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Citation for published version (APA):

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Academic language in early childhood interactions

A longitudinal study of 3- to 6-year-old Dutch monolingual children

Lotte Henrichs

This study examines academic language in early childhood. It covers children's exposure to academic language in early childhood, children's early production of academic language, the development of academic language proficiency and the co-construction of academic language by children and adults.

The study is an in-depth study, which forms part of a larger interdisciplinary research project called 'the Development of Academic language at School and Home' (DASH). Twenty-five children were observed in interaction with their parent four times, between the ages of three and six. In addition, the children were observed in interaction with their teacher in first and second grade of primary education.

The results of the study show that children are more frequently exposed to a number of language features characteristic of the academic register in the first two years of primary school than at home. However, the results also indicate that parents, who utilise a particular interaction with their child as an opportunity for their child to learn something new, typically create a linguistic context that contains features of the academic register. The way in which adults position children during spoken discourse has a strong influence on the nature of the conversation, and on the opportunities created for children's own creative contributions to the particular discourse. Hence, when the social relationships are thus shaped, ample opportunity is created for knowledge transfer and co-construction, and the content of the conversation and the structure of the conversation follow accordingly in an 'academic' way. As such, children can become familiarised with the academic register at an early age.