Cultural Behaviors of Mexican American Preschoolers in a Bilingual Classroom

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Abstract

This article examines the way cultural behaviors emerge during sociodramatic play in a bilingual preschool classroom. The focus of this microethnographic study were 18 Mexican American preschoolers enrolled in an inner-city school in Central Texas. Data were collected through classroom observations, filed notes, and a reflexive journal for six weeks three times a week. The study emphasizes how cultural traits or behaviors including language enhance children's play. The article provides important information regarding the role of first and second language use in a bilingual prekindergarten classroom.

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Children's play varies depending on their cultural background, although some characteristics of play may be similar across cultures. Nissani (1993) emphasizes the need to understand the cultural differences among language minority children in the United States, especially in the area of child development. The author suggests for educators to develop an understanding not only of the values of a specific culture, but the goals of socialization, the beliefs about the nature of the child, and child-rearing techniques. Sociodramatic play, in particular, will differ because children follow the patterns that are determined by their culture. Outside forces such as the popular culture and the majority culture influence children's sociodramatic play in the themes and characters chosen by the children that are different from those in their immediate culture. Thus, some cultural elements of culturally diverse children in the US, may be similar to those of the majority culture.

There are two paramount factors that arise when children engage in a sociodramatic play episode. First, as children organize for a sociodramatic play scene, children use language. The type of language used during the interactions of a sociodramatic play episode has been in many cases labeled as literate language, the language that is required for active classroom participation. Mexican American children may choose Spanish, English, or code switching to initiate and throughout the sociodramatic play episode. The second factor includes the shared knowledge that the participants in sociodramatic play

must have in order to maintain the play scene. The shared knowledge includes cultural traits common to the children who are participating in the sociodramatic play episode. Cultural patterns or elements have been known to emerge in the themes and characters chosen by the children (Michaels, 1986; Genishi and Galván, 1983; Heath, 1983; Delgado-Gaitán and Trueba, 1991). Thus, language use and shared knowledge during sociodramatic play appear to be essential in order for children to exhibit their cultural and linguistic repertoires.

The purpose of this paper is to present data collected at an elementary school in Central Texas. The analysis includes searching for cultural behaviors (including language) displayed by Mexican American children during sociodramatic play in a bilingual preschool classroom.

This study provides information regarding the need to facilitate a play-based environment in order for children to interact with one another, thus allowing them to use their communicative competence as well as their shared cultural knowledge. In addition, it shows the importance of training teachers on appropriate instructional methods that work with young bilingual children including theories on child development, language use, play, and culture.

Review of the Literature

The study presented in this monograph bases its theoretical framework on the existing literature regarding play, culture, and language use. The themes discovered in the study relate to the themes and topics found in the literature including cultural elements and language choice during play with an emphasis on Mexican American children.

Cultural Elements in Play

Although play is a difficult concept to define, Frost and Sunderlin (1985) define play as universal, knowing no national or cultural boundaries, peculiar to all ages and all races, essential to the development of thought and language, and central to the transmission of culture. Similarly, trying to find one definition for culture is a complex task (Guddemi, 1987). Culture is something that is learned (Goodenough, 1976). What is learned and shared by members of some group includes cultural behavior, cultural artifacts, and cultural knowledge (Spradley, 1980). Spradley and McCurdy (1972) state that culture involves emotions, works of art, behavior, beliefs, thoughts, feelings and institutions. Play can be an example of a cultural behavior. Cultural artifacts include things people shape or make from natural resources such as books, newspapers, and toys (p. 5). Behaviors and artifacts represent only the “thin surface” of culture, as Spradley notes. Cultural knowledge involves knowing and the deciphering the cultural rules (shared knowledge) members need to know in order to engage in a cultural behavior.

Culture plays a key role in children's play (Rogers and Sawyers, 1988). Roopnarine and Johnson (1994), state that play, a dominant activity of children in all cultures, is viewed to be a cause and effect of culture. Rettig (1995) points that that play is a way for young children to learn about the cultural norms and values of a society.

Since every culture is different, the type of play exhibited by children differs also. Some researchers state that culture and socioeconomic backgrounds determine the level of play engaged by children (Smilansky, 1968; Rubin, Maioni, and Hornung, 1976; Griffing 1980). Consequently, misinterpretations of culturally diverse children's play have led some researchers to consider it deficient. Smith (1983) argues, however, that differences in play are just differences but not necessarily deficits.

Research that compares and contrasts minority children's play behaviors to those of children in the majority culture run the risk of disseminating value judgments. Inevitably, a deficit interpretation will be afforded to one group when another group is used as the yardstick comparison (Soto and Negron, 1994). The assumption, according to Soto and Negron, is that one group serves as the norm which is usually that majority culture.

Children do not attend preschool, child care centers or elementary schools as "blank slates" on the topic of diversity (Derman-Sparks, 1993-94). Although very young children may know very little about their ethnic group, their use of ethnic role behaviors and customs with their families may be a precursor of ethnic knowledge (Bernal, Knight, Garza, Ocampo, and Cota, 1990). Bernal et al. (1990) identified several characteristics of preschoolers' ethnic knowledge

> At the preschool level, the content of children's ethnic identity component may be characterized by simple, concrete descriptions of physical attributes, appearances, and behaviors. Their ethnic labels may have little meaning; and they may not have ethnic constancy, feelings, and preferences. These children may engage in the customs and behaviors of their culture because their families do, rather than because the children associate these customs and behaviors with their ethnicity or because of ethnic preferences (p.6).

The package of cultural elements helps young children create their ethnic identity, even if they cannot identify themselves as members of a particular ethnic group. During sociodramatic play, children practice the cultural behaviors transmitted by their families.

Children become active participants in the acquisition of the culture which they learn throughout their lives (Engelbrecht and Moyer, 1987). The sociocultural environment in which children develop influences their self-concept and structures their motivational and cognitive processes. As the children learn who they are (their personal characteristics as well as those of their group) they also learn which characteristics are attributed to other groups. In addition, since language is part of culture, children display cultural traits or

characteristics through language. Such linguistic or cultural traits may include terms of endearment, poems, rhymes and proverbs. In the case of language minority children, such as Mexican Americans, their linguistic repertoire includes the use of Spanish, English and code switching in a variety of cultural behaviors such as sociodramatic play.

Language Use in Play

Play stimulates innovation in language, it introduces and clarifies new words and concepts, it motivates language use and practice, it develops metalinguistic awareness and encourages verbal thinking (Levy, 1984). Levy also states that children not only use language to facilitate play; they also play with language, using it as an object or resource for play. Children play with language by imitating sounds, spontaneous rhyming, fantasy and nonsense. In addition, children tend to correct one another when they engage in play talk (Berk, 1994). During sociodramatic play, children play linguistically by making up stories or retelling familiar stories (Söderbergh, 1980). It involves imagination of real life situations. During this category of play, children feel the freedom to express themselves.

Children use language in a variety of ways and for different reasons, especially for communication. In addition, children's immediate environment, including family and peers influence the way they use language (Pellegrini, 1986). Thus, children have the ability to communicate in different ways at different times. Communicative competence can be described as a varied linguistic repertoire and use of appropriate forms in different speech events. Such speech events can include the plot during sociodramatic play. Play allows children to practice decontextualized language when they define play themes.

Sachs, Goldman, and Chaillé (1985) point out two factors that must be taken into consideration for a sociodramatic play episode. First, children must have knowledge about the theme or scripted events so that each child in the interaction can generate ideas for actions that are compatible with the theme. Knowledge includes the choice of lexicon or vocabulary. Older children, according to Sachs et al., with more knowledge of the script, may be able to draw on shared knowledge and thus construct a narrative line. This factor relates to the "dramatic" aspect of sociodramatic play. The second factor relates to the "social" aspect of sociodramatic play--communicative competence. Children need to convey their ideas to one another and come to agreements about what is to be done in the play scene. Thus, communicative competence is necessary for this sharing to occur.

Social and linguistic exchanges occur through the negotiation and development of the sociodramatic play ritual. Children use several techniques as they talk during their play. Rogers and Sawyers (1988) explain that before children can coordinate play, they must share some knowledge of the script. Pellegrini (1981) also agrees that players must use a speech repertoire which is acceptable in a certain context if the play episode is to be

sustained. Such speech repertoire differs depending on the linguistic and cultural background of the children.

Mexican American discourse styles usually differ from discourse styles of other cultural groups in the US. Research regarding Mexican American children often concentrates on the gap that exists in the children's linguistic repertoire rather than on the ways they know how to communicate (García, 1997). Additionally, for some educators, it is more important for young children to learn English rather than to develop and practice their existing linguistic abilities in order to perform successfully in school. This belief arises from misconceptions regarding how children learn language as well as the persistence of some educators who insist that minority children assimilate into the "mainstream" culture as quickly as possible at the expense of the children's cultural and linguistic capital.

The ways with words that children have are largely founded on how their families structure their socialization (Heath, 1983). Mexican American children use different types of language during play. Within the play scene, Mexican American children may use their first and second language as well as code switching. This is greatly dependent on the way their families use language at home. Some Mexican American families prefer English (García, 1981) while others, such as immigrants prefer Spanish. A common phenomenon heard in many Mexican American households is code switching.

Code switching is a language phenomenon that occurs between two or more languages in different cultures all over the world. Code switching has been defined as the alternating use of two languages within one single discourse, sentence, or segment (Valdés-Fallis, 1979; Elías-Olivares, 1983; Huerta-Macías and Quintero, 1992; Sánchez, 1994). According to Romaine (1994), code switching is "part of the normal process of growing up bilingually and acquiring competence in more than one language" (p. 56).

Some educators believe that children code switch because of the lack of lexicon in one language, while others believe that code switching is a language preference. McLaughlin (1995) explains that code switching is purposeful in that its aim is to communicate. Genishi (1976) found that children's ways of code switching were different from the adults, they were much simpler. For example, in Genishi's study, the children matched the appropriate language to the linguistic ability to the addressee. In addition, the children switched from English to Spanish phonology or vice versa when using someone's name to get attention. This kind of switching, according to Genishi, is situational since it takes an obvious feature of the situation, the language capability of the participants. The kindergartners in Genishi's study only occasionally code switched to emphasize points or

to quote speech. The children did not code switch to mark their ethnicity. Code switching reflects the language situation of the home and the child's bilingualism.

Language is a cultural trait that is displayed in different forms in the sociodramatic play of children. Many ethnic minorities consider language the most important evidence of their cultural identity (Keats, 1997).

The Study

The purpose of this microethnographic study was to examine how Mexican American preschoolers use language during sociodramatic play in a bilingual classroom and how those interactions help them in the development of cultural identity.

Methodology

A microethnographic research approach (Ogbu, 1981; Corsaro, 1988) was used to conduct the study. According to Fetterman (1989), a micro study is a "close-up view, as if under a microscope, of a small social unit or an identifiable activity within the social unit" (p. 38). Ogbu (1981) states that microethnographic studies generally focus on school classroom events, home and playground events, or educational projects. In the study, I was a passive observer due to school district regulations. As a passive observer I was able to look at children and examine their cultural behavior during sociodramatic play in the housekeeping and block centers. Interaction with the children was limited to casual conversations.

The Setting

The study was conducted at an elementary school in an inner-city school in Central Texas. The school houses grade levels from prekindergarten to fifth grade. The ethnic background of the school is Latino--with the majority of the students being Mexican American. Teachers and staff are of diverse ethnic backgrounds. The school was chosen as a study site because it has a large population of bilingual students and a preschool program.

A variety of announcements and art can be noticed in the entrance of the school. The community involvement shows in the wall displays of organizations and businesses such as the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and a Texas bank. Special holidays are not only celebrated the "American Way," but are integrated with some "tradiciones mexicanas" or Mexican traditions. This was visible during Halloween week when the whole school created altars for "El Día de los Muertos" (Day of the Dead). One of the altars was adorned

with presents for Tejano singer Selena. In addition, the children's culture was represented in the use of the native language (Spanish) on posters, signs and literacy materials in the classrooms and the school's library. Parents and teachers spoke Spanish freely in the hallways and in the classrooms.

The school provided three preschool classrooms, but only one met the criteria for the study. The classroom chosen had the largest number of Spanish-dominant children as identified at the beginning of the school year by the Home Language Survey and the Pre-Language Assessment Scale (Pre-LAS) instrument.

This classroom was organized in six learning centers. There was a large group area where activities such as the calendar, music, show-and-tell, and story-time were conducted. The learning centers included listening, computers, writing, large and small blocks, and small toys. Observations were conducted in the housekeeping center. The block center was incorporated in the observations after the teacher changed the classroom setting and children begin to move freely between both centers because of their proximity.

The labels displayed on each of the learning centers included a list of skills that children are supposed to acquire when they "play" in that center. All the labels were in written in English. According to the teacher's schedule, the children spent about one hour on "Free Play" in the different learning centers, morning and afternoon. At the beginning of the study, the children were able to play in the learning center of their choice during the "Free Play" period. As the study progressed, the teacher appointed children to the learning centers. While a group of children played in the learning centers, the other children "worked" with the teacher. The "work" activity included tasks such as coloring sheets and cut and paste dittos. During the middle course of the study, the teacher began grouping the children by language.

The Children

The participants of the study were 18 preschoolers (ages 4 and 5). There were more girls than boys in the classroom. The children qualified for the preschool program on their family income and/or language. According to the teacher, all the children in the classroom were identified as Spanish-dominant except for one, as shown in the children's scores on the Pre-LAS (Pre-Language Assessment Scale) instrument. This instrument is used as a pre and post measure for language identification. Depending on the scores and with the parents' consent, the children are placed in a bilingual classroom.

All the children in the classroom were Latinos. At the beginning of the study, I assumed that all the children were of Mexican origin. As I got to know the teacher, she

informed me that there were two children (a set of twins--Rosario and Daniel[1]) that were born in El Salvador. Another girl, Carolina, born in the United States of Guatemalan mother and Mexican father. The rest of the children were born in the United States and were of Mexican origin. Some of their parents were Mexican nationals and others were Chicanos. Mrs. Sánchez, the teacher, informed me that the language proficiency of the parents was diverse, some were Spanish-dominant, others English-dominant, and some were bilingual.

The children were always friendly. During the observation blocks, these preschoolers displayed their socialization skills by greeting me with a hand shake or a hug, even "los más penosos" or the shy ones.

The Teacher

Mrs. Sánchez was an experienced teacher who has taught prekindergarten for approximately eight years. She is fluent in Spanish and uses it often when speaking to the children. Mrs. Sánchez believes that prekindergarten programs are important for the development of the children's language. She feels that children come to the classroom with "no language" and they need the prekindergarten experience to develop it. An interesting fact is that Mrs. Sánchez never explained what she meant by this statement. However, one day she asked me if I could understand what Lety was saying: *"Do you understand her? Half of the time I don't know what she is saying!"* I suggested for Lety to repeat the question and then we were able to understand her comment.

Many times Mrs. Sánchez confided that she did not feel prepared to teach prekindergarten. She felt as if she needed more guidance on implementing developmentally appropriate practices. Mrs. Sánchez uses worksheets to "enhance the academic development of the children," a task that she feels is important. She has the children "working" with her while the others "play." This type of thinking was an indication that Mrs. Sánchez knowledge about child development was very limited.

At times Mrs. Sánchez felt frustrated because she did not understand the children's speech. She was also frustrated because the children are very active and talkative, two qualitites that are considered by Mrs. Sánchez as "inappropriate behaviors in the classroom." Her frustration was evident since she often asked me about appropriate practices including which language to use with children who were truly bilingual. This created a dilemma for me as a researcher because I did not want to influence her thinking since that was not my job and I did not want to compromise the study.

Even though the focus of my study was on the children, it was inevitable to listen to the teacher's language when speaking to the children. Most of the time Mrs. Sánchez used

[1] All names have been changed to protect the participants identity.

Spanish, except when she became upset. I did notice that she felt more comfortable using English, even though she was fluent in Spanish.

Data Collection

The children were observed interacting with each other at the beginning of the study in the housekeeping area, and as the study progressed in the block area during "Free Play" in the afternoon. The observations lasted for one hour three times a week for six weeks with a total number of 18 hours.

Field notes were recorded during each of these sessions. Each observation was audiotaped and later transcribed. The purpose of the audiotapes was to have a retrievable record of the children's verbal interactions as they engaged in sociodramatic play.

Another source of data included a journal or reflective diary written shortly after each observation block. The purpose of the journal was to record personal reflections about the observations.

Data Analysis

The data from the field notes and audiotaped transcriptions was examined for patterns and then coded (Miles and Huberman, 1994) for cultural patterns and language use during sociodramatic play in the housekeeping and block centers. The field notes, audiotaped transcriptions, and journal entries were analyzed together for cross-reference purposes or triangulation (Patton, 1990).

Using the existing literature regarding culture (Spradley, 1980; Saville-Troike, 1980) and language use (Pellegrini, 1986; Garvey, 1990) the following coding schemes evolved

1. Cultural patterns--themes, values, beliefs, gender roles, among others.
2. Language use--English, Spanish, code switching.

Findings

Cultural Elements in Play

Cultural behavior and cultural knowledge, as explained by Spradley and McCurdy (1980) were exhibited by the preschooles during sociodramatic play episodes. As I observed the children's language and social behavior, I realized that their language was a reflection of their culture. The children played with terminology possibly used by their families.

The children's sociodramatic play involved episodes of the children's real life. The children enjoyed cooking "huevitos" or eggs, ordering a "pizza," and preparing lunch for their father, thus reflecting the children's family routines and traditions. Their cultural

traditions were displayed during a scenario when the children were trying to decide, as a "family," where to go on a Sunday. Suggestions ranged from México, to "*el estadio*" the stadium, to "*la misa*" the mass, and "*el trabajo*" work. There were no instances when children mentioned that they were from a specific ethnic background, they never said they were "Mexicanos" or Mexicans. However, a couple of instances were mentioned where children spoke about going to countries like Mexico and the United States! A strong indication that the children came from two different yet related worlds.

Cultural norms were evident during sociodramatic play. Differences in role-playing family figures such as the father and the mother were evident. In other words, gender roles were very specific. A fascinating finding includes that boys did not expect girls to "cook" for them. Most of the time it was a joint effort, a finding similar to Delgado-Gaitán and Trueba's study (1991). When the girls in this bilingual classroom role-played being mothers, they would be nurturing towards their "kids and husband" by preparing favorite foods and taking them to favorite places. The children who took the role of husband or father and older siblings were always leaving to go to work. Only one boy, Jesse, when role-playing the father figure, "stayed" at home and took care of the baby. Furthermore, in one occasion, while organizing their play, Lupita said that she could not play with boys "*porque mi mamá me regaña*" that is, because her mother would punish her.

The popular culture also influences the children's lives (Orellana, 1994). For example, Rosalinda was named after the main character of a "telenovela" or soap opera. In one scenario, Rosalinda is rocking her doll and Manuel approaches her with a flower. The sociodramatic play episode can be analyzed in two ways. First, one can see this scenario as an influence from the popular culture of "telenovelas" or soap operas and second, one can see this scenario as the children role-playing cultural elements or traditions displayed by family members:

Manuel: *Mira* (look) <showing something to Lupita Mercedes>.

Rosalinda: *¿Qué es eso?* (What's that?)

Manuel: *Una flor* (a flower) <he gives it to her>.

Rosalinda: *Pues no la quiero, guárdala*. (Well, I don't want it! Put it away!)

Manuel: *Ténla* (Take it!)

Rosalinda: *No me gusta* (I don't like it) <with an attitude>.

<Manuel gives the flower to another girl>

Rosalinda: <Angrily> ¡*No! ¡No!, yo la quiero* (No! No! No! I want it).

Manuel: *Pues tu dijiste que no la querías* (Well, you said that you didn't want it).

Rosalinda: *Pero ahora sí* (Put now I do) <she got the flower back>.

José: *Ja, ja, ja,* (ha, ha, ha) <making fun af Manuel> *una flor* (a flower).

Rosalinda: *Mañana hacemos un pastel para tu hermanita* (Tomorrow we'll make a cake for your little sister).

This play episode was difficult to classify as sociodramatic play because it was difficult to determine if the children were in fact role-playing family members, or "novela" soap opera characters or if they were not. However, this episode provides important facts regarding cultural values and identity, the man giving the flower to the woman and the woman turning it down because she is "too good" for him. At the end of the episode José teases Manuel because he is giving a girl a flower. In the Mexican American culture, boys and girls are teased when they display a cultural behavior that marks a rite of passage from childhood to the teenage years. Although these preschoolers are very young to go through that rite of passage, they imitate it during their play because of their cultural knowledge. Finally, language was the means that children used to communicate cultural knowledge.

Children's Use of Spanish

The findings in this category demonstrate the Spanish proficiency level of the children. Throughout the observation block, I was able to hear the children use their native language in a variety of situations. For instance, to organize their sociodramatic play, children used Spanish. The children resolved conflicts mainly by using Spanish, even those who were English-dominant. They would carefully make a plan for their play and organize the area to carry out their play. In addition, the children would assign roles to every child who was going to be involved. In other words, their play was highly organized and structured. Even children who were more quiet participated in sociodramatic play using Spanish.

The annexation of the block center to the housekeeping area allowed children to expand their play from one area to the other. In the housekeeping area, the children were able to use particular terminology related to that area. The children carried conversations while cooking, eating, and feeding the baby among other situations. In the block center, however, the vocabulary was related to functions of construction.

During sociodramatic play the children experienced a variety of role playing from being monsters to passengers in a bus, but their favorite recurring theme was the family. This was apparent especially when they were getting ready to go to work. The following sample exhibits the preschoolers knowledge and use of Spanish throughout the play scene

Rosalinda: *¿Quieres un huevo mi cielo? Bueno, ya no hay pizza* (Would you like an egg, dear? Okay, there's no pizza).

Sara: *Ya me voy trabajar* (I'm going to work).

Simón: *No, ahorita, hija* (Not yet, daughter).
Rosalinda: *Nada más tienes que comer un chile mi cielo* (You just have to eat one pepper, darling).
Sara: *Mami* (Mommy).
Rosalinda: *¿Que mijita? No lo voy a calentar* (Yes, daughter? I'm not going to warm it up.)
Sara: *Ten mija un sanwiche* (Here's my sandwich, daughter).
Sara: *En tu trabajo hay un perro* (Is there a dog at your job?).
Rosalinda: <Eats and says> *¿Van a ir a trabajar? Ya dále a tu hermano chiflado. Véte a trabajar córrele* <snaps fingers> (Are you going to work? Stop! Give some to your spoiled brother. Go to work, hurry up!).

Although the children use Spanish, there appears to be a misconception in semantics regarding the term "mija" which means "my daughter." Sara seems to follow the play script by answering Rosalinda, the mother, with the appropriate vocabulary except on the fourth line, where Sara calls her "mija". It is possible that she may have wanted to take over the role of the mother, but Rosalinda did not follow and continued with her role as a mother expanding the play script by giving specific directions. Also, it is possible that Sara made an "honest" mistake, but since she did not correct herself after the utterance was made, it is difficult to know if she understands the meaning of the word. This block of conversations is only an example of the type of language children used in sociodramatic play. The children listed are only two out of 16 that used Spanish during sociodramatic play.

Most children were fully aware of the differences between English and Spanish. For example, Jesse used Spanish with Spanish-dominant children and for specific functions. Jesse used Spanish when trying to give commands such as "*No pueden usar eso*" meaning "you can't use that." Jesse knew that he spoke Spanish as he shared with me one day: "I *'skeep' Spanish, I sleep 'Splanish*.'" The teacher shared that Jesse's parents were bilingual and that they wanted him in a bilingual class to learn more Spanish.

Children's Use of English

A fascinating instance that showed how most children were aware of the differences between English and Spanish occurred during casual conversations with three children. Lupita shared that she spoke only in Spanish and few words in English "*un poquito*." When talking with Willie, he did not answer my question regarding language use, but all

his comments were in Spanish. Rosalinda told me that she knew how to say two things in English "*clean up*" and "*let's go inside*," two functional phrases that the teacher used daily. In another instance, Lupita tried to practice her English by asking me "*What you name?*" Furthermore in the conversation, Lupita tells Rosalinda to repeat the same question, when she fails to repeat the question, Lupita says "*todavía no sabe*" meaning that she does not know English yet. However, Rosalinda used English when addressing English-preferring children.

According to the language assessment scale and Mrs. Sánchez, there was only one child who was English-dominant in the whole group. As the study progressed, it became evident that there were more children who were bilingual and used their two languages at different times. Some would choose to use more English during their sociodramatic play, especially if their peers spoke English. This situation increased when the teacher began grouping the children by language. The children who were bilingual did not get to play as much in the designated centers for the study. These children were mainly assigned to do work with the teacher and other centers.

The play episodes when children used English during sociodramatic play were not as highly developed as when they used Spanish, mainly because they were experimenting with the second language. As Pellegrini (1986) explains children must have the communicative competence to elaborate on a play episode. The lexicon used was limited and the linguistic forms were limited to simple questions and phrases. The children never achieved the highest level of sociodramatic play--verbal communication while role-playing a character as they did in Spanish. Most of the time they spent it rocking or feeding the baby without communicating with the other children.

English use by the children was limited throughout the study. Most of the time when playing house with peers who were Spanish-dominant, the children preferred to use Spanish. The following sociodramatic play episode is one of the few that was in English where the children were trying to engage in sociodramatic play

Manuel: *I got cookie now.*

Jesse: *Tomorrow, I got cookie now.*

Liliana: *Dámela* (Give it to me).

José: ……

Lety: *You know my baby.*

Amanda: ……

Liliana: *My baby sit here on lap.*

Jesse: *Mira, mira* (look, look)

Liliana: *Es un pancake* (It's a pancake).

Jesse: *Get off!*
Lety: *Mira* (look).
Jesse: *She's stepping on my shoes. I close it. Who broke it?* <stepping out of the character role>
Lety: *Ah!*
Liliana: *Don't eat the pancake yet* (rocking the doll).
Manuel: *Look se me cayó una comida* (look I some food fell). *Se me cayó una comida al bebé* (I dropped some of the baby's food).
Lety: *¿Qué?* (What?) *Erni,e this fell down of the baby and it dropped.*
José: *I get this. Okay, I too.*
Liliana: *I need the chicken, macaroni.*
Jesse: *No it can't eat that because it has chile on it.*
Manuel *I wan this and this.*
Lety: *Oh my God!*

As this episode progressed, the script of the sociodramatic play was not very clear, children were not able to communicate with each other in an elaborate way as they did when interacting in Spanish. Their play seems disorganized and unstructured because their English proficiency appears to be in the early stages of development. This finding shows how researchers can mistakenly examine these children's play as disorganized and unstructured. However, it is imperative that we consider this example as a very important attempt for children to learn to communicate in their second language.

As the text shows, some children preferred to retrieve to Spanish in some play instances. After talking to Jesse, I discovered that he uses the two languages depending on the social context. He told me that he uses Spanish at his grandma's and "Tío's" (uncle's) house, whereas in the classroom he uses English. Although the episode cited above may not be elaborate, it is a good indication of how children play with language. These preschoolers are experimenting with English by using appropriate "kitchen" lexicon such as cookie, pancake, and chicken macaroni. Also, the children talked about sitting the baby on their lap, a cultural element that may occur in their households.

Children's Use of Code Switching

A third finding during sociodramatic play related to language was code switching. Code switching occurred mostly when bilingual children played with Spanish-dominant children. Code switching was situational but sporadic and did not happen throughout a whole block of sociodramatic play. There was one boy who did most of the code

switching, Jacob. Some of his code switching episodes are as follows (not in the same day):

Jacob: *Yo quiero ver tu toy…no quiero ver tu toy que tenías en tu pocket…ah! It's a girl* (I want to see your toy…no, I want to see the toy you had in your pocket…ah!)

……

Jacob: *Pero no entres aquí, está Jesse loqueado en la cárcel*. (But don't come in here, Jesse is "locked-up" in jail).

Jacob was not the only child that code switched. An interesting finding from the analysis of code switching patterns in the field notes was Rosalinda's code switching. When I spoke with Rosalinda she mentioned that she did not know English except for two things. As I analyzed the field notes, I found Rosalinda code switching in a variety of play episodes in sociodramatic play like when she tells Sara "*Es mi turn, Sara. Sara es mi turn.*" Rosalinda was desperately letting Sara know that it was her turn. This is an example of using code switching to emphasize a point (Genishi, 1976). The other children that code switched at times were Jesse, Lety, Liliana, and Manuel. The rest of the children did not code switch during the time they were observed.

Discussion/Conclusion

This study, in spite of the limitations, provided some patterns regarding how Mexican American preschoolers use their linguistic and cultural knowledge to organize a sociodramatic play scene in a bilingual classroom. The microethnographic study gives a voice to the children by showing how they use cultural elements such as language, values, beliefs and traditions.

As I observed these preschoolers using their native language in play interactions with others, they were using language much more than just as a means of communication, they were using it to solve problems, create situations, and engage in meaningful conversations. The need for native language instructional strategies including the use of songs, poems, games, and books is imperative for the linguistic and cognitive growth of limited-English proficient preschoolers not only in Spanish but in English as well. However, learning English should not be the focus of a prekindergarten curriculum, but rather the opportunity to learn through play. Children's sociodramatic play began to be limited when the teacher formed groups by language proficiency. Spanish- as well as English-dominant children need help in the advancement of their scaffolds in their first and second languages. These children need their peers to act as role models to obtain the necessary lexicon to participate in sociodramatic play. In order for all children to benefit

from each other's language, children need to play together in every area of the room, regardless of their language. In addition, it is important to promote developmentally appropriate English as a Second Language (ESL) activities that will foster the development of the second language through play. Children are more willing to take risks when using their second language while they role-play characters such as family members or popular cartoon characters.

Although most of the children involved in the study did not code switch, the use of code switching in the classroom by bilingual children was purposeful. Children used it as a means of communication. Their code switching reflected their knowledge of a larger social and linguistic context. Children need to express themselves freely in play and educators should help children to develop their self-esteem in every manner. Remarks such as "these children have no language" should be completely eliminated.

The children displayed knowledge of their cultural background through sociodramatic play. The children never identified themselves as part of a specific ethnic group, but the values, beliefs, norms, standards and funds of knowledge transmitted from their families were evident throughout the sociodramatic play scenes. One of the most striking features of this cultural identity was in the way children used terms of endearment such as "*mi amor*" (my love), "*mi cielo*" (my heavenly) "viejote"(literally means old man but with a tender connotation) and "mijita" (my daughter) during sociodramatic play. This type of cultural knowledge needs to be nurtured by providing additional materials, what Spradley (1980) calls cultural artifacts, that reflect the children's culture. Literature, toys, pictures, posters and other materials comprise a long list of possibilities. Accepting a child's cultural identity will help them foster positive self-esteem.

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