

Exploring young learners' foreign language learning awareness

What this research was about and why it is important

Previous studies looking at young children's language learning in schools have tended to focus on materials, children's attitudes, children's achievement, and the influence of a second language on the children's first language. Few studies have documented children's awareness of their learning processes and the conditions that help them to learn, and few have looked at children's views of themselves as language learners. This article explored these under the umbrella term 'language awareness', bringing together data from previous studies. The children showed an early awareness of foreign language learning and the conditions that affected their learning, as well as an awareness of how these conditions and their experience of learning a language shaped their views as they moved up through the primary years.

What the researchers did

The researchers used interview data from two previous studies to explore children's language awareness. The previous studies included data collected over six years as children progressed through the primary school system.

- The researchers identified three aspects of learners' beliefs to explore: children's beliefs about themselves as language learners; their views on language learning; and their views about the learning situation (the conditions of learning).
- The data was taken from interviews with 24 children aged 8 to 9 years, and 50 children aged 11 to 12. The children (35 girls and 39 boys) came from a mix of state schools and were all bilingual Catalan-Spanish learning English as a foreign language. These interviews were done as part of two previous studies.
- The children had been interviewed individually in whichever language (Catalan or Spanish) they chose.
- The researchers for this study concentrated on the children's answers to five questions (below).

What the researchers found

- ***Do you think you learn English as fast as other children in class, or faster or slower? How do you know?***
 - Results implied that children 'attune their views and differentiate themselves from the others [in the class] as they grow older and gain experience as school learners' (p. 30).
- ***What does learning English mean to you?***
 - An analysis comparing answers from the younger children (8 to 9 years) and the older children (11 to 12 years) indicated that children develop their self-regulation (meaning that parents' and teachers' views become less influential). As children grew older, they referred less often to 'inside' learning activities in the school and more to 'outside' reasons for learning, such as international travel and communication.
- ***What do you think is most difficult about English?***
 - Children across the age group most often cited language difficulties, such as English spelling and its lack of transparency as a problem, as well as the problems of matching the spoken word to the written word. This may be a reflection of the amount of attention paid to written accuracy in the classroom 'which may not be appropriate at this age and proficiency level' (p. 34).
- ***In which of these classrooms would you learn English best? Why?***
 - Children voiced opinions that were strongly linked to their own classroom experiences. This showed that from children's early language-learning days the classroom experience seemed 'to help them build a conception of learning along traditional teacher-centered lines' (p. 35).
- ***What English class activities help you learn most? Why?***
 - Younger children mentioned vocabulary activities more frequently than older children, who also referred to grammar tasks. Interestingly, the choice of activities by which children learned (e.g., vocabulary, speaking, listening) did not always match the ones they enjoyed most (e.g., songs).

Things to consider

- Children's answers to individual questions often gave more than one reason, for example a child might report finding both spelling and pronunciation difficult.
- The children in this study were already bilingual. Results might not be similar with children who are monolingual.