Young Children's Discourse Strategies During Block Play: A Bakhtinian Approach
Lynn Cohen; Joanna Uhry
Journal of Research in Childhood Education; Spring 2007; 21, 3; Research Library
pg. 302

Journal of Research in Childhood Education
2007, Vol. 21, No. 3

Copyright 2007 by the Association for
Childhood Education International
0256-8543/07

Young Children's Discourse Strategies During Block Play: A Bakhtinian Approach

Lynn Cohen
Long Island University
Joanna Uhry
Fordham University

Abstract. This study describes the application of Bakhtin's theories of dialogism to nineteen 5-year-old preschool children's communication strategies and the ways children appropriate meaning in block play. The observed frequency of communication strategies used in three different naturally emerging social relationships—1) individuals, 2) dyads, and 3) groups of three or more children—in a culturally diverse preschool program was investigated. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed. Using Corsaro's (1986) coding system for types of utterances, results indicated significant differences in the communication strategies of 5-year-old children engaged in block play. Significant differences were also found in the communication strategies with regard to social groupings. This study suggests that 5-year-old preschool children use communication strategies and appropriate shared meaning in block play, and is important in that it has implications for encouraging language development.

One of the most important jobs of a preschool program is to provide opportunities for language development, and for the underlying concepts expressed through language. This study applies Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin's theories of dialogism to children's communication while playing with blocks (Cohen, 2006). Most of the children were 5 years old and enrolled in preschool at the time of the study.

Block play has been defined as any time a child manipulates proportional wooden blocks, using actions and/or language to represent realistic or imaginary experiences. A building block is a construction toy intended to educate young children. The block play center contains wooden unit blocks and supplemental props. These props might include vehicles; road signs; miniature people; and farm, zoo, or wild animals. Unit blocks and supplemental props are important play materials that promote oral language and emergent literacy skills. The following episode illustrates how five young children used language and appropriated meaning during the construction of bridges in the block area:

Abby and Nancy initiate the idea of building a bridge. "Hey guys, let's build a bridge," says Abby. "Yeah, let's build bridges," replied Nancy. Peter says, "This is a double-decker." Shawn says, "This is a road and you put another one here on the road." Shawn continues by saying, "Abby, we're making a small bridge, okay? Abby, we're making a small bridge." Nicky asks, "What is that, Abby?" Abby replies, "I didn't make it, Nancy did." Peter talks to himself and says, "It goes up here," and then says, "I don't know how to make a double-decker. It's so hard!!!" Nancy

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

holds up a curved block and says to Abby, "Put it like this." Nicky runs over and says, "I'll help!" Nancy, addressing Abby, says, "Oh no, no, this is the other tunnel." Shawn announces, "This is the Brooklyn Bridge. There might be an older bridge than the Brooklyn Bridge." Nicky says, "Vrooom, vrooom, see the cars traveling on the Brooklyn Bridge."

This is a typical pretend play scene in an early childhood classroom. In this scenario, the children were voicing and appropriating meaning about the construction of bridges through block play. Nicky voices the sound of a car as he says, "Vroom, vroom." Peter is using unit blocks to understand the meaning of a double-decker bridge. This episode gives a sample of the range of verbalizations as children socially interact in the block area.

The typical 5-year-old preschool child is able to create and sustain a pretend play world as she or he builds elaborate constructions with blocks and other materials. Role enactment or adopting the role of another is significant in young children's play. Role enactment (role play) indicates a child's knowledge of role attributes, role relations, and role-appropriate actions (Garvey, 1990). Role enactments typically suggest the theme of a play episode. As young children begin acquiring greater linguistic competence, they engage in pretend dialogues while playing with blocks. While building with blocks and giving representational meaning to familiar objects seen in school and home, preschool and kindergarten children also will represent and animate sounds of these objects or use voices to represent a pretend play character.

Theoretical Framework

The Russian language philosopher Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975) provided a conceptual framework for this study. There is little discussion of Bakhtin's theories of the dialogic process in early childhood literature. Bakhtin (1981, 1986) conceptualized language as a dialogic process, and his work can contribute to the understanding of how young children acquire and use language (Wertsch, 1991). Researchers (Dyson, 1994, 1997; Sawyer, 1996, 1997) have investigated play and language from a Bakhtinian perspective, but not in the context of block play with young children. Dyson (1994, 1997) examined voicing in the context of narratives. Sawyer (1996, 1997) investigated play discourse and role voicing of 3-, 4,- and 5-year-old children in four locations of a preschool classroom: 1) the block area, 2) the doll corner, 3) the sand table, and 3) the Lego table. Sawyer (1996, 1997) examined different gender and age compositions, not exclusively the block activity area. Paley's (1990) oral narratives of the children reveal children voicing: "And the lion went... Br-r-r-eee-ah!" (p. 51), but she did not describe Bakhtin's theories of dialogism. Several key assumptions of dialogism ground the current study. Bakhtin's theories of dialogism, including speech genre, voicing, and authority in discourse, are discussed to show how social interaction and linguistic skills develop in block play.

Speech Genre

One assumption of Bakhtin's theory is the concept of speech genre. Speech genres develop from interactions with others. Bakhtin (1986) did not provide a list of speech genres, but some forms include family table conversations, conversations among friends, greetings, etc. This concept is also relevant to children's play because different types of play have many characteristics of a speech genre. As Sawyer (1997) stated, "The term 'genre' can be used for a type of play activity" (p. 173). In the current study, block play is a speech genre in which children have different ways of communicating, using different voices, each associated with a distinct role in a social interaction.

Voicing

Bakhtin's theory of dialogism is defined as two distinct voices in one utterance or double-voicedness (Vice, 1997). It involves a deep understanding of each individual's voice. The dialogic process consists of three elements: a speaker, a listener/respondent,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and a relation between the two. Bakhtin advocated a unit of analysis based on utterances, which is linked to voice. The utterance is the "real unit of speech communication" (Wertsch, 1998, p. 50). Bakhtin (1986) believed that language is learned by appropriating and assimilating the voices of others. In a dialogue, a listener appropriates the speaker's words, and in the process of understanding, the listener assimilates these words. In block play, there is always a listener(s) and speaker(s). For example, the block play episode began as Nancy appropriated Abby's words. Abby says, "Hey guys, let's build a bridge," and Nancy repeated by saying, "Yeah, let's build bridges."

In everyday communication, internalization is closely related to Bakhtin's notion of hidden dialogicality. Hidden dialogicality is characterized by an invisible speaker. Cheyne and Tarulli (1999) describe hidden dialogicality as follows:

> Imagine a dialogue of two persons in which the statements of the second speaker are omitted, but in such a way that the general sense is not violated. The second speaker is present and invisibly, his words are not there, but deep traces left by these words have a determining influence on all present and visible words of the first speaker. We sense that this is a conversation, although only one person is speaking, and it is a conversation of the most intense kind, for each present, uttered word responds and reacts with its every fiber to the invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person. (p. 8)

For children, understanding comes when they actively respond through external social speech, such as engaging in a dialogue with an adult, or in private speech by talking aloud, or through inner speech by responding internally to what has been said. Peter talked to himself in the block play episode as he built the double-decker bridge. He said, "It goes up here" as he placed a unit block on the top of his structure. Bakhtin's notion of hidden dialogicality accounts for understanding and dialogue in block play. When individual children play with blocks and engage in solitary play, they might voice to themselves or engage in inner dialogues.

Bakhtin (1986) theorized that there are many variations of speaking or "voices" that position individuals in a social environment. He called these variations "heteroglossia," which is the idea of a multiplicity of ways of speaking in a social environment. Children take on roles in play and vary the role and communication strategy when communicating to one another. This is similar to the improvisational processes that Sawyer (1996, 1997) identifies in children's play discourse. Sawyer (1996) studied and defined role voicing as "the way a child enacts a play role" (p. 291) by using different types of verbalizations. Appropriation inherently involves some power and authority, which leads to the third assumption and Bakhtin's (1981) discussion of authority in discourse.

Social Forces of Language

A third assumption of Bakhtin's theories, critical to the present study, is the way play roles create different situations of power among the players. Bakhtin (1981) discusses language as a unifying force through which meaning is consumed and created. Bakhtin (1981) also described two ways in which individuals assimilate the words of others: authoritative and internally persuasive. Authoritative dialogue is fused with authority and power. In contrast, internally persuasive discourse is "backed by no authority at all and is frequently not recognized by society" (p. 342). Cazden (2001) described these struggles between teacher and children in classrooms.

Discourse that is authoritative must be accepted without question. On the other hand, internally persuasive discourse allows mutual communication and mutual construction of knowledge. It is discourse that is dialogic and enables collaboration and true communication. Bakhtin (1981) characterized these differences between authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse as two language intentions or two

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

voices with different perspectives. Therefore, language belongs to the dominant culture and powerful social forces. A dialogue always exists between individuals and the dominant culture, and among individuals in different situations of power. There is always a struggle between authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse. In the beginning episode, Nancy directed Abby as she said, "Put it like this." In block play, some players use language to control others and direct the building process, while others collaborate and discuss which unit blocks to use or how tall they'll make the building.

Observing the ways that children voice in social interactions while engaging in block play in an early childhood environment is a way to examine how different voices that compose a play culture can interact, struggle, and be resolved in a heteroglossic social environment. In the present study, features of dialogism from a Bakhtinian perspective are highlighted to investigate how meaning was appropriated as young children enact play roles in the block center in different social relationships. With this in mind, the purpose was to answer two questions. What communication strategies do children use to make themselves understood and to appropriate meaning in block play? And, specifically, are there significant preferences for communication strategies across naturally emerging social relationships?

Method

Data collection involved observing and videotaping children in the block area. A play episode was the unit of analysis. This mixed methods study examined three groupings: 1) individuals, 2) dyads, and 3) groups of three or more children. These three groupings have been studied by numerous researchers (Cook, Fritz, McCornack, & Visperas, 1985; Corsaro, 1985, 2003; Farver, 1992; Goncu, 1993; Sluss, 1996; Sluss & Stremmel, 2004).

Observations of a single child's language were conducted by Halliday (1975). Halliday (1975) observed his son Nigel, and developed a scheme for classifying different types of utterances and categorizing language into functions. Observing dyads and group interaction supports Vygotsky's (1978) notion of appropriation and zone of proximal development, as well as Bakhtin's ideas of voicing and children appropriating the words of others. According to Goncu (1993), in order to have a complete understanding of play dynamics, the process of forming a group should be included in play research. If playing in a group produces a different set of communication strategies than playing by oneself or with a partner, this should be seriously considered when planning a classroom environment that promotes language, cognitive, and social skills. The three groupings (individual, dyads, and groups of three or more children) were particularly important to this research design, because different contextual settings also may affect communication during play.

Participants

The participants for this study were students in a preschool program located in a culturally diverse suburb in Long Island, New York. Nineteen children (10 boys and 9 girls) from the same preschool classroom participated in this study with 3 teachers. In June, at the time of data collection procedures, the average age of the class was 5 years and 2 months.

The majority of the children came from middle and upper-income families. The ethnic composition of the sample was approximately 79 percent white and 21 percent other, including Korean, Indian, and Israeli. Of the 19 children, 15 were monolingual and four participants spoke English in school and a language other than English at home, or spoke another language in combination with English at home. Languages spoken in the home were English, Hebrew, Korean, Telugu, and Punjabi.

The 19 participants attended an extended day session. The extended day hours were from 9:10 a.m. to 1:45 p.m.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The extended day paradigm of this school allowed for the videotaping of pretend block play through large blocks of time for play and exploration. Most children in this study were 5 years old and ready to enter kindergarten in the fall. Finally, the majority of the children in the extended day program had attended the morning session the year before, so this was their second year attending the school. Table 1 contains a list of children who participated in the research, the total number of episodes in which each child participated, their gender, and language spoken.

Assessment Instruments
To meet the goals of oral language assessment, Salvia and Ysseldyke (1995) state that evaluation should include both nonstandard instruments of conversational abilities and administration of a psychometrically sound standardized instrument. Consequently, prior to data collection, a standardized measure, *Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals-Preschool* (CELF-P; Wiig, Secord, & Semel, 1992), was used as a general screening of receptive and expressive language development. The CELF-P was developed as a screening and diagnostic instrument to measure receptive and expressive language with preschool and kindergarten children, ages 3.0 to 6.11 years. It provides norm-referenced scores for each six-month interval within this age range. The "Quick Test," containing two subtests measuring receptive and expressive language skills, is recommended as a general screening for language competence.

In addition, a non-standardized assessment, Corsaro's (1986) communication framework with seven subscales, was used to evaluate participants' language performance in a naturalistic play context. The seven subscales are: 1) paralinguistic cues, 2) descriptions of action, 3) repetitions, 4) semantic tying, 5) calls for attention, 6) directives, and 7) tags. Paralinguistic cues are changes in intonation and pitch to mark fantasy and the animation of objects; it also involves the use of pretense and high and low voices to mark role enactment.

Table 1
Children in Extended-Day Class

	Total Number of the 53 Episodes in Which Each Child Participated	Gender	Home and School Languages Spoken
IA	3	Female	Hebrew & English
KB	4	Female	English
AC	1	Female	English
LC	14	Male	English
LF	4	Female	English
SF	14	Male	English
EH	2	Female	Korean & English
PK	7	Male	English
NK	5	Male	English
AK	3	Male	Punjabi & English
LP	1	Female	English
MR	5	Female	Telugu & English
RS	6	Male	English
AS	2	Female	English
JT	10	Male	English
IU	1	Female	English
JV	7	Male	English
BV	11	Male	English
IW	5	Male	English

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Descriptions of actions are declarative statements accompanying ongoing activity or describing past or future action. Repetitions are repeating a partner's or own prior utterance(s). Semantic tying is adding new semantic elements to a partner's previous contribution. Calls for attention are utterances used to gain a partner's attention that include calling a partner's name or using expressions such as, "Hey!" or "Look!" Directives are declarative statements used to control a partner or other players' action. Directives also can be used in pretend scripts or role play. Tags are verbal devices placed at the end of a conversational turn to elicit a response or acknowledgement.

Play can take the form of variations in language or the "voices" that position individuals in a social environment (Bakhtin, 1981). Language variations include appropriating noises and sounds of objects children are using in play (e.g., "vroom, vroom"), naming and inventing objects, playing with the linguistic system (e.g., saying "uh, oh!"), or assigning roles. Corsaro's (1986) communication scale was used to evaluate participants' language variations, voicing, and other communication strategies in a naturalistic play context.

To ensure reliability of Corsaro's (1986) communication scale, inter-rater reliability was established prior to data collection, using a training video. Digital footage from five block play episodes from a previous pilot study on block play was copied, transcribed, and used to train a classroom teacher to identify the way children voice and appropriate meaning, using Corsaro's (1986) coding system. Conversations were coded using Corsaro's (1986) communication scale. Each communication strategy was given numerical values of 1-7. Paralinguistic cues were given a numerical value of 1; descriptions of action the value of 2; repetition the value of 3; semantic tying, 4; calls for attention, 5; directives, 6; and the last strategy, tags, was designated the value of 7. This procedure was repeated with six randomly selected block play episodes from the actual study. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Spearman rank-order correlation coefficients. Overall, the mean ranking of the coefficient was .91 and the median was .99. The method of observing communication strategies was considered acceptable for purposes of this study.

Procedures

At the onset of the study, the two subtests of the *Quick Test* from *The Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals—Preschool* (Wiig et al., 1992) were administered individually by the first author. With the exception of one child, IW, monolingual and bilingual children were functioning in the average or above-average range on the two subtests, indicating competence in oral language. IW's score was 95 percent for receptive language and 1 percent for expressive language. IW has an expressive language delay and is receiving intervention services in school. IW was kept in the study, but was never involved in an individual play episode.

Children were observed and videotaped in the natural setting of a preschool classroom during June, the final month of the preschool year preceding entry to kindergarten. The duration of the observations was three weeks. Videotaping was done using a wide-angle lens, with the camera set on a tripod. The wide-angle lens was used to tape the entire block area and capture the three groupings (individuals, dyads, and groups). Taping was conducted in the morning during activity time (i.e., 9:30 - 10:30 a.m.). The authors videotaped block players while the rest of the children participated in other center activities. The videotaped observations resulted in the 53 play episodes used for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Qualitative and quantitative data sources were used and analyzed. Transcribed videotapes of block play were analyzed for episodes of pretend play. There were

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

a total of 53 block play episodes. Chi-square analyses were carried out to calculate the observed frequency and expected frequency of communication strategies, both with and without regard to the three different naturally emerging social groupings.

Findings

Communication Strategies Without Regard to Social Groupings

For ease of reading, data are presented chronologically. Excerpts of transcripts from qualitative data are included to discuss specific communication strategies (Corsaro, 1986). There were a total of 1,250 observed communication strategies in 53 episodes. A one-way Chi-square analysis was calculated to compare seven communication strategies to each other. The expected frequency for all communication strategies was 178.57. Table 2 shows results of the analysis, which indicate that significant differences existed in the communication strategies of 5-year-old children engaged in block play ($x^2 [6] = 815.91, p < .001$). Descriptions of actions (510), followed by calls for attention (198), were the most frequently used communication strategies, and occurred significantly more often than expected. In comparison, tags (25) and repetitions (93) were the least preferred strategies, occurring less often than expected.

Qualitative data reported in an excerpt from a transcribed play episode below exemplify and support quantitative findings.

Language	Action	Strategy
1. LC: "This is a zebra cage."		Descriptions of actions
2. SF: "Yeah."	SF gets a block. Hands it to LC.	
3. JV: "I'm back."		
4. JV: "This is an awesome building."		Descriptions of actions
5. LC: "No, it's not a building, it's a zoo."		Directives
6. SF: "Remember, we can't build on the floor."		Descriptions of actions
7. SF: "Hey, LC, I did it."	SF leans ramp vertically against two cylinder blocks.	Calls for attention
8. JV: "LC, a crack!"	Points to a small opening between two blocks.	Calls for attention
9. LC: "No, we're working on the zebra cage, leave it."		Directives
10. JV: "Where can I put this?"		Calls for attention
11. SF: "Here, here, LC."	JV and SF get two trucks and fill them with blocks. They pretend to drive trucks as they push them to the zebra cage. LC takes the blocks out of the trucks and builds a zebra cage.	Calls for attention
12. JV: "Delivery truck!"		Descriptions of action
13. JV: "Delivery truck!"		Repetition

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The group of three boys used language to initiate building a zebra cage. Descriptions of actions were observed as the boys worked with a general plan in mind and described how to build a zebra cage. LC clearly described what the structure was early in the construction stage and made it clear to SF and JV that the blocks were appropriated for a zebra cage in the zoo (lines 1, 5, 9). LC described the structure by saying, "This is a zebra cage." When JV entered the block area, he told him he was making a zebra cage with SF. JV and SF appropriated blocks for a delivery truck as they described the arrival of a delivery truck (lines 12, 13). JV said, "Delivery truck!"

Directives were observed when LC demonstrated power and peer control as he verbally directed SF and JV (lines 5, 9). LC was the leader and used directives to remind JV that they were building a zebra cage, not a building (line 5). He reminded JV again that the group's job was to work on building a zebra cage (line 9).

Calls for attention were observed when SF and JV attempted to gain LC's attention for a shared understanding regarding the status of the zebra cage (lines 7, 8, 10, 11). They wanted LC's approval as JV asked permission to build, "Where can I put this?" (line 10) and SF sought LC's attention by calling his name, "Hey, LC, I did it" (line 7). The children used these strategies to make themselves understood and to appropriate meaning in block play activities.

Communication Strategies With Regard to Social Groupings

Fifty-three episodes of pretend block play were transcribed and analyzed for each of the social groupings. The number of

Table 2
Frequencies and X^2 Calculation of Communication Strategies Without Regard to Social Groups

Strategy	Frequency obs.
Paralinguistic Cues	129
Descriptions of Actions	510
Repetitions	93
Semantic Tying	138
Calls for Attention	198
Directives	157
Tags	25

Note. The expected value = 178.57, $\chi^2(6) = 815.91$, $^{**}p<.001$, critical value = 22.46

Table 3
Frequency and X^2 Calculations of Seven Communication Strategies Among Three Social Groupings (Individual, Dyads, and Groups)

Strategy	Group $I(f_{obs})$	$D(f_{obs})$	$G(f_{obs})$	*Frequency obs.*	$\chi^2(df{=}2)$
Paralinguistic Cues	19	65	45	129	24.75 **
Descriptions of Actions	33	191	286	510	192.15 **
Repetitions	5	36	52	93	36.85**
Semantic Tying	4	65	69	138	57.70**
Calls for Attention	25	81	92	198	39.12**
Directives	11	73	73	157	48.96**
Tags	2	12	11	25	7.29*

$^{*}p<.05$, critical value = 5.99, $^{**}p<.001$, critical value = 13.82

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

episodes in each social grouping was: 1) 17, individual; 2) 19, dyadic; and 3) 17, small-group episodes. The results are reported using Chi-square analysis and qualitative data. One-way Chi-square analyses were calculated to determine whether or not there was frequent usage across social groupings for each communication strategy. Significant differences among the three social groupings were found for all the communication strategies. Table 3 summarizes the results. For paralinguistic cues, the expected value was 24.75. The use of this strategy occurred more frequently than the expected value for dyads and groups and less frequently for individuals. For descriptions of actions, the expected value was 192.15. The expected value was 36.52 for repetitions. The use of both of these communication strategies occurred more frequently than expected in groups, around the expected value for dyads, and less frequently than expected for individuals. The use of particular strategies—semantic tying, calls for attention, directives, and tags—occurred more frequently than the expected value for dyads and groups of three or more. The expected values were 57.70 for semantic tying; 39.12 for calls for attention; 48.96 for directives; and 7.29 for tags.

Across all seven communication categories, the strategies were used least frequently by individuals. Groups, on the other hand, used all of the communication strategies more frequently than expected, with the exception of paralinguistic cues. Paralinguistic cues were used more frequently by dyads than by groups.

Qualitative data showed the usage of paralinguistic cues to animate objects, to voice intonation in order to mark fantasy, and to portray roles. Paralinguistic cues were used to appropriate sounds of cars (Yaaarrrrr, Brrroom) and animals (Yeehoo, whoo-ooo). In one episode, JT and BV built a hotel with blocks. JT used paralinguistic cues to appropriate people skiing down a slope. He said, "They go Sssssssss as they bump and move and ski on that way and that way or straight up."

Children used figurines and replicas of objects to voice and appropriate meaning in play in several episodes. Children playing alone frequently used high and low voices and engaged in monologues. Below are a few excerpts from transcriptions that show how children appropriated meaning through dialogue. In the first excerpt, a child (NK) has internalized the words of an invisible speaker and appropriated meaning by engaging in an inner dialogue. NK took several block play accessories and talked aloud and named each wooden community building. He voiced to himself, "Mail, these are mail," "The police place," and "This is a garbage truck." NK used a very high voice as he turned the police car upside down to voice the sound of an accident scene.

Language	Action	Strategy
NK: "Hey, these blocks are for play."	Finds a basket of wooden community blocks.	Descriptions of actions
NK: "Mail, these are mail."		Paralinguistic cues
NK: "The police place."	Picks out police station and post office and places it on the structure.	Paralinguistic cues
NK: "This is a car!"		Paralinguistic cues
NK: "This is a garbage truck."		Paralinguistic cues
NK: "An upside down police car."		Paralinguistic cues

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

In the next excerpt, two children (LF and AS) enacted play roles as they built a dentist's office and role-played with figurines to reenact LF's experience of having a tooth extracted the previous day. Descriptions of actions were used as both children planned and built the waiting room in the dentist office. When LF completed the structure, paralinguistic cues were used as LF and AS voiced the figurines. AS voiced the pretend role of dentist and LF used language as she pretended to be Molly, the patient. LF used her experience with the dentist to appropriate meaning and understanding through pretend block play with AS.

Language	Action	Strategy
AS: "Here's the waiting room."	Holding a figurine of a girl.	Paralinguistic cues
AS: "Do you want to watch TV?"	Talks to figurine.	Paralinguistic cues
AS-LF: "Who are you?"	AS's figurine talks to LF's figurine.	Paralinguistic cues
AS: "I call people."	AS's figurine talks to LF's figurine.	Paralinguistic cues
LF: "Molly!"	LF talks to girl figurine.	Paralinguistic cues

The following is an example of a dyadic grouping of bilingual and monolingual partners. The monolingual child (BV) used paralinguistic cues when the bilingual partner (EH) did not communicate to the partner. BV embellished upon his structure to announce the addition of a gas station he was building. He attempted to clarify to EH his actions of building a gas station through repetition and described additional information about the construction process. When EH did not respond to him, BV began to talk to himself and to use paralinguistic strategies.

Language	Action	Strategy
BV-EH: "Now we have a gas station."		Descriptions of action
BV-EH: "We have a gas station."	EH walks back and forth to block shelf, placing figurines and blocks on structure.	Repetition
BV-EH: "We even have gas before they take off."		Descriptions of action
BV-EH: "Maybe we can use it for parking."	EH goes to block shelf for more blocks.	Semantic tying
BV: "I made a gas station."	BV sits in front of structure, talks to himself.	Paralinguistic cues
BV: "You need to get gas before they take off."	BV talks aloud. Plays with wooden gas pumps. Stands up, claps hands together.	Paralinguistic cues
BV: "Brmmm. Brrmmm. Brrmmm."	BV claps hands together and makes sounds of an airplane.	Paralinguistic cues
BV: "Brmmm. Brrmmm. Brrmmm."		Paralinguistic cues

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Chi-square analyses reported significantly frequent usage of communication strategies across three naturally emerging social groups (individuals, dyads, and groups of three or more children) in block play. Qualitative analyses of transcribed episodes of block play from three naturally emerging social groups elucidated these findings through discussion and examples of the use of paralinguistic cues. The example of descriptions of actions and repetitions, and of the communication strategies frequently used in groups of three or more children, served to further support the findings of the quantitative data.

Discussion

The findings from the study (Cohen, 2006) demonstrate that Bakhtin's theories of dialogism can be applied to children's block play. With regard to genre, the data represented different types of speech events. Descriptions of actions were frequently used as explanations of how to build a zoo or narratives retelling a dentist visit or going to Disney World were used by children in this study to make themselves understood and appropriate meaning through shared discourse. Conversations in each social grouping—individuals, dyads, and groups—reflected voices that were "filled with others' words" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 84) as they appropriated the language of others and internalized the genre of narrative to tell their own stories.

Findings suggest that individual communication was observed least frequently across all communication strategies. Individuals had a total of 96 utterances, compared to 656 utterances for groups with the same number of episodes of pretend play. Individuals used communication strategies and engaged in Bakhtin's notion of hidden dialogicality in pretend block play (Cheyne & Tarulli, 1999). They used communication strategies as they "responded and reacted to an invisible speaker." The individual group was assimilating the unspoken words of another. This invisible speaker might be a parent, teacher, or peer. The individual grouping was engaging in inner dialogues in solitary play.

The use of paralinguistic cues, as defined by Corsaro (1986), is an example of voicing. This was a preferred strategy for individuals as they voiced to themselves and the most frequently used communication strategy for dyadic groups. The children were voicing and appropriating the sounds of cars, animals, and voices of people as they played with blocks. This research supports previous studies of voicing and replica play while manipulating puppets or plastic figures (Andersen, 1990; Corsaro, 1985; Farver, 1992; Sawyer, 1996; Wolf, Rygh, & Altshuler, 1984). The use of replicas or small-scale figures and props in previous research enhanced language usage of sound effects and changes in voices. Similar to these findings, children frequently used paralinguistic cues as they manipulated puppets, plastic figurines, and other block accessories.

Sawyer's (1996) study of role voicing supports findings from this study with regard to voicing and use of paralinguistic cues, and also provides support for a rationale for Bakhtin's (1981) theories of heteroglossia. The idea of speaking in many different voices in pretend play is based on Bakhtin's (1981) theories of the many ways individuals speak in social situations. According to Sawyer (1996), Bakhtin's writings focus on how members of a society manipulate their voices for different purposes for interactional effects. Similarly, children use different voices in pretend block play.

The block area in an early childhood classroom is an interactional space within which children confront a social world. In this study, children used descriptions of action, calls for attention, and directives to share knowledge of their everyday world to describe events, request the attention of peers, and direct and control behavior of peers. In block play, children's discourse will constantly move from authoritative discourse to internally persuasive discourse (Bakhtin, 1981), as we are constantly drawing on others' words. Past research

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

(Cook et al., 1985; Corsaro, 1986; Farver, 1992) provides support for the communication strategy of directives as language used in play to control the behavior of others or getting others to do what they want them to do. In this research, the leader used directives to exhibit power over the players by giving permission for others to join, changing the structure, deciding whether to place more blocks or not, getting input from others, and deciding whether or not to take the input. Using Bakhtin's (1981) terminology, the leader used authoritative discourse that was accepted without question.

This study adds to the research on block play and bilingual children. The results in the current study suggest that the bilingual participants were performing at an average or above-average range on oral language assessments given prior to data collection. These findings were inconsistent with the use of communication strategies and participation in episodes of play (Table 1). The number of episodes each bilingual child participated in was: EH, 2; AK, 3; IA, 3; and MR, 5. This is consistent with Clawson's (2002) findings with a bilingual Korean child and English-speaking peer, and suggests that bilingual children may need more time and teacher intervention to assist and help them join in block play with peers.

Researchers (Battle, 1996; Bowman, 2004; Hughes, 1999; Trawick-Smith, 2003; Wyatt, 1995) caution that children who speak a dialect or another language in the home should not be labeled as language-delayed. The results in the current study suggest the bilingual participants were performing at an average or above-average range on oral language assessments, and clearly did not have a language disability.

Another conclusion from this finding concerns the context of play. French, Lucariello, Seidman, and Nelson (1985) describe sociodramatic play involving the use of props that have clear uses, so verbal negotiation is not a prerequisite for pretense. Blocks, however, require language in order to establish a common meaning. This is a critical difference. The bilingual participants need more time in block play experiences in early childhood environments to successfully use communication strategies to communicate and engage in social interactions with peers.

Educational Implications

The results of this investigation to identify the value of block play on 5-year-old children's cognitive, social, and linguistic competence can have practical implications for teachers of early childhood programs. Additionally, some of these findings can be influential in creating programs for teacher training and curriculum development.

First, dyads and groups of three or more children communicated more frequently than did individual groups in this study. Schools need to provide time for young children to play with blocks and engage in social interaction. By participating in social interactions, children learned about themselves in relation to their environment and culture. Block play provides the social activity setting in which children practice social roles and learn the skills needed to be a member of the culture as a social being. Blocks are a particularly good material for language development because, as stated above, they require verbal negotiation in order to establish a common representational system.

Second, the children in this study used communication strategies to appropriate meaning while building structures in the block area. Teachers in early childhood programs need to create a learning area in the classroom and include a large assortment of unit blocks stored and arranged on shelves. Block accessories, writing and sign-making supplies, and recycled materials (e.g., foam cubes, fabric scraps, film canisters) need to be provided to enhance children's language and literacy skills.

The use of oral language and vocabulary words were acquired as children used com-

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

munication strategies and shared common understandings by talking about their block structures. Block building can be used as an opportunity to promote oral language skills through discussions and sharing. In this study, children were given opportunities to talk about their completed block structures. Such questions as: What was the most important thing you did while building today? What blocks did you use to build your structure? Why? were asked to promote conversation and share block building experiences in the present study. Children's language development is crucial for later academic success.

Findings suggest that bilingual children did not participate in many episodes of block play, nor did they use many communication strategies. Teachers need to observe children in the block area for the following behaviors: 1) how children use the play materials, 2) who comes to the block center all the time and who does not, 3) who is always rejected, 4) why certain children have trouble during block play, and 5) who is skilled in construction or decorating buildings. When teachers do not observe and provide assistance, children who are repeatedly rejected, or children who are English language learners, cannot be assisted.

In summary, there is much to understand about 5-year-old preschool children and their language and cognition in block play. A sociocultural approach to children's discourse in the context of block play has been presented. This study suggests that 5-year-old preschool children use communication strategies and appropriate shared meaning in block play.

References

Andersen, E. S. (1990). *Speaking with style: The sociolinguistic skills of children.* New York: Routledge.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *Discourse in the novel. In the dialogic imagination.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Battle, D. E. (1996). Language learning and use by African American children. *Topics in Language Disorders, 16*(4), 22-37.

Bowman, B. T. (2004). Play in the multicultural world of children: Implications for adults. In E. Zigler, D. Singer, & S. J. Bishop-Josef (Eds.), *Children's play: The roots of reading* (pp. 125-141). Washington, DC: Zero to Three Press.

Cazden, C. B. (2001). *Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning* (2nd ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Cheyne, J. A., & Tarulli, D. (1999). Dialogue, difference, and the "third voice" in the zone of proximal development. *Theory and Psychology, 9*, 5-28.

Clawson, M. A. (2002). Play of language-minority children in an early childhood setting. In J. Roopnarine (Ed.), *Conceptual, social-cognitive, and contextual issues in the fields of play* (pp. 93-110). Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing.

Cohen, L. E. (2006). Young children's discourse strategies in pretend block play. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 67*(02A), (UMI No. 3208578).

Cook, A. S., Fritz, J. J., McCornack, B. L., & Visperas, C. (1985). Early gender differences in the functional usage of language. *Sex Roles, 12*, 909-915.

Corsaro, W. A. (1985). *Friendship and peer culture in the early years.* Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing.

Corsaro, W. A. (1986). Discourse processes within peer culture: From a constructivist to an interpretative approach to childhood socialization. In P. Adler (Ed.), *Sociological studies of child development* (pp. 81-101). New York: JAI Press.

Corsaro, W. A. (2003). *We're friends, right? Inside kids' culture.* Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press.

Dyson, A. H. (1994). "I'm gonna express myself": The politics of story in the children's worlds. In A. H. Dyson & C. Genishi (Eds.), *The need for story: Cultural diversity in classroom and community* (pp. 155-169). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Dyson, A. H. (1997). *Writing superheroes. Contemporary childhood, popular culture, and classroom literacy.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Farver, J. M. (1992). Communicating shared meaning in social pretend play. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 7*(4), 501-

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

516.

French, L. A., Lucariello, J., Seidman, S., & Nelson, K. (1985). The influence of discourse content and context on preschoolers' use of language. In L.Galda & A. D. Pelligrini (Eds.), *Play, language, and stories: The development of children's literate behavior* (pp. 1-28). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Garvey, C. (1990). *Play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Goncu, A. (1993). Development of intersubjectivity in the dyadic play of preschoolers. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 8*, 99-116.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1975). *Learning how to mean: Exploration in the development of language*. London: Edward Arnold.

Hughes, F. P. (1999). *Children, play, and development*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Paley, V. G. (1990). *The boy who would be a helicopter*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Salvia, J., & Ysseldyke, J. E. (1995). *Assessment* (6th ed.). Wilmington, MA: Houghton Mifflin Publishers.

Sawyer, R. K. (1996). Role voicing, gender, and age in preschool play discourse. *Discourse Processes, 22*, 289-307.

Sawyer, R. K. (1997). *Pretend play as improvisation: Conversation in the preschool classroom*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Sluss, D. J. (1996). Play as the zone of proximal development: Collaborative constructive block play. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 57*(02), (UMI No. 9619011).

Sluss, D. J., & Stremmel, A. J. (2004). A sociocultural investigation of the effects of peer interaction on play. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 18*(4), 293-305.

Trawick-Smith, J. (2003). *Early childhood development. A multicultural perspective*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Vice, S. (1997). *Introducing Bakhtin*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society. The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wertsch, J. V. (1991). *Voices of the mind. A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wertsch, J. V. (1998). *Minds in action*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wiig, E., Secord, W., & Semel, E. (1992). *Clinical evaluation of language fundamentals—Preschool*. San Antonio, TX: Psychological Corporation.

Wolf, D. P., Rygh, J., & Altshuler, J. (1984). Agency and experience: Actions and stages in play narratives. In I. Bretherton (Ed.), *Symbolic play* (pp. 195-218). Orlando, FL: Academic.

Wyatt, T. A. (1995). Language development in African American English child speech. *Linguistics and Education, 7*, 7-22.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.