



Vermont State  
University

Center for Schools



## Early Childhood Educators Institute 2025 Course Syllabus

**Course Title:** The Words We Use: Reflecting on Language in Early Childhood Education Practices

**Number of Credits:** 3 credits

**Level:** Undergraduate or Graduate

This course will be offered at both the graduate and undergraduate level. Any registrant who has not yet earned a Bachelor's Degree will be automatically registered for the undergraduate section. Some assignments and expectations for scholarly writing (paper page length, APA expectations) will be matched to the level of complexity for what would be expected of an undergraduate or graduate student.

**Course Code:** EDX 5710 S53 (graduate) EDX 4710 S53 (undergraduate)

**Dates:** July 29 – October 1, 2025

**Times:** This course is aligned with the Early Childhood Educators Institute. Attendance is required at the online institute from 9 am to 3 pm on the following dates: Tuesday, July 29; Thursday, July 31, Tuesday, August 5 and Thursday, August 7, 2025. This course continues in an online environment until October 1, 2025.

**Format:** Online synchronously and asynchronously.

**Remote Learning Technologies:** Synchronous meetings will be held using VTSU's Zoom Pro account. Assignment work will be completed and submitted to the instructor via email.

**Location:** Online

**Course Zoom Dates and Times:** Online institute July 29th and 31st, and August 5th and 7th, 2025 from 9 am to 3 pm.

**Instructor:** Christine Birong-Smith MA, MEd  
**Instructor Email Address:** birong.smith@gmail.com  
**Instructor Phone:** 802-373-5052

**Instructor Zoom Office Hours:** Via Zoom

Wednesday August 20th 4:30 to 5:30p

Wednesday September 17th 4:30 to 5:30p

Office hours are also available by appointment

**Course Cost to Student:** \$435 due and payable to Vermont State University

**Course Description:** As early childhood education (ECE) continues evolving, the kind of language early educators use in our everyday professional engagements can evolve with it. In this course, we will examine the way the language we use impacts how early educators see ourselves, how others see us, and how examining the language we use deepens our connection to our practices. We will begin our exploration by developing an interdisciplinary understanding of how the language individuals and groups use impacts the ways in which people see the world, or worldview perspective, and how people see specific subjects. Upon establishment of this concept, course participants will think deeply about how the language they use impacts how they, themselves, and others see our work and their participation in it, and how we can regularly reflect upon the kind of language we use in our work across professional encounters among families, legislators, colleagues, and directly with children to most fully convey our work and meanings.

This Early Childhood Educators Institute champions the use of reflective practice by all childcare providers and their supervisors. Each of the four keynote presentations at the institute will incorporate this practice and all course instructors have been asked to embed, in some way, reflective practice during their 4 days of institute time and during follow-up time spent by those choosing to add credit. Throughout this course, students will be asked to use reflective practices designed to improve self-awareness, enhance professional development, and build better problem-solving skills. Reflective practices also encourage lifelong learning, boost creativity, and can lead to more effective teaching and learning environments for young children. By regularly reflecting on experiences, individuals in this course will identify their strengths and weaknesses, refine instructional methods, and develop more adaptable approaches in whatever role they play in early childhood.

**Audience:** Early Childhood Educators (birth to grade 3)

**Course Goals:** The goal of this course is to support teachers and administrators to think critically and intentionally about the language they use in their professional encounters. This includes everyday encounters with families, children, and colleagues, and less frequent encounters such with legislators.

Upon completion of this course, participants will learn to critically analyze their experiences and actions and to use that analysis to inform future learning and practice, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and growth through self-awareness and deliberate reflection.

**Course Objectives:** The objective is for early childhood educators to leave the course with the tools they need to continuously reflect upon and evolve language that further supports and strengthens their work across ECE settings and in their day-to-day encounters during this time of professional elevation.

## **Course Schedule:**

Please note:

- There is required reading to be completed prior to Day One
- Journaling will take place during the 11:15 to 12:00 period and there is no time or length requirement for your journaling

### **Introduction Session - Tuesday, July 22nd**

- Via Zoom from 4:30 to 5:30pm
- Getting Started:
  - Personal introductions
  - Review syllabus
  - What is a thesis statement?
  - Q&A

### **Day One - Tuesday, July 29th**

#### **Tentative Agenda**

- Introduction to Worldview Perspective & Linguistic Relativity Theory
  - Define, discuss, and explore the concept of worldview perspective and linguistic relativity theory to develop foundational understanding
  - Mixture of lecture, video, journaling, and collective dialogue will be utilized.

#### **Readings & Viewing (Complete for day of)**

Marian, V. Introduction  
Matatov, S. (2021, April 28)  
Boroditsky, L. [\*How language shapes the way we think\*](#)

#### **\*Assignment & Due Date**

- Undergraduate & Graduate Students: *Due via instructor's email Friday, August 1st*
  - Write a personal reflection based upon Day One class session and assigned readings
    - Include how you see or how you don't see the information and materials relating to early childhood education reflective practices
- Graduate Students: *Due via instructor's email Friday, August 1st*
  - Create a Mind Map to chart and organize your thinking and understanding of linguistic relativity theory
    - View this instructional [video](#) as a reference for how and why to Mind Map

## **Day Two - Thursday, July 31st**

### **Tentative Agenda**

- Worldview Perspective & Linguistic Relativity Theory revisited
  - Sharing thoughts, perspectives, questions, and insights in a general discussion
- Language & Our Professional Selves
  - Language evolution
  - Discuss and explore how language impacts how we, early childhood educators, see ourselves and our work regarding:
    - Professional identity
    - Documentation as a reflection tool
    - Workplace policies: do they reflect our self-image and values?
  - Mixture of lecture, video, journaling, and collective dialogue will be utilized

### **Readings (Complete for day of)**

Deutscher, G. (2005) Chapter 2  
Early Childhood Australia. (2021, Nov 8)  
First Steps Kent

### **\*Assignment & Due Date**

- Undergraduate & Graduate Students: *Due via instructor's email Monday, August 4th*
  - Applied concepts exercise:
    - Find a piece of documentation you have created in the past or a current policy from your workplace
    - Reflect on its language and what it conveys - does the wording accurately communicate your intentions, values, message, so forth?
    - Rework (if needed) the language used
    - Write about what language you changed and why. If you did not change any of the language used, explain why
    - Provide both the unedited and edited (if applicable) documentation or policy
- Graduate Students: *Due via instructor's email Monday, August 4th*
  - Write a personal reflection based upon Day Two class session and assigned readings

## **Day Three - Tuesday, August 5th**

### **Tentative Agenda**

- Language & Our Professional Selves revisited
  - Sharing thoughts, perspectives, questions, and insights in a general discussion
- Reflecting on Language used with Families and Legislators
  - Why are grouping families and legislators together?
  - Paradigm shifts
  - Families and the wording we use with them in communication
    - Written communication
    - Verbal communication
    - Documentation

- Legislators and the wording we use with them in communication
  - Written communication
  - Verbal communication
  - Advocacy
- Mixture of lecture, video, journaling, and collective dialogue will be utilized

### **Readings & Viewing (Complete for day of)**

Marian, V. chapter 7

Lombrozo, T. (2016, July 18)

*Mastering Meetings with Policymakers.* (n.d.)

Nebraska Department of Education Step Up to Quality. (n.d.)

Tedx Talks. (2024, Oct) [\*How to be confident \(even if you're not\)\*](#)

### **\*Assignment & Due Date**

- Undergraduate students: *Due via instructor's email Friday, August 8th*
  - Write a personal reflection based upon Day Three class session and assigned readings
- OR**
- Applied concepts exercise:
  1. Write a letter to either the families you work with or your legislator
    - This is meant to be a real life letter that you could send out, so the topic and content of the letter is your choice
  2. Reflect on why you utilized the specific language and framing of your letter and write a summary of your reasoning
- Graduate students: *Due via instructor's email Friday, August 8th*
  - Are **required to do both of the above** assignments

### **Day Four - Thursday, August 7th**

#### **Tentative Agenda**

- Reflecting on Language used with Families and Legislators revisited
  - Sharing thoughts, perspectives, questions, and insights in a general discussion
- Language Used With Children
  - How do children develop worldview perspective?
    - Essentialism vs. Vocabulary exposure
  - How we speak with children
    - Its impacts on the children themselves
    - Its impacts on us as early childhood educators

### **Readings (Complete for day of)**

Colker, L.J. (2014)

Gelman, S., & E.M. Markman. (1986)

Kelemen, D. (2004)

Malaguzzi, L. (translated by L. Gandini). (n.d.)

### **\*Assignment & Due Date**

- Undergraduate & Graduate Students: *Due via instructor's email Friday, August 1st*
  - Create a Mind Map to chart and organize your thinking and understanding of how early childhood educators use language with children
    - View this instructional [video](#) as a reference for how and why to Mind Map
  - After creating your Mind Map, write an explanation and reflection about your Mind Map
    - Remember to tie readings and lecture into your reflection

### **Day Five - Wednesday August 20th 4:30 to 5:30p**

- Tying It All Together: Applying Our Learning to Reflective Practice (Part I)
  - Through lecture and general discussion, we will focus this time to exploring specific, applied strategies for incorporating intentional language and word choice into our reflective practices across early childhood education contexts

### **\*Assignment (complete for day of)**

- Undergraduate & Graduate students
  - Come prepared with at least one question you have around intentional language and word choice in reflective practices

### **Day Six - Wednesday September 17th 4:30 to 5:30p**

- Tying It All Together: Applying Our Learning to Reflective Practice (Part II)
  - Through lecture and general discussion, we will focus this time on exploring specific, applied strategies for incorporating intentional language and word choice into our reflective practices across early childhood education contexts
- Farewells!

### **\*Final Paper: *Due September 30th, 2025 via instructor's email***

#### **Undergraduate & Graduate Students: Research Paper**

- You will develop a research topic and [thesis statement](#) relating to the contents of this course and the institute theme of Reflective Practice
  - The instructor must approve your final paper topic in advance by Tuesday, August 19th
- Your paper will utilize class materials, lectures, and your own research
- Your paper citations will be in [APA](#) format
- There is no length requirement

*\*Submissions from students will be evaluated for rigor and quality using the provided rubric and considering the level at which each student is completing the course (grad vs undergrad). At the graduate level, students need to demonstrate expertise, competence, and professionalism. Written assignments for them will be evaluated based on length, depth, synthesizing outside sources, reading and evaluating scholarly articles, critical thinking, logic and organization, use*

of language, spelling, grammar and punctuation, sentence variety, concision (using only the words necessary to convey ideas, eliminating redundancy, and use of correct and thorough citations

### **Required Readings provided via citation link OR emailed PDF.**

*If you have questions or need clarification on required readings, please reach out to your instructor.*

Boroditsky, L. (2018, May). [How language shapes the way we think](https://www.ted.com/dubbing/lera_boroditsky_how_language_shapes_the_way_we_think?audio=en&language=en) [Video]. TED. [https://www.ted.com/dubbing/lera\\_boroditsky\\_how\\_language\\_shapes\\_the\\_way\\_we\\_think?audio=en&language=en](https://www.ted.com/dubbing/lera_boroditsky_how_language_shapes_the_way_we_think?audio=en&language=en)

Colker, L.J. (2014). [The Word Gap: The Early Years Make The Difference](https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/feb2014/the-word-gap). *NAEYC: Teaching Young Children*, 7(3), <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/feb2014/the-word-gap>

Deutscher, G. (2005). Chapter 2: Perpetual Motion. *The Unfolding of Language: An Evolutionary Tour of Mankind's Greatest Invention*. Picador.

Early Childhood Australia. (2021, Nov 8). [Words Matter: How to talk about early childhood education and care](https://thespoke.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/words-matter/). The Spoke. <https://thespoke.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/words-matter/>

First Steps Kent. [The Power of Recognizing and Using Accurate Early Childhood Education and Care Terminology](https://www.firststepskent.org/articles/the-power-of-recognizing-and-using-accurate-early-childhood-education-and-care-terminology). First Steps Kent. <https://www.firststepskent.org/articles/the-power-of-recognizing-and-using-accurate-early-childhood-education-and-care-terminology>

Gelman, S., & E.M. Markman. (1986). Understanding Natural Kinds: A Developmental Comparison. *Papers and Reports on Child Language Development*, 25, 41-48.

Kelemen, D. (2004). Are Children "Intuitive Theists"? Reasoning About Purpose and Design in Nature. *Psychological Science*, 15(5), 295-301.

Lombrozo, T. (2016, July 18). [What is a Paradigm Shift, Anyway?](https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2016/07/18/486487713/what-is-a-paradigm-shift-anyway) *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2016/07/18/486487713/what-is-a-paradigm-shift-anyway>

Malaguzzi, L. (translated by L. Gandini). (n.d.). [100 languages](https://www.reggiochildren.it/en/reggio-emilia-approach/100-linguaggi-en/). Reggio Emilia Approach. <https://www.reggiochildren.it/en/reggio-emilia-approach/100-linguaggi-en/>

Marian, V. (2023). *The Power of Language: How the Codes We Use to Think, Speak, and Live Transform Our Minds*. Dutton.

[Mastering Meetings with Policymakers](https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/mastering-meetings-policy-makers). (n.d.) National Association for the Education of Young Children. Retrieved April 5, 2025, from <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/mastering-meetings-policy-makers>

Matatov, S. (2021, April 28). [The Influence Of Language On The Perception Of The World](https://icjs.us/the-influence-of-language-on-the-perception-of-the-world/). *International Collegiate Journal of Science*. Retrieved April 2, 2025 from <https://icjs.us/the-influence-of-language-on-the-perception-of-the-world/>

Nebraska Department of Education Step Up to Quality. (n.d.). [Why We Use the Term 'Child Care' and Not 'Day Care'](https://www.education.ne.gov/step-up-to-quality/stories/why-we-use-the-term-child-care-and-not-day-care/). Step Up to Quality Stories. Retrieved April 4, 2025, from <https://www.education.ne.gov/step-up-to-quality/stories/why-we-use-the-term-child-care-and-not-day-care/>

Tedx Talks. (2024, Oct). [How to be confident \(even if you're not\) - Montana von Fliss - TEDxBellevueWomen](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVFzbxmKNUw) [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVFzbxmKNUw>

### **Suggested Additional Readings:**

Denton, P. (2007). *The power of our words: Teacher language that helps children learn*. Northeast Foundation for Children, Inc.

Wurm, J. (2005b). *Working in the Reggio Way: A beginner's guide for American teachers*. Redleaf Press.

### **Evaluation:**

Students will be evaluated based upon three areas: Class Participation & Engagement, Class Assignments, and Final Paper. If there are questions regarding assignments and/or their evaluation, students are strongly encouraged to reach out to the instructor via email, phone, text, or by making an appointment to speak.

Class Participation & Engagement will be evaluated based upon student contributions in synchronous and asynchronous work, such as journaling. Students are also encouraged to bring up questions, thoughts, and clarifications during lectures as they arise. There is no length requirement for written assignments.

Class Assignments will be evaluated based upon:

- Content:
  - The student clearly engages with assignment topic(s)
  - The student incorporates the required materials for that assignment
- Substance:
  - The student conveys their own thinking while utilizing course materials
- Focus:
  - The student weaves the institute theme of Reflective Practice into assignments
  - The student completes tasks and objectives of their assignments
- Timeliness:
  - Assignment is turned in on or before its due date
    - If the student must turn in an assignment late they must contact the instructor in advance to create an alternate arrangement and deduction from assignment grade may be applied

Final Paper will be evaluated based upon:

- The student's ability to develop a research thesis statement and defend it utilizing course material and their own additional research
- The student was in clear communication with instructor regarding research topic and thesis statement development



- The student's ability to include proper citations of sources using APA format
- Timeliness: the final paper is submitted on or before the due date

### **Grading:**

Final grades will be based upon the following course components and their given weight:

Class Participation & Engagement: 15%

Class Assignments: 40%

Final Paper: 45%

**Instructor Biography:** I am a passionate lifelong learner and a teacher at Lincoln Cooperative Preschool. I was born and raised in Vermont and knew I wanted to be an early educator when I was in high school. However, life took a different turn for a while. I moved from Vermont to Missoula where I attended the University of Montana where I received a BA in Native American Studies. I then went on to the University of Arizona where I received a MA in American Indian Law and Policy and worked with and on behalf of urban Indigenous Peoples. I then decided to move home to Vermont and found myself coming full circle and being drawn again to early education. I earned my MEd in Early Childhood Education from Goddard College and hold a Vermont state teaching license for birth through Pre-K. I have been teaching in the birth to PK range for 14 years and currently serve as Chair of my town's Conservation Commission.

I live in the woods of Lincoln with my husband Nick, our three young children, two cats, and a tortoise named Gilbert. I enjoy travelling and have been to 49 states - Alaska remains elusive.

### **Vermont State University (VTSU) Policies**

#### **Grading Policy:**

Grades are indicated by letter with a designated "quality point" value assigned to each as follows:

A	4.0
A-	3.7
B+	3.3
B	3.0
B-	2.7
C+	2.3
C	2.0

**NOTE:** Anything less than a C+ at the graduate level is considered **unsatisfactory** and an F will be entered.

**Expectation:** Students enrolled in this course will complete a series of activities, readings, and reflections before, during and/or after any scheduled face-to-face or synchronous sessions.

This will assure that Carnegie expectations for a credited course, both new learning and hours of outside preparation, are sufficiently met.

These course requirements can be met through a combination of Academic Engagement and Academic Preparation.

**Academic Engagement** is instructor-led instruction and may include but is not limited to: participating in synchronous class activities, listening to class lectures or webinars (synchronous or asynchronous), taking an exam, participating in an interactive tutorial, conducting instructor-led laboratory experiments, contributing to an academic discussion (online, virtual, or in-person), submitting an academic assignment, initiating contact with an instructor to ask a question about the academic subject studied in the course, or similar academic activity.

**Academic Preparation** is independently conducted by the student and may include but is not limited to: research, reading, rehearsing, study time, and completing assignments and projects.

### **Academic Honesty Policy**

Vermont State University upholds high standards of academic integrity from all community members. Academic integrity encompasses honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and the courage to act on these fundamental values (International Center for Academic Integrity [ICAI], 2021; The Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity, 3rd ed.). A student who fails to uphold these values may experience academic consequences including a grade of F, indicating no credit, for assignments or courses, or dismissal from the University. Examples of failure to uphold academic integrity may include using unauthorized aids to complete or enhance academic work, copying another person's work on exams, quizzes, or assignments, or engaging in other forms of plagiarism. To plagiarize is to use someone else's words or ideas without full and proper citation and to present them as one's own. The sharing of VTSU password and login credentials to misrepresent oneself in online learning is a violation of academic integrity. Violations need not be intentional in nature. All members of the VTSU community are expected to investigate and understand their responsibility to act with integrity, and to seek assistance when uncertain. For more information, please see the [VTSU Graduate Catalog Academic Integrity Policy](#)

### **Use and Ownership of Copyrighted Materials**

For information and guidance, faculty and students are referred to the [Vermont State Colleges Manual of Policy and Procedures](#) annual disclosure regarding illegal file sharing and the Higher Education Opportunity Act.

### **Accommodations**

VTSU is committed to providing reasonable accommodations to qualified students with disabilities so that no such student shall, by reason of a disability, be excluded from participating in, or be denied the benefits of, the services, programs or activities of VTSU. If you have questions about these services, please contact [VTSU Disability Services](#) or request appointments on the [Disability Services web page](#).

### **Course Duration Timelines:**

The VTSU Center for Schools consistently monitors courses to assure that students complete the required hours for the number of credits assigned. Course durations have been set to

assure that 15 hours of academic engagement per credit PLUS additional aligned and connected learning hours of academic preparation can take place.

### **Grading Timelines:**

Final grades for this course will be posted by November 1, 2025. Please see transcript access instructions provided below.

### **Course Drop Policy**

For a course that is **8 weeks or less** in duration, a student can **drop** the course **within the first 7 days** for any reason. For a course that is **more than 8 weeks** in duration, a student can drop the course **within the first 14 days** for any reason. The course **will NOT appear on a transcript** and the student (or school/district) can expect a full refund for any tuition paid.

The student must email a drop notification to the instructor *and* submit the [Center for Schools drop request form](#).

Once the applicable drop period detailed above has passed, drop requests will no longer be honored.

### **Withdrawal Policy**

After the initial drop period has passed, but **before 60%** of the course has taken place, a student can **withdraw** from a course. The course **will appear on the student transcript with a “W”** and NO refund can be issued. The student must email a **withdrawal** request to the instructor and complete the [Center for Schools drop request form](#).

Again, this form must be submitted before 60% of the course has passed.

After 60% of the course is complete, withdrawals are NO longer permitted. At this point, a student has 3 options:

1. Complete the course as originally planned.
2. Request a formal extension from the instructor and the university, which if granted, would allow up to an additional 7 weeks to complete the coursework.
3. Accept a final grade based on the work completed to date, even if it means a failing grade.

Those who withdraw without adhering to the policies described above may receive a failing grade on their transcript and/or be liable for associated course costs. Please direct any questions to your instructor and to the [Center for Schools Team](#).

### **Transcript Request:**

Students can access a free, unofficial transcript by logging in to [VTSU's Self-Service Portal](#). The unofficial transcript shows all grades for courses taken through Vermont State University since 2002 and DOES have the University heading. Most districts accept this for tuition reimbursement.

Students can also order an official transcript from [VTSU's Parchment page](#). Please direct transcript request questions to the [VTSU Registrar](#).

