

Research on the Current Status and Problems of the Bilingual Education for Preschool Children in China

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Abstract: With the development of world economic integration, the number of bilinguals is gradually increasing. Nowadays, bilingual education for preschool children has become one of the most important research topics. The feasibility and superiority of bilingual education for preschool children have been confirmed by existing studies. However, the bilingual education for preschool children in China is relatively inadequate. Therefore, on account of three aspects: parents, kindergarten, and government, this paper analyses the current status and problems of bilingual education for preschool children in China and puts forward possibly effective recommendations separately based on Chinese actual conditions. This paper points out that there are some problems in the bilingual education for preschool children in China, such as the inadequate knowledge and vague expectations leading to blind selections in parents, insufficient qualified teachers and unscientific teaching activities in kindergartens, and negligent supervision and minor policies in government. This paper suggests that parents should increase their knowledge and conduct scientific family education, kindergartens should improve their teachers and organize scientific teaching activities, and government should strengthen the supervision and support the introduction of policies and academic research.

Keywords: Preschool Education, Bilingual Education, English Study, Second Language Acquisition

1. Introduction

Affected by the rapid development of the world economy and the acceleration of globalization, many countries have shown a multilingual and multicultural social development trend. The population all over the world living in bilingual and multilingual environments has accounted for more than 50% of the world's population [1]. The number of bilingual children is constantly increasing, and the research on bilingualism and children's development has attracted more and more attention from scholars. The superiority of bilingual children has pushed society forward to reflect on bilingual education for preschool children.

Since the 21st century, China has entered a period of rapid development of society. Because English learning in China shows a trend toward younger age students, bilingual education for preschool children is becoming more and more popular. Beginning in the mid-1990s, although Chinese bilingual education started relatively late, it had a great prospect. Due to the negligent supervision of the government, the lack of policies and academic research, the insufficient qualified

preschool teachers, unscientific teaching activities in kindergartens and families, and so on, bilingual education for preschool children in China has shown a strange phenomenon development which is fast in speed but uneven in quality.

This paper aims to explain the current status and problems of bilingual education for preschool children in China, and put forward some effective recommendations, providing theoretical reference for the research and practice in this field.

2. The Advantages of the Bilingual Education for Preschool Children

The preschool education circles and the developmental psychology circles do not completely reach an agreement on the definition of the concept of "preschool children". Influenced by Chinese national conditions, the bilingual education in China includes two types: one is the bilingual education of minority language and Chinese while the other is the bilingual education of foreign language and Chinese. The bilingual education for preschool children in this paper refers to the purposeful, organized, and planned teaching of Chinese and English for Chinese children with age of 0-6 years old who do not go to primary school. The advantages of the bilingual education for preschool children are mainly reflected in many aspects, such as mastering authentic pronunciation methods quickly, promoting cognitive development, and promoting social development.

2.1. Beneficial to Master Pronunciation Methods

For preschool children, their development is not mature, and they have strong plasticity. The preschool education period the most potential period for children's language acquisition. In 1953, neuropsychologist Penfield proposed that children's language acquisition ability is related to the development of their brains. He believed there is the Optimum Age for language acquisition, and pointed out that the Optimal Age is within ten years old. Then, Lenneberg proposed the Critical Period Hypothesis in 1967. He thought the critical period of natural language acquisition for human beings is between the ages of two and adolescence (10-12 years old) [2]. Kuhl, from the UW Center for Human Neuroscience, found that infants between 6 and 12 months of age have the strongest ability for speech recognition [3]. In early childhood, both the left brain and the right brain grow rapidly and have the highest plasticity. The motor nerve regulation of the vocal organs controlled by the right brain has great flexibility. Therefore, it is easier for children to master authentic pronunciation methods when they are exposed to a second language in their early stages. People who learn a second language later than this period will be affected by the standardization of the vocal organs and the habituation of the mother tongue. Thus, it will be more difficult for them to speak like English native speakers than children learning in the early stage.

In conclusion, a lot of empirical studies prove that there is indeed a "critical period" for preschool children to learn a second language. The advantage of young age owned by preschool children, is conducive to them to distinguish phonetic differences and quickly master the pronunciation methods of the second language.

2.2. Beneficial to the Cognitive Development

Bilingual education is good for the development of preschool children in the cognitive field. Experiments have shown that the influences of second language learning on individual executive function are mainly reflected in the following three aspects: working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility [4]. The positive effect of bilingual experiences on the bilinguals' cognitive ability is known as the bilingual cognitive advantage effect, which means that bilinguals perform better than monolinguals in a series of cognitive measurement tests [5]. The study about children's working memory ability conducted by Asadollahpour and his colleagues shows that, compared with

monolingual children, bilingual children update their working memory faster and have higher response accuracy in working memory tasks [6]. Wimmer and his colleagues studying children aged 3-5 find out that bilingual children show better inhibitory control ability [7]. In the study of the color-shape conversion task, Barac and his partners find that the response of three groups of bilingual children with different second languages is faster than that of monolingual children [8].

In summary, regardless of the influence of gender, age, family economic status, social culture, and other external factors, bilingual children show some advantages in working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility. The bilingual learning experience helps children develop cognitive abilities such as memory, attention and control, creativity and imagination.

2.3. Beneficial to the Social Development

Becoming a social person is one of the main purposes of education. However, Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist, pointed out that preschool children have the cognitive characteristic of "egocentrism", which means that preschool children can only understand things from their perspective, believing that the world is the way they think it and there is no other way. The social development of preschool children is immature. Adults are expected to help children become "decentralism". Adults need to help children gradually learn to distinguish between the subject and the object, and know that the world does not revolve around him or her. Children should accept the existence of other people's views and establish mutual connections between the ego and the world.

Through the emotional face n-back task, Janus and his colleagues claim that the accuracy of bilingual children is higher than that of monolingual children under the interference of emotional faces [9]. According to this task, in terms of sociality, bilingual children have a stronger ability to read between the lines than monolingual children, that is bilingual children can grasp the true meaning behind other people's words and can be not influenced by the facial expressions of speakers. The bilingual learning experience can make children understand that there are differences between languages and make it easier for them to accept different opinions from others.

To sum up, it is proved that the bilingual education for preschool children can make it easier for children to be "decentrism" and promote children's social development.

3. The Status and Problems of Bilingual Education for Preschool Children in China

3.1. Parents

Since China's reform and opening up, Chinese parents have seen the positive effects of English learning on their children's future development. They try their best to make their children learn English. However, because of the inadequate knowledge of most parents and the vague expectations of bilingual learning leading to blind selections, the effect of children's bilingual learning is worse than expected.

The Inadequate Knowledge of Parents. The bilingual education of preschool children cannot be separated from the support of parents. However, due to the lack of knowledge of some parents, there are some misunderstandings in their education ideas. That leads to unreasonable family education in the process of preschool children's bilingual learning. Some parents are firm supporters of the standpoint that there are absolute advantages for children who are immersed in English from a very young age. In the case of ignoring children's abilities and interests, these parents blindly require children to learn English as early as possible and pay no attention to the development of children's mother tongue. It ends in the situation that both children's mother tongue and English are not well developed. While some parents think that children's learning is the responsibility of teachers since kindergartens charge tuition fees from them. Children need to learn English and Chinese well in kindergartens, and that's all. This results in the lack of family education for children.

The Vague Expectations of Parents Leading to Blind Selections. One of the reasons that goes against the bilingual education for preschool children is that many Chinese parents have vague expectations for their children's English learning, so they always make wrong choices for children. A survey of Chinese parents shows that few parents have clear purposes for their children's future development in foreign language learning [10]. Most parents have their children learn foreign languages because they hope that foreign language education in the preschool stage can lay the foundation for foreign language courses in the compulsory education stage in the future [10]. It is worth noting that, in the Chinese compulsory education stage, the tool to evaluate students' learning outcomes is the test scores. Affected by that, parents of preschool children mistakenly choose kindergartens or institutions that provide "preschool education toward primary school". What parents pay attention to is not students' abilities but students' test scores. This misconception provides children with a tense and high-pressure learning environment and overlooks the cultivation of children's interest in English learning, which is not conducive to children's English learning in the future and even causes children to hate learning English.

3.2. Kindergarten

As Chinese society is in a period of rapid development, citizens recognize the importance of English skills in children's future competitiveness. At present, many kindergartens attract students under the banner of providing the bilingual teaching, but the teachers' abilities and teaching methods in kindergartens are uneven. There are not so many kindergartens that can truly offer the bilingual education.

The Insufficient Qualified Teachers. There is a serious shortage of qualified bilingual teachers for preschool children in China. Although the number of preschool education graduates in colleges and universities is increasing year by year, the proportion of these graduates who insist on engaging in preschool education and related fields is not high. In the current field of preschool education, most of the in-service teachers are non-professional graduates. They earn the teacher certificates in preschool education through later study and then work in kindergartens. The time non-professional graduates spend on learning professional knowledge of preschool education is less than that of professional graduates. Also, their learning is not systematic. So, the long-term effect of non-professional graduates' learning is not as good as that of professional graduates. At the same time, most in-service teachers do not have a high level of English and cannot be responsible for the bilingual teaching as advertised by the kindergartens. To enhance their competitiveness, some bilingual kindergartens hire foreign teachers. However most of these foreign teachers do not understand preschool education and cannot speak Chinese well, so they are not a better choice for children to learn English.

The Unscientific Teaching Activities in Kindergartens. At present, the teaching quality of many bilingual kindergartens is not high. In the process of teaching, many teachers always adopt the teaching method that mixes English and Chinese. They carry out Chinese-English and English-Chinese translation teaching. This not only makes the amount of the second language input in the teaching process insufficient, but also makes children unable to realize the independence of the two languages, which is not good for children to develop good habits in language learning. Moreover, owing to the limitation of teachers' abilities, teachers' pronunciation and intonation are not qualified, which gives rise to the low quality of children's second language input. However, completely relying on multimedia which has the standard pronunciation to teach cannot achieve the interaction of the real teachers' teaching.

The lack of innovation in preschool teaching activities is also detrimental to bilingual education. Current bilingual teaching for preschool children is rigid in form and boring in content [11]. Teachers are not interested in teaching while students are not interested in learning [11]. Many of the so-called bilingual teaching are just a formality and are difficult to achieve the purpose of bilingual education

[11]. Influenced by compulsory education in China, the phenomenon of "preschool education toward primary school" appears in many kindergartens. These kindergartens adopt the traditional teaching methods which mainly focus on teachers giving lectures. In these kindergartens, the teaching form is single and the participation of children in class is low.

3.3. Government

The bilingual education for preschool children is the product that symbolizes the certain stage human society has reached. The effective support from the government contributes to the positive development of this field. However, faced with new phenomena, government has a lack of supervision, and relevant policies and academic research are minor.

Due to the late start of bilingual education in English and Chinese for preschool children in China, the Chinese government pays less attention to the bilingual education in English and Chinese than to bilingual education in ethnic languages and Chinese. So, there are relatively few policies and documents on English-Chinese bilingual education for preschool children.

At the same time, academic research in this field is relatively scattered and scarce in China. Although the existing research on bilingual education is enough, the research on preschool children with Chinese as their mother tongue and English as their second foreign language is still poor. In addition, the current research in China is mainly basic research. These current research outcomes cannot form a systematic theoretical system for not only the basic principles such as the law of the development of preschool children's bilingual learning but also the practical education problems such as teacher training. There is a supply-demand imbalance between social needs and academic research. It seriously hinders the bilingual education for preschool children.

The Chinese government's negligent supervision of the bilingual education market also keeps the bilingual education for preschool children from developing healthfully. The development of bilingual education for the younger group has provided a huge market for related organizations. More and more English learning institutions and early childhood education centers have developed. It also provides the possibility of online bilingual teaching thanks to the development of science and technology. A variety of English reading materials, cartoons and textbooks have emerged in an endless stream. There are many ways for children to learn English on the market, but their quality cannot be guaranteed. Yet, relevant government departments lack punishment and supervision to unqualified institutions and organizations, allowing them to carry out false propaganda without scruples.

4. Recommendations

4.1. Parents

Increasing Parents' Knowledge. This paper encourages parents to keep learning and improve their own knowledge reserve. It will help parents understand the bilingual education for preschool children correctly and provide children with scientific and effective family education. Even if relevant studies have proved that language learning has a critical period, it is also worth paying attention to before and after the critical period. There is a silence period before the critical period. During the silence period, children identify, store, and process the target language by "listening". Only when the external environment is complete do the children begin to produce a large amount of output. Therefore, parents should understand the silence period of children and provide children with plenty of high-quality input. They should not be eager to force children to speak. In addition, the hard work after the critical period is also worthy of attention. Once the preschool children miss the critical period, parents should no longer require children to practice authentic pronunciation but should guide children to focus on the study of vocabulary and grammar.

It is necessary to be clear that the mother tongue is the cornerstone of bilingual education for preschool children. Chinese is the main social language for Chinese children. Parents should firmly appreciate their mother tongue and ensure the development of their children's native language. They should not over-emphasize their children's English acquisition, which may hinder the mother tongue acquisition.

Conducting Scientific Family Education. The key to stimulating children's bilingual learning is to create a suitable family environment. In terms of mental environment, parents should provide a natural, warm, and positive bilingual learning environment. Scientific family education should be taught according to children's aptitude, taking full account of children's own development level, interests, growing environment, and so on. Parents should keep a close eye on children's emotional changes and provide children with timely emotional feedback during the bilingual learning. At the same time, parents should focus on cultivating children's self-confidence. It is practical to encourage children frequently and not scold children's mistakes so that children will have the courage to express themselves and dare to make mistakes which they learn from. All these can protect children's curiosity and thirst for knowledge and then foster children's interest in learning bilingualism. In terms of physical environment, rich and diverse material conditions are beneficial for children to learn bilingualism. Studies have proved that in families that achieve high quality and high efficiency in the bilingual education for preschool children, their parents are more likely to use kinds of language stimulation methods such as books, games, and intellectual toys [12]. Picture books are the primary choice for family education. Interesting, colorful, and intuitive picture books cater to the characteristics of preschool children's cognitive development stage and can stimulate the growth of children's senses. Multimedia such as English nursery rhymes and original cartoons can also play an active role in children's learning. But parents need to pay more attention to the time children spend watching electronic products to avoid damaging their vision.

4.2. Kindergarten

Improving Teachers' Abilities. To carry out the bilingual education for preschool children smoothly, a sufficient reserve of qualified bilingual preschool teachers is essential. Qualified bilingual preschool teachers should be integrated with foreign teachers and preschool teachers. They should not only master the knowledge and skills of preschool education, psychology, hygiene, playing piano, music skill, art skill, dance skill, etc., but also have good oral English and English teaching ability. Above all in-service bilingual preschool teachers to improve themselves constantly and ask kindergartens to actively build platforms for teachers' training to increase the probability of receiving re-education for in-service teachers [13]. The training should aim at improving teachers' bilingual teaching abilities for preschool children, and strengthen teachers' daily English communication ability, oral pronunciation, and English grammar.

In the meantime, kindergartens should communicate and cooperate with colleges and universities. Kindergartens can take the initiative to clarify their requirements for preschool education graduates' abilities to colleges and universities and provide opportunities for professional students to work as interns. To achieve the requirements that kindergartens make for students majoring in preschool education, colleges and universities should gradually form a talent training model of “English + Professional courses + General education” [14]. Kindergartens and universities should work together to promote the long-term cultivation of the bilingual teachers for preschool children. Colleges and universities should help students build a solid professional theoretical foundation, and kindergartens should provide a lot of internship and practical experience for students in kindergartens.

Organizing Scientific Teaching Activities. The bilingual education for preschool children should be child-centered. Kindergartens should carefully get to know the children's abilities and find out the

zone of proximal development of every child. Then the teaching activities must be organized in each child's zone of proximal development. Furthermore, teaching activities must combine games and life situations. The bilingual teaching must start from children's daily life experience so that children can learn bilingualism in a natural context. Besides, it is essential to let games run through the whole teaching activity so that children can learn unconsciously in games. In addition, keeping the independence and integrity of the two languages in the teaching process is crucial. Children need to learn English in English rather than learning English in Chinese. So, the English-Chinese and Chinese-English translation teaching method adopted by most teachers is not desirable.

Children's language learning should pay more attention to the development of listening and phonological ability. According to Krashen's second language acquisition theory, enough input is the key to acquiring a language. Kindergartens should provide children with abundant high-quality language input. Kindergarten can play songs for young children. Because children can not only learn language in songs but also develop art cultivation. Letting children watch original cartoons and listen to English picture books are also effective ways to put language in, and they can enable children to learn in situations.

The main purpose of the bilingual education for preschool children should be to stimulate children's interest in bilingual learning. Providing various and enough teaching materials to children and making good use of multimedia resources are conducive to improving the interest and innovation of kindergartens' teaching activities. According to Piaget's Cognitive-developmental theory, preschool children are in the preoperational stage, and they cannot be separated from concrete representations. Teachers need to use intuitive materials to assist in teaching, for example, they can use physical objects to show the things told and use pictures to show the plot of the story.

4.3. Government

Effective policies and guidelines can promote the development of bilingual education for preschool children in China in the right direction. Government should issue effective documents to provide ideological and behavioral guidance for corresponding educators and parents according to the development status and social needs of the bilingual education for preschool children in China,

Abundant academic research contributes to the development of the bilingual education for preschool children in China. Departments at all levels should strongly support the academic research of the bilingual education for preschool children, making full use of the excellent human resources in numerous colleges and universities. It is important to find out the rules and directions of the bilingual education for preschool children based on Chinese national conditions.

To purify a good bilingual education environment for preschool children, the government is required to strengthen the supervision for the whole field. The Ministry of Education should strictly manage the issuance of teacher certificates. Relevant functional departments should strengthen the qualification examination of the bilingual kindergartens, investigate the teaching conditions of kindergartens as well as the teaching abilities of teachers, and give rectification orders to or even ban the unqualified kindergartens. Meanwhile, market supervision departments should take actions to punish those inadequate educational institutions and platforms, and strictly control the sales of related products.

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper is to summarize the current status and problems of bilingual education for preschool children in China from three aspects which are parents, kindergarten, and government, and make suggestions respectively. This paper finds that the main problems in bilingual education for preschool children in China as follows. Firstly, parents' knowledge reserves are inadequate, and

their expectations for children are vague which contributes to the blind selection. Secondly, the qualified teachers in kindergartens are insufficient, and the teaching activities are not scientific. Thirdly, Chinese government supervision is always absent, and the introduction of corresponding policies is few. Accordingly, this paper encourages parents to improve their knowledge and conduct family education scientifically, expects kindergartens to improve teachers' teaching abilities and arrange scientific teaching activities, and suggests government strengthen supervision and support the introduction of corresponding policies and academic research.

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