Fact sheet 1.6 Structure of language

Learning aim D: Language development, including communication from birth up to eight years

Understanding the structure of language is essential to ensure that effective communication takes place. It forms a foundation for learning in helping children build vocabulary and learn the grammatical rules of sentence structure and the patters of language. The following provides an outline of the main structure or building blocks of language structures which support development of more complex language skills.

Language development

Language helps children to communicate and understand more about the world around them. It is also the basis for developing literacy skills. Language is an important developmental topic and we will be looking at it again in the next unit.

Understanding the structure of language

It is important to have some understanding of the structure of language. All languages have rules, which are understood and used by both the speaker and listener. These rules are often referred to as grammar. By following the rules of grammar, speakers and listeners can understand each other. Linguists who study the structure of language use the term ‘grammar’ to describe the package of a language. This consists of three key elements: phonology, semantics and syntax.

Phonology

Languages have a sound system, known as phonology. When we hear someone speaking, we may recognise the language that they are using, even if we cannot speak it. This recognition may be based on listening to the sounds that are being used. The sounds that are used in a language are called phonemes. Some languages use fewer phonemes than others. There are 44 phonemes used in English, as opposed to 11 in Rotokas, an East Papuan language.

Semantics

Languages are composed of words, or units of meaning. When we learn a language we also have to learn what these units are and how they can be changed. An example of a unit is adding ‘-less’ onto the end of a word, which changes the meaning of the original word.

Syntax

Finally, we have to learn the rules for using the words and how their place in a sentence can change their meaning. For example, ‘the cat ate the mouse’ has a different meaning from ‘the mouse ate the cat’ even though the same words have been used.

Early years settings often use phonics, which is a method that focuses on sounds and their letters and provides a bedrock for reading and language production. Professionals in early years settings use interactive activities such as phonic games, songs and rhymes to support children’s language development. Common resources supporting language development include word walls, flashcards, reading aloud, sound sorting and phonic readers.

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