

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Myth and reality in foreign language education for young learners

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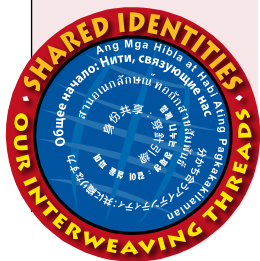
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Reference data:

Butler, Y. G. (2009). Myth and reality in foreign language education for young learners. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.), *JALT2008 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Many countries and regions have introduced foreign language education at the elementary school level, most notably English, as English has increasingly become an international language. However, policy decisions regarding FLES (foreign language at elementary schools) are often made based on assumptions that are not necessarily grounded in theory or supported by empirical evidence. Teachers and students in these countries often face significant challenges as a result of both the policies themselves as well as the rapid pace of change in such English teaching policies. Drawing examples primarily from select East Asian countries, this talk examines both the assumptions underlying recent policy decisions regarding the introduction of English at the elementary school level as well as the challenges that teachers face in implementing these new policies.

Foreign language at elementary schools (FLES) has gained a substantial amount of attention in recent years worldwide, most notably as English FLES has become more common. While many countries and regions have introduced FLES, policy decisions regarding FLES have often been made based on assumptions that are not necessarily grounded in theory or supported by empirical evidence. East Asia is no exception to this phenomenon. Is it better to learn a foreign language as early as possible? Should oral-based communicative activities be the focus of instruction in FLES? Should English be taught through the medium of English only? Isn't assessment bad for young learners? Does early foreign language instruction have a negative influence on young learners' first language development? Teachers and students in these countries often face significant challenges as a result of such policy decisions. This paper focuses on some of the major issues or "assumptions" underlying recent policy decisions regarding the introduction



of English at the elementary school level in East Asia. Such issues include: the age of starting FLES instruction; instructional methods in FLES; and assessment and evaluation.

The age at which to start FLES

The concept that “the younger the better for language learning” appears to be widespread among the general public in many parts of the world. Various types of foreign language learning programs and materials have been developed for children. Bilingual and English-only kindergartens and head-start programs are very popular among parents in numerous countries. Language education policies often appear to be influenced by this notion as well. Indeed, an increasing number of countries have introduced FLES at younger and younger grade levels. But it is really true that “the younger the better” for foreign language learning?

The notion of *the younger the better* is often associated with the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). If CPH is applied to language learning, one can predict that there is a certain period in development during which language learning takes place naturally. After this period, however, one can no longer acquire languages effortlessly and will not be able to attain native-like proficiency in a given target language. This, in turn, is often interpreted to mean that foreign language instruction should begin in early childhood.

However, it is problematic to apply the CPH to FLES for a number of reasons. First, despite the substantial amount of literature on CHP in second language acquisition, the results to date are still largely inconclusive. Even in the

phonological or phonetic domain in which children have generally been reported to have an advantage over adult learners, there is some evidence indicating that age is not an inevitable factor for the successful attainment of native-like pronunciation (Nikolov, 2000). We still do not have sufficient evidence to demonstrate that there are irreversible neurobiological changes which lead to different levels in the attainment of language between children and adults (Leather, 2003).

Second, existing studies on CPH have been almost exclusively conducted in the context of naturalistic second language acquisition. Simply applying the results of these studies to a foreign language instructional context can be highly misleading due to a number of potential but critically important differences between these two types of context. Such factors include the types and the amount of input in the target language, the goals and motivation for learning the language, the opportunities to use the target language, and other sociocultural factors. After all, the CPH, in principle, is an argument of potential neurobiological capabilities for acquiring languages; but foreign language instructional contexts often do not provide learners with opportunities to exercise such capabilities.

Unfortunately, we still have limited information regarding the relationship between the age at which FLES is introduced and students' learning. A few case studies have been reported (mainly from Europe and North America), but the results have been mixed. While some studies indicated no significant advantage among early starters in various linguistic domains including pronunciation (e.g., Lecumberri & Gallardo, 2003; Munoz, 2003), others showed the opposite

result. For example, in a study conducted in Croatia, early starters (those who started learning English before the age of 10) outperformed late starters in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in both their L1 and English when they were tested in the 8th grade. Early starters showed stronger inter-relations among different sub-skills within and between their L1 and English (Djigunović, 2008). Only motivational and other affective factors appear to consistently show superiority among early starters across studies.

Apparently, FLES programs vary substantially in terms of the intensity and quality of instruction. One would expect that early starters tend to have more allocated instructional hours, but older children can also have a large number of instructional hours if they have received intensive instruction. While it has been suggested that the allocated hours of instruction and the intensity of instruction may be among the most influential factors for successful foreign language learning (Met & Rhodes, 1990), the relationship between these factors and the age of onset of instruction is far from clear. A wide range in performance among early starters, depending upon the programs involved and the individuals themselves, indicates that factors other than the age of onset are also influential. Such factors include the types of instruction, the quality of the teachers, class sizes, the outcome measures used in the studies, learner motivation, aptitude, socioeconomic status (SES), and so forth.

In the East Asian context, very little reliable data is available with respect to the age of onset of FLES instruction and students' learning. Various sociocultural factors such as the amount of exposure to English outside of school

(e.g., through private English lessons) make it difficult to examine the effect of age on learning in FLES in many parts of East Asia. We also have very little information about the relationship between the age of onset of FLES instruction and learning among children who have non-European L1 backgrounds. In order to inform policy and enhance instructional decisions, what we need is information about the conditions for optimizing learning for different student age groups. Since one can assume that introducing FLES earlier in the educational process tends to increase educational expenditures from a policy point of view, analyses of cost-effectiveness should also be conducted.

Instructional methods in FLES

Partially as a response to repeated criticism towards the traditional English teaching approaches (e.g., grammar and translation exercises) in East Asia, communicative language teaching (CLT) has been widely promoted in recent policy initiatives. Along with this promotion of CLT, teachers have been asked to consider various other types of related instructional approaches and strategies, including adopting activity-based instruction, teacher-centered instruction, teaching English through the medium of English only (TETE), and so forth. Teaching content subjects such as math at the elementary school level has also been frequently discussed at the policy level, as can be seen in the recent debate in South Korea on this matter (e.g., Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union, 2008).

However, a number of studies have reported various difficulties and problems with implementing CLT in Asian contexts (for reviews of these studies, see Butler, 2005;

Littlewood, 2007). The problems addressed in those studies seem to be two-fold in nature: one aspect has to do with the conceptualization of CLT and the other concerns the adoption of CLT in local contexts.

With regards to the first point, CLT has been interpreted in various ways, rather confusingly, in Asia. Some teachers interpret CLT as almost synonymous with the avoidance of grammar instruction or the use of students' L1 (namely, teaching English through English only). These interpretations also can be found in some FLES policy documents. However, grammar instruction has been revitalized and new approaches to grammar instruction have gained attention in the literature recently. It is important to note, however, that how best to introduce grammar instruction to young learners is largely an unexplored area. A growing literature has also shed light on the effective use of students' L1 as an instructional tool. Such uses include classroom management and affective support. While there is some research indicating that the amount of teachers' L1 use influences young learners' attitudes towards their English classes (Inbar, 2008), the relationship between the amount of teachers' L1 use and young learners' foreign language learning is not yet clear. It appears that what matters more is how to use L1 and the target language rather than the amount of use of L1 and the target language per se. In other words, one cannot assume that TETE works best regardless of context.

With regards to the second aspect noted above, difficulties have also arisen from the direct implementation of CLT (and other related methods and approaches) when local factors have not been given sufficient consideration. As has been

described in the case of Korea, methods that have proven to be effective in one context are not necessary transferable to another context (Mitchell & Lee, 2003). In *adopting* methods and strategies locally (whether CLT or any other method or strategy), *reinterpretation* and *adaptation* are usually indispensable. For example, the nature of a "student-centered approach" would certainly be different if one teaches a class of 45 children instead of 10 children. "Authentic material" adopted from English-speaking countries may not be "authentic" for young learners of English as a lingua franca. Perhaps we should pay closer attention to the process of *adaptation* of various methods and embrace locally adapted approaches, instead of forcing teachers to implement certain imported methods or approaches uniformly and treating the adapted approaches as "misapplications" or "lost in translation" variants of the originals.

In addition to considering local factors, we need to pay closer attention to age factors when it comes to FLES. There is still relatively little information regarding which methods and approaches are effective for young learners. The existing literature on task-based instruction, for example, has not yet paid sufficient attention to the emotional and affective component of tasks, such as playfulness, excitement, and unexpectedness. Such components are often addressed by teachers as a key to keeping young learners focused on tasks and to help motivate them. In identifying effective methods, it is also important to pay close attention to developmental differences among grade levels; 1st graders and 6th graders, for instance, are at totally different developmental stages both cognitively and affectively.

Assessment and evaluation

Assessment is often an object of controversy in FLES. In some countries, including Japan, there seems to be some hesitation among teachers towards introducing the assessment of young learners of foreign languages. Some people are concerned that assessment may de-motivate students, and others worry that assessment creates unnecessary competition among young learners (Butler, 2005).

However, assessment is an indispensable component in teaching. Through assessment, teachers can gain information about their students' needs, mastery of learning, weaknesses, and improvement, and such information in turn should be utilized in order to improve teaching as well as to facilitate the students' learning. It is not assessment per se that is harmful. Rather, it is the inappropriate administration of assessment and the misuse of information gained through assessment that may potentially have negative consequences for young learners' motivation and learning. Assessment itself is indispensable for evaluating the effectiveness of FLES policies.

While systematic evaluations of FLES are still very limited, the evaluation reports that have been made available to date generally have shown positive results for FLES. This includes a large scale evaluation study in South Korea where 10th grade students who received FLES instruction outperformed 10th graders who did not receive FLES instruction in a general proficiency test called the GTEC, most notably in the domain of listening (Kwon, 2005). In addition, as far as I am aware of, there have been no published evaluation reports which show negative effects of FLES instruction on young learners' L1.

However, we are still far from getting an accurate picture of the effectiveness of early foreign language education. One may be concerned with the validity and reliability of the outcome measures used in such studies. Unfortunately, however, we still do not yet have a clear understanding of what constitutes foreign language proficiency among young learners who are still developing their L1 (Johnstone, 2000). Indeed, it is not always clear that the measurements being used in the studies sufficiently capture the various kinds of competencies that are more likely to be developed through FLES instruction. The positive effects of FLES on learners' affective factors have often been reported. Yet these factors are not easy to operationalize (especially for young learners) (Nikolov, 2000). More importantly, we have only limited understanding of how such affective factors relate to or influence young learners' foreign language learning. Substantial individual differences in performance have also often been reported in various FLES programs. We need more information about the relationship between the types and quality of instruction and children's performance. Individual factors also need to be carefully examined.

When we examine the effects of FLES, it is perhaps important to put FLES instruction into perspective in the larger socio-educational context. Multiple evaluation dimensions should be taken into consideration. Such dimensions include: the impact on various aspects of English education (e.g., instructional methods/strategies, curricula and material development, professional development, as well as the impact on students' performance) at the secondary school level and beyond; the effect of FLES on other academic subjects, such as language arts; and socio-

economic and regional gaps in student performance and their impact on social stratification.

Conclusion

FLES recently has gained substantial attention worldwide, and many countries have introduced FLES as part of their formal educational system. However, policy decisions have often been based on a series of assumptions that are not necessarily grounded in theory nor empirically proven. In this paper, I briefly examined some of the major assumptions regarding three primary topics related to FLES: the age of onset of FLES instruction; instructional methods and FLES; and assessment and evaluation. Research on FLES is still in its infancy. More collaboration among some of the key agents in early childhood education (including educators, researchers, and policy makers) and across regions is necessary in order to develop effective FLES programs for our children.

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