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Language Development

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Module: Language Development

Overview & rationale

This module will explore the various aspects of language development (phonetics, syntax, semantics and pragmatics). Using topical readings and clips from Sesame Street, students will consider the steps involved in learning language (e.g., learning word-object pairings), cues available in daily language, and techniques that parents and teachers can use to help children acquire language.

Potential classes: Intro Psych, Developmental Psychology (Child Development, Lifespan Development) Psycholinguistics/Psychology of Language, Education classes (e.g., Emergent Literacy; Language, Literacy, and Cognition; Essential Literacy for Early Childhood Education)

Potential format and modality: Lecture or seminar class; online, hybrid, in-person

Topical Readings

- Burnham, D., & Dodd, B. (2004). Auditory-visual speech integration by prelinguistic infants: Perception of an emergent consonant in the McGurk effect. *Developmental Psychobiology*, 45(4), 204–220. <https://doi.org/10.1002/dev.20032>
- Byers-Heinlein, K., Tsui, A. S. M., Bergmann, C., Black, A. K., Brown, A., Carbajal, M. J., ... & Wermelinger, S. (2021). A multilab study of bilingual infants: Exploring the preference for infant-directed speech. *Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science*, 4(1), 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2515245920974622>
- Golinkoff, R. M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2016). *Becoming brilliant: What science tells us about raising successful children*. American Psychological Association.
- Hoff E. (2013). Interpreting the early language trajectories of children from low-SES and language minority homes: implications for closing achievement gaps. *Developmental Psychology*, 49(1), 4–14. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027238>
- Larson, A. L., & Rahn, N. L. (2015). Vocabulary instruction on Sesame Street: A content analysis of the word on the street initiative. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 46(3), 207-221. https://doi.org/10.1044/2015_LSHSS-14-0079
- Rice, M. L., Huston, A. C., Truglio, R., & Wright, J. C. (1990). Words from "Sesame Street": Learning vocabulary while viewing. *Developmental Psychology*, 26(3), 421-428. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.26.3.421>
- Truglio, R. T., Thomas, P., & Pruett, K. D. (2019). Words, Words, and More Words. In *Sesame Street ready for school: A parent's guide to playful learning for children ages 2 to 5.*, Running Press.

Video clips

Vocabulary Development

- [Word on the Street \(with Murray\)](#) (13:08 but each segment is roughly 30 seconds)
 - Summary: Each clip presents a word in a variety of formats (e.g., verbally, visually, definition, examples)
- [I Love Words \(with Abby Cadabby\)](#) (2:38)
 - Summary: The clip uses rhyme and repetition to teach new words, using a combination of verbal and visual cues
- [Sesame Street: Signing Exercise](#) (1:26)
 - Summary: Elmo introduces and explains the ‘sign of the day’ using visual cues similar to Word on the Street.
- [Hearing Different Languages](#) (1:26)
 - Summary: Natasha plays a word learning game and hears words in different languages.

Rhyming

- [Sesame Street: Rhyme with Bert and Ernie](#) (2:45)
 - Summary: Bert and Ernie play a rhyming game. The rhymes are set to a beat, helping children understand similarity of sound and rhythm.
- [Sesame Street: Rhyming Day \(with Grover\)](#) (3:01)
 - Summary: It is Rhyming Day at Charlie’s restaurant. Waiter Grover brainstorms rhymes for a customer’s order as he waits (and gets hungrier).

Activities

- Assign articles on language development (e.g., Larson & Rahn, 2015; Rice et al., 1990) for students to read before class. During class, show [What's the Word on the Street?](#). Have students discuss different elements of word learning techniques (education classes can consider interventions), how they were used in the clip (e.g., presenting words in multiple contexts), how the segment aligns with research on word learning, and ways to improve the segment to better align with research. Students can also work in pairs or small groups to develop their own “Word on the Street” segment.
 - *Notes: appropriate for a lecture-based class and could be adapted for synchronous and asynchronous online classes using breakout rooms or discussion boards. Could be a starter activity for a semester-long project where students create a Sesame Street segment or episode.*
- Assign articles on language development (e.g., Larson & Rahn, 2015; Rice et al., 1990) for students to read before class. During class, show [Rhyme with Bert and Ernie](#). Put students into small groups to discuss phonemes and their presentation in the video. Have students consider the different parts of words (e.g. the beginning vs the end), as well as suggestions for additional ways to help children learn them.
 - *Notes: appropriate for a lecture-based class. Could be adapted for asynchronous or synchronous online classes using breakout rooms or discussion boards.*
- Assign articles on the 30 million word gap (e.g., Hoff, 2013) for students to read before class. During class, students could write an argument paper or lead a discussion about how *Sesame Street* has addressed this phenomenon over the last 50 years.
 - *Notes: appropriate for an upper division class such as a senior seminar course,*

can be an in-class activity or take-home paper. Could be adapted for a synchronous online class.

- During class, show [I Love Words](#), [Signing Exercise](#), and [Hearing Different Languages](#). Split students into small groups or pairs to compare and contrast techniques used in each of the clips to encourage word learning. Have them consider how these techniques align with research on language acquisition.
 - *Notes: appropriate for a lecture-based class and could be adapted for synchronous and asynchronous online classes using breakout rooms or discussion boards.*
- Assign Burnham & Dodd (2004) for students to read before class. During class, split students into small groups/pairs to discuss how combining auditory and visual cues can improve and/or interfere with language perception. Have students consider the potential implications of increased mask-wearing as a result of the pandemic on language development.
 - *Notes: appropriate for a lecture-based or seminar class. Could be adapted for synchronous and asynchronous online classes.*
- Have students design their own Sesame Street segment or a full episode as a semester-long project.
 - *Notes: appropriate for a lecture-based or seminar class. Could be adapted for synchronous and asynchronous online classes.*

Supplemental Materials

- Sesame Street in Communities web page containing a number of resources regarding language development. Includes articles, workshops, videos, stories, and printables: <https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/language/>

Related Modules:

- [Cognition](#)
- [Social-Emotional Development](#)
- [Executive Function](#)