



The perception of foreign languages and culture for early childhood

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Abstract

Language acquisition is a multifaceted process that often intertwines with acculturation. When a child encounters a foreign language and culture at an early age, they start to gain an understanding of both their native cultural values and the values of the other culture. As young learners gradually become aware of the world beyond their immediate surroundings, their cultural awareness undergoes a profound expansion. This research endeavors to delve into the perceptions of language learning and the assimilation of the target culture among very young language learners, irrespective of whether they have received formal language education. In pursuit of this objective, a semi-structured qualitative study was designed. The study included interviews with ten kindergarten students of age 5 in Antalya, Turkey. Participants were divided into two: one group had received foreign language education for three years, while the other had not received any. The conversations were recorded and subsequently subjected to an in-depth analysis carried out. The compelling findings of this research reveal that young language learners who have been exposed to previous language learning experiences are significantly better equipped to discern and appreciate the distinctions presented by a foreign language and culture. Moreover, it becomes evident that very young learners, even at the tender age of five, can grasp the lifestyles, needs, and interests of individuals from foreign cultures when they are immersed in a communicative language-rich environment. This underscores the pivotal role of early language exposure in fostering not only linguistic proficiency but also cultural awareness and understanding among children.

Keywords: Cultural awareness, Culture, Early childhood, Foreign language learning, Learners, Motivation, Second language, Target culture, Young learners.

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Contents

1. Introduction	19
2. Method.....	20
3. Discussion and Conclusion	21
References	22

Contribution of this paper to the literature

The development of children's language skills has been a central topic in language research. Previous studies have explored how children acquire their native and second languages. However, there is a lack of research that specifically delves into the cognitive representations of children concerning foreign language and culture concepts. Therefore, this study centers on the perceptions of children exposed to a foreign language within the context of foreign language and culture.

1. Introduction

Foreign language acquisition constitutes a complex process encompassing numerous intricate components including grammar, vocabulary language skills, and the cultural facets of the target language. For language researchers, it is not possible to separate foreign language learning/teaching from culture because the process involves not only language but everyday life as well (Kramsch, 1995). It is thought that language is one of the elements of culture, so culture and language learning can be melted in the same pot without the need to teach them separately. Pinter (2011) accepts this idea and explains that language and culture belong together. Wahyanti and Warsono (2014) emphasise that introducing culture to young learners can sometimes be difficult, but even so, language education should begin in kindergarten.

Foreign language education for children is based on the idea that learning a second language is better if it starts earlier (Hammerly, 1982). Children's sensorimotor and preoperational stages are active for acquisition and foreign language learning and acquisition (Brown, 2000). According to Scott and Ytreberg (2010), children at the age of five have a significant capacity for comprehension and can relate what they have seen, heard, and done. Their cognition level can be affected positively when children start foreign language learning at the beginning of their early years. Vygotsky (2004) asserts that the participation of young language learners in social events with creative and imaginative ideas increases their cognitive level. Halliwell (2002) supports this view and mentions that young learners can construct knowledge when they share their imaginative ideas.

Children over the age of 4 can understand other people's actions and be aware of the content and meaning of conversations. They subsequently develop social and cognitive awareness and increase their communicative participation during this period of development (Cameron, 2009). In addition, they do not understand the distinction between what is real and what is imagination, but they see everything from their point of view (Woolley & Phelps, 1994). According to Harmer (2007), young learners are always eager to learn different things about the world, so different languages and cultures are interesting for them. Scott and Ytreberg (2010) say that young learners are full of energy and positive feelings when learning different cultures and languages around them. Brewster, Ellis, and Girard (2004) accept this idea and add that children can learn more about different cultures by using the internet, and through music, games, and books. They also mention that cultural awareness and intercultural learning are important components of foreign languages for young learners. Wright, Betteridge, and Buckby (2007) explain the importance of games for active language learning since games provide an excellent real and enjoyable learning atmosphere in which young learners can acquire a feeling for the language. Besides they also mention that cultural awareness and intercultural learning are important components of foreign languages for young learners (Wells, 1986). Their cognition level can be affected positively when children start foreign language learning at the beginning of their early years. When children start to learn a foreign language, they have to confront the different features of that language such as the symbols, images and body language which are representative of the target culture (Tomalin & Stempleski, 2008). Young language learners are curious and always want to learn what is happening around the world and understand. Therefore, they need more intercultural stimuli to encourage real communication (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2005).

Cunningham (1995) explains the importance of language and culture for young learners and mentions that the cultural aspects as seen by young learners are different from the ideas of adult learners. Young learners may not experience cultural aspects directly. Halliwell (2002) supports this idea and adds that children learn everything indirectly because of their good instincts. Brown (2000) claims that very young learners are not conscious of what they are learning on the other hand Ausubel (1964) argues that young learners can take responsibility for their learning routes. Ammon and Dittmar (2005) discuss the way that young language learners can be affected positively by exposure to the target culture. Madiano (2001) explains that the target culture influences young language learners. Tomalin and Stempleski (2008) also believe that culturally oriented language lessons help language learners to feel empathy and understand differences.

The rise of globalization has brought language learners into frequent contact with native cultures. Therefore, in a multicultural environment young language learners need more intercultural stimuli to encourage real communication (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2005). Foreign Language education involves the social and philosophical aspects. In other words, it comprises the cultural dimension of language (Bennett, 1997). The culture of the target language provides authentic materials not only for adult language learners but for young language learners as well. Byram (1991) claims that language learners can convey their ideas, thoughts, and feelings by using cultural elements. Brown (2000) further suggests that these cultural elements can influence cognitive behavior and have a positive impact on language learning.

Studies related to young language learners indicate that children can learn a foreign language easily through games, songs, chants, and group activities (Herrare & Hojel, 2009). Teachers for young learners develop different strategies to teach a foreign language and introduce a new culture. For example, they could bring pictures containing cultural elements and stick them on the wall to create a peripheral learning atmosphere, and they could also read storybooks and fairy tales for their development. According to Evans (2003), teachers in preschools encourage children to create greeting cards for special days, festivals, and birthdays to teach them about different cultures in language learning settings. Moreover, teachers can introduce musical activities related to the target culture, as well as plan artistic activities to provide very young learners with skillful applications of cultural practices. Songs, rhymes, and musical applications help very young learners gain speaking and listening skills in a rich cultural atmosphere (Low, 2011).

2. Method

This research paper involves a qualitative study, the purpose of which is to find out the ideas of young learners aged 5 regarding foreign languages and culture in detail. The main purpose is to understand the perception and awareness of very young learners of learning a foreign language and culture during their education process. This is a qualitative research study in which the researchers investigated the problems in detail through interviews. The study also contains triangulation that supports rich data and enables the cross-checking of similarities (Denzin, 1970). During triangulation, semi-structured interviews, classroom observation and second interviews were completed. The first semi-structured interview was held in September, and the second application was completed in December because some of the young learners had difficulties in dealing with the concept of language and culture. Observation of these children also gained importance during this study because the aim was to investigate the behavior of the children and their attitudes towards foreign languages and culture. In Turkey, the curriculum of a kindergarten is mainly based on mother tongue development as well as improving children's physical and cognitive development, but some of the private kindergartens have a special curriculum regarding language learning and can provide a foreign language learning environment.

2.1. Participants

10 pupils from one private kindergarten in the southern part of Turkey participated in this study. They were selected randomly to participate in this study. Six of them were girls and four of them were boys. They had attended different kindergartens in the past, and they also had a variety of language experiences from different school settings. The private kindergarten board provided observational data in the classroom. Participants varied in their age (4-6).

2.2. Data Collection

In order to understand the ideas and perceptions of very young learners about foreign language learning and culture, six semi-structured questions were posed to them. Semi-structured questions provide researchers with detailed data (Yildirim & Simsek, 2011). The questions were in their mother tongue because they would not otherwise have been able to understand the questions. The questions and answers were analyzed by three experts in the field. Before the interviews, the researchers observed the children in their kindergarten for one month. After one month, some students were randomly selected, considering the characteristics of both groups. All participants were informed about the interviews and recordings. They were excited and participated in the interview as volunteers. Their parents also gave permission for this study, and they were eager to see the results obtained. To verify the validity and reliability of this research study, various data types, including interviews and observations, were collected. Classroom observations are crucial for ensuring the reliability and validity of the collected data (Cohen & Manion, 1985).

As mentioned before, the children were grouped into two parts as group 1 and group 2. To understand their perspective, the researchers conducted 20-minute interviews with the kindergarten pupils due to the children's short attention spans. The interviews were conducted in Turkish, which allowed the children to express their ideas in detail. Agreeing with Yin (2009) who thinks that using interviews provides the researchers with detailed data, the researchers interviewed each subject twice in order to make the data clear and understandable. The research question of this study is how children perceive foreign language and culture. This study also seeks answers to the questions listed below. When the pupils did not understand question 4 and 5, the researchers tried to explain this concept and changed the questions to make them clear.

1. What does a foreign language mean?
2. What does a foreign culture mean?
3. Do you want to learn a foreign language and different culture and why?
4. Are there any similarities between your language and a foreign language?
5. Are there any differences between your language and a foreign language?
6. Can you explain the similarities and differences of the target culture and your culture?

Before the interview, the researchers observed the children in kindergarten, and they found that very young learners could analyze the differences between a foreign language and their mother tongue consciously. As Scott and Ytreberg (2010) mentioned before at the age of five, children can use their logical minds and argue for something in their surroundings so they were able to tell the researchers something about language and culture in this research. The interviews with the ten children were transcribed and the transcripts were examined by two of the researchers and one expert in the field of young language learning. In order to analyze the obtained data, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used. Coding was done manually with coloring. All of the data were coded systematically, and two ideas were identified as language awareness and cultural awareness.

2.3. Data Analysis

Before transcribing the interviews, the researchers observed the young learners for a month to find out their attitudes towards language learning. The researchers observed that the young learners were very shy at the beginning of the term, but they improved intellectually day by day. Very young learners belonging to group 1 have been observed to use a foreign language everywhere both in the classroom and during break time. Their levels of involvement were observed to be higher than in the other group. It was also observed that all kindergarten students have positive attitudes towards foreign language and culture, but some of the students from the second group displayed a lack of interest and competence. The researchers also observed that the children's enthusiasm during the class period and the interviews and noted that they were happy to answer questions about foreign language and culture.

The ten children were asked questions about foreign language learning and culture in detail. Because of their age and understanding, it was difficult for them to make a comment. However, they understood the questions and tried to answer all of the questions in their own terms. The same questions were asked again to understand their feelings and ideas. In group 1, children were called A, B, C, D, and E and in group 2 they were coded as F, G, H, I, J instead of their names.

The researchers asked what a foreign language means for children. Child A from the first group said *'Foreign language is another language different from Turkish for example Russian and German. We have some friends from Germany and Russia, and they speak different languages. It is a kind of foreign language'*. Child B *'I listened to songs in different languages and a fairy tale. Cinderella speaks English. It is a foreign language. I also like storytelling in different languages. There are different languages such as Russian, Chinese, and Japanese'*. Child C said *'I learned some different words and watched different children's films in other languages. I understood a few words while I was watching and listening to stories. It is a foreign language.'*

The same question was put to the children in group 2 who had not had any English lessons before. They had only started attending kindergarten at the beginning of the term. Child F from the second group said *'A foreign language is a language, but I do not know what it is'*. Child G said *'A foreign language is my language. I shout but my friend listens to the teacher. It is a foreign language'*. Child H *'Some of my friends and people in Antalya do not speak like me. It is a foreign language.'*

The researchers asked the children what a foreign culture means. Child B from the first group said, *'Foreign people eat and wear different things so I like to eat sushi and I want to learn Japanese to eat Sushi.'* Child D from the first group said *'Children from foreign countries and cultures can play different games and watch different films. They do not eat the same food as us.'* Child G from the second group said *'I do not know about different cultures and languages. Everybody can speak Turkish.'* Child I from the second group said *'I do not know about foreign culture but there are foreign people in Antalya, and their clothes and food are different.'*

The researchers asked the children whether they wanted to learn a foreign language and why. All of the children participating in this study said that they wanted to learn a foreign language and culture because they like friends from different countries. Child A from the first group said *'I want to learn a foreign language because I want to speak to foreigners. He can teach me Russian, Chinese, and Japanese; I can teach him/her Turkish.'* Child J from the second group said *'Yes, I want to learn a foreign language. If I have a friend from Russia or Germany, I can learn their languages and we can sing songs together both in Turkish and their language.'*

When the researchers asked similarities and differences between their native language and a foreign language, one of the children from group 1, Child C said *'They are different. Their meals, their paper, it is made of wood. They speak faster than us. Their language is difficult but mine is simple. Our mouths are similar, but our eyes are different'*. Child D from the first group said *'They have different feast days, festivals, and Halloween days, I like Halloween days. When we have foreign friends in the classroom, we celebrate our feast days and their feast days, so we celebrate lots of feast days.'* Child E from the first group *'their birthday parties and presents are the same, but their houses, toilets and streets are different. Foreign language is easy for me, for example, we say the same things for some animals, zebra is same in Turkish and English'*. Child F from the second group said *'German children and Turkish children are different. Their heads and hands are different, but I want to make a German friend. We can play very well and speak both languages.'* Child J from the second group said, *'Everything is the same so I can learn all the languages.'*

When the researchers asked about similarities and differences between the target culture and their native culture, child C from the first group said *'Their houses and roofs are different. Japanese children live in small houses. They eat different food and wear different clothes. Our houses are big, and my bed is also big. It is very enjoyable to live in a house with a triangular roof like a Japanese child'*. Child D from the first group said *'Their culture and our culture may be different because their trees are different. People sometimes wear thick clothes, but we never wear thick clothes here. Children feel cold in Germany and Russia, but we always feel warm here. Chinese people drink green tea, but we drink black tea in Turkey'*. Child G from the second group said *'All people live in Turkey but in different towns. Everybody's culture is the same. Some of the children from different towns only wear different hats'*. Child I from the second group *'There is only one culture, and it is my culture. Some children wear different coats because their mothers and fathers are from different countries. They can wear according to their countries' weather conditions'*. After the analyses of the transcript, it was found that both the first group of children and the second group of children understood that there are different languages and cultures in the world. It is clear that both groups of students were aware of different language and cultures. However, when the sentences were analyzed, the language and cultural awareness of the first group of children were higher than the second group. They expressed their ideas and feelings about foreign languages and cultures in more detail than the second group. This indicates that the language awareness and readiness of the children in the first group of children were higher than in the second group of children. Although some of the children participating in this study are taking part in English as a foreign language lesson, many of them wanted to learn Russian, German, Chinese or Japanese because they met many tourists from these countries in Antalya. That is one of the interesting results of this study.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

This study is a limited study involving only ten pupils so it is not sufficient to establish a clear result, but the results obtained from the questionnaire may indicate that very young learners are eager to learn different languages and about different cultures, even though they do not have any ideas about culture. All the children participating in this study mentioned that they were aware of different languages and their mother tongue. Once they have started learning a foreign language, they want to learn many things about that language, and its associated country and culture. They like communication and want to learn a foreign language with their peers. In Antalya there are a lot of Russian and German people who have been living here for many years, so the children living in Antalya can meet many people from these countries. This may affect very young learners to recognize Russian and German as foreign languages. Many children participating in this research state that they want to learn Japanese and Chinese. When we consider their ages, they may be watching Japanese cartoons and playing with Chinese toys in Turkey, so this may influence their point of view. All the children in the study said that they always watched cartoons and animated films and played computer games in other languages. They added that they were all interested in music, art, games and films, as well as computer-based games; hence it would be a good idea to use these cultural elements when teaching a foreign language. Anything we use as cultural elements encourages young learners to think about what is happening around them in their world (Brewster et al., 2004) for example, listening to children's songs in different languages, watching films belonging to another culture, and taking part in artistic activities and handicrafts from foreign countries. It is very difficult for the very young learners to understand an abstract concept such as culture,

but they can learn quickly when they are exposed to abstract concepts through the use of authentic materials in the classroom, telling some fairy tales from different countries, looking at pictures and postcards etc. Donaldson (1978) explains that children have symbolic thoughts when they are four years old, and they can classify everything around them. After five years old they can be aware of the differences of others, different lives, different lifestyles and different cultures. For example, Child B from the first group said, 'Some people are different because their houses are different'. Child G from the second group, 'Some people from different countries and culture have small eyes and mouth'. When the researchers asked about the differences between the houses and the reasons for the differences in detail, Child B said 'The shapes of Japanese houses are different because they like these kinds of houses, it is their culture. They can live in big houses when they come to Turkey'. They only give concrete examples when they are asked about culture. They can symbolize what they see and hear at this stage. According to Schwänenflugel (1991) abstract concepts are problematic for very young learners and they cannot be improved until the period of adolescence. However, abstract concepts such as culture can be improved by exercising linguistics skills with the children's peers in the same atmosphere. Children can understand abstract concepts by speaking, listening, and playing with their peers in all languages. Storytelling may be a good way to gain abstract concepts. Wright (2004) supports this idea and says that storytelling creates meaningful contexts, and children can learn a foreign language naturally by repetition. They can acquire the concept of culture unconsciously. It can also be said that experience is important for young learners, and they can appreciate abstract concepts after they have experienced them in the concrete kindergarten environment.

In conclusion, it can be said that a good foreign language setting can be an excellent environment for improving cultural and language awareness during an early age, and using target cultural elements may help very young language learners to understand and internalize a foreign language better. All of the cultural activities, such as using games in foreign languages, songs and visuals related to that target culture, increase the young learners' intercultural awareness, and also improve their cognitive and communication skills. They can distinguish differences and similarities through drama activities with their peers. Activities and visual aids such as cartoon films from the everyday life of the target culture may be used to motivate very young learners in kindergartens. Furthermore, teachers can use authentic materials to help very young learners increase their curiosity and awareness of the other culture. Sticking up pictures that contain cultural images associated with the language on the classroom wall can have a positive effect on young language learners (Wahyanti & Warsono, 2014). Scott and Yetreberg (2010) support this idea and say that children can learn better when they have a pleasant environment. Getting nursery rhymes and finger plays from different cultures help very young learners find out about cultural topics. Curtain and Pesola (1988) think that using songs and nursery rhymes can increase the cognitive and affective minds of children and enrich their cultural awareness. To sum up, it can be said that materials, games and songs have vital roles to play in a child's language development. Although the physical world is meaningful for young learners, they can appreciate abstract concepts by listening to each other and playing with their peers. The findings of this study suggest that children need more communicative activities, and young learners between the ages of 3-6 can appreciate the differences (Roth, 1998). Holden (1991) supports this idea and implies that personal relationships have great importance for young learners, and that is why they can describe the people around them easily. Cultural language materials can make the children more enthusiastic and excited during the language learning process in kindergartens. It can also be said that games, songs and visual materials belonging to that culture can increase the intercultural, cognitive and communicative awareness of very young learners. Moreover, daily activities involving the target culture, such as watching cartoons and listening to fairy stories, can motivate very young learners in the kindergarten. Finally, it can be understood that very young learners can understand other people and their lifestyles, their needs and interests when they are in a communicative language atmosphere. Moreover, they can assign importance to other cultures, and accept similarities and differences among people. They can also have positive attitudes towards other children and their way of life.

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