

Types of utterances in the development of pretend play

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Abstract

Children mainly use words to express their intentions during pretend play and obtain a common understanding of pretend play theme they are performing. This study focuses on utterances that are made during pretend play, which was classified into two types; “pretending” utterances, which are made by pretending to be different characters, and “non-pretending” utterances, which are communicative words directed at self and others. The correlation between the appearance of the two types of utterances and the development of pretend play was analyzed. It was assumed that children would skillfully use pretending and non-pretending utterances depending on the situation, and these skills might be crucial for the smooth performance of pretend play. Conditions related to the spontaneous performance of pretend play by young children in kindergarten classes for 3-5-year-olds were observed, and thirty pretend play types were analyzed. “Pretending” utterances and “Non-pretending” utterances were noted based on the episode, and according to the development of play. The number of each type utterance and interactions between utterances and the development of play was qualitatively analyzed. The results indicated that pretend play developed more smoothly in episodes in which pretending utterances and non-pretending utterances were well-balanced, compared to episodes in which one of the two types of utterances appeared more often than the other. The characteristics of utterances depending on age indicated that younger children often made non-pretending utterances through which they spontaneously explained their situation to adults, or tried to interact with them. Older children, on the other hand, tended not to interact with adults.

Keywords: pretend play, pretending, utterance, assistance for play, qualitative analysis

1. Introduction

Cooperative learning is currently viewed as an essential part of early childhood education. The Preschool Education Guidelines that were implemented in Japan in 2018 lists “cooperativity” as one of the desirable capacities and skills to be acquired in early childhood. This requires a curriculum in which children can learn the importance of cooperative activities in working toward common goals shared with peers. Pretend play is a typical channel for engaging in cooperative activities through which young children develop symbolic function and socioemotional skills. As Garvey (1984) states, “pretend play is essentially an issue of communication.” The process in which children negotiate amongst themselves about what to do next, what kind of procedures and

rules to have, how much space to use, what kind of materials and equipment to use, how to divide things up, etc., is a process of systemizing cooperative activities, and in pretend play, the majority of this systemization is expressed in words. That is, the use of words is essential to convey intent in pretend play. To encourage the development of pretend play, it is therefore important to consider how children's utterances function in the process of play.

This study focuses on utterances during pretend play and differentiates between "pretending utterances" that are part of pretending activities, and "non-pretending utterances" that are directed to self or others but are not part of pretending activities. Based on the assumption that differentiation between these two types of utterances is an important element in sustained pretend play, the purposes of this study is to analyze the relationship between the occurrence of various utterances and the development of pretend play. It is hypothesized that the occurrence of non-pretending utterances will decrease as children grow and begin to substitute pretending utterances to maintain their worldview while they play.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Children from the 3 to 5-year old classes (25 from one 3-year old class, 30 from one 4-year old class, and 57 from two 5-year old classes) at Preschool A in a metropolitan area in Japan (quiet residential area with comparatively stable income levels).

2.2 Procedures

Child initiated pretend play was observed over a 2-month period. Through participant observation, the observer recorded pretend play with a video camera and took notes as needed. The observer asked questions to the children about all play situations to confirm themes and roles (three types: What is the theme? What is your role? What is the object supposed to be?).

3. Method of Analysis

A total of 30 types of pretend play episodes were selected for analysis and pretending utterances and non-pretending utterances were listed up for each episode. The proportions of pretending utterances and non-pretending utterances were calculated to divide the utterances into three categories: more pretending utterances (at least 60%; 4 episodes), more non-pretending utterances (less than 40%; 17 episodes), and balanced pretending and non-pretending utterances (40% to 59%; 9 episodes). Qualitative analysis was also conducted regarding the interaction between utterances and development of play.

Table 1. Episode titles and proportion of pretending and non-pretending utterances

	Episode	percentage of “Pretending” utterances	percentage of “not- pretending” utterances
1	Making a cake for teacher	81.0%	19.0%
2	Making individual cakes side by side	72.7%	27.3%
3	Tea party	67.1%	32.9%
4	“But now it’s time to clean up”	66.7%	33.3%
5	A baby is born	54.5%	45.5%
6	Consulting about playing ramen shop	53.8%	46.2%
7	Making “sticky” cookies	51.3%	48.7%
8	A house with a cat	48.5%	51.5%
9	Making dinner in the sandbox	45.5%	54.5%
10	“Say: Do XX”	44.4%	55.6%
11	From playing trains to playing bakery	43.2%	56.8%
12	M’s birthday party	41.4%	58.6%
13	Girls making poisoned snow cones and boys playing ninja	40.0%	60.0%
14	Having tea and cake with a play set	36.4%	63.6%
15	Princess rides in a carriage	35.0%	65.0%
16	Switching from pizza shop to restaurant	32.1%	67.9%
17	Making mud strawberries for a cake	31.3%	68.8%
18	Cookie shop (interrupted by acorns)	29.4%	70.6%
19	Playing battle with toy soldiers	27.3%	72.7%
20	Chocolate shop	26.4%	73.6%
21	Two children trying to get the doctor’s syringe	26.1%	73.9%
22	White sand shop	25.0%	75.0%
23	Carriage for playing princess	25.0%	75.0%
24	Meat shop and cake shop	23.8%	76.2%
25	Clay donut shop	20.9%	79.1%
26	Playing doctor	20.0%	80.0%
27	Conversation while playing with blocks	16.7%	83.3%
28	Playing princess	11.1%	88.9%
29	“We’re going to make dirt balls together, right?”	9.1%	90.9%
30	Chocolate factory	6.4%	93.6%

4. Episodes and Analysis

4.1 Episodes with a high proportion of pretending utterances

Episode 1. Making a cake for teacher (excerpts)

- pretending utterance 81%, non-pretending utterance 19%
- 3 year old class Girls A and B
- A and B are making cakes out of sand for their teacher next to the play equipment in the nursery yard.

“Pretending” utterances	Play situation, behaviors and Observer utterances	“Not-pretending” utterances
<p>A: I’m making a cake.</p> <p>A: Oof! Dark chocolate cake.</p> <p>A: I’m going to town now.</p> <p>A: Bye bye.</p> <p>B: This is my house. I’m making a cake at home.</p> <p>A: I got a lot.</p> <p>A: I’m going to town now!</p> <p>B: Knead knead. This is a dark cake too.</p>	<p>O: You’re making a cake now. Are you a cake shop?</p> <p>O: Oh, that’s nice.</p> <p>O: You’re making it bigger and bigger. Is this all cake?</p> <p>O: It’s really big.</p> <p>O: Dark chocolate cake. That’s nice.</p> <p>O: Bye bye.</p> <p>O: Bye bye.</p> <p>A comes back with a scoop of sand.</p> <p>O: Welcome back.</p> <p>B pats the sand with a shovel.</p>	<p>A: Yes, a cake. And Teacher Ayuka and Teacher Chie are going to eat it.</p> <p>A: So, I’m making it bigger and bigger.</p> <p>A: Yes.</p>

Episode 1. (continued)

<p>B: Right. A mold. This is a circle, a circle.</p> <p>A: I'm going to get more.</p> <p>B: Phew. Put in in the cake.</p> <p>B: Whee</p> <p>A: Whee</p> <p>B: Plop, plop</p> <p>A: There</p>	<p>O: Wow. This time it's in a mold.</p> <p>A comes back and adds the sand to the cake.</p> <p>B lifts up the cake mold and lets the sand fall</p>	<p>A: I'll take this then.</p>
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This episode centers on pretending utterances between the girls and conversation with the observer. The girls did not engage in much conversation with each other, but they each had the shared understanding that they were making cakes, and with the security they felt from being with a friend, they were freely enjoying the world they imagined. Although the proportion of pretending utterances was high, each girl tended to talk to herself and there was no conversation for the most part probably because both girls were only 3 years old and not quite at the point of being able to engage in cooperative play with active exchange of ideas or roles. Rather than simply talking to themselves, however, utterances such as “I’m going to town now!” suggest an effort to inform others about their actions and play. Although B did not react to A’s utterance about dark chocolate cake and continued on with her activities, B later referred to a dark cake as well, and when B poured the sand out while saying “Whee,” A followed suit. The girls thus each seemed to have an awareness of playing together. Among pretending utterances, instinctively spoken onomatopoeia might make it easier to share experiences compared to regular language.

4.2 Episodes with a middle proportion of pretending utterances

Episodes 8. A house with a cat (excerpts)

- pretending utterances 48.5%, non-pretending utterances 51.5%
- 5-year old class: Girls C, D, E A boy F
- C, D, E have made a cardboard house in a corner of the room and are pretending to be mothers and cats. The boys come over and interrupt, but in the end the play continues as the children mutually accept each other.

Episodes 8. (continued)

<p>D: Meow!! E: Don't be afraid, I'm with you.</p> <p>E: Beg. Beg. D: Me-ow! Meow! (shaking head "no") E: Beg. Begging.</p> <p>E: Beg. Be-eg!</p> <p>F: Ding-dong, special delivery! Please give this (large Lego block) to the baby to play with!</p>	<p>D waves E's hand</p> <p>D rolls around using E's lap as a pillow. D cover up with a blanket and rolls around. E pretends to give milk to D using a bowling pin.</p>	<p>D: They fight, sometimes they fight.</p> <p>E: They can beg together too.</p>
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It was apparent that this group of 3 girls regularly played together since they started preparing as soon as playtime began. Even so, they first consulted about the division of roles. Prior to finalizing, each girl declared her role through non-pretending utterances.” In this episode, D added traits to her own role and gave multiple instructions about lines she wanted the other girls to say. Her peers went along with the revised scenarios and continued to play accordingly. This may have been because D’s intentions were easy for the other children to understand: D explained the scenario through non-pretending utterances (e.g. “They fight, sometimes they fight”) and then followed up with pretending utterances that matched her role (e.g. “Meow! Meow!” while shaking her head). By differentiating between pretending and non-pretending utterances, her play developed freely.

When the boys came over and interrupted without regard to the girls’ scenario, C and D strongly objected. The mat the girls were sitting on was their “house,” which of course should have walls. When the boys randomly entered this space without appearing to open the door, the girls chased them away with the non-pretending utterance “You can’t see this.” After a while, the same boy returned to visit the house saying “Ding-dong, special delivery!” and was received by J, who joined the latter half of playtime. J then asked C’s group to “let me in too” and formally entered the group.

In the same classroom and at the same time, the boys were engaged in making trains. By visiting C group's "house" with their "delivery service," they tied their own play in with the girls. The scenario continued with the addition of J and the boys.

4.3 Episodes with a low proportion of pretending utterances

Episode 26. Playing doctor (excerpts)

- Pretending utterances 20.0%, non-pretending utterances 80%
- 3-year old class G, H, J
- After initially playing doctor, the children shifted midway to playing regular house.

"Pretending" utterances	Play situation, behaviors and Observer utterance	"Not-pretending" utterances
<p>J: Okay. What are we going to cook with?</p> <p>H: (The pot) is hot. It's hot.</p> <p>H: Eat this.</p>	<p>G and J hold hands and go over to the nurse playset. G also takes out a stethoscope from the playset and hangs it around her neck.</p> <p>J puts on a nurse's hat.</p> <p>H takes out the table for playing house.</p> <p>O: (touching the pot) Hot hot hot.</p>	<p>G: I'm a doctor.</p> <p>J: Oh- there is one more knife.</p> <p>H: Over here (table), then.</p> <p>J: H~</p> <p>H: Hurry, hurry, hurry.</p> <p>H: This (table) is where we eat.</p>

There were no pretending utterances in the first half of Episode 26. The children probably felt like playing doctor since they initially took out doctor props, but at some point, they shifted to cooking something in a pot and playing house. The turning point appeared to be when J found a knife among the doctor props and said "Oh- there is one more knife" and H responded "over here, then" and pulled out a table. Although the only utterance at this transition was H's "over here, then," H held J's hand and led her over the play kitchen corner. These sorts of transitions without utterances might be explained by the inability of 3-year olds to make differentiations in pretend play. If a peer were to suddenly switch to playing house among a group of 5-year olds, the children would be likely to ask "What happened to playing doctor?" to confirm and avoid confusion. 3-year

olds also appeared to emphasize “who” they were with over “what” they would do, as exemplified when G declined H’s invitation because “I’m going to play with J.” Because the children are together, they are content even if the pretend play shifts course, and they can continue playing with minimal pretending utterances.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings suggest that pretend play developed more in episodes with a balance of both pretending utterances and non-pretending utterances compared to episodes in which there was a high proportion of pretending utterances and a low proportion of non-pretending utterances as well as episodes in which there was a low proportion of pretending utterances and high proportion of non-pretending utterances. Further, a comparison of age groups shows that 3 and 4-year olds had more non-pretending utterances in which they desired attention from adults such as teachers and observers and voluntarily offered explanations, while the 5 and 6-year olds had more non-pretending utterances in which they did not wish for adult involvement and understood themselves as the “main actors” in their play. This suggests that appropriate adult interaction in pretend play depends on a child’s stage of development. The analysis in this study of two types of utterances in pretend play also provide insight into early childhood SST (sustained shared thinking), that is, active cooperation in building thoughts and skills. The children were able to use pretending utterances and non-pretending utterances to share pretend play themes with their friends and sustain and develop their pretend play. SST is developed in the process of maintaining this interaction among peers and ultimately leads to social interaction.

Further investigation of pretend play tendencies among peers of differing age groups, which was for the most part not observed in this study.

Since the methodology involved the observer as a partial participant in play, there were more observer-child interactions that affected inter-child conversations and monologues. The children’s usual utterances may have also been restricted if they experienced tension from playing with an adult present.

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