Play in Language Development
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Among the many changes that we see taking place in preschool children is the rapid growth of language—most apparently, the development of vocabulary, sentence complexity, conversational skill, storytelling, register and style variation, and persuasiveness. If several languages are heard, children become competent bilinguals in preschool. Play can provide an ideal setting for the study of these developments in young children’s language. In this chapter we shall address the question of the effects of play on language.

Defining the Problem
The search for the effects of preschool play on language development has two aspects. One is the difference between peers and adults as partners, or facilitators of development. Would children learn language faster by interacting primarily with adult teachers and parents or by playing with other children? The other issue is the effects of play on language, in contrast to other activities, such as organized instruction.

Potential language “teachers” may be adults, peers, or older children. In the case of an older child, the precise age gap between the children is relevant, since a child one year older than the learner is a very different model and play partner than one three years older. The type of activity in which talk takes place changes with age; adults do not engage in the same activities (e.g., sound play) as children. So if partners make a difference, we have to find out if it is their age or their activity that is crucial. Furthermore, the stage of language development matters. The learning needs of the child are different at different stages: In the first few years the need is to get into language; later, it is to expand and elaborate skills.

At the beginning of language, before age 3, the most extreme cases of delay or impairment are found in children in institutions and in twins. Institutionalized children may suffer from lack of organized language stimulation. We know that twins understand each other too well, have less need of explicitness, and develop their own way of communicating. Their knowledge of adult language can be less because their knowledge of their twin language is relatively greater (Bates, 1975).

Conditions of Learning
Let us step back a moment and ask what is necessary for the initial acquisition of a language. This question has been most clearly addressed in second-language learning, where conditions vary even more widely than in first-language acquisition. The notion has developed that for successful language acquisition the following conditions must be met:

1. Exchanges should be salient and motivating enough for the learner to pay attention.
2. Language “input” should be comprehensible but only slightly in advance of the learner’s own knowledge in either form or ideas. These conditions ensure that the learner hears language forms (words, phrases, sentences), while at the same time understanding the context and inferring the meanings of the forms or the structures underlying them. In this way, the learner can match new forms to these meanings. If either the language heard or the ideas expressed are too difficult, the learner might just tune out, might not understand the meaning or the syntax, or might not be able to retain enough to make use of the models for changing his or her own system.
3. The learner should be able to engage in one-on-one exchanges. These transactions allow the learner to practice producing new forms in natural contexts, while permitting the partner to see what is understood by the learner, so that the “input” is delicately tuned to the learner’s knowledge and interests.

Learning from Siblings
Dunn and Kendrick (1982) have noted that 1-year-old children spend as much time playing with siblings as with their mothers in En-
lish and Canadian families. Slightly older siblings or verbally skilled friends might be ideal partners for learning, because they can play at the level of the learner, gain attention, and provide meanings and forms closely tuned to the child’s level. A study by Patricia Zukow (1989) demonstrated the effectiveness of sibling partners for learners. In Mexican families siblings often take on care-giving roles. Zukow did a fine-grained analysis of interaction between Mexican mothers and their infants, and between siblings and infants. The siblings had a greater effect on the level of performance of the infants than did the mothers. When the babies did not understand, the mothers’ remedy was to explain verbally, but the siblings were more likely to demonstrate, gesture, and show, resulting in better comprehension. The siblings pointed out the younger children’s mistakes and showed the right way to do what was discussed. In this way, they provided the necessary form-meaning match.

Andersen and Kekelis’ (1986) study of blind children with older siblings found more language facilitation from the older siblings than from the mothers. Parents in their study had a stereotyped way of talking with the blind infants. They spent a lot of time being teachers and testers, directing, labeling and requesting labels, rather than describing events around the children and engaging the children as participants in what was happening. The siblings, while they used many strategies like the parents’, increasingly diverged in interactional style. They were less accommodating to the children, they “modeled formulae and general linguistic strategies for topic initiation and maintenance, for group inclusion and for conflict resolution” (Andersen & Kekelis, 1986, p. 147). Most important, they wanted to set up joint play and struggled to get the blind child to understand how to play, and so they set more challenges, made more communicative demands, joked more, and prepared the blind children for normal interaction.

Judy Dunn (1989) found that when relations were warm and affectionate, the older child of a sibling pair engaged the younger child as a pretend-play partner. The younger child in such a pair learns to negotiate rules and roles and to offer suggestions to the older child. Pretend-play is not part of many busy mothers’ repertoires, but it is a rich source of important language practice in different styles and vocabulary. For “older” learners, those of 4 and up, it provides a chance to practice a range of speech acts, styles, and registers. Siblings in these skilled age cohorts incorporate the younger learners in their play and initiate the learners into this skill.

In sum, these studies imply that siblings can in fact be a valuable source of experience in language, even for beginners, but definitely so for children of 4 or more. We know relatively little about the differences that surely affect these family processes. Older sisters, for instance, may be more likely to involve younger siblings in role play than are older brothers, since girls role play more than boys. There are wide cultural and subcultural differences in the extent to which adults engage young children in talk at all (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986); in some groups if there is to be practice or child participation in talk outside of school, the dyad must be with child care-givers, play-mates, or siblings.

Age of Learner

The facilitating role of peer interaction in the preschool is likely to change its properties because the aspects of language undergoing growth change with age. At ages 1 and 2, children are busy developing the rhythms and sounds of language. Their peer play gives them practice in sound play, which helps tune their prosodic and phonetic articulation to what they hear. Adults are often bored and even irritated by sound play. At age 2, children are developing rudimentary syntax from conversational exchanges during play. Between ages 3 and 4, children develop conversational and strategic skills in negotiating object play with each other, so that by age 4 their talk is surprisingly mature from the standpoint of the rudiments of conversation; at ages 4 and 5 we see a much wider range in styles and ability to adopt other roles (such as daddy, teacher, or doctor), which normally children could not practice with adults.

While we know that new vocabulary often comes from travel and from experience gained outside the peer group, at least by age 3½ the peer group can bring considerable stimulation to language learning. By then children have had more diverse experiences, verbalize experience more, and take more initiative in play. For these reasons, children can become effective sources of stimulation and instruction to age peers, like the older sibling with the infant. The fact that it is peers and not just adults who are the sources of children’s language knowledge is readily evident in the facts of language change, in the spread of new vocabulary, and in detailed phonological features; the sound systems used by children increasingly reflect their friendship networks throughout the school years (Eckert, 1989).

Peer Influence on Language Learning

It is folk wisdom that children learn second languages more readily from other children than they do in formal instruction. One can see how such
"instruction" takes place by observing the natural interaction between learners and peer models. The learning of a second language is not basically different from first-language learning in this type of natural context, so it is a good source of clues about peer input.

The data below come from home tape recordings of peer play of English-speaking children ages 4 to 11 who had been placed in French medium schools near Geneva, Switzerland (Ervin-Tripp, 1986). A typical recording situation consisted of an English or American child, a French-speaking friend, a sibling of either or both, and sometimes a parent in the vicinity. I made repeated recordings; the activities of the children included jump-ropes, card games, table soccer, dress-up, and role play. In addition to this material, I used tapes of kindergarten and first-grade Chinese and Hispanic immigrant data collected by Lily Wong-Fillmore.

In these studies it was possible to identify instances in which children added to the vocabulary, syntax, and conversational formulas that they knew. The interactional processes that brought such changes about are described below.

**Imitation**

When the activities were repetitive, or there were social routines where imitation was possible, the beginning efforts often relied on copying a partner. I found such imitation in the soccer game, where the same situation occurred over and over, and in play phone conversations where children were obligated to greet, make opening moves, and terminate. The easiest way to make these moves was to imitate the formulas used by others. It is important to note, however, that this is a tactic that can be used successfully only when the expected formulas are identical, not complementary: "Hi . . . Hi . . . Bye . . . Bye." In many languages, a child may not be able to greet an adult in the same way the adult greets the child, so that learning to use even simple routines cannot be based entirely on imitation of the addressee. However, in a group context like a nursery school, peers in parallel situations are always available to imitate.

**Talk About Context**

Young children’s play with objects can include talk about the objects that the participants are playing with. If you are playing with an infant who has a ball, and you say, “Throw the ball,” the child may throw it because that is what one usually does with balls. The conjunction of the typical activity with an object, and talking about that activity, helps the child match the words and meaning. There must be that kind of redundancy or predictability for language to be learned. Child play embeds talk into actions with the objects that are being referred to, ensuring that language is usually understandable because it is redundant with the context. Immigrant workers doing manual labor that is demonstrated while it is described have the same advantage.

For contrast, think of tuning into a television program in Chinese or Japanese if you do not know these languages. It would be very hard to learn meanings because you do not know what the people are talking about at each moment.

Children engaged in joint action, imitating each other’s actions and talk about the actions, can learn language because the meaning of the talk is obvious. This learning was obvious in the data we gathered on soccer games.

**Contextual Inference**

In nursery school, children learn the structure of many games and regular play forms, just as at home they have learned household routines and can guess the meaning of new words and phrases from their situation within a routine, as in the following second-language example. The children were playing a game with repetitive turn cycles. At the end of each cycle the alternate child got to start the next cycle. The French-speaking child said to the American: “Tu commences,” as she set out the materials for the next round. The American child looked puzzled at the new word, but began the round. At the end, she did the same, saying “Tu commences” to her partner. We do not know what she thought this meant; perhaps she thought it meant “It’s your turn” rather than “You begin.” But it is not unusual for the first uses of forms to have relatively situated, local meanings. Unlike talk about context, the meaning is inferred; the beginning of a round is not a visible referent but a concept or a position in a structure. As children learn increasingly complicated pragmatic, situated patterns, they are ready to acquire language about these patterns.

**Predictable Talk Schemata**

Certain speech activities have internal structure. We could say they have predictable routines. A good example of predictable routines is the framework of phone conversations. One of my children showed attention to this framework when, at about 18 months, she picked up the phone
and said "Hi. Fine. Bye." She had the bare bones of the responses in the phone schema: Greeting-introductory exchange—farewell.

A fuller example appears in two 5-year-old immigrant children. By age 5, phone conversations have five steps: greeting, introductory exchange, core, pre-parting, and farewell.

A: Hello, what ya doin?  
B: Got two people here.  
A: Fine. My mommy told me to go to school.  
B: Me too.  
A: Okay, bye. I'll call you back tomorrow.  
B: Okay, bye.

In this conversation, A, the more competent speaker, produced both a greeting and introductory move on the first turn, as well as initiating the core topic about school, the farewell, and pre-parting move. In each of As turns, she makes two moves. In each, if she replies, she also initiates. Bs moves are all one-move replies, reflecting prior experience with this genre and skill that is still rudimentary but beyond mere imitation.

Correction

Children correct each other if they make errors in the predictable routines or in game talk. An indirect form of correction, common among children, who are often less didactic than adults, is to demonstrate the correct mode, without saying the other is wrong. In a play telephone conversation between an English- and a Spanish-speaking kindergartner, the Spanish speaker said, "Hello, come to my house, please." She was corrected and told, "No, you've got to say 'what are you doing?'" In this case, the learner had not correctly performed the routine for children's introductory moves following the greeting, and was explicitly taught. Children correct role play performance, as, for example, a child who told another, "You can't say 'honey'; I'm the mommy." In role play, address forms are crucial to correct enactment and would be noticeable. The location for such explicit language correction is most often in verbal routines like phone conversations, in role play, or in games requiring a specific wording of moves.

Permutation and Combination

Recombining is an important feature of learning from dialogue. Each child makes use of the material provided by the partner. We see this vividly in the sound play of 2- and 3-year-olds, who can get a lot of mileage from making rhythmic and phonological changes on each other's sound material. Unfortunately, this nonsense play often disgusts serious adults, who can rapidly tire of hearing it.

A more advanced form appears in Lily Wong-Fillmore's (1976) study of how immigrant kindergaten children took a few elementary conversational components and permuted and recombined them, as in the following example (months of exposure to English are indicated in parentheses):

(2 months) How-you-do-dese?  
(5 months) How-do-you-do-dese + noun or prepositional phrase  
How-do-you + verb phrase  
How-did-you + verb phrase

(7 months) How-do + clause  
How-does + clause  
How-did + clause

We can see such pushing of resources in children's argument structure. Lein and Brennise (1978), in elicited arguments, showed vividly how alterations of rhythm, emphasis, and values can keep turn cycles going in arguments. There is a good example in an argument in English between Chinese-speaking 5-year-olds who were newcomers to English:

B: My father, bigger your father.  
C: You father big big big big.  
B: My father, uh, bigger you father.  
C: My father, my father like that! [stands, reaches high]  
B: My father stronger your father.  
C: My father like that! [arms wide]  
B: Don't talk for—I hit you!

Though American teachers often stop arguments on such occasions, children can be highly motivated in arguments to push their language resources to elaboration. Sprott (1990) has shown that justifications occur in children's arguments as early as age 3.

Language Features Learned

Sounds

The youngest children learn about the sounds of language by practicing rhythms and rhymes in sound play, a typical peer activity at age
2. Later, they practice style shifts in pronunciation and in the prosodic features of language during doll play and role play. Children talk in high pitch when they are playing babies and in low pitch when they are playing daddy or doctor. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan (1979) has reported observing Afro-American children who spoke in high pitch when playing whites and in low pitch when playing blacks. These vocal differences appear very early. Children's differentiation of speech to dolls or babies appears by age 2 (Sachs, 1984; Sachs & Devin, 1976).

**Vocabulary**

In role play, it is especially obvious that children learn vocabulary and set phrases. It has been known for a long time that this aspect of language is the most sensitive to variations in experience, to travel, and to schooling.

A 4-year-old playing nurse said to another, “I'm going to give you a temperature.” The nurse put something in the patient's mouth, so she appeared to give rather than to take; perhaps the child assumed the name for a thermometer was “temperature.” The child's first use of the term is an approximation, which moves the child into a greater readiness to notice the word at the next visit to the doctor's office. We could say that play has prepared the child for future learning and lowered the future threshold for vocabulary heard in play.

If one child brings a word from outside and uses it in play, it is now available to the others who share the play. Peers thus become a resource for new learning, because their experiences are diverse enough to provide them with material to enrich each other. We know that this transfer of vocabulary takes place, because we see it in children's role play. Children playing doctor learn medical terms from each other just as adult patients have been observed picking up medical terms from doctors.

**Social Markers**

Part of the need for specialized vocabulary comes from the desire to play a role correctly, to sound like a doctor or nurse. Children are very sensitive to these role or register features. They notice that teachers mark boundaries with “OK” as in “OK, it's time for our math lesson.” Andersen (1986) has observed that children use “well” as a discourse marker (Schiffrin, 1986) in role playing adults rather than children. She has numerous examples of the fine-tuning of speech to role, such as the doctor's “Let's take a look at your throat now,” rather than “I'll take a look at your throat now,” and the following child–father exchange (Andersen, 1990):

[**high voice**] Father, father, come right here now. Baby threw up.
[**deep voice**] Oh, damn it.

The pitch, intonation, vocabulary, syntactic, and discourse marker variations come from the need to represent social categories in the child's version of the social system. It is only in role play that many of these representations are practiced.

The role play we have observed often displays the stereotypes in the oral culture shared by children, rather than directly mimics the realistic life of the family. Children maintain traditions about how to play certain roles; for example, a child whose mother is a doctor still called role-played females “nurse” and males “doctor.” Daddies go to work, mummies don't, despite the child's own life. Andersen found that even in a university nursery school, fathers ordered mothers about, mothers were more polite to fathers than fathers were to mothers, and children were more polite to fathers than to mothers. Children learn social markers from each other, like the “OK” or “now” of teachers, and the bossiness and imperatives of daddies, which may occur in dramatic play regardless of the home model presented by the children's fathers.

We know that children learn both vocabulary and social markers in their play with other children. We are beginning to discover, in our studies of children's syntax, that the learning of syntax also occurs in social contexts of use.

**Syntactic Elaboration**

In a recent project, Aura Bocaz and I (Ervin-Tripp & Bocaz, 1989) examined the development of temporal conjunctions like “when,” “while,” “before,” and “after.” These conjunctions are syntactically important because they reveal the development of complex sentences. We found the earliest examples of temporal clauses did not appear in narratives, as was assumed, but in children's joint planning for play and in their directives to each other.

Examples of children’s “planning” speech that is oriented toward the future are

— I'm going to make a garbage can when I'm all through with the train.
— When I grow up and you grow up, we're going to be the bosses.

Lots of children's talk during play involves directions about what to do, disputes over toys, claims to space and goods, and requests for permission to use goods. In these exchanges, we found many conjunctions, as in these examples:
shifted frequently, using choice of auxiliary to reveal their perspective on the action.

This kind of shifting indicates a developing awareness of the larger units of organization in discourse. It is possible to see this skill only when children are involved in peer play, because when children talk to adults, the adults commonly dominate the organization, timing, content of talk, framing of what is to be done, and definition of the situation.

**Strategic Language**

The social skills involved in carrying on an argument, helping other children resolve disputes so play can continue, nurturing each other, and persuading other children to collaborate involve strategic deployment of language (Corsaro, 1985). By examining language in a variety of contexts, with adults and children, we have seen that children shift their language resources according to addressee (Ervin-Tripp & Guo, in press), as well as shifting a wide range of features of conversational structure (McTear, 1985).

Peer interaction may aid in the loss of egocentrism, necessary for the development of conversational abilities. By age 5, children begin to consider the point of view of the addressee (Ervin-Tripp & Gordon, 1986). Differences in children's skill in understanding the perspective of other speakers may, for example, be fundamental to later discourse where there is less situational support, such as reading, as Joanna Dimitrakopoulou (in press) has shown in pilot research.

If children interact only with adults, or only in controlled didactic contexts, they are constantly in a subordinate situation with respect to both knowledge and power. Children in such conditions of subordination have no chance to practice the language of organization, negotiation, instruction, and nurturance, which constitutes an important component of their "linguistic capital."

**Summary**

I have indicated in this chapter that play gives opportunities for children to learn language from each other and to practice what they have learned elsewhere. This process of learning affects all levels of language: prosody and sounds, vocabulary, syntax, the verb system, social markers and stylistic features, and organized routines. The process of learning through interaction with other children probably is similar in first language to observations in second-language contexts: Children imitate
their models, receive corrections, copy predictable routines, figure out meanings from context, and then permute and recombine what they have learned.

The opportunity to practice new forms is particularly available in play, because (as we have observed) in peer contexts children are required to negotiate what they want, to argue for their positions, and to explain plans and games. In role play they can enact a far wider range of verbal styles and genres than are available to them in adult–child contexts. In play they have the chance to acquire and practice strategic language used in social relations where adults or more powerful partners do not control them.

References


