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Metalinguistic Play as a Methodological Approach to the Development of the Metalinguistic Function of Speech in Children

Extended summary

Some studies have unequivocally indicated the links between the early development of metalinguistic consciousness and the later success of children in the acquisition of literacy, as well as with their integration into society. However, in the context of the methodology of speech development, the multiplicity of aspects of metalinguistic consciousness has not been thoroughly examined so far. This paper attempts to fill this gap and show a possible approach to the development of the metalinguistic consciousness and the metalanguage of speech function in children. In its first part, the text provides a systematic overview of the requirements that can examine and encourage metalinguistic awareness in children at different levels: phonological, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic. The second part of the paper offers a model of crossing metalinguistic tasks with traditional forms of play, so that the work on the development of metalinguistic awareness in preschool is realized in an adequate way considering the cognitive and socio-emotional characteristics of the child - through metalinguistic games.

The concept of language play is differentiated according to different criteria: a) on the basis of the means of language communication on which it relies - non-verbal and verbal; b) on the basis of the linguistic level it involves - phonological, lexical, syntactic, pragmatic; c) on the basis of the function of language that it predominantly encourages - expressive, appellative, referential, phatic, aesthetic and metalinguistic; d) based on the attitude towards language material - normative and imaginative, where the function of the normative language game would be to learn the rules of language and its vocabulary, and the function of the imaginative lan-

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guage game would be to employ a creative attitude towards language, through which different language mechanisms and patterns are realized. In that context, metalinguistic play is an activity based on the intersection of language content (requirements and material) and game form, which aims to stimulate the metalinguistic function of speech (and thus metalinguistic consciousness). As a rule, it is verbal, and in the preschool context it is predominantly oral (although it may include graphic - iconic or symbolic - representation). Since the metalinguistic consciousness can concern different linguistic units, the metalanguage game can be phonological, lexical, syntactic, and (or) pragmatic, and with regard to the relation to the linguistic material, it can be normative or imaginative.

The design of a metalinguistic game takes place in two steps. The first step consists of choosing the language requirement and language material, on the one hand, and the game form, on the other; the second step involves adapting the rules of the game to a new purpose - through the incorporation of language requirements and materials into the game. Thus, one of the possible *linguistic requirements* that check the degree of phonological awareness is the counting of sounds in a word. *Linguistic material* in this case can be examples of words that have different length and different structure (their meaning can be diverse and can be thematically related, for example, they can denote the names of characters from fairy tales: *dragon, king, princess, Little Red Riding Hood*, etc.). The *game* whose form we use in this example can be a well-known “Царь, царь, государь” (eng. Emperor, emperor, master). The incorporation of the metalanguage request and language material into the game is done in the place on which the outcome of the game depends, because in that way the response to the language request gets full functionality without disturbing its uncertainty. In this game, it is the part where the children ask the emperor what time it is - then the emperor determines the “speed” of the players’ movement with his answer. The changed rules of the game can look like this: *At one end of the room sits the “emperor”. He turned his back to the other participants in the game, who are standing next to each other at the opposite end of the room. The children ask the emperor one by one: “Emperor, emperor, master, give me one word.” The emperor answers “dragon”, “prince”, “Snow White”. A child counts the number of the sounds in the word and makes that many steps on the way to the emperor. The winner is the child who reaches the emperor first. Then, it becomes the emperor and the game is repeated from the beginning.*

This game, with minimal changes in the rules, can also be used to count syllables in a word (which also encourages phonological awareness) or words in a sentence (which would encourage lexical awareness). Additionally, if a more demanding game is desired, the rule could be reformulated so that the emperor assigns the number of sounds (e.g. *four*), and that the player who first utters the word with the given number of the sounds (*baby*) moves towards the emperor. In doing so, the player should pronounce the appropriate sound of the selected word at each step (in the first step *b*, in the second *e*, etc.).

The limited space has conditioned that the importance of certain topics remains only hinted at. For example, it is certain that some language contents cannot fruitfully intersect with certain forms of play and their rules, so it would be worth examining the limitations of this pattern of creating language games. In addition, there was no special mention here of the difficulty of individual requirements and possible ways of complicating the language game (these

will be the subject of one of our future considerations). Finally, the implementation of a certain program of metalinguistic games could experimentally confirm or refute their effectiveness in children's language development, but also in their development in general. предмет једног од наших будућих разматрања).

Keywords: metalinguistic consciousness, language game, metalinguistic game, speech development methodology

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