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► **To cite this version:**

Manon Boutin-Charles. Second Language Education in the Early Years: implications on literacy learning. The 2nd International Conference on Advanced Research in Education, Educationconf, Nov 2019, Paris, France. 10.33422/2nd.educationconf.2019.11.796 . halshs-02404589

HAL Id: halshs-02404589

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02404589>

Submitted on 11 Dec 2019

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SECOND LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE EARLY YEARS: IMPLICATIONS ON LITERACY LEARNING

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Abstract. Learning a foreign language is not merely about learning vocabulary and grammar, but also learning about concepts and intellectual skills that are transferable to one's first language. Many authors seem to think that this is mostly related to metalinguistic abilities which, during early childhood, seem to be closely linked to later literacy competences, including reading and writing. Indeed, Cummins explains through his CUP theory that these skills are "linked and interdependent" (1976) for additive bilingual subjects, who have a high proficiency in both of their languages. The present study explores whether these advantages could also be seen in monolingual children who learn a second language at school in the pre-literacy years. If this is the case, how does the second-language learning influence and help develop first-language abilities and literacy? Is it possible to easily develop a method for children in all types of schools, especially in a monolingual education? This article explores how this could be effective and how one could apply this easily in any setting. It uses a case-study currently taking place in Paris, France, following 38 French-speaking children for two years from age 5 to age 7. After one year, of both qualitative and quantitative assessment, early results show that after one school year of 45 minutes of ESL per week, 5 to 6 year old children's literacy skills seem to have increased compared to children who did not have any ESL classes.

Keywords: early childhood education ; ESL ; literacy ; metalinguistics ; second language education

1. Introduction

The first part of this study was set in a primary school in the outskirts of Paris, France, in two classes of children aged five to six years old. Thirty nine children were followed for their third and last year of *école maternelle* (preschool) in two classes. They attended English classes for 45 minutes per week for the entire year, separated in three groups of 13 children. They followed the same program, consisting of oral English, developing listening and speaking skills, as well as basic interaction skills. Each lesson contained songs and / or nursery rhymes.

1.1 Purpose / Objectives

The aim of this case-study is to explore the influences of a foreign language learning program on pre-readers, especially the influence it could have on literacy skills in the first language. If this influence can be noticed and turns out to have a beneficial outcome for children's literacy skills, this study could be yet another argument in favor of early years foreign languages programs in public schools.

1.2 Literature review

Orsenna (2007 : 15) found that early general language comprehension abilities could be linked to later reading comprehension skills, and that these skills could be trained in young children before they learn any formal written literacy. Indeed, the preschool frameworks in France do not include any training in writing and/or reading. Children are expected to start learning reading and writing during the first year of primary school, at the age of 6 years old. However, preschool prepares children for this with numerous steps towards literacy learning, such as listening to long stories read by their teachers (which help children familiarise with more complex grammatical structures and new vocabulary), learning how to write by dictation to the adult (constructing full sentences, "editing" them while speaking, thinking before saying) and phonological awareness skills developed through language games, playing with words, syllables and letters, so children can understand how sounds are linked to make meaning, and coded into letters or chunks of letters to spell words.

The foundation of mastering writing skills is the discovery of the alphabetic principle, explains Orsenna (2007 : 17). It is important that children understand that this principle is not only about being able to name the alphabet letters, but to understand that writing codes speech through graphemes which are linked to abstract oral units called phonemes.

Because the awareness of this principle is the basis of all future learning of written communication, specific training tasks are given to pre-reading students before and during the first years of literacy learning under the name of *phonological awareness*.

Specifically in French, most of the spelling irregularities can support a morphological explanation as well, which conducts French educators to discuss morphological principles early during literacy learning, especially since it helps children linking the written word with its meaning (Orsenna, 2007 : 20)

Reading skills are developed in a functional region of the left fusiform gyrus called "*Visual Word Form Area*" (VWFA). While learning how to read, this area develops and its activity

increases. Before any formal literacy learning, this area is also used to recognise and differentiate faces, objects and geometrical shapes.

To be able to read, children have to possess a certain sense of autonomy ; when making a “reading mistake”, there is no immediate external feedback following that mistake. This absence of feedback is uncommon in the life of a six year old child. Before literacy education, most learning activities consisted of manipulating physical objects, which give instant, clear feedback (the tower falls down, the cube cannot go through the round hole, etc). During reading activities, the child is alone with the text and has to be the one giving the feedback (Gaonac’h and Golder, 1998 : 152). Indeed, any reading comprehension exercise needs feedback, either from the child themselves, a peer, or an adult (Orsenna, 2007 : 26). Research in educational neuroscience has identified three main factors in learning (Dehaene, 2011 : 95): (1) children’s active engagement, (2) focus on the learning object and (3) enjoyment of the task’s realisation, whether it is fun to do, shows clear progress, makes children feel appreciated or admired. This third factor explains the need for children to be able to provide themselves the feedback needed to achieve a sense of completion when they start learning how to read.

Through the CP class in France (children aged 6 to 7), children progressively shift from reading comprehension with texts read by the teacher, to comprehension with texts they can decode and understand on their own. This shift is slow because children need to focus so much on decoding the written words that they sometimes focus very little on the global meaning of what they are trying to read (Orsenna, 2007 : 27).

French has a lot of short, yet important grammatical words, thus explicit teaching of those words and their function can help children decode them faster, helping them to focus on less common words and on general meaning. This could accelerate the shift and also help children visualize how complex French spelling can be, and that it doesn’t always respect the most basic phonological rules (Orsenna, 2007 : 28).

Gaonac’h (2006 : 101) finds that metalinguistic skills (such as phonological awareness, but not exclusively) benefit from bilingualism. Spada and Lightbown (cited in Gaonac’h, *ibid*) explain that learning a foreign language at a young age usually makes children actively look for situations to learn new content, to speak that foreign language with natives or to consume cultural products in the foreign language. Early language learning changes the behaviour, representation and relationship to the foreign language by making the foreign language part of the child’s identity.

Gaonac’h also notes (*ibid* : 108) that there is a substantiated correlation between foreign language and first language skills. Cummin’s thresholds’ theory (1981) explains that once a minimal threshold level is acquired, learning a second or a foreign language is beneficial to the first language. However, if this threshold level is not reached, there is no benefit from learning a second or foreign languages, and the consequences could even be negative to the first language mastery.

Gaonac’h cites as an example a research study conducted by Garfinkel and Tabor in the US. After four years of foreign language learning (Spanish) in primary school, these researchers found a clear advantage in reading skills in the first language at the beginning of middle school education (compared to children who did not receive a foreign language education in the primary school years).

It seems that foreign language learning acts like a *trigger* (Gaonac'h, 2006 : 109) for other more general linguistic acquisitions. It increases the development of metalinguistic abilities and reinforces reading skills. These metalinguistic abilities could be one of the most important factors of first language written literacy learning, as well as being the singularly most significant advantage that could come from learning a foreign language in the early years.

Göncz and Kodzopeljic (1991 : 137-163, cited in Gaonach, 2006) showed a positive effect of early years foreign language learning on Serbo-Croatian children's ability to segment words into syllables in their first language. Those children, who were learning either English or French, could segment words into syllables more easily than other children who did not learn a foreign language in the early years. However, no difference was found between the two groups for phonological segmentation. Another study took place in Australia with English native children who were learning Italian an hour per week in a primary school. It showed very positive effects on the children metalinguistic abilities. Yelland, Pollard and Mercuri (1993, cited in Gaonac'h, 2006) insist that while the foreign language acquisitions are poor (time and duration of the study), children who participated have far better skills in reading than their peers who did not learn Italian. Gaonac'h explains that metalinguistic abilities can be transferred from one language to another (*ibid* : 112).

2. Approach

This study is part of a PhD thesis in Education commenced in September 2018. It is still being conducted presently and plans to follow approximately forty children for two years. This article concentrates on the first half of the study which focuses on the third and last year of preschool (*école maternelle*) and was conducted from September 2018 to September 2019. It uses both a quantitative and a qualitative approach.

2.1 Quantitative and Qualitative approaches

The quantitative part of the data was taken from national tests that were introduced in 2017 in all public schools. Two tests are used for this study : a test that takes place in the last year of preschool in February : results from the 2017 class who did not benefit from English as a Foreign Language lessons and the 2018 class who did were compared. The study also utilises a subsequent test taken in September 2019 after the end of the program's first year, compared with the previous year's children who took the same test in September 2018.

The quantitative data is mixed with qualitative data taken from video footage of classroom activities in English (including children's oral productions), written productions and various work made by the children combined with interviews from teachers and children.

2.2 Hypotheses

This study uses a hypothetico-deductive approach. This means it has delimited hypotheses that were chosen before conducting the study. They are the following;

- Learning a foreign language in the early years develops metalinguistic skills, which are known to be in close correlation with later literacy skills ;

- Learning a foreign language with listening and interaction-based activities can boost self-confidence when confronted with unknown words or phrases, which can assist children in overcoming difficulties when reading their first texts.

Because this project is still undergoing, the PhD thesis this study is part of might use an inductive-hypothetico-deductive approach¹ with the first results (stated in this paper) used to sharpen new hypotheses that will later be tested more thoroughly.

3. Discussion

The earliest results seem to show that various literacy skills have been increased by the research process, such as listening comprehension of short texts or writing of simple words. However, taking into consideration that the study is still being conducted at present, these results have to be discussed with caution. Two different groups of around 40 students have been compared. Another control group will be tested in September 2020 to get closer to an objective representation of the school's population over time.

The rest of the quantitative data also needs to be collected before a thorough analysis is conducted : children's and the teachers' behaviour will be studied and put in relation with both children's and teachers' interviews.

While waiting for the final results to be available, the literature study seems to go in the right direction to confirm the hypotheses stated earlier ;

[1] Learning a foreign language in the early years develops metalinguistic skills, which are known to be in close correlation with later literacy skills :

This hypothesis links two verified statements : (1) learning a foreign language at a young age helps develop metalinguistic skills, which has been stated by Gaonac'h (ibid) through several studies as examples and (2) metalinguistic skills are in close correlation with later literacy skills, which has also been verified by researchers in literacy learning such as Orsenna (ibid).

[2] Learning a foreign language with listening and interaction-based activities can boost self-confidence when confronted with unknown words or phrases, which in turn can help children overcome difficulties when reading their first texts.

This hypothesis follows a completely different lead in the study ; apart from knowledge and skills, it is highly possible that psychological bias would have an impact on children's learning. The study's qualitative data can be used to determine if children's mindset during reading tasks has been modified by the study's process. This will be done through the analysis of several children's and teacher's interviews as well as some precise case-studies following a couple of children in particular.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the PhD research conducted under Ms Malory Leclère and Mr Jean-Louis Chiss' supervision. It is also made possible by the project research team MELangE directed by Ms Anne Salazar-Orvig and Ms Aliyah Morgenstern.

¹ Bru in Paquay & al., 2010, p.18

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