Potential of the ELLECCT in teachers’ professional development: A commentary on Weadman, Serry and Snow (2022)

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Abstract
There are important aspects to consider before adapting the Emergent Literacy and Language Early Childhood Checklist for Teachers (ELLECCT) for improving teachers’ shared book reading strategies in different teaching contexts. To exemplify possible challenges when adapting the ELLECCT, this commentary uses the early childhood education context in Sweden.

Keywords
Early childhood education, oral language, language support, children, observation tool

Early childhood teachers play a key role in supporting children’s oral language and the Emergent Literacy and Language Early Childhood Checklist for Teachers (ELLECCT; Weadman et al., 2022) might be a useful tool for improving the quality of their shared book reading. The ELLECCT has the potential to enable teachers to improve their language-supportive practices and to discover new strategies for supporting children’s language and emergent literacy development. When using the ELLECCT, it may be possible for the teachers to pay greater attention to their own extratextual and paralinguistic strategies during their observations of their interactive book reading together with the children. However, there are some aspects and challenges which are important to consider before adapting the ELLECCT into new teaching contexts. To exemplify possible challenges when adapting the ELLECCT, this commentary uses the early childhood education context in Sweden.

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In Sweden, every child aged 1 to 5 years is legally entitled to attend early childhood education. The staff must have the training or experience necessary to support child development so that the aim to support all children can be fulfilled (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018). The early years curriculum highlights that ‘... children should be offered a stimulating environment and given the opportunity to develop their language by listening to reading aloud and discussing literature and other texts’. Teachers should therefore be encouraged to use high-quality language interactions during book reading. One way to provide a clear focus on book reading in the early childhood education practice would be using a tool like the ELLECCT.

However, it has been shown that early childhood education in Sweden varies greatly in quality and does not all support children’s language equally well (Swedish School Inspectorate, 2017). It might therefore be a challenge for many teachers to use a specific tool for shared book reading (like the ELLECCT) when general language-supportive models and approaches in early childhood educational settings are not in place. According to the Swedish Education Act, early childhood education aims to promote all children’s development and learning as well as a lifelong desire to learn. Internationally, Swedish early childhood education is described as ‘educare’, which is based on the premise that learning and care cannot be separated and is reflected in the integrated and cohesive practice. Many circumstances affect the quality, and high quality is usually described as consisting of several interacting factors, such as well-trained staff with pedagogical competence, ability to interact with the children, content knowledge and an active and communicative view of their assignment and of children’s learning and learning processes. Structural factors that affect quality are, of course, access to resources, teachers’ competence development and management of the actual early childhood education setting. High-quality pedagogical relationships with the children contain an intertwining of care and teaching, and the staff’s relationships with the children are important. Another important aspect to be able to improve the quality of their work is that teachers are given reasonable conditions in the form of sufficient time for analysing and discussing, for example, observations of how they interact with the children. Something that teachers often lack is sufficient time to reflect on their own practice.

To increase the teachers’ general knowledge about supporting children’s language, a structured programme or model for language support should be implemented on a large scale in early childhood education settings in Sweden, language support models based on evidence-based language-supportive strategies. Given the aforementioned variations and shortcomings in language support for children, teachers need more knowledge about how to increase the opportunities for the children to develop and expand their language. This can, for example, be done by implementing a general ‘communication and language friendly’ approach towards the children. A language-supportive model that recently has been tested in early childhood educational settings in Sweden is the Early Educational Language Support Activities (ELSA) model (Nordberg, 2019; Rönnerman & Nordberg, in press). In the ELSA model, the Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool (Dockrell et al., 2015) has been used. This tool has been translated and adapted for the Swedish early childhood context in close cooperation with early education teachers.

The ELSA model involves that the teachers select an everyday situation they want to develop regarding their language support; for example, it can be the meal situation. The
situation is then video-filmed and the teachers watch it and fill in the observation tool’s protocol (Dockrell et al., 2015). Then, structured collegial discussions and reflections take place, in line with action research, on how to understand their own language support and where to go next (Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2021; Rönnerman et al., 2015). Accordingly, the observation tool is used before and after collegial discussions take place. When using a general language support strategy, like in this ELSA model, the teachers can find out what kind of improved language support they need to focus and develop. Maybe they detect that their work on shared book reading needs to be improved and developed. In such a case, the ELLECCT (Weadman et al., 2022) could be useful in complementing a generic language support approach, to try to raise the quality of the interactive book reading.

Early years settings are complex. Language-supporting interactions can happen in different ways. When using a tool like the ELLECCT in Swedish early childhood educational settings, it would be necessary to take further contextual aspects into account. There is no actual tradition among teachers and other professions in Sweden of using an observation tool like the ELLECCT for shared book reading. A suggestion to inspire the teachers to evaluate their language support would be to try to increase the teachers’ knowledge about the benefit of shared book reading. This can be done during their regular collegial discussions where they can learn more about current research in the research field of interactive book reading. The teachers themselves may in that case discover the usefulness of an observation tool such as the ELLECCT during their shared book reading. As we discovered when implementing language-supportive work via the ELSA model in Swedish early childhood educational settings (Rönnerman & Nordberg, in press), the best work is always done when the teachers themselves gain insight into what they need to improve in their educational practice.

Author contribution(s)

Ann Nordberg: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Software; Supervision; Validation; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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