

## An Examination of The Challenges Faced By Teachers in Pre-School Foreign Language Education

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### Abstract

There are many benefits to learning a second language in addition to one's mother tongue. For this reason, learning a foreign language has become a necessity. Particularly with the influence of globalisation and technology, it is recommended to learn languages such as English, which are widely accepted as a common language across the globe. However, due to the complex nature of foreign language learning and the challenges it presents, it is believed that education at an early age is far more effective. It is recognised that foreign language education is far more enduring, particularly during the pre-school years, as this marks the brain's initial developmental phase. This is because it is anticipated that skills acquired, knowledge gained and habits formed during childhood remain more enduring into adulthood and become reinforced over time. However, there are certain challenges that teachers face in pre-school foreign language education. It is frequently observed that educators struggle during the process due to the problems arising from teaching children. Consequently, given the importance of the subject, this study examined the challenges teachers face during foreign language education in the pre-school education process and yielded significant findings and conclusions.

**Keyword:** Foreign Language Education, Foreign Language Education in Pre-school, Challenges in Foreign Language Education.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, learning a foreign language offers people many advantages. Consequently, it provides significant benefits in areas such as communicating with others, embracing different cultures and career development.

Given the importance of foreign language teaching, it has become less a matter of need and more of a necessity in today's world. It is widely believed that learning languages recognised as common languages, such as English, enables an individual to progress in life to a much higher level. Consequently, an individual proficient in a common language such as English is able to express themselves, convey their thoughts or communicate their wishes in any country in the world.

Apart from the importance of learning a foreign language, there are certain challenges inherent in the learning process itself. This is because every language has its own structure, grammar, pronunciation and unique characteristics. Consequently, when learning a language other than one's mother tongue, a person must step outside their usual habits and adapt to a new language. Consequently, when learning a new language or a second language, people often find it challenging, make mistakes, and have to work hard over a long period to master the language fully.

Due to the challenges and complex nature of learning a foreign language, it is generally believed that learning it at a young age is much easier. This is because the process resembles the way a child's first language is taught by parents or teachers. In particular, the period between the ages of 0 and 5 is regarded as a stage of brain development and the formation of the brain's foundational structures. For this reason, it is believed that foreign language education during the pre-school years is far more effective. As this is a period when children form habits and learning becomes ingrained in their subconscious, a lasting education in foreign language acquisition emerges.

Research conducted worldwide suggests that children who learn a foreign language during the pre-school years are able to speak the language much more comfortably in later years and enter the world with a command of two languages. However, alongside the advantages offered by pre-school foreign language education, there are certain challenges from the perspective of teachers or educators. In particular, it has been observed that teachers face difficulties due to the challenges posed by foreign language education for the 0–5 age group. For this reason, the study examined the challenges faced by teachers in foreign language education during the pre-school years.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Early childhood foreign language education is one of the most important topics, due to the lasting nature of habits formed during the initial stages of brain development in childhood. As learning acquired at an early age tends to become permanent over time and turn into a habit, those who receive early years foreign language education find it much easier to become proficient in a second language later in life. However, there is a possibility of encountering certain difficulties during the educational process due to the way teachers deliver instruction to children. For this reason, all details regarding the subject have been examined under subheadings.

### 2.1. Characteristics of a Pre-school-age Child

It has been observed that certain characteristics come to the fore in individuals at different stages during the developmental process. The developmental stages in which such characteristics come to the fore are defined as developmental periods (Yatgın Gökbayrak, 2008, p. 9).

Developmental periods are generally categorised by age. However, the names given to these periods and the start and end years of the ages they encompass vary depending on the psychologist. There is, however, a general consensus regarding the sequence of developmental periods. The developmental periods are listed as follows (Erden, 2005, p. 98);

- Early childhood (3–6 years)

- Middle childhood (7–11 years)
- Adolescence (12–18 years)
- Young adulthood (19–25 years)
- Adulthood (26–34 years)
- Middle age (34–60 years)
- Old age (60+ years)

The pre-school period, referred to as early childhood, forms the foundation and core of human life. During this period, all aspects of the child's health and nutrition are taken into account. At the same time, factors such as the affection and love provided by the family environment are also of significant importance. However, another crucial point stems from the need for a physical and social environment capable of supporting all aspects of human development (DPT, 2001).

In the psychology of language, a distinction is made between the learning and acquisition of a foreign language. Consequently, acquisition refers to the unconscious and spontaneous learning of a foreign language through everyday life. For example, a child may develop and learn certain speech patterns through play. Learning, on the other hand, is based on conscious learning that takes place under formal conditions (such as in the classroom). Within the educational process, the family is identified as the primary agent or institution. However, pre-school educational institutions and the mass media also make significant contributions to the family's educational efforts (Apeltauer, 1997, p. 22).

According to Chomsky, if a child is provided with sufficient nourishment and comfort and is given the freedom to do so, and if the child is able to learn to walk, the same may hold true for language acquisition. Consequently, Chomsky does not view the minds of such children as a blank slate that merely absorbs the sounds it hears from its environment. In his research, Chomsky argues that the child is born with an innate capacity to discover the underlying conditions of the language system. This special ability is termed the 'language acquisition device' (LAD). This feature is described as a hypothetical 'black box'. It is therefore argued that this hypothetical box contains the principles necessary for human languages and facilitates the child's language acquisition. For this process to function correctly, the child must be immersed in the natural environment in which language is used. Consequently, learning is facilitated by the innate system operating within the child in a natural environment (Yatgın Gökbayrak, 2008, p. 9–10).

## **2.2. Pre-school Education and its Objectives**

Behaviour in childhood is observed to differ from that of adults in terms of emotional and cognitive development. Consequently, it is regarded as a process open to change and renewal. For this reason, exposure to early-stage stimuli enables the creation of a favourable educational environment. Various studies have shown that 50% of mental development up to the age of 17 occurs by the age of 4, whilst 30% occurs between the ages of 4 and 8. Furthermore, it has been observed that 33% of academic achievement up to the age of 18 is attributable to the education received between the ages of 0 and 6 (Koçak, 2001, p. 10).

When children are born, they need the care of others to survive; consequently, they attempt to explore their surroundings through their senses. As these senses mature, their ability to perceive

the world becomes much more acute. Therefore, a child's initial exploration of the external world through their senses is regarded as the beginning of 'learning', one of the most significant endeavours of human life. Perception, thought and behaviour can influence every stage of human life. Indeed, it is argued that humans continue to learn something new every single day. Research in this area has revealed that, compared to other periods of life, humans possess a significantly higher rate of learning during the first four years. Consequently, it is believed that a large part of mental development is completed within the first four years of life (Koç, 1983, pp. 4–5).

From birth, a child forms close emotional bonds with family members. Consequently, until the age of three, a child feels the need to interact with peers and join playgroups. Furthermore, children learn to seek acceptance, respect, accept others and share within playgroups. For this reason, this period is also regarded as a transition to socially oriented sensitivity (Koçak, 2001, p. 10).

Pre-school education (0–72 months) is regarded as an educational process that provides a rich, stimulating environment tailored to the developmental levels and individual characteristics of children in this age group, and supports their physical, mental, social and emotional development. It is also regarded as an educational process that enables children to guide themselves in the best possible way in accordance with societal and cultural values and prepares them for primary education (Ayhan, 1998, p. 5).

In any country in the world, education during the first five years of life is regarded as one of the fundamental responsibilities of the mother and father. From this perspective, a child's attendance at pre-school institutions is also viewed as a matter dependent on the family. Consequently, if the family feels the need to make use of such institutions, the child can receive pre-school education. Whilst such needs are recognised by families and administrators, they arise in close connection with the country's cultural, economic and traditional child-rearing methods (Koç, 1983, p. 13).

In the UK, pre-school education is not included within the scope of compulsory education. Consequently, there are four distinct types of flexible educational provision for children aged between 3 months and 5 years. These four types of provision are as follows (Karacaoğlu & Çabuk, 2002, p. 20);

- Day nurseries (up to 4–5 years old)
- Pre-school groups and playgroups (ages 2–5)
- Childcare centres and classes (ages 3–5)
- Classes at private schools (ages 4 and above)

According to the Reggio Emilia approach, the tools a child uses to interact with their environment are described as language. It is therefore believed that, unlike other living beings, humans possess the privilege of self-expression and the ability to communicate their thoughts thanks to the richness of language. For this reason, children have the right to grow, to become individuals, and even to express themselves freely. The language used today is imposed on children through narrow, imitative mechanisms based on reciprocal exchange, rather than processes rooted in a strong imagination. This situation leads to children being restricted in their ability to express themselves. In Reggio Emilia programmes, children are provided with a free

environment to discover the unknown properties of materials, colours and shapes through their senses. Thanks to this free environment, children are able to experience the joy of learning, understanding and knowing through the experiences they have on their own, with their peers and with adults (Temel, 2005).

### **2.3. Learning a Foreign Language in Childhood**

Embryologically, the brain's initial development equips humans with specific communication abilities that enable them to understand one another and learn a new language. This ability diminishes over time, as people focus on acquiring other skills required for social and cultural life. Consequently, learning a new language and applying the language they have learnt becomes much easier for a young child. For this reason, children possess the ability to imitate new sounds they hear and to copy them into their memory. Therefore, starting to learn a foreign language at an early age or during childhood provides children with many significant benefits and advantages (Koç, 2019, p. 9).

Young learners can easily acquire compound elements. This is because they are too young to realise that learning is difficult and possess a structure that is too flexible to be confined to set patterns. Consequently, it is concluded that a second foreign language can be learnt much more simply compared to adults. Once young learners or children have begun learning a foreign language, they are able to expand upon the knowledge they have acquired much more quickly and easily in adulthood (İmer, 1990, p. 11–15).

Because language and society are closely intertwined, languages differ from one another in terms of their functioning or form, depending on the societies' modes of thought and emotion, climatic conditions, social circumstances, geographical regions, cultures, histories, and the changes they have undergone over time (Gömleksiz & Kan, 2012, p. 1163).

### **2.4. The Advantages and Disadvantages of Learning a Foreign Language in the Pre-school Education**

The learning of a foreign language is a process that can take place at any age, but it is notable for the critical stages involved during the pre-school period. Given the importance of these critical stages in language acquisition, cooperation between school, family and the wider community is essential (Demirezen, 2003).

It is considered important to cultivate each skill in children during the pre-school years. For this reason, it is recommended that the necessary steps be taken to foster language acquisition skills. According to research on the subject, children develop language acquisition skills during the pre-school period in order to convey their feelings and thoughts to those around them. Consequently, language learning occurs as a result of natural experiences. In subsequent years, children communicate by using language in a manner specific to their own language. The healthy functioning of this communication is seen as directly linked to experiences during the pre-school period. Consequently, it is believed that children's communication skills improve through their use of language (Cömertpay, 2006).

The aim of teaching children a foreign language at an early age is not merely to expect them to speak that language as fluently as their mother tongue. It is also a fundamental objective to help children realise that there are other languages and cultures beyond their own. The aim is also to

help children learn to be tolerant of these cultures and to foster a positive attitude towards learning a foreign language (Karakoç 2007).

The period between the ages of 0 and 5 is regarded as the stage during which brain function is at its most intensive. During this period, the foreign language children learn can become as proficient as their mother tongue. Furthermore, it is believed that children who learn a foreign language at an early age are psychologically much more mature (Bilçentayev, 2004).

Children exposed to a foreign language at an early age gain the opportunity to compare their own cultural values with those of other countries. Consequently, it is anticipated that these children will grow up to be tolerant individuals with strong communication skills. For this reason, early language education helps to foster children's social, personal and cultural development in a positive manner (İlter & Er, 2007, s. 21-30).

Language education provided to children at an early age contributes to the development of their intelligence. It is also thought to enhance their ability to understand their mother tongue correctly (Anşın, 2006, p. 9-20).

Research suggests that foreign language education provided at an early age may also have certain negative effects on children's use of their first language and second language. This is because, as children have not yet fully mastered their first language at a young age, mixing their first language with the second language can lead to certain misconceptions. Consequently, children can only achieve full success in learning a foreign language once they have reached a certain level of proficiency in their first language. It is thought that there are two significant negative consequences of children starting to learn a foreign language at an early age. The first of these negative consequences stems from the possibility that foreign language education provided at an early age may negatively affect children's first language. The second stems from the differences between foreign language education provided at an early age and that received after migration. For this reason, it is recommended that foreign language education be prioritised using methods that are compatible with children's development and psychology. It is therefore important to pay attention to pre-school foreign language education by following the relevant recommendations. Otherwise, the effects of these shortcomings are felt more clearly in children's foreign language education (Akdoğan, 2004, p. 97-109).

### **2.5. Challenges Faced by Teachers in Foreign Language in the Pre-school Education**

Foreign language education during the pre-school years offers critical opportunities for children's language development. Consequently, it also presents various structural and pedagogical challenges for teachers. The key aspects of these challenges are as follows (Pinter, 2011);

- Developmental appropriateness
- Classroom management
- Lack of materials
- Teacher competencies
- Parental expectations

Children in the pre-school years struggle to understand abstract concepts. Consequently, interactive methods based on concrete and play-based approaches are required for foreign language teaching. However, it has been observed that many teachers today face difficulties in

applying age-appropriate pedagogical strategies in language teaching. According to research on the subject, within the framework of cognitive development theory, it is believed that children are in the pre-operational stage and that learning occurs primarily through experience and imitation. For this reason, it is anticipated that traditional teaching methods may prove ineffective (Piaget, 2001).

A significant proportion of pre-school teachers do not possess adequate training in foreign language teaching. Consequently, foreign language teachers may experience certain shortcomings due to their lack of familiarity with early childhood education pedagogy. This situation reduces the efficiency of the teaching process and demonstrates the necessity for the teacher to possess both linguistic and pedagogical competence in language teaching (Thornbury, 2006).

The limited availability of materials that are suitable for the early years and culturally and pedagogically appropriate is also regarded as a significant problem. It is clear that teachers are often forced to produce their own materials and face a shortage of resources for foreign language teaching in the pre-school years. According to research in this area, it is stated that visual and auditory materials play a critical role in language teaching for young children. Consequently, due to the lack of relevant materials, teachers are required to make an extra effort or exert additional effort in relation to the subject (Cameron, 2001).

It has been observed that pre-school teachers encounter various difficulties or problems in the teaching of foreign languages during the learning process. The most fundamental of these problems is considered to be the language barrier. Consequently, some of the relevant issues are as follows (Kara, 2004, p. 295-314).

- Inability to communicate due to children's lack of language skills
- Lack of preparation for reading and writing and insufficient participation in language activities
- Reluctance and difficulty
- Incorrect application of teaching methods
- Short attention spans and listening periods
- Inadequacy of the activity books used

When foreign language education is provided during the pre-school years, parents have high expectations regarding language learning at an early age. This is because parents expect their children to speak the foreign language at an advanced level. It is also noteworthy that some parents expect tangible results in a short period of time. Consequently, as language learning is a long-term process, teachers are increasingly likely to face difficulties in managing parental expectations. This situation can lead teachers to resort to pedagogically inappropriate methods and act hastily (Enever, 2011).

Assessing and analysing foreign language learning in the pre-school period is also among the challenges faced by teachers. In particular, it is considered that traditional examination methods are not suitable for the pre-school age group. Consequently, it is observed that teachers are compelled to use techniques based on observation, process and performance (McKay, 2006).

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study focused on examining the challenges faced by teachers in pre-school foreign language education. In this context, details such as the aim, significance and methodology of the study, as outlined in the methodology section, were examined under subheadings.

#### a. Purpose of the Study

The aim of this research is to examine the challenges encountered in pre-school foreign language education. Consequently, the study seeks to analyse the challenges faced by teachers in this context. Furthermore, one of the study's secondary objectives is to contribute a significant body of knowledge to the relevant literature.

#### b. Significance of the Study

Given the importance of foreign language education today, there is a wealth of research on this subject. However, a review of the relevant literature reveals that there are very few sources specifically addressing foreign language education in the context of pre-school education. Furthermore, it is evident that there are also very few sources examining the challenges faced by teachers in pre-school foreign language education. Consequently, the originality of this study and its focus on an important topic enhance the significance of the research. Therefore, the contributions this study makes to the literature underscore its importance.

#### c. Research Method

A literature review approach was adopted for this study. Consequently, information from literature sources deemed relevant to the subject was incorporated into the study through a systematic review. By collating and integrating these sources in an original manner, significant findings and conclusions were derived within the scope of the subject.

### 4. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The study investigated the challenges faced by teachers in pre-school foreign language education. In this context, a number of significant findings and conclusions relating to the subject were obtained.

In light of the findings obtained during the research, it has been observed that children are more receptive to learning during the pre-school years. This is because the period between the ages of 0 and 5 is recognised as the stage during which the brain develops most rapidly. It has been established that during this period, as children are still learning their own language and possess a highly developed ability to imitate, they are able to acquire a new language very quickly. Consequently, it has been observed that children who receive bilingual education at an early age are able to develop the language they learn later on much more rapidly and, by forming habits, gain greater mastery of that language. In this context, it is evident that pre-school foreign language education offers numerous opportunities. However, the findings of the research also indicate that, alongside these opportunities, there are certain disadvantages.

Language-related difficulties are among the primary challenges children face when learning a foreign language during the pre-school period. This is because, whilst children are still in the process of learning their own mother tongue and have not yet fully internalised it, attempting to learn another language can lead to the two languages becoming confused. Consequently, speaking both languages incompletely, mixing up certain words, or experiencing pronunciation

difficulties are among the negative effects. However, it is anticipated that such issues will be resolved entirely as children develop further.

When the challenges faced by teachers in pre-school foreign language education were examined as part of the research, a number of issues came to light. In particular, the problem of being unable to communicate, stemming from the fact that children do not know their own mother tongue, stands out. This can lead to teachers becoming worn down and experiencing difficulties. Another problem encountered may stem from children's reluctance to learn a foreign language. This is because families often force their children to learn other languages by directing them to relevant institutions. If a child exhibits such disinterest or reluctance, it is likely that teachers will face significant difficulties in pre-school foreign language education. A further problem may stem from the incorrect application of guidelines or teaching methods by the teacher. Such situations are generally anticipated to apply to educators who lack sufficient training in the teaching of foreign languages in early childhood education.

Another finding relating to the difficulties or challenges teachers face in teaching foreign languages in pre-school settings stems from the fact that children have short attention spans and listening times. Young children may struggle to maintain focus and can become bored quickly. This situation creates certain obstacles for teachers in foreign language teaching. Consequently, it may require teachers to exert significantly more effort in foreign language teaching. Furthermore, the lack of or inadequacy of the books or materials used is one of the primary problems faced by teachers. Particularly due to the lack of resources for pre-school content, teachers often have to develop materials themselves. Consequently, during pre-school foreign language education, teachers frequently find themselves having to create and present their own materials to pupils. This, in turn, leads to difficulties such as teachers having to put in more effort and becoming exhausted.

Another problem faced by teachers has been identified as stemming from parents. During pre-school foreign language education, parents expect their children to learn a foreign language very quickly. In addition to this, parents' high expectations and their assumption that their children will speak the foreign language as fluently as their mother tongue can lead them to adopt certain inappropriate attitudes towards teachers. Teachers influenced by such parents may resort to inappropriate techniques in an attempt to speed up the process, which can in turn lead to certain drawbacks. It is therefore recommended that teachers manage the process in a clear and explanatory manner without being unduly influenced by such situations.

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