Thompson, J. (pending publication 2008). Table Talk: Taking Dinner Conversation into the Classroom. *Monograph on Best Practices in Bilingual and ESL Education*. Denton: Federation of North Texas Universities.

Something good happens when families talk together at mealtimes. Some use dinner conversations to share stories, tell jokes, or pray prayers. Others review the day just past, or talk about plans for the days ahead. Most feel like this is something good for children and their families. Research confirms that children benefit from these routine events. For example, their participation helps them develop role identity, group identity, individual differentiation within the group, and the relative value of the individual to the group's larger goals (Fiese, Tomcho, Douglas, Josephs, Poltrock, & Baker, 2002). Simply put, from a language learning perspective, these are lessons in communication. Children are learning, through modeling and guided practice, the rules of language use, what Hymes calls communicative competence: "knowing when to speak, when not to, what to talk about, and with whom, when, where, and in what manner to interact" (Hymes, 1972, p. 277). The value of family togetherness resonates with these intimate interactions of families and children over the dinner table. Table talk, taking dinner conversation into the classroom setting, helps teachers expand their language repertoire, and thus enhance children's communicative competence.

Conversations in the classroom are not like dinner conversations. Recent research (Thompson, 2008) examined the language used by teachers in early childhood classrooms while talking with young children. Preliminary reports, using a microethnographic approach to analysis (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005), included a high incidence of language of control, and a moderate use of language of instruction and pedagogy. Other research indicated that improving the quality of general conversation between children and their parents or caregivers improves language development and, consequently, the literacy development of young children (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). They also stated "Our data strongly indicate that it is the nature of the teacher-child relationship and the kinds of conversations that they have that make the biggest difference to early language and literacy development" (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002, p. 17). They suggested mealtime as an example of extended discourse. In analyzing Israeli and American families during mealtimes, Blum-Kulka (1997) summarized her findings with a list: "To become competent conversationalists, children have to learn how to choose and introduce topics for talk, respond appropriately, tell a story, and develop an argument" (p.3).

Fillmore and Snow (2000) described many roles for the classroom teacher, two of which included communicator and educator. This symbiotic relationship between communicator and educator creates a dynamic tension within a teacher, a balance that many mentor and master teachers navigate, but one which other, more novice, teachers frequently struggle with. Language use, such as table talk, may be the difference between these models of success or struggle. Massey (2004) discussed four levels of complexity in teacher-child conversations:

- Level 1 – matching perception. This type of language is least abstract, most concrete. It involves pointing and naming, speaking about things in the immediate present; everything is here and now. "This is a ball, Katie." "Did you bring me your doll, or did you bring me Jane's doll?"

- Level 2 – selective analysis/integration of perception. Conversations that describe or recall earlier events use present objects to prompt children to remember prior experiences, and the language learned before. “Think about what we did this morning with this granola snack.” “Did you see the hamster eat the carrot we put in there yesterday?”
- Level 3 – reordering or inferring about perception. A higher level of abstraction occurs when the child can summarize, define, compare and contrast, and provide judgments about things observed. “What did it feel like when Max came back into his room, and found his supper, and it was still hot?” “Do you think there is a difference between oranges sliced just before snack, and oranges sliced early in the morning and left out on the snack tray? What about bananas?”
- Level 4 – reasoning about perceptions. “Tell me how your machine works.” “Can we figure out how the hamsters are escaping? Since they are nocturnal, and they escape at night, how can we find out how they get out of the cage?”

These four levels of complexity implement a language use strategy that engages the teacher in potent conversations with children. This starts with valuing the verbal contributions of other speakers – in this case, the children. “A talk-rich environment is an accepting place where teachers encourage young children to talk” (Kalmar, 2008, p. 89). This 'accepting place' is not silent – but rather the adult speaks with the child, expectantly, looking to the child to engage and reply. At first, the things to talk about come from the immediate environment, and from the objects and items in the classroom. Soon, the teacher and child extend their conversations into objects, events, and people beyond the here and now, and describe things that happened on the way to school, or yesterday, or plans for later.

Children learn language through using language. This requires much watching and listening involved, followed by many approximations, trial and errors, where different sounds are experimented with in an attempt to communicate (Gunning, 2008). This early language environment is highly contextual – one has to be there to understand. But this young language learner, in tandem with a responsive caregiver – a parent, a teacher, an engaging older sibling or playmate – can learn, and typically does learn, how to communicate. Lindfors (1991) summarized the phenomenon in a single, potent, sentence: “…virtually every child, without special training, exposed to surface structures of language in many interaction contexts, builds for himself – in a short period of time and at an early stage in his cognitive development – a deep-level, abstract, and highly complex system of linguistic structure and use” (p. 90).

The language environment in the home rates as the single greatest factor in the child’s language learning, both in vocabulary development (Hart and Risley, 1995) and in communicative competence (Hart and Risley, 1999; Dickinson and Tabor, 2002). The child’s early classroom environment is another important source of language interaction (Cazden, 2001). The classroom creates an expansion of known repertoires of language use into broader contexts. Cazden (2001, p. 3) subdivided classroom language in three types, or functions: propositional, social, and expressive. She elaborated on each:

- Propositional, language of curriculum: the communication of propositional information – also known as referential, cognitive, or ideational function. “This is a ball, Katie.”
- Social, the language of control: the establishment and maintenance of social

relationships. “Let’s go, it’s time for us to move outside.”

- Expressive, language of personal identity: the expression of the speaker’s identity and attitudes. “How do you feel when that happens?”

While these three features are also present in home life, what is often present in dinner conversations but absent in classroom discourse is the sense of language for language sake. Jakobson (1960) called this “phatic” language, and Baron (1990) referred to this as the language of social exchange. Building 'talk for talk’s sake' into the classroom improves the child’s repertoire of language functions; by talking just to be talking, children increase their ability to talk in other decontextualized settings.

An example of phatic speech occurred when a small group of kindergartners were sitting around the teacher’s table, working on addition activities with manipulatives. They became really comfortable with their work, and started talking. At this point, they may have seemed “off task” because the conversation was growing away from the objects and activities set before them. But, in fact, their real work was just beginning; the conversation began to include other, non-present situations, including home and family, and eventually, their parents’ work. “My dad is a carpenter. He builds houses,” said Liseth. Robert answered, “Yeah? Well, my mom works in a build, you know, with desks inside.” “Do you mean an office in a building, like downtown?” Mr. Smith adds. Jimmy looked up at his teacher with concern: “Mr. Smith, do you have a job?”

This sample of non-directed talk, evolving out of the speakers’ interests and passions, demonstrates the four part pattern found often in table talk (Blum-Kulka, 1997):

- Vocabulary Approximation – use of ‘carpenter’ and ‘build’ are approximations, extensions of vocabulary heard in some homes, and extended here to become common vocabulary for all these children.
- Extended Narrative – the slice presented here goes on for three turns, providing each child a moment in the dialog.
- Non-immediate – the talk is not about what is immediately obvious, but rather describes something in their collective understanding.
- De-contextualized – the setting, topic, tone, and purpose is not here present.

These parts, while not always present in a table talk speech event, do characterize the type of extended discourse that encourages the language development of children (Tabors, 1997; Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2006).

The English Language Learner, whether stuck in a monolingual English-only immersion classroom, moderated in transitional English as a Second Language program, or situated in a Two-Way Bilingual Immersion program, benefits from talking. Yip and Matthews (2007) delineated the influence of dominant language culture on the second language learner, and they described ways teachers adapt their language usage to soften the edges of language differences and create a more equitable language distribution in the classroom. The primacy of oral language development in the native language as a precursor for literacy development in the native, and, eventually, in the target language has long been recognized as an important ingredient in a complete second language program (Gersten, Marks, Keating, & Baker, 1998). This form of classroom language creates space for the child to create in the classroom the type of authentic learning environment that she brought to native language acquisition (Ovando, Combs, & Collier, 2006).

Encouraging teachers to expand their language use will benefit all children. But,

as Dickinson and Tabors (2002) pointed out, it requires a transition, a commitment to change before teachers become stronger at building communicative capacity of their children:

> For this to happen, we must help all preschool teachers understand the major role they play in supporting children's long-term development. These teachers must deepen the know-how required to constantly extend children's oral language while they also encourage phonemic awareness and writing skills. Rather than adding an extra burden, this attention to language development is likely to create livelier, more enjoyable experiences for both teachers and children. Finally, teachers also must actively reach out to families, building on their strengths while guiding them toward the kinds of home language and literacy activities that will help their children achieve the educational success that families desire for their children. With these early language experiences, children will be far more likely to acquire the specific reading and writing skills needed for school success (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002, p. 18).

Children learn to speak because they want to connect. The drive for relationship is stronger than any internal or external mechanics of language. Providing children, in classrooms, with rich potent language partners holds promise for extending language well into literacy, into communicative competence. Engaging children in conversation within classrooms creates a deeper, richer language system within these young scholars.

Table Talk: Taking Normal Dinner Conversations into the Classroom

- Language learners need competent partners for language practice
- Teacher talk is too often filled with directives and pedagogy
- Engaging children in normal conversation is particularly effective in three school-time settings: playtime, storybook reading, and mealtime.
- Dinner conversation is most readily accessible to teachers as a model for how to decontextualize talk.
- Using common objects readily available, discuss properties, uses, and dimensions – while also listening, allowing the child to lead as she expresses interest and insight into the object.
- Notice four levels of complexity in language use with young children. Start simple, but do not delay building complexity and abstraction into everyday conversations:
    - Level 1 – matching perception.
    - Level 2 – selective analysis/integration of perception.
    - Level 3 – reordering or inferring about perception.
    - Level 4 – reasoning about perceptions.
- Build 'talk for talk's sake' into the classroom

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