



Children learn to interpret language in social context



Janet Holmes
WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

THE end of the first term is a good time to reflect on what is expected from children as they continue new classes both in and out of school.

When Finn began his swimming class last year, he was a water-confident 3-year-old. He was happy to dive and duck his head under the water and to retrieve objects from the bottom of the pool. But he was shy and initially needed encouragement to get into the pool, and he did not immediately respond to the teacher's instructions.

When I asked if he was ready to progress to the next set of classes, the teacher said she realised that he could do everything required, but he had not yet learned to follow her instructions promptly and exactly. This was part of the learning which I had not taken into account.

This experience was an interesting reminder of how much children have to learn that goes beyond the content of lessons. When they start kindergarten or school, both children and their parents tend to think in terms of opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills, such as reading and writing.

But there is another raft of skills which need to be developed which are about behaving appropriately in the school environment.

From a sociolinguistic point of view, the child needs to acquire sociolinguistic competence in a

new set of social contexts.

First of all there is the issue of what to call the teacher. Different schools have different norms and getting it wrong could create bad feeling and attract ridicule. At Finn's kindergarten the teachers, no matter what their age, prefer first names.

In school, however, the level of formality increases and teachers expect to be called Miss Yates and Mr Davis, not Lisa and Rob. Children often compromise with Miss and Mister and this seems generally acceptable.

More complicated are the turn-taking rules. Children need to learn when it is OK to call out an answer, or answer as a group, as opposed to waiting to be nominated to speak. The rules are not always obvious, though the teacher often spells them out in the new entrants' class with instructions such as "altogether children" or "raise your hand if you know the answer".

Learning when it is good to talk to the child next to you and when it is bad is another challenge.

And children need to learn to respond quickly to what initially seem like mysterious instructions. "Mat-time" means "come and sit quietly on the mat with the other children". "Listening" doesn't mean "I am listening to you" but rather "you should all be listening to me". And when the teacher asks "are you talking, Dylan?" or "is that Mary I see sitting on the windowsill?", she does not expect

the child to answer with a "yes", as new entrants sometimes do.

As the child progresses up the school, the messages become even more enigmatic.

Here are a couple of examples from my classroom observations in a class of 9-year olds. "I can hear talking". Is this good or bad? Talk is surely a good thing in school. But, in fact, this message is generally negative. In this case the teacher had instructed the children to read a passage from their books in silence. So talk was not a good thing.

"Door" means "open the door for me". "Board" means "the child in charge of cleaning the board this week needs to do their job now". "Bus people" means "those of you who are going home on the bus should collect your things and leave now".

Children learn to scan the teacher's utterances, however initially inscrutable, for potential instructions.

The notice on the side of the pool next to the blow-up monster reads, with nice ambiguity, "Inflatable rules". Behaving appropriately in the pool or at school (or in any new context) seems so easy once you know the rules.

It is salutary to see the world through the eyes of a new entrant once in a while.

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