



Scenes of children arriving at school

NARRATOR: Every day children are surrounded by language.

Scenes of Teacher Angelica speaking to a child in Spanish and Teacher Tamara with children at group time.

TEACHER LESLIE: . . . the itsy bitsy spider went up the water spout . . . (read in Spanish)

Scenes of children playing and Teacher Robin reading to a group of children in Spanish.

NARRATOR: One of the biggest jobs children have is to learn to make sense of it all . . . to improve their understanding of a wide range of words and ideas . . . and to eventually draw on this knowledge to communicate with others . . .

ADAM TO TEACHER SHERRIE: They're taking things away!

NARRATOR: . . . to seek help . . .

BOY WEARING RED VEST: Teacher!

NARRATOR: . . . to express feelings and opinions . . .

GIRL IN GREY SHIRT: I'm happy when my mommy starts to get the [Christmas] lights out. That makes me happy.

NARRATOR: . . . to make friends . . .

BOY PASSING OUT PLATES: One for you and one for my friend (spoken in Spanish)

NARRATOR: As teachers, we know how critical strong language skills are - that children who struggle with language now, have a higher risk of struggling later on.

DIA, SPEECH LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST (SLP): Language is probably underpinnings of just about anything that children will do in their life to come. It's certainly the underpinnings of reading, and it's so critical to school success. It's critical to social success; it's critical to participation in the family, in the community. It's the kind of — it's the building blocks that allow children to do all of the other skills that they're going to be expected to do.



NARRATOR: It's clear that strong language skills are critical to children's success in life. But when we look around our classroom, when we look at the range of children we serve, it can feel like an impossible task.

TEACHER KARISSA: Our children range in age from 3 to 5 years old. Their language might be, uh, somewhat delayed, and we have others that are much more advanced, using full complete sentences, as opposed to the others, who use 2, 3 word sentences or do a lot of pointing.

TEACHER SHERRIE: We have kids that have a lot of language and speak in full sentences, and are very creative about what they say. And some kids that are nonverbal.

TEACHER KARISSA: I think planning for all of them sometimes is a little bit difficult.

NARRATOR: Planning for classrooms that span such a range of abilities can be a struggle. We want *all* our children to make progress in language, whether they have language delays, typical language skills, or are learning a new language all together.

Scene of Hindia speaking in Somali to Sumaya

NARRATOR: We have so many children, at all different levels. How can we meet everyone's needs? Let's look at how these teachers approach it.

This is Jacob. Jacob's a child who's been slow to develop language skills. Listen as Sherrie interacts with him.

Scene of Teacher Sherrie and Jacob playing with a puzzle

TEACHER SHERRIE: A heart! A pink heart. You're using the handle to put it in, turning and turning, will it go in? You did it!

NARRATOR: Sherrie knows that Jacob is still trying to grasp early language concepts like color and shape. Listen to how she uses her voice to bring attention to these words.

TEACHER SHERRIE: Shall we take them all out? Yes. Okay, I'll take out the square, what will you take out? Oh the rectangle. Okay, the last circle.

NARRATOR: She's stressing shape words, helping him connect this vocabulary to his play. This technique is called "Highlighting."

DIA, SLP: I think of a highlight marker, and all of the information on a page that you might be reading is important and interesting, but then there's certain things you want to focus on and so you highlight it with your marker. And the same can be true of language concepts.

NARRATOR: When we highlight language concepts, we use our voice, gestures, and repetition in the same way we use a highlighting marker: we're drawing attention to certain words and concepts we believe children are ready to learn.

TEACHER SHERRIE: I'm thinking of one little guy who's learning to label things and says, ball and cracker, and that kind of thing, and so really emphasizing that word when you hand them things or when they're experiencing it themselves.

Scene of Teacher Sherrie and Tanner

TEACHER SHERRIE with TANNER: You want this ball? That's the BIG ball!

TEACHER SHERRIE: . . . just emphasizing the word, just a little more drama to the word.

Scene of Teacher Sherrie and Tanner

TEACHER SHERRIE: : Coat off, all done!

NARRATOR: Sherrie highlights by stressing certain words, helping them stand out from the rest of her language. But she doesn't highlight everything she sees happening. She has developed language goals, and these goals determine what words and concepts she will focus on.

For Jacob and Tanner, the language goals are fairly basic. But Sherrie also uses highlighting with her children who have strong language skills, adapting her goals to meet their skill level.

Scene of Teacher Sherrie and Michael on the phone

TEACHER SHERRIE: For kids with more verbal skills, [you might be highlighting] ... different kinds of more abstract words ... to get them kind of thinking about the world around them a little bit more and ... putting it together with language ...

Scene of Teacher Sherrie and Bobbie in dramatic play

TEACHER SHERRIE to BOBBIE: He brought us two pizzas. Did it cost a lot of money, Bobbie, or a little bit of money?

BOBBIE: a lot of money!

NARRATOR: Whether children are learning basic object names or complex concepts, highlighting works because Sherrie knows her language goals and keeps them in mind as she interacts.



Scenes from a bilingual classroom

NARRATOR: The language goals in this classroom look a little different. Here, teachers speak both English and Spanish and can highlight in either language.

Most of the children have fairly strong native language skills, so these teachers have chosen to highlight more complex vocabulary.

Scene of Teacher Robin and children playing with clamps

TEACHER ROBIN: Abril la boca. Open the mouth. And now we have to spin this around to close it. Do you want to do that part?

Scene of Teacher Robin and Lucas playing with a hermit crab

TEACHER ROBIN: He has a head and claws.

LUCAS: like this! [makes pincher gesture with his fingers]

TEACHER ROBIN: uh huh, pinchers, he's got pinchers

Scene of Teacher Leslie reading to Erik in Spanish

NARRATOR: It's great when we can highlight our language goals in a child's native language, but it isn't always possible. Consider Sumaya.

Scenes of Sumaya in the classroom

Sumaya recently moved to the US from Somalia. She's only just beginning to learn English. And on top of that, she's very shy and uncomfortable.

Her lack of English skills make it very difficult for her to connect with the other children, to make friends. Building a relationship with Sumaya was first.

Scenes of Sumaya interacting with teachers

NARRATOR: Since her teachers couldn't speak Somali, and the family's desire was to help Sumaya learn English, they developed language goals around core vocabulary.

Scene of Sumaya with a teacher at the touch table

TEACHER: Would this lid fit? This *small* lid, would it fit here? (Teacher gestures as she speaks for emphasis.)

SUMAYA: No. (Shakes her head.)

TEACHER: Does the *big* lid fit on that one? You put two small lids inside.

NARRATOR: As Sumaya plays, she hears these new words, over and over, and eventually they begin to take on meaning.



TEACHER: Do you want me to roll that up? (Points to her sleeve and makes a rolling gesture.)

SUMAYA: Up. (Points to her other sleeve and indicates she wants that one rolled up as well.)

TEACHER: You want the other one up? You said up. I'll pull it up.

NARRATOR: Teachers use highlighting with all sorts of language goals. We've seen them highlight core vocabulary like object names, and concepts like color, number, shape. But there's so much more! We can highlight verbs, verb tenses, prepositions, opposites, relative sizes, feeling words.

Scene of Teacher Sherrie with Adam

TEACHER SHERRIE: Oh are you feeling calm? He's feeling calm. How 'bout you Adam? How do you feel?

ADAM: Calm

TEACHER SHERRIE: Calm? Yeah, you're looking pretty calm. You were kind of mad a minute ago but now you look calm.

NARRATOR: We can highlight pronouns

DIA, SLP: Knowing Bailing and knowing that he substitutes "her" for "she", then I would highlight all the opportunities I can find to use the word "she" instead of "her".

Scene of Dia and Bailey playing with a dinosaur

DIA NORRIS, SLP: Oh, *she's* nice. *She* loves hotdogs. *She* loves them. (Bailey pretends the dinosaur is eating the hotdog.) Is *she* full? (Bailey pretends the dinosaur burps.) Oh, she burped! (Dia laughs.)

NARRATOR: Even when the play takes an unexpected turn, Dia maintains her sense of humor and stays focused on her language goal.

Wherever the child is developmentally, whatever language they speak, when we have our goals clearly in mind, we'll know what to highlight during any interaction.

Scene of Teacher Sherrie, Kyle and Jacob when they hear a train pass by

TEACHER SHERRIE: I hear a real train. Shall we look? Look a train is passing by.

NARRATOR: A passing train has gotten these children so excited! Rather than viewing this as an interruption, Sherrie sees it as an opportunity to highlight some of her goals.

TEACHER SHERRIE: There are lots of boxcars. I see a blue... ooh! There's a red boxcar!



NARRATOR: Sherrie knows that the key to successful highlighting is to connect our language to children’s interests and excitement. That’s when they really hear us. That’s when they learn.

TEACHER SHERRIE: The train is all gone. We have a toy train you could play with.

TEACHER KARISSA: You have to find their interests to get their attention and to keep them tuned in to what you’re talking about or what you’re trying to do with them ‘Cause our kids this age, they learn better from hands-on.

TEACHER SHERRIE: Kids learn most by playing and doing, and experiencing... And you can begin a concept or present it in a group experience kind of a thing. But I think really where they really get it is when they’re doing it.

NARRATOR: Children learn by doing—by touching, manipulating, smelling, tasting—over and over. So the best way for them to learn new *language* is for them to hear it *while* they’re experiencing it.

Here, Sherrie created an activity designed to capture children’s interest and provide an opportunity to highlight the preposition “on”.

Scene of Sherrie and Austin at a Christmas tree

TEACHER SHERRIE: These are long. Where will we put them? *On* the tree?

AUSTIN: On. (Nods his head, yes.)

TEACHER SHERRIE: I’ll scoot it over and you put it *on*. Up there. Here’s more. *On* the top. You’re putting it all the way *on* the top.

AUSTIN: Top.

NARRATOR: Even though this tree decorating activity was pre-planned, Sherrie still waits for Austin’s play to offer an opportunity to highlight her goal.

TEACHER SHERRIE: Look Christopher, he’s putting it all on top. Pretty fancy.... Up on top.

NARRATOR: These children are having a wonderful time exploring birdseed. Watch how Trinka follows their play, looking for opportunities to highlight numbers and prepositions.

Scene of Trinka, Speech Language Pathologist with several children

TRINKA, SLP: The man is deep in the seeds, the man is in the seeds. The man is in the seeds. There’s one, two men in the seeds. Look at that!

NARRATOR: Did you notice how she doesn't interrupt the play? She doesn't try to change its focus? Instead, she builds on their enthusiasm, providing language linked to their experience.

TRINKA, SLP: He's in the hole.

Scene of Teacher Sherrie with Austin and Jacob playing with magnets

NARRATOR: Austin and Jacob are intrigued by the magnets. Their interest gives Sherrie an opportunity to highlight verbs: stick, sticking, stuck.

TEACHER SHERRIE: Look it's sticking! It stuck to the Thomas the train. It's sticking again.

NARRATOR: As they play, she follows their actions, emphasizing her language goal as they experience it.

Highlighting is not directive, but it is very intentional. It's about knowing our goal and looking for opportunities to tie it in to whatever the child is involved with, whether it's free play, planned activities, or daily routines.

DIA, SLP: Pretend that what you really would like to highlight might be opposites. Um, throughout the day when, when children come to school in the morning and they go to hang up their coat, you could point out coats that are on the hook, and oh look – that one fell off the hook. This one is on, and that one is off. So, you put the coats away – and you move to the bathroom. The water is on, the water s off. Let's turn it on! Oh, turn it off. It's on; it's off!

So you can highlight all of your opposite concepts through the day, no matter what the activity is, but knowing that today we're talking about opposites. And we're going to use every opportunity to do that.

Scene of Cassie and Josh playing with a hat

TEACHER CASSIE: Hat on. Hat off.

NARRATOR: The teachers we've seen use highlighting so seamlessly, the children don't even know they're being taught. But they are. Every time the child hears these new words while s/he experiences them, meaning is created.

TEACHER KARISSA: I think at first, when I first began working with children, it didn't, I don't know, it just felt a little unusual, you know, talking to this child about what they're doing - but now, um, a couple years later, it is, it's much more comfortable because I know the importance of it. When they hear the words as they're doing that and are directly related to what they're doing, you know, it just adds into the vocabulary. So it's vital; it's really important.



NARRATOR: Highlighting *is* important. It's a valuable tool we can use to help children progress toward language goals. And it integrates naturally into the flow of the day.

DIA: Probably the biggest challenge for teachers, regardless of what age group they're working with, is that there is so much to do. But the nice thing about language is that it's everywhere. I think once teachers understand that it's more a matter of framing what they're already doing and building the language pieces into the daily routine, then it becomes a natural part of the day and it's not something that you have to superimpose on an already extremely busy schedule.

NARRATOR: We spend much of our day talking with children. Highlighting helps us make the most of that time, bringing *focus* to our teaching - helping children learn and understand more about the world around them.