Title:
Exploring children’s oral language use during sociodramatic play in a junior infant classroom.

Thesis
By
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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the award of the degree of Master in Education Studies (Early Childhood Education)

Date:
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Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly. This work has not been submitted previously at this or any other educational institution. The work was done under the guidance of Dr. Joan Kiely at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. I agree that the library may lend or copy this dissertation upon request.

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Fiona Colfer
Date: June 2019
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I would like to thank my family and friends for their good humour, constant motivation and unfailing help and support throughout the last two years.

Finally I would like to thank the parents of the participants, and the children who agreed to help with this dissertation; may they continue to use their language in playful ways to explore and learn about the world in which they are growing up in!
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Abstract

This dissertation seeks to examine children’s language use during sociodramatic play in a junior infant classroom. The research is a case study which aimed to examine the purposes of children’s oral language use during sociodramatic play and to investigate if the elements and learning outcomes from the oral language strand of the *Primary Language Curriculum* (DES, 2015) are realised through sociodramatic play. Teacher involvement in sociodramatic play is also examined in order to discover the ways in which children’s oral language use is affected by adult involvement during play.

The findings indicate that children who take part in carefully planned sociodramatic play use language for many purposes. They use language for their own needs, language for co-operating with others, language for planning and directing, and playful and imaginative use of language. The findings also suggest that language curriculum objectives in relation to oral language can be realised through sociodramatic play. The study points to teacher involvement in sociodramatic play as being important in order to support and extend children’s language use during play. The findings of this dissertation are important for those working in similar settings who struggle with the competing demands of meeting curricular goals while maintaining child-centered practices. This dissertation promotes sociodramatic play as an effective pedagogy through which teachers can achieve a balance between child-directed and teacher-guided interactions in early years classrooms.
Chapter 1:

Introduction

Language development is a topic of extensive research in the field of early childhood education. Language is essential for human development; it is the means through which young children make sense of the world around them. It forms the basis of all aspects of communication and social interactions. Language plays an important role in developing specific mental capacities and skills such as self-regulation, problem solving, persistence and attention (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, 2013b). Children with well-developed language skills display better academic outcomes and are more likely to succeed in later academic learning (Justice & Pullen, 2003). Delays in language learning impact other areas of development, including motor, social and cognitive skills (Bluiett, 2018).

The importance of developing effective practice in relation to language learning has been widely acknowledged and studied. The links between language development and play have been broadly attested to in early childhood literature (Stagnitti, Bailey, Hudspeth Stevenson, Reynolds & Kidd, 2016; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, 2013a). Research points to playful approaches to teaching and learning as a means through which language can best be developed and supported. This chapter will describe the background and context to the study, the aims of the study and it will lay out the structure of the work, chapter by chapter.

Background and Context to the Study

Play and play-based learning is a widely researched topic in the field of early childhood education. Many researchers have acknowledged the pivotal role of play in early years settings and classrooms (Anning, 2015; Wood 2013b). Research has demonstrated that play contributes to many important skills in early childhood such as
persistence and creativity, self-regulation, increased attention and concentration, abstract thinking and language and literacy development (Brooker, Blaise & Edwards, 2014). Furthermore, play-based curricula have been argued to provide a meaningful context for children’s learning and are understood to promote long-lasting positive influences on future academic success (Justice & Pullen, 2003).

Despite these positive endorsements of play in relation to children’s learning, recent research points to tensions which exist at the play-pedagogy interface (Wood, 2014). Several researchers indicate that there is a growing trend to make play more academic in relation to curriculum goals in early childhood education and that this top-down push in achieving academic standards has narrowed the diversity of play-pedagogy (Fleer, 2015; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). This has led to many teachers adopting a teacher-directed academic focus on instruction in early childhood settings. As a result, time spent on child-directed play is decreasing. Teacher uncertainty about the implementation of child-directed play as a pedagogical approach is another area of tension in the field (Devi, Fleer & Li, 2018). In order to address these tensions Singer, Nederend, Pennix, Tajik and Boom (2014) argue the need for those working in early childhood education to look at new ways of understanding play. Pramling Samulesson and Asplund Carlsson (2008) propose a sustainable pedagogy for the future which does not separate play from learning but rather seeks to integrate playful approaches to teaching and learning in all aspects of early childhood education.

In line with international research, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) introduced Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in 2009. The Aistear framework seeks to enhance early childhood education in Ireland through play-based pedagogy for children from birth to six years. It promotes social, interactive learning experiences and emphasises adult-child interactions during play.
The framework spans early childhood and pre-school settings as well as infant classes in primary schools. In this way it aims to complement and extend the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) in infant classes and to provide a national curriculum framework for all early childcare settings.

Despite high expectations in relation to the introduction of *Aistear* some research indicates that its overall implementation was slow (Wolf, O’ Donoghue-Hynes & Hayes, 2013) and that teachers found it difficult to achieve curricular objectives through the play-based framework (Gray & Ryan, 2016). The NCCA subsequently called for a review of the *Primary School Curriculum* and in June 2010 signalled a move towards the reconstruction of the area of language in the curriculum. Three NCCA research papers were published in 2012 in support of the development of a new primary language curriculum. The purpose of the research was to identify, analyse and synthesise evidence from international and Irish research about language teaching and learning. Meanwhile *The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People* (DES, 2011) promoted the use of developmentally appropriate experiences that foster a firm foundation in literacy skills, most notably in the area of language awareness and development. The new *Primary Language Curriculum* was subsequently introduced in 2015 by the Department of Education and Skills. Informed by curriculum reviews and research it promotes a more succinct and integrated approach to the teaching of language, and shifts the focus from the teacher to the child and his/her learning. It incorporates and builds upon the principles and methodologies of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) by identifying adult-child and child-child interactions as essential for language teaching and learning. It also emphasises playful experiences as an important aspect of language learning. It notes the current diversity of Irish society and acknowledges the language experiences that all children bring to
school. The *Primary Language Curriculum* is currently being used by teachers from junior infants to second class in primary schools. Teachers from third class to sixth class are still following the updated English curriculum from the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES. 1999). Professional development has been provided in the form of whole school in-service days for all teachers. The aim of these in-service days is to allow teachers to familiarise themselves with the new language curriculum. It remains to be seen if teachers using the *Primary Language Curriculum* will understand and embrace the integrated play-based methodologies recommended by the curriculum.

This study offers a starting point for those wishing to understand how specific curricular objectives in relation to oral language can be realised through sociodramatic play.

**Aims of the Study**

This study seeks to address some of the tensions identified in relation to the play-pedagogy interface and to supplement the body of literature which focuses on promoting integrated approaches to teaching and learning in early childhood. Specifically the dissertation examines the link between playful interactions and language development. Sociodramatic play is chosen as the lens through which to examine children’s oral language use during playful interactions. Due to its collaborative nature, sociodramatic play is viewed as a natural vehicle for language learning and the development of social skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2003a; Wesiberg et al., 2013b), it therefore offers an exceptional forum for examining young children’s oral language use.

This study examines the purpose and function of children’s language use during sociodramatic play. It uses the oral language strand of the *Primary Language Curriculum* (DES, 2015) to gain a deeper understanding of the elements of language used by participants. It seeks to discover whether academic learning outcomes can be
realised through playful interactions. Teacher involvement in sociodramatic play is additionally analysed in an attempt to provide guidance regarding the adult’s role during playful interactions.

It is hoped that this research project can add to the growing body of research into playful pedagogies and be used by researchers, teachers, SNAs and all those working with young children to help guide their use of playful interactions in their early childhood settings.

**Content of the Study**

Chapter one has provided a description of the background and policy context of the study. It has referred to international research regarding play-based curricula and has identified tensions that exist in relation to the play-pedagogy interface. Chapter one has also detailed the broad objectives, research questions and aims of this study.

Chapter two reviews the relevant literature pertaining to play and language development, specifically in relation to sociodramatic play. It examines the challenges and tensions faced when developing integrated pedagogies to support children’s learning and development through play. It reviews the literature on the involvement of the teacher in sociodramatic play and identifies teachers’ important role of supporting and extending children’s make-believe play.

Chapter three describes the research methodology. An overview of the design of the study which describes the research methods is provided. The research sample and the data collection strategies employed are outlined. The organisation and analysis of the data are documented. Issues related to the research process such as ethics, reliability, validity, sampling and recruitment of participants are also examined as part of the scrutiny of research.
Chapter four discusses the findings that emerged from the data analysis process. Finally, chapter five summarises the main findings of the study and offers recommendations based upon these findings.
Chapter 2:

Literature Review

The first section of this chapter explores literature pertaining to language development in early childhood education. The literature identifies best practice in relation to promoting oral language development. A link between playful interactions and language development is identified in the literature. Socio-cultural views of language acquisition are examined and found to be an important aspect of children’s early language development.

The second section of the chapter provides the reader with a detailed account of the literature regarding the role of play and playful learning in early childhood education. Research and literature pertaining to playful pedagogies are carefully examined. Sociodramatic play is critically examined in an attempt to understand how it can effectively promote language development. The multifaceted role of the teacher in play is explored in detail. Tensions relating to the play-pedagogy interface are identified and explored.

The third and final section of the chapter examines what the literature says about play and language learning in the Irish educational context. It highlights the tensions which appear to exist in relation to balancing curricular objectives with playful interactions in primary schools. It identifies and discusses developments in the field of early childhood education in Ireland. Finally it seeks to address ways in which playful, integrated pedagogies in play and learning might best be promoted in early childhood education in Ireland.
Language Development in the Early Years

Language development requires specific attention in the early years as it enables children to understand the world around them and to communicate effectively with others (DES, 2015). Language learning is a topic of extensive research in the field of early childhood education. Bodrova and Leong (2007) identify how language development is central to the overall intellectual development of the child. They see language as a primary tool of the mind which helps people to extend their mental abilities and to attend, remember and think better. According to them language plays a central role in mental development because it facilitates the acquisition of other mental tools and is used for many mental functions such as attention, memory, feeling and problem solving. It also allows the acquisition of new information and enables us to think logically and to learn new behaviours (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Stagnitti, Bailey, Hudspeth Stevenson, Reynolds and Kidd (2016) also highlight the importance of oral language for children’s development.

Oral language is the single most important socio-cognitive skill a child brings to the classroom; it is the medium through which children acquire and represent new knowledge and communicate their understanding and competencies, as well as being the foundation from which they learn early literacy skills (p. 390).

In fact many of the concepts, dispositions and skills developed through oral language are precursors to related skills and concepts developed in reading and writing. Research demonstrates that children with well-developed language skills display better academic outcomes and are more likely to succeed in later academic learning (Bluiett, 2018; Meacham, Vukelich, Han & Buell, 2016). Whitehurst and Lonigan (2002), identify oral language development as one of the foundation skills upon which learning to read is based. According to them, children with more of these skills profit more from
reading instruction and learn to read sooner and read better than do children with less of these skills. Delays in language learning can therefore impact other areas of development, including motor, social and cognitive skills (Bluiett, 2018).

The importance of language learning in the early years has also been acknowledged in Irish research. NCCA research report number 14, *Oral Language in Early Childhood and Primary Education (3-8 years)*, reviews international literature on language learning (Shiel, Cregan, Mc Gough & Archer, 2012). Additionally the *Primary Language Curriculum* (DES, 2015) provides much detail in relation to language; it posits that language is the chief means of intrapersonal and interpersonal communication and is key to the development of the child as a person.

Language enables children to engage emotionally, socially, cognitively, imaginatively and aesthetically in relationships and cultural experiences. It empowers children to develop their thinking, expression, reflections, critique and empathy, and it supports the development of self-efficacy, identity and full participation in society (DES, 2015, p. 18).

Furthermore it suggests that language learning is an integrated, developmental process in which meaningful interactions help to develop children’s language. Neuman and Dickinson (2002) also view language acquisition as a continuum in which there is considerable variation among children in their development. This perspective challenges the historical view that language develops in the same way for all children and has led to much debate about best practice in relation to language development in education. During the pre-school years evidence of language growth is easy to measure due to the rapid developments which take place in children’s spoken language. Language developments during the early primary school years are more subtle and
difficult to identify however, and ways in which such developments could be promoted and measured warrant significant attention (Shiel et al., 2012).

**Supporting language development in the early primary school years.**

Quality instruction makes a vital contribution to children’s success as language users (Bluiett, 2018; DES, 2015; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Approaches used in the development of emergent language skills should complement learning in other areas; particularly reading and writing, prioritise play and reinforce the concept of the child as an active learner (DES, 2011). It is essential therefore that language instruction in the early years be engaging, enjoyable and meaningful for children in order to promote a positive attitude towards literacy from an early age (Concannon-Gibney, 2019).

Research demonstrates that language learning will thrive in settings that promote rich linguistic and literacy environments where children can focus on improving their language and literacy skills (Shiel et al, 2012). Harris, Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek (2010) suggest that language learning should mimic the early processes used by infants and toddlers who learn language through natural interactions with their parents and caregivers. They recommend using playful peer interactions to enhance classroom conversations and language development. They propose six principles of word learning which draws on the language learning that takes place in the crib. First, children learn the words that they hear most, frequency matters. Second, children learn words for things and events that interest them. Third, they learn best in interactive and responsive contexts rather than in passive contexts. Fourth, they learn words in meaningful contexts that exemplify the meanings of the words. Fifth, they need clear information about word meanings that take their prior knowledge into account. And finally, vocabulary learning and grammatical learning are reciprocal processes. (Harris et al., 2010). These principles of language learning encourage a combination of pedagogical
approaches which promote language learning through meaningful and playful interactions.

An emergent approach to literacy learning therefore works for language development as it includes the creation of a child-centered environment where each child feels valued and where playful and natural interactions form the basis for learning (Harris et al., 2010). The interconnectedness of oral language, reading and writing has been widely acknowledged. Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) see the acquisition of literacy as a developmental continuum, viewing reading, writing and oral language as interrelated processes that develop concurrently and interdependently from an early age and in the absence of formal instruction.

Teachers and early childhood practitioners can cultivate positive dispositions to literacy by creating a culture of reading and writing for pleasure and information in their settings. This can be achieved by ensuring settings promote print-rich environments with a broad range of reading and writing materials, supporting children in their make-believe play, engaging children in dialogic storybook reading and discussion, promoting children’s vocabulary development and assisting children in developing their oral and written language (Shiel et al., 2012).

The role that society and culture play in the development of language and literacy skills is an important aspect of children’s early language development. This social element of emergent literacy is acknowledged by Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) who state that reading, writing and oral language develop “from children’s exposure to interactions in the social contexts in which literacy is component” (p.84). Children’s literacy learning is multidimensional and begins in the home environment. This sociocultural view of emergent literacy is also espoused by Justice and Pullen (2003) who believe that children’s overall development is highly influenced by the social and
cultural capital of the society in which they are growing up. The Primary Language Curriculum (DES, 2015) also concur that children’s homes and communities play a key role in their language learning. Socio-cultural theories seek to better understand children by taking the social, historical and cultural dimensions of everyday activities into account (Dunphy, 2008). The roots of socio-cultural theories can be found in the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky who argued that children are cultural beings who learn through social interactions with others. A socio-cultural approach to practices in early childhood education regards effective practice as:

Practice that is built on the construct of the learner as active, and as an equal partner in any transaction. It is marked by a proactive pedagogical approach in which the teacher promotes learning through active engagement with the learner; interactions that occur between learners are seen as critically important for learning; knowledge is understood to be co-constructed between learners; and the context in which learning is taking place is central (Dunphy, 2008, p.57).

The socio-cultural perspective supports and promotes language development by focusing on the importance of meaningful and active interactions between learners that promote the co-construction of knowledge.

**Play and Language Development**

As mentioned in previous paragraphs, research suggests that language thrives when children interact with adults and peers in a playful and naturalistic way. Many researchers have considered the merits of play and propose that it can make important contributions to the learning of language and literacy (Kernan, 2007; Meacham et al., 2016; Shiel et al., 2012; Weisberg et al., 2013a). Concannon-Gibney (2019) draws attention to the fact that play is an exceptional forum for the development of oral language skills as children are ‘natural players’ who are engaged and motivated to play.
By communicating during play they develop their oral language through talking about things that are meaningful, interesting and engaging to them (Concannon-Gibney, 2019).

Weisberg et al. (2013b) suggest that asking whether play causes language development may be the wrong question, instead they propose asking ‘what aspects of play might promote language development’? Accordingly play benefits children’s language development because “it incorporates many of the socially interactive and cognitive elements known to enhance language skills” (p.39). They identify four characteristics of play which potentially link play and language skills. First; play and symbolic thinking, where props serve as symbols for real objects. This relationship between a prop and the object it represents resembles the relationship of a word to its referent. Second; play and social interaction, during play children must collaborate together to take on roles and create play scenarios. They are encouraged to use more advanced linguistic forms than they would use in other interactions. Third; the amount of language used in play bolsters language development as children interact and communicate with adults and peers. Finally they propose that when children are in control of an interaction such as child-initiated play, they are fully engaged. They speak about and listen to what interests them and are more likely to learn new and novel vocabulary when deeply involved in the play situation. These observations lead Weisberg et al. (2013b) to conclude that

Play is highly beneficial to children’s language skills and provides a supportive context for language learning. Specifically, play contains a variety of elements that stimulate the kinds of conditions that grow language. These elements are likely not unique to play; rather, play is one of the many contexts in which several of these elements converge (p. 49).
Similarly Roskos and Christie (2001) undertook a critical analysis of a number of investigations into the play-literacy interface and found strong evidence to support that play can serve literacy in a number of ways; firstly by providing settings that promote literacy activity, skills and strategies; secondly by serving as a language experience that can build connections between oral and written modes of expression; and thirdly by providing opportunities to teach and learn literacy. Understanding how play-based learning relates to oral language learning is therefore essential if evidence-based play practices are to be incorporated into mainstream education.

Whitebread, Coltman, Jameson and Lander (2009) note that play makes a significant contribution to the development of children as metacognitively skilful and self-regulated learners. Vygotsky (1978) related play to children’s developing sense of control and self-regulation of their own learning; during play children create their own level of challenge or ‘zone of proximal development’, so that what they are doing is always developmentally appropriate. Vygotsky considered this self-regulation; the way in which young children learn to follow rules and control their emotions, as a strong indicator of children’s ability to master academic skills in formal schooling.

During the preschool and early school years (one to seven years of age) children master increasingly complex ways of constructing play activities. They move from the relatively repetitive, unimaginative ‘immature’ play of toddlers through to the ‘mature play’ of older preschoolers and early school goers (Bodrova & Leong, 2003b). Mature play is the type of play which best supports overall learning as it contributes to children’s learning and development in many areas that immature play does not. Bodrova and Leong (2003b) consider play to be mature only when it has the following characteristics: imaginary situations, multiple roles, clearly defined rules, flexible themes, language development and a significant length of time spent at play.
Hakkarainen, Bredikyte, Jakkula and Munter (2013) propose similar criteria to describe mature narrative role play, it must have a social or collective character, be imaginative, be creative, be developed over time, be challenging and have a narrative structure. When these elements of mature play are in place children get an opportunity to develop and apply their social and self-regulation skills (Hakkarainen et al., 2013).

There are many different types of play that are effective for promoting children’s learning and development. Guided play approaches are recommended in particular for promoting language development because they encourage children to become active and engaged partners in the learning process. Guided play “lies midway between direct instruction and free play, presenting a learning goal and scaffolding the environment while allowing children to maintain a large degree of control over their learning” (Weisberg et al., 2013a, p.104). According to Weisberg et al. (2013a) guided play is an effective learning pedagogy because it offers a context in which “active, engaged, interactive, and meaningful experiences coalesce, thus providing a fertile pedagogy for optimising learning” (p. 109). Guided play activities such as fine motor play, story-based play or sociodramatic play create rich language-learning environments in early childhood settings.

**Sociodramatic Play**

Sociodramatic play, also known as pretend play or fantasy play, is a collaborative and social type of guided play. It is improvisational in nature; during play activities children communicate about the play as well as being involved in the play. They role play, use pretend talk and imitate language and literacy behaviours that they have seen in the wider environment. In fact, sociodramatic play involves complex learning and has been identified as incorporating sophisticated social or meta-communicative skills such as “language skills, perspective taking, representational
thinking, problem solving, turn taking, and the ability to interpret environmental cues” (Kernan, 2007, p.31). Sociodramatic play provides a very appropriate forum for expanding and developing children’s language as it requires the development of joint attention, the ability to give and follow instructions, and also the ability to work collaboratively and interact with others (Bluiett, 2018). Through the use of play themes children develop subject-specific vocabulary and the ability to demonstrate understanding of new words in a meaningful context. When children produce and use new words during play it assures teachers that they actually understand what the word means. Children draw on their cognitive, creative and oral language skills to develop roles and characters in an imagined reality. As their repertoire of roles grows, so too does their vocabulary, mastery of grammar, pragmatics of language and metalinguistic awareness (Bodrova and Leong, 2003a).

**Adult-child interactions during sociodramatic play.** Adults have an excellent opportunity to capitalise upon the great learning potential of play by becoming part of the sociodramatic play. Vygotsky’s ‘zone of proximal development’ is worth considering here; sensitive interventions by the adult can help to scaffold the play and make learning more precise. The adult’s role is active but not dictatorial, they may initiate the play situation but do not seek to direct the play. Rather they should follow the child’s lead and provide subtle scaffolding by commenting on children’s discoveries, co-playing along with the children, asking open-ended questions or exploring the materials in new ways (Weisberg et al., 2013a). Adults can provide guidance and support without taking over the play; they can monitor the negotiation of ideas, set problems for the children to solve, help to refocus the story and generate excitement by introducing tension into the story, “these inputs into sociodramatic play become the subtle tools of the adult working and playing with children. Within the
play, the adult is able to enrich and deepen the play and open up new areas of learning for the children” (Kitson, 2010, p.117).

Adult participation in play should be free from constraints as much as possible in order for them to become ‘genuine partners’ in children’s play through joint interaction (Hakikarainen et al., 2013). It is important to remember that while adults can participate and guide the play, essentially the play must belong to the children. Whitehead (2010) notes that if we want play to be free flowing and in order to allow children to take risks then “control of the nature and direction of genuine play must stay with the player(s) . . . we have to follow their lead and learn to be co-explorers and thinkers with them in their play” (Whitehead, 2010, p.86). Singer et al, (2014) highlight dual roles the teacher can have in relation to play, that of play manager and play enhancer. The play manager helps prepare the setting and the children for play through careful planning. The play enhancer enters children’s play and provides support to make it a quality experience for the children, but do not stifle the play. Stanton-Chapman (2014) recommends that observing children at play is especially important when teachers wish to become involved in children’s play. During observation teachers can view children’s themes, role, words and plots. Upon entering the play the teacher can then use this information to provide support and to make it a quality experience for the children involved by following their lead with the play themes and plots. Stanton-Chapman (2014) views this role as one of play enhancer and suggests that the teacher’s ability to set-up, observe, enter and exit play with sensitivity is crucial in relation to this role.

During sociodramatic play there is an abundance of teacher-child dialogue which is vitally important for language development (Meacham et al., 2016; Weisberg et al., 2013b). The ability of the players to develop shared ideas and construct a plot
together leads to sustained shared thinking. Sustainable shared thinking has been identified as a quality factor in children’s learning (Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson, 2008). It is achieved through the collaborative contributions of all participants during play interactions. Meacham et al. (2016) completed a study of teachers interacting with children in order to classify and evaluate the interactions styles used by teachers during sociodramatic play. They found sociodramatic play to be an important guided play context through which children’s language development can be supported. Their research question asked how teachers’ responsiveness is related to children’s verbal response types in sociodramatic play. Their findings are threefold; firstly they found that teachers’ responsiveness and the children’s responsiveness to their teachers’ talk varied substantially, secondly they discovered that children responded frequently to the teacher’s topic-continuing utterances, thirdly they found that children responded frequently in the pretend play mode when teachers extended their utterances following child-initiated topics. These findings led them to suggest that teachers should continue to stay with the child-initiated conversations topics in play either by repeating or extending some or all of the children’s utterances. This helps to facilitate children’s engagement in conversation during sociodramatic play and encourages children to persist in the play. Meacham et al. (2016) also suggest that teachers work on strategies to increase their own topic-continuing utterances in sociodramatic play contexts, and that they continue to be mindful of how they interact with children during sociodramatic play.

Specific features of adult talk have been identified as facilitative of children’s language development, these include communicative behaviour in the form of imitation, prompts, questions, repetitions, recasts, expansions and extensions of children’s utterances, using pretend talk, modelling of more sophisticated vocabulary and sentence...
structure, and scaffolding of children’s language (Meacham et. al 2016; Stanton-Chapman, 2014). These features are described as “naturalistic language intervention procedures through which specific teaching episodes, employing specific talk-strategies, can be used in response to children’s initiations” and which “can be embedded in the on-going stream of interactions in early childhood settings” (Shiel et al., 2012, p.18).

The quality of the adult intervention in extending the child’s engagement with a particular activity is important. Meacham et al. (2016) suggest that teacher education and practices and policies supporting teaching quality should consider placing greater emphasis on the importance of high-quality adult-child interactions.

**Planning for play.** As well as being mindful of how they interact with children in order to promote learning during play, teachers also need to create environments that are conducive to play. Edwards and Gandini (2015) refer to the environment as the ‘third teacher’ and advise teachers to be aware of classroom layout and organisation and to ensure that play is well resourced and organised. Careful and effective planning for play is also necessary in order to ensure that children will have a better chance of having positive language-rich interactions (Bodrova & Leong, 2003a; Concannon-Gibney, 2019). Planning thematic units of work help to develop language as children learn new vocabulary, discuss the play scenario, and make the roles, props and actions clear to other players. Language objectives in relation to key vocabulary should be planned as part of the play scenarios. The NCCA have provided a planning framework developed by Kiely (2012) as part of its support material repository for the Primary Language Curriculum (see Appendix A). This framework provides practical advice on how to set up a play scenario in the classroom. It suggests different types of activities which can be used to support sociodramatic play and promotes an integrated approach to oral language and literacy learning in the early year’s classroom. Pramling
Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson (2008) recognise that being able to integrate play and learning as part of an objective-oriented curriculum and seeing “the playing learning child” is an important part of building a sustainable pedagogy for the future; “a pedagogy that does not separate play from learning but draws upon the similarities in order to promote creativity in future generations” (Pramling Samuelsson, et al., 2008, p.638).

Assessing play. Assessment is a crucial aspect of teachers’ jobs and an essential part of teacher’s role in ensuring that play is a high-quality learning experience for children (Concannon-Gibney, 2019). Moyles (2004) recommends that assessment be multifaceted; ranging from teacher reflections of his/her own interactions with the children, to examining the learning environment and resources.

Leong and Bodrova (2012) outline a useful approach to assessing children’s play which is based on examining the maturity of children’s play through five stages. Through teacher observations, children can be placed on this continuum and plans for children’s play can be created accordingly. This strategy is termed PRoPELS, an acronym that stands for the most crucial elements of children’s play that can be assessed and scaffolded by the adult. The categories for assessment include: planning, roles, props, extended time frame, language and scenario. Concannon-Gibney (2019) identifies PRoPELS as a useful tool in assessing three aspects of play that are important for children’s language and literacy development: explication of meaning, reflection on meaning and narrative structure. “In assessing children’s ability to take on a role and deal with props for an extended time while using appropriate language, the teacher will be able to determine the extent to which children can negotiate meaning among their peers and their ability to build oral and imaginative storylines” (Concannon-Gibney, 2019, p.198).
**Tensions relating to play.** Despite the many positive endorsements of play for children’s overall learning, some academics question the privileged position play has in relation to children’s development. Lillard, Hopkins, Dore, Smith and Palmquist (2013) regard play as an epiphenomenon of learning rather than being directly related to learning. They propose that existing evidence does not support causal claims about the unique importance of pretend play for children’s development. They suggest that play is a by-product of other factors that drive development and that much more research is essential in order to clarify the role of pretend play in children’s development.

Furthermore Grieshaber and Mc Ardle (2011) believe that there are some ideas associated with play in early childhood education that seem to be accepted almost without question; these include the ideas that play is natural, normal, innocent, fun and beneficial to all children. They call for those working in early childhood education to challenge these taken-for-granted understandings of play and to explore more equitable approaches to play in the early years.

Research also points to tensions which exist at the play-pedagogy interface (Wood, 2014). Many researchers indicate that there is a growing trend to make play more academic in relation to curriculum goals in early childhood education (Fleer, 2015) and that this top-down push in achieving academic standards has narrowed the diversity of play-pedagogy (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). As a result, many teachers have adopted a teacher-academic focus on instruction in early childhood settings leading to didactic teaching styles and less time being spent on child-directed play (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Martlew, Stephen & Ellis, 2011). Additionally Bodrova and Leong (2003b) cite growing demands for teacher accountability and measurable outcomes as pushing play to the periphery of the curriculum. Many teachers feel obligated to prove that play
promotes the learning of pre-academic skills and concepts but remain unsure of how best to achieve this.

Teacher uncertainty regarding their role in children’s play is another area of tension in the field (Devi, Fleer & Li, 2018). Fleer (2015) notes that while evidence shows that most teachers have a good understanding about the important of play for children’s learning and acknowledge the importance of the adult’s role in children’s play, there is very little research which systematically examines the role of the teacher in children’s play. This has led to teachers positioning themselves outside of children’s play acting as an observer, supporter or active planner (Fleer, 2015). Kitson (2010) demonstrates teacher’s uncertainty in relation to their role in children’s play. He uses an effective analogy of how teachers encourage children to read and enjoy books; they do this by sharing books with them, talking about what has happened and what might happen, they model good practice by reading to them. He asks us to imagine if teachers tried to develop reading solely by giving children lots of books to look at. Yet when it comes to play, teachers are often guilty of doing this; of telling children to go into a corner and make up a story without providing any kind of support for them to complete the task. Accordingly when it comes to play, children require guidance (Kitson, 2010).

Leong and Bodrova (2012) also concur that adult support is necessary for children’s play, they state that children need to be taught how to play in intentional and systematic ways much like they would be taught literacy or maths. At the same time, however, the teaching of play must take a very different form from the adult-initiated practices often used to teach these content-related skills. The very nature of learning to play has changed significantly. In the past children learned to play within informal neighbourhood multi-age peer groups where younger children learned from older ‘play
experts’ and then passed their knowledge on to other ‘play novices’. Play time now
tends to be more constrained and limited unlike the unstructured play of the past.

In today’s early childhood settings, children are almost always segregated by
age and have to interact with play partners who are as inexperienced as they are.
As a result, many of the play skills that children learned in the past by observing
and imitating their older playmates now have to be taught directly by teachers or
learned by behaviours that teachers model (Leong & Bodrova, 2012, p.31).

Adults therefore have a significant role to play in promoting, guiding,
supporting, scaffolding and extending children’s play in early childhood settings.

In order to address the tensions relating to the play-pedagogy interface Singer et
al. (2014) demonstrate the need for those working in early childhood education to look
at new ways of understanding play. Pramling Samulesson and Asplund Carlsson (2008)
propose a sustainable pedagogy for the future which does not separate play from
learning but rather seeks to integrate playful approaches to teaching and learning in all
aspects of early childhood education. Bodrova and Leong (2003a) also state that play
and learning do not have to compete, rather they make the case that when children are
properly supported in their play it in fact contributes to their learning.

As we learn more about how young children learn, it is becoming clear that we
do not need to sacrifice play in order to meet academic requirements. On the
contrary, only by supporting mature, high-quality play can we really help
children fully develop their language and literacy skills (Bodrova & Leong,
2003a, p.34).
Play and Language Learning in the Irish Educational Context

Teachers working in primary schools in Ireland, particularly those in junior and senior infant classes are presented with a unique situation regarding children’s learning. They are expected to teach and meet curricular objectives laid out in the mandated Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) and also to use Aistear, the non-mandatory early childhood curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009) to extend children’s learning in their classrooms through playful interactions. The Aistear framework was introduced by the NCCA in 2009 in an effort to enhance early childhood education in Ireland through play-based pedagogy for children from birth to six years. In line with international research it promotes social, interactive learning experiences for young children and emphasises adult-child interactions during play. The framework spans early childhood and pre-school settings as well as infant classes in primary schools.

According to Moloney (2010) the publication of Aistear in Ireland in 2009 “marked a watershed in the history of curriculum development in the ECCE sector” (Moloney, 2010, p.187). Aistear reflected global trends such as the expansion of play-based curriculum frameworks (Gray and Ryan, 2016) and it was the first curriculum framework in Ireland for all children aged birth to six years of age (Walsh, 2016). The age span covered by Aistear is an important feature of the framework because despite having a compulsory school attendance age of six, over half of Ireland’s four-year olds and most five-year olds are in primary school (O’Connor & Angus, 2011). The development of Aistear involved intense consultation with the early childhood sector, commissioned research papers and studies of young children. According to French (2013) “this rigorous and inclusive approach has led to a framework for early learning which is soundly based in research and draws from the contributions of our diverse early childhood sector” (French, 2013, p. 2).
Yet despite these high expectations in regards to Aistear some research has found that its implementation into both the early childhood sector and primary schools has been “slow and partial” (Wolfe, O’Donoghue-Hynes & Hayes, 2013, p.200) and that there is “little evidence that Aistear has transformed classroom teaching” (Gray & Ryan, 2016, p.188).

Moloney (2010) identifies two major issues relating to the implementation of a number of early childhood initiatives, including Aistear, which were introduced to assist in supporting pedagogies in relation to early childhood education in Ireland. These issues are “the lack of a mandatory training requirement and the fact that these initiatives at best can be termed soft policy, i.e. they are not a statutory requirement for those working in the ECCE sector” (Moloney, 2010, p.185). French (2013) concurs that the weakness of Aistear’s implementation lies in the fact that it is not mandatory. She claims that primary school teachers will naturally prioritise the statutory Primary School Curriculum over the optional, less familiar play framework which is Aistear. French (2013) identifies other factors which continue to impede the implementation of Aistear; namely that there is no named body responsible for its implementation and that funding is currently unavailable for the training of early childhood practitioners in Aistear.

The need for training and support in implementing a play-based pedagogy has been expressed by Dunphy (2008). In examining the introduction of the Foundation Stage (a primarily play-based curriculum) in England in 2000, she found that teachers there were unsure about the pedagogical approaches being advocated and about how they were expected to use play as a key strategy for learning (Dunphy, 2008). She predicted that teachers in Ireland would experience the same difficulties with the introduction of a play-based curriculum, based on the fact that many would be
unfamiliar with recent developments in theories about learning in early childhood and the use of effective pedagogies.

Research has identified other pedagogical, structural and practical problems faced by teachers when attempting to meet competing curricular demands. These issues were explored by Gray and Ryan (2016) in a detailed study of teachers’ experiences regarding the status of Aistear and the Primary School Curriculum. Based on statements and teachers’ responses, they discovered that the main perceived barriers to a play-based learning curriculum are; lack of awareness and training, large class sizes, lack of resources and funding, and high pupil-to-teacher ratios. Teacher and parents’ lack of value for play was also noted as well as a sense that some teachers continue to steer towards traditional learning approaches. Furthermore the study found that teachers were largely unfamiliar with the Aistear framework and would welcome more training and information about it. Based on their findings the authors state that although the vast majority of junior and senior infant teachers value play and acknowledge that play is an important pedagogical tool in practice play sits on the periphery of the school day with curricular subjects afforded the greatest amount of time and teacher attention … play is adult-directed … child-child contact is restricted and controlled by the fact that children remain seated at their desk during play-based sessions (Gray and Ryan, 2016, p.200).

Based on current research, it could be argued therefore that the implementation of a play-based curriculum such as Aistear in tandem with an already established curriculum can be a difficult process and that at the moment there is little evidence to suggest that the introduction of Aistear has transformed classroom practice. Further research is necessary in order for this debate to be explored in more detail, particularly
in relation to recent developments that have been made in teacher training courses in the areas of early childhood education.

Additional attempts to promote quality instruction in early childhood education in Ireland must be noted. Following the introduction of Aistear in 2009 the NCCA issued a review of the Primary School Curriculum and in June 2010 signalled a move towards the reconstruction of the area of language in the curriculum. Three NCCA research papers were published in 2012 in support of the development of a new primary language curriculum. The purpose of these research papers was to identify, analyse and synthesise evidence from international and Irish research about language teaching and learning. The research paper into oral language in early years and childhood education (Shiel et al., 2012) recommended a language curriculum which promotes the co-construction of meaning between adult and child and that allows for differential rates of progress by children. Additionally The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People (DES, 2011) stated that language and literacy learning in early childhood should take place through a broad, holistic and interconnected programme of activities. The strategy also recommended revising the literacy and numeracy aspects of the Primary School Curriculum for infant classes to bring them more in line with the approaches to teaching and learning advocated in the Aistear curriculum framework.

Based on the research and recommendations the new Primary Language Curriculum was introduced in 2015 by the Department of Education and Skills. It promotes a more integrated approach to the teaching of language and shifts the focus from the teacher to the child and his/her learning. An emergentist view of language acquisition is encompassed by the Primary Language Curriculum; the emergentist approach builds upon children’s prior language learning and development in early
childhood settings. Children’s concepts, dispositions and skills are developed as appropriate to each individual child’s stage of learning. The *Primary Language Curriculum* also builds upon the principles of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) and international research in highlighting the importance of adult-child relationships and the need for playful and meaningful experiences for children’s learning and development. The curriculum highlights the importance of developing dispositions alongside concepts and skills in order to nurture children’s development as competent and confident communicators. It also attempts to bridge the gap between playful interactions and curriculum objectives.

The 2009 audit of *Aistear* and the *Primary School Curriculum* refers to the fact that recent research has “created greater understandings of the importance of play in children’s learning and development” and also reminds us that “it is important to consider that much has been learned about how children learn and develop in early childhood since the Primary School Curriculum was developed” (NCCAb, 2009, p.16/17). It could be argued therefore that the *Primary School Curriculum* for junior and senior infants is too academic and goal orientated for young children aged four to six.

On the one hand, infants classes are places where free play is permitted and even emphasised, and little formal learning is brought. On the other, learning outcomes of an academic nature are defined, and their achievement advocated, and determined through standards based assessment (O’Connor and Angus, 2011).

Indeed O’Connor and Angus argue that the academic focus at primary level should move towards a more play based approach. Dunphy (2008) suggests that the content objectives in the *Primary School Curriculum* are very specific for all curriculum
subjects meaning that teachers tend to focus of these as their chief pedagogical concern rather that their pupils interests.

It is clear therefore that a review of the Primary School Curriculum is needed and that “a subject-based curriculum is no longer the most appropriate structure for supporting children’s learning and development in their early years of primary school” (NCCA, 2016, p.5). In fact, proposals for a new curriculum structure and for the redevelopment of the primary school curriculum have already been put forward and will be subject to further consultation in the near future (www.ncca.ie/timeandstructure). As part of these proposals a three-stage model is presented as a possible new structure for the Primary School Curriculum. In this model, Stage One would encompass the pre-school years and junior and senior infant classes in primary school. It would be based on the principles, themes and methodologies of Aistear, to support continuity, experience and progression in children’s learning, as they move from pre-school to primary school. Prioritise playful teaching and learning across the curriculum with child-led play being an important aspect of this (NCCA, 2016, p.6).

These recommendations would enable those working in primary school classes to achieve a more balanced approach to developing playful approaches in their teaching and learning in line with international research. It is clear that in order for such pedagogical improvements and policy developments to be implemented successfully and achieve their full potential there needs to be far better cohesion and shared approaches in all departments, agencies and organisations involved in early childhood education in Ireland (Walsh, 2016).

As previously mentioned, training and in-service education for those working with children in early childhood education is necessary in order for them to gain a better
understanding of current early childhood pedagogy so that they can learn how to effectively infuse playful pedagogy into classroom practice. Dunphy (2008) believes that teachers would be able to adapt and develop their pedagogical practices by having appropriate structures and support in place.

Teachers, by the nature of their professional preparation and their experience with teaching children of different ages, have very well developed skills in relation to interactive teaching … these skills need to be utilized more extensively and intensively when teaching the youngest children at school … This is achievable if infant teachers in Ireland receive supports in the form of extensive in-service education, appropriate guidance on pedagogy and structural supports in the form of resources and informed management and inspection systems (Dunphy, 2008, p. 64,65).

Conclusion

The literature points to playful pedagogies which promote meaningful interactions between adults and children as best practice in early childhood education. It is proposed that rather than trying to compete with curricular goals and objectives, teachers try to find ways to integrate learning content with play and to allow playful interactions to permeate throughout the school day. Teachers should continue to carefully plan for, scaffold and extend children’s play so that it makes it possible for content learning to occur naturally during playful interactions (Hedges, 2014).
Chapter Three:

Methodology

This chapter begins by outlining the aims of the research study. This is followed by an overview of the design of the study which provides a rationale for the research design, describes qualitative research methods and a case study. The research sample and the data collection strategies employed are outlined. The organisation and analysis of the data are documented. Issues related to the research process such as ethics, reliability, validity, sampling and recruitment of participants are examined as part of the scrutiny of research. This chapter also outlines the philosophical stance of the researcher and describes how the dual role of the author as researcher and class teacher was addressed.

Aims of the Study

This research study aims to explore and examine children’s oral language use during sociodramatic play in a junior infant classroom. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- For what purposes do children use language during sociodramatic play?
- Are the elements of language as identified in the oral language strand of the
  *Primary Language Curriculum* realised through sociodramatic play?
- How does teacher involvement in sociodramatic play affect children’s oral language use?

It is hoped that the findings will clarify how children use language during sociodramatic play and demonstrate how sociodramatic play can be an effective methodology through which young children’s emerging language skills can be developed. The study aims to clarify if sociodramatic play can be used to realise and support the learning outcomes of the oral language strand of the *Primary Language*
Curriculum. The learning outcomes are grouped under three broad elements of language use; Developing communicative relationships through language; Understanding the content and structure of language; and Exploring and using language. Teacher involvement in sociodramatic play will be analysed specifically to identify how it impacts on children’s oral language use. It is hoped that the study will add to the growing body of research based on the importance of promoting playful and integrated pedagogies in early years classrooms and settings (Hedges, 2014).

Overview of the Research Design

Constructivist methodological approach. Research is shaped, guided and impacted by the researcher’s own beliefs and stance. The researcher believes that there are multiple constructions of reality and that those constructions are shaped by different individuals and their culture and life experiences or circumstances. This belief influences the researcher’s choice of research paradigm. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2018) define a paradigm as a “way of looking at or researching phenomena” (2018, p.8). They explore the idea of a paradigm as a way of pursuing knowledge and as a means of guiding the researcher in the direction they need to go in order to get the answers they seek. Mertens (2015) suggests that a paradigm is “composed of certain philosophical assumptions that guide and direct thinking and action” (2015, p. 8) and she highlights that a “researcher’s philosophical orientation has implications for every decision made in the research process, including the choice of method” (Mertens, 2015, p.7).

The overarching paradigm for this research study therefore is a constructivist approach. The basic assumption guiding the constructivist paradigm (often described as interpretative paradigm), is that knowledge and reality is socially constructed. The researcher’s goal in a constructivist paradigm is to understand and interpret the multiple
social constructions of meaning and knowledge (Mertens, 2015). Constructivist researchers address the processes of interactions among individuals, they “position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural and historical experiences” (Creswell, 2018, p. 24).

Qualitative methods of data collection are predominant in the constructivist paradigm. Qualitative methods are characterised as being inductive and emerging; in order to study the research problem researchers use “an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes” (Creswell, 2018, p. 8). The researcher attempts to make sense of the phenomenon without imposing pre-existing expectations on it and thus begins with specific observations that allow the categories of analysis to emerge from the data as the study progresses (Mertens, 2015). The qualitative methods employed during this research study were observations of children’s oral language use during sociodramatic play. Observations were chosen as the primary form of data collection due to the fact that they “can reveal characteristics of groups or individuals which would have been impossible to discover by other means” (Bell, 2010, p. 191). In order to obtain data, audio and video recordings were made of the children and teacher’s interactions as they played in the sociodramatic play centre in the classroom. These recordings formed the basis of data analysis of children’s oral language use during sociodramatic play. The researcher also used semi-structured observations to provide data; these observations were recorded by the researcher in field notes during play and after the play session had finished.

Through observation of the children’s language use during sociodramatic play two types of qualitative data were collected; the actual language used during play which
was gathered, recorded, transcribed and organised by entry from the audio and video recordings, and the researcher’s ongoing analysis and interpretations of the phenomenon from the field notes. “Qualitative research… draws the researcher into the phenomenological complexity of participants’ worlds; here situations unfold, and connections, causes and correlations can be observed as they occur over time. The qualitative researcher aims to catch the dynamic nature of events, to see intentionality, to seek trends and patterns over time” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 458). The observations were gathered for the purpose of generating hypothesis rather than hypothesis testing. The researcher therefore has to review the observational data before suggesting an explanation for the phenomena being observed.

**Case study.** A case study was the chosen research strategy for this study. A case study allows one aspect of a problem or phenomenon to be studied in some depth (Yin, 2009); in this case a junior infant class developing their oral language use during play. A case study can penetrate situations in ways that other forms of research cannot; it “provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than by simply presenting them with abstract theories or principles” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 376). A case study begins with the identification of a specific case that will be described and analysed (Creswell, 2015) and involves the collection of many forms of qualitative data, “evidence has to be collected systematically, and the investigation methodically planned” (Bell, 2010, p. 8).

Yin (2009) identifies many components which should be addressed when designing a case study, these include developing specific research questions, identifying the case study’s propositions, specifying the unit of analysis, establishing the logic that links the data to the propositions and explaining the criteria for interpretation of the findings. Yin (2009) also recommends theory generation as an essential part of the
EXPLORING CHILDREN’S LANGUAGE USE IN SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY

For this particular research study the researcher explored a real-life system using multiple data collection in an effort to develop an in-depth understanding of the research questions. The class group constitutes the individual case to be studied with the unit of analysis being participants’ language use in the sociodramatic play centre and teacher interactions with participants. Research relating to effective pedagogy in early childhood settings by Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva (2004), suggest that settings which are most effective for enhancing child development achieve a balance between providing opportunities for children to benefit from teacher-initiated work and from freely chosen, yet potentially instructive play activities. They distinguish between ‘pedagogical interaction’; specific behaviours on the part of the adults, and ‘pedagogical framing’; the behind-the-scenes aspects of pedagogy which include planning, resources and establishment of routines (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). The researcher was cognisant of these pedagogical stances when planning for the research study.

The play theme for this research study was pets, this theme was chosen by the teacher based on her knowledge of the children’s interests. Play scenarios were child-led. Planning for the sociodramatic play was informed by a planning framework developed by Kiely (2015), and used by the NCCA as part of its support material repository for the Primary Language Curriculum (see Appendix A). This framework provides practical advice on how to set up a play scenario in the classroom. It suggests different types of activities which can be used to support sociodramatic play and promotes an integrated approach to oral language and literacy learning in the early year’s classroom. The researcher has been using the framework to aid planning for sociodramatic play since the start of the school year; hence routines relating to play and
teacher involvement in play have been well established in the classroom. The children initially chose to set up the sociodramatic play centre as a vet’s surgery, they sourced appropriate props from the classroom and brought in props and toys from home. Oral language lessons were conducted prior to commencing the play theme and the children also received a visit from a real vet. Appendix B shows the books used as part of discrete oral language lessons prior to and during the play theme. As play progressed the children decided to add a grooming parlour as part of the vet’s surgery in the sociodramatic play centre. Once again they sourced additional resources from the classroom and home.

**Research Sample and Research Site**

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) recommend that qualitative research be conducted as far as possible in natural, uncontrived, real world settings. The ‘real world setting’ in this research study was the participant’s own classroom. Convenience sampling was used in this research study in the clear knowledge that the sample “does not represent any group apart from itself, it does not seek to generalize to the wider population” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 218). The research sample consists of 17 junior infant pupils in the researcher’s own class. The research site is a single-sex primary school in an affluent Dublin suburb. The school has a broad catchment area, many children who attend the school have mixed socio-economic backgrounds.

**Instrumentation**

Cohen et al. (2018) recommend that instruments of data collection in qualitative research be chosen on a “fitness for purpose basis” in order to “enable researchers to decide on the most appropriate instruments for data collection, and to carry out the practical, careful design and use of such instruments” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 469). A range of data collection methods were used in this research study including audio
recordings, video recordings and field notes. An audio recording device was used to collect data from the children in the sociodramatic play centre. This instrument was deemed to be suitable for use as it could be easily placed in close proximity to children in order to capture their language use during the play session. A fixed video recorder was also used to collect data as the children played. This instrument was deemed necessary in order to capture the non-verbal data which the audio recordings could not.

The data from the video recordings were examined retrospectively in order to corroborate the data from the audio recordings and to provide contextual information (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Field notes were recorded by the researcher as the children played in the play centre and after the play session.

Timeline

The data was collected as the children played in the sociodramatic play area in the classroom over a period of three weeks. Children played in small groups of four/five in the sociodramatic play area while the rest of the children in the class played at other stations in the classroom. A different group played in the sociodramatic play area each day. The researcher was the only adult present during the data collection process.

Pilot Phase

A two day pilot phase was conducted by the researcher prior to commencement of the research study. Piloting the audio and video recording devices allowed the researcher to investigate their effectiveness and adapt their feasibility for use as necessary. Following the pilot several adjustments in relation to the placing of the microphone and camera were necessary in order to ensure high quality data was collected. A second audio recording device was also placed in a different area of the sociodramatic play centre in order to ensure that all voices were recorded.
Description of the Analysis Process

Data analysis in qualitative studies is an ongoing process; the researcher must reflect on and organise the data, noting patterns, determining themes and categories as well as recognising data which is relevant and irrelevant to the research question. Data from the study were compiled from the audio recordings, video recordings and field notes. The audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher. Participants were given numbers to ensure confidentiality e.g. P1: Pupil 1. The teacher is coded as T. Appendix C shows an excerpt from an original transcript. Transcription is not a transparent process and Mertens (2015) advises researchers to transcribe the data themselves because “this is part of the data analysis process engendered by interacting with the data in an intensive and intimate way” (Mertens, 2015, p. 438). She adds that “researchers bring their own point of view to the process, including noting multiple meanings that lie in what might appear to be simple utterances” (Mertens, 2015, p. 438).

Prior to analysis, all transcripts were read alongside the video recordings to ensure reliability and accuracy and to provide contextual information. An inductive data analysis process followed. The nature of this research study calls for careful and considered analysis of the data in order to explore the children’s use of language during sociodramatic play. It requires deep listening, exploring and interpretation on the researcher’s behalf. Using the transcripts, video recordings and field notes the researcher conducted an analysis of the purpose and function of each utterance that was made by the children during the sociodramatic play. Data analysis of the transcripts was conducted at sentence level. A list of initial codes were developed; these codes were then reanalysed and grouped into six categories of oral language use that emerged from the data including language for own needs, language for co-operation, language for planning, language for directing, playful/imaginative use of language and real talk.
The transcripts were then recoded using the elements of language from the oral language strand of the *Primary Language Curriculum*. Participants’ language use was mapped accordingly onto the elements of Communicating, Understanding, and Exploring and Using. Data were then analysed in more detail in order to assess if the learning outcomes from each of the three elements of the language curriculum were realised during the sociodramatic play. Finally the researcher’s interactions with the participants in the sociodramatic play were analysed using the transcripts, video recordings and the researcher’s field notes.

Direct phrases and sentences will be reported for analysis due to the richness of the detail involved. These “thick descriptions” are described by Cohen et al. (2018) as being a feature of good qualitative research which provide much scope for careful analysis of data.

**Positionality of the Researcher**

It is important for researchers to reflect on their own values, beliefs and biases throughout the research process (Mertens, 2015). The researcher was cognisant of her dual role as researcher and class teacher during the research study and an awareness of researcher bias was critical throughout the process. The researcher acknowledges her belief in the importance of play in the early years for children’s development. She recognises the complexities involved in play scenarios such as children’s developing abilities as cooperative players and the tensions relating to teacher involvement in child-led play. She is cognisant of how teacher involvement in play must be carefully planned and nuanced. It was hoped that by triangulating the methods of data collection using audio and video recordings and field notes, researcher bias could be identified and tracked. The research process also involved examining how teacher involvement in sociodramatic play affected the language use of participants. This required the
researcher to work in close proximity with participants in the play centre. These details were taken into account when analysing the interactions between researcher and participants.

**Ethical Considerations**

Full ethical approval was granted for the research study from the ethics committee of Marino Institute of Education. Permission to conduct research in the school was granted by the governing body of the school (Board of Management) and the school principal. The parents and guardians of the participants (all under 18) received a consent letter detailing the research methods and the management and storage of data. The letter contained details of how to make contact with the researcher and supervisor with questions regarding the research study. The letter also informed parents and guardians of their right to withdraw permission at any time. Parents and guardians signed the consent letter indicating their willingness to allow their child to take part in the research study (see Appendix D).

Pupil assent was obtained in a number a ways; a simple oral description of their involvement was given to the class and individually to each child. An opportunity to give written assent was provided, the children were asked if they understood that they would be recorded during play to which the circled ‘yes’ or ‘no’. The children were asked if they were willing to be recorded and drew a happy face to indicate assent or a sad face to indicate dissent, they also signed their names to indicate assent (see Appendix E). Children were encouraged to discuss the research study at home before signing the form again in the presence of their parents and guardians. The right to withdraw from the research project at any time was also explained clearly to the pupils.

All parents returned signed letters of informed consent. However one set of parents gave permissions for audio recordings only, they did not give permission for
video recordings of their child to be used. In fulfilling ethical commitments audio recordings only were made of this child and the group she was playing with in the play area.

As the study involves children under the age of 18, steps were taken to protect participants during this research. Individuals were not named and were given numbers in the transcripts of the observations (P1: Pupil 1). Confidentiality of participants was promised by the researcher. The name of the school and location was not used. Data collected was initially stored on the researcher’s password protected laptop, after all data had been collected it was transferred on to a USB key and locked into a safe. Data was then deleted from the researcher’s laptop. The data on the USB key will be deleted after thirteen months. Any unexpected outcomes were referred to the principal or researcher’s supervisor. Data remained confidential unless information given by a pupil raised concerns for their safety and well-being under Child Protection Regulations.

Quality Assurance

Quality indicators for qualitative research are dependent on the approach and purpose of the study (Cohen et al., 2018). Case studies do not have the external checks that other forms of research have and therefore standards of evidence and quality in this approach requires careful documentation of how the research was conducted and how data were analysed (Mertens, 2015). Yin (2009) advises case study researchers to provide a chain of evidence that can be used to track through every step of the study from beginning to end.

Credibility and internal validity was attempted in this study through the triangulation of data collection using audio and video recordings and field notes. It was hoped that by triangulating the methods of data collection researcher bias could be avoided and emerging data would be objective. Thick descriptions of data were used in
an attempt to do justice to meaning and to facilitate clarity of findings. Critics of case studies as a form of research design question the value of the study of a small-scale single event and express concern that generalisation is not always possible. Bassey addressed this issue in his 1981 paper on the study of single events, he used the term ‘relatability’ rather than ‘generalisability’. In his opinion “an important criterion for judging the merit of a case study is the extent to which the details are sufficient and appropriate for a teacher working in a similar situation to relate his decision making to that described in the case study. The relatability of a case study is more important than its generalisability” (cited in Bell, 2010, p. 9). This case study therefore may be very relatable to other early year educators who wish to learn more about promoting children’s oral language use through sociodramatic play.

Limitations

The researcher acknowledges that this is a small-scale research study and therefore the results cannot seek to be generalisable. As such, the findings reported in the next chapter should be viewed with this limitation of sample size in mind. Despite this, Bell contests that much can still be learned from such a study “well prepared, small-scale studies may inform, illuminate and provide a basis for policy decisions within the institution. As such, they can be invaluable” (Bell, 2010, p. 210).

Another limitation of the study is in relation to the recordings. Despite using two audio devices to record children’s voices there were several instances where background noise made it hard to distinguish who was talking and what they were saying. Some of this information was captured by the video recordings and therefore could be transcribed. However the video recordings were recorded using a fixed camera, there were no options for moving the lens closer to different areas as the children moved while playing. Therefore certain interactions were not recorded or
subsequently transcribed. Despite this limitation the researcher believes that adequate data were collected for analysis.

There are limitations relating to the researcher’s dual role of class teacher and researcher. Researcher bias has already been addressed in this chapter, however there were additional elements that added some limitations to the study. This involved the need for the researcher to monitor the rest of the class while simultaneously playing with participants in the sociodramatic play area. The researcher found that her attention could be divided at times, and opportunities to extend children’s activities in the play centre were sometimes missed due to the need to offer support and guidance to the other children in the classroom. Additional adult support would have been helpful in this regard.

Conclusion

This chapter conveyed a clear representation of the research process engaged in this study. Rationales and descriptions of the research paradigm were provided and the methodologies and data collection techniques employed during the research process were discussed. Relevant ethical issues and validity concerns were also addressed. Finally, this chapter speculated on how data analysis will be generated in order to formulate relevant conclusions to the research questions. Data analysis will be further discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 4:  
Data Analysis

The aim of this chapter is to analyse data collected and to present and discuss its findings. Data were compiled using audio transcripts from sociodramatic play, video recordings and the researcher’s field notes. Prior to analysis, all transcripts were read alongside the video recordings to ensure reliability and accuracy and to provide contextual information. An inductive data analysis process followed. The researcher conducted an analysis of the purpose and function of each utterance that was made by the children during the sociodramatic play. A list of initial codes were developed; these codes were then reanalysed and grouped into six broad categories of oral language use. The transcripts were recoded using the elements and learning outcomes from the oral language strand of the Primary Language Curriculum (DES, 2015). Finally the researcher’s involvement in the sociodramatic play was analysed using the transcripts, video recordings of interactions in the play setting and the researcher’s field notes.

Purpose of Children’s Oral Language use During Sociodramatic Play

This study sought to explore children’s oral language use during sociodramatic play in a junior infant classroom. The first section of this chapter presents the findings related to the purpose and function of children’s language use during sociodramatic play. Through inductive data analysis the study found that children use language for a wide range of purposes during sociodramatic play. Six broad categories of oral language use were identified and are detailed in Table 1.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Examples of utterances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language for own needs</td>
<td>I want to be the receptionist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I need a chair there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language for co-operation</td>
<td>What if we take turns?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’ve an idea, how about we could all switch in a few minutes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language for planning</td>
<td>I’m going to use a bandage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think she has to cut her hair, if she doesn’t cut her hair then she’ll get even more dirty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language for directing</td>
<td>Pretend you had a cat too ok.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You’re not allowed to open it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playful/imaginative use of language</td>
<td>Scrub a dub dub dub.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’m very posh, I’m sounding very posh!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real-talk</td>
<td>I’ve got swimming today.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It’s like when they took my tonsils out.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Colfer (2019)

At the beginning of the play sessions children were mainly observed using language for their own needs, language for co-operation and language for planning as they negotiated roles and props to use in the play as the following excerpt demonstrates.

P4: I’ll be the vet. (Language for own needs)

P7: I think I will be over there too. (Language for own needs)

P3: But guys that’s not fair cos I haven’t been the receptionist. (Language for own needs)

P4: There can be two. (Language for planning/language for co-operation)

P1: There can be three too. (Language for planning/language for co-operation)

P3: No there can’t be three. (Language for planning)

P4: Then we’ll have no patients. (Language for planning)
P3: I’ve an idea, how about we could all switch in a few minutes. I’ll be the receptionist first, then P7 be the receptionist, then P1, then you P4 ok?

(Language for co-operation)

This excerpt demonstrates how the participants used self-regulation skills during sociodramatic play (Meyers & Berk, 2014); they use language to express their own needs in relation to the roles they wish to play and to negotiate with each other in order to reach an agreement on how to ensure each player could be fully involved in the play. Vygotsky considered self-regulation, the way in which young children learn to follow rules and control their emotions, as an important aspect of oral language development and a strong indicator of children’s future academic ability (Vygotsky, 1978).

As the play sessions progressed language for planning and language for directing was observed to be used frequently by the children.

P11: What’s wrong with these pets? (Language for planning)

P10: These are old pets and they are dirty ok. (Language for planning)

P11: Ok, and will we put them in this bath? Let’s put some soap on him.

(Language for planning)

P10: And you have to pretend it’s your pet. (Language for directing)

In the language for planning category the children most frequently used language to ask questions, give information, explain or elaborate on something. This is seen when P11 asks a question about the pets and receives information from P10. This information allows the play to successfully continue and P11 elaborates on the narrative by suggesting what the next step of the play could be ‘Let’s put some soap on him’.

Playful and imaginative language was observed to be used most frequently as the children developed more in-depth and detailed narratives together while they played. This is demonstrated in the following excerpt when one child introduces the
idea that the queen is coming to the grooming parlour with her pet dog. The children all respond imaginatively to the idea while one child takes on the role of the queen, adopting a different voice and mannerisms for the role.

P9: Groomer, groomer, the queen is coming here with pet dog! (Imaginative use of language)

P11: Ok, can you be the queen? (Language for directing)

P13: I’m gonna be the queen. (Language for own needs)

P9: The queen is coming in one minute (Imaginative use of language)

P10: Your dog, she needs a shower (Language for planning)

P15: Make sure she’s not too wet (Language for directing)

Make sure she gets a hair dryer, fur dryer, we call that fur dryer (Playful use of language)

The children in this group continued to use language playfully and imaginatively to elaborate on this particular narrative for the rest of the play session and in subsequent play sessions. This collaborative and sustained shared thinking between players demonstrates the criteria used by Hakkarainen et al. (2013) to describe mature narrative role play. They propose that the play must have a social or collective character, be imaginative, be creative, be developed over time, be challenging and have a narrative structure. When these elements of mature play are in place children get an opportunity to develop and apply their social and self-regulation skills (Hakkarainen et al., 2013).

Playful use of language was also observed when the children interacted with toys and props during the play sessions; the children frequently used sounds, rhyming words, songs and made up words to accompany actions or feelings. This creative and playful use of language contributes significantly to the development of children’s metalinguistic skills and their ability to understand the subtleties of language (DES, 2015).
following excerpt P4 makes appropriate noises to demonstrate she is grooming an animal.

P4: I’m gonna brush her (Language for planning)

Makes hair dryer noises. (Playful/imaginative use of language)

Now we snip, snip, snip, snip (Playful/imaginative use of language)

P7: Makes scared animal noises. I think he’s a little bit scared

(Playful/imaginative use of language)

P7 adds to the playful nature of the interaction by pretending that her dog is frightened as he gets groomed. The children frequently used the toys and props in the play centre to extend their playful and imaginative use of language. They were observed using props for their given purpose i.e. using pretend scissors to trim a cat’s fur or a bath to wash animals. Other props had multiple functions, e.g. when a toy banana was used as a phone. The props also prompted moments of excitement as the children experimented with novel ways of using them as part of the play, the ‘real’ shampoo bottles were a source of great amusement and the hairdryer that made noises prompted lots of playful language use. Using the props in various different ways demonstrates the children’s ability to understand symbolic representation. Weisberg et al. (2013b) suggest that this type of symbolic thinking, where props serve as symbols for real objects, resembles the relationship of a word to its referent. Bodrova and Leong (2003a) affirm that when children use symbolic props in play they are using language extensively and are laying the foundation for more advanced symbolic representations.

‘Real-talk’ describes the language used by children when they took themselves out of role to explain something or to make a connection with a topic from the play narrative to their own lives. Children frequently used ‘real talk’ to express excitement in relation to the props. Although this type of language was observed less frequently
than other types of language in the play sessions it nonetheless requires analysis. In the following excerpt P12 is fascinated by a toy that P5 has brought in and is using in the play session.

P12: I wish I had one of them, they’re like so good. (Language for own needs)
P5: I know. (Real-talk)
P12: I really want one of them, where did you get them? (Real-talk)
P5: For my birthday. (Real-talk)
P12: I really, really … no where did you get it? (Real-talk)
P5: I got it off my mum, no I think I got it off someone else, no I can’t remember who gave it to me. (Real-talk)
P12: ok, now I’m the receptionist. (Language for own needs/planning)
P5: no, I need to check you in! (Language for planning)

Kravtsova (2014) explains how being inside and outside the play simultaneously like in this excerpt is a form of double-subjectivity for the player. This important concept draws attention to the imaginary situation in play and the ability of the players to read the play situation (Fleer, 2015). In the excerpt above the ‘real-talk’ does not take from the overall narrative of the play session and the children are able to continue their play once they have finished discussing the origin of the toy.

Analysis of Children’s Oral Language using the Primary Language Curriculum

As outlined in this chapter’s introduction, the second stage of data analysis for this research project involved recoding the data using the elements and learning outcomes of the oral language strand of the Primary Language Curriculum. It was hoped that analysing children’s oral language use using the Primary Language Curriculum would provide additional information about how children learn and explore through language during sociodramatic play.
The children’s language was recoded at sentence level using the three elements of the oral language strand and each sentence was matched to an appropriate learning outcome under the particular element. The elements and learning outcomes are detailed in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Learning Outcome Label</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developing communicative relationships through language</td>
<td>Engagement, listening and attention. Social conventions and awareness of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the content and structure of language</td>
<td>Sentence structure and grammar. Acquisition and use of oral vocabulary. Demonstration of understanding.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DES (2015)

Children were observed using language outcomes from each of the three elements of oral language throughout the research study. A detailed analysis of how each of the elements were used by children during sociodramatic play follows.

**Element one: developing communicative relationships through language.**

This element focuses on developing children’s knowledge and understanding of how we build and share meaning together in communicative relationships, as listeners and speakers, and as givers and receivers of information. The learning outcomes for this element promote enjoyment, motivation, choice, and a sense of purpose and engagement in using language to communicate with others (DES, 2015).
The children used language to develop communicative relationships frequently throughout the play sessions. As the children discussed play scenarios and different roles they were required to engage in conversations and to listen attentively to their co-players responses. There were many examples of children being aware of other children’s perspectives throughout the play. Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson (2008) note that this ‘intersubjectivity’ is an important aspect of sociodramatic play as “children communicate and interpret continuously in the negotiation with peers and role play” (2008, p. 627). The roles of receptionist, vet and groomer in particular required the children to use language as both listeners and receivers of information as is demonstrated in the following excerpt.

P10: Hello.

P11: Hello.

P15: Hello.

P11: Ok let me check you in. Can I get your name? Go to the waiting room please.

(to next customer) What’s the owner’s name?

P10: Her name’s Emma.

P11: Her name’s Emma, what’s your name?

P15: (gives own name)

P11: Ok, now let me put you in the book ok.
(to the groomers) There’s somebody waiting.

The children in this extract are clearly engaged in the play narrative, they demonstrate social conventions, take turns, listen to information and react accordingly. The child in the role of receptionist (P11) uses language that is direct and that elicits the attention of all players. This demonstrates her ability to self-regulate her own behaviour in order to guide the play while also displaying an awareness of others (Meyers & Berk, 2014).

Some children were also observed using extra linguistic skills while interacting with others. Extra linguistic skills are the aspects of spoken communication that do not involve words, they add emphasis of meaning to what people say (DES, 2015). For example when one child became the queen during the play sessions her mannerisms, facial expression and tone of voice all changed as she adapted to the role. The ability to use these subtle forms of language are essential for building communication and meaning-making during play and are an important indicator of language development (Bodrova & Leong, 2003b).

**Element two: understanding the content and structure of language.** This element focuses on developing children’s ability to create and interact successfully with oral and written texts using increasingly sophisticated knowledge and understanding of the content and structure of language. The learning outcomes support children’s understanding in these areas. In the oral language strand they focus on sentence structure and grammar, oral vocabulary and understanding (DES, 2015).
Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Learning outcome label</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the content and structure of</td>
<td>Sentence structure and grammar (syntax, morphology).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acquisition and use of oral vocabulary (semantics, verbal memory, articulation skills).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demonstration of understanding (semantics).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DES (2015)

Understanding the content and structure of language is an important skill which is constantly being developed by children through their daily interactions with other children, adults, family members and the wider communities in which they live (Hedges, 2014). As children practice their developing language skills during sociodramatic play they are exposed to new vocabulary and meanings and they begin to gain a deeper understanding of the semantics and structure of language. Sociodramatic play offers the ideal setting for children to learn about the content and structure of language in meaningful, child-directed ways as the following excerpts demonstrate.

T:    hello

P11: so what’s wrong with your ginormous bear?

T:    my enormous bear, he is quite big, well his name is Jelly and his tummy isn’t feeling great and I’m wondering if he needs a wash

P11: oh yeah his tummy hurts

T:    now I don’t know if he’ll fit in anything

P11: *(tries to put bear in small bath)* I think that should be good

P10: oh no

P11: that should be good

P10: he doesn’t fit

T:    and what are you going to do with him?
In this excerpt the children are exposed to new vocabulary in a meaningful way as part of the play narrative. The teacher models more sophisticated vocabulary when she refers to part of the bear’s fur that is ‘matted’, P11 demonstrates understanding of the word by referring to it as a ‘tangle’, P15 demonstrates understanding of the word ‘shedding’ by mentioning that it always happens to her cat. These new words are used in a natural and uncontrived way during the play, the teacher does not have to formally teach them to the children. Harris et al. (2010) promote language learning through meaningful and playful peer interactions as is seen in the excerpt above. The teacher uses another opportunity to model language at the start of the excerpt by recasting what
P11 asks; instead of using the word ‘ginormous’ as P11 had done, the teacher repeats the phrase with the word ‘enormous’ and agrees that the bear ‘is quite big’. This leads to a conversation about which bath the bear might fit in due to his size. The teacher was able to recognise and act on a link between content learning (i.e. vocabulary development) and play in a genuine way. Hedges (2014) recommend using playful interactions in this way as they “allow children to take charge of play while also enabling capable teachers to make judgements about when to blend in educative opportunities, such as content learning, rather than teach didactically” (p. 200).

Furthermore when children use new and sophisticated vocabulary, grammar and sentence structures in playful and meaningful ways they gain a deeper understanding of the semantics and structure of language (Roskos & Christie, 2001).

**Element three: exploring and using language.** This element prioritises the development of children’s ability to explore and use language for a wide range of purposes, in a variety of genres, and with a range of audiences. In the oral language strand listening and speaking are developed as reciprocal skills and comprehension is supported and extended through expressions. Children’s metalinguistic skills i.e. the ability to reflect on and ponder about language and how it is used, are developed through the creative and playful use of language (DES, 2015).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning Outcome Labels of Element Three: Exploring and Using</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Element</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring and using language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

DES (2015)
The learning outcomes from this element of the oral language strand were observed most frequently during the play sessions. Children’s appreciation of the aesthetic dimensions of language was evident, as was their ability to elaborate and extend their language use through the play narrative. The following excerpt demonstrate how the different learning outcomes for this element of oral language were used by the children during play.

P14: yes. What’s your pets’ name? (requests and questions)

P12: Nemo (categorisation)

P14: ok, let me just see that, oh what about Ella? (requests and questions)

P12: no, his name is Nemo. And he can jump out of the water (categorisation, retelling and elaborating)

P14: what’s wrong with your pet? (requests and questions)

P12: he’s not eating his food (information giving)

P14: probably cos there’s cellotape *(in the container)*, let me go get food, let’s see if he eats this food (explanation and justification, prediction)

oh why’s he not eating them? He was eating them, he’s probably not hungry any more (questions, explanation, justification)

P12: see you have to fix him, I think his fin is broken (information giving, elaborating, prediction)

P14: so I’m gonna cut off his fin and give him a new one (description)

P12: I can’t look *(covers eyes)* ahhhh! (playful use of language)

This element of language was observed to be used most frequently by children during the play sessions, particularly as the children became more involved in creating and sustaining narratives together as co-players. They continued to extend their own and other’s ideas to create playful and imaginative stories. Blueitt (2018) points to joint
attention and the ability to work collaboratively and interact with others as essential for expanding and developing children’s language. Additionally there was evidence of children using subject-specific vocabulary when they used words related to the play theme during the play sessions. The following excerpt demonstrates children using vocabulary related to the theme of the vet and caring for animals, and based around language and vocabulary developed during discrete oral language lessons and stories prior to the children taking part in the sociodramatic play.

P5: now his heart, now I need to fix it. I need to fix it P14

P14: no, you told me he’s all better

P5: I wasn’t ready, I need to put this on his tongue (a tongue depressor)

P14: ok just quick, he’s dying

P5: and I need to give you something

P14: what?

P5: I need to give you something, it’s medicine, you can keep it but bring it back for …

P14: twenty, ten years

P5: yeah, ten years, and then we have more so, I’m actually giving you something else, some cream for him, put it on his paw now, there

This extract also demonstrates how the children integrated ideas from a previous play theme, the doctor’s surgery, into their play. Bodrova and Leong (2003a) suggest that using play themes helps to develop subject-specific vocabulary and that as children’s repertoire of roles grow, so too does their vocabulary, mastery of grammar, pragmatics of language and metalinguistic awareness.

This section has demonstrated that the elements of language as identified in the oral language strand of the Primary Language Curriculum are realised through
sociodramatic play. The children used language to develop communicative relationships, their interactions led to increased understanding of the content and structure of language and they explored and used language for a wide range of purposes during the playful peer-interactions. The implications of this finding will be discussed in the following chapter.

**Analysis of Teacher Interactions in Sociodramatic Play**

A third focus of this study was to investigate how teacher involvement in sociodramatic play affected children’s language use. The researcher’s interactions with the children during sociodramatic play were analysed using the transcripts of the sociodramatic play, video recordings and field notes. The video recordings were helpful when attempting to analyse teacher interactions with participants as it provided contextual information that the audio transcripts did not. The field notes were also useful for providing additional information in regards to the researcher’s immediate observations before, during and after the play sessions. A number of findings were made regarding the teacher’s involvement in sociodramatic play. These relate to the role of the teacher during play, children’s responses to teacher talk and issues raised through data analysis. They will be described and discussed in the following section.

**The role(s) of the teacher in sociodramatic play.** As identified in the Literature Review of this dissertation the researcher was well informed of the responsibilities of teacher-as-player when entering the sociodramatic play with the children. The researcher took on the dual roles of play manager and play enhancer as identified by Singer et al (2014) during the study through planning for the sociodramatic play and becoming a co-player with the children. The researcher was cognisant of the need to not overly direct or stifle the play; the ability to do this is essential as Stanton-Chapman (2014) acknowledges “a teacher’s ability to set-up, observe and exit play with
sensitivity and grace is crucial to the success of the play enhancer role” (p. 102). The following excerpt highlights teacher sensitivity when entering the play session. The researcher had noticed that one group was not interacting very well together and entered the play in the role of a health inspector in order to guide the narrative and promote language use.

T:  hello, how are you, I am the health inspector, I’m here to inspect the premises
P6:  em wait
T:  can I come in? where are the groomers?
P16:  (whispering) somebody’s here, somebody’s here at the door
P8:  hello
T:  hello, I’m with the health inspectors and I’m here to inspect the premises
P8:  yup, they’re doing good
T:  yes, can you show me? What are you doing there?
P8:  I’m trimming them, their fur
T:  ok, and can I ask what that is there? Is this food?
P8:  uh huh
T:  and who’s that food for?
P8:  for the animals in case they get hungry
T:  what kind of food do you think the animals should be eating?
P6:  healthy stuff
T:  uh huh, like ….  
P6:  broccoli
P17:  and dog food
P8:  peanuts for the elephant
T: I’ll have to write that in my notes, and the next time I come back I expect to see healthy food ok

P8: alright

The teacher was able to gain the attention of all participants in a playful way and to stimulate their conversation. The children continued to talk about the different healthy foods they could give the animals after the teacher had exited the play.

As well as managing entries and exits during play the teacher needed to be highly cognisant of her language use during the play sessions. Stanton-Chapman (2014) highlights the importance of teacher talk as a form of scaffolding and support that can be used to enhance play. She identifies specific formats of teacher talk that can help to develop children’s oral language use; these include recasting, repeating, expanding, open-ended questioning and prompting. In the study the teacher used a range of questioning techniques and oral responses in order to extend children’s language use, encourage responses and provide models of different oral language structures as is demonstrated in the following excerpt.

T: what could be wrong with him vet?

P12: I don’t know

T: what are you going to do next?

P12: I think I can see a little splinter

T: where?

P12: (points) there

T: in his tail? Oh that could be it, how would you get it out if it was in there?

P12: I would look and get the scissors

T: oh ok, I don’t know if I can look
P12: his heart is beating really slowly
T: and what does that mean?
P12: it means he’s going to die soon
T: oh no, and can we fix him?
P12: I think so
T: what could we give him?
P12: a needle
T: oh what’s that for?
P12: it’s for…
P14: to check his heart
T: the vet said he might die soon
P14: you might get a new pet
T: I know but I love Nemo
P5: but he’ll be ok
T: do you think he might be ok?
P5: yeah
T: well she’s going to try to give him a …. I can’t look
P14: shot to wake him up
P5: mmmm I don’t know about that (laughing)

The teacher used effective questioning techniques to elicit responses and extend children’s language use. Initially only P12 was interacting with the teacher, however as the teacher and child continued to sustain the conversation P14 and P5 also became involved in the conversation. The researcher’s observations in her field notes found that the children tended to use much longer utterances when prompted with thoughtful open-ended questions and topic-continuing utterances by the teacher. Meacham et al. (2016)
identified similar findings in relation to teachers’ responsiveness to preschoolers’ utterances in sociodramatic play. They discovered that children responded frequently to the teacher’s topic-continuing utterances and when teachers extended their utterances following child-initiated topics. These findings led them to suggest that teachers should continue to stay with the child-initiated conversation topics in play either by repeating or extending some or all of the children’s utterances. They found that this will help to facilitate children’s engagement in conversation during sociodramatic play and will encourage them to persist in the play.

There was much evidence to suggest that the children in this study were very capable of creating and sustaining play narratives together. Therefore the teacher was frequently able to follow the children’s lead as they developed their own play narratives. Many children were observed using language modelled by the teacher during the play sessions. The children used specific words, phrases, questions and ideas that had been introduced by the teacher. For example when the teacher had played the role of the groomer she had used a lot of talking aloud strategies to describe her actions, using words such as first, next and then. The following excerpt shows how P11 modelled the language used by the teacher.

P10: are you gonna brush her hair or dry it?

P11: now I’m going to just brush her hair, then I’m going to dry it, but first I need to wash it, first I need to get some pet soap, now I need to scrub it all in with this

In the next excerpt P12 asks similar questions that the teacher had asked regarding how to look after an animal and reminds the vet to write the prescription down.

P12: now he’s all better
P14: no he’s not missie, what you have to do is, this is your medicine and you have to give it to him

P12: how many times do I have to give it to him?

P14: about once every day, every time

P12: I think you have to write something down so I can remember

The teacher identified one group who found it difficult to create and sustain play narratives together. The language use of this group only increased when the teacher entered the play and extended their interactions. It was noted by the researcher in her field notes that the children’s ability to work together had improved by the third week of play suggesting that the teacher’s interventions may have helped to scaffold their language use.

Meacham et al., (2016) additionally noted that children’s responsiveness to their teachers’ talk varied substantially. Similar findings were identified in this study. The researcher’s observations allowed her to track participant’s language use carefully and to identify children who were less talkative during the play sessions. The researcher identified certain children were quieter when the teacher was involved as co-player but who were observed to continue talking once the teacher had exited the play. Fleer (2015) refers to this behaviour as ‘social referencing’; the child is aware of the adult’s presence in the play setting and will adjust their behaviour accordingly, either by seeking affirmation or becoming quieter as was identified in this study. The teacher attempted to involve these less dominant players during the play session by using open-ended questions to draw them into conversations. Their language use was then carefully scaffolded and extended. Overall these children tended to follow the teacher’s lead and become involved in the play with support, however one child in particular continued to give one word answers. Therefore it is important to note that “teachers
have to look for appropriateness of fit between their responses and the level of support that children need (Singer et al., 2014).

Overall the teacher’s involvement in the sociodramatic play led to increased language use by participants. The teacher identified and used opportunities to extend and scaffold children’s ideas, model new and sophisticated vocabulary and elaborate play narratives following the children’s lead. Field notes supported the researcher in critiquing her role; she identified times where she missed opportunities to extend children’s ideas or language, sometimes this was due to being distracted by other pupil’s behaviour in different parts of the class. The teacher also noted that she needed to listen more carefully at times to what children were saying in order to give them a chance to extend their own language before rushing in with an appropriate response. Singer et al. (2014) acknowledge the importance of the teacher taking time to establish shared attention and make connections with children during play. It must be noted again that the children were used to participating in teacher-guided sociodramatic play in this setting and therefore they were comfortable with the teacher being a co-player. However as identified by the teacher there were still some children who are less talkative than others, the video recordings allowed the teacher to analyse these children’s interactions with their peers without teacher involvement. It was noted that some of the children became more involved in the play when the teacher was not present. However one child in particular remained quiet even when playing with her peers. This child interacted particularly well with the props in the play area however, using them frequently for various purposes. This finding highlights the need for teachers to be able to understand and accept children’s actions during play and the importance of respect for children’s agency. Johnson (2014) concurs, stating that teachers too are learners when it comes to play.
Teachers are learners in the process of improving the way they listen to children at play, support their play expressions, infer the playing and learning child’s internal mental and emotional states, enable the child to become and be a decision-maker at play and invite children to share power with them and participate in decision-making about their play opportunities. (p. 189)
Chapter 5:

Discussion and Recommendations

This chapter aims to provide a clear summary of the main findings of this dissertation. The chapter will also outline recommended actions informed by the findings of this study for those working in early childhood education.

Summary of Main Findings

This study sought to examine children’s language use during sociodramatic play in a junior infant classroom. The aim of the research was to identify the purposes of children’s oral language use during sociodramatic play and to investigate if the elements and learning outcomes from the oral language strand of the Primary Language Curriculum are realised through sociodramatic play. Teacher involvement in sociodramatic play was also examined in order to discover if/how children’s oral language use was affected by teacher involvement in sociodramatic play.

As discussed in Chapter 2, sociodramatic play proves a natural context through which young children can interact with their peers and develop their oral language skills. The sociodramatic play context in this study provided children with a comfortable and familiar space in which they could use language to explore, play and learn together. The findings demonstrate that children who take part in carefully planned, teacher-guided, child-led sociodramatic play used oral language for a wide range of purposes. These include language for own needs, language for co-operation, language for planning, language for directing, playful/imaginative use of language and real-talk. The findings also show that language curriculum objectives in relation to oral language can be realised through sociodramatic play. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, sociodramatic play requires children to use language to develop communicative relationships, in doing so they gain deeper understanding of the content and structure of
language and explore and use language in increasingly complex ways. The sociodramatic play area in a classroom could therefore be used as a way of supporting teachers in their assessment of children’s oral language use.

As research suggests and the findings from this study show, the teacher’s role in sociodramatic play is important for supporting and extending children’s language. Teachers need to have a thorough understanding of play; this includes planning carefully both for the play sessions and in relation to their roles during play. It is the teachers’ responsibility to attend to what is happening in play, what it is the children are learning and to understand how they are learning (Greishaber & Mc Ardle, 2011). By doing so they can see learning holistically, where play and learning are integrated and where children can explore their worlds through being creative, communicative, imaginative, participatory and active (Pramling-Samuelsen & Pramling, 2014).

This study has also highlighted the value of observing children’s interactions in authentic contexts such as a play area in an early years’ classroom. Observing children interacting with others during play provides valuable information in relation to their language skills and thinking processes. It also provides evidence of children’s social, cultural and conceptual knowledge. Analysis of children’s language use during play can highlight the complexity of the language being used by children in everyday interactions. Careful analysis of children’s language use during naturally occurring interactions also allows teachers to identify children who might be at risk for speech and language problems, or to assess an EAL learner’s needs. Assessment information gathered would provide detailed information which could be used to inform planning for play/parent-teacher meetings/report card writing or speech/language interventions.
Finally it is important to note that sociodramatic play is not without its challenges; it can be complex and demanding at times. The tensions that exist in relation to the play-pedagogy interface have been well documented in this study. Wood (2014) states that the challenge for the early childhood community is to “maintain an expansive understanding of play and pedagogy, and to hold that space against reductionist policy discourses” (p. 155). This dissertation promotes sociodramatic play as an effective pedagogy through which teachers can achieve a balance between child-directed and teacher-guided interactions in early years classrooms. It is hoped that the findings of this study can be used to demonstrate the potential of playful and integrated pedagogical approaches such as sociodramatic play for children’s development in early childhood.

**Recommendations**

Before proceeding with the discussion of recommendations, it is necessary to re-iterate the limitations of this small-scale study. Further research into the use of playful pedagogies to promote children’s oral language development would add to the body of research. Similarly teacher involvement in play requires further in-depth research in order to increase understanding in relation to promoting playful pedagogies in early childhood education. The findings of this study may be of interest to those working in similar early childhood settings who struggle to meet curricular demands through playful interactions.

The dissertation recommends the following actions:

- Improved training and education for those working in early childhood education in relation to play pedagogies. This training could take the form of pre-service and in-service for teachers and those working in early childhood settings. Better
opportunities for training in play pedagogies in undergraduate areas is also recommended, particularly in relation to the role of the teacher during play.

- Additional in-service support from the P.D.S.T. and/or the NCCA for those using Aistear in tandem with the Primary School Curriculum. This training could focus on helping teachers to integrate play-based pedagogies with curriculum objectives.

- Continued in-service support from the P.D.S.T. regarding the implementation of the Primary Language Curriculum.

- The continued review and development of the Primary School Curriculum by the NCCA focusing on a more integrated curriculum for the early years of primary school, providing greater flexibility in timetabling and promoting learning through inquiry and play-based pedagogies.

- Lower pupil:teacher ratios in all classes in primary schools, particularly in junior and senior infants.

- Teachers use the findings from this case study to inform their own practice. The planning framework for sociodramatic play (Appendix A) could be used to guide the set up for play in their own settings. Following the steps outlined in the study teachers could complete action research in their own settings in order to promote playful interactions and improve teacher practice.

  It is hoped that this research could promote interest and learning on the benefits of playful approaches to language learning. Further focused research would enable those working with young children to gain a deeper understanding in relation to integrating play and learning so that practitioners could see the “playing learning child (Pramling Samulesson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008, p. 638) and come to view
learning as wholeness, “where play and learning are not separated but integrated and generate each other” (Pramling Samulesson & Pramling, 2014, p.177).
Appendix A: Suggested Planning Framework for Sociodramatic Play: The Paint Shop

1. Give children the opportunity to talk about their own experiences and knowledge about the topic.
2. Start with story or stories related to the topic, think about using fiction as well as non-fiction.
3. Plan oral language lessons based on the topic. Think about using pair-work and employing strategies such as role-play, hot-seating and interviews.
4. Gather resources for the socio-dramatic play on The Paint shop: e.g. colour-charts, pencils, paints, brushes, paper, a paint-mixing machine, overalls, rollers, trays, paint scrapers, wall-paper stripping machine, a queue ticket dispenser machine.
5. Create laminated signs to make the play area a print-rich environment e.g. shop directions such as Queue here, Pay here, Toilets this way →, Customer Service, Paint mixing area, Please take a colour chart, Please take a number and wait to be called. These signs can be shared with the children during oral language lessons based on the topic. The children will also make their own signs as part of the play.
6. Think about poems, rhymes, jokes related to the topic.
7. Play language games e.g. I spy, Spot the difference, Find the odd one out to familiarise the children with new vocabulary which they can use in their play.
8. Organise a visit from a professional in the field. Prepare questions with the children before the visit.
10. Model literacy activities, e.g. booking a painter to give an estimate, using a calendar to make appointments, creating signs for a business premises, sending invoices, reminder letters, notices of upcoming sales, special offers, curriculum vitae of painter, testimonial letters from previous clients.
11. Give children time to play freely with the different resources. During this time, the teacher observes, documents, gives guidance (e.g. reinforces new vocabulary and models the language register used in the play situation) and sometimes participates in the play by taking on a role.

Kiely (2015)
Appendix B: Books used for Discrete Oral Language Lessons
Appendix C: Sample Transcript from Sociodramatic Play

**Week Three, Day One, Group One  08/09/19**

P4: I want to be the receptionist

P3: I will be the groomer and then you can be the groomer

P4: and then I’ll be the groomer and then P1 will be the groomer

P1: wait I’m the patient

P7: I’ve never been the, I’ve never been the …

P3: how about there could be two groomers, you could be the groomer and I could be the groomer

P7: yeah

P4: and P1 could be the

P1: patient

P4: patient, all of the people, and I could be the receptionist

P3: yeah

P1: ok

P7: ok

P3: (humming) we’re ready

P3: what’s your name?

P1: Meaney

P4: (writing name) What’s your phone number?

P1: 10, 4, 8

P4: done, so what are you here for? You can go wait now

T: good morning, is this a vets or a groomers?

P4: a groomers and a vet

T: and a vet, ok ok.
Appendix D: Parental Letter of Consent

Dear Parents and Guardians,

I am currently completing Year 2 of a Masters in Education Studies (Early Childhood Education) at the Marino Institute of Education [MIE]. As part of my course I will be completing a research study about the development of young children’s oral language through play.

The research study will take place over a three/four week period during Aistear playtime in the classroom. During this time the children will be playing as normal at different play centres in the classroom. The research will focus on observing children’s interactions and language use in the sociodramatic play centre.

In order for data to be collected and analysed I propose to videotape and/or audio record the children at play in the sociodramatic play centre. I am therefore requesting your consent to allow your child to be videotaped/audio recorded as part of this project. If you agree to allow your child to be videotaped/recorded, your child’s identity will remain completely confidential. Her name will not be attached to any information I collect nor will the recordings be used by anyone but me. If you decide not to allow your child to be videotaped/recorded, she will still participate in the play activities but will not be recorded. Your child’s involvement in the research project is entirely voluntary. You may agree to your child’s participation but decide to remove your child from the process at any time.

All data collected will be stored on a password protected laptop and destroyed within thirteen months.

Should you have any questions regarding your child’s participation in the research please do not hesitate to contact me. You can email me at fcolfermece17@mmail.mie.ie. You may also contact my thesis supervisor, Dr. Joan Kiely at Marino Institute of Education at joan.kiely@mie.ie if you would like to discuss the research with her.

Child’s name (please print):________________________

Please tick all that apply:

☐ I consent to audio recordings of my child being taken.
☐ I consent to audio-visual recordings of my child being taken.
☐ I do not consent to audio recording of my child being taken.
☐ I do not consent to audio-visual recording of my child being taken.

Parent /Guardian signature:_____________________
Date:_________________________

Thanking you for your support

Fiona Colfer
Appendix E: Children’s Letter of Consent/Assent

I am doing a study to try to find out how children use their language during play. I hope to be able to understand more about how children play and use language by doing this study.

As part of it I would like to record you playing with your friends in the role play area of our classroom. We will be playing as normal but I will be using special equipment to record what you are doing and saying because I want to be able to play it again later to remind myself of what you said. If you do not want me to record you, you can tell me and I won’t do so. You will still be able to take part in the play as usual even if you do not want to be recorded.

If you want to find out more about the study you can talk to your parent/guardian. I asked them if I could record you playing and they said ‘yes’ but only if you want to.

Confirmation of Understanding:

Do you understand that I will be recording you as you play in our classroom?

YES  NO

You can say NO if you do not want to do this.

Will you draw a smiley face if you are happy for me to record you during play?

Can you sign your name here to say that you would like to be recorded during play?

_____________________________

Informed Consent:

Signature of child ……………………………………………………………………………

Name of child in block capitals ……………………………………………………………

Signature of Parent/Guardian(s) …………………………………………………………

Date …………………………………………………………………………………
References


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