

How Can English Education for Preschool Children Be Developed?

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ABSTRACT

With the strengthening and deepening of international communication, English occupies the most important position among thousands of languages in the world as the universal language. In many non-English speaking countries with well-developed educational resources, English learning (EL) has been popularized among preschool children. However, many people are sceptical about preschool children's early learning of English and believe that it may affect children's later language learning (LL). English educators are also discussing if it is better for children to learn English as early as possible and what teaching strategies should educators adopt according to children's learning characteristics. The purpose of this article is to discuss the aforementioned issues in light of the physiological, emotional and cognitive factors and proposes a few strategies that educators can use in their language teaching classroom, for example, to create a better learning environment, encourage the use of technology devices, and enhance student confidence and self-esteem. This article also examines the current situation and future development of China's preschool English education in combination with China's current education policies: the proportion of English in academic work of preschool students in China is decreasing, and English as a second language for preschoolers may flourish in the direction of interest and elites.

Keywords: *Preschool Children, English Teaching, Language Learning.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Preschool children mainly refer to children before entering elementary school with an age range of 2-6 years in this article. Although English education for preschool children is now widespread in many countries, the rationale behind this phenomenon is still worth exploring. Accordingly, the following article will examine the rationale from three different perspectives based on the characteristics of the children themselves, suggest various measures educators can employ and examine the current situation and future development of China's preschool English education, specifically the impact of China's current education policy.

2. THE THEORETICAL BASIS FOR PRESCHOOL CHILDREN TO LEARN ENGLISH

2.1. Physiological factors

A number of researchers emphasize the importance of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) [1]. According to

CPH theory, 2-3 years old is the critical period for children's oral language development, and 4-5 years old is for written language. It would be difficult for all human beings to master a language if they missed this period, which is the preschool stage. The CPH theory is well exemplified by the example of Kamala, a 'Wolf child' in India. Kamala left the human language environment in the critical period of language development and did not get the opportunity of early education. She barely learned a few words until seven years after she returned to the human world, and still has difficulty communicating with humans.

CPH theory is not only applicable to learning of native language, but also learning of a second language (L2). It can be explained by CPH theory that compared to adults, children are more suitable for learning L2 due to the difference in the way their brain is organized [1].

However, the scientific nature of L2 learning for preschool children does not mean that older people have no advantages in L2 learning. Older people tend to perform better in English teaching activities in a school setting. It is at best simplistic and at worst inaccurate to

conclude that young people learn better than older people [2].

2.2. Emotional factors

From the perspective of Educational Psychology, the affective attitude of learners is an important factor affecting the learning effect in the learning process. The affective attitude mentioned here mainly includes the learner's motivation, attitude, personality and so on.

There is a big difference between teaching a foreign language to adults and children, and the main difference lies in their emotional attitudes. The most obvious point is that adults often feel restrained or embarrassed when they step out of their comfort zone especially when learning something completely new. However, most preschool children have not experienced the burden of homework and the pressure of learning. They are always enthusiastic and lively when trying something special before entering primary school [3]. Compared with adults, children are more curious and interested in learning, so the learning atmosphere between them will be more relaxed. In this way, children can better enter the learning state, and at the same time master a more authentic accent in a cheerful mood. Children also progress slightly faster than adults.

2.3. Cognitive factors

Language not only serves as a bridge for communication and information transmission in human society, but also plays a significant role in one's self-definition and as an individual and a social being[4]. Learning is not just a cognitive process that occurs in the individual's brain, it involves socialization. It is accomplished in a social context, whether taught in school or at home. Judith et al. [4] suggests that an encouraging learning environment motivates dialogue, apprenticeship and mentoring, which would definitely help children to get in touch with the outside world and form the ability to judge things. This is a crucial part in the growth of children, and it also has an impact on the life-long development of children.

On the other hand, in the process of LL (including L1 and L2), children gradually use language to think. It's an unconscious and natural process which will promote the development of children's intelligence and promote subsequent LL.

3. THE TEACHING STRATEGIES EDUCATORS SHOULD TAKE FOR PRESCHOOL TEACHING

Cameron [3] states that it is erroneous to suppose that children only need to learn simple English words and usages, such as numbers and colors. As mentioned above, preschool children are in the critical period of language

learning and have great potential in language learning. Preschool educators are in a critical position to take a longer view and push preschool children to face new challenges without wasting their language learning potential. There are several measures that educators could adopt.

3.1. Create a language learning environment

All children can profit from language learning (LL) and good education should provide effective language instruction and guidance for children [4]. One of the main reasons why children can learn their mother tongue easily is that they have a complete language environment. Educators should try their best to create an English-related environment for preschoolers' EL to cultivate their interests and improve children's enthusiasm for communicating in English. The following practices apply to early education centers, training institutions and bilingual kindergartens:

3.1.1. Stick corresponding English words on indoor objects

Educators could stick corresponding English words on indoor objects, write English mottos and post English comics in the classroom. In addition, the content of English teaching can be combined with these words and comics to make children immersed in the atmosphere of EL.

3.1.2. Communicate with children in English at any time

Educators should increase the opportunities for children to speak, so that children can learn and use English in a relaxed and happy atmosphere. During the communication children can remember the English content they have learned in a subtle way, so as to support their second language learning and promote the continuous improvement of their language skills[5]. When children find it difficult to understand what the educator wants to express, the educator can use body language to assist. In this way, children can be trained to think in English.

3.2. Use technology devices to assist teaching

Cameron [3] points out that computers and the Internet have changed the way of language learning. Among the 11,775 children surveyed by the Chinese Youth Research Association [6], computers and applications on mobile phone were the most frequently used auxiliary means for their EL, accounting for 57% of the total. The more they liked English, the more often they used various auxiliary means.

Educators cannot ignore the tremendous changes that the Internet has brought to traditional education. Educators should enrich their own teaching methods and display their knowledge to students in a more vivid way through the integration of multimedia methods such as video playback and slide show in the classroom to integrate traditional education with scientific and technological development[7].

3.3. Enhance preschoolers' confidence in EL

Children first come into contact with a new language with curiosity and enthusiasm, but in many cases this positive emotion will be transformed into fear by improper actions of the educator and parents [3]. Children will encounter many difficulties in learning English. At this time, encouragement and praise are necessary means to stimulate children's self-motivated and enhance their self-confidence and self-esteem. Teachers should often say "Good! Well-done! Wonderful! Cool!" such encouraging statements to stimulate children's learning enthusiasm, set up their sense of achievement [8].

When children have aversion and resistance, teachers should be more patient and try to establish a harmonious relationship with them [9]. To cultivate preschool children's self-confidence, the bond is love and the foundation is emotional education, which has always been a blind spot of traditional education.

4. THE CURRENT SITUATION AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH TEACHING FOR PRESCHOOL CHILDREN IN CHINA

4.1. The current situation

Looking around the world, major Western countries such as Britain, France and Germany have attached increasing importance to foreign LL since the last century. In China, English was introduced as a compulsory course in elementary school classrooms in 2001. With more than 350 million learners [10], English has become the three main subjects in primary and secondary schools together with Chinese and mathematics and been included in university entrance examination. The government's guidance for preschool children's EL is to improve the national standards of foreign language use and parents suppose their children will reap benefits [3]. English teaching soon became popular among preschoolers as a result of this policy.

According to official data released by the Chinese Youth Research Association[6], as of 2016, 67.2% of children in China started learning English before the age of 5. In nearly 20 years, a large number of English tutoring centres have been established outside the home. Early education centres, training institutions and

bilingual kindergartens have been popularized in almost every city in China.

4.2. Future development

In July 2021, the State Council of China issued the "Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Students' Homework and Off-campus Training in Compulsory Education". And Shanghai Municipal Education Commission [11] issued a notice that the final English test will no longer be conducted at the elementary school level. The two policies are aimed at easing the study burden of primary and middle school students. On the other hand, as Shanghai is the largest city in China, the issuance of this policy also means that in the future, the importance of English in primary and secondary schools may gradually decline.

Based on these new policies we need to reconsider the future trends of EL in China. One inclination is the EL of preschool children will gradually develop to the direction of interest. As preschool children will not face the pressure of exams in the short term, future EL is likely to revolve around children who are genuinely interested in a second foreign language. Another inclination is that due to the gradual banning of off-campus training institutions, professional English training for preschool children may only be conducted in the form of tutors. However, it is difficult for ordinary families to afford to hire expert tutors. Therefore, preschoolers' English teaching may develop towards the direction of elite.

5. CONCLUSION

The EL of preschool children has been widely concerned and discussed since the last century. We can infer the rationality of preschoolers' English learning through CPH theory, children's emotional attitude and cognitive development. It is precisely because of these rationalities that educators need to adopt relevant methods and strategies to adapt to children in teaching activities, including creating a language environment, combining scientific and technological means to assist teaching, and fostering students' self-confidence. This article also analyzes the development of EL for preschool children in China and the latest policy changes. As the most populous country in the world, more than 60% of children in China begin to learn English before entering elementary school. However, the relevant policies recently issued by the Chinese government are gradually reducing the proportion of English in students' academic work. In the future, EL for preschoolers may develop to the direction of interest and elite.

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