MA TESOL Research Dissertation

Title of Dissertation: An investigation into the use of a theme based on children's literature to support the development of speaking skills and early writing skills in a bilingual preschool environment.

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Abstract

In the area of TESOL, the term "young learners" tends to refer to children aged between 8-12 years old. This however belies the existence of an increasing number of English preschools in Europe, many of which follow the British curriculum, such as the setting for this study. Unfortunately there is a marked, albeit acknowledged, lack of research into the process of teaching and learning a second language in formal settings at this age. Nevertheless, the expectation is that preschool children must be "ready" for school by the age of five in terms of their early literacy skills, which as Sylvester and Kragler (2011) note, puts enormous pressure on young second language learners and their teachers.

Accordingly, this case study aimed to shed some light on how English speaking skills and early writing skills can be developed in an Italian preschool setting. Firstly, the study aimed to investigate how the use of a theme, developed around the popular children's story "The Three Little Pigs" could be used during teacher led activities to develop these skills. Secondly, given the importance of play in children's learning, the study explored how this theme could be extended into children's free play sessions within learning centres designed for this purpose. More specifically, the teacher's provision of scaffolding during play to develop these skills was analysed.

Raw data was collected in the form of videos, and photographs. The videos were transcribed and codes were developed to facilitate the analysis of speaking and early writing skills that the children displayed during these activities. The transcripts also permitted the analysis of the teacher's interactions with the children during their play sessions. This in turn provided an insight into the role of the teacher as a scaffold for the children's learning in the development of these skills.

The results of this research show that the incorporation of a theme into the classroom during the data collection period resulted in the children using the theme related language in both the teacher led and child initiated activities. As time went on, the children also began to use this language in increasingly complex ways.

Additionally, it was observed that the theme language provided the basis for a number of literacy activities such as drawings and labels. The children's work contained many features of emergent writing and demonstrated that the oral language skills and vocabulary gains transferred into their early writing activities.

Finally, the research found that the teacher played an important role in guiding and sustaining the children's free play activities, and spontaneous use of theme related language was observed to be highest at these times.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The current study investigates the development of speaking skills and early writing skills in very young second language learners. In this chapter, the specific aims of the study will be presented, and key terminology will be clearly defined. Following this there will be a brief description of the setting which provided the context for the research. Finally, the rationale for the study and the relevance of the findings to existing knowledge in the field will be discussed, as well as a brief outline for the chapters to follow.

1.1: The Research Aims.

The research undertaken in this study addressed the following question;

How does theme based instruction linked to children's literature support the development of speaking and pre-writing skills in an early childhood classroom environment?

In addressing this question, a dual focus was adopted;

1) An investigation into how a theme based approach linked to children's literature can be used to scaffold the development of speaking and early writing skills in teacher led activities

2) An exploration into the role of the adult as a scaffold in the development of those skills during free play times within theme based learning centres.

1.2: Definitions of Key terms

An understanding of the following terms is essential for the readers of this study;

- Young Learners: In the context of this research, young learners are preschool children between the ages of three and four years old.

- Play: Described by Roskos and Christie (2011,p. 74) as "Symbolic representation, imaginative use of language, role-taking, social interaction, and sustained play activity." Saracho (2001a) adds that play is voluntary, and selected by the players.

- Children's Literature: Books and stories intended for young children.

- Emergent Writing Skills: Before conventional writing skills are learned, young learners develop an awareness of the concept that print conveys meaning, and their early efforts to communicate through print typically include drawings, scribbles, shapes, random letters or shapes running from left to right. These are features of emergent writing and are the first steps on the journey to literacy (Mayer 2007)

- Language Chunks: A Short sentence or phrase, such as the line "I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house down" from "The Three Little Pigs." Cameron (2001) suggests that language chunks are particularly beneficial for very young learners, as they can be broken down and recombined. Many stories for young children include high levels of repetition of language chunks.

- Literacy materials: Materials used for reading and writing such as books, paper, pens and other mark making materials.

- Literacy enriched play centres: Set areas in the classroom containing props and images related to the story, environmental print and mark making tools for the purposes of encouraging children's exploration of skills associated with speaking and writing. (Rybczynski and Troy 1995, Bond and Wasik 2009)

- Scaffolding: "The support provided to learners to enable them to perform tasks which are beyond their capacity," (Richards and Schmidt 2002 p.466). Cameron (2001) suggests that with young learners, scaffolding includes getting children interested in a task or topic, simplifying it, guiding activities through making suggestions or asking questions, and providing praise and feedback.

- Teacher led Activities: Activities organised and directed by the teacher.

- Child Initiated Activities: Play activities where the children decide what they are going to play, what materials they will use, and how they will use them. In this study, the teacher joined in with the children's play activities to provide scaffolding.

- Print Referencing: Verbal or non-verbal techniques used by the teacher to encourage children to notice print in books or in the environment (Dennis, Lynch and Stockall, 2012).

- Dialogic Reading: A reading strategy wherein the teacher encourages input and participation from the children (Justice and Pullen, 2003)

- Environmental Print: Literally, print in the environment. Neumann et al (2012) suggest that ideally it should be aesthetically appealing to young children, and provide contextual support.

- L1: The first language of the learners, in this case Italian

- L2: A second language, in this case English.

- Code Switching: A change from one language to another in speech, or writing (Richards and Schmidt 2002)

- Picto-writing: A feature of emergent writing, typically including some of all of the following; Drawings, a combination of letters, words or letter shapes.

- Story board: In this study many of the learning centres and teacher led activities took place outside. In these instances a portable story board was created with the all of the illustrations and environmental print related to the theme. As a result, the children had access to environmental print even during activities that took place in the garden.

1.3: The Rationale for the Study.

In this section I will discuss the rationale for focusing on the development of speaking and writing skills, as well as on the choice of using themes, children's literature, and play, as a vehicle for doing so.

<u>1.3.1: The development of speaking and emergent writing skills.</u>

Teaching an English curriculum in an Italian preschool for the last four years has heightened my awareness of the lack of research into the formal instruction of second languages in this age group. In fact, the term Young Learners typically refers to children between the ages of five to twelve years old (Cameron 2001, Hasselgreen 2005). Remarkably, studies of *very* young learners, particularly from an ESL standpoint, are notably sparse, as Piker and Rex lament (2008, p.187);

>   "Empirical literature regarding second language development for pre-schoolers is minimal at best compared to older children."

However, having conducted extensive literature reviews for earlier parts of this course, I am led to believe that this does not imply that research into the older spectrum of young learners is redundant to those interested in preschool settings. On the contrary, much of the existing research lends itself very well to preschool contexts, if we turn our attention from application of theory to practice to *adaptation* of theory to practice (Kersten et al. 2010).

Unfortunately, there is a common misperception that young learners are only capable of learning simple vocabulary such as colours and farmyard animals, but as Cameron (2001 p.xii) notes "of course, if that is all they are taught, that will be all that they can learn."

Undoubtedly, urgent attention is required to the specific development of communication skills in early childhood classrooms (Chen and Shire 2011), particularly where the language of instruction is not the first language of the children, as in this study.

Indeed, existing research points to a pressing need to identify best practice guidelines for the support of young learners' oral language development, necessitating further studies to be conducted in this area (Brouilette 2012). The rationale for this study comes from this requisite.

To clarify, developing language skills of preschool learners entails the introduction and consolidation of vocabulary skills, and subsequent provision of meaningful opportunities wherein children can encounter and utilise language that they are becoming familiar with (Martinez, Lastero and Conte, 2010).

Additionally, the rationale for the dual focus of the study to encompass both speaking and early writing skills lies in the fact that studies show oral language proficiency as being indicative of future literacy success (Bialystol 2002, Martinez, Laster and Conte 2010). Furthermore, although the development of speaking skills are likely to precede early writing skills, the literature review in Chapter 2 will highlight that existing research suggests an integrated approach supporting the links between the two (Bauer and Manyak 2008, and Araujo 2002). As Lennox (2013p. 382) notes;

> "If we are aiming for long-term impact on language learning and academic success, more broad-based approaches focusing on developing vocabulary, language knowledge and comprehension are necessary at the time when young children are developing code knowledge"

On the grounds that the development of speaking and writing skills are not mutually exclusive, this case study aims to investigate the development of both skills within a preschool context.

1.3.2: Pre-schoolers and Second Language Learning

Theme based instruction is shown in the existing literature to be an appropriate vehicle for vocabulary building in young learners, as it supports

> "Development from partial to more complete knowledge by building links and connections in the networks of children's language resources," (Cameron, 2001 p.191)

Indeed, Kersten et al (2010. p 108) suggest that it is crucial for young language learners to "'recycle' the foreign language in many different ways."

Increasingly, researchers and practitioners alike view theme based instruction coupled with children's literature as a particularly appropriate means for facilitating this recycling of language.

Indeed, research shows that incorporating a theme or topic into all areas of the classroom increases familiarity with vocabulary and language structures, which can then be developed and extended on through repeated encounters with the theme language (Facella, Rampino and Shea 2005, Fassler 1998a, Heathfield 2011 and Brouilette 2012).

Additionally, it has long been recognised that children learn about the world and make sense of their experiences through play. Such is the fundamental role of play to young children's learning that it can also extend to second language learning and literacy development. Indeed, Jalongo and Sobolak (2011, p. 425). advocate the use of story books "to build a bridge between play and language"

Accordingly, the rationale for my choice of approach to researching the development of speaking and writing skills in very young learners comes from the knowledge that children learn through play, and that children's stories and themes are valuable tools in the process of second language learning.

1.4 The contribution of this study to research in the field.

The present study aims to contribute to existing knowledge in the field of TESOL by adding to the existing studies on very young learners. The research aims and questions have been formed by consulting existing literature into young learners and adopting, adapting and combining many of the theories presented therein. Despite the age of the learners, their low proficiency is not viewed to hamper their literacy development, rather a broader approach incorporating the world of play, literature and theme based instruction is used to develop oral and writing skills simultaneously. Insofar as I am aware, this is the first study, albeit small scale, to fit the pieces of the puzzle together in this way, and I believe the results presented in Chapter 4 will be of interest to others working with this age group.

1.5: The Research Context

The research for this study was carried out in my own classroom in the British American Preschool, Milan. The school follows the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum, which will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 2.

There are 23 children in the class, which is divided into three groups, for the purposes of classroom organisation. The groups are not organised according to ability, rather they are divided in such a way as to ensure, insofar as possible, an equal distribution of boys and girls from both ends of the age spectrum (3-4 years). From these, the red group was selected as the focus group, on the basis that fewer of these children take a nap in the afternoon. More details on the sample will be provided in chapter 3.

1.6 Summary

This chapter has;

- Presented the research aims of the study,
- Defined key terms with will be used in subsequent chapters,
- Discussed the context where the study was carried out,
- Provided a rationale for the research.
- Outlined the contribution of this research to the field.

Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the EYFS curriculum which is implemented in the school where this study takes place. This will be followed by a review of the literature and the existing research in the areas of Early Childhood Education and Second Language Acquisition which have informed the framework

of this study, and the formation of the research questions underpinning it. Finally, a brief discussion will outline the contribution of this research project to existing knowledge in the research corpus as a whole.

2.1. Early Childhood Education and Second Language Acquisition.

In order to contextualize the study, this section will begin by discussing the curriculum followed in the setting.

2.1.1 The Early Years Foundation Stage.

The preschool setting for this study is situated in Milan, Italy and follows the Early Years Foundation Stage as outlined by the British Ministry for Education. The setting is unique in that all of the children share a common language other than English. In terms of children whose first language is not English, the statutory framework requires that "children have sufficient opportunities to learn and reach a good standard of English in the EYFS." (Great Britain, Department of Education, 2012 p.6)

The guidelines for supporting these children within the classroom assume that the majority of the classroom population is composed of English speaking children, which is not the case here, and therefore many of the guidelines are not applicable.

2.1.2 Oral Language and Early Literacy, a Two Way Street.

Recent research has demonstrated the existence of links between oral language and literacy skills development. Ernst and Richard (1994) advocate the need for fostering these links through an integrated approach to language learning, a view which is shared by many (Youb,2008, Restreppo and Towle-Harmon 2008 and Saracho 2002).

 Indeed, research into the language and literacy development of young learners suggests that even very young language learners stand to benefit from a variety of

oral and written experiences of language (Saracho 2002). Ostrosky, Gaffney and Thomas (2006, p.174) , add that;

> "literacy casts a wider net than reading and incorporates the complex array of learning that contributes to becoming a competent user of oral and print language,"

To this end, Bauer and Manyak (2008, p. 176) suggest colourfully that we move past "the old adage that oral language precedes written language skills" and widen the scope to include both.

This begs the question of how young second language learners fit into this scheme of things. In her study into using a literature based curriculum to support the literacy development of Portugese ESL pre-schoolers, Araujo (2002, p. 323) found that "limited oral language proficiency does not constrain children's emergent writing and reading development." This view is shared by Restreppo and Towle-Harmon (2002) who add that further research is required into emergent writing in ESL pre-schoolers. Similarly, Saracho (2003) notes the necessity of this research being undertaken in order to cater to the needs of a growing number of ESL preschool children.

Studies have shown how the development of oral language skills can result in a "spillover" into early writing skills. Dix and Amoore (2010) suggest that developing oral skills will enhance written language development, while Dennis and Horn (2011), Gest et al (2006), and Neuman and Dwyer (2009) further highlight the relationship between oral language and literacy skills development.

Furthermore, in an investigation into the links between oracy and literacy in young ESL learners, Youb (2008, p.432), found that "English reading and writing can serve as an effective scaffolding tool to develop oral language skills" which highlights the two-way nature of oral language and literacy skills development.

2.1.3 Oral Language Skills development

Interaction, whether it is between children and teachers, or children themselves, is seen as a very effective way of developing young learners' oral language skills. Bond and Wasik (2009, p. 467) note that "conversations are the primary tool for

oral language development in preschool classrooms," while Sylvester and Kragler (2012) and Ostrosky, Gaffney and Thomas (2006), view high quality interactions between young children and their teachers as critical to the development of language skills.

It is clear, therefore, that for young second language learners especially, providing opportunities for interaction and conversation despite low proficiency goes a long way towards developing oral language skills.

In terms of promoting conversation with young second language learners, Massey (2004, p.228) suggests that

> "children need success with concrete information such as labelling, describing and recalling (levels 1 and 2) before they can be challenged to apply the information and vocabulary to higher level thinking skills such as noting similarities and differences, predicting and explaining (levels 3 and 4)."

To this end, she suggests that teachers focus their attention on the lower levels to begin with, as this will provide the foundation for more complex language skills to follow. This view is echoed by Hay and Fielding-Barnsley (2012), who propose a similar model with four categories of language development.

2.1.4 The development of Early Writing Skills

Research and literature in the area of Early Childhood Education is unanimous in the importance accorded to the preschool period in literacy development. Brown et al (2012, p.315) put it succinctly, remarking that it is during this time that "children's literacy behaviours develop."

In order to support preschool children on their road to literacy, an understanding of early writing features and behaviours is vital.

Many children include scribbles, and strings of seemingly random letters in their drawings, which according to Genishi, Stires and Yung-Chan (2001) represents clear features of emergent writing. Neumann and Neumann (2010) identify marks, circles, dots and lines represented in a linear pattern as further features of early

writing, and this view is upheld by Chan, Juan and Foon (2008), and Puranik and Lonigan (2011, p.268) who remark that young children "scribble to convey meaning through print."

These seemingly meaningless marks on paper created by young children are evidence of their author's "attempt to communicate an idea through print," (Mayer 2007, p. 35) and of their budding literary awareness (Morrow 1990).

The crucial role of drawing in learning to write is also widely recognised. Baghban (2007 p.20) notes that drawing provides one of the primary motivations for writing, and that it dominates children's mark-making activities in the early years, adding that "children's first texts emerge as labels, captions and short stories that they use to clarify, complete or accompany drawings"

This view of drawing and developing writing skills in the early years is supported by Neumann and Neumann (2010) and Araujo (2002).

In these early stages, labels accompanying drawings are likely to consist mostly of scribbles, however, Restreppo and Towle-Harmon (2008) argue that children will progress from scribbles to invented spelling, and finally to conventional writing, adding that children operating in two or more languages display the same features of prewriting as monolingual peers. Furthermore, Gillanders and Castro (2010) note that with very young learners who often experience limited language proficiency, a certain amount of code switching is inevitable at this point.

However incomprehensible these early texts may be to a more conventional audience of readers, research suggests that children's early efforts to communicate their thoughts through print must be supported and valued (Christie and Enz 1992, and Rybczynski and Troy 1995).

2.1.5 Learning through play

The EYFS states that "children learn by leading their own play, and by taking part in play which is guided by adults." (Great Britain, Department of Education, 2012p.6)

In an attempt to define what is meant by "play" Saracho (2001a, p.108) offers two criteria- that play is "(1) spontaneous and voluntary and (2) willingly selected by the players." She adds that literacy related play is not necessarily restricted to the writing corner of the classroom, but that it can extend to the construction corner, the art table…and anywhere else where there are mark making materials such as paper and crayons available.

There is little doubt as to the efficacy of play as a means of developing language and literacy skills for young learners. In fact, it is seen by many as a natural vehicle for curriculum, (Bjork- Willen and Cromdal, 2009, Saracho, 2001a). Indeed, Schrader (1990, p.81) takes the Vygotskian view of play as a process "which leads from oral language, through symbolic play, to written language."

Similarly, Bond and Wasik (2009, p.496) identify play as a "strategy that can promote conversations and develop oral language skills," while Dennis, Lynch and Stockall (2012) maintain that writing skills are supported in a play setting just as much as speaking skills, a view shared by Neumann et al (2012).

Furthermore, Saracho (2004, p. 201) observes that "children discover the uses of the written language when they engage in play," adding in a later study that in these circumstances "a play and literacy relationship emerges" (Saracho and Spodek 2006, p. 707).

Indeed, it is through their play that children have the opportunity to experiment with spoken language, while also practicing the conventions of writing as they incorporate it into their activities (Koralek 2007, Connor, Morrison and Slominski 2006).

The above discussion highlights the crucial role of play in a child's oral and written language learning and development. In the following section, I will turn to the role of children's literature in this process, with particular reference to the development of literacy skills in young second language learners.

2.2. Children's Literature

2.2.1 Learning through Stories

For the sake of simplicity, I have divided the many advantages of using children's literature to support the development of language and literacy skills into two categories.

(a): Literature as a spring-board for conversation.
Reading stories is a short step from talking about them, and as such stories serve as a springboard for conversation, which as discussed, plays a role in oral language skills development. Indeed, the opportunity for conversation afforded by children's stories is noted by Fassler (1998a and 1998b), Han and Ernst-Slavit (1999), Araujo (2002) and more recently, Dennis and Horn (2011).

Furthermore, book reading has been described as a "critical activity developing children's language and literacy skills" due to the opportunities for conversation it provides (Bond and Wasilk, 2009, p 468).

Books can provide young language learners with "a very special kind of shared experience and the basic English words and phrases needed to talk about it," (Ernst and Richard, 1994, p. 323). Moreover, Callaghan and Madelaine (2012) Gest et al (2006) and Connor Morrison and Slominski (2006) argue that children's vocabulary can be enhanced through reading books which in turn is likely to increase their level of participation in book related conversations.

A significant benefit of engaging in story reading with young learners is that it contributes to what Lugo-Neris, Jackson and Goldstein (2010, p.316) refer to as a "meaningful, naturalistic context that facilitates vocabulary learning," which in turn will "lay the groundwork" for future literacy development (Sylvester and Kragler, 2012, p.124). Indeed, the transfer of vocabulary knowledge into emergent writing skills is a feature of literature based instruction that Meier (2003) and Dix and Amoore (2010) identify.

(b): Creating links between speaking and writing, and developing awareness about the conventions of writing.

A second benefit that story reading can have with young second language learners is that "Listening to stories and telling them prepare the children to be effective writers and communicators." (Genishi, Stires and Yung- Chan 2001, p.405)

As noted previously, young children frequently draw pictures about familiar topics and things that interest them, so it stands to reason that a well chosen story can in this way promote writing. In her study into the effects of literacy enriched play centres on the literacy behaviours of kindergarten children Saracho (2001a) observed children drawing pictures from a story familiar to them. The teacher frequently asked the children about their pictures and recorded their words, thus demonstrating a meaningful link between the spoken and written word for the children. The study showed that in their play, children engaged in oral language and literacy behaviours.

Significantly, many researchers view children's literature as providing a scaffold for learning in its own right. Indeed, Zeece (2010, p. 346) refers to the use of story book reading to build vocabulary, promote conversation, and develop an awareness of print as "literature related scaffolding." This view is supported by Ernst and Richard (1994, p. 320), who maintain that story reading should be "a natural part of the ESL classroom, carving pathways to meaningful connections between second language learners."

The above arguments highlight the value of children's literature in building vocabulary skills, and in promoting conversation and links between the spoken and written word. A further noteworthy benefit is addressed by Wasik and Bond (2001) and later by Dennis, Lynch and Stockall (2012, p.6) who maintain that "children develop an understanding about the forms and functions of print" through their interactions with books.

2.2.2 Literature based thematic instruction

The opportunities for conversation that arise from story reading described above, can be enhanced for young second language learners by the inclusion of a literature based theme in the classroom, thus providing extended opportunities to encounter the key language and to practise it in different contexts.

Just as Zeece (2010) refers to literature as a scaffold for learning, Bourke (2006, p.280), describes the development of a theme in the classroom as providing "scaffolding around which the language grows and develops," adding that a familiar theme motivates early authors to experiment with writing. A curriculum

including theme based literature was observed by Lonigan et al (2011) to be an effective way to improve oral language skills, and print knowledge.

Moreover, the literature in the field suggests that designing learning centres with props and illustrations related to a theme can extend young learners' language skills. This theory is supported by recent studies undertaken by Gest et al (2006) Bond and Wasik (2009), Pentimonti and Justice (2010) Wasik (2010), Dix and Amoore (2010), Gillanders and Castro (2011) and Dennis, Lynch and Stockall (2012).

Furthermore, an investigation into the vocabulary development of children engaged in book reading found that "Children whose teachers provided multiple opportunities to interact with vocabulary words learned more book-related vocabulary compared to children who were exposed to just the books" (Wasik and Bond, 2001, p. 247) In the context of their study, interacting with vocabulary words entails introducing vocabulary through a story, and then providing opportunities to use that vocabulary in other contexts such as role play with story related props, and other extension activities. These results lend weight to the argument in favour of literature based themes in the classroom and are supported by Schmitt's (2010) discussion on the incremental nature of vocabulary acquisition.

The developmental gains afforded by classroom themes are further extended into children's early writing attempts. Rybczynski and Troy (1995) and Guo et al (2012) advocate the inclusion of literacy materials related to a theme in play centres to encourage early writing. Morrow (1990) notes that so doing increases the literacy behaviours of children, while Elliott and Olliff (2008) suggest that the literacy materials should be interesting and appealing to young learners.

2.2.3 Read Aloud Strategies

Reading stories to children might seem like a straightforward activity, however Ostrosky, Gaffney and Thomas (2006) argue that this is not necessarily the case. In order to maximise the benefits gained from story reading, certain strategies are suggested following research into this area, which are outlined below.

Dialogic reading, asking questions and encouraging participation.

As noted previously, literature can provide a springboard for conversation. One reading strategy which encourages increased input from the children is dialogic reading, defined by Justice and Pullen (2003, p. 107) as "adult use of evocative or interactive behaviours during reading sessions."

Dialogic reading is a strategy that is encouraged by researchers such as Restreppo and Towle- Harmon (2008), Sylvester and Kragel (2012) and Callaghan and Madelaine (2012).

Gillanders and Castro (2011 p. 92) note that

> "reading aloud to young dual language learners needs to be done in a way that allows the children to join in even if they are in the early stages of learning English."

Dialogic reading appears to be one way of doing this. There are a number of ways that teachers can encourage participation in read alouds with young learners. To this end, Shedd and Duke (2008) make the following suggestions; firstly, ask children to provide key words from the story, secondly, encourage them to identify features from the illustrations, thirdly, invite them to join in with key refrains during the story, and finally, ask more open ended questions about the story, such as predictions about what will happen next.

Similarly, Gillanders and Castro (2010) add that for children with lower levels of oral language proficiency, questioning styles should involve asking children to finish sentences with one or two words, or by asking specific questions that require a one or two word answer.

In the same vein, Meier (2003, p.248) notes, "many children would probably participate more in talk about books if their teachers asked more creative, open ended questions."

Print referencing is another reading strategy, similar to dialogic reading, which has been observed in numerous studies to be an efficient strategy for encouraging literacy development (Justice and Pullen, 2003). Justice et al (2009, p.68) define print referencing as using "verbal and nonverbal techniques to heighten children's

attention to and interest in print within the story book," while Dennis, Lynch and Stockall (2012, p. 13) identify three characteristics of the strategy;

"(a) questions about print, (b) comments about print, and (c) tracking your finger along print while you read."

The results of the study by Justice et al (2009) show that after a year of participation in print focused story sessions, children demonstrated gains in print awareness, alphabet knowledge, and name writing abilities.

Indeed, Pentimonti and Justice (2010) add their voices to the discussion on the benefits of adopting a reading strategy that gets the children involved with the story. They maintain that such strategies lead to an increase of children's knowledge of the written language. In their study six scaffolding techniques are identified, ranging from low to high support, and they argue that

"the quality of the read aloud experience, including teacher use of scaffolding strategies when reading, may strongly influence the benefits children derive from these interactions" (2010, p. 244)

2.3 The Role of the Teacher

From the above discussion it is evident that one of the primary roles of the adult is to select activities and organise the learning environment in such a way as to create a language rich environment. However, given that "Play is work for young children" (Rybczynski and Troy 1995, p.7) and is acknowledged as being fundamental to children's learning, it seems logical that the role of the teacher must extend into this domain in order to scaffold, extend and support learning.

Indeed, Morrow (1990) demonstrated that teacher participation in children's play can lead to children's increased engagement with literacy materials. More recent research supports this view, in fact, Ostrosky, Gaffney and Thomas (2006, p. 175) even go as far as to describe the classroom teacher as a "catalyst" for children's learning and development.

An overwhelming common denominator across the literature on the role of the teacher in play is the concern that the play remains the domain of the child, in other words that it isn't dominated by the teacher. Just as a deep sea diver is a visitor to the habitat beneath the surface of the water, so too is an adult a visitor to the play environment inhabited by the child. To this end, Spodek and Saracho 1998, Roskos and Neuman 1993, Schrader 1990 and Saracho 2001a, all unanimously caution against inadvertently dominating children's play sequences through well intentioned participation.

2.3.1 Scaffolding Speaking Skills in Play Time

There have been a number of studies conducted into teacher scaffolding of children's oral language skills, with an increasing interest in making the most of play times for this purpose.

Indeed, Spodek and Saracho (2006, p.707) argue that "young children's literacy learning can be promoted in a play setting," while further research undertaken by Saracho (2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2003 and 2004) suggests that learning can be further enhanced through teacher scaffolding during play.

Accordingly, many studies have attempted to define the role of the teacher in play times by identifying scaffolding styles used by teachers during play times (Saracho (2001, 2003 and 2003, Roskos and Neuman 1993).

However, more recently the interest in teacher scaffolding has shifted slightly. Pentimonti and Justice (2010) focus more on the support provided through scaffolding activities rather than on the specific behaviour of the teacher. Scaffolding is described as a skill that needs to be developed in order to judge the level of the child, situate the activity in the child's zone of proximal development, and modify the amount of support needed. In terms of the level of support provided, a low level is described as "when a child is nearing maturation in a given skill" while high support features "more structured adult assistance" when a child is only beginning to learn a skill and needs constant support. (Pentimonti and Justice 2010, p.243)

In light of the above, there can be little doubt as to the importance of the role of the teacher as providing a scaffold for learning. However, Massey (2004, p.227) points out that while much has been made of the need for teachers to facilitate play, not enough attention is paid to the development of speaking skills in this context, noting that frequently "conversations are not filled with rich, stimulating content." Therefore, one of the vital roles of the teacher in the play centre is to draw the children into conversation by encouraging them to make predictions, talk about vocabulary and the characters in stories. "The adult's primary role is to be available to children during playtime," (Massey 2004, p. 229). The importance of teacher scaffolding of speaking skills through conversations during play time is shared by Justice and Pullen (2003) and Sylvester and Kragler who identify a key component of quality preschool programs as "rich student teacher interactions" (2012, p.124).

The value of quality interactions with the teacher in the development of oral language skills is further advocated by Bouchard et al (2010), while Gest et al (2006, p. 313) add "everyday conversations with children in multiple classroom settings represent a potentially critical contribution to children's oral language skills."

Indeed, Guo et al (2012) and Hay and Fielding- Barnsley (2012) suggest that when organising their classroom environment, teachers should give further consideration to their interactions with children to support their literacy development.

The concern about the teacher inadvertently dominating children's play extends to teacher- child interactions, Goh, Yamauchi and Ratliffe (2012) and Yamauchi, Im and Schonleber (2012) advise teachers to avoid this by being responsive to children's talk in the context of free play and to extend and scaffold speaking skills in this way.

2.3.2 Scaffolding Writing Skills in Playtime

Studies suggest that children's writing development can also benefit from teacher scaffolding during play activities. As discussed previously drawing pictures is viewed as a key step in developing the writing skills of young children. Indeed,

Genishi, Stires and Yung-Chan (2001) maintain that one way of supporting this in a play setting is to ask children about their attempts at writing and by offering to label drawings. Mayer (2007) adds that teachers can provide further scaffolding by modelling writing in play activities with children.

Similarly, Puranik and Lonigan (2011, p. 585) maintain teachers can help children develop their early writing skills through "scaffolded support through the use of prompts, cues, modelling and feedback," while Neumann and Neumann (2010) suggest that drawing children's attention to environmental print for the purposes of labelling serves as an another invaluable scaffolding tool.

2.4 A Niche in the literature

In order to situate this study in relation to current knowledge in the field as discussed above, I will consider a niche that has been identified by many researchers, along with suggestions for further research generated by those studies. Roskos and Christie (2011) and Callaghan and Madelaine (2012) highlight the conflict between the over academic nature of preschool instruction and the role of play therein, calling for further studies into balancing teacher and child initiated activities, while Rosenquest (2002), Roskos and Neuman (1993), Saracho (2001b) and Schrader (1990) lament the lack of research into the micro process of adult scaffolded play to support emergent literacy. This study tentatively proposes to take the first steps in addressing this gap in the knowledge of language and literacy learning in early childhood, particularly in the case of young second language learners.

2.5 A brief Summary

The research question posed by this study is simply: how does theme- based instruction linked to children's literature contribute to the development of speaking and prewriting- skills in an early childhood classroom environment? The review of the literature above reveals the following;

- Early writing skills are closely linked to oral language development,

- Children's stories provide an ideal way to introduce new vocabulary to young learners as well as providing a forum for subsequent practice through conversation.
- The building of these oral language skills frequently supports the development of early writing skills.
- Themes, designed around stories provide opportunities for reinforcement of new vocabulary as the children encounter it in different areas and activities in the classroom.
- Play is a fundamental part of the learning process, especially in terms of early literacy development.
- Teacher scaffolding can significantly enhance those opportunities
- Literacy development in ESL pre-schoolers is an area that is currently under-represented in the existing literature.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This chapter will briefly review the aims of the study and the context in which it takes place. It will also include a discussion of ethical considerations and measures taken to address them, followed by a description of the sample. The selection of the case study approach will then be justified, and finally, the data sources and collection procedures will be addressed.

3.1 A review of the aims of the study.

Irrespective of the research approach used, the necessity of "some steer from research questions for the capture of meaningful data" (Cousin 2005, p. 424, Gerring, 2007) is fundamental.

To recap briefly, the research question providing the "steer" in this study was: How does theme-based instruction linked to children's literature contribute to the development of speaking and pre-writing skills in an early childhood classroom environment?

The many benefits of using children's stories to develop themes in the classroom for young learners was reviewed in the previous chapter, as was the importance of play to children's learning and the role of the teacher therein.

Thus informed, the aims of the study were twofold: (1) to investigate the use of a theme-based approach linked to children's literature to scaffold the development of speaking and writing skills during teacher led activities, and (2) to explore the specific role of the teacher in facilitating the development of those skills during free play times in literacy enriched learning centres.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

Specific measures were proposed to the Ethics Committee to ensure that this study adhered to the University Research Ethics policies. The following provisions were proposed;

- I undertook to maintain the balance of teacher led and child led activities as outlined by the EYFS, as this is a statutory requirement (Great Britain, Department of Education 2012).
- In the interests of equality of instruction, participation in the activities outlined as part of the data collection procedures was not restricted to the focus children, but available to all the children in the class. However only data collected from the focus group was used in the study.
- The use of the Ipad to video and photograph children is a normal part of the class routine; this data is used on an ongoing basis to create the children's individual profiles. Parents are asked for their consent to this when they enrol their child. Any child whose parent did not grant consent was not be videoed or photographed as part of this study, although they were still free to participate in the activities.
- Finally, participation in the activities was entirely voluntary, - I undertook to ensure the children were aware of this by explaining clearly in Italian, and

alternative activities were constantly available to further demonstrate the point.

These measures were reviewed by the Ethics Committee and were subsequently accepted.

3.2.1 Letters of Information and Consent

Consent to the use of video recordings and photographs was gained from the director through the provision of a letter of information and consent (Letter 1 Appendix 4).This document outlines measures to preserve the anonymity of the participants at all times. As per the provisions undertaken, pseudonyms are used throughout instead of children's real names, and no child is identifiable in the photographic evidence documented.

Furthermore, the letter assures that access to the data collected would be restricted to the staff in the school who are directly involved with the children, the children themselves, and their parents. The letter further stipulates that data was to be transferred regularly from the school Ipad to my personal, password protected computer and then deleted from the Ipad. My willingness to share the results of the research with colleagues was also clearly expressed. Acting as a "gatekeeper" for the school, the director signed the consent form in loco parentis.

Consent was obtained from my teaching assistant to record her interactions with the children (Letter 2 Appendix 4). Her participation was voluntary, and she retained the right to withdraw at any time without fear of a negative impact on our working relationship, as per the Research Ethics Policies and Procedures (Sheffield Hallam University, 2009).

3.3 The Sample

Chapter 1 outlined the details of how the class is divided into three colour groups, and that the red group was selected as the sample for this study. The sample consisted of 8 children, 3 boys and 5 girls. Seven of the focus children were mother tongue Italian speakers, while three children had previous exposure to

English prior to starting school and 1 of them was from a bilingual home environment, although Italian is his language of preference. When the data collection process began in May, they had all been attending the preschool on a fulltime basis for the previous nine months.

3.4 The Case Study Approach

The most appropriate research approach for this study was deemed to be a Case Study, described by Dörnyei (2007, p.152) as "the ultimate qualitative method focusing on the 'particular one.'" Of the three categories of case study research identified by Dörnyei (2007) the second, Instrumental case study is most applicable to this research. The specific case in such a study is said to "provide insight into a wider issue while the actual case is of secondary interest; it facilitates our understanding of something else," (Dörnyei, 2007 p.152).

Indeed, Cousin (2005, p.422) lends weight to this definition of case study research, adding that it "aims to explore and depict a setting with a view to advancing understanding of it." The instrumental case study approach is distinguished from the intrinsic case study model thus; "Whereas an intrinsic case study aims to generalize within, instrumental case study attempts to generalize from a case study." (Cousin 2005, p. 422).

Similarly, Gerring (2007 p.20) defines the case study as "the intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that study is – at least in part – to shed light on a larger class of cases."

However, it must be noted that the approach is not without its critics. Indeed, Duff (2008) notes that case studies are frequently compared quite negatively with larger scale studies. Notwithstanding, researchers favouring the approach counter those claims, arguing on the contrary that "Social science may be strengthened by the execution of a greater number of good case studies," (Flyvberg 2006 p.19).

In this instance, I am looking at the particular case of one Italian preschool setting; however, it is anticipated that the discussion of the results of this individual case may give rise to further implications for similar preschool settings on a broader scale.

3.5 Data Sources

This section will take a look at the sources of data that will be discussed in section 5.

3.5.1 Videos and transcripts

One of the primary sources of data selected for the study was the use of video recordings taken on the Ipad, which were then transcribed. Given that this study is concerned with the development of speaking skills, a research method facilitating the documentation and subsequent analysis of the speech produced by the sample was deemed fundamental. Obviously, recordings can be transcribed, resulting in a record of all oral language used in the activities.

One might ask whether an audio recording would not achieve the same objective? As noted by Goh, Yamauchi and Ratliffe (2012), many of the communication skills in a young language learner's repertoire are non-verbal, and include facial expressions, or physical responses. As video recordings permit the analysis of any non-verbal behaviour exhibited by the sample, it was deemed to be the most appropriate research method for the case at hand.

Furthermore, previous studies by Genishi and Stires (2001), Bjork-Willen and Cromdal (2009), Saracho (2001b, 2002 and 2004) were greatly enhanced by the inclusion of non-verbal behaviours in the transcripts of video recordings. Indeed, Dooley and Mathews (2009 p.289) note that video data "allow us to view physical behaviours and perform more detailed examinations."

In this case, the use of video recordings permitted transcriptions of speech to include nonverbal communication during the activities.

The following transcription conventions, adapted from Duff (2010) were observed:

- Words in **bold type** indicate emphasis.
- *Italics* indicate that the word or sentence was translated from Italian to English
- Print appearing in red indicates that these are words spoken in English by the children

- Print appearing in <u>red and underlined</u> indicates code switching from Italian to English
- - Indicates interrupted speech.
- … Indicates a pause
- (↑?) Indicates a rising intonation used by the adult to encourage the children to provide vocabulary or join in with key refrains from the story.
- C refers to the code Number in the table below
- P refers to the photograph number
- R refers to the resources used and mentioned.

The video transcripts are similar in style to those of Araujo (2002) and Saracho (2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2003, and 2004) insofar as they include description of non-verbal behaviours. Care was taken to avoid compromising the validity of the data through interpreting non-verbal behaviour; as such a descriptive style was used to document this type of behaviour. Utterances in Italian are not verbatim; instead they have been directly translated into English.

3.5.2 Photographs

The second data source consisted of photographic evidence of the materials, the children engaged in activities, and their picto-drawings. The characteristics of emergent writing discussed in chapter two, such as linearity, circles and dots, as well as strings of letters and letter-like markings are more effectively represented by photographic evidence than by a verbal description, which is the justification for this choice of research method.

Moreover, photographic evidence of early writing has previously been used to great effect by Dix and Amoore (2010), Bjork-Willen (2009) , Araujo (2002), Schrader (1990), Neumann and Neumann (2010), Baghban (2007) and Mayer (2007), and Martinez, Laster and Conte (2010).

3.6 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection took place over a series of three weeks. Each week there was one teacher led activity and three literacy enriched play centres which were in operation for the duration of the week. During the child initiated activities, Stef (all

names are pseudonyms) was available to "play" in the learning centres, and she tended to gravitate to the centre with the largest number of focus children. All of the activities and play centres included theme related pictures, puppets and props (See Appendix 3).

3.6.1 The Three Little Pigs

The theme incorporated into the classroom activities was based on the story "The Three Little Pigs." In this section I will briefly justify this choice.

Cameron (2001) suggests that stories selected for young learners be well illustrated and engaging, with a clear plot, a balance between dialogue and narrative, views which are upheld elsewhere by Dix and Amoore (2010). Dennis and Horn (2011) add that the story should provide opportunities for discussion, while Vardell, Hadaway and Terrel (2006) maintain that there should be a high frequency of repetition of language that is accessible to the learners.

The chosen story meets all of the above criteria, it contains simple, repetitive language, the plot is very clear and resolved neatly at the end, and it lends itself easily to role play. Furthermore, the children had been introduced to the story during book week.

Finally, as discussed previously, creating a literacy enriched play centre requires the provision of theme related props and artefacts. The school was already in possession of a puppet set related to the story, and this was the final motivating factor in the selection.

3.6.2 The Activities and Learning Centres

Saracho and Spodek (2006) suggest that an environment in which literacy can be scaffolded through play should meet the following criteria;

- The children have necessary background knowledge of the subject or setting,
- There are opportunities for scaffolding through drama,
- Teachers are available to model, interact with and guide the children in their play.

This was adopted as a checklist of sorts in the design of the learning centres and play based teacher led activities

<u>Week 1:</u>

<u>Teacher led activity.</u>

The two part teacher led activity consisted of a story reading session (Resource 1 Appendix 3), using a combination of dialogic reading and print referencing strategies, as discussed in the previous section.

In the second part, the children were invited to draw a picture of their favourite part of the story. They were encouraged to label their drawings if they wanted to and environmental print related to the theme was readily available for the children to consult (Resource 4 Appendix 3). The discussion on reading strategies, emergent writing and literacy enriched learning centres in chapter 2 informed the selection of these data collection procedures.

<u>Child Initiated activities in the Learning Centres</u>

The first literacy enriched learning centre was the dramatic play area, where there were copies of the story, pictures on the storyboard, and puppets (Resources 1, 2 and 5, Appendix 3).

Centre 2 was the block area, featuring pictures of the three houses from the story (Resource 2 Appendix 3). This learning centre was equipped with theme related environmental print and a plentiful, varied supply of mark making materials for the children to label their constructions, (Resource 4 Appendix 3).

The third centre consisted of a painting table, once again, with plenty of labelled illustrations from the story clearly visible to the children. (Resource 2 Appendix 3)

<u>Week 2</u>

<u>Teacher Led Activities</u>

The children were encouraged to retell the story in simple terms using a choice of illustrations (Resources 1 and 2 Appendix 3). The second part of this activity involved "Magic Writing[1]" in the garden, where they were encouraged to draw, label and talk about elements of the story. Once again, sources of environmental print were readily available (Resource 4 Appendix 3).

Child Initiated activities in the Learning Centres

The first learning centre was set up in the writing corner, but instead of pens and paper, the children had chalk boards to draw and write on, reflecting the discussion in Chapter 2 on using varied and interesting literacy materials.

In centre two, the reading corner was furnished with numerous copies of the book, and story sequence cards, as well as the puppets to facilitate and encourage play reading and discussion (Resource 1, 2 and 5).

The third centre involved more puppets (Resource 5 Appendix 3) and props, such as blocks and Lego for constructing houses, in the dramatic play area. There were also materials for labelling constructions. Here we can see that, as suggested in Chapter 2, literacy materials have been included in different areas of the classroom instead of being restricted to the writing area.

Week 3

Teacher led activities

In the third week of data collection, the children were invited to participate in a scrapbooking activity related to the theme. They were encouraged to talk about the various elements of the story and to relate it to the images they were working with. Labelling activities were also suggested and encouraged.

Child Initiated activities in the Learning Centres

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[1] Magic writing involves using water and paintbrushes on concrete. Children draw/ write using the wet paintbrushes and watch as it dries in the sun and disappears.

In the learning centres, the children had a series of play dough mats with scenes from the story, (Resource 3 Appendix 3). They were encouraged to talk about and identify elements from the illustrations or their creations with play dough. Print referencing strategies were also used to draw the children's attention to print in the environment, and they were invited to try and form letters with their play dough. As before, there were illustrations and related environmental print displayed in this area for reference (Resources 2 and 4 Appendix 3)

In the second learning centre, the children were invited to participate in a magic writing activity on the concrete section of the garden. They were encouraged to paint their favourite parts from the story with water, and then watch their pictures disappear as the water evaporated. The story board was available for reference and to use in labelling activities.

The third learning centre also took place outside, and the children were provided with chalk, puppets (resource 5) and images from the story (resources 1 and 2). They were free to use these materials, and they chose to dramatise the story with the puppets and the story cards, before using the chalk to draw pictures of the little pigs.

3.7 Data Analysis Procedures

In this section, I will briefly discuss how the data collected was analysed, coded and cross referenced. The process of selecting a sample from the raw data corpus to include in the appendices will also be addressed.

3.7.1 Summary of Data Collected

Over the three week data collection period, there were a total of 12 video recordings taken of the teacher led activities and learning centres activities. These recordings were then transcribed verbatim, utterances in Italian were translated into English, and a description of non-verbal communication that occurred was included. There were also a total of 133 photographs taken during the three weeks.

3.7.2 Coding the Data

Dornyei (2007) describes of the nature of qualitative research as a zig zag pattern between the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data. Indeed, previous studies suggest that this is particularly true of studies where there are transcripts to be analysed and coded (Genishi and Stires 2001, Fassler 1998b, Araujo 2002).

Transcribing the recordings was the first stage of data analysis, and was ongoing throughout the data collection period. Each transcript was cross referenced to the photographic evidence, and to the resources used (see Samples in Appendix 1). I found that having worked on the transcripts in such detail helped enormously when I came to coding the data for the second stage of analysis. Indeed, Duff (2008) notes that the transcription process allows the researcher to make notes of recurring patterns, or other observations, as they work, which can be useful in determining codes and categories later on in the data analysis phase.

At the end of the collection process, there was a substantial amount of raw data to be organised. Le Compte (2000) argues that careful analysis is needed in order to meaningfully interpret data, and suggests repeated sifting through the data in order to start the process, before categories and patterns can be established.

Guided by Bell's (2010) suggestion, I began coding by listing four broad categories which related to the initial research questions. (A, B, C, D codes, Appendix 1). Having established these categories, the coding process began.

To create the codes, I followed a similar process suggested by Bell (2010) and employed by Penso (2001) which entailed working through the transcripts and finding as many items as possible that were worthy of an individual code. I continued to sift through the transcripts until every item of interest was accounted for. Frequently, this required amendments to be made as new codes emerged, or similar codes were merged.

Coding the photographs proved less arduous, as there was less room for interpretation, the features of emergent writing were coded according to those discussed in chapter 2. The necessity for interpretation during the coding process is one of the limitations of the study which will be discussed subsequently.

3.7.3 Collating the Results.

Collating the data is likened by LeCompte (2000) to the process of reassembling a jigsaw puzzle once it has been broken down into its component parts. Indeed, as Bell (2010 p.211) notes;

> "A hundred separate pieces of interesting information will mean nothing to a researcher or to a reader unless they have been categorized and interpreted"

Interpretation of the coded data was the final stage of analysis. To this end, the results were collated to create four graphs demonstrating the levels of speaking and writing skills observed in both the teacher led and child initiated activities, as well as the different roles taken on by the teacher in the learning centres. These graphs are presented and discussed in Chapter 4.

3.7.4 Selecting samples from the raw data

Holliday (2007) identifies the final stage of data collection as the selection of samples from the raw data to include in the final document. Unavoidably, determining which fragments of data to include is a decision made by the researcher, and as such, is subjective.

In order to select an excerpt from the transcripts that was representative both of the coding process and also of the corpus of raw data, the criteria followed was that the sample should be "rich in the sense of containing as many of the key elements as possible within a short space" (Holliday 2007 p106) (Sample Transcripts in Appendix 1).

Summary

This chapter has summarised the following;

- All of the teacher led activities and the learning centres for free play were designed around a theme based on "The Three Little Pigs."

- The teacher led activities included using dialogic reading and print referencing strategies.
- The learning centres included theme related props, environmental print, and mark making materials to encourage conversation, retellings of the story and picto-writing.
- Mark making materials and environmental print were not restricted to the writing centre, but were present in all the learning centres to encourage natural links between oral language and writing. The balance between teacher led activities and play activities was maintained.
- Both the teacher led activities and the play sessions in the literacy enriched play centres were videoed using the Ipad. The recordings were transcribed to include translations from Italian to English, and with brief but detailed descriptions of non-verbal communication .The transcripts were then coded for analysis.
- Photographs were taken of the children's pictures and work. These were also coded to identify the features of emergent writing discussed in chapter 2.

In the next section, the data collected during this stage will be presented, and discussed.

Chapter 4: The presentation of the Results.

In this section of the report, I will present the results of my investigation into the use of literature based themes in the development of speaking and early writing skills in preschool children.

The results are presented in relation to the initial aims of the project.

Accordingly, I will begin by discussing the use of a theme, based on children's literature in relation to the development of speaking and writing skills during the

teacher led activities. I will then move on to consider the role of the adult in scaffolding those skills during play times in the literacy enriched theme based learning centres.

Throughout the discussion there will be references to the specific codes identifying speaking and emergent writing skills, as well as adult scaffolding strategies. A full list and description of these codes is provided for reference in Appendix 1, as well as a full description of the transcription conventions followed which will be useful to refer to when reading the excerpts from the transcripts.

4.1: Evidence of Speaking Skills Development during the Teacher Led Activities.
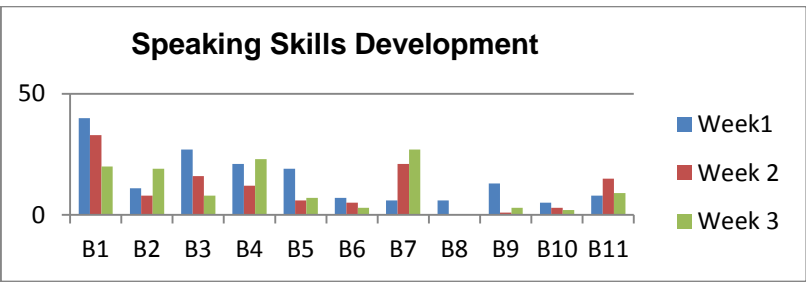
It has been noted previously that non-verbal communication is an integral part of the growing repertoire of communication skills in very young learners, (Goh, Yamouchi and Ratliffe 2012). Indeed, during the first teacher led activity in week one, this was the communication strategy observed with the highest level of frequency among the focus children (code B1).

In addition, figure 1 indicates that during this activity, the focus children made frequent use of theme vocabulary in response to questions or prompts (Code B3), as in extract 1;

Line	Speaker	Speech	Action	Code	Resource
1.	Me	The wolf came along and said (↑?)		C5	
2.	Me		I point to the picture	C6	1.4
3.	Lucy, Violet, Andrew+ Anne	**Knock, knock, let me in!**	.	B4	
4.	Lucy, Violet, Andrew+ Anne		Get to their knees, all children mime knocking	B1	
5.	Me	And the frightened Little pig, said (↑?)		C5	
6.	Chorus	No, No, No, not by the hair on my chinny chin chin!		B4	
7.	Children		Shaking their heads and fingers.	B1	

Furthermore, Figure 1 indicates that the focus children also employed this theme vocabulary spontaneously to speak about the story and make observations (B5), as in excerpt 2;

Line	Speaker	Speech	Code
1.	Me	Was the house of sticks strong?	C1
2.	Chorus	**Noooooo!!**	B11
3.	Hillary+ Andrew	Sticks not strong!	B5

Significantly, figure 1 demonstrates that in the second teacher led activity, week two, the level of non-verbal communication decreased (B1), while it emerged that the children made increasingly extensive use of theme related language (B7). One possible explanation for this is that in the interval between teacher led activities the theme continued to be extended into play activities in the learning centres,

which suggests that repeated exposure to the theme story resulted in notable gains in vocabulary development in the focus children. This is in keeping with previous research on theme based instruction (Bourke 2006, Cameron 2001).

Interestingly, the increase in spontaneous use of theme vocabulary to speak in more complex terms (B7), mentioned above appears to be directly proportional to the decrease in the use of "language chunks" to identify or retell elements of the story when requested (B3 and B4). A clear example of this can be seen in excerpt 3, where the children are discussing why the house of bricks doesn't fall down.

Line	Speaker	Speech	Action	Code	Resource
1.	Anne	This one…..yes strong!		B7	
2.	Me	This one is very strong, and the wolf-		C4	
3.	Andrew	Very strong!		B5	
4.	me	Good Andrew! And the wolf is not able to blow it down!		C4	
5.		Who wants to help me tell the next bit?		C8	
6.	Violet		Puts her hand up.	B1	
7.	Violet	Water…hot…..splash!		B7	
8.	Violet		Points to the picture.	B1	2.7

Excerpt 3: Teacher led activity week 2

Clearly the children continued to employ theme related language, in this case the words, "strong," and "splash," as their foundation. However, it is apparent that Anne and Violet attempted to expand on this familiar vocabulary to discuss the story and make predictions about the plot.

The final teacher led activity in week three saw a continued decrease in non-verbal communication (B1), however this was matched by a higher level of Italian than previously documented (B2). I believe that this is a result of the quiet interludes when the children were focused on their gluing activity during which they chatted among themselves.

Despite the increased use of Italian, figure 1 clearly shows that the use of theme related vocabulary to retell elements of the story (B4) was nevertheless at its highest during this activity. The children used the scrapbook collages that they made to tell and discuss various parts of the story.

Furthermore, this activity also gave rise to the highest frequency of expansion of theme related language (B7) as the children used increasingly complex speech patterns to discuss the story in greater detail, as in extract 4;

Line	Speaker	Speech	Action	Code	Resource
1.	Me	Well, who is in the picture?		C5	
2.	Anne	The pig, and the wolf.		B7	
3.			Points.	A8	6.3
4.	Me	Is the pig happy?		C12	
5.	Anne		Shakes her head.	B1	
6.	Me	No, he's not happy he's (↑?)		C5	
7.	Anne+ Violet	Scared!		B3	
8.	Me	Why is he scared?		C9	
9.	Anne	Why, why…the wolf…..		B7	
10.	Me	Wants…		C8	
11.	Anne	Why the wolf wants to eat the pigs		B7	

Excerpt 4: Teacher led activity week 3

4.2 Evidence of Emergent Writing Skills Development during Teacher Led Activities.
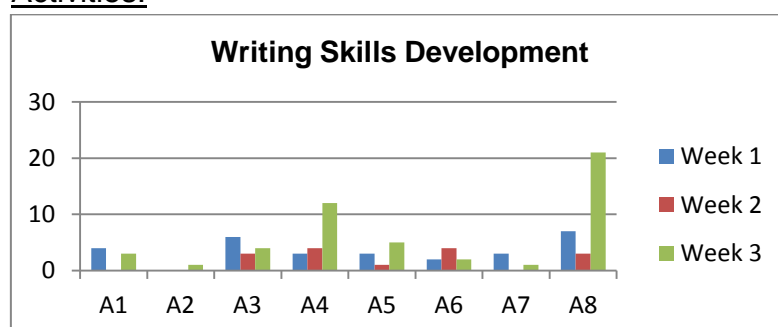
Figure 2: Writing Skills Development observed during 3 teacher led activities, over a 3 week period.

Figure 3 demonstrates that the children's mark making efforts during the teacher led activities showed many of the features of emergent writing discussed previously, most notably the concept that marks, in the form of letters, words, or illustrations can represent concepts, or ideas (A8).

Indeed, the importance of drawing to early writing skills development (Baghban 2007) was apparent during these activities, as the focus children engaged in frequent attempts to label their illustrations, either spontaneously (A7) or on suggestion (A6). These labels displayed further early writing features.

Image 1   Image 2   Image 3

The above writing samples were collected during the first teacher led activity.

In image 1, Violet used the letter P to label her drawing of one of the little pigs (A7). In doing so she demonstrated that she knows the word "pig" in English, but more importantly, that she knows lots *about* that word, including the fact that the first sound is /p/, and that this is represented by the letter P (A4). Furthermore, representing a word by writing its first letter is an early example of invented spelling, as seen previously.

Image 2 shows Anne's picture of the 3rd little pig. She responded enthusiastically to my suggestion that she label her drawing, and she copied the words "pig" and "bricks" by copying from environmental print (A6). Anne demonstrated her understanding of how symbols and drawings can be used to represent events, in

drawing about her favourite part of the story, when the wolf climbs onto the chimney (A8).

Another early writing skill which figure 3 shows was observed in this teacher led activity was self-motivated labelling (A7). Image 3 is a good example of this; Violet drew another pig from the story (A8), and copied the words "not strong" independently. The bottom of the page also shows a string of seemingly random letters, (A1) which is another feature of emergent writing identified by Genishi, Stires and Yung- Chan (2001).

Image 4   Image 5

The above images are from the teacher led activity in week two, and provide one example of how the children used pictures to communicate about aspects of the story (A8) and demonstrated an awareness of letters and sounds in their labelling activities (A4). When Anne finished her picture of the three little pigs, she followed my suggestion to label it by finding the appropriate flashcard, and copying it.
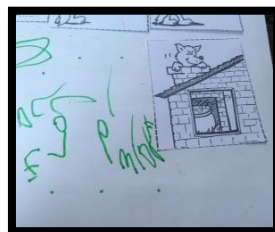
Image 6   Image 7   Image 8

During the final teacher led activity, in week three, it was observed that in addition to demonstrating their understanding that pictures and symbols represent ideas and concepts (A8), the children exhibited many other characteristics of emergent writers.

Image 6 shows a string of seemingly random letters and shapes, however on closer inspection, it is apparent that Violet has used her knowledge of letter sounds in an attempt to write the words "pig" and "wolf" to label her work (A7). The word "pig" is represented by a P, an I and backwards G, while the letters L, F and an upside down W represent the word "wolf" (A4).

In images 7 and 8, Gail and Anne showed their understanding that print can be used to convey meaning (A8) by the writing the words "wolf" and "splash" on their work (A7).

4.3 Speaking Skills Development in the Learning Centres and the Role of the Teacher.
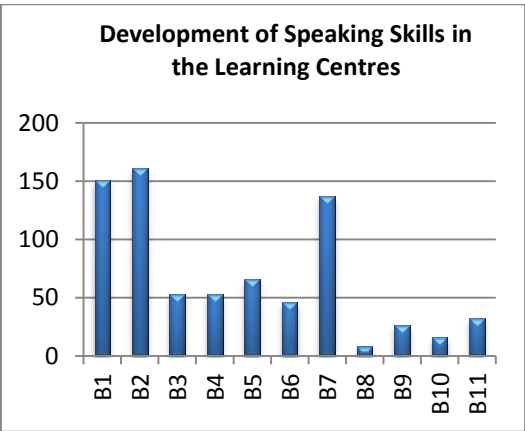
Figure 3
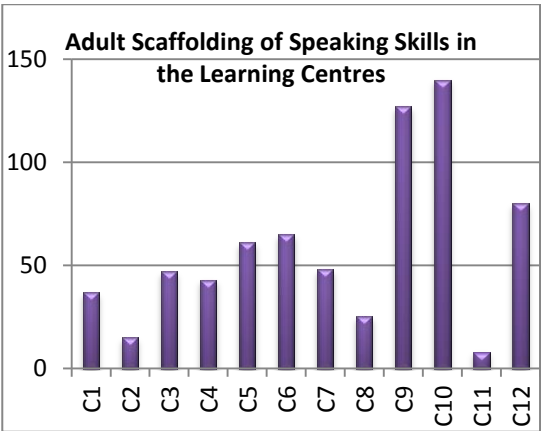
Figure 4

As in the teacher led activities, figure 4 indicates that the speaking skills used most frequently by the focus children in the learning centres were non-verbal communication (B1), or L1 use to talk about the story and related activities (B2).

Excerpt 5 is one example, as Stef is encouraging the children to try and blow down the houses they have made with Lego;

Image 9

Line	Speaker	Speech	Action	Code
1.	Stef	Are you able to?		C12
2	Alex		Shakes his head.	B1
3.	Stef	No? Why?		C3
4.	Thomas	*Wait!*		B2
5.	Thomas		Tries to blow it down.	B1
6.	Alex		Shakes his head.	B1
7.	Stef	Why won't it fall down?		C3
8.	Alex	**NO!**		B8
9.	Stef	I wonder why!		C9
10.	Alex	*Because it's made of bricks!*		B2
11.	Stef	Ah! It's made of bricks,		C4
12.	Stef	So it's very, very (↑?)		C5
13.	Alex	Strong!	Keeps building.	B4

Excerpt 5: Week 1 learning centre 2.

Nevertheless, Figure 4 also indicates that the children used the theme language frequently in the learning centres to talk about the story (B3), their related activities (B7), or to recount parts of the story (B4), as in excerpt 6 where Stef asks the children to talk about what parts of the story they were drawing.

Line	Speaker	Speech	Action	Code
1.	Stef	And what does he say?		C9
2.	Lucy	**Knock, knock, let me in!**		B4

3.	Stef	And do the little pigs say "Ok, in you come, Mr Wolf!"?		C12
4.			mimes opening the door.	C7
5.	Lucy	No!		B11
6.	Stef	No? Do they not?		C9
7.	Lucy	**No, no, no, not by the hair on my chinny chin chin! And I'll huff, and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down!**		B5
8.	Stef	And does he blow the house down?		C1
9.	Lucy	No.	Starts colouring in her picture.	B5
10.	Stef	No? It doesn't go down?		C1
11.	Lucy	No		B11
12.	Stef	Why?		C3
13.	Lucy	Because **very, very** strong!		B7

Excerpt 6: Week 2 learning centre 1

The most significant aspect emerging from the data collected in the learning centres was that the speaking skill observed most frequently entailed use of the theme language to expand on the story and discuss it in greater detail, and in more complex terms (B7). In turn, this was accompanied by an increased level of code switching than previously observed (B6).

Furthermore, this trend was matched by Stef's frequent use of a particular scaffolding style. Figure 5 indicates that Stef consistently guided and extended the children's activities and conversations through making suggestions or asking questions (C9). In addition, she was attentive to the children's activities and frequently helped them to extend their ideas as they played (C12). Excerpt 7 is a good example of how Stef used these styles of scaffolding, and how the children responded- the change in the script that Stef uses is following Andrew's idea that

the wolf and the pig become friends. They are playing with the puppets in this excerpt (resource 5).

Line	Speaker	Speech	Action	Code
1.	Stef	Knock, knock, let me in!		C5
2.	Gail+ Anne	No, no, no, not by the hair on my chinny chin chin!		B4
3.	Stef	Please little pigs! I want to be friends!		C12
4.	Gail	No!		B11
5.	Stef	I only want to be friends, please little pigs		C12
6.			Turn to Anne.	C7
7.	Anne	Yes!		B11
8.			Holds her puppet up to the wolf.	B1
9.	Stef	Oh! Thank you!		C10
10.		Can I be your friend too Mummy pig?		C9
11.	Gail	Hmmm,	Pretends to think.	
12.	Stef	Yes?		C1
13.	Gail	Yes!		B11
14.	Stef	I have a big kiss for you Mummy pig! Thank you!		C12
15.		How are you Mummy pig?		C12
16.	Gail	I'm fine!	Laughing	B7
17.	Andrew	*Me!*		B2
18.	Stef	You're in the house of bricks! I'm not there yet! I'm making friends in the house of straw!		C10
19.	Andrew	Straw,		B5
20.		*but then my house!*		B6
21.	Stef	I'm a bit sad, nobody wants to ask me how I am today!		C9
22.	Anne	How are you?		B7
23.	Gail	How are you wolf?		B7
24.	Stef	You mean me? How am I?		C4

25.	Gail and Anne	Yes!		B11
26.	Stef	I'm a really happy wolf today, because I have new friends!		C10
27.		Let's see how many new friends I have.		C9
28.	Anne	One, two, three!	She counts the puppets	B7

Excerpt 7: Learning Centre 3 week 3

Finally, figure 5 also shows that Stef provided a lot of contextual support in the learning centres, often pointing to illustrations or materials (C6), or miming actions (C7), which in turn resulted in high levels of comprehension. Stef's style of guiding activities and paying attention to the children's input seemed to impact the level of spontaneous language used in the learning centres (B5 and B7).

4.4 Writing Skills Development in the Learning Centres
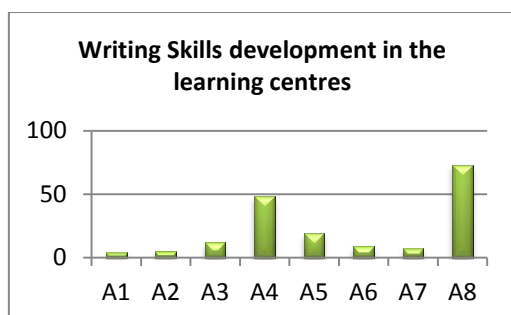
Figure 5
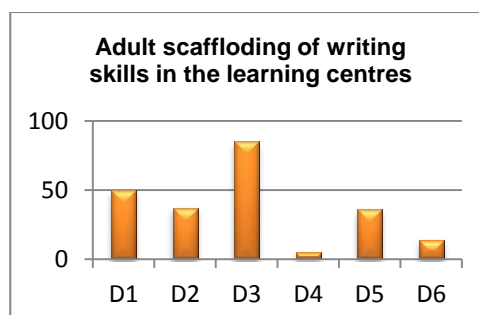
Figure 6

It is apparent from figure 6 that in the learning centres, asking children about their drawings (D1), suggesting labelling activities (D2), encouraging interaction with environmental print (D5) and making connections between letters and sounds (D6) featured strongly in Stef's interaction with the children.

Furthermore, she was frequently observed using positive encouragement and praise of the children's writing attempts (D3). Excerpt 8 provides a good example, when asked, Gail tells Stef that she is drawing a pig, and Stef gives her the appropriate flashcard to write that word while drawing her attention to the relationship between the sound /p/ and the letter P (D6).

Line	Speaker	Speech	Code
1.	Stef	the /p/ for pig when you're ready!	D2
2.	Gail	Yes!	B11
3.	Stef	/p/, /p/, /p/!	D6
4.	Gail	/p/ for Pig!	A4
5.	Stef	/p/ for pig, that's right, good!	D6

Excerpt 8: Learning centre 3 week 1

In their creative mark making activities, figure 6 shows that the most prominent early writing skill observed in the learning centres was the use of pictures to communicate about the story (A8). Many of these pictures portray different aspects of the story and show other early writing features, as the images below show,

Image 10

Image 11

Image 12   Image 13

In Image 10, Gail has drawn her favourite part of the story, the big bad wolf attempting to blow down the little pig's house (A8), and she has written "pig" on the top of her page (A6).

Image 11 depicts Hillary's house of straw, and her efforts to make a signpost for it by copying the word "straw" from an environmental print card (A6).

Image 12 shows Lucy's attempt to label her picture of a pig, the letters P and the I are clearly visible, and the G is represented by a letter like shape, another early writing feature.

Image 13 is an example of self-motivated spelling (A7). Anne identified the sounds in the word "wolf," and knew which letters represented those sounds (A4).

Image 14   Image 15   Image 16

Further evidence of how the children applied their knowledge of letter sounds to their labelling activities is seen above. Figure 14 shows a house of bricks (A8), and although this might not be immediately clear, the effort to represent this through writing is a combination of letters, and letter like shapes (A3) that closely

resemble the letter in the word "bricks." Image 15 shows the letter P that one child made with play dough, to represent the /p/ for pig (A4). Finally, Image 16 shows another common feature of emergent writing, strings of seemingly random letters presented in a linear pattern (A1).

4.5: A Brief Summary of the findings

- Non-verbal communication decreased steadily during the teacher led activities, as did the use of Italian. The only exception being the use of L1 in week three as explained above. In the learning centres, non-verbal communication and L1 use was consistently high.
- Theme related vocabulary was used frequently by the focus children to identify, retell or join in with parts of the story, in both the teacher led activities and the learning centres.
- The decrease in the use of theme vocabulary for identification purposes in the teacher led activities was matched by a steady rise in the use of this language to speak in more complex terms about the story.
  A similar trend was observed in the learning centres, where the teacher used suggestions and questions to guide and extend activities, and where positive feedback and attention to the children's ideas also featured strongly.
- The teacher led writing led activities resulted in frequent use of pictures or symbols to represent events in the theme story. This was also the case in the learning centres, where the results show that the teacher asked a lot of questions about the children's pictures, suggested labelling, and provided positive feedback on early writing efforts.
- In their labelling exercises undertaken as part of teacher led activities and in the learning centres alike, the focus children

demonstrated many other features of emergent writing, such as invented spelling, and awareness of letters and sounds.

- The children showed their enthusiasm for labelling their own pictures, and as a result there were few instances of teacher modelling writing by labelling.

The implications of these findings will be discussed in chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion of the Results

In this chapter, I will discuss how the results presented previously contribute to a greater understanding of the research questions posed at the outset. This chapter will highlight that theme based instruction through adult led activities and play based learning centres did indeed have a positive impact on the children's speaking and early writing skills. I will also discuss the role of the teacher in scaffolding these skills within play sessions in the learning centres. Finally, I will propose how this study takes a step towards addressing the existing niche in research and knowledge in the field which was noted in Chapter 2.

5.1: Theme Based Instruction and the Development of Speaking Skills

The results show that the focus group in this study developed their oral language skills while engaged in both the teacher led activities, and while playing in the learning centres.

5.1.1: Speaking Skills Development in Teacher Led Activities

The results in Chapter 4 clearly show that using the theme of the story "The Three Little Pigs" in a series of teacher led activities did indeed provide the opportunity for conversation and speaking skills development.

While the use of non-verbal communication decreased steadily from week one to three, the children increasingly employed theme related language to identify,

recount, or discuss elements of the story. In addition to supporting existing research which claims that literature and story based themes provide children with shared reading experiences, and the opportunity and vocabulary to talk about them (Ernst and Richards 1994), these findings further demonstrate that this applies equally in the case of very young learners.

Furthermore, during the three teacher led activities it was observed that the children did indeed use the theme language to participate in role play and shared reading, as Genishi, Stires and Yung- Chan (2001) noted elsewhere. Not only did they use the language chunks provided by the story in retelling it, they also used this language to discuss the story, the characters, and the plot.

Indeed, Massey (2004) suggests that one benefit of using children's stories is that the children can be encouraged to talk about characters and plot in more detailed terms, and the results of my study show that this is indeed possible even in the case of very young second language learners.

5.2: Theme Based Instruction and the Development of writing Skills in Teacher Led Activities

The early writing features observed during the teacher led activities support many of the theories presented by previous research in the field.

The links between oral and written language identified by Ernst and Richards (1994) and others which were discussed in Chapter 2 are evident in the results of this study. Meier (2003) and Dix and Amoore (2010) argue the theory of skill transfer from oral to written language, which is also a significant feature that emerged from this study.

Indeed, the results presented previously demonstrate that the children engaged frequently in drawing pictures related to the story, which Baghban (2007) maintains is a common feature of emergent writers.

Furthermore, it was observed that the focus children used high levels of the theme language to talk about and give meaning to their pictures. The transfer from their

oral language skills to their early writing efforts became apparent in the labels that they wrote for their drawings. Having identified key elements of their drawings using the words that they had learned from the theme story, many of the children engaged in self- motivated labelling activities, where they demonstrated that their knowledge of a particular word included an awareness of the letters and sounds in that word, which in turn fuelled their attempts at labelling, as seen in Image 1.

Further evidence of oral language transfer to developing writing skills is also present in the focus children's attempts to label their pictures by copying from environmental print. Print referencing strategies were not unique to reading activities, but rather children were encouraged to select the appropriate labels to use to write their own captions. Figure 3 indicates that the children demonstrated increasing levels of awareness of the letters and sounds that make up words as the weeks went by.

Saracho (2001a p. 107) notes that stories provide children "an opportunity to sequence events" and observed that the children in her study frequently drew pictures about familiar stories. The findings of this study support this. During the data collection period the children used their drawings to recreate and represent elements of the story, which they were then able to talk about. This suggests that the links between oral language and literacy are two- fold; children's developing literacy also supports oral language development.

5.3: Speaking and Writing Skills in the Learning Centres.

Schrader (1990) identifies symbolic play as the road along which oral language skills transfer to early writing skills. The results of this study lend weight to this claim. The focus children were observed to use high levels of the language from the theme story, "The Three Little Pigs" as they played in the learning centres. In some instances this was used to talk about what they were doing, for example in learning centre 3 in week 2, the children built houses in the construction centre, and used the vocabulary from the story to identify them, and talk about whether they were strong, or not. In other instances, the language was used to retell the story, as in the second learning centre in week 2, where the children acted out the story using puppets and story sequence cards.

Image 17

What is apparent from the results is that these oral language skills appeared to extend into the children's writing activities. In image 17Thomas has built the house of bricks using Lego. He has found the flashcard and used it as a signpost, and he has written the letter P to signify that this house belongs to the Pig.

The links between oral and written language skills discussed in Chapter 2 were most definitely apparent in the play activities that took place in the learning centres. In numerous activities, the children drew pictures, or represented elements of the story with paint, play dough or Lego and used the language from the theme story to identify and describe them.

Indeed, efforts to label drawings is a common motivation for young children as emergent writers, (Baghban, 2007) and very often this provided the link between oral and written language as the children engaged in labelling activities, not only for their drawings but also for their constructions.

Moreover, Saracho (2001a) claims that literacy materials should be present in all areas of the classroom, which is supported by the findings of this study where the focus children were observed engaging in play related literacy activities during drama, construction games, and while playing with the chalk board or experimenting with magic writing in the garden.

5.4: The Role of the Teacher in Scaffolding the Development of Speaking and Writing Skills in Play.

The results in chapter 4 indicate that Stef, the teacher in the learning centres, was a very consistent presence, providing continuous feedback and commentary to the children as they played. Stef asked a lot of open ended questions, and provided a high level of contextual support.

Furthermore, she was attentive to the children's own ideas as they played, and used questions and suggestions to help them to extend these ideas and activities. This resulted in high levels of the children using the theme language to speak in more complex terms, and in turn, higher levels of code switching were observed in the learning centres than in the teacher led activities. Once again, this is reminiscent of previous studies which highlighted the importance of the teacher being tuned in and responsive to the child during play. To this end, Connor, Morrison and Slominski (2006 p.666), note that curricula which balanced teacher led instruction and "child-initiated, teacher-responsive approaches" had more successful short and long-term educational outcomes.

Indeed, the presence of the teacher in the learning centre as an active participant in the games resulted in the children engaging enthusiastically in games and activities and using the theme vocabulary to do so. With Stef's support, they also incorporated literacy behaviours into their play.

The importance of teachers involving themselves in young children's play activities to support learning has been recognised by previous researchers (Morrow 1990, Ostrosky, Gaffney and Thomas 2006, Spodek and Saracho 2006). The findings of this study suggest that this theory can be applied equally effectively to second language learning with very young learners.

Stef encouraged links between oral and written language by suggesting mark making activities in the play centres, e.g. suggesting that the children label the

houses they built with Lego. The results discussed previously indicate that she frequently asked children about their drawings and paintings, and was very responsive to their early writing efforts.

Indeed, the fact that the children showed signs of developing their speaking and early writing skills lends support to the theory proposed by Bjork-Willen and Cromdal (2006 p.1496);

"In early child education, play has become something of a professional instrument: preschool teachers initiate play and engage children in playful activities as a way of working towards curricular goals."

Certainly, the results show that Stef encouraged the children to notice the print that was available in the environment, and this resulted in the children demonstrating significant levels of awareness of letters and sounds in addition to providing a springboard for labelling activities.

5.5: A final note on the development of speaking skills

A final significant aspect emerging from the findings lend support to Massey (2004) and Hay and Fielding-Barnsley's (2012) earlier discussion on the levels of language development (Chapter 2). The results showed high levels of language used for identifying or retelling elements of the story (B3 and B4), accompanied by increasing levels of more elaborate language used to expand on the theme vocabulary (B7). This in turn appeared to be linked to Stef's responsiveness to the children and their ideas (C9 and C12). Furthermore, developing the simple language of identification and naming was also observed to appear in the children's early writing efforts.

5.6 Addressing the Niche in the Literature.

A niche in the existing literature was identified in Chapter 2, which this study aimed to address.

5.6.1: Academia vs. Play, Finding the Balance in Preschool:

As outlined previously, Callaghan and Madelaine (2012) identify the conflict arising from the increasingly academic nature of preschool programmes, versus the value of play to children's learning. Although this is a very small scale study with certain limitations, which will be addressed in the following chapter, the results nevertheless indicate that one possible way to overcome this conflict is by moving away from the idea that children are wasting valuable learning time when they are "just playing." Research into how children learn, as discussed in chapter 2 tells us that there is no such thing as "just playing."

Indeed, this study shows that the focus children made considerable vocabulary gains while engaging in both teacher led and child initiated play activities related to the theme of the story. These gains were initially observed in their spoken language proficiency, and transferred to their writing.

5.6.2: Teacher Scaffolding in Play Times, Without Dominating Play

The role of the teacher in both sets of play activities was to provide scaffolding for language development. High level scaffolding as defined in Chapter 2 was predominantly used in the teacher led activities, while in the play centres the results show that the teacher acted mainly as a facilitator and guide to the process.

As discussed previously, Rosenquest (2002), Roskos and Neuman (1993), Saracho (1001b) and Schrader (1990) highlight the need for more detailed research into adult scaffolded play and emergent literacy. This study was driven by a broader focus, and as such can't legitimately claim to address the issue fully. However, the results do indicate that with the presence and subtle input of the teacher in the play centres, the children's literacy activities, both oral and written, extended beyond where they might have filtered out had the children been "just playing" on their own. Therefore, the results of this study suggest that further in depth research into this macro process of adult scaffolding in play centres would be beneficial.

5.6.3 The Art of Conversation.

Many researchers have argued that teachers need to keep the level of "teacher talk" to a minimum in order to maximise students' talk time. When dealing with young second language learners of this age, their low oral language proficiency means that this is not feasible. Massey (2004), Justice and Pullen (2003), among others, maintain that teachers need to master the art of providing high quality interactions with children to scaffold speaking skills. The results of this study indicate that theme based instruction provides children with enough language and vocabulary skills to begin to engage in simple conversations with a teacher, that would otherwise be beyond their capabilities.

5.7 A brief Summary

This study supports the argument made by Fassler (1998a and1998b), Dennis and Horn (2011) and others, that using children's literature is a very effective way of developing vocabulary and language skills, even in very young second language learners. Moreover, the findings suggest that these gains can be further extended through the use of a theme based on children's literature, as suggested by Gest et al. (2006).

In addition, the fundamental role of play in children's learning, as identified by Bjork- Willen and Cromdal (2009), Bond and Wasik (2009) and others, is recognised in this study. The results indicate that the children made significant gains in both oral and written language skills in play activities that were both teacher led, and child initiated.

Indeed, this study finds that incorporating a story based theme into children's play activities and providing attentive scaffolding, is one way of developing and strengthening the links between oral language development and early writing skills for preschool second language learners.

In the following chapter, I will present the overall summary of the findings of this report before drawing some general conclusions. This will be followed by a brief

discussion on the limitations of the report, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The final chapter will feature a summary of the general findings and a general conclusion. At this point there will also be a reflection on the whole research process, where I will discuss the limitations of the study and implications for practice before finally making some recommendations for further study based on my findings.

6.1 A summary of the findings

The results of this study show that even preschool second language learners can develop oral language skills that will support their early writing skills, and that a theme based on children's literature is one way to overcome the low language proficiency that is deemed to hold children back.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that children's language skills both oral and written, can be very successfully developed in play activities, and that the role of the teacher in this area is crucial.

6.2 Limitations of the Study: Impartiality in Coding

Having completed the data collection and analysis, I have identified one significant limitation which must be highlighted.

Despite my best intentions to ensure validity of the results, the nature of the coding process requires a certain amount of interpretation. While every attempt was made to be consistent and subjective during the process, the fact remains that the charts presented in chapter 4 were based on the codes assigned in the transcripts, which were based solely on my interpretations.

Coding the emergent writing features in the photographic evidence was quite straightforward, however coding the transcripts was not a simple affair, and on numerous occasions I found myself struggling to decide how to classify a certain utterance, and ultimately how I decided to interpret it impacted directly on the results. At this point I think it would have been immensely beneficial to have had the support of a second researcher with whom to discuss and compare results during the coding process. One example of this difficulty is the following excerpt from the recording of the second learning centre in week 2

Stef	One day the wolf came along, and he said? (?↑)		C9
Stef		Holds her hand up ready to knock	C7
Andrew +Hillary	Knock, knock, let me in!		B4
Andrew +Hillary		They knock with their hands.	B1
Stef	And the pig said? (?↑)		C9
Hillary + Violet	No, no, no, not by the hair on my chinny chin chin!		B4
Hillary + Violet		Shaking their heads and tapping their chins.	B1
Stef	Then I'll (?↑)		C9
Stef		Holds up the wolf puppet ready to say the refrain.	C7
Violet and Hillary	Huff, and Puff, and blow the house down!		B4
Stef	And what happened then?		C3
Violet	Down!		B7

Excerpt 9: Week 2 learning centre 2

In this activity, the children were playing with the puppets and were acting out the story of the three little pigs, when Stef joined them. The excerpt shows that I have used the code C9 (using questions/suggestions to guide activities). However, I could just as easily have applied the code C5 (encouraging rehearsal by prompting for vocabulary words.) Ultimately, my decision was guided by the fact that upon looking at the recording again, I asked myself what Stef had been trying to achieve with each of the statements highlighted. Clearly Stef is trying to

encourage the children to use the language chunks from the story, which would fall under the category of C5, however I judged that she was doing this in order to keep the activity going and encourage the children to continue with the role play by guiding them through the steps, and therefore I decided that the code C9 more aptly represented this.

Clearly, the results discussed in chapter 4 are dependent on my interpretations of the coding process, consequentially I must acknowledge that there is an element of subjectivity to the study.

6.3 Recommendations for further study

As discussed previously, the results of this study show that the children did use the language related to the theme story of The Three Little Pigs in both teacher led activities, and in their free play, and that this language also extended to early writing skills. I feel that this could be the starting point for a number of avenues for further study.

A) As mentioned in chapter 5, I believe that people working with young learners could benefit from further more in-depth research into the macro process of adult scaffolding during play times. This is one direction further study could take.

B) As second area of investigation that I would be keen to undertake myself would be a longitudinal study wherein a number of different themes related to three or four stories could be used over the course of a year. It would be interesting to see if the children would be able to apply the vocabulary and writing skills they learned over the course of the study to another theme, such as "Little Red Riding Hood." Similarly, it would be interesting to observe how their overall oral and writing language skills would develop over the course of a year using three or four literature based themes. I would like to compare such a focus group to a control group. This of course would require base line testing at the outset, and is not the sort of study that could be carried out by one researcher, but one that I feel would be very interesting and relevant, and which could potentially bridge the gap between academia and fun in preschool.

6.4 Reflections on the process: Final Thoughts.

I feel very strongly that the process of preparing for this final dissertation did not begin a mere ten months ago when the first research proposal was drafted, but rather three years ago when conducting action research for the first time at the start of the programme. I now see how all of the previous research conducted for the Certificate and Diploma stage led me to pose the research questions for this project.

There is an enormous sense of achievement at this point, as I feel that the last three years I have been working on the skills necessary to review the literature, find a niche, develop a research question, and set about finding answers.

The process of researching, data collection, and presenting my findings in this study has been immensely challenging, but equally rewarding. I feel that I have learned a lot about how I can improve the learning experience for the preschool children I work with, and that I have contributed in a small way to the existing research in the field.

In hindsight, I realise that although I knew there would be a lot of work involved, I significantly underestimated the time consuming nature of transcribing and coding so much data on my own. Having said that, I don't believe another research method would have served the purpose so well, or generated such rich data, so I must say, if I was starting again, I wouldn't change that aspect. What I would do however, is invite a colleague to collaborate with me on the coding process. The main benefit of this would be that the results would then be less dependent on my interpretation of the data.

One aspect that has helped throughout the journey is that I strongly believe in the importance of gaining an insight into the areas that I set out to investigate. This helped me to maintain my momentum at times when the whole process seemed overwhelming, and it also contributes to the sense of achievement now, at the end.

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Links to Resources.

Resource 1: Three Little Pigs Story

http://resources.sparkleplus.co.uk/sb405.pdf

Resource 2:

Story Sequence Cards:

http://www.primarytreasurechest.com/once-upon-a-time/the-three-little-pigs.html

Resource 3:

Play Dough Mats

http://resources.sparkleboxres.co.uk/sb3689.pdf

Resource 4:

Environmental Print Cards

http://www.sparklebox.co.uk/literacy/fairytales/three-little-pigs.html#.Ugzg2CdBvMz

Appendix 1: Codes, and Sample Transcript

A Codes	Description	B Codes	Description
A1	Scribbles, or strings of random letters.	B1	Non-verbal action signalling comprehension of language spoken or aspects of the story.
A2	Marks, circles, dots+ lines organised in a linear pattern	B2	L1 speech signalling comprehension of language spoken or aspects of the story.
A3	Combination of letters + letter like shapes.	B3	L2 theme related vocabulary used to talk about or identify elements of the story following a prompt/ question.
A4	Showing awareness of or interest in letters, letter sounds, or letter formation.	B4	L2 Theme related language used to recount/retell or join in with elements of the story when prompted or asked to.
A5	Invented spelling used to label pictures.	B5	Spontaneous use of L2 theme related vocab to identify, discuss or retell elements of the story.
A6	Copying from environmental print following adult suggestion	B6	Code switching
A7	Noticing environmental print independently, self-motivated labelling.	B7	L2 extension within theme related activity.
A8	Using images and symbols e.g. drawings/ illustrations to represent broader concepts, or to talk about and retell elements of the story.	B8	Non comprehension in L1 or L2
		B9	Repetition of language used by teacher.
		B10	Repetition of language used by peers.
		B11	Yes/no/one word response to question.
C Codes	Description	D Codes	Description
C1	Polar questions	D1	Asking about drawings
C2	Choice questions		
C3	Open ended questions		
C4	Recapping	D2	Suggesting labelling- provide environmental print/ model writing
C5	Encouraging use of theme related vocabulary by prompting or encouraging repetition.		
C6	Contextual support- pointing		
C7	Contextual support- miming action		
C8	Organisation, instructions and requests	D3	Encouraging children's writing efforts and attempts to represent concepts through marks by acknowledging their efforts.
C9	Guiding activities through the use of suggestions, prompts or questions.		
C10	Offering praise, or comments	D4	Providing reasons for writing
C11	Using a sound prompt to help children recall a word.	D5	Using print referencing strategies by drawing children's attention to print in the environment, and praising children's response to these strategies.
C12	Helping children to extend their activities based on their input and interests and suggestions.	D6	Making links/ encouraging children to make links between letters and sounds.

Transcription Key

- Words in **bold type** indicate emphasis.
- *Italics* indicate that the word or sentence was translated from Italian to English
- Print appearing in red indicates that these are words spoken in English by the children
- Print appearing in red and underlined indicates code switching from Italian to English
- - Indicates interrupted speech.
- … Indicates a pause
- (↑?) Indicates a rising intonation used by the adult to encourage the children to provide vocabulary or join in with key refrains from the story.
- C refers to the code Number in the table below
- P refers to the photograph number
- R refers to the resources used and mentioned.

C= Code (Above)
P= Photo (Appendix 2)
R= Resource (Appendix 3)

Excerpt from Teacher Led Activity Week 1

Line	Speaker	Speech	Action	C	P	R
1.	Me	This is the story of (↑?)		C5		
2.	Chorus	Three Little Pigs.		B3		
3.	Me	**Very** Good!		C10		
4.	Me	One, (↑?)		C5		
5.	Chorus	**Two, Three!**		B3		
6.	Me	**Fantastic**!		C10		
7.	Me	Who can see the **/p/** for Pig on this page?		D5		1.1
8.	Me		Point to the word Pig on the page.	C6		
9.	Anne		Raises her hand.	B1		
10.	Me	Anne, come and show me where you can see **/p/** for pig.		C8		
11.	Lucy	**/p/** for Pig….		B9		
12.	Violet		While Anne is moving forward to show me, Violet who is closer, points out the P in the word Pig on the page.	A4		1.1
13.	Me	**Good,**		D5		1.1
14.	Me	/p/, /p/, /p/ for Pig,		D6		
15.	Me	Who can see it?		D5		
16.	Violet		Points to the correct letter again.	A4		
17.	Me	**Good girl Violet,**		D5		
18.	Me	Can you show me again where you see /p/ for Pig?		D6		

Line	Speaker	Speech	Action	C	P	R
19.	Me	Good, Fantastic!		D5		
20.	Alex	Pig!		B5		
21.	Lucy		Points to the P.	A4		1.1
22.	Me	Well done, are we ready?		C1		

Excerpt from teacher led activity week 2

Line	Speaker	Speech	Action	C	P	R
1.	Me	I like this one here Violet!		D3		
2.		What are you doing?		D1		
3.	Violet	*Wolf*	Points to her picture.	B2		4.2
4.	Me	The wolf?		C4		
5.	Violet		Nods.	B1		
6.	Me	Is your wolf a good wolf or a bad wolf?		C2	1	
7.	Violet		Shakes her head.	B1		
8.	Me	Is he a good wolf?		C1		
9.	Violet	No!		B11		
10.	Me	No, he's a bad wolf!		C4		
11.		Would you like to write Wolf underneath your picture like Thomas did?		D2		
12.	Violet		Nods and goes and gets the Wolf flashcard that Thomas used.	B1	2	4.2
13.	Me	Anne, can Violet share your water please? I'll just move it here so you can both use it.		C8		
14.	Anne	Yes!		B11		
15.	Me	Good girl, thank you for sharing.				
16.	Violet		Writes wolf.		3	
17.	Me	Wow, that was quick! Good girl, it looks really good!		D3		

Excerpt from Week 2 Learning Centre 1: The children are at the chalk table. Stef asks Andrew about his picture

Line	Speaker	Speech	Action	C	P	R
1.	Stef	Which house is it Andrew? Is it this one?		D1		
2.			Point to the house of sticks flashcard that's near him	C9		2.3
3.	Andrew	*No, this one*	Points to the house of bricks.	B1		2.5
4.	Stef	Ah, is that a strong house Andrew?		C5		
5.	Andrew		Nods.	B1		
6.	Stef	Can you say strong?		C5		
7.	Andrew	**Strong!**		B3		
8.	Stef	Very good! It looks very strong!		C10	6	
9.		And what happens next when the wolf comes along?		C5		
10.			Point to the flashcard.	C6		2.6
11.	Anne+	Knock, knock…		B4		

	Hillary					
12.	Andrew, Hillary+ Anne	**Let me in!**		B4		
13.	Stef	And the little pig says?		C9		
14.	Children	**No, no, no, not by the hair on my chinny chin, chin!**		B4		
15.	Stef	And the wolf?		C9		
16.	Violet	And I'll **huff**, and I'll **puff,**		B4		
17.	Anne	And I'll **blow** the house **down!**		B4		
18.	Stef	Oh the poor little pig!		C10		

Excerpt from Week 3 Learning Centre 1

Line	Speaker	Speech	Action	C	P	R
1.	Stef,	I'll put the play dough in the middle, it's for everybody to share.		C8		
2.	Violet	*I want the blue*!		B2		
3.	Stef	What are you doing Thomas?		C3		
4.	Thomas	*I did the* Wolf !	Points at his wolf.	B6/B7	12	
5.	Stef	You're doing the Wolf!		C10		
6.		What are these?		C12		
7.			Points to where Thomas has made the wolf's eyes.	C6		
8.	Thomas	Eyes.		B7		
9.	Stef	They're his eyes, good!		C10		
10.		And what's this?		C12		
11.			Points to the Wolf's nose.	C6		
12.	Thomas	*Nose.*		B2		
13.	Stef	Can you say it in English?		C5		
14.	Alex	**Nose!**		B7		
15.			Touches his own nose.	B1		
16.	Stef	His nose, that's right well done!		C10		
17.	Thomas	Nose!		B5		
18.	Stef	Yes.		C10		
19.	Andrew	*Nose*! **nose!**		B6/B10		
20.	Stef	The wolf's nose!		C12		
21.	Stef	Hillary, what one are you doing?	Hillary has turned her mat over so there is no picture- she has a blank surface to work on.	C3		
22.	Hillary	**Sticks!**		B5		
23.	Stef	Sticks! The house of sticks! That's really good!		C10		
24.	Alex	*Me, the house of… **strong!***		B5/B6	13	

				C4		
25.		You're making a very strong house?		C4		
26.	Stef	Let's see? What's your strong house made of Alex?		C12		
27.	Alex		Smiles at Stef bit doesn't answer.			
28.	Stef	Is the strong house made, of straw, or sticks, or -		C2		
29.	Thomas	**Bricks!**		B5		

Excerpt from Week 3 Learning Centre 2

Line	Speaker	Speech	Action	C	P	R
1.	Anne		Starts painting again next to Stef. Draws two circles to make a wolf		18	
2.	Stef	Wow, well done!		D3		

Line	Speaker	Speech	Action	C	P	R
1.	Lucy		Standing at the story board looking at the pig and running her finger under the letters	A4		
2.	Stef	Lucy, are you looking at the pig?		C1		
3.		Are you going to try and draw the pig? Oh!		D3		
4.	Lucy	**Pig!**		B4		
5.			Nods her head and gets on her knees, and draws a pig.		19	

Line	Speaker	Speech	Action	C	P	R
1.	Andrew	*come…*wolf		B6/b5		
2.			Leads stef to the story board and points to the wolf.	A8		
3.	Andrew		Starts painting.			
4.	Stef	Oh dear, we can't see that can we? You need some water on your brush!		C8		
5.			Points to the pot of water and Andrew's brush.	C6		

6.	Andrew		Dips his brush in the water.	B1		
7.	Stef	I've done the /w/ for wolf here, why don't you draw the wolf next to it?		D6		
8.	Andrew		Starts painting.	B1		
9.	Andrew	**Pig!**		B5		
10.	Stef	Oh you've changed your mind, it's a pig not a wolf, ok!		D3	21	
11.		Then I better to a /p/ for pig!		D6		
12.			Writes a P next to Andrew's pig.	D2	22	

Appendix 2: Some Samples of Photographic Data Collected

Photographs from Teacher Led Activity, Week 2

P1   **P2**   **P3**

P4

P1-P4

A8: Violet's picture represents a Wolf

A6: Following Stef's suggestion, Viola selects the appropriate flashcard to help her write a label (51)

A4: She writes the letters w, o, l and f in a linear pattern.

P4

A6: Andrew's picture dried up in the sun before Stef could see it. He agreed to write bricks" to represent his picture when Stef suggested it.

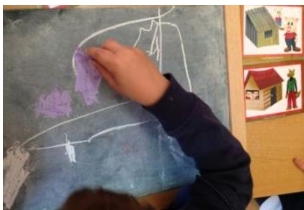A4: Andrew identified the letter B in the word bricks.

A3+ A5: Andrew drew a shape resembling the letter B and used this as his label.

Photographs from Week 2, Learning Centre 1

A8: Hillary is looking at the flashcard and drawing the pot of boiling water that the wolf falls in to.

P5

A8: Andrew has is drawing the house of bricks from the story. He is looking at the flashcard to help him.

P6

A2: Thomas is drawing a picture for Mummy. Near the top, to the right, we can see a series of scribbles and lines that appear to run in a linear pattern.

P7

A6: Lucy decides to copy the letters from this flashcard by herself.

A5: She uses this to create her own label of what she is going to draw.

A8: When she has finished writing what she wants to draw, she draws a pig.

P8

Photographs from Week 2 Learning centre 3

Anne has built the house of bricks, and added the puppet of one of the little pigs. When asked which one it is she says; "This one! The clever pig!"(B7)

P9

A5: Alex uses the "bricks" flashcard to label his construction.

A4: He shows an awareness of letter and sounds as he selects the flashcard.

P10

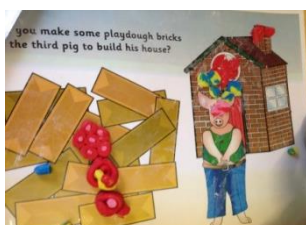A8: Alex is drawing the house of bricks to put beside his construction.

A5: In the top left, we can see that Alex has attempted to write the letter B to label his picture

P11

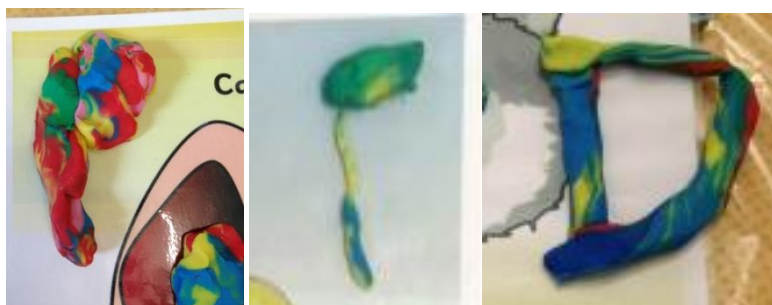A8: Thomas is using the play dough mat to make a wolf- in this mark making activities he is using creative materials to represent elements of the story.

P12

A8: Alex has used his play dough mat to make a strong house. He says the word "Bricks!"

P13

P 14: A4: Thomas has made the letter P for Pig out of play dough.

P 15: A4: Andrew has made the letter P with his play dough.

P16: A4: Thomas has made a letter D.

A4+ A7: Alex matches the W that Thomas has made next to his Wolf with the letter W for Wood on the story board, and he shows Thomas that they are the same.

P17

Photographs from Learning Centre 2 Week 3

A8: Anne is drawing the big bad wolf, she has done a body and a head, with ears.

P18

A8: Lucy looks at the pictures on the story board and then decides to draw this Pig.

P19

A8: Violet and Anne are drawing a house together, and Andrew comes and adds a chimney.

P20

P21   **P22**

A8: Andrew has drawn a pig.

D6: Stef writes the letter P

Photographs from Week 3 learning centre 3

A8: Anne has drawn the three little pigs and their house of bricks

P23

A5: He has labelled his drawing by writing the initial of his name.

A4: In doing so he demonstrates an understanding of letter and sounds.

P22

Appendix 3: Resources

1: Three Little Pigs Picture Story

1.1

1.2

1.3

1.4

1.5

1.6

1.7

1.8

1.9

1.10

1.11

1.12

1.13

1.14

2: Three Little Pigs Story Sequence Cards

2.1

2.2

2.3

2.4

2.5   2.6   2.7

3: Three Little Pigs Play Dough Mats

3.1

3.2

3.3

3.5

3.6

4: Three Little Pigs Signs and Labels

4.1   4,2

Pig

Wolf

4.3

4.4

4.5

4.6 Wood

4.7 DO NOT USE WOOD

4.8 BRICKS

4.9 Bricks

4.10 PLEASE USE BRICKS
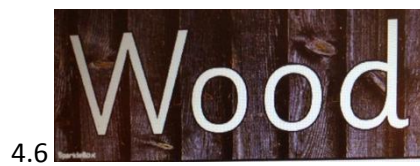
5 Puppets

Letter 1: Dear

I am currently studying for my MA in TESOL. For my MA thesis I am looking into ways in which children's literature can be used to create themes within the classroom to support the children's development in the areas of speaking skills and pre- writing skills. This is closely linked to the Communication Continuum that I developed as an earlier part of this course and which is being implemented this year in the school.

I would like to use my observations of the children of classroom activities in my own class as part of my data collection. No child will be mentioned by name, and no child will be obliged to participate in activities against their will. I would also like to use video recordings of how the children engage with the learning centres in the classrooms. The video recordings will only be used to inform my observations and will not viewed by anyone outside of the staff at school. In cases where the recordings are transcribed, no child shall be named and their anonymity shall be maintained at all times. I may require samples or photos of children's pictures, again, this will only be with the consent of the children, and once again, their anonymity will be protected. In keeping with school policy, only children whose parents have given express written permission will be videoed and photographed. The data will be transferred regularly to my personal password protected computer, and deleted from the Ipad kept in school.

I am happy to share insights gained from this research with my colleagues as part of continued professional development.

I would be very grateful if you would agree to sign the consent form below and return it to me.

Kind regards,

Research Consent Form

Having read the above proposal, I consent to the research described therein being carried out at The British American Preschool, Milan.

Signed …………………………………………   Date……………………………………………………
(Director and owner of the Preschool)

Signed …………………………………………   Date……………………………………………………

Letter 2 Dear

As you are aware, I am currently studying for my MA in TESOL. For my MA thesis I am looking into ways in which children's literature can be used to create themes within the classroom to support the children's development in the areas of speaking skills and pre- writing skills. As part of my research I will be looking at the role of the adult during free play activities in the learning centres in the classroom to gain an insight into how speaking and pre-writing skills can be developed in these contexts. If you agree, I would like to observe your interactions with the children in the learning centres. You are of course under no obligation to consent to this, and please remember that you can withdraw your consent at any time without any negative impact on our working relationship. I am happy to answer any questions you may have, at any time, and to share details on my research as it develops as well as when it is completed. If you are happy for me to use my observations of your interactions with the children as described above, please sign the consent form below and return it to me.

Many thanks!

Rhona

Consent Form

Having read the above information letter, I consent to allow the researcher to carry out observations of my interactions with the children as I work with them.

Signed …………………………………………   Date……………………………………………
(Teaching Assistant at the Preschool)

Signed …………………………………………   Date……………………………………………