

# Recognition of the distinction between productivity and complexity of the spontaneous narrative of children enrolled in ECEC's: Promoting children's language development

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# Content

Research Question

Context and Aims (4)

## **Theoretical Framework**

1. Educators' Knowledge of Children's Language Development (3)
2. The Emerging Development of Oral Communication of Children
  - 2.1 Productivity vs Complexity (2)
  - 2.2 Spontaneous Narratives
  - 2.3 Development of Oral Communication In/Through Play (2)

Discussion: 3 observations

Conclusion

# Research question

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What educational practices concerning the development of oral communication promote the use of complex language structures by 3 to 5-year-old children?

# Context and Aims (1/4)

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- Uneven overall development from one child to another in kindergarten (Japel, 2008).
- 20% of Quebecois children (Canada) evolve under conditions of vulnerability (Janus & Duku, 2007; Kershaw, 2010; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).
- Early learning of children is established through the development of their oral communication.
  - under-stimulated communication would have consequences on the overall development of the child.

# Context and Aims (2/4)

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Current knowledge holds that attending a quality educational environment would allow these children to have a language development comparable to that of their peers,

as well as making up for various differences related to the conditions of vulnerability when they enter kindergarten at 5 years old, which is an issue for Quebec's education policies for the next few years

# What matters for educators to help children develop their Oral Communication of Children (3/4)

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- Diploma linked to early childhood is positively associated with the development of children's language.

However, the more educators have experiences in the educational context, the less they plan oral communication situations, the less children in their group would be free to develop only on these aspects, because the teaching situations would be more oriented and less emergent (Spear-Swerling and Zibulsky, 2014).

- A better understanding of the importance of language development and its components have a positive impact on them presenting oral oriented content which lead to **complexity where in other contexts, educators focus more on productivity.**

# Context and Aims (4/4)

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- Through **spontaneous narratives which are** functional and complex language tasks that include social, linguistic and cognitive skills , children would take more risks using a variety of language forms which would lead in the development of the **complexity** of their narrative
- BUT emphasis is placed on the development of vocabulary and of correct syntactic structures, which **diminishes the spontaneity of children's** narratives (Kail, 2015).

## Theoretical Framework

### 1. Educators' Knowledge of Children's Language Development (1/3)

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- In one study, Cash, Cabell, Hamre, DeCoster & Pianta (2015) found that educators' knowledge **only predicted children's gains with respect to expressive vocabulary and their ability to write** and in no way, the pragmatic components of spontaneous narratives which are part of the **complexity** of the oral development.
- The language development of young children includes language production (words, clauses, phrases, gestures, etc.) and the understanding of the production of others through answers or consistent gestures.
- The child learns to develop his language structures by the words, gestures, expressions that are most relevant to them in a specific context which favors the retention of information, makes them meaningful and directly transferable.
  - Thus, interactions with adults would be especially effective for learning complex language.

# Four strategies used by Educators to promote children's communication (Gest *et al.*, 2006) (2/3)

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1. Lexical diversity;
2. In-depth conversation about a topic;
3. Response to children's utterances;
4. Content-rich conversation.

AND

1. Educators use symbolic language only during periods of play;
2. During lunchtime conversation is often decontextualized;
3. Complex and elaborate vocabulary, but decontextualized.

# In summary (3/3)

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## Symbolic language

Embody a character

One object/multiple functions

Use of complex formulations



Educators more easily accept to embody a character to support the children's narrative development in symbolic play which includes complexity of the formulations.

## 2.1 Productivity vs Complexity (1/2)

Productivity	Complexity
Number of words, of clauses used in a defined sequence and includes in particular the number of words, the number of different words and the number of thematic units (T-unit).	Variety in oral communication represented in clauses, primarily in terms of their richness, their length, and their connection to one another.
Formal aspects of language to be acquired through adult models (Doyon & Fisher, 2010, p. 47).	Consistency between the gestures or actions and the words spoken or heard by the child.
<p>To evaluate it we:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- measure the average length of the T-units (in words and morphemes), the number of coordination clauses, the number of relative subordinate clauses, the number of dialogues included in the story and the number of complex sentences;</li><li>- consider the child's ability to adapt to the context: the strategies used to establish, re-establish or maintain oral communication, especially with respect to non-verbal manifestations.</li></ul> <p>(Peterson &amp; McCabe, 1983; Schneider, Hayward &amp; Dubé, 2006)</p>	

## 2.1 Productivity vs Complexity (2/2)

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- **Interactions between peers** can be sufficient for some to promote their **productivity**.
- **Qualitative interactions between adults and children, and children among themselves** support the development of **complexity** better (Delamotte & Akinci, 2012; McCabe *et al.*, 2008).
  - With the **peers**, the children learn the elements related to their **immediate daily life** (vocabulary of play, discovery of communication strategies, etc.) whereas with the **adult**, they acquire the elements of the **standardized language** (to make a request, to wait for their turn, etc.) (Abdelilah-Bauer, 2008; Grosjean, 2010).

## 2.2 Spontaneous Narratives

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- From 3 ½ to 4 years old, the number of words no longer makes it possible to distinguish children from one another, but that the syntactic organization of utterance makes it possible (Lentin, 1971).
- Educators working with young children should distinguish between the statement and the understanding of a statement by the child (Lentin, 1971).
  - I.e. educators need to consider these differences between children and **plan more conversational sessions** where they ask several questions to children who respond with more and more elaborate statements, **as opposed to sessions with a more informational function** involving children who talk less and participate less.

## 2.3 Development of Oral Communication In/Through Play (1/2)

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- **Spontaneous narrative in a context of natural play** provides indications regarding all aspects of child development and they learn in it in an intuitive, informal, spontaneous and circumstantial way.
- Oral language used by preschool children is more advanced **in natural play contexts** because these children experience a greater amount of mature language and behavior than they observe in social contexts.
  - Play is seen as an opportunity **for children to assimilate information** and the focus is on interactions between peers rather than interactions between people with different skill levels.
  - When children interact to create an imaginary situation, their thinking becomes more complex; it develops several cognitive and metacognitive strategies and allows them to promote their overall development.
  - Therefore, their attention is directed towards the **complexity** rather than productivity, which would also **show a more mature language development**.

## 2.3 Development of Oral Communication In/Through Play (2/2)

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- Learning situations resulting from natural play and **supported by the educator** create favorable conditions for the development of oral skills (Eyraud, 1998; Gervais, 1990).
- Developing complexity is more effective in the context of natural play, where interactive strategies are deployed and where activities are used to promote language and communication (Leroy-Collombel, 2009; Solomon & Rhodes, 1995).
  - The **quality of the interactions** that are then established between the child and the adult would support the child's learning to produce results in terms of **pragmatic** (Hamre *et al.*, 2014; Howes *et al.*, 2008) and **language skills** (Hamre *et al.*, 2014 ; Howes *et al.*, 2008 ; Mashburn *et al.*, 2008) **which contributes to the development of complexity.**

### 3. Discussion

#### First observations made out of our ongoing research

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- Educators with **more than 10 years' experience**= **less planned** formal oral communication activities;
  - Children= more freedom to explore and choose their play.
- Educators with **five years of experience or less**= planned and organized children's play; = more aware of the effects of this planning for the development of children's communication and oral interactions.
- **Less experienced educators** let the children name the material they needed, then ask for scissors to cut, glue to glue and then ask permission to go back to the do-it-yourself closet for the equipment they needed to continue their creation.

# Second Observation

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- Less supervision in groups= more talkative children;
- More supervision= less talkative children.
- Planned situations= fewer but more complex clauses produced.
- Children often shorten the length of the statements and combined them with gestures to ensure that they are understood.
  - In addition, educators seem more inclined to give children time to find words to express themselves or a way of saying things to make themselves understood, as children do, especially in the context of play.
- Exchanges between the children are **multiple** in the situation of natural play, but these are often **brief or approximate**.
- I.e. as part of the ongoing research, a boy to whom a girl gives the wrong toy walks away when the communication attempt fails, while an adult would probably have rephrased the request or used nonverbal language to support it.

# Third Observation : space left to oral communication

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- Less planned groups + more free play= less time to develop complex communication.
- More planned groups =
  - children let their friend talk.
  - respect of speaking orders (Zimmerman *et al.*, 2009).

# Conclusion

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- **Results suggest:**
  - educators' experience levels may not be an indicator of best practices;
  - experienced educators offer children the words to say rather than help them find their words;
  - practices of educators with less experience seem more rigid from the point of view of activities, but more constructive from the point of view of language learning.
- The level of experience of educators has long been regarded as a leader in best practices BUT:
  - it remains important to question the **value of these activities** for the development of the complexity of children's oral communication.