

Does the Shadowing Affect the Second Language Preschool Children's English Speaking Proficiency?

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Abstract: Unsurprisingly, changes in attitudes towards learning English in the international context have coincided with English becoming a global lingua franca. Learning a foreign language, especially English, from an early age is believed to impact children's language acquisition positively. This belief is supported by the Critical Period Hypothesis, which suggests that there is a biologically determined period when language can be acquired more easily. However, recent studies suggest that the assumption that younger people are better when learning English is only sometimes valid. The growing body of research on bilingual development examines the connection between language exposure and learning outcomes. The research studies the factors and the process of shadowing the efficiency of preschool children in learning English (as the L2) and which age is the most suitable for learning a foreign language. This paper presents two views: the earlier, the better to learn L2, or the latter to learn L2 during preschool years, with some degree of understanding of the native language. The implications of the holistic view on the neurolinguistics of bilingualism will be used in the field of education directly. Afterwards, the students could get a favourable education with rigorous and correct scientific practice and cultivate their English thinking patterns.

Keywords: bilingual development, learning proficiency, learning age, native language

1. Introduction

With the development of globalization, the importance of learning English has become increasingly prominent. More and more learners start learning English at a very young age. According to Ayu Oktaviani, Morrow states that learning English in elementary schools could offer children a series of possible advantages if the instructional goals and methods are appropriate for the learners' age. [1] Although children between the ages of 4 and 7 are similar, their physical development and brain growth are rapid, and they accept new knowledge faster than adults. Each year a child grows older, the more complete the brain development. So, which age is the best time for children to learn? According to Brown, there are five categories of practical approaches for teaching children. They are intellectual development, attention span, sensory input, affective factors, and authentic, meaningful language. [2] There is a widespread assumption that the children are better than adults in learning a new language. Shadowing is an effective technique to enhance listening and speaking skills, which are essential elements of oral communication, according to Ayu Oktaviani [1]. This study aims to research how children learn English and intends to improve linguistic and educational instruction.

Meanwhile, the study examines whether shadowing motivates children and provides opportunities to stimulate their interest in learning English. Furthermore, shadowing is a fashionable method for learning English speaking in recent years, but its deeper relationship with the objective law of children's brain development has yet to be fully explored. Now that the years have passed since attention began to focus on shadowing, it is a ripe time to summarize research on shadowing and propose future directions of further study (Yo Hamada). [2] In summary, there are still many unanswered questions regarding shadowing, which could benefit future learners.

2. Literature Review

The number of English learners (ELs) in school increased by 51% from 1997-1998 to 2008-2009 (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition). Nowadays, nearly 70% of ELs read at a below-basic level (National Assessment of Educational Progress), performing 20 to 50 percentage points below native speakers (Menken). [3] Shadowing has become a popular method of learning English in recent years. According to Atsuko Horiyama, Tamai explains that shadowing involves listening carefully to spoken content and repeating it as closely as possible. Initially, shadowing was considered an exercise for interpreting training. [4] Afterwards, based on the results of the interpreter practice, the researchers found that shadowing was of great help for beginners' listening and advanced learners' speaking. In this way, it provided a native-like oral communication environment that flowed into the field of education. The brain's plasticity makes learning a foreign language easy for preschool children.

Acquiring natural speech has a significant advantage. Learning a foreign language during this period can imprint on the brain, stimulate the neural function system, and develop language habits and abilities that are relatively easy to form. However, there are some disadvantages. Preschool children need better long-term memory ability and often need to be more transparent about their mother tongue with foreign languages and the local culture with foreign culture. Additionally, abstract logical thinking ability has yet to develop, making language learning time-consuming. Littlewood states that while there are several reasons to believe that children have an edge in acquiring a second language, such as early exposure and a higher level of proficiency in the long run, it has not been conclusively proven that children have an absolute advantage over adults. Additionally, children are observed to be better than adults at phonics acquisition.

In contrast, while the neural connections in the adult brain are completely established, and their thinking process is more refined, they may need help focusing on too many affairs simultaneously. They may need help in maintaining a continuous learning process. However, they have an advantage in dealing with complex language forms and contents due to their well-developed metalinguistic awareness. They are better equipped to master foreign language reading and writing. On the other hand, they may have difficulty establishing standard pronunciation patterns of foreign languages. Compared to children, they may struggle to absorb and use everyday communicative language and develop it into communicative skills. Scott and Lisbeth indicated that children, particularly those between the ages of 8 and 10, can use their native language proficiently. [5] At this stage, they possess knowledge of the fundamental linguistic rules of their first language. During this period, children can understand abstract concepts and symbols, generalize language and organize it systematically (Masoud et al.). [4] Children must have a robust foundation in their first language before learning a second one, as it improves their language learning capabilities and logical thinking in multiple languages.

3. Methodology

For questionnaire surveys, a non-probability convenience sample will be recruited. A mixed-method design will be adopted for the current study. Questionnaires will be distributed with the help of a children's assistant at a bilingual kindergarten and an English tutoring institution in Tianjin. This research also assured them that the information would not be misused for any other purposes except for this research report preparation. With this commitment, the students wrote their responses in the paper provided, and this research gathered the information required for this study. The gathered data were analyzed and interpreted using simple statistical tools. The questionnaire that included these questions: What age did your child start learning English? How long has your child been learning English? What is your child's level of English and native language? How does your child learn English? Have you ever tried shadowing? If tried, how quickly did the child improve? Does your child prefer Chinese or English? Can your child accurately distinguish between Chinese and English language use and logic?

The responses to the questionnaire were divided into five levels: strongly agree, agree, average, disagree and strongly disagree. McDonald found that the form of shadowing was most prominently featured as a method to document behaviours and complete tasks. [6] Interpreters and learners who use this method improve significantly in speaking English. According to Charisse Elaine Major, participants were also asked why they were motivated to learn a second language—English and their responses were coded as 0 for responses deemed to stem from instrumental motivation and 1 for integrative motivation responses (Krashen; Thompson). [7]

Questionnaires were sent to each participant in the form of paper questions.

Conducted separately by the researcher and his guardian to ensure complete understanding. The participants in this study were native Chinese speakers (n=38, 18 females, 20 males). They were divided into three groups based on age of acquisition: 4-5 years old (n=12), 5-6 years old (n=13), and 6-7 years old (n=13). The average age of all Chinese language participants in the inspection time is 1.2 years.

For the pre-test and post-test, all the participants were asked to shadow the same speech used for the training and to record their shadowed voice into IC Recorders. Each child took the shadowing's speaking test for the same amount of time. By comparison, children between the ages of 6 and 7 have the best ability to learn a second language. Some of the results are controversial because female school-age children are better at language learning than males.

4. Results

Shadowing yields better results than reading aloud alone, indicating its cognitive load reflects learners' proficiency (Dean Luo, Nobuaki Minematsu, Yutaka Yamauchi and Keikichi Hirose). [8] Previous studies have indicated that shadowing is more effective for listeners with lower proficiency levels (Hamada; Kato, Tamai). [9] Every child has some degree of improvement after shadowing. Among preschool children aged 4 to 6 years, children aged six years had the most remarkable improvement and the most negligible variance; it proves that it is most advantageous to learn to speak English after having a certain degree of understanding of the native language. While the initial study provides valuable insights, extending the research to cover more prolonged periods would be beneficial. Additionally, the study should consider using materials in various voices and accents representative of different regions. This expanded approach will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

5. Discussion

According to Torikai's research in 2003, shadowing can improve concentration. Typically, general listening activities are passive and lack focus. However, shadowing allows learners to focus extensively on listening to the message or recording and repeating the content to follow the speech. This can enhance memory capacity and improve learners' English-speaking ability. Therefore, this survey sampled a 1:1 sex ratio because boys' language systems typically develop later than girls. Additionally, according to research by Meece et al. and Voyer and Voyer, students' gender has crucial effects on results. [9] Girls are more motivated to learn languages and are more interested in foreign cultures than boys in language-learning settings. Boys show less persistence, emphasising the significance of gender and domain-specific motivation for language learning (Carreira). [10] The research conducted by Yo Hamada in 2018 has significant implications for the use of shadowing in the classroom. [2] The research suggests that standard shadowing for listening should be used for beginner-level learners. As the learners advance to the upper-intermediate or advanced level, shadowing for speaking becomes more effective, particularly for preschool children. Shadowing is an interactive research method where information is gathered in the context of interaction between the observer and the person being shadowed, as noted by Gill. [11]

Recently, researchers have become increasingly interested in exploring the impact of shadowing on speaking skills and its effectiveness (e.g., Mori, Foote & McDonough, Hamada, Martinsen, Montgomery, Willardson). [9] To improve the accuracy of pronunciation through shadowing, learners need to attend to both speech perception and prosody, including prosody shadowing (Kadota & Tamai, for a case study, see Foote & McDonough). [12] To effectively develop speaking skills through shadowing, it is suggested that students start using shadowing after they have achieved a particular level of proficiency in their listening skills. (Hamada); otherwise, it will overload their cognitive capacity. Foote and McDonough found that advanced language learners who used authentic materials, such as TV shows for shadowing practice outside of their language courses for two months, showed significant progress in imitation skills, comprehension, and speech fluency (Yo Hamada). [9] Further research should be conducted to examine the long-term effects of shadowing and to compare its advantages and disadvantages with other methods of learning L2 speaking.

6. Conclusions

This article summarises research on shadowing for listening and speaking development. It also proposes areas for further exploration to enhance the technique and its effectiveness. While shadowing has been used in educational settings, both in schools and institutions, there is a need for more studies on this method. This research aims to inspire those who have yet to try shadowing to do so, guide future research, and help young learners develop an interest and confidence in learning English or other second languages through shadowing.

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