

DOCUMENTING YOUNG CHILDREN'S INTERACTIONAL COMPETENCE

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LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

. Language and its functions are learned, practiced, and used from birth in the social interactive context with family and significant others (Strauss 1962; Lewis & Cherry 1975). As children hear and enter social conversation they learn what Hymes calls communicative competence, which underlies language and social behavior in face-to-face interaction. Hymes contends that children learn sentence structure not only as grammatically but also as socially appropriate. He suggests that language competence is a matter of adequate performance and ability to use appropriate communicative means in particular contexts (Hymes 1964, 1971). Cicourel defines interactional competence as the "ability to recognize, receive, process, and generate communicational procedures while simultaneously integrating and elaborating our thinking and reaction to these activities in the act of production and elaboration" (Cicourel 1972 213).

. Some research has indicated that children's peer speech does not demonstrate knowledge of Sacks's adult turn-taking rules (Sacks 1974; Keenan 1974; Cosaro 1978; Newman 1978). Others have shown that children do not consistently produce directive questions, and often do not mark termination of play and other settings (Garvey 1978; Ervin-Tripp 1974; Gleason & Weintraub 1976). This suggests that young children are inconsistent in the use of certain conversational strategies, and are not as competent as adults in interactional skills.

. On the other hand, Mishler (1976) suggests that first grade school children are conversationally competent, and that they do not differ significantly from adults in the length of utterances which include questions. These children can alter speech style according to variation in social setting, topical content, and other

speakers, which are well-known criteria of sociolinguistic competence. First graders could also use complex conversational rules and strategies. Turn-taking and recycling previously identified in adult conversation was also found in first grade children's speech. Announcements or topic initiators were often marked by repairs, recycles, or repeats. Repeats are often considered a sign of poor fluency, but Mishler suggests the contrary. The repetition of the opening phrase gets the listener's attention and promotes better understanding, which shows conversational competence. First grade children show competence by using appropriate stress, intonation, and terminal politeness exchanges. Bernstein (1972) concluded that children evidence oral language competency in contexts that they know.

. If a child occasionally shows a knowledge of a conversation technique, s/he may be developing a competency by incorporating that strategy into a repertoire of communicative skills. Thus, in the practice of language, children develop competence.

. From the compensatory philosophy and subsequent educational programs of the 1960's there was a tendency to view young children as incompetent, and to overlook the developmental aspect. Teachers were conditioned to view detection of disability in children as part of their teaching responsibility. The teacher, in testing and diagnosing behavior in a manner that focuses on the child's alleged deficits; gives little regard to what the child can do, and his/her development potential. Most assessments of children's oral language ability occur in formal school settings. Such procedures consider only the grammatical component of language competence. This limits the assessment of language ability due to 1) the artificial testing environment, 2) cultural bias in formal oral

language instruments, and 3) the narrow definition which includes only the grammatical component and neglects the interaction aspect. The test performance can label the child deficient or handicapped, and qualified only for special programs. Ascribed abilities and inabilities tend to become crippling realities (Rosenthal 1968).

. We will answer 2 questions.

- 1) Do young children use strategies of interaction?
- 2) Is it possible to document children's interactional ability?

METHODOLOGY

. The data for this study were collected at a private school in a kindergarten class of 5 boys and 7 girls. Attempts to study public school kindergarten classes were frustrated by public school administrators. Thus, our findings are confined to private school kindergartners from middle class families. The sample is necessarily small because of the enormous volume arising in collecting naturalistic data (Piaget 1955, 1962; Brown & Bellugi 1964; Bloom 1972). The children were aged 4.8 to 5.8 years at the start of the study. Most came from professional families. A play area was chosen to observe and record language, because it stimulates interaction, and could be controlled for acoustics and observation. It had a variety of real and miniature props and materials to aid children in sociodramatic play and spontaneous conversation (Black 1977, 1979). There the children could play adult roles, and we could analyze their knowledge of those rules, behaviors and communication processes. If children have the chance to interact in settings where they exercise some control, their response tends to reflect their true interactional competence.

. The 12 subjects worked in 4 3-person groups, each of which was videotaped for about 30 minutes. Two audio recorders supplemented the videotapes. The researcher noted 1) the persons which

the subject addressed;

2) the verbal content of conversation; 3) nonverbal gestures, body movements and facial expression, and 4) materials used by the subjects in their play. The researcher avoided interaction with the children, but responded briefly to their requests.

. After 4 recording and observation periods, the researchers transcribed each tape within 48 hours. The verbal transcriptions were verified against the source. The contextual information was compiled from the videotapes from the observer's notes. Then the contextual and interaction data were analyzed according to the Interaction Competency Checklist which we designed and pretested a year earlier. The Interaction Competency Checklist was based on 3 factors.

- 1) Oral language develops, is practiced, and is used in the social or interactive context.
- 2) The speaker's competence is in itself a matter of adequate performance, and ability to select and use appropriate communicative means in particular social contexts.
- 3) Cicourel's 7 properties of interaction competence were applied to the sociodramatic scene.

ADAPTING TO CHANGE IN SETTING

Ability to adapt to change in the setting refers to the child's adjustment to the themes of play, to extend the organization of the plot and character development in the sociodramatic area. In the following scene, Tai (T) cooks while Mike (M) and Jay (J) play doctor. M throws the medicine bottle into T's cooking bowl, which evolves into the theme of M and J throwing props into the waste basket. T cooks pudding and tea, and sets the table for M and J to eat.

1 T:M,J OK, I set the table. (T walks back to J & M at waste basket.)

2 M:J Oh boy! Hey look what I did. (All look at waste basket full of props.)

3 J:M Telephone! (M & J laugh)

4 T:M,J Quit it! (J goes to table, picks up phone, throws it to M. He puts in in waste basket.)

5 M:J I got it! (telephone)

6 T:M,J You guys are always causing me trouble. So please don't. (T has her arms folded. J stops & looks at T.)

7 M:J Sit. Sit down. (M & J walk to table)

8 J:M Sit down. Which way now? (T thinks they are coming to eat.)

9 T:M,J OK. (Indicates to M & J what they should eat.)

10 J,M OK, now let me have it. (M takes cup that J wants. J takes tablecloth off. Most of dishes fall on floor.)

11 T:M OK. Not yet. (M starts for waste basket.)

12 M:J Oh, I got it. (M puts cups in waste basket.)

13 J:M Look at those cups from the table.

14 T:M,J Thanks! (Sarcastically)

15 M:J Pudding's all gone. (M throws pudding in waste basket.)

16 J:M Look what you have. You have a lot of trash. (J points to tablecloth & dishes on floor.)

17 M:J Oh boy! I'll throw it in the trash can. We're throwing everything in the trash can. (M picks up tablecloth, throws it in waste basket. J picks up a saucer & throws it in.)

18 T:M How about the broom, after I sweep? (T lifts up broom. J looks at T.)

19 M:T Yah, let me have it. (M turns & walks toward T.)

20 T:M After I sweep. (Sweeping)

In this sequence, J and M have created a scheme of play which focuses on throwing props into the trash can. T demonstrates frustration and disgust with their theme of play. She is not contributing to this theme, and tries to stop their behavior (4,6). T sets the table, but does not want M or J to put the cups and plates into the trash just yet (11). Here there is a slight shift in T's attitude. M and J can dump the dishes in the trash later, but not now. But they do dump them in the trash and T responds with a sarcastic "Thanks!" T's next

remark to M (18) shows that she has decided that M can have the broom to dump in the trash after she finishes sweeping. T now supports the boys' theme of dumping props in the trash.

NONVERBAL APPROPRIATENESS

. Nonverbal appropriateness refers to the child's use of gestures, facial expression, body movement, and speech intonation and stress. Here is another scene which illustrates the use of appropriate nonverbal behavior and its documentation in context.

G:M Smell this, Megan. (G holds out perfume ring & points to it.)

2 C:G Ouch! (C & G bump heads.)

FAMILIARITY WITH CONSTRAINTS

. Familiarity with normal constraints and conditions is the 3rd category of the Interaction Competency Checklist. It refers to the child's knowledge of who can speak next, interrogatives, repair recycling, repeating, relevant topics, and how to terminate an exchange.

1) Who speaks next?

1 T:M,J You guys want pudding or cake?

2 M:T Pudding and cake.

3 T:M I can only make one.

4 M:T Uh, hum/ pu/ pudding. Ugh!

5 T:M OK.

6 J:T Pudding, yah!

7 T:M,J All right. Pudding.

As is shown in this exchange, young children do facilitate the interactive process in that they appear to possess the knowledge of turn taking in conversation. T begins by asking a question involving choice (6). M indicates that he realizes it is his turn to respond. His response is not what T requested. She then takes her turn and clarifies the choice. M and J respond appropriately. T shows her knowledge of turn taking when she gets a suitable response from the boys. Much of turn taking involves the use of questions, responses, and clarifying questions.

2) Interrogatives

. Questions are catalysts for continued conversation and interaction. Here is how the children use questions.

M:C&G What's the matter, kids?

C:M I ain't no kid. I'm the mother.

C:G I'll/ I'll be the nurse. OK?

G:C Okeedokee, I'll be the doctor.

These episodes show that the children could use questions and get appropriate response in an interaction context.

3) Repair, Recycling, Repeating

. These three conditions serve to solicit attention to the speaker and the content of the speaker's language. Here are 3 examples.

M:T Here baby. I'm gonna throw your little baby in the trash can. Good little baby.

T:M She wants/ She doesn't want to sit down, and she wants to sit here.

M:J,T Hey, where's something else?

G:M Now where's that mask at? Where's that mask at? Where did that mask disappear to? Where's the mask?

M:G What mask?

G:M That, this mask.

E:J Yah, well we/ Jonathan, why don't you decorate the tree and then you can help. D, Decorate the tree and then you can cut. Then you can cut. (J is cutting wrapping paper. E wants him to decorate the tree first.)

J:E I'll get some jewelry. This is to put on the tree.

In these sequences, young children understand the function of repair, recycling and repeating, and are able to show recognition or response when they use this technique. T responds to M's threat to put her baby in the trash. In this response, she recycles and repairs, adding emphasis that the baby does not want to be thrown in the trash. The next time M responds, he wants to know what else he can throw in the trash. The recycling and

repairing in T's response have convinced him that the baby is not to be thrown out. G's initial question contains repetition and recycling to draw attention to G and his problem of finding the mask. M responds appropriately to G's question, demonstrating G's effective use of repetition and recycling. E repeats, recycles, and repairs in her attempt to stop J from wrapping presents, and to begin decorating the tree. She is effective in knowing how to get her message to J as he stops wrapping, and begins decorating.

4) Socially Relevant Topics

.In T's case, most of the topics pertained to her two contributions to the theme of play through mothering and through throwing props in the trash can.

Mothering topics:

It's OK. I'm making it for the dog.

There's no more butter. I need the eggs.

I'm gonna clean the refrigerator.

You guys better clean up.

You know what? He's coming for dinner.

Doctor topics:

Is the baby sick?

No, we're gonna give her medicine.

I hurt her a little. Put the band-aid on.

Christmas topics:

This is to put on the tree.

Hey, where's my list? Where's my list?

How do you spell Merry Christmas?

I'm Santa Claus, and I'm writing.

5) How to Terminate an Exchange

. Knowledge of how to conclude conversation or interaction is observed when T prepares to go shopping; G is leaving on a Halloween date; and G terminates playing house.

T:M,J I'm going shopping.

J:T Bye.

T:J Bye bye.

M:G Are you going on a date?

G:M Yea, I'm going on a witch's broom.

M:G Halloween's so fun!

G:M Shoom!

M:G Bye.

G:M Bye.

M:B,G We made a mess of the playhouse.

G:M Oooh, Ben did it.

M:B,G And we've been breaking stuff in the playhouse.

B:M,G We've been breaking stuff. We've been breaking stuff.

G:B Ben, don't.

G:B,M Good-bye. I'm going off to King's Island.

. G takes off on his broom. M responds by terminating the exchange, and G also responds with a terminating exchange. Both understand that G is leaving, and respond appropriately. Peer pressure evidently causes B to end a conversation, since, according to G, he has been the major cause of creating a mess in the playhouse. B finally responds to the accusation by ending the talk.

6) Sequencing refers to the child's ability to think back or reflect on previous experiences from multiple sources, including those in the setting, and to link past experience with the present and possible future informative events, objects and resources in the setting. The following document shows several children's ability to draw on past experiences, and to relate them appropriately to the ongoing interaction.

You guys are always causing me trouble, so please don't. (The boys have been taking T's cooking props.)

Those are women's shoes. (Child discriminates shoes by sex.)

You guys better clean up. You know what? He's coming to dinner. (T knows it is socially right to clean up before having guests.)

D, decorate the tree, then you can cut. (Knows that the tree should be decorated first, before presents are put under it.)

Looks like we'll have to get some

right up here. (Knows that proper procedure to decorate a tree is fairly even distribution of ornaments.)

I betcha my present's gonna be wrapped right. (Recognizes right & wrong way to wrap.)

. Young children are able to think back on previous experiences from multiple sources, and to use them with present events, objects, and resources. G brings information from past experiences of his own visits to the doctor, and uses prior knowledge to portray the doctor, facilitating the interaction. And E's direction to J to decorate the tree first re-focused his attention to work with the group decorating the tree. E's observation of the bare spot and what should be done about it also prompted interaction to get a chair to reach the spot, and discussion on who would use it. It is evident that young children do use past information in the present interaction context, and that this facilitates interaction.

CONCLUSION

. Young children demonstrate interaction competence in familiar environments over which they have control. The kindergarten children showed competence in 4 areas.

1) Children adapted to changes in setting and changes in themes of play. They extended organization of plot and character development. They behave as if aware of sharing the same setting, and can correct discrepancies to continue the verbal action.

2) The children were able to use nonverbal behavior, such as gestures, facial expressions, body movements, and voice intonation and stress when appropriate. This is evidence of awareness and possession of normal form repertoires of possible appearances, behavior and utterance.

3) The children were familiar with normal constraints and conditions of conversation, as to turn taking, relevant topics, termination, repair, and recycling.

4) They showed ability to sequence, and to incorporate previous experience from multiple sources, including those in the setting.

. Sociolinguistic research should shift its focus from concern with children's inconsistency of performance and the labeling of behavior as incompetent and immature to concern with children's emerging patterns of competence. We question whether formal testing, labeling, and programming of young children can properly indicate that they are incompetent or deficient in communicative ability. They are developing and demonstrating interactional competence in familiar social contexts. This implies that teachers need to become better at documenting and observing emerging patterns of development.

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