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INTE2012**Age Factor in Foreign Language Education At Preschool
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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to find out preschool teacher educators' opinions on foreign language education at preschool. The opinions of a preschool teacher educator at a state university and a teacher at a preschool in a private institution were obtained through structured and semi structured interviews. The opinions were then coded and categorized. The emerging categories were the effects of foreign language education on children's mental development, the age to start foreign language education, teachers of foreign language, and ways of teaching foreign language to preschoolers. The participants agreed on the beneficial effects of foreign language education at early ages, methods of teaching, and the qualities of teachers. However, they differed in the appropriate age to start foreign language education.

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1. Main text

The introduction of foreign language education in preschool educational institutions in Turkey has fuelled discussions on its rationale. Those who have welcomed the development claim that starting foreign language education as early as possible – preferably before the age of seven – enables learners to reach higher levels of language proficiency and improves their awareness of their mother tongue. The opposition front has viewed the change in policy as a threat to children's mastery of their mother tongue as well as to their overall cognitive skills (Celebi 2006; Demircan 2006). In the very centre of the discussions are the best age to start foreign language education, its effects of the mental and linguistic development of children, and the way foreign language education should be given.

Children, their parents, teachers, and teacher educators are the main stakeholders in this policy change, as in other educational policies, a fact that makes their opinions on the issue important. Recent research

has looked into opinions of teachers as the implementers of the policy. Equally as important is what opinions teacher educators at universities hold as they educate the teachers in preschool educational institutions.

In her study with 20 English teachers, 34 preschool teachers, and 274 families in Seyhan district, Adana, Kucuk (2006) found that most members of the sample group were in favour of foreign language education in preschool. English teachers believed early it is both beneficial and necessary for children's foreign language development. They said that they used songs, games, art, and drama as principle techniques of teaching, and reported that children developed a positive attitude toward foreign language and tried to use it outside the class. A majority of the English teachers reported that children did not mix their mother tongue Turkish and English. Preschool teachers reported similar support for foreign language education in preschool. 85 percent of the teachers reported a variety of reasons ranging from age factor to the European Union process. Most believed that foreign language education developed the children's linguistic, conceptual, cognitive, social, and emotional development. The greatest support for foreign language education in preschool came from families (93%) who found it necessary to have foreign language education in preschool.

Another study by Aytar and Öğretir (2008) found somewhat similar results in a larger sample in Çankaya, Ankara. Of the 350 parents interviewed for the study, 94% said that foreign language education would have a positive impact on the cognitive and linguistic development of their preschool children. However, 66% acknowledged that foreign language education was not a factor for their choosing that particular institution. Of the 33% percent of the parents who reported that foreign language education at preschool was not as much as it should be and should be incorporated in all the activities. Similarly, a vast majority of the teachers believed that foreign language education is necessary at preschool level because children learn better at an early age and would have an easier life in school in succeeding years. 57% of the teachers believed that 5-6 were optimal ages to learn a foreign language and others thought 3-4 could be even better (35%).

2. Method

This section gives detail about the participants, research instruments, and data analysis methods.

2.1 Participants:

The first participant was a preschool teacher educator at a Turkish state university. The second participant was a teacher of English at a preschool institution. The first participant has been working as an assistant professor in a state university at the preschool teaching department. The second participant has been working in a private school as an English teacher and she is an experienced and only teacher working at all levels of the preschool.

2.2 Data collection:

In this study data were collected through structured interviews. Data from the first participant were obtained through a video interview and a written interview, while those from only the second participant were obtained from a written interview. The video interview from the first participant was transcribed, and then all three data sources were analyzed through pattern-coding, which revealed four categories. The beliefs of the participants as emerged in the four categories were underlined in the original tapescripts and

then translated into English. The participants' ideas that are not directly related to the emerging categories were also included but in complementary roles.

3. Findings

The emerging four categories involved the positive effects of foreign language education in children, the age to start language education, the staff to teach language courses, and ways of teaching foreign languages. The participants agreed on the positive outcomes of language study for children, but their opinions differed in when to start it. The first participant had somewhat ambiguous views about it, referring to research studies and current examples from European countries that showed the effects of foreign language learning for children as young as three and then advocating for delaying it until after preschool years. Unlike the first participant who put the optimal age as seven, the second participant believed ages five and six are late enough because children's first language development is almost complete by then. The participants had differing opinions about who should teach language classes. The first participant expressed that either preschool teachers or language teachers should teach it only if they obtain a certificate for the other. That is, preschool teachers can teach language classes if they have a language teaching certificate and vice versa. The second participant firmly voiced her choice of English teachers who can use the language effectively, without mentioning a reservation for lack of preschool teaching certificate. As to the best way of teaching, both participants agreed that teaching should be appropriate for children's level and include game-based activities.

3.1 Foreign language education at preschool and children's mental development: Children are equipped to learn several languages, and learning a second language contributes to their mental development.

The first participant is of the opinion that children are endowed with the capacity to learn several languages at once and that this process will contribute to children's mental development. The following excerpts reflect this opinion:

"We know that children are cognitively, physiologically, and biologically ready for foreign language learning-teaching after they are born."

"... we know that children can learn not just one but several languages and that this has significant contribution to their mental development."

In the structured interview the first participant added better reasoning skills and mental functioning as the positive outcome of foreign language learning in children. The following excerpt reveals this view:

"Reasoning and problem solving behavior develops more in children who receive a bilingual education. A second language will prove useful for the stimulation and proper processing of mental functions."

The first participant reiterated his opinion in the structured interview, adding that learning foreign languages will contribute to the child's social as well as mental development and improve his problem solving abilities.

"Learning foreign languages develops an individual's mental capacity. It helps improve the individual's social development. It develops the individual's ability to solve problems."

When asked how learning a foreign language would affect children, the first participant explained that it would affect children's mental development positively. In the education process that starts even before birth, he emphasized, learning another language and sometimes several languages will always affect children's intelligence in a positive way. The following excerpt supports this view:

"Language learning starts well before birth. Research confirms that it is in the mother's womb that the child starts hearing his parents' voice, hearing the words (of the language), making sense of them, and after birth he is able to learn several languages ... However, the child loses this ability later."

Referring to previous research studies, the first participant pointed to the child's prolonged presence in the same environment during mental process as the reason for the child to lose his ability to distinguish languages.

The first participant stated in the structured interview that besides its contribution to mental abilities learning a second language early also ensures that the language is learned quickly and effectively. However, mother tongue education should never be neglected. The following excerpt reflects this view:

"Starting foreign language education at early ages will not lead to any negative development for the child if education is given in the first language ... The first language should not be neglected."

The first participant gave examples from European countries such as England, France, and Italy, where these studies were carried out, and concluded that a bilingual education does not harm the development of the mother tongue.

However, the first participant stated in the structured interview that foreign language learning is not healthy in some circumstances, one of which concerns families in foreign countries. Children of these families learn another language at school and outside in addition to the one they use at home. The following excerpt shows this view:

"Parents who work in foreign countries ... send their children to schools in these countries. For this reason these children – willingly or not – learn the foreign language spoken at home and outside in addition to the language used in the home. But it is hard to say that such learning is healthy at all."

The second participant agreed to the first participant's views about the positive effects of foreign language education, and stated that it is important for children's mental development. She also added that learning a foreign language in addition to their mother tongue will keep the children's minds active. The following excerpt reflects her view:

I think learning languages is important for (children's) mental development. The fact that the child is learning a (foreign language) will maintain that his mind is active."

3.2 When to start foreign language education: The earlier the age of foreign language education, the better.

Referring to research studies, the first participant stated his opinion that children aged three can successfully start learning a foreign language. The following excerpt from the interview reveals his perspective:

“There are a number of research studies into how well children who start schooling at three years of age can learn their mother tongue and foreign languages afterwards.”

On the other hand, the first participant provides examples from Italy and France, where foreign language education starts at 8-11 and 7, respectively, but he was observed to be hesitant to pinpoint a certain optimal age for the commencement of foreign language education, mentioning the fact that it is a controversial issue. The following excerpt reveals the participant's indecision:

“But there is a controversy about (the optimal) age (for foreign language learning). I mean ... should we start it at primary school, or should we start it earlier... It requires scientific studies to decide whether we can antedate the foreign language education (that starts at ages seven and eight at present).”

While stating that foreign language education should start as early as possible and giving research studies that showed its effectiveness at the age of three, the first participant claimed in the structured interview that foreign language education should start at primary school because the child should first acquire the syntax of his first language. The following excerpt shows this conviction:

“Foreign language education should be one that should start after the fundamental grammatical structures of the first language are acquired. ... In my opinion, foreign language education should be started in Grade 1.”

The first participant maintained that foreign language education should be avoided in preschool years because mother tongue plays a crucial role in a period when the foundations of personality and mental development are laid. Children should understand the world through their mother tongue for healthy mental development. The following excerpt shows this perspective:

“I do not think that foreign language is necessary in preschool institutions because ages 0-6 are a period when children get to know the world and acquire vital behaviour. Especially the foundations of personality development and mental development are laid during this period. Getting to know the world through their mother tongue will positively affect children's mental development.”

While the first participant implied that the best age to start foreign language education was seven and above, It could also be inferred from his remarks that foreign language learning should not start later because he denounced the change in Turkish education system that deferred intensive language education until after grade 8.

Unlike the first participant who suggested age seven, or grade 1, as the ideal time for starting foreign language learning, the second participant argued that children can start learning at the age of five. She believed that children were cognitively ready to learn another language readily. The following excerpt shows her stance:

“I think children aged five and six are perceptive enough to learn a foreign language. At these ages children can easily learn a foreign language because they are ready cognitively.”

“In early ages children’s memory works at full throttle. They can recall what they hear or see for longer periods than an adult can. “

3.3 Who should teach foreign language to preschoolers: Preschool language teachers should be trained specifically for this age group.

The first participant expressed the view that qualified people should teach foreign language classes, by which he meant that these teachers should have a degree in preschool education as well as a certificate for teaching English.

“I believe that (foreign language education at preschool) should be provided by teachers trained in teaching at preschool and the foreign language and having a language teaching certificate.”

The first participant said the opposite is also advisable, that is, teachers with a degree in teaching English can obtain a preschool teaching certificate to be able to teach preschoolers. He confirmed his view in the structured interview, but this time he favoured language teachers with preschool certificate over preschool teachers with language certificates. The following excerpt reveals this preference when asked which of the two should teach foreign language classes:

(16) “None. Because a foreign language teacher cannot administer activities appropriate for the children’s level since they cannot know children’s developmental characteristics. However, if the foreign language teacher is trained in preschool education, it will be healthier.”

The first participant expressed his concerns for the present situation where foreign language teachers without preschool teaching certificates are employed rampantly in private preschool institutions. Small as it might be, an educational mistake made at these ages, he argued, may affect the entire life of the child, advocating for the importance of training in preschool teaching. The following excerpt mirrors these concerns:

“This is the greatest danger because mistakes made during preschool education years are mistakes that are difficult to undo. I mean if we fail to lay a sound foundation in preschool years a mistake we make – in the child’s mental development, psychomotor development, socio-emotional development – may cause them to acquire wrong behaviour, and it becomes very difficult to correct it in adulthood.”

The second participant, on the other hand, clearly expressed the view that foreign language teachers should teach preschool foreign language classes and did not mention vice versa, i.e. preschool teachers teaching language classes. Only the ability to use the language effectively, she argued, is required by the language teachers. The following excerpt reflects this view:

“(Preschool foreign language education) should be provided by foreign language teachers. Teachers who are trained in foreign language education, who can use the language effectively should teach (it).”

3.4 How to teach foreign language to preschoolers: Game-based activities aimed at introducing children to the new language should be implemented.

The first participant viewed preschool foreign language education as a preparation for primary school years as is done some European countries but also expressed his uncertainty as to how a foreign language education should be. The following excerpt shows his doubts:

“Through what kind of programs, what kind of education should we give (foreign language education? Nobody knows the correct answer to this question. ... (in successful programs in Europe) there are preparatory activities for primary education”

The participant spoke highly of Italian and French schools in Turkey that implemented such successful programs, where one or two foreign languages are taught through games. In these games, the participant marked, children are taught new vocabulary items through pictures, improving their phonological skills and increasing their sensitivity to the language.

The second participant emphasized the difference between state and private schools, resulting from the availability and use of technology. The following excerpt shows her views:

“There are great differences between state and private institutions (with respect to foreign language education). Since private schools are technologically better equipped, a wider array of activities can be implemented.”

According to the second participant, this array involves audiovisual and game-based activities, stories that develop around specific topics, and other exciting activities. Here is an excerpt that shows how she believes games can be integrated in foreign language classrooms:

The child can be taught plenty of words through game activities. For example, when children first watch a video and then asked to dramatize the events in it, I believe they will learn permanently because they have both seen and applied it.

The first participant pronounced his anxiety about foreign language education across the country, the effects of which were present in preschool education as well. Foreign language education, he argued, is a complete failure that requires overhauling the present system and replacing it with programs that zero in on lifelike activities. The following excerpt expresses this suggestion:

“We should (both start teaching foreign languages at an earlier age and) develop a teaching program that is based on real life situations.”

“(We failed) because we could not teach foreign languages through a program based on real life situations. Languages are learned by living them.”

4. Discussion

The views of both participants generally converge with research findings. The first line of agreement lies in the positive effects of foreign language education on children. Support for its positive effects mostly comes from bilingualism studies that research children learning the language of the society as a second language, for example, a Turkish child learning English in Britain or the USA. Still, these research findings are applicable to foreign language environments such as studying English in Turkey. In their review of such bilingual programs, Bournot-Trites and Tellowitz (2002) conclude that the general result is

positive in all: children have better metalinguistic knowledge that has a positive impact of their mother tongue and they do not fall behind their monolingual peers in the long run. In their study into the effects of the newly introduced foreign language course in the early childhood curriculum, Eichmann and Fori (1977) found that foreign language education has potential beneficial effects such as greater readiness for school work in general, greater creative abilities, higher general intelligence, and superior vocabulary knowledge. Preschool language education is also found to enable preschoolers to be aware of different cultures and languages and develop positive attitudes toward a second language. (Sığirtmaç and Özbek 2009). However, some research studies (e.g. Chang 1986) concluded that teaching foreign languages along with their mother tongue caused difficulties for preschoolers.

The related literature also confirms what the participants think about the starting point of foreign language learning. "Preschool years are vital years so during this period and especially the first three years of life, the foundations for thinking, language, vision, attitudes, aptitudes, and other characteristics are laid down," says Kotulak (1997). Consequently, it would be a waste not to use a child's natural ability to learn during his or her most vital years, when learning a second language is as easy as learning the first. Long before Kotulak, Bloom (1964) asserted that people develop half their ability to learn in the first few years of their life, nearly one third of it by the age of eight, and the remaining one-fifth during the rest of their lives. Children form their basic learning abilities through sight, sound, taste, touch, smell, and doing (Dryden & Vos, 1997). What children learn during these years lays the foundations of their future learning. Nicholas and Lightbown (2008) claim second language acquisition begins as early as age three and after age seven language acquisition can be viewed as adult language acquisition. They also support the idea that the five year period between ages 2 and 7 are critical in reaching ultimate proficiency; starting foreign language learning later will decrease children's chances of learning the language better. In their study with preschoolers Sığirtmaç and Özbek (2009) found that Turkish children age 4-6 learning English as a foreign language were eager to learn a foreign language and use the words they learn in their daily life, but four year olds were less successful than five and six year olds.

As child language learning up to the age of seven is totally different from language learning in later years, foreign language teachers at preschool institutions should be equipped with the necessary skills to address preschoolers. Foreign language teachers at preschool should know the age-appropriate activities that would provide scaffolding to facilitate the acquisition of language for children's developing minds (Mhathuna 1995). In cases when the teacher is not proficient enough in the foreign language, plenty of tape recordings can be exploited (Dryden and Vos 1997).

Educational literature abounds in examples of methods of teaching to young children, which support the participants' opinions. Dryden and Vos (1997) argue that any method of teaching a foreign language to preschoolers should involve talking to them from the start. Rhymes, songs, games, and counting in a second or third language should be introduced so that they can listen, see, imitate, and practice. Allowing children to learn through imaginative play such as imitating the voices of their popular heroes can help them learn a foreign language without affecting their identity negatively (Orallena 1992).

5. Conclusion

Especially in recent years parents in Turkey have been striving to send their children to schools where their children can have a better foreign language education. In fact, this desire is consistent with much research which confirms that earlier foreign language education will ensure higher proficiency in children together with developed mental abilities. The participants in this study, however, disagreed with the

proper age of language learning. The first participant believed that foreign language education should start at the age of seven when children have fully acquired their mother language, whereas the second participant said ages five and six were a good time to start. Despite their disagreement as to the starting point of language education, they both agreed to the beneficial effects of language study and to the ways of teaching to preschoolers. As for who to teach children, the second participant said the answer should be teachers of English, while the first participant was more lenient in that it could be either teachers of English holding a preschool teaching certificate or preschool teachers proficient in the foreign language.

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