

Learning Status, Trends and Issues of Online Young Language Learner in China

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ABSTRACT. *On-line education is a buzz word of our time. With the development of technology, awareness of language learning and current education policy in China, many young language learners have become the target of foreign language teaching. It is widely noticed that children who are aware of foreign language easily and productively into latter education. Based on the survey of online language learning platform, this paper aims to outline the recent trends of on-line young language learners about language learning, teaching process and assessment in order to optimize the foreign language teaching to on-line young learners and also give a suggestion for future research for on-line teaching practice.*

KEYWORDS: *young language learners ; foreign language teaching; on-line learning*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the language education industry has developed fast in the past several years to combine traditional pedagogy with the cutting-edge technologies such as AI, AR, and VR to transform learning models. Due to the two-child policy, popularization of online education, the improvement of people's living standards and consumption upgrading, millions of young language learners learn foreign language, most often English, in public and private schools around China. It can be said that young language learners have become a huge number of groups in foreign language classrooms around the world, but overall, the research results targeted at this group are still quite lacking.

Although the concept of "the younger and the better" is widely accepted by the public (table 1), many experts emphasized that the starting age is a misleading factor in language learning [1]. More and more studies show that learners can use metacognitive knowledge and are more suitable for explicit language learning, they have higher learning efficiency under the condition of limited input. Some studies show that the quantity and quality of early provision, teachers, programs and continuity are more important [2].

Table. 1 On-line users' (parents) recognition of early English learning age

Age0-3	Age4-6	Age7-9	Age10-12	After age 13
54.7%	40%	3.3%	1.7%	0.3%

2. Research Status

More and more parents realize that how young language learners can benefit from foreign language teaching is more important. An important shift can be identified from an emphasis on the early learning opportunity to optimize outcome. In the following, we summarize how to carry out related research on foreign language teaching for on-line young language learners from the following interrelated links of learners, teachers teaching process and assessment.

2.1 Learners

Early foreign language learners have several key variables interacting in the process of language learning, including attitudes, motivation, aptitude, anxiety, self-perceptions, self-confidence, strategies, etc. This article mainly focuses on cognitive and emotional characteristics.

From the cognitive perspective of second language acquisition, there are two coexisting systems in language competence development: one is a rule-based, analytical procedural system; the other is an example-based declarative system. Children rely more on the latter, while adults are characterized by the former [3]. Implicit knowledge has intuitive awareness of linguistic norms and mainly focuses on knowledge of rules and fragments, accessing to knowledge by means of automatic processing during fluent performance. Due to different cognitive characteristics, young language learners have an advantage under natural acquisition conditions, because their ability to learn implicitly is stronger. Considering the cognitive characteristics of young language learners, the researchers suggested that they should provide classrooms similar to natural acquisition opportunities and use more task-based activities [4]. In addition, sufficient teaching time will guarantee the efficiency to involve the hidden learning mechanism, which needs more intensive teaching arrangements.

Research findings on motivation and attitudes of young language learners are gaining grounds. Many research results show that young language learners have a positive attitude towards foreign language learning. However, in a large survey of foreign language teachers from 142 countries around the world, teachers reported that young language learners are not as intrinsically motivated and eager to learn as people generally think, and they do not understand the purpose of learning English. Parents emphasize the importance of learning English [5]. According to the survey, the top 3 On-line users' motivations of early English learning are developing children's interest and language awareness (70.1%), developing intelligence during

bilingual learning(78.5%) and learning ahead to prepare future language study(39.5%). Thus, to motivate young learner, to mobilize their interest and to cultivate their positive attitude is the primary tasks for language teachers. Some survey results show that the motivation mainly comes from curiosity, interest, and sense of achievement . There is also research evidence that it is not only fun and games that can create intrinsic motivation, but also intellectual challenges and satisfaction from personal accomplishments. As for the construct of early language learning, more diachronic studies are needed to observe the dynamic changes in motivation, attitudes and interests of young language learners

2.2 Teacher

As indicated in the first part, young language learners may perform differently from adult in the language learning scenario. Parents will consider factors such as teachers' personality and teaching style, teaching experience, characteristics, education background, nationality, gender and age etc. For personality and teaching style preferences, parents prefer teachers with rich facial expressions, strong interactivity and ability to understand the child's intentions. They should be gentle, affinity, and strict logic and a sense of responsibility.

Foreign language teachers' issues are one of the focuses of researchers. The shortage of qualified language teachers is very common in many countries and regions. One qualified language teacher should meet the target language proficiency standards, and receive professional training in language teaching. In China, due to the large number of students in compulsory education, there are a large gap between the need of qualified language teachers and the number of qualified language teachers. As Table 2 and Table 3 show, Compared to Chinese teachers, the vast majority of on-line users are tend to foreign teachers from English-speaking countries for the concerns about the pronunciation. Among them, American foreign teachers are the most popular. In terms of teacher's education background, users prefer master's degrees, followed by undergraduates, which believe that teachers with high degree are not easy to communicate with children, and teachers with low degree may be insufficient in teaching qualification and professional skills [6].Young language learners are at a critical stage of cognitive development and they are still learning in the process of acquiring mother tongue. Therefore qualified language teachers also need specialized training in children's education methods in addition to professional ability of foreign languages and language teaching theories.

Table.2 on- line users preference of foreign language teachers' nationality

<i>American</i>	39.5%
<i>English-speaking countries</i>	25.8%
<i>British</i>	22.1%
<i>Chinese</i>	5.5%

<i>Other European countries</i>	<i>4.1%</i>
<i>Southeast Asian countries</i>	<i>2.6%</i>
<i>Other countries</i>	<i>0.4%</i>

Table.3 on- line users preference of foreign language teachers' degree

<i>Bachelor degree</i>	<i>Master degree</i>	<i>Doctor degree</i>	<i>Others</i>
<i>32%</i>	<i>50%</i>	<i>16.3%</i>	<i>1.3%</i>

2.3 Teaching process

The existing forms of on-line language education for young learners can be divided into six categories: nursery rhymes, games, recording courses, picture books, stories, live interaction and animation. The commonly used teaching methods are communicative competence teaching approach, game-oriented teaching process, picture book teaching method, and phonics approach .

As communicative competence in foreign languages is increasingly valued, many East Asian countries and regions have introduced some form of communicative language teaching or task-based language teaching process ,which are suitable for young language learners[7]. In order to develop the ability to communicate in a foreign language, it is recommended that control of classroom discourse. This is especially important for young language learners , because they are more likely to use foreign languages as tools of meaning rather than analysis. Teachers create a classroom situation where learners learn language naturally by completing meaningful activities [8]. Task-based language teaching can provide learners with control of classroom discourse, allowing them to determine the content of the conversation and to take the conversation forward, thereby promoting implicit language learning suitable for young language learners . Theoretically, task-based language teaching process does meet the cognitive characteristics of young language learners : they rely more on memory and procedural knowledge rather than explicit rules, which is suitable for classrooms similar to natural acquisition environments. However, in practice, teachers may find it difficult to implement this teaching method effectively. It was originally used to teach adults in small classrooms with complete facilities. It is not necessarily suitable for teaching children in classrooms with limited resources and large numbers. It is also possible to encounter cultural resistance because it is inconsistent with educational traditions .

In terms of the quantity and quality of classroom input, researchers generally point out that target language input is critical to successful learning. However, most of English input may be insufficient also with inappropriate pragmatics uses[9]. Overall it is not satisfactory. It is worth noting that the results of separate interviews with teachers and students showed that teachers were worried that students would feel frustrated and anxious if they did not understand the English they spoke, while

students thought that the teachers spoke too little. There is very little real communication between teachers and students in the classroom, and teachers' feedback is mostly simple "Yes", "No", "OK" and so on. In order to increase the input as much as possible, on-line English classes should be created to require learners to use only English when communicating with teachers and classmates. The benefit is that it can prevent learners from relying on their mother tongue in the classroom, but some researchers have questioned classrooms that use only the target language, believing that children's mother tongue can play a great educational role in teaching the target language [10]. They pointed out that teachers should still use the target language as much as possible to ensure meaningful input to students in classroom teaching, and only use the mother tongue to explain when necessary. The appropriate proportion of target language used in the classroom needs further exploration.

2.4 Assessment

Early language learning assessment focuses on how to help children developing their target language knowledge and skills with teach-based assessment, ongoing classroom testing, and learning oriented assessment. Teachers could get feedback from the assessment to scaffold children's language learning development. With the diagnosis competence of teachers, the learning process will go smoothly and concentrate on children's readiness, while teachers are more sensitive to the reflection on their class practice.

Among the international examinations for young language learners, the following are widely accepted by Chinese schools and parents, including Cambridge Young Learners English Tests, Pearson Test of English Young Learners, TOEFL Primary, Key English Test and Preliminary English Test. These exams can offer certificates to prove young learner's proficiency in English with listening skills, oral skills, reading skills and writing skills. We should pay attention to this examination how to impact language development of young learner and how to engage with the modern technologies for better outcome. Especially, the assessment should design to accommodate learners of different levels, learning styles, goals and interests. During this assessment, let young language learners study automatically, get more motivation and have flexible learning process to achieve personalization. Through assessment and revision to identify learning needs and set further learning goals to enhance teacher to have further understanding of learning plan, optimize learn resources and learning strategies in practice.

3. Conclusion

In recent years, the field of early language learning research has grown remarkably. Many new studies have been published in the refereed journals. The above research provides important inspiration and recommendations for future research based on existing research deficiencies.

In terms of research content, the existing research is not comprehensive enough. In theory, children's second language acquisition is becoming an independent research area. Due to the huge differences in learning situations, we need more research on children's second language development in foreign language environments. Studying how Asian children acquire English can make a special contribution to language acquisition theory [11].

In terms of practice, young language learners' foreign language teaching as a whole lacks guidance from research results. Research on effective pedagogy suitable for young language learners is not abundant, and teachers need guidance on how to teach a variety of language skills. Although China has introduced research results on children's English teaching methods, the effect still needs to be tested. Whether it is the implementation of the teaching method, the creation of the classroom environment, or the quantity and quality of language input, it depends to a large extent on the teacher. Therefore, the teacher is the key to improving the quality of teaching. Future research should learn more about the specific problems faced by teachers in teaching and strive to provide guidance and support for them.

In terms of research methods, empirical research is not enough. Although there are a large number of foreign language learners of all ages in our country, empirical studies comparing the characteristics and effectiveness of foreign language learning among different age groups are very scarce. Learners rarely approach the target language outside the classroom. Therefore, more classroom-based research is needed.

Researching and documenting how certain tests work with young learners is time-consuming and this is an area where there is a need and a lot of room for further work. If young language learners really want to benefit from early foreign language learning, we need to take the cognitive and emotional characteristics of this group as the starting point, and take strengthening teachers as the key link to improve teaching quality. Researchers should conduct more empirical research, especially diachronic research and classroom-based research, and use the research results to provide guidance for young language learners in foreign language teaching.

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