

The Effect of Foreign Language Education on Preschoolers' Native Language Development

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine how foreign language education may affect preschool children's native language development. The early childhood years represent a critical period in learning and development. At this age, children are very receptive to learning a second language. Ideally, for effective language learning to occur, a stimulating and rich linguistic environment is required. Children learn a language, not because they are subjected to a similar conditioning process, but because they possess an inborn capacity which permits them to acquire a language as a normal maturational process. This capacity is universal. The child has an innate language acquiring device. He learns a language by exposure to it in society and by unconsciously forming certain hypothesis about language, which he goes on modifying till he comes to the adult model to which he is for the most part exposed. So the child goes on constructing an innate grammar, operating over generalized rules. The study concluded that foreign language education given to preschool children in institutions improves children's language skills (both foreign and native). Embedding L2 learning within a meaningful context has typically been demonstrated to be an effective way of motivating children and encouraging the development of L1 skills. The study recommended that it is important to note that teachers need to be provided with support and training to use the technology to enhance pedagogical practices as these technologies are merely useful tools to enhance teaching and learning in the language classroom.

Keywords: Foreign Language Education, Preschoolers, Native Language Development, New Technologies, and Content-Based Instruction

Introduction

Language is a communication tool that was born out of the necessity of conveying ideas and participating socially. Newborns are acquainted with the world through hearing their native language and acquire it in a short time by observing and imitating the language, so that they can communicate with their parents, caretakers and other people in their environment (Behrmann, 2018).

There is a rapidly growing interest in second and foreign language learning and teaching (Dixon et al., 2012). This is partially due to the huge impact that English has had globally, but also owing to the rapidly growing interest in other languages, particularly Asian languages such as Mandarin Chinese (Hu, 2007). The early childhood years represent a critical period in learning and development. During these first few years young children develop language and other cognitive skills at a very rapid pace. At this age, children are also very receptive to learning a second language. If children learn a second language at an early age, they are more likely to be able to pronounce foreign language words similar to a native speaker and eventually learn the complex grammatical system of the second language. Young children may also be less self-conscious than older children and adolescents (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Moreover, there are potential benefits for children learning a second language in terms of enhanced executive and cognitive function including meta-linguistic awareness (Bialystok & Viswanathan, 2009). Through learning a second language, children also learn about other cultures and increase their cultural awareness and understanding of different cultural practices and behaviours, and thus, become more appreciative of diversity and different cultures through this experience. This experience of learning a second or foreign language in the important early childhood years sets the seed for growth, future development and engagement in learning a second language. Ideally, for effective language learning to occur, a stimulating and rich linguistic environment is required. Thus, children need to be given many opportunities to be actively engaged and interact with others, as occurs when learning the first language. This can be quite a challenge in the foreign language classroom, as typically children learning a second language in a foreign language context have little exposure to the language outside of the classroom. One way to remedy this is to utilise the new technologies to enhance learning by giving children opportunities to interact and engage with native speakers. Innovations in technologies are serving a growing and increasingly important role in early childhood education all around the world.

Conceptual Review

Foreign Language Education

Bilingualism is reported to have a positive effect on the brain when acquired at an early age. It has been observed that students who speak more than one language perform better in mathematics and reading skills than their peers (Merritt, 2013). In addition, it was observed that children who were involved in learning two languages in early childhood are more skilled in focusing on relevant information, as well as ignoring irrelevant and misleading stimuli. The reason for this is that by learning another language, they move between two different — systems of rules and acquire a higher level of difficulty in terms of recognition, interpretation, and language proficiency. Therefore, two languages support critical thinking and improve problem solving (Merritt, 2013). Learning a second language can also improve native language skills. In general, not much attention is paid to grammatical structures of the native language, but when the second language highlights the functioning of grammar, conjunctions and sentence structure, awareness about L1 grammar increases. These transferable skills give bilingual individuals more information about their native language, so they use language more effectively both in communication and in writing (Merritt, 2013). Although student-centered teaching approaches are foreseen in the teaching of foreign languages at all educational levels in the existing programs, it is observed that traditional teaching methods are widely used in practice (Kocaman, 1983). Given the research on language and language teaching, it is clear that acquiring language requires developing a number of strategies. Determining these strategies in the field of foreign language teaching is crucial in terms of fulfilling foreign language learning goals.

In foreign language teaching, it is necessary to create real life environments for individuals and show them that they can navigate matters and overcome obstacles they encounter by using the target language. Andresen et al. (2000) developed a list of criteria for life-based learning. Researchers state that some features are necessary for a learning process to be truly experiential. The first of these features relates to the purpose of experience-based learning—experiences should include meaningful knowledge for students. The second point is to create an environment where students are personally engaged in the learning process. Another feature is the necessity for students to have continual opportunity to write or discuss their experiences throughout the process. The students are a part of the process, not only with their minds, but also with their senses and emotions. Students' previous knowledge and habits should be included in the process. Finally, teachers need to create and foster feelings of trust, respect, openness, excitement and curiosity so that students can learn.

Native Language Development

Language acquisition is the process whereby children achieve a fluent control of their native language (Varshney, 2003). The ability to get and understand the language is inherited genetically but the particular language that children speak is culturally and environmentally transmitted to them. Children all over the world acquire their first language without tutoring. Whereas a child exposed to speak to an English speaking community begins to speak English fluently, the other one exposed to a community of Indonesian speakers, begins to use Indonesia fluently. Language acquisition thus appears to be different in kind from the acquisition of other skill such as swimming, dancing, or gymnastics. Native language acquisition is much less likely to be affected by mental retardation than the acquisition of other intellectual skill activities. Every normal human child learns one or more language unless he is brought up in linguistic isolation, and learns the essentials of his language by a fairly little age, say by six.

Parents do not teach the native language to their children formally. Although they may try to reinforce their child's verbal behavior with smiles or other ways or through the gap between their mature linguistic competence and the child's beginning by means of "baby talk". But there is no particular reason to believe that such ability appears on the child's final achievement in becoming a native speaker of his parents' language; children can pick up a language like playing a game with other children to extend their language abilities. The specific environmental factors that make it possible for language acquisition to occur, but the primary element would appear to be merely sufficient exposure to language use in a social context. Children seem to learn language the way they learn to walk.

Foreign Language Education and Native Language Development

Many different research results can be found regarding the relationship between foreign language and native language acquisition. For example, a series of cross-sectional studies have been conducted to examine lexical processing skills in children learning native and foreign languages (Jia et al., 2006; Kohnert & Bates, 2002; Turunen, 2019). Participants, consisting of 5-year-old children whose native language is Spanish and foreign language is English, have been subjected to formal English (L2) experiences at school. Among the lexical processing criteria, image naming (Jia et al., 2006) and word verification were performed. The findings revealed that there were positive increases in both languages, and it was observed that relatively more learning outcomes occurred in L2 in the passing weeks (Kohnert & Bates, 2002).

When the relationship between preschool children's language skills and early reading skills is investigated, different conclusions are found. Some studies have found positive predictive relationships between language and later reading skills. For example, Lonigan et al. (2000) stated that children's receptive and expressive vocabulary skills predict their subsequent native and foreign language skills. Windsor et al. (2010) studied with early childhood groups that had either language impairment or had normal language development regarding the level of the native language (Spanish) and foreign language (English). They found that both normal and language impaired groups were performing better in their native language (Spanish) as well as in the foreign language (English).

Other evidence for the relationship between early foreign language acquisition and native language skills has contradictory findings. Storch and Whitehurst (2002) found that the development of native language acquisition during the preschool period weakened foreign language acquisition. In addition, the measurements performed by the US Department of Health and Human Services revealed that children's initial vocabulary abilities did not predict foreign language acquisitions that occurred until the end of a teaching period (US DHHS, 2003). Due to differences in measurements and designs, studies have inconsistent findings. Therefore, additional research is needed to clarify the relationship among foreign languages, components of the native language and subsequent language acquisition. As can be seen, more research is needed on this subject, as there is relatively little information about the acquisition and output of two different languages.

Effect of Foreign Language Education on Preschoolers' Native Language Development

It should not be overlooked that the information presented so far regarding foreign language education in preschool period is the results of foreign research. There are some studies in Turkey regarding preschool children's foreign language education. In most of these studies, the opinions of parents and teachers about foreign language education during preschool period were examined (Çetintaş & Yazıcı, 2016; Karakus, 2016). In these studies, it is understood that both parents and teachers gave their positive opinions about learning a foreign language during early years. On the other hand, in a study conducted in an experimental design (Sığırtmaç & Özbek, 2009), it was determined that the English vocabulary training given to 4-6 year-old children positively affects their English vocabulary.

In addition, in another study that Modiri conducted, the levels of achievement of 5-6 year-old children who had traditional English education based on memorization

with English educational activities reinforced with music activities (Modiri, 2010) were compared. The study of Karakoç (2007), which is another example of the positive perception of foreign language education in preschool period, is also remarkable. Karakoç developed an English curriculum for kindergartens in her master thesis. In the vast majority of private preschool education institutions, children receive foreign language education, which is emphasized as a curricular bonus, which increases enrollments for these schools. Experimental studies in this sense, (Modiri, 2010; Sığirtmaç & Özbek, 2009; Uslu 2018) reveal the positive effects of preschool children having foreign language education. However, the additional possible impact of foreign language education on preschool children's mother tongue remains uncertain both nationally and internationally. It is inevitable to make use of different methods and approaches to facilitate and accelerate the process of teaching and learning foreign languages and to improve native language. For this reason, in the present study, the effect of life-focused foreign language teaching practices on native language development of 4 and 5 year-olds was investigated via experimental research model.

The acquisition of the native language is a very long and complex process, but native language acquisition of each individual is completed as a result of a series of widely accepted stages (Al-Husban, 2020; An & Mindrila, 2020; Chua & Lin, 2020; Cüceloğlu, 2011; Ergin & Koçak, 2018; Gurgenedze, 2018; Laadem & Mallahi, 2019). Besides, it is emphasized that learning or speaking only one language is not enough today and learning one or more foreign languages is becoming more and more essential. Additionally of interest, findings of other studies conducted on the relationship between early foreign language acquisition and native language skills have reached contradictory conclusions. The effective acquisition of native language and foreign language at an early age plays an important role in language development throughout life. At the beginning of the school years, children experience rapid increases in their native language and foreign language vocabulary, especially with the effect of formal learning environments (Clark, 1995).

Use of New Technologies to Facilitate Language Learning

The rapid development in digital technologies enables us to be creative and innovative in the way that we teach second languages. It can be used as a tool to enhance language learning, through increasing the opportunities for contact with native speakers and input from the target language. This interactive exchange and experience with native speakers facilitates learning the language (vocabulary and grammar) as well as cultural knowledge and competency associated with using the language to communicate effectively and appropriately. Moreover, this experience

broadens and deepens young children's as well as teacher's knowledge and understanding of the different cultures and languages. New technologies can be used to increase student motivation and engagement in the second language learning classroom. Typically, young children use a variety of technologies while involved in everyday activities at home. This is one reason why we need to also include these technologies in the classroom. One technology that has proved popular and an effective tool in teaching/learning in the second language classroom is the Interactive Whiteboard (IWB) (Xu & Moloney, 2011). The visual aspect of the IWB appears to be the primary reason for active motivated engagement in the learning process (Smith, Hardman, & Higgins, 2006). The opportunity that it gives students to present and discuss their work has been found to improve attention and engagement in the learning process. This type of technology can be used to provide opportunities for children to actively engage in different activities for different purposes (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009).

Additional technologies can also be used in language learning activities including email, Apple or Android apps, and social media applications such as Skype, Facebook and YouTube channels if available. Use of virtual worlds such as Minecraft has become popular in teaching/ learning languages, particularly with adults but also with older children. The activities and goals involved in the use of these technologies can be organised so that they involve collaborative learning between peers. For younger children, electronic books and games can be of great benefit. These types of activities can be projected onto the interactive whiteboard so that the whole class or groups of children can be actively engaged and/or they can be used by individual children on portable tablets so that the content can be learned and revised. As Betcher and Lee (2009) point out, the teacher needs to understand how to use these technologies in creative and meaningful ways to actively engage children in the learning process.

Content-Based Instruction

A particularly suitable approach for teaching young children a second or foreign language is content-based instruction (Snow 1999). Content is interpreted as the use of subject matter as a vehicle for second or foreign language teaching/learning. The language is learned within the context of a specific academic subject or topic. Thus, second-language learners learn both language and content simultaneously. According to Genesee (1994), this content can refer to any topic or theme of interest or importance to the learners. Cultural information associated with the target language is also considered to be an integral part of learning the language (Huang, 2003). Thus, this approach provides opportunities for cultural learning and language development. A theme-based approach has proven to be an effective

method of language learning for young children. Concrete and highly-contextualized content can be incorporated into this teaching approach, which is very suitable for use with young children and for learners with limited levels of L2 proficiency (Archibald et al., 2006). A theme-based approach provides opportunities for children to use the target language in meaningful contexts. By adopting this approach, content material is contextualized, which makes it both easier to process and serve as meaningful input for language learning for young children. If children's interests are taken into consideration then children are more likely to be motivated and engaged (Valentine & Repath-Martos, 1997). The L1 and L2 content can be aligned so that topic content in the L1 and L2 serve to reinforce each other (Snow, 2001). With careful and considered implementation, the integration of topic content in the L1 and L2 can help children contextualize their L2 learning and make connections and reinforce learning in the L1 and L2. This, in turn, can lead to improved motivation and learning. In addition, new concepts and ideas can be taught in their first language prior to being introduced or revisited in their second language lessons. There are many interesting and engaging themes or topics that are suitably engaging for young children that the partner teachers can select. This includes animals, foods and about us and our daily lives.

Conclusion

In Nigeria, it is well known that a very large majority of private schools teach a foreign language (usually English) in their preschools while public institutions have no foreign education practices in their preschool classes. In fact, foreign language education is provided in most of the private preschool institutions. The study concluded that foreign language education given to preschool children in these institutions improves children's language skills (both foreign and native). Embedding L2 learning within a meaningful context has typically been demonstrated to be an effective way of motivating children and encouraging the development of L1 skills. There are some problems in foreign language acquisition by preschoolers namely: grammatical errors, phonological errors, incorrect utterances, imitation, repetition, correction, indicating the question, learning by experiences, and laziness. In teaching children at home, it is better for the parents to pronounce the word genuinely. It means that parents should give the real pronunciation to the child.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that the native language development of children should be followed carefully in institutions where foreign language education is taught.
2. During the preschool period, children are prone to language acquisition and learning in terms of their cognitive and language development characteristics. Therefore, teaching materials and tools suitable for a life-focused learning approach and techniques can be developed within preschool native and foreign language teaching programs.
3. Just knowing a foreign language may not be enough to give foreign language education to children during the preschool period. Therefore, foreign language education programs should be prepared with appropriate content, and the practitioners should be able to interact effectively with children regarding their ages and developmental characteristics.
4. It is important to note that teachers need to be provided with support and training to use the technology to enhance pedagogical practices as these technologies are merely useful tools to enhance teaching and learning in the language classroom.

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