

Dramatic Play and Language Development

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Play has a significant effect on the development of a child's home language (first language or L1). It integrates mental and physical activities in a meaningful manner and is fun, interesting, and engaging for the child. Play often involves private speech (in children aged between 2-7 years, in L1), more commonly known as 'self-talk', which leads to the development of language skills. As a child engages himself/ herself in play, he/ she uses private speech to regulate his/her behaviour. Over time, private speech manifests as thoughts. In the process, the learner also has ample opportunities to practice his/her receptive and expressive skills. As children grow up, the language they use in their pretend play also evolves to a level where not only can they describe their actions, but also the play scenario and roles which enables counterfactual thinking in them.

Even in the initial years, a child becomes familiar with words by engaging with books and other material that have letters/printed text on them. Throughout his/her school years, the child is constantly developing his/her language skills through play (Seefeldt, 2001). For example, when a child plays *House*, he/she interacts with playmates, an important factor that contributes to language development. Dramatic play, when planned carefully with coordinated activities, promotes active learning in children.

Dramatic play and first language

Growing up, I often played with my younger brother and a cousin. One of our favourite games was playing *House* in the afternoon when all the adults were resting. Inevitably, every time, I would assume the role of the mother and my brother and cousin, both two and a half years younger than me, would assume the roles of the children in the family. Each play session, though the roles we assumed were the same, the situation would be different, something we discussed and developed before engaging in the play. We spoke in L1, and I distinctly remember many instances where I imitated the behaviours of my grandmother, mother and aunt, my immediate role models. We used household

items, like newspapers, notebooks, and utensils from the kitchen to make our play-acting more authentic.

This is one example of spontaneous, dramatic play. Dramatic play often allows children to experiment with purposes/instances that lead to literacy development. In the above example, I often pretended to read the newspaper, as my aunt did every morning with her coffee. My brother and cousin used our nursery class notebooks (used for practising to write numbers and alphabets in our respective classes) to pretend to do homework, which I would oversee (as the 'mother'). All these aspects significantly contribute to a child's language development. The dialogues in the play, while starting from imitation of role models, soon morphs into creative expressions that are rooted in the child's experiences and observations. The more the children experiment with the language, the more comfortable and confident they become in expressing themselves freely. Often, these creative expressions also help playmates learn from one another.

Similar role plays can be organised in the classroom by the teacher on familiar stories. This has been done by several teachers using stories from the English kit provided to the MGML (multi-grade, multi-level) classes I to III in Karnataka. A teacher involved some of the students, made props and worked with the learners to adapt to the roles of the characters in a story called, *The Fat King*. In the event that the students forgot the rehearsed speech, they often ad-libbed the lines from the story they recalled, in a mix of L1 and L2 (second language). Overall, the whole class was motivated and engaged in the roles and their interactions with each other in their various roles. The scope for creative expression allowed by the teacher not only encourages children to participate in the role play but also helps them learn to react/respond to situations that are unexpected. Such instances of play planned by the teacher build communicative confidence and competence in the learners – an important skill that many learners in the locations where we work lack.

In their paper, Mielonen & Paterson (2009) have stated that the language that children used during their play was like the language they would use when they start to read and write. The researchers conclusively stated that the children who engaged in dramatic play used language to develop scripts (for play), combining the skills of reading and writing with play. Practising these skills allows learners to transfer their skills and knowledge to reading and comprehending texts in school.

Second language development

In another class I classroom, students in the English medium section, left alone in the classroom when the teacher had to suddenly step out for something, a student seized the opportunity to play the role of the teacher in the class. I watched silently as the girl adjusted her dress (as her teacher would adjust her sari) and then picked up the stick to point at the board and began to ask the other students to identify the alphabets being introduced in the class by their teacher. The rest of the students corrected the incorrect responses of the girl posing as the teacher and engaged in this small game with her. The seamless stepping into the role of the teacher by the 6-year-old girl is an example of spontaneous play in the classroom.

For the learners in this above scenario, English is their L2. The learners come from various backgrounds and their L1 ranges from Kannada and Telugu to Lambani and Urdu. Many of them were still in their silent periods (a timeframe during which learners are actively processing the language they hear and see around them, but do not produce/speak it), yet they engaged in English with the 6-year-old girl as much as they could. Engaging in this short activity, many students had the opportunity to revise the letters (with the help of their classmates) before the teacher returned to resume the lesson and practise the few English expressions they had learnt in class. The children engaging in this game not only have scope for stepping into adult roles and practising vocabulary but also develop and practice creative expressions. When the 6-year-old girl gets a response from her classmates that is unanticipated, she automatically goes through her experiences and knowledge to find a new expression that she finds acceptable in the scenario being played out. The response of her playmates to her creative expression may also lead to further exploration of language and expression within the parameters of their game and boosting her communicative competence.

In most schools in Karnataka, English is the second language/L2. Yet, many learners in the smaller towns and villages have little to no exposure to the language. The classroom is the only space for them to hear and use English and the English teacher is their only source for aural input. Dramatic play in the L2 classroom can go a long way in helping the learners engage more actively with English and gain more confidence and motivation to learn the language.

In another instance, a teacher worked with her grade I students to set up a market. Each student had one stall in the market, where they had a range of items to sell. The learners were scaffolded through the process of using English to name their products and then inform the buyers of the prices of each item. The whole activity became one of play for the learners. Each student would visit other stalls and 'buy' other products and items and, after a while, they would engage in the process of 'selling' their own items to the other shop owners who visited their stalls. The teacher had the students bring in props from their homes, like small articles of clothing, rubber bands, hair clips, and toy cars, that were put on display in the stalls. The whole activity was planned by the teacher to help the learners become more comfortable in speaking in English and gain more exposure to the language. Once the learners had become comfortable with the whole game, the teacher invited the parents of all the students in her class for a demonstration. This time, the parents were the visitors/buyers of the many products the children were selling.

On this day, I witnessed even the quieter students confidently speak with every person who visited their stalls. There were many instances where the students forgot the rehearsed dialogues and had to come up with impromptu dialogues. These unplanned dialogues were, no doubt, based on their own observations of visits to the store with their parents or siblings. Often, these dialogues were delivered in a mix of L1 and L2 (English), but they were confidently delivered in almost every instance. The comfort of the learners in using English and in their creative expression was a direct result of the sustained exposure to the play activity and the roles the learners were assigned. This sustained exposure also resulted in the learners making modifications to the dialogues that came with their role.

The combining of verbal and non-verbal communication in dramatic play activities can help

many students better understand the play scenario, roles and dialogues involved. More importantly, the play activity helps shift the focus of the L2 learners from speaking 'correctly' to speaking confidently. This shift in focus is an important development in L2 learners since many of the children hesitate to experiment with a language that is largely unfamiliar to them, despite their English lessons in school.

Role of the teacher

What the government schools need now is to enable teachers to facilitate play processes at all levels in their classrooms, so as to help the students step into different roles, wield language in familiar settings, develop diverse play scenarios and plan roles for play for themselves. Learning through play is not limited to primary school and can be an effective learning tool in the higher primary classes as well. Methodically planned play (using various types of language games and activities) can be used to develop the LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) skills of learners at all levels of L1 and L2. Perhaps the serious lack of age-appropriate skills in the learners in government schools can be more effectively developed using play as the mode through which content is delivered to build language skills effectively in the learners.

Even though play is largely self-initiated by the learner, the learning through play is enhanced when the teacher facilitates the process. A teacher's intervention during play takes on

many possibilities – from assisting learners with problem-solving and questioning, to redirecting undesired behaviours. The teacher also needs to teach play skills to children who have difficulty engaging in a play scenario. Often, the intervention of an adult helps children transition from toy-oriented play to people-oriented play. It is with this transition that children begin adopting roles in their games.

The teacher should plan play activities with specific outcomes in mind. Objectives developed from the observation of learners should mould the play experiences of the learners as well to enable the developmental progress to a higher level. The teacher should individualise the play experiences based on the physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and language levels of the learners. For a learner who has difficulty engaging in play, the teacher should simplify roles so that they are straightforward and familiar to the child. But for a learner who is more communicatively competent, more complex roles can be planned and assigned.

Many issues faced by learners in the L1 and L2 classroom can be addressed through dramatic play carefully constructed by the teacher – from hesitancy to speak to the fostering of creativity in the learners. The exploration of the various possibilities of using dramatic play in the classroom can open up a host of options for teachers to liven up the language classroom and promote active learning in their students.

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