

The influence of pretend play on children's social communication skills.

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Abstract

Background : Early childhood development, crucial between ages 0-6, encompasses cognitive, social-emotional, and communication skills. Language development theories emphasize communication as a vital aspect of early childhood growth. Children's ability to express themselves supports their learning process and social interactions. Pretend play, involving role-playing and imagination, is a key activity that stimulates language and social skills in children. In urban areas, low social education levels often lead to inappropriate communication styles, making effective early interventions essential.

Aim : This study aims to investigate the influence of pretend play on the social communication skills of children in a kindergarten in Makassar City. It seeks to determine whether pretend play can effectively enhance these skills among young children.

Method : A quantitative approach with a One Group Pretest-Posttest Design was employed. Data were collected from 20 children through direct observation and pre- and post-intervention evaluations. Validity and reliability tests ensured the research instruments' accuracy.

Result : Children who participated in the pretend play program showed significant improvement in social communication skills. The average score increased from 29 (61.90% of the ideal score) before the intervention to 42 (93.65%) after the intervention.

Conclusion : Pretend play significantly enhances children's social communication skills, making it a valuable method in early childhood education. Its application can positively impact language development, creativity, and character formation.

INTRODUCTION

Human development begins at the early childhood stage, between the ages of 0 to 6, as stated in the National Education System Law. This early childhood stage includes crucial foundations for development (Windayani, N. L. I., et al., 2021; Atikah, C., 2023; Sriyanto, A., & Sutrisno, S., 2022) such as cognitive, social, emotional, and communication skills. Based on language development theories, communication ability is one of the main aspects of early childhood development (Gleason & Ratner, 2022; Zahrianis et al., 2024; Madyawati, L. 2016). Children's ability to express themselves through language is very important because language development can support the learning process (Lake & Evangelou, 2019; M. P. Dewi et al., 2020; Nugraheni, L., & Ahsin, 2021).

In early childhood, children are learning to build their understanding of language through sounds, expressions, gestures, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Children start communicating from the early years of their birth using cries (Amri, 2017; Salamah, S., 2022; Yahya, Y. 2020). Children's speaking abilities vary greatly, especially in the speed of acquiring words—some start slow and then speed up, while others start quickly and continue at a steady pace (Rowe et al., 2012; Wati, H. R., 2019; Owa, A., Meka, M., & Ngura, E. T., 2022). Richer language experiences strengthen processing skills that facilitate children's language growth, particularly their speaking skills (Weisleder & Fernald, 2013; Azizah, U., 2018; Keti, E., Dhiu, K. D., & Maku, K. R. M., 2022).

As children grow older, they will further develop their range of relationships, demanding good communication skills to be accepted in their social environment. Each child's language ability varies depending on their early environment (family) and the stimulation they receive according to their learning interests, whether through natural exposure or educational intervention (Gonzalez et al., 2022; Khotijah, 2016; Barac & Bialystok, 2011). To acquire good communicative competence, adult-child interaction is crucial, including providing early communication opportunities with adult guidance since children's speaking abilities do not develop instantly but require proper support from an early age (Levin & Haines, 2007; Hermoyo, 2015; Khoiriyah & Rachman, 2019).

Language is not only a communication tool in children's socio-cultural interactions but also a category of communication skills with proper social etiquette according to their social rules. Besides conveying messages, language builds interpersonal relationships, expands social circles, and enriches children's daily experiences. Effective communication occurs when the message recipient can accurately interpret what the communicator conveys. Sociolinguistic theory highlights the role of the social environment in shaping children's communication skills because language is not only for mutual understanding or conveying thoughts but also for social interaction and participating in community culture (Dahniar & Sulistyawati, 2023; Mailani et al., 2022; Khatimah, 2018).

Communication problems often arise in social environments, especially among children from low-education families or village communities who are frequently exposed to impolite or rude forms of communication. These communication patterns often carry over into the school environment for many children. During the development of communication skills, children are not yet able to distinguish between polite and impolite language in their social interactions and thus cannot perform code-switching. Language is the primary means of interaction and communication, and children who are frequently exposed to impolite language at home tend to use such language in other environments like school because children's language abilities do not develop instantly but through stages requiring proper support. Therefore, the development of storytelling skills and understanding of others' stories needs support (Santoso et al., 2023; Haryanti, 2019; Pesco & Gagné, 2017; Khoiriyah & Rachman, 2019).

Some theories state that children's social environment plays a crucial role in developing their communication skills, an essential factor in language acquisition. Furthermore, social interaction can enhance children's language and cognitive abilities (Saeed et al., 2020; Astuti, 2022; Zahrianis et al., 2024; Khoiriyati, 2019). Hence, sufficient stimulation from the environment must match children's learning interests (Khotijah, 2016; Hikmah, D. N., Heni Purwati, 2022; Rijkiyani, R. P., et al., 2022). Although these theories are accurate, it is essential to consider the child's social environment's ability to positively impact not only their communication skills but also their social behavior and character. This study aims to address the gap in children's communication ethics in their social environment.

Children exposed to poor communication ethics will carry such social communication styles into their educational environment, which, if prolonged, can spread to their peers in educational settings. Thus, a learning program is needed to break the exposure to unethical social communication.

A learning method involving interaction activities, imagination, situation description, and problem-solving relevant to real life is necessary. The pretend play method fits these criteria well. Furthermore, pretend play is familiar to children as it is a part of their developmental stages. Pretend Play or role-playing involves children engaging in fantasy play, taking on imaginary characters supported by costumes (Kavanaugh, 2014; Suminar, D. R., 2009; Jurnal et al., 2019). One of the initial play stages in children's development begins with pretend play, where children provide correct responses leading to cognitive skills, communication skills, and problem-solving abilities (Hollenstein et al., 2022; Qudsyi, H., 2010; Ardhyantama, V., & Apriyanti, C., 2021).

The pretend play method also allows children to express and understand their emotions and others through communication, aiding in developing empathy. Through pretend play, children understand others' perspectives, enabling them to behave and interact according to their roles and social norms, using rich and varied language, and facilitating social interactions that support language development related to children's social and cognitive skills (Lillard et al., 2013; Weisberg, 2015; Mindell & Williamson, 2018).

Pretend play is recognized as an activity with significant potential to facilitate language learning, creativity, character formation, and children's social and cognitive skills (Jaggy et al., 2023; Mulyani elin, 2023; Istiqomah et al., 2023; Weisberg, 2015; Amri & Intisari, 2019). To optimize the application of the pretend play method, learning activities should adopt themes relevant to local wisdom or children's daily lives aligned with the values held in their environment, using techniques and media suitable for children's development, and creating a fun atmosphere (Amri et al., 2023; Amal et al., 2019; Lillard et al., 2013; Garvey, 1989).

Based on several research results mentioned above, the influence of pretend play on children's social communication skills has shown significant progress and changes compared to previous studies because it tends to adopt a broader interdisciplinary approach. Most previous studies only found that pretend play impacts one aspect of children's development, such as language, cognition, or character. In contrast, this study explains that besides communication skills, pretend play also significantly affects social skills.

METHODS

This research uses a comparative quantitative approach based on positivism theory with a One Group Pretest-Posttest Design experimental design. The research was conducted in February of the even semester of the 2023/2024 academic year for one month. The sampling technique used simple random sampling, considering the population was homogeneous (Aditya Virgiansyah et al., 2022). With a population of 110 children spread across four class groups at Bustanul Athfal Alauddin Kindergarten in Makassar, only 20 children were needed as samples, according to Suharsimi Arikunto's opinion that if the population exceeds 100, a sample of 20-25% can be taken (Amin et al., 2023).

Data collection followed the steps below:

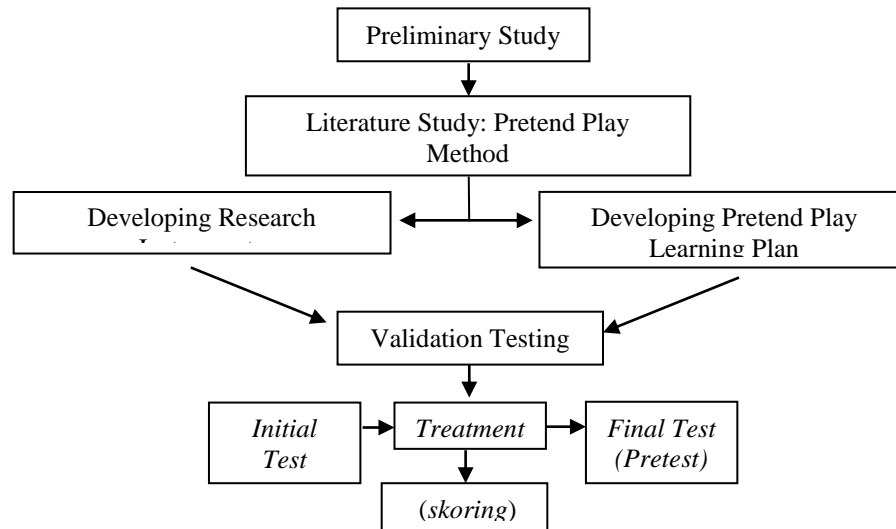


Figure 1. Research Flow

The valid instruments are as follows

Table 1. Children's Social Communication Skills

Variabel	Dimensi	Indikator	Butir Pernyataan/Instrumen
Children's Social Communication Skills	Expressing Language/Message	Expressing desires	Children use polite language when asking for something Children express their desires verbally Children can control their emotions appropriately when expressing desires Children understand the rules of using "no" or "yes" when asking or receiving something
		Permissive	Using simple sentences to use someone else's belongings Children understand the rule of asking permission
		Constructing simple sentences in a complete structure (subject-predicate-object).	Children can use pronouns such as "I", "you", "he/she", and "they" Children can demonstrate emotional experiences such as happiness or frustration, e.g., "I am happy to go to the beach with my mom"
	Receiving Language/Message	Answering complex questions	Using and answering questions like "what", "why", "where", "how", etc.
		Responding to commands	Children respond to commands politely and correctly Children understand proper command forms
		Understanding game rules	Children follow game rules Children use toys according to their functions Children complete games Children do not disturb friends during games

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Result

A series of preliminary tests, such as validity and reliability tests, were conducted to test the research instruments' eligibility for data collection, which were then analyzed to determine the influence of the pretend play method on children's social communication skills. Validity testing was performed using two techniques: educational and educational psychology expert construction tests, followed by instrument testing. An instrument is considered valid if it has been tested for validity and the results are valid (Anggraini et al., 2012). The Pearson product-moment correlation was used to perform the validity test in this study. The t-table value was obtained with degrees of freedom (df) = n-1 and a significant level $\alpha = 0.05$, where n = the number of students. Then, the t-calculated value was compared with the t-table value based on the interpretation rule: if t-calculated > t-table, the data is valid; if t-calculated < t-table, the data is invalid. Out of 20 items tested on 20 students, five items were invalid, namely items 3, 5, 7, 12, and 18. Thus, only 15 items were considered valid.

Reliability testing was conducted using the Alpha-Cronbach method to check if the instrument met reliability requirements (S. K. Dewi & Sudaryanto, 2020). The standard used to determine an instrument's reliability is generally the comparison between the calculated reliability value and the t-table value at a 95% confidence level or a 5% significance level. The reliability level using the Alpha-Cronbach method is measured on a scale of 0 to 1. This scale is divided into five classes, interpreted as follows:

Table 2. Reliability Level

Alpha	Reliability Level
0,00 s.d 0,20	Not Reliable
>0,20 s.d 0,40	Slightly reliable
>0,40 s.d 0,60	Moderately reliable
>0,60 s.d 0,80	Reliable
>0,80 s.d 1,00	Highly Reliabel

Based on the field data (attached), before the treatment using the pretend play method, the average score was 29, with a percentage of 61.90% of the ideal score of 45. After the treatment, the average score of children's social communication skills was 42, with a percentage of 93.65% of the ideal score of 45.

Table 3. Paired Samples Statistics

Paired Samples Statistics			
		Mean	N
Pair 1	Pratest	29.0000	20
	Postest	42.4500	20

Overall, the data will be presented in a frequency distribution table classified into three categories: good, sufficient, and poor. The category classification was calculated with a 10-interval average variable score calculation.

$$\frac{45-15}{3} = 10$$

Table 4. Frequency Distribution Before and After Treatment

Before Treatment		Interval- Category	After Treatment	
Percentage	Frequency		Frequency	Percentage
10%	2	35-45 Good	19	95%
40%	8	25-34 Sufficient	1	5%
50%	10	15-24 Poor	-	-

In the table shown above, the percentage before and after the treatment indicates children's social communication skills obtained from the research instrument conducted through data collection during play activities. The data were then processed using the Wilcoxon test to compare data before and after treatment (Rudianto et al., 2020), with the following results:

Table 5. Wilcoxon Test Results

Subjek	(Xi)	(Yi)	Difference Yi - Xi	Rank	Rank Sign	
					+	-
1	29	57	28	17	17	-
2	35	62	27	15	15	-
3	26	56	30	19,5	19,5	-
4	34	62	28	17	17	-
5	45	63	18	8,5	8,5	-
6	49	63	14	3,5	3,5	-
7	45	60	15	5	5	-
8	33	61	28	17	17	-
9	31	54	23	13,5	13,5	-
10	26	56	30	19,5	19,5	-
11	47	63	16	6	6	-
12	43	63	20	10,5	10,5	-
13	40	63	23	13,5	13,5	-
14	33	53	20	10,5	10,5	-
15	52	61	9	1,5	1,5	-
16	52	61	9	1,5	1,5	-
17	29	47	18	8,5	8,5	-

18	49	63	14	3,5	3,5	-
19	44	61	17	7	7	-
20	38	60	22	12	12	-
<i>Whitung</i>						0

Table 6. Ranks

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
After - Before	Negative Ranks	0 ^a	.00	.00
	Positive Ranks	20 ^b	10.50	210.00
	Ties	0 ^c		
	Total	20		

A. After < Before

B. After > Before

C. After = Before

Based on the table above, it can be concluded that the output ranks show children's social communication skills before and after treatment using the pretend play method on negative ranks with a value of 0, indicating no decrease in social communication skills after treatment. Ties remain unchanged, and positive ranks show all children experienced an increase in social communication skills. The Wilcoxon test result shows a calculated Z (-3.923) with an Asymp Sig. (2-tailed) value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$), thus rejecting H_0 . This means the pretend play method significantly influences social communication skills.

B. Discussion

The research results show that the pretend play method influences children's social communication skills. The research instrument reveals children's social communication skills in speaking and listening. Pretend play is one method that can stimulate the improvement of children's social and communication skills (Istiqomah et al., 2023). Pretend play activities help children express language and understand what they hear, and understand proper social interactions according to norms and rules in their social environment. In practice, pretend play effectively develops children's morals and characters, shaping them into individuals with good character (Amri & Intisari, 2019).

Pretend play, similar to role-playing (Rambe et al., 2023), shows positive potential in stimulating children's communication skills when playing with peers compared to playing alone (Mulyani elin, 2023). Pretend play promotes children's language development, creativity, and character formation (Jaggy et al., 2023) through using words to describe characters, situations, and actions. The pretend play method is applied with themes relevant to children's lives because speaking ability is acquired from everyday life (Moeslichatoen, 2004).

The research shows that children's social communication skills before and after treatment with the pretend play method indicate an improvement. Communication skills factors include speech accuracy (Minto, 2022), word choice (Anas & Sapri, 2022), and language target accuracy. Social factors include natural behavior, eye contact with the conversation partner (Isticomah et al., 2022), willingness to respect others' opinions, appropriate gestures and expressions (Ningsih, 2023), voice clarity, fluency, and topic mastery. For example, when a child plays the role of a father, they can describe a father as authoritative and loving,

understanding a father's duties. When playing as a child, they show respectful behavior towards elders, use polite language, use good non-verbal language, and do not raise their voice when communicating.

The novelty of the pretend play method brings a unique impact on children's social communication skills as an essential factor in developing these skills. Through this method, children can interact with peers, share roles, and understand others' perspectives. Hence, involving children in such activities is an effective intervention strategy in the learning process, especially in kindergarten. The pretend play method benefits not only students but also teachers, parents, and future researchers. Teachers can use these findings to design learning activities, choosing pretend play as a method to stimulate children's social communication skills. Future researchers can develop further studies and understand the relationship between pretend play and children's social skills in-depth.

The limitations of this study relate to time constraints, as children must be involved in all activities, and children's interests and participation vary due to their natural or spontaneous behavior without following the existing scenario. Therefore, understanding children's interests in playing roles is essential for more flexible implementation. This is important because children's natural behavior is part of their developmental changes.

The **implications** of this research underscore the significant role that pretend play can play in enhancing children's social communication skills. Educational practitioners and policymakers should consider incorporating pretend play activities into early childhood education curricula to foster better communication skills, social interactions, and overall developmental outcomes. By leveraging the benefits of pretend play, educators can create more engaging and effective learning environments that support children's holistic development. **The research contributes** to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence on the positive impact of pretend play on children's social communication skills. It bridges the gap in understanding how pretend play can be an interdisciplinary approach, influencing not only language and cognitive development but also social behaviors and character building. This study highlights the importance of interactive and imaginative play in early childhood education, offering practical insights for educators and researchers in developing effective learning strategies.

One of the primary **limitations** of this study is the time constraint, which affected the extent to which children could be consistently involved in all activities. Additionally, the variability in children's interests and spontaneous behaviors posed challenges in maintaining uniformity in the play scenarios. These factors may have influenced the outcomes and should be considered when interpreting the results. The sample size and setting of the study, limited to one kindergarten in Makassar City, also restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. **Future research** should aim to address these limitations by extending the duration of studies and including a more diverse and larger sample size across different geographical and socio-economic settings. Additionally, exploring the long-term effects of pretend play on various aspects of child development, including emotional regulation and academic performance, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of its benefits. Investigating the role of teacher and parental involvement in facilitating pretend play and its impact on children's developmental outcomes would also be valuable for developing holistic educational interventions.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, this study confirms that the pretend play method affects children's social communication skills in kindergarten. Therefore, pretend play is a beneficial tool in early childhood education. With empirical evidence supporting its effectiveness, pretend play should be considered a critical component in educational strategies aimed at facilitating children's social and communication development. Consequently, this study contributes not only to child development theory but also has significant practical applications in developing more effective and inclusive early childhood education programs.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

H designed the study, developed the research methodology, and conducted literature review and validation of results. S and NAA wrote the initial draft of the manuscript, edited, and revised the manuscript. NA and IM conducted literature review, result validation, and editing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript version.

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