Closing the word gap: activities for the classroom
Early years foundation stage
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Introduction

The development of language – in all its forms – is crucial to the learning and development of children in the early years. This is recognised, not only by families and early years practitioners, but also by the DfE; Communication and language is identified as a prime area of learning, and 12 of the 17 early learning goals make explicit reference to children’s ability to talk about their knowledge, skills, and understanding.

‘Communication and language development involves giving children opportunities to experience a rich language environment; to develop their confidence and skills in expressing themselves; and to speak and listen in a range of situations.’

Statutory Framework for Early Years Foundation Stage, 2017

As such, many EYFS settings choose to structure their curriculum with language at the core, with communication and language running through learning opportunities like a ‘golden thread’. The role of the adult is key in this scenario, and adults should exploit any opportunity to reinforce taught vocabulary, modelling correct usage in different contexts. This is particularly true for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may suffer from a paucity of language, which, when starting school, immediately places them in a less advantageous position than their peers. The importance of providing a language-rich environment cannot be overestimated for these children. Every interaction with a child provides an opportunity to extend vocabulary, model standard English, encourage the use of extended sentences, and to have fun with language. While the ideas and activities below provide specific opportunities to close the word gap, adults should ensure that they are also teaching vocabulary during child-initiated learning. Language development is incredibly effective when in the context of purposeful play.

Developing children’s enthusiasm for reading is fundamental in helping to develop their language skills and in closing the word gap. Never is this truer than for disadvantaged pupils. Research has shown that reading for pleasure has more impact on educational attainment than any socio-economic factors. However, it is precisely those disadvantaged children who are less likely to read often, to see themselves positively as readers, and to have access to a broad range of different reading materials. It is therefore incumbent on us in school to provide children with an environment that fosters a love of reading, offering every child the benefits associated with becoming a lifelong lover of books.
Strategies to promote an ethos of reading for pleasure may include:

- Providing a well-stocked reading area, allowing children access to a wide range of reading materials, such as picture books (with and without words), comics and magazines for children, age-appropriate information books, and texts relating to children’s interests.

- Ensuring there is time, every day, for children to be read to. This allows children to access books – and language – beyond their reading ability and to begin to internalise the music of language, as well as enjoying the sheer pleasure of being immersed in a great story. Building in time to talk about the stories being read will also help children to develop critical thinking around books, supporting them to develop their own thoughts and opinions about what they have encountered.

- Developing teachers’ subject knowledge regarding high-quality children’s literature, including newly published works.

- Celebrating reading through whole-school events, such as World Book Day assemblies, author visits, and competitions.

- Modelling a love of reading and valuing different ‘forms’ of reading – class reading displays could incorporate images of adults and children reading different types of text in different locations.

- Providing cozy and comfortable spaces for reading. Small ‘book nooks’ seem particularly attractive to young children, and, in appropriate weather, a blanket and a basket of books outside will always be enjoyed.

- Responding to books in different ways, including those which incorporate drama and role-play, or visual art.

- Building reading relationships via paired reading across year groups; inviting parents and friends into school for regular ‘reading for pleasure’ sessions or, ideally, building a relationship with a published author who acts as a ‘Patron of Reading’.

The activities in this section fall into two categories: quick activity ideas – ideal for registration, lining up, or for when you have a few minutes before lunch or at the end of the day – and session ideas – activities which require more time and a little more preparation. There is also a section at the end which you may wish to hand out to parents. This section comprises ideas for games and conversations at home, and useful links.

Please note that you will need to join www.oxfordowl.co.uk for free to access some of the featured resources.
Quick activity ideas

Activity 1: How could I ...?
When preparing for lunch, model the use of adverbs to children:

‘Today, I shall eat my lunch hungrily!’

Encourage other adults to offer alternative adverbs, and then, as they are lining up, ask each child how they will eat their lunch today. Encourage children to answer in full sentences, offering them a starter prompt if necessary.

Use the same activity in different contexts.

‘How could you walk to the hall today?’ (quickly, slowly, happily)

‘How could you put your coat on today?’

Activity 2: What’s in my bucket?
Use a bucket, or a picture of a bucket, as a visual prompt and model a sentence using alliterative adjectives.

‘My bucket is full of slimy slugs!’
‘My bucket of full of glittering gold!’

Ask children to contribute their own ideas, encouraging the use of full sentences and celebrating the use of alliterative adjectives – the sillier the better!

Activity 3: Guess who?
Use higher-order vocabulary to describe a member of the class, or a character linked to children’s interests.

‘She is powerful, icy and wears a glittering dress. Guess who?’
‘When he is furious, he transforms into an enormous, green monster. Guess who?’

Photographs or other visual cues can be used to support children with additional needs.

Activity 4: Say more!
Give children a starter sentence, and then go around the group, encouraging children to change one word each.

‘I love my new toy.’
‘I love my new dog.’
‘I love my beautiful dog.’
‘I cuddle my beautiful dog.’
Activity 5: Grandpa’s shopping list

Challenge children to add alliterative nouns and adjectives to the starter sentence: ‘Grandpa went shopping and he bought … crumbly cookies / scarlet strawberries / fresh fish …’

This could be linked to sounds children are learning in Phase Two and Phase Three phonics lessons.

As in the traditional version of the game, higher-attaining children could be encouraged to include previous items on the list in order to develop their memory skills.

Visual cues or objects could support children with additional needs.

Activity 6: Adding adjectives

Draw a simple picture on the board, for example, a cat. Ask children to first name the parts of the cat: paws, whiskers, tail etc., and then to contribute adjectives to describe the cat in more detail.

‘She has sharp claws.’
‘She has bright green eyes.’
‘She has a fluffy tail.’

Give children the opportunity to add their detail to the image on the board.

Activity 7: Finish my sentence

Offer children an oral sentence starter with a conjunction, and then ask them to complete your sentence before repeating the whole sentence aloud.

‘I am furious because …’
‘I love apples but …’
‘I am frightened of monsters and …’

Session ideas

Session 1: Listening walk

You will need: large pictures of ears – cut out and laminated, a checklist of sound vocabulary (both resource 1 and resource 2), a simple map of your setting.

Orientating task
Show children the laminated ears, and use them as a prompt to discuss what we use our ears for. This is a good opportunity to revise what it means to be a good listener (i.e. being still and quiet, looking in the direction of the sound, thinking about what they are listening to). Explain that you are going to take a listening walk to collect different sounds around school. Decide on a checklist of different sounds, using higher-order vocabulary, such as a shriek, a babble, a whisper. Note these on the checklist.

Teaching input
Divide children into groups with an accompanying adult. Accompany groups around different parts of the setting, such as the entrance lobby, the hall during a PE lesson, or outside a busy classroom. Stop at different points, and discuss the sounds that can be heard, using vocabulary from the checklist. Add further sounds to the checklist.

Follow-up small-group activity
Run through each of the sounds on the checklist, and discuss where each sound was heard. Encourage children to draw pictures to mark ‘sounds’ on the school map.

Reinforce new vocabulary with continued discussion.

‘Where else might you hear a shrieking sound?’

‘Have you ever heard a rustling at night?’

Enhancements to continuous provision

- Use photographs of different sound-making objects as a prompt for talk in the snack area.
- Place instruments in an explore and investigate area for children to use in exploratory play, with adults modelling and extending the use of vocabulary relating to sounds.
Resource 1:
A listening prompt
### Resource 2:
**Listening walk checklist**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What did we hear?</th>
<th>Where did we hear it?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A shriek</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A shout</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A babble</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A whisper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Session 2: Would you rather...?

You will need: a copy of *Would You Rather*... by John Burningham.

**Orientating task**
Read *Would You Rather*... by John Burningham to the children.

**Teaching input**
Discuss the hypothetical situations from the book, modelling the use of conjunctions, adjectives, and higher-order vocabulary to arrive at a decision.

- ‘I would rather read to a bear because I am sure his fur would be *thick*, *soft* and *warm* and I would *enjoy* cuddling up to him!’
- ‘I would rather a pig tried on my clothes, *although* I would be *anxious* that they would smell *dreadful* afterwards!’

**Follow-up small-group activity**
Use pictures to give children a binary choice which could be linked to a theme or topic, or to a specific interest.

- ‘Would you rather have a tyrannosaurus rex or a velociraptor as a pet?’
- ‘Would you rather have tea with a wicked witch or a big bad wolf?’

Encourage children to list adjectives to describe each option in order to help them to choose. These could be scribed for children, or they could list them using initial sounds or further phonemes, depending on where they are in their development as writers.

When each child has made their choice, ask them to share it with their friends, encouraging them to speak in full sentences and to use conjunctions to extend these.

**Enhancements to continuous provision**
- Place copies of *Would You Rather*... by John Burningham and *You Choose* by Pippa Goodhart and Nick Sharratt in the reading area.
- Place laminated images from the group activity in the sand for children to discover and use as a talk prompt.
Session 3: Make the sound

You will need: a story including a variety of characters – *The Gruffalo* by Julia Donaldson, for example; a range of percussion instruments.

**Orientating task**

Read the story to the children. This could be a class focus text linked to topic or theme, or a favourite story brought in from home. The activity will work most effectively if it has a variety of characters, such as different types of animal.

**Teaching input**

Discuss the characters in the story with particular reference to how they move. Model the use of adventurous verbs and adverbs.

‘The snake *slithered, slowly.*’

‘The fox *padded, softly.*’

Introduce the different instruments to the children, and invite them to choose an instrument and a method of playing it to ‘match’ a chosen character. Reinforce the use of adventurous vocabulary when describing how a character moves and how this relates to the sound they have chosen.

**Follow-up small-group activity**

Invite one of the children to role-play moving like a character from the story, while other children guess who. Model and encourage answers in full sentences, reinforcing the use of interesting verbs and adverbs.

‘I think Amer was being the Gruffalo because he was *stomping, clumsily.*’

**Enhancements to continuous provision**

- Place the instruments and images from the whole-class activity in the explore and investigate area for children to play independently.
- Place copies of the books and puppets or soft toys in the reading area to encourage children to retell the stories.
Session 4: Storytelling bags

You will need: four bags of different colours filled with images or objects to represent settings, characters, problems, and endings.

Orientating task

Explain to children that not all stories come from books; when we know the right language, we can use it to make up stories of our own. Model the oral telling of a simple story in three parts, with a focus on storytelling vocabulary. For example:

‘Once upon a time, in a castle far, far away, lived a grumpy king. This king was so mean that he made everyone in the land unhappy. One day, a dragon found the king and tried to gobble him up. But the grumpy king tasted so terrible that the dragon spat him out! The king was so happy that he hadn’t been eaten that he was never mean again, and everyone in the land lived happily ever after.’

Oral storytelling is particularly effective when told with lots of vocal and physical expression!

Teaching input

Place images or objects representing the setting of the story (the castle), the character (the king), the problem (the dragon), and the ending (happy people) in each of the four bags, differentiated by colour. Invite children to have a turn at taking objects out of each of the bags and at telling their own stories. Model, encourage, and celebrate the use of storytelling language and higher-order vocabulary.

Follow-up small-group activity

Fill each of the bags with a wider selection of images and objects to allow for lots of potential stories. Work in groups while children take it in turns to withdraw objects from the bag and tell their own stories.

Children who need additional support could work with an adult, while higher-attaining children could be encouraged to evaluate their own and one another’s stories.

Enhancements to continuous provision

- Record some of the children (and other familiar adults) telling their stories, and place the recordings in the reading area, along with the storytelling bags.
- Place dressing-up clothes and role-play objects in larger versions of the storytelling bags in the role-play area to encourage children to make up and perform their stories.
Session 5: Narrating our lives

You will need: three photographs from a class event, such as a trip or Christmas party.

**Orientating task**

Show children the three photographs, and ask them what they remember about the event. Encourage children to share their memories, modelling and praising the use of full sentences and higher-order vocabulary.

**Teaching input**

Make a note of the children’s memories, and then arrange the photographs in chronological order. Model narrating the event, using the photographs as a prompt and emphasising sequential language.

‘First, we looked at the monkeys, who made us giggle. Next, we ate lunch on the grass because it was a beautiful day. Finally, we watched the hippos taking a bath in the thick, squelchy mud!’

Explain to children that you would like them to bring in three photographs from a significant event in their own lives, such as a birthday or other family celebration. (For children for whom this is problematic, you could take three photographs of the child’s day at school.)

**Follow-up small-group activity**

Children use their photographs to narrate events from their own lives, using sequential language to order them. Encourage children to ask questions of the rest of their group, continuing to model and praise the use of higher-order vocabulary.

**Enhancements to continuous provision**

- Place enlarged photographs of different class events on a washing line in the outdoor area for children to sequence and to act as a prompt for talk.
- Place images from a favourite class text in the reading area as a prompt for retelling.
- Place sequencing storyboards in the writing area, along with images or prompts from the storytelling bags (see session 4).
**Session 6: Chicken Licken**

You will need: *Chicken Licken* storytelling video, available from [www.oxfordowl.co.uk](http://www.oxfordowl.co.uk).

**Orientating task**

Watch the *storytelling video* of *Chicken Licken*. Discuss the names of the characters in the story, focusing on the pattern of phoneme substitution. Following the same pattern, change the names of some of the children, for example, *Charlie Larlie, Emily Lemily*. Invite children to make their own suggestions.

**Teaching input**

Watch the story for a second time, encouraging children to join in with the repeated refrains. Ask children:

‘Where was Chicken Licken at the beginning of the story?’

‘Where did Chicken Licken find Hen Len?’

Emphasise the vocabulary used in the story to describe each character’s position and actions.

‘Chicken Licken, sitting under the little nut tree.’

‘Hen Len, sitting in the straw, with her little chicks, four.’

‘Cock Lock, sitting on hay, whiling the afternoon away.’

‘Duck Luck, splashing in the pool, dip-double-diving and keeping cool.’

**Follow-up small-group activity**

Consider which other animals Chicken Licken might have approached. What might their story name be (according to the established pattern)? With an adult as scribe, encourage children to formulate sentences based upon these new characters, following the noun–verb–adverbial phrase pattern of the story. For example:

‘Turkey Lurkey, fluffing his tail feather, enjoying the warm weather.’

‘Goose Loose, basking in the sun, dreaming of fun.’

**Enhancements to continuous provision**

- Place *Chicken Licken*, and *Green Eggs and Ham* and *There’s a Wocket in my Pocket* by Dr. Seuss in the reading area, along with other texts rich in phoneme substitution.
- Include character puppets and/or role-play masks in the role-play area.
- Place writing frames and word cards from the story in the writing area.
Session 7: Making Numiconimals

You will need: Numicon shapes if available, and/or copies of Numicon shapes, available from www.oxfordowl.co.uk, paper or card; pens; pencils; paint; scissors; glue.

Orientating task
Tell children a story about an encounter with an imaginary creature – a Numiconimal – using higher-order vocabulary and mathematical language. For example:

‘Yesterday, I spotted a Numiconimal in our playground! It was a beautiful shade of scarlet, and, although it was flat, it had one part that stuck out. It had five even, round holes and five tall, straight ears. It took five enormous jumps, and then disappeared behind the sandpit!’

Teaching input
Model to children how to create a Numiconimal – by either printing with a Numicon shape five or cutting out a copy and sticking it onto card or paper – then add the details of five tall, straight ears, as described in the encounter.

Follow-up small-group activity
Provide Numicon shapes for printing – or hand out copies of the Numicon shapes – and support children in creating their own Numiconimal by printing (or cutting and sticking) and adding the corresponding number of details, for example, three legs for the three shape, four tails for four. Ask children to tell you about their Numiconimal, encouraging answers in full sentences and reinforcing the use of higher-order vocabulary and mathematical language. Higher-attaining children could describe an encounter such as the one modelled.

Enhancements to continuous provision
- Place Numicon shapes in the creative area.
- Take photographs of the children’s Numiconimals, cut out and laminate them, and place in the small world area to encourage children to use them to create and retell stories.
Session 8: What’s in the box, Mr Fox?

You will need: a fox toy or puppet, a box, rhyming objects or images (cat/hat/rat/mat, dog/frog, house/mouse), blank sock templates (see resource 3).

Orientating task
Introduce your ‘friend’ Mr Fox, and explain to children that he lives in the box. Remind children of learning of rhymes from Phase One phonics lessons, and explain that Mr Fox loves rhyming words so much that he collects them to keep in his box.

Teaching input
Show children the images or objects from the box, and name each of them. Ask children to place them into rhyming pairs. (If any children or adults have names which are easy to rhyme, it is particularly engaging – and therefore effective – to include their photographs in Mr Fox’s box.)

As children become more familiar and confident with the game, use the opportunity to introduce new objects or pictures and discuss the meaning of new words.

‘Potion and sea don’t rhyme, so Mr Fox won’t collect them. Does anyone know another word for sea? Another word for the sea is ocean. Do potion and ocean rhyme? Yes! Look how excited Mr Fox is now!’

Follow-up small-group activity
Provide children with blank sock templates (resource 3) and discuss with them how and why socks always come in pairs. Ask children to think of a pair of rhyming words and to draw one on each sock, making a pair of socks for the box of Mr Fox!

Encourage children to write labels for their words using initial sounds or more, depending on their development as writers.

Enhancements to continuous provision
- Place rhyming dominoes/jigsaws in the explore and investigate area.
- Make The Ox and The Yak by Julia Donaldson from www.oxfordowl.co.uk available on the interactive whiteboard.
- Play a CD of nursery rhymes in the role-play area.
- Place poems and other rhyming texts in the reading area.
Resource 3: A pair of socks for the box of Mr Fox

Write a rhyming word on each of these socks to make a pair.
Conversations and vocabulary games to try at home

Whatever your child’s reading ability, enjoying a book together allows them to develop their understanding, as well as to learn lots of new and exciting words. Read to your child whenever you can, ask them to read to you, or take turns reading pages or chapters of a book. Public libraries are a fantastic resource for allowing children to borrow books for free (and often have storytelling sessions and other craft and activity sessions in those long school holidays!).

Talking with and listening to your child teaches them the importance of spoken language and supports them in developing their vocabulary. When chatting with your child, try to avoid asking too many questions, but let them hear your own thoughts; children need to hear language in order to use it themselves. When you do ask your child a question, it is ideal to ask an ‘open’ question – one that cannot be answered with a single word. For example, ‘What was the best thing that happened today?’ rather than ‘How was school?’, to which the inevitable answer is ‘Fine’!

Here are some more suggestions:

- ‘I felt cross today because … What makes you feel cross? Why?’
- ‘I felt happy today when … What made you feel happy today? Why?’
- ‘If you had a superpower, what would it be?’
- ‘What would you take to the moon?’
- ‘Which book/film/TV character would you like to meet? Why?’
- ‘Let’s imagine it snowed tomorrow. What would we do?’
- ‘Play I Spy where one player says, ‘I spy with my little eye something beginning with …’ and makes or names the first sound or letter at the beginning of the name of something near them. The other player(s) try to guess what it is using the first sound or letter as a clue. You could also try ‘spying’ things that are different colours or textures.
- Play the game of ‘I went shopping and I bought …’, where a player names an item, for example, apples, and the next player names this item and adds another, so players end up reciting a list. Play continues until a player can no longer remember all the items.

For more ideas, see: https://www.oxfordowl.co.uk/for-home/advice-for-parents/fun-ideas-learning-at-home/

For more information on why the word gap matters and how you can help your child to develop their vocabulary at home, see: https://blog.oxfordowl.co.uk/why-the-word-gap-matters-and-what-can-you-do-at-home-to-close-it/
For further information

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