





Play-based pedagogy for oral communication in early grade and preschool classrooms



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Background: Teachers are responsible for developing and enhancing communication skills amongst young learners. Unfortunately, the overly structured pedagogy which many teachers adopt inhibits the optimal development of oral communication skills. Hence, the researchers investigated ways of strengthening group-work play-based pedagogy to stimulate oral communication.

Aim: This research aimed to find out (1) what prior knowledge, skills and classroom practice teachers have and how they demonstrate their competence in implementing group play-based pedagogy; and (2) how a professional development programme assists teachers to implement play-based group pedagogy to develop oral communication skills in young learners.

Setting: The study took place in the Owerri Education Zone in the eastern part of Nigeria.

Methods: The researchers implemented a participatory action research (PAR) design. Nine participants were purposively selected from a cohort of teachers who taught the 5–9-year age group. Teacher participants responded to the semistructured interviews and observational schedules used as tools for data collection. The researchers used inductive thematic data analysis techniques to make sense of the data. This was performed in three phases: sorting the data and organising them in data sets, after which the analysis process commenced.

Results: Findings from the study showed that although the participants had a fair understanding of play-based pedagogy, they did not know how to operationalise their understanding of play-based pedagogy directed at oral communication

Conclusion: The participants gained expert knowledge of play pedagogies that require children to increase oral language use in interaction with each other, using vocabulary and phrases introduced by the teacher as scaffolding for their communication.

Keywords: group work; play-based pedagogy; core skills; young learners; professional development programme; communication.

Introduction

Acquisition of communication skills is a set of essential linguistic milestones that young learners are expected to attain during childhood. The effectiveness of communication skills is evidenced in the ability of children to convey messages clearly to their communication partners; children do this through a combination of communication cues or skills (Beatson 2020). Such skills are crucial for academic and social competence for young learners in the 3–8-year age group (Milton, Du Plessis & Van Der Heever 2020). Beatson (2020), Milton et al. (2020) and Ojile (2020) agreed that the development of communication skills for young learners is an appropriate tool for the expression of thoughts, feelings, needs and social interactions. Young learners learn to be respectful and become socially competent individuals as they relate and interact positively with their environment (Goodliff et al. 2017; Goodspeed 2016). These positive interactions enable young learners to understand and adapt to their environment, connect with others appropriately and engage in the world (Hedges & Cooper 2018; Lillard & Eisen 2016; University of Waterloo 2018).

Mardani (2020) stated that as soon as a child is born, he or she is expected to communicate to the world by crying. After that, the acquisition of specific communication skills continues with the language development sequence of listening, speaking, reading and writing (Milton et al. 2020; Njoku 2015). Early childhood teachers are expected to enhance the communication skills of young learners that already existed before their admission into preschool. Unfortunately, according to Afurobi et al. (2017), young learners often encounter early childhood teachers who do not invest

Note: Special Collection: Early Childhood Development in Theory and Practice.

in active learning opportunities. There are still teacher-centred traditional educators who are not yet skilled in mapping out strategies to enhance young learners' communication skills (Afurobi et al. 2017; Njoku 2015).

Characteristics of persistent teacher-centred pedagogies

Teaching during the mid-1900s was characterised by teacher-centred pedagogy in many schools across the globe (Fleer 2013; Hong, Shaffer & Han 2017). In such pedagogies, teachers usually provided information to learners, and learners often worked in isolation, focusing on memorising information and processes. Instructions in the foundation and middle primary schools (intermediate phases) were often textbook- or worksheet-based. In this type of classroom, learning was expected to happen with limited active dialogue and discussion (Goswami 2014; Sawyer 2018). Siraj (2017) and Henson (2003) concurred that a shift emerged from teacher-centred pedagogy to learner-centred learning by the last few decades of the late 20th century. The transversal, 21st-century skills became prominent in education circles: communication, interpersonal relationships, collaboration and creative joint planning became important. Communication skills became increasingly important amongst the 21st-century skills which early childhood researchers aimed to develop. Researchers such as Fleer (2013) and Hong et al. (2017) advocated the use of play-based pedagogy, specifically to enhance oral communication.

Children's play

Although play pedagogies are used for teaching specific content, it usually involves some pleasurable experience whilst learning ensues for children. Hence, play-based pedagogy as an instructional procedure integrates the teacher and the learner into a joint playful task to promote the learner's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development (Fleer 2013; Hong et al. 2017). Fleer (2009) stated that the application of play-based pedagogy to enhance oral communication skills should not be stereotyped in a traditional (formal) classroom environment, arguing that play involves indoor and outdoor activities. Young learners are stimulated when they play outdoors. Both Beatson (2020) and Perry (2019) agreed that play promotes healthy growth and development. A study by University of Waterloo (2018) mentioned that the longer young learners were confined to their seats and behind their desks in the classroom, the more they were deprived of developing a sense of freedom, creativity, communication and new possibilities for adventure. Therefore, teachers should utilise their available learning space in the school environment to ensure that the teaching and learning of communication skills are not restricted to classrooms alone (Brooker, Blaise & Edwards 2014).

Play-based pedagogy for group tasks

Play-based pedagogy has been shown to enhance the competence and effectiveness of young learners when teaching children to collaborate in groups (Hong et al.

2017). According to Sadullojeva (2018a, 2018b), the success of young learners who have learned to communicate competently in school is often an indicator of their social skills (collaboration and communication) development. The development of these social skills results from informal or formal group tasks in a play-based pedagogy. Ogunyemi and Ragpot (2015) argued that teachers who predominantly use the 'traditional' (teacher and textbook-focused) approach may require interventions in professional development to enhance their knowledge of how to plan lessons for optimal communication in play-based learning.

A professional development programme (PDP) is a pre-service training aimed to upgrade and update teachers' knowledge of curricula, content, instructions and pedagogies for effectiveness and professional competence (Luneta, 2012).

Theoretical framework

In this study, the researchers utilised one aspect of Lev Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory, namely the development of cognition within social interaction (McLeod 2014; Vygotsky 1978, 1986). According to Vygotsky's view, firstly a child experiences development from interaction with the social world (social level) through sensory perception and then 'internalises' encounters by storing much of it in their memory. Having learnt from the environment and people around him or her, the child reflects on what is learnt, which begins to occur in the child's mental representations at his or her individual level of mental representation (Gajdamaschko 2015; Marginson & Dang 2017; Vygotsky 1978).

The implication of this component of Vygotsky's theory of semiotic mediation is the use of tools and signs, and the role of cultural history in a child's learning activity for this study is that, socially, the child begins to listen to the sounds and language of people in the child's environment before engaging with other people around him or her. Whereas relating with people in the child's environment indicates a social interaction for the child, speaking becomes a product of reflection of what the child has heard from the environment. For example, when a child makes an animal noise, such as barking like a dog, it is because the child has interacted with the environment at his or her social level, has come to know what a dog is and how a dog behaves and has reflected what he or she learnt at the social level so as to enable him or her to bark like a dog at his or her individual level.

The theory of 'sociocultural learning' is pertinent to this study because various play-based pedagogy activities create social interaction requiring children to relate through language. As children reflect individually, they start building an inventory of vocabulary. They begin to reason logically, form concepts and develop intrinsic values, as prompted in group-work play-based pedagogy during the social interaction level (Gajdamaschko 2015; Marginson & Dang 2017; Vygotsky 1978).

To explore how play-based teaching can assist preschool and early grade children in developing oral communication, the following research question was asked:

1. What prior knowledge, skills and classroom practice do teachers have regarding play-based pedagogy?
2. How could a professional development programme assist teachers in implementing group-work play-based pedagogy to enhance communication skills in young learners?

Research methods

Sampling: The researchers purposefully selected three teachers from each of the three sampled preprimary and primary schools in the Owerri Educational Zone of Imo State, Nigeria. All purposively sampled nine teachers teaching young learners aged 5–9 years were black and female.

Table 1 briefly describes teacher participants' profiles, codes, qualifications and years of experience.

Design and methods: A qualitative research method was adopted for this study. A participatory action research (PAR)

TABLE 1: Profiling of teacher participants' gender, codes, work profiles, schools and teaching experience.

Gender	Code	Qualifications	Work profile	Years of teaching experience
School A				
Female	T1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National diploma Higher national diploma Postgraduate diploma in education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching preprimary 3 since 2014 	5
Female	T2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nigerian Certificate in Education Bachelor of Education (Hons) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Started teaching in 2009 Taught in private schools Teaches primary 2 Sectional head, junior primary 	10
Female	T3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Started teaching 2012 Teaches primary 3 	7
School B				
Female	T4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) Bachelor of Education (Hons) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaches preprimary 3 since 2013 6 years teaching experience 	6
Female	T5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Taught 5 years in private schools Taught 7 years in public school Sectional head, junior primary Currently teaching Primary 1 	12
Female	T6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers' Grade 11 Certificate Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) Bachelor of Education (Hons) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assist. Headmistress Taught in the private sector 7 years Taught in different public schools for 23 years Currently teaching the preprimary 3 learners 	30
School C				
Female	T7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) Bachelor of Education (Hons) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sectional head, junior primary Primary 2 teacher 	9
Female	T8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor of Education (Hons) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preprimary 3 class teacher 	7

design was used because the teacher participants were viewed as stakeholders in the action research, thus having a say in the 'action' planned for their PDP. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and the responses of teacher participants about the professional development programme. The semistructured interview questions were formulated to elicit responses to the first research question, whilst the teacher's reaction addressed the second question to the PDP.

The relevant university's ethics committee granted ethics clearance prior to the onset of the inquiry. To ensure harm-free research and confidentiality, all research ethics and considerations were duly applied throughout the research as approved by the ethics committee of the University of Pretoria, South Africa.

The professional development programme

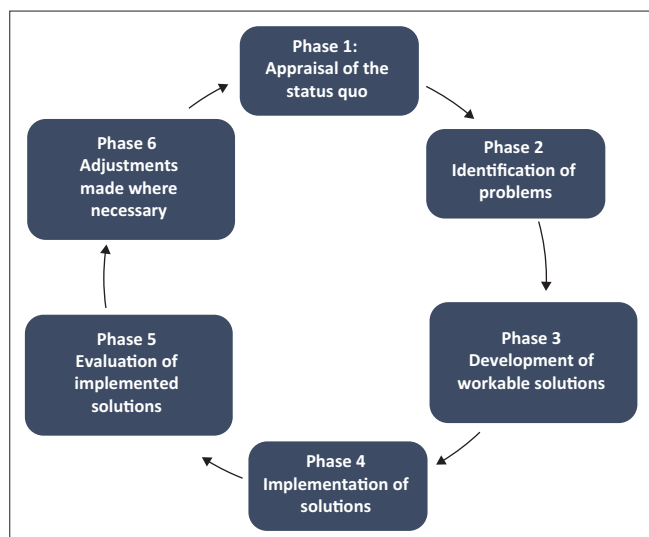
The use of PAR in its different phases allowed for appraisal of the teachers' use of group work play-based pedagogy, which led to identifying inappropriate teaching pedagogy as a problem. Thereafter, the development of a workable solution directed to the adaptation and implementation of jigsaw, think-pair-share and buzz group learning pedagogies. The evaluation and reflection of the implementation of the proposed solution cumulated into the research outcome.

Jigsaw is a teaching technique that allows for a breakdown of learning content (theme) into smaller units, which are divided amongst learners (participants) who are expected to become experts in the learning content and, after that, become facilitators of that learning content (Sproule & Trew 2010; University of Waterloo 2018). Jigsaw could be seen as a cooperative learning strategy, hence the justification of its inclusion as group-work play-based pedagogy. Similarly, think-pair-share is a learning strategy that enables learners (participants) to think critically about the topic, formulate their ideas and share their ideas with their peers (Sproule & Trew 2010; University of Waterloo 2018). On the other hand, the buzz group is another teaching strategy that entails dividing a large group of learners (participants) into groups of 2–5 to enable them to discuss a specific topic for a given time. The professional development section discuss these three group-work play-based pedagogies used in this study (see Figure 1) (Ekeh 2020).

Phase 1: Appraisal of the status quo

The researchers met with all the participants in Phase 1, introduced the research project and appraised the teaching pedagogy used in the area.

In this phase, a semistructured interview was conducted with each teacher participant to elucidate their previous knowledge of the research focus. After the appraisal and analysis of data collected in Phase 1, the problem of the study was identified; hence, the need to develop a workable solution was apparent.



Source: Ekeh, M.C., 2020, 'Strengthening group work play-based pedagogy to enhance core skills in young learners', Doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria.

FIGURE 1: Participatory action research cycle.

Phase 2: Identification of problem

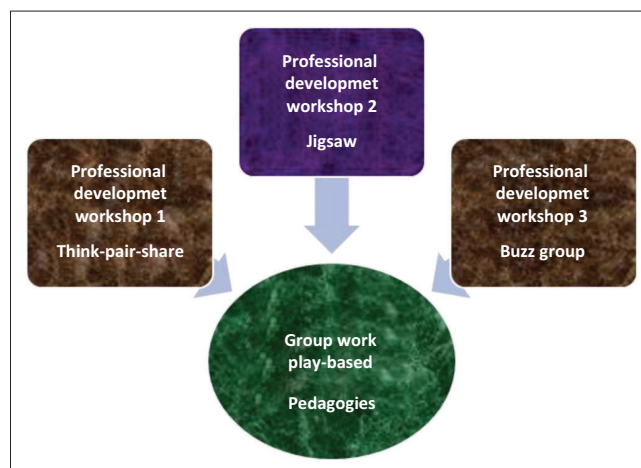
From their reflections on the baseline assessment, teachers were able to identify their 'chalk and talk' method of teaching as a problem that inhibited the enhancement of oral communication skills amongst learners. The teachers' response to the semistructured interview enabled them to understand and appreciate the need for a shift from teacher-centred learning to learner-centred. Teachers realised the shortcomings of their knowledge on using group-work play-based pedagogy to enhance oral communication skills in young learners.

Phase 3: Development of a workable solution

To develop a workable solution for the identified problem, the teachers and the researchers jointly developed and organised three professional development workshops (see Figure 2) (Ekeh 2020). The workshops capacitated the teachers on using think-pair-share, jigsaw and buzz group play-based pedagogies. After that, the teachers went to their various schools and classes to implement the teaching strategies. The workshops, which spanned 4 months, enabled the researchers to collect data that were helpful in answering research questions 1 and 2. In Nigeria, each school term has 4 months in the academic calendar; therefore, teachers were given the opportunity of implementing the strategies for 4 months whilst reporting back to their groups.

Phase 4: Implementation of solutions

During the professional development workshops, teacher participants were divided into groups to participate in group-work activities such as think-pair-share, jigsaw and buzz group. Subject content such as sources of water supply (health sciences curriculum), transportation (civic education



Source: Ekeh, M.C., 2020, 'Strengthening group work play-based pedagogy to enhance core skills in young learners', Doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria.

FIGURE 2: Professional development workshops on group-work play-based pedagogies.

curriculum), puzzles and generation of words from a single word (English language curriculum) were used during group-work play-based activities. On teachers' return to their classes, they implemented the solution using different subject contents. Each teacher implemented the solution an average of seven times during different lessons whilst the authors observed their implementations. After each implementation phase, the teachers and researchers met to evaluate the success of the implementation.

Professional development workshop 1 (think-pair-share)

The idea of think-pair-share was to allow for a 25-min time to enable individual teacher participant to think and generate 30 words from the keyword 'GENERATION'. For example, teachers develop words such as *nation*, *ration*, *generate*, *it*, *no*, *tin*, *gen*, *gene*, *net*, *ten*, *rat*, *near*, *on* and *gear* from the keyword 'GENERATION'. After thinking through and generating these words on their own within the allocated time frame, they were paired with their colleagues to share the words they had generated. This outcome facilitated oral communication amongst themselves and enhanced critical thinking. Unfortunately, because of time constraints for their task, some teacher participants did not reach the expected number of answers. The reason cited was that the exercise was engaging and challenging, as attested by the teacher participants. Teacher participants worked together to achieve a common goal; most could not arrive at the expected number of answers, whilst others did. Teacher participants who could not arrive at the expected number of answers were challenged to work harder in the subsequent task. The researchers observed a positive outcome.

Professional development workshop 2 (jigsaw)

This group-work learning strategy involved two groups, namely the 'home groups' and the 'expert groups'. Teachers were allowed to choose a home group that would not exceed three members. For the purpose of this study, these home

groups were nicknamed (Champions, Eagles and Achievers); each home group was made up of three teacher participants. There were three home groups because the total number of teacher participants used for the research was nine. In the home group, teachers were given numbers 1, 2 and 3 as codes instead of their actual names. Each home group member represented her home group in the Expert Group.

Members of the home groups integrated into the expert group. The researchers requested all the number 1s to a group, as well as number 2s and 3s. This culminated in having three expert groups. Each expert group was given a different task (such as sources of water supply, means of transportation, calculating the number of squares in a big square) to work on within a specified time frame. When the expert group members completed their given task, each member had to return to their respective home groups.

In the home groups, each representative of the home group was given time to teach her group members what she learnt from the expert group. The implication was that number 1 in the Champion home group taught her colleagues what she learnt from the expert group; thereafter, numbers 2 and 3 did the same. At the end of the learning process, all the group members had an opportunity to communicate and share what they learned with their home group members. This strategy contributed to each group gaining knowledge and understanding from three different contents. In this way, the researchers achieved the strategy of sharing and 'each one teach one'.

Teachers learned how to utilise time to achieve meaningful learning content within a given time frame. It was observed that shuffling and regrouping members was advantageous in getting teacher participants involved in the learning task. The teacher participants were all involved and made valuable contributions to their groups about the learning content. The facilitation of the jigsaw pedagogical strategy fascinated teachers because this was their first practical experience using the jigsaw strategy.

Professional development workshop 3 (buzz group)

The buzz group was the last training workshop for teachers because they were approaching the examination period. The teachers, however, attended the workshop and implemented the possible solution gained from the workshop. Facilitating learning through a 'buzz group' was fun for teachers. Teachers were grouped into twos and tasked to work within a very short period. The short time allocation for the task in the buzz group was a crucial factor to see how fast each group would accurately come up with an answer. The facilitation of the buzz group generated an educational buzz. This educational buzz was healthy because it showed that oral communication was taking place amongst group members. An example of the task given to them was: *Identify one word that fits into the four blank spaces presented in the task.*

'A rich man wants _____; a poor man has _____. If you eat _____ you die, when you die you can take _____ with you. Answer (NOTHING)'. This task aimed to engage teacher participants to think critically and work in teams. The researchers observed that this activity aided in developing their critical thinking, oral communication and creativity skills.

Phase 5: Appraisal and evaluation of implemented solutions

After the 3 weeks of implementation in their respective classrooms, the teacher participants reconvened for evaluation. During the evaluation phase, teacher participants indicated a positive change in young learners; then it was accepted that group-work play-based pedagogy was successful. Should the outcome be unsatisfactory, the researchers would adjust and replay the whole process again. In their responses during the evaluation, it was found that all the implemented programmes were both successful and satisfactory. An observation schedule containing a rating scale of learners' performance, as cited in Table 2, and feedback from teachers was used to determine the success of the implemented solution.

Phase 6: Adjustment of implemented solutions

Phase 6 provided for adjustment of areas that were not adequately implemented. This phase saw to the corrections and reimplementation of the programme, therefore necessitating a redesign of the PAR cycle. However, there was no need to redesign or redo any programmes that capacitated the teacher participants. This was because the appraisal and evaluation of the implementation of solutions were all successful and satisfactory.

Data analysis

A systematic procedure is needed to analyse and synthesise data collected to interpret participants' perceptions, views and experiences about a phenomenon. Merriam (2009:34) observed that data analysis is 'making sense of the data by consolidating, reducing and interpreting verbal accounts, observations and information from documents'. In this research, inductive thematic data analysis was used to make sense of the data collected, and this was performed in three segments. In Segment 1, the researchers prepared and organised the data through transcription of the semistructured interview, participants' reflection notes and the observation schedule (sorting of data). In Segment 2, researchers used colours to code similar data. After that, themes and subthemes emerged (categorising of data). Finally, Segment 3 dealt with analysing and discussing the findings of the data (analysing of data).

Data analysis of research question 1

As discussed earlier, for research question 1, the researchers conducted a baseline assessment to appraise teachers'

TABLE 2: Observation schedule for think-pair-share, jigsaw and buzz group.

Twenty-first century skills observed		Rating scale				
Communication skills observed using a think-pair-share						
1	Young learners' performance in the implementation of group-work play-based pedagogy (think-pair-share, jigsaw and buzz group) to enhance communication skills.	Very poor	Poor	OK	Good	Very good
a.	Communicate effectively with peers.	-	-	-	3	3
b.	Use the names of peers during interactions.	-	-	1	3	2
c.	Follow instructions given by the teacher.	-	-	1	-	4
d.	Show good listening skills.	-	-	-	1	5
e.	Ask questions concerning classwork.	-	1	1	4	-
f.	Make use of nonverbal communication cues.	-	1	2	3	-
g.	Group work activity is noisy.	-	-	-	5	1
Communication skills observed using the jigsaw						
a.	Communicate effectively with peers.	-	-	-	4	3
b.	Use the names of peers during interactions.	-	-	-	3	4
c.	Follow instructions given by the teacher.	-	-	1	5	1
d.	Show good listening skills.	-	-	-	5	2
e.	Ask questions concerning classwork.	-	1	1	5	1
f.	Make use of nonverbal communication cues.	1	-	-	3	1
g.	Group work activity is noisy.	-	-	-	4	3
Communication skills observed using the buzz group						
a.	Communicate effectively with peers.	-	-	-	2	4
b.	Use the names of peers during interactions.	-	-	-	4	2
c.	Follow instructions given by the teacher.	-	-	-	4	1
d.	Show good listening skills.	-	-	-	6	-
e.	Ask questions concerning classwork.	-	-	2	4	-
f.	Make use of nonverbal communication cues.	1	-	-	3	2
g.	Group work activity is noisy.	-	-	1	1	4

previous understanding, knowledge and practice of group-work play-based pedagogy. Theme 1 and its three subthemes were generated because of the data analysis on research question 1.

Theme 1: Teachers' inadequate knowledge of play-based pedagogy

The analysis of research question 1 provided for the emergence of three subthemes as discussed next.

Sub-theme 1.1: Teachers' understanding and perception of play-based pedagogy

In response to what participants understood play-based pedagogy to mean, T1 observed that 'play-based pedagogy is the means or act of using play method in the act of teaching and learning', transcribed as 'the means or act of using play method in the act of teaching and learning'. T2 avowed play-based pedagogy to mean 'the teaching method a teacher uses to teach

the pupils learning', transcribed as 'teaching method a teacher uses in teaching learners'. T3 indicated, 'in my understanding, play-based pedagogy means the activities of education or the strategies of instruction'. T4 considered play-based pedagogy to mean 'the activities or ability of teaching, educating or instructing'. T5 said: 'play-based pedagogy is a method of using songs to dramatise what the teacher is educating to the pupils, taking the pupils along as the lesson is going on'.

Similarly, T6 asserted that: 'play-based pedagogy means the method of teaching in school; this method helps the learners to understand what the teacher is talking about all don't a topic it makes the learner learn fast because learners can learn fast whilst using play-based pedagogy'. T7 observed that 'play-based pedagogy means a method of teaching with play'. T8 mentioned that in her view:

'What we mean by play-based pedagogy is a way or a technique used in teaching to understand [or] to make the lesson easier or [an] intertwine of quickly to understand example. If you are teaching counting, we can use the singing method to teach it, for example, "one - *otu*, two - *abuo*, three - *ato*."'

The example T8 gave is a mathematical song in English and vernacular. T9 said, 'play-based pedagogy means using play-and still teaching the children'.

Subtheme 1.2: Teacher's limited use of play-based pedagogy

Considering that participants had a fair knowledge of what play-based pedagogy means, the researchers proceeded to find out how these teachers used group-work play-based pedagogy in their teaching. Their responses are reflected here.

T1 mentioned: 'I used this method mostly when I was in the junior primary', transcribed as 'junior primary means learners from ages 6 to 8'. T2 observed: 'story-telling and role play'. T3 avowed: 'by interacting with them whenever I am in class'. T4 asserted that she 'used play-based pedagogy to teach by using objects or figures that have similar examples to educate and draw the interest of the pupil'. T5 opined: 'I have used it to teach parts of the body'. T6 said:

'While teaching using play-based pedagogy, I make sure I divide the learners into groups to achieve what I want, and also I make sure I make use of learning materials to enable them to understand what I want them to understand to know.'

T7 argued: 'we have been using play-based method sometimes in the classroom whilst teaching children, mostly the preprimary class children'. T8 maintained: 'I use play-based pedagogy to teach counting in mathematics, for example, "one - *otu*, two - *abuo*". T9 asserted: 'to ask the learner who is the tallest should come out and who is the shortest should come out and stand out and also ask who is talker, to come out, stand'.

Sub-theme 1.3: Knowledge of types of play-based pedagogy

Whereas the researchers would not want to assume that teachers' response to subtheme 1.2 was because of insufficient

understanding of how to use group-work play-based pedagogy, a step further into the interview was to find out the types of group task play-based pedagogy the teachers do use. The responses are reflected here.

T1 said:

'The method I used is based mostly on the topic I want to teach. That means that the play method must [be] relative[ly] close to the topic I was teaching or handling.'

This was transcribed as 'the teaching method she uses depends on the topic she wants to teach'. T2 mentioned that 'sometimes, the pupils feel shy to participate in the role-play method, even in story-telling method'. This was transcribed as 'play role and story-telling method'. T3 observed: 'you find out the weak ones that find it difficult to pick up with others'. T4 avowed: 'teaching with some stones, cracking jokes to draw their interests'. T5 indicated: 'songs and dramatisation' as a pedagogy. T6 maintained: 'I normally use demonstration method'. T7 did not differ much, as she observed that 'the kinds of play-based pedagogy we use [are] (1) singing, (2) dramatising, etc.'. T8 said, 'use the singing method', whereas T9 observed she uses 'play-based method'. These responses show the brevity of participant teachers' understanding of group-work play-based pedagogy.

Data analysis of research question 2

In research question 2, the researchers developed a professional programme on how teachers can be assisted to implement group-work play-based pedagogy to enhance communication skills in young learners. The outcome of data analysis for research question 2 is discussed in theme 2.

Theme 2: Strategies for the enhancement of communication skills through play-based pedagogies

Three group-work play-based pedagogies were used to enhance the oral communication skills of young learners. Table 2 shows the pedagogies used and feedback from teacher participants on the classroom implementation of the use of these pedagogies.

Data analysis of communication skills using think-pair-share

The think-pair-share activity presented to learners in the class yielded different results. When the activity was initially presented, learners were reluctant to involve themselves. Once the teacher explained what the activity involved and what the learners' roles were going to be, there was a fair amount of excitement amongst the learners. In her class, T6 indicated that her young learners were unable to 'ask questions concerning the classwork' and unable to 'make use of nonverbal communication cues'. One possible reason for this is that young learners have not yet developed adequate social skills that enable them to interact with their peers. According to Sadullojeva (2018a, 2018b), most learners remain passive when they lack the

social skills needed for active participation and interactions amongst peers.

In contrast, T6, T1, T4, T5, T7 and T9 had a more positive experience with their learners regarding the think-pair-share activity. They indicated that the learners in their classes were able to 'communicate effectively with their peers', 'use the names of their peers during interaction', 'follow the instructions given by the teacher', 'show good listening skills', 'ask questions in relation with classwork', 'make use of nonverbal communication cues' and 'group work activity is noisy' (T6, T1, T4, T5, T7, T9).

Data analysis of communication skills using a jigsaw

Responding to the question of whether using jigsaw enhanced communication skills, T1, T2, T4, T5, T7 and T9 agreed that young learners were able to 'communicate effectively with peers', 'use the names of peers during interactions', 'follow instructions given by the teacher', 'show good listening skills', 'ask questions in relation with classwork', 'make use of nonverbal communication cues' and that 'group work activity is noisy'. The teachers' response supports the assertion that group-work play-based pedagogy fostered communication amongst learners. Effective group work encourages communication, respect for one another, participation and assisting others in achieving their goal, constructive questions and answers, patiently managing differences and enthusiasm in keeping deadlines (Brooker et al. 2014; Lillard & Eisen 2016; University of Waterloo 2018).

Teacher T6 disagreed, stating that young learners could not 'ask questions concerning classwork' in using a jigsaw' and were unable to 'make use of nonverbal communication cues'. The views of T6 may not be sustained because she agreed that her learners were able to 'communicate effectively with peers', 'follow instructions given by the teacher' and 'show good listening skills' and that the group work activity in her class was noisy. Learners only need to ask questions when they do not understand the instruction given by the teacher. However, T6 noticed that her learners followed the instruction she gave to them. According to Hong et al. (2017), Beatson (2020) and Feinberg (2002), effective communication entails vocal communication skills that may happen during face-to-face negotiations. In contrast, nonverbal communication skills represent the use of body language, gestures and dress.

Data analysis of communication skills using the buzz group

According to T2, T3, T4, T5, T7 and T8, the buzz group enhanced young learners' communication skills. The indication from teachers' responses showed that learners 'communicated effectively with peers', 'used the names of peers during interactions', 'followed instructions given by the teacher', 'showed good listening skills', 'asked questions in relation

with classwork', 'made use of nonverbal communication cues' and that 'group work activity was noisy'.

Communication skills were enhanced, as can be seen from teachers' responses. The views of T2, T3, T4, T5, T7 and T8 support the statement that effective communication entails vocal communication skills that may happen during face-to-face negotiations, whereas nonverbal communication skills represent the use of body language, gestures and dress (Beatson 2020; Feinberg 2002; Hong et al. 2017).

In her response, T8 agreed with the rest of the teachers but objected that the buzz group did not encourage young learners in her class to 'make use of nonverbal communication cues'. The position of T8 on learners not making use of nonverbal communication skills during the implementation of the buzz group was not significant because T2, T3, T4, T5 and T7 upheld that learners used nonverbal communication cues during programme implementation. Moreover, from the researchers' observation, learners were active in the learning process; hence, there was bodily movement and no learners came to class without being properly dressed. Hong et al. (2017), Beatson (2020) and Feinberg (2002) affirmed that nonverbal communication skills characterise the use of body language, gestures and dress.

Findings of research question 1

From the participants' responses, there is a strong indication that all participants understood what play-based pedagogy means. An example of this, a prevalent code in the data analysis, was that play-based pedagogy is a 'teaching method for young learners'.

According to Chien (2017), play-based pedagogy is a generic tool used by early years teachers. Chen and Fleer (2016) said that play is a 'vehicle' through which learning occurs. Similarly, Marginson and Dang (2017) and Topçiu and Myftiu (2015) maintained that play-based pedagogy is an intrinsically motivated, voluntary activity that allows the child the opportunity to construct their knowledge.

Teachers' responses to subtheme 2 indicate that teachers mainly used story-telling, discussion and singing as components of a play-based pedagogy. T6 was the only teacher who observed the use of group tasks. This suggests that most teachers do not sufficiently understand how to use group tasks as play-based pedagogy. Engelen et al. (2018) maintained that group work as a pedagogy must involve learners to work in collaboration on *fixed tasks*, in or outside the classroom.

Furthermore, the response from teachers on the kind of group-work play-based pedagogy they used showed that these teachers were not abreast. Ogunyemi and Ragpot (2015) affirmed that most Nigerian teachers have a narrow understanding of the use of play and its integration into teaching. According to Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie

(2011), Hedges and Cooper (2018) and Walsh et al. (2010), there are different kinds of group-work play-based pedagogies available for teachers' use. These include think-pair-share, circle of voices, rotating trios, snowball groups, jigsaw, fishbowl, learning teams and others. Some teachers are yet to find their feet in implementing play-based pedagogy adequately (Federal Government of Nigeria 2013; Fleer 2013, 2017).

The teachers were given a task to identify the kind of group work play-based pedagogy they used. This task confirmed that teachers were accustomed to the traditional methods of teaching.

Findings of research question 2

Research question 2 showed that the professional development workshop on think-pair-share as a teaching strategy was organised to see if learners' oral communication skills would be enhanced. The learning strategy's outcome was enhanced communication skills (see Table 2). The teachers agreed that this teaching and learning strategy is a valuable tool for enhancing communication skills in young learners. They also observed a significant shift from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred approach, significantly improving learner participation.

Similarly, a workshop on professional development on 'jigsaw' was organised, which yielded a positive outcome. Teachers implemented the programme, and they reported that oral communication had increased.

The enhancement of communication skills using the 'buzz group' tool was advantageous for the teachers. Two teachers, however, noticed that a buzz group did not allow the learners to make use of nonverbal communication cues.

Conclusion

This study set out to inquire into group-work play-based pedagogy as a tool for learners' oral communication in preschool and the Foundation Phase. A component of the Vygotskian theory of child development, namely learning as a social activity (Vygotsky 1978), was used as a theoretical lens to view play-based learning. From such a view, it was evident from the data that the teachers first learned through social mediation and reported some success in that the learners engaged in play-based learning and responded with increased oral communication.

Based on the current research findings, recommendations are made for strengthening group-work play-based pedagogy for teachers – specifically to develop oral communication skills.

The study has yielded valuable findings crucial for classroom practice. Policymakers and national and state universal basic education officials who organise PDP may wish to include

play-based group work for oral communication and language development goals in the early years.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

The primary author is M.C.E., whilst the other co-authors were his PhD supervisor and cosupervisors. The article was drawn from M.C.E.'s PhD, which has been concluded.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

The data used in this article can only be accessed from the University of Pretoria Library, as it is the custom of the university to store hard copies and soft copies of a completed PhD document.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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