

A Case Study for Chinese Children's English Learning

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the linguistic features of young children when learning a second language. Transcripts of the target child will be analyzed in terms of phonological, lexical, grammatical and communicative development. The result of this case study identified that age is strongly related to learning a foreign language and children are more likely to develop native-like proficiency at an earlier age.

Keywords

Case study; Children; English learning.

1. Introduction

Language learning is a product of the interaction of the child's learning capacities with the language environment [1]. Children acquiring English have been found to already be sensitive to word order from an early age [2]. Research on the age characteristics of children learning English is conducive to better teacher teaching. Therefore, this study aims to examine the linguistic features of young children when learning a second language through a case study of a Chinese boy.

Michael, a boy of 4 years and 3 months old, is the target child in my project. He began foreign language learning at the age of 3 years and 5 months when he attended an international kindergarten in Mainland China. He was chosen as the target mainly because he is a Chinese-English bilingual child leaning English as a second language from an early stage. After one year's English acquisition in the international kindergarten, where kids are taught a full curriculum in English, this boy is progressing significantly in his early English language development.

Michael is immersed in an English environment for 7 to 8 hours per day. Through varied content like role-play, learning through doing, and real-life practical activities, Michael is building a foundation for a second language. He absorbs the language around him and is steadily building his vocabularies. He understands common phrases and simple directions used in routine situations.

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2. Procedure and Methodology

The process of performing through spontaneous speech was audio taped. The first conversation was recorded in the boy's interaction with the teacher in kindergarten. It is just free talk during the dessert time. Miss K, as his caretaker, is quiet familiar with Michael. She showed a good demonstration on how to motivate young kids in a positive classroom atmosphere where English learning happens as naturally as possible.

The second conversation was recorded at Michael's home. As his investigator, I list a few questions and even ask Michael to tell a short story so that language features could be more salient. Most of the time, Michael could understand, because the words are most used in context. However, there are some difficulties and misunderstandings of some pronunciations and words, which needs to be "translated" by familiar adults (his mother). Most significantly, those parts are most relevant to my study. Methodology like Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) will be conducted to analyze the language developmental stages of the target boy. This method is frequently used to describe individual differences and developmental changes in linguistic proficiency [3].

3. Discussion

3.1. Phonological Development

The sounds kids produce is influenced by the language they hear. As the target boy is immersed in an environment where most teachers are native speakers with a standard American English, his phonological development is shaped by properties of the input that he perceives. From the conversation between the target boy and his teacher, it seems that the boy has laid a good foundation for his phonological development. He has a better phonological awareness to perceive the sound and imitate his teacher. Every time when he tries to express his idea but couldn't figure out the exact word or sentence, the teacher is kindly to help him finish his utterance with the exact meaning. In learning situations, the teacher continues talking English to him until he understands. Appropriate input is extremely important in learner's language development [4]. Many examples of appropriate input like demonstration and repetition can be found in the first conversation.

In terms of phonological processes, weak syllable deletion and final consonant deletion are typical features of early children's language development [5], and Michael is no exception. In the following example, Michael said 'No from Sinpo', actually means 'not from Singapore'. He deleted an unstressed syllable in the word 'Singapore'. When he said 'fa fa fa, goer goer', he simple means 'fast and go'. The final consonant, even the consonant cluster is omitted. Most interesting, Michael added a vowel /ə/ at the end of 'go', this is typical feature of Chinese learners.

3.2. Lexical Knowledge

During the 24 minutes of conversational interaction, Michael is capable to give positive responses and answers to each question. In this way, conversation can be carried out fluently and smoothly, even though the majority of questions are answered with single word or discourse markers like 'yeah'. It shows that Michael is engaged in real communication and his comprehension ability at this level is more advanced than production ability. Comprehension vocabularies are required earlier and grow faster than production vocabularies [6].

In the first conversation, the teacher asked Michael 'which one do you prefer?' As the word 'prefer' is a new word for Michael, then the teacher gave an explicit explanation, 'Prefer means that you like something better, you like something more, favorite, maybe'. Several days later, when Michael was asked again with the word 'prefer' in the second conversation 'which color do you prefer?', he can quickly replied 'this red'. This example indicates that children learn words in communicative contexts and they often learn a new word after only a single exposure.

3.3. Grammatical Development and Narrative Development

According to MLU[3], Michael's ratio of words over utterances is 3.322 and his total number of utterances is 90. Compared with Brown's five stages of language development based on MLU, Michael is at the IV stage. He starts to combine words and use grammatical constructions to produce multiword utterances. But many sentences are formed in an ungrammatical order. It seems that he does not have much grammatical awareness.

No more than one year's English learning, Michael seems not to have much grammatical awareness and narrative skills in English. He tries to express his understanding of the relationships between events in a second language, but it seems that he still has far to go in terms of learning all of the aspects of narration. In the following transcript, typical features can be reflected in terms of reference, temporality and connectivity.

Example 1:

One boy is... she, he is so happy. One monster can eating the boy. Alligator, and, and drink ocean. The ocean drink and go out, eat the girl and boy. And then, she she said mommy and daddy! Yeah, and go and alligator now and go out, and go like xxx, boy xxx alligator's mouth. The boy is xxx. The girl is like xxx .

Example 2:

He can, he is the boy, and one day, he go far away. Mommy is saying, "kuai, kuai, kuai," Ok, boy is go home. Finished.

Michael has begun to use basic pronouns, but he seems to get confused and refer to everyone as one gender. Narrative reference is difficult for children, as it demands a combination of linguistic and cognitive abilities. Michael also has trouble with possessive pronouns. He says "my" for "I" in the following example: Alice is little. My is big. / My from Shandong. What's more, the frequent use of 'and' is another feature at his level.

4. Conclusion

Analyzing the linguistic features of target boy has broadened my knowledge about young children's acquisition of language. I firmly believe that age is strongly related to learning a foreign language and children are more likely to develop native-like proficiency at an earlier age. Michael is a good example, even though he is now at the very initial stage. He is progressing and building a foundation for a second language. As for teacher, providing comprehensible input to children is crucial. Moreover, a teacher should be aware of how language is acquired and how children develop their languages. Those are essential backgrounds of any language teacher.

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