

PARTICIPATING IN CHILDREN LANGUAGE USE DURING PLAY

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ABSTRACT: *Participant observation is one of the techniques in qualitative research. There are different skills that a researcher needs in order to be able to participate successfully in a study. This paper will discuss the experience and insights of one study that involved participant observation as one of the main data collection methods. The researcher participated in the activities at a nursery as parent-teacher in order to try to understand the forms and the nature of the language used by native and non-native children at a nursery attended by children from local resident, USA and foreign countries. The results of the study clearly show that language is used by children during play for different purposes: for social interaction with peers and adults; for negotiating in play and conflict; for questioning; for controlling other children; to guide the play progression, or just for word play. The word play or making nonsense rhymes show evidence that the children were being creative with the internalized rules of the language. The paper discusses the experience and steps in preparing field-notes for the fieldwork. Delivery of findings will involve qualitative reporting with actual quotations of the language being used by the children.*

Introduction

Children are playful by nature. They enjoy playing, and will do so whenever they can latch onto the opportunity. In play, children have a chance to deal with the world as it might be and as they want it to be. Besides being fun, play serves a variety of important functions such as socializing with other children. Play changes with the children's development. During the preschool years, children are increasingly involved in social interactions with same-age friends. Most of these activities involve bodily contacts and body movements, facial expressions, and play with language. Language use during play offers many clues to children's developmental level. Different factors, like the environment, language differences and individual aptitude may bring children of the same age to different levels of language facility.

Many cognitive strategies have been documented through research when children use language during their playtime, including planning, negotiation, problem solving, and

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goal seeking. Researchers argue whether the occurrence of the developing abilities is an indication of a shared or of a consequential relationship. Although the answer to this question is still under study, it is clear that play has a vital role in young children's lives, and that its importance extends through the primary school years as well (Bergen, 1998).

Purposes of the Study and Researcher's Role

On the onset of the study, I was hoping to investigate children's use of language during play. I would like to know what language is used for and how it is being used. I anticipate observing the children social interaction both with their peers as well as with adults. I expect to see the children's use of language to express what they want, to share their fun, to complain about peers and conditions and to demand. I also anticipate that they would use language to express their thinking to reason, to describe and to ask questions. The role that the researcher assumed was that of a friend. I would try to protect the anonymity of the participants. I would expect to see their difficulties in the use of language to express ideas. I would just look for evidence of their use of language without in any way disrupting their communication or helping them to express their ideas. I anticipate seeing signs of speech patterns of the children's language in the form of words, phrases and sentences, which may be grammatically correct or incorrect. In order to find the evidence, I engaged myself as participant observer, where I became parent-teacher of a number of occasions to observe the children's interactions during play at a nursery. I also interviewed two teachers at the nursery to provide first hand account of their experiences on the phenomenon.

Review of Related Literature

Play is one of the first opportunities children have to "make external meaning." They begin to experiment with relationship between their real, physical world and their constructed fantasy world (Bruner, 1986). Children use language to negotiate and define the relationship between the external and the internal meaning (Vygotsky, 1962; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Garvey, 1990). Play is also used to describe other worlds, events and characters. In this case they were experimenting with what successful "decontextualized" language is, how to assume multiple perspectives and how to

resolve the conflict between what was meant, what was said and what was understood (Vygotsky, 1962).

Because pretending involves language use and takes place in social contexts, the findings of many recent studies of pretend play shed light on the social and linguistic competence vital for school success. In an extensive observational study of pretend play, Sawyer (1997) found that, rather than following a script, much of preschool children's pretend play involved improvisational exchanges. He also found that these strategies were more successful when they were implicitly included in the play scenario rather than when children stopped the play to make explicit suggestions. He provides rich examples of the skill children exhibit in using improvisation in pretend play.

Children usually engage in collaborative play with peers and siblings. Garvey (1990) found that children engaged in focused interaction or mutual engagement during play an average of 88 percent of the session and Preece (1992) found that children's spontaneous stories involved collaborative telling approximately 70 percent of the time.

During play, language is used by children for various social purposes such as communicating with peers and adults, negotiating in play and conflict and questioning. In other situation, children use language to control other children, to guide the progression of their play, or just to play with words. In some instances, as children build up the ability to represent experience symbolically, pretend play becomes routine. In this type of play, children perform action plans, role-play and convert objects into different things as they convey their ideas and feelings about their social world (Garvey, 1984). Jakobson (1960) stated that in the course of play, children may make *puns* - jokes that exploit the different meanings of a word, or the fact that there are words of the same sound and different meanings. They may also play with words that are related to each other, such as: *homonyms* (words of the same sound, but of different meanings); *synonyms* (words of the same meaning); and *antonyms* (words of opposite meaning). In forming play phrases, they may use *alliteration* (successive repetition of the initial sound of words); *assonance* (resemblance of sounds, usually vowels, between two syllables in nearby words); and *anaphora* (repetition of an initial word or phrase in successive sentences). All of these phenomena involve *repetition with variation*, a basic and universal feature of verbal play.

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The playing of word games and the making up of nonsense rhymes provides clear evidence that the child has internalized at least some of the language's rules and is beginning to exploit the possibilities of the language, and to create alternatives to those possibilities. A child may at times prefer to work on, or play with, certain levels of the language and assign nonsense, or purposely incorrect, forms to the other levels. *Gibberish* can involve imitating the inflections, melodies, and rhythms of the sounds of the language without having to worry about the meaning of the sounds. In *jabberwocky*, both phonological and syntactic rules are maintained, but the words are largely nonsensical. In *tangle-talk*, the syntax is jumbled, but the words are correctly spoken.

The study addressed the following research questions: What is language used for in the children's play? How do children use language to express thinking? What are other uses of language for the children?

Methods of Data Collection

Being there where the activities were carried out provided first hand information to the researcher. The instruments used were participant observation and interview. By becoming a participant and being a part of the social setting, the researcher will be provided with how the events unfold and what the reactions of the other individuals were in response. The researcher will also "see patterns of behavior, experience the unexpected, as well as the expected, and develop a quality of trust with your others that motivates them to tell you what otherwise they might not." (Glesne & Peskin, 1992). The role of a participant observer involves being present in the everyday situation and events. By being where the actions are, the understanding of the researcher will increase because he or she is absorbed into the surroundings, the player and the questions about the phenomenon that is being studied.

Participants of the study

Fifteen preschool children attending one nursery in a city in the United States were observed in the study. The nursery catered for children of the university staff and graduate students of the university. The nursery is located next to a 10-storey apartment building where graduate families stayed during their study. The nursery opened at

eight o'clock everyday except Saturday and Sunday. On different occasions, parents were required to help in the activities in becoming parent-teacher. Parents would help for half or whole day. The children came from many countries like Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Columbia as well as from the United States. Apart from participant observation, two teachers were interviewed to gauge their understanding of the phenomenon of language use among children.

Results and Discussion

Children are playful by nature. They enjoy playing, and will do so whenever they can latch onto the opportunity to play. During play, children have a chance to deal with the world as it might be and as they want it to be. Besides being fun, play serves a variety of important functions such as socializing with other children. Play changes with children's development. During the preschool years, children are increasingly involved in social interactions with same-age friends. Some of this involves bodily movements, facial expressions, and play with language. Language use during play offers many clues to children's developmental level. Different factors, like the environment, language differences, and individual aptitude may bring children of the same age to different levels of language facility.

During play, language is used by children for various social purposes such as communicating with peers and adults, negotiating in play and conflict, and questioning. In other situation, children use language to control other children, to guide the progression of their play, or just to play with words.

Description of the classroom

The class is divided into sections. The eating and drawing area where most activities involving cleaning up with water are done in the area when one enters the class. Two sinks, two faucets and garbage bin are located next to it. Low tables and chairs of children's height for eating and drawing filled most of the area. On the periphery near the windows, children drawings and plants hanged from the ceiling all over the class. Soft breeze moves and turns them. Window blinds of different colors hang on every window which stops the glare of the daylight. On the far right, next to the eating area,

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a workshop table, several woodworking toys tools and woodblocks are found. Several green plants were placed by the window on the shelves. Posters of different pictures cover most of the wall sections. Walking further ahead on the left, one could see a section which is bordered by furniture. Near the entrance, an oven-stove model made of wood welcomes everyone who entered the class. Used kettles and teapots with spoons and spatula that look like from the bygone era decorated the stove. On the left side, another section secluded by furniture consists of trays and boxes of board games, puzzles and books. A rather thick green carpet, two sofa and a low table occupy the area. Moving on to the end of the class, the biggest open carpeted area can be seen. This is where the usual group circle activity is conducted. On the left of the open area, several musical instruments such as old piano and drums from the African continent can be seen.

The need for peer associations

The need to relate to others is basic to all human including children. The urge to socialize is apparent in all the children in the class. All of them appear to try to develop some kind of friendship with at least one partner. Friendship usually provides them with a familiar partner, someone who is willing to spend time with them and join in collaborative activities. Language is one of the important aspects in forming and maintaining friendship. The example below shows how a child was trying to develop a friendship:

A Chinese kid, Weisa, wearing an apron, was playing "cook in the kitchen." She boiled water in a kettle. Becky walked into the kitchen and watched what Weisa was doing for a short while. And then she walked closer to Weisa, standing next to her. Weisa continued with her activity, ignoring Becky's presence. Suddenly Becky said to Weisa, "Are you my friend? Are you my friend?" Weisa just kept quiet. Becky continued to ask the question in a moderately louder and clear voice. She turned to me and said, "I want Weisa to be my friend, but she won't listen to me." She once again turned to Weisa and asks, Weisa, are you my friend?" Without looking at her, Weisa replied, "No." Becky puckered her lips.

In the example given, language was used as a tool to forming a relationship. Child A was not successful in forming a relationship with child B, although child A was so

persistence in her quest. Child B was not responsive probably she did not want another person to disturb her with her activity, or she probably had a bad experience with child A. Anyway, there was a short interaction using language as a form. Sometimes, friendship forming was not successful in children especially when one child does not speak or understand the language of the other child.

The two teachers whom I interviewed, Jitka and Katite recognize the lack of language skills in some of the children especially among the non English speaking children. It is a big problem in children relationship with one another, Jitka relates how language is important to the children in forming and maintaining friendship:

"Here what you see, the importance is how to interact, that is if they don't know the language, they don't make friends because they can't communicate ...their ideas...if they can't use the language, you can see that the child is pretty much isolated that it can't communicate."

To Jitka, the problem of initiating and maintaining communication, especially for the non-native English speaking children with the other children is based more on her personal experiences. For her, the purpose of language is a mere means towards getting away from being isolated in a group play. Being a foreigner herself, she asserts that she "...came here not knowing very well English, so I feel with these kids, hoe it is when you can't express what you need to tell and able to put ideas into use..." Katite also has the same conceptions of the importance of language in forming friendship in children. She relates:

"I think, the language barrier can add to a child isolation. It definitely makes it harder for the other children to approach them."

She also provides example of the language problem faced by non-English speaking children in relation to their peers. According to her, it is difficult for the children "...to work with each other.. if the English speaking child or two children have different language are trying to play together. It makes it really hard, because one kid is saying " I was playing with that first." And the other one has no idea of what they are saying that they are trying to take the toys out of their hands."

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Here language is seen as something needed to form relationship. Without it, friendship would not be successful. Even if the children have difficulty to socialize because of their lack of language or because of other reasons, they would try their best to be included in group game their friends are playing. For example, in the case of Mitchel and Ian, they tried to get in the "bowling" game of George and Sam by employing two different strategies. Mitchel used kinesics and Ian used verbal means. The cheering and shouting of Sam and George have attracted two other kids, Mitchel and Ian. Mitchel moved slowly and quietly to the place where the "bowling" was taking place, but did not make a word. He just watched the game without saying a word. After the few rounds of "bowling", Mitchel moved in to help the boys to arrange the pins. He was trying to get into the group by offering his help of doing the "work". In doing so, he was hoping that his gestures of good will would get the attention of the boys into letting him join the game. On the other hand, Ian had a different strategy. He tried to get the attention of the boys into accepting him into the game by using language. Along the course of the game, Sam was heard saying "Stick your peanut out." Upon hearing that, Ian felt it would be the right time to cut in, by making a joke about what Sam was saying, "What? Stick your peanut out?", and kept laughing at the remarks.

For the ESL children who had the limitations in the language and who would still try to join in the game would try to compensate their lack of verbal skills with other forms of mediums. Katite, one of the teachers states: "If they don't speak the language, they still initiate contact, eye contact, body contact touching another child to try to play with them."

Conflict and Negotiation

Children's play, pretend or real is by no means free of conflict and disagreement. The children might be involved in conflicts over popular toys or over differences in opinions of the way they want the play to continue. Denials and refusals do occur during play. The conflict and the way it is resolved usually involve the use of language through the process of negotiation. The term negotiation is valued highly by the main teacher, Katite who suggested it as one of the main uses of language by the children. One of the situations observed during play involving conflict and negotiation is during the fire-drill period. The children were outside the building in the playground.

Three of the kids George, Sam and Ian went to a barn where outdoor toys were stored. Two of the kids, George and Sam were trying to get a spade. Sam grabbed at one end of the spade while saying, I want this, I got it first." In reply, George grabbed the other end and said, "No, I got it first." The kept pulling the spade, Then George suddenly released his grip and said, "O.K you can have it." He also suggested that they share the spade, "Why don't you use it first, and then I use it. " Sam agreed.

In another case, several children were involved in a conflict.

Jesse walked to Levente and Ian after cleanup time and angrily poked his finger at Levente while saying "I was sitting here." Levente and Ian ignored him and looked the other way and talking to the other children. Jesse, insisted, "I was sitting here, I was sitting here, I was sitting here." Levente turned to him and told him , "He took your seat, not me" pointing at Ian. Ian kept his silence, not moving either. Jesse turned away saying, "I'm not going to give you this" taking something from his pocket.

In another case involving the use of language in conflict, Sam was building a barn using woodblocks. Two other kids were helping him. Jesse, however, pulled a truck into Sam's barn. Sam yelled at him to move the truck out of his barn. Another kid, Levente took something out of Sam's barn. Sam also yelled at him, saying "That's mine."

Another conflict involving Sam and Mitchel happened at a sand table. Three children were burying several "whales" in the sand. Each of them had their own whale to bury. Sam's whale was already buried in the sand. He gathered more and more sand on the whale. Mitchel saw that most of the sand had been taken by Sam, and he tried to get some from Sam's "hill." Sam screamed at him, saying "No". Mitchel replied hesitantly and in a yelling voice, said "Why don't you just say, Please don't take it."

Playing with Language

Children like to play with language. Almost every part of language is a potential resource for play. It is observed that the children play with language in two different ways: i) in repetitive rhythmic words or phrases, and ii) nonsense wordplay. The first type of word play is repetitive wordplay. It sometime involves rhythmic vocalizations. In this kind of play, the meaning is not important, and it is only the sound and rhythm that are enjoyed. This is confirmed by Jitka that the children in the class like rhymes. She asserts that the teachers do encourage the use of rhymes during circle time. She explains how the teacher use rhyme in guided activity in the class.

Katite (the other teacher) has books like that and it rhymes most of the time. We try to show with hands and motions and thing that they like doing that, and very often they would like to make it longer or change something... those rhymes are set (in) such as way that you put the child's names in and the child will choose.

There are several examples observed of the children use of rhymes during play. For example, during the fire-alarm drill, many children were "fire, fire, fire, let's go, let's go." The children were actually having fun saying the word than feeling anxious about the situation.

In another situation, Mitchel upon hearing a sentence made by a parent's teacher started repeating what was said,

"We're playing Mitchel ball. We're playing Mitchel ball."

Again Mitchell one morning was pretending to make a pancake. After he had finished making them, he started going around the class from one kid to another with a spatula offering his "pancake". Would you like some pancake? Would you like some pancake?" He kept repeating the sentence until he has "offered" everyone a pancake.

In another example of children use of language in play, Mitchel and Sam were putting woodblocks into trailers.

Mitchel has been repeating "grass, grass, grass" with a little laugh. Sam, alternately said, instead of "grass", "gas, gas, gas." After that he continued and said that he was putting poison gas in the trailer. Every woodblock represents a poison gas. Mitchel asked him why he would do that, in which Sam replied "We're the bad guys, remember." After he had filled the trailer full with "poison gas" he pulled it around to the other children offering his "gas", and kept repeating the "gas" and putting down one "poison gas" block for each child.

The second type of wordplay used by the children observed is nonsense wordplay. The children were seen to engage in nonsense wordplay at many different times. The children came up with meaningless words for the enjoyment of it, which is to be a source of laughter for making such a nonsense word. It is possible that they are still experimenting with the language and in doing so they stumble and come up with all sorts of nonsense words. Whatever it is, they seem to be enjoying the nonsense words that they produced.

Of all the children, Sam seems to produce the most different nonsense words. During the "bowling game" , Sam produced nonsense phrase which ahs attracted other child attention. Sam said to George "Stick your peanut out." Ian heard it and found it to be funny. He repeated the phrase several times to other children and ended up laughing at the remark. In another situation, Sam, George and Ian were playing with Lego in water table when Sam inadvertently said, "You are "teap". George, upon hearing the word, asked immediately, "Is that a word?" and repeat the word around. In other situation, Sam was heard to use insulting words to other children such as "dumb-head, and "silly".

Another kind of nonsense language play observed was when the children seem to be making all sort of sentences which were not related to one another. Again this was observed when the children were playing together with Lego in a water table. Although they seem to be engaged in conversations, their conversations were very fragmented and not related. Their languages were more focused on their own actions.

The kids were connecting the LEGO pieces in the water to form something. Sam asked for more LEGO pieces from the other kids. There was no reply from the other children. Then, sensing he was not getting the response from others, George said, "Because they have no way to put the ugly...", but before

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he could finish his sentence, Sam made a splash in which George sneered at him. And later Sam said, "I am not letting you go to my house." Ian replied, "I don't want to go to your house." Then, they were quiet again. Ian broke the silence, "Boys, can change into different feet, look." Subsequently, Sam said, "You are teap." George responded, "Is that a word?"

Language Use for Questioning and Asking for Help

Parents often realize that their children usually ask a lot of questions during their preschool age. They ask questions for different reasons. The two teachers Jitka and Katite acknowledged that the children continue to questions in different activities in class. Jitka notices that the pattern of children's questioning is more contextually based. She relates that the children ask questions which are related to the activities they were doing, asuch as during the circle time. However, Katite observes that children ask more general type questions such as "Why do certain thing happen?" She also emphasized that the children ask a lot more questions related to "why" and "do I have to" questions.

In the course of their play, children focus more on their own actions and on what it takes to carry on with their play. And they use questions to get at what they want. In one situation in the class, George needed a ball to play bowling with, and he went straight to the teacher, Katite asking, "Could you get me a ball?" Sam who got tired of waiting for the ball asked George to hurry up and said, "Are you finding the ball?" After a few minutes "bowling", Sam asked George to arrange the pins, "Can you fix it back?" At the nursery, the children also asked questions to get help. The teacher asserted that the children were actually encouraged to use language to ask for help if they need something. One example of children asking for help is Anna, when after trying to put on her coat but failed, asked me, a stranger to the class "Could you help me?" In another situation, Becky asked me if I could tie he shoes, and I obliged.

Dramatic or Symbolic Play

Children usually engage in dramatic, symbolic or pretend play. This pretend play can be carried out alone or with other children. In both cases, the play involves some

degree of language use: a child can be pretending to feed a teddy bear or talk on the telephone with a partner; they can assume certain social roles such as a doctor and a patient. During dramatic play, the children have to have the ability to communicate with a social partner. Dramatic play is both fun and educational. Katite emphasized that the children do use language in dramatic play where children "have to use language. It's really a language environment that are crating stories, (like) mom and dad in the kitchen making dinner, or making bed, or (having) picnic, and (they) use the language to make everybody do the same thing." The use of dramatic play or pretend play among the children was confirmed by Jitka, "...they need to use the language because they have to divides who is what,...(whether) pretended or not pretended, it is just very important to have the exchange."

Scenes of pretend play that were observed among the children in the nursery are presented. In a game of "bowling" played by two children, George and Sam, some lively exchanges took place between the two.

George hit all the pin down and they both shouted, "Yeah, I got them." Then, George said to Sam, "Now, it's your turn." When Sam was ready to throw, George noticed Sam was not in the right position, and instructed him, "You know Sam, you have to go here, ok. Good job, Sam." When it was George turn, and in order to imitate the real bowling game, George said, "I'm gonna stand up, ok."

In another pretend play involving two other children, Nadia and Anna were building a house using rectangular woodblocks. "This is my house." Nadia said gleefully. "This is the garage." Anna replied. "So where can I sleep then?" asked Nadia. "In my room. Here." replied Anna.

Conclusion

In conclusion, children use language for many different reasons in order to satisfy their needs and wants to communicate their ideas as well as to voice their objections or criticisms. They tend to pick up the language they hear easily by themselves and use it rather creatively to say what they want to say. Along the way, they make mistakes and produce nonsense words, which they use as a tool for enjoyment and entertainment.

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During much of the children's play, language is an accompaniment to actions, a means of initiating and maintaining friendship, a vehicle for engaging in conflict and conflict resolution, and a medium in dramatic or pretend play. When children fail to use language in their daily interaction with their peers and adult, they would normally be isolated from the group and be left out of the play. They do not have the inhibition to make mistake and to laugh at their own mistakes. Rather they use the mistakes they make to ensure they take hold of the language they are learning. There is a lesson for adults here in language learning. Adult should try to learn and imitate the way children use mistakes in becoming proficient in the language.

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