

## **Inviting Small Children to Dialogue – Scaffolding and Challenging Conversational Skills**

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The purpose of this study was to learn about how to scaffold and challenge conversational skills in children at an early stage in language development. Language production most often mirrors verbal comprehension, and moreover gives cues to the conversational partner to relate to and further expand upon. The presented results come from dialogues between speech and language therapists and children aged five to six whose language development has been found to be delayed for their age. However, the results are highly applicable to all children, particularly in small children during their most intensive language developing phases. The theoretical framework highlights the importance of being an active language learner, i.e. language skills are mastered by being used in social interaction. Twenty-two dialogues were video-, and audio recorded, transcribed and coded with respect to language structure and interaction. The mean number of words per turn in the children's contributions was quantified and a qualitative analysis of the preceding turn of the elicitation strategies was performed. The results underline the importance of relating to the child's focus without being soliciting, i.e. to comment and give feedback, rather than using many questions and imperatives.

Keywords: conversational skill, dialogue, elicitation strategies, language production, scaffolding

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### **Language skills are developed by being practiced**

The rationale and theoretical framework of this paper is that children develop language skills through social interactions (Linell, 2009). Interactions give them opportunities to practice their receptive language skill which means to understand and interpret the meaning of language, as well as expressive skills, i.e. language production (Strömqvist, 2003/2010; 2007; Westerlund, 2009). This holds true regardless of how far they have come in their language development, and includes the mastery written language skills (Söderbergh, 2009). For this reason the interactional style of the conversational partner is of high importance, e.g. how vocalizations, answers and comments from the child can be promoted and enhanced (Dunst, Gorman and Hamby, 2010). A dialogue is a verbal interaction between two persons and a conversation might include more than two, but in this paper *dialogue* and *conversation* are used synonymously.

In this paper, active and functional language use, i.e. language production, is emphasized for several reasons. Most often it reflects language comprehension, which is crucial for all sorts of communication, in oral conversation as well as while reading (Bishop, 2013). Problems of reading comprehension are detrimental for learning and thereby for all school work. In order to proactively enhance language comprehension skill, it is important to identify early signs of weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Comprehension problems often generate misunderstandings and peer conflicts, which are commonly occurring in a preschool context (Horowitz, 2005).

Moreover, language production renders clues of the child's topics of interest as well as of the language development for the conversational partner to thematically relate to, and to further expand. Another aspect is that the language production of the child reflects his/her mastery of grammar, which has to be the point of departure for the conversational partner in searching for the proximal zone of development of the child (Vygotsky, 1986).

Accordingly, professional awareness of different means of inviting and motivating the child to actively participate in interactions is very important. Strategies for challenging as well as supporting children in becoming active conversationalists, i. e. elicitation strategies, can be performed explicitly. Doing this, experiences of professionals like - speech-language therapists (hence abbreviated as SLTs) are of great value (Bruce, Hansson & Nettelblad, 2007).

However, the extent to which small children are invited to participate in dialogues with adults, and how explicitly they are expected to be active conversationalists, is highly culturally dependent (van Kleeck, 1994). The role

of socialization in language development differs in different cultures, e.g. there are cultures in which the child is not expected to participate actively in conversations with adults (Salameh, 2012).

Young children who have not yet developed much of expressive verbal language, and preschool children who are late and/or have problems with language development, have much in common, although they represent two areas of research. However, there are great advantages when research in child language and research on the topic of language problems in children meet and merge. These two perspectives share the interest of exploring how to promote and enhance language development in children (Kouri, 2005). In this theoretical framework the conversational partner is a good model who invites, supports, scaffolds and challenges the child in developing language skills.

Typical language development is an active process which starts with an interest of sharing something with another person, most often a parent or some other close caregiver (Bruner, 1996). This requires a shared/common focus of attention, which often is manifested through joint action. Together they build a common ground, which is a starting point for social interaction as well as communication. At first the interaction or turn-taking consist of eye gaze, gestures, sounds and movements, i.e. body language, but successively the proportion of verbal exchanges increase. Such non-verbal aspects, i.e. body language continues to support language long after the verbal language is fully developed. Therefore, enhancing small children to interact with others - peers as well as adults – is a key for them to develop their language skills. And vice versa: the more language they have acquired, the easier it is to interact and communicate (Strömqvist, 2003/2010; 2007). This is in line with the principle of a child-centered education based on the child's curiosity and motivation to learn (Wells, 1999/2004).

### **Enhancing children's language production – elicitation strategies**

The more explicitly and demandingly you try to make a child active in a conversation, verbally or non-verbally, the less you might succeed. There are studies showing that it is not a good idea or strategy to ask a lot of questions nor talking too much yourself (Nettelbladt, Hansson & Nilholm, 2001). Therefore, offering the optimal amount of support and scaffolding, as well as an optimal amount of challenge, and to do this with perfect timing when the child is interested and needs it, is therefore an act of balance. The goal is a dynamic, symmetrical pattern of turn taking, in which responsiveness and assertiveness are manifested (Fey, Long & Finestack, 2003).

Language skills are enhanced and challenged in all naturalistic and authentic interactions (Dunst, Raab & Trivette, 2012; Warren & Kaiser, 1986). Conversational partners adapt to each other; and the most mature interactional partner is commonly expected to enable, and to promote, the joint venture of a dialogue. This could for example be done by addressing the child as if s/he already was a skilled conversational partner, leaving pauses for the child to fill, and of course relate to the focus of the child's interest.

Language skills continue to develop in a life time perspective; with respect to vocabulary, as well as grammar and pragmatics skill. The more language skills are practiced in social communication, the more they develop (Nettelbladt, 2013). In order to be able to scaffold and challenge the language of a child, at least in a more specific way, you must know what phonological and grammatical structures that have been acquired and which are still to be mastered. Their developmental stage is revealed through the language production, and implicitly by how the child reacts to language directed towards him/her, e.g. instructions, imperatives or texts read out loud to the child (Bishop, 2013).

The question of whether specific elicitation strategies can generate or elicit language production at each child's maximum linguistic capacity has been raised in earlier studies (Southwood & Russel, 2004; Bruce, Hansson & Nettelbladt, 2007). The outcome in the study of Bruce et al. (2007) showed that elicitation strategies that generate expanded utterances from children with language delays are linked to the child's focus and represent a non-soliciting style. This tendency was regardless of context, i.e. both in an informal chat and language training. To sum up, we know that linking to the focus of the child without soliciting (using explicit questions or imperatives) seems to be prosperous for promoting the child to take an active role in the dialogue. The more initiatives – non-verbal as well as verbal - the child takes, the more opportunities there will be for the conversational partner to relate to and expand upon. Expressive language mirrors the level of language development, and is therefore important for assessing as well as for designing the scaffold of language skills.

## **Aim**

The purpose of this study was to explore what professionals, in this case speech-language therapists, do, in order to make children at an early stage of language development actively participate in verbal interaction. The underlying assumption is that toddlers under two years of age and preschool chil-

dren who have been diagnosed with a language delay, show similar need of support and scaffolding in communication. They both rely on support from the context and different means of body language, for example gazes, pointing and gestures. Specifically, this study aimed to explore what kind of elicitation strategies these professionals use in order to make children produce language at the peak of their capacity. Such knowledge is of great value for parents as well as preschool teachers in order to optimize the conditions for all children's language development.

### ***Research questions***

- Are there specific elicitation strategies that generate language productions at the peak of the individual language capacity in children representing an early stage of language development?
- What governs the choice of elicitation strategy? Is there an adaptation of elicitation strategy to the child, and if yes, how can such an adaptation be described? Are there different elicitation strategies for children representing different stages of language development?

### **Method**

#### ***Participants, context and procedure***

Eleven children (6 girls and 5 boys) aged 4;9-6;5 with a language delay as defined by a grammatical ability that was not adequate for their age, interacted with seven well experienced speech-language therapists (SLTs). Each child participated with one speech and language therapist in two types of dialogues, of which one was a language training session and one was a free conversation. In total there were 22 dialogues each lasting 15 minutes. The research project was given consent by The Regional Ethical Review Board in Lund (registration number 42/2008). The parents of the children provided consent to participation as well as the speech and language therapists. The dialogues took place in SLT's clinics, which to some extent might have influenced the children's feeling of comfort. However, the children were familiar with the context as well as the SLTs, and knew the procedure quite well. Each session lasted 15 minutes. All dialogues were recorded on video as well as audiotape, and were orthographically transcribed.

### ***Coding and analysis***

The first step in the coding procedure was to identify the most expanded utterances from the child, the so called “peaks” of the language production of the child. The peak was defined as the individual and personal mean length utterance plus two words (MLU+2), which was computed and subsequently analyzed with respect to descriptive statistics.

The next step in the analysis was to explore the preceding turns from the speech therapist. Rephrased: what characterize the elicitation strategies that resulted in an answer from the child that was maximally expanded? A qualitative analysis was done with respect to whether the utterance was linked to the child’s focus or not, and whether it had soliciting properties or not. Differences in proportions were tested using T-test paired samples.

### **Results**

#### ***Each child’s peak of language productions – quantitative data***

The statistical analysis shows that expanded utterances from the child were occurring significantly more frequently after SLT’s utterances that were linked to the focus of the child, compared to SLT’s utterances that were unlinked to the child’s focus (54,0 versus 45,7%,  $p=0,013$ ). Furthermore, a significantly higher proportion of expanded utterances were found to occur following a non-soliciting utterance, compared to a solicitation, i.e. question and imperative from the SLT (53,0 versus 46,5 %,  $p = 0,032$ ).

#### ***Adaptation of elicitation strategy to the child – qualitative data***

A qualitative analysis of the excerpts of interactions shows that some strategies seem to be more basic, like to invite the child to interaction, and other seem to be more elaborated in order to maintain and further challenge. This finding can be described as a progression, see Figure 1. The first phase focuses on promoting and initiating, the second on commenting and confirming the child, while the last focuses on scaffolding as well as challenging conversational skill.



Figure 1. Progression in the elicitation strategies used by the SLTs.

### **Promote and initiate**

To promote is to make possible, to set a framework and to help the child feel successful without too much effort. The responsibility lies entirely on the SLT, who tries to interpret and follow the child's focus of interest and to establish a joint attention. This seems to most successfully be done through initiating actions that will be performed in a reciprocal way, that sets a frame for turn-taking and interest to participate, i.e. a joint action is a perfect way of starting an interaction.

Excerpt 1-2. Dialogue excerpts illustrating how a speech-language therapist (SLT) promotes and initiates a dialogue with a preschool child with a late language development thus representing an early stage of language development.

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Excerpt 1. . The SLT and the child are counting some photos.

SLT: *let's see how many you had*

CHI: *yes one one*

SLT: *there's one ... wait we put them so that we can ...*

CHI: *two and three four*

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Excerpt 2. The SLT and the child are looking at a toy pamphlet and they are both commenting the pictures and telling what they want for Christmas.

SLT: *m oh no how cute!*

CHI: *m those we have ... and these!*

SLT: *ah there were no such toys that I like and I don't want these*

SLT: *I want nice Santa Clauses and so on*

CHI: *me too, and those that you can have highest up in the Christmas tree*

/.../

SLT: *yes ... it looks like a very yellow golden horse*

CHI: *m*

SLT: *it shines*

CHI: *and I will do an angel*

### **Comment and confirm**

Next phase is to invite the child to contribute without making explicit demand or putting pressure on the child, i.e. to enhance the child's wish to contribute of her or his own will. The speech-language therapist facilitates the entrance of the child into a turn-taking pattern by leaving pauses for the child to fill in and not explicitly expecting verbal turns, and accepts body language like eye gaze, pointing or other gestures. Sometimes the utterance of the child is hard to understand for the SLT because of a simplified articulation. In such a case, the speech-language therapist tries to figure out what the child wants to say and repeats the correct form as an affirmation of reception, sometimes with an expansion to further underline how important the contribution of the child is. The speech-language therapist responds to the child as s/he already was a completely competent conversational partner by being a model in a symmetrical turn-taking during a sustained interaction, where all means are accepted and regarded as relevant.

Excerpts 3-4. Dialogue excerpts illustrate the elicitation strategies of commenting and confirming by speech and language therapists (SLTs) in interaction with a child with a late language development thus representing an early stage of language development.

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Excerpt 3. The SLT and the child are looking at commercials from a food market.

SLT:       *and I will take these three cherries*  
 CHI:       and I will take the cookies [points]  
 SLT:       *aha and then I will take this sausage*  
 CHI:       then I will take these tea cups

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Excerpt 4. The SLT and the child are looking at a story book.

CHI:       pehap in de pace ... a pace monte  
 SLT:       *a space monster?*  
 CHI:       yes the cat fraid [is afraid]  
 SLT:       *the cat is afraid of the space monster yes*  
 CHI:       ye I am not fraid no, I don't hide  
 /.../  
 CHI:       sawing  
 SLT:       *yes she is sawing yes*  
 CHI:       mm she is also sawing  
 SLT:       yes  
 CHI:       and this is the money box



SLT: *mm*  
CHI: what a lot of money she has  
SLT: *yes a lot of money*  
CHI: and a big money box

### **Scaffold and challenge**

Here the speech and language therapist helps the child make progress as a conversationalist, which includes becoming a good listener as well as a narrator. The following excerpts show how the speech-language therapist focuses on the child's feelings, thoughts and opinions. This strategy enhances responsiveness as well as assertiveness in a smooth and flexible interaction based on genuine interest and will to share and communicate. With this as a common ground, more and more challenges are introduced, for example requests of clarification and questions that probes reflection, which helps the child to make progress.

Excerpts 5-7. Dialogue excerpts illustrating how a speech and language therapist (SLT) supports and challenges children with a late language development to actively take part in verbal interaction.

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Excerpt 5. The SLT and the child are trying to make a car move.

CHI: you should turn around  
SLT: *turn around how do you mean ... turn around?*  
CHI: you turn around ... if you turn around with your hand, then it travels backwards

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Excerpt 6. The SLT and the child are talking about their experiences of flying.

SLT: *how do you like to fly?*  
CHI: good, but I think it is a bit scary, eh, or exiting to fly up there  
CHI: it does like this when you fly /backwards like this [shows with the body]  
SLT: *do you hold anybody's hand?*  
CHI: mm you feel like you are falling down

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Excerpt 7. The SLT and the child are discussing their experiences of eating candy.

SLT: *m ... has this happened to you too sometimes?*  
CHI: 0 [shakes his head]  
SLT: *never?*

CHI: I have never eaten so much  
SLT: *haven't you?*  
CHI: as him  
SLT: *no*  
CHI: I am sure he likes this candy

## Conclusions

The quantitative analysis showed that expanded utterances from the child to a significantly higher extent follow after turns that are linked to the focus of the child and that are not soliciting. The qualitative analysis of the dialogue excerpts show adaptations from the SLT to the focus of interest of the individual child. There is a tendency of progression in the qualitative style from a very child-centered non-soliciting style towards a more symmetrical turn-taking that enhances responsiveness as well as assertiveness in verbal exchanges – i.e. dialogues. Some key aspects to become and grow as a conversationalist seem to be genuine interest of sharing a common focus (joint attention), doing something alternately in a symmetrical interaction (joint action), where both partners link to each other's contributions and shares her/his own reflections, experiences and feelings.

## Pedagogical implications

The data in this study comes from dialogues between children who are found to be late in their language development and for this reason visit speech and language therapists in order to get help and recommendations. The obvious question is therefore how relevant these results are in other contexts with other conversational partners at preschool as well as at home. The question of generalization and implication is relevant of several reasons. First, language development and learning are central in a preschool context, since they are intrinsically chained in a mutual relation. On the same time as language is a tool for learning, the reverse is as true: new discoveries generate new concepts that have to be labeled in order to be shared with others – i.e. communicated. Therefore the preschool context is an important platform for both learning and language development.

Second, language skills are enhanced by being practiced, the more active language user the child is, the more feedback he/she will get. The more you can express verbally, the more there will be for the pedagogues as well as for the play mates to answer and relate to as well as to expand. Children who are passive conversationalists will therefore be engaged in less verbal interac-

tions. Thereby their language skills will be less enhanced. Here we come to a pedagogical dilemma: those who need to develop their language skills get *less* rather than *more* language enhancement. This dilemma is accentuated by large groups of children reducing the amount of dialogic interactions. Accordingly, strategies to stimulate children to become more active conversationalists – elicitation strategies – could be a way to increase the quantitative as well as qualitative input of language stimulation. From earlier research cited in this study, we know that it is not easy to make passive and taciturn children talk and participate in conversations: the harder you try the more silent the child tends to be.

## Discussion

The theoretical framework of this work relies on the fact that small children need to actively and functionally practice language skills in order to master and develop their language ability. However, verbal interaction in dialogues are neither easy to initiate - nor to maintain – resulting in less practice, and thereby limited progress in language development. Therefore small children need help to initiate verbal interaction, as well as continuous scaffolding from his/her conversational partner in order to further develop language skills (Wells, 1999/2004).

The question is how a conversational partner can offer an optimal support to the child to perform at his/her peak of language and communication performance. Such professional knowledge means not giving too much help, and not too little. This is something that requires awareness about how – and why - you act, as well as react, as you tend to do in social interactions. Professional behavior, e.g. elicitation strategies to make children actively participate in dialogues, is driven by your own awareness and skill as a conversational partner. Such awareness is something that can be studied, evaluated and furthermore taught – and learnt – and implemented by preschool teachers as well as parents (Bruce, Hansson & Nettelbladt, 2007). For these reasons it is easy to imagine how the outcome of this study can be applied or implemented by preschool teachers as well as parents. The importance of such awareness is useful regardless of context – it is something that has to do with style and behavior when interacting with children. This implies that the findings from this research have relevance and can be implemented in any preschool context as well as any family context of the children.

Developing language skills requires close connections between a semantic content, a language form and to share something with others in a func-

tional way. In case there is a learning outcome related to a specific content to consider, language and communication skills serve as learning tools, i.e. the generic skills that make all other learning possible. Furthermore, to be able to share or take part of a content, the topic, in a conversation is closely related to the motivation to communicate, which is the key to language development. The ability to relate to the child's focus, and to challenge the child to verbalize his/her findings and reflections, is a skill that can be taught and practiced. The condition is to become aware and pay attention to the reactions from the child in connection to your behavior.

To what extent findings from studies on children with a late language development can be applied on all children, i.e. children with typical language development, is a question that has to be addressed? Children with late language development represent an early stage of language development characterized by a need of contextual support as well as scaffolding. This means that the similarities between the population in this study and children with a typical language development are obvious and robust. This is particularly true for children under two years of age, i.e. children who still needs scaffolding in order to start and maintain a conversation with respect to both content (topic), language form and language use (Bloom & Lahey, 1978).

Another question has to do with progression of how you act professionally in order to challenge the language development of the child. The concept of the proximal zone of development (Vygotsky, 1986) is very useful. This means that the focus of interest as well as the actual language skill of the child serves as the starting point when initiating an interaction, such as a dialogue or a conversation. With a genuine interest for the intention and message of the child, as well as with knowledge of the child's actual language ability, you offer the child the scaffolding he/she needs in order to manage at his/her peak of capacity.

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