

The importance of play for cultural and language learning

Play and its various multifaceted and multifunctional forms are widely understood as the most effective vehicle for young children's learning. Vygotsky's famous statement emphasises this aptly: "Play creates a zone of proximal development of the child. In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development." (Vygotsky, 1978:102) But 'play' in a new cultural context can be a bewildering experience and not all play activities in early years settings are conducive to language and cultural learning. (see [Amadur and Mohiuddin](#)). In this section we examine three significant concerns for bilingual children:

- The role of the teacher in play
- Teacher interaction
- Playing with others

The role of the teacher in play

The teacher's role is critical in ensuring that when all children engage in play experiences they continue to learn. However kind, energetic and welcoming the teacher is, it cannot be assumed that any intended learning will take place because of these qualities. The organisation of sandboxes, home corners and imaginative learning experiences, familiar from many early years settings, are important, and yet, not sufficient on their own. What remains significant is the teacher's engagement with children and their play.

It must be emphasised here that the focus of this section is on examining how teachers can support young bilingual children in learning through play rather than on guiding them on *how to play*. In order to be conducive to learning – and especially conducive to language learning - bilingual children's play experiences need to be supported by teacher-child interaction. This in return requires constant movement and interchange between observation, participation, analysis and reflection. A successful teacher will play with the children, observe their interests, and aim to see the world from children's perspectives. They will aim to enter children's own imaginary and exploratory play worlds as a respectful and sensitive participant, and guide them further in trying out new ideas, approaches or resources.

Play situations tend to create meaningful and interesting contexts for children, in which children new to English can become motivated to communicate both non-verbally and verbally, and to practise and rehearse familiar words and short phrases, and to begin the process of combining new words together. A teacher who joins in and provides a running commentary and talks through everyone's actions and ideas - i.e. models the use of language – when children are not yet able or ready to talk for themselves, provides language teaching in a meaningful context. Within such a child-sensitive approach it is anticipated that the teacher will build on, paraphrase and extend children's responses, from their very minimal non-verbal actions or gestures to more linguistically complex and longer sentences. This is often supported by a sensitive use of questions.

Teacher interaction

It is the quality and timing of teacher interaction that has the potential to make a real difference for all children. Sylva et al (2004) have identified 'shared, sustained thinking' as an important aspect of practitioner-child interaction. In their influential, large-scale EPPE project Sylva et al noted that the quality of adult-child interactions varied between different types of settings. High quality interaction - which they termed as 'shared, sustained thinking' - was the defining characteristic that singled out successful teachers from others. This is a particularly important finding for bilingual children who may have fewer opportunities to engage with others, both peers and adults in the setting, and who may initially find the overall context of learning baffling.

Research suggests that too often teachers remain distant from their bilingual children, their emotional state, their previous learning or starting points, regardless of their age or ethnicity (see, for example, Drury's (2007) work with young bilingual children and Chen's (2007) research with older Chinese children). From the children's first school day onwards, the emotional and conceptual distance, and, for example, the teacher's praise for their efforts, needs to reinforce high expectations.

The moment of interaction is critical. Children's play is often characterised by sudden changes of direction, both conceptual and physical, and the appropriate moment is easily missed. But catching the moment has the potential for moving children on, and for learning. The teacher will balance on a knife edge here. On the one hand children need space to be on their own, and with their peers, in order to remain in control of their play so that they can initiate and follow their own interests; on the other hand the teacher will need to be close, listening and tuning into their play, and joining in as appropriate in order to influence their learning. Learning a new language will depend on social interaction with others, and opportunities for conceptual development need to be accompanied by the use of language.

Playing with others

Play between peers has the potential to capture and sustain children's interest. In play activities children are likely to engage in personally meaningful communication with one another and thereby they create optimal conditions for language learning. In joint episodes of play, children are often more equal participants (as compared to adult-child play) and their levels of engagement tend to remain high. They create a purpose for their interaction and this often provides a context for practising and rehearsing language heard elsewhere in the setting. Daily routines are a good example. What the teacher says at different times of the day (for example 'It's tidy up time' and 'Who's ready for their snack?') is often repeated by the children in their play. Such daily rituals and routines and related language are an important source of language learning for young bilingual children and benefit from being 'recycled' through their own spontaneous play.

The following transcript reveals how young children practise and rehearse their language repertoires within their play. In the transcript, Samia, of British-Pakistani background, is at home playing with her younger brother Sadaqat, who is 2 years old. Samia decides to play school. She has already started attending a local nursery and now in her play she takes on the role of a teacher and uses both English and Pahari, her home language. Samia is, according to her nursery practitioners, 'new to English', and the extract shows clearly how the early years setting's daily rituals and routines are a powerful source of language for Samia. It also reveals how play provides a meaningful context for using a number of English phrases appropriately. Roman text is used for English and italicised text denotes Pahari:

Samia playing school at home	
1.	Samia: <i>Sadaqat, stand up</i> <i>We're not having group time now</i> Group time You can play, Sadaqat
5.	<i>Shall we play something?</i> You want to do painting? [noise from Sadaqat] OK get your water Let's get a water
10.	Let's get a water Let's get a paper Baby didn't cry Hurry up (whispering) You want paper
15.	And put in the painting Do that and what are you choose colour Black
	Sadaqat: Back
20.	Samia: No, there's a black Did you finish it? Painting You make it <i>Sadaqat, do it with this finger</i>
25.	<i>Do it like this, do it like that</i> Wash <i>Which colour are you going to choose</i> Next thing <i>Don't do it, Sadaqat</i>
30.	<i>Orange satsuma</i> <i>I'm doing it satsuma colour</i>

(Drury, 2007, p.27-28)

Samia appears to have a strong need to demonstrate to herself that she has understood both the setting's routines and the related language. In her play she is in control of school learning. For Samia this is an empowering experience which illustrates the importance of play. But what is also notable here is the ease of with which Samia uses the two languages and generally her interest in trying out English phrases. In this context she is confident and self-assured, and, therefore, she is able to use appropriate English words and various syntactical structures, from asking questions, to giving instructions and making statements. Some of these are formulaic chunks, everyday phrases of the setting such as 'group time' and 'hurry up' which she has no doubt heard frequently. In addition 'group time' may be a term that is not used at home at all – why would it be? – and Samia may not yet know its equivalent in Pahari, and here (line 2) she mixes the two languages in one sentence, or code-switches, with competence. It is also clear that Samia is using her own increasing knowledge of English grammar when she says 'let's get a water'. Samia knows that in English articles - here 'a' - are often placed in front of nouns, and her miscue - 'a water' - reveals that she is doing more than simply repeating common phases. She is experimenting, rehearsing and making sense of grammar. Samia is well on the way of to becoming bilingual

Socio-cultural perspectives on the learning of young bilingual children emphasise the inter-relatedness of the social, cultural and linguistic aspects of children's learning. A socio-cultural perspective also supports our understanding of young bilingual children's learning in a new social environment with different cultural rules and expectations. And it can take account of the individual child's experience from the home.

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