

# Variation in Children's Engagement in Conversational Exchanges with Teachers and Peers across Preschool Classroom Settings

## Background

- Within preschool classrooms, ninety percent of children's time is spent in various structural settings, including large group, free choice, meals, and routines. How teachers and children talk to one another tends to differ in meaningful ways across these settings.
- Most studies of preschool classroom talk focus on efforts made *by the teacher* to maintain conversational interactions with little attention to children's contributions to these exchanges. Yet, young children's participation in conversational exchanges is considered to be an active ingredient in accelerating their language development.
- Classroom settings may affect how children participate in conversations with teachers and peers. Moreover, children's language skills may interact with settings to inform the ways in which children participate in conversations.

## Research Questions

- 1) Are there significant differences in the extent to which preschool children initiate and maintain conversations with their teachers and peers across classroom settings?
- 2) To what extent do children's expressive language skills moderate setting differences?

## Key Measures

**Observations:** Two dimensions of the *Individualized Classroom Assessment Scoring System (inCLASS)* were used (Downer et al., 2010):

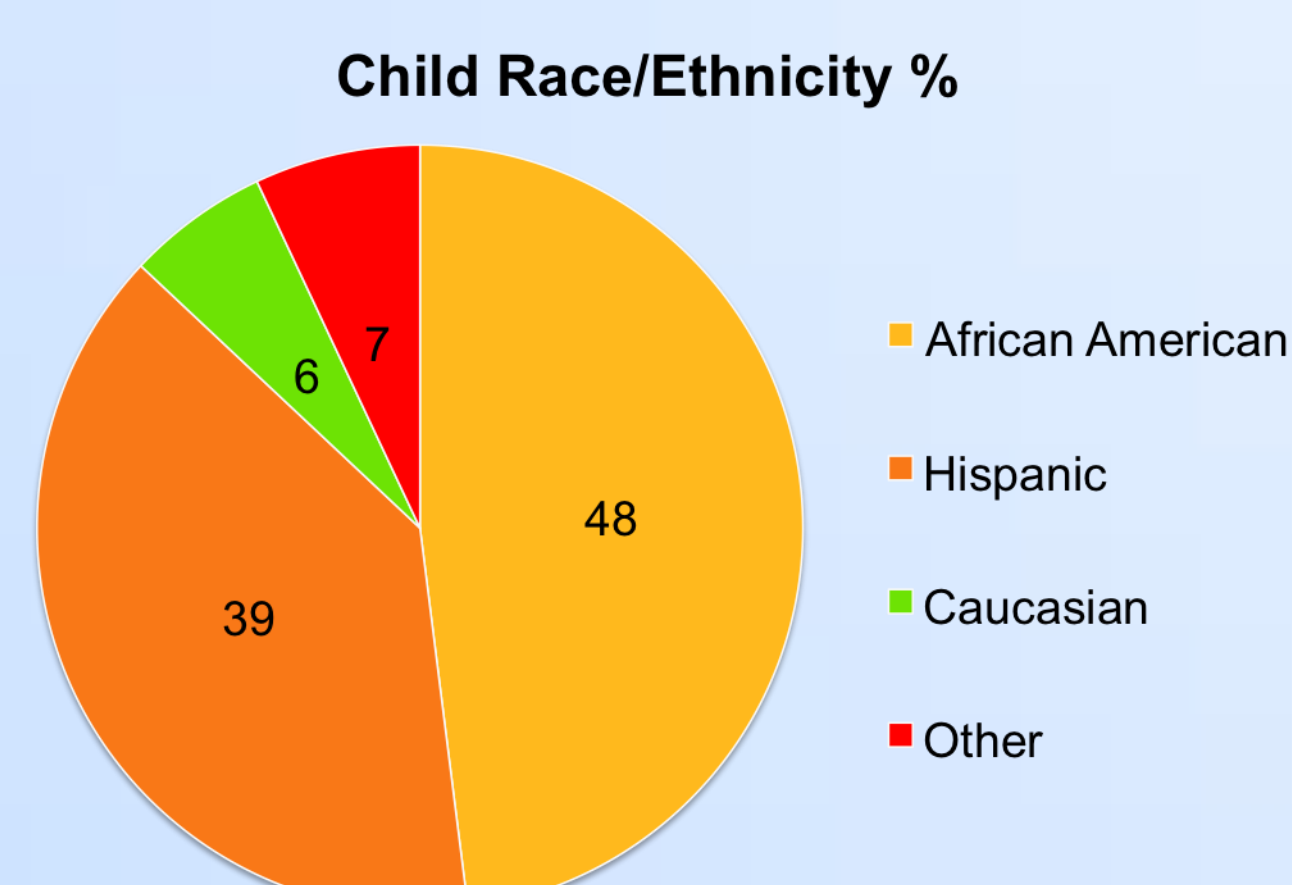
- *Teacher Communication*
- *Peer Communication*

These dimensions measure the degree to which the child initiates and maintains conversations with teachers and peers, respectively. Each dimension was rated on 7-pt scale (1=low, 7=high) using behavioral markers in a standardized manual.

**Assessment:** Children's expressive vocabulary was measured using the Picture Vocabulary subtest of the *Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement* (Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2001).

## Participants

**Participants:** 179 children (93 girls and 86 boys;  $M=52.13$ ,  $SD=3.83$  age in months) from 45 preschool classrooms.



## Procedure

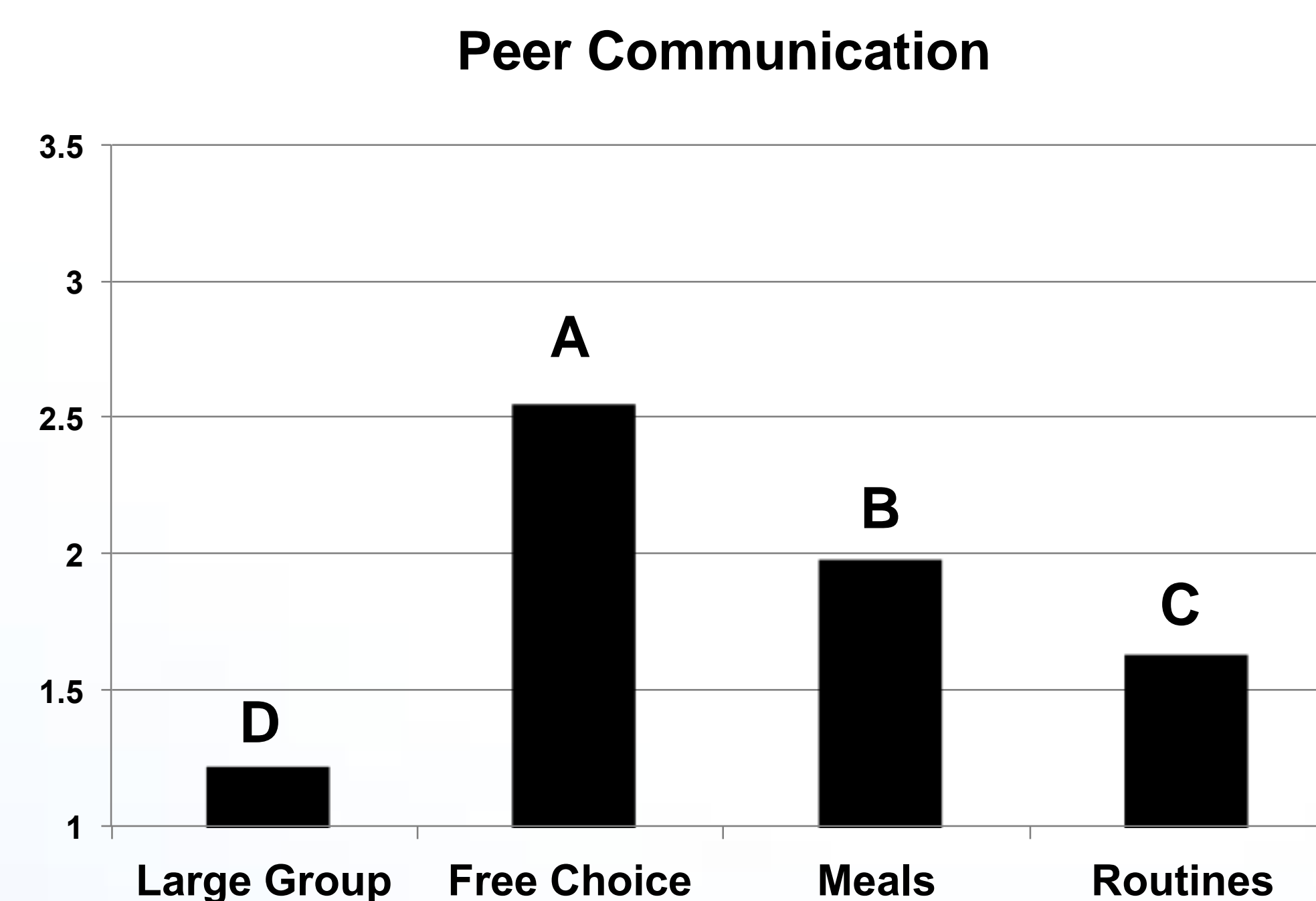
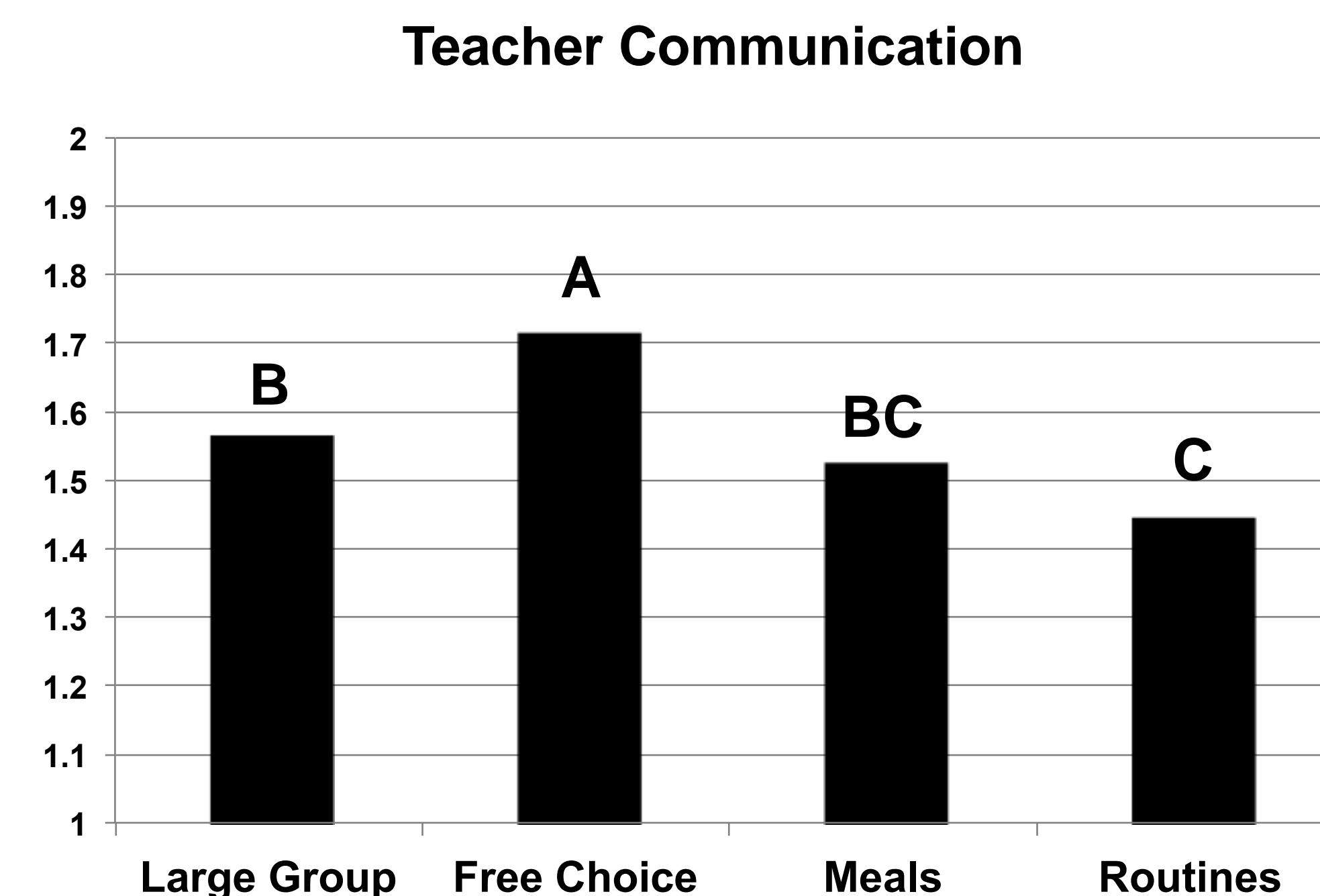
- Observations and assessments were conducted in the fall of the preschool year.
- The inCLASS observations were conducted alternating four cycles (10 minutes observing, 5 minutes coding) across the morning on randomly selected children in each classroom ( $M=10.60$ ,  $SD=1.40$  cycles per child).
  - Each child was observed at least twice in four primary classroom settings: large group, free choice, meals, and routines.

**Data Analysis:** Multilevel models (using Mplus 6.0) with cycles nested within children examined associations between settings and children's communication with teachers and peers.

Classroom Settings			
Large Group	Free Choice	Meals	Routines
A teacher-directed setting with six or more children. Structured activities could include book reading, singing songs, and discussions.	A child-directed setting in which children selected their own activities. This is often synonymous with centers.	A setting in which children were eating snacks, breakfast, or lunch.	A setting in which children were changing from one activity to another or performed routine classroom procedures such as washing hands and lining up.

## Results: Main Effects

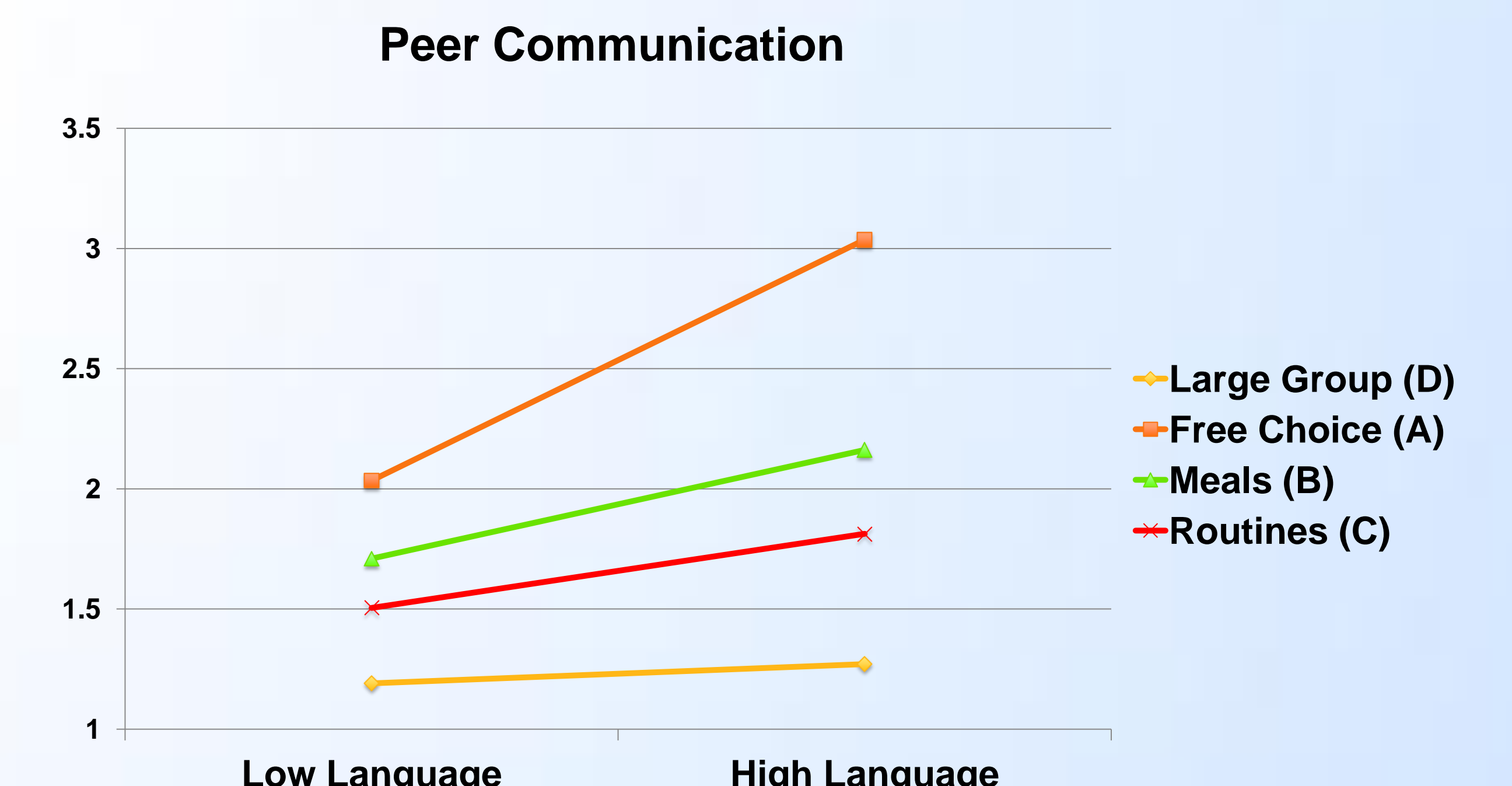
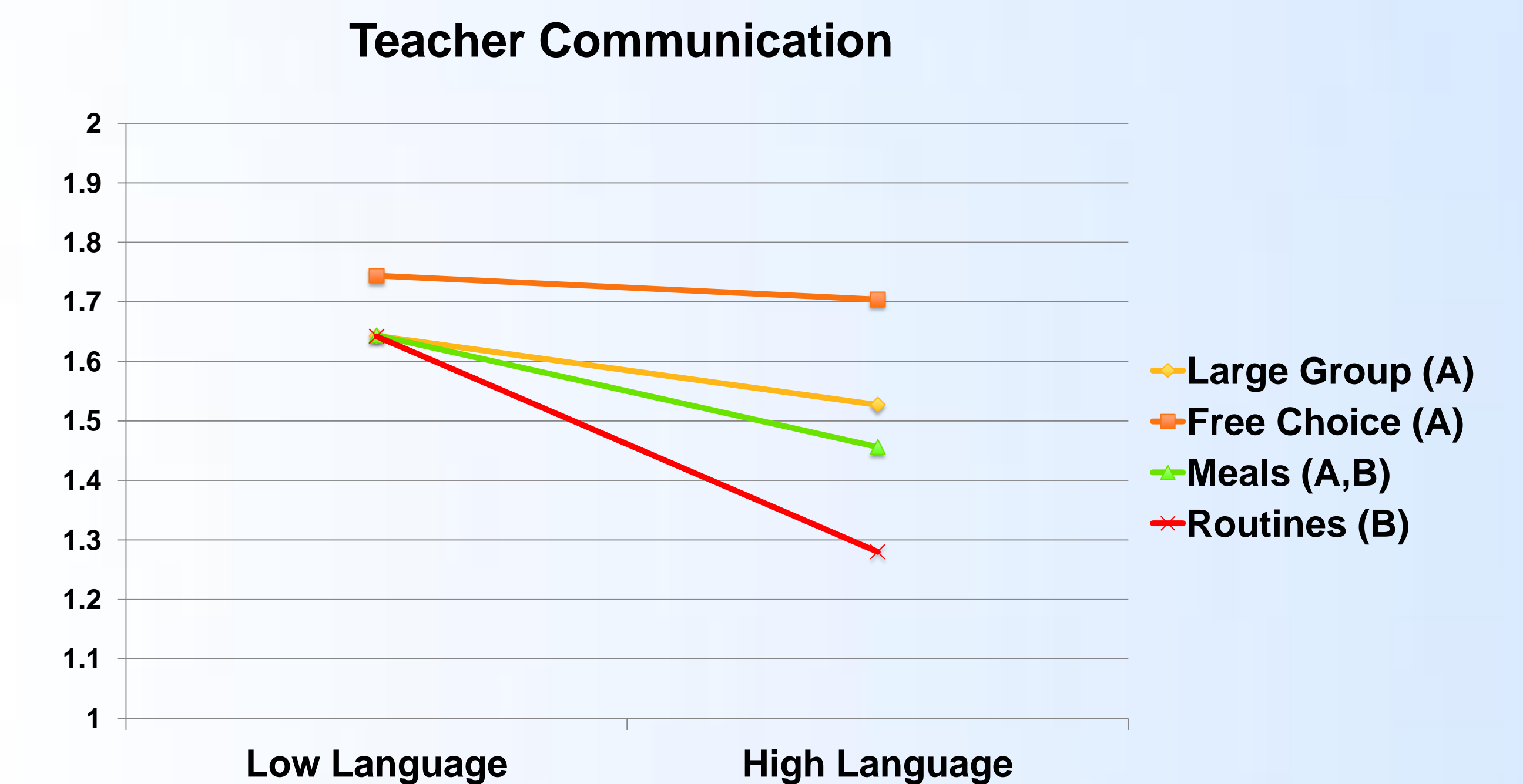
Significant differences in children's communication with teachers [ $\chi^2(3)=18.73, p<.001$ ] and peers [ $\chi^2(3)=254.26, p<.001$ ] were observed across classroom settings.



*Note: For each figure, homogenous subsets are indicated. Means that do not share any letters are significantly different from one another. Slopes that do not share any letters are significantly different from one another.*

## Results: Moderated Effects

Children's language ability magnified some settings differences for communication with teachers [ $\chi^2(3)=17.15, p<.001$ ] and peers [ $\chi^2(3)=55.68, p<.001$ ].



- The extent to which children initiated and maintained conversations with teachers and peers differed significantly across settings.
- Children engaged in conversations during free choice significantly more than during other settings.

- Children with lower language communicated even more with teachers during routines than during the large group and free choice settings.
- Children with higher language demonstrated even higher peer communication during all settings.

## Conclusions

- Findings extend our understanding of the experiences of preschool children's communication within the classroom and have implications for teachers in fostering child communication. For example, teachers can systematically foster peer-to-peer communication for children with lower language skills across settings.
- Future research can investigate reasons for increased teacher communication during routines for lower language children. It could be the case that children with lower language require more teacher communication during routines due to less regulated or disruptive behavior.