Oral language is a child’s ability to understand and use spoken/signed words and sentences. Preschoolers begin to develop these specific oral language abilities:

- Understand and use increasingly complex sentences
- Understand and use a growing vocabulary both in quantity and diversity of words
- Attend to language for longer periods of time, such as when books are read, people are telling stories, and during conversations
- Consistently respond to requests for information or action (e.g., respond to questions and follow one- and two-step directions)
- Comprehend and use language for multiple social and cognitive purposes (e.g., understand and talk about feelings, create and enact “roles,” establish/maintain relationships)
- Develop familiarity with sounds in words (e.g., listening to, identifying, recognizing, discriminating)
- Understand that people communicate in many ways, including through gestures, sign language, facial expressions and augmentative communication devices
- Use verbal and non-verbal language (gestures, devices, signs and picture symbols) to communicate for multiple purposes (e.g., to express wants, needs, ideas, feelings and to relate personal information and experiences)
- Describe experiences and create and/or retell simple stories
- Ask questions and make comments related to the topic of discussion.


### References and Resources


CENTER FOR LITERACY & DISABILITY STUDIES (CLDS)
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
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Brochure compiled by Patsy Pierce, Ph.D. (CLDS), Pat Porter, Ph.D. (CLDS) please add and reviewed by Jan Putney, M.S. (Cabarrus County Schools) and Vivian James, Ph.D. (DPI).

Visit NC’s Preschool Demonstration Programs. For more information: http://www.governor.state.nc.us/Office/Education/Home.asp under training and conferences.

What to Listen for

### Not only for language but also for social and cognitive development, nothing is more crucial than our responsiveness to what children do and say.”

—Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000, p.48

A guide for Administrators, Teachers, and Families
What to Listen for in a Rich-Language Environment

All learning environments, indoors and outdoors should have interesting, open-ended material for children to explore and use for building and creating. “Let’s give ‘em something to talk about” really applies when working with young children!

One strategy for increasing the quality and quantity of interactions between adults and children is for instructors, mentors, and supervisors to use environmental assessments of teacher-child interactions and conversations. Teachers and/or administrators wishing to assess and improve the “Language Richness of a Classroom” may decide to utilize a portion or all of a rating scale at the beginning and end of school year in an attempt to measure teacher progress. One suggestion is to put the goal of “Increase the Language Richness of My Classroom” on your Independent Growth Plan at the beginning of the year. Then choose which of the following scales you decide as the pre- and post measure for documentation of progress. Teachers may choose to rate themselves or ask another person to assist.

Measures to consider include the Caregiver Interaction Scale (Arnette, 1989), portions of the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998) and the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) (Smith, Dickinson, Sangeorge, & Anastasopoulos, 2003), and the Preschool Outdoor Environment Measurement Scale (POEMS) (Debord et al, 2005). All of these scales can be used to increase the quality and quantity of interactions between adults and children. Examples from the ECERS-R and the ELLCO are provided.

Example High-Quality Rich Oral Language Environments

ECERS-R (item 18) Exemplary
- Staff have individual conversations with most of the children everyday.
- Children are asked questions to encourage them to give longer and more complex answers (younger child is asked “what” or “where” questions; older child is asked “why” or “how” questions).

ELLCO (item 6) Exemplary
- The tone of classroom conversations is positive and shows respect for children’s contributions, encouraging children to speak from their different perspectives and experience.
- Teachers listen attentively to children, encourage children to listen to each other, and deliberately foster a climate in which differing opinions & ideas are valued.
- Teachers display fairness in treatment of children from differing ability, gender, racial, and cultural groups.

ECERS-R (item 32) Exemplary
- Staff seem to enjoy being with the children.
- Staff encourage the development of mutual respect between children and adults (staff wait until children finish asking questions before answering; encourage children in a polite way to listen when adults speak).

ELLCO (item 7) Exemplary
- Teachers appear to be aware of children’s oral language abilities, considering both normative and individual patterns of development in 1st and 2nd language.
- Teachers plan sufficient time for conversations. Children are systematically encouraged to use oral language to share experiences, discuss and plan activities for broader intellectual purposes (e.g., analyzing, predicting, problem solving, reflecting on learning);
- Goals & opportunities for extended use of oral language are coordinated with goals for literacy and content area learning.
- Regular, intentional efforts are made to expand children’s vocabulary.