

# Starting Non-native Language Instruction in Early Childhood Education

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## Abstract

With socio-economic and cultural development, children's early non-native language development has received much attention from researchers and practitioners. Many children education researchers have noted that language instruction from the early ages, during the sensitive periods of language learning, can secure improvement in not just language proficiency—an immersive approach to language acquisition also stimulates children's brain development, cognitive skills and general abilities. After the birth of an infant, the animal's instinct to survive makes it necessary for them to adapt to the unfamiliar world as quickly as possible. In addition to eating and drinking, they will look for the sound that they think is most beneficial and safe for them among the many sounds in the world. And that sound is human language, a tool for expressing information. It is an articulated expression that is embedded with various meanings by the vibrations of the human vocal cords combined with the different positions and shapes of the lips, teeth and tongue, and it is used for communication and exchange between people. Infants have this ability in the earliest stages. The non-native language in this paper refers to English as an example.

## Keywords

Early childhood education; English language instruction from an early age; Significance of instruction from an early age.

## 1. The Best Time for Children to Learn a Language

Opinions differ on the best time for children to start learning a language. Researches show that the best time for children to learn a language is before the age of 7. The ability to learn languages decreases with age, and it becomes more difficult to intervene learning after the age of 7, especially after puberty. Professor Akita of Japan believes that children's ability to absorb languages is one hundred percent effective before the age of 3, and eighty percent between the ages of 3 and 6. Patricia Kuhl, professor of the University of Washington, said in her lecture "The linguistic genius of babies" that after many researches and experiments, the best time for infants to start learning a language is before the age of 1, and the most critical and effective time before the age of 1 is concentrated in the 8-10 months of the infant's life [1]. The experiment, which uses instrumental data feedback on the infant's brain taking statistics on multiple languages, shows that infants are very sensitive to language at this particular time and respond to any language in the experiment, whether it is their native language or not.

Until children are one year old, all languages have equal effects. They have not been influenced much by their own culture, but are the "citizen of the world". Therefore, whatever language symbols are fed to children before the age of one, the children will accept and output the same language. The main character in the book "The Education of Karl Witt" was born in July 1880, and by the age of eight or nine he was able to speak six languages: German, French, Italian, Latin, English and Greek [2], not as a case of genius, but because Karl's father seized the critical period

of language learning. Carl's father started teaching him Latin when he was in the cradle. This case also proves the effectiveness of language instruction during infancy.

Infants are receptive to any language before there is intensive input from their native language, and as they grow older and the dominant position of the native language becomes prominent, the non-native language will inevitably be squeezed out. Assuming that the non-native language is used as often and to the same extent as the native language, children will have the possibility of acquiring multiple languages simultaneously. Increasingly more experimental results tend to suggest that a child's language learning is independent of which language it is, because for a child, any language is a sound symbol that can be perceived and used.

## 2. Rationales for Language Learning from an Early Age

The French philosopher and sociologist Charles Letourneau and the British educator Percy Nunn shared the same view that education is a "biological process" and that "education is innate in race life" [3]. It is an instinct shared by humans and animals alike. Keepers' articulated sounds or a special tap will give the animals the message that it is "time to eat" or "time to go into the cage". Different growls from wild animals represents different meanings varying from a call to a friend to an impending disaster.

"Complex human behaviours are learned through a series of responses built up by stimuli. Behaviourism treats language as a human behaviour and argues that language as a behaviour, like other human behaviours, is learned through the development of habits. Environmental determinism emphasizes the importance of the language environment and stimuli" [4]. As higher animals, human beings are familiar with their mother's voice as early as in their mother's womb. Therefore, they also consider their mother's voice to be the safest after birth. Babies cry when they are hungry. When they hear their mother's voice saying "There, there, mommy is here", they will stop crying. When they cannot produce their own vocal symbols, they are only able to express themselves by crying, the most direct and simple way. And once they are given a secure and familiar vocal symbol from their mother or other feeders, the infant will respond by stopping crying. Their cries and their mother's action constitute a communication link. Over time, the infant will hear the sound symbols " There, there, mommy is here" and will naturally understand the meaning of them by connecting it to the real action that his mother comes for him. This is the principle of language learning for infants.

"Environmental determinism within the framework of behaviourism has its roots in the Classical Conditioning theory of the 19th century Russian physiologist Pavlov and the behavioural psychology theory of the American psychologist Watson John Broadus. Behaviourist theory advocates the objective study of humans and emphasizes the use of the rigorous scientific method to study observable behaviour". Another example is to say the word "apple" to the child when you see an apple, repeat it many times and the child will slowly learn that the round, red, smelling thing in front of him is an apple, and when he is able enough to control his own lips, teeth and tongue, he will also say "apple" when he sees an apple. If the feeder points at the apple and says "apple" in English from the very beginning, the child will slowly form the sound of "apple" in his brain, and later he will also say "apple" in English when he sees an apple. The same goes for other English expressions and other languages like Korean, Japanese, Italian etc. For a child at that age, different languages are mere expressions of different modes. Patricia Kuhl (Patricia Kuhl) said in her speech "The linguistic genius of babies" that the baby's brain has the ability to take statistics on languages.

### 3. Methods and Significance of Learning a Non-native Language from an Early Age

Take English as example, it is universally acknowledged that children can learn the language through children's songs, picture books, games, cartoons and other immersive methods. Traditional prescriptive methods like learning by rote are not encouraged, for language is acquired naturally.

#### 3.1. Initial English Perception

Learning through nursery rhymes, the easiest and most direct approach, is suitable for all babies. Nursery rhymes can be played selectively from birth. The soft and cheerful melody can not only calm children, but also help them cultivate English intuition, which is often referred to as "sharpening the hearing". The classic nursery rhymes such as "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star", "Old Macdonald" and "The Wheels on the BUS" are suitable for babies to "sharpen their hearing". This method is simple and quick, and goes beyond the limit of time and space—it can be achieved with just a mobile phone. Nursery rhymes not only have a direct effect on children's English language learning, but also can have a boost on their music perception.

#### 3.2. Three Dimensions in a Plane

Reading picture books is a crucial method of learning English in infancy. The colours and pictures in picture books easily attract children's attention, and the children naturally learn how to use the language by experiencing the interplay of language and pictures in a flat book, with the help of the flat scenes in the picture books and the voice of the mother (or nurturer) reading.

For the younger stages picture books are made in various modes, such as Poke-And-Look books, Flip Flap books, Touch-And-Feel books, books that can be played in the bathtub and in the baby carriage etc. Picture books of diverse modes can greatly mobilize the children's interest in language learning. Recently the emergence of Point-and-Read books has brought great help to many parents who are weak in English or who are worried about poor pronunciation.

#### 3.3. Simulating the Real Environment

Games are more interesting than the first two methods. Parents can interact with their children with simple activities such as finger games, animal imitations, etc. After the age of 2, they can also perform English stories with their children, such as "The Eagle Catches the Chicken" and "Little Red Riding Hood", which stimulates children's active language output in a simulated environment. The immersive game play is a way for parents and children to create a pure "English language environment", where language output changes from passive to active.

#### 3.4. Audio-visual Synchronization

After the age of 2.5, children can watch quality cartoons, which are the most direct presentation of the natural contexts with the audio-visual where the language is immediate. With the aid of the picture, children are given the most direct audio-visual input. This approach requires parents to watch and discuss with children, or they can select and imitate certain clips particularly for better results.

#### 3.5. Direct Dialogues with Fosterers

Patricia Kuhl's experiment found that if the mother interacts with the child via a language, the child can fully pick up the sound symbols. Compared to the former four methods, this one is the most direct and effective. While the other four methods are designed to create immersive environment, direct communication in English between parents and children creates a native-like language environment. If parents are from different countries and speak different

languages, children can also produce multiple languages at the same time. However, not all families can have a direct conversation, which proves the necessity of the other four methods.

#### 4. Conclusion

Learning a language from an early age enhances parent-child bonding, facilitates the development of reading habits, and makes children feel loved and secure. The happiness in childhood has a healing effect for a lifetime. Learning a language from an early age is very important in children's young ages and even throughout their life. Instructing children to learn a language during the critical period not only reaps rewards in terms of language itself, but also promotes the children's brain development, the formation of learning habits and the development of the children's overall ability.

#### Acknowledgments

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