

An Analysis of Research to Determine Developmentally
Appropriate Practices for English Language Learners
at St. Matthew's Lutheran Japanese Preschool

by

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Literature Review

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the
Master of Science Degree in Education

Graduate Studies

Martin Luther College

New Ulm, MN

July 2011

Signature Page

Date: July 16, 2011

This literature review has been examined and approved.

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Graduate Studies

Martin Luther College

New Ulm, MN

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Title: An Analysis of Research to Determine Developmentally Appropriate Practices for
English Language Learners at St. Matthew's Lutheran Japanese Preschool

Graduate Degree: MS Education

Advisor: Prof. Jim Brandt

Month/Year: July 2011

Number of Pages: 9

Credits: 3

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Introduction

Overview of the Topic

Language is a very important developmental tool for young children of preschool age (three to five years old). They use language to explore and to expand their learning, to communicate with others and to build relationships with both peers and adults, as well as to express their own thoughts and ideas. They use language to gradually step out and expand their world.

St. Matthew's Lutheran Japanese Preschool is located in Niles, Illinois. The Japanese session of St. Matthew's was created to serve children and families who have the Japanese culture as their background. The school is conducted in the Japanese language and communication and instruction between the teachers and students are all in Japanese. The students' Japanese language skills are nurtured with daily Japanese activities; however, these young children are surrounded by the English speaking American culture. This provides a great opportunity for these young children to learn the American culture and the English language. As educators, it is valuable to understand what research says about introducing the English language to these young children from the ages of three to five.

While generalizations can be made about developmentally appropriate learning methods and strategies for instructing three to five year old children, the truth remains that each child is unique and has a different learning speed than any of his or her peers. The same can be said for learning a second language. In addition to their learning of the dual-languages, the timing of introducing the languages, the environment, and the family support offered will directly impact the child's ability to acquire the second language.

Purpose of the Study

For the young child, preschool is often his or her first small step into the world on one's own. At preschool, a young child starts to construct very important life skills. A high-quality preschool provides and supports the student's learning. Regardless of his or her first language and culture, each student is growing not only physically, but academically, socially, and emotionally. It is important for preschools to gain a better understanding of children who are acquiring a second language. In order to accomplish this goal, the purpose of this study will be to review what literature says about the appropriate developmental stages for second language acquisition in children ages three through five.

Rationale

Both America and the Chicagoland area are becoming more multilingual every day. The parents and faculty of St. Matthew's Lutheran Japanese Preschool see the value of reviewing literature that focuses on identifying appropriate developmental stages for receiving dual language instruction in order to better serve and assist the school's children and families.

Literature Review

The Appropriate Time for Beginning Dual Language Instruction

When is an appropriate time to introduce Japanese children to the English language? Some parents and even educators might feel that learning two languages during the early childhood years will overwhelm, confuse, or delay a child's acquisition of the English language. However, research from neuroscientists and psycholinguists indicated, according to Espinosa (2008), that throughout the world, young children demonstrate successful language learning, therefore, infants have the innate capacity to successfully learn dual languages from birth. Nakajima (2008) also stated,

If the child is exposed to the same amount and quality of two languages in appropriate settings, the child is more than likely to successfully learn two languages... Just because a child is exposed to two language at the same time, this will not confuse the child, mixing two languages in their speech, delaying their speech, or have difficulty deciding which language they should be using to converse with others. (p. 21)

Further research supported the evidence that newborns are able to distinguish between languages.

Steiner (2009) reported that newborn children can distinguish between even subtle sounds of different languages. Children show awareness for their native languages within four days of life. An example of this is a child who suckles a pacifier harder when hearing his or her own language than when a non-native language is used. This study showed that even newborns can identify their caregivers' language and that hearing this language gives the newborn a sense of comfort. It also gives the newborn a sense of identity; a language that is his or her own. If a child is born into a household where two languages are spoken, the more frequently used language is likely to be the one with which the child most strongly identifies.

While a child begins to understand the sound patterns of his or her primary language from infancy, the appropriate timing of exposing the child to a second language is affected by many factors. The cooperation of a quality school, the home, and the community is important, so that all can be involved in the child's dual language development. Petitto (2009) stated that when quality languages experiences are provided throughout the day, children are able to acquire more than one primary language. Petitto's research showed very strongly that when the proper means of support are in place, the child can be successful. On the other hand, when support is limited, the process of acquiring a second language becomes very difficult. If no support from the home, the community, or the school is available, then learning a second language simply will not happen—there will be no appropriate time to become bilingual. Therefore, the appropriate time to teach a second language to a child is when the language will be readily available for the child to hear and to process regularly throughout his

or her day. This could be from infancy on, or just as likely, the correct scenario may never exist for the young child.

Appropriate Methods for Providing Dual Language Instruction to a Child in the Preschool Years

Ichikawa described the importance of a high quantity of language exposure for the young Japanese students who are trying to learn English. According to Ichikawa,

By the time the child reaches age two, their vocabularies expand dramatically and after the age of three, the child is able to start communicating using language. Children this age truly enjoy communicating with an adult. The children want to learn language in order to expand their communication. In this period of time, the educator should not focus on expanding the number of vocabulary, but on putting a strong focus on ongoing high quality hands-on language experiences. (Ichikawa, 2005, p. 39)

When second-language learning occurs, these young children learn not only through their ears but they are also using all their other senses to learn the language. It is important for young children to have quality hands on experiences with native English speakers.

Ballantyne (2008) introduced and explained two types of English language learning processes. The two processes were: simultaneous and sequential language learning. The child who experienced simultaneous learning found herself in a situation where two languages were used equally in the home, so the child had an equal opportunity to be exposed to both. The child who experienced sequential language learning found herself in a situation where only one primary language was used for her early years. The second language was not introduced until the child began school.

Hammer (2008) demonstrated that a learner's language comprehension ability is based on the timing of exposure to English. The study pointed out that the timing of exposure to English in relation to school entry is a key factor that needs to be considered when studying bilingual children's English language development. The

research was conducted in two groups, one group was children who were in an exclusively Spanish speaking environment until they entered an English speaking school and the other group was the students who were exposed to both Spanish and English from an early age. Their research showed that it is generally quicker for young children who had previous exposure to the English language to develop their English language fluency during school; however, as time goes on they are quick to lose their primary language (Spanish) if it is not frequently used.

Thus, the research from this section showed that the proper method for teaching a bilingual child is first and foremost to keep him or her exposed to both languages. One language cannot be sacrificed for the development of the other. A child who hears only one language will struggle to learn a second. Rather, regular interaction (listening and speaking) must be continued with both languages in order for the child to best learn.

Additional Factors in the Dual Language Acquisition Process of a Child

Three additional factors affecting a child's language acquisition process are: the importance of a learner's emotional readiness, the role of family, and the role of environment.

The importance of a learner's emotional readiness.

Many preschool-aged children have a difficult time parting with their parents each morning. Each student requires a different length of time to adjust to his or her new environment and each needs a unique amount of time to be emotionally ready for this new learning environment. Nakajima (2008) noted that Japanese-speaking parents of early childhood children had a tendency to enroll their young child in a local nursery or preschool (English speaking). If the child was emotionally ready for the change, that would be great.

However, the parents needed to put a conscious effort into providing their child with a continuous Japanese environment, otherwise the child would be more likely to lose their Japanese language and the child would also have difficulty acquiring the English language.

When the child comes to school for the first time, he or she may be nervous and anxious about his or her new environment. When the school introduces the English language to students, the school and parents must remember to focus on the child's emotional state and to protect the child by providing emotional support.

Soderman and Oshio (2008) focused on the role of gender in the child's dual-language development. The authors concluded that girls generally have more difficulties adjusting to learning a second language than boys do. However, their research also showed that as the dual-proficiency increased, the difficulties ended.

Some parents may feel obligated to immerse their child in the community's majority language quickly, so parents start to speak to their child in English, as opposed to their primary language. However, research showed that speaking a second language to a child might end up serving as an emotional burden, as the child could view his or her primary language as substandard. De Houwer (2007) concluded that adolescents who communicated with their family members in their native language felt a greater emotional bond than those who were not able to communicate with their parent in the parents' primary language. This is true with younger children as well. Speaking the primary language of the home with family members is something that research shows should be valued.

The role of family.

For the young children to learn a new language, De Houwer (1999) suggested that it is very important for them to receive strong support from their family members. As parents working together with the school, and showing support and establishing a trust between the two parties, the child will be helped in feeling comfortable as he or she explores a new language. Then, the school will be viewed as a positive and safe

learning place. In other words, the fastest way for a child to like learning English at school is for the parents to like the school first.

In addition to the parents promoting the school, the school needs to see parents as valuable partners in their children's education. A rich learning environment does not stop at school but starts and continues at home. Every child has the capacity to learn; however, it is essential for educators to remember that language learning is a long process (Haynes & Salazar, 2001; Nakajima, 2001). For the young English language learner, it is important for the parents to set realistic English achievement goals. One of the important goals in the home is to foster a lifelong love of literacy.

This love of literacy will need to be continued in the classroom. Research clearly showed that children who come to school with experiences in reading are less likely to encounter reading difficulties, regardless of the language in which they read or are read to at home. Exposure to print also promoted higher levels of reading achievement in the secondary English language (Goldenberg, 2008). This family interaction activity is also important because by conversing and sharing their everyday lives with their parents in their native language, the children gain background knowledge as well. From that background knowledge a child will be able to develop a broad concept about language and about life, which will be essential for the child when it comes to classroom learning (Goldenberg, 2008). The family can also support a child by having regular conversations with them, playing age appropriate finger plays, and singing songs in their home language in order to nurture and build a strong first language base for the child (Nakajima, 2001).

Parents often ask if they should use English at home to get their child's ears used to the English sounds they will hear at school. As previously noted, research suggested that if the parents' native language is not English, it is hard to create the same sounds as a native English speaker. Parents are encouraged to speak in their native language to their child, and by doing so, parents are helping the child to attain their native language. This supports cognitive and linguistic development (De Houwer, 2007). After all, how difficult it would be for a person if her language were taken away and she were not able to communicate with loved ones.

Through language, humans express their emotions. Young children need to be supported in their own language so that they feel they are safe and loved. When parents speak to their children in words other than their own language, it might cause negative effects on their relationship. Continuing his work, De Houwer (2007) reported that parents run the risk of being less able to properly bond with their child when they have difficulty communicating through a second language. This could lead to a reduced amount of closeness in their relationship, as well as lead the child to lack social confidence.

The role of environment.

The dual-language learning student's school needs to provide its students with an inviting learning environment. De Houwer (2007) suggested that it needs to provide students with many opportunities to practice speaking in the English language. The dual-language learning environment should be filled with several opportunities for the child to hear language used in different circumstances and in various contexts. A wide variety of vocabulary should also be used. It is important for the teacher to focus on the child's interests and to seek opportunities to have them speak and hear the English language in authentic situations.

Whatever the child's ethnic and language background, the school should be a peaceful place for children, an environment to which children come eager to see what challenging, stimulating, and fun activities are going to take place. Children know they may not succeed at everything they try, but also know they will be valued for who they are. Children's efforts should be rewarded, so that they will persevere and they will see themselves as learners (Grossman, n.d.). Other research also reported that increased usage of a child's primary language in the classroom can even lead to a lower amount of bullying. As the child is seen as less of an outsider, they are better accepted in the learning community (Chang et. al., 2007). In short, if a child is not comfortable, learning a new language will be very difficult. On the other hand, a child who is comfortable in her school surroundings is much more likely to be successful in learning a second language.

Unfortunately, some children will be uncomfortable when placed in a new preschool for the first time. When a child is removed from their normal environment and introduced to a new environment, the child needs time to adjust to her environment. Furthermore, Ogawa (1992) reported if the child is not able to speak her native language, the adults need to understand the stress and the difficult adjustment that the child has to make. By the time the child reaches the age of four, a child has mastered their first language and uses their language to communicate with others. Age four is the time when a child thrives at working with his or her peers to learn to play cooperatively. This is the time they express their thoughts and grow emotionally. However, when their communication is taken away from them when they need to be expressing themselves, how does this affect the child emotionally? Is gaining English language skills more important than the child's emotional growth? Ogawa (1992) surveyed parents to research what kind of school options the immigrant Japanese parents preferred for their child. Three options were to one, enroll their child in a local English preschool; two, go to a Japanese language preschool; and three, go to a preschool which features both English and Japanese. Interestingly, the highest amount of parents chose to send their preschool age children to the English preschool. Regardless of what kind of language program is selected, it is important to note that research showed that the emotional health of the child is an important piece of the language learning puzzle.

Implementation

This author's synthesis of the literature reviewed in this study is that a language rich environment for the dual-language speaking child is critical to the child's second language development. In addition, both the family and the preschool need to provide emotional support, so that the child views the process of learning two languages to be beneficial and enjoyable. Since the preschool aged child is still working hard to develop their primary language, the preschool needs to be very careful as it teaches in English to not diminish the importance of the child's primary language or to devalue the child's native culture. Instead, rich and varied hands-on experiences with the English language will be beneficial to guide the child. In the end, the more naturally each language is used around and with the child, the more enthusiastically the child will learn them.

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