

The role of environmental context in shaping teachers' linguistic input.

Nicola Lester, Katherine Twomey, Anna Theakston
The University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom

Abstract

Decades of research show that the quantity of linguistic input children receive has significant effects on their language development (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995). More recently, there has been a focus on quality of linguistic input, with vocabulary gains (e.g., Salo et al., 2016), greater narrative skill (e.g., Katz, 2001) and better reading comprehension (e.g., Snow, Tabors & Dickenson, 2001) being observed when a high-quality linguistic input is provided, even when quantity is controlled for (Rowe, 2017). Previous studies define input quality in a variety of ways, for example: *wh*- questions (e.g., Salo et al., 2016), decontextualised talk (e.g., Reese et al., 2010), and sophisticated vocabulary (e.g., Rowe, 2012). Interestingly, the context in which linguistic input is provided, such as the activity and the level of structure, can affect the extent to which these different elements of quality are produced (e.g., Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2017). Importantly, much of the input children receive is in the educational context. However, while the current literature explores parental linguistic input, few studies explore how the quality of input provided by teachers differs between environmental contexts.

In the current study, six teachers were audio-recorded teaching four- and five-year-old children similar content across 11 20-minute sessions, in a museum (three sessions), their classroom with museum resources (three sessions), or their classroom with typical classroom resources (five sessions). Input quality was defined as proportion of decontextualised talk, *wh*- questions, rare words and multi-clausal sentences produced, and was compared across contexts. Teachers produced significantly more decontextualised talk when teaching in the museum compared to teaching in the classroom with regular classroom resources. However, teachers used the highest proportion of rare words when teaching with museum resources in the classroom. These findings demonstrate that different environmental contexts lend themselves to different aspects of high-quality input. The present study is the first to provide empirical support for claims that museums could support children's language development by promoting greater levels of decontextualised talk compared to classroom environments. Moreover, teaching with the addition of novel resources from institutions such as museums in the classroom could promote greater levels of sophisticated vocabulary.