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# Socio-cultural differences and the adjustment of mothers' speech to their children's cognitive and language comprehension skills

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## Abstract

This study compares the ways in which mothers with two different levels of education adjust to their 3-to-5 year-old children's cognitive and language comprehension skills when engaged in different tasks, such as doing jigsaw puzzles, seriation and laying a table. The children were divided into groups with a low and a high level of development, as measured by Raven's Matrices and the Reynell Language Comprehension Scale.

Using Wertsch's model [Wertsch J. (1985). *Vygotsky and the social formation of the mind*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press] as our basis, we analysed the cognitive demands contained in the mothers' speech (abbreviation and referential perspective). The results indicated that mothers of both educational levels adjusted their speech to their children's level of development. However, more educated mothers were more demanding and challenging with both low- and high-skilled children, using more abbreviated directives and a higher level of referential expressions. There were small differences between the task effects on the groups.

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*Keywords:* Socio-cultural differences; Mothers' scaffolding speech; Zone of proximal development; Cognitive development

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most important aspects of instructional interactions between mothers and their children involves how the mothers' behaviour is contingent on the children's ages and current skills. One facet of the tutoring process in asymmetric adult-child dyads is the way in which strategies are adopted to match the difficulties the child experiences in relation to the task and his/her level of development. During play or problem-solving activities mothers alter their scaffolding strategies depending on their child's age (Freund, 1990; Gauvain, 1995; Greenfield, 1984; Rogoff, Ellis, & Gardner, 1984; Wertsch & Stone, 1985; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976): they adapt the strategies they use to regulate the child's actions in accordance with both cognitive and language-related (particularly understanding) difficulties (Deleau, Gandon, & Taburet, 1993; Palacios, González, & Moreno, 1992; Sorsby & Martlew, 1991; Wertsch & Sammarco, 1985). Parent and Moss (1994) also show the effect of children's verbal skills on scaffolding strategies, which enable adults to use a greater or lesser amount of verbal mediation in order to communicate, regulate the action and adjust to children's skills.

### 1.1. *Language and scaffolding strategies*

The use of spoken language can also be related to cultural values (McNaughton, 1996), as in the case of the Navajo in the United States or the Gusii in Kenya (Rogoff, 1990). Similarly, in western societies not all social groups attach the same value to the use of spoken language, particularly where joint task-resolution interactions are concerned, and imitation and modelling often substitute the use of the word in interactive situations in which an adult attempts to teach a child. Studies on parents' educational practises reveal that non-verbal procedures and learning by observation are used more by parents with lower socio-cultural levels (Rogoff, 1990; Rogoff, Mistry, Göncü, & Mosier, 1993), whereas parents with higher socio-cultural levels seem to have incorporated more formal teaching practises, like using spoken language as the main interactive medium, into their own educational techniques (Bernstein, 1975, 1996; Delgado-Gaitan, 1993; Rogoff et al., 1993; Tudge, Putman, & Sidden, 1994).

However, the role that language plays in cognitive functioning, and particularly in metacognitive thinking and other higher mental functions (DeLoache & Brown, 1997/1979; Scribner & Cole, 1982; Vygotsky, 1985), justifies taking it into account when studying mothers' scaffolding interactions. For example, the skill needed to use plans or models as a source of information to guide action is different from that involved in spontaneous planning (Gauvain, de la Ossa & Hurtado-Ortiz, 2001). It is an important metacognitive skill (Flavell, 1979), which should be appropriated by the child within the context of meaningful interactions with adults. Recent research (Gauvain et al., 2001; Ossa & Gauvain, 2001) has showed that in a problem-solving context, when mothers directed children's attention to a plan with the aim of telling them what to do next or of conveying information to monitor the result of their actions, in a post-test pre-school children performed better in their use of the plan to anticipate action.

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