

Free play as a context for children's language development

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Abstract

Play is considered to be an important context for the development of language, communication skills and competence, and is often accompanied by complex language interactions. Children use language in their play most of the time, talking to themselves, their toys or their playmates. The purpose of our study was to evaluate children's use of language during three different pre-school activities: free play, routine activity and guided activity. The sample included 60 preschool children, aged 4 to 5 years (30 boys and 30 girls), from families with different educational backgrounds (30 with secondary and 30 with higher parental education). Children's speech was recorded during each of the three activities in the pre-school institution. The results of the structural and functional analysis show significant differences in many of the characteristics of children's speech during each of the three activities. Children spoke significantly more, used more multi-word utterances, interrogative and negative clauses, as well as using their language more frequently in the symbolic and regulatory function during free play than during routine and guided activity. The results show no significant differences between girls and boys in their free speech during the three pre-school activities.

Key words: early language development, pre-school curriculum, socio-dramatic play.

Introduction

Characteristics of language development in early childhood

Language, a system based on words and grammar which facilitates communication, is a fundamental element in a child's cognitive development (Papalia, Olds and Feldman, 2001). In early childhood syntax, which represents the grammatical rules of language, develops rapidly. Children's utterances become increasingly structured and similar to the grammatically correct utterances of adults (Siegler, 1998; Tomasello and Bates, 2001). From the age of three onwards, children start to form longer and more complete clauses, subordinate and coordinate, and to use different verb tenses (Browne, 1996). With the development of multi-word and ever-more complex utterances, there is an increasing use of conjunctions, such as *and*, *if* and *but*, prepositions and auxiliary verbs (Papalia et al., 2001; Toporišič, 1992). The words and grammatical rules children master allow them to talk about objects that are not present and about past events, or to ask about objects in the immediate environment. Children also learn to conjugate and to use the passive (Browne, 1996; Papalia et al., 2001; Smith and Cowie, 1993). Smith and Cowie (1993) note that the speech of a three-year-old is, in most cases, understandable not only to the parents but to other adults at which it is directed. By the age of five, children within all cultures understand and take account of most of the grammatical rules of their language (Smith and Cowie, 1993; Reynell, 1977). At the same time, they also communicate effectively, allowing them to engage in spoken interaction with their peers, for instance in play (Smith and Cowie, 1993). Although the acquisition of basic grammatical rules is largely complete by the age of five, the learning of irregular forms continues to the age of ten (Crain and Lillo-Martin, 1999). Children aged four to five also develop certain metalinguistic capabilities, such as identifying word classes and correcting their own grammatical mistakes (Crain and Lillo-Martin, 1999).

A functional approach to children's language development

In addition to phonology, semantics and syntax, the speech of pre-school children soon takes in pragmatics, i.e. the use of language in different social contexts. A functional approach to language use takes in broad aspects of social interaction between individuals (Harris, 1993). While an adult is capable of using language in different ways and for different aims, the child's pragmatic capabilities are at first much more limited and may involve only certain language functions (Halliday, 1973). Halliday (1973) identifies a number of functions in the speech of children up to the age of five; these represent the use of language in different speech situations.

1. The *instrumental function* is the most basic one, enabling the child to satisfy its biological needs. The use of language here is not dependent on the formation of grammatically correct sentences, but may simply involve, for example, an exclamation of some kind.
2. The *regulatory function* is closely linked to the instrumental. The child uses language in order to influence the behaviour of others, including peers and siblings. The child first forms simple, unstructured requests, then logically sequenced instructions, and is finally able to form groups of instructions, that may also involve conditional patterns such as *if, then*.
3. The *interactional function* is closely linked to the regulatory. It relates to the use of language in social interaction between the child and other children or adults. Peer groups offer the greatest scope for rapidly-shifting, complex patterns of interaction. The child uses language to define its reference group, to join or leave the group, to express group membership, or to convince or mislead its peers.
4. The *personal function* relates to the child's understanding of language as part of his or her own identity. Language plays an important role in the development of the child's self-awareness and personality. Through language, the child expresses not only thoughts, but also unique personal characteristics.
5. The *heuristic function* represents the use of language as a medium for exploring reality and for learning. The child uses questions to ask for facts and explanations, and also to generalise from the immediate reality. Pre-school children already make use of meta-language: they understand what is meant by *question* and *answer*, and also by *know* and *understand*.

6. The *representational function* allows children to develop their metalinguistic skills (for example, they make use of expressions like *story*, *make up* and *pretend*). By means of this function, the child is able to form a special relationship with the environment, shaping it to suit his or her wishes. The imaginative world that children create through language does not only include copies of real things, people or animals, but also songs, rhymes, puzzles and other language games.

7. The *informative function* allows the child to communicate messages relating to the different processes, people, objects, abstract concepts, qualities, states and relations in his or her environment. In the author's opinion, the transfer of information is the least important function for children, while in relation to adults it becomes the prime function.

Some factors in the pre-school curriculum that influence a child's language development

The pre-school teacher

The pre-school teacher, just like the parents, plays an important role in encouraging the child's language development by clarifying and describing most class activities, and by encouraging understanding of group activities (Browne, 1996). Browne (1996) emphasises that language does not represent a separate part of the pre-school curriculum, but is rather inter-connected with all the other areas and activities within and outside the pre-school environment. In the Slovene pre-school curriculum (1999), certain linguistic goals are defined and activities to encourage language development recommended: listening to speech in everyday communication, inclusion in the communicative process with peers and adults, listening to and telling stories and other literature, and developing the child's ability to use language in different functions and roles in relation to everyday activities and different social activities. At the same time, the child's language development inter-connects with all the other activities which form part of the pre-school day.

Authors emphasise the importance of encouraging verbal expression during familiar activities, such as dressing, having lunch or going for a walk (Nelson, 1996) as well as engaging the children in sharing stories (Fiese and Bickham, 2004). Some of the characteristics of the language pre-school children use when describing various activities (for example, the structure of statements, the use of concepts marking relations between objects, the range of vocabulary used) are different from those occurring in free play (French, Lucariello, Seidman and Nelson, 1985). Moyles (1995) points in particular to one-to-one communication between the teacher and the individual child, as well as discussion within small groups, as having a positive influence on language development. Similarly, Browne (1996) notes that discussion between the teacher and the whole group of children, for instance when a story is read, is rarely an effective way of encouraging such development, as the majority remains silent while one child or the teacher is speaking. In such a situation very few children take part in the group discussion and social interaction between the children is limited. The teacher most often engages with those children who have more developed language skills (Katz, 1985). The British authors Wood and Wood (1983) believe that teacher talk is one of the major contributory factors with regard to the child's level of activity, initiative and language competence. They note that the frequent use of questions requiring a very short answer, or of questions to which the teacher already knows the right answer, do not promote, but rather hinder the creative expression of the child through language. Children are well aware that the response to a question for which the teacher has already decided the answer can only be either right or wrong. Effective communication between children and teacher often triggers a response from the teacher which helps to elaborate upon and broaden a child's question or statement (Browne, 1996). Preschool teacher plays an important role in reading to and telling stories to groups of pre-school children as reading aloud with the appropriate intonation and emphases promotes the development of the child's understanding of language as a symbolic system, of sentence formation, of letters of the alphabet, punctuation, paragraphing and so on (Meek, 1985) Similarly, when the adult reads aloud a story with which the children are already familiar it promotes the understanding of words that were not understood first time around (Pellegrini and Galda, 1998). The reading of children's literature is one of the key ways of encouraging the

language development of pre-school children; however, where such reading is frequent, regular and purposeful, it leads to a higher level of language development, than where it is more coincidental, infrequent or perhaps understood as a "filler" activity. Adults can also have an indirect influence, for instance through games in which children take on different roles, adopt different relations with other children and make use of meta-communicative statements (Marjanovič Umek and Fekonja, 2004).

Peer groups

From a language development point of view, the child's communication with her peers is as important as communication with adults (Papalia et al., 2001). A child, in communicating with other children, speaks more than when interacting with an adult, the language is more elaborate and involves a wider vocabulary. Child's talk with peers involves more emotion and is more directed towards the common activity than talk with an adult (Reinstein, 1982). The function of planning and regulating first appears in communication with other children. Boynton's (1984) research among two- year-olds suggests that language at that stage is socially oriented and aimed at communication with peers, whereas some earlier authors, such as Piaget (1962), believe that the language of pre-school children is primarily egocentric. The children studied by Boynton were never observed to engage in group monologue. Nelson (1996) similarly notes that discussion among four-year-olds focuses largely on common recognition of different events. Her analysis of children's conversations shows them not to be egocentric when discussing activities or events familiar to all. French and Boynton (1983) draw two conclusions from their research in this area: the language used by pre-school children when communicating with their peers does not have the characteristics of monologue, but is rather socially-oriented and communicative; the quality and quantity of such language use is partially dependent on the nature of the type of play to which it relates and the structure of the environment in which the play unfolds. The Slovene authors Marjanovič Umek, Lešnik Musek, Pečjak and Kranjc (1999) report that communication among children within the context of play (especially of a symbolic nature) happens sooner than in other contexts. Their research indicates that, in symbolic play, children aged four to six more often use

formal language and registers, while the level of socially-transformed language and meta-communication also increases.

Play as a context for child's language development

One of the most frequent forms of play in early childhood, symbolic play, because of its symbolic nature, promotes the child's ability to express itself through language. Role play and the use of a range of objects that have different functions in the real world, demand that the child clarifies this symbolic transformation in order to make it understandable to the others involved. Symbolic elements, such as those just mentioned, thus encourage language development (McCune-Nicolich, 1981; Pellegrini and Galda, 1982). Symbols can be representative of different things: for instance, children may use their voices to imitate a baby, a particular movement, a picture, and so on (Whitehead, 1999). Symbolic play transcends the current situation, time and space. An imagined space and objects are presented by the child through naming (Moyles, 1995). Games of "pretend" are realised through the use of language which, as a symbolic system, facilitates thought at the level of representation, i.e. the search for new connections and relations (Pellegrini and Galda, 1982; Smilansky and Shefatya, 1990; Whitehead, 1999). Many researchers believe that language development and symbolic play are connected, because both are dependent on the development of the child's *ability to use symbols* or replace one object with another (Piaget, 1962; Lewis, Boucher, Lupton and Watson, 2000; McCune, 1995). In childhood development, play and language work interactively. Language is a tool through which the child can express what is learnt through play and a medium for internalising what has been learnt (Moyles, 1995). Children use language in play most of the time, as they often talk to each other or to their toys. During play children are able to realise a syntactically more complex level of language (Ohler and Nieding, 2004). Moyles (1995) believes that it is above all its symbolic nature that offers children the opportunity to develop language and communicative skills, as it is often accompanied by complex social interaction. In the pre-school period, children's symbolic play becomes increasingly social. The social context of symbolic play demands that the child increasingly makes use of language (Rubin, 1980). In socio-symbolic or socio-dramatic play, children clearly define their

own transformation, for instance "I am a doctor" (Pellegrini, 1985). In such play, child talk has an additional function: the planning, development and maintenance of the game demands cooperation, which is achieved through verbal explanations, discussion or commands, for example "We don't need two bus drivers – no bus has two drivers – you be the conductor!" Such language use is realistic rather than imitative or substitutional, as it facilitates organisation of the play and the solving of any problems that may arise (Smilansky and Shefatya, 1990).

Some research (Pellegrini and Galda, 1998; Bornstein and Haynes, 1998; Rescorla and Alley, 2001) indicates that, in different social contexts, pre-school children speak in different ways and achieve different levels of language development. In our research we examined, from a structural and functional point of view, children's spontaneous speech in three different pre-school activities – having breakfast, free play and guided activity. We wanted to establish whether these activities facilitate specific language use or the adoption of different linguistic roles, structural differences in the formation of utterances and, overall, the presence of lower or higher levels of language development. We were also interested to establish whether any linguistic differences between boys and girls could be identified during the highlighted activities.

Method

Participants

The research involved 60 children aged from 4 to 5. They were among five pre-school classes at three selected Slovene pre-school institutions. There was an equal number of boys and girls in the sample.

Instruments

The children were recorded engaged in different activities, using a camera and an additional microphone. To analyse the children's free talk, we took into account the laws

of language development in early childhood and Halliday's (1973) functional approach to language research in order to create an *analytical framework*. This enables a *functional analysis* to be carried out of the children's utterances within the instrumental, regulatory, interactional, personal, heuristic, representational and informative functions, as well as a *grammatical analysis* of children's speech involving the number of one-word, two-word and multi-word utterances, as well as coordinate, subordinate, interrogative and negative clauses.

Procedure

Having obtained permission from the relevant pre-schools and parents, we recorded children involved in *three daily activities*: having breakfast, free play and an activity guided by the teacher. The latter two were recorded for half an hour; breakfast normally did not last as long as this. Recording during breakfast ended when the children finished eating and left the table. During both free play and breakfast, children were recorded in groups of four, otherwise the recordings would not have been clear enough for later analysis; during guided activity, the whole group was recorded. At *breakfast*, which took place as it did every day, children sat at tables in groups of four, and we started recording when the teacher gave out the food. Children could talk at the table or not, depending on what the usual agreement with the teacher was. Groups of children engaged in *free play* in an area of the play room, limited to facilitate recording; the children played with whatever toys were available. We started recording when they showed an interest in the toys and began to handle them. We told them to play however they wanted to. When the group of four was playing, the teacher and the other children withdrew, otherwise it would not have been possible to record, even with an additional microphone. The *guided activity*, led by the teacher, involved the whole class. The teacher read the children a story that they had chosen themselves, or a picture book was used as a basis for telling a story and then discussing the content. The teacher received no specific instructions with regard to this activity, other than to carry on as usual, in the way that suited her. We started recording when the teacher began to read or tell the story, or began to talk to the children.

The transcripts of the recordings were produced by students trained for the task. We then analysed them within our *analytical framework*.

Results

The statistical significance of the occurrence of particular language functions and types of utterance used by the children in free play, at breakfast and during guided activity was verified using a t-test for dependent samples. Figures 1, 2 and 3 show the relative frequency of occurrence of particular language functions and types of utterance used by the children during the three activities.



Figure 1. Share of different language functions and utterances in the speech of children engaged in free play

In the speech of children engaged in free play the representational function of language prevails, being responsible for well over a half of utterances (59.1 %). This is followed by the informative function (21.4 %), while the other five occur far less frequently: heuristic (7.1 %), regulatory (6.3 %), interactional (4.9 %), personal (0.9 %) and instrumental (0.3 %). Children use mainly multi-word utterances (74.6 %); one-word (12.6 %) and two-word utterances (12.8 %) are much less common. Interrogatives (72.1 %) occur more often than negatives clauses (27.9 %), while there are far more subordinate clauses (85.3 %) than coordinate (14.7 %).

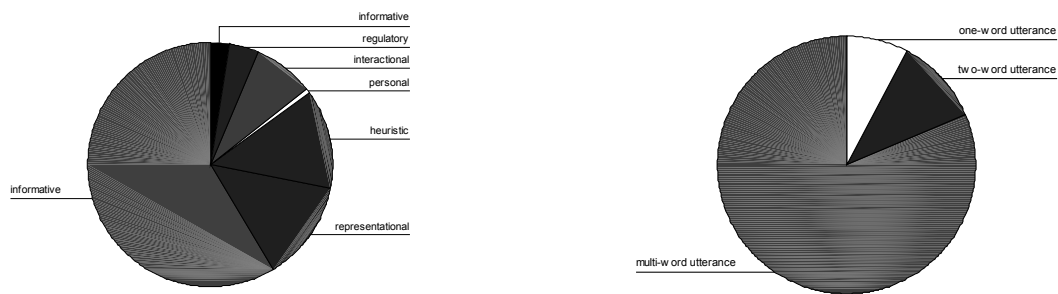


Figure 2. Share of different language functions and utterances in the speech of children during breakfast

In contrast with the language used during free play, at breakfast the informative function prevails (58.6 %), the representational (13.6 %), heuristic (12.5 %), interactional (8.0 %), regulatory (4.1 %) and instrumental functions (2.5 %) were much less frequent, while the personal function was rare (0.8 %). At breakfast, children used more multi-word (81.2 %) than one-word (7.6 %) or two-word utterances (11.2 %). Children used more interrogatives (72.4 %) than negative statements (27.6 %), and more subordinate (75.0 %) than coordinate clauses (25.0 %).

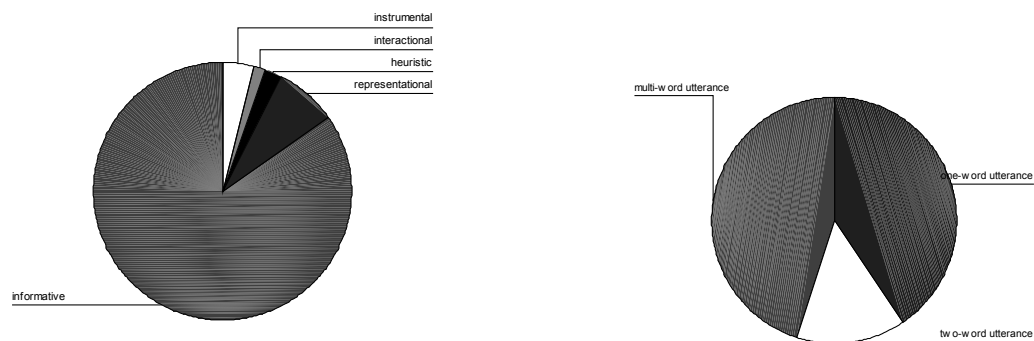


Figure 3. Share of different language functions and utterances in the speech of children during guided activity

In the speech of children during guided activity, the informative function dominates (84.6 %), while the representational (7.8 %), instrumental (4.0 %), heuristic (2.2 %) and interactional functions (1.3 %) were far less frequent and the personal function did not feature at all. Multi-word (45.0 %) and one-word utterances (40.5 %) occurred with roughly equal frequency, while two-word utterances (14.5 %) were less frequent. Children used only interrogative and subordinate clauses, rather than negative or coordinate ones.

Table 1. Relative occurrence of language functions in children's speech during free play, breakfast and guided activity

<i>Language function</i>	<i>M_p</i>	<i>M_b</i>	<i>M_a</i>	<i>t (p,b)</i>	<i>t (p,a)</i>	<i>t (b,a)</i>
<i>Instrumental</i>	0.08	0.31	0.64	-1.88	-0.83	-0.28
<i>Regulatory</i>	1.28	0.50	0.00	2.33*	3.47**	2.08*
<i>Interactional</i>	1.08	0.98	0.13	0.47	3.45**	3.19**
<i>Personal</i>	0.20	0.09	0.00	1.15	2.25*	2.07*
<i>Heuristic</i>	1.54	1.55	0.26	0.11	3.12**	3.74**
<i>Representational</i>	13.36	1.67	0.59	4.29**	4.86**	1.51
<i>Informative</i>	4.31	7.21	8.23	-2.02*	-2.57*	-1.08

Note. *... $p < 0.05$; **... $p < 0.01$; *M_p*... arithmetic mean during free play; *M_b*... arithmetic mean during breakfast; *M_a*... arithmetic mean during guided activity; *t (p,b)*... t-test of differences between arithmetic means during free play and breakfast; *t (p,a)*... t-test of differences between arithmetic means during free play and guided activity; *t (b,a)*... t-test of differences between arithmetic means during breakfast and guided activity.

During free play, children used the regulatory and representational functions significantly more often than they did during breakfast or guided activity. Similarly, the interactional, personal and heuristic functions were used more often during free play than during guided activity. During breakfast, the regulatory, interactional, personal and heuristic functions were used more often than during guided activity.

Table 2. Relative occurrence of individual sentence structures in children's speech during free play, breakfast and guided activity

<i>Language structure</i>	<i>M_p</i>	<i>M_b</i>	<i>M_a</i>	<i>t (p,b)</i>	<i>t (p,a)</i>	<i>t (b,a)</i>
<i>One-word utterance</i>	2.97	0.93	4.03	3.87**	-1.11	-4.86**
<i>Two-word utterance</i>	2.44	1.36	1.46	2.72**	1.96	-0.54
<i>Multi-word utterance</i>	16.97	9.93	4.20	2.89**	5.35**	3.16**
<i>Number of utterances</i>	22.38	12.21	9.67	3.57**	3.93**	0.96
<i>Subordinate clauses</i>	0.69	0.36	0.18	1.11	2.55*	0.33

<i>Coordinate clauses</i>	0.13	0.12	0.00	0.00	1.96	1.95
<i>Interrogative clauses</i>	3.15	1.62	0.33	2.67*	4.81**	3.39**
<i>Negative clauses</i>	1.31	0.58	0.00	2.00*	5.13**	3.45**

Note. See Table 2.

During free play, children use more multi-word utterances, and interrogative and negative clauses, than during breakfast or guided activity. Similarly, during free play, children used significantly more one-word or two-word utterances than during breakfast, and significantly more subordinate clauses than during guided activity. At breakfast, children used significantly more multi-word utterances, interrogative and negative clauses, and fewer one-word utterances, than during guided activity.

Table 3. Arithmetic mean of the results of functional and structural analysis of boys and girls during three activities

<i>Language function</i>	<i>Mp</i>		<i>Mb</i>		<i>Ma</i>		<i>F(p)</i>	<i>F(b)</i>	<i>F(a)</i>
	<i>g</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>b</i>			
<i>Instrumental</i>	0.00	0.12	0.00	0.44	0.00	0.60	1.77	3.02	0.52
<i>Regulatory</i>	1.44	1.45	0.16	0.64	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.87	-
<i>Interactional</i>	1.25	1.00	0.57	1.12	0.04	0.23	0.23	1.43	1.57
<i>Personal</i>	0.12	0.28	0.00	0.16	0.00	0.00	0.74	3.08	-
<i>Heuristic</i>	0.94	2.03	1.50	1.42	0.00	0.45	2.24	0.01	3.11
<i>Representational</i>	12.81	13.65	1.30	1.64	0.58	0.90	0.02	0.10	0.28
<i>Informative</i>	4.69	5.04	6.31	7.10	8.08	7.98	0.06	0.11	0.00
<i>Language structure</i>	<i>Mp</i>		<i>Mb</i>		<i>Ma</i>		<i>F(p)</i>	<i>F(b)</i>	<i>F(a)</i>
	<i>g</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>b</i>			
<i>One-word utterance</i>	3.50	2.38	1.01	0.78	3.85	3.83	0.02	0.35	0.00
<i>Two-word utterance</i>	2.19	3.40	0.96	1.45	1.02	1.50	1.12	0.93	0.77
<i>Multi-word utterance</i>	17.06	17.58	7.59	10.33	3.83	4.87	0.01	0.76	0.45
<i>Number of utterances</i>	22.25	23.87	9.70	12.50	8.71	10.17	0.08	0.54	0.27
<i>Subordinate clauses</i>	0.50	0.83	0.31	0.30	0.25	0.33	0.43	0.00	0.06
<i>Coordinate clauses</i>	0.19	0.00	0.00	0.14	0.00	0.00	0.89	0.61	-
<i>Interrogative clauses</i>	2.44	3.71	1.45	1.50	0.00	0.55	1.27	0.00	2.29
<i>Negative clauses</i>	1.50	1.13	0.23	0.78	0.00	0.00	0.57	3.23	-

Note. *Mp*... arithmetic mean during free play; *Mb*... arithmetic mean during breakfast; *Ma*... arithmetic mean during guided activity; *g*... girls; *b*... boys; *F (p)*... F-test of differences between arithmetic means of girls and boys during free play; *F (b)*... F-test of differences between arithmetic means of girls and boys during breakfast; *F (a)*... F-test of differences between arithmetic means of girls and boys during guided activity.

Results show no significant differences between boys and girls with regard to the use of either language functions or structures.

Discussion

The results of our analysis confirm the findings of Bornstein and Haynes (1998), who state that spontaneous play with their peers leads children to produce different utterances than in structured situations, such as breakfast or guided activity. Our findings confirm that different pre-school activities encourage children to adopt different speech roles and to produce utterances that differ structurally. Recording and analysing the verbal expression of children during different activities provides a fuller and deeper picture of their linguistic competence than similar research focused on one activity. This is confirmed by other authors (e.g. Bornstein and Haynes, 1998; Dale, Bates, Reznick and Morisset, 1989; Rescorla and Alley, 2001). The three activities – free play, breakfast and guided activity – differed with regard to what they offered the children; there were also difference with regard to the space in which the children could move, in the rules applying to speaking, and in terms of the inclusion of an adult in the communication with the children. All these characteristics helped shape the language used by the children.

The findings confirm Wood and Wood's (1983) assertion that the behaviour and utterances of the pre-school teacher have an important influence on the child's use of language, especially during guided activity, when the teacher is most actively involved. All the guided activities were language based (story-reading, storytelling based on a picture book, discussing the story that has been read, continuing stories). Our findings are similar to those of Browne (1996), as they show that most children are silent during guided activity, while a single child or the teacher speaks. Very few children contributed to group discussion, while social interaction and communication between children was almost non-existent. Our results also support Katz (1985), who notes that questions to the whole group were most often answered by the same individual children. These were usually the loudest and spoke more than others, so that the teacher tended to notice them and involve them in the discussion. Teacher questions requiring short answers most often led to one-word responses, in spite of the fact that children age four to five are capable of forming complex, multi-word sentences, involving subordination or coordination. Children spoke less during guided activity than during play, and failed to make use of

either negative or coordinate clauses – although these occurred during free play and at breakfast – as well as resorting more often to one-word sentences. The British authors Wood and Wood (1983) note that the teacher's frequent use of questions demanding very short answers hinders rather than encourages children's verbal expression. The smaller number of utterances in children's speech during guided activity was partly a result of the fact that at least half the time available the teacher was reading to the children or telling them a story, while they listened. Discussion between teacher and children began only after the reading or story was complete. The teacher's questions primarily encouraged the children to use the informative function, even though studies show that children of this age are capable of making use of all seven functions. By encouraging children's independent narration and the forming of stories that go beyond what had been read, and through the encouragement of social interaction and conversation among children, the teacher could provide greater opportunities for the use of language in other speech roles.

The number of child utterances during breakfast was significantly lower than during free play, but similar to the number occurring during guided activity. Although teachers did not forbid children from talking, they did not encourage them by asking questions or by active participation of their own. Many authors (e. g. Nelson, 1978; Siegler, 1998) emphasise the importance of encouraging children's verbal expression when they are engaged in routine activities. The questions asked during breakfast were linked solely to food and drink, for example, "Do you want cheese?" or "Who wants more milk?"; these required only short answers with "yes" or "no". Moreover, the children, in talking to their peers, most often relied on the informative function of language, for example "Look how much I've got in my mouth!" The results of functional and structural analysis of children's talk during breakfast is not entirely comparable with that during the other two activities, as breakfast usually lasted less than fifteen minutes. However, children's speech at breakfast contained significantly more multi-word, interrogative and negative clauses than during guided activity. Moreover, children at breakfast stimulated each other more to form complex sentences than did the teacher during guided activity.

In contrast with guided activity, free play enables children to use all language functions. Children's speech during play most often involves multi-word utterances, as well as interrogative, negative, subordinate and, somewhat less frequently, coordinate clauses. The results of functional and structural analysis confirm the findings of many authors (e.g. Lyytinen, Poikkeus, and Laakso, 1997; McCune-Nicolich, 1981; Moyles, 1995; Pellegrini and Galda, 1982) who state that play represents an effective medium for the encouragement of the child's language development and meta-linguistic skills. Children's speech during free play was most often peer-directed and did not display the kind of collective monologue often observed by Piaget (1962). Children engaged in dialogue with each other discussed what they were playing, determined the rules of the game, and distributed and adopted roles. The most frequently-used function was the representational: for example "She's a princess" or "There's petrol in here". This is because role playing, and the use of various objects with a different function from that which they have in the real world, demand of children that they also symbolically transform their verbal expression in order to make it understandable to fellow players (Pellegrini and Galda, 1982). Speech during play that was not directed at peers was most often 'loaned' to toys or used to show the noise they would make: for instance, a child pours imaginary water on an imaginary fire and says "Schhh". The results we obtained were similar to those of Reinstein (1982), who observes that children communicating with each other speak more than when communicating with an adult, their speech is more elaborate and employs a wider vocabulary. Play activity, in which, as Vygotsky (1986) says, the child is "a head taller" than in other activities, and the peer group in which the child interacts with others are both factors that, in the pre-school curriculum, encourage language development from the point of view of structure, as well as the use of different speech roles. The child's age and situation, with its characteristics and rules, determine how often a particular function occurs in the child's speech, as well as which function predominates, so it makes sense to research the effects of different pre-school activities on children's language development over a longer period and, at the same time, to consider "the field of language" in the pre-school curriculum.

Many authors (e.g. White, 1990; Whitehead, 1999; Swann, 1992) believe that children's language ability is dependent also on gender. However, our results showed no significant differences during any of the activities. This is similar to the findings of Maccoby and Jacklin (1974), who state that, after the age of two, differences between boys and girls with regard in the level of spontaneous speech during everyday activities are negligible. Pellegrini and Jones (1994) assert that girls more often engage in imaginative play and, because of this, more often use language at a symbolic level than do boys. Our functional analysis of the language used during free play does not confirm these findings, as boys and girls showed no significant differences in the use of the representational or any other function. In fact, boys even used the representational function more than girls. Nor did boys and girls, during free play, differ significantly in the use of one-word, two-word or multi-word utterances, in the overall number of utterances, or in the number of subordinate, coordinate, interrogative or negative clauses used. Similarly, there were no important differences relating to breakfast time, although boys more often used the instrumental, regulatory and personal functions, while girls used more interrogatives. At breakfast, boys were somewhat more likely than girls to use the heuristic function: i.e. they more often asked for information and for explanation. These requests were usually directed at the teacher, as in guided activity there was little interaction or discussion among the children. Nor did the relative frequency of the seven functions differ in the speech of boys and girls during guided activity. Bearing in mind that, during guided activity, the same children tended to speak – usually those with the most developed abilities (Katz, 1985) – we can conclude that there were among them a roughly equal number of boys and girls.

Due to the relatively small sample involved, we cannot draw generalisations, nor did we monitor the quality of the pre-school teacher's work; however, we can conclude that in the pre-school environment, free play is an appropriate context for children's language development.

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