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Abstract

This theoretical research gives practitioners a glimpse into what it means to be a student with English as an additional language when immersed in the monolingual culture of a English speaking school, the real implications and impact this has on EAL students as they navigate their way through the education system on their attainment and academic success and the possible lifelong effects on mental health, and career prospects. From the examples of research, I found which examined EAL student in primary or early year settings, few engaged with parents, therefore I have decided to include the parental perspective in the analysis of gathered data in the hope it will tap into their expertise for fresh perspectives on the subject of EAL education, as well as give deeper meaning to the research if it were undertaken. For the purposes of this ethnographic research, I chose to use a qualitative approach to gather data. I will be exploring the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative methods such as video observations, assessment and data analysis.

This paper will also look at the purpose and the role of play in early years settings and current research carried out by UNICEF and Lego (2018) and other scholars that backs the importance of play in our early years and beyond. I will be investigating at the links between play, language acquisition and early literacy in addition to the benefits of learning through play and using play a tool for children to access learning rather than using carpet sessions and rote learning. The research

also be acknowledging the importance of play not only for the child's development but also their wellbeing as laid out in Articles 29 and 31 (UNICEF, 2024).

Additionally, It will discuss some of the ways in which practitioners integrate themselves into the world of early year students play to develop meaningful and engaging pedagogy to support the language acquisition of EAL students. I will be touching upon some of the strategies already taking place and some food for thought in how pedagogical practices might be adapted in order that all students reach the best possible outcomes within our educational settings.

Literature Review

How can play be used to enhance the language acquisition of EAL students in Early Year settings?

A literature review is the foundation upon which a research topic is based, therefore the methodology and academic sources linked to the subject of research used in a literary review need to be rigorously evaluated for their accuracy and validity to support the research being undertaken and to identify gaps in current research or open new areas for future research, according to Synder (2019).

This literature review will be investigating if play supports language acquisition in early years settings, focusing on EAL students. It will be discussing the definition of play and types of play and as well as exploring possible advantages and disadvantages EAL student face and the role practitioners play in supporting EAL students. The review will outline the type of sample and methodology that would be used if this literature review were to be carried out based on literature reviews findings.

Play

Play has been given many definitions; however, most scholars use Huizinga's definition as a foundation for their hypothesis according to LaScotte and Tarrone (2024). Huizinga (1949) proposed that play is a voluntary action which is explored within the parameters of a defined time and place with naturally occurring rules,

plays is its own aim and allows for the exploration of both tension and joy and is consciously different to everyday life.

Most play types can be said to positively impact and support a children's language acquisition -Lego (2018) Hughes(2011) had 16 definitions of play. In my research I will focusing upon communication in play, as described by Hughes and using the Froebel approach by using singing and rhymes to support language acquisition. Hughes (2011), Dyke(2017). Hughes(2011) describes communication play as a form of social play where children sing, rhyme, role-play and tell stories using different ways to manipulate and express language and, in the process, become more able and self-confident communicators. Playing with words engages children at their developmental level and can be steered by their motivation by identifying the uniqueness of each child, central early years pedagogy and practice. Dyke (2017) and EYFS (2024). Communication play offers a playful way to explore early phonic skills such as identifying sounds and expansion of vocabulary and through the repetition of songs and rhymes children can begin to understand sequencing and sentence structure. Bruce and Spratt (2011), Dyke (2017), Kuhl, (2004)

It is important to point out that it is difficult to find academic research that contradicts the role that play has in language acquisition. Reggio Emilia, Loris Malaguzzi poem 'The Hundred Languages' says that children have infinite ways to express, explore and connect their ideas, emotions and fantasies. By adopting the Reggio Emilia philosophy practitioners might consider play itself as form of language and one of the hundred ways through which children gain understanding and make connections to the world around them (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2011)

English as an additional language

England is a multilingual society, with an estimated 360 languages being spoken across the country. (UK Government, 2024). Baker (2000) Paap *et al* (2024) states that being bilingual, multilingual or monolingual is integral to your identity, affecting your education, relationships, employment and even the way you think.

According to Current data from UK national statistics (2022/23) 79.3 % of children were know as having English as their first language with 20.2% of other students having a first language other than English with a small percentage of pupils were

recorded as having a unclassified language. This information classes pupils recorded as EAL as 'those that are exposed to another language other than English at home and is not a measure of English language proficiency'. However, a UK government paper 'English Language proficiency for pupils of EAL' (2020) looked at the relationship between EAL students and attainment from early years all the way through to Key Stage 4. The data gathered here highlighted that EAL pupils struggled with English fluency and had gaps in their attainment in every key stage.

Closing this language gap as early as possible in a child's educational journey is imperative and practitioners must adapt and reflect on current pedagogy when supporting language fluency of EAL students in order for the children to reach their academic potential. EYFS (2024), Hallet (2013).

The role of Early Year Practitioners

Looking at the research gathered on play it is imperative that early year's practitioners engage in play purposefully, connecting with the child through language to enrich their play experiences and scaffold development.

This is supported by research carried out by Weisberg *et al* (2016) and Toub *et al.*, (2018) who found that guided play supported a child's language development in a way free play and didactic direction alone did not. Toub *et al.* (2018) and Weisberg *et al.* (2016) empirical evidence from this research stated that guided play supported children's language development and in turn helped to achieve set learning goals especially when practitioners followed the interests of the child and when practicing strategies such as serve and return responses. Lui *et al*, (2013) Masek *et al*, (2021). Weisberger *et al*, (2016) posit that when play is purposeful it serves to provide opportunities for reflection and challenge for children and they begin to make connections becoming independent learners. Practitioners engaging in singing and rhyme and using combinations of gesture-word, symbol-word, sign-object combinations, reinforce language acquisition. Demir *et al* (2015), Goldin-Meadow *et al.* (2014) Vallotton and Ayoub, (2010).

Methodological Considerations

Sample

The sample for this research has been selected with consideration of the theme of the study, supporting EAL students' language acquisition in early years and a qualitative approach to collecting data to determine if play can be used to support language acquisition (Dawson, 2019, Roberts-Holmes, 2018). According to Dhivyadeepa (2015) sampling is an important aspect of any research of the significant influence it has on the quality and validity of the results or findings.

The early years setting, and the children selected for this research are from an inner-city primary school have been chosen because of their convenience and demographic in relation to the research theme. The school's population is made up of many different minority ethnic groups with over a third of the pupils speaking English as an additional language. The setting has also adopted an early phonics programme used to assess and develop phonemic awareness skills (Kuhl, 2004). Data is recorded and measured against, Development Matters(2024) – literacy, listening and attention and EYFS (2024) literacy early learning goals as well as the programmes own phonic assessments. The setting also offers a variety of resources and areas which support the children to explore a variety of play types including, role-play, loose-parts, mud kitchen, garden and musical instruments (Bruce, 2023).

The impact of the empirical data collected from this study could possibly impact future pedagogy practices in play or how practitioners support EAL students. Analysis may even lead to a review of the effectiveness of the learning environment in supporting language acquisition Bruce and Spratt, (2014).

The participants selected from the setting would be made up of a small group from the nursery class with data collected from the analysis of observations, using 'Development Matters' (2024) document to guide the analysis. Children will be selected if they have English as an additional language, have a similar level of spoken English language, a mix of genders, regular attendance at school.

The ethical implications and risk mitigation to reduce/remove harm or negative impact the participants, researcher or university associated with or in this study will

be discussed in further detail later in this document under ethical considerations (BERA, 2024).

Methodology

The methodology aspect of a study are the values, principles, philosophies, and ideologies which are the foundation that support it (Roberts-Holmes, 2018. Walker and Solvason, 2014). As I am looking at how play might support language acquisition and bringing in family members to be part of analysis, the study had been influenced by a few key theorists. My primary concern is the impact that the research might have on the child and their family, as well as the impact my role as a researcher may have on the children. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory discusses the relationship between the development of the children at the centre of how the interactions and the surrounding environments - in this case family and school - affect development through their values, culture and customs (Pound, 2009). The two areas of interest being explored in this research are play and language, and how these support a child's development alongside the role of the adults. I looked to theorists such as Froebel (Bruce, 2023) for the ideas on play, but was also inspired by Vygotsky's (Pound, 2018) social interaction theory and by Rousseau (Pound, 2018) who believed in a child centred approach to education, with experiences that are sensory driven and practical which should be used to support a child's development.

This research will take a qualitative approach rather than a quantitative approach, as the main source of data will be collated from one small group of children (Dawson, 2019). I have decided to opt a mixed methodology approach with the use of video participant observations to take place over half a term - approximately 6 weeks - as my primary source of data, which will then be used for analysis and electronic logs with involves participation from both the researcher and parent. Therefore, a quantitative approach would not be suitable for this particular research, as data collected would not be supported through certain means, such as conducting sampling, or running record-to-record focused observations (Roberts-Holmes, 2018. Dawson, 2019), as the nature of this kind of observation may mean I miss or dismiss information happening at the time of the observation that could provide valid evidence for later analysis. It is also important to consider the 'Hawthorn affect' when making observations of children; if they are aware of you within their play, the

children may adapt how they interact in order to conform to their perceived expectations of the observer (Worthy *et al*, 2024). Unfortunately, this is the case for both types of observation mentioned, however, the use of cameras may be less disruptive as children might forget they are being filmed, whereas the use of a running record would be obvious to the child through the observation. As an early year's professional you are constantly making observations, listening to children and observing behaviours to support children in order to understand the world around them and build upon their knowledge (Robert-Holmes, 2018). The observations will be of a singing session with props to support the understanding of new vocabulary. I have considered the engagement and participation of students within the parameters of this type of play and for the purpose of this research regarding 'Hart's ladder of participation'. Due to barriers, such as the age and communication skills, I would most likely place most of the participants at around the middle of the ladder at the being of the process, where children are consulted and informed. However, as research continues participants as well as the researcher may gain more confident in their capabilities, and therefore progress up the ladder (Stek-Łopatka and Piekarska, 2024). It is difficult not to be influenced by the 'Halo affect' when working with very young children, at least at the beginning of a study. However, as data is collected throughout the observation, the researcher will gain a better knowledge of the child's abilities, and therefore removing 'Halo affect', with preconceptions not impacting the results of the study (Noor *et al*, 2023)

As part of the study, I will be using participant observations to examine the impact of play on the children's linguistic development over a set time (15-minute sessions 3 times a week, over the course of 6 weeks), and will be assessed against Development Matters (2024), 'characteristic of effective teaching and learning', communication and language and literacy. Analysis meetings will take place 3 times during the research period: once at the beginning, middle and end of the research, as to not over burden families or the researcher. To support the research and relationships between researcher, children and families I would create an electronic log for families to use if they wished to feed back any observations made at home linked to the above areas of development (Birbili, 2024). The logs would also follow the principles of (PLOD) 'Possible Lines of Direction' capturing the child's interests, parent's experiences from the home environment and researchers' ideas for future

learning opportunities based on this information (Palaiologou, 2021). The purpose of these logs would be to act as inspiration for ideas to inform the future planning of sessions, including the child's interests and motivations and to ensure that children remain the central focus of the research. Although clear communication would be necessary with families that the logs were only for the purposes of the research theme and used only for the purpose of supporting the research and not about giving any individual special considerations or adaptations during the research, meaning all feedback would need rigours scrutiny to avoid bias that might affect the results of the research. The decision to use mixed methodology was twofold as it will give a holistic overview of the children participating during the research process and the bringing together of data from observations and logs supports and enables the researcher to clarify and identify information with conviction enabling them to explore other questions and generating new areas of enquiry which might be explored within this study or for future research (Tashakkori and Teddie, 2010)

Triangulation

Carter *et al* (2014) describes triangulations the use of multiple methods or data sources used in quantitative research to support the understand of and an area of research, Turner and Turner (no date) say that triangle can be approach from two different angles 'hard' or 'soft' stating that the 'hard' approach was more productive in gaining insights from anomalous results and 'soft' would add weight to a research project but you would not necessarily gain as much insight. Patton (1999) was able to define 4 main types of triangulation as follows method, investigator, theory and data source. Each type concerned with the prefix and using they particular approach to gather data to validate the theme of the research undertaken. As with any method of data which ever type of triangulation used the motivation behind the choice needs to be explained clearly to form rigorous conclusions to the research being undertaken and avoid potential bias (Turner and Turner, 2009).

From the methodology methods I choose to gather data for my research and the size of my sample meant for this particular research triangulation would be unnecessary for this particular research, as I the data from the videos and parent/researcher logs and analysis would be sufficient in measuring the impact of play on language acquisition. However, I can appreciate the rigor triangulation could provide through

the examination of a range of sources (Schwandt, Lincoln and Guba 2007) and therefore minimising bias and supporting credibility of the research objectives.

Ethical Considerations

This theoretical research has been underpinned by several ethical considerations, which will inform and motivate the processes of research undertaken, in how to approach and conduct a methodology, and how potential findings would be recorded and stored. These considerations ensure that the research is undertaken with integrity and rigor in accordance with and adhering to agreed standards of good practice (UWTSD, 2022). These have all been informed and guided by a variety of sources, including the 'Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice' University of Wales Trinity Saint David (2022), Ethical guidelines for educational research BERA (2024), UNCRC, UNICEF (2024), and Roberts-Holmes (2018). The application of these ethical procedures serves to protect the confidentiality and anonymity the participants, as well as inform participants of the purposes of the research with openness and clarity to gain informed consent and to mitigate risk to the participants, researcher and other associated bodies such as the used school and the university.

Much of what can be deemed to be ethical practice is easily accessible as it is already part of legislation, policies, and procedures which already have direct impact on daily life such as 'The Data Protection Act 2018' or GDPR (UK Government 2024), and the guidance from these documents is set out relatively clearly and is easy follow. While these policies are useful in supporting ethical practice, the researcher is also required to have an ethical proclivity by respecting the uniqueness each participant, environment and set of circumstances brings to the research being carried out (Michell and Irvine, 2008, Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). Researchers need to be able to evaluate their approach and consider if it is appropriate and respectful to all concerned. The personal wellbeing of the researcher is also important and can be supported through reflection throughout the process, as it is vital that research should not compromise their welfare either (BERA, 2024, Michelle and Irvine 2008).

Interactions and relationships

One of the main features of qualitative research is the relationship between the researcher and participants (Einarsdottir, 2007). The main area of interest for this research involved EAL students as participants. It can be tricky to mitigate risks such as power imbalance, but it is important when considering issues such as child rights. (UNCRC, 2024)

Children are potentially vulnerable in research due to the unequal power balance with the adult researcher (Roberts-Holmes, 2018). The child participants could be considered as unequal for many reasons, including language, age, and understanding; in this case, researching infants that have English as an additional language. However, in this study families are also to be part of the process, bringing with them another power dynamic and possible complex issues including motivation to take part, and influence over the child involved in the research. These power dynamics need to be understood thoroughly as these relationships could affect the methodology process chosen, data, and the engagement levels of participants (Nixon 2022, Roberts-Holmes 2018).

Finally, consideration for how these relationships could inadvertently or directly impact the university should be considered. Poor relationships formed during a research study may lead to families withdrawing or deciding not to take part in future research, and participants may question the University's credibility and their values or ethics, impacting on the reputation of the university and future projects. (Nixon, 2022)

Informed Consent

Powell *et al* (2013) state that consent is fundamental to qualitative research - or in fact any research - which requires participation of any kind, as it is requiring explicit agreement from the outset of the research process. Indeed, if this research project were to be carried out, ethical considerations would need to be written up following the procedures and guidelines outlined in the 'Code of Practice' and should be signed off by the Ethics Committee before any research could even start, as the University has its own obligations to the Concordat to Support Research Integrity which have drawn up a set of agreed standards for good practice (UWTSD, 2024)

Gaining the consent of children from the start is an important matter of child rights when we think of the child's voice and 'matters that affect them' (UNCRC Article 12). Research can potentially be open to child protection and safeguarding concerns around confidentiality, therefore researchers have a duty of care to protect children participating in their research (NCB, 2024. SRA, 2021). A child's ability to consent will be dependent on their ability to express themselves and understand what is being asked of them. Powel *et al* (2013) suggest that using plain, simplified language to explain the purpose of activities and the use of 'emojis', thumb prints or other similar methods which the communication is at the level of the child, the researcher can acquire the child's consent. Child Ethics (2024) also raise the importance of children having the right to dissent at any time during the research process (Bourke and Loveridge (2014)). Researchers may need to support children to express their wish to dissent and need to be in tune with non-verbal cues younger children give through their body language and respect the child's wishes if they are unwilling to participate, we should consider the participants rights as set out in the UNCRC under Article 13 'children have the freedom to expression' (Powell, 2013. UNCRC, 2024). BERA (2024) suggests that children may vary in their capacity to give informed consent due to age or understanding, and researchers should seek additional consent from a person who is legally responsible such as a parent, grand parent or carer for the child if they are under the age of 16 years.

Participating adults or adults acting as advocates for children at any level will also need to give their informed consent at the beginning of the research project and before any activities take place (BERA, 2024). This consent can be given either verbal or written and should be recorded in order to protect both the participant and researcher. Michell and Irvine (2008) suggest that the language used in letters may need to be adapted or translated for some participants for them to truly make informed consent. This could be of benefit for the multilingual participants in the research study suggested in this paper. It is key for the researcher to be transparent from the beginning, and information about why this research is being carried out should be clearly justified and what will happen during the research process, with again the option to opt out of the research at any point of the process should they wish too made clear in any form of communication regarding consent. One of the disadvantages of written consent is that participants can feel obligated to

continue with research. According to SRA (2021) it is up to the researcher to remind participants that their role is voluntary throughout the research process.

Researchers should also consider the implications of offering incentives and how this might skew or distort findings and results (SRA, 2021).

Protection of confidentiality

The protection of confidentiality is another risk which should be assessed and mitigated to the best of the ability of the researcher. As already mentioned, following guidance from the UWTSD (2024) BERA (2024), GDPR and the data protection act 2018 will assist in this, and there is even more guidance on the 'information commissioner's office' website with guidance relating to specific topics such as child data and research provisions. ICO (2012) state that data collected needs to be anonymous to be risk free, and the researcher must be able to mitigate that risk of identification. If identification is likely this is then regarded as personal data, and this has been found to be binding in case law from the High Court. BERA (2024) suggest the use of pseudonymisation or the 'fictionalising' approach when reporting, whatever method you choose this should also explain how and why for doing so somewhere in your research. BERA (2024) states that researchers should respect not only the privacy of participants but also the institutions - in this case, the school and university. BERA (2024) also point out that some participants may wish to waive their right to anonymity and confidentiality, and it is the responsibility of the researcher to recognise their right to do this (UWSTD, 2024). In my proposed research I would use videos and electronic logs to gather information. Video recordings could prove difficult to provide anonymity for and this data could be misused by others, therefore it is imperative that the videos be protected. This can be achieved by following policies set out by the university and school policies which state guidance on the use of encrypted files to store such information, and any devices be password protected and locked away securely when not in use. All forms of data including videos, letters, logs, data analysis or documents needed for consent, the details of how long this data will be retained for or how it is to be shared, protected and stored needs to be set out in clear and plain language for the trust of the participants and to protect them, the researcher and university. (BERA, 2024, UWTSD, 2024)

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