Story Drama in Northern Playrooms: Supporting Children's English and Tłı̨chǫ Language Learning

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Kate and Emma, two instructors working in an early childhood educator (ECE) certification and diploma program at Far North College (the name of the college and all the participants are pseudonyms for review purposes), partnered with a university team to conduct collaborative action research. They introduced story drama, a pedagogical approach that was new to them and to the ECE interns they taught, while drawing on resources of their university partners (the authors of this paper).

They saw the story drama approach as potentially valuable for ECEs to develop skills and understanding in order to provide authentic contexts for children's English language development and for supporting ECEs and children in learning Tłı̨chǫ, the local Indigenous language. Because of historical and ongoing colonizing policies and practices, many Indigenous parents and early childhood educators in Canada are not confident in their knowledge of their languages and feel ill-prepared to teach their traditional language to future generations (Hare and Anderson 2010).

Our focus on oral language comes from a recognition of its contributions to learning that have been identified through decades of research (Boyd and Galda 2011; Cambourne 1984; Cazden 1988/2001). However, oral language is only one mode that communicates meaning. Our research also recognizes that nonverbal communication modes, including gesture, facial expressions, postures, positions and body movements (Wohlwend 2011) also communicate meaning. They are not simply providing contextual information for language-based communication.

Much of the research shows that the contributions of oral language to children's learning cannot be fully realized using traditional classroom interactions where teachers initiate a topic, ask questions and provide evaluative feedback on students' responses (Cazden 1988/2001; Fassler 2003). The purposes of teachers' and children's language must extend beyond asking

individual children to provide information about a topic and then praising or correcting the child's contribution.

We examined the potential of story drama as a classroom practice that encourages interns' communication to include more than close-ended questions and evaluating children's responses. We were interested in learning about the range of purposes for which interns and children used language in story drama interactions. With the goal of improving teaching, our analysis is part of the ongoing cycle of teaching, data collection and reflection that characterizes action research (MacDonald et al 2024; Somekh and Zeichner 2009). We tell the story of the action research with the hope that, in addition to guiding Kate and Emma's instruction in their program, it may provide insights useful to other ECEs and teachers.

Story drama

Story drama begins with the ECE selecting a story from a book or from their own lives. After the story is told or read, the ECE establishes a problem-solving situation related to the story, with the goal of inviting children to help her solve the problem. The ECE's role, usually that of a character from the story, allows her to guide and support children as they take up roles to explore ideas and collaboratively solve a problem within the imagined world of the story drama (O'Neill 1994).

Story drama positions children as capable storytellers and problem solvers who can contribute to the story narrative through their actions and words (Heathcote and Bolton 1995). Previous research has linked children's enhanced language development, conceptual learning and problem-solving abilities to participation in story drama (O'Neill 1994). The polished, practiced performance that requires memorization of a script, a characteristic of plays that are performed for an audience, is not expected in story drama. Instead, the teacher encourages and responds to children's suggestions and actions in the emerging drama with the goal of deepening their thinking and creative problem-solving, and with the potential of fostering an exploration of character, theme and narrative structure. Children can also try out new vocabulary introduced within the context of the story drama narrative. They have access to their teacher's and peers' background knowledge, are exposed to new viewpoints and learn about alternate ways to solve problems (Wanerman 2010).

Methods

In September, Sarah visited Far North College and provided background information about story drama. She described a story drama and follow-up writing/drawing activities that she had facilitated in a northern Ontario kindergarten classroom. The story was one she had been told by the kindergarten teacher, about going blueberry picking as a child. Her parents encouraged their children to sing to keep the bears away. As part of the teacher's action research, Sarah and the research assistants took up roles as adult family members and the children were part of the family as they picked blueberries in the bushes around the community. Some children spontaneously took up roles as bears who wanted the blueberries that had been picked. The children and adults chose a song to sing, and the bears obligingly ran off when they heard the singing. Follow-up writing included providing a map to good blueberry picking spots in the area and writing about blueberry picking experiences.

Sarah also did a story drama demonstration, inviting ECE interns to take up roles while she took another role. The story was from a children's picture book, *Stanley's Party* (Bailey 2003). In this story, Stanley the dog is lonely and bored when his family goes out. He finds things to do that are not allowed when they are at home: sitting on the couch; eating food from the refrigerator; playing music on the stereo; and inviting other dogs in the neighbourhood to a party at his house. After reading the story, Sarah took up a role she created that was not in the story: Sadie, the Dog Advice Lady. She introduced the Tłı̨chǫ word for dogs: Tłı̀. She also introduced the problem: Stanley has written a letter to Sadie, the Dog Advice Lady, saying that he was tired of having fun alone. Sadie has called on her friends, the ECE interns, to help her give advice to Stanley on how to solve his problem.

Kate and Emma did follow-up classes with the interns to discuss possibilities for story drama. They asked the interns to work together in groups of three to plan and carry out story drama scenarios in their Playroom classes.

The action research context: Playroom

Playroom was scheduled on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. Local daycares, kindergartens and Aboriginal Head Start programs signed up to bring children to participate in the Playroom experience. Ten interns participated in the study: five Indigenous and five non-Indigenous. Two of the five Indigenous interns had some knowledge of Tłı̨chǫ. Groups of three or four interns rotated through the Playroom on a schedule of four to five weeks. Two different groups participated each week. Each group of ECE interns created play centers from the wide-ranging set of materials in the program's storage room and brought other materials, such as a canoe, themselves. There were two physical spaces that could accommodate 20 or so children at the centers, so two groups of ECE interns implemented their story dramas each week. Within each group of ECE interns, every intern took the lead at different times and the other two

supported them. Figure 1 provides further details of each story, classroom setup, approaches to introducing stories and problems for collaborative problem-solving.

Figure 1

Story Drama Themes, Settings and Language Goals

Team 1 Classroom Setup: Teepee, northern animal puppets, northern clothing and camping gear; construction paper trees on the wall; building blocks of pine wood, some with bark	
Story/Context	Approach & problem to solve
Fox and Squirrel by Ruth Ohi	Approach: Mogwi was hooting in the nest to get the children's attention; introduced Mogwi and his letter; read letter and book. The Tłı̨chǫ language words introduced were *Mogwi* (owl), *Dlòo* (squirrel), *Nǫgèe* (Fox), *Mahsi cho* (thank you). Problem: Help build Squirrel a new home
The Fox and My Boot by Lana de Bastiani	Approach: Same as above. The Tłı̨chǫ language words introduced were *Mogwi* (owl), *Nǫgèe* (Fox), *Hoteèdà kè* (mukluks), *Mahsi cho* (thank you). Problem: Design a new boot to replace the missing boot
Team 2 Classroom Setup: Fish market; wooden boat; blocks to build boat or fishing rod; lake with fishing poles and logs around it; table for decorating fish; "I spy" wall with animal pictures and Tłı̨chǫ words; local museum Edukit; light table with fish; from the kit; tent; Dene laws on the wall	
Story/Context	Approach & problem to solve
Fishing in the Summertime by Monica Ittusardjuat	Approach: Mogwi was hooting from the tree to get the children's attention; introduced Mogwi and his letter; sat around pretend lake to read letter and co-create a story for a wordless picture book with the children; educator wrote on a chart paper while the story was being created. The Tłı̨chǫ language word introduced was *Mahsi cho* (thank you). Problem: to answer what was forgotten in our class story that you could add to the story?
Team 3 Classroom Setup: Regular setup in learning centres	
Story/Theme	Approach & problem to solve
The Polar Bear Son: An Inuit Tale – retold and illustrated by Lydia Dabchovich	Approach: First read story; then switched to telling the story. The Tłı̨chǫ language words introduced were *sah* (bear) and *chekoa* (children). Problem: Acted out the part about the old lady hiding the son from the hunters in the village; What do you do when a beloved family member lives far away? Help the old lady get in touch with her son
Team 4 Classroom Setup: Blanket on the carpet for story time	
Story/Theme	Approach & problem to solve
The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle	Approach: Read story, asking questions throughout. No Tłı̨chǫ language words were introduced. Problem: Children pretend to be one big caterpillar developing into a butterfly—how do all the children fit together on a blanket that gets smaller as the caterpillar gets bigger?

The children, who arrived on a bus around 9:30 a.m., were greeted by the interns, and by Kate and Emma. They were then invited into the Playroom spaces to play at various centres related to the story drama theme and to participate in the formal story drama if they wished. The ECEs and teachers from the daycare/kindergarten left the room, so the interns, as well as Kate and Emma, were responsible for the care of the children. The bus came to pick up the children and their ECEs and teachers about 90 minutes later. In the afternoon, Kate and Emma met with the interns to talk about what went well and what could be improved.

Data collection and analysis

Kate and Emma used an iPad to record videos of the interns' interactions with the children. The children's parents/guardians had given written permission to participate in the project. We analyzed 24 video recordings of the story drama interactions of the ten interns. Our inductive data analysis of the video transcripts was led by one question: For what purposes do interns and children use language and/or actions?

We developed a total of 14 social purpose codes for the interns' meaning-making acts and 12 social purpose codes for the children's meaning-making acts. The inter-rater reliability was 84.7%.

Our codes aligned with those of past research, so we grouped our codes, when applicable, under Halliday's (1978) categories:

- instrumental (using language for own purposes),
- regulatory (using language to get others to do something),
- interactional (using language for maintaining and developing relationships),
- personal (expressing emotion and identity),
- heuristic (using language to find out about the world),
- imaginative (using language creatively) and
- representational (using language to provide information/explain)

Figures 2 and 3 provide examples of the utterances and actions illustrative of each of our codes.

Figure 2

Purposes of Interns' Language and Actions

Categories and codes	Examples of utterances and/or actions
Regulatory - Learning	
Inviting (continued) participation in role play	"Let's go see this tree. Let's see if we can find any squirrels."
Inviting (continued) participation through the use of voice expressions	"Hoot, hoot, hoot!" (Imitating owl sounds) "Chh/chh/chh/chh/chh/chh." (Making squirrel sounds)
Asking children to repeat Tłı̨chǫ language model	"Mo-gwi. Can you say Mogwi?"
Regulatory – Behavioural Management	
Responding with praise/ affirmation	"Oh, … I like that you're looking behind the tree. Good investigations!"
Managing behaviour using soft commands	"Okay, we have to listen to what Mogwi said, let's just wait."
Managing behaviour using questioning approach	"Is everybody ready to listen?"
Managing behaviour nonverbally	*Intern halts as if recalling something and makes a "stop" gesture with two extended index fingers directed at the students.*
Heuristic	
Asking for information and/or explanations	"We are gonna try and FIT in our cocoon, but as the caterpillar eats, what happens to him?"
Asking for clarification	"No squirrel? Are you sure?"
Asking questions to encourage creativity/suggesting possibilities	"You can't find Mr. Squirrel? How about you ask your friends to help you?"
Inviting students to predict/infer	"Let's think about the squirrel. As a squirrel, where would I hide?"
Representational	
Providing new information	"So, Mogwi says that Mr. Fox was chasing the squirrel, and now he's lost!"
Providing Tłı̨chǫ language model	"Do you know Mogwi means owl in Tłı̨chǫ?"
Labelling objects in English	"This is an owl!"

Language uses in story drama interactions

Interns

As shown in Table 1, the interns' utterances and actions were most frequently for the purpose of getting the children to do something, either to engage in developing the narrative, to resolve the problem arising from the story or to manage children's behaviour to facilitate their participation. The interns often used expressions such as, "Let's go . . ." or "Let's find. . ." In one of the story drama settings, an intern directed the children's attention to an envelope and encouraged them to do something with the envelope by saying: "Should we open up the envelope and see what the owl has to say?" She followed this invitation by saying, "Okay, come sit, let's hear it. . .let's come sit and listen to what the owl's asking us to do."

The story drama setting also fostered the interns' *imaginative* use of sound to direct children's behaviour, as they made the sounds of story drama characters to encourage the children to go to a particular part of the room to find one of the animals. In their attempt to address one of the goals of the story drama, to teach Tłı̨chǫ language, the interns used language for *regulatory* purposes by asking children to repeat a language model (eg, "Can you say *Mogwi*?"). Interns also used praise, affirmed children's language and actions, and gently directed children's behaviour (eg, "Let's make sure all our friends fit," when children curled up as pupae about to become butterflies in the Hungry Caterpillar story drama).

Table 1

Social Purposes of Interns' Meaning-Making Acts

Social Purpose	Talk & Action (n = 809)	Action (n = 19)	Overall (n = 828)
Regulatory	61.5	100.0	62.4
Heuristic	30.2	0.0	29.5
Representational	8.3	0.0	8.1

The interns' language for *heuristic* purposes usually involved describing the problem scenario and asking children for information about what they should do to help solve the problem: "But Mr. Squirrel's house is broken! What are we going to do to help him?"

Language used for *representational* purposes usually went hand-in-hand with their questions about solving a problem, as the interns provided new information about the story drama narrative. For example, an intern explained to the children that "Mogwi says that Mr. Fox was chasing the squirrel, and now he's lost!" The explanation was followed by a question about how the children will help find Mr. Squirrel.

Children

We recognize the limitations of the Playroom setting (since a different group of children attended each week, the interns could not develop relationships with them) for the ECEs to encourage children's talk. As Tables 1 and 2 show, there were many more intern utterances than child utterances.

Typical of interactions initiated by interns' *regulatory* talk, the intern provided a language model with the intent of teaching the Tłı̨chǫ word and asked the children to say the word.

Intern: "Okay so, *déchiqueté* is a boot!" (as part of her invitation to the children to find a hidden déchiqueté in the playroom)

Intern: "Can you say *déchiqueté*?"

Student: "*Déchiqueté*!"

Because the story dramas mostly involved seeking characters, children's *representational* language tended to provide information about objects that might be used in the play or about the location of particular animal characters in the role play narrative. For example, when an intern said, "Let's pretend to put our hats on, and what else?" a child responded, "Mittens!"

Table 2

Social Purposes of Children's Meaning-Making Acts

Social Purpose	Talk & Action (n = 270)	Action (n = 99)	Overall (n = 369)
Affirming & Repeating	29.2	78.8	42.5
Representational	36.7	1.0	27.1
Regulatory	11.5	15.2	12.5
Heuristic	11.5	0.0	8.4
Imaginative	9.6	2.0	7.6
Interactional	1.5	3.0	1.9

When children used language for *regulatory* purposes, they often reinforced the interns' efforts to manage the class or to direct the children to follow along with the narrative. For example, when an intern prompted the children to look for trees around the classroom, a child turned to a peer and said: "Let's go over there." In another example, when an intern said, "Do you guys want to sit down?," a child said to their peers, "Sit down guys."

Children's utterances for *heuristic* purposes were usually requests for clarification about the interns' instructions. *Imaginative* language involved making sounds for characters in the story. Offering assistance to or negotiating with peers to get an object were the primary purposes of *interactional* language and actions.

Story drama in early learning settings: What we've learned

We found many instances of what Boyd and Galda (2011) call "real talk," as children asked for information, gave explanations and used their imagination to add to the story. The children and interns learned Tłı̨chǫ words, such as *Mogwi*, very well when Mogwi was a character in the story dramas. However, several of the interactions centering on teaching Tłı̨chǫ language put the children in

a position where they simply repeated or affirmed what the interns said. Additionally, the ratio of adult to child talk was heavily skewed toward adult talk.

Kate, Emma and we believe that greater attention to supporting ECEs to be a part of the story drama as cocreators of the stories with the children would foster more child talk (Heathcote and Bolton 1995; O'Neill 1994; Wanerman 2010). Since the project began, we have also come to recognize that the story drama approach and the interns' attempts to teach Tłı̨chǫ are rooted in western perspectives that do not show respect for the complex conceptualizations underpinning Indigenous words and expressions (Steinhauer et al 2020; Steinhauer 2023). Fully understanding the Tłı̨chǫ concept of *Mogwi* requires going beyond a simple translation to the English word through, for example, demonstration or immersion (Cambourne 1984), as was observed in this story drama context. Future support of Tłı̨chǫ language teaching and learning for ECEs and children will start with consulting Tłı̨chǫ Elders and Knowledge Keepers who can provide contextual information about the experiences that are embedded within the Tłı̨chǫ words in relationship with the land. We have learned the importance of drawing upon Indigenous pedagogies and perspectives in order to capitalize on the authentic, contextualized language learning affordances of story drama.

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