

Preschool Children's Engagement in Language Learning through Child-Centred Pedagogy

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There are various theories that explain how children learn language. The Interactionist theorists believe that children develop the ability to learn language when they respond to the language in their environment. This article reflects the work of Interactionist theorists to address how children learn language. The purpose of this study is to explore preschool children's engagement in language learning through child-centred pedagogy. A qualitative research approach was carried out through the observation of children's interactions with peers when engaged with richer play materials. This study was conducted in two classrooms of the Ministry of Education (MoE) preschool in Selangor. Qualitative data was collected from six preschool children through purposive sampling. The selection of children was based on a mixed ability of good, average and low performance learners. Two preschool teachers were selected purposely to guide and scaffold to the children's language learning experience. Children observation data was taken through video recording. Anecdotal notes were used to record their engagement and interaction in language learning. Thematic analysis was used to focus on examining themes within data. This study found that children acquire language through interaction, not only with peers but also through the manipulation of language materials, observation of symbols and printed materials. The finding of this study shows that children express their ideas in their own words when they engage in child-initiated activity.

Keywords: *Preschool children, Language learning, Interactionist theory, Child-centred pedagogy.*



Introduction

Language development is major accomplishment during the preschool years (Bidle et al., 2014) and most children develop language skills naturally without any intentional guidance from adults (Essa, 2011). As human beings, children use language when they engage through interaction with peers and with the use of various developmentally appropriate materials. They express their thoughts, feelings and ideas through social interaction and an active learning environment. Play is instrumental in achieving mastery of the object and furthering symbolic ability (Brodova & Leong 2015). When young children play with their peers, their inner energy will be represented and expressed, and they will grow as an intelligent and mature person (Won, 2016). Interacting with both materials and peers socially results in a great amount of language learning.

Literature Review

Teaching and Learning Young Children Language

Current teaching practices involve many different styles and approaches to languages activities (Eiason & Jenkins 2008). However, teaching young children language is a complex process and is demanding work that requires specific skills and knowledge to impact significantly in children learning and development. To facilitate the process of knowledge transmission, teachers should apply appropriate teaching methods that best suit specific objectives and level exit outcomes (Andiema & Kemboi 2016). As such, preschool teachers need to know how children best learn and acquire language. Understanding the stage of child development, helps teachers know what to expect and how to best support the child as she or he grows and develops. Thus, teachers need to enhance their skills and knowledge continuously, not only responding to a changing curriculum, but to new research-based and practice-based knowledge about teaching young children.

Learning language can be very meaningful if children receive best support from adults without direct instruction. The process of children's language learning does not require direct construction, instead they need to invent their own language learning and be allowed to decide how it works. The key to the success of child language development is the child's own initiative. This way, children learn to make choices and will express their thoughts based on the choices they have made. According to Gunduz & Hursena (2015) self-directed approach in the learning process is the fundamental advantage of the Interactionist theory. The best way to help children learn language is through child-initiated activity such as play. Learning through play is widely considered to be the appropriate approach to facilitate young children's language acquisition (Aliza & Z. M 2015). There are a number of theorists who explain how language acquisition develops in children. The interactionist view of language development emphasises that both biology and experience contribute to language development. Interactionist theorists play a very important role in early language development. Two of the biggest names in the Interactionist Theory of Language development are Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget.



Vygotsky's theory of language development stated that children acquire knowledge as a result of the development of young children (NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) 2009). According to Vygotsky, language is a social concept that develops through social interaction. Vygotsky believed that as children develop language, they actively build a symbol system, which helps them to understand the world⁸. Vygotsky's emphasises the effect of social interaction between a child and a linguistically competent adult or peers. Vygotsky (1978) stressed the fundamental role of play through social interaction and language expression. As children explore the world through play, they learn to communicate and express naturally.

The concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as the distance between the level of independent performance and the level of assisted performance is probably the most famous of the Vygotskian concepts (Brodova & Leong 2015). Vygotsky developed a theory which focused on the concept of Zone of Proximal Development and scaffolding. The ZPD is a zone of development obtained when children engage in social interaction with others. Vygotskian principles on the ZPD explain the difference between what children can do without help and what children can do with help. ZPD can be reached when children learn from competent peers or an adult and gradually develop the ability to do certain tasks without help or assistance. However, the concept of scaffolding is closely related to the ZPD and applying a Vygotskian principle on the ZPD. Scaffolding is a teacher's action supporting a child's learning. It also can be seen as a process through which a more competent adult or peers aid the child. The person in this scaffolding process is someone who has mastered that particular function and provide non-intrusive intervention to the child.

Another name in the Interactionist theory of language development is Jean Piaget. Unlike Vygotsky, Piaget stresses language development as being related to cognitive development². Piaget believed that cognitive development led to the growth of child language development and child's thinking, which will determine how the child will use language. Piaget viewed that cognitive development led to the development of child language acquisition, whereas Vygotsky believed language is a social concept that can develop children's thought through social interaction.

Statement of the Problem

Little research attention has been paid to child-centred pedagogy, especially on how young children learn language in the Malaysian preschool setting. Some early research found that a large number of young Malaysian preschoolers in private settings still learn in traditional, structured classrooms, where academic and rote learning take up most of the daily preschool routine (Tee & Mariani 2018). According to Wood (2014) at the kindergarten level, direct instruction of teaching may limit children's opportunities to communicate and

understand the world. Indeed, in 2008, Curriculum Development Division of Malaysia Ministry of Education (MoE) reported that teachers still use conventional teacher-directed instructions in the classroom (Eiason & Jenkins 2008).

Subsequent research has further shown that there is also an issue on teaching practice in the early childhood setting. Studies have also shown that teachers tend to endorse more child-centred practices in theory but employed less of these practices in their classroom (Chin & Nirmala 2017). Besides, the problem of overloading, Iruka et al (2013) reported that a group of school children significantly decline in language acquisition because they do not have a strong foundation in language learning during their preschool years

Research Objective and Research Question

The objective of this study is to explore how preschool children learn language with peers when they engage in play. Specifically, the research question is as follows: How do preschool children learn language with peers when they engage in play?

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research employs a qualitative approach design which involves data collection from children of MoE Preschools. Data collection was carried out through the observation of children and their work samples. The selection of children was based on a mixed ability of good, average and low performance learners. Two preschool teachers were selected to guide and scaffold children's language learning experience. Children observation data was taken through video recording and anecdotal notes that recorded their engagement and interaction in language learning. Thematic analysis was used to focus on examining themes within data. Data from children's work samples were taken through children's worksheet. The purposive sampling technique was used to identify six preschool children and two preschool teachers from two classrooms from the MoE preschool in Selangor.

Research Procedure

Before the commencement of the research, the researcher obtained written permission from the parents of the children selected, as well as from the teachers. A set of lesson activities which included learning objectives, types of materials used and, teaching procedures were given to teachers as a guide. According to Einarsdottir (2012) teachers must contribute to a rich environment that gives room for creativity and places emphasis on the children's own choices and initiatives, while at the same time stimulating their interests in certain issues and directing their awareness towards learning. Thus, the activities were designed to allow children to make decisions and choices in a rich environment.

To promote meaningful language learning, teachers were encouraged to promote children to think and talk about things that interested and made sense to them. The role of teachers in this study was to allow children to interact with their peers and use the materials in their

own way. Children were encouraged to talk about materials thereby empowering them in their language acquisition. Thus, children were placed in print-rich area and were given props with printed letters, words and pictures to allow them to use language in meaningful ways.

Results of the Study

According to the results of children's observation and their work samples, the following three themes emerged.

Theme 1: Children used play experience to understand the abstract concept of letters and words.

The use of variety of props with printed letters, words and pictures has provided children with playful experiences and has been able to motivate and engage children to learn language in a way that is enjoyable. During language activities, the children used play experience to understand the abstract concept of symbols. They recognised the form of letters and words in printed materials even though they did not actually read the print. Figure 1 shows how a child used props with letters to understand the abstract concept of letters and sound.

Fig. 1. The use of props with letters help children understand the abstract concept of letters and sounds

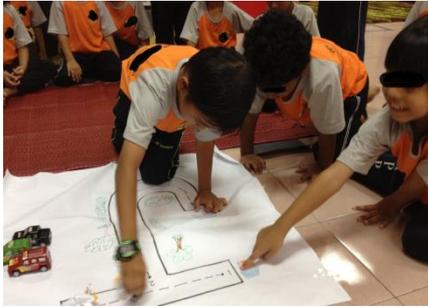


Theme 2: Children are found to be motivated and felt invited to help others

Through appropriate support and guidance from teachers and competent peers, children were able to complete the task successfully and were capable of performing independently. At this stage, children have reached the area of potential learning and Vygotsky (1978) described this as Zone of Proximal Development or ZPD. As the children reached ZPD, less and less instruction and guidance was required. Thus, teachers do not have to use traditional instruction or to force and drill children to learn language in a formal way. Through social interaction in a mixed ability group, less competent children learn from

advanced peers. Figure 2 shows how social interaction in mixed ability group helps children learn from others in an informal way

Fig. 2. Meaningful learning experience in mixed ability group motivates more competence to children to help their friend to learn.



Theme 3: Early writing takes place through object manipulation, observation of symbols and printed material.

Children expressed their ideas on paper and wrote or drew real things in their own way and perspectives, by observing props and objects with print. This study shows that early writing takes place when written text construction is added with drawing to allow flexible text production. Figure 3 shows a combination of writing and pictures in a child's work sample. As shown in the work sample, the child's experience with meaningful learning experience encouraged the child's symbolisation with image representation.

Discussion

The results of the study showed that children in this study are more motivated to engage with their peers and printed material in a language-rich language environment. The learning becomes much more exciting and visible to them in this way. The more they play, the more they talk and express their thoughts. The use of materials provides children opportunities to engage in language learning, as well allowing them to talk and support each other during language play. Peer interaction during play with printed materials supports the use and understanding of symbolic representation and oral language while providing opportunities for children to demonstrate and expand what they know.

Clearly, children who experience language with peers when engaged in play learn language more easily. They learn language not only with peers but also through the manipulation of language materials, observation of symbols and printed materials.

The finding of this study shows that the preschool level at the preoperational stage of Piaget Cognitive development is an exciting period, marked by significant childhood competencies such as language facility and representational thought (Bidle et al.,



2014). They learn language through the manipulation of objects with print in child-initiated activity.

This study also shows that in the Vygotskian classroom, children are able to construct their knowledge via interaction with others, in which they can perform more challenging tasks when assisted by a more competent individual. This indicates that socialisation does not require formal direct instruction, whereas children can develop new zones of proximal development through interaction with peers and play in the printed rich environment.

Conclusion

This study implies that learning language is not something what and how the teacher does, but that it is a natural process of language acquisition, which develop in the child through peers' interaction and objects' manipulation through a language-rich environment. When the Interactionist theory is taken into account, learning is not acquired by direct instruction, but through social interaction between children and language rich language environment in which the child acts in their own way. Learning language in a group, through social interaction, teaches children how to work with others and helps them to understand the use of language in different contexts. According to Eiason & Jenkins (2008) learning in small groups from their peers satisfies children's needs more than when they learn alone. When these methods are applied, these children will acquire necessary scientific skills to increase their skills (Andiema & Kemboi 2016).



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