The Contribution of Play in the Emergence of Hybrid Genres in Kindergarten [1]

Abstract

This study looks into the role of the educational practices in constructing nursery school activities. A basic characteristic of the educational discourse in the nursery school is its multifunctional structure, which is however based on opposing discourses. While the contemporary curricula require the use of scientific discourse, the child centred approach is expressed through play-like activities. The lack of a linguistic theory to support the planning of activities doesn't allow the teacher to reflect on the materialization of the activities, defines the pedagogical discourse and enables the emergence of hybrid genres. Trying to explore the pedagogical practices that define the constitution of discourse we have obtained data by video recording school science activities in a nursery classroom. With the use of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) we pinpoint the alterations in the structure of genre and register as well as its importance to achieve the original educational goals.

1. The influence of pedagogic concepts in the formation of educational practice

1.1. Child-centred Pedagogy

Piaget's theory supported a new pedagogic approach, known as the Child centred Pedagogy (Goehlich 2003: 89). This new approach, which was proposed through the Plowden report and referred to the English school, gave a new perspective to the designing of curricula, provided pedagogy with a different insight about the role of the teacher and proposed a new organization of classroom and school. The main characteristics of this theory, as recapitulated by Goehlich (2003: 89-90), are:

- A model of learning that is built on a more intuitive and energetic involvement of the child in an exploring process.
- The role of the teacher as facilitator of the pedagogic process.

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[1] **Στοιχεία δημοσίευσης (Ν. 28)**

Papadopoulou, M. & Poimenidou, M. (2008). The Contribution of Play in the Emergence of Hybrid Genres in Kindergarten. In N. Norgaard (ed) Systemic Functional Linguistics in Use. *Odense Working Papers in Language and Communication, 29:* 621-633.

- The support of an equal communicative relation and the opening of the school to society.
- A timetable with plenty of breaks.
- The transformation of the educational environment into a field of experience.

1.2. The role of play in pre-school education.

Play per se, has been the object of many research projects since it is considered important to the formation of knowledge, the building of the identity and the reproduction of culture. Piaget considered play to be a biological function; while children enter into an active process with their environment, the development of their intelligence occurs naturally. Play is the ideal method for the achievement of the goals of the Child-centred Education as work and play are complementary to each other. (Plowden Report 1967: 187). In this way, play is used as the main pedagogic strategy that supports learning and socialization of the children. Play facilitates the child's self-expression, its interactivity with the environment and the attainment of knowledge through action. When play is adopted into the educational activities, it constitutes an educational strategy (Pollard 1990: 27) that contributes towards the activation of the children.

Between the age of 4 to 5, children begin to deal with abstract ideas (Halliday & Matthiessen 2000: 616) and learn to reconstruct the world through symbols (Bruner 1977: 34). The development of the abstractness is considered to be very important to the cognitive development of the child and fundamental in attaining educational knowledge (Halliday & Matthiessen 2006: 616) in all subjects. Symbolic play moves into the globe of fantasy and is fully exploited in pre-school education since it facilitates children to cope with abstractness in meaning. At the same time, symbolic play contributes to the development of the children's language (Hutt 1989, Kitson 1994, Sellares & Bassedas 1995). Symbolic play is considered to be the preferential way that permits children to justify their own as well as other people's behavior, while at the same time, it facilitates them to reasoning and decision making in resolving everyday problems (Hendy 1998:107).

In the Greek nursery schools, symbolic play, through role-playing, is apparent both in the spontaneous activities of the children as well as in the daily schedule (Nursery School Teachers' Handbook 2006: 28). Play is always present in every context of activity be it free or guided play; in the former the child's initiative is ever present, while in the latter it is used as a method of teaching. The class teacher is the

mediator in this relationship by defining every time the degree of intervention in the development of every activity.

1.3. The social dimension of Child-centred Pedagogy

According to the analysis of the educational practices by Bernstein (1990: 183-4), the Child-centred approach develops within the framework of the 'invisible pedagogy' and is based on ineffable and therefore invisible rules of regulative and instructional order. Invisible pedagogy is focused on the acquirer and based on acquisition and competence. The control exerted by the teacher both on the child as well as on the activity is not clear, and therefore the goal of the educational activity remains indefinite. Nevertheless, Bernstein (1991: 138) pointed out that through invisible pedagogy the creative potential of the children in the nursery school is facilitated. In this context, the concepts of play and learning coexist in the nursery school without the need to be defined by clearly stated regulative relations.

Symbolic play creates an imaginary world that children can identify as fictional, whilst at the same time, they are fully aware of the simultaneous coexistence of reality. Symbolic play, based on every day experience, utilizes horizontal and not vertical discourse which is directly related to the formation of scientific knowledge.

2. The linguistic structure of science activities in the nursery school

2.1. Science language in education

The last few decades researchers have pointed out that specialized topics on science can be treated in nursery schools aiming at the development of scientific literacy (Tsatsaroni et al 2004: 385). As Lemke has pointed out "learning science means learning to talk science, learning to communicate in the language of science" (Lemke 1990: 1). Halliday (Halliday & Martin 2004: 137) argued that scientific knowledge could never be fully expressed through everyday ordinary language and common sense statements. Research studies on the language of the sciences (Halliday 2004, Martin 1992, Lemke 1990, Veel 2000) have detected the presence of specific characteristics which were developed to meet the needs of science and are functional elements of scientific texts.

2.2. Pedagogic discourse

The scientific discourse is modified within the framework of school applications. As Bhathia (1993: 144) comments, a special factor that contributes towards the differentiation of scientific discourse in education is the attempt to provide a simple alternative to the meaning of a scientific text, "bringing its content or

linguistic form within the area of experience of a particular group of readers". As far as young children are concerned, Martin (Halliday & Martin 2004: 254) points out that the basic concept according to which children can not understand scientific discourse renders it necessary to make language more personal, expressive and often create their own imaginary worlds.

Schooling, as early as nursery school, enables children to come in contact with science and therefore scientific discourse. School discourse, however, does not appropriate scientific discourse but modifies it through the process of recontextualization. Pedagogic discourse according to Bernstein is a principle which removes a discourse from its substantive practice and context, and relocates it according to its own principles of selective reordering and focusing (Bernstein 1990: 183-4).

However, more specialised subjects deem necessary the use of more specialised voices (Bernstein 1991: 176). According to Bernstein, 'voice' is formed by the degree of specialization of the rules of discourse, which fine tune the mode of communication and correspond linguistically to the level of register (Bernstein 1991: 176). The process of constructing pedagogic discourse through recontextualization is a multifunctional one, and as a result pedagogic discourse is not unitary but is made up of official and other unofficial and sometimes oppositional discourses (Tsatsaroni et al 2004: 401).

2.3. The construction of discourse in the nursery school

Although at most educational levels textbooks shape 'educational knowledge' (Halliday 1999) in accordance with the 'written' form of the scientific discourse, in the nursery school the initiation of an activity is not based on any written text. Educational discourse, mainly oral in the nursery school, is constructed through dialogue and is interactive. The main characteristics of oral discourse such as its dynamic structure, interactive staging and open-ending (Eggins 2004: 92) provide educational activity with a perspective of freedom in dealing with any topic. Oral discourse, through dialogue, offers the ideal functional framework, which goes nicely hand-in-hand with the proposals of the Child-centred Pedagogy for loose classification and framing and the play-like activities, all of them characteristics of the nursery school curriculum. However, it is also true, that the nursery school is a transitory period in a child's life, which, according to Christie (1999: 3) – who has systematically studied early childhood education – is considered to be one of the most crucial periods in the development of language in children.

3. Research action

3.1. Data analysis through SFG

Till now, in the Greek nursery school's curriculum concerning science development in preschool education, as well as in the dominating philosophy in planning, application and the assessment of science activities, the role of language has been greatly depreciated. The application of Systemic Functional Grammar in analyzing the discourse produced in the classroom is a valuable tool in understanding the structure of the discourse and the exploration of its validity.

The loose boundaries between different subjects in the nursery school's program and the use of play in all the rage of the offered activities, which is usually considered to be creativity, very often alter the educational goal (Tsatsaroni et al 2004: 406). According to Eggins (2004: 81) the combination or the merging of various genres produces hybrid genres. In this particular project, discourse analysis via SFG is used as a tool to study the consequences of hybridism in the semantic unity of the genre. Through the concept of 'coherence', both on the level of genre and register, we can detect the way text relates to context (Halliday & Hassan 1976: 23). In this particular study the questions posed are the following:

- Whether in the emerging hybrid genre we can identify a communicational purpose that renders it effective.
- Which are the consequences of hybridism in the construction of the register.
- And finally, whether hybrid genre contributes to the accomplishment of the cognitive goal of the activity.

3.2. Methodology

The present study is part of a wider research aiming at the exploration of the factors that affect the structure of genres in the nursery school program, and at revealing their contribution to the attainment of the communicative and cognitive goals posed for the organized activities. Science activities in six different nursery school classes in the Prefectures of Magnesia and Attica from March 2004 to May 2005 were video recorded and analyzed. The researcher was only an observer without interfering in the teaching procedure.

The present research is a case study of a science activity with magnets, based on different research projects (Ravanis 1994, Tsatsaroni et al 2004) which have proved that preschoolers can effectively participate in activities concerning magnetism. The complete videotaped teaching material was digitized and analyzed with selective use of Systemic Function Grammar.

3.3. Research results

The text chosen for analysis is the last part of an activity where the children, through experiments, explored the magnets, their characteristics, their properties and uses. Throughout the experimental procedure, children undertook the role of the researcher, whereas the nursery teacher supported and coordinated the development of the activity. In the last part of the activity the materials are classified as those attracted by the magnet and those that are not. During the classification not only does the nursery teacher repeat the technical vocabulary that supports the thematic specific domain, meaning the classification criteria “all attracted by the magnet, gathered by the magnet” but also the meta-language required for the organizing of the taxonomies “we have two groups, one set”. The classification procedure enables the transition from the world of everyday knowledge and experience into the educational and technical knowledge of science. In other words, it refers to a logical procedure during which a new relationship is created, within the field of magnetism, through the adoption of the classification criteria for the materials. Children are asked to develop insight into the abstract categories of “materials that are attracted by the magnet” and “materials that are not attracted by the magnet” that describe the properties of the materials on which the scientific taxonomy is based. The classification is completed with the construction of two posters relevant to the groups that have been formed. The aim of this construction is the apprehension of the classification, as a repetition of an experience, and furthermore as a reference point for a possible review in the future.

In the introduction of the construction Helen suggests: “Madam, since you mentioned spaghetti, can we make spaghetti with minced meat?” The combination of the imaginary world of the symbolic play with the activity of the construction creates a hybrid genre. As there is no unified purpose motivating the language, the activity does not have any generic coherence. In the symbolic play children pretend they cook. In this imaginary world there are no expectations for a specific result; children play just for pleasure. However, contrary to this, the construction within the framework of science is oriented towards a specific objective and requires coordination of specific actions. In the hybrid genre that emerges, the identification of the target is difficult and consequently the children cannot adopt it.

Following, we will explore the registerial coherence. The mode is dialogic while the use of language is ancillary to the construction. The genre of procedure is used for the construction and, as expected, the imperative mood is used throughout (i.e. wait, take, do, stick together, place, think). The teacher also uses plenty of

adverbial expressions (here, on, to the side, inside) in order to direct the action and to maximize the chances of success.

We will try to explore, through the domain analysis on which the context focuses, the formation of the field, which corresponds to the theme of the activity. Helen deviates from the purpose of the activity suggesting a symbolic game that is accepted, resulting in the creation of two contexts of reference. The nursery teacher originally enhances the suggested vocabulary: “plate”, “platter”, “spaghetti”, “delicious”, “food” whereas next, more children participate in the talk adopting the game of cooking with words such as: “we shall fry”, “grebe beans”, “bean soup”, “butter”. The vocabulary that is used creates two lexical strings and each one defines a thematic context of reference, cooking and magnetism correspondingly. While the nursery teacher uses vocabulary both from cooking and magnetism at the same time, for the children the symbolic game of cooking is the only context of reference. The symbolic game “I pretend I cook” is based on the reproduction of everyday routine and the way the children have experienced it. As a result the activity and the speech used, even though they create an imaginary world, refer to specific objects with specific uses and not general classes of objects. In addition, play breaks up the co-hyponomy relation that connected the materials for the constitution of the scientific taxonomy and restores the use of lexical items (“spaghetti”, “beans”) to the referenced and not to the signified which is required in the constitution of taxonomy. In this way, the scientific taxonomy achieved through the experimental procedure is rejected and the game restores materials to their everyday status.

In the interpersonal dimension, the hybrid genre reconstructs discourse on two levels. Firstly, the imperative mood is tempered semantically by the use of modulation, one of the faces of modality. Therefore, the obligation is tempered by the use either of the future (“you will stick together”, “you will place”) or by using the form of the first plural person in the present (“we don’t put”, “we said”, “we put”).

In our case, however, the combination of play and instruction creates further differentiations to the roles of the children and the nursery teacher. More specifically, while the procedure is usually a genre in which the role of the teacher is dominant, this approach is modified. So, while in the development of the dialogue the initiating move should belong to the speech of the nursery teacher, in the extract we study children very often take the initiative: “Shall we make spaghetti with minced meat?”/ “Fresh beans?/ “ Fresh beans later”. “Madam, we will make bean soup”/ “Madam, we will also need butter for the spaghetti”.

The masking of the instructional discourse is apparent in the length of the nursery teacher’s replies. While it is common for the responding moves to be short,

the particular ones are lengthy as the nursery teacher is trying to adopt the children's responses to the educational target of the activity.

The nursery teacher's responses are usually supportive: "I will give you a plate to cook in"/ "You will cook your own spaghetti, in your platter with materials that are not attracted by a magnet". Even in the case that the replies differ from the children's suggestion, the use of play by the nursery teacher covers the attempt to redirect the activity to its educational target: "*No, not spaghetti. Wait a moment, I'll tell you exactly what to put on it. To cook right spaghetti with minced meat it must have, … to become delicious,… it must contain all these things on the table, except, of course, the things that will not fit. Ok? Let's do it. Take your glue sticks and stick everything here."*

The same fact is also established in the use of the adjunct "right"*,* which, even though it refers to the spaghetti, assesses the whole activity. Soon the adjunct "right" is replaced by "delicious", thus covering the nursery teacher's intervention.

4. Conclusion

This paper was sparked by the important function of play in the formation of nursery school activities. In our study we analyzed a construction activity that targeted the formation of two classification posters in the framework of the sciences. At this level, by adopting play, there's a differentiation from the previous correlation of the materials as it had resulted from the specialized field of magnetism. This combination created a hybrid genre that functioned not only in the everyday routine through symbolic play but also in the abstract sphere of science. This stage of activity was finally found unsuccessful by the nursery school teacher, as the construction finally did not accomplish its original target.

The nursery school is the main place where we can observe the adoption of play-like activities that fit nicely with the loose classification and framing that characterize its curriculum. The determining factors are direct speech, which is a means that allows the continuous adaptation of the educational activities through the interactive formation of discourse, and also the lack of a theory of educational linguistics to support the verbal organizing of activities. These factors bring about an inconsistent organizing of the activities in specialized fields which is reflected in language with the alteration of fixed genres.

The invisible pedagogy, as Bernstein has pointed out, facilitates the creative potential of the child but, at the same time, it creates problems both in the teaching and learning processes of science. In the attempt to teach science through play-like activities, different conflicting needs emerge between scientific and educational

discourse. In the particular case play becomes the framework for the development of an equal democratic relation between the children and the nursery teacher. The children become regulators of the situation, defining the context and the pace of the activity.

However, the loose boundary between play/everyday routine and educational knowledge has a negative impact on learning as this process may obstruct the acquisition of scientific knowledge through the adoption of scientific discourse. Therefore, in the attempt to adopt a Child-centred approach in nursery school, the recognition of the structural characteristics that shape the pedagogical discourse should not be neglected, so as to safeguard the cognitive development of the child, together with its social and emotional development.

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Appendix – Dialogues in the classroom

-So, you have a piece of glass, a cork, and a plastic, right? And you also have some spaghetti.
…….

E-Madam, now that you said spaghetti, can we make spaghetti with minced meat?
-Spaghetti with minced meat, hmmm! Can I give you a dish to cook in?
AT- Oh, yes.
-Excellent, both of you wait for a minute (pointing at both groups).
B-Madam, what are you doing?
-I’ll give you a dish. So, (she picks a piece of cardboard to cut plates)
B-Ah! Such a big dish?

- We will cut it. We'll make a big platter. Here we are! Ay you, little gang, take this platter and put on it ….
D- Spaghetti?
-No, not spaghetti. Wait a moment, I'll tell you exactly what to put on it. To cook right spaghetti with minced meat it must have, … to become delicious,… it must contain all these things on the table, except, of course, the things that will not fit. Ok? Let's do it. Take your glue sticks and stick everything here.

……..
And stick all these things here in your set. Ok?
They're all things not attracted by the magnet. Right?
You will cook your own spaghetti, on your own platter, with things not attracted by the magnet.
Now, your group (the other one), I'll give you one more platter.
Z- We will put these things, won't we?
- Yes, I'll give you one more plate.
Z- Shall we fry them?

……..
-Take your own platter
I- they green platter (have).
-And make your own set your own food with things attracted by the magnet. You won't stick the magnets on them, will you? Everything attracted by the magnet. Everything on the table. All apart from the magnets. Put the magnets on the side so that there won't be any damage.

……..
B-Fresh beans. The fresh beans afterwards. Ma'am, we will make some bean soup.
-Let's see it.
B-Ma'am, now we're cooking spaghetti and then we'll make the bean soup.
-Yes, but we don't only put spaghetti. You will use a variety of things. Didn't we agree you will put… What exactly did we say we will put on the spaghetti?
A variety of things. So, what will we add? Everything not attracted by the magnet. Which are the ones not attracted by the magnet?

…….
-… and we don't add everything. (She empties the cardboard). Wait a minute. The magnets to the side, children (she takes the magnets)
I- Here's the beans, so that everyone can reach them.
- Take your glue sticks.
B-Ma'am, we need some butter for the spaghetti.
-Think about butter, will you add any, what else will you add?
……
B-Let's put the beans for butter.