Young children’s use of cohesion and facework: Interactions at the classroom sand centre

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Abstract

In this study, we investigated the ways in which young children used cohesive devices and demonstrated facework to achieve social purposes in their interactions at the sand centre in one kindergarten class. Analyses of video-recordings of five-year old children revealed that children used cohesive strategies, such as referring to objects and people using pronouns, rather than proper nouns. They used repetitions and conjunctions to tie together the ideas from one speaker to the next. Additionally, conversation partners were readily able to construct appropriate meanings from the general references using contextual information. Further, their oral communication demonstrated cooperativeness and engagement as part of their social development. Children used language primarily for imaginative purposes, in addition to communicating information, regulating others’ behavior, and expressing their individuality and emotional responses to activities at the sand centre. They were least likely to use language for interactional purposes. Children’s use of face-work strategies included complimenting peers, softening regulatory language with words, such as “just”, and showing interest in others’ activities.

Keywords: child language development, cohesion, facework strategies

Introduction and purpose

“You get the purple one because you’re the mom, right?” five-year old Leah tells her peer during dramatic play in a Northern Rural Canadian kindergarten classroom. The tag question, “right?” softens the sense of being “bossy” as Leah assigns forks to peers. At the other end of the
Jean Paul uses a conjunction to create a flow of ideas in the imaginary play. His peer fixes up a sandwich for the pair and Jean Paul says, “And a salad.” There’s a sense of cohesion between the contributions made by each boy in their dramatic play conversation. The children’s use of language reflects social understandings that have been constructed through everyday interactions with family, classroom and community members. Though language is not the only semiotic tool available to children, it is a particularly important one for achieving social intentions and fulfilling personal needs in a wide range of social contexts (Boyd & Galda, 2011; Comber & Nicols, 2004; Halliday, 1975, Leah’s use of language and other semiotic material for positive social value is a demonstration of facework (Arundale, 2006; Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967; Shimanoff, 1988). Jean Paul’s contribution to meaning-making through maintaining a flow of ideas in conversation (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) is evidence of his ability to continue a flow of conversation, demonstrating cohesion (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). As we found in our examination of children’s interactions with peers and their teacher at the sand centre in this kindergarten classroom, children develop a healthy repertoire of strategies for carrying out this social work using language at a very young age.

Classroom teachers may intuitively recognize children’s demonstration of such social knowledge, but often do not have the linguistic backgrounds to describe these and other aspects of children’s language (Author). These teachers value oral language as a communicative tool and as a foundation to literacy and all learning (Resnick & Snow, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978) but are uncertain as to what they could be noticing about children’s language that would inform their teaching. This was the starting point for a six-year collaborative action research project involving an ongoing cycle of initiation, reflection and refinement of pedagogical and assessment approaches. Teachers’ action research initiatives involve creating opportunities for children to
interact by setting up dramatic play and other types of play contexts in their classrooms. With an overarching goal of enhancing the language growth of young children through supporting their teachers’ professional learning, teachers video record children’s interactions and then talk with university researchers about what we notice about children’s language and social learning during research visits every six to eight weeks. Our collaborative action research activities are based on a view that observing and analyzing children’s talk during play provides a window not only into their knowledge of what they can do with language and their knowledge of language and language forms, but also their cultural awareness of ways of interacting and their knowledge of the world (Owocki & Goodman, 2002).

The principal investigator (PI) of the study, a former teacher and now researcher with expertise in literacy education, invited a doctoral student with expertise in linguistics to work with her on a linguistic analysis of the data. The linguistic-oriented researcher has provided helpful ways to think and talk about the PI’s intuitive assessment of children’s language. Together we have added a new branch to the action research work, as we analyze the video recorded interactions with the following questions as guides:

1. For what social purposes do children use language as they interact with peers during play at the sand centre?
2. How do young children use cohesive devices to communicate meaning in these interactions?
3. How do children use facework strategies to achieve/demonstrate social intentions in their interactions?
In this paper, our description of the theoretical framework, methods and findings leads to a discussion of the ways in which this study is informing our collaborative action research work with teachers.

**Literature review**

Our study builds on a body of research, conducted across many decades, showing that play is foundational to children’s conceptual and social learning and to their language and literacy development (e.g., Bodrova & Leong, 2011; Ervin-Tripp, 1991; Levy, 1984; Whitehead, 2009). Play contexts provide abundant opportunities for the authentic talk espoused by researchers as being important to all learning (e.g., Barnes, 1975/1992; Boyd & Galda, 2011); the kinds of talk that researchers have found to be minimal or absent in many classrooms around the world (Alexander, 2000; Cazden, 1988/2001). In the following sections, we provide definitions and synthesize research examining children’s language in terms of the three elements of our research: functions of language, cohesion and facework.

*Functions of language*

Language is “a rich and adaptable instrument for the realization of [a child’s] intentions; there is hardly any limit to what he can do with it” (Halliday, 1969, p. 27). Observations of a very young child’s verbal and non-verbal communication at home provided the foundation for Halliday’s contributions to our understanding of language. Over the course of Halliday’s observations, Nigel, the young child, used language for seven categories of purposes, ranging from instrumental—to satisfy his needs; to interactional—to build relationships; to
representational—to communicate information and ideas (Halliday, 1969; 1977). These purposes are detailed in our methods section.

In the earliest research that examined functions of language in children’s play, Smilansky (1968) found that children carried out the following purposes in their dramatic play: taking up a role or changing identities, assigning a role to an object (e.g., a pencil is assigned a role as a worm), describing actions and situations while in role, and moving the imagined play situation forward (e.g., “I’m going to pick you up on my snowmobile”). Almost a decade later, Tough (1976) classified the social purposes of four-to seven-year-old children’s talk in dramatic and construction play settings. Participating children used language for the purposes of: self-maintaining; directing others’ behaviour; reporting on present and past experiences; moving towards logical reasoning; predicting; projecting and imagining.

The most recent research of which we are aware is tied to another branch of our collaborative action research project (Author, under review). Our analysis of 147 video clips of five-year-old children’s interactions in dramatic and construction play showed that children used language for 36 specific purposes. We grouped these specific purposes into seven categories: (1) using language for their own needs, (2) for getting along, (3) for learning, (4) for directing, (5) for imagining, (6) for expressing disagreement, and (7) for real life. Children most frequently used language for learning and for imagining (e.g., to give information about, explain, or elaborate on something, or to assign roles to an object/themselves/peers in the imaginary play). In gender comparisons, girls were significantly more likely than boys to use language for their own needs (e.g., to assert ownership of an object or space; to ask for assistance), whereas boys were more significantly more likely to use language for imagining and for directing others’ behavior.
Cohesion

Cohesive ties are used to illustrate the relationship between sentences as well as ideas, supporting the “forward motion” of play talk with or without teacher talk. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), cohesion is necessary for meaning-making in writing and in speech. It is achieved through the use of cohesive ties, such as: reference, repetition, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical. Reference usually involves the use of pronouns. For cohesive purposes, the pronouns refer backward (anaphoric usage) or forward (cataphoric usage) in a flow of conversation. Repetition of words and phrases may serve to connect ideas in a flow of conversation, rather than simply being a restatement of something previously uttered (Brody 1986). Substitution through the use of words such as, one, some, or any, signals a relationship between linguistic items (p. 298). The basic function of ellipsis is to “create cohesion by leaving out” (p. 196). Ellipsis relies on the hearer’s understanding and grasp of a specific word or phrase which then does not have to be repeated. For example: a person who is asked, “What are you doing?” does not have to provide more than the word describing the action: “Cooking” in order to indicate that she or he is the one doing the cooking. Conjunction establishes a semantic connection between utterances. Lexical cohesion refers to how words are selected and linked together to create meaning in text. The word can be repeated or take the form of a synonym.

Previous research examining young children’s use of cohesive elements in play narratives, shows that the number and type of cohesive devices increases with age, making older children’s narratives more comprehensible (Peterson & Dodsworth, 1991). Regardless of whether children are language impaired, autistic, or normal-functioning, they use the same cohesion strategies and exhibit similar patterns and rates of use (Baltaxe & D’Angiola, 1992). Pellegrini’s (1982) analysis of four preschoolers’ interactions during dramatic and constructive
play showed that children used repetition of introductory utterances to start new play sessions in both contexts. Repetition was used to clarify the topic or theme of the play session in dramatic play but not in constructive play. The children used pronouns to refer to past or future actions/objects in dramatic play and referred to objects and actions outside the play context in their constructive play.

*Face and Facework*

A key element of politeness theory (Goffman, 1955) is the concept of *face*. Goffman (1967) defines face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (p. 5). Facework refers to “the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face” (Goffman 1967, p. 12). For example, poise is a type of facework. Face-saving practices differ across cultures, societies and contexts, as well as between individuals. Essentially, individuals have two orientations: the first is a defensive orientation to saving one’s own face and the second is a protective orientation towards saving others’ face. Credited for enriching our understanding about the details of social organization and social interaction, Goffman (1959) proposed the presentation of self as intertwined with the ways individual projects themselves and their assumptions about others.

In our analysis of young children’s conversation during play, we recognize the need for the more universal theory of politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). They define face as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” including “the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of” (p. 61.) Further, Brown and Levinson proposed that self-image consists of a positive and negative face. Positive face, they argue, is the need for others’ approval. Conversely, negative face involves the need for autonomy, or the
desire to be unimpeded by others. They also proposed that at times, communication between interlocutors could threaten each other’s positive face, negative face, or both. They refer to these as face-threatening-acts (FTAs).

Also relevant to our examination of facework in young children’s interactions is the examination of “cultural conceptualizations of the social self and its relationship to others as an alternative and more fruitful way of studying the relevance and dynamics of face and facework in interpersonal contacts” (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003, p. 1463), and recognition that face is both interactional and relational as the social self evolves through relationships with others (Arundale, 2006). In order to achieve a deeper understanding about how the children in our study navigated conversation in play we examined facework both in children’s peer interaction and in child-teacher interaction. We interpret Goffman’s (1967) and Brown and Levinson’s concepts of facework for children’s language use in play talk. We note that both politeness theory and facework are useful tools in trying to understand both verbal and non-verbal cues as well as the extent to which FTAs occur in peer interaction and child/teacher interaction.

In one of the few studies of young children’s use of facework, Hatch (1987) applied Goffman’s construct of facework to peer interactions in kindergarten classrooms and found that children aged 5–6 years had developed “a substantial, yet incomplete, knowledge of the norms, rules and expectations of adult face-work” (p.100) and tended to be less tactful than adults. Overall, studies on face, face needs and facework tended to focus on face concerns across cultures in an attempt to dispute the claim of “universality” made by Brown and Levinson (1987).

Matsumoto’s (1988) study is one of several which has challenged the universality of face. A study of Japanese culture involving honorifics and verbs that indicate giving and receiving gave evidence to suggest that Brown and Levinson’s theory does not correctly predict politeness
indicators in Japanese society. Cultural variability is therefore and important factor in examinations of face. Another study that reports on cultural differences in the examination of face concentrated on Chinese speakers and American English speakers’ responses to compliments. Results revealed that Chinese speakers’ strategies in response to compliments focus on modesty and American English speakers’ responses show agreement (Chen, 1993). More recent research has examined perceptions of apology intentions (Park & Guan, 2009), positive-face redress strategies (Ruzickova, 2007), and the ways in which some FTAs are deployed through humour (Zajdman, 1995).

**Research methods**

The language samples analyzed in this paper come from a corpus of video-recordings of kindergarten children (aged 5–6 years) recorded by the teacher, Polly (all names of participants and communities are pseudonyms), a participant in our six-year collaborative action research study teaching in Aspen Elementary School.

**Research contexts and participants**

Aspen, with a population of about 3000 people, is an agricultural-based working class community approximately 500 kilometers north of a major urban area and 4000 kilometers from our university. Polly had been teaching for 32 years at the time data were gathered. Children attend Polly’s kindergarten class half-time; with some attending only in the mornings or afternoons and some attending two full-days per week. All of the 32 children (20 girls and 12 boys) in her classes participated in the research study, in terms of being video recorded while playing at a centre at some point during the school year. English is the mother tongue of Polly and of all the children in her class.
Polly’s kindergarten program is centre-based with centres in two large classrooms located across the hall from each other. In one room, Polly uses a carpeted area with a SmartBoard as the formal instructional area. Also in this room are the classroom library, water table, paint easels, and a table used for crafts. The room across the hall houses the sand centre, climbing equipment, a puppet theatre, and a two-story frame house that has also served as a restaurant, a store, and other buildings, depending on the dramatic play theme of the month. Polly sets up 22 centres every month. Children are expected to visit each centre during the daily 45-minute centre times within a month and then can return to the centres they prefer, generally visiting most of the centres a few times per month.

Data collection

To record children’s language and actions while they were playing, Polly placed an iPod on a tripod on a table in front of the sand centre; usually twice weekly between October and May. We university researchers visited Polly and her students about every six weeks to get to know the students whose language we were analyzing, and to talk with Polly about children’s language use in the videos she was uploading to our secure website. We met with Polly during her preparation time to discuss observations of the children as learners and members of the classroom social network—factors that might help us to understand more fully and accurately the children’s interactions in the video clips. Also at this time, we asked Polly to provide additional contextual information about events preceding or following the play activity recorded in the videos. Although Polly also recorded children’s interactions the dramatic play, puppet and water centres, we selected videos recorded at the sand centre to ensure consistency of the environment, which would then allow us to do a detailed description while looking at differences and similarities that arose. As shown in Table 1, the sand centre videos ranged in length from 2 to 27 minutes. In
each session, there was usually one teacher and a combination of boy and girl peers. The selected videos contain recorded images of 22 children.

Table 1: Analyzed videos of children at sand centre

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video Segment’s Name</th>
<th>Time (in minutes)</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Gender of children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing in sand</td>
<td>14.57</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoveling and playing in sand</td>
<td>9.01</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanding houses</td>
<td>26.42</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secret base in the sand table</td>
<td>9.31</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing farm</td>
<td>22.01</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sand table farm</td>
<td>24.54</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm in the sand table</td>
<td>9.09</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Transcription and Data Analysis**

The video clips were transcribed using the Jeffersonian Transcription System (http://mis.ucd.ie/wiki/JeffersonianTranscription). To ensure consistency across the transcripts and accuracy of the transcribing, transcribers met every six weeks to transcribe common video clips and compare transcripts. Additionally, a second transcriber transcribed 10% of the videos. The most consistently accurate transcriber reviewed both transcripts for discrepancies and corrected inaccuracies before the transcripts were analyzed.

We analyzed 382 utterances within the seven videos. As described below, we deductively analyzed children’s use of language, their use of cohesion devices, and the facework they carried out in the seven video clips. Our initial analysis involved identifying who the interlocutors were: boy peer or girl peer; the specific context of sand play; teacher interaction; and the subcategories of verbal cohesion that occurred in specific utterances. We viewed the video clips frequently, in addition to reading transcripts, to ensure reliability and accuracy.

*Analyzing functions of language in children’s interactions*

We analyzed the social purposes of different utterances using Halliday’s (1969) seven functions of language. We found that the instrumental, regulatory, interactional, personal, heuristic and representational categories overlapped in many of the children’s utterances. For example, applying the function “imaginative” to play seemed redundant and required a subcategory in some cases. We made this observation on the basis that most of the play interaction was imaginative. Examples of our analysis are found in Figure 2.
Table 2: Examples of functions of language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function of language</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental (to satisfy needs)</td>
<td>I want a tree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Now it’s my turn to race.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulatory – to get others to do something</td>
<td>You can’t go this way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Look at the castle!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactional – to build/maintain social relationships</td>
<td>Do you play horseshoes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think we got this!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal – to express individuality/emotions</td>
<td>Guess how old I am?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Because I was too scared it would run.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heuristic – to seek information</td>
<td>Where’s the highway gonna go to?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why doesn’t it come out the other side?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imaginative – to create new contexts/ideas beyond the immediate context</td>
<td>That’s a monster right there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>They’re buried! They’re buried!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(/Descriptive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It’s a digger so it can bury people. (/Representational)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’m just gonna peddle… I’m just gonna run. (/personal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Then we gonna bury this one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(/regulatory)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representational – to communicate information and ideas</td>
<td>Do you play horseshoes?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analyzing elements of cohesion

As shown in Table 3, we used Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) categories in our analysis of children’s use of cohesive devices. We found that the children used three devices: repetition, references (use of pronouns to refer to something already mentioned or to something of future interest in the conversation), and conjunctions to establish cohesion between ideas and sentences. The use of pronouns (e.g., “these things here”) demonstrates collaboration and common understanding between interlocutors.
Table 3: Examples of analysis of cohesive devices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohesive device</th>
<th>Examples from participating children’s utterances during play at the sand centre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>References: mainly used to refer back to a word, idea or concept.</td>
<td><em>This truck ordered us, dirt.</em> <em>We crashed in them.</em> <em>I’m burying it.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conjunctions: Mainly used not only to join utterances but to hold or take the floor</td>
<td><em>See the door. And there’s the door.</em> <em>’Cause I’m making a garden</em> <em>So he knows not to crash here.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetitions: Mainly used to create emphasis for imaginative usage, holding the floor and regulating others’ behavior in the context of sand play</td>
<td><em>Nouns: Building, hundreds, castle, mud.</em> <em>Verb forms: sticking, trespass, Attention:</em> <em>Hey! Stop!</em> <em>Animal sounds: Oink, oink!</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Analyzing politeness and facework**

To understand how facework was negotiated in the interactions, we examined ways in which participating children and their teacher used language for the following categories of facework (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Ting-Toomey, 1999):

1. Face-restoration (self-autonomy)
2. Face-saving (other autonomy)

These facework strategies respond to a need for others to acknowledge one’s privacy and self-sufficiency, and at the same time, to show consideration of others’ need for independence. For example, when one child says to another “I’m gonna go wash my hands on the other side, okay?” she is demonstrating her independence and her need for non-imposition. She simultaneously shows consideration for the need for freedom and space in the listener by using the word “okay” which acknowledges the listener’s need for control.
3. Face-giving (other inclusion)

4. Face-assertion (self-inclusion)

Inclusion-oriented facework responds to the need to be recognized by others as friendly and likeable. Inclusion strategies include demonstrating cooperative behaviour or expressing a need for collaboration. A good example of how one utterance can show both sides of inclusion comes from Polly when she asks, “Are you sure Lego’s a good thing to bring in the sand table?”. Polly is showing interest in the child’s play activity, appears pleasant as well as giving the child the opportunity to co-operate with her suggestion. Polly effectively protects her own need for inclusion and supports the child’s need for inclusion.

We found these categories helpful to examine the different types of orientation that the children adopted to save face, protect another’s face and/or maintain face by using direct/indirect language and expressing requests and apologies. Further, we looked at specific speech markers that seemed to show evidence of seeking cooperation, through arguing or requesting within the parameters of play. Examples of these include: “well”, “ok”, “yeah/yup” and “just”. The rationale here is that children’s play talk may not be as ritualized as adult conversation.

Findings

Children’s use of language to achieve social purposes

As Table 4 shows, participating children used language for a wide range of functions. The children found that sand play offered many opportunities to use languages for imaginative purposes. Children asked questions about the environment and convey facts and information to fill in gaps of knowledge, at times making connections to real-life experiences (e.g., “One of my cousins’ names is ___”) and to cultural situations (“It’s Halloween already”). The children used
language to talk about their own needs (e.g., “I need one of those fences”). They frequently used language to describe their actions (“I’m gonna go wash my hands”), to state ownership over an idea or object (“I found this animal!”), and asserting their roles (“I’m a farmer!”). We noted that the interactional function was not prominent, perhaps because the children found space to play by themselves in their own corner of the sandbox. It is also interesting that there is such great use of the representational function, as many of the utterances were explanations and/or conclusions.

**Table 4:** Functions of language while playing in the sand box

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functions of Language</th>
<th>Percentage of Utterances (n = 352)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imaginative</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representational</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulatory</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imaginative hybrid</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heuristic</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactional</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other hybrids</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the hybrid functions are combinations of the imaginative function and another function, as demonstrated in this excerpt from Secret Base in the Sand Table.

Rick: I’m building a secret base.

Polly: What’s your –what’s your base for?

Rick: The military.

Polly: The military! Military base.
Rick: I’m building a cage for my dinosaur.
Polly: Is that their secret weapon? Yeah?
Rick: I’m gonna put some dirt in it.
Polly: He’s kind of ferocious. Maybe he’s their security system, hey?
Rick: Yeah he is.
Polly: Maybe he is. Kind of unexpected. No one’s going to expect that when they come attack.
Rick: He can break the fence. Only when he sees an enemy.
Polly: So how do you protect the people who are–this military. How do you protect them from him?
Rick: The–the military–he’s the military’s pet.

Here, Rick announces the imaginative context for his sand play, creating a military base with a pet dinosaur as security. Polly asks questions to encourage Rick to build on this context. Because he is explaining how the military base is protected, his language, in our view, is for imaginative and representational purposes. Another instance of hybrid purposes occurs when he describes what he is doing (instrumental function) within the imaginative context: building a secret base and building a cage for his dinosaur.

We also found that children used language in the sand centre to provide information about themselves. Often, either the physical object or the imaginative role assigned to the object provided a starting point for sharing information about themselves. We coded the utterances as carrying out a representational function if they narrated events and as achieving a personal intention if the utterance conveyed emotion (e.g., Tina was frightened about riding a running horse). In the following example, excerpted from a later portion of the same video, Tina provides information about herself having ridden a real horse once, narrating the events. Rick, not to be
outdone, provides evidence that he has opportunity to ride real horses on a regular basis because he has six horses.

Tina: Once I rided a real horse.

Polly: Yeah? Once you did?

Rick: I have a farm and I have six horses.

Tina: I never rided a horse before and it was my first time riding it. It didn’t run. Because I was too scared if it would run. So, I just had a walk.

Children’s use of cohesion

Participating children used the verbal cohesion categories of references, repetitions and conjunctions most frequently to tie together the ideas of the speaker and those of their peers. Throughout the seven play sessions that we examined in the sand box we observed 12 different types of references, four different uses of conjunctions, and four ways of using repetition for cohesive purposes: using nouns verb forms; animal sounds; or an interjection to get someone’s attention. For the most part, children used references such as it, that, and they. Children and Polly used the conjunctions but, because, and and. Typically, children used conjunctions at the start of an utterance to connect their contribution to a play narrative with something a peer had previously contributed. In the excerpt below, “Sand Table Farm”, four peers (all boys) are interacting with the teacher, Polly.

Ryder: Then we gotta bury this one. Gotta bury this one.

Jace: That guy’s.

Ryder: There now. Now they’re all buried.

And later. . .
Polly: Oh my! How come these are all buried?

Ryder: I don’t know.

Polly: Was there an avalanche?

_Polly describes an avalanche._

Polly: When it starts rolling down the hill and it starts coming really really fast.

Ryder: Yeah, that’s what was happen.

Ryder: So they, digged underground, so we buried them.

Polly: Oh my, and you rescued them!

Here, the children are playing with an imaginary farm and use references to indicate the elements and/or animals in the play sequence. The use of “this one”, “they” and “that guys” between Jace and Ryder shows the importance of joint action in the performance between listener and speaker. It is interesting that the children never seem to ask for clarification about the objects or their roles. When Jace says “that one” in response to Polly’s question, he is not only pointing by using the reference, but also clarifying. Another interesting observation is the description/explanation of the avalanche. The children confirm their co-constructed knowledge with Polly and with each other by simply affirming “That’s [what happened]”. We observed the use of a few conjunctions here such as “and” and “so”. As part of the on-going talk, the use of conjunctions goes beyond joining sentences. They link a speaker’s turn, build on the imaginary context and promote the forward motion of talk.
Children’s and Teacher’s Use of Politeness and Facework Strategies

The children observed turn-taking rules of conversation for the most part and used a combination of words, gestures and body positioning to project a particular public self-image while gaining cooperation.

We found that the facework strategies carried out by the children and Polly depended upon the purpose of the utterance. Children’s facework while using language for instrumental purposes involved asking for assistance and information using “please”, asserting ownership over an object or a space or their role in dramatic play using words expressions such as, “I just want...”. Children’s use of language for interactional purposes involved facework strategies, such as polite invitations to their peers and teachers to go along with the storyline, accepting correction from peers and teacher, negotiating for possession/ownership, offering and accepting help and advice, and complimenting their peers. When children used language for regulatory purposes, their facework strategies involved the use of “softer” or mitigating language.

In several instances across the play sessions, Polly exhibited facework by (1) modeling real-life social rules, (2) playing the role of mediator, (3) showing interest in others’ and their activities, and (4) directing children’s actions and behaviour.

We present an example of children’s and Polly’s use of facework strategies in the following excerpt of *Sand Table Farm*.

Michelle: Good job [child’s name].

*Michelle and Karli talk while Danny plays silently.*

Karli: Guess what? I got some…

Michelle: Oh, that sucks…[inaudible]…on my thumb. On my toe right there.

*Students continue to play silently and then Michelle addresses Karli.*
Michelle: Oh. I like your shirt.

Michelle: It’s so adult.

_Polly comes over and helps Michelle put a fallen object back on a shelf._

Polly: Oh, did they tip over? Let me help you.

_Danny is ready to leave the sand centre and notices his pants are dirty._

Danny: These are wor–these are work pants!

Danny: They’re allowed to get dirty. These are work pants. They’re allowed to get dirty.

Michelle: I’m not gonna be like this... (inaudible).

Polly: Ok. Wash your hands in here.

Children’s use of facework is in the form of compliments. Polly’s facework takes the form of showing interest by asking questions. Giving compliments is a face-giving strategy which shows that children are including others. This makes the speaker of the utterance “look good” as well. For example, when Michelle says to Karli “I like your shirt”, and “It’s so adult”, she’s giving a compliment to make her peer feel included not just in a group of people who have good taste in clothes, but attaches another idea that her peer is capable of making adult choices in fashion. Phrases like “Good job” and “Guess what?” fall into the face-giving category as examples of compliments and ways of showing interest and inviting others in to your circle. It makes them feel included.

Another category which emerged was face-assertion. Face assertion took the form of giving an opinion: “that sucks”, and expressing a degree of emotion or placing emphasis on your viewpoint in the context of play and imagination: “These are work pants!” “I never! Cause it was a car.”
There were also a few instances of face-saving or protecting someone’s positive face. These examples came mostly from Polly, the teacher. We found that she often uses phrases like “alright”, “ok” and gives direction to help guide the children: “Ok, wash your hands here”; “ok, don’t lose any of the pieces”, “Ok, but don’t bury them”. Polly also asked questions as a face-saving mechanism. When she asks “Do you think that’s a good idea?” she is giving the child autonomy over his actions and decision making.

**Discussion and implications**

Children’s play at the sand centre provides opportunities for complex language use. Participating children used language to achieve a range of social purposes and demonstrated social understandings about how to continue a flow of ideas and how to carry out facework to position others and themselves in favourable ways.

As in previous research spanning many decades (e.g., Author; Smilansky, 1968; Tough, 1976), participating children used talk to accomplish a wide range of purposes. Often, children put language to work in order to carry out other purposes within the imagined context; creating hybrid uses of language. The symbolic thought involved in using language to transform the sandbox into a military base, a farm and other imagined settings, is reflective of the representational thinking of reading and writing (Sawyer & DeZutter, 2009). We believe that in their hybrid-purpose talk, children demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of language as a tool for creating meanings beyond the immediate lived context. Additionally, the narratives and constructions within the sand centre provided opportunities for children to explain and draw conclusions in their interactions with peers and their teacher, indicating the value of the sand
centre for children’s development of academic language typically valued in schools (Alexander, 2000; Cazden, 1988/2001) and their conceptual learning.

Whereas kindergarteners have been found in previous research to have limited awareness of the norms of face-work (Hatch, 1987), the children in Polly’s class employed facework strategies on numerous occasions in their play at the sand centre. They used negotiating language to get others to do things (achieving a regulatory purpose), and complimented and showed empathy with peers to develop relationships with others (achieving an interactional purpose). Participating children also used polite language, as well as tag questions, such as “Okay?” and tempering types of words and expressions, such as “I just wanted. . .” for these purposes. By joining in the play, the teacher, Polly was able to model face-work strategies, as well. In this respect, by showing interest in the children’s sand play narratives and constructions, and extending children’s narratives, Polly opened up new pedagogical opportunities. Her informal, contextual teaching built on children’s language and understandings in the immediate situation.

The third facet of our analysis, examining children’s use of cohesive devices, reinforced previous research showing that such devices are within the capabilities of young children (e.g., Baltaxe and D’Aniola, 1992; Peterson & Dodsworth, 1991; Pellegrini, 1984). Children in Polly’s class used three of the six categories of cohesive devices identified by Halliday and Hasan (1976): references, repetitions and conjunctions. Their use of cohesive devices while co-constructing narratives at the sand centre provides a foundation for the children’s later use of cohesive ties in their writing later in school (Halliday and Hasan, 1976).

Our analysis of three aspects of young children’s language while playing at the sand centre underscores the importance of play as a context for children’s language and social learning (Moyles, 2015). By joining in the play, teachers can support children’s language development by
modeling various cohesive devices and facework strategies, and providing feedback on
children’s use of these strategies. As such, we propose that children’s use of cohesive ties and
facework strategies might be integrated into informal observations of children’s language.
We offer early work of our action research as an example. Participating teachers say that ongoing
systematic analysis of children’s language, focusing on aspects such as the social purposes of
language, has been valuable for identifying specific aspects of children’s language that can be
considered as strengths or areas needing further support (Author, in press). Sometimes the
systematic analysis reinforces teachers’ more informal observations of particular students’
language abilities, and other times, it reveals language uses that surprise teachers. The analyses
provide teachers with specific examples of what children do with language for assessment
purposes, as well. We believe that the linguistic features of cohesion and facework provide a
richer and more comprehensive picture of children’s use of language and their social knowledge,
and will be working with teachers to expand on our observation frameworks.
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