
THESIS / DISSERTATION SUBMISSION

Title: Developing Grade R Learners' Oral Language Proficiency for Afrikaans Through Play: Teachers' Perceptions in Mangaung Metropolitan Education District (MMED)

Full names and surname: Elzaan van Wyk

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements in respect of the master's degree with specialization in Subject Education in Languages in the department of languages in the faculty of Education at the University of the Free State.

Supervisor: Dr Martha Khosa

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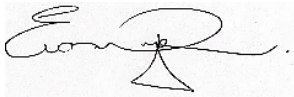
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Declaration

I, **Elzaan van Wyk** declare that the Master's Degree research dissertation or interrelated, publishable manuscripts/published articles, or coursework Master's Degree mini-dissertation that I herewith submit for the Master's Degree qualification in subject education in languages at the University of the Free State is my independent work, and that I have not previously submitted it for a qualification at another institution of higher education.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elzaan van Wyk', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Student's Signature

28 July 2025

Date

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First of all, I thank God Almighty for what He has done for me. It is through Him that I have made it this far. I never imagined I could complete this journey, but God showed me that I am capable by blessing me with strength and wisdom every step of the way. One day, I told someone that I wished I could have completed my studies, and they said, *“I dream of having the opportunity you have.”* From that moment on, I saw my academic journey as a gift from God, an opportunity not to be taken for granted. Through Him, I am.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my cousin's daughter, Misháne, who was just two years old at that time. She inspired me to explore this topic, to dig deeper into the development of children, asking the whys and hows. I also dedicate this work to all the teachers who are teaching and will be teaching Grade R learners. May this study bring you closer to using play as a successful instrument in your classroom. An overall dedication goes out to all the teachers. We are shaping minds, and sometimes, with all the teaching, admin., sports, meetings, and school events, we forget why and for whom we are doing this. Just remember, WE MATTER.

You touch the future. You teach. – Christa Mcauliffe

Abstract

Play-based pedagogy serves as a vital tool for developing oral language in early childhood education, laying the groundwork for further literacy development. However, implementing this approach remains challenging, particularly in under-resourced contexts. This study explored how Afrikaans oral language developed through play in Grade R classrooms. Guided by Froebel's theory of learning and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the study was situated within an interpretivist paradigm and employed a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with three Grade R teachers at an Afrikaans-medium school in the Mangaung Metropolitan Education District (MMED), in Free State, selected through convenience and purposive sampling. The interpretivist lens enabled a deeper understanding of teachers' lived experiences and the meanings they attached to play-based oral language instructions. The findings revealed that play offers valuable opportunities for teachers to engage learners through various strategies, including visual aids, songs, drawings, role play, and collaborative group work. These playful approaches create a meaningful, enjoyable context for oral language development, especially in linguistically diverse classrooms. Teachers adapted their strategies to accommodate multilingual learners by using code-switching, repetition, and scaffolded support, in line with the Zone of Proximal Development. Despite these strengths, the study found that limited parental involvement hindered learner progress in developing oral proficiency. Teachers expressed concern that without support from home, learners, particularly those who do not speak Afrikaans as a first language, face significant barriers in achieving oral milestones. The study therefore recommends stronger collaboration between teachers and parents to reinforce language acquisition in multilingual settings and highlight the importance of play, teacher scaffolding, and home-school partnerships in promoting oral language proficiency in Afrikaans or any first language.

Keywords: Oral language development; Play-based learning; Afrikaans; Grade R; Early childhood education

Acronyms / Abbreviations

CAPS:	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
DBE:	Department of Basic Education
FAL:	First Additional Language
HL:	Home Language
MMED:	Mangaung Metropolitan Education District
NELDS:	National Early Learning and Development Standards
ZPD:	Zone of Proximal Development

Definition of Operational Terms

Oral Language

Oral language refers to the system through which humans use spoken words to express knowledge, ideas, and feelings. It encompasses listening, speaking, and vocabulary development, and serves as the foundation for reading and writing (Byington, 2013; Snow, 2016).

Grade R

Grade R, or the Reception Year, is the year before Grade 1 in South African Schools, designed to prepare children aged five to six for formal learning through play and holistic development (Department of Basic Education, 2011).

Afrikaans

Afrikaans is a West Germanic language that developed in South Africa and is one of the country's 12 official languages (Webb, 2010).

Mangaung Metropolitan Education District

The Mangaung Metropolitan Education District is an educational district within the Free State Province of South Africa, responsible for managing schools and implementing Department of Education policies (Free State Department of Education, 2020).

Early Childhood Education (ECE)

Early Childhood Education refers to the formal and informal teaching of children from birth to the age of eight, focusing on cognitive, social, emotional, and linguistic development (UNESCO, 2015).

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY

1.1. INTRODUCTION

Oral language refers to a process developed by using spoken language (Byington, 2013). In the Grade R classroom, there are numerous opportunities for children to develop their oral language throughout the day, such as role-playing and listening to stories with pictures. Research has demonstrated that preschool children show higher levels of literacy achievement in subsequent years when they have preschool teachers who actively develop children's language skills by modelling the use of more sophisticated vocabulary, engaging children actively in discussing books, and using more complex syntax (Paatsch & Nolan, 2020). Play is one of the effective ways teachers can use to strengthen children's language development (Reed & Lee, 2020).

This chapter presents the background of the study, followed by the research problem and the theory that supports the current study. Thereafter, it outlines the research aim, objectives, and research questions. This is then followed by a brief description of the research methodology used to collect and analyse the data, followed by a brief explanation of the ethical principles followed. Thereafter, the value of the study is highlighted, followed by the scope and limitations of the study. Lastly, the layout of the chapters is set out.

1.2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The importance of oral language development in early childhood encompasses several key points that are worth highlighting. Oral language development in early childhood lays the foundation for learning and literacy. Oral language needs to be developed before reading and writing skills can step in. Thus, oral language must be well-developed from a young age. Cognitive development also rises from oral language development in early childhood. Oral language is necessary for receiving information. Through speech, children can make sense of the world that they live in. The development of oral language through play effectively enhances cognitive abilities for young learners.

This study is focused on the Motheo district, which is located in the Free State Province of South Africa. This district focuses on certain educational and language dynamics. One of these dynamics is in the context of multilingualism. Sesotho, Setswana, isiXhosa, English, and Afrikaans are the main languages spoken in this province. Language diversity existing in the Free State province is also reflected in schools, which house learners who often speak either of the languages mentioned above. Learners in the South African schools, in particular, foundation phase classrooms (Grades R to 3) are taught all the subjects in their home language. In South Africa, only languages that are officially recognised are used as the language of instruction in the foundation phase, these being English, Afrikaans, isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, isiSwati, Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi, Xitsonga, Tshivenda, and the South African Sign Language. This enables Grade R (reception year) learners to develop their oral language through play, given that instruction at this level is not formal yet, but aims to prepare learners for their formal learning in the Grade 1 classroom.

Developing oral language through play helps children learn to discover, create, and solve problems in a safe, caring environment (Oddo, n.d.). Although play is an effective strategy for developing oral language, teachers may lack understanding of how to integrate play into language instruction effectively. Research conducted in the Northeast United States reveals that preschool teachers received no additional professional development to enhance their understanding of how to effectively implement play-based learning strategies (Acevedo, 2022). A South African study examining teachers' prior knowledge, skills, and classroom practices in implementing group play-based pedagogy found that, although teachers had a general understanding of the approach, they struggled to apply it effectively to support oral communication (Ekeh, Venketsamy, Thuketana & Joubert, 2022).

1.3. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Through play, children learn to engage with their surroundings, explore their interests, and develop essential skills such as thinking, movement, communication, language, and social-emotional abilities (American Academy of Paediatrics, 2007).

However, research conducted nationally and internationally has shown that teachers do not seem to understand how to integrate play with instruction for developing oral language. This may deprive children of opportunities for engaging in rich oral language experiences. According to Mashilo (2025), Grade R teachers are not yet qualified to teach their classes. On the report of the DBE report, there are only 25,944 Grade R teachers who are listed as qualified in the system (Mashilo, 2025). Hence, the current study seeks to explore the extent to which Grade R teachers in the Motheo district use play to develop children's oral language in Afrikaans, the types of play-based activities they use, and the barriers they encounter.

1.4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is underpinned by Froebel's (1782–1852) theory of learning through play. Froebel's philosophy emphasises that children are inherently creative and learn most effectively through play and active, hands-on experiences. He regarded education as a means of providing children with opportunities to express their unique abilities and interests, nurtured through guided exploration and discovery.

His theory of learning through play is characterised by the following core principles: play as the foundation of learning; unity and connectedness; nature and outdoor play; learning through self-activity and reflection; creativity and symbolism; and the vital role of the educator. Froebel proposed that play is a natural and essential activity for young children, serving as the primary way they explore, understand, and make sense of the world. This theory is highly relevant to the current study as it offers guidance for teachers on how to integrate play into instruction, creating a less intimidating and more engaging learning environment. Froebel's theory of learning through play is used in this study to inform the interpretation of findings and to support educators in using play-based instruction to develop children's oral language.

Vygotsky also recognised the significance of play in children's learning, although his perspective differs from Froebel's. Vygotsky (1896–1934), through his sociocultural theory, introduced the concept of ZPD.

He described the ZPD as the gap between what a child can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance and support. According to Vygotsky, language is the most important cultural tool for learning and thinking. He believed that through collaborative dialogue, children acquire new concepts, ways of thinking, and vocabulary. Thus, social interaction, especially during guided play, plays a crucial role in the development of language and cognitive skills.

When focusing on Froebel's theory, it becomes evident that play forms the foundation of learning. In this study, play is viewed as a central element in the development of oral language. Froebel (1887) regarded play as one of the most vital activities in childhood, asserting that it plays a key role in emotional, linguistic, and cognitive development. He believed that play enables children to express their thoughts, ideas, and emotions; crucial aspects that, according to Froebel, form the basis of language development. This highlights the relationship between play, expression, and communication. Turning to Vygotsky's theory, several important concepts also connect language development with play. Vygotsky (1978) argued that development and learning are primarily driven by social interactions, which subsequently foster individual growth. Language develops through engagement with others, particularly more knowledgeable peers, emphasising the significance of social interaction in learning. A key aspect of Vygotsky's theory is ZPD, which refers to the difference between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with guidance. Within this zone, various opportunities allow children to enhance their language skills by incorporating more advanced vocabulary and structures, which they can later use independently. Both Froebel's and Vygotsky's theories are highly relevant to this study, particularly in exploring oral language development through play in young learners. Together, these two theorists contribute distinct yet complementary perspectives to the topic of oral language development through play, each reinforcing the importance of nurturing children's emotional expression and conversational abilities.

1.5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AIM, AND OBJECTIVES

Primary Research Question:

- How does oral language in Afrikaans develop through play in the Grade R classroom?

Secondary Research Questions:

- What are the teachers' perceptions of using play for developing children's oral language in Afrikaans in the Grade R classroom?
- Which strategies can teachers use to support the development of children's oral language in Afrikaans through play?

Research Aim

To explore and interpret Grade R teachers' experiences of developing children's oral language in Afrikaans through play in the Mangaung Metropolitan Education District (MMED).

Research objectives

- To examine how oral language in Afrikaans is developed through play.
- To establish teachers' perceptions of using play for developing children's oral language in Afrikaans in the Grade R classroom.
- To recommend strategies that teachers can use to develop children's oral language in Afrikaans through play.

The background and topic of this study are imperative to investigate because oral language development forms the foundation of literacy, learning, and social interaction in the early years of schooling. In the South African Foundation Phase, particularly in Grade R, the acquisition of oral language is critical for learners' later reading and writing competence. Afrikaans, as one of South Africa's official languages, is used as a medium of instruction in many schools within the MMED. However, classrooms in this context are often linguistically diverse, which creates challenges for teachers who must facilitate oral language development among both Afrikaans home-language speakers and learners for whom Afrikaans is an additional language.

This study is therefore significant because it responds to the practical realities and pedagogical challenges faced by Grade R teachers in developing children's oral language in multilingual settings. Despite the emphasis placed on play-based learning in national policy documents such as the CAPS and the NELDS, limited empirical research has explored how teachers in Afrikaans-medium classrooms implement play to foster oral language skills. Investigating this topic thus addresses a clear research gap and provides context-specific insights into how play-based pedagogies are understood and enacted in the MMED.

In alignment with the aim of the study, this research seeks to capture teachers' voices and lived experiences of using play to promote Afrikaans oral language development. By examining how oral language is developed through play, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of effective classroom practices that support active, meaningful language use in early childhood education.

1.6. PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Snow (2016), the cornerstone of early literacy and cognitive growth in young children is oral language. Their own experiences can be expressed by themselves before they can read and write. A key learning outcome in the South African Foundation Phase is oral language, according to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). Through oral language, listening, and speaking are emphasised as essential components for literacy development (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2011). One of the most effective pedagogical strategies that has been identified for promoting oral language is play-based learning in early childhood (Reed & Lee, 2020). Skills such as dialogue, imagination, problem-solving, and negotiation contribute to oral language competence. Froebel's theory of learning through play (1887) sets play as the centre of all learning, where children direct themselves through joyful activities. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which is similar to Froebel's theory, underlines the importance of social interaction and guided participation when language is being developed.

Vygotsky's theory highlights the role of the teacher through ZPD, where they need to scaffold children's verbal abilities during play-based activities. The Mangaung Metropolitan Education District (MMED) in the Free State is connected by linguistic variation, where Afrikaans, Sesotho, Setswana, isiXhosa, and English are commonly spoken, which makes it very easy to look at it from a multilingual context. This diversity requires teachers to adapt to different strategies, such as code-switching, repetition, and visual scaffolds, to support learners in understanding (Henning, 2012). According to Acevedo (2022), many Grade R teachers face challenges in implementing play-based learning due to limited training, inadequate resources, or insufficient understanding of how to integrate play with language activities. Teachers' experiences and perceptions also have a significant influence on how play is integrated in the classroom (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Teachers who limit play as a pedagogical tool have a broken chain in their classroom when it comes to creating a language-rich, interactive learning environment.

Existing literature shows that play-based learning gives strong opportunities for oral language development in a child's early years, especially when the usage of Froebelian and Vygotskian principles is being used. The biggest concern is that there is still a gap in the understanding of how Grade R teachers in multilingual, Afrikaans-medium classrooms, such as those in MMED, apply play-based strategies to embrace oral language development and communication.

1.7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand and interpret the meanings that individuals assign to their experiences in a specific context. This paradigm focuses on the subjective understanding of social realities and acknowledges that knowledge is constructed through interaction between the participant and the researcher (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). The interpretivist paradigm was appropriate for this study because it aimed to explore Grade R teachers' experiences and perceptions of developing children's oral language in Afrikaans through play.

An interpretivist qualitative case study design was adopted to provide an in-depth exploration of how oral language is developed through play in an Afrikaans-medium Grade R classroom. According to Yin (2018), a case study design is suitable when the researcher seeks to obtain a detailed understanding of a phenomenon within its real-life context. This single case, which was one public Grade R school in Bloemfontein, located in the MMED of the Free State Province, enabled the researcher to investigate how teachers implement play-based strategies to encourage oral language development in a specific educational and linguistic setting. The reason why this design was chosen was to get rich, contextual insights.

A qualitative research approach was used to collect and analyse data from the Grade R teachers through interviews and classroom observations. According to Creswell (2014), the qualitative approach focuses on understanding meaning, experiences, and processes rather than measuring variables or generating statistical data. Because of this reason, this research approach was well-suited to the aim of the study, which captured lived experiences and practices of teachers within their natural classroom environments. The participants in this study were three Grade R teachers, selected through convenience and purposive sampling. As mentioned, the data collection methods included semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, which provided complementary perspectives on teachers' instructional strategies, beliefs, and interactions with learners. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, which, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), is a method that involves the identification, organisation, and interpretation of recurring patterns or themes within qualitative data.

The methodology that aligns best with this study is the interpretivist qualitative case study methodology, because this study aims to explore and interpret teachers' subjective experiences rather than to measure the outcomes in numbers. It gives the researcher the chance to gain a deeper understanding of how Grade R teachers design and implement play-based strategies for oral language development in Afrikaans. When heads are turned to the combination of interviews, observations, and thematic analysis, it is clear that it provides a holistic, rich view of the practices in education within the context of the selected school.

1.8. TRUSTWORTHINESS

There are four key criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) when it comes to the trustworthiness of a study, which are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In this study, credibility was ensured by using classroom observations to triangulate data collected through semi-structured interviews with the Grade R teachers. The triangulation helped to verify the accuracy and consistency of the participants' accounts and provided a more comprehensive understanding of how oral language in Afrikaans was developed through play. Transferability was achieved by selecting teachers who had experience teaching Afrikaans Grade R learners, which ensured that the findings could be relevant and meaningful to a similar educational context where Afrikaans is the medium of instruction.

Dependability was strengthened by employing more than one data collection method, specifically, interviews and observations, which allowed for cross-verification of findings and reduced the likelihood of researcher bias or any misinterpretation. The study demonstrated consistency in how results were derived by using multiple sources of data. Thereby, it enhances the reliability of the findings. Confirmability was given through the use of different data collection methods to minimise personal bias and to ensure that the findings reflected the participants' experiences rather than the researchers' assumptions. The combination of these strategies made the findings more dependable and trustworthy, as a lot of forms of evidence were used to support the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the data.

1.9. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Because of the involvement of human participants, the following ethical principles were adhered to: first, I applied for approval to conduct research, which was granted by the University of Free State research ethics committee. I also secured permission to collect data in the targeted school from the Free State Department of Education, which I was also granted. Before collecting data, all the teachers were provided with documents that had all the details on what the study was about, its purpose, processes, and the expectations of the study.

Again, teachers were provided with written consent (see Appendix E) to sign as a way of agreeing to participate voluntarily in the study. It was also explained to the teachers that they could withdraw from participating in the study if they happened to change their minds. To protect the teachers' identity, pseudonyms (e.g., Teachers A, B, and C, School X) were used. All the data that was collected was stored securely and treated with strict confidentiality. None of the responses from the participants were shared with anyone who is not involved with the research process. All participants were treated fairly and with respect. All the findings were reported truthfully and accurately by the researcher. Direct quotes were used to pay tribute to the participants' feelings and experiences.

1.10. THE VALUE OF THE STUDY

As mentioned, many times throughout this chapter, the development of oral language builds the foundation for success in a learner's academic life. Through spoken language, people can communicate, share their ideas, and interact in a social way. For young children, it is the same, but they first need to discover the way of doing it. Literacy development goes hand in hand with oral language development. This includes comprehension, the growth of their vocabulary, reading, and writing. In the early childhood phase, oral language is a crucial component for a learner's future curriculum success.

This study is valuable because it explores play-based learning, and it can be productively used by Grade R teachers to strengthen the development of oral language in Afrikaans. The understanding of how to reinforce learners' home language, advance effective teaching practices, and build early literacy foundations in the South African context. The role of play in promoting language in the foundation phase is very powerful. Through play, different opportunities are given to learners to explore the world around them and to connect meaning with their surroundings. It can be through storytelling, role-play, games, etc.

This study contributes valuable insights into how teachers can reinforce Afrikaans language investments in interactive and playful ways by investigating play-based strategies that support oral language development. This study also pays tribute to the use of the CAPS policy, which encourages the use of the home language of learners and emphasises the significance of oral communication in the early years of learning.

When we also look at the multilingual settings, it gives strength to build confidence in the usage of oral language in Afrikaans, which creates access for learning to be more effective and the transformation to be more successful in Afrikaans and other additional languages. Given that the study is conducted in the Motheo district, this brings localised knowledge to the forefront. It draws attention to the specific language development needs and resources in Afrikaans-speaking communities, which are often under-researched compared to other languages in multilingual South Africa. The findings will also add to the body of knowledge on language development theories and early childhood pedagogy, particularly within the South African context. It bridges the gap between theory and practice by showing how child-centred, play-based methods can support oral language development in a home-language context like Afrikaans. Grade R teachers will benefit from the practical strategies on how play-based activities can be used to support the development of oral language in Afrikaans, which will enlighten their classroom practices.

The curriculum developers realise the need to design or filter programmes that include play as a tool to develop language. Policy makers will also benefit from this study as it is good, hard evidence to recommend the strengthening of the implementations in policies, for example, the CAPS document. The best and most important is kept for last; learners will benefit from this study as they play while developing oral language in Afrikaans. This study makes a significant contribution to the research fields, practices in the classrooms, and educational policies. The findings of this study will offer insights that teachers can apply to create a language-rich environment, supporting learners' oral language development and strengthening their Afrikaans vocabulary daily.

This study will also have an effect on policy development as it makes use of the CAPS document for the Foundational Phase, which promotes play-based learning and also promotes the use of a learner's home language. This study will also highlight the need to train Grade R teachers in using play-based instruction for developing children's oral language.

1.11. THE SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study focused on the development of oral language through play in Afrikaans, specifically in the Foundation Phase in Grade R. The research looks into different strategies that teachers can use to bring play as a key concept when focusing on the development of language in the classroom. The study was conducted in Bloemfontein, in the Motheo district of the Free State Province in South Africa, and the participants consisted of three Afrikaans Grade R teachers.

Although this study offers a lot of value in certain contexts, there are also limitations attached. One of the limitations is that the research was conducted at only one of the schools in the Motheo district. This may limit the geographical span, and it may not be the same circumstances of other teachers in other districts. Another limitation is the sample size of the Grade R teachers. Sampling only three Grade R teachers restricts the breadth of the study. A third limitation is that the study was done over a very short period of time, which may strain the ability to detect certain changes or samples in the development of oral language over time.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW: ORAL LANGUAGE THROUGH PLAY

2.1. INTRODUCTION

Developing children's oral language in the Grade R classroom is crucial for preparing them to cope with learning language at the cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) level, as described by Cummins (1979). This chapter aims to review literature on the development of Afrikaans oral language through play in the Motheo district in the Free State province. First, the theoretical perspective supporting the current study will be discussed, followed by highlighting the importance of oral language development in Grade R and the role of play during early learning. Thereafter, the curriculum guidelines on oral language will be discussed. The chapter will conclude the discussion by reviewing literature according to the research questions/objectives in this study; hence, the following themes will be discussed: developing oral language through play during early learning, teachers' experiences of developing oral language through play, and strategies for developing oral language through play.

2.2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE OF LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

A theoretical framework refers to a carefully constructed and interconnected collection of theories that a researcher uses to guide and shape a study (Varpio et al. & Young, 2019). A solid base should be laid to provide the grounding for the research. Without a theoretical framework, the study will not have a pathway to proceed. This study is underpinned by two theories: Froebel's theory of learning through play and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. These are briefly explained below.

2.2.1. Froebel's theory of learning through play: oral language development

Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852), founder of the kindergarten movement (known in the South African context as pre-school education), conceptualised play as the highest form of human development in early childhood.

He proposed that children learn most effectively through active engagement involving their senses, imagination, and creativity.

For Froebel, play does not serve as a diversion from learning but constitutes learning itself. His theory emphasises that structured play activities allow children to develop an understanding of their environment while fostering imagination, problem-solving, and independent thinking. Froebel's approach values both guided and open-ended play, providing opportunities for children to make choices, interact with materials, and construct meaning through exploration.

In relation to oral language development, Froebel's theory asserts the following:

Play provides natural opportunities for communication: During imaginative or role-play, children are encouraged to express themselves verbally. For example, when playing *house* or *shop*, they take on roles, negotiate rules, ask questions, give instructions, and narrate events, all of which stimulate vocabulary growth and sentence construction.

Social interaction through play fosters language skills: Froebel emphasises the importance of social relationships in learning. Play often involves working with peers, which promotes dialogue, listening, turn-taking, and responding (which are essential components of oral language development).

Symbolic play supports meaning-making and storytelling: Through pretend play, children use symbols (e.g., objects, gestures, or words) to represent other things. This symbolic thinking is closely tied to language and narrative skills, helping children learn how to narrate stories, describe events, and express thoughts.

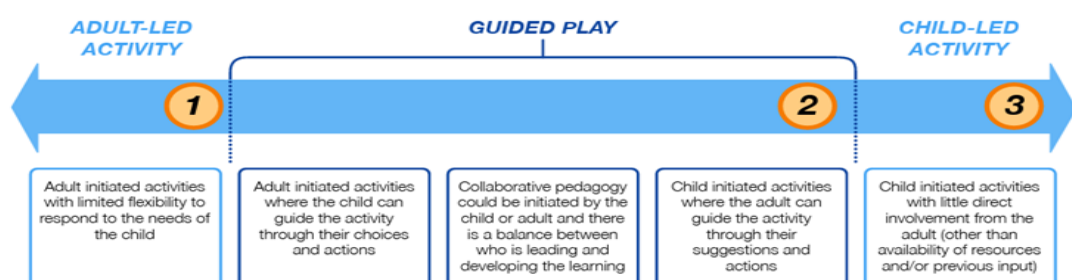
Play aligns with the child's interests and developmental stage: Froebel believes that learning should be child-centred. When children engage in play that interests them, they are more motivated to communicate and more likely to practice new words and expressions.

Songs, rhymes, and finger plays enhance phonological awareness: Froebel integrated music and movement into his play-based approach. Singing songs and reciting rhymes help children recognise sounds, rhythms, and patterns in language, laying the foundation for strong oral language and later literacy.

Froebel regarded play as a crucial component of education, equivalent in importance to work and lessons. He maintained that play represents “the most important step in the development of a child” and that teachers should observe play to assess learning progress. Froebel also emphasised the educational value of specially designed toys, known as “gifts,” which were intended to stimulate learning through guided play. These materials—such as balls, globes, cubes, cylinders, paper folding materials, rods, beads, and buttons—encourage the development of perceptual and cognitive skills such as form recognition, colour differentiation, grouping, and matching. When experienced under the guidance of a teacher, these activities facilitate the child’s connection between inner understanding and the unity of the external world.

Froebel viewed the teacher as a guide rather than a director of learning (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2016). Teachers should therefore facilitate guided play, creating environments where children can explore, discover, and construct knowledge through experience. Figure 2.1 illustrates the early years pedagogical continuum, highlighting guided play as a significant instructional approach that supports children’s learning and autonomy.

Figure 2.1. Early years pedagogical continuum



(Source: Education Endowment Foundation, 2023, 2)

Rather than prescribing step-by-step instructions for activities, a Froebelian approach encourages teachers to provide diverse materials and invite children to create freely. This process nurtures creativity, decision-making, problem-solving, and perseverance—skills essential for holistic development. Froebel's theory is highly relevant to the present study, as it informs teachers' practices for implementing play-based learning programmes in Grade R classrooms. It provides a framework for promoting oral language development through interactive, meaningful, and imaginative play experiences that enable children to talk, listen, imagine, and collaborate. The theory also serves as a guiding framework for interpreting findings derived from teacher interviews and classroom observations in this study.

Froebel's belief that learning is inherently social aligns with Lev Vygotsky's concepts of the ZPD and scaffolding. Accordingly, the following section discusses Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as the second theoretical foundation underpinning this study.

2.2.2. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory highlights the crucial role of social interaction and cultural context in learning, emphasising that play is a powerful tool for cognitive development. Through play, children engage in activities that stretch their abilities, guided by more knowledgeable others (MKO) like adults or peers, within their ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). This collaborative learning, especially through pretend play and games, fosters the development of abstract thought, problem-solving skills, and social skills. Vygotsky's support of learning through play is highlighted below:

ZPD: Vygotsky's theory emphasises the ZPD, the gap between what a child can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance. Play provides a natural environment for children to operate within their ZPD, as they can explore new skills and concepts with support from others.

Social Interaction: Vygotsky believes that learning is a social process. In play, children interact with peers and adults, learning from their actions, language, and guidance. This social interaction is crucial for internalising new knowledge and skills.

MKO: Adults and more advanced peers act as MKOs, providing scaffolding and support to help children learn. In play, this could involve modelling more complex actions, providing suggestions, or helping children navigate challenges.

Language and Thought: Vygotsky perceives language as a tool for cognitive development, and that play provides ample opportunities for language use and development. Through play, children develop internal language, which they use to regulate their actions and thoughts.

Culture and Play: Vygotsky's theory highlights the importance of culture in shaping learning. Play is influenced by cultural norms and values, and children learn these through their interactions within play.

Pretend Play and Imagination: Pretend play allows children to explore different roles, scenarios, and rules, fostering creativity and imagination. This type of play helps children develop symbolic thinking and understanding of social roles and rules.

Collaborative Dialogue and Problem-Solving: Through collaborative play, children engage in dialogue, share ideas, and solve problems together. This process of working together strengthens their cognitive and social skills. Figure 2.2 below shows the process of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development.

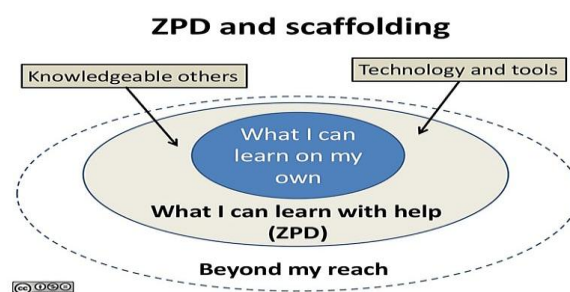


Figure 2.2. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development (Source: Wheeler, 2016, 71)

The sociocultural theory is relevant to the current study because it emphasises social interaction as a learning tool, which aligns with learning through play, which happens through interacting with more capable individuals and independently. Vygotsky's theory is used in this study to assist in exploring how play materials and activities reflect and support the Grade R teachers' pedagogy in terms of facilitating or guiding learning through play.

This study draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks because together they provide a more comprehensive understanding of how children's oral language develops through play in the Grade R classroom. By using both theories, the theoretical foundation of the study is strengthened by integrating two important dimensions of learning, which are the individual and developmental focus of Froebel's approach, and then the social and interactive focus of Vygotsky's point of view.

Froebel's theory of learning through play and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory interrelate through their beliefs, where they share that play is central to children's learning and development. Although Froebel focuses more on the child's natural curiosity, imagination, and self-expression through play, and Vygotsky emphasises the social and cultural dimensions of learning, both theorists view play as an essential medium through which children explore, construct knowledge, and develop communication skills.

These two theories give a comprehensive framework for understanding how play supports oral language development, where Froebel explains the child's engagement and expression during play, and Vygotsky explains how interaction and support within play enhance that learning. Their interrelation is in the balance between individual exploration and social collaboration, both of which are important for effective language development in the Grade R classroom.

2.3. THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN GRADE R

Language development in Grade R is a critical stage, as it lays the foundation for all future learning (Nel, 2015; Piasta et al., 2012). Without realising it, children pick up language and its usage rapidly during this developmental phase (Byington, 2013; Berk, 2018). Through language acquisition, they develop vocabulary, grasp sentence structure, and learn to express their emotions through words (Paatsch & Nolan, 2020; Whitebread, 2012).

In Grade R, learners must prepare for Grade 1, where they are expected to begin reading, identifying words, and speaking in complete sentences (Byington, 2013; Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2011). If this foundational stage is neglected, it can lead to developmental delays not only in oral language but in overall literacy and academic skills (Reed & Lee, 2020; Snow, 2017). Cognitive and social development are also closely linked to language acquisition (Byington, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978).

During this phase, Grade R learners begin to identify, label, solve problems, and think critically, developing symbolic thought and representational understanding (Paatsch & Nolan, 2020; Donald et al., 2010). Language becomes central to these processes as it provides meaning and structure to children's understanding of the world (Byington, 2013; Berk, 2018).

Furthermore, language allows children to identify, categorise, and organise their thoughts about their environment (Vygotsky, 1978; Cameron, 2011). Grade R may also mark the first significant period of social interaction with peers. Through social engagement, conversation emerges as a natural and necessary tool for learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003). Within these interactions, learners develop friendships that foster cooperation, empathy, and collaboration. Conversations also provide an avenue for emotional expression, allowing children to articulate feelings and understand those of others (Froebel, 1887; Berk, 2018).

Such interactions support both emotional and social development. When friendships are established, classroom participation and confidence in communication increase, enabling children to engage meaningfully in learning tasks (Byington, 2013; Paatsch & Nolan, 2020; DBE, 2011). Effective communication equips learners to comprehend classroom instructions—what to do, how to do it, and when—thereby strengthening school readiness and later academic success (Byington, 2013; Reed & Lee, 2020).

Language development in South African classrooms often occurs within a multilingual context (Heugh, 2015; DBE, 2010). Many learners are introduced to Grade R through a language that differs from their home language, often functioning in a second or third language. However, maintaining and developing the home language remains essential, as it forms the cognitive and linguistic foundation for acquiring additional languages (Lessing & De Witt, 2005; Cummins, 2001). Neglecting the home language can hinder bilingual and biliteracy development, affecting identity and academic confidence (Lessing & De Witt, 2005; Heugh, 2015).

Play and language development are inherently interconnected. Play is a fundamental vehicle for language acquisition and conceptual understanding (Froebel, 1887; Reed & Lee, 2020; Weisberg et al., 2016). Through play, Grade R learners engage in storytelling, songs, rhymes, and picture-based activities that stimulate imagination and encourage verbal expression (Froebel, 1887; Vygotsky, 1978; Whitebread, 2012). Play provides authentic opportunities for daily language practice, supports vocabulary growth, and fosters narrative competence, thereby laying a foundation for future literacy and overall language proficiency (Byington, 2013; Reed & Lee, 2020; Weisberg et al., 2016).

2.4. THE ROLE OF PLAY DURING EARLY LEARNING

Play is a natural and instinctive activity that young children engage in from an early age. Educators can utilise this natural disposition as a pedagogical tool to support children's holistic and academic development. Scholars such as Piaget (1962) and Froebel (1887) argued that play is not simply a leisure activity but a fundamental mode through which children construct knowledge and make sense of their world.

Play enables children to explore, experiment, and test ideas in a low-risk context, which contributes significantly to cognitive and emotional growth (Wood, 2014; Whitebread, 2012). Through purposeful play, children learn to solve problems, think critically, and engage creatively, which are all essential foundations for future academic success (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Ebrahim, 2010).

As children grow, their curiosity and desire to explore the world around them intensify. Play thus serves as a bridge between their natural curiosity and structured learning (Weisberg et al., 2016). When learners engage in playful activities such as drawing body parts—like the eyes, nose, mouth, and ears—they are not only enjoying themselves but also constructing knowledge about human senses, linking sensory experiences with emerging conceptual understanding. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that learning occurs through social interaction and mediated activity. Within play, children operate in what Vygotsky termed the ZPD, where collaboration with peers or guidance from adults enables them to achieve higher levels of cognitive and linguistic competence.

Cognitively, play stimulates thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving abilities (Berk, 2018; Donald et al., 2010). It encourages children to test hypotheses, negotiate meanings, and develop symbolic representation—skills foundational to later academic learning. International studies by Siraj-Blatchford (2009) and Fleer (2013) further reveal that when play is integrated into early learning, children demonstrate deeper conceptual understanding and sustained engagement. In the South African context, Ebrahim (2011) and Henning (2014) highlight that play-based pedagogies are vital for developing critical thinking and creativity, especially in resource-constrained classrooms where experiential learning opportunities may be limited.

Play is also crucial for language development. Through role play, storytelling, and dramatisation, children develop oral language and communication skills (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). Such activities provide authentic contexts in which children practice turn-taking, listening, and responding—core elements of pragmatic language use. When learners engage in meaningful conversations during play, their vocabulary, sentence structure, and expressive abilities expand naturally (Weisberg et al., 2016; Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

In South Africa, Ekeh, Ngozwana, and Mukonza (2022) found that structured play activities, such as storytelling and dramatic expression, significantly enhanced children's oral vocabulary and narrative competence in preschool settings. This supports the assertion that play not only promotes linguistic growth but also facilitates cultural and social learning through shared language experiences.

Furthermore, play supports social and emotional development. Through collaborative play, learners form relationships, negotiate roles, and learn empathy and emotional regulation (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Rogoff, 2003). According to Ginsburg (2007), play allows children to express feelings and cope with challenges in a safe environment. South African research (Ebrahim, 2010; Modise, 2019) similarly shows that social play fosters emotional resilience, particularly in multilingual and multicultural classrooms where learners navigate diverse identities.

Physical development is another key dimension of play. Activities such as climbing, running, and manipulating objects develop gross and fine motor skills, coordination, and dexterity (Whitebread, 2012; Pellegrini, 2009). The South African National Curriculum Framework (DBE, 2015) recognises physical play as foundational to overall development, reinforcing the link between movement, brain development, and learning readiness. Internationally, the OECD (2022) and UNICEF (2018) both advocate for play-based approaches as essential to supporting young children's health, concentration, and executive functioning.

Critically, play enhances motivation and engagement. When learning occurs in a playful and enjoyable context, children sustain attention longer and internalise learning more effectively (Weisberg et al., 2016; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). However, scholars such as Brooker and Edwards (2010) caution that play should not be romanticised as inherently educational; rather, its value depends on the teacher's intentionality and ability to scaffold experiences that link play with curricular goals. In this sense, play should not be viewed as separate from academic learning but as a pedagogically rich process that integrates cognitive, linguistic, and emotional development.

Ultimately, the role of play in early learning is foundational. It cultivates the skills, attitudes, and dispositions necessary for lifelong learning. As Froebel (1887) observed, “play is the highest expression of human development in childhood.” For Grade R learners in South Africa, integrating play within teaching practices ensures that education remains developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, and cognitively stimulating.

2.5. CURRICULUM GUIDELINES ON ORAL LANGUAGE AND PLAY

Curriculum guidelines are there to guide the curriculum. It is also there to guide the teachers, telling them how, what, and when things need to be done. Once this structure is followed and the curriculum is covered, the development of each learner will take place as it should. In the Motheo district, the schools use the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) as a guideline and framework. These curriculum guidelines cover the important aspects of the development of a child during that stage. There are also specific guidelines on oral language and play.

2.5.1. CAPS on oral language and play

CAPS serves as the official curriculum framework for all South African schools and is actively used by educators in the Motheo district. Implemented in 2012 by the Department of Basic Education, CAPS aims to enhance the quality of education by providing a structured and coherent curriculum across all grades and subjects. It seeks to reduce teacher workload through simplified, user-friendly materials and to promote uniformity in curriculum implementation and assessment. Within the Foundation Phase (Grades R to 3), CAPS outlines specific guidelines for Home Language, First Additional Language, Mathematics, and Life Skills. This study focuses specifically on Grade R, where the CAPS document places strong emphasis on oral language development, learning through play, and holistic development as key pillars of early childhood education.

CAPS identifies oral language as a critical foundational skill in the early years. The policy highlights the importance of developing learners' listening and speaking abilities as a basis for future literacy and academic success. Essential oral language outlined in CAPS includes:

- listening for enjoyment (e.g., engaging with rhymes, songs, and stories)
- listening for specific details and sequence
- vocabulary development (lexicon building)
- participation in conversations using appropriate language structures

To support these outcomes, CAPS recommends various oral activities such as show and tell, songs and rhymes, role play, and describing pictures or personal experiences. These activities are designed to promote expressive and receptive language skills, encouraging young learners to use language in meaningful and interactive ways. Play is also recognised in the CAPS document as a central methodology in the Grade R classroom. According to the Department of Basic Education (2011), play is not only a natural learning process for young children but also a strategic tool for fostering cognitive, emotional, and especially language development.

CAPS acknowledges two major roles of play: core teaching and learning strategy, which endorses play as an essential pedagogical approach in Grade R, where children engage in structured and unstructured activities to explore concepts and develop foundational skills. A vehicle for holistic development, where, through play, children are given opportunities to build communication skills, social interaction, imagination, and creativity. Play-based learning promotes a child-centred approach that aligns with their developmental stage and individual learning pace. The policy also promotes guided and purposeful play, where teachers plan and facilitate play experiences that align with learning outcomes. This approach ensures that while play remains enjoyable and exploratory, it also contributes meaningfully to oral language acquisition and other key developmental areas.

2.5.2. National Early Learning Development Standards

The National Early Learning Development Standards are the outlined guidelines that are set for the expected enriching breakthrough and educational aims for young children from when they are born to school entry. These guidelines aim to provide support for early childhood development and to give a framework for how to provide the support. What a child should know and what a child should be able to do at a certain stage in their life is set by these standards through the framework.

The Department of Education, together with the Department of Social Development and UNICEF (2010), set these standards following the South African context. According to the Department of Education (2009), the National Early Learning and Development Standards balance six developmental areas. These six areas are: (1) well-being, (2) identity and belonging, (3) communication, (4) exploring mathematics, (5) creativity, and (6) knowledge and understanding of the world (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2009). The first area is well-being. This area focuses on the physical and emotional health of an individual. Physical health includes fine motor and gross motor skills. This area ensures that a child develops a sense of security in their environment, boosts their self-confidence, balances their emotions, and teaches them to express their feelings and emotions. The second area is identity and belonging. This area focuses on a child being able to develop relationships with others, to find their true and cultural identity. This area encourages a child to interact with their friends, family, and community. Through NELDS, the promotion of an inclusive environment takes place where diversity is honoured and where every child feels that he or she belongs.

Communication is the third area that NELDS covers. This area has a crucial component, which is the development of language. When the development of language takes place, it involves the investment and use of language for them to communicate, to think, and to learn. In this component of language development, there are smaller components that form language. These smaller components include: non-verbal and verbal communication, vocabulary development, and skills such as listening and comprehension. The NELDS motivates multilingual exposure and development. Creativity is the fifth area.

This is where children's creative thinking and imagination are developed. To develop this area, fun activities are included, such as storytelling, drawing, rhymes, poems, songs, etc. Creative declaration is supposed to be a necessary approach for children to share their experiences, tell how they are feeling, solve problems, and develop their creative thinking. The last area is knowledge and understanding of the world. This presents a child's early scientific thinking. It makes children aware of their environment.

The specific purpose of the NELDS consists of three words: *advise*, *guarantee*, and *enlighten*. The NELDS is there to *advise* teachers, parents, or any form that helps with the development of young children, giving them a set of basic guidelines. It is there to *guarantee* complete development in children and also to *enlighten* certain programs, such as early learning and curriculum expansion.

There lies importance in the National early learning development standards. One will certainly have specific expectations in a different environment. With NELDS, advanced learning expectations are equalised across the different settings. NELDS increases the readiness for school. This document prepares young children for the transition from Grade R to primary school. It makes sure that a child keeps up socially and academically from a young age, and, lastly, when it comes to learning, it makes sure that a child has a positive and confident attitude towards it.

The NELDS is still in use today. Different parties use it for different reasons. Teachers make use of NELDS for lesson planning and to set the correct level of assessments for learners. This document is also available for parents to see the specific development taking place in their child. To notify others through policies, policymakers also use this document. This document does not only exist in the South African context. It goes worldwide. In the United States, it is called the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF). This document is an educational childhood support guiding the development of children from birth to the age of five years (Office of Head Start, 2015).

The NELDS and language development walk hand-in-hand with each other, as well as with this study. As previously mentioned, NELDS focuses on learners from birth up to four (4) years of age. NELDS's philosophy informs the Grade R curriculum, which is based on early learning. The Grade R curriculum emphasises and focuses on play-based activities, which are integrated into all learning areas, such as language and mathematics. Children take part in rhymes, songs, storytelling, plays, and conversations with their friends, teachers, and family. All these activities are labelled under the communication sphere of NELDS.

2.5.3. Implementation of inclusive education in South Africa

Inclusive education in South Africa may be one of the biggest struggles in education because South Africa is rich in diversity. The struggle to improve inclusive education came after apartheid, where, as the Department of Education (2001) puts it in White Paper 6, we recognise and respect the differences among all types of learners and build an education system that can accommodate a diverse range of learning needs. White Paper 6 shifts the problem from the learner to the system in which that learner occurs. The main objective of White Paper 6 is to signify an exclusive, inclusive education system. White Paper 6 has a theoretical repositioning where it states that it is convinced that diversity is a strength and not a problem, learning can take place in all learners, and that schools must adapt to unite with the children's needs (DBE, 2001).

In order to achieve this goal, certain implementations are needed using different strategies. The first implementation strategy is full-service schools. According to the DBE (2001), a full-service school is a mainstream public school that is improved and reinforced to provide quality education to all learners, especially those learners who have learning barriers. The objective of full-service schools is to encourage entry and engagement for all learners, to provide a safe and welcoming environment for every learner, to be an example of an inclusive institution for others in the surrounding community, and lastly, to identify barriers at an early stage and work through them with the appropriate support (DBE, 2001).

The Department of Basic Education has the aim to create a full-service school per district, as outlined in White Paper 6 (DBE, 2001), where the school will then obtain training for the teacher teaching at that specific school, obtain a grant to improve the school infrastructure, and receive support from the provincial education departments and District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs). Another implementation strategy is Special Schools as Resource Centres (SSRCs). According to the Department of Education (2001), schools that already exist for learners with special needs are improved and constructed to function as support points for full-service and mainstream schools in the surrounding area.

The main objective of SSRCs is to support learners who may require more assistance than others. These SSRCs must provide expertise, liaise with ordinary and full-service schools to offer training and support, accommodate necessary changes in the curriculum, and reinforce methodologies of inclusive teaching (Department of Education, 2001).

Another implementation strategy is to strengthen District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs). According to the Department of Education (2001), DBSTs are multidisciplinary teams responsible for coordinating the support that schools receive in terms of inclusive education. DBSTs are also responsible for addressing learners who may experience learning difficulties. They consist of various professionals, such as social workers, education specialists, and special needs educators. The main objective of DBSTs is to build capacity by providing specific training and guidance for schools, focusing particularly on School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs), and equipping teachers with strategies for classroom management and inclusive education (DBE, 2001). The DBSTs provide training to SBSTs on identifying learning barriers, implementing Individual Support Plans (ISPs), and applying diverse teaching approaches (DBE, 2001).

White Paper 6 (DBE, 2001) also recommends implementing the SIAS Policy (Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support). The SIAS policy, formally implemented by the Department of Basic Education in 2014, aims to identify learners with learning barriers and provide the appropriate support.

The policy focuses on addressing barriers within mainstream schools rather than removing learners from them. SIAS consists of four components: screening, identification, assessment, and support. Screening involves teachers observing learners for signs of learning difficulties and collecting relevant background information, including health, development, and socio-economic status (DBE, 2014).

The second component, identification, requires collaboration between SBSTs and teachers to determine whether learners face short-term or long-term learning barriers (DBE, 2014). Assessment is conducted with the involvement of teachers, healthcare professionals, and DBSTs, focusing on understanding the learner's needs (DBE, 2014). The final component, support, requires teachers to develop an ISP outlining the type of support required, the roles of parents, SBSTs, and DBSTs, and timelines for review (DBE, 2014). White Paper 6 (DBE, 2001) also highlights curriculum and institutional flexibility as an implementation strategy. This approach emphasises adapting teaching methods, learning materials, and curricular frameworks to meet learners' diverse needs.

Flexibility in curriculum delivery is essential to promote access for learners experiencing barriers to learning, ensuring that education is inclusive and responsive (DBE, 2011). Inclusive education remains an ongoing process until solutions exist for every learner with a learning barrier. Key role-players in this process include the government, educators, and parents, all sharing the goal of ensuring that every child is valued and supported. Through White Paper 6 (DBE, 2001) and the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014), progress in inclusive education is evident, but sustained implementation is critical for long-term success.

2.6. DEVELOPING ORAL LANGUAGE THROUGH PLAY

Oral language forms the bedrock of literacy and overall academic success. It enables children to communicate thoughts, express emotions, and interact meaningfully with others (Whitebread, 2012; Paatsch & Nolan, 2020).

Research globally and in South Africa demonstrates that play-based pedagogy enhances oral language acquisition in early childhood classrooms (Weisberg et al., 2016; Ekeh et al., 2022; Strauss & Bipath, 2020). In South Africa, Ekeh, Ngozwana, and Mukonza's (2022) study found that intentional play activities—such as role play, puppet theatre, and group storytelling—substantially improved learners' vocabulary, pronunciation, and narrative sequencing. Their findings underscore the importance of guided play in multilingual classrooms, where learners must navigate between home languages and instructional languages. Similarly, Strauss and Bipath (2020) observed that play-based literacy stations (e.g., word games, rhymes, and sight-word activities) enhanced vocabulary and confidence among ESL learners. This aligns with Cummins's (2001) interdependence hypothesis, which emphasises that oral proficiency in one language can transfer to literacy development in another, underscoring the multilingual dimension of South African classrooms.

Internationally, Nicolopoulou et al. (2015) demonstrated in U.S. Grade R contexts that storytelling and dramatic reenactment significantly developed learners' descriptive language, self-regulation, and social awareness. These results resonate with Vygotsky's (1978) theory that language is both a social and cognitive tool—children learn to think through language as they engage with others. Pyle, Prioretta, and Poliszczuk (2024) extended this understanding by differentiating between free, guided, and teacher-directed play, concluding that guided play—a balance of child autonomy and teacher scaffolding—yielded the greatest language gains. However, they also highlighted challenges such as curriculum overload and limited teacher training, which mirror barriers found in South African contexts (Ebrahim, 2011; DBE, 2011).

Critically, while the benefits of play for oral language development are well-documented, scholars emphasise the need for teacher intentionality and curricular alignment. Fleer (2013) and Wood (2014) argue that without deliberate scaffolding, play risks becoming disconnected from language learning goals. In contrast, guided play encourages teachers to model language, ask open-ended questions, and extend conversations, creating what Siraj-Blatchford (2009) calls “sustained shared thinking.”

This interactional approach is particularly important in the South African Grade R context, where large class sizes and linguistic diversity may limit one-on-one verbal engagement. Despite these challenges, play remains a powerful pedagogical tool for promoting oral language. It creates authentic opportunities for learners to use language in context, negotiate meaning, and build confidence (Weisberg et al., 2016; Ekeh et al., 2022). Moreover, play contributes to **social inclusion**—enabling multilingual learners to participate meaningfully in learning communities and develop a sense of belonging (Heugh, 2015).

However, there is a notable gap in research on oral language development through play in Afrikaans-medium Grade R classrooms. Much of the existing South African literature focuses on English or multilingual contexts (Ebrahim, 2010; Strauss & Bipath, 2020). Therefore, the present study contributes to this emerging field by examining how play facilitates oral language development, specifically among Afrikaans-speaking Grade R learners in the Motheo district, addressing both linguistic and contextual gaps.

Despite the growing body of international research, there remains a gap in studies specifically focused on Afrikaans-speaking Grade R classrooms. By building on the findings of the above studies, this research aims to explore how teachers develop oral language through play in Afrikaans-medium classrooms in the MMED. In doing so, the study addresses a gap in both language-specific research and regional context, while providing empirical insights into how play supports oral language development in early childhood education.

2.7. TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF DEVELOPING ORAL LANGUAGE THROUGH PLAY

Teachers' experiences in developing oral language through play serve as a bridge between theory and practice. As the implementers of curriculum, teachers are positioned to adapt and apply theoretical frameworks in real classroom contexts.

Their insights stem from hands-on involvement and firsthand understanding of what works and what challenges arise. These experiences not only inform their practice but can also guide and inspire others in the teaching profession.

Many teachers report positive experiences with using play to support oral language development. According to Strauss and Bipath (2020), as well as Nicolopoulou et al. (2015), teachers observe that learners are more willing to speak and engage during playful activities than in formal instructional settings. Play encourages natural communication, enabling learners to express themselves more freely. Through storytelling, role-play, and imaginary scenarios, learners are more inclined to use newly acquired vocabulary and experiment with complex sentence structures (Christie & Roskos, 2006).

Teachers further report that play helps build learner confidence, especially in multilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts. As noted by Pyle et al. (2024), teachers have witnessed significant growth in once-shy or socially excluded learners, who become more expressive and independent through role-play activities. Based on their experiences, teachers have also identified effective strategies for promoting oral language through play. A commonly used technique involves posing open-ended questions such as, “What happens next in the story?” or “Why did he say those words?” These questions prompt learners to think critically and articulate their thoughts in full sentences (Christie & Roskos, 2006). Another strategy involves repeating and extending learners’ speech to model more complex language forms. Dickinson and Tabors (2001) assert that this kind of scaffolding supports the development of sophisticated language structures. Additionally, teachers often incorporate peer collaboration by having learners act as co-players or facilitators, providing them with opportunities to practice advanced vocabulary and descriptive language (Weisberg et al., 2013).

Despite these benefits, teachers also face several challenges when implementing play-based approaches. One major barrier is the pressure to meet curriculum goals, which limits the time available for play-based activities (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Strauss & Bipath, 2020). Teachers report feeling torn between covering content and fostering language through play.

As one teacher in Pyle et al. (2024) explained, “It’s challenging when I want to help them learn new words, but I’m not sure when to step in without disrupting their play.” A lack of formal training also emerged as a significant concern. Some teachers feel ill-equipped to use play effectively for language development, citing limited guidance or professional development in this area. Weisberg et al. (2013) refer to this as a need for more *explicit training*.

Furthermore, Christie and Roskos (2006) highlight that there is often a misunderstanding of the role of play in the classroom. Some educators and staff view play as a break from instruction rather than a purposeful learning activity. This misperception can hinder its integration into meaningful language development practices. Another challenge identified by teachers is the linguistic diversity in South African classrooms. Henning (2013) notes that teachers often struggle to balance the development of learners' English proficiency while also respecting and incorporating their home languages. Navigating this multilingual context requires sensitivity, adaptability, and support, which not all teachers have access to.

In conclusion, teachers’ experiences reveal both the transformative potential and practical limitations of using play to develop oral language. While many see play as a powerful tool for enhancing learner engagement, vocabulary use, and confidence, they also face constraints related to time, training, and classroom diversity. These insights are essential for informing teacher education and policy development aimed at fostering oral language through play in early childhood education.

2.8. STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING ORAL LANGUAGE THROUGH PLAY

Throughout this chapter, it is made clear that developing oral language through play is a very strategic way to perform well academically in the future. Throughout the years, researchers have looked for strategies for developing oral language through play. According to Dickinson & Tabors (2001), oral language is the cornerstone for reading comprehension, vocabulary growth, and written articulation.

One of the first strategies that can be used to develop oral language through play is dramatic play based on literature. Through this strategy, learners can express how they feel, they can interact in their role, and debate with their classmates. Nicolopoulou (2010) states that when submerging these dramatic play-based activities in a literature context, such as performing scenes from well-known stories, this strategy braces both descriptive competence and vocabulary investment. Another strategy that can be used is storytelling. One can then also add different props and puppets. This strategy can be seen as a multimodal approach that strengthens comprehension and encourages oral description competence according to Morrow (1990). Using extra tools such as different props and puppets helps children to attribute descriptive structures and vocabulary. In 1978, Vygotsky's theory of social interaction was seen as a foundational element in the development of language. This lines up with roleplay as a strategy.

This strategy vitalises voluntary language use, and it also intensifies comprehension through necessary position-taking. Symbolic play is also one of the strategies one can use to develop oral language through play. Symbolic play is to create little or small story environments by using toys and other materials, for example, creating a doll house in the classroom. Familiar text is being used to help the learners link the story, which then allows them to perform and increase story occurrences, encouraging unplanned conversations and language investigation (Fisher, 2010). Repetition is one of the best strategies a teacher can use to develop oral language through play. Unchanging and well-known texts, such as "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" or "Little Red Riding Hood," supply a natural platform where language can develop. Constant repetition of texts and oral involvement encourage the fluency of language and understanding in early readers (Sulzby & Teale, 1991).

2.9. SUMMARY

This chapter has explored how oral language development is deeply enriched through play-based learning, drawing on both local and international studies. The research presented confirms that play creates meaningful opportunities for learners to engage in authentic dialogue, expand vocabulary, and build confidence, especially in multilingual and early learning environments.

Grounded in theoretical perspectives such as Froebel's play-based learning and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the literature shows that guided and structured play fosters cognitive, linguistic, and social growth. While the benefits of integrating play into oral language development are well-documented, challenges such as curriculum constraints, large class sizes, and limited teacher training remain. Nonetheless, teachers' experiences demonstrate that play is not only an effective pedagogical tool but also a transformative force for language learning when thoughtfully implemented. The following chapter will present and analyse the findings of the current study, which investigates how Grade R teachers in Afrikaans-medium classrooms in the Motheo District implement play to support oral language development.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the research methodology employed in exploring the development of oral language through play in the Grade R Afrikaans classroom. The study is underpinned by two theoretical frameworks: Froebel's Theory of Play and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. A qualitative research approach was adopted, with data collected through classroom observations and interviews, and analysed using thematic analysis. The research was conducted at a single school located in Bloemfontein, within the MMED of the Free State, based on proximity to the researcher. The chapter begins with a descriptive background of the school and the three participating teachers, who were conveniently sampled (see Table 3.1). It then discusses the research paradigm, followed by the research design, approach, sampling strategy, data collection methods, instruments, data collection procedures, data analysis techniques, measures to ensure trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

3.2. BIOGRAPHICAL DATA AND PROCEDURE FOR COLLECTING DATA

Table 3.1. The background information of teachers and the school

Name	School	Type of school	Home language	Age	Gender	Grade	Teaching experience	Qualification
Teacher A	School X	Quantile 2	Afrikaans	46	Female	Grade R	6 years	4 Years (Higher Education Diploma)
Teacher B	School X	Quantile 2	Afrikaans	37	Female	Grade R	5 years	B.Ed. Degree
Teacher C	School X	Quantile 2	Afrikaans	36	Female	Grade R	2 years	NQF 5 (Diploma in Early Childhood Development)

3.2.1. Background Information of Teachers and the School

School X is a preschool school for Grade R learners in Bloemfontein, Free State, in the Motheo district. Three teachers between the ages of 36 and 46 participated in this study with teaching experience from 2 to 6 years. The three teachers were purposefully and conveniently sampled.

3.2.2. Procedure for collecting data

For this study, the researcher arranged with the school principal to conduct observations on three separate dates. A structured observation schedule was prepared in advance to guide note-taking during the sessions. The researcher remained unobtrusive throughout the process, observing silently and recording notes. Bell et al. (2019) identify two key purposes of classroom observation: to enhance teaching and to recognise effective instructional practices.

3.3. RESEARCH PARADIGM

The interpretivist paradigm underpins this study, as it emphasises understanding the subjective experiences and perceptions of the Grade R teachers concerning the use of play-based learning to develop oral language in Afrikaans. Research aims to acknowledge how individuals interpret their social world. This study recognises multiple realities as it seeks to uncover how teachers perceive and implement play-based strategies in diverse classroom contexts. It prioritises subjective meanings and rich descriptions, particularly in how teachers interpret and apply play in oral language development.

Interpretivism is relevant for this study, given that human behaviour, beliefs, learning processes, and classroom dynamics are best understood through qualitative data. The interpretivist paradigm is also suited because, as Cohen et al. (2018) note, observations, interviews, and case studies are useful tools in interpretivist research, which were the procedures of the data collection in this study. Additionally, thematic analysis, which was used for data analysis, aligns with the interpretivist goal of identifying patterns and meanings within participants' lived experiences and responses.

3.4. RESEARCH DESIGN

As already mentioned in Chapter One, this study is a qualitative case study design specifically focusing on a single case, which is School X in the Motheo district. A case study design is an observed investigation that looks into a contemporary phenomenon in depth and looks into a real-life context, mainly when boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident (Yin, 2018). Within this design, two primary data collection methods were used: semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. When we look at interviews as a qualitative research design, it constructs the foundation of primary data collection (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). When one looks at the definition of the term “interviews”, Adhabi and Anozie (2017) describe it as a consultation where the researcher investigates to know more about a certain matter, as per the opinion of the individual being asked. Furthermore, one can see interviews as attempts to understand the world from a subject’s perspective, to unwind the true meaning of what other people experience, and to also discover other people’s lived world before scientific explanations (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017).

In this study, nine (9) interview questions were asked of the participants, respectively. The participants did not know the questions beforehand. All nine (9) questions were focused on the development of the Afrikaans home language in the Grade R classroom. The single case study research design is suitable for this study because the focus was only on three teachers teaching Afrikaans home language in the same school for the purpose of examining their approach in developing Grade R learners’ oral language.

Through interviews, the researcher gained insights into the unique challenges and strategies that Grade R teachers use to develop oral language, perspectives often unknown to educators outside this specific phase. For example, how to handle certain situations in class. The researcher immersed herself in the participants’ lived experiences, adopting an empathetic stance to understand their perspectives. Classroom observation was also conducted as part of the data collection in this study. According to Smit and Onwuegbuzie (2018), observation is one of the oldest and most fundamental methods in research.

Beyond its use in academic inquiry, classroom observation serves multiple purposes, such as teacher appraisal, promotion decisions, curriculum development, and professional growth (Mohammed Abdullah AL-Balushi & Mat Saad, 2022). In this context, classroom observations were conducted without interrupting the teaching and learning process. Hence, the observation schedule (see Appendix B) was used to identify and note all the activities related to developing oral language through play in the three classes observed. As Bell et al. (2019) explain, classroom observations are often guided by structured rubrics or checklists used to assess the quality of teaching practices. This method was therefore appropriate for the current study, as it enabled the researcher to observe, listen, and experience the day-to-day realities of Grade R learners. It also provided insight into the various strategies teachers employ to develop oral language in the learners' home language, Afrikaans.

3.5. RESEARCH APPROACH

As already mentioned in Chapter 1, the current study adopted a qualitative research approach to collect and analyse data gathered through interviews and classroom observations. Qualitative research provides a rich and nuanced understanding of human experiences, offering a range of philosophical perspectives and methodological tools for exploring the dynamics within organisations, their members, and their broader societal impact (Gehman et al., 2018). This approach allows researchers to engage deeply with the meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences and actions. According to Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2020), qualitative research enables a broader and more in-depth exploration of participants' involvement in a specific context, using methods such as interviews, observations, and visual techniques. Tenny, Brannan, and Brannan (2017) further explain that qualitative research focuses on capturing participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviours, aiming to answer "how" and "why" questions rather than "how many" or "how much."

In this study, data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, focusing exclusively on teachers rather than learners. One school was selected based on accessibility. The qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for this research, as it allowed the researcher to explore the teachers' lived experiences, emotions, and interactions in meaningful depth. A quantitative approach focused on numerical data, as described by Ahmad et al. (2019), would not have provided the same insight into the nuanced conversations. Therefore, qualitative research was best suited to address the aims of this study.

3.6. SAMPLING STRATEGY

Sampling methods are generally categorised into two broad groups: probability sampling (random sampling) and non-probability sampling (non-random sampling) (Taherdoost, 2016).

According to Taherdoost (2016), non-probability sampling includes four main types: quota sampling, snowball sampling, judgment sampling, and convenience sampling. This study employed convenience sampling. As the term suggests, convenience sampling involves selecting participants who are readily accessible and willing to participate. In this case chosen because they were easily available to the researcher. This method was selected because it was the most practical, cost-effective, and time-efficient option.

The researcher conducted interviews and classroom observations at a conveniently located school within the Motheo district, minimising travel time and associated expenses. Overall, convenience sampling proved to be the most suitable strategy for this study due to its simplicity, minimal resource requirements, and alignment with the logistical constraints of the research.

3.7. DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Two methods were used to collect data, namely, classroom observations and interviews. These two methods guaranteed a complete understanding of the teacher's experience.

3.7.1 Classrooms Observations

Classroom observations were employed to gather data on the development of Afrikaans oral language in Grade R classrooms. Observation is a valuable method for collecting data on naturally occurring behaviours within their authentic contexts (Cohen et al., 2018).

This study utilised non-participant observation, where the researcher observes without participating in the activities being studied (O'Leary, 2017). Non-participant observation allows for the unobtrusive capture of real-time behaviour in natural settings, including non-verbal cues that may not surface in interviews. This method also enhances data triangulation when used alongside other tools such as interviews (O'Leary, 2017). The observations conducted in this study followed a structured format, guided by a pre-designed observation schedule (see Appendix B), which was divided into two sections: Section A comprising the information of the school and the class observed and Section B, activities related to the development of oral language through play.

3.7.2. Interviews

Interviews were conducted to further explore the development of oral language in Grade R Afrikaans classrooms. As Cohen et al. (2018) note, interviews allow participants to articulate their perspectives and interpretations of their experiences and environments. In this study, the interviews were semi-structured and guided by a predetermined set of questions, allowing for both consistency across participants and flexibility to probe for deeper insights.

The interview schedule (see Appendix A), used to note the teachers' responses, was divided into the following sections: Section A (for capturing the teachers' background information) and Section B comprised the participants' questions regarding their experiences of developing Afrikaans oral language in the Grade R classroom.

3.8. PROCEDURE FOR COLLECTING DATA

The data in this study were collected from School X in the Motheo district, Free State, through classroom observations and interviews in May 2024. Classroom observations were done in the mornings over three days, one day per teacher. The researcher went to the school to arrange when these classroom observations and interviews could take place. The principal gave the suited dates for each of the three teachers. Each classroom observation lasted approximately 30 minutes. Not interrupting the lesson, the researcher sat at the back of the classroom while the teacher was busy with the lesson. The data was collected by using the observation schedule, an extra notepad, and a voice recorder.

The interviews with each of the teachers took place directly after classroom observations. Each teacher had a teaching assistant. Each of these interviews took approximately 14 minutes per teacher. Teachers were interviewed in their home language, Afrikaans, which the researcher then translated into English for the study. Interview questions were set up before the interviews took place. None of the three teachers knew the interview questions beforehand. The interview questions, an extra notepad, and a voice recorder were used to collect data via the interviews.

3.9. DATA ANALYSIS

After collecting the data, the researcher used **thematic analysis** to examine and interpret the responses from the teachers. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This approach allowed the researcher to explore recurring ideas and issues that emerged from the interviews and classroom observations.

The data analysis process began with repeated readings of the transcripts to gain familiarity with the content. Initial codes were generated, and these codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflected meaningful patterns across the dataset. The researcher paid particular attention to themes that recurred frequently, using them as a foundation for deeper analysis and interpretation. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012), there is a six-phase framework for thematic analysis. These steps are as follows:

Step 1: Familiarisation with the data

This step involves immersing oneself in the raw data through reading and re-reading transcripts and notes. In this study, the first step involved listening to the audio-recorded data and translating it from Afrikaans to English. Thereafter, the researcher read the observation notes captured in the observation tool and the field notes. This process allowed for the early identification of patterns, and the researcher became deeply engaged with the teachers' experiences.

Step 2: Generating initial codes

Step two involves identifying interesting characteristics across the dataset through systematic coding. After becoming familiar with the data, the researcher worked through the transcripts in an organised manner to create primary codes. These codes were used to identify meaningful aspects related to oral language development in the Grade R context.

Step 3: Searching for themes

In this step, themes are identified, and all relevant coded data are organised within these selected themes. In this study, the researcher identified several themes from the collected data and organised them using a table to visualise the relationships between different ideas.

Step 4: Reviewing themes In step four, the researcher checks whether the themes function in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset. In this study, the researcher evaluated the collected data and removed unclear or irrelevant data to ensure consistency and clarity. Some themes were refined to better reflect the patterns present in the data.

Step 5: Defining and naming themes

In this step, the themes are refined to identify the essence of what each theme represents, and clear definitions and names are created. In this study, after the themes were finalised, the researcher defined what each theme encompassed and explained how each theme contributed to understanding the development of oral language through play. An organised and analytical summary was written for each theme to explain its relevance to the research questions.

Step 6: Producing the report

The final step involves producing the overall analysis and written report, supported by compelling examples and evidence from the data. In this study, the findings were presented by integrating the thematic analysis with direct quotations from participants to support each theme.

Thematic analysis was particularly suited to this study due to its theoretical flexibility and its capacity to explore both explicit and underlying meanings in participants' responses. Given the researcher's background in education and languages, familiarity with the subject matter facilitated the identification and interpretation of relevant themes. However, care was taken to remain critically reflective and to approach the data with openness to emerging insights. This method also aligned with a critical analytical framework, enabling the researcher to interrogate patterns of meaning within broader social and educational contexts. The researcher asked critical questions about how and why certain themes emerged, and what their implications were for the development of Afrikaans oral language in Grade R classrooms.

3.10. TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is ensured through four key criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ahmed, 2024). In this study, these criteria were carefully considered and applied to ensure the integrity and rigour of the research process, as explained below.

To enhance credibility, the researcher ensured that the data collection and analysis processes were transparent and grounded in sound methodological practices. Transferability was supported by providing sufficient contextual details, allowing others to determine the applicability of the findings to similar settings. Dependability was achieved by documenting the research procedures consistently and systematically. Lastly, confirmability was maintained by grounding interpretations in the data and supporting them with evidence drawn from both local and international studies. Furthermore, the study acknowledged the equal value of all scholarly sources used. Both South African and international research were consulted to strengthen the research foundation. All sources cited in the study are properly acknowledged and listed in the reference section, ensuring academic integrity and traceability.

3.11. ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Ethical considerations are also one of the most important aspects to follow correctly when research is being conducted. In this study, the researcher respected the participants' privacy, feelings, and even their information that was being shared. Thus, ethical considerations were made by sending out consent forms to each participant, where all the information and details of this specific study were explained. These consent forms were also given to the targeted school. The protection of each participant as an individual is of utmost importance. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of individuals; for example, codes such as Teacher A, B, and C, and School X. The data that was collected from these individuals was stored safely and is not available for access, except for the researcher and the researcher's supervisor.

The University of the Free State's Ethics Committee provided ethical clearance under the ethical clearance number UFS-HSD2023/2597, which conforms to its rules and regulations (see Appendix C). The Department of Basic Education of the Free State Province also provided permission to collect data at the sampled school (see Appendix D).

3.12. SUMMARY

This chapter outlined and explained the research approach adopted in the study. Careful consideration was given to the sampling strategy, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques to ensure that the findings are credible, consistent, and aligned with the study's aims and objectives. Ethical considerations relevant to the research process were also addressed. The next chapter presents, analyses, and interprets the findings of the study in detail.

CHAPTER 4

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND INTERPRETATION

4.1. INTRODUCTION

This study aimed to explore children's oral language development in Afrikaans through play. The current chapter presented, analysed, and interpreted the findings collected through classroom observations and interviews with Grade R teachers in the MMED. Data in this study were collected and analysed using a qualitative research approach. The following research questions were used to address the research aim and objectives of this study:

- How is oral language in Afrikaans developed through play in the Grade R classroom?
- What are the teachers' experiences of using play for developing children's oral language in Afrikaans in the Grade R classroom?
- Which strategies can teachers use to support the development of children's oral language in Afrikaans through play?

The data were presented, analysed, and interpreted in cognisance of the following research objectives:

- To examine how oral language in Afrikaans is developed through play,
- To establish teachers' experiences of using play for developing children's oral language in Afrikaans in the Grade R classroom
- To recommend the strategies teachers can use to develop children's oral language in Afrikaans through play.

This chapter begins by briefly introducing the profile of the teachers and the school, as well as the procedures followed when collecting the data, as already highlighted in Chapter 3, section 3.2. Next, the key findings, which were collected through classroom observations and interviews, are presented, analysed, and interpreted for meaning-making.

The teachers in this study were interviewed in their home language, Afrikaans, to give them opportunities to express themselves freely without language barriers. However, in this study, the teachers' responses were translated into English for the readership and italicised in the form of direct quotations. Three teachers in one school participated in this study. The protection of the identity of the participants was of the utmost importance. Thus, codes (e.g., Teachers A, B, and C, and X for the school) were used throughout this chapter.

4.2. THE PROFILE OF THE TEACHERS AND THE SCHOOL

Table 4.1 indicates nine demographic data items, such as the name of the teacher, school name, type of school, home language, age, gender, grade, and teaching experience, as well as information about their qualifications. This information is repeated to ease the references of the teachers' experience and qualifications.

Table 4.1: Data profiles of teachers and the school

Name	School	Type of school	Home language	Age	Gender	Grade	Teaching experience	Qualification
Teacher A	School X	Quantile 2	Afrikaans	46	Female	Grade R	6 years	4 Years (Higher Education Diploma)
Teacher B	School X	Quantile 2	Afrikaans	37	Female	Grade R	5 years	B.Ed. Degree
Teacher C	School X	Quantile 2	Afrikaans	36	Female	Grade R	2 years	NQF 5 (Diploma in Early Childhood Development)

Of all the teachers sampled, the youngest was 36 years old, while the oldest was 46 years old. All the teachers were qualified to teach in South African schools. However, Teacher C seemed to have specialised in teaching Grade R (reception year according to the South African context) children more than the others. Interestingly, she was the only teacher who had taught for two years in Grade R by the time of the research. The school visited was categorised under Quintile 2, which meant that although it was an Afrikaans home language school, it was regarded as an under-resourced school that did not charge school fees, as per the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996.

4.3. PROCEDURES FOLLOWED FOR COLLECTING DATA

The data collection process, which included both observations and interviews, took place in May 2024 at School X and lasted approximately three weeks (one day per week with each teacher). In the first week, data were collected from Teacher A, in the second week from Teacher B, and in the third week from Teacher C. The data were generated in the mornings, beginning with classroom observations and followed by face-to-face interviews with each teacher.

The classroom observations were conducted in each teacher's own classroom to capture authentic teaching and learning interactions, while the interviews were conducted one-on-one in the staff room and, when necessary, after school hours. Each teacher was asked nine similar questions focusing on how play was used to develop oral language in the Grade R classroom. Throughout this process, ethical considerations were prioritised to ensure confidentiality, informed consent, and respect for participants.

After collecting the data, the researcher analysed both the observation and interview data using a qualitative thematic data analysis methodology. This method enabled the researcher to examine recurring ideas and patterns that emerged across the different data sources, providing deeper insight into how play supports oral language development in Grade R.

4.4. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS FROM CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

This section presents the findings from observing how teachers develop children's oral language through play. The focus was based on understanding the approaches and strategies teachers use in the classroom to prepare children in Grade R for their formal learning in Grade 1. As mentioned earlier, codes (e.g., Teachers A, B, and C) are used to name teachers.

4.4.1 Observation in Teacher A's Classroom

Teacher A's class was observed on the 16th of May 2024. The lesson commenced at 08:00 am and lasted about 21 minutes. The observation took place in the teacher's classroom. The classroom was set up for different activities where the development of oral language occurred, such as a space with tables for learners to draw or write something in their books. This included cutting out pictures and pasting them into their books according to the teacher's instructions. For example, children were instructed to cut a picture of a human being in their "ice cream book." The teacher asked them to cut out a picture showing the senses used to taste the ice cream. The learners cut out the picture of a tongue.

The teacher praised them and motivated them through her praise. The teacher then said aloud another sense, which was smell – she showed the learners a clue by modelling the sense. Thereafter, learners drew the sense representing smell (e.g., nose) on the whiteboard.

There was a mat (see Figure 4.1 below) where the learners sat and listened to stories that the teacher narrated to them. Besides using the mat for telling stories, other activities, such as flashcards, were also conducted while children sat on the mat. The picture below shows the classroom setting of Teacher A's Grade R class with a mat where learners sat and listened to the stories narrated by the teacher.



Figure 4.1. A placemate area for reading and listening to stories

Oral activities in the classroom included depicting the weather, words on the days of the week, etc. The teacher held up a flashcard written with the day of the week, and the learners identified the word and said what day it was. There was a dollhouse where children played according to the theme of the week/month. Teacher A started the lesson by calling all the learners to sit on the mat. She began the lesson by reading a Bible story and then prayed together with the whole class in Afrikaans.

The teacher then took out different flashcards (e.g., weather flashcards, days of the week flashcards, and months of the year flashcards) and conducted fun activities, which included word games where children were asked to point out a flashcard showing *reënerig, son, of winderig* weather (rainy, sunny, or windy). After pointing **out** the correct flashcards according to the different weather conditions, the teacher asked the whole class to share how they felt when it was cold, hot, or rainy. She also changed the games with each of the different themes. The picture below **was** an example of the flashcards used to teach learners about the different types of weather.



Figure 4.2. Flashcards for different types of weather in Teacher A's class

The teacher used the flashcards to show the whole class the different seasons of the year. She showed the flashcard of winter, asking learners, *Watter seisoen is hierdie?* (What season is this?) while holding the flashcard up. The first learner who gave the correct answer elaborated more about the season, whether it was cold, or explained whether the sun showed in the sky until late.

The teacher gave learners opportunities to sing playful songs using different rhymes in Afrikaans, for example:

Somer, (Summer,)

Herfs, (Autumn,)

Winter, (Winter,)

Lente, (Spring)

Vier seisoene in 'n jaar, (Four seasons in a year,)

Drie maande in 'n seisoen. (Three months in a season.)

Another example:

Januarie (January)

Februarie (February)

Maart (March)

April (April)

Mei, (May)

Junie (June)

Julie (July)

Augustus (August)

September (September)

Oktober (October)

November (November)

Desember (December)

Twaalf maande in 'n jaar. (Twelve months in a year)

Thereafter, the focus shifted to the body parts, where learners were asked to draw, for example, an eye or a mouth. After drawing, they sounded the first letter of their drawing of either an eye or a mouth. Teacher A used the pictures to guide learners on how they were supposed to draw the body parts in their books (Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3. Body parts

4.4.1.1. Comments on Teacher A's Lesson

Teacher A's lesson was well-structured and organised, with a clear focus on oral language development. The lesson incorporated a variety of interactive activities that engaged learners in multiple ways, such as drawing, cutting and pasting, storytelling, and flashcard games. The transitions between activities were smooth, maintaining learners' interest and participation throughout the session. However, the duration of the lesson (21 minutes) was relatively short, which may have limited the depth of engagement with certain activities. According to the CAPS document, a language lesson should have been 30 minutes per day with a total of 2 and a half hours per week. The classroom setup was conducive to learning, with designated spaces for different activities. The availability of resources such as flashcards, books, and a dollhouse contributed to a stimulating learning environment. These materials supported Teacher A's goal of developing oral language and reinforced conceptual understanding through visual and kinaesthetic learning. The use of a mat for storytelling and group activities created an inclusive space where learners could comfortably sit and learn through play.

Teacher A demonstrated effective teaching strategies by using a combination of visual, auditory, and hands-on activities to cater for different learning styles. The lesson encouraged active participation through questioning, discussions, and practical exercises. The use of modelling in this classroom, such as demonstrating the sense of smell, assisted learners in grasping abstract concepts more easily.

Additionally, incorporating playful songs in Afrikaans enhanced engagement and reinforced phonemic awareness skills. However, while the lesson was interactive, there were limited opportunities for open-ended discussions where learners could express their thoughts beyond structured questioning. For instance, instead of only asking learners to name or describe seasons, an extensive oral activity could have involved them sharing personal experiences related to each season. The inclusion of a Bible story and prayer at the beginning of the lesson required sensitivity to diverse cultural and religious backgrounds in the classroom.

If the class consisted of learners from different religious backgrounds, an alternative approach could have been to incorporate more general moral or ethical stories to promote inclusion. The teacher effectively assessed learners' understanding through direct questioning and interactive activities.

By asking learners to draw and identify body parts while sounding out the first letter, the teacher reinforced phonemic awareness and vocabulary development. Encouraging elaboration on responses (e.g., explaining how they **felt** in different weather conditions) supported language development. However, further formative assessment techniques, such as peer discussions or group work, could have been incorporated to deepen learning.

4.4.2 Observation in Teacher B's Classroom

Teacher B's class was observed on the 22nd of May 2024. The lesson commenced at 08:30 am and lasted about 26 minutes. The teacher started the lesson by showing different flashcards with different numbers. Learners were asked to say the number they saw on each flashcard. The activity was done in such a way that learners had to compete to see who put up their hands faster than the others to give the correct answer. The activity was quite interesting, given that all learners participated effectively since they had the chance to compete by putting up their hands to say the answer. The picture in brackets (Figure 4.5) below shows the classroom setting of Teacher B's Grade R class.



Figure 4.5. The classroom setting of Teacher B's Grade R class

The classroom was well-lit, with bright and natural light coming from the window. There were four tables with plastic chairs, suggesting a seating arrangement that accommodated group work. The classroom also accommodated enough learning space and teaching, and playful materials. The next activity involved sounding out letters from the flashcards. The teacher used the same technique of play, where the learners who put their hands up first were allowed to answer. However, learners seemed to struggle with this activity. The teacher helped them by saying aloud the sound of the letters on the flashcards. Learners were then asked to say the sounds aloud after the teacher.

Another activity involved identifying different letters (Figure 4.6) of the alphabet and connecting them with a word that started with that specific letter. The tool that the teacher used during this playful activity was once again flashcards, shown in the pictures below:



Figure 4.6. Word Flashcards

The teacher used the same technique as with the previous flashcards, where the learners had to *steek hulle hande* (raise their hands) to be recognised for answering. The teacher also had the children listen to and identify rhymes in flashcards. She then asked the whole class to listen for rhyming words as she repeated them aloud. Thereafter, she asked them to raise their hands when they heard them. The teacher also provided opportunities for the children to recite rhymes in songs.

Thereafter, she asked the learners to identify different letters of the alphabet and then connect them with a word that began with that specific letter. The tool that the teacher used during this playful activity was once again flashcards. She used the same technique as with the previous flashcards, where the learners had to raise their hands and provide the answer. The teacher also included different rhymes during this activity to help children develop their oral language in Afrikaans.

Teacher B then introduced another topic, which focused on the different senses used by humans. She gave them something to taste so that they could link it to different tastes, such as *soet, suur, bitter, of soutereg* (sweet, sour, bitter, or salty). The learners were then asked to say what they had tasted, and also showed through reactions as an indication of what they had tasted. Those who tasted something sweet reacted by showing a smile, and bitter, salty, or sour taste was characterised by an intense disgusted reaction. Learners who experienced a bad taste were laughed at by those who had a sweet taste.

4.4.2.1. Comments on Teacher B's lesson

Teacher B's lesson was structured with clear sequential activities focusing on letter sounds, rhyming, and sensory exploration. The use of flashcards was consistent throughout the lesson, which assisted in reinforcing her teaching and learning objectives. However, while the lesson had engaging elements, it was somewhat repetitive in its approach, relying heavily on the competitive *steek eers jou hand* (raise your hand first) method. This strategy worked well for engagement, but it seemed to have limited participation for less confident learners. The teacher effectively used flashcards to support letter recognition, as well as rhyming activities. These materials were appropriate for visual learners and helped reinforce key concepts.

The tasting activity provided a hands-on, sensory experience, making learning more tangible and engaging. However, the lesson could have been enhanced with additional resources such as objects, pictures, or group-based learning to cater to different learning styles.

The competitive nature of the flashcard activities seemed to have motivated learners to participate actively. However, this method seemed to have discouraged some learners who were slower to respond or less confident. To promote inclusivity, the teacher could have incorporated different engagement techniques, such as small-group discussions or pairing learners to answer questions collaboratively. The rhyming activity was effective in developing phonemic awareness, and the inclusion of songs supported language development. The teacher's use of repetition helped reinforce concepts, but the over-reliance on flashcards could have been supplemented with more diverse learning strategies.

The sensory activity was a valuable addition, allowing learners to engage with real-world experiences. However, the social dynamics where learners laughed at those experiencing unpleasant tastes indicated a need for better classroom management and reinforcement of respect and empathy among peers. The teacher assessed learners' understanding primarily through verbal responses in a competitive format. While this method helped gauge immediate recognition of letters and rhymes, it did not provide insight into deeper understanding. Alternative assessment strategies, such as peer discussions or written reflections, could have helped assess comprehension more effectively.

4.4.3 Observation in Teacher C's classroom

Teacher C's class was observed on the 23rd of May 2024. The lesson commenced at 08:00 am and lasted about 35 minutes. The teacher started the lesson by singing with the whole class in Afrikaans and also in English. When singing, they moved in different directions of left and right, while saying aloud the direction of their movement. After singing, the teacher asked everyone to greet each other. Figure 4.6. shows the classroom setting of Teacher C's Grade R class.



Figure 4.7. Classroom setting of Teacher C

The teacher commenced the lesson by asking the whole class to say the different days of the week in Afrikaans. For example, she said, “*As vandag Donderdag is, watter dag is dit more?*” (If today is Thursday, what day is it tomorrow?). She showed the learners different flashcards (Figure 4.7) with different types of weather conditions. The learners then selected the flashcard with the weather conditions of that day.



Figure 4.5. Weather Flashcards with words and pictures

Teacher C also used different rhymes that the learners had to say and remember, such as the different days of the week, which also included the number of days in a week, as well as the number of school days in a week. Thereafter, she said the days of the week in different voice tones, speed, and volume. Learners had to imitate the different tones said by the teacher. A lot of laughter went with this activity, given that some learners took time to follow the rhythm and made mistakes in the process of repeating what was said by the teacher. The activity was repeated twice, with the teacher adjusting to a high-pitched voice, then in a very low-pitched voice, then normal but very fast. This seemed to have been an interesting, fun way of developing the learner’s oral language in Afrikaans.

4.4.3.1. Comments on Teacher C's Lesson

Teacher C's lesson was well-structured and lasted for approximately 35 minutes, allowing sufficient time for engagement and reinforcement of concepts. The lesson followed a logical sequence, starting with an interactive singing and movement activity, progressing to vocabulary reinforcement through flashcards, and culminating in an engaging voice imitation exercise.

The smooth transitions between activities helped maintain learners' focus and participation. The teacher created a positive and interactive learning environment by incorporating movement, music, and humour into the lesson. The use of flashcards for weather conditions helped reinforce visual learning, while the integration of both Afrikaans and English supported bilingual language development. The learning space encouraged active participation, fostering a dynamic and enjoyable atmosphere for learners.

Teacher C used various teaching techniques, such as movement-based learning, repetition, memorisation, voice modulation, and imitation. The learners responded positively, as evidenced by their active participation and laughter. The playful approach ensured that learning was enjoyable and memorable. However, while the humour and fun were beneficial, the teacher could have provided additional moments for focused reflection to ensure that all learners fully grasped the content. The bilingual aspect of the lesson was a strong feature, allowing learners to develop proficiency in both Afrikaans and English. The integration of songs and greetings fostered social interaction and language development. Teacher C assessed learning informally through interactive questioning, repetition, and observation. The flashcard activity allowed learners to demonstrate their understanding of weather concepts, while the voice imitation task seemed to have tested the learners' listening and responsive skills.

4.4.4. Overall findings for observations

The classroom observations of Teachers A, B, and C revealed that Grade R teachers in the MMED effectively used play-based approaches to promote oral language development in Afrikaans. Lessons were well structured, engaging, and incorporated multisensory activities such as singing, storytelling, flashcards, and role play, which fostered learner participation, vocabulary growth, and confidence. Teachers used code switching and bilingual strategies to support multilingual learners, while praise and encouragement created a positive learning atmosphere. However, some lessons were constrained by limited duration, over-reliance on flashcards, and competitive formats that reduced inclusivity. Assessment was largely informal, focusing on questioning and observation.

Overall, the findings show that play-based learning, aligned with Froebel's and Vygotsky's theories, provides effective opportunities for oral language development, though greater attention is needed to inclusivity, reflection, and varied assessment.

4.5. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS

This section presents findings from three Grade R teachers interviewed. As mentioned earlier, codes are used to name the teachers and the target school to protect their identities. Five themes and 11 sub-themes were identified from interviewing the Grade R teachers. Table 4.2 presents the main themes with their different sub-themes, which are presented and analysed in line with the responses of the teachers in terms of establishing their experiences of using play to develop children's oral language in Afrikaans in the Grade R classroom.

4.5.1 Identification of themes and sub-themes

The process of identifying themes and subthemes followed the principles of qualitative thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). After the data were collected from both classroom observations and interviews, the researcher engaged in an iterative process of coding, categorising, and interpreting the data to identify recurring patterns and meaningful units related to the development of oral language through play in the Grade R Afrikaans classroom. During the initial coding phase, descriptive codes were assigned to phrases, actions, and interactions that reflected teachers' strategies, learner engagement, and contextual factors influencing language development. These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories that reflected conceptual similarities. Through constant comparison across data sources, overlapping or redundant codes were merged, and related ideas were clustered into coherent subthemes. From this analytical process, five dominant themes, with their sub-themes, emerged as the most prominent and conceptually significant across the data set:

Table 4.2. Themes and Sub-themes from Teacher Interviews

Themes	Sub-Themes
1. Language development	• Visual reinforcement for language development • Drawing • Using games • Collaborative learning • Using gesture and sign-based activities • Play-based activities • Translation
2. Parental Involvement	
3. Accommodating non-Afrikaans language learners	• Interactive activities • Repetition • Informal learning approach
4. The importance of Teaching and learning resources	
5. Code switching and mixing	• The pressure between what happens in the classroom versus what the language policy says

4.5.1.1. Language development

The key theme above was identified when teachers responded to the question regarding how they develop their learners' Afrikaans oral language in the Grade R classroom through play. The following sub-themes: visual reinforcement for language development, drawing, using games, collaborative learning, using gesture and sign-based activities, play-based activities, and translation.

4.5.1.1.1. Visual Reinforcement for Language Development

Learners in Grade R are at the age where they can remember everything they see and hear; they can imitate how others do things. Teachers capitalised on these skills when they said:

We draw a picture, and we learn different sounds. I will also give them a worksheet with a lot of pictures on it. We will then go through these pictures and say which ones start with the letter A? (Teacher A).

I have a cardboard with different pictures on it. I would then ask them, "Show me the picture that starts with an R", and in a group, they will show me the picture of a ring (Teacher B).

Responses use visual aids and interactive methods to support phonemic awareness and early literacy skills. Their strategies align with what was observed in the classroom, where learners cut and pasted pictures, drew body parts, and sounded out letters. The use of a worksheet with multiple pictures for learners to identify words that start with a specific letter further reinforces the visual and hands-on approach seen during the observed lesson of Teacher A.

Teacher B stated that learners use cardboards with pictures and are asked to find words that begin with a specific letter, which directly correlates with the observed lesson where learners identified letters on flashcards and connected them to words. The competitive, hands-up method noted in the classroom aligns with the group-based picture identification strategy described in Teacher B's response. The use of visual aids in language teaching has also been emphasised by Tabacaru and Bucuroiu (2021).

4.5.1.1.2 Drawing

Art and drawing play significant roles in enhancing oral language learning. For example, Teacher A said ...*they need to draw an apple and then write the letter 'a' next to it.* Teacher A's response suggests a multisensory approach to teaching letter recognition and phonics. By having learners draw an apple and then write the letter 'a', the teacher seems to be reinforcing the connection between the visual representation (which is the apple ) , the letter symbol /a/, and its sound. This helps learners link the letter *a* to a familiar object (apple), reinforcing phonemic awareness, whereas the learners' drawing and writing support their early writing skills and hand-eye coordination. This aligns with what was noted during observations, where learners were asked to cut out and paste pictures related to words, draw body parts, and sound out letters. Kumari and Kurian (2020) also noted that drawing is a creative tool that has great potential in teaching young learners. Through drawing, young children translate images into words, and words into meaning.

Children draw pictures of what they understand about what is said to them. If a child draws a picture, it teaches them a new word that is related to colours and different shapes. With each sketch, the learner has a story to tell, and through storytelling, oral language is being developed.

4.5.1.1.3 Using Games

Regarding the said sub-theme, Teachers B and C noted that *we use a lot of games...* This response suggests that both Teachers B and C prioritise play-based learning as a key instructional strategy. Their emphasis on games indicates that they use interactive and engaging methods to reinforce concepts, encourage participation, and make learning enjoyable for young learners. As also noted in Teacher B's class, her lesson included competitive flashcard games where learners had to quickly raise their hands to answer questions correctly.

Teacher B also playfully incorporated rhyming activities, and the tasting activity involved learners reacting to different tastes, adding an element of fun and an interesting way of developing the learners' oral language.

Teacher C also incorporated games by using movement-based activities while singing, which made learning interactive. Again, the days of the week involved variations with different voice tones, speed, and volumes, which made learners laugh and engage actively. Ibrahim (2017) also supports the importance of using games when teaching language. These include enhancement of learner motivation, creation of a low-anxiety environment, and assisting with vocabulary and structure (Ibrahim, 2017).

4.5.1.1.4 Collaborative Learning

Regarding collaborative learning, teachers explained that,

The learners also learn a lot from each other. You have your strong group of learners, and then the group that is not so strong. And they learn through play contact, and socialising with each other (Teacher B).

I would then ask them, “Show me the picture that starts with an ‘R’”, and in a group, they will show me the picture of a ring (Teacher A).

Both responses suggest that collaborative and peer-assisted learning play a significant role in these teachers’ instructional approaches. The teachers recognise that learners benefit not only from teacher-led instruction but also from peer interactions, group work, and social learning experiences. However, collaborative learning was not evident in the three classes observed, which appears to be a shortcoming that teachers have to improve, given the benefit of promoting social interaction. On the other hand, Teacher A described using group-based picture identification for phonics learning. Teacher A’s response sounds interesting because what was noted during observations showed that learners enacted the task individually, but not in groups.

4.5.1.1.5 Using Gesture and Sign-Based Activities

For developing the learners’ oral language in Afrikaans, teachers also used body parts during lessons. For example, Teacher A said:

We also work a lot with our hands, more specifically, our fingers. I teach them different “signs”, for example, “Maandag” – showing the letter “M” with your fingers, and “Woensdag” - showing the letter “W” with your fingers.

This response suggests that the teacher incorporates kinaesthetic learning and multisensory teaching techniques to help learners engage with language through movement and tactile experiences. By using finger signs to represent letter sounds, for example, *M vir Maandag en W vir Woensdag* (M for Monday and W for Wednesday), the teacher reinforces letter sound recognition and word association in visual and physical approaches. From what was observed in Teachers A's and C's classrooms, their lessons included drawing, cutting, pasting, pointing, and gesturing, all of which involve hand movements and active participation, which aligns with using physical gestures for language learning.

4.5.1.1.6 Play-Based Activities

For the play-based activities, teachers explained that,

When we are outside, busy playing, someone will come and tell me there is a bird that looks like this or that. I will then ask them, "With what does the word 'voëltjie' (bird) start with? What colours is the bird?" so that they can see more and explain a bit more. We did The Three Little Pigs. Each one gets a turn to tell the story, but you must change your voice to the character. For example, when they are wolves, they must talk like wolves. So that is how we try to improve oral development in the classroom (Teacher A).

The response suggests that Teacher A emphasises oral language development through interactive and creative activities. It highlights a play-based, multimodal approach where children engage in storytelling, role-playing, and observation to enhance their linguistic and expressive skills. Teacher A's response aligns with the activities observed in her classroom when she incorporated finger puppets to encourage learners to take on different roles, which helped them practice speech variation and expression. Teacher C also added:

We also have our time that we play outside. When we do our artwork, we also talk a lot. Then we have music and movement after we have read a story. So, it is either music or movement that we do outside...and then movement is just literally playing outside, where we will use the jumping rope, kick the ball, and throw the ball.

Let's say, for example, if we are playing hopscotch, we will say, "You may only jump on the 'S' sound for today". So, we incorporate all our sounds, our work, and our numbers within different games. ...the more they do it, through play, the better for them. We always do our Bible and songs first in the mornings. And the discussion of our theme. We do talk a lot.

The response above suggests that Teacher C prioritises learning through play, movement, music, and discussion to reinforce language and cognitive skills. She integrates structured and unstructured activities to make learning interactive and engaging. For example, in her classroom, she emphasises outdoor activities like jumping rope, hopscotch, and ball games to reinforce learning. The example of hopscotch with specific letter sounds shows how phonemic awareness is built through play. Teacher C's lesson also includes morning routines with Bible study, songs, and theme discussions, ensuring structured oral language practice.

4.5.1.1.7 Translation

Regarding the above sub-theme, Teacher A said:

The children pick up an English word much more easily than an Afrikaans word. I will ask them, "What fruit is this? And when I say a 'papaya,' then someone will ask, 'What is a papaya?' and I must translate it to English and say, 'It is a pawpaw.' Then they know exactly what fruit it is.

The response suggests that children can grasp English words more easily than Afrikaans words, especially when they are introduced to new vocabulary. The example provided by Teacher A illustrates how children struggle to understand the Afrikaans word *papaja* (pawpaw 🥥) but quickly recognise the English word 'pawpaw' after it is translated. This suggests that the children may have more familiarity with English, possibly because they are exposed to it more frequently or it is more widely used in their environment. In the context of what was observed in class, this could align with the idea that children in a bilingual or multilingual setting often develop a preference for the language they hear most often or the one they are more comfortable with. If English is the dominant language in their daily lives, they are likely to understand and remember English words more readily than those in a less frequently used language like Afrikaans.

It may also suggest that the process of language acquisition is influenced by exposure and context, where familiarity with a language directly impacts comprehension and retention of vocabulary. Through translation, learners get the bigger picture of the message that is being taught. When the teacher translates, it helps the learners understand the language in which they are taught. Not only will the learners accumulate vocabulary, but also their proficiency in grammar and comprehension. Surprisingly, of all the teachers, only Teacher C seemed to have accommodated bilingualism in her classroom by singing with the whole class in Afrikaans and also in English.

4.5.2. Parental involvement

The said theme was identified from the teachers' responses to the challenges they experience regarding the level of parental involvement in their children's school activities. For example, Teacher A said

I gave her mother extra activities that she can do with the learner at home. But to be completely honest, most parents do not support their children's schoolwork at home.

Teacher B added that

A lot of the parents are "double parents". So, they don't have time, we know it's challenging in the evenings after work, food needs to be prepared, siblings need to do homework, etc.

Teacher A expresses frustration that many parents do not seem involved in their children's schoolwork, suggesting that learners in TA's class only have the opportunity to learn effectively when they are in the classroom, given the inconsistent support at home. However, Teacher B's response acknowledges that many parents have dual responsibilities, either as single parents or working parents handling multiple duties. This suggests that some parents might not be intentionally neglecting their children's schoolwork but are simply overwhelmed by their daily responsibilities.

4.5.3. Accommodating non-Afrikaans language learners

The key theme above included the following sub-themes: Interactive activities, repetition, and an informal learning approach.

4.5.3.1. Interactive activities

Grade R learners are at a point where interaction plays a big role in their development. Without interaction, certain important characteristics may be unlikely to be developed, especially when the learner is a non-speaker of Afrikaans. Continuous interaction is thus very important. For example, Teacher A said:

At school, I usually work individually with her when the other learners have group work. I do extra activities with her.

The above response suggests that there should be a little more interaction with those learners who need attention.

4.5.3.2. Repetition

Repetition for the young learners is crucial because it helps them learn at ease, as noted by Teacher B.

...we repeat it to them in Afrikaans. So, the more they hear it, the more they also repeat it. The more we repeat, the more they will remember it.

According to Lester et al. (2022), children who are exposed to repetitive activities are more likely to imitate what they hear constantly and say the words more accurately in their daily communication. Repetition of rhyming words was also noted in Teacher B's classroom. Through repetition, the teacher increases conversation connection, and this gives more space for feedback and simplification (Larsen-Freeman, 2012). The phrase 'practice makes perfect' is well known and can be used in the development of oral language when it comes to repetition.

4.5.3.3. Informal learning approach

For the informal learning approach, Teacher A said:

When we played outside, I would usually call her and ask her, for example, “What is that learner’s name?” She would then answer, for example, “Arno”, and then I would ask her, ‘With what does his name start?’ and she would then answer, ‘with the uppercase letter A. By doing this, you don’t make it a formal activity the whole time, but a bit more informal (Teacher A).

Teacher A’s response above indicates that she does not rely on engaging her Grade R learners only in the classroom; she also uses the time when learners are playing outside to teach them informally. Informal learning approach has the benefit of teaching learners who are likely to pay attention because of not stressed or anxious. Thus, the interaction of this nature is likely to be equated with playing a game or having fun. This is an environment where learners at the Grade R level develop a sense of relaxation when learning without borders.

4.5.4. The importance of teaching and learning resources

This theme was identified from the teachers’ responses when they emphasised the significance of having teaching and learning resources for the Grade R classes.

Teacher A said:

Believe it or not, but sometimes we use their counters. I would say, for example, “I am going to say three words – ‘appel’, ‘kar’, en ‘mooi,’ And when I say a word that starts with an ‘A’, they should move one of their counters to the front. When we are done, I would ask them, “How many words did I say that start with the letter sound /a/ and then they should count their counters. So, this is a combination of language and mathematics.

We also use books from which we cut out letters and/or pictures. We also have pictures/flashcards for the days of the week.

Within this activity, I would ask the learners, “With what sound does it start?” And then they need to answer. I also have flashcards displayed on the wall. For example, at the table, I will have the flashcard that says Tafel (Table), or the clock that says “Horlosie” so that they can see the word and connect the word and spelling with a certain structure.

Teacher B added that,

I have a lot of puzzles where I will do consonant, vowel, and consonant sounds – small words. Within the first term, it is a bit difficult; second term, they have reasonably developed sounds, and they build on it.

Teacher C also explained that

When we build a puzzle, I will usually say something like ‘A puzzle has corners that stand out, and it has a flat sliding side.’ So that class of things, I would create an image from so that they can look at, and it feels to me, except for the puzzle that they build, you also emphasised their language.

The response of Teacher A highlights an integrated approach where counters are used to reinforce phonemic awareness and early numeracy skills. Learners in this case are likely to have the opportunity to develop their listening skills and the ability to count numbers. Teacher A further emphasises the use of books, flashcards, and labelled classroom objects, suggesting her commitment to realising the significance of a print-rich classroom environment, which plays an important role in helping children learn by seeing authentic material available in the classroom.

Interestingly, all the classroom settings of the three Grade R teachers were fully decorated with print and painted bright colours, which promoted stimulating learning environments for developing oral skills for developing oral skills in Afrikaans.

Teacher B highlights the use of puzzles in terms of developing children’s early phonics skills, especially consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) structure, like in the Afrikaans word *kat* (cat). Given the significance of learning through play, puzzles provide the opportunity for the children to practice decoding skills in a less stressful environment. Teacher C’s response also emphasises the importance of having puzzles in the Grade R classroom in terms of promoting oral language learning through play activities, such as engaging in dialogues.

4.5.5. Code switching and mixing

In terms of accommodating learners who are not home language speakers of Afrikaans, Teacher B said

We are an Afrikaans school, but the media at home is mostly in English. Like for example, on YouTube, the learners watch Netflix. They are used to logging in themselves. So, they mix the language a lot. And the parents do not always have control over it. So, it is problematic for us, as teachers. Because now you teach your Afrikaans sounds, and the English sounds differ, and then they mix the sounds. And that is what makes it difficult. So, to repeat is very important. When they say an English word, you repeat it in Afrikaans. When they say, for example, “Ek het nou met horses gespeel.” (I played with the horses), then you answer him/her back “Ek sien jy het oulik met die perdjies gespeel. Wat het jy nog met die perdjies gedoen?” (I saw you played with the horses. What else did you do with the horses?)

Teacher B explains a gap that exists between what is happening in the classroom and at home regarding issues of oral language development. She highlights the fact that she has English language speakers who only have the opportunity to learn Afrikaans in the classroom, but when they are home, they do not have access to speak or use Afrikaans. This, according to her, ends up putting these learners in a situation where they find themselves developing two languages at the same time. From Teacher B's perspective, this might end up compromising one language against another.

Teacher C concluded by saying:

...if I do something, I will first do it in Afrikaans. Let me use a shape, for example. I will not say “driehoek – triangle” and then “drie ewe lang sye” – and then immediately repeat it in English. I will teach in Afrikaans with the rhyme, and then I will repeat everything in English. For children, it is easier to play in English because they watch stories and the language is English.

Then they would repeat everything in English, and because of that, they would not know the Afrikaans word for it.

The response of Teacher C above indicates that she prefers using Afrikaans as the language of instruction; thereafter, she will accommodate non-speakers of Afrikaans by repeating the content in English. Her second response highlights that children in her classroom seem comfortable communicating in English rather than Afrikaans.

This might suggest that although the school is Afrikaans medium, the English language seems to be appearing as a dominant language, which compels teachers to use it for effective interaction and communication in the classroom. Given the above presentation and analysis of what was observed in the Grade R classroom and established from the teachers through interviews, the next section focuses on providing meaning to the data regarding the development of Afrikaans oral language in the Grade R classroom.

4.6. INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS FROM OBSERVATIONS AND INTERVIEWS

This section interprets the findings presented above from interviewing three Grade R teachers, using observations to triangulate the interviews. The interpretation is guided by the first two research questions of the study, while the third research question will be addressed in Chapter 5 through a set of recommendations.

The findings gathered through observations revealed that teachers integrated visual resources such as flashcards and body part images to enhance oral language development through play. This was confirmed in interviews, where teachers stated that visuals help learners understand and retain concepts more easily.

These findings are supported by Pam, Adhiambo, and Mwalw'a (2020), who advocate for visual aids in facilitating learning across all subjects, and Mawaddah and Affandi (2022), who highlight the positive impact of flashcards on language development. This aligns with Froebel's theory, which emphasises that children learn best through hands-on interaction and playful experiences. Teachers were observed using bilingual strategies, such as singing in both Afrikaans and English. Teacher C, for example, began the class with a bilingual song, allowing learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds to promote comprehension.

Interviews confirmed the use of code-switching and translation as deliberate strategies to include non-Afrikaans speakers. These strategies reflect inclusive education principles (Department of Education, 2001) and correspond with findings by Chan et al. (2022), who recommend multilingual strategies to support Dual Language Learners. This also aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which views language as socially mediated. Support for struggling learners was evident, particularly in Teacher B's class, where phonemic awareness support was offered through repeated letter sounds. This resonates with Bates (2014), who emphasises learner support as crucial to effective pedagogy. The practice is consistent with the ZPD principle, where the teacher scaffolds learning within the learner's potential developmental level.

Teachers also used cut-and-paste activities to teach vocabulary related to senses. These tasks seemed playful and engaging, encouraging language use while simultaneously developing fine motor skills. A study by Tarmidi and Bakar (2022) confirms the value of such activities. Froebel supports such hands-on learning practices in terms of exploration for the learners. Teacher A was seen praising learners for completing tasks, which seems to actively engage learners. This supports Abbasi et al. (2021), who found that appreciation boosts learner motivation. Froebel's theory emphasises the importance of encouraging children to develop self-motivation through teacher support. Similarly, Munna and Kalam (2021) assert that positive feedback enhances learners' self-esteem. Sounding out letters in Afrikaans was another observed practice that contributed to phonological awareness and inclusion. Mastery of the alphabet in Grade R lays the groundwork for future literacy, confirming its foundational role in oral language development.

Using a mat during storytelling sessions was another notable strategy. Mats in the Grade R classrooms observed seem to have created enough spaces for social interaction, fostering turn-taking and meaningful conversations. This echoes findings by Van Zyl (2016) and complements Kathard et al. (2022), who advocate for supportive classroom environments, even if not explicitly using mats. Using a dollhouse enabled learners to engage in imaginative role play and storytelling, which enriched vocabulary and narrative skills. Mohan (2020) found similar benefits in pretend play, emphasising the value of both structured and free-play settings in language development.

Teachers varied their tone, pitch, and volume to capture learners' attention and convey emotional nuances. This practice enhances phonological and emotional awareness. The study by Quam, Knight, and Gampe (2022) illustrates how caregivers adjust speech features to support language learning, an approach mirrored in these classrooms.

Drawings were also used to support oral language. Learners were encouraged to describe their drawings, thereby linking language to emotions and storytelling. This aligns with Xiao, Amzah, & Rong (2023), who found that drawing stimulates vocabulary growth, and Pitri & Michaelidou (2025), who view drawing as a bridge to early narrative and literacy development. Interactive games, songs, rhymes, and hands-on tasks were widely used to develop oral language. These practices resonate with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which posits that social interaction in playful contexts fosters language growth. All three teachers incorporated such interactive activities, enabling learners to engage through fun, low-pressure contexts.

Findings indicate that learners participated in collaborative group work, which enhanced their opportunities for authentic communication. This supports Vygotsky's ZPD, where learning is mediated by more capable peers and social contexts. Collaboration strengthens social-emotional and linguistic skills simultaneously. Gesture-based activities, including physical storytelling, seemed to have assisted learners in expressing meaning and building confidence. These multimodal practices support vocabulary development and communication.

Thuketana and Ekeh (2022) found similar benefits in play-based pedagogy, highlighting the importance of teacher training in this area, echoing a key concern in this study.

Interviews with teachers revealed that they encouraged parental involvement, especially for learners whose home language is not Afrikaans. When parents engage in their child's early education, language development improves (Motshusi, Ngoben, & Speng, 2024).

Teachers supported multilingual learners by code-switching and using scaffolded explanations, which aligns with Aronstam and Braund (2016), who found that teacher training in play-based strategies is crucial in linguistically diverse classrooms. Repetition was a recurring theme across all three classrooms. Teachers used repetition through songs, flashcards, and routines like scripture and prayer. Repetition promotes fluency and recognition of frequently used words and phrases. Informal learning approaches further reinforced language use in authentic contexts. This informal setting supports holistic development, including phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and social language use.

4.7. SUMMARY

The findings demonstrate that oral language development in Afrikaans is effectively promoted in Grade R classrooms through a range of play-based strategies. These include visual aids, songs, role play, repetition, bilingualism, collaborative learning, and parental involvement.

The findings are well-supported by Froebel's theory, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and inclusive education principles, and they respond directly to the study's first two research questions. Chapter 5 addresses the third research question by proposing practical strategies for teachers to enhance oral language development through play. Visuals and play are effective in this context. Solid references help learners connect spoken words to meaning, particularly in multilingual environments where learners may still be learning the Afrikaans language. Through the observations, these visuals were effectively used in most group work.

Through this, the visuals promote further discussions, which allowed the learners to arrange the meaning and also practice new vocabulary with other learners and the teacher. Using play to develop language, place learners in a creative environment that encourages them to use dialogue to negotiate, question, and do role-switching. As mentioned many times before in this study, Froebel's theory emphasises that play is the highest declaration of a child's development, and it is a foundational way through which learning takes place.

In multilingual classrooms, where many learners may or may not speak Afrikaans as their first language, play creates a low-pressure, engaging environment where the learners can feel more confident to take a chance with new vocabulary and sentence structure.

This is supported by Froebel's theory because it encourages the use of songs, rhymes, role play, and storytelling, all of which involve oral expression. Froebel also believes that a child's lived experiences should be connected with learning. This belief can be reached by including culturally relevant themes and everyday scenarios into play in the Grade R classroom. This not only develops vocabulary and sentence fluency, but also encourages their bilingual or multilingual skills.

The observations also demonstrated that teachers support children who struggle to learn. This was noted during Teacher B's class when she helped learners who struggled with the activity of sounding letters in Afrikaans. She said the sounds aloud so that the learners could hear clearly how the letters are supposed to be read. This approach is effective because auditory modelling is a key concept when it comes to developing phonemic awareness, which is the ability to hear, identify, and repeat individual sounds in spoken words. Phonemic awareness is of much importance when it comes to early reading skills, especially in learning the sounds of an additional language such as Afrikaans. By clearly articulating the sound, Teacher B provided a scaffolded learning experience that made the theoretical concepts of letter-sound similarity more attainable. When it comes to the context of a multilingual environment, this type of support is important because many learners may not speak Afrikaans at home and then encounter the phonological structure of this language for the first time.

Teacher B's plain and straightforward oral modelling gives a connection between learners' home language and the target language, which then increases both their pronunciation and their comprehension. This strategy goes hand-in-hand with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, especially with his concept of the ZPD.

Learners are encouraged and motivated when they are supported by someone who has more knowledge and someone who can provide guidance just beyond the learner's capabilities. Teacher B's way of teaching symbolises scaffolding in the ZPD, which means that she is not just giving the answers, but she is also providing deliberate support, which can help Grade R learners to reach their next level of phonemic understanding independently.

It was also noted that the teachers motivated the learners to learn through play. This was seen in Teacher A's class, where she praised the learners for successfully cutting and pasting pictures in their books. This is seen as positive reinforcement, but also encouragement for the learners to continue engaging in the learning task. Play-based activities, such as cutting and pasting, are motivating for young children because they are hands-on activities. Play holds a key to ownership in the learning process, which increases intrinsic motivation. This can be seen by learners who are actively engaged in playful tasks, which encourage them to take risks and apply new skills, which are key factors in the success of learning.

The pedagogical value of play lies in the capacity to integrate skill development with emotional gratification and social interaction. In this context, play supports academic learning, personal growth, and a productive attitude towards school activities.

Through this study, findings have also shown that the teachers use a mat when conducting certain classroom activities. This motion creates an awareness of physical boundaries, and it teaches learners about routine and spatial organisation in the classroom. Moreover, the use of a shared mat space creates awareness of social interaction with other learners. When the teacher invites the learners to the mat, they are physically brought to closeness, which creates a communal learning space. This communal learning space creates many opportunities for communication, cooperation, and turn-taking.

These interactions are crucial when it comes to the development of oral language, because they give multiple opportunities for the correct language. Hence, the mat is more than just a tool; it activates a social space that encourages the learners to build relationships, practise communication skills, and learn from each other in a structured, yet playful setting.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. INTRODUCTION

The study sought to explore how Grade R teachers in the MMED use a play-based approach to develop children's oral language in Afrikaans. The previous chapter presented and interpreted the main findings, which were drawn from teacher interviews and classroom observations and aligned with the study's research questions/objectives. The current chapter provides a summary of the study, outlines the conclusions, which are drawn from the findings, and links them to the objectives of the study. The chapter concludes by providing recommendations for improving oral language development in Afrikaans through play-based strategies. To recap, below are the research questions that guided the current study:

- How does oral language in Afrikaans develop through play in the Grade R classroom?
- What are the teachers' perceptions of using play for developing children's oral language in Afrikaans in the Grade R classroom?
- Which strategies can teachers use to support the development of children's oral language in Afrikaans through play?

5.2. SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore how Grade R teachers in the MMED use play to support oral language development in Afrikaans. A qualitative research approach was employed to gain in-depth insights into teachers' experiences and practices. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with three Grade R teachers in one school.

The literature review highlighted that play is a powerful pedagogical tool for enhancing young children's oral language skills, as it creates natural and meaningful contexts for communication (Severino, Cabatic & Molina, 2025).

The theoretical framework was grounded in Froebel's theory of learning through play, which emphasises that children learn best when they are actively engaged in using their imagination and creativity, and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which supports learning through social interaction.

Based on the data collected through observations, the findings revealed that teachers effectively used a variety of play-based activities, such as singing, role play, games, storytelling, drawing, and cutting-and-pasting to stimulate oral language use in Afrikaans. These activities created an engaging, low-pressure environment that encouraged learners to speak, experiment with language, and build vocabulary. Visual materials like flashcards, story cards, puppets, and drawings were widely used to support word recognition and concept comprehension. These tools helped learners make meaningful connections between spoken and visual information, especially in multilingual settings.

Teachers frequently used code switching and bilingual songs to accommodate non-Afrikaans speakers. These inclusive strategies promoted participation and understanding, aligned with Vygotsky's sociocultural and South Africa's inclusive education principles. Targeted support strategies such as repetition, phonemic modelling, and scaffolding were used to support children who struggled to learn, particularly in phonemic awareness or sounding letters. This support aligns with Vygotsky's ZPD framework. Teachers used praise and positive reinforcement to motivate learners. This built learners' confidence and encouraged continued participation in language-rich activities, reflecting Froebel's view that encouragement enhances self-motivation. As rightly observed in the classrooms, learners engaged in group work and mat-based activities, which created opportunities for peer interaction, turn-taking, and dialogue. These social interactions enriched oral language development and supported learners' confidence in using Afrikaans.

The classroom mat served as more than a physical space; it functioned as a social hub that established classroom routines and encouraged communal learning. The structure helped learners internalise conversational norms and develop social communication skills. Activities such as drawing and pretend play encouraged learners to express ideas, emotions, and stories verbally.

These tasks helped bridge oral language with literacy development and supported narrative competence. However, there were variations in how effectively these activities were structured to elicit rich oral interactions. On the other hand, interviews revealed that teachers recognise the value of play in promoting oral language but often face challenges related to parental involvement and language barriers.

The above-mentioned findings demonstrate that play, when intentionally integrated with language objectives, significantly supports the development of oral language in Afrikaans for Grade R learners. The strategies observed and reported by teachers reflect key theoretical frameworks (Froebel and Vygotsky) and offer a model for best practices in multilingual early childhood classrooms.

5.3. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysed data from classroom observations and interviews, several key findings emerged regarding how Grade R teachers in the MMED district use play to develop children's oral language in Afrikaans. These findings reflect the themes and subthemes that surfaced during thematic analysis and form the basis of the study's research results.

Play is an effective and purposeful pedagogical tool for oral language development. The data reveal that teachers consistently use play-based activities—such as singing, storytelling, role play, games, and art-related tasks—to create meaningful opportunities for learners to practise speaking Afrikaans. These play experiences allow learners to build vocabulary, improve pronunciation, and develop confidence in oral expression. The findings confirm that play provides a natural and engaging platform for language practice, supporting Froebel's notion that learning occurs through active engagement, creativity, and exploration.

Use of visual and interactive materials to enhance comprehension. Across the observed classrooms, teachers integrated visual tools such as flashcards, puppets, and drawings to support children's understanding and retention of new words.

These multimodal strategies emerged as a strong subtheme under “Language Development,” showing how visual reinforcement helps learners connect spoken and visual information. In multilingual classrooms, such strategies also supported differentiated and inclusive learning.

Social interaction and collaborative learning as drivers of oral communication
Observation data highlighted that group play, mat-based activities, and peer interactions promote turn-taking, active listening, and conversational participation. These forms of social engagement fostered learners’ oral communication skills and social understanding, aligning with Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory that language learning is mediated through social interaction.

Inclusive strategies to accommodate linguistic diversity. Both interview and observation data demonstrated that teachers employed adaptive strategies such as code-switching, bilingual songs, and scaffolding to include non-Afrikaans-speaking learners. These inclusive practices were essential for bridging linguistic gaps while still promoting Afrikaans oral language development. They also reflect the application of Vygotsky’s ZPD, where learners receive the support necessary to progress toward independent language use.

Positive reinforcement as a means of strengthening learner confidence
The findings further indicate that teachers’ use of praise, encouragement, and emotional support enhances learners’ willingness to speak and participate. This subtheme illustrates how positive reinforcement cultivates a nurturing classroom environment, reinforcing Froebel’s view that emotional development and intrinsic motivation are central to meaningful learning through play.

Play is a bridge between oral language and emergent literacy. Data from activities involving drawing, storytelling, and pretend play show that learners use oral language to construct and share narratives. This finding suggests that oral expression through play lays the foundation for later literacy skills, demonstrating the interconnectedness between spoken and written language in the Foundation Phase. Contextual challenges influencing implementation.

Despite the consistent recognition of play's importance, the analysis revealed that implementation varies across classrooms. Factors such as limited parental involvement, multilingual contexts, and insufficient teaching and learning resources hinder the full integration of play-based language development. These contextual barriers highlight the need for systemic support and resource allocation to sustain effective practice.

Theoretical alignment and pedagogical implications. The findings strongly align with Froebel's and Vygotsky's theoretical frameworks. Teachers' practices demonstrate that play, social interaction, and scaffolded learning collectively enhance oral language development. This theoretical alignment offers a practical model for integrating play-based pedagogy into multilingual early childhood classrooms, ensuring that oral language learning remains interactive, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate.

5.4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made for classroom practice, teacher professional development, parental involvement, and future research. These recommendations aim to strengthen the role of play in developing children's oral language in Afrikaans within Grade R classrooms in the MMED.

5.4.1 Recommendations for Classroom Practice

Integrate intentional play-based language activities: Teachers should deliberately plan play sessions that include specific oral language objectives such as vocabulary expansion, sentence construction, and storytelling. Play should not be seen as free time but as a structured opportunity for language enrichment.

Use diverse and interactive teaching materials: Visual and tactile resources such as puppets, flashcards, picture books, and real-life objects should be used consistently to support comprehension and vocabulary development in Afrikaans. These tools can help bridge linguistic gaps for multilingual learners.

Encourage learner-led and peer-interactive play: Teachers should allow children to take leadership roles during play to stimulate spontaneous conversation and collaborative problem-solving. This approach promotes authentic language use and social interaction.

Integrate music and movement into daily routines: Songs, rhymes, and rhythm-based games should be embedded into classroom routines to reinforce phonemic awareness and pronunciation enjoyable way.

Promote a supportive classroom atmosphere: Positive reinforcement through praise and encouragement should continue to be used to build learners' confidence and motivation to participate in oral activities.

5.4.2 Recommendations for Teacher Professional Development

Provide ongoing training on play-based pedagogy: The Department of Education, together with teacher education institutions, should organise workshops and professional learning communities to strengthen teachers' skills in integrating play for language development.

Emphasise theoretical grounding in teacher preparation: Training should include practical applications of Froebel's and Vygotsky's theories to help teachers understand how play and social interaction facilitate oral language growth.

Enhance assessment literacy: Teachers should be equipped with formative assessment strategies to monitor and evaluate learners' oral language progress during play without disrupting the natural learning flow.

5.4.3 Recommendations for Parental and Community Involvement

Engage parents as partners in language development: Schools should host information sessions or parent workshops demonstrating how everyday play at home can support children's oral language in Afrikaans.

Encourage home–school collaboration: Teachers can share simple, play-based language activities that parents can replicate at home to reinforce classroom learning and strengthen Afrikaans oral competence.

5.4.4 Recommendations for Policy and School Support

Recognise play as a formal pedagogical approach: Education policy and school management should treat play as an essential component of language teaching in the Foundation Phase, not merely as recreation.

Allocate resources and time for structured play: Schools should ensure that play-based learning areas are well-equipped with age-appropriate materials and that daily timetables include dedicated time for play-based oral language activities.

Encourage multilingual inclusion: Language-in-education policy should continue promoting inclusivity by supporting bilingual and code-switching strategies that facilitate learning for non-Afrikaans-speaking learners.

5.4.5 Recommendations for Further Research

Future studies could investigate play-based oral language development across diverse socio-linguistic contexts to enhance the generalisability of findings. Further research could examine how families and communities contribute to developing Afrikaans oral language through informal play and storytelling. Longitudinal studies could assess how early play-based oral language development influences later reading and writing proficiency in Afrikaans and other languages.

5.5. CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

When we look into the theoretical and practical fields, this study contributes to both of these fields of early childhood education. It provides solid evidence of how play-based learning embraces oral language development in linguistically diverse classrooms, particularly for Afrikaans as an additional language. Theoretically, this study confirms and extends Froebel's theory of play and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in the South African context.

It reveals the enduring relevance of aspects such as the ZPD, scaffolding, and social interaction in embracing language investments. By showing how learners develop oral language through different strategies like using songs, rhymes, etc., the study strengthens Froebel's point that play promotes holistic, cognitive, linguistic, emotional, and social development. In this study, the research identifies a set of classroom strategies that effectively promote Afrikaans oral language development through play, including:

- visual aids and multimodal materials (e.g., flashcards, story cards, puppets)
- interactive songs and rhymes
- role play, storytelling, and dramatisation
- drawing, cutting, and other creative tasks
- shared physical spaces, such as classroom mats
- gestural and physical storytelling
- positive reinforcement and emotional encouragement

These strategies provide valuable insights for curriculum design and teacher training. They focus on the importance of teacher-guided scaffolding, phonemic instruction, and inclusive pedagogy in multilingual Grade R environments. The study emphasises the importance of culturally relevant and contextually meaningful learning experiences. Integrating familiar cultural references and everyday scenarios into play helps learners connect new language concepts to their lived experiences, thereby enhancing comprehension and motivation.

The inclusion of parents as active partners reinforces the notion that language development is a collaborative process extending beyond the classroom. This research contributes to policy and teacher education by advocating for:

- stronger emphasis on play-based pedagogy in Grade R curricula;
- inclusion of multilingual and inclusive teaching modules in pre-service and in-service training; and
- improved classroom resourcing to support visual, interactive, and experiential learning.

5.6. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study provides valuable insights into how teachers develop children's oral language in Afrikaans through play in Grade R classrooms. However, several limitations are highlighted below.

The study was conducted at a single school located in the MMED of the Free State Province. As a result, the findings are context-specific and may not reflect the practices, challenges, or perspectives of teachers in other regions of South Africa or more diverse linguistic or socioeconomic contexts. Only three Grade R teachers participated in the study. Although their insights were rich and informative, the small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings. Larger samples across multiple schools may offer a broader understanding of how play is used to develop oral language in Afrikaans.

The use of convenience sampling, based on the school's proximity to the researcher, may have introduced sampling bias. The selected participants might not be representative of the wider population of Grade R Afrikaans teachers, potentially influencing the diversity of perspectives captured. The study exclusively focused on teachers' perspectives and practices in the Grade R classroom. It did not include direct input from learners or parents, which could have enriched the understanding of how play-based language development is experienced from multiple viewpoints.

Classroom observations were conducted over a short period (one plus or minus 30-minute session per teacher). This limited duration may not fully capture the range of strategies teachers use over time or during different learning activities and classroom dynamics. Interviews were conducted in Afrikaans and later translated into English. While this approach was necessary to align with the participants' home language and the reporting language of the study, there is a possibility of meaning being lost or altered during translation, which could affect data interpretation. Therefore, there is a need for a study that could extend the period of observing lessons and exploring the use of translanguaging in a multilingual classroom context.

Although the researcher took measures to remain objective and unobtrusive, their background in education and partial immersion in the research setting may have influenced how data were interpreted. Subjectivity is inherent in qualitative research, and complete detachment is challenging, particularly in interpretivist research. The qualitative approach, while suitable for exploring lived experiences, does not allow for statistical generalisation or the measurement of the extent of oral language development outcomes among learners. Incorporating some quantitative measures in future research could offer a more comprehensive view. Again, the study is limited to the Afrikaans language context. This may not apply to oral language development practices in other South African languages or in multilingual Grade R classrooms where learners' home languages differ from the language of learning and teaching. Developing oral language through play can have a few areas for future research. The following topics are suggested for future research:

- varieties of play and the outcome, where the focus will be more specifically on the types of play, while still focusing on developing oral language.
- the use of technology to develop oral language through play, where they can explore different technology tools to develop oral language.
- inclusive education through language and play, where one can examine different strategies on how play-based activities can bring learners together through language.
- the impact of parent involvement through oral language and play, where one investigates how oral language progresses through parent involvement.

5.7. CONCLUSION

Chapter 5 concludes this study and presents all its findings. Teachers play a crucial role when it comes to the development of oral language through play. However, they still need to know the different strategies of using play to enhance a stimulating, learning, and relaxed environment. Through detailed observation and analysis, it became evident that when teachers actively and intentionally integrate play into their teaching lessons, it creates a rich environment of language that supports learners' oral development.

Overall, this study contributes valuable insights into the connection between play-based learning and oral language development, emphasising the importance of equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to implement effective play strategies in the Grade R classroom.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions:

1. How do you develop oral language skills in your Grade R classroom through play?
2. Do you have children speaking languages other than Afrikaans? If so, how do you accommodate them during your Afrikaans learning activities?
3. Which resources do you use to improve children's Afrikaans oral language through play? Why do you use these resources?
4. What is, according to you, your role as the teacher when it comes to developing oral language with your Grade R learners?
5. What is the day-to-day play-based activities that you use to improve oral language within the Grade R classroom?
6. Do you think oral language can be improved through play-based activities, and why?
7. Which strategies do you use to support the development of oral language in Afrikaans through play?
8. Do you think the influence of a second language influences children's oral language? Why?
9. What influence does the internet, for example, YouTube Kids, which is 90% English, have on the development of oral language within the Grade R learner?

APPENDIX B

Classroom Observations:

Classroom Observation Schedule			
Question	Yes (X)	No (X)	Notes, comments, and/or reflections
Does the teacher develop oral language according to the recommendations of CAPS?			
Do all learners engage in the play-based activities?			
Does the teacher use material during the play-based activities?			
Are there children who struggle to convey themselves to the teachers and/or other children?			
Is the environment fitted for play-based activities?			
Do the teacher's strategies support the development of oral language through play?			
Does the teacher stick to the time allocated to these activities?			

APPENDIX C



GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

08-Apr-2024

Dear Mej Elzaan Van Wyk

Application Approved

Research Project Title:

Developing Children's Oral Language in Afrikaans Through Play: Grade-R Teachers study in Motheo District.

Ethical Clearance number:

UFS-HSD2023/2597

We are pleased to inform you that your application for ethical clearance has been approved. Your ethical clearance is valid for twelve (12) months from the date of issue. We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your study/research project be submitted via an Amendment on RIMS to the ethics office to ensure ethical transparency. Furthermore, you are requested to submit a Final Report on RIMS for your study/research project to the ethics office once the project has concluded. Should you require more time than the allotted 12 months to complete this research, please apply for an extension by submitting a Continuation/Report on RIMS. Thank you for submitting your proposal for ethical clearance. We wish you success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Sean van der Merwe

Vice-Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee

Digitally signed by Sean van der Merwe
Date: 2024.04.08 15:41:36 +02'00'

205 Nelson Mandela P.O. Box 339
Drive Bloemfontein 9300
Park West Tel: +27 (0)51 401
Bloemfontein 9301 3770
South Africa VandermerweS@ufs.ac.za
www.ufs.ac.za



APPENDIX D

Enquiries: M.Z. Thango
Ref: Notification of research: E. Van Wyk
Tel. 051 404 8808
Email: M.Z.Thango@fseducation.gov.za



District Director
Motho District

Dear Mr. Moloi

NOTIFICATION OF RESEARCH: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH PROJECT IN MOTHEO DISTRICT

This letter serves to inform you that Ms. E. Van Wyk has been granted permission to conduct research in the Motheo District under the auspices of the University of the Free State. The details in relation to the research project are as follows:

Topic: Developing Children's Oral Language in Afrikaans Through Play: Grade-R Teachers study in Motheo District.

1. **List of schools involved:** Jim Fouché Primary School.
2. **Target Population:** Three teachers teaching in grade R at the selected school.
3. **Period of research:** From the second week of February 2024 letter until 30 September 2024. Please note the department does not allow any research to be conducted during the fourth term (quarter) of the academic year nor during normal school hours. The researcher is expected to request permission from the school principals to conduct research at schools.
4. **Research benefits:** The Free State Department will benefit from this study by having or adding more play-based approaches when exploring the development of oral language in Afrikaans. The department will consist of different approaches Grade R teachers can use when focusing on oral development within the Afrikaans language. The department will also benefit from this research because the field for this research will expand which mean if further research will be done through other researchers, they will find this study within the Free State Department.
5. The Sub-directorate of Research and policy will make the necessary arrangements for the researchers to present the findings and recommendations to the relevant officials in the Department.

Yours Sincerely,

Mr. MZAMW. JACOBS
DIRECTOR: QUALITY ASSURANCE, M&E AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

DATE: 18/01/2024

APPENDIX E

Research study information leaflet and consent form

Date

January 2023 – November 2024

Title of the research project

Developing Children's Oral Language in Afrikaans Through Play: Grade-R Teachers study in Motheo District.

Principle investigator / researcher(s) name(s) and contact number(s):

Elzaan van Wyk

2015041334

071 885 6715

Faculty and Department:

Education

Languages in Education Department

Study leader(s) name and contact number:

Dr. M. Khosa

What is the aim / purpose of the study?

Using a play-based approach in developing oral language is a challenge to many teachers as

demonstrated by research both, internationally and nationally. Previous studies conducted in using the play-based approach in developing oral language focused on languages other than Afrikaans. This study will close the gap by using qualitative research methods to explore the development of oral language in Afrikaans through a play-based approach. The main aim is to investigate how teachers develop children's oral language in Afrikaans through play.

Who is doing the research?

The research will be done by myself, Elzaan van Wyk.

Has the study received ethical approval?

Approval number: UFS-HSD2023/2597

Why are you invited to take part in this research project?

Grade R teachers are necessary in this study because they have qualified within this field. The Grade R-teachers are also the adults and are above 18 years of age. No other teachers than the Grade R-teachers will be used within this study. The teachers that teach higher grades than Grade R does not have Grade R children in front of them to work with, whereas this study is focused on Grade-R learners, not those in higher grades. I am currently working within the same school as these teachers, and they will be easy to access. The approximate number of participants are three (3) teachers in total.

What is the nature of participation in this study?

Through the actions of the participants the data will be collected. The study involves an interview per participant and a class observation schedule. Short interview questions will be asked. When an interview needs to take place, I will arrange with the teacher to have an interview within break time as it suits them. The time duration per interview will be about 20 minutes.

Can the participant withdraw from the study?

Participation within this study is voluntary and there is no penalty or loss of benefit for non-participation. Being in this study is voluntary, and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What are the potential benefits of taking part in this study?

By being part in this study the participant will contribute to the purpose of the study which is to explore the development of oral language in Afrikaans through a play-based approach. The participant may benefit by also identifying certain approaches when focusing on play-based approaches. The subject's participation in the study will be kept confidential, but information about him/her will be given to the study sponsor.

What is the anticipated inconvenience of taking part in this study?

The time that will be used to collect the data through interviews and the classroom observation schedule may have the potential level of inconvenience and/or discomfort to the participant. The risk level within the data collection of this study is *low risk*. There are no kind of risk factor that may be foreseen for general participant involvement, except the loss of work time.

Will what I say be kept confidential?

The extent, if any, to which confidentiality of information will be maintained, e.g. your name will not be recorded, anywhere and no one will be able to connect you to the answers you give. You will be referred to as "the participant" and you will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings. Only the researcher will have access to the data.

Your answers may be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that research is done properly, including the transcriber, external coder, and members of the Research Ethics Committee. Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study, unless you give permission for other people to see the records.

Your anonymous data may be used for other purposes, e.g. research report, journal articles, conference presentation, etc.

A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report. While every effort will be made by the researcher to ensure that you will not be connected to the information that you share during the interview, I cannot guarantee that other participants in the separate interview will treat information confidentially. I shall, however, encourage all participants to do so. For this reason, I advise you not to disclose personally sensitive information in the interview. The participant may refuse to take part. Participants can stop being in the study at any time without getting in trouble.

How will the information be stored and ultimately destroyed?

Hard copies of your answers will be stored by the researcher for a period of five years in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet within the school's safe. For future research or academic purposes, electronic information will be stored on a password protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. Hard copies will be shredded through a shredding machine when the time period is over.

Will I receive payment or any incentives for participating in this study?

No payments or rewards will be offered within this study. The time that will be used to collect the data through interviews and the classroom observation schedule may have the potential level of inconvenience and/or discomfort to the participant. No injury or harm attributable will apply to this study.

How will the participant be informed of the findings / results of the study?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact **Elzaan van Wyk** on 071 885 6715 or vanwyke127@gmail.com. The findings are accessible for two (2) years. Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please use the contact details above. Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Dr. M. Khosa on KhosaM@ufs.ac.za

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Consent to participate in this study

I, the undersigned,

(participant's full names to be included), (the "Participant")

confirm that I voluntarily agree to participate in the research study referred to as the **"Developing Children's Oral Language in Afrikaans Through Play: A Grade-R Teachers study in Motheo District"** in relation to

and which Study is being conducted by **ELZAAN VAN WYK**, the **Researcher**

I, the undersigned Participant, further confirm that—

1. the Researcher has explained the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of my participation in the Study;
2. I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the Study as explained in the attached information sheet;
3. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the Study;
4. I understand that my participation in the Study is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable);
5. I voluntarily provide the UFS and the Researcher with my personal information and consent to the UFS and the Researcher collecting, disclosing and processing my personal information in order to conduct the Study and any related activities in relation thereto;

6. I hereby acknowledge and confirm that I understand the purpose for which the UFS and the Researcher may collect, store, use, delete, destroy, outsource, transfer or otherwise process, as the context and circumstances may require and as contemplated in terms of POPIA, my personal information as set out herein;
7. I am aware that the findings of the Study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings and that my personal information will be aggregated and deidentified at such stage;
8. I also give the UFS permission to share, without notification, the collected data with other researchers at the UFS or other Higher Education Institutions. This permission is dependent on the same principles of ethical research practices, anonymity/confidentiality, safekeeping of information, and other issues listed above applying.

I, the Participant, agree to the recording of the <insert specific data collection method>.

Full Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): **ELZAAN VAN WYK**

Signature of Researcher:



Date: 03/01/2024

APPENDIX F



Certificate of Language Editing

This certifies that I have edited the dissertation detailed below for language.

TITLE:

Developing Children's Oral Language in Afrikaans Through Play: A Grade-R Teacher Study in Motheo District.

BY:

Elzaan van Wyk
Student Number: 2015041334

Kind Regards

RJ Fourie
rudolf@psif.co.za
21 June 2025

APPENDIX G

E. van Wyk_Turnitin Report.pdf

ORIGINALITY REPORT

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