

How does the use of role-play to facilitate high quality vocabulary and oracy impact boys' communication and language development within the outdoor environment?

Hoxton Garden School, EYFS

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of the use of role-play in the outdoors to support the facilitation of language development in boys. The premise of the study stemmed from previous data which highlighted the need for support systems in place to allow boys in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) to make rapid progress from their baseline assessment. This was further supported by the national baseline data as well as data gleaned from internal school assessments. The information obtained suggested there was an 8% gap between boys and girls, with girls outperforming boys (Fig. 3) in the area of communication and language (C&L). The study centred on a control group of initially six boys, later refined to four boys, who were identified as significantly underachieving in communication and language (Fig. 1 and Appendix 2).

Introduction

Hoxton Garden Primary School is a two-form entry, multi-cultural primary school situated in Hackney, London. The proportion of pupils who are eligible for the pupil premium is higher than average and a significant number of pupils enter nursery and reception below the expected level for their age across a number of areas of learning. A published report into an analysis of Education Recovery in Early Years Providers in 2022 identified the tremendous impact of COVID-19 on children's communication and language. It highlighted how there were still delays in children's speech and language development (Great Britain. Department for Education, The Office for Standard in Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2022). With such compelling evidence it was important the study maintained the importance of supporting children language development as high profile as possible. In the context of the EYFS, which is a framework used in England to support the development, learning, and care of children from birth to five years old, communication and language play a crucial role. The EYFS recognises that strong communication and language skills are fundamental for children's overall development and future learning. (Department for Education, 2021).

The EYFS framework outlines several aspects related to communication and language:

- Listening and attention: this aspect emphasises the development of children’s ability to listen carefully and focus their attention on both sounds and spoken language. This skill is essential for understanding instructions, engaging in conversations, and following conversations in group settings.
- Understanding: this aspect involves developing children’s comprehension skills, enabling them to understand spoken language, follow instructions, and respond appropriately.
- Speaking: the focus here is on developing children’s ability to express themselves through spoken language. This includes using a wide range of vocabulary, forming sentences, and engaging in meaningful conversations with peers and adults.
- Vocabulary development: the EYFS encourages the introduction of new words and vocabulary in everyday interactions and activities. Building a rich and diverse vocabulary is crucial for a child’s ability to express themselves effectively and understand more complex ideas.
- Narrative skills: this aspect involves developing storytelling skills, including retelling events, experiences, and stories. It helps children make connections between different events and develop a deeper understanding of narrative structures.
- Non-verbal communication: the EYFS recognizes that non-verbal communication, such as body language, facial expressions, and gestures, is essential for effective communication. Children are encouraged to understand and use non-verbal cues to enhance their communication with others. (Department for Education, 2021).

This project and research began with the creation of an outdoor role-play area that reflected children’s natural inclinations and experiences which then allowed for an enhancement of their communication and language development, (Appendix 1). Using role play as the stimulus throughout the research sought to understand children’s language skills and thereafter be used as the main platform by which effective scaffolding and support may be offered. Simply put, role-play was identified as a powerful tool for children to engage with their imaginations, express themselves, and practice various aspects of communication, (Bento and Costa, 2022). By offering a space where children could freely immerse themselves in imaginative play, it provided the children with numerous communication opportunities that positively impacted their language and oracy skills (Canning, 2010)

Research Process

The research ran for a course of 18 weeks in total. The principle behind this was the need for an in-depth analysis of the development of children’s language and communication as well as their engagement in the outdoors and how this facilitated quality language use, (Chalke, 2016; Bilton, 2010). Most of the children in the study were identified as being summer born and so sufficient time was needed to allow for notable acquisition of language and ensure the measured impact would be meaningful. The project was aimed at boys who were from two different reception classes and it was led by the EYFS lead. The research process initially consisted of a control group of six boys (this was later refined to only four boys). These boys were identified from baseline data, (Fig. 1) as being significantly underachieving in Communication and Language / Speaking. Observations of talk and language was conducted in the form of detailed narrative observations. An initial observation was carried out to ascertain depth of language and vocabulary. This was then followed by a block of four weeks of incidental observations which sought to identify any changes in the quality of language use. A narrative observation was then conducted at the end of the term. This cycle of observation-block week-observation would be the feature of the research.

| Baseline | Communication and Language |
|----------|----------------------------|
| Child A | 1 |
| Child B | 1 |
| Child C | 1 |
| Child D | 1 |

Fig. 1 Baseline Data

Findings

The attainment of the focus group were tracked through key assessment dates and although small progress was evident by the Spring Term, it was not until the Summer Term the language and speaking confidence of the control group was highly noticeable. As a result the attainment of children from the spring term onwards demonstrated an increased level of confidence of language use as well as vibrant choices of vocabulary. The children involved in the study all achieved age expected development and met their Early Learning Goal of speaking, as evident in Figure 2. A key finding that was extrapolated from project pertained to the significance of the adult's role in supporting children's language development in the outdoor setting. The following key findings were:

- **Maintain and initiating discussion:** the adults actively engaged in discussions with the children while they were playing outdoors; this created valuable opportunities for language development. By asking open-ended questions, showing interest in the children's play, and encouraging them to share their ideas, the adults promoted high level communication and language skills. These discussions helped children organise their thoughts, articulate their ideas, and express themselves confidently.
- **Sustained shared thinking:** sustained shared thinking occurred when adults and children explored ideas together, extending and developing conversations over time. When adults participated in children's play, it encouraged further curiosity, problem-solving, and higher-order thinking. This then fostered deeper communication and language development. This collaborative thinking process helped children become more confident in expressing their thoughts and engaging in meaningful conversations.
- **Modelling new vocabulary:** the adults' role in introducing and modelling new vocabulary was also crucial for children's language growth. When adults used rich and diverse language during discussions and play, it exposed the children to a wide range of words and phrases. This modelling helped children understand how to use the vocabulary appropriately and encouraged them to incorporate these new words into their own communication.
- **Confidence building:** the supportive and encouraging approach of the adults in the outdoor setting helped build children's confidence in communicating. When children felt that their contributions were valued and appreciated, they were more willing to engage in conversations. As a result children took more risks with language and were more open to try and use new vocabulary.
- **Language expression:** through the interactions with adults, children were exposed to more complex language structures and expressions. As a result, their language skills progressed throughout the year, leading to successful attainment of the C&L ELG. The adults played a vital role in scaffolding children's language development, helping them move from simpler language to more sophisticated forms of talk over time.
- **Positive learning environment:** the outdoors provided a natural and open environment for learning, exploration, and play. The adults' facilitation of discussions and language-rich interactions contributed to creating a positive and stimulating learning environment, where children felt motivated to communicate and explore language.

In summary, the adults' intentional efforts to engage children in discussions, fostered sustained shared thinking, and modelled new vocabulary in the outdoor environment had a profound impact on children's communication and language development. These experiences not only supported the successful attainment of the C&L ELG but also laid the foundation for strong language skills that have and will benefit the children in their future learning and beyond.

| Communication and Language control group data | Baseline | Autumn Term | Spring Term | Summer Term |
|---|----------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | 0/4 | 0/4 | 3/4 | 4/4 |

Fig. 2 Assessment Tracker

Impact and Conclusion

In conclusion, creating an outdoor role-play area that aligned with children's natural inclinations and experiences have proven to be a successful approach in fostering their communication and language development. Children's innate inclination for role play provided a strong foundation for imaginative expression and creative thinking. By designing the outdoor role-play area to mirror their real-life experiences and interests, meant the children were readily engaged and eager to immerse themselves in play scenarios, which, in turn, created numerous communication opportunities.

In this language-rich environment, children had the chance to expand their vocabulary, practice social interactions, and develop essential communication skills. The active engagement of adults in maintaining and initiating discussions, as well as their role in sustained shared thinking and modelling new vocabulary, significantly contributed to the children's confidence in communicating. This support and encouragement built a positive learning environment where children felt empowered to express themselves, leading to progressive attainment within (C&L) throughout the year.

By embracing children's natural inclination for role play and providing them with an outdoor space that facilitates imaginative play, we nurtured their love for learning and language. The communication opportunities afforded in the setting laid the groundwork for strong language skills, fostering both individual growth and collaborative learning experiences. As a result, children were better equipped to navigate the world around them, built meaningful relationships, and expressed their thoughts and feelings effectively. Ultimately, this approach enhanced overall communication and language development, paving the way for a successful and enriching educational journey for the children at the setting.

Recommendation to school policy/next steps

The following three recommendations have been put forward:

1. Creating more role play opportunities with explicit links to expressive arts and design to further enhance the quality of child-child language interaction.

- **Costumes and props:** provide a variety of costumes and props that allow children to immerse themselves fully in their roles. Dressing up as characters, artists, musicians, or dancers encourages children to adopt new personas and explore language in different contexts.
- **Storytelling and drama:** encourage children to create and perform their own stories, plays, or puppet shows. This form of expressive arts not only fosters creativity but also requires children to communicate effectively to convey their narratives and ideas to their peers.
- **Artistic collaboration:** encourage collaborative art projects, where children work together to create murals, sculptures, or other visual representations. During these activities, they can discuss their ideas, make joint decisions, and share their artistic vision with one another.
- **Language prompts:** provide language prompts and sentence starters related to the expressive arts themes. These prompts can encourage children to express themselves more elaborately and enhance their vocabulary use during play.
- **Role play reflections:** After role play sessions, facilitate discussions where children can reflect on their experiences. Encourage them to talk about their roles, how they felt, and what they learned during the play. This reflection helps consolidate language skills and fosters self-awareness.

By incorporating expressive arts and design elements into role play opportunities, children will be able to explore a wide range of language and communication styles. It will offer opportunities to develop language skills while expressing their creativity, emotions, and ideas, fostering a dynamic and enriching learning environment. Moreover, the collaborative nature of expressive arts play further strengthens child-child language interaction, as children collaborate, negotiate, and share their experiences with each other.

2. Sharing findings related to the important role of adults in facilitating children’s language development and use of high-quality vocabulary is essential for raising awareness and promoting effective practices.

- Parental workshops: organising workshops to share the research findings and discuss practical strategies for supporting children’s language development. Workshops can provide a platform for interactive discussions, role-playing, and demonstrations of effective language facilitation techniques. Specific parental workshop pertaining to importance of their role in language development. Provide practical tips and activities they can implement at home to support their child’s language growth.
- CPD: incorporating the research findings into professional development sessions/phase meetings; with a real focus on evidence-based practices, language-rich activities, adult’s role as facilitators in children learning and modelling high-quality vocabulary use.
- School newsletter: regular articles in school newsletters and website that highlight the significance of adult involvement in language development. Offering tips and suggestions for parents to create language-rich environments at home.

3. Targeted and joint parental workshops with on-site speech and language therapist (SaLT) on the importance of developing social language skills can be highly beneficial in raising awareness, providing guidance, and fostering effective communication strategies for parents.

- By conducting targeted and joint parental workshops with SaLT, parents will gain valuable insights into social language development and acquire practical tools to support their child’s communication skills. The aim of such workshops is to help foster a collaborative partnership between parents, the school and speech and language services thus creating a supportive network for children’s social language development.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – outdoor role play area



Appendix 2 - Reception Assessment Bands/categorisation

| Below expected (Autumn) | At Expected (Autumn) | Exceeding (Autumn) |
|--|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Working within ' <u>Three and Four Year Olds</u> ' | Reception Emerging | Reception Developing (and above) |