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Ellis, G. & Ibrahim, N.

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Using metaphor elicitation with pre-primary children learning English

Gail Ellis and Nayr Ibrahim

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study that investigates children's experiences and perceptions of English language learning by using a metaphor elicitation technique. Giving children a voice in the early years recognizes children as individuals and as active and capable participants in their own learning. It gives both children and teachers an insight into the language learning process and contributes to a more learner-centred pedagogy. Previous studies using this technique have shown that children are creative and capable of giving their own metaphorical representations of their English language learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom. This study includes bilingual and EFL four- and five-year-olds' representations in the form of a 'My learning English senses' zig-zag book, which provides an affective, personal record of their early English language learning experiences. The findings confirm the extent to which children of this age group operate mainly in the 'here and now'.

Introduction

This article reports on a small-scale research study, which aimed to investigate children's experiences and perceptions of English language learning by using a metaphor elicitation technique. Cameron (2005: 8) observes that although metaphor uses creative cognitive skills that children have from an early age, and that the simplest words can be used metaphorically, it is surprising how little appears in Young Learner coursebooks and classrooms. This study goes some way to bridging this gap and was based on an activity around the five senses which allowed children to voice their views about their English language learning. It gave teachers the opportunity to experiment with an activity which elicits children's opinions and perceptions of their English language learning experiences and gave both children and teachers an insight into the language learning process. It combines the elements of early language learning, play-based pedagogy, and children's voices and creativity, thereby contributing to a more learner-centred pedagogy in the pre-primary English language classroom.

Theoretical background

Metaphors help us make sense of our world. They organize our thoughts and actions and are a vehicle for creative and personalized expression. They can be defined as conceptual representations of deeper thoughts and are vehicles for understanding a concept by virtue of their experiential basis (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). More recently, Gibbs (2008: 3) draws attention to 'the ways that context shapes metaphor use and understanding', where metaphors arise in the intersections of lived experience, culture and communication. Forceville (2016) also shows how metaphors go beyond the verbal to include visuals as well as multimodality.

In relation to children and metaphors, Vosniadou (1986) has shown that metaphoric understanding emerges during the pre-school years and develops gradually to encompass a greater variety of metaphorical expressions. However, according to Winner (1982: 162) 'almost all early metaphors are based on a physical resemblance between elements, rather than on a conceptual, expressive, or psychological link'. Most early childhood metaphors, therefore, are simple noun/noun substitutions and metaphor first emerges during pretend or symbolic play. Children create representations through which they imaginatively manipulate both the objects around them and their ideas about those objects. During pretend play children describe objects as other objects and then use them as such. For example, a cardboard box can be used as a car, then a house, then a table, and so on.

Jin, Liang, Jiang, Zhang, Yuang, and Xie (2014) highlighted a number of studies where metaphor elicitation techniques were used with primary children successfully to ascertain perceptions and attitudes about learning. When eliciting metaphor with seven- and nine-year-olds in China (Jin et al. 2014: 289), they required the children to give three key elements:

- 1. -. A ‘target domain’ which is often an abstract topic, e.g. ‘learning English’. We linked the target domain to the five senses, ‘learning English tastes/feels like etc.’, as children of this age are familiar with the concept of the senses. This concept provided a concrete bridge between the abstract notion of learning English and the concrete experience of tasting, smelling, touching, hearing, and seeing.
- 2. -. A ‘source domain’ which is a commonly understood concrete image, compared to the abstract topic, e.g. ‘Learning English tastes like a lollipop’ (BL5). In this study, children were asked to draw their ‘source domain’ which allowed them to respond spontaneously, thus overcoming gaps in their English vocabulary and the stage in their literacy development.
- 3. -. An ‘entailment’ which explains the child’s reason for their ‘source domain’, e.g. ‘Learning English tastes like a lollipop because it is sweet, and I like it’ (BL5). The entailment gives the underlying meaning of the metaphor and develops early critical thinking.

We used these three elements to analyse and categorize our data. They provided a structure for analysing perceptions about learning, through metaphor, within the context of English language learning. The entailment underscored the rationale for the metaphor and clarified children’s choices. It allowed the researchers to understand the connection between the learning of English and the children’s personal, concrete, and immediate experiences and feelings.

Context and participants

The last few decades have seen a phenomenal growth in language learning to ever-younger children (Enever 2018) and more and more parents are sending their children to out-of-school English classes. The children in our study were attending out-of-school classes in Paris. A previous study (Ellis and Ibrahim 2015: 92 and 114) we conducted using metaphor elicitation also around the five senses with a group of five-year-old bilingual (English/French) children showed that the children were both creative and capable of giving metaphorical representations of their English language learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom. Their representations were broad and included metaphors of their personal sociocultural experiences. This study motivated us to expand our research to include both children who speak English fluently and children who were just embarking on their English language journeys as well as to include four-year-olds.

The children fell into two groups:

- 1. •. Those who already spoke English fluently and were enrolled in a Bilingual Section. These children had developed their English in the family context with one or two English-speaking parents or had attended pre-school in an English-speaking country or elsewhere. Some also had English-speaking nannies/babysitters which allowed for further development of their English. These children were attending classes to maintain and extend their existing communication skills as well as to develop their literacy in English. The term ‘bilingual’ in the Bilingual Section is used as an adjective to describe the fact that the children speak at least two languages, English and French. The term does not describe the pedagogical approach used. We refer to these classes and the children in this study as BL n (n = age).
- 2. •. Those who were just embarking on their English language learning journeys and were enrolled in an EFL Section. The parents of these children wished to give them an early start in English. We refer to these classes and children in the study as EFL n (n = age).

We chose four classes of four- and five-year-olds (Table 1) in order to have one class from each age group from each section, giving a total of forty-seven children (twenty-four girls and twenty-three boys).

table 1 Number of children per class

BL5	BL4	EFL5	EFL4
14	9	16	8

The children in the Bilingual Section spoke English and French and some also spoke a third language. The children in the EFL Section spoke French and some also spoke another language at home, although English was new for most of these children. Student profiles completed at registration by the parents showed that 32 percent of the children spoke other languages, in addition to French or English at home in the family environment. This meant that many already had a great deal of existing knowledge and experience of languages, which they could draw on as a resource for learning English.

A wide variety of teaching resources were used with children in both sections, and children in the Bilingual Section were introduced to phonics via the *Jolly Phonics* programme. The study was conducted at the end of Term 1 during the month of December which accounts for some of the Christmas-related references.

Research foundations

Successful early language learning depends on an active, play-based pedagogy that stimulates the natural acquisition-rich environments that are conducive to learning. This includes a holistic approach where English is integrated across all learning via learner-centred multimodal resources and play activities in order to provide maximum exposure to the language within enabling environments. It recognizes that each child is unique, learns in different ways and rates, and is an active and capable participant in their own learning.

Our study was embedded in a children's rights perspective, which values children's voices, in this case, their perceptions of learning English in an out-of-school context. This includes 'using more participatory methods where adults give children the opportunity to express their views, help them express their views, listen to their views and act on their views as appropriate' (Ellis 2019: 25). When eliciting young children's views, a variety of age-appropriate methods made as practicable as possible is required so that language is not a barrier. The younger the child, the greater the importance of techniques that engage children's interests and minimize adult dominance. Hence, we need a variety of modes which allow children to express themselves via drawing, photographs, and movement. The mosaic approach (Clark 2017) was used to inform our methodology. This is a pedagogy of listening that acknowledges children and adults as co-constructors of meaning. It is an integrated approach which combines the visual, via drawing in this study, with the verbal, when children explained their perceptions to us. There was also a tactile dimension in the form of the creation of a folding zig-zag book (Figure 1) which provided an affective, personal record of their early language learning experiences, as well as a concrete outcome to share with their families.

figure 1 My learning English senses book



Research ethics

At registration, parents are asked to give their consent for their child to participate in various events, including research studies. The children were also informed verbally about the study (in French for the EFL children) and asked if they would like to participate, that is, they were asked if they would like to tell us how they feel about learning English. They all agreed but were not pressured into any aspect of the process. To avoid disruption, the study formed part of their regular lessons and their teachers were present as participant helpers and observers to ensure familiarity and continuity.

Data collection

We structured the activity around the creation of a ‘My learning English senses’ zig-zag book (see [Figure 1](#)). During circle time, we used flashcards (visuals representing a nose for the sense of smell, a hand for the sense of touch, eyes for the sense of sight, a mouth for the sense of taste, an ear for the sense of sound) to review the concept of the senses and to introduce or review the nouns and verbs in English. We then introduced the sentence stem ‘Learning English sounds/tastes like etc.’ as a prompt. Using a simile made the activity more accessible and age-appropriate and ensured that the children made a comparison. We thereby accept ‘that a metaphor *can* underlie a simile’ ([Fisher 2015: 8](#)) when the target and source domains come from two different domains. In this study, the similes are metaphorical as the children produced comparisons from two different domains related to their lived experiences. For example, ‘Learning English sounds like breaking chocolate’ (EFL5). However, some children responded very literally. As one child in EFL4 said in response to the sentence stem, ‘Learning English sounds like’, ‘But English doesn’t have ears, Miss!’ (in French, our translation). We avoided giving any examples because past experience showed that children will copy these which they tended to do anyway with each other. For example, when one child said ‘English tastes like strawberries’, several children used the same source domain.

Children then moved to their tables and the zig-zag book template and colouring pencils were distributed. We concept checked the images of the senses in the book by asking children to show us the eyes, nose, etc., and which senses these were associated with. Children were asked to complete the sentences for each of the senses by drawing pictures, although some children also made attempts to write the words for their drawings showing interesting examples of their early literacy development. All children wrote their own names. During this process, assisted by the class teacher, we sat with the children, observing and listening, only intervening to keep them on task or to respond to their questions. When they had finished, we asked them to give the entailment to explain the reason for their source domain. For example, ‘English tastes like strawberries because I eat strawberries at home, and I speak English at home’ (BL5). We recorded each child’s source domain and entailment for each sense onto a table. French was used between the researchers and the EFL children to enable them to express meaningfully their entailments. Otherwise, they would have been restricted by their limited knowledge of English and unable to talk about their experiences of learning English. In some cases, children moved between both French and English, thereby translanguaging and drawing naturally on their linguistic repertoires. Any utterances made by children in French have been translated into English by the researchers.

Data analysis

When analysing the data, the findings showed that the children associated English language learning mainly with the ‘here and now’ and their lived experiences. We first looked at each sense and identified eight recurring themes based on children’s source domains, the concrete images represented by their drawings. Some themes, such as living things, people, food, and objects, were common in more than one sense ([Table 2](#)).

table 2 Occurring themes by sense

Taste	Touch/feel	Sound	Sight/look	Smell
Communication	Living things	Living things	Living things	Living things
Food	Objects	People	Object	Object
	Sensations	Noises	People	Food
		Transport		Transport

Other drawings were specific to a sense such as music and sounds for the sense of sound, and food for the sense of taste. Living things was the most common theme across all senses. The sense of touch had a theme we called sensations because it included feelings, and physical and imaginative sensations unlike the others, e.g. ‘Learning English feels like the heart because feelings are in your heart’ (BL5); ‘Learning English feels like touching the stars because when we do like this (putting hand up) it’s like we are touching the stars. It’s the teacher who tells us to put up our hands’ (EFL5). The sense of sight was mainly linked to objects the children could see in their classroom, e.g. ‘Learning English looks like a Christmas tree’ (BL5); ‘Learning English looks like a rainbow’ (EFL4)—this child was referring to a picture on the classroom wall. Flowers, as part of living things, were the biggest category for the sense of smell.

The following examples from the sense of sound exemplify how we analysed the data:

- By recurring themes, which included people (a lady, BL5; children playing, EFL5), noises which included music (trumpet, EFL5; music on the radio, EFL4), various sounds (breaking chocolate, EFL5; hands clapping, BL4—[Figure 2](#)), and harsh sounds (pneumatic drill, EFL4; children shouting, EFL5), transport (train, EFL/BL5), and animals (a cat, BL5; a duck, BL5; a bird, BL5) as part of living things.
- By themes, age, and section to identify the number of source domains and drawings produced. We found that the five-year-olds in both sections (all children in BL5 and 75 percent in EFL5) produced more than the four-year-olds in both sections, which was probably due to the cognitive demands of the activity. They therefore produced 50 percent fewer drawings or drawings which we identified as random because it was not possible to associate them with a particular sense and the children were unable to give entailments to explain their choices. We speculated that the children in BL5 produced the most drawings because they were functioning in both languages on a daily basis and therefore had more vocabulary and references across both languages ([Grosjean 2010](#)). They exhibited more creativity, greater flexibility and were more spontaneous when expressing their views about learning English. For example, one BL5 child drew Fisherman’s Friend,¹ ‘Learning English tastes like Fisherman’s Friend because it’s an English sweet but they sell them in Auchan’.² Another child made a cultural and seasonal reference to Christmas, ‘Learning English sounds like Santa because he says ho, ho, ho!’ (BL5) ([Figure 3](#)).

figure 2 Learning English sounds like hands clapping (BL4)

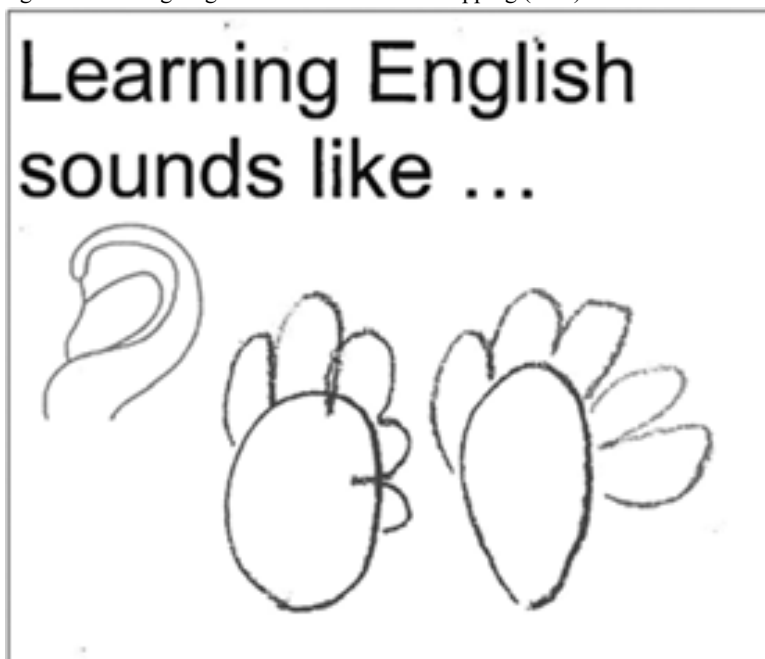


figure 3 Learning English sounds like Santa because he says ho, ho, ho! (BL5)



When analysing the data at a second level, we noticed how children's source domains were linked to the 'here and now' of their own personal, concrete English language learning and lived experiences. These fell into two main categories:

- 1. -. Experiences outside the school which included associations of using English linked to people, places, or routines in their lives. For example, 'Learning English feels like *muwc*' (child's spelling) and pronounced /muz/ (Figure 4). Initially, neither the word (written or pronounced) or the drawing elucidated the meaning the child was trying to convey.

figure 4 Learning English feels like *muwc* (BL5)



However, when she gave her entailment in English, she explained that the word *muwc* was linked to bubbles and the illustration became clear as we were able to decipher the shape of a bath and circles representing bubbles. This shows that drawing and other mark making is an important way in which children record their experiences and express their ideas and meanings. [Vygotsky \(1986\)](#) points out the close links between early drawing and writing that is very commonly observed in young children's mark making. The drawing also shows that children record what they know about objects rather than attempting to represent how the objects look. The child explained, 'Learning English feels like bubbles because it's soft and I have *muwc* [*mousse* in French means 'bubble bath' in English] in my bath at home with my nanny and we speak English' (BL5). This shows how the child is translanguaging between French and English to express her experience.

- 1. -. Experiences inside the classroom or school environment which include associations of learning English and their learning materials and are linked to people, places, and routines in their lives. An example linked to the child's learning materials, *Jolly Phonics*, showed how the visual representation of the letter 'S' as a snake and the onomatopoeic word 'slithers' helped the child memorize this sound and make connections to learning English sounds, 'Learning English sounds like a snake because a snake slithers' (BL5). A second example from the same learning materials showed how the child drew a castanet to associate the sound /k/ illustrated in the materials by a Spanish flamenco dancer with castanets, 'Learning English sounds like clacking because I can hear it' (BL5). Another example, 'Learning English looks like the alphabet' (BL5) is associated with a song, 'The ABC Train' ([Figure 5](#)).

figure 5 Learning English looks like the alphabet (BL5)



Discussion

The data in the form of the children's drawings and their entailments indicate that the addition of the sentence stem prompt facilitated the task, enabling most five-year-olds to make concrete noun/noun metaphors and explain their choices. Some were able to go beyond to make noun/verb action metaphors by linking their drawings to their direct learning space 'Learning English looks like children playing football because we can see them through the window of our English classroom' (EFL5). According to Vosniadou (1986: 22), 'metaphoric competence emerges out of children's ability to see similarity between different objects and events as well as out of children's tendency to impose familiar schemas on the object world'. The metaphors elicited from this study were meaningful and familiar to the children as they were centred in their concrete learning environment and lived experiences.

We also found evidence that children were making multiple associations to both inside and outside the classroom. They made associations to places as well as to people and routines in their daily lives, including their English classes, and the learning resources associated with English learning. Their experiences were closely associated with the 'here and now' of living with and learning English:

- • **places** school building/classroom/home/shops
- • **people** teacher/classmates/parent/babysitter
- • **routines** English class time/bath time/mealtime/play time

This study therefore provides evidence that when creating activities to elicit pre-primary children's experiences of English learning, they need to be related to the 'here and now' and the concrete and affective experiences of places, people, and routines. As our data show, the five-year-olds appropriated the activity, connected it to their own lived reality and to the context of learning English, and responded according to their cognitive capacity. However, metaphor elicitation as a data-collection technique was beyond the cognitive ability of the majority of the four-year-olds.

The drawing and kinaesthetic book-making aspect added a multimodal dimension to the data-collection technique and included a creative element in eliciting children's voices so young children and adults are involved in meaning-making together. However, our class sizes were relatively small and teachers with larger classes may need the support of classroom assistants to enable them to engage effectively in collaborative meaning-making. Furthermore, this study highlights the benefits of allowing children to use their full linguistic repertoires when expressing their perceptions and experiences of learning another language. This inclusive practice provides richer data and valorizes and empowers children's voices.

Conclusion

Children's drawings together with observation and interaction between teacher and child can enable teachers to gain a deeper understanding of children's English language learning. It can give children an opportunity to reflect on their experiences of learning English and express their views. This study enabled the children to make explicit the many connections that the English language had for them in their young lives with people, places, and routines. The metaphor elicitation activity enabled the children to think creatively and concretely about learning English. However, we need to keep in mind that these children are still very young with limited knowledge of the world and ability to verbally articulate their thoughts and feelings. Adults need to be careful not to misinterpret or overinterpret the data and read their own interpretations into it. We hope this study may provide readers with ideas for tasks to conduct in their own classrooms to gain insights into children's emotional responses to learning English. Further research would be interesting in order to discover how the children's metaphors evolve over time as their English language journeys continue and as they develop cognitively.

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The authors

Gail Ellis is an independent teacher educator and adviser, based in France. Her main interests include children's rights, picturebooks in primary ELT, young learner ELT management, and inclusive practices. Her recent publications include *Teaching English to Pre-Primary Children* (DELTA Publishing/Klett, 2020) and *Tell It Again!* (British Council, 2014). She is a co-founder of Picturebooks in European Primary English Language Teaching (PEPELT).

Email: gail.ellis75@gmail.com

Nayr Ibrahim is Associate Professor of English Subject Pedagogy at Nord University in Norway. She has over twenty-five years of experience in English and bilingual education in Portugal, Paris, Cairo, Hong Kong, and now Norway. Her research interests include early language learning, learning to learn, bi/multilingualism, multiple literacies, language and identity, children's literature, and children's language rights.

Email: nayr.d.ibrahim@nord.no

Gail and Nayr are co-authors of *Teaching Children How to Learn* (DELTA Publishing 2015) which won an award in the 2016 ESU English Language Awards.

Notes

1 Fisherman's Friend is a brand of strong menthol lozenges manufactured by the Lofthouse Company in Fleetwood, Lancashire, England.

2 Auchan is a French multinational retail group founded in 1961 with several hypermarkets in Europe as well as China and Taiwan.

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COMMENTS

C1 Author: Please add a colon after the words 'places', 'people', 'routines' to identify them as categories and separate them from the examples that follow;

C2 Author: idem;

C3 Author: idem;