Understanding influences of play on second language learning: A microethnographic view in one Head Start preschool classroom

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Abstract
With dual language learners falling behind their same-age peers at the beginning of kindergarten, understanding how school experiences can enhance language learning is critical. This study demonstrates how play among preschool-aged children can foster English language learning. Using an ethnographic approach, one classroom composed of two teachers and 17 four- to five-year-old children was observed and videotaped during Free Play. Interactional analyses of four Spanish-speaking children’s play scenarios with their same-language peers and English-speaking peers illustrate how through these social interactions their oral English language was supported and, at times, hindered. The implications for play as an avenue for supporting English language learning in the classroom are discussed.

Keywords
play, dual language learners, preschool

In the United States, language proficiency is acknowledged as a major factor in the gap that exists between non-English-speaking and English-speaking children’s readiness for school when they enter kindergarten. Also commonly acknowledged are the academic and social sorting consequences of this gap. If proficiency in English is not addressed early on, the achievement gap continues throughout schooling, limiting societal access in adulthood (Cannon and Karoly, 2007; Garcia and Miller, 2008). Dickinson and Tabor (2001), for example, found early oral language development to be linked to later reading achievement, and Reardon and Galindo (2009) found that Hispanic children who entered kindergarten with limited oral English skills were behind their non-Hispanic White peers at fifth grade on reading and mathematics tests. In addition, Spanish-speaking children fell further behind Hispanic children who lived in homes where English was spoken, and those results do not include the estimated one-third of Hispanic children entering...
kindergarten insufficiently proficient in English to be assessed (National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, 2007). These children are dual language learners (DLL), in the process of acquiring a second language as they develop their first language system, and they are increasing in number (Ballantyne et al., 2008). Identifying instructional strategies for supporting the learning of DLL vocabulary, grammatical forms, semantics, and language use during prekindergarten schooling has become critical.

Researchers have found that children learning English as a second language in a school setting develop English language competencies over time regardless of program types and instruction (Barnett et al., 2007; Chesterfield et al., 1983; Rodriguez et al., 1995; Saunders and O’Brien, 2006; Winsler et al., 1999). This noteworthy finding raises the question. What else may be supporting language learning in school? Play, central in the life learning of small children, is also a site for academic and language learning. The importance of play for language development in monolingual speaking children is well established (see Bodrova, 2008). Yet little research has focused on play and its role in second language learning at this age and in this type of setting. In the United States, there is a shift away from play as a main form of instruction during the preschool years toward an instruction that aligns with the K-3 education system, which emphasizes direct instruction and learning of discrete skills. The purpose of this study is to illustrate the importance of play for learning a second language through the children’s natural social interactions with their peers. This study builds upon only a handful of studies that have examined the influence of types of social interactions between learners and their teachers and peers in oral language development (Clarke, 1999; Fassler, 1998; Gillanders, 2007; Logan, 1991; Piker and Rex, 2008; Saville-Troike, 1987; Thompson, 1994). It is part of a larger investigation that used an ethnographic approach to investigate the language environment of a preschool classroom (Piker, 2006). The larger study documented that by the end of the school year, even without specific language instruction or curriculum, Spanish-speaking children in that setting produced more English than when they began. The focused comparative case study reported here asked the question: How did the four children’s social relationships with their peers, specifically their play interactions, influence the change in their oral English production?

**Theoretical framework**

Taking a sociolinguistic approach, language use is situation dependent, and therefore, second language acquisition can only be understood in relation to the social context in which it occurs (Fishman, 1976; Gumperz, 1986). The nature of classroom interactions makes it an ideal social context for language learning. Social communication in classrooms has been the foundation of interactional ethnographers, who view teaching and learning as social, interactive communicative processes and study classrooms as cultural settings for understanding how students learn (Green et al., 2002; Rex, 2006). The ethnographic approach supports attempts to understand the “consequences of membership, and how differential access within a group shapes opportunities for learning and participation” (Green et al., 2002: 206). By focusing on interaction, interactional ethnographers seek to understand how, through language routines, social practices in the daily activities of the classroom contribute to gaining access to learning and to the construction of knowledge (Green and Dixon, 1994; Piker, 2006; Rex, 2000, 2001). This combined focus on the social culture of the classroom as a whole and on the language interactions within that culture is well suited to build upon recent research on language learning. Saunders and O’Brien (2006) suggest that mere exposure to an English speaker, or speaker of the second language (L2), is not as important as the nature of the interaction between the interactants.
Vygotsky’s concept of play as rule driven provides both a site and a conceptual perspective for studying oral language development in the preschool years (Andresen, 2005; Bodrova, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) explained that the play of 3- and 4-year-old children mirrors their memory of real experiences rather than imaginary situations. Therefore, children’s play at this age is rule based; the child may seem free to act as he wishes, “but in another sense this is an illusory freedom, for his actions are in fact subordinated to the meanings of things, and he acts accordingly” (Vygotsky, 1978: 103). Bodrova (2008) refers to this as “mature play,” which is characterized by the child’s use of objects and gestures to symbolize real or imaginary objects or actions, by the ability to stay in character, and by following the rules of the specific role. For example, a child takes on the role of “mother” and assigns her doll the role of “baby.” Her actions are constrained by her notion of the rules of what it means to be a mother. Thus, it would be unrealistic of the “mother” to drink from a bottle, but perfectly normal for the baby. Vygotsky argues that rule-based play allows the child to play within her zone of proximal development. With the help of social mediators, such as the teacher and peers, to assist in scaffolding the child’s play, the child is able to perform at higher mental levels (Bodrova, 2008; Bodrova and Leong, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978), which includes oral language and literacy learning (Bodrova, 2008). Participation in mature play may create optimal learning opportunities for DLL as they develop their communicative competency (Hymes, 1967) in the L2.

In the case of this study, the concept of optimal learning opportunities affords a conceptual unit of analysis for examining how DLLs develop and practice their L2 or English (Riojas-Cortez, 2001) in interaction with language-equivalent and more language-knowledgeable peers. Data selection, transcription, and analysis for the study relied upon a theory of second language learning known as the Interactionist Model (Wong-Fillmore, 1991). This model theorizes a reciprocal relationship among the social, linguistic, and cognitive processes activated by the L2 learner, the L2 speaker, and the social setting. Collectively, the three processes explain the interaction between the L2 learner and the L2 speaker and the development of the learner’s understandings of the grammatical and social structures of the L2. To successfully learn the L2, the social context must contain three components: learners, who realize they must learn the L2 and are motivated; speakers of the L2, who know the L2 well enough to provide access to the language and help the learner learn it; and social setting, situations that bring learners and speakers into frequent contact. The term optimal learning opportunity that is used throughout this article refers to social contexts that provide these three components.

Relevant research

Peers are perceived as a valuable resource for learning a second language (Fassler, 1998; Logan, 1991; Thompson, 1994; Wong-Fillmore, 1991). However, few studies investigate the ways peers influence preschool-aged children’s oral production of English, especially L2. Conclusions about the role of same-language peers in the learning of the children’s oral production of English are conflicting. For example, Thompson (1994) found that the 3-year-old Pakistani girl she followed utilized her same-language peers to facilitate her learning of the appropriate social behaviors for participating in classroom activities and interactions, which ultimately helped her oral production of English. Meyer et al. (1994) had similar findings for four Korean girls learning English as a second language. However, Logan (1991) found that same-language peers limited the eight Spanish-speaking children he followed from being exposed to English-speaking peers and from further developing their oral English production. After 8 months of observations, he discovered that the children preferred to play within their language groups and witnessed few occasions of
children playing between the language groups. The classroom context offered few opportunities for spontaneous play interactions among the children, with the teachers controlling most of the children’s interactions. Because he found little evidence of children interacting or communicating between language groups, he concluded that there was no indication of peers contributing to these children’s learning of English as a second language. The importance of such interaction had been established by an older study by Chesterfield et al. (1983) that found the more the Spanish-speaking preschoolers interacted with their English-speaking peers, the higher their level of English proficiency.

In a later study, Fassler (1998) found that kindergarten L2 learners’ motivation to play and interact with peers supported their oral English production. Some of the children in her study used a variety of strategies, including gestures, code switching, rephrasing, and participant structures for interacting with different-language peers. As the children shared vocabulary and increased their fluency with English, they extended each other’s conversations by requesting elaboration and clarification. Fassler concluded that the children’s motivation to play with each other helped them learn and teach English to one another. Most preschool programs provide extended periods of time for children to play freely with each other and spontaneously interact with adults. Play is viewed as an important component for language development in preschool settings (Bodrova, 2008; Pellegrini and Boyd, 1993). Since play has been found important both for language development and specifically for L2 learning, I designed this study to examine how play might benefit DLL.

**Methodology**

**Setting and participants**

Head Start is a United States of America federally funded preschool program dedicated to providing high-quality comprehensive services for 3- to 5-year-old children and their families living in poverty. In 2008, 26 percent of all the children who were enrolled in Head Start nationally spoke Spanish (Office of Head Start, 2008). Head Start Performance Standards, at the time of data collection, state that adults should “foster children’s primary language, while supporting the continued development of English” (Head Start, 2001). The classroom that is the focus of this study is located in a Head Start center in a Midwestern section of the United States where more than 90 percent of the children enrolled speak Spanish as their home language. This Head Start center contains eight classrooms and serves a maximum of 217 children, all between the ages of 3 and 5 years. Due to Head Start’s policy, the Director of the center expects the teachers to teach both English and Spanish to increase the children’s bilingualism—teaching Spanish to English-speaking children and English to Spanish-speaking children. The center did not have clear guidelines for how teachers supported the child’s primary language and English language development.

During the time of the study, the classroom composition included two female classroom teachers and, on average, 17 children (11 girls). The Head Teacher Sue is a European-American monolingual English speaker, and Linda the Assistant Teacher is a Mexican-American bilingual speaker. At the time of data collection, Sue had no previous experience working in a preschool setting, nor had she taken courses in child development, and Linda’s educational knowledge evolved from attending 6 years of Head Start workshops. The children’s ages ranged from 3 to 5 years. Seven of the 13 children identified as Spanish speakers were 4 years old, attended the program regularly, predominantly spoke Spanish at the beginning of the academic year, and were scheduled to enter kindergarten the following academic year. Of these seven children, three were girls and four were boys. To reduce gender and age differences, the four children selected for the cross-case analysis were two girls and two boys. Two of the children (Carmen and David) had some experience using
English at the beginning of the school year, had older siblings who spoke English, and had been enrolled in the program the previous year. The other two children (Rita and Javier) had minimal English experience at the beginning of the school year and were the eldest children in their families. I chose these children to demonstrate how Spanish-speaking children with some experience and those with less experience increased their English abilities and changed their interactional patterns over time, regardless of out-of-classroom experiences.

The research project was reviewed by the University’s Institutional Review Board. The teachers and parents of all the children in the classroom signed an informed consent and were assured that all the data collected were securely stored during the period of study. The consent form notified them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and I honored their requests to not be recorded during certain activities.

Data collection

Using an ethnographic approach, I observed and documented classroom practices twice a week for approximately 3 hours a day for one academic year, spending a total of 50 days in the classroom. The data collection instruments were participant observations and video recordings. As a participant observer, I participated in all the classroom activities, including group times, meals and children’s play, and assisted in preparing and cleaning the tables for lunch. For safety reasons, I reframed from partaking in certain classroom activities, such as resolving a conflict between two children and being alone with any child. I also participated in conversations where the teachers and other adults discussed classroom practices, curriculum, and children and administrative issues. My observational notes included documentation of the events and interactions of the day, such as group activities, individual activities, child–child interactions, and adult–child interactions. Throughout the course of the year, my role shifted (Patton, 1990). When a teacher was absent, I took on an Assistant Teacher role. For example, when Linda was absent for the day, Sue depended on me for translating with the children and the parents. Because of my multiple jobs, the teachers viewed me as someone with multiple roles: researcher, student, assistant teacher, and friend. By the end of the year, both teachers agreed that the children thought of me as an assistant teacher.

Video recordings of the children playing in multisize groups and using conversational language enhanced the quality and accuracy of field notes and were instrumental in studying and analyzing classroom discourse. Revisiting the recorded play scenarios augmented the identification of gestures, pauses, hesitations, and hand motions that otherwise would have been missed. Two compromising conditions were acknowledged during video recording analysis. As a consequence of using only one camera for data collection, I recorded the social interactions that exercised the most discourse during the initial data collections. Therefore, the length of time any one child was recorded differed among the children. Second, on several occasions, classroom noises, such as child and adult conversations or music playing, prevented the recording of specific verbal conversations; therefore, data collection missed some of the children’s dialogue.

The corpus of data selected for analysis includes video recordings of the daily Free Play event collected between October and February. The Free Play event promoted spontaneous social interactions among the children and the teachers and facilitated the children’s choice in language usage. The children played either alone, in small groups of 2–4, or as a large group of 7–12. The children interacted with their same-language peers, different-language peers, and in a mixed group of same- and different-language peers. As the year progressed, the children spent most of their class time participating in Free Play, extended from 45 minutes to as long as 1½ hours (9:00–10:30 a.m.).
Being bilingual in Spanish and English enabled me to communicate with all members of the classroom. I consistently used English with the teachers and conversed with the children in their home language. As a result, the Spanish-speaking children predominantly spoke Spanish with me. For example, one Spanish-speaking boy began to tell me in English about an event, but stopped mid-sentence, looked at me, and retold the story in Spanish. Researchers found that by the ages of 3 and 4 years, children express conscious metalinguistic awareness of their use of two languages rarely mixing the two (Grosjean, 1982; Hakuta, 1986; Romaine, 1995). Children who are fully proficient in both languages at this age use the same language consistently in certain settings and with certain individuals, even if the child lives in an environment in which code switching is common (Grosjean, 1982). The children and I created a language relationship in Spanish, and therefore, the children continued to sustain our relationship in Spanish, even though they knew I understood both Spanish and English.

Data analysis

I conducted a cross-case analysis of the four case study children’s narratives, which were created from individual case records (Patton, 1990). The data corpus for each case record was selected from the video recordings of the Free Play event. Of the 24 data collection days between October and February, Carmen attended 20 days, David attended 21 days, Rita attended 18 days, and Javier attended 17 days. Initially, I identified when and how often the children appeared on the video recordings during Free Play. From these results, I chose days for each child that were at least 1 week apart in order to avoid selecting two Free Play events from the same week. I selected 2 days in December, January, and February for each child; and 1 day in October for Rita; 1 day in November for Carmen and Javier; and 2 days in November for David. The distribution of selected days provided a more accurate picture of the children’s activities over time. The days chosen for one child at times differed from the days chosen for another child. The length of time any one child was recorded for each Free Play event differed among the children: for Carmen 26–63 minutes, for David 13–57 minutes, for Rita 10–51 minutes, and for Javier 13–65 minutes.

Creating the case records required a series of analytical steps. First, I generated a detailed description of each child’s behavior during each Free Play event, totaling 29 descriptions for all four children. Second, I developed a list of all the English words spoken during each event by the focal children. Because the children were developing their first and second languages, their pronunciations were not adultlike. Consequently, the list includes words grammatically inaccurate. Third, using a Grounded Theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), I coded the descriptions using line-by-line coding. Each description was divided into scenarios. The scenario represented a time period during which the child participated in an activity or activities in one location. The scenario ended and a new one began when the child moved to a different location or was no longer in camera view. For each scenario, the following three elements were coded.

1. **Language use.** The nonverbal gestures and verbal forms of communication used by the child during the interaction, such as the production of Spanish, English, or a mix of languages.
2. **Participants involved.** The individuals involved in the interaction, such as a same-language peer, a different-language peer, and a teacher.
3. **Types of interactional moves.** Terms that described the interactions between the child and the other individual(s), for example, playing, requesting to play, arguing, negotiating, and sharing with peer.
Each child’s codes were summarized by day, including the number of scenarios, the language spoken, the individuals participating in the interaction, and the types of interactional moves. The unit of analysis was either a single interactional move or a whole scenario, and the interactions included one child or multiple children of similar and different language backgrounds. The complexity of language use cannot be limited to one-on-one interactions or group interactions; rather I found that both can influence English language learning.

Results

As a result of the cross-case comparison, I ascertained that the four Spanish-speaking children’s learning of English appeared to be influenced in particular ways by their social relationships with their peers. Specifically, the children’s play interactions with their peers enabled them to develop social relationships with both their Spanish-speaking and English-speaking peers. These relationships directed with whom, where, and how they spent their time, which in turn determined which language the children spoke. Some of these social interactions provided optimal learning opportunities that enabled the children to develop their oral English production into more complex forms as well as use English for various purposes. An optimal learning opportunity refers to a social interaction between a motivated L2 learner and an L2 speaker who respond in ways that foster further communication. These social interactions prompt the learners’ use of English in more complex forms (Wong-Fillmore, 1982, 1991; Fassler, 1998; Genishi et al., 1994) and facilitate learners’ communicative competency development (Hymes, 1967). Yet, most of the focal children’s interactions with their peers did not seem to support the development of the children’s English language. Even when they participated in optimal social interactions, the actual development of their oral production of English differed.

From the observational data, two similar patterns emerged that appear to indicate why play did not more productively influence their English language development. First, all the four children accomplished their play significantly more often with their Spanish-speaking peers compared to how often they played with the English-speaking peers (see Table 1). When the children played with only Spanish-speaking children, they generally used Spanish as the medium of communication. As a result, the children had few opportunities to develop their oral English production into more complex forms amid their same-language peers. Nevertheless, these interactions prompted the development of their pragmatic competence. Although this finding might appear to support Logan’s (1991) conclusions that same-language peers hinder the learning of the L2, the second pattern highlights the complexity of language learning during social interactions and how

| Table 1. The number of times each child played with his/her peers by language groups. |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Child   | Language groups | Total |
|         | Spanish speaking | English speaking | Mixed-language group |       |
| David   | 22              | 1               | 10             | 33    |
| Carmen  | 20              | 6               | 4              | 30    |
| Rita    | 13              | 8               | 5              | 26    |
| Javier  | 23              | 0               | 7              | 30    |

This group represents the play interactions between the child and other Spanish-speaking children.

This group represents the play interactions between the child and the English-speaking children.

This group represents the play interactions that include the child and at least one Spanish-speaking and English-speaking child.
same- and different-language peers support language learning differently, both enhancing and hindering the more advanced learning.

The second pattern clarifies how optimal learning opportunities influenced L2 learning. I noted that when the focal children played with certain Spanish-speaking peers, and these Spanish-speaking peers included English-speaking children in their play, the focal children had access to what may be considered optimal circumstances. Specifically, each child had a preferred friend with whom he or she played—usually a same-gender and a same-language peer. During those few occasions, when the preferred playmate played with an English-speaking peer, the focal child was obligated to interact with the English-speaking child. Some of these optimal circumstances facilitated the children’s opportunities to learn the English language and practice using English in various ways. Nonetheless, most of their interactions with their English-speaking peers did not seem to support the children’s English production. The English-speaking children’s response to the focal child during these social contexts determined whether the interaction supported or hindered L2 learning.

The following examples from the four cases show how playing with a preferred peer who wished to play with English-speaking children seemed to encourage the children’s oral production of English, as well as demonstrated how these interactions may have hindered their learning. During these play interactions, David, Rita, Javier, and Carmen had to speak English to be full members of the play scenario, otherwise they were ignored or excluded. Unfortunately, there were few optimal circumstances for most of the children, with Carmen as the exception. The examples further illustrate the relevance of individual social behavior and of building friendly social relationships to enhance language learning.

**David**

The frequency of David’s play interactions with certain children might have provided him with more occasions to develop his English; however, the English-speaking children’s responses to his initiations appeared to prevent him from developing his English into more complex forms. During one Free Play event, David wished to play with Carlos (Spanish-speaking child), who wanted to play with Tanya (English-speaking child). Although David usually spoke Spanish with Carlos, on this day, Carlos spoke with and responded to David in English. As a result, David spoke English when playing with Carlos and the English-speaking children. During this scenario, Tanya, Carlos, and David sat at the table in the House Area feeding their plastic animals plastic pretend food. Brian decided to join the play in progress by sitting at the table looking through a magazine. As Brian cut pictures and removed inserts from a magazine, Tanya, Carlos, and David continued feeding their animals. Brian nonverbally handed Carlos a magazine insert and then one to Tanya. David quietly observed as Brian shared the magazine clippings with Carlos and Tanya. Although this interaction could have produced an optimal learning opportunity, Brian’s nonverbal gestures exclude David from the play. After 3 minutes of David, Carlos, and Tanya feeding the animals and Brian cutting from the magazine, David initiated a conversation with Brian when he saw something in the magazine. David pointed to the picture and asked, “Brian, gotta cut that.” Brian looked at David, pretended to eat the plastic food, and then continued cutting a piece other than the one David requested. It was unclear whether Brian misunderstood David’s request or whether he decided to ignore his suggestion. If it was a misunderstanding, neither boy knew how to ask for clarification or sustain the conversation regarding the magazine picture.

Carlos became instrumental in David gaining access to play interactions with the English-speaking children. However, in this instance, it was not enough to support David’s learning of English through his interactions with Brian. David was able to sustain the play with Tanya as they
fed the animals and covered them with blankets. The different responses by Brian and Tanya may be due to the children’s personalities rather than being misunderstood. Tanya’s strong interpersonal social skills enabled her to sustain the play with David for 15 minutes. Perhaps Brian wished to partake in David and Tanya’s play, but lacked the social skills to maintain his interaction with David. Because Brian did not respond to David’s initiation, David may have decided against attempting to play with Brian and thus losing an opportunity to practice his English skills. It is also important to note that although Carlos appeared to be a more favorable playmate, David had stronger oral English skills between the two boys. Lending further evidence to issues of personality and how personality impacts these social relationships may impede opportunities for language learning.

Rita

Rita had more positive social interactions than David. She usually played with Carmen, wherever Carmen played and in whatever language Carmen spoke. Because Carmen played with many of her same-language and different-language peers, Rita had access to optimal circumstances that might have encouraged her English language learning; however, due to Carmen’s strong personality, Rita’s L2 production was also hindered. For example, on one of the observation days, Carmen’s actions during certain activities kept Rita from joining Shannon (English-speaking child) and Edgar’s (English-speaking child) play, whereas later, Carmen pushed Rita to converse with Tanya and Shannon, which in turn fostered Rita’s English language usage. During the first scenario, Rita, Carmen, Shannon, and Edgar played in the House Area. Rita watched as Shannon and Edgar played at the table pretending to eat a birthday cake. Rita stood next to them watching their interaction, appearing as though she wanted to join them. However, Edgar and Shannon continued eating their cake without inviting Rita to join them, nor did she attempt to initiate a conversation. About a minute later, Carmen approached informing Rita that she was not allowed to play with them, perhaps suggesting that as Carmen’s pretend daughter or young child, Rita could not eat cake. Carmen’s suggestions for assigning specific rules for play appeared to prevent Rita from playing with Shannon and Edgar, which seems to have prevented her from practicing her English skills in this instance. Rita’s quiet mannerism illustrated Rita’s difficulty initiating play with other children. Her inability to initiate play was not specific to this instance, but visible during other Free Play events. Rita was dependent on Carmen, who played by her rules as the mother and in charge to decide where, when, and with whom Rita played.

The second scenario offered Rita opportunities to produce English and practice her communicative competence skills (Hymes, 1967). While playing in the House Area, Carmen instructed Rita to sit at the table while she finished folding clothes and pretended to wash them. After a minute, Carmen heard Linda instructing the boys to cleanup and so Carmen instructed Rita to clean up the Block Area. Rita followed Carmen’s instructions as her pretend daughter. While picking up blocks, Rita saw Tanya and Shannon playing in the area and asked them in English, “you gonna play?” to which Tanya nodded affirmatively. Rita informed Carmen, who then, in Spanish, instructed Rita to tell the girls to cleanup. Frowning, Rita did as she was told when Carmen pushed her toward the girls. It would seem that Rita’s preference for playing with Carmen overcame her reluctance to take on a more dominant social position with the English-speaking girls by communicating the teacher’s command. In addition, in English, Rita had to ask for information from her English-speaking peers, instruct and convince them to cleanup, and negotiate when and who would cleanup. Consequently, Rita gained an opportunity to practice her English skills by reinforcing her Spanish-speaking relationship and risking her English-speaking relationships, all the time staying in her role as the daughter following her mother’s instructions.
Javier

The evidence suggests that Javier’s opportunities for producing English were better than Rita’s because he more fully engaged in play with Spanish-speaking and English-speaking children. He especially produced more English when he played with Carlos and the English-speaking children with whom he acted as a social equal. For example, during one play scenario, Carlos and Shannon had been playing in the Block Area with a 3-foot 3-story doll house and 2-inch dolls when Javier approached Carlos. Javier initiated play with Carlos and Shannon by reaching for one of Carlos’s plastic dolls, which upset Carlos. Shannon saw Carlos’s reaction and told Javier in English that he could not play with them. Javier ignored Shannon’s comment and informed Carlos that he would not do something; although, it was unclear what Javier was not willing to do. Carlos then handed Javier a toy person, implying Javier was allowed to join their play.

Mostly, the three stayed together in ways that maintained their play and related talk for 8 minutes. The boys produced Spanish when conversing among themselves. However, Carlos spoke English to Javier when Shannon joined their play. Occasionally, Javier and Carlos played alone without speaking while Shannon sat nearby. The three children spent the first 2 minutes negotiating in English how the toys (table, chairs, and dolls) would be distributed among themselves, followed by a brief play interaction. When it was clear that Shannon was not part of the boys play, but instead partook in parallel play, Carlos conversed with Javier in Spanish. The following interaction illustrates the boys playing in Spanish and how Carlos switched the language of the play as Shannon responded to his doll falling.

Segment 1

40. Carlos: Javier, mira Javier que estoy (Javier, look Javier what I am)
41. Javier: oh, te vas a caer (oh, you are going to fall)
42. Carlos: no, no me voy a caer (no, no I won’t fall)
        yo me voy a morir (I will die)
43. Javier: te vas a caer (you will fall; the doll falls from the roof to the floor)
44. Shannon: here [Shannon picks up the doll and hands it to Carlos]
45. Carlos: oh, thanks
46. [Carlos’s doll pretends to throw the other doll. Javier laughs as Shannon watches them]
47. Carlos: come on we play in here and we take him up [he grabs Shannon’s doll]
48. Shannon: hey mmm, that’s my people
49. Carlos: I need my bed
50. Javier: I need my bed

In this Segment, as Carlos and Javier drop their dolls from the rooftop of the doll house, Carlos used Spanish to obtain Javier’s attention and explain what happens when his doll falls (line 42). Shannon, who had been playing next to them with her dolls, saw his doll fall, unaware of the doll falling to its death, she decided to hand Carlos the doll (line 44). Carlos accepted the doll and
thanked her in English. Instead of using Spanish to continue his play with Javier, as they had played prior to Shannon’s assistance, Carlos used English to continue the play (line 47). As they played together for the next few minutes, the three children spoke English as the medium of communication. Influenced by Carlos’s language choices, Javier also used English when Shannon participated in their play and Spanish when Carlos and he played alone. This social inclusion of the English-speaking girl into the play seemed to prime English-speaking sequences among the Spanish-speaking boys, which aligns with previous research findings of children speaking the language understood by the listener to continue the conversation (Grosjean, 1982).

In addition to playing within this 8-minute play time, Javier interacted with Shannon in various ways, consequently using English in multiple ways. Javier initiated play with Carlos and Shannon, played with Shannon and Carlos, disagreed and argued with Shannon, ignored Shannon’s comments, observed Carlos and Shannon argue, failed to understand Shannon’s intentions, acknowledged Shannon’s toy, got into trouble with Linda, was misunderstood and disagreed with Shannon, and finally, mediated a disagreement between Shannon and Carlos. Therefore, this scenario appeared to provide Javier with a variety of interrelated opportunities to develop his communicative competency of English. More of his social play episodes were optimal compared to Rita’s experiences, meaning that he was strongly motivated to play with high-performing L2 speakers on multiple occasions.

Carmen

Even more of Carmen’s play episodes were optimal. Her outgoing personality and ability to guide play in multiple directions made her a desirable playmate. She accepted, pursued, and developed the most optimal English-speaking circumstances. Both the same-language and the English-speaking female peers persistently sought her out, regardless of her interest. For example, on one occasion, Carmen played in the Block Area with the House Area foods and dishes. She had been playing with Rita and invited Shannon to join them. Other children noticed the play scenario and also joined them. By the end, Carmen had initiated and sustained a 39-minute mixed-language group play scenario.

Three elements of the 39-minute play scenario indicate how Carmen’s play, in which she was socially dominant over her peers, provided social interactions that encouraged her continued English language learning. This was the first time Carmen initiated play with an English speaker and guided the play of nine mixed Spanish-speaking and English-speaking peers. Second, Carmen’s English and Spanish language skills and her ability to guide play in multiple directions called for extended language use in complicated scenarios. On this occasion, she guided the group of children in English and Spanish on a pretend flight to Mexico, on a day at the beach, and in preventing the House Area from burning. Third, this play scenario also illustrated that Carmen’s English vocabulary was still developing. Yet, while she made language mistakes, she knew how to maintain her social status as a leader of the play.

The segment in Table 2 shows how two elements played out—initiating play and illustrating Carmen’s ability to maintain her interactions with her limited English. The play scenario started with Carmen, Rita, and Shannon in the House Area. There was a disagreement regarding to whom a baby doll belonged—Shannon or Rita. Carmen, Rita’s close friend, was the translator and attempted to negotiate the doll away from Shannon for Rita, but was unsuccessful. Carmen and Rita then decided to go to the beach and moved their play into the Block Area; the two areas were divided by low narrow shelves. While Rita waited in the Block Area, Carmen carried the plastic food and dishes from the House Area to the Block Area. The segment begins with Carmen saying, “well, see
you later” to Shannon as she left the House Area. Although there was a disagreement between Rita and Shannon, Carmen used simple phrases to sustain an open line of communication with Shannon (lines 1–6). These simple exchanges prompted Shannon to invite Carmen to join her play with the doll (line 7), which then led Carmen to invite Shannon to join her play (line 21).

Carmen and Shannon wished to play with the other. However, they had to negotiate which play—playing in the House Area with dolls or going to the beach in the Block Area. Shannon’s two failed attempts to convince Carmen to play with her dolls resulted from Carmen’s unawareness that Shannon was speaking to her and Carmen’s limited vocabulary in explaining her play in progress with Rita. Shannon used a traditional approach for initiating play—just asking (line 7). Her unsuccessful invitation, most likely because Carmen did not hear her, required Shannon to think of an alternative approach to initiating play with Carmen. Shannon decided to take on the character role of the daughter; thus, calling Carmen mom (line 15), a role commonly owned by Carmen. Shannon used her doll (line 17) as a strategy to entice Carmen in joining her play in progress. Carmen, who already had a play in progress with Rita, was unable to fully explain to Shannon that Rita and she were in the Block Area playing at the beach (lines 18–20). Ignoring the fact that she could not fully explain to Shannon what Rita and she were playing in the Block Area, Carmen rather decided to invite Shannon to join her instead. Shannon motivated to play with Carmen, perhaps realized that she would never really understand why Carmen would not play with her in the House Area, decided to join Carmen and Rita in the Block Area (line 22). The girls’ motivation to play with each other, even with a breakdown in understanding and Shannon’s decision to call Carmen mom, illustrates the power of play in language development. Furthermore, Carmen’s success suggests strong social acuity that influenced her interactions throughout the year. Carmen’s capacity to keep the

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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Carmen: well see you later</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Shannon: bye</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Carmen: bye [she leaves the House Area with food]</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>[20 seconds Carmen returns for more food]</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Carmen: hi Shannon</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Shannon: hi [pause]</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>You want to play with me [Carmen does not hear her]</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>[Shannon talks to herself as she dresses her doll; Carmen gathers food in a basket]</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>[Carmen glances up to Shannon]</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Carmen: she she your baby okay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Shannon: Okay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>I will keep her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>I will keep her okay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>[Carmen continues packing her basket]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Shannon: Mom [looking in Carmen’s direction]</td>
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<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>[Carmen looks at Shannon]</td>
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<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Shannon: Can we show the baby XXX?</td>
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<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Carmen: No, we go to the Block [Carmen points to the Block Area]</td>
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<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Shannon: why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Carmen: [shrugs shoulders — indicating “I don’t know”]</td>
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<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Common let’s go</td>
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<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>[Shannon gets up and both girls walk toward the Block Area]</td>
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mixed-language play going, even when mistakes confused meaning, made her a powerful leader in constructing optimal language learning opportunities for herself and others, thus improving her English language skills.

**Discussion**

The play scenarios demonstrate the potential impact of role-playing on English language development. When the rules of play (Vygotsky, 1978) required children to directly interact, these social interactions encouraged the children to practice and use various forms of English. For the focal children, the motivation to play made learning English a necessity. Fassler (1998) also illustrated in her study how play motivated all the children to develop their oral English production and to improve their English language. This study supports Fassler’s conclusion insofar as how the English-speaking children responded to the learners’ inquiries ultimately determined the number, frequency, and length of opportunities—features that were critical for developing their oral production of English. Play became the vehicle for children’s practice and learning of their English language.

Particular kinds of social configurations and interactions seemed more opportune as well. In particular, playing with peers who played well with English-speaking children positioned them to independently engage with English-speaking students. Unlike Logan (1991), the case study children in this study preferred to play with children who at times chose to play with English-speaking peers. These mixed-language-group instances provided optimal circumstances for producing extended and complex English language. The English-speaking children’s willingness to continue to play with their Spanish-speaking peers was important, even when their English faltered and they made language errors. Extended interactions were more likely to encourage Spanish-speaking children to speak English, because they were eager to continue playing.

This study also notes that not all kinds of play interactions were optimal for English learning. Practicing English depended on the nature of the play and of the participants, such that the rules of play allowed for social interactions between DLL and English-speaking children and the English-speaking children’s willingness to continue the conversational play. Furthermore, supporting oral English production depended on access to the learning circumstances. With only a few of these opportunities available, the potential English language learning may have been hindered. The results suggest that teachers should encourage more optimal learning circumstances to ensure frequent opportunities for developing English language skills. By intentional grouping of mixed-language speaking children during instances of mature play (Bodrova, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978), teachers can mediate the children’s social interactions in order to extend and facilitate the continuation of the play; therefore, offering optimal learning opportunities for all the children. Friendly social relationships between DLL and L2 speakers might encourage both groups to take risks with language during their social interactions. Consequently, extended periods of mature play might foster DLLs’ L2 development into more complex forms. More research examining oral language learning among DLL in preschool setting is needed to understand how other social interactions support DLL language learning, either the child’s home language or the L2.

Additionally, the evidence from this study illustrates the simultaneous learning of appropriate social behaviors for interacting with others and learning of verbal responses. Thus, suggesting that the play interactions facilitated the learners’ communicative competency development (Hymes, 1967). Although verbally communicating is necessary for sustaining an ongoing interaction and for learning language, the learner must learn the social norms and appropriate behaviors of interactions for joining a given play scenario and maintaining their membership within the play. The play
scenarios show how the focal children negotiated and attempted new strategies for joining and sustaining play with these new members, which in turn helped in learning the social norms and appropriate behaviors associated for interacting with other. More research is needed to fully understand how DLL learn the appropriate social norms and the impact of these on language learning in classroom contexts.

Investigating informal social interaction as a key site for understanding how the learning of English can be enhanced for Spanish-speaking preschool children offered new insights into second language learning. Educational scholarship in primary and secondary education continues to demonstrate that the social culture of a classroom is seminal in learning subject matter and in the development of literacy (Rex and Schiller, 2009). I am encouraged that this study begins to make use of that rich theoretical and methodological compendium for exploring preschool classrooms. However, the extent to which the focal children learned English is unclear. One limitation of this study is using the children’s spoken language as the source of their linguistic abilities. Future research should include formal measures for evaluating the children’s English and Spanish expressive and receptive abilities in order to provide greater insight into the effects of the child’s personality and the children’s motivation to partake in play scenarios, as well as examine the larger social and educational impact, including values and curriculum, influencing second language learning within these social contexts. Poststructural theories of identity, power, and language (Norton, 2000) provide a framework for examining second language learning variations within individuals across settings. Another limitation of this study is the emphasis on English language learning. Young children have their own repertoire of home language skills and usage. Through their social interaction with their family and the community, young children learn to communicate with others and understand how language is used from birth. Children bring these rich cultural and linguistic abilities with them into the classroom. The teacher either continues to reinforce and support their cultural ways of interaction or the children must learn new forms of language and ways of interacting. Future research should examine how the children’s bilingualism enables their learning of English and other languages and access to social interactions in play.

In conclusion, with the achievement gap between DLLs and their English-speaking counterparts at kindergarten, there is a sense of urgency for identifying instructional strategies and educational programs that better prepare DLLs for academic success. The evidence presented in this study demonstrates mature play social interactions as an approach in supporting and developing children’s language learning. The importance of social interactions during play for DLLs—both linguistically and academically—has never been more critical. Unfortunately, play is slowly eroding from preschool programs (Carlsson-Paige, 2008), consequently placing the children who need the most academic preparedness and support at greater risk of falling further behind. Preschool is the beginning of school social life, and the influence of social interactions on children’s schooling success and their development cannot be overestimate. Research into the relationship between social interactions and English language learning offers valuable insights when it can show how preschool can truly be a Head Start.

Acknowledgement
I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Lesley Rex for her assistance, guidance, and support for this study.

Funding
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.
Notes
1. Although the term *Latino* has emerged within the United States to represent individuals whose family originates from Latin American countries, the term *Hispanic* continues to be used by the US government and some researchers. Reardon and Galindo use the term Hispanic to represent the students whose families’ originate from both Spain and Latin America.
2. Pseudonyms are used for all the participants.
3. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of human subjects participating in research activities.

References


