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Supporting Children's Participation in Second Language Stories in an Irish-Language Preschool

Máire Mhic Mhathúna

ABSTRACT

This paper considers how children learning a second language were supported as active participants during storytelling sessions in an Irish-language immersion preschool in Dublin. Audio-recordings and observations were made of the story sessions once a fortnight over a period of six months. The resulting transcripts were analysed from an interactionist perspective, recognising both the cognitive and social aspects of the process. The staff were also interviewed and a questionnaire was completed by the parents. The analysis showed that the practitioners provided support for the children through dynamic repeated readings of target books, scaffolded interactions, sufficient experience of storybook reading and small and large group organisation of story sessions. The language of the stories was integrated with the language used in the other activities and interactional routines. Difficult choices had to be made in regard to the type and breadth of learning experiences provided when focusing primarily on second language learning.

Key words: Early childhood education; Storytelling; Second language learning; Irish language; Narrative understanding.

Introduction

Many early educators view children as active participants in their own learning. The concept of collaborative learning proves more challenging than usual to put into practice in early years settings that provide early childhood education through children's second language. This paper considers how children learning a second language were supported as active participants during storytelling sessions in a naíonra or Irish-language immersion preschool in Dublin. Stories were chosen as the focus of enquiry because they are regarded as productive language enriching activities and at the same time, many early educators find storytelling challenging, especially in second language contexts. Hickey (1997:77) in her survey of 182 naíonraí found that naíonra practitioners valued stories as a language enriching activity but almost half (49%) did not tell or read stories on a daily basis. Dickinson (2001:200) studied the practice of story reading in children's first language in a large scale investigation in day care centres in the United States and also found that practice lagged behind belief. This suggests that storytelling is difficult to undertake with groups of children, no matter what the language, and that it is particularly challenging with beginner learners of a second language. The strategies adopted by the naíonra practitioners in this study are therefore worth investigating.

“Naíonra” (plural naíonraí) is a newly coined term to denote an Irish language immersion preschool for three- and four-year-old children and is derived from an Irish word for an infant or young child, “naí.” Immersion education is one type of bilingual education (Swain and Johnson 1997:6,7) and naíonra education is a form of total early immersion in the target language, with all teaching, nurturing and support provided by the practitioners in Irish only. The use of Irish only by the adults is intended to provide a context for the use of the target language and a means to maximise the quantity of comprehensible input in Irish. Most children attending naíonraí, outside the Irish-speaking areas in the west of the country, are native speakers of English and are acquiring Irish as an additional language. Naíonraí aim to provide the opportunity to learn Irish as an additional language through a high quality curriculum delivered through the children's second language. Play is regarded as the main medium of learning, but as the practitioners are the principal source of input in Irish, they must maintain a highly vocal profile in order to provide input in Irish. It is, undoubtedly, a

challenge to provide sufficient input for the children to acquire Irish within a play-based, child-centred curriculum, while not dominating the situation to the extent of stifling children's initiative and creativity.

A case study method of enquiry was adopted for this research project, focusing on story sessions with three- and four-year old children in a Dublin naíonra, where all but one of the children were learning Irish as a second language. A particular naíonra was chosen as the practitioners were known to have developed a systematic way of using stories for second language acquisition. The naíonra provided two three-hour sessions every day, with twenty children in each. Audio-recordings and observations of the story sessions were made once a fortnight, over a period of six months. Detailed observation notes were kept of the story sessions, which lasted approximately thirty minutes. The researcher then stayed in the naíonra for the remainder of the session. This allowed recording of a further thirty minutes of interaction between the practitioners and children, which usually included lunch-time, songs and whole group storytelling. There was also a lot of incidental talk and less formal interaction during lunch-time.

Every effort was made to be a non-participant observer, but the researcher responded to any initiatives from the children, speaking in Irish only, in line with naíonra policy. The children were free to withdraw from the recordings at any time. During the 11 hours of recordings, the children showed a great deal of interest in the mini-disk and microphone and several children asked to be specially recorded saying something or singing a song. One child only withdrew from the recordings during the study period.

The resulting transcripts were analysed from an interactionist perspective, recognising both the cognitive and social aspects of the language learning process (Gass 2002: 172; Lightbrown and Spada 2006:43). Interactionists prioritise the importance of input, the language addressed to the learner, and the modifications made by competent speakers to the way they use language and structure conversations with learners. In the case of a second language, these modifications include context-bound topics and vocabulary, short sentences, and repetition and paraphrase. The interaction process is regarded as two-way with adults adjusting their input in line with the learners'

understanding and learners influencing the competent speakers' input through the negotiation of meaning.

Analysis of the data showed that the naíonra practitioners provided support for the children through the:

Method of Storytelling

Development of Language

Development of Narrative

Organisation of Storytelling Sessions

These supports were used to provide opportunities for children's second language learning while the interactive nature of the storytelling facilitated children's participation and initiatives through their home language English, and their emerging competencies in Irish as a second language. The staff were interviewed to discuss their views on the practice of storytelling and book-reading in the naíonra and a questionnaire was completed by the parents.

Method of storytelling

The practitioners chose a small number of target stories, about five, that were read in Irish intensively over the course of the year, focusing on one target story every month or six weeks, which was told or read four times a week for that period. The practitioners also read other stories in each story session, often those chosen by the children. They started telling the target stories in December, when the children had had three months exposure to Irish as a second language and continued until mid-June.

Development of language

The children quickly became familiar with the gist of the stories. The practitioners were able to adopt a question-and-answer style of storytelling, similar to the didactic-interactive style described by Dickinson and Smith (1994) which involved a teacher-led question and answer style of interaction. The practitioners told/read the stories using questions directly based on the illustrations, supplemented by exaggerated gestures, actions and onomatopoeia. This meant that the children only had to

concentrate on describing the pictures and saying the recurring words and phrases. In this way, the children experienced many opportunities to hear the same language both from the practitioners and from each other, a form of peer scaffolding outlined by Kanagy (1991:1486). As the children became familiar with the recurring words and phrases, the practitioners gradually drew back and created opportunities for the children to say more and more of the recurring phrases. Over several weeks, the content of the questions became more complex, as the practitioners looked for more detail or reasons for actions, features that were not evident in the illustrations. In fact, they were so attuned to the children's stage of development that they rarely asked questions that the children could not answer. The children were therefore being supported to think of themselves as competent participants in storytelling and language.

The style of questioning also changed in tandem with the children's increasing ability, moving from basic labelling questions to a more playful and teasing style, with lots of improbable suggestions and false statements that the children took great delight in correcting! The affective nature of the interaction was very important. It was clear that the staff enjoyed telling the story. They made connections with the interests of the particular children in the group and the children responded warmly to the staff's initiatives. The staff also moved the affective aspect of these interactions forward, with praise being transferred from simple items, once they had been learned, to the new aspects of the language. This process mirrors the evolving scaffolding process described by Rogoff (1995: 699), Wood and Wood (1996:6) and Van Lier (2001:96).

Child Initiatives

The practitioners listened carefully to the children's responses, comments and initiatives. They listened both for language and for content. In the early stages, they accepted the children's one-word contributions in Irish by repeating them and then expanding them into whole sentences. They did likewise with the recurring phrases and helped the children to build them up incrementally. But they also accepted the children's use of English, their first language and responded to the content of their utterances through Irish. By concentrating on the content of what children were saying, and by following the child's lead, the staff were able to provide input that

directly reflected the child's interest and focus of attention. Gass (2002:178) holds that this is the type of input that most likely assists learning. There is a consistent pattern in the data of the staff diverting from the story to follow a child's lead, discussing it and then returning to the story. It was particularly strong in the small group sessions but also featured in the whole group tellings as well.

A number of examples from the small group sessions to illustrate the above points will now be given. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants and the transcript notation is given in the appendix. The examples show how the practitioners responded to individual children in the naíonra, how routines were integrated into talk about stories and how frequent readings of the same stories also provided other opportunities for talk. The first example shows a child, Marcas, making the connection between the naíonra routine of putting banana skins in the bin at lunch time and a banana skin in the illustration.

Example 1: February

Practitioner: Céard é sin? {What's that?}[pointing to banana skin in picture]

Marcas: **Craiceann banana.** {Banana skin.}

Practitioner: Agus cá bhfuil sé? Tá sé --- {Where is it? It's in ---}

Marcas: *You're not supposed to put it on the floor. You're supposed to put it in the bin.*

Practitioner: Cuireann Marcas an craiceann banana sa mbosca bruscair. {Marcas puts the banana skin in the bin}

Marcas: *Yep.*

In the second example, Marcas connected the penguins in the picture with the naíonra outing to the zoo and the practitioner responded by agreeing with this comment and then moved on to a counting routine that the children knew well.

Example 2: May.

Practitioner: Céard atá ann? {What's there?} [pointing to penguins in picture]

Marcas: *We saw penguins at the zoo.*

Practitioner: Ó, chonaic, chonaic. Cé mhéad piongain a chonaic muid? A lán, ceapaim ag an sú. Agus cé mhéad atá sa mbosca? Aon, dó, trí. {Oh, we

did see. How many penguins did we see? Lots, I think, at the zoo. And how many are in the box? One, two, three}.

Sorcha: **Aon, dó, trí.** {One, two, three}.

Hughes and Westgate (1998:219) state that when children were engaged in more leisurely conversation with adults, they recollected and made more connections and interpretations than in a formal scaffolded interaction. Several true conversations, conducted in a bilingual fashion, flowed from the more relaxed period of interaction at the end of the small group stories. On one occasion the story had finished with reference to a doctor.

Example 3: March.

Practitioner: Dúirt an dochtúir leis go gcaithfeadh sé fanacht sa leaba. {The doctor said that he had to stay in bed.}

Tomás: *I'm going to the **dochtúir** today.* {doctor}

Practitioner: Cén fáth? {Why?}

Tomás: *Bad cough.*

Practitioner: Ó, mar tá casacht orm. {Oh, because I have a cough.}

Tomás continued the conversation by saying that he was to go the doctor and the practitioner asked him why. He responded with a telegraphic answer in English. The practitioner translated and expanded his reply. The conversation continued with several other children discussing their health. This emphasises the importance of giving sufficient time to storytelling so that spontaneous conversations can occur.

Integrated Approach

Another significant aspect of the storytelling was the integrated approach to the whole session taken by the staff. In telling the stories, the practitioners often used words and phrases that the children knew from other contexts in the naíonra, e.g. songs, rhymes and routine interactional phrases. The idea of incorporating songs and rhymes is well documented in the literature (Browne 2001), but the idea of using and reusing the interactional phrases is quite innovative. They always made great fun and a great fuss about putting banana skins in the bin at lunch-time and this routine crossed over into any story that showed bananas in the illustrations, such as *Cá bhfuil Bran?* (*Where is*

Bran?). As seen in the example above, the children were able to use some of the words such as “craiceann banana” (banana skin) and “bosca bruscair” (bin) from the lunch-time context in the new context of the story and gain an extended view of the meaning and mastery practice at the same time. Theory tells us that young children rarely analyse the language of rhymes and songs and that songs and rhymes tend to remain as formulaic units (Wray 2002:108). This was largely true in the present storytelling context and the songs and rhymes that were incorporated remained as unanalysed units. On only one occasion did any of the children change one of the words of a song to fit the new context.

However, colours such as red, black, blue and pink did transfer across stories and contexts. Colours did of course feature in many contexts in the naíonra and the staff deliberately pointed them out as they occurred naturally or in the various stories. This meant that colours were being constantly reinforced, used and the context of their use extended. Numbers also transferred from their original context, but to a lesser extent. They were always said in a counting sequence and a child volunteered the sequence on one occasion when the practitioner did not ask the expected question at the right time! Size was another feature that transferred across some contexts. The children were able to describe relative size as in “big” and “small” in a matching card game based on one story and one child was able to talk about “buachaillí móra” (big boys) in a discussion about an outing. Characters also transferred across contexts. The main characters of the various stories were often referred to in other stories, e.g. monkeys were always Micí Moncaí, a character in a story by Mairéad Ní Ghráda, and all other monkeys were also called by his name, an early form of intertextual reference.

Narrative development

The children gradually built up their narrative skills. Initially they relied on the visual clues of the pictures and on the verbal prompts provided by the practitioner. Then they slowly developed their expressive skills to tell part of the story, while relying on the structure provided by the practitioner to do so. Berman and Slobin (1994:32) and Sulzby (1985:465) hold that young children aged three and four years can describe individual scenes, participants and events in their home language on a one-by-one basis when looking at picture books. They gradually develop an appreciation of the storyline and begin to make connections between events, i.e. an understanding of plot.

It is difficult to see if these developments are taking place in practitioner-led narratives but in the case of the most familiar story, *Teidí* by Mairéad Ní Ghráda, many children could give more detailed descriptions of individual pictures and several children could identify the key elements of the story without pictures or verbal prompts. This was the most frequently read story, with eight tellings recorded for each of the two sessions. The next most frequent story was *Cá bhfuil Bran?* by Eric Hill (Where is Bran?) with four tellings for each session. In this story, the order of events was more arbitrary and consequently more difficult to recall in order. The children could, however, predict which animal was hiding behind a particular flap and could describe the pictures in more detail, naming objects, describing colours and counting. As location is a major feature of the story, their ability to name the location, using the correct preposition, also developed.

Organisation of story sessions

One of the most striking features of the naíonra practice was the frequency and regularity of the story sessions. Stories were told/read at least three times a week to the whole group of 20 children attending each session and each child participated in a small group telling on a rolling basis over the week as well. Each child was therefore involved in a story session at least four times a week. The number of story sessions is much more frequent than that reported by Hickey (1997:77) and Dickinson (2001:200). The story sessions were held at the same time each day, with the small group telling/reading taking place during free-play time in the early part of the session and the whole group session immediately following lunch. In other words, it was a normal and expected part of the daily routine and sufficient time was allocated for it to be carried out in a flexible manner.

The number of available adults was used very productively. There were two senior members of staff and two assistants available for twenty children, which is higher than the Irish statutory requirement for sessional care. One of the senior members of staff took responsibility for a target-story, and took the lead in both the whole group and small group tellings. The other members of staff assisted with organisational matters during the whole group session or by interacting with the main group of children during the small group tellings. This meant that the storyteller could concentrate on the storytelling and give it her full attention. Mercer (1994:101)

describes this type of process as environmental scaffolding because it encompasses the organisation of the session and the relationship to other activities as well as the core activity itself.

Views of staff and parents

Staff Interviews

Formal interviews were carried out with the senior staff members at the end of the study period, but in addition, a great deal of discussion had taken place during the visits to the naíonra. Both naíonra practitioners were very experienced, each having worked in the naíonra for over twenty years. They had a strong belief in the community value of the Irish language and the role that naíonraí could play in the transmission of the language. Both staff members had completed further education courses in early years education and had attended a number of short courses organised by Forbairt Naíonraí Teo., an agency for naíonraí development. Based on their knowledge of language acquisition, their interest in stories and their observations of how the children in their own naíonra were learning a second language, the practitioners developed their own model of storytelling.

When selecting stories, they chose ones that were interesting, short and repetitive and tried to link the target story to the theme of the week. They also tried to link the characters and happenings in the stories to everyday routines in the naíonra. They used a range of props, pictures and toys to mediate the story for the children. These included commercial and specially made resources, such as the pictures that a parent drew for the *Teidí* story.

The staff expected the children to participate in the story sessions according to their developing linguistic competencies. In the early stages, they expected interest, understanding, gestures and actions. As the children acquired some of the vocabulary of the story, they were expected to use these words and phrases in answer to the practitioner's questions and to use their initiative in adding to the story by pointing things out in the pictures or referring to their own experiences. As well as the target stories, children were often given the opportunity to choose books for group sessions and could also "read" the books in the library corner.

Parent Questionnaire

A parent questionnaire was distributed to all parents in the naíonra in order to ascertain the children's experiences of Irish books at home. Not surprisingly, the level of ownership of Irish books was correlated with the parents' reported use of Irish at home. One family who had over 50 children's books in the Irish language also spoke a great deal of Irish at home with their child, while the four families who had no books in Irish did not speak any Irish at home. The families with most Irish books also read these books frequently to their child. The family with 50 books read stories daily with their child, those with 6 to 15 books read stories weekly and families with under five books read them monthly or rarely. Attendance at the naíonra and a general interest in books and in helping their children to develop their learning were reported by parents as the main motivating forces behind buying Irish books. Most of the books (66%) were picture books, with the Bran series being the most popular. This series was read extensively in the naíonra. Caption and concept books (see Browne's 2001 typology) were the next most popular type at 16% and small numbers of information and rhyme books were also mentioned. Two parents said that they would welcome information on the current books being read in the naíonra so that they could also read them at home. One parent commented on the dramatic method of storytelling in the naíonra and said that it made a big impression on her child. Another parent said, "Storybook reading certainly worked in helping my son to understand the story without making an issue of a different language."

Discussion

This study illustrates some of the dilemmas faced by immersion practitioners in early childhood settings. How can children's interests and initiatives be facilitated when they are at the beginning stages of second language acquisition and when the adult is the main source of input? To do this successfully requires a deep knowledge of the process of second language acquisition as well as early childhood pedagogy. Staff need to know how to manage the process of second language learning so that children are offered input at an appropriate level, sufficient for progress but not overwhelming. They need to be able to apply this knowledge to early years practice so that children are offered a rich educational experience as well as language learning. The storytelling method employed by the practitioners provided scaffolded input and also

facilitated children's involvement at two integrated levels. On the one hand, there was the opportunity for them to complete the formulaic sentences of the story and on the other hand, the children were encouraged to use their initiative by describing the pictures in more detail and by making connections to characters in other stories and to their own experiences in the naíonra or at home. Torr (2007:88) found that many children spontaneously relate to texts by making connections with other texts and/or the personal lives. This also mirrors the connections that Phillips and McNaughton (1990:209) and De Temple (2001:50) made in relation to repeated readings of the same stories in children's first language. They point out that it is usually with later readings of stories that children begin to make comments, predictions and links to personal experiences. The naíonra children were doing likewise in both their languages, by understanding the input in Irish but responding mainly in English as was appropriate for their stage of development.

It is vital to regard the children holistically and not only as language learners. Storytelling is an accepted part of childhood and an accepted part of the early childhood curriculum in any language. By choosing stories wisely and by adapting an appropriate method of storytelling, it is possible to tell stories well to young children at the initial stages of second language acquisition. It is also possible to cater for children's interests by following their line of thought or focus of interest, especially when the staff know the children and their families well. The staff in this case study were willing to divert from the planned storyline on almost every occasion recorded over the six-month study period and this gave a very clear message to the children that the staff were genuinely interested in **what** they had to say as well as **how** they said it.

Implications for other second languages

This study has described the process of storytelling in one naíonra context in Dublin. In common with other countries, we now have a new situation in Ireland, where increasing numbers of children are entering early education centres and learning English as an additional language. This presents a number of challenges for practitioners who may not have met second language children before. While recognising that there are substantial socio-cultural differences between the naíonra experience of second language learning and other situations, this study can offer some

relevant ideas and guidelines. The practice of using repeated readings of stories for language acquisition is one example. The stories were chosen for their language level as well as their intrinsic value and they were told/read sufficiently often so that the children could acquire the language of these stories. The language of the stories and of the other early education routines and activities were integrated to give maximum exposure/practice to the children. It would be possible for practitioners working with children learning English as an Additional Language to choose interesting books with simple, repetitive language and to read these frequently in a formulaic way, using props, pictures, actions and gestures so that the children could become familiar with the language of the story. The level of complexity in the language and the story could then be extended. A book that links into the theme of the week or the interactional routines would be useful as the language could be used in several contexts, thus providing practice and reinforcement.

The integrated approach to language learning also provides ideas for other second language practitioners. The naónra deliberately integrated language across all aspects of the curriculum, planned and unplanned, and took every opportunity to use and reuse the same words, phrase and references to story characters and events. They incorporated songs the children knew into the stories and used words and phrases from the lunch-time routine in the stories. Repeated use of similar language across all aspects of the curriculum would help second language learners of English to understand and to use the language they are acquiring and to participate verbally at an early stage of second language acquisition.

Staff resources were used to free up one member of staff to concentrate on telling a target story with a small or large group of children. Staff in English-speaking centres could also organise their work so that one practitioner could be nominated to tell stories at a certain time with individual children or a small group and the other staff members could care for the other children. The small and whole group organisation of story sessions could be adapted to focus on children learning English as an additional language in small groups and to include all children in the large group setting. This method could provide input at the appropriate level for the children learning English in the smaller setting and allow them to benefit from more advanced input in relation to the same story in the large group. This study found that the frequency of the

storytelling sessions was also important and similarly stories could be scheduled every day for children learning English.

The storytelling took place in a very supportive environment, wherein the staff displayed a very warm and respectful affection for the children, shown in how they supported the children's learning and how they encouraged and facilitated the children's initiatives in all aspects of the work. By responding to all initiatives shown by the children and by scaffolding their participation in stories, staff could bolster the children's motivation and facilitate second language learning.

Two parents mentioned that they would welcome information about the books being read in the naónra. While one is very reluctant to suggest sending books in English home to families who speak other languages, dual language books in the language of the home and in English could provide a bridge between the story and language used in the early years setting and the home language. This would have the added advantage of recognising the home language and helping the child develop cognitively in both languages and could form a link between the home and the early years' centre.

Conclusion

De Temple (2001:50) said that one of the key facilitative features in language development is "adequate exposure to specific books." This study bears out her statement. By reading the target stories many times in a systematic manner, by organising the session so that sufficient time and attention could be paid to the storytelling and by promoting and facilitating the children's involvement in as many ways as possible, the practitioners provided multiple scaffolds and supported children's initiatives to a very considerable extent. The dynamic, repeated readings of stories facilitated the understanding of the story, the acquisition of the words and phrases used and the links that could be made to the children's own experiences. The two-way integrated approach between the stories and the language used in interactional routines, songs and activities provided many opportunities for the children to hear and to use the same language. In this way the children could use the language they were learning for real purposes, gain feedback and consolidate what

they knew. The children's ready involvement in the stories showed that they too enjoyed learning a second language through stories.

Appendix

Transcription Notation

Square brackets:	[contextual clues]
Bold print:	children's utterances in Irish
Italics:	<i>appropriate response in English</i>
Underlined:	<u>overlap between speakers</u>
---	prompting pause
Curly brackets:	{translation into English}

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