TALKING BEYOND THE HERE-AND-NOW: SINGAPOREAN PRESCHOOLERS’ USE OF DECONTEXTUALIZED LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Decontextualized oral language skills enable individuals to communicate clearly and explicitly with interlocutors who share limited background knowledge (Snow, 1991). It is a linguistic ability that is valued highly in formal education systems. Some researchers have argued that preschoolers’ ability to use decontextualized oral language can provide an indication of their potential success in school (Snow, Tabors, Nicolson, & Kurland, 1995). This chapter reports a study that examined decontextualized oral language skills of three preschoolers when performing two oral tasks in English – picture description and story narration. These skills are examined according to three criteria: grammatical accuracy, cohesion and coherence, and vocabulary. The study also explored whether oral interaction between parent and child during shared book reading was a factor in the children’s decontextualized language abilities. The results showed that the three children, who came from similar socio-economic and language backgrounds, had rather different abilities. Their acquisition of Standard English syntax was also observed to lag behind English children of a similar age-group in English monolingual contexts. The study gave some preliminary indications that parent-child oral interaction during shared book reading lacked the type of talk that could promote the development of decontextualized oral language in children. Furthermore, it was observed that all three parents used a non-standard variety of English when talking to their children. These results are discussed with
reference to the Singaporean context where preschool children usually have multiple caregivers and non-standard English is used frequently in many situations at home and even in schools.

INTRODUCTION

Where English is the medium of instruction, it is evident that children’s spoken English ability will have an effect on their academic performance. To be specific, however, it is the ability to use decontextualized language in English that may have a more significant effect on school achievements. Decontextualized language is language that makes reference to people, events and experiences that are not part of the immediate context of interaction (Gleason, 2001). In an early discussion of decontextualized language, Bernstein (1974) made a distinction between the elaborated code and the restricted code. Children who use the elaborated code produce a wide range of syntactical structures and they use vocabulary items that are accurate and appropriate. The result is that even listeners who do not share similar background or contextual knowledge will be able to understand what they are communicating. On the other hand, the restricted code is context-dependent. Children using the restricted code assume that their listener knows what they are talking about and the context they are referring to even though it may not be so. As a result their language is less precise and their meaning may be unclear to their listener.

Gleason (2001) argues that as children develop cognitively and socially, they will increasingly need to communicate information to people, such as peers and teachers,
who do not share similar background knowledge and experience about the topic. Most school tasks also require children to demonstrate these abilities, for example, describing what they do while on vacation or explaining why birds migrate. To be effective in their narrations and explanations, children have to use decontextualized language. Preschooler’s decontextualized language use is a precursor to the type of rich and precise code that children need in academic learning. Decontextualized oral language skills are therefore highly relevant for school performance. Snow and colleagues have found that preschool children who possessed good decontextualized language skills were the ones most likely to have good reading comprehension ability when they reached middle grades (Snow et al., 1989, 1995). They found moderate correlations between decontextualized oral language skills and reading scores in first and second grade, and argued that the correlations would become stronger as children proceeded to a higher grade when reading tasks focused more on higher levels of comprehension. They further argued that such skills would have a significant impact on children’s academic performance in general.

Children’s decontextualized language abilities clearly form an important part of their language development. Few studies, however, have been conducted in environments such as Singapore where the dominant school language may not be the home language and where, if the home and school languages are the same, there may be substantial differences in the variety (see Silver et al., this volume). In view of this, we examined three Singaporean preschoolers in order to gain some preliminary insights into their abilities to communicate meaning clearly and explicitly when performing two oral tasks in English. The study also explored whether the type of oral
interaction initiated by parents during shared storybook reading had any influence on the children’s abilities to use decontextualized oral language skills. Before going into details about our study, further explanations about the development of decontextualized oral language skills are in order.

DECONTEXTUALIZED ORAL LANGUAGE SKILLS

There are two main types of oral language skills that children develop before going to school. The first is contextualized oral language where what is being talked about is anchored in the here-and-now or the immediate context. Because listeners and speakers share a common understanding of what is being talked about, speakers can get by with using language that is less explicit. Contextualized oral language skills develop very early in a child’s life – from the time they make one- or two-word utterances. The second set of skills is decontextualized oral language, which is necessary for talking about people, events and experiences beyond the here-and-now, and where the speaker and the listener may share only limited background knowledge (Snow, 1991). According to Snow et al. (1995: 38) decontextualized spoken ability is characterized by three features of language use:

- procedures for making information explicit
- procedures for establishing cohesion in extended discourse
- sophisticated vocabulary.

Contextualized and decontextualized oral language skills are used for different purposes and the development of these skills may be uneven in the same speaker. According to Snow (1991), correlations between these two skills within a single
language (for example, English) may be low for some speakers while cross-language correlations (for example, English to French) are high. In other words, children who are competent users of contextualized oral language are not necessarily competent users of decontextualized oral language within a single language. On the other hand, if they demonstrate good decontextualized oral language abilities in one language, they will also show the same kinds of ability when using another language.

Children’s oral language abilities are heavily influenced by the type of language environments they experience at home. Beals and De Temple (1992) examined the language experiences of three-year-olds to identify the types of interactions and talk between them and their mothers. They found that young children’s decontextualized oral language developed when they were regularly engaged in producing and comprehending extended discourse (for example, explanations and personal narratives) and using language to create fantasy worlds. Dickson and Tabors (1991) found that certain kinds of conversational language experiences could support literacy-related language skills development for school. They argued that explanatory and narrative talks during mealtimes and book reading resembled the nature of classroom talk in many ways. Repeated reading of a storybook, in particular, ‘incorporates speculation and interpretation, requiring lengthier and more complex interjections, which are characteristics of non-immediate talk’ (p. 42). These experiences can enhance children’s vocabulary use and narrative skills. Kunalan (2000) found that children acquired new vocabulary from listening to stories. Their acquisition was facilitated by adults explaining unfamiliar words during the reading. The study, however, did not examine the development of decontextualized oral language.
Narratives have an internal structure known commonly as story grammar. Trabasso (1989) claims that the structure of children’s narratives is affected by their social knowledge. This is developed when children are provided sufficient input from which to draw inferences about various story components. The effects of repeated readings were examined in Bungar’s (2002) study involving children with intellectual disabilities in Singapore. The purpose of the study was to determine whether repeated readings of the same stories would increase the children’s expressive skills (measured by Mean Length of Utterance) and understanding of the story structure (assessed by oral retelling). Results showed children were able to retell stories with story grammar elements, consisting of setting, problem and resolution. There was however only a low correlation between their abilities to structure narratives and expressive skills. Hayes et al. (1998) found that narratives of underachieving gifted students were shorter, had less internal organisation and cohesion, and contained fewer story grammar components and less sentence complexity as compared with their high-achieving gifted counterparts.

In a major study on children’s decontextualized language, Snow et al. (1995) made use of several oral language tasks to assess the children’s language production. These included narrative production, picture description and word definition. The children’s abilities in the narrative task were assessed for the presence of story grammar and its syntactic complexity, while the description task was assessed on the length of the description, the presence of specificity markers (e.g. adjectives, verbs and prepositional phrases) and the inclusion of key theme words related to the picture. Definitions were graded as either formal or informal, indicated by the presence or
absence of a superordinate for the word being defined. The researchers found that children’s decontextualized oral language abilities developed over time (from kindergarten to Grade 1), and that decontextualized language skills, particularly giving formal definitions, correlated strongly with reading comprehension, vocabulary and emergent literacy scores, suggesting that oral language is a good predictor of schooling and literacy achievement.

THE STUDY

The study we are reporting here is a descriptive study of three six-year-old Chinese preschoolers’ decontextualized oral language. The children’s abilities were examined through two oral tasks – a picture description task and a story narration task which we have adapted from Snow et al. (1995). The study further explored whether the children’s abilities were influenced by their mothers’ language use during shared book reading. The following questions were addressed:

1. What are the similarities and differences in the children's abilities to use decontextualized oral language?

2. Are the children’s abilities influenced by their mothers’ language use during shared book reading?

Participants

To control for possible effects of language and social experiences, all three children were selected based on some common characteristics:
- Socio-economic status: They were from families with middle socio-economic status. One or both parents have an educational level that falls within one of the following: polytechnic, technical institute, ‘A’ level or pre-university.
- Age: The children were approximately six years three months old.
- Ethnic group: Chinese
- Dominant home language: English

One of the children (Child A) was a girl who was cared for by her grandmother. The other two were boys (B and C). They were each looked after by a foreign domestic helper. All of the mothers worked in jobs providing administrative and clerical support, and none of them were the child’s main caregivers. The mothers reported reading to their children at home but the frequency for each varied.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected separately for each child in their respective homes at a time convenient to the family. Three data collection methods were used: two oral elicitation tasks, observations of story reading sessions in the home, and parent interviews.

Elicitation tasks (picture description and narrative production)

In the picture description task, each child chose one picture from three options. The pictures depicted different but familiar topics (the beach, the zoo and pets) and had interesting details to ensure opportunities for specificity and explicitness’ in oral production. For the narrative production task, each child was given three pictures sets
to choose from. Each set consisted of a sequence of four pictures depicting different plots (a boy is rescued after he falls into a river, a little girl’s hat is retrieved by a monkey, a boy who eats too many sweets ends up at the dentist’s surgery). Each child chose one set and looked at it for as long as he/she wanted. Before beginning the story, the child was asked to put the picture down. This was to prevent the child from merely describing the pictures instead of narrating the story. If a child paused for more than five seconds, simple prompts such as ‘What happens next?’ or ‘Is that all?’ were used. In both tasks, the children were told not to reveal their selected pictures to the interviewer. This resulted in two oral tasks per child, six oral tasks in all for analysis.

The children’s oral productions were recorded, transcribed and coded for the features of decontextualized oral language. Table 1 shows the features for analysis. There are some overlaps in the linguistic criteria set out. For example, the use of appropriate and precise vocabulary can contribute to the overall explicitness of the information. We have decided, however, to follow Snow et al. (1995) to focus on grammar and vocabulary separately. Transcripts are given in Appendix A.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of decontextualized language</th>
<th>Specific linguistic features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Ability to make information linguistically explicit</td>
<td>• Length (number of words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Simple sentence structure (SVO/SVC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Evidence of coordination, subordination and embedding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The children’s decontextualized language abilities are described and compared based on the three broad features shown in Table 1. Both transcripts from one child (Child A) were coded by the second author and an independent coder to establish inter-rater agreement. The second author coded the other four transcripts independently while selected excerpts of the transcripts were then coded by the first author.

**Observation (Shared book reading)**

The children and their mothers were asked to carry out a shared book reading session. *Princess Smartypants* by Cole (2000) was selected because of its interesting plot. More importantly, none of the children was familiar with the story and this would minimize the effects of shared prior knowledge on the oral interaction. The mothers read the story twice and interacted with the children as they normally would when reading to them. Our purpose was to find out whether the mother used the type of discourse which researchers argued would encourage the development of decontextualized oral language in children (De Temple & Beals, 1991). The recordings of each shared book reading activity were transcribed and coded for
interactional strategies and features of decontextualized oral language use (see Table 2). All the transcripts were coded by the second author and an independent coder to establish inter-rater reliability. The coded transcripts were further checked by the first author.

**TABLE 2**
Interaction strategies and decontextualized language use during shared book reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interactional strategies</th>
<th>Decontextualized language use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Repetition</td>
<td>Explanatory talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recast</td>
<td>Non-immediate utterances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension check</td>
<td>New and appropriate (‘rare’) words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmation check</td>
<td>Metaphorical language (e.g. idioms, similes, figurative language)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarification request</td>
<td>Language in fantasy or pretend play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correcting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prompting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing attention to illustrations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making information explicit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews involving one or both parents were conducted to gather information on their children’s home and language environments. More specifically, the interviews focused on (a) family members, (b) hobbies and reading habits, (c) the frequency and nature of the activities parents and children engaged in together, (d) the kinds of activities the children were involved in with others living in the same household, (e) family activities such as games and play activities during weekdays and weekends, and (f) parental support and expectations of the children. Each interview lasted about one hour.
RESULTS

Making information linguistically explicit

The children’s oral language was first observed for the length of their output. The longest output was not necessarily the most explicit because it might have contained repetitions which would affect the clarity of the discourse. On the other hand, short output might suggest that some important details have been left out. The output was then analysed for syntactic features, such as basic sentence structures as well as grammatical complexity as evidenced by coordination, subordination and clausal embeddings. See Table 3. This part of the analysis proved to be a challenge because the children produced structures that did not conform to the syntactic patterns of Standard English and yet served similar functions in the colloquial variety of English in Singapore. For the purpose of the analysis the following decisions were taken: (1) As the use of coordinating conjunctions allows for the ellipsis of subjects, an utterance with only the verb and an object was counted as a token of SV(O). The use of ‘got’ in non-standard Singapore English has similar functions to sentences that include ‘has/ have’ or structures beginning with ‘There is/ are’. Such utterances were also coded as SV (O). Morphological inaccuracies (e.g. the absence of inflections) are ignored.

Child A’s use of coordinators were confined to ‘and’ and ‘then’. Child B also used these two coordinators frequently, but at the same time included a few subordinators such as ‘after’ mainly to indicate time sequence. Child C had the lowest word count for his oral tasks and the fewest SV(O) constructions. There was only one instance of coordination in which the conjunction ‘and’ was used. As shown in Table 3, all three
children constructed a substantial number of SV(O) sentences. This is perhaps not surprising, as the children focused a great deal on talking about action in the pictures and narratives. What were lacking were SV(C) constructions, which are necessary for explaining the states of objects and people. No clausal embeddings were found. In all, Child B was the one with the longest productions in both tasks and the highest number of sentences with coordination. His utterances, however, did not conform to Standard English syntax most of the time. He also had problems with the inflections of verbs, indicating inadequate morphological development or the acquisition of non-standard English grammar from his environment.

**Examples of SV(O) structures**

1. I see somebody reading a book (Child A)
2. Then some people also make some sandcastle. (Child B)
3. One man saved him (Child C)

**Examples of coordination**

4. I saw a people with a sunglass… and there are umbrellas. (Child A)
5. Then got people er…sit…sit on er…the chair there and read book. (Child B)
6. The boy kicked a ball… and he fell down in the water. (Child C)

**TABLE 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key syntactic features and their frequency of occurrence in two oral language tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length (Total word count, excluding hesitation marker ‘er’*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of SV(O) utterances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embedding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Establishing coherence and cohesion

Children who are competent users of decontextualized oral language are not only able to express units of information clearly, but to express all of them in a coherent manner. Coherence refers to a consistency of topic and completeness of information. This is realized by a variety of linguistic means including the use of cohesive devices that utilize both the lexis and grammar of the language. When using decontextualized oral language effectively, children make use of these devices to establish clear relationships among their utterances so that the spoken texts ‘hang together’. In examining the oral productions of these three children, we found only three types of cohesive devices: linking adverbials (after that, then, so), pronoun references, and use of determiners (articles). The use of each is shown in Table 4.

**TABLE 4**
Features and frequency of occurrence of cohesion and coherence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linking adverbials</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>references</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronouns</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determiners (articles)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples of linking adverbials

7. I saw a boy taking a sweet. Then he take the sweet and eat. After that, he had a toothache. (Child A)

8. People also got er…chairs…so that they all put over there and they read book or put the what spectacles…very dark. (Child B)
Examples of references

9. I see a mat. … I saw people lying on the mat. (Child A)

10. One day hor…got one…a girl hor…she got wear one purple hat. (Child B)

11. A hippopotamus is opening his mouth. (Child C)

The children also used elements of story grammar, although Child A’s story grammar was less complete than the other two (Table 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 5</th>
<th>Story grammar structure in the children’s narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complication</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct consequence</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Child A used several linking adverbials and references appropriately in her oral productions even though they were short. Pronouns and determiners were used appropriately on the whole to refer to the character and event anaphorically. Nevertheless, she organized her narrative using a typical story grammar structure which consists of an orientation, a complication, followed by a resolution. Child B used the greatest number of linking adverbials and references. He also used the definite article ‘the’ more frequently and was able to use it appropriately most of the time. This demonstrates that he was establishing links to actions and characters already mentioned. In terms of story grammar, Child B’s narrative had all four key components. He also established the context of the story, the orientation, by saying ‘Here is a beach’. Neither of the other two children did this. Child C’s discourse had
the fewest cohesive devices and he did not use them in places where they were mandatory, such as when referring to the tiger and the giraffe in the pictures (e.g. ‘I see a tiger… A tiger have a long tail’). His narrative was also the shortest, consisting of four short clauses. For Child C, each clause could be said to represent one component of the story grammar; however, there was no attempt to include further details of the narrative. None of the children used any hyponyms, synonyms or antonyms to establish lexical cohesion.

**Using appropriate vocabulary**

For this feature of decontextualized language, we examined the children’s use of words or phrases to denote spatial, temporal and physical relationships as markers of specificity. In addition, for picture descriptions, we identified appropriate vocabulary items that were related to the topic and theme in the pictures. These words signified both tangible objects as well as intangible concepts shown. We also looked for uses of figurative language and other sophisticated vocabulary items but none was found. The results are summarized in Table 6.

**TABLE 6**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vocabulary features and frequency of occurrence</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spatial Relations (Deictic terms and prepositions)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal Relations (Words for sequencing, showing duration and simultaneous actions)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Relations (Words for pre- or post-modifying noun groups)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic/topical words</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Examples of words expressing spatial relations

12. I saw a float on the sand. (Child A)
13. Then some people make a castle inside. (Child B)
14. …and he fell down into the water. (Child C)

Examples of words expressing temporal relations

15. After that, he has a toothache. (Child A)
16. After that, hor, got one elephant. (Child B)

Examples of words expressing physical relations

17. It was a windy day. (Child A)
18. …but the elephant’s trunk not long enough … (Child B)
19. The elephant have a big butt. (Child C)

Examples of thematic/topical words

20. It’s a windy day. (Child A)
21. Here is a beach. (Child B)
22. I can see a tiger. (Child C)

At first glance, Child B appeared to use more words to show the widest range of semantic relationships, especially in the picture description task. In fact, he repeated some of the information and he also used the phrase ‘over there’ quite frequently as a strategy to talk about objects and people in relation to one another on the picture. So even though he used markers to indicate spatial relationships, these did not increase the preciseness of his description. To show temporal relations between the events,
Child A and Child B used mainly ‘after that’ Child C, however, did not use any temporal terms even when he was narrating the story. Words for showing physical relationships such as size and length were used by Child B and Child C, but not Child A. All three children, nevertheless, used an equal number of thematic/topical words, suggesting that they had acquired a fairly large vocabulary which they were able to use to talk about the pictures. All three children’s use of language was, however, limited to the literal level. None of them used figurative language such as similes for purposes of comparisons and descriptions.

**Discussion**

In order to convey information and meaning of a topic explicitly, children need to have at least acquired the relevant vocabulary, an awareness of the listeners’ perspectives, and control over relevant structure and forms of the English language. In other words, decontextualized language use is contingent upon satisfactory language development. With respect to story narration and picture description, children need to use words for connecting ideas and referring to concrete and abstract concepts. They also need to use accurate grammar to express precise meaning and have linguistic devices for structuring a narrative. Bennett-Kaster (1986) and Scott (1988) noted that ‘and’ is the dominant connector of clauses found in the narratives of five-year-olds and school-age children; it can be used five to twenty times as frequently as the next most common conjunction in a child’s repertoire. This was true of all the three children in the study, and most notable in Child B’s productions. Compared to the other two children, he conveyed more information by connecting meaning units with
‘and’. The relations between the clauses, expressed in the forms of clause + coordinator (and) + clause have additive, causal, or contrastive functions in children’s speech (Owens, 2001). A child is normally able to express a contrasting relationship with the use of ‘but’ only after he/she has acquired the use of ‘and’. Apart from Child B who used ‘but’ in his speech, the other two children used only ‘and’ to show additive, causal and contrastive functions. As a result, their meaning was less precise.

In storytelling, narrators first need to create a common context with the listeners. They also have to adhere to accepted conventions of story grammar so that the relationships between events are presented in a predictable manner. Child B used the formulaic phrase ‘One day’ to mark the beginning of his story before introducing the main character and ended with the word ‘Finished’. He also attempted to show how one event is influenced by another through the use of ‘so’. In contrast, both Child A and Child C were less explicit in orientating their listeners to the stories. Child A, nevertheless, made a good attempt at sequencing her events in a chronological manner while Child C’s narrative was on the whole inadequate. Kemper and Edwards (1986) noted that children at the age of six were generally able to produce narratives that were causally coherent. Child A and Child C in the study, however, did not demonstrate that ability. They also left out internal responses or reactions of the characters in their stories, suggesting that they constructed and understood the stories at a literal level with regard to character, action and events. There were no speculations about causes, motives, thoughts and actions. Research has shown that children’s ability to do this may be influenced by their language experiences during shared book reading with adults (Beals, 2001). Of particular significance is adults’ use of non-immediate utterances to explore ideas beyond the literal contents in the story,
including character’s motive, feelings, values and reactions. This type of talk helps children enjoy the story as well as develop deeper and more abstract ways of thinking about the stories and the world around them. It also helps children acquire language for talking about ideas that are beyond the here-and-now. We will now turn to this issue by presenting and discussing our observations from the mother-child shared book reading sessions conducted.

INFLUENCES ON DECONTEXTUALIZED ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Many studies in child language acquisition have shown that mothers and caregivers play an important role in influencing their children’s use of language. In particular, there is a strong relationship between mothers’ use of non-immediate talk and children’s increased linguistic capabilities in producing such utterances (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). To explore whether such a relationship existed in the language capabilities of our child participants, observations of mother-child interactions during shared book reading were conducted. We first summarize some key features of the interactions (e.g. mothers’ use of comments and questions, children’s responses, amount of talk). We then analyze non-immediate talk within the story reading sessions in more detail.
Summary of story reading interactions

1. The mothers of Child A and Child B began by reading the title of the book, while Child C’s mother began to read without referring to the title. None of the mothers paid any attention to details such as the author and the illustrator.

2. All three mothers directed the activity by providing both comments and questions. The children responded to their mothers’ questions but offered few comments and questions unprompted.

3. Most of the mothers’ comments and questions focused on the immediate context. The focus was often on the illustrations or words that the mothers felt their children might not have understood.

4. The children were actively involved in the activity through dramatisation, word recognition and even counting.

5. In reading 1 and reading 2, the mothers’ talk strategies were mainly communication-oriented, for example, using comprehension checks, prompting and repetition. While the mothers attempted to explain unfamiliar words, there were few instances of non-immediate talk which required the use of decontextualized language and encouraged more abstract thinking. (The use of non-immediate utterances is illustrated below)

Non-immediate utterances

During story reading all three mothers were mainly concerned with whether or not their children had understood the story (and particularly unfamiliar words). Non-immediate talk was, on the whole, rare in all three mothers’ speech. See Table 7
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Readings</th>
<th>A 1st</th>
<th>A 2nd</th>
<th>B 1st</th>
<th>B 2nd</th>
<th>C 1st</th>
<th>C 2nd</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-immediate utterances</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Nevertheless, in the case of Child A’s mother there were a few attempts at non-immediate talk where she invited A to explain and evaluate some parts of the story.

**Example 23**

Mother  None of the princes could accomplish the task… he set... he was set. They all left in disgrace. ‘That’s that then’, said Smartypants, thinking she was safe. See, nobody passed the test.

Then what happen?

Child   [Giggled] Hmm… then nobody… then nobody married her.

**Example 24**

Mother  So, she give him a magic kiss… See, she give him a magic kiss.

Child   --Why?

Mother  Because he can do … everything other people cannot do.

Mother A also made a further attempt at the end of the story by inviting her child to evaluate the rather untypical ending of the story. When Child A did not respond in the way she had hoped, she checked her understanding. She did not, however, take that further to highlight the fact that in most fairy tales, it was the norm for a princess to
marry a prince and live happily ever after. This would have been a useful opportunity for extended talk on an abstract topic.

**Example 25**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>How she lived happily ever after? She didn’t marry anybody.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>Yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>She lives with all – her?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>Pets.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Yeah…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was not possible to establish a direct relationship between a mother’s use of non-immediate talk and the child’s decontextualized language abilities. Child A’s mother used the most non-immediate talk, but Child A’s narratives and descriptions were shorter and less detailed than Child B’s. Child B’s mother engaged him only once in non-immediate talk but his narratives were more detailed. The mother-child oral interaction which most strongly suggested a link was between Child C and his mother. During the first reading, C’s mother read the story continuously without stopping to check his understanding. Nevertheless, during the second reading she did pause to check C’s comprehension. She also explained some parts of the story to him. While she was reading, C followed the words that his mother was reading, and at times glanced at the illustrations drawn. His mother, however, did not draw C’s attention to any of the colourful illustrations at all, and C probably had no time to relate the illustrations to the text by himself.
In sum, the children’s decontextualized oral language use did not appear to be related to the mothers’ use or lack of use of such type during shared book reading. An explanation for this is that the linguistic environment that many Singaporean children are in differs somewhat from other contexts in which the children’s abilities are correlated with their mothers’ language use. In Singapore, children’s main caregivers and conversational partners during the day are often not mothers, but grandparents, siblings, foreign domestic helpers or childminders in day care centres. Thus, the language use of these caregivers may have a greater influence on young children than that of the mothers’. The parental interviews indicated that the parents were not the primary caregivers in most parts of the week.

Although the parents initially reported that they read to their children, the interview subsequently revealed that this was not done frequently. The parents all felt that the children were old enough to read independently, as they were already attending kindergarten where teachers placed an emphasis on teaching children early reading skills. Child B, however, had an older sister who enjoyed reading aloud, and whenever she did, B would sit beside her and listen to the story. He also spent a great deal of time with his family on the weekends when they went on frequent outings. In the evenings, B often had conversations with his parents about the events of the day in school and at home. These frequent conversations about non-immediate topics could have had an influence on B’s ability to explain, elaborate and speculate. Moreover, B also had many people he could talk to since age two where he was enrolled in a nursery programme. He also spent a lot of time playing with his siblings and talking with grandparents. The broadening of a child’s schemata through wide ranging
activities and exposure can provide opportunities for the development of decontextualized talk, as these events require explanation, description and narration (Beals & De Temple, 1992).

Child A did not see her working parents much in the day. She was cared for by her grandmother who spoke little English, but she also had a brother to converse with. Her parents did take her to the library frequently and this has cultivated an interest in reading. Child C’s parents rarely took him to the library; instead they bought him many storybooks. Although he had many books, C expressed that he had no interest in reading and would prefer to watch television programmes. He was mostly left in the care of a foreign domestic helper who did not speak very much English. As he was the only child, he did not have other conversation partners except on weekends where he could interact with his cousins and grandparents. There was no evidence that he had experienced rich language use during shared reading with adults or in other situations, such as mealtimes. It was also clear from the observation sessions that his mother was not familiar with reading with him. The lack of a rich linguistic environment could partially account for his inability to communicate clearly in English in the two oral tasks.

One final but important observation concerns the use of non-standard colloquial English by all the mothers during the story reading sessions. For example:

Example 26
Mother A: Mrs! Wanted her to be their Mrs. That means what? To be their… what?
Example 27
Mother B: Wah… This one hor… eat and eat and eat… until the whole garden… gone! Hor?

Example 28
Mother C: Tell mummy which prince? Tell mummy… Swan what?

Throughout the interviews and story reading sessions, it was clear that the parents did not speak Standard English consistently. This to a large extent might account for the many non-standard features in the children’s oral productions. This was particularly true for Child B. He had the most extended oral productions, as well as the greatest linguistic complexity and the most complete story grammar. His speech, however, displayed many features of his non-standard English:

(i) the use of ‘got’ in place of ‘there is/are’ or ‘have/have’ depending on the context of use (‘got some radio over there’, ‘we got been before’)
(ii) the use of pragmatic particles (‘hor’)
(iii) copular verb deletion (‘the elephant’s trunk not long enough’)
(iv) object deletion (‘the wind blow away to one tall tree’) where the object ‘the hat’ was omitted
(v) problems with subject-verb agreement (‘the monkey go and take’).

The language of Child A and Child B also demonstrated non-standard grammatical features. Although there were fewer instances in their speech, these features could
have been less conspicuous because both children produced much shorter narratives and descriptions as compared to Child B.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The aim of our study was to examine the decontextualized oral language abilities of three preschool children in Singapore. The results showed all three children to have differing abilities. On the whole, two of the children demonstrated some decontextualized abilities that could help them to succeed in school. One of the children, however, clearly lacked the ability to elaborate and communicate information clearly to his listeners who did not share the same background knowledge as him. We also concluded that while two of these children are able to communicate novel information to listeners ‘at a distance’, one of them did this mainly by speaking the non-standard colloquial variety of English. This was most obvious in the child who produced the longest texts in each task. In other words, this child’s ability to talk beyond the here-and-now was acceptable only in the local sociolinguistic context in which his interlocutors understand the non-standard variety he speaks. A crucial question therefore is whether or not he would be intelligible to a non-Singaporean listener who does not speak that variety. While the children’s use of the localized variety seemed to be influenced by parental language use, their ability to use decontextualized oral language was not always directly influenced by shared book reading with their mothers. Given the situation of multiple-caregivers in many Singaporean families, this will not come as a surprise but rather confirms informal observations about the influence of this diverse linguistic environment on a child’s
language development in Singapore. It is recommended that future studies focus on the language use of caregivers other than the parents. Our study examined mother-child interaction based on previous research practices, but clearly given the complex care-giving situation Singapore, data collected from diverse sources will be able to shed more light on the interplay of different environmental and linguistic factors on a child’s English language development. Furthermore, there is a need to gather more data on caregiver-child interaction so that stronger claims can be made about its relationship to language development. A limitation of our present study is the limited amount of data collected from the shared-book reading between mother and child.

The results of this study have directed our attention to two issues about decontextualized oral language abilities in preschool children in Singapore. If Singapore preschoolers enter primary school with minimal decontextualized oral ability, as was the case with Child C, will they be disadvantaged in their academic learning? Research on preschoolers’ decontextualized oral language use in the United States suggests that it is a predictor of academic success. There are good reasons to believe this is also the case in Singapore, especially when we consider the types of tasks that school pupils are expected to carry out. In primary schools in Singapore, children are expected to be clear and explicit regardless of whether they are doing a show-and-tell, giving a presentation, or writing a picture composition. Furthermore, if we accept the arguments that support oral skills as a basis for literacy, we may begin to understand why some primary pupils in Singapore produce written pieces that are short and inadequate both in terms of content and language. Wee (2003) who examined Singaporean children’s grammar and writing reported that many of them
had problems with elaboration. As a result, they produced ‘minimal’ writing. Since oral language development is closely associated with literacy (Grainger, 2004), children who cannot elaborate and make their meaning explicit in speech (such as Child A and Child C) might also produce writing that is short and inexplicit. They might experience educational setbacks if they do receive support in developing decontextualized oral language in lower primary.

The second issue concerns the acceptability of a non-standard English variety in school communication. Children in Singapore live in diverse linguistic backgrounds. They are typically bilingual, if not trilingual. The three children in this study were from English-speaking families, but the English spoken at home is not the standard variety which is expected at school. There may also be some influence of other languages spoken within the same domains. As suggested by Gupta (1994: 5), the kind of English, which the English-speaking parents of Singapore have supplied to their children, is a variety known as Singapore Colloquial English [SCE] or Singlish. This variety is different from Standard English (Lim, 2004). If children have basic decontextualized language ability but can function only in a non-standard English variety, as was the case with Child B, will they be disadvantaged in their academic learning? Research on children in other countries seem to suggest that children who speak a non-standard variety are often perceived as less intelligent by their teachers who speak only the standard variety (Haig & Oliver, 2003) and this may be an obstacle to many children receiving equal opportunities in education (Corson, 2001). If Child B continued to speak this variety when performing academic tasks in his primary school, would his teachers accept it? Gupta (1994) for example has also
argued that teachers should focus on the content of children’s responses rather than the form. This argument is based on the assumption that all teachers in Singapore speak a variety of Standard English when they teach and interact with their pupils. However, as Doyle (this volume) observes from a large corpus of classroom talk, some teachers in fact use the colloquial variety themselves when interacting with pupils in the classroom. (See also, Foley, 1998).

What will be the impact of such language practices on Singapore children’s academic learning and English language development? It is our view that while some teachers may be prepared to accept a non-standard variety of English when pupils are talking or when they talk to pupils, they would be less accepting of it when written work is involved. Given the close link between oracy and literacy, it is not surprising that many teachers complain that their pupils use non-standard English when writing their compositions, and the common refrain that many pupils ‘write like the way they talk’. What this means is that there should be a strong emphasis on the teaching of standard spoken English in Singapore schools from Primary 1. Pupils who are ‘fluent’ in English may only be fluent in a non-standard English variety. Only a concerted effort in helping them develop Standard English usage in speech can prepare them to function fully and effectively in all aspects of academic learning.

REFERENCES


Appendix A

1) Picture Description

Child A
People playing a ball. Three children playing sandcastle… (Where is that place?) A beach… I see somebody reading a book. I see a mat. A cloud. It’s a windy day. I saw a float on the sand. I saw people lying on the mat. I saw a people with a sunglass…and there are umbrellas. No more. (Total: 54 words)

Child B
Here is a beach. Then some people make a castle inside and got umbrella, Then hor, got some starfish on the sand. People see then they still make the sandcastle. Got some radio over there and people sit down and they all got some er…chair over there. Then got people er…sit…sit on er…the chair there and read book. Some people went to the swimming pool there swimming, some people also got play some ball. Then some people also make some sandcastle. People also got er…chairs…so that they all put over there and they read book or put the what spectacles? Very dark. Then also got trees over there. Got wind. Then some wind blow on the trees but the trees never fall down. (Total: 125 words)

Child C
I can see a tiger, giraffe, a snake, a monkey… [Giggled] The elephant have a big butt. A giraffe have a long neck. A tiger have a long tail . (What is this place?) In the forest. Got one people. One sign. A seal playing a ball. A hippopotamus is opening his mouth…yawning (Is this a forest) A zoo? Er…no no… a forest. (Total: 53 words)
2) Narrative Production

Child A
I saw a boy taking a sweet. Then he take the sweet and eat. After that, he has a toothache. After that, he went to the dentist. And the doctor take out one teeth. Then the boy went home. (Total: 39 words)

Child B
One day hor…one day hor…got one.. a girl hor she got wear one purple hat… then suddenly the wind blow away to one tall tree…so the elephant.. After that, hor, got one elephant… but the elephant’s trunk not long enough, then she asked the monkey. Then the monkey go and take. Then hor she asked the monkey take her hat so the monkey climbed on the tree to take her hat for her. Then after that she said, ‘Thank you’. Finished. (Total: 84 words)

Child C
The boy kicked a ball and he fell down into the water er…Into the water…erm……one man saved him……and people clapped… (Total: 22 words)