

The Role of Playing into the Development of the Pre-School Children's Linguistic Skills

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Abstract

Children of different age-groups presuppose a harmonic and conditioned development of their linguistic peculiarities and features. The contexts these linguistic peculiarities have been developed as well as their implications are greatly promoted through playing games which have an important role in the children's linguistic formation. Relevantly, the object of this study focuses on the development of the 4-5 age-group children by means of playing games: Our study has been oriented over the following issues: - The features of the linguistic formation for the 4-5 age-group children. - The selected models of the games influencing the development of the children's abilities in these evolvment fields. - Identification of the relevent indicators related with the children's linguistic abilities by applying the model of games for this age-group. Methods to be used are those of investigation, observation, assessment, analyses and synthesis. Our research has been based on the concrete understanding of children's features in the pre-school institutions as well as on modelling the games that improve speaking for this age-group. The results generated by applying those models have been presented to the relevant pre-school teachers in Elbasan County, Albania .

Keywords: linguistic formation, assessment model, games , symbolic language , 4-5 years age-group.

1. Introduction

1.1 Understanding Child Development as a Process.

Child development is an all-round process, including the entire changes occurring to individuals in the course of their lifetime. The concept of development in children involves the cooperation of physical, emotional, cognitive and social development fields, making possible for more and more complicated levels of motions to be realized as well as enhancing children's thinking, communication and cooperation with other people in the surrounding ambience. Considering the concept in a wider dimension, development includes growth, change, communication, learning, the motion towards autonomy as well as assuming the proper role in society. (Jareg, 1994:38).

However, the child development occurs with a social ecological frame. This means that it occurs in a variety of environmental contexts, classified in interpersonal, social, and cultural level; with various factors having an essential role. Some of the main factors impacting the child's health are natural, (genetic, heredity) and environmental, (Save the Children, 2007: 38-39). In order to understand child's development, its main fields should be determined first, including the physical, emotional and cognitive development (the last is linked with linguistic skills, intelligence, thinking processes and the skills to manage and give solutions to difficult situations as well as social development.

1.2 Linguistic development and its features in 4 - 5 yrs-old children.

Language is an important element of communication and its acquisition is vital to each individual in the society. As such, it embodies, at least, three main ideas: the language is a *par excellence* means of communication, the school promotes its further and more qualitative development and third, language learning is promoted solely by the children's need to communicate with others. By perfecting their acquired linguistic knowledge, children shape their own opinions. (Plangarica 2002 : 27-28)

However, communication occurs even in the absence of the wordy language, (non-verbal communication through symbols, gestures and mime). Children, regardless of their cultural descent, come to the world prepared to communicate by means of sounds, gestures and words. (Tahsini et al. 2012: 16-17).

Some of the main features in pre-school children, regarding the linguistic development, include abilities to understand spoken language, the variety of the vocabulary, use of various grammatical forms, communicative deftness, the interest in reading books, abilities to express their ideas in writing etc.

Such abilities for this age group of children would include: clearly pronouncing both words and sentences. Using more than 1500 words in their vocabulary. Using 4 – 5 words clauses and sentences giving details, i.e. *I need to read my book*. Pronouncing consonants *l, s, r, v, z, j, c, h, sh, th* correctly. Using magic words in their proper place and time. Using verbal expressions when speaking or telling stories. Listening to storytelling or short accounts attentively and answering to questions around them. Communicating freely with other children and with adults. Having the concept of time and space. (Kamani, Mato 2004 : 25-29, 45-49)

1.3 Role of playing in the pre-school children linguistic development

Playing is one of the main activities for children, linked directly with their instinctive life. In other points of view, it is defined as a preparatory exercising to the adult life and as a constant and punctual verification of the gained experience, by means of which they realize their equilibrium with the surrounding environment. Having their imagination as a simulative function, which is one of the mantel development indicators; it acts freely in the reality, by adjusting to their needs. Creation of an ambiance reach with toys and promoting their attempts to "investigate" the world, make up premises developing their cognitive development. This development is mirrored in the in general changes in the children's mental activities, as well as especially in other elements suchlike the memory, reasoning, perception, logic, etc. Cognitive abilities are gained while interacting with others in the surrounding ambiance. Children of this age progress in observing, interacting and processing information.

Each game, however simple it is, is featured by intensive motoric participation and commitment, by means of which children integrate their psycho-motoric skills and gain new knowledge. As such, it favors not only their physical development but the linguistic, social and spiritual ones as well. The use of the daily non-formal activities and playing have been considered as possibilities to develop children's vocabulary, as an improvement of their daily language, the ways of storytelling or commenting events, their thinking processes, fantasy and imagination.

2. Application Procedure

Considering all that has been said about the role and importance of applying games in different fields of child's development, the purpose of this study is to evidence the development level of certain linguistic indicators through playing as a motoric element. The study was realized in the course of observing pedagogical practices of the pre-school students department, Faculty of the Education Sciences, at the " Aleksandër Xhuvani ", Elbasan University (EU), academic year 2011-2012. About 280 4-6 age group children partook in the study, all from about 12 pre-school institutions of Elbasan city and county. The selected kindergartens were in Elbasan town, including the pilot kindergarten, No. 5, Kindergarten No. 12 and Kindergarten No. 4, in Kuqan, Katund i Ri and Shushice villages, all in their respective primary schools. Moreover, participating were the Librazhd town kindergartens, Kindergarten No. 1 and 2, the Gramsh town No. 1 and 2 kindergarten, Perrenjas town kindergartens, Belesh municipality kindergarten installed in the " Halit Uruçi". 9-year school. The study was also supported by the interest groups, such as the work group with the authors of this study and the manager of the pilot kindergarten Ms. Lira Ballhysa, the supporting group, consisting of the pre-school teachers in the kindergartens involved in the study, as well as the pre-school department students.

Some of the study identified indicators, reflecting the formation of linguistic abilities for this group-age children, are the ones connected with the application of the speaking, writing, reading, hearing and seeing strategies, in which the children need to activate all the five main senses which impact the communication improvements directly.

2.1 Models of Playing

1. The game "*My name is special*", intends to enhance children to write their names according to the model showed by their teacher. (Mato et al. 2010 : 100-102). *Method*: on a colored sheet of paper the teacher lists all children group's names in capital letters and reads them aloud. S/he shows each the first letter of their

- respective names to the children. S/he gives a sheet of paper with his/her name written on it to each of them encouraging them to write their own name under the written name on the respective paper.
2. The game: "*Me and my family*", intends to develop speaking and fine motoric skills. (Mato et al. 2010 : 110). Method: A day in advance, the teacher has ordered children to bring a photo of their family to the kindergarten. Photos are stuck on a large piece of cardboard. S/he urges children to draw their family members as they fantasize about them and describe them in words. S/he explains the concept of the family, as a commune of individuals living together and having common interests. Children use simple sentences.
 3. A game intending to develop speaking abilities by retelling a well-known story via figurative illustrations. (Tahsini et al. 2012: 141-143). Method: Figurative illustrations with well-known characters for children suchlike *The Snow White, The Princess, The Santa Claus*, (on the eve of the New year), etc, have been selected in advance by the teacher. Children are urged to retell the stories they know in advance, since they have heard them by their parents or have read them somewhere or they are told by their teacher. Such figurative illustrations can be used by the teachers even for newly told stories, heard for the first time. After the teacher narrates them the children are urged to retell the events and distinct the various parts of narration suchlike the introduction, the narration body and the conclusion. Children are urged to use verbs in past tense in the narration process. This way of storytelling can be perceived as a game in which children switch each other to finish the story, by passing the ball to the consecutive classmate.
 4. A game intending to develop the speaking, writing and fine motoric skills. (Mato, Grillo 2003: 163). Method: As many pieces of written papers have prepared as the number of the children partaking in the game. In one of them is written the name of a male animal, in the other the name of its counterpart female animal, (or, the children are asked to draw their favorite animals). For instance: tomcat – cat, cock-hen, ram-sheep, bear – she-bear. The pieces of paper are inserted into a glass vessel and the children are invited to take one of them. Once they read the paper they should imitate the animal loudly. Once this is over the children are divided in pairs (tomcat-cat and so on).
 5. A game to develop the speaking and hearing skills via the use of words imitating various noises in the nature (objects, natural phenomena, animals etc), (Mato et al. 2010 : 137-139). Method: Children are invited to play the game "*Listen to and describe sound as they are heard*" They are invited to listen to the wind blowing outside, or to recreate other noises heard in their ambiance. Children reproduce and describe different noises as they hear them. They are assisted to use descriptive sound-imitating words suchlike chirping, meow-meow, oink-oink, etc. Symbolic games or, the mimic ones, intend to enhance communication, transmission of the message by means of gestures and body motions. (Kamani et al. 2004 : 79). Method: In the first learning situation games with children are improvised, with each of them taking the role of a child, i.e. the blind one, the clumsy one, the one who cannot speak and cannot understand the language, etc while participating into the game. Children are directed to blindfold themselves and try to find the classmate which gave them the ball. Also they are encouraged to understand the message via gestures and the language of signs. In the second learning situation, the body as a whole is to be used, with its movements, trying to convey the messages and responding by imitating physical, spiritual and emotional situations i.e. big, small, fat, thin, happy, sad, angry, surprised, dreamy, etc.

Following this is the format of observation and assessment of the linguistic abilities in which the field indicators development results for the 4-5 yrs-old children have been reflected. To draft the format we have been based in the leaflet "*Observe and Estimate*" (Zisi, Selmani 2009 : 6, 10), a document which has been built basing on the standards achieved in the pre-school system.

3. Results and their Interpretation

Other than statistical data, the intention of the study was to frame problems relating to child development, which obviously reveal the following question: what are the conclusions and their interpretations? In the field of linguistic formation, which essentially is promoting language learning in group, through the need to communicate with others, the results drawn brought us to the following conclusions:

1. By means of the game "*My name is special*" which intended to incite children write their names according to the model shown by the teacher, about 95% of the children can identify their name as well as can write it after the model offered by their teacher, using capital letters. They can identify the first letter their name commences with, as well as identify their age and gender. This is a satisfying indicator showing the scale of

- their knowledge and the identification skills they possess.
2. About 89% of the children describe their family members through figurative descriptions, using clauses to make the descriptions with more than four words. This indicator asserts a good level of the descriptive abilities, using physical and emotional qualifiers in their descriptions.
 3. About 72% of the children can retell an event happening very closely in time, i.e. in the morning or yesterday), in the game intending to develop linguistic abilities, further enrichment of their vocabulary and sentence patterns, by means of storytelling. This is a relatively good indicator. Children face difficulties in preserving logical continuity and in some cases into using the narration cohesive structures properly
 4. About 83% of the children can retell a generally known story by watching figures (by identifying the story introduction, the narration body and the conclusion). This is also a good indicator, divulging that events are better memorized through visual perception and figurative illustrations help children to preserve the logical fluency in narration, by further enriching their vocabulary and using time and place adverbs suchlike: *at the end, later on, in the ends* etc.
 5. In the game intending to develop the speaking abilities through storytelling a generally known story via figurative illustration, about 91% of the children could use past time verbs. This is a very good indicator regarding the use of the cohesive verb patterns, by means of which the characters' actions and events in narration become more dynamic.
 6. In the game for developing of speaking and writing abilities, about 97% of the children could name the animals, could write the animals' names written by the teacher, by imitating them and know to create the male-female pairs. This is a good indicator regarding animal naming and creating their gender pairs. .
 7. About 94% of the children could name five colors. (red, yellow, blue, green, orange), and can realize coloring figurative illustrations. This is another satisfying indicator regarding the development of the linguistic abilities via fine motorics.
 8. 76%of the children can recite rhymes by using words imitating certain noises in nature, (objects, natural phenomena, animals). This is a relatively good indicator about learning verses by heart and reciting them as well as for the memorization of the sound-imitating words.
 9. In the symbolic games or differently said, - the mimic ones, intending to enhance communication, transmission of the messages by means of gestures and bodily motions, children were placed in situations representing different scales of difficulties, making the achievement levels for this age group to be varying. Direct imitation has been proposed in the first situation, (imitation has been realized by sketching the object). About 84% of the children communicate by means of their hands and bodies. In the second situation, with a greater scale of difficulty, direct imitation has been proposed, (imitation of action). About 71% of the children communicate in group, by understanding the message and responding to it by reverse imitation i.e. *big/small, fat/thin, angry/smiley, etc.*The second indicator shows that symbolic games should be applied widely in the teaching process, in order to bring variety in communication.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

1. In our study we tried to bring forth a simple and functional model for the assessment of the linguistic formation in pre- school children (4 – 5 yrs-old age group) through playing. Since games cover a considerable part of the curricular activities in different aspect of child development, we have offered this model to be used by the pre-school students and teachers in their work with children.
2. The models of the games selected by us were received and realized satisfactorily by the children. This is a fact showing that they are realized with the proper methodic and scientific criteria, and impact not only the further enrichment of children's experience but even the progress of these abilities in the respective fields of child development. The study also showed that the selected models of games were fully understood and administered by the supporting group – the teachers and students, which further convinced us that these games can serve as an assessment model for the children's abilities in these two fields of development.
3. In the field of linguistic development the results showed a good level. The reason is that the children's linguistic formation for this age group has a background and is urged by their need to communicate. However, the children's linguistic development should be understood as an ever growing process, which must pass through its own development stages in time, (from one month to the other, in the course of the school year), always considering the different level of knowledge linked with the social ambiance the children belong to. The

pre-school teachers should apply various techniques to compensate inequalities resulting in children, to help them acquire and understand a base vocabulary in communication. Games consist to be one of the techniques contributing to the improvement of children communication.

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Table 1. Summary table containing the observation and assessment results for some of the Elbasan county kindergartens.

Fields of development	Observed behaviors		Assessment in percentage (%)
	Yes	No	
<i>Linguistic and communicative abilities</i>			
1. Identifies his/her name	266	14	95 %
2. Describes family members by using clauses with more than four words.	249	31	89 %
3. Retells an event that has occurred in a short time hence. (today, yesterday).	202	78	72 %
4. Retells a generally known story by watching figures (identifies introduction, the narration body and conclusions).	232	48	83 %
5. Uses past tense verbs.	255	25	91 %
6. Names the animals by creating male-female pairs).	244	36	87 %
7. Names five colors (red, yellow, blue, green, orange).	263	17	94 %
8. Recites rhymes by using words imitating certain noises (objects, natural phenomena, animals)	213	67	76 %
9. Imitates by means of figures (indirect).	235	45	84 %
10. Imitates by means of action (direct).	199	81	71 %

Graphic presentation of Table 1.

