

Building Foundational English Skills In Early Childhood Education

Bahya Alfitri (bahyaalfitri335@gmail.com)

Lailatul Sakdiah (lailatulsakdiahelkatarie@gmail.com)

Institut Elkattarie

Abstract

Language development in children begins at birth with the simplest forms of communication, such as crying, which later evolve into babbling, simple words, and sentences. This progression aligns with Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which divides intellectual growth into distinct stages: the sensory-motor stage (0-2 years), the preoperational stage (2-7 years), the concrete operational stage (7-11 years), and the formal operational stage (11 years and beyond). During the preoperational stage, children begin mastering symbols and words, yet their thinking remains limited and egocentric. As such, language learning for children in this phase requires the use of concrete aids, images, and hands-on activities that are in harmony with their cognitive development. Furthermore, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory underscores the significance of social interaction and the role of adults in supporting children's language development. Children learn more effectively through social engagement, with the guidance of more capable peers or adults. By integrating Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories, a more comprehensive approach to language learning emerges, combining direct experiences with social support to facilitate both language and cognitive development.

Keywords: language development, Piaget, Vygotsky, language learning, children.

1. INTRODUCTION

English has emerged as one of the most widely utilized international languages across various fields, including education, technology, business, and global communication. In the era of globalization, English proficiency is no longer regarded as an auxiliary skill but as a fundamental necessity that should be cultivated from an early age. Consequently, introducing English to young learners represents a strategic step in establishing a solid foundation for language acquisition. Early childhood is often referred to as the "golden age" of development, a period when children's learning capacities, including their ability to acquire language, are at their peak. During this critical stage, children demonstrate remarkable aptitude for absorbing new information, encompassing vocabulary, pronunciation, and language structures. However, if English instruction is not thoughtfully designed to align with the developmental characteristics of young learners, it may lead to linguistic confusion, diminished motivation, or even a failure to establish a strong language foundation (Rogers et al., 2010).

Foreign language education for children began in the United States and Europe during the 1950s, gained significant popularity in the 1960s, but experienced a decline in the 1970s. According to Hammerly (1982), English education is rooted in the belief that learning a second language is more effective when started at an early age. This perspective is based on the assumption that children are naturally more adept at acquiring languages compared to adults, as their cognitive and linguistic development is at its peak during childhood (Säre et al., 2016).

In the era of globalization, proficiency in English, both spoken and written, has become an essential requirement. This demand has driven many parents to enroll their children in national or international schools where English is used as the primary medium of instruction. However, this trend often disregards critical factors such as the psychological readiness of children, their developmental stages, and the suitability of teaching methods. As a result, many children experience frustration and stress due to being exposed to language learning environments that are misaligned with their developmental needs. This frequently leads to poor language acquisition, incorrect pronunciation, and structural errors, ultimately hindering their confidence and interest in learning the language (Aisyah, 2020).

It is widely assumed that learning English at an early age is advantageous, as children are believed to be more easily engaged and possess higher receptiveness compared to adults. Nonetheless, research indicates that older children or adolescents with more advanced cognitive abilities may, in some cases, learn languages more effectively. Thus, determining the appropriate age for introducing English education requires careful consideration to ensure that children are neither overwhelmed nor placed in unsuitable learning contexts (Purnell et al., 2007).

Moreover, teaching methods play a pivotal role in the success of foreign language education. Ineffective or developmentally inappropriate instructional approaches can hinder progress and diminish children's motivation to learn. Therefore, a comprehensive exploration of the optimal age for initiating English language learning and the most effective pedagogical strategies for young learners is essential.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to address two critical questions: at what age should children begin learning English as a foreign language, and what teaching methods are

most suitable for early childhood learners to ensure a meaningful and enjoyable language learning experience?

2. RESEARCH METHOD

According to M. Nazir (2003), a literature study is a method of data collection conducted by reviewing various sources such as textbooks, literature, notes, and reports relevant to the topic being investigated. Similarly, Sarwono (2006) describes a literature study as a research method that gathers information from books, magazines, newspapers, and other resources to establish a theoretical foundation for the study.

A literature study typically involves two main stages. The first stage is determining the research topic. Once the topic is identified, the researcher proceeds to gather information related to the subject. This process includes collecting data from various sources such as textbooks, journals, research findings, online articles, newspapers, and magazines. The collected data is then analyzed and organized systematically, enabling the researcher to build a comprehensive and coherent study. The process involves identifying relevant theories, reviewing the literature, and analyzing documents that align with the research focus.

In the context of this study, the focus is on English education for young learners in Lombok. Therefore, data sources are specifically related to this topic and include materials such as academic journals, research articles, educational textbooks, and internet-based resources. After gathering the data, the researcher systematically organizes and analyzes it to develop insights that are beneficial for both teachers and parents in Lombok.

The primary objective of this research is to enhance the understanding of educators and parents in providing optimal English learning experiences for children. By equipping children with strong English skills—both written and spoken—they are better prepared to meet future challenges. However, it is crucial that English learning for children in Lombok is conducted in a way that is enjoyable and appropriate for their developmental stage. During childhood, children are naturally curious and learn best through play and exploration. Therefore, both teachers and parents must create a fun and engaging environment for English learning, avoiding excessive pressure or rigid teaching methods. Instead, learning should be integrated into playful and experiential activities that allow children to acquire language skills naturally and joyfully.

3. DISCUSSION ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

English has become the dominant international language, utilized in almost every aspect of global life, including education, technology, business, and science. It serves as the primary medium for connecting people and transferring knowledge across the world. This establishes English proficiency as an essential requirement in modern society, enabling individuals to expand their interactions on an international scale. As Fromkin (1990) aptly stated, English is considered the "lingua franca of the world," underscoring its critical role in facilitating global communication. In Indonesia, English holds the status of the first foreign language. This differs significantly from the concept of English as a second language. According to Mustafa (2007), a second language is learned after one's mother tongue and is commonly used within a community. In contrast, a foreign language, like English in Indonesia, is not used for daily social interactions. Because English is not integrated into the everyday communication of most Indonesians, it is more challenging to learn and master (Stanton-Chapman et al., 2014).

Despite these challenges, English proficiency is a crucial skill in the current era of information and communication. It is indispensable for global interaction and directly impacts an individual's ability to participate in international discourse. The demands of globalization necessitate skilled human resources who can communicate effectively in foreign languages, particularly English. These skills are vital for acquiring knowledge, engaging in extensive social interactions, and advancing careers. People from various social and economic backgrounds are increasingly motivated to learn English, both spoken and written. Mastery of English not only enhances personal and professional opportunities but also prepares individuals to meet the demands of a highly interconnected and competitive global environment. This highlights the growing importance of fostering effective English language education in Indonesia to equip its population with the tools needed to succeed in the modern world (Ahokas et al., 2024).

The growing emphasis on mastering foreign languages has led many people to compete in giving their children the opportunity to learn English as an essential skill. This is based on Santrock's (2007) assertion that children acquire foreign languages more quickly than adults. A study by Johnson and Newport (1991) supports this idea, revealing that Chinese and

Korean immigrants who arrived in the U.S. between the ages of 3 and 7 demonstrated superior English language skills compared to those who started learning at an older age.

Research also highlights the benefits of early foreign language acquisition. Mustafa (2007) emphasizes that children who learn a foreign language at an early age gain numerous advantages, such as enhanced intellectual flexibility, academic achievement, and improved social skills. Moreover, these children are better prepared to navigate social environments with diverse languages and cultures. As they grow older, they become more qualified and well-rounded individuals, equipped with global competencies. Mustafa (2007) further explains that early foreign language learning contributes to a deeper understanding and appreciation of a child's native language and culture. Exposure to a foreign language broadens their access to different cultures and linguistic systems, enriching their worldview (Arasomwan & Mashiy, 2021).

In Indonesia, English is taught differently than in countries where it serves as the primary medium of communication. While English is the first foreign language in Indonesian junior and senior high schools, it is only considered a local content subject in elementary schools and is not yet a mandatory subject. According to Chamot (1987), English is often used as a medium in bilingual education. Many Indonesian schools offer bilingual learning programs, which aim to develop proficiency in English alongside the students' first language.

The goal of English education in Indonesia is to develop all language competencies—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, English presents significant linguistic challenges for Indonesian children, as it differs greatly from local languages such as Indonesian, Javanese, and Sundanese, particularly in pronunciation and structure. Understanding these differences is crucial to ensure the validity of English teaching and learning. Key distinctions include speech sounds, spelling, grammatical structure, stress and intonation patterns, vocabulary, and cultural values embedded in language. Additionally, English employs specific rules related to time (tenses), numbers (singular and plural), and gender (masculine and feminine), which are essential for learners to comprehend (Wood & Neethling, 2023).

Cognitive Language Development in Young Learners

The development of a child's language begins at birth, initially through the most basic forms of communication, such as crying. As they grow, this communication evolves into babbling and the use of simple words and sentences, often accompanied by body movements. Educational psychology offers various learning theories that can be foundational for teaching. One prominent model is the cognitive development approach proposed by Jean Piaget (1896-1980). According to Piaget's theory, individuals go through several stages of intellectual development:

- a. **Sensory-Motor Stage (0-2 years):** In this stage, children start to interact with their environment using their senses and movement. Their behavior is driven by the stimuli they receive. By around 8 months, babies develop an understanding of object permanence—recognizing that objects still exist even when out of sight. Before this age, babies often assume that unseen objects do not exist. At this stage, babies understand their world through basic movements and observations of their surroundings.
- b. **Preoperational Stage (2-7 years):** At this stage, children begin to use symbols (such as words) and can express their experiences, though often in an illogical manner. Their thinking is egocentric, meaning they view the world only from their perspective, disregarding others' viewpoints. They also struggle to understand that two objects can have the same mass or volume despite appearing different. Learning is most effective when concrete objects are used, as abstract thinking has not yet developed.
- c. **Concrete Operational Stage (7-11 years):** Children at this stage can think logically about concrete situations. They understand the concept of conservation (i.e., that an object's mass, volume, or quantity remains the same despite changes in its appearance). Their thinking becomes less egocentric, and they are able to perform tasks that require logical thought. Hands-on learning is highly effective for children at this stage.
- d. **Formal Operational Stage (11 years and older):** At this stage, children gain the ability to think abstractly. They can hypothesize, predict potential outcomes, and analyze situations logically. They are able to consider multiple possibilities when confronted with a problem.

According to Piaget, children in the preoperational stage (ages 2-7) use symbolic language and have an intuitive understanding of the world. This stage is divided into two

phases: the **pre-conceptual stage** (2-4 years), where children express themselves through imagination, images, and play, and the **intuitive stage** (4-7 years), where their understanding is based more on personal experience rather than logical analysis. At this stage, children tend to be egocentric, believing that their thoughts and experiences are shared by others, and they may even attribute life-like qualities to inanimate objects (Justice & Pullen, 2003).

Given that young children are in the preoperational stage, their language learning requires the use of concrete materials, illustrations, and models. Piaget believed that learning through direct experiences and hands-on activities was crucial for developing logical thinking, especially in science and mathematics. However, Vygotsky (1986) emphasized the importance of social interaction in learning, proposing the theory of the **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)**. Vygotsky suggested that a child's learning potential is enhanced through guidance from more capable peers or adults, bridging the gap between what they can achieve independently and what they can achieve with assistance.

Research supports the idea that social interaction and verbal communication are essential for optimal learning, and these interactions are facilitated by the presence of adults or teachers. According to Vygotsky, children's cognitive development is deeply rooted in social contexts, where adults play a key role in helping children understand and navigate the world.

Incorporating the ideas of Piaget and Vygotsky into foreign language teaching helps create an environment that supports active learning and social interaction. Children, as active learners, benefit from engaging with their environment and receiving support from adults and peers. Through these interactions, children not only learn language but also develop their cognitive and social skills.

4. CONCLUSION

The development of children's language is a gradual process that begins at birth and progresses through various cognitive stages, as outlined by Piaget. From basic communication through crying and babbling, children eventually learn to use symbols, words, and sentences to express themselves. Piaget's stages of cognitive development—sensory-motor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational—highlight the evolving nature of children's thinking and understanding of the world, with each stage offering distinct challenges and opportunities for learning. For children in the preoperational stage (ages 2-7),

language acquisition is best supported through concrete materials, visual aids, and hands-on activities that engage their senses and imagination. Piaget's emphasis on the importance of direct, active learning is complemented by Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which underscores the role of social interaction and adult guidance in enhancing a child's learning potential. Incorporating both Piaget and Vygotsky's theories into language education provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how children learn. This approach emphasizes the need for both concrete learning experiences and social interactions to foster language development. As children progress through these stages, the role of educators and caregivers in providing a supportive, engaging, and interactive learning environment becomes increasingly important in facilitating their cognitive and language growth.

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