



PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S VERBAL COMMUNICATION WITHIN TWO DIFFERENT CLASSROOM SETTING¹

OKULÖNCESİ DÖNEM ÇOCUKLARININ İKİ FARKLI SINIF ORTAMINDAKİ SÖZEL İLETİŞİMLERİ

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Abstract

This study investigated the effects of two different classroom contexts, sociodramatic play and a teacher led activity, on children's use of verbal communication. Additionally, the effect of children's gender on their use of verbal communication was examined. Participants in the study were 24 children between the ages of 37 and 55 months old, who were attending two preschools located in the northern part of the state of Florida, USA. The data collection was completed through observation of children's play and teacher-led reading-retelling-drawing activities. Children were observed on two occasions for each activity, and the total observation time was 40 minutes per child. Sociometric Interview, Leaper's (1991) discourse patterns categories, and Halliday's (1973) seven types of language demands were used as instruments to collect data in the study. Data analyses were completed by using Descriptive and repeated measurements and ANOVA statistical techniques. According to the findings, children use language to serve a variety of functions during different classroom activities. In the play context (open) language is used mostly to serve imaginative and interactional functions. In the closed-field context, where the interaction was led by the teacher, the most common language function used by the children was informative language. Five out of seven (Regulatory, personal, imaginative, informative, interactional); and one out of four discourse patterns (Control) were used in different frequencies within play and teacher contexts.

Keywords. Preschool children, Oral language, Social context, Socialcultural approach.

Öz

Bu çalışmada, serbest etkinlik olarak sosyal dramatik oyun ve öğretmen gözetiminde yapılan hikâye okuma, yeniden anlatma-resimlendirme olmak üzere iki farklı sınıf ortamının çocukların sözel iletişimindeki etkileri araştırılmıştır. Ayrıca çocukların cinsiyetinin sözel iletişimdeki etkisi de incelenmiştir. Araştırmanın örneklemini, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin Florida eyaletinin kuzeyinde bulunan iki farklı anaokulunda yaşları 37 ve 55 ay arasında olan 24 çocuk (12 kız, 12 erkek) oluşturmaktadır. Veriler çocukların oyunları ve öğretmen gözetiminde yaptıkları okuma, anlatma ve resim çizme faaliyetleri esnasında toplanmıştır. Çocukların sosyal dramatik oyunları ve öğretmen ile yaptıkları etkinlik iki farklı zamanda gözlenip videoya kaydedilmiştir ve her bir çocuk için gözlem süresi 40 dakikadır. Bu çalışmada sosyometrik görüşme, Leaper'ın (1991) geliştirdiği konuşma (söylev) türleri ölçeği ve Halliday 'in (1973) geliştirdiği konuşma dilinin kullanım amaçları ölçeği veri toplama araçları olarak kullanılmıştır. Verilerin analizi tanımlayıcı ve ANOVA istatistik teknikleri kullanılarak yapılmıştır. Elde edilen bulgulara göre, çocuklar sınıftaki çeşitli faaliyetlerde dili farklı amaçlara hizmet etmek için kullanmışlardır. Çocukların oyun oynarken en sık kullandıkları dil türlerinin sırasıyla ilişkisel dil, yaratıcı ve araçsal dil olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Öğretmen tarafından yaptırılan etkinlikte ise en sık bilgilendirme dil türünü kullanmışlardır. Çocukların diyaloglarına işbirlikçi, kontrol edici, uzak duran ya da uyumlu olma açılarından bakıldığında, sonuçlar çocukların gerek oyunlarında gerekse öğretmenle yaptıkları etkinlikte en sık işbirlikçi dili kullandıklarını göstermiştir. Bunu kontrol edici dil takip edip, uyum gösteren dil her iki bağlamda da en az kullanılan dil olmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler. Okul öncesi dönem çocukları, Sözel dil, Sosyal bağlam, Sosyokültürel yaklaşım.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Oral language and emergent literacy have been important topics in the field of early childhood education (McLachlan, 2007; Neuman & Dickenson, 2001). Emergent literacy is a pre-literacy period that represents children's exposure to and experience with literacy from birth to individual reading (Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000; Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Yaden, Rowe, & MacGillivray, 2000). Research in relative literature suggests that all aspects of linguistic competence, in some way, influence children's reading and writing abilities. Young children need to master skills in different aspects of oral language such as vocabulary, and language use (pragmatics), prior to becoming a reader and writer (Snow, Burns, & Griffin 1998).

Young children use oral language along with different modes, means, and materials to make meaning in their communication and representation. Children's flexibility in using oral language and different modes in their meaning-making process is the key to become literate in contemporary times (Kress 1997, 2003). Learning functions of oral language let children to think, obtain and share knowledge with other people, and understand the world around them (Halliday, 1975; Halliday & Hasan, 1985).

According to sociocultural approach, through social interaction that children learn to use mediators or tools, such as language to represent their ideas (Razfar & Gutierrez, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1995). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in recent years researchers have been concerned with the social contexts in which children's early language and literacy skills develop (e.g., Aram & Levin, 2001; Pellegrini, Melhuish, Jones, Trojanowska, & Gilden, 2000; Pianta, 2004, 2006). The preschool classroom is one of the social contexts where children participate in different meaning-making language practices. Within the preschool context, there are different activities where different interactional patterns can be found. For example, it can include open or closed fields of interaction. While open field situations allow participants to choose with whom to interact, as well as the materials they want to use, in a closed field situation the teacher decides where, who, and what materials are going to be used in the activity. As a result of these contextual differences the meanings, purposes, functions, and outcomes of children's verbal communication will be different (Green & Meyer, 1991). Within preschools young children participate in more open-ended activities such as block play, pretend play (e.g., in a housekeeping center), or other self-selected activities (DeZutter, 2007).

Children's individual differences, their interests and identities such as their gender, are also important factors in their verbal communication (Siegel, 2006). Research has demonstrated that gender differences in children's communicational strategies started as early as three years of age (Leaper, 1991). For instance, while preschool boys use more direct and demanding communicative strategies among their peers, girls are usually using more polite and cooperative strategies (Black & Hazen, 1990). In general, girls are more likely to demonstrate elaboration of the peer proposals and be more responsive than boys (Murphy & Faulkner, 2006). Therefore, gender-related differences are important factors in examining children's verbal communication in their play and other classroom activities (Black & Hazen, 1990).

Although it is well known that young children use verbal communication as a medium to represent and communicate their ideas, there is limited knowledge concerning the nature and extent of their use of verbal communication in school contexts. This study

investigated how young children engaged in meaning making using verbal communication in their play and other school-based activities. Using an observational approach, the study sought to understand how context and gender can affect young children's oral language practices. For this study, context is defined as open and closed activities. Open activity is a socio-dramatic play and closed activity is a teacher directed reading a story-retelling the story and drawing the picture about the story. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the differences in communicative functions of the children's oral language in play and teacher directed activity?
2. What are the differences in discourse patterns of the children's oral language in play and teacher directed activity?
3. Is there any gender difference in the use of verbal communicative functions and discourse patterns in the classroom?

2. Method

This study was a quantitative study. The data collection was completed through observation of children's play and teacher-led reading-retelling -drawing activities. Children were observed in triads in both contexts; the play context and the teacher context (or open and closed). For the pretend play sessions, the appropriate play props were set out on the floor. For the teacher led activity, a classroom teacher was asked to conduct the activity. The teacher was blind to the research questions, coding schemes, and research hypotheses. The teacher led activity including reading a book to children, and then asking them to retell and draw a picture related to the story in the book. The books were chosen by consulting an early childhood expert; who has extensive experience teaching young children. Children were observed on two occasions for each activity, and the total observation time was 40 minutes per child. Measures of verbal communication were derived from the videotaped recordings of the play and teacher-led observational sessions. The researcher was present during the observational sessions in order to manage the recording equipment.

Data Analyses

For this research, each focal child was observed for 10 minutes during a 15- minute play and teacher led activity sections. During the 10-minute period, the researcher recorded all relevant behavior of the focal child. The selection order of the focal child for observation was counterbalanced (Pellegrini, 2004). Initial determination of focal child's observational order was random. Each participating child's name was written on a small paper and then drawn from a box until all names were exhausted. After establishing the initial order of the observation, the observed child was placed at the bottom of the list and the cycle continued with each child to obtain the counterbalance order of observations. Data was coded directly from the videotapes using The Observer XT software.

The analysis of data started with watching the videotapes and coding the behaviors of a focal child. Each focal child was observed in order to assess the number of verbal communicational he or she used. The total number of communication modes each focal child used in two different settings were summed to obtain focal child subtype scores (frequencies and relative frequencies). In order to test the hypotheses an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures was conducted. Relative frequencies for verbal communication served as the dependent variables.

The data was examined to insure that the assumptions associated with analysis of variance (ANOVA) are not violated. First, descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations were calculated for each of the outcome variables of interest including. Preliminary analysis of the data was conducted to identify potential outliers that could exert excessive influence on the results. Any violation of a multivariate normal distribution introduces bias into the estimates of the model parameters thereby increasing the probability of Type I errors. Violations of normality were examined by identifying measures of skewness and kurtosis. The Pearson-product moment correlations between the indicators were computed to check for problems of multicollinearity with the data.

Participants

The participants were recruited from two preschools which were located in the northern part of the state of Florida, USA. Participants in the study were 24 preschool children (12 girls, 12 boys) between the ages of 37 and 55 months old. All of the children were Caucasian except one who was an African-American. Only typically developing children were included in the study, and those children with identified exceptionalities were excluded. The majority of the children were from middle and upper middle class families with both parents working outside of the home.

Instruments

Sociometric Interview

A picture sociometric interview was utilized to establish the triads. This interview method requires each child to indicate his or her friendship preference of same-sex peers. A picture sociometric interview has been extensively used in research, and is considered appropriate for identifying the friendship preference of preschool aged children (Gleason, Gower, Gleason, & Hohmann, 2005; McCandless & Marshall, 1954). The interview was conducted in the following manner: First, a child was shown his classmates' photos in random order, and was asked to name the child in the photograph. Then, the child was asked to select two friends among the classmates (Gleason, et al., 2005). The triads consisted of reciprocally nominated friends.

Speech Acts (Discourse Patterns)

In order to describe the speech acts of children's communication, Leaper's (1991) discourse patterns categories were used. A conversation involving at least one receiver and at least one sender that conveys speech messages was coded as demonstrating one of the following discourse patterns (Leaper, 1991). Collaborative discourse: Refers to speech messages that are direct and affiliative. Control discourse: Refers to speech messages that are direct and distancing. Oblige discourse: Refers to speech messages that are not direct and affiliative. Withdraw: Refers to speech messages that are not direct and distancing.

Function of Language

In order to understand children's oral language production and its functions in classroom interactions, Halliday's (1973) seven types of language demands were used. This aspect of the children's communication will be captured using the codes as;

Instrumental (Inst): Language is used to satisfy personal needs and to get things done. For example "I need to have this".

Regulatory (Reg): Language is used to control the behaviors of others. For instance “Do not do that”

Personal (Pers): Language is used to tell about themselves. For example “I am drawing a car”.

Imaginative (Imag): Language is used to create, pretend or make believe such as “You are a doctor”.

Informative or Representational (Infor): Language is used to explain things. For instance “This is the little pig”.

Interactional (Interac): Language is used to get along with others such as “Do you want to play with me”

3. Results

Function of Language

In this section, occurrences of children’s use of seven types of spoken language (Instrumental, Regulatory, Personal, Imaginative, Informative or Representational, Interactional) within play and teacher led activity are displayed.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for spoken language within play and teacher led activities.*

		Inst.	Reg.	Pers.	Heur.	Imag.	Infor.	Interac.
Play	Mean	.142	.104	.114	.028	.229	.102	.282
	S. Dev.	.10	.08	.06	.05	.12	.06	.12
Teacher Led Activity	Mean	.104	.039	.181	.026	.058	.448	.144
	S. Dev.	.05	.04	.08	.03	.06	.13	.06

Note. N=24

The study’s findings revealed that children used all seven types of language in both contexts. The data indicated that interactional language was the most frequently used form of language in the play context. This type of language was used by children to go along with others, such as asking, “Do you want to play with me?”, complementing “I like your hair,” or making suggestions such as “I can give you the pizza.” Imaginative language was the second most frequently form used by children in the play context. This finding confirms Halliday’s theory and related research suggestions concerning young children’s use of imaginative language while they are playing (Feng & Benson, 2007; Plowman & Stephen, 2005). The findings showed that Instrumental language was the third most frequent language function used in the play context. That form of language serves to satisfy children’s personal needs such as “I need to have this” or “I want that red crayon,” etc.

In the closed-field context, where the interaction was led by the teacher, the most common language function used by the children was informative language. This is the language type that serves to communicate information to others (Feng & Benson, 2007). During the retelling and drawing activity, for example, children's answered questions about the book by saying things such as "The mouse ate the whole strawberry". Similarly, when telling their teacher about their drawing they would say things such as "This is the little pig".

The results indicated that personal language was frequently used in both contexts. Children use personal language to tell about what they are doing or have done; their preference; or personal will (Feng & Benson, 2007). Examples of such language form, from the observations, are "I've drawn the house", "I am going to use this basket," "I like to use brown color", "I do not want to draw or play right now," etc. One of the interesting observations of the children's interactional behaviors was that they repeated what others said. For instance, if one child said "I am drawing a road" the others followed with the same statement "I am drawing the road too." Possibly, the children were learning language patterns or language functions from each other.

Neither regulatory language nor heuristic language was frequently used by the children in the preschool classroom. Regulatory language is used when there is an attempt to control or manipulation the behavior of others. For example, "Don't draw on my paper" or, "Push this button" (cashier). Heuristic language, on the other hand, is used when individuals what to investigate or learn about something, such as "How can I use it?" (Doctor Equipment), "Where is the bear?" Feng and Benson's (2007) study of the language patterns of children in computer environments showed different results for both regulatory and heuristic language. According to their findings these two types of language were used most frequently. Their observations of language use, however, was when children were working with computers; a context that is very different from the play and small-group teaching context used in this study. Since context shapes children's language use, the minimal use of regulatory and heuristic language would be expected.

Children's Discourse Patterns

In this section, children's use of four discourse patterns (Collaborative, control, withdraw and obligate) within play and teacher led activity are demonstrated.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics for discourse patterns within play and teacher led activities*

		Control	Collaborative	Withdraw	Obligate
Play	Mean	.237	.610	.094	.059
	S. Dev.	.14	.11	.12	.07
Teacher Led Activity	Mean	.125	.688	.103	.085
	S. Dev.	.10	.18	.11	.09

Note. N=24

Children's verbal language was also examined based on their discourse patterns: Collaborative, control, withdraw and obligate. The findings revealed that children used collaborative language most frequently compared to the other discourse patterns in both the play

and teacher led contexts. This discourse pattern refers to children's initiation or making suggestions. For instance, "Can you check my blood pressure" or "You can draw with any color you want." Control was the second most frequent discourse pattern used by children. Children used Control discourse when they rejected the initiation from peers or commanded the others, "I don't want to do this," "No, I am the doctor, you are the patient," or "Don't do that." Both, in play and in teacher contexts, withdraw was the third most frequent discourse pattern. The study's findings also showed that Obligate was the least frequently used discourse patterns in both contexts. The findings seem to be consisted with prior research by Leaper's (1991) who studied children's discourse patterns while playing with each other. The results also indicated that, as expected, children used more collaborative language while they play with their peers.

Activity Settings and Gender Effect on Children's Oral Language Use:

The second and the third question of this study were related to the context and gender effect on children's use of oral language. The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures was utilized to comprehend the differences in children discourse patterns and their use of verbal communicative functions based on gender and activity contexts (play versus teacher led activity).

The ANOVA revealed (Table 3 and Table 4) the significant test results for the main effects of context on, regulatory language, personal language, imaginative language, informative language, interactional language, and control discourse. The research findings did not reveal any statistically significant differences between boys' and girls' use of function of language, or social function of language. As seen on the tables above, the ANOVA results were not significant for the two-way interaction between gender and context.

Table 3. Children's *Discourse Patterns based on context and gender*

		df	F	p	η^2
Control	A: Context	1	10.671	0.004	0.327
	B:Gender	1	0.014	0.906	0.001
	AXB	1	0.192	0.666	0.009
Collaboration	A: Context	1	3.416	0.078	0.134
	B:Gender	1	1.462	0.239	0.062
	AXB	1	0.004	0.949	0.000
Withdraw	A: Context	1	0.069	0.795	0.003
	B:Gender	1	0.364	0.552	0.016
	AXB	1	3.174	0.089	0.126
Obligate	A: Context	1	1.831	0.190	0.077
	B:Gender	1	2.085	0.163	0.087
	AXB	1	4.019	0.057	0.154

Note. N=24, $p < 0.05$

Table 4. *Children's use of verbal communicative functions based on context and gender*

		df	F	p	η^2
Inst.	A: Context	1	2.252	0.148	0.093
	B:Gender	1	0.133	0.719	0.006
	AXB	1	0.164	0.69	0.007
Reg.	A: Context	1	14.074	0.001	0.390
	B:Gender	1	0.715	0.407	0.031
	AXB	1	0.004	0.951	0.000
Pers.	A: Context	1	11.342	0.003	0.340
	B:Gender	1	0.259	0.616	0.012
	AXB	1	0.001	0.981	0.000
Heur.	A: Context	1	0.020	0.888	0.001
	B:Gender	1	0.187	0.669	0.008
	AXB	1	0.124	0.728	0.006
Imag.	A: Context	1	55.319	0.000	0.715
	B:Gender	1	0.354	0.558	0.016
	AXB	1	0.180	0.675	0.008
Infor.	A: Context	1	181.916	0.000	0.892
	B:Gender	1	0.247	0.624	0.011
	AXB	1	0.055	0.816	0.003
Interac.	A: Context	1	24.373	0.000	0.526
	B:Gender	1	0.126	0.726	0.006
	AXB	1	0.719	0.406	0.003

Note. N=24, $p < 0.05$

4. Conclusion and Discussion

Overall, the results showed that there were differences in children's use of verbal communication during the play and teacher led activities: Five out of seven (Regulatory, personal, imaginative, informative, interactional); and one out of four discourse patterns (Control) were used in different frequencies within play and teacher contexts. Children used more varied language types in the play context. What is interesting, and significant, in the data reported in this study is that the teacher led context, or closed field, seemed to limit the repertoire of the children's linguistic strategies, in comparison to the play context (Dickinson & Sprague, 2001). This is interesting because of the likelihood that preschool teachers plan and teach small group activities with a goal of providing children with rich, varied language experiences. The findings suggest that the reality of the teacher-led activity, in terms of children's language use, could be different. That is, the children's repertoire of language use, in the teacher led context, could be limited to using informative language.

The contextual effects on children's communication preference can be best explained by sociocultural views on language and literacy ideas (Razfar & Gutierrez, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990; Wertsh, 1995). Social context, which is shaped by roles, relationships, interactions and activity types, defines the use of language, communication modes during interactions. The preschool classroom is the one important social context, with its own set of routines, expectations, and values that are shaped by the participants. In classrooms, play can offer an open context where children interact with their peers, and they themselves govern the activity. Teacher led activities are considered closed field activities, whereby the rules and expectations are governed by an adult. As a result, children's use of language communication in their meaning-making processes differed in the two contexts.

The research findings did not reveal any statistically significant differences

between boys' and girls' use of verbal communication. According to the social constructivist view, the type of activity in which children engage mediates gender-related differences in children's behaviors (Leaper & Smith, 2004). For instance, Leaper (2000) observed children's play in two different occasions; in one occasion, children were playing with a feminine stereotyped toy set, and in another occasion, children were playing with a masculine stereotyped toy set. The results showed that both girls and boys demonstrated more affiliative behavior while they were playing with the feminine stereotyped toy set in comparison to when they were playing with the masculine stereotyped toy set. However, when the researcher controlled the activity there were no significant gender differences in children's affiliative behavior.

In conclusion, studying children's everyday interactions is important because it can help us to understand children's oral language use. After all, young children learn and share what they know by interacting with others in their social worlds. This study has tried to provide a small glimpse into this world, and that it has contributed in a small way to our understanding of young children's oral language use.

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