Supporting Socio-Dramatic Play in Preschools to Promote Shanghainese Development in Young Children

Yan-Yan LI
Shanghai Normal University, Tianhua College, Shanghai, China
leeyeanyean@126.com

Keywords: Socio-dramatic Play, Preschools, Shanghainese Development.

Abstract. Studies show that preschool children engaged in socio-dramatic play exhibit greater competence and interest in language development. Socio-dramatic play is utilized to maintain and develop Shanghainese in Shanghai preschools regarding Shanghainese teaching program. The purpose of this article is to examine preschool teachers’ use of socio-dramatic play in Shanghainese teaching program and to share recommendations for supporting Shanghainese development through socio-dramatic play as well.

Introduction

Shanghainese is being used less by the youth of Shanghai. It is becoming a vulnerable dialect in China. Shanghainese refers to a dialect spoken in Shanghai, which is called Huyu. The Shanghai government officially issued a paper on Shanghainese teaching program in Shanghai preschools in May, 2013 as a way of maintaining and developing Shanghainese. As a result, 20 public preschools were selected to start the program on a trial basis in September, 2014.

Learning happens through play. Hyvonen[1] stated that play is a favorable and great tool in early childhood education, and suggested strategies that are helpful for designing effective playful learning processes, so as to create a pleasant learning environment. Socio-dramatic play happens often in the preschool years, influences children’s behavior to a greater extent and promotes children’s language development during this period[2]. Six characteristics defines socio-dramatic play[3]: (1) make-believing that involves objects (2) assuming a make-believe that involves roles; (3) make-believing that involves situations; (4) continuing the play even with challenges; (5) using language to communicate the context of play; and (6) interacting socially while playing.

The last two characteristics are closely connected with interaction and communication which make socio-dramatic play different from simple dramatic play. Socio-dramatic play drives children’s development in social-emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development domains, and grants children to perform at their top level of capability[4]. Socio-dramatic play provides a valuable and delightful context for young children to develop language.

For the sake of promoting Shanghainese teaching program in preschools, socio-dramatic play functioned as a primary mean to teach children Shanghainese. The purpose of this article is to examine preschool teachers’ use of socio-dramatic play in Shanghainese teaching program and to share recommendations for supporting Shanghainese development through socio-dramatic play as well.

Methods

Case study seemed to be the best choice for making a holistic study. In terms of sampling selection procedures, I employed a purposeful sampling strategy to identify Preschool Qing in the 20 selected public preschools which were on a trial basis of Shanghainese teaching program in Shanghai to conduct my study. Preschool Qing already set up socio-dramatic play area for teaching Shanghainese. There are three grades in Preschool Qing. The third grade preschoolers are older, and Shanghainese development may be reflected more through socio-dramatic play activities on those third graders in the Preschool Qing. There are two or three classes in each grade in the Preschool
Qing. The principal Wen in Preschool Qing recommended one third grader class Seashell class. Thus, I used purposeful sampling strategy to identify Seashell class from Preschool Qing to highlight the normal preschool teachers’ use of socio-dramatic play in Shanghainese teaching program. It is norm for two teachers to be responsible for each class. As a result, Principal Wen and two teachers (Teacher Xu and Teacher Cao) were involved into this study. They were interviewed separately. Sources of data include observations, audio-recorded interviews, and documents.

Results

Preschool Qing focuses on the development of basic mathematical skills. Principal Wen is in charge of Shanghainese teaching program. There are 45 teachers and 560 children in Preschool Qing. Teachers are all native Shanghainese. The majority of children are also native Shanghainese. Of these children, 78% have parents who are both native Shanghainese, 11% have one native parent, and 11% have parents who are both New Shanghainese (Figure 1). New Shanghainese refer to the immigrants who moved to Shanghai from other areas of China.

![Figure 1. Dialect Background of Parents in Preschool Qing.](image1)

Teacher Xu and Teacher Cao are responsible for the Seashell class. The Seashell class is composed of 32 children, 15 girls and 17 boys. Of these children, 59% have parents who are both native Shanghainese, 28% have one native parent, and 13% have parents who are New Shanghainese (Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Dialect Background of Parents in Seashell Class.](image2)

At the start of Shanghainese teaching program, Preschool Qing set up Old Shanghai street in Xiao’an Square to develop socio-dramatic play. As Principal Wen stated, “Old Shanghai Street aimed at creating a natural learning environment where the children communicated with each other in Shanghainese naturally and experience Shanghai culture.” Generally speaking, Shanghainese was the only language being used during the socio-dramatic play at Old Shanghai Street. Socio-dramatic play in Shanghainese (30 minutes) occurred once a week. By conducting data analysis, teachers’
use of socio-dramatic play in Shanghainese in Preschool Qing demonstrated the themes of learning environment setup, teachers’ preparing children before the start, and Shanghai culture.

Respecting learning environment setup, some symbolic settings representing Old Shanghai were displayed at Old Shanghai Street. There was Nanjing Barbershop, a grocery store, rickshaws, Wangkai Photo Shop, Huifeng Bank, Seventy Two Lodgers (a hotel), shoe polishers, knife and scissors sharpeners, and a snack shop. Nanjing Barbershop was set with shampoo, a stand for shaving razors, a uniform, and more. The grocery store was set up with soap, coarse paper, matches, oil, salt, salted sauce, vinegar, and uniforms, etc. There were two rickshaws, together with tables, desks and uniforms. Wangkai Photo Shop was set up with one old-fashioned camera, background frames for taking pictures, some Chi-pao (ladies’ Chinese long gowns), backpacks, pens, paper, a camera stand, uniforms, etc. Huifeng Bank was set with some play currency. Seventy Two Lodgers was a two-story Shikumen (a style of building in Shanghai, which blended features of east and west). In the downstairs kitchen, there was a coal ball stove, a fire poker, coal, a fan, a kettle and cooking pots. There was a sink, a washboard for washing clothes, a soap box, a spittoon, and a brush in one place in the bathroom. There was a dresser and a recorder in another place in the bathroom. Upstairs, there was a broom, a mop, a cotton fluffer, a vine fan and a bed. Shoes Polishing was set with some leather shoes, a stand for placing shoes on, a wiping cloth, shoe polish and uniforms. Sharpened knives were set with a stand for placing knives on, some knives and scissors, and uniforms. A snacks shop was set with toy pancakes, deep-fried dough stickers, wonton, glutinous rice rolls, and uniforms.

From my observation, four girls were playing at Wangkai Photo Shop. Two were wearing chi-paos and pretending to be customers and the other two were wearing hats and pretending to be photographers.

Photographer A (in a red and white plaid hat): “Miss, ready, I will press the button.”
Photographer B (in a black and white plaid hat): “Say cheese! Raise your arm a little bit.”
Customer A (in white chi-pao): “Ok? My smile is almost stuck!”
Customer B (in red chi-pao): “Let’s change to another pose.”
Photographer B: “Hold on! Closer! Go!”
Photographer A: “Ready! One, two, three, follow me, say ‘cheese’.”

The “Photographers” were using competent Shanghainese that seemed to flow naturally. The two “customers” could not speak Shanghainese well, but their facial expressions helped them to communicate; for example, they demonstrated impatience with their facial expressions when waiting to take pictures.

Respecting teachers’ preparing children before the start, appropriate introduction of background knowledge is crucial in the socio-dramatic play. From my observations, Teacher Cao started the game with free talk, discussing the lives of the people living in the Old Shanghai. As the teachers stated, people living in Old Shanghai are different from the people living in New Shanghai concerning the way of speaking and behavior. For example, when girls were dressed up with chi-pao, girls should slow down the pace of walking and speaking. Also Shanghainese is featured with a special tone when crying out for selling product.

For example, a girl was dressed up to be a shop assistant in the Snack Shop. She was selling pancakes to passers-by in Shanghainese. At this time, Teacher Cao pretended to be a passer-by:
Shop Assistant: “Breakfast, pancake, deep-fried dough sticker and glutinous rice roll. Were you to buy it today, you would want it tomorrow.”
Teacher Cao: “How much for one deep-fried dough sticker?”
Shop Assistant: Two yuan.
Teacher Cao paid and the shop assistant asked: “Any pancakes?”
Teacher Cao thought for a little while, and said: “Ok, one.”
The shop assistant wrapped a pancake with oil-paper skillfully and handed it to teacher Cao. Teacher Cao paid one yuan.
The “shop assistant” was crying that her pancakes were for sale by imitating the cry that a real shop assistant in Old Shanghai would do. She did a nice job!
Respecting Shanghai culture, socio-dramatic play provided the children with a specific context to speak and learn Shanghainese. More than that, the children experienced Shanghai culture. As the principal Wen stated:

Shanghainese development is not only about learning some words, but also about experiencing Shanghai culture. The children played the socio-dramatic play on the street of Old Shanghai and experienced the glamour of Shanghainese and Shanghai culture at the same time, which may leave some trace on children’s minds.

Some research shows that learning language and culture together is a shortcut to master a language. Socio-dramatic play on Old Shanghai Street is one way to learn Shanghai culture. By learning more about Shanghai culture, the children get to know more about Shanghai, become familiar with and appreciate its history, and become proud of being a part of Shanghai. More importantly, the children are more likely to speak Shanghainese. Old Shanghai Street creates a favorable environment for the children to learn Shanghainese with more interactions with others and teachers and to gain Shanghai cultural experiences.

In summary, Preschool Qing set up a socio-dramatic play environment, teachers prepared children before the start of the socio-dramatic play on Old Shanghai Street, and socio-dramatic play brought in Shanghai culture aspect. To a certain extent, socio-dramatic play on Old Shanghai Street proved its effectiveness in promoting Shanghainese development in young children.

Conclusion

With regard to socio-dramatic play, Preschool Qing has formed some good practices to spur Shanghainese development in young children. Socio-dramatic play on Old Shanghai Street provides a good platform for the children to help and learn Shanghainese from each other. Socio-dramatic play has shown to stimulate the minds of young ones, developing their Shanghainese and building their social interactive skills as well. Teachers also make contribute to the development of children’s Shanghainese by initiating and sustaining the interaction among children during socio-dramatic playtime. However, there is much more that needs to be done in enhancing “Shanghainese richness” of the environment and teachers as mediators/facilitators.

In order to enhance “Shanghainese richness” of the environment, socio-dramatic play time may be extended to 2 or 3 times per week. Meanwhile, teachers need to undertake multiple roles to support children’s socio-dramatic play as well as their Shanghainese development. Children must learn how to engage in satisfying socio-dramatic play and teachers must take responsibility for setting up their environment and assisting the play by taking on the role of observer, stage-manager, player, mediator, interpreter, social director [5]. Socio-dramatic play will play a critical role in promoting Shanghainese development in young children. It will be also true for other local dialects in other parts of China.

References


