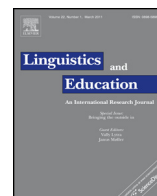




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Embracing, contesting and negotiating new languages: Young children's early socialization into foreign language learning

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ABSTRACT

With early childhood foreign language programs on the rise worldwide, this study is guided by the question of what young participants are learning about language, linguistic diversity and language education itself through their initial experiences with foreign language learning. Our study analyzes young learners' encounters with linguistic difference and diversity in seven U.S. pre-school classrooms in which children learned Chinese, Korean or Spanish twice a week from a "language partner". Adopting a language socialization perspective and analyzing video-recorded classroom interactions through the lenses of language awareness and engagement with language/s, we are able to characterize these early encounters with FL learning based on the interactional patterns of embracing, contesting and negotiating languages we discerned in our data. We highlight interactions that involve explicit talk about language/s as particularly promising in thinking about pedagogy as well as program goals and structures.

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Introduction

Early foreign language (FL) learning is increasingly popular all over the world. The appeal for parents and educators alike can range from getting kids a jump-start on developing advanced FL proficiency to providing them with opportunities to begin fashioning "global" orientations. In the face of these desires for what early FL education *could* do for children, the reality is that we know little about the impact of FL learning on young learners and how they experience language education. With regard to development of linguistic proficiency, the majority of pre-school and primary school FL programs are not immersion style (Johnstone, 2009). They offer only infrequent exposure to new languages, and as a result, goals around cultivating positive and open attitudes rather than developing functional language proficiency tend to predominate. How curriculum and instruction might actually foster positive attitudes and in relation to what exactly – particular languages or cultures; FL learning as an activity; various language users, including themselves – is only marginally studied or understood at present. What development of a "global" outlook might look like in early FL programs and what understandings of linguistic and social diversity children gain as a result of FL learning are also unclear.

Although rare, some early childhood programs center on raising language awareness (e.g. the *Eveil au langage et à la diversité linguistique*/Awakening to language and linguistic diversity project in Quebec, <http://www.elodil.com/>); in these, the express goal is not to cultivate children's communicative FL abilities so much as it is to draw explicit attention to

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language/s, what they mean and how they operate for individuals and social groups. In this kind of approach, FL learning and use of the FL are not central and in some cases not even all that prevalent in program activities; it is a broader metalinguistic and sociolinguistic consideration of language/s that is key. Given the range of FL programs in place around the world – from atypical immersion and awareness-raising programs to the much more prevalent model of introducing children to FLs but only in limited ways (two to three times a week for short periods of time) – the question arises, what are children learning about language/s, about language difference and diversity and about language education itself as they engage in early FL programs? Often, it is assumed that regardless of program type, any FL learning will naturally lead to greater language awareness and openness to diversity of all kinds, but such outcomes should not be taken for granted. We should look more closely at how the presumed benefits of early FL learning develop when particular curricula are in use and in various teaching and learning interactions. Practically, we might also wonder what kinds of structures and approaches might focus on awareness-raising and shaping children’s various language-related attitudes and orientations while also supporting children in coming to use FLs meaningfully and proficiently (if only basically at the beginning). A close look at the kinds of socializing interactions children experience in existing early FL programs may offer some preliminary answers to these questions.

The study we report here focused on one pre-school FL program operating in several different classrooms. The program was typical in that it did not adopt an immersion model and there was no explicit awareness-raising pedagogy in place. Under such programmatic and pedagogical conditions, as one might expect, the vast majority of interactions that took place in the context of the program did not draw children’s attention to considering language/s explicitly; however, some interactions did emerge that were awareness-raising in nature. Children were found to be engaged with language/s as object of consideration, and in these interactions, they debated and dialogued about language as opposed to simply producing it. These interactions especially, we believe, are worthy of our analytic attention since they offer windows into what early FL programs could offer in terms of socializing children into positive outlooks on linguistic difference and diversity as well as favorable attitudes toward FL education.

We first review existing research on early FL learning and then explain our concept of FL learning and the insights from theories of language socialization, academic socialization, language awareness and engagement with language that inform our own thinking. With these frames in place, we describe details of our methodological approach and present excerpts from pre-school classrooms that illustrate trends we noted in our data with regard to awareness-raising, language socialization and academic socialization in children’s early encounters with FLs. Finally, we discuss curricular and pedagogical implications of our study and entertain possibilities for future research.

Early FL learning

Studies on additional language learning among children are few when compared to those conducted with adults as participants (Pinter, 2014), but research on early FL learning is an especially small body of work (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2011). Nikolov and Mihajević Djigunović’s (2006, 2011) syntheses of the early language learning literature and our own survey of studies across early childhood education, foreign language education and applied linguistics literatures indicate increasingly robust information about program types in use around the world (Johnstone, 2009), a growing body of research on motivation amongst young learners (Dörnyei, Csizér, & Németh, 2006; Heining-Boynton & Haitema, 2007; Matsuzaki Carreira, 2006; Szpotowicz, Mihajević Djigunović, & Enever, 2009), documentation of positive academic outcomes related to early FL learning programs (Taylor & Lafayette, 2010) and work on teachers’ classroom roles and attitudes toward early FL learning (Aline & Hosada, 2006; Butler, 2005; Michel, Ofner, & Thoma, 2014). Yet, there are very few studies that investigate the teaching and learning interactions that actually occur in such FL programs for young learners. Our own study takes a decidedly interactional focus, allowing for detailed analysis of the processes surrounding early FL learning, including the ways children notice and negotiate linguistic difference as they encounter FLs for the first time in school.

Early FL programs that take up awareness-raising as a main goal are rare, and our review of the literature found no empirical research that analyzes encounters with a new FL as socializing interactions or that specifically focuses on socialization into awareness of linguistic diversity or the academic activity of language learning through FL programs. A handful of researchers, however, have studied how awareness-raising takes shape within particular programs and interactions. Hélot and Young (2006), for example, studied a language awareness project undertaken by three primary school teachers and found that by involving parents of linguistically diverse students in classroom life, the project led to increased valorization of the linguistic diversity of the student population and cultivated more positive attitudes toward multilingualism in the school. In a similar vein, Dagenais and her colleagues have conducted empirical work on language awareness approaches in several primary schools across Canada. Analysis of interactions during language awareness activities in two school settings (Dagenais, Walsh, Armand, & Maraillet, 2008) showed learners engaged in “focused discussions about language diversity and . . . emergence of a community of learners who had access to a repertoire of languages that expanded beyond official languages” (p. 139). In classrooms that adopted a linguistic landscape-based approach to language awareness pedagogy (Dagenais, Moore, Sabatier, Lamarre, & Armand, 2009), researchers found that venturing into the community, photographically documenting the linguistic landscape and then using this as the basis for dialog once back in the classroom provided rich opportunities for a critical engagement with the human and linguistic dynamics of students’ own neighborhoods. Research on the development of this kind of language awareness can be pushed further. Our own study contributes by focusing on

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