

The Impact of Bilingual Setting on Teaching Russian to Preschool Children

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Abstract

The following study investigates preschool teacher's experiences of addressing children from different background in order to support the Russian language in bilingual kindergartens in Uzbekistan. The aim of this study is to look at the interactions and strategies preschool teachers applied in kindergarten for enhancing and measuring the progress of language and vocabulary development. The study also examined the effective techniques used for teaching Russian to preschoolers. We determined the possibilities of preschoolers in foreign language acquisition and analyzed the difficulties the children can encounter while learning Russian. Additionally, we investigated factors contributing to the development of communicative and cognitive abilities of preschoolers learning Russian as a foreign language.

Keywords: bilingual condition, preschool (kindergarten), Russian, language acquisition, linguistic environment.

1.0. Introduction

Today's younger children are exposed to different languages and they typically learn them faster than adults. However, the benefits of foreign language teaching for preschool children are in question. Children are highly adaptable, so they are not perturbed by grammar rules and learning a new language is often very easy for them. This is in contrast to adults, who typically need to devote their entire time to learning a new language to achieve mastery within a shortened time frame. As globalization has led to the greater importance of multilingualism, parents are more interested in the idea of their kids learning more than one language. At present, the best way for parents is to enroll their children in a preschool educational institution that offers foreign language courses; however, many preschool EI do not offer these courses yet, especially in far-away districts. With the increase in demand for foreign language learning, though, more preschool EIs are considering the idea.

2.0. Advantages and Potential Problems of Teaching Russian for Preschool Children

Given the idea that children learn language faster, foreign language courses should ideally be taught from a young age. Starting early provides children with a greater chance to attain a mastery of other languages as they grow older. Experience has shown that children, who have learned their native language and Russian at the same time, have developed a proficiency in both languages. Studies have also revealed that children become smarter if they are challenged to learn different languages at a young age.

The foremost issue to consider is the potential for information overload, as preschool children are already learning several subjects — adding a foreign language could make effective learning untenable. Additionally, other skills could be sacrificed if a student's attention is further divided. Some children will excel in language learning, while others learn better in other fields; therefore, it is unfair to require language learning of students who are genuinely uninterested in the subject.

Continuity is currently another issue, as only a few preschool educational centers offer Russian language courses. Even if a child has acquired basic language skills at a young age, the opportunity for necessary enhancement might not be available as they grow older.

Aside from the effects upon children, preschools are also managing concerns. Most preschools in Uzbekistan typically do not employ any teachers from another country. While specifically hiring teachers to teach a foreign language is a possibility, the preschool might not be able to absorb what is usually a high expense. Furthermore, a translator or a Russian language teaching assistant might also be necessary in bigger classes to ensure that children are not left out.

If a preschool weighs up the matter and concludes that Russian language courses are necessary for their children, then it should introduce the course regardless of the potential problems. Issues can be dealt with at a later stage, once the additional courses are fully implemented.

3.0. Some Practical Tips for Teaching Russian to Preschoolers

One of the methods preschool teachers obtain information of children's language level is through observation and documentation in different natural environment or settings. For instance, a preschool teacher may observe that the child has an extensive vocabulary when he interacts with peers but not with adults. Observation is a starting point for making conclusion or interpretation about the child situation; however, guides observation helps to ensure that observations conducted by kindergartens are performed in a systematic and objective manner. This allows identifying areas of strength and areas of need without putting constraints on children's behavior and activities, enabling them to behave naturally in different environments. Notables researchers have provided insights in the development and assessment of vocabulary in young children in bilingual kindergartens. The approach in vocabulary instruction differs in schools, preschool and early primary years. Studies have shown that develop vocabulary size in kindergarten is an effective predictor of reading comprehension in the middle elementary years (Scarborough, 1998, 2001; Silverman& Crandall, 2010 cited in Kame'enui & Baumann, 2012). Hence the input that the child receives from kindergartens, including words for explanation, expressions, books, games, etc. should be appropriated in terms of age and maturity.

Vocabulary may receive little attention in kindergarten and first grades because the condition and method employ it. There is not difficult to test children's vocabulary orally on a one-to-one basis. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) and the Expressive Vocabulary Test are well established. However, none of these methods are attainable for classroom teachers since it takes from 10 to 15 minutes per student. In kindergarten settings could be even more challenging since the inability to easily and directly assess vocabulary and vocabulary growth is higher. Gail Kearns & Biemiller (2005) cited in Kame'enui & Baumann (2012) published a method for group assessment in kindergarten and first grades illustrating that "two-questions" method bring similar results to the method of PPVT. The method implies using two questions that could be responded by "yes" or "no" for each word meaning tested. Correct answer means that the child understood the meaning of the word. For instance: "Are cherries and peaches fruits" (yes or no). These questions are given to the child orally and they respond on a sheet with a yes with means a smile face or not which means a frown face. Every item was represented by small picture.

Overall, the widespread belief that children learn a language faster than adults mentioned by some participants in this study may be discussed, on one hand, children may be linguistically more skillful than adults in terms of phonetic-auditory ability and also be more playful and uninhibited than adults but in another hand adults hold analytical skills important for learning a second language which may them to acquire a language in relatively little time unlike to the first language acquisition. An important psychological factor to mention is the motivation and willingness to learn a language rather than physiological or biological ones.

The participants addressed that the strategy used in bilingual kindergarten are not different than one in a monolingual kindergarten in Uzbekistan. They apply the strategy to speak permanently in Uzbek and Russian to the children. It seems like these kindergartens employ the one person-one language category (Romaine,1995, Baker, 2006); which means that two languages are used throughout the day: one preschool teacher or assistant exclusively uses the community language (Uzbek), the other one, preferably a native speaker, uses only the target foreign language (Russian) in all interaction with the children. This approach may provide security and stability to the child when he/she uses one language with a particular person. However, the distribution of the two languages may be uneven, preschool teachers use their mother language but some of them mentioned that they use both languages since they master fluently. Thus, children received a combination of both languages on a regular basis. However, it may be inexact to conclude that children in these kindergartens have an equal balance in two languages experiences, even though they are exposed to two languages, it does not mean that the child responds equally, they may answer in the minority or dominant language; or even in either of the languages since they have not developed enough verbal skills. Young children from seven months in these kindergartens have not developed verbal communication, but they have good understanding based on routines and repetitive activities performed every time. Therefore, some children have receptive or passive vocabulary, because they understand instruction and activities but they have not developed speaking abilities, while other have active or productive vocabulary because they understand and are able to speak.

Thus, early acquisition of two languages may go gradually and slowly since they are exposed to two types of linguistic codes in relation to monolingual. This situation, as participants mentioned can create in parents some discomfort due to the slow speed the bilingual course works. There is rarely that bilingual become equally fluent in all situation in both their languages. There are factors that develop language faster than other, such as the child personality, ability, aptitude for language learning and social development, interaction with parents and peers.

On the other hand, some authors suggest that the age of language acquisition may influence in the growth of the vocabulary. Thus, those who learn before the age of three are considered simultaneous bilingual and those who learn after this age are considered as sequential bilingual (McLaughlin, 1978 & Padilla and Lindholm, 1984, cited in MacLaughlin, 1984). This means that children from these kindergartens are both simultaneous and sequential bilingual since they start from eight months to five years old. This early stage is a good start for developing children intellectually, socially and emotionally; activities like playing provide experiences for learning in different perspectives. Children learn a vocabulary through repetition and imitating adults, the process children acquire a language depend of the input they received by adults, personality and age. Some children use gestalt strategies because their speech contents more affective and social expressions, while others are more referential, meaning that they use strategy to name things, using nouns or expressing the meaning of two-and three word utterances (Nelson, 1973 cited in McLaughlin, 1984). The activities used in kindergarten are based on intentionally planning learning goals in relation to the seven areas in the Framework for Kindergarten (KD, p. 32-42). These are connected to each other and provide rich opportunities for development verbal and non-verbal communication. Participants mentioned the variety of indoor and outdoor activities they apply in the kindergartens such as role play, games, reading books, songs, rhymes, etc., which offer opportunities for observing, describing and exploring situations the child experience, allowing them to develop their vocabulary when they are exposed regularly and often with words identified in their environment (Kame'enui & Baumann, 2012) resulted from a sample of six preschool teachers from two bilingual kindergartens which has Uzbek and Russian as a means of communication. When teaching Russian to preschool children, we cannot use in a pure form the forms and methods of control used at school. The specificity of control at preschool age is such that children do not know that at the moment they are objects of control. Purposeful control, i.e. when children know that their actions are being evaluated, they can negatively affect the results of the inspection. Often, when questioning, children are worried, lost, refuse to speak, especially if the inquiry goes in an unfamiliar environment in the presence of strangers. In addition, children of this age quickly get tired and it is difficult for them to keep their attention on one object for a long time. Thus, control takes on specific forms. The control of speech skills is supposed to be built in such a way that it stimulates the development of students' speech in unity with the development of their thinking, memory, imagination, and influences the improvement of those personality qualities that are necessary for successful cognitive activity of preschoolers.

Preschools teachers of kindergartens I have interviewed expressed positive views of bilingual education. Cognitive and socio cultural aspect were highlight in bilingualism, like the advantages to raise a child in early years, the possibility of learning tradition and cultures and the respect and tolerance of the differences. Kindergarten profile stated that 50% of the personnel should speak one of the languages, however; some preschool teachers recognized the lacking competence in Russian. All of them seem to apply the strategy one person-one language category, talking to the child either in Uzbek or Russian. Although in some cases, both languages were used simultaneously. Different activities such as playing games, singing, reading stories, books, outdoor activities and other steady routines were mostly employed in interaction with children for language development. They follow kindergarten framework as non-bilingual kindergartens with the difference they perform activities in two languages. Strategies applied in these kindergartens were aimed to develop social, cultural, physical and linguistic abilities in a ludic and playful ways rather than systematic or structured. Thus, in relation to use strategies and measure language and vocabulary, all participants apply different resources as observation, but not specifically for vocabulary instruction and assessment. Researches have highlighted the importance of development vocabulary in early years and the positive influence in school; however, it is still a complex subject to measure vocabulary due to human diversity and the styles applied. Strategies in languages development including activities and routines that is basically related with cultural and traditions children are from strengthening bones of identity and belonging. Besides, parents and assistants played an important role in bilingual education by contributing strongly with linguistic and cultural differences in language development. They serve as a bridge between kindergarten and children in terms of inclusion and identity; highlighting the similarities and differences in a positive way, which contribute children gain respect and understanding for what is different from oneself. This does not mean one should stop with Uzbek or Russian traditions, but one can add other things as well.

4.0. Conclusion

Both staff in kindergartens, parents and the society plays an important role in the development of young children. It is relevant that kindergarten personnel gain insights about how to communicate with children who have different languages of expression. In this study the term bilingualism is used rather than multilingualism because the last term covers a broad range of practice and policy. At the same time, bilingualism embraces what researchers have referred to as multilingualism in terms of using more than one language, and /or languages varieties, in whatever combination. In a bilingual setting, such as the bilingual kindergartens in Uzbekistan who has Uzbek and Russian as a languages of communication; preschool teacher meets children from different characteristic; those who comes from families who raise their child simultaneously in two languages environment; parents who master/ not master the dominant or the minority languages or parents from different backgrounds who are willing their children to learn a language in young age. In order to address children with different features; preschool teachers may apply resources or create conditions so that they are able to enhance these languages. In fact, there are various methods; although there are not proven to be successful, that teachers may employ at all grades levels for enriching vocabulary, but in kindergarten settings, there are lack of recognized best practices for teaching vocabulary.

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