activity, you will read several academic texts. These Readings, will be handed out together with this umthamo, but they will be separate. To complete the **Key Activity** you will write out **in detail** your theory of how you think we acquire our first, or our heritage language (in other words, how we learn to language).







Unit 1 - Observing early language

How do we learn to speak? It's really interesting that virtually everybody learns to talk. We all learn to communicate orally, unless we have a specific physical disability.

Parents, caregivers and other members of a family are not taught how to help a new baby to communicate through speech. And yet they successfully manage to help the new member of the family become an active participant of the speaking community. How does this happen? What goes on in a young infant's mind? What does she pay attention to? What stages does she go through? How does she manage to turn those cries, gurgles and babblings into words? How does she learn the grammar of the language spoken by her community?



Everybody talks. But we don't think about it. We just do it. In this umthamo, we want you to think about what goes on when we learn to language. One way to begin to develop an idea of what happens is to carefully observe young children. That is what a number of academics at different universities all over the world have done. And that is what we are going to ask you to do.

Remember that you already have a huge amount of direct, personal experience of learning language. You, yourself, were a baby once, and you learned your own first language really well. You probably had younger brothers and sisters who you interacted with as they were learning to talk, and you helped them learn (unless you have a name like Ntombizodwa!).

Most of you have had children of your own and you were a close observer and mentor of every step in their language learning.

Here in South Africa, most people are polylingual. Some are bilingual. Very few are monolingual. How many languages do you know and understand, 3, 4, 5? That makes you an expert in language learning. So, remember that you bring your own expertise and experience of language learning to this umthamo.

Some people have spent their whole lives studying the acquisition of language. Many people have written PhDs on how we learn to communicate verbally. Many books have been written on this topic. But in this umthamo, you will spend just two to four weeks concentrating on this aspect of young children's development.



Activity 1 - Observing three young children

In order to complete this activity you need to make time to observe and listen carefully to three different children in or around your home, *regularly* and *often* throughout the next two or three weeks, as you work through this umthamo. One child should be between 6 and 12 months. The second child should be between 1 and 2 years. And the third child should be between 2 and 3 years.

The reason we want you to observe three very young children is that we want you to develop your own theory of how young children learn to communicate through language, before they ever get to school. By **comparing** children at three different ages or stages of language learning, you may get some idea of how language learning happens and develops.

You need to carry out *your own* research. You need to collect *your own* data, so that you can develop *your own* theory of how we learn to talk.

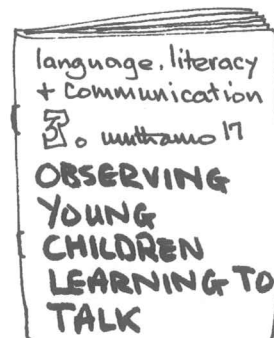
First of all, take the note-book which you received with this umthamo. On the outside, write the title, *Language, Literacy and Communication, Umthamo 3 - Observing young children learning to talk*. Then count the pages of the book, and divide it as equally as you can into three parts; one part for the observations of *each* child.

Then start by writing a brief description of the youngest of the three young children you intend to observe on the first page. Write down the baby's sex, age, and a little bit about the her or his family. Include information about the number of brothers and sisters s/he has, and her/his position in the family (for example, first-born, or youngest of three children, or the middle child, etc). Also record sensitively some details about the family circumstances.

Then turn to the second and third parts of your note-book, and write down the same kinds of details and information about the other two young children (one aged between 1 and 2 years, and one aged between 2 and 3 years) who you intend to observe.

Then you will need to arrange, and make time, to observe each of these three children **two or three times a week** for the next **two or three weeks**. Make sure that each time you observe and listen to the language of one of the children, you take this note-book. Then you can make notes of what you observe the child doing, what you hear the child saying and what takes place, as it happens.

Remember in Umthamo 10, you observed a learner in your class while you worked through that umthamo? Now we want you to work in a similar way for this first stage of the Key Activity of this umthamo.



Who is at home with the child during the day?

How much contact does she/he have with

What toys and things does the child play with?



It's a good idea to think about what you might do, or what might happen **before** you carry out an observation. For example, if you are going to observe a baby between six and twelve months, you might think of playing a clapping game, or singing some rhymes such as, *Nal' isele, emva kwendlu kabawo* or *Tula bhabhana, mus' ukulila umama uyeza neti yomntana*. Then watch and listen to see how the child responds.

If you are planning to observe a toddler of between one and two years, it's a good idea to plan to do something with her/him like water-play. Then you can 'tune in' to the child's talk that goes with what is being done. You just need one or two spoons, a mug, and perhaps a jug or a small bowl, and a washing-up bowl of water. Young children of this age also enjoy clapping games and rhymes, and games which involve a bit of chasing! You can compare the response to that of a younger child.

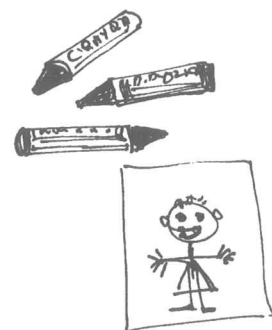
If you are going to observe a young child of between two and three years, it might be a good idea to take some wax crayons or a pencil and some paper so that the child can draw. Ask the child to describe what is being drawn. But children of this age also enjoy water-play, rhymes and chasing games. (Again, if you repeat activities, you will have a basis for comparison.)

The next time that you observe the three children you select, make sure that you are prepared to do something different. If the child *wants* to repeat whatever you did before, then do so. But try to vary the activities each time that you observe the child.

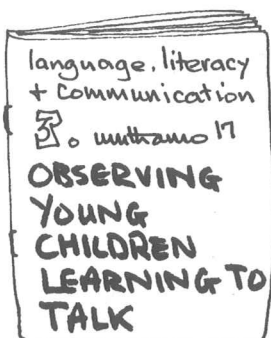
If you find the child busily engaged in an activity with somebody else when you arrive to observe, don't worry. Watch and listen carefully. Make careful notes of whatever is going on.

As you play with the child, talk with her/him. Try to ask open questions. Don't ask questions which elicit a "yes" or "no" answer. **Listen** to the child. If the child shows that s/he is interested in something, respond to her/his interest. Try to follow the child's lead. Try to listen *actively*. Expect whatever the child says or does to make sense. It will make sense to her/him. Tune in to her/his interests.

But don't go unprepared. Remember, this is a research project. You have to prepare before you carry out your research. You have to plan what you might do, and how you might do it. You have to be prepared for the expected, and be open to the unexpected.



We thought about 'open' and 'closed' questions in Umthamo 12, pages 19 and 20.



Sometimes you may want, and you may have the opportunity, to observe these children playing or interacting with other children. Whether you are talking with the child, or whether you are observing and listening to the child talking with another child or adult, make notes about what is going on and what is actually being said. Record what you **observe** and **hear** in your note-book on the appropriate page for that particular child. **Always** write the date and time of day of the observation.

At the end of the three weeks of carrying out your observations of these three children, you should have at least 6 to 9 observations for each child. This may sound like a lot, but the observations don't have to be very long. The important thing is to observe and compare these three children **often**. If you are able to carry out more observations, it will be to your advantage. You will have more data from which to draw your conclusions and to develop your own theory of how we learn to 'language'.

Although you will be handing in a Research Report at the end of this umthamo, we would like you to continue to observe these three young children over the next twelve months. Then at the end of this year of the course, you will have substantial *additional* data to attach to your report, and to include in your Portfolio.

At the East London Centre, the teacher-learners staple a sheet of paper into the inside back cover of their imithamo. On this sheet they make notes. These notes include instances where they have come back to the ideas in an umthamo later in the course. You could do the same at your Centre with this umthamo, if you wish. We think this is an excellent way to ensure that the ideas of the umthamo become part of your regular professional knowledge and understanding as a primary school teacher.





Unit 2 - What do learners think happens when we learn to talk?



While you are busy carrying out your own research (observing, making notes, talking with three very young children), we would like you to find out what your learners **think** about how we learn to 'language', and what they **find** when they themselves observe and listen to very young children.

Getting learners to think about how we learn language is **not** something that is done in school. At best, it is sometimes part of the curriculum for teacher education at colleges. You will probably be doing something quite innovative and new. Other teachers elsewhere may be interested to hear about this work and try it for themselves. (Perhaps after this unit, some teacher-learners can collaborate with the writers to produce an article for a teachers' magazine or newspaper about this work.)

Preparing for Activity 2

No matter what age or stage your learners have reached, we would like you to do the next activity *with* your learners. We want you to discuss with your learners **how we learn to talk**.



You will have to think carefully about how you initiate and guide this discussion, according to the age and stage of your learners. But we *know* that you can discuss this with very young children. If you work with younger learners, you will need a large sheet of newsprint, and a koki pen with a broad nib. If you work with older learners, you will also need a large sheet of newsprint and a koki pen with a broad nib. And you will need a sheet of paper for each group. (For this activity, you could use paper which has been used on one side, which you are re-cycling.)

Paper is made from trees. Every time we use paper we need to be aware of this. Recycling our resources means that we don't waste either our own, or the earth's resources. If you don't have newsprint, you can even use (recycle) old newspaper pages.

You could either follow your own intuition in order to get your learners thinking and talking about **how** we actually learn to talk and communicate verbally. Or you could follow our suggestions below.

When we trialled this activity at Vanani School, Kholiswa started off by showing the Grade 1s and 2s a big picture of a street scene. Then she asked a few children to identify the young children in the picture. Having got the learners to focus on very young children, Kholiswa then asked the Grade 1s and 2s what they can do now, themselves, that they couldn't do when they were very young. Immediately the children wanted to share their responses with her.



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Activity 2 - A Discussion - How *do* we learn to talk?

Working with younger learners

If you work with young learners, gather them around you. Make sure that you are sitting down, and that your eyes are at the same level as theirs. You will have a whole class discussion with your learners.

Start off by asking your learners if anybody has a baby brother or sister at home. We are sure that somebody will tell you that they do. Then ask them "What does your baby brother or sister do when he or she is hungry?"

What does your baby brother or sister do when he or she wants something?"

Listen carefully to your learners. Give different children a chance to share what they have to say. We are sure that somebody will say that their baby brother or sister talks. If not, ask them what their baby brother or sister can't do at this stage. Don't spend more than five minutes on this part of the discussion. You just want to get your learners thinking.



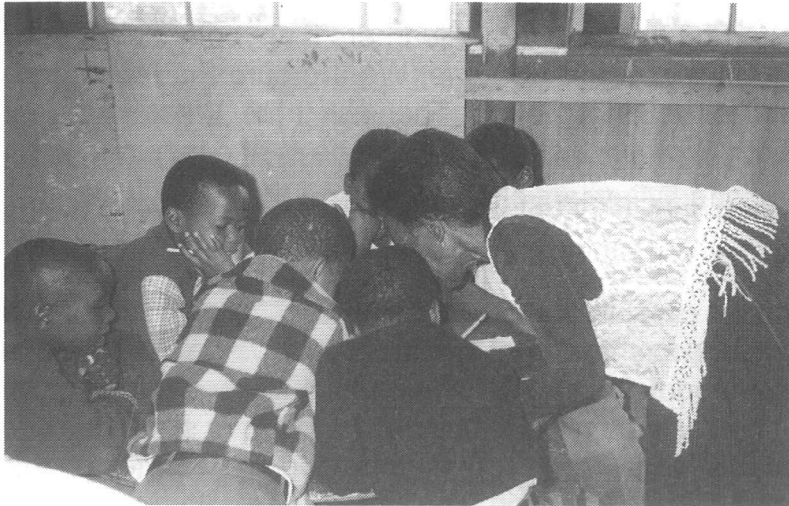
Then ask your learners to think about how we learned to talk when we were very small, when we were babies. Ask your young learners,

- How do you think your baby brother or sister learns to talk?
- How did you learn to talk? Turn to the person next to you, and tell her/him what you think.

In this way, everybody in your class gets a chance to speak, not just the children who are the most confident, and who usually voice out their ideas. It will also give your learners a chance to rehearse, or practise, what they may want to say more publicly to the whole class.

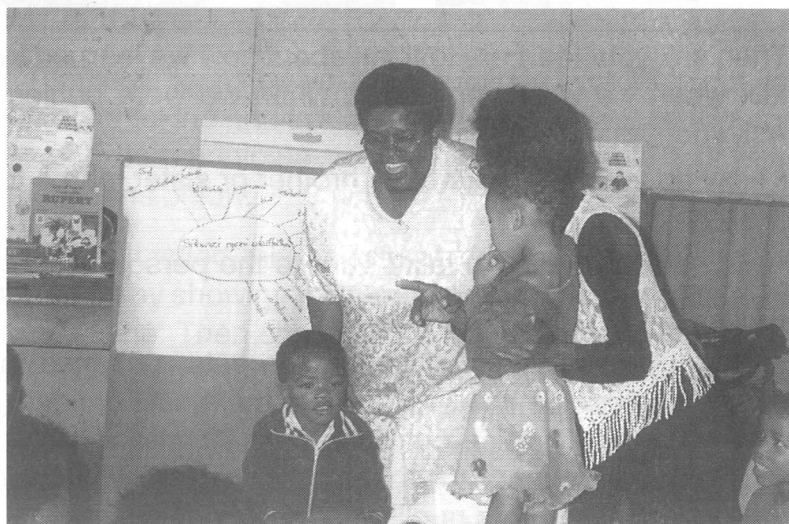
By asking your learners to do this, you are asking them to theorise, or to develop their own theories about how we learn to talk.

Then put up the large sheet of newsprint. As your learners share their ideas with one another, watch them carefully. After a minute or two, call some of them to whisper in your ear and to tell you what they think. Write down quickly in your Journal what they say so that you can share it with the whole group.



We found that this idea of getting the children to whisper their ideas to the teacher was very valuable. In this way we picked up some interesting, individual and authentic ideas which we may not have otherwise heard. We found that the young children tended to repeat what their peers said. Some lacked the confidence to share their own ideas publicly.

After two or three minutes, draw a circle in the middle of the large sheet of newsprint. In the circle write, *Sifunda njani ukuthetha*. Then ask your learners to share their ideas with everybody. Listen carefully to what your learners say. Give as many learners as possible the chance to share their ideas with the whole group. As they share their ideas, record what they say on the newsprint, in the form of a mind-map, in large clear letters. Try to write *exactly* what your learners say. Don't dismiss any learner's ideas. Accept everything that your learners say. But push them to give you reasons to support their ideas. You may also wish to record this discussion on your cassette-tape recorder.



Don't let the discussion drag. As soon as you see that your learners are getting tired of the discussion topic, or that they are restless, summarise what has been said, and close the discussion. Don't spend more than twenty minutes on the whole activity.

After this discussion, take the sheet of paper on which you recorded your learners' ideas and theories and clearly write your name, the Grade(s) you teach and the date. Then store this data safely in your Concertina File.

Homework (A research task for your learners)

Before you move on to another task with your learners, tell them that you want them to do some homework. Tell them that you want them to spend some time during the coming week *carefully observing, listening, talking and playing* with a very young child at, or near, their home. The child should be between six months and three years of age. It could be a sibling (brother or sister), a relative, or a neighbour's child.

Ask your learners to think of ways that they might be able to get that young child to talk. They may suggest that they will need to talk to that child. Push them to think of activities that they could, or might even have to do. For example, they might need to play with the child, or they may have to *do* something for the child (such as feeding the child, bathing it, helping to dress the child). Tell your learners that they will need to

observe

listen to, and

talk with

that child.

Tell them you want them to observe, talk with and listen to that child as often as they can over the next week. Then you will have another discussion about what they have observed and heard.

At Vanani, we suggested that the Grade 1's should ask somebody to write down what they had observed and heard so that they wouldn't forget what they had found out. This worked really well. When we went back to Vanani, we had some wonderful samples of writing that parents, older siblings, aunties, uncles and gran-nies had written.

You may find it also helps to write up the instruction on the chalkboard for your learners to copy into their books. Many of the parents can read and write, and will understand better what their children have been asked to do if they read a written instruction. Family involvement in the work of school is an exciting new development in education. In some parts of the world there are Family Maths programmes, for example.





Reflecting on the discussion

Sometime later (if possible on the same day), listen to the cassette-tape and study the mind-map of your learners' ideas. Then take your Journal and write a summary of what your learners have said and written.

- Was there anything common in what different learners said? Why do you think this was so?
- What surprised or interested you?
- How did you feel when you carried out this activity? (Did you enjoy this activity? Or did it make you feel uncomfortable? Why do you think you felt this way?)
- What have you learned from this activity?

You will have an opportunity to share what you have written in this Journal entry at the face-to-face session where this umthamo is monitored.

Working with older learners

If you work with learners in an Intermediate Phase class, make sure that they are sitting in groups of about 6. You will get your learners to have discussions in groups.

Start off by introducing the topic of language and talking. You may want to start in the same way that we suggested for the younger learners. Or you may want to use one or more of the following questions as a stimulus:

- How do we share our ideas?
- How do we let someone else know what we're thinking and feeling? What do we do?
- What do we do when someone is talking about something we don't know anything about?
- How do we understand? How do we make sense of what is going on?
- How do we let someone know that we don't know what they're saying?
- How do you show that you do understand?
- How do we add our own opinion to what has been said?
- How do we show that we agree or disagree?
- How do you remember what you have heard, or what you have learned?

This discussion should not last more than about five minutes. You just want to get your learners thinking. Then ask your learners to think about how they think we learned to talk when we were very young, when we were babies. Tell them to turn to the person next to them to share their ideas.

If they are in bigger groups than 6, not all your learners will have a chance to talk and share their ideas. Remember Umthamo 4?

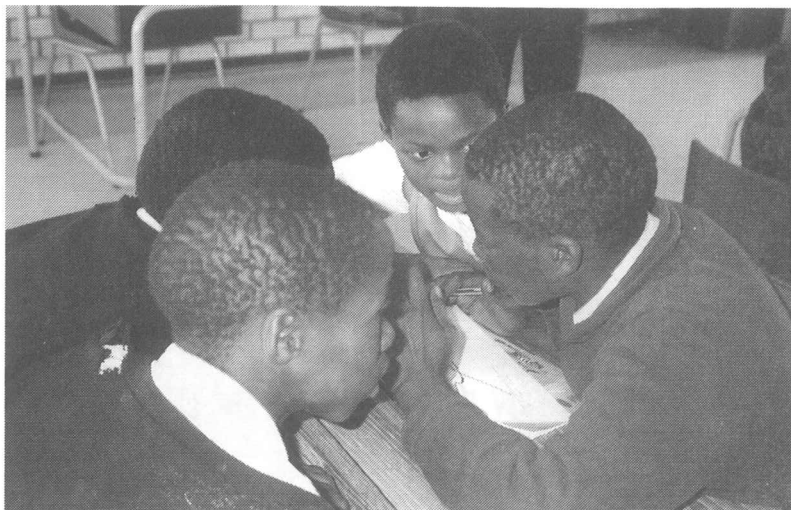
By asking your learners to do this, you are asking them to theorise, or to develop their own theories about how we learn to talk.



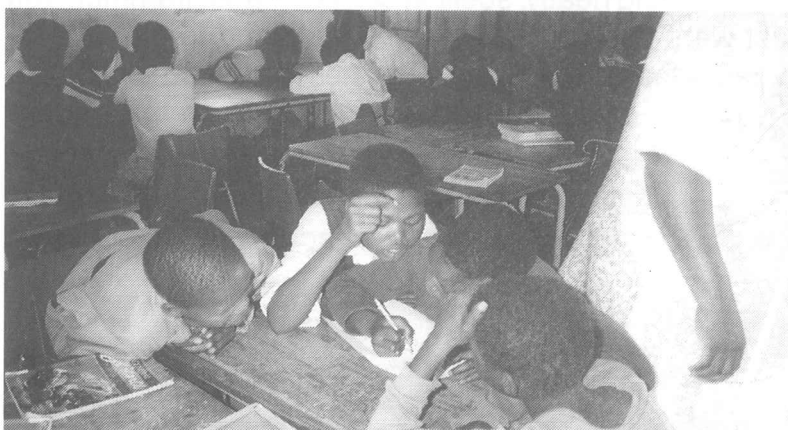
After two or three minutes, hand out a sheet of paper to each group. Make sure that in each group one of the learners makes rough notes of what is said and discussed on the sheet of paper. (They could do this in the form of a mind-map, or just as a list.) Tell your learners not to worry about writing neatly, spelling correctly, and grammar. You just want them to write very quickly and to make **brief** notes of their discussions. They need to write their names, their ages, their Grade(s), and the date on the back of their notes.



While the groups discuss, put the cassette tape in the middle of one group, and leave it there for about 2 or 3 minutes and record the group's discussion. Then move the cassette tape to another group and record about 2 or 3 minutes of that group's discussion. You will probably be able to tape-record what three groups say.



After about 8 minutes, move around all the groups and remind them that you will expect them to be ready to report back in about two minutes' time. When you have informed each group, put up a large sheet of newsprint, and write in the centre of the page, *Sifunda njani ukuthetha*, and draw a circle around the words. Then add some "arms" or "branches" ready to record the different points.



After 2 minutes, chair a *short* whole class discussion. Give each group a minute or two to share **one** point that they have written down. When one point has been made, encourage the other groups to share *different* points. Discourage them from repeating what a previous group has said. As they share their points, record what each group representative says on a large mind-map as those who are working with younger learners.

Collect your learners' written record of the group discussions, and put these together safely, so that you don't lose them. Also, label the cassette-tape by writing your name, the Grade(s) whose discussions you have taped, and the different groups, as well as the date. Store this data, together with the large class mind-map, safely in your Concertina File. You will need it for Activity 3.

Homework

Before you move on to another task with your learners, tell them that you want them to do some homework. Tell them that you want them to spend some time during the coming week ***carefully observing, listening, talking and playing*** with a very young child (aged between six months and three years of age) at or near their home. This could be a sibling, a relative or a neighbour's child.

Ask them to think of ways that they might be able to get that young child to talk. They may suggest that they will need to talk to that child. Push them to think of activities that they could, or might even have to do. For example, they might need to play with the child, or they may have to *do* something for the child (such as feeding the child, bathing it, or helping to dress the child). Tell your learners that they will need to

observe

listen to, and

talk with

that child.

Tell them you want them to observe, talk with and listen to that child as often as they can over the next week. Then you will have another discussion about what they have observed.

If one or two of your learners do not have a younger brother or sister, and there are no babies at or nearby their homes, ask those children to ask an elderly somebody at or near their home how *that* person thinks we learn to talk. In this way, everybody in your class should be able to do some research.

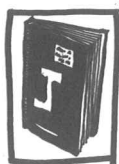
Tell your learners that in a week's time you are going to have another discussion and they will be able to share their findings from their research.

Tell them that if they want to, they can make notes of what they ***observe and hear*** in an old half-finished notebook or in their scribbler. Tell them not to worry about their spelling, grammar and neatness. Tell them the important thing is to get down the ***gist*** (the main point or part) of each observation. Then they can share these observations in the next discussion.

If your learners want to know why you are asking them to do this, you could give them several reasons. You could explain that you are asking them to help you with your research for this umthamo, or the course you are doing.

*You could also tell them that you want to know what they think about how we learn language **before** we come to school. And you could tell them that if they think about how we learn to talk, this can help them to understand better how they learn other things about language and communication. You could also tell them that as adults, they will one day have to help their own babies/children learn to talk.*

0:30



Reflecting on this discussion

Sometime later, if possible on the same day, listen to the cassette tape and study the notes that each group made. Then take your Journal and write a summary of what your learners have said and written.

- Is there anything common in what the groups have said or written? Why do you think this is?
- What surprised or interested you?
- How did you feel when you carried out this activity? (Did you enjoy this activity? Or did it make you feel uncomfortable? Why do you think you felt this way?)
- What have you learned from it?

You will have an opportunity to share what you have written in this Journal entry at the face-to-face session where this umthamo is monitored.

The next activity will follow a similar pattern to Activity 2. If you work with younger learners (in an Early Childhood or Foundation Phase class), we suggest that you **lead, guide, and record** a whole group discussion. If you work with older learners, we suggest that you let them discuss again in the same small groups as they did before.

No matter what class or Grade you teach, you will need the class mind-map which you made of your learners' discussion and ideas in Activity 2. You will also need a koki pen with a broad nib, in a **different colour** from the pen you used in Activity 2. If you work with older learners, you will need to remember to take your learners' group mind-maps to class, as well.



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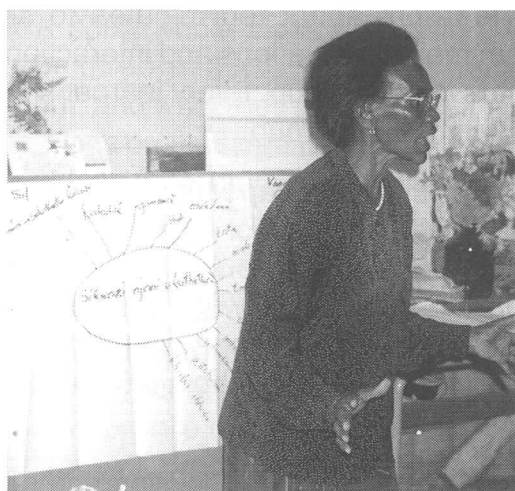


Activity 3 - A Discussion: Sharing findings and developing a theory

Working with younger learners

Gather your learners around you and remind of them of the task which you set them to do the previous week. Put up the mind-map that you made of all their ideas about how we learn to talk. Read each idea aloud. Then tell them you want to know what they discovered when they watched and talked with a very young child. Tell them to tell the person next to them what they found out. Remember, this will give them a chance to rehearse, or practise, what they may want to share with the whole class group.

When you worked through Umthamo 11, the second Science umthamo, you provided your learners with some tasks so that they could also develop a theory.



After a few minutes, stop your learners, and ask them to share their ideas with the whole group. If nobody seems to have anything to say, be patient. Try to ask some guiding or prompting questions. For example,

- When you played with a young child this last week, what happened? What surprised you?
- How much could s/he say?
- What interesting mistakes did s/he make?
- Why do you think s/he said that? (This is not an easy question, and you may need to leave it unanswered. Later on, in a few years' time, the learner may remember this question and think of a possible answer.)

As they share their experiences, record what your learners tell you on the mind-map from before. But now write with a **different coloured** koki pen.

Don't let the discussion drag. If your learners begin to get restless, it might be wiser to summarise what has been said, and to close the discussion. You may wish to speak to individual children throughout the week as the rest of the class gets on with other work, activities and tasks. Or your learners may come up to you and tell you something new that they have observed. Add whatever they say to the mind-map in the second colour. Leave the mind-map up on the wall of your classroom so that your learners are constantly reminded of the discussion.

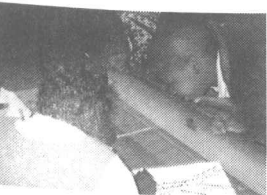
You know your own learners. You know the questions which will get them to talk. Some learners may want to tell you about some words or a phrase, or even a rhyme that they taught the child with whom they were interacting.

By doing this, you are modelling for your learners the way you record information. It is important to be aware of what you are doing, and the possible effects your actions may have on your learners. You could even tell your learners why you are using two different colours: one to record what they thought before they observed very young children, and another to record what they found out from their observations.

030

Working with older learners

If you work with older learners, get them to work in the same groups that they were working in for Activity 2. Each learner should have the data which s/he has collected from her/his observations and interactions with a very young child.



Give your learners about ten minutes to share their findings from their observations and interactions with the other learners in their group. Every learner should share something with her/his group.

Give each group the mind-map which they made in Activity 2. Ask them to add any new or different information in a **different colour**. Each group will need to appoint someone to make notes of what is said. This person should not be the same person who made notes in the previous discussion - it should be a **different** member of the group.

Remind your learners that handwriting and spelling are not important. The important thing is to get notes down about what each group member has to say. Then they will be able to share their discussion with the whole class. When it is the turn of the one who is recording to share her/his ideas, someone else in the group will have to make notes. Ask them to write the date of this discussion on the back of the mind-map next to the first date.

Write up some **open** questions on the board (or on a large sheet of paper) to guide your learners' discussions. We have written some suggestions below:

- What surprised you? What did the child say?
- How much could the child say?
- What sorts of mistakes did s/he make? Can you explain the mistakes? (Is there a sense to the mistakes?)
- Were there things that the child couldn't do yet?

Give your learners about 10 minutes to share their experiences. You are the best judge of how much time your learners will need. But watch and eavesdrop on the different groups' discussions to sense when they have finished sharing.

Again, you may wish to use your cassette tape-recorder to record some of your learners' discussions. And they may be prepared to have their discussions recorded. We think you will need a new tape. Then you will be able to compare both recordings of your learners' two discussions.

After about ten minutes, go round to each group and tell your learners quietly that they have two or three minutes to finish off. Tell them that you want them to share anything that they found out, and anything that was very similar about their experiences.

We thought about 'open' and 'closed' questions in umthamo 12, pages 19 & 20. Open questions invite many possible answers. Closed questions usually expect just one 'correct' answer, or a "yes" or "no" response.

We have used the word 'eavesdrop' because it is important that you listen as unobtrusively as possible. In other words, don't let the learners be aware that you are listening to their discussions. If they think you are listening, they may not say what they really think. Your presence might inhibit them.



Then chair a *short* whole class discussion. Give each group two or three minutes to report back on what surprised them, and what they found was similar. Record their contributions on the large mind-map from Activity 2, in a **different** colour. Remember to collect each group's notes of their discussion. This is valuable data which you should store in your Concertina File together with the class mind-map and cassette-tape.



1:30

During the week that follows this discussion, get each group to come to your table to discuss and explain their group's mind-map while the rest of the class gets on with other work. You will probably need to spend about ten minutes with each group. After they have shared their ideas and findings with you, ask them the question that you asked them in Activity 2 on page 12 - "*How do you think we learn to talk? What do you think now, after watching and talking with a very young child?*" Again, record what your learners think on a piece of paper, and attach this to their mind-map securely.

Make sure that you write your name, the Grade of the learners with whom you had this discussion, and the date underneath your notes. Then store this data safely in your Concertina File.

1:00



Analysing the two discussions

Before the face-to-face session where this umthamo is monitored, you will need to spend some time analysing the two discussions which you have had with your learners.

Take out the mind-maps which you made from the stories (research) which your learners shared with you and their peers. Then use the following questions to guide you as you study and compare the data from the two discussions.

- What is similar in the stories (research) which my learners reported? (You are looking for regularity, or patterns of behaviour.)
- What is different?
- What surprised my learners?
- What theories did my learners make to explain how we learn to talk? What conclusions did they come to?
- What surprised me about this activity?
- What have I learned?
- How do I feel now?

Open your Journal. Write your answers to the questions. You will have an opportunity to share this at the face-to-face session where this umthamo is monitored.





Unit 3 - Finding out what the 'Experts' say

In this umthamo we have been thinking about how human beings learn to communicate through words, that is, how we learn to talk as very young children. You have been observing three children on a regular basis for the past two weeks or so. You have discussed this topic with your own learners. And you have asked your learners to carry out their own observations, and to come up with their own theories.

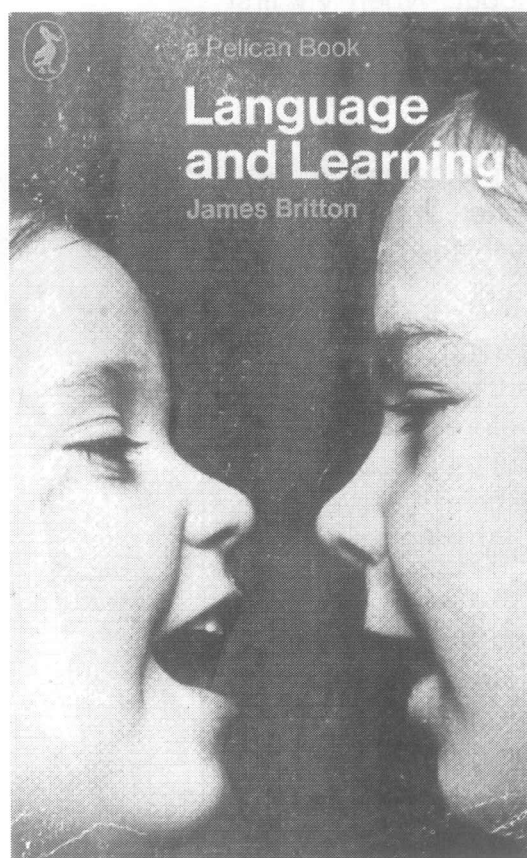
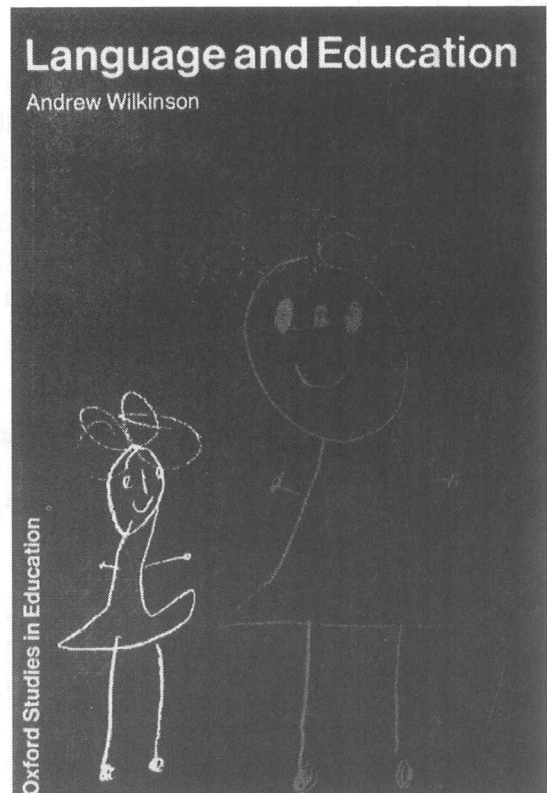
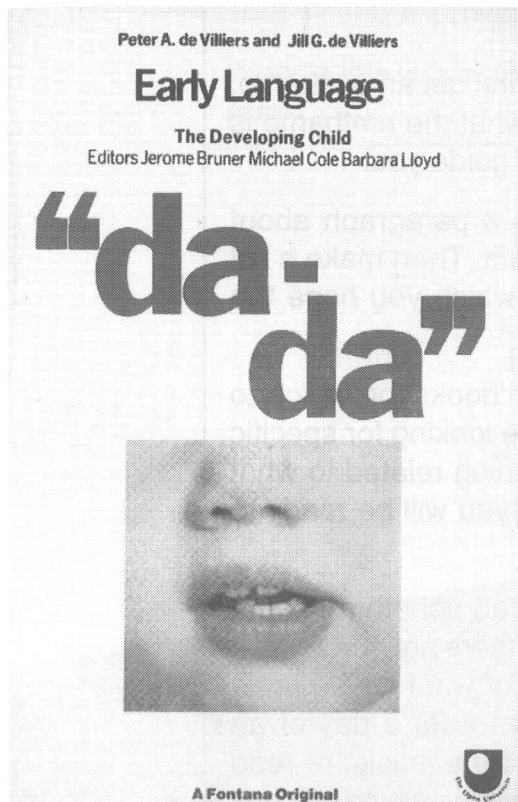
Now we are going to study what a number of 'experts' in this field have written. But before you do anything, there is something that we must say. And that is, *nobody really knows exactly how we learn to speak, or how we acquire language*. Many university academics have observed and studied young children. And they have recorded their observations, and written down their theories.

There are different theories. In 1957 a psychologist named BF Skinner published a book called, *Verbal Behaviour*. Skinner was a psychologist who was known as a 'behaviourist'. He studied behaviour. From observing experiments which he carried out in his university laboratory, he came to the conclusion that most behaviour was learned ('nurture'), and this was largely through imitation and being rewarded. Skinner said that it was exactly the same with language.

However, when another university academic, Noam Chomsky, read that book, he could not agree with what Skinner had written. He had also observed young children learning language. He felt that if we only learned through imitation, then we would only be able to repeat whatever we heard. We would not be able to make up our own new sentences, and say our own ideas and thoughts. Noam Chomsky suggested that we have a '*language acquisition device*'. In other words, we have something in our brains that processes whatever the brain receives through the ears, and then this sends out new ideas and thoughts through speech. According to this view, language acquisition is more to do with 'nature'.

In the following activity (part 3 of the **Key Activity**) we want you to read some texts. We expect everybody to read the extract from *Early Language*, by Peter and Jill de Villiers, as well as the extract from *Language and Education*, by Andrew Wilkinson. You will learn more about this topic if you also read the extract from *Language and Learning* by James Britton, and the journal article by Jerome Bruner, "*The Ontogenesis of Speech Acts*".

These four passages discuss this issue of language acquisition. But before you read any of the passages, we suggest that you follow a procedure so that you get as much as you can out of each one.



J. Child Lang. 2, 1-19. Printed in Great Britain

The ontogenesis of speech acts*

JEROME S. BRUNER
University of Oxford

(Received 2 August 1974)

ABSTRACT

A speech act approach to the transition from pre-linguistic to linguistic communication is adopted in order to consider language in relation to behaviour generally and to allow for an emphasis on the use of language rather than on its form. The structure of language is seen as non-arbitrary in that it reflects both attention structures (via predication) and action structures (via the fundamental case grammatical form of language). Linguistic concepts are first realized in action. A pilot study focusing on the regulation of joint attention and joint activity within the context of mutuality between mother and infant is discussed, with emphasis on ritualization in mutual play as a vehicle for understanding the development of the formal structures of language.

INTRODUCTION

It has become increasingly customary in the past several decades to consider language as a code, a set of rules by which grammatical utterances are produced and in terms of which they are comprehended in order to extract their meaning. This tradition, ancient in origin, was greatly reinforced by the brilliant insights of de Saussure (1959) and Jakobson (1973), amplified by Chomsky (1965). It has resulted in stunning perception of the formal nature of language and has permitted the application of powerful mathematical techniques to the field of linguistics. But all advances in knowledge have attendant costs. Depth of insight must often be earned at the cost of breadth of perspective. So, whilst we have in the past decades learned much about the structures of language, we have perhaps overlooked important considerations about its functions. Our oversight has, I think, turned our attention away from how language is used. And since the uses of language are, I believe, crucial to an understanding of how language is acquired, now it is initially used, the study of language acquisition has been distorted.

* Parts of this paper were delivered at a Symposium honouring Professor Niko Tinbergen on his receiving the Zwanmiedem Medal, Amsterdam, 7 December 1973. A later version was presented at the University of Edinburgh, School of Epistemics, 21 May 1974. I wish to express my thanks to Miss Wendy Zerin and to Miss Virginia Sherwood for help in these observations and also to Dr Aidan Macfarlane and Mr John Churcher for aid in recording. Dr Michael Scelfo and Dr Renée Paton have also helped in the analysis of data.



Activity 4 - What do the 'Experts' say?

First of all read the title of the extract or chapter. Next, glance quickly (skim) through the pages and make a note of any headings. Then read the very first paragraph, and the last paragraph.

This is what you often do when you first get an umthamo. You try to get an overall picture of what the umthamo is about. You look for the signposts to guide you.

Now, open your Journal, and write a paragraph about what you expect to read in the extract. Then make a list of questions which you have, and which you hope the extract will answer.

If you do this, it will give you some 'hooks' on which to catch whatever you read. You will be looking for specific information. When you meet something related to what you are looking for in the passage, you will be ready to take it in.

Then read the extract. First of all, read right through the whole article. Don't worry too much if there are parts which puzzle you. Just try to get a sense of what the writer is trying to say. You may want to leave it for a day or an hour or two. When you come back to the article, re-read it, and in your Journal write down anything which puzzles you, or that you have questions about. When Viv first read Margaret Donaldson's book, *Children's Minds*, she found that she had to read each part three times! Don't give up. Persevere!

Remember that you have your own expertise. As you read, compare what has been written with what you already think and know. Don't just try to absorb the words and ideas like a sponge absorbs water.

You will have to find the way of reading these extracts that suits you. Some of you may want to read one article at a time, and really understand it before you move onto another. Others may want to read all four, because you feel that one extract may explain another. That's very true. You may want to experiment, and try different ways of approaching this Reading Activity.

When you have read an article and you feel that you understand it fairly well, open your Journal and write your thoughts, feelings and ideas about that article. Did it answer the questions which you hoped it would answer? If you are part of a study group which meets in between the face-to-face sessions, you may want to share and



discuss what you have written with the rest of your study group. But writing will also help you to clarify your thinking around this very important topic of language acquisition. And an additional benefit is that every time you write, your writing improves.

Work in this way with all the extracts you have chosen to read.

MARGARET DONALDSON
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MINDS**

'One of the most powerful, most wisely balanced and best informed books on the development of the child's mind to have appeared in twenty years. Its implications for education are enormous.'
JEROME BRUNER

First published in 1978, *Children's Minds* has become a classic inquiry into the nature of human thought. Margaret Donaldson shows how thought and language originally depend upon the interpersonal contexts within which they develop, and how, given the support of such contexts, children are already skilled thinkers and language users by the time they come to school.

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Unit 4 - Developing your own theory

The next Activity is the fourth part of the **Key Activity**. In this Activity you will need to work with and analyse the data which you have collected. You will try to put everything together. **This will take some time.** You will also need to refer to the extracts which you read, and the notes that you made on those readings. Then you will write a Reflective Report on how **you** think we first learn to 'language'.

Activity 5 - Writing a Research Report on Language Acquisition

Studying your data

1. Your own observations of young children

First of all, take your note-book entitled, *Observing young children learning to talk*, and re-read the observations which you have been making on each of those three children. Read all the observations about one child, before you move onto your notes on the other two children.

As you read your notes, mark any interesting or surprising notes in the margin with a pencil or a highlighter. If you notice a pattern, or you come across something which reminds you of something that you have read, make a note in the margin, too. Be prepared to spend an hour or two on this task.

My own observations of young children

Then take a sheet of paper and write the youngest child's first name and age. Make **point form notes** on what you found interesting, surprising, or that fits in or contradicts something that you have read.

Next read your observations on the child who is between one and two years of age. When you have finished reading your observations on that child, write that child's first name and age. Again, make **brief notes** on what you found interesting, surprising, or that fits in or contradicts something you have read in the extracts.

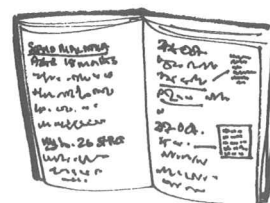
Then do the same for the oldest child whom you have observed.

2. Your learners' ideas, research and theories

For this task, you need

- the large mind-maps of your learners' ideas and theories (or conclusions) from the discussions which you held with them in Activity 2 and 3 (see pages 9 and 16)

200



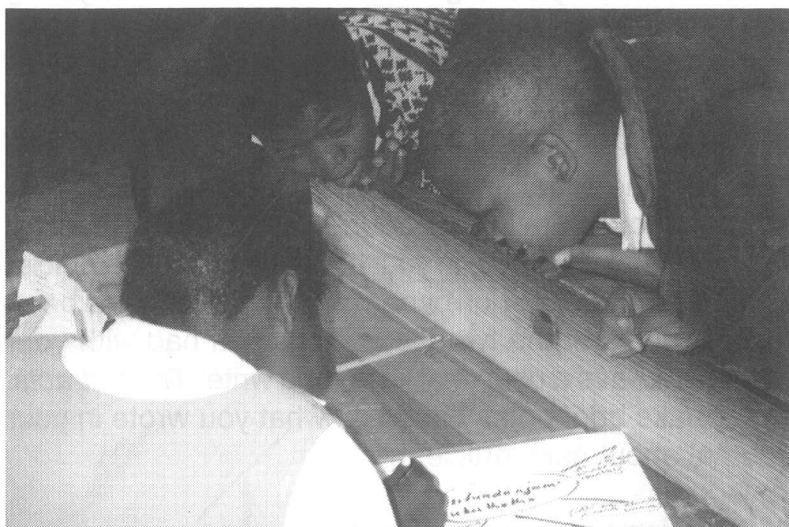
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100

- the cassette recordings of your learners' discussions, if you tape recorded any discussions
- the Journal entries which you made after both of these discussions.

If you work with older learners, you will also need the mind-maps and notes that your learners made.



You will need to work with this data in a way that suits you. But if you are not sure how to go about this task, we have some suggestions. **Again, this is a task which takes a lot of time if you do it carefully and thoroughly.**



First of all, take the large mind-maps which you made with your learners in the whole class discussions. In your Journal, find the entry you made after the first discussion. Re-read what you have written. Look at, and re-read, the mind-map you made of that discussion. If you work with older learners, make sure that you also study the notes that your learners made while they discussed their ideas in groups. Are you happy with what you wrote in your Journal? Is there anything that you would like to add?



Next, take another sheet of paper, and at the top write, *First Discussion with Grade(s) _* and write in the Grade(s) that you teach. Make **brief notes** of what you see on that mind-map and what you wrote in your Journal after the discussion. If you now have any additional comments to make, write them down underneath your notes of the discussion.

Then work with the mind-map from the second discussion in the same way. Leave two or three lines under your notes on the First Discussion, and write, *Second Discussion with Grade(s) _*. Then make notes from the mind-map and your Journal entry after that discussion.

If you have used your cassette-tape recorder, listen to the recordings that you made of the discussions. **This is a time-consuming task.** But it is worth persevering because you may well pick up things your learners said, but which you weren't able to write down. Or you may hear something that reminds you of something that was said, but which you forgot to write down. Add anything you think or feel is **significant** (important and meaningful) to the notes you have already written.



3. The Extracts

Now take the extracts which you read for Activity 4. Turn to where you wrote in your Journal about each Reading. Re-read what you wrote in your Journal about each article. Then take the sheet of paper on which you have been making notes of the two discussions you had with your learners. Leave a couple of lines, and write, *The Extracts*. Now, make brief notes based on what you wrote in your Journal about each article.

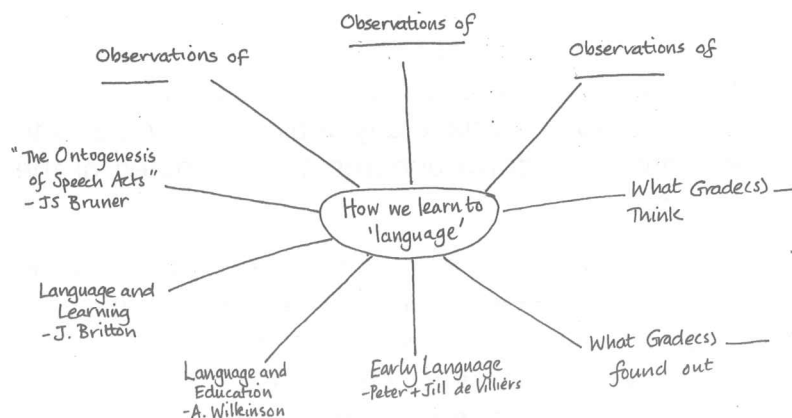


4. Planning what you will write

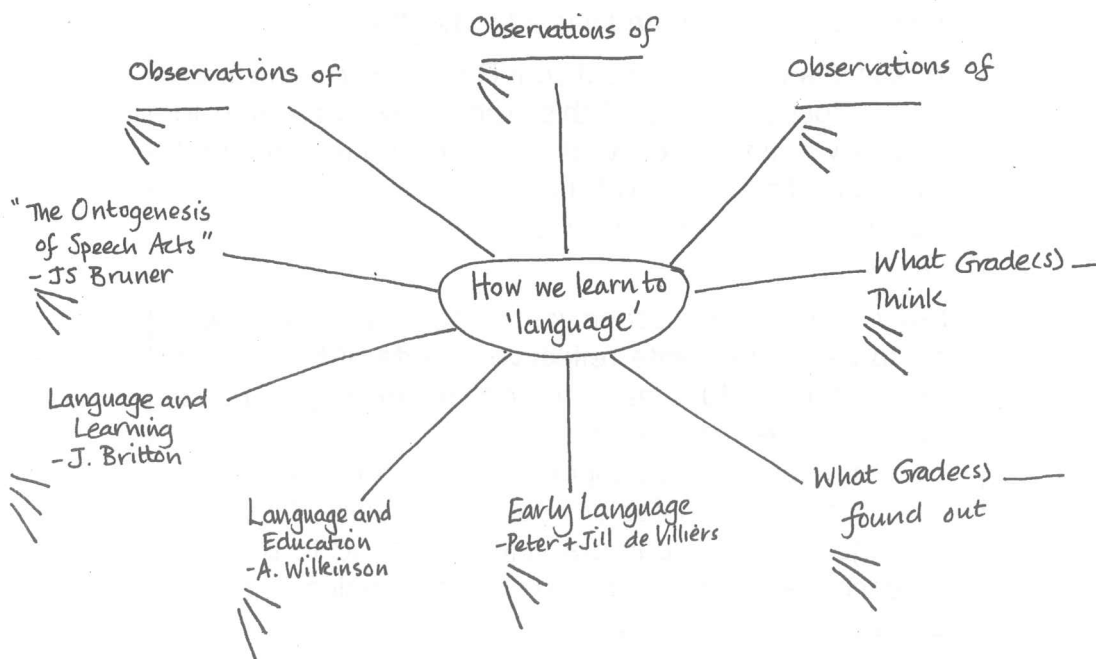
Take a clean sheet of paper. In the centre write, *How we learn to 'language'*, and draw a circle or a box around it. We suggest that you make a mind-map of the different sets of information or data that you will draw on in order to write your Report.

One 'arm' will be *Observations of* _ (the youngest of the 3 children you observed). A second will be *Observations of* _ (the child between 1 and 2 years). A third will be *Observations of* _ (the oldest child you observed).

Another 'arm' will be *What Grade _s Think*. A fifth will be *What Grade _s Found*. And then you will need an 'arm' for what you found interesting in each article that you read on language acquisition.



Then add two or three points to each arm (like 'fingers') to remind you of the things you want to write about in your report. These will be your main points. Don't rush this activity. If you plan your Report carefully, your Report will be organised, logical and will make sense. It is worth taking time and trouble over this step.



4:00



5. Writing your Report

Start the first draft of your Report by writing the title, *How do we learn to 'language'?* on a sheet of paper. Then begin to write. There isn't just one way to go about writing. Some people like to start with the beginning, or the Introduction. Others prefer to write the Introduction *after* they have drafted most, if not all, of a piece of writing. The important thing is to start writing.

Think about the title of this report. How do you think we learn to talk in our first/home/heritage language? Make a list of your ideas in point form. Look at the mind-map you made. How can you support what you think and want to write from the research you have carried out, and from the data you have collected?

Choose where you want to start, and write the main point as a heading. Refer to the notes you have made on your own observations, as well as those of your learners. Refer to the notes you have made from your discussions with your learners. And refer to the notes you have made from the articles you read. Include examples of your own and your learners' observations to support your ideas.

It is a good idea to start with your main idea or point, and write a sentence about that. Then you need to add other sentences to support the main idea.

If you want to quote from one of the articles, make sure that you put whatever you wish to **copy** from an article in quotation marks (or quotes). Copy exactly what has been written. Then in brackets after the quote, put the writer's surname, the date of the publication, and the page number. For example, (Britton, 1970: 12.) If you don't do this, copying what another person has said is actually known as plagiarism and it is a form of theft!

Work in this way throughout your Report. But all the time, keep in focus the title of this Report. We want you to write down **your** theory of how we acquire our first language. This may well be very similar to what an academic has said. But you must make it clear to us what **you** think.

Now you are in your second year of the course, we expect you to be able to write reflective reports of between 7 and 12 pages. But please remember, **quality is more important than quantity**. Don't be afraid to say what you think. But do try to support whatever you want to say. Try to include examples of what you actually observed, or things that your learners said. You need to provide evidence that you have carried out the activities, and that you have read the extracts.

Your Introduction should say briefly what you intend to say in the Report. Your Conclusion should sum up what you have said in the Report.

When you have finished writing your Report, leave it for at least a day. Then when you come back to it, you will probably see places where you wish to make some changes. You may want to put your ideas in a different order. Check that your report is logical and that it makes sense. Sometimes it helps to give what you have written to someone else to read. They may find places where they are not quite clear about what you have written. Take note of their comments, and make any changes you think would improve your report. Then write your second draft. **Your second draft should not be exactly the same as your first draft!**

Finally, include a Bibliography of the books, articles and texts that you have read and consulted in order to write this Report. You will see how to write this from the Bibliography at the end of the umthamo on page 32.

Then put together all the data that you have collected as you have worked through this umthamo. Make sure that everything is attached securely to the back of your Report as evidence of your research.



A bibliography should include all the texts, books or articles which have been consulted. They should be written in alphabetical order, according to the surnames of the writers.

Britton, J. 1970. *Language and Learning*. (Middlesex: Penguin)

Bruner, JS. 1974. "The Ontogenesis of Speech Acts" in *Journal of Child Language*, 2. pp 1-19.

de Villiers, P & de Villiers, J. 1979. *Early Language*. (Glasgow: Fontana books)

Wilkinson, A. 1975. *Language and Education*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Conclusion

In this umthamo we have asked you to carry out research of your own about how we learn to language. You have observed three young children between 0 and 3 years.

You have also discussed the question of how we learn to speak in our first language with your learners. And they, in turn, have spent time observing younger children in or around their homes.

In addition to this, you have read some academic texts on this topic. And finally, you have written a Research Report in which you have described your own theory of how we learn to speak.

You will have realised that this is an enormous topic. In this umthamo we have only been able to just begin to think about it. We hope you will go on thinking about, observing and listening to young children. In this way we hope that your theory evolves, grows, and perhaps even changes. And we hope that it begins to inform your practice and influences what you encourage to take place in your classroom.

Appendix

Language Learning Interaction

Example of a brother (age 6 years) and his younger sister (age nearly 2 years). Caleb + Cloud 1983.

Scene/Context Arriving home one afternoon the children notice a tak-takkie beetle (gongqothwane) on a path near their home. The sister initiates (starts) the talk sequence by pointing to the insect and saying.....

Sister: "Goggo."

Brother: "Beetle."

Sister: "Beetle."

Brother: "Black beetle."

Sister: "Black beetle."

Brother: "Big black beetle."

Sister: "Big black beetle."

Brother: "Big black beetle crossing the path."

Sister: "Goggo."

(and she moves away)



Comments. Here we see that the learner is in control of the learning (curriculum). She starts it, and she signals when it is over! She does this by reverting to the first word.

The brother acts as a skilled language teacher. He works with her input and responses, but extends what she can do. He doesn't try to force her to continue. He is satisfied to help her do something that she could not yet do on her own.

Both know that she has done some significant learning about language involving accuracy of naming and description.

Observation There is a lot of repetition, but it is in the form of a meaningful and real human interaction based on a shared interest. The repetition is not meaningless.

Researchers who have studied how caregivers speak to young children have identified three essential characteristics.

- (i) The sentence structure is simple, and there is more redundancy and repetition.
- (ii) They talk about whatever is going on at the time (the "here and now").
- (iii) Their talk is real communication.

In this dialogue between Caleb and Cloud they talk about something they can both see. Caleb uses simple language. And there is repetition. Nobody taught him how to do this!
Viv Kenyon '99

Comparing Caregiver and Teacher responses to language learners.*

After falling down and grazing her knee, a small pre-scholar runs crying to tell someone.

Child: "Bhuti, I falled down!"

Caregiver: "Aa shame! Yes, You fell down. Do you want a plaster?"

Child: "No. Just kiss it better."

Compare this with a teacher concerned with correctness.

Child: "Teacher, I falled down!"

Teacher: "No, Sarah! I fell down."

Child: (Confused, cries more) "I falled down."

Teacher: "No! No! I fell down."

Comment.

The caregiver responds to the meaning of the talk. In responding he informally feeds back in a meaningful way the correct form of the verb.

The teacher emphasises the error and ignores the message confusing and frustrating the language learner.

* The gist of this example comes from Courtney Cazden (in conversation - Cape Town - mid 1990's)

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**UNIVERSITY OF FORT HARE
DISTANCE EDUCATION PROJECT**

**CORE LEARNING AREAS CORE COURSE
Language, Literacy and Communication**

Umthamo 3 - How do we learn to 'language'?

First Pilot Edition - 1999

Viv Kenyon and Tillie Tshangela

Co-ordinated, illustrated and edited by
Alan and Viv Kenyon

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Little Anchors Pre-School



Mpongo Primary School

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