Play-Based Intervention Supporting Kindergarten Children’s Language in a Northern Ontario First Nations Community

Miga Kim a  Shelley Stagg Peterson a
a Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

Abstract

As a recent graduate of the Master of Teaching program and a professor teaching in the program, we are interested in learning more about how to support young children’s oral language. We believe, as the provincial language arts curriculum states, that “oral communication skills are fundamental to the development of literacy and essential for thinking and learning” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 9). We would like to put a greater emphasis on oral language in our teaching practice at the elementary and initial teacher education levels. Teachers participating in our six-year action research project, like those working with researchers in previous studies (e.g., Dench, Cleave, Tagak, & Bedard, 2011), are concerned about the limited language use of children entering their kindergartens. To address these concerns, we and participating teachers have collaborated with a speech-language pathologist (S-LP) so we can share our knowledge and experiences about language learning, Indigenous cultural practices, and pedagogy. In this paper, we present what we have learned from a play-based intervention carried out in a Northern Ontario First Nations community by an Indigenous educator who works with an external S-LP to support the language development of young children who have been identified by the classroom teacher and S-LP as needing support beyond their regular classroom activities.

Introduction

Research published by speech-language pathologists shows that the speech and language problems that Indigenous children encounter may be a result of a mild to moderate hearing loss associated with an ear infection: otitis media. Young First Nations children are more likely to suffer from untreated ear infections in comparison to students in southern communities with better health facilities (Langan, Sockalingam, Caissie & Corsten, 2007). Because of the hearing loss resulting from the chronic ear infections, First Nations primary grade students may be misdiagnosed with speech and language problems. Additionally, many researchers have found that S-LP’s are under- and over-identifying speech and language problems when testing young First Nations children because the majority of tools in current use in Canada have been developed and normed predominantly on children of European heritage in urban settings (Ball, 2007; Eriks-Brophy, 2014; Peltier, 2003). The Indigenous English dialects spoken in children’s homes may be different, in terms of speech sounds, syntax, and word use, from the Standard English that is used...
in the assessments. For example, children speaking an Indigenous English dialect may omit the regular past tense verb marker “-ed” and may use a past tense irregular verb form not used in Standard English (e.g., “jamp” for jumped”). They may substitute gender pronouns (e.g., he/she, her/him), or substitute “there” or “here” for a prepositional phrase (Peltier, 2011). If these dialect differences are not taken into account, standardized language assessments and the follow-up instruction will be culturally inappropriate for First Nations children. A final concern is that for children who need support, “speech-language services are extremely limited for children living on reserve, since this is not a benefit provided by the federal government and many communities cannot afford to allocate funds from other programs to contract for this ancillary service” (Ball, 2009, p. 26). Each of these factors contribute to the need for S-LP’s and teachers to work together to support young First Nations children’s language.

The history of First Nations children’s education in Canada must also be recognized as playing a role in the need for such collaboration. Although residential schools are no longer operating, there are lasting impacts of residential schools in First Nations communities. Duff and Li (2009) provide statistical evidence of the impact, as they summarize Statistics Canada (2008) reports presenting that “fewer than 30% of Canadian Indigenous people report being able to speak or understand an Indigenous language (often their L2) conversationally; even smaller numbers report it as their mother tongue, the language they first learned and continue to understand, or as their current home language” (p. 4). The Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) recommends that Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators work collaboratively to better understand “our histories, our traumas, and ourselves” (p. 283).

In this research report, we describe an initiative undertaken by Dana, a non-Indigenous speech-language pathologist, who works with Kari, an Indigenous early childhood educator, to provide speech and language services to children in the Northern Ontario community of Sinence Shores (names of the community and participants are pseudonyms). The goal of the initiative, as explained by Dana, is to provide a boost to First Nations children who are linguistically developing as expected for their age, but encounter specific language difficulties. Following a brief review of the literature on language, play and learning, we describe how Kari carried out the intervention under Dana’s supervision and then report on our analysis of Kari’s interactions with three children. The following research questions guided our analysis:

(1) What specific prompts does Kari use to elicit children’s language?
(2) In what ways do the children respond to Kari’s prompts?

We conclude with recommendations for teachers who wish to support children’s language, particularly in First Nations communities.
Literature Review: Language, Play and Learning

Language is not only a cultural tool for communicating with others; it is the primary means for making sense of the world. Children learn language and learn what they can do with language as they interact with others (Halliday, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978). Play allows children to build on the knowledge about language that they bring from home and community experiences (Boyd & Galda, 2011). Every child can contribute their cultural experiences and knowledge as they use language and nonverbal communication in play (Moyles, 2015; Sawyer & DeZutter, 2009). Teachers can scaffold children’s communication during play by observing and listening before contributing to the play and then providing sufficient time for children to make meaning of the verbal and nonverbal information before responding (Greenberg & Weitzman, 2005).

In their play, children explore their world, creating hypotheses about and experimenting with language and ideas. They also develop social and cultural understandings, such as expected social conventions and rules in particular social contexts, through, for example, observing how peers and adults react to what they say and do in play (Resnick & Snow, 2009; Wood, 2013). The importance of play is recognized in the Ontario kindergarten program:

“Play is recognized as a child’s right, and it is essential to the child’s optimal development, all children are viewed as competent, curious, capable of complex thinking, rich in potential and experience, and a natural curiosity and a desire to explore, play, and inquire are the primary drivers of learning among young children, the learning environment plays a key role in what and how a child learns, and in play-based learning programs, assessment supports the child’s learning and autonomy as a learner (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, pp. 12-13).”

Recognizing that play is “influenced by wider social, historical and cultural factors, so that understanding what play is and learning how to play are culturally and contextually situated processes” (Wood, 2013, p. 8), we define play broadly for the purpose of our study to include activities in Kari’s S-LP room that involve children talking to each other and to Kari as they construct things with Play Doh and manipulate toy objects. Our definition draws on Hirsh-Pasek’s and Golinkoff’s (2011) notion of “guided play”, where teachers provide a physical environment and interact with children in ways that support children’s language and learning during play (p. 113). This play-based language support, reported in previous research conducted in kindergarten classrooms (e.g., Damhuis & DeBlauw, 2008; Peterson & Greenberg, 2017), encourages children to explore ideas and solve problems through talk. It aligns with Wood’s (2014) technicist or curriculum-driven mode of pedagogy. Kari purposefully selects play objects and initiates conversation with the three participating children with the language goals set by Dana. The language learning affordances are created through the materials that Kari makes available and also how children make use of the materials and their “investment of existing knowledge, expertise and skills” (Wood, 2009, p. 35).
This “investment”, which could also be viewed as “funds of knowledge”, is culturally based, as children draw on the perspectives, understandings and experiences of their communities and of the media and other texts of the world beyond their communities (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). It is important for educators to assess their teaching practices to ensure that they are recognizing and building upon children’s funds of knowledge. This involves providing a culturally appropriate space for their students to learn. Ladson-Billings (2014) explains that the main objective in culturally appropriate practices is to “link principles of learning with deep understanding of (and appreciation for) culture” (p. 77).

Methods

Context and Participants

Our research takes place in the ancestral territory of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation. We are grateful for the opportunity to work with community members of Sinence Shores First Nations within this territory. Sinence Shores First Nations is only accessible by airplane and by winter roads when the lakes freeze over. With a population of approximately 3000 people, Sinence Shores has an elementary and a high school. The elementary school has three kindergarten classes. English is the language of instruction in two classrooms and Oji-Cree, the traditional language of the community, is the language of instruction of the third classroom. All kindergarten teachers are from Sinence Shores. Kari, the assistant to Dana, the speech-language pathologist on contract to provide services to Sinence Shores children, has been a Teaching Assistant for seven years and a full-time Speech Language Pathology Classroom Assistant for three years. She has lived all her life in Sinence Shores. Kari’s mother tongue is the First Nations English dialect of her community.

The two boys, Kaeden and Trey, and girl, Pam, who participated in our research were five-years-olds and in senior kindergarten at the time of the study. They speak the First Nations English dialect of their community at home. Two of the children were in the Oji-Cree immersion kindergarten classroom. The three children were chosen to be part of the play-based intervention because they had been identified by their junior kindergarten teachers as having some language difficulties. After Dana assessed their language, she found that their language skills were developing appropriately, but required additional support for certain grammatical markers. Kari met for approximately 30 minutes with the three children twice weekly for five weeks.

Data Collection and Analysis

This qualitative research study is underpinned by the view that participants’ voices and views are at the center of understanding the issues and phenomena that are being researched (Charmaz, 2004). During our data collecting process, Kari primarily collected the data by setting up an iPod on a tripod in the small room that the school designated as the speech-language room. For this paper, two videos, each approximately 20 minutes in length, were used to examine Kari’s play-based facilitation. The children’s and Kari’s language and actions were transcribed using the
Jeffersonian Transcription System (http://mis.ucd.ie/wiki/JeffersonianTranscription). To ensure consistency across the transcripts and accuracy of the transcribing, transcribers met twice to transcribe common video clips and compare transcripts. Additionally, one video was transcribed by a second transcriber.

Two research assistants, including the first author of this paper, initially read the transcripts and viewed the videos multiple times. They began analyzing the transcripts by identifying types of prompts (verbal and nonverbal input from the teacher directed to the children) that Kari used that elicited children’s language (in response to research question #1). In response to research question #2, the analyzers categorized children’s responses according to which of the target grammatical markers, that Dana had identified from her language assessments, were being used by the children. The children’s use of grammatical markers was further categorized as being conventional or unconventional examples of the grammatical markers. The two researchers involved in the coding and analysis met multiple times to report frequencies and to ensure the reliability throughout the process.

The Play-Based Intervention

Kari focused on specific linguistic goals for each child in each video-recorded meeting with the children. In one video she focused on prepositions, in another on regular plurals, and in another video she focused on singular pronouns + is. The videos recorded two of the ten sessions where the three children were removed from their kindergarten class to meet with Kari. Each video-recorded session took place in the small room designated as the speech and language support room. The room has a table with four chairs around it and shelves with toys and language games.

With the intention of encouraging children’s talk, Kari began the sessions with open-ended activities where children and Kari created something (e.g., with Play Doh). She then brought out materials (e.g., clay, stuffed and toy animals, toy blocks) and engaged in conversations with the goal of encouraging children’s use of the target grammatical marker for the class.

Findings: Kari’s and the Children’s Interactions

In her conversations with children during the two 20-minute video-recorded sessions, Kari most frequently affirmed or clarified the children’s contributions. Affirmations and clarifications took the form of repeating/paraphrasing a child’s response or asking a question with, “Hmm? or What?” The following excerpt from one of the videos illustrates the pattern of conversations in which Kari used affirmations. In this interaction, the children are playing the game, Connect Four.

Kari: When do you go to sleep?

Trey: At night.
Kari: At night.

Trey: (no verbal response)

Kari: That’s good.

Child: And I wake up at sunny.

In this interaction, after Kari affirms Trey’s response by repeating, “At night,” he provides more information to extend his initial two-word answer containing the target grammatical marker – a preposition.

The second most frequent type of prompt that most frequently elicited children’s language was asking real-life questions that were either associated with the play context or referred to something in the child’s out-of-school life. This pattern is illustrated in the following excerpt, as Kari asked questions related to the children’s play with toy animals:

Kari: Pam, where does the elephant live?

Pam: (no verbal response)

Kari: Jungle or...?

Pam: A jungle.

Kari: Oh, in a jungle.

Kaeden: Cats live in houses.

When Pam did not respond to the question, Kari provided a suggestion. She then affirmed Pam’s response by repeating what Pam had said. Additionally, Kari added the target grammatical marker, a preposition. Playing with a toy elephant provided Pam with conceptual information about the term, “elephant”. Being part of a small group also supported Pam’s language development, as Kaeden, who made connections to his existing knowledge, contributed another example of the use of a preposition.

Kari used other prompts less frequently to elicit children’s language. They took the form of: (1) asking children to identify what they planned to do/were constructing, or why they were doing something; and (2) modelling the desired sentence structure/word and then asking children to repeat it. The former type of prompt typically elicited more elaborated language from children.
(e.g., explanations/providing information), whereas the model-and-repeat prompt typically elicited one- or two-word responses from children.

**Discussion and Implications**

Our analysis of Kari’s and the three children’s interactions in a play-based language intervention setting demonstrates that affirming (often through repeating what the child had said) and clarifying children’s responses while playing with materials can be used as alternatives to the initiation-response-evaluation form of teacher-student interaction (e.g., teacher asks questions, children answer the question and then the teacher evaluates the children’s responses) that researchers describe as typical in classrooms (Alexander, 2000; Cazden, 1988/2001). Kari’s affirmations of children’s language or actions elicited the greatest number of responses from the children. This practice aligns with Greenberg and Weitzman’s (2005) recommendations that teachers use comments and not just questions in order to encourage children’s talk. Also consistent with practices recommended by speech-language pathologists, Kari was intentional in asking questions that the children could understand and answer, and that corresponded with their interests (Greenberg & Weitzman, 2005).

Our research also shows that small-group play activities involving the manipulation of materials provided a useful context for encouraging children’s talk. Play with toy animals provided opportunities to talk using prepositions, for example, as children talked about where the animals lived. Play with a basket of toy frogs provided opportunities for children to use regular plurals, as they talked about how the frogs could jump. The play activities were also motivational (Moyles, 2015), as children enthusiastically played with the materials that Kari set on the table.

During the unstructured play time, Kari asked questions about children’s real-life experiences, encouraging stories about their lives. Kari’s practice honoured Indigenous ways of teaching, as storytelling is an important form of cultural expression and transmission of knowledge within Indigenous cultures (Castellano, 2008; Dion & Salamanca, 2014; Styres, 2011). However, in our reflections with Kari and Dana on what we were seeing in the videos, we found that the children’s storytelling could be further developed. We are exploring ways in which Kari and the children might co-create narratives about play objects, and are proposing that some local Indigenous cultural objects, in addition to the commercially-produced toy animals, might enhance the cultural appropriateness of the play. We are also examining ways to integrate Oji-Cree, the language of the community before the Canadian government’s assimilationist policies led to the widespread use of English in Sinence Shores. We are seeking out possible opportunities for the children’s Indigenous language and culture to be incorporated into their time with Kari in order to foster children’s “increased pride, both in themselves and in their families” (Bernhard et al., 2006, p. 2399). As McCarty and Nicholas (2014) explain, teaching the children the Indigenous language of their community is “intimately tied to decolonization, cultural autonomy, and identity” (p. 116).
While there has been substantial research showing connections between play and children’s learning (e.g., Moyles, 2015; Wood, 2009, 2013), there is a need for more evidence on ways in which teachers can participate in children’s play to support children’s oral language. We believe that although the small sample size limits the scope of the research, our findings contribute to understandings of how teachers can support children’s language and learning through play, whether in Indigenous or mainstream classrooms. Research findings about the potential of affirmations to elicit children’s language, for example, can serve as a springboard for other teachers to seek out alternatives to the initiation-response-evaluation teacher-child interaction pattern. Additionally, we hope that other teachers will find, after reading our research, that conversations between teachers and speech-language pathologists and a closer look at research in the field of speech-language pathology, are valuable forms of professional development.

Acknowledgements: We are grateful to Kari, her students and her community, for participating in this research. We are also grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and to the Canadian Institute for Health Research (CIHR) for funding this research.

References


**Author Details:**
Shelley Stagg Peterson*, a former elementary teacher in rural Alberta, teaches literacy curriculum, theory and methods courses and conducts research in the teaching and assessing of writing, young children’s language learning in play contexts, rural education, and collaborative action research. Email: shelleystagg.peterson@utoronto.ca

Miga Kim is a recent graduate from the Master of Teaching program, and a teacher working in the Toronto District School Board. She is a strong advocate for children who are marginalized, and is
interested in continuing research concerning the integration of Korean immigrant families in Toronto schools. Email: migakim@tdsb.on.ca

* Corresponding author