

PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN AS LEARNERS IN A MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

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1. Introduction and aims

In many Western countries, pre-schools are the first place where immigrant children really get in touch with the majority language, and therefore a place where they begin to develop a bilingual or even multilingual identity. The Swedish pre-school curriculum emphasises the importance of a multilingual development:

Language and learning are inseparably linked together, as language and development of a personal identity. The pre-school should put great emphasis on stimulating each child's curiosity and interest in the written language. The pre-school should help to ensure that children with a mother tongue other than Swedish, receive the opportunity to develop both Swedish language and their mother tongue.

(Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden, 1998: 11)

Whereas the pre-school should be of great interest to research on language and social interaction, as yet, we find surprisingly few studies on the mundane interactions taking place among multilingual pre-schoolers. My focus in the present paper is on multilingual children's interaction in pedagogic activities as well as during free play³ at a multilingual pre-school in Sweden. However, rather than primarily viewing the individual children as second language learners, I focus on their use and construction of socially distributed knowledge in joint multilingual activities. How can we understand

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³ In Sweden "free play" (In Swedish; *fri lek*) is a practice term, referring to those play events, which were initiated and conducted with no instruction from the staff (Ivarsson, 2001). It is also used as an administrative term, made up from a adult point of view, and it doesn't say anything about the way children indicate play and playfulness (Strandell, 1994).

the learning process in a multilingual environment, and how do multilingual children use their language resources in mundane social interaction?

The multilingual children in the present study are aged three to five and most of them have Swedish as their second or third language. The analyses draw on data from a fieldwork in progress, located in a multilingual pre-school environment in a Swedish city. In-depth analyses of situated “classroom” interaction explore the participants’ methods for accomplishing pedagogic activities, that is, their ways of exploiting and reflexively producing contexts for learning. The results are discussed from a discourse psychological perspective on learning (Potter, 1996), highlighting the collaborative and situated aspects of children’s conduct in and through which learning can be said to take place. On this view, children are seen as competent constructors of their social and cultural order (Speier, 1971; Mackay, 1974). During the participating observations, the video camera has served as the main tool for recording data, providing an invaluable resource for documenting social interaction, in that it allows the analyst to examine the complexity of social events at a considerable level of detail (Heath, 1997).

2. The children at the pre-school

The pre-school has a multicultural approach and except for Swedish, the main language, English and Spanish are also used for pedagogical purposes. There are six teachers in the staff, with different language background and skills. The children are divided in two groups, one for the youngest children and the other for the older, aged three to five. However, in the mornings and late afternoons the groups are merged, and of course the outdoor play-yard is collectively used. In Swedish pre-schools, education is combined with daycare, “educare”⁴, which means the children in this group are staying at the pre-school when their parents are at work, and therefore the length of their stay may vary. There are several scheduled activities at the pre-school, such as “sharing time”, educational training, meals, sleeping, (for the youngest). On the top of that there is also a lot of time for “free play”. My focus is, as mentioned, on the older children. There are 24 children and three teachers in this group.

⁴ Viewing education and care as two parts of the same coin is characteristic and unique for the Swedish childcare, and it is stressed in official reports (Lidholt, 2001).

3. Learners in a multilingual environment

The analysis below focuses on, children as learners in a multilingual environment. The first excerpt presents a teacher led Spanish-group activity, and the second one children engaged in free play, showing as it were their ways of “doing Spanish group”.

3.1. ¿De qué color?

The Spanish-group is a limited weekly activity at the pre-school. Its main pedagogical aim is to make the children familiar with the Spanish language in a playful way. In the course of these activities, the teacher is using both Swedish and Spanish.

In the Spanish-group described below, there are seven four-year-old children: Michael, Irma, Eva, Gordon, Karin, Fia and Lena as well as the Spanish teacher. Two of the girls reportedly speak Spanish at home. The excerpt shows the opening of a teacher-fronted play event, involving pea bags. As a way of introducing the play material, the teacher gets the children’s attention by asking; “Do you know what you are going to get now?”. At the same time, she produces two small coloured pea-bags from a cotton bag. She keeps one bag in each hand and the children standing close to her, are acting very excited. The teacher presents the bags in Swedish calling them pea bags or “small pillows”. She then starts by giving Irma one of the bags.

Excerpt 1

- 12 Teacher: *[qué color Irma? ((Points at Irma.))*
[what colour is it?
- 13 *[((Lena and Eva stretch their hands towards the cotton bag.))*
- 14 Teacher: *vänta*
wait
((Most of the children show that they are very eager to get a bag. They stretch their hands after the bag and some of them jump up and down, eyes fixed on the teacher. Irma is standing right in front of the teacher.))
- 15 Irma: *azul ((moves back.))*
blue
- 16 Teacher: *azul*
blue
- 17 Teacher: *och den här, vad är det för färg?*
and this one, what colour is it?
((She shows the bag she has held in her right hand.))
- 18 Eva: *ROJO*

- RED
- 19 Teacher: *rojo* heter den på spanska (.) *rojo*
rojo is the name in Spanish (.) *rojo*
- 20 ((She gives the bag to Lena and picks up a new one from the cotton bag.))
- 21 Teacher: och den här heter?
and the name of this one?
- 22 Gordon: *AZUL*
BLUE
- 23 Teacher: *azuuu*/l ((Gives the bag to Gordon.))
bluuu/e
- 24 Michael: [JA, JA, JA ((Jumping))
[ME, ME, ME
- 25 Teacher: schyyy, du måste säga namnet.
schyyy, you have to name it.
- 26 Teacher: ((She takes a new bag and holds it up.))
- 27 och vad heter den här?
and what is the name?
- 28 Eva: blå=
blue=
- 29 Michael: =blå
=blue
((Michael has stopped jumping, and stands, trampling with his feet looking up at the teacher.))
- 30 Teacher: och på spanska Michael?
and in Spanish Michael?
- 31 Eva: *AZUL*=(Looks at the teacher.)
BLUE=
- 32 ((Turns her head and looks at Michael.))
- 33 Gordon: =*azul*
=blue
- 34 Michael: (1) blue
- 35 Teacher: blue på engelska, på spanska?
blue in English, in Spanish?
- 36 Eva: *AZUL*=
BLUE=
- 37 ((Turns her head and looks at Michael.))
- 38 Gordon: =*azul*
=blue
- 39 Michael: [(3) °*bleu*°
[(3) °blue°
- 40 [((The teacher looks at him with her mouth open forming an a.))
- 41 Teacher: *azul* ja ((with a smiling voice)) *bleu* på franska (.) *azul*

- 42 *azul* yes *bleu* in French (.) *azul*
 ((Gives the bag to Michael who takes it, smiles and makes six short jumps.))
- 43 Teacher: *azul* ((gives a bag to Eva.))
- 44 Teacher: *azul* Karin ((gives a bag to Karin.))
- 45 Teacher: *azul* Fia
- 46 ((Gives a bag to Fia and puts away the cotton bag.))
- 47 Teacher: vet ni vad Gordon, nu gör vi så att ni försöker kasta upp (.) och
 fånga den inte för högt upp
 you know what Gordon, now we try to throw it up in the air (.)
 and catch it not to high.

When the teacher asks Irma for the colour of the bag, she code-switches to Spanish (line 12). This sets off the Spanish pedagogic activity, and we can see Irma responding, aligning with the teacher's language choice (line 15). Note however that the teacher gives the bag to Irma before asking for the colour, as if she acted on the assumption that Irma will give the "right" answer orienting in this way to her knowledge of Irma's Spanish skills. In line 17, the teacher switches to Swedish, asking for the colour of the next bag. Here, Eva's answer "*rojo*" results in a sequential code-switch (line 18). Thus Eva's answer "*rojo*" can be seen to follow the concept introduced earlier by the teacher, who also confirms this, orienting to Eva's language choice: "*rojo* heter den på spanska" (*rojo*, is the Spanish name) (line 19). In line 22, Gordon follows the same concept and the teacher again confirms. Overlapping with the teachers words, Michael shouts "JA, JA, JA" (ME, ME, ME), jumping on the spot in line 24. In response, the teacher tells him in Swedish that he has to name it, producing a new pea bag. In a second, Eva, who has not received a bag supplies the answer "blå" (blue) in Swedish (line 28) and Michael immediately follows suit, latching his answer onto Eva's (line 29). This time the teacher does not orient to Eva. Instead, she corrects Michael in line 30, saying; "och på spanska Michael" (and in Spanish Michael). Michael, who has stopped jumping, is standing trampling looking at the teacher, while Eva code-switches yelling out the answer "*azul*" immediately followed by Gordon. After a second's pause, Michael provides the answer in English. In line 35, the teacher corrects him again in a friendly voice, telling him what is wrong and what she expects instead. And again the answer "*azul*" comes rapidly from Eva and Gordon echoing each other. The teacher disattends them both focusing on Michael. After a three-second's pause, Michael produces his answer in French, in a markedly low voice (line 39). This time the teacher

tells him the expected answer in a smiling voice, confirming that “*bleu*” is the French word for *azul*. She repeats the right answer once again and gives the bag to Michael who receives it happily, smiling and jumping. Then the teacher goes on handing out pea bags to the rest of the children. At the same time, she is telling the colour of each bag.

3.2. Producing the correct answer as a matter of learning

The above excerpt shows how the children respond and co-ordinate their talk with their teacher during the Spanish activity. Let us first note that the teacher orients towards Irma as a competent speaker of Spanish and possibly as a helping hand to introduce the concept of naming the colour of the bags in Spanish. She achieves this by first giving Irma the pea bag and then asking Irma explicitly for the colour. Note that her question results, on the level of conversational organisation, in a code-switch into Spanish. Studies of bilingual interaction have shown that whereas code-switching is used for many purposes, it is always subject to participants’ local interpretations in the process of mutual construction of meaning (Auer, 1998; Cromdal, 2000). Irma’s answer in Spanish confirms the teacher’s expectation and this exchange sets off the Spanish activity. Interestingly, whereas the teacher code-switches into Swedish after the exchange with Irma, the children answer in Spanish, thus orienting to the “Spanishness” of the activity. Hence, the children apparently orient to the normative expectations regarding the choice of language in this pedagogical event.

Two more pea bags are distributed in a similar way. However, when the turn comes to Michael, the event takes a rather different direction, as he repeatedly fails to provide the answer that the teacher expects. How can we account for this failure? From a mainstream SLA perspective the answer might perhaps be that Michael’s failure to provide the Spanish word for blue has to do with his limited proficiency in Spanish.

However, if we pay attention to the way this event unfolds in terms of interactive organisation, the picture looks rather different, and we can see that Michael is very consistent in his way of answering. First, Eva says blue in Swedish, and Michael follows, which leads his first answer in a wrong direction. Secondly, when Eva and Gordon give the right answer twice and the teacher doesn’t confirm this, Michael is acting in a consistent manner and does not follow suit. Instead, he tries to come up with the right answer using other languages for the colour blue.

In summary, I would like to suggest that the learning, taking place here, does not merely relate to the children's developing skills in Spanish. Of equal importance is the children's ability to grasp the normative organisation of this activity: that one has to name the colour of the bag, prior to receiving it and also that it has to be named in Spanish. Indeed, I have argued that Michael's failure to produce the expected answer need not to have to do with his limited proficiency in Spanish. Rather, it should be seen, as a result of the unfolding interaction, in which the teacher does not acknowledge the "correct" answer, produced repeatedly by several other children. In the following excerpt, I will try to show how a group of girls use their experience from the Spanish group during free play.

3.3. ¿Cómo te llamas tú? –multilingual learning in play

This excerpt presents an instance of free play, in which five 5-years old girls (Linn, Elsa, Sally, Anna and Elin) are sitting on the floor in the playing room. They are sitting in a circle with their legs wide open so that their feet meet in a star formation. They use a plastic ball, the size of a football, which they roll on the floor, passing it to each other. As a player passes the ball, she will ask for the name of the receiver in Spanish. The Spanish teacher has introduced this form of play the day before when they were having Spanish group. In the present episode, one of the players (Elsa) has a Spanish-speaking parent, but according to the teacher's report, they have just recently begun to practice Spanish at home. When this episode begins, Elsa has just got the ball.

Excerpt 2

- 1 Linn: x *llamo* ((Addresses to Elsa.))
x name is
- 2 Elsa: *yo me llamo*
my name is
- 3 Linn: Elsa
- 4 Elsa: Elsa
- 5 Linn: *c[ómo te [llama] (.) s tú* ((points and looks at Sally))
what is [your name
- 6 Sally: [x [xx]] ((Points at herself.))
- 7 Linn: ((looks back at Elsa.))
- 8 Elsa: *cómo te llamas tú?*
what is your name?
- 9 ((She passes the ball to Sally.))
- 10 Sally: > *yo me llamo Sally como [te llamas tú?* <

- > my name is Sally [what's your name? <
 11 Linn: [Sally du kan inte hålla så, då
 måste alla försöka studsa över dina fötter. ((She makes gestures
 and looks at the other girls and then at Sally.))
 [Sally you can't hold like that,
 then everyone has to bounce over your feet.
 12 Sally: (2)((stretches her legs and passes the ball to Linn, who catches the
 ball and places it between her legs.))
 13 Linn: *yo me llamo* Linn. ((As a carefully articulated gesture and talk, she
 points at herself with both hands.))
 my name is Linn
cómo te llamas [tú?
 what's your [name?
 14 Linn: [As a carefully articulated gesture she puts her
 hand on the ball and passes it to Elsa.))
 15 Elsa: (((Looks at her.))
 16 Linn: [nej jag skicka fel ((She points with her right hand at Alex
 carefully articulating the gesture.))
 [no, I made a wrong pass
 17 Anna: hon skicka fel((Tilts her head to the side and looks at Elsa.))
 she made a wrong pass
 18 Linn: Elsa ((with a pleading voice.))
 19 Anna: (((Moves against Elsa as if to fetch the ball.))
 20 Elsa: [MAN FÅR INTE GÖRA SÅ ((Looks up, holding the ball.))
 [YOU ARE NOT ALLOWED TO DO THAT
 21 Anna: ((Lends back.)) hon skicka faktiskt fel
 she really made a wrong pass
 22 Elsa: (((Looks at the observer.))
 23 Elin: (((crawling slowly out from the circle.))
 24 Linn: men vi kanske (.) men hon filmar ju ((points at the observer, and
 all the girls turn their head and look at me.))
 but perhaps we (.) but she is recording

The children are transforming into play an activity they did on the day before, in their Spanish group. In other words, they are playing “doing Spanish group”. Obviously, in the Spanish group they have a teacher, and we may see Linn taking a position in this play event, which resembles what Wetherell (1998) and Tholander & Aronsson (2002) label “subteaching”. Accordingly we can see Linn engaging in scaffolding of Elsa’s moves turn by turn from line 1 to 7 by showing her how to do the name-play in a correct fashion. Note that Linn does that in spite of Elsa being the girl we might expect to have most experience in Spanish. Furthermore, it is Linn who legitimates Elsa’s choice of who should get the ball next, pointing at Sally in line 5. She

also corrects Sally's way of holding her legs in line 11 and we can see Sally complying without objection.

In line 13, Linn copies the expressive manner of the teacher when she introduced the name play. Linn produces clearly articulated, almost exaggerated gestures pointing with her both hands at herself and expressively telling her own name followed by the question "*cómo te llamas tú*" (what is your name) as she puts her both hands on the ball and makes a pass (line 14). In copying the manner of the teacher both physically and verbally, Linn has embodied the teacher's actions from the day before. As Goodwin points out, gestures as well as vocal pitch can be used in play by children "[...] to build and display themselves as social actors with specific embodied characteristics, a habit of power" (1998: 35).

In line 16, Linn makes a mistake and passes the ball to the "wrong" receiver. Note that in producing a remedy for this, she switches to Swedish. We should also note that Ann collaborates with Linn attempting to get the ball back. Moreover in line 19, Ann makes a bodily move towards Elsa, as if she was going to retrieve the ball. In response, Elsa claims this to be a violation of the rules, addressing her accusation to Ann. Then finally Elsa looks up at the observer and following her gaze Linn points out in line 23 that, "she is recording" (*hon filmar ju*).

With this excerpt I want to focus on the girls' language choice. Normally, the girls would use Swedish when they play, but here we can see them accomplishing a play event partly in Spanish. This might be accounted for by the fact that they are doing Spanish group, an event, which is normatively conducted in Spanish. Although the girl's use of Spanish is restricted to the naming activity, the very fact that they choose Spanish for this event shows their orientation to this norm. In other words, they have learned an essential organisational feature, of the pre-school's Spanish group activities.

4. Concluding summary

Drawing on data on two different settings at the pre-school, I have tried to show how we can understand the learning process as a jointly accomplished, situated affair. The point here is not to evaluate the teacher's pedagogical practice, nor the children's language skills. Rather, I have tried to show how these two situations mirror the

complexity of everyday talk, and how children's learning arises as part and parcel of social interaction. Approaching the analysis from the members' perspective (e.g. Sacks, 1992), I want to suggest that being an issue of participation in different activities at the pre-school, learning entails not merely the acquisition of Spanish concepts and phrases, but also the ability to recognise the normative organisation of pedagogic activities. Here, as I have shown, the issue of language choice is of paramount importance.

Appendix

Transcription key (partly adapted from Edwards, 1997)

| | |
|-------------|---|
| [] | Square brackets mark the start and the ends of the overlapping speech. |
| Underlining | Signals emphasis; the extent of underlining within individual words locates emphasis. |
| Bold | Pronunciation differs from surrounding speech, e.g. irony, theatrical. |
| CAPITALS | Mark speech that is obviously louder than surrounding speech. |
| ° | Quieter speech. |
| (3) | Measure pauses in seconds. |
| (.) | Micropause. |
| ((Text.)) | Transcriber's comments. |
| : | Prolongation of preceding vowel. |
| > < | Speeded-up talk. |
| > | Slower than surrounding talk. |
| = | Immediate "latching" of successive talk. |
| – | Utterance interrupted or ebbed away. |
| (...) | Talk has been omitted from a data example. |
| (text) | Uncertain interpretation. |
| (x) (xx) | Inaudible word or words. |
| he he | Laughter. |

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