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THE ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF GAME IN EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

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Abstract

Man develops and changes from conception through end of its life cycle. Under development we mean series of quantitative and qualitative changes over time period that can be progressive or regressive (but not pathological – those changes are not subject of developmental psychology). Preschool age is period in which whole series of developmental changes occur. Child play in early childhood is dominant daily activity. Music game and the increasing attention paid to it has been a result of changing the concept of musical upbringing and education in broader professional circles. In the same time it is beyond dispute that learner-specific features are significant factors of foreign language learning and teaching. Pleasure, which is a consequence of play, is the only conscious reason of why child engage in play. Child play is the activity that is

in the same time game and work because play affects all aspects of child development (sensory-motor, cognitive, emotional, moral, social, as well as speech development). In social view, play is preparation of child for life in society with others. Also, we will include classification of preschool children games, in accordance with their level of cognitive development and level of social inclusion.

Keywords

Game, Development, Language Learning Activities, Music Game, Preschool Teaching, Early Age

1. Introduction

Play is the zone of proximal development of a child. In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his normal behaviour” (Vigotski, 1996).

Developmental psychologists have paid greater attention to play since 1930ies. Play has attracted their attention not only because it is a dominant activity of a child, but also because it is related to all the aspects of child’s development. It is an activity through which psychophysical development of a child is most completely accomplished. According to its characteristics, play is different from other activities of small children (Edmiston, 2008) . It stems from intrinsic need of a child – characterised by spontaneous, free and original activity of a child. A statement can often be found in the literature according to which play is a specific way of learning of a preschool child. Certain authors go so far in similar standpoints as to compare play with scientific research, considered to be its extension in mature age (Fagen, 1976; Lorayone, 2004; Pickering, 1971, as cited by Kopas Vukašinović, 2006).

Play has a significant and might be said irreplaceable importance in comprehensive child’s development (Nedimović, Prtljaga 2014). The difference between play and other activities is that play is a free, spontaneous activity, which is its own aim. Pleasure which is a consequence of play is the only conscious reason why a child plays. Child play is the activity that is in the same time game and work because play affects all aspects of child development – sensory-motor, cognitive, emotional, moral, social, as well as speech development (Biro, Nedimović, 2015). According to Piaget (Pijaže, Inhelder, 1978), the essence of play is

assimilation, or primacy of assimilation over accommodation. The same author considers that for his/her affective and intellectual balance it is necessary for a child to have at his/her disposal a part of activities whose motivation does not consist of adjustment to reality, but of assimilation of reality in him/herself, without constraints or punishments (Kasikara, S. & Altan, O., 2015:10). Piaget studies play as a developmental phenomenon within general, especially cognitive development. Importance of play for cognitive and educational development of a preschool child is irreplaceable (Moyles,2005), Even as an infant, through play, a child learns and gets acquainted with the quality and characteristics of things and objects around him/her – he or she touches, watches, taps, puts in his/her mouth, etc. In the process of play, and with the help of toys, a child learns about various shapes, forms, colours, materials (Derrah, R., 2016:31). Through play, self-discovery, and self-experiment, a child acquires many skills and knowledge which can be long lasting or permanent. Important functions of play for the welfare of a child are numerous, primarily related to the following: development of capacity for research and acting in changed circumstances; building of one's own personal and cultural identity, development of communication and interaction with others, as well as development of imagination and symbolic representation (Krnjaja, 2009).

2. General Characteristics of Children at Early Age

There are numerous attempts to classify child's play according to various criteria (e.g. the age of children, types of games, social participation of children in play, the level of cognitive development...). Nevertheless, before outlining some of the existing classifications of children play, it seems necessary to state general characteristics of children games, considered to be relevant for majority of cases (Biro, Nedimović, 2015).

1. *Type of play depends on the level of development* – at certain age a child plays in a way appropriate for his/her age and development level. Majority of these games related to age and developmental level are universal, with slight differences in regard to culture, race, nation; e.g. play with a ball, play with a doll, with construction blocks... This characteristic of child play is dominantly based on the theory of Jean Piaget (according to Kamenov, 2006), who deals with play in the function of cognitive abilities development. According to Piaget, the same factors determining intellectual development actually determine play development; in other words, play is a phenomenon followed by the development of intellectual functions and reflecting main characteristics of intellectual development stages.

2. *The number of games decreases with maturation* – a child starts to play with a large number of toys and he/she gets engaged in a great number of games; however, with age a child rejects certain games and keeps to play only the chosen ones. This decrease in the number of games a child plays can also be explained according to cognitive development, having in mind that the child becomes capable of paying and preserving greater attention for one game whose complexity level is higher, in accordance with higher level of development.

3. *Time spent in a specific play increases with age* – small children are not able to focus on a certain game for a longer period of time; on the other hand, older the child, longer he/she is engaged in one game. At the age of 4 to 5, a child plays a game for 10 to 15 minutes on the average; at the age of higher primary school grades, a child can play one game for several hours, leading to elimination of other games.

4. *Total time spent in play decreases with age* – a preschool child spends greatest period of the day in play. With age, and especially once he/she enters school, a child has more obligations, so that the total time spent in play decreases.

5. *From informal to more and more formal play* – in the beginning a child plays spontaneously, without time limits, independently from toys, without special rules. Later game becomes more formal, a child looks for or prepares special requisites for play, makes arrangements with his/her friends regarding the time and rules of a game.

6. *Play can be diagnostic and therapeutic tool* – child's intrinsic, i.e. psychological worlds is visible in the child's play. If a child is afraid or sad, it will be manifested in his/her play. It should be born in mind that the psychological mechanisms manifested in game are rather subtle and complex, demanding careful, long, patient and professional work, along with cooperation with the parents. Through play a child can solve his/her negative emotional states and conditions, leading to relief, resolution of conflict situations and development of adequate behaviour patterns. Importance of play therapeutically has been emphasized by psychoanalytical theories of child play. According to the advocates of this theoretical movement, play is an opportunity for a child to spend the accumulated aggression in the way safest for him/herself and others, as well as to express his/her own repressed emotions, becoming liberated from them. Apart from being a "vent" for unpleasant feelings, play is also a generator of joy, enthusiasm, satisfaction arising out of success and other pleasant emotions (Kamenov, 2006).

7. *Toys have a great role to play in child's development* – toys are crucial for comprehensive development of a child. In principle, children toys are as good as they encourage

development of child’s creative potentials. Toys should be relatively simple, stable, aesthetic, functional and fulfilling hygienic – health conditions. Stability is important, having in mind that the moves of a child are sudden and uncontrolled, so that the child can unintentionally destroy unstable toy. Significance of toys decreases with age of children.

3. Classifications of Child Games at Early Age

Apart from the above mentioned general characteristics of child play, the most common classifications of games in literature are those made according to the criterion of cognitive complexity and the level of social involvement. According to the criterion of **cognitive complexity of a game**, types of games can be differentiated shown in Table 1 (Biro, Nedimović, 2015). The stated types of games are different according to cognitive complexity, ranging from simple motor exercise in a functional game to making agreements and establishing rules in the games with rules.

Table 1: *Types of Games according to the Level of Cognitive Complexity*

Game type	Description	Example
Functional game	Simple muscle movements repeated with or without objects. A child uses tests and thus develops his/her own abilities (functions).	shaking a rattle jumping up and down
Symbolic games	Use of objects or people as symbols for something they actually are not.	pretending that a bottle cap is a coffee cup; playing Batman with friends
Constructor games	Manipulating of objects in order to create something.	making a tower out of construction blocks; making a train out of coins.
Games with rules	Playing games with pre-established rules and limitations.	<i>Do not get angry man game</i> , dominos, hide and seek.

Functional games appear early and they prevail in the period of infancy and early preschool age. These are the first games appearing when a child volitionally activates certain functions, causing child’s satisfaction. A game with various sensual and perceptive functions also falls within functional games: careful watching of objects of different colours, shapes and configuration; playing with rattles and music boxes, swinging, balancing, etc. A child makes

effort to repeat these gems, and they contribute to further development of the functions activated by the game. Functional games are classified as games with new sensory motor functions maturing in a child (Duran, 2003). On the one hand, a child is testing his/her own functions, while on the other hand, he or she is examining the characteristics of an object. Even though there are certain similarities between a functional game in early childhood and a game of primate offspring, functional game of a child is determined by early social interaction, at least as much as sensory motor intelligence. Very early a child tries to involve an adult in a “playful dialogue”, and around the sixth month a child plays more intensely and cheerfully if somebody observes him/her. Between 8 and 12 months the existing functional games continue, while new appear (chattering, thumb sucking, watching objects, swinging...). Functional games which appear even in the first months of infant’s life have a significant role to play during the second year of his/her life. Focus is on those functions which undergo the process of maturation in this period: a child tirelessly plays with a new function of standing up and waking, testing his/her own ability to move in space walking (with no help, or pushing or dragging various means helping walking). A child also plays intensively with a new ability to catch with tips of his/her fingers with thumb opposition: a child catches specks of dust in the air, crumbles, pills and buttons (takes them up with his/her fingers, puts them down, puts them in boxes or bottles).

Symbolic (“as if”) *games* are very important in the study of the role of play in child’s development, since the increase of frequency and complexity of this type of games has a positive influence on both cognitive and social development of a child. Symbolic games appear during the year two, within mutual activities with adults, so that they are highly imitative and they are not a part of a complex playful activity, but they are rather simple and single. Some of those most common are “feeding” others or oneself, putting a doll to sleep, “preparing” food, swinging a doll, etc. By the end of the second year of life, apart from single actions (e.g. “drinking” from an empty glass), beginnings of drama plays appear, i.e. linking of several playful actions in a short story, i.e. event (for example, children “serve guests” and then all the “guests drink” from empty glasses). These games thrive in the third year of life. Apart from those games representing single actions, more complex combinations of playful activities emerge. With the help of these actions and activities, a child composes a modest drama story (play). The play involves, apart from playful actions, symbolic objects appear in those games, including speech as an element building the game (for example, if there is no suitable to, a child names an object giving it a function of that what is necessary for the game; role plays also appear at this age. Appearance of

these games is a novelty for this developmental stage and it is rather significant for social – emotional development of a child, having in mind that they enable a child to experience a specific role of each involved personality during play.

Construction games appear in the third year and they are most present around the sixth year. During the third year of child’s life, explorative (research) games are very common and children like them. Research will be driven by any novelty in a situation, any new object. What is especially interesting for children of this age are those games involving testing of possibilities of combination of different objects (putting them in interrelations, spatial, mechanic, static or solely visual relations between various objects). Such games at this age become real construction games. Most frequent ones are building with construction blocks, playing with clay, sand or water, playing with paper, etc. These games differ from others in the sense that a child cares about success.

Playing games with rules is dominant between age 6 and 7. The main feature of games with rules is that playing them children are supposed to recognize, accept and subject themselves to predetermined, agreed and accepted rules. This kind of game appears in the third year, but it dominates preschool age of children. A child meets a game with rules in a ready-made form and masters it as an element of culture; on the other hand, a child can also participate in creation of new games with rules. Piaget holds that games with rules are not typical for the age between 4 and 7, and that they mostly belong to the period between 7 and 11 years; they permeate a whole life of a man (Kamenov, 2006). “Game with rules are games with sensory motor combinations or intellectual combinations in which individuals compete and which are regulated either by the codex taken from older generations or by contemporary agreement. Games with rules can be a result of acts of adults which have become outdated or sensory motor, practical games which have become collective, but which have lost a whole or a part of its imaginative content, i.e. its symbolism” (Pijaze, 1962, as cited by Duran 2003). According to Piaget, what prevails in games with rules, as well as in functional and symbolic games, is assimilation, and assimilation of reality is in accordance with the structure of child’s thinking. Nevertheless, there is a certain amount of harmony between assimilation and accommodation in social life. There are rules in these games, as well as collective discipline, codex of honour and fair play, so that they represent “amazing social institutions” and “a real political material of childhood” (Pijaze, as cited by Duran, 2003). The same author associates games with rules with child’s moral development, dominated by cognitive development.

According to the criterion of **level of social inclusion** there are different types of games shown in Table 2. In classifications made according to this criterion, emphasis is put on social organization of a game, rather than its cognitive level. Two-year-old children (younger toddler age) most often play by themselves or observe other children playing (observation and independent play). At older toddler age (third year), a parallel game appears. There are not emphasized and relevant social interactions among children in such a play, even though children are involved in the same activity. There is primitive social communication in this period: observation of other children, attempts to imitate their actions, to get an attractive toy from another child... A number of participants in such a social participation is small – mostly we are talking about two or three children who can be involved in a parallel game. *Associative game* is a game of children in a group in which roles are not sufficiently differentiated or directed towards mutual aim. Characteristic of *collaborating game* is that children play in a group in which roles and tasks are delegated and shared. Frequency of collaborative game grows after the third year of child’s life. A child likes to play games demanding participation of a large number of adults and children, and the most common number of participants in a game is between 4 and 5. Even though a child has undergone in the course of his/her development a long way from individual game to complex group game, all types of games continue to be played, so that at this age in different periods a child plays both by him/herself and with other children. It is important that a child perceives how adults cooperate, to notice how mature people behave, in order to transfer such patterns in play and involve them into the repertoire of his/her own behaviour (Nedimovic, Sturza-Milic, & Činč, 2016).

Table 2: *Types of Games according to the Level of Social Involvement*

Type of game	Description
Observation	Observation of others playing without getting involved.
Independent play	Independent play on one’s own without making attempts to approach other children.
Parallel play	Children play side by side with similar materials, without real cooperation or friendly relations.

Associative play	Playing with other children something rather close to all children and involving them all, without delegation of roles or work and without mutual, i.e. group aim.
Collaborating game	Playing in a group created in order to do an activity or reach an aim, in which actions of individual members of a group are coordinated and leading to a common aim.

4. Method of Music Game - an important part of didactic strategies at preschool age

Being a didactic game with music content, music game can be successfully used in kindergarten, especially having in mind the age of children whose main activity is actually play. It has drawn attention of psychologists only recently, having had a significant influence on the success of youngest children.

If we tried to offer a definition of didactic music game, we could say that it is an activity through which participants develop their musical abilities, creativity, imagination, socialization skill, etc. in a free and optional way (Munteanu, 1999: 65).

Music game and the increasing attention paid to it has been a result of changing the concept of musical upbringing and education in broader professional circles. Game is established as a method and at the same time as an opposite concept to Herbert view on upbringing (education). Pedagogic movements in the twentieth century led this science, as well as music upbringing implicitly, towards new and interesting views. Experimental pedagogy has given possibility of gaining insights through the method of observation and tests; social pedagogy has suggested group learning as a contrast to traditional distribution of knowledge according to age, contributing to the development of theory of game; especially in regard to its genesis and function. Authors of different game theories were, among others, Gross, Piaget, Chateau, Leontiev, Moruzzi, etc.

It is interesting how music game is conceptually viewed in European and American pedagogic fields. Europeans consider game as a way to draw a child to learning, as a stimulating means leading to learning. American way of considering didactic music game and its role is, of course, rather pragmatic. Game is seen as an aim to itself, i.e. to prepare a child find his/her way in concrete life situations.

Paradigms of music games, difficulties emerging in the attempts to classify them are the result of outstanding flexibility of the method, unexpected effects appearing in its very preparation. Briefly, music games can be classified in the following way:

- Creative music games;
- Didactic music games;
- Games with music background (Munteanu, 1999).

All the three groups can be further divided into subgroups, depending on the established aim (outcome). So, we recognize:

- Didactic games of children socialization through music;
- Didactic games for musical abilities development;
- Didactic games for stimulating of creativity and imagination.

It is wrong to consider music game as any other game (or play) only through hedonistic prism. In the least, such an approach and implementation would reflect unprofessionalism of preschool teachers and teachers. Music games facilitate development of music hearing, music memory, voice, sense for rhythm and other music elements and, most importantly, they do all this latently, imperceptibly, having in mind that they are essentially designed to be accessible to children psyche and their everyday activities.

There are various types of music games, and the main criterion for their classification is their aim or outcome. One of the classifications was offered by Vasile Vasile in his book *Teaching Methodology of Music Upbringing*. According to his classification, first group includes music games helping development of music abilities (melody games, rhythm games, games developing ability to differentiate between dynamic tones, pace, tone colours, etc.). The second group of music games involves games stimulating children socialization, group work, overcoming of certain fears and timidity and helping development of self-confidence. Music games which develop creativity and imagination fall under the third group of music games. They include musical rebuses, riddles and other kinds of music games combining visual art, literary and music representations. Music games of all kinds are based on children songs, instrumental compositions, auditions and exercises.

In regard to didactic games in the field of music upbringing and education, it is necessary to mention the so-called *profession songs*, following imitation of guests specific for certain profession, i.e. job, as well as *Montessori games* emphasizing the development of a single component, like height, duration, strength of a tone. Such extractions of certain elements of

music language are specific for the music games created by Maurice Chevais, Maurice Martenot or Manya Botez.

5. Young Foreign Language Learners and Play

It is beyond dispute that learner-specific features are significant factors of foreign language learning and teaching. Even though learners differ from each other in respect of a vast number of traits, four factors have received special attention in second language (L2) research: motivation, language aptitude, learning styles, and learning strategies (Prtljaga, Nedimović, Gojkov, 2014: 95). For example, well developed attention and high motivation can significantly encourage development of speech and communication. In other words, insufficient motivation, attention or fear of inappropriately pronounced word (especially in the case of adults learning a foreign language) can discourage learning and development of speech, language and communication. Children and adults differ significantly in all segments of psychological life. Thus, it could be said that motivation is interconnected with age as learner-specific feature, since, children, who are naturally curious and intrinsically motivated, learn foreign language spontaneously, while adults need to be extrinsically highly motivated in order to be successful in foreign language learning. On the other hand, children's attention span is much shorter, so that they need time limited foreign language activities. Since the exposure to foreign language is correlated with successful learning, what young learners need are more frequent foreign language activities in the context of partial or semi-immersion. Furthermore, even though curious, easily excited and highly intrinsically motivated, they learn slowly and forget easily, due to their language aptitude which is in accordance with general developmental features of their age. Thus, they need lots of repetition and revision. With young learners, one game can be used more than once or can be slightly modified to serve its purpose. Apart from the fact that they like things to be repeated, they also like to know what is coming, which enables them participate with greater confidence and enjoy the game more. Having in mind that we are dealing with young foreign language learners, it might be suggested that, due to the above stated factors and characteristics of preschool children, play seems to be an ideal didactic strategy for the features specific for them as learners. According to *Greenwood Dictionary of Education*, play can be a broad term encompassing games, activities, and actions that children engage in to explore, experiment and stimulate the imagination. It is critical in its many forms (dramatic,

improvisational, pretend, group) for the development of children cognitively, socially and creatively. Play refers to physical, intellectual, or creative exercise (Collins, O'Brien, 2011, 354).

If we now turn to the above-mentioned classifications of games according different criteria (i.e. to the level of cognitive complexity or according to the level of social involvement), it is easily noticeable that the whole range of the games, from the simplest, like, for example functional games, to those most elaborated, requiring high cognitive abilities and social involvement, like, for example, games with rules, are all appropriate for language learning at preschool age. Play seems to be the framework which fulfils the requirements of essential ground teaching principles and teaching methods suitable for teaching foreign language at young age, referring to the following: oral, playful approach, open task-based approach, authentic picture and concrete object-based materials, content-based approach, total physical response, everyday speech throughout the day, learning in concrete contexts, integrative and holistic approach. Thus, it might be concluded that play and playing games is all that should take place in a preschool age group of children who learn a foreign language: from rhymes and songs, drawing and colouring, puppets, total response games, role-play, simulation and pretend games, to table games often implying cooperation and competition (Al Zeidi, M., 2016). Apart from loose play which is characterised by spontaneity, creativity and interactivity, there are highly structured rule governed language games, like for example: sorting, ordering, or arranging games; information gap games; guessing games, search games, matching games, labelling games, exchanging games and already mentioned and among children rather popular board games. Last, but not least, relying on integrative and holistic approach within multiple intelligence theory, played in a foreign language classroom, games can contribute to the development of all different types of intelligence, ranging from cognitive, linguistic, interpersonal and intrapersonal to kinaesthetic and special intelligence.

6. Conclusion

Preschool children do not have much experience. On the other hand, their imagination, curiosity, spontaneity and urge to discover the world are fresh and full of creative power. Lack of experience is in a sense their advantage, since they do not carry the burden of what has already been experienced. At the same time, the concentration children reach in the heat of a game can be rather intense and long, depending on the level of engagement of the whole being of a child. If

a child is emotionally engaged and motivated, his/her concentration in play and learning through play can be long-lasting (Nedimović, Sekulić, 2014).

Play has indispensable importance of all aspects of child's development (Kamenov, 2006), i.e. sensory-motor (e.g. eye-hand coordination, movement, handiness, etc.), intellectual (e.g. memory, anticipation, conclusion making, problem solving, etc.), as well as social-emotional development (socialization, volition, empathy, aggression control, etc.). Play is also very significant for communication and creativity development. Through play a child experiments and tests his/her abilities. Play encourages child's cognitive development, addressing his/he social needs for companionship and social interaction. In the beginning a child learns about quality of things and objects surrounding him/her. Through toys a child becomes familiar with a variety of forms, shapes, colours, materials, A child forms different skills and abilities through play, acquires both self-knowledge and knowledge about the world. Knowledge acquired in such a way, i.e. through play, is characterized by self-discovery and self-experimenting. A child is a tireless researcher in play and he or she is not afraid of new or unknown. With age content and complexity of play increases, and the number and type of games children gladly play increases. With maturation group activities and increasingly longer, a child starts to share things with others and takes turns. Furthermore, emotionality emerges and becomes obvious while playing a game.

According to the Article 12 of the Convention of United Nations on Child's Rights, a child needs adults who create conditions and promote processes empowering children to express views, to be consulted and to make decisions on their own play (Pešić, 1996). The context in which a child grows up, along with dominating adults (parents, preschool teachers) has a significant influence on the extent to which a child has possibilities to use various functions of play. The relations of acceptance, security and respect a child builds with adults in his/her immediate environment contributes to circumstances in which a child experiences play as satisfaction and gets involved in a game with other children easily (Krnjaja, 2009). Not only in play, but also in other activities, a child should be provided with an opportunity to experience success in what he or she is engaged in, through praise for his/her efforts, so that a child could be motivated to be even more successful in all his/her endeavours.

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