

Cultural Inquiry Study & Report: Second Language Learning in the Preschool Setting

**EDUC 606**

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**Cultural Inquiry Study & Report**

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## Background

*As I come into the preschool classroom, while some of the children greet me with a high pitch "Hello!" others are still cleaning up the toys laying on the floor, or putting away the puzzle pieces sitting on the round table. Most of the three-year-olds know by now that it is time to gather around and sit on the carpet by the far right side corner, but a few still need reminding. At that time, I start Spanish class by saying, "Hola, Buenos días. Cómo están?" and the children answer in unison, "Bien gracias!"*

Usually, I like to start class with my preschool students by singing songs. This is a good transition from their regular classroom routine and makes them focus on me. Most of the preschoolers enjoy singing these songs and sing along with me. However, there are some students that either just stare at me, or are distracted by something else happening at the time.

I am the Spanish Teacher at a private school in Fairfax, Virginia that serves three-year-old students all the way through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Even though my school is a Christian based school, we take children of all faiths and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, we are a very diverse school that currently has an enrollment of one hundred and eleven students, which makes our school a very small and close environment, where we all feel like a family. In fact, we are proud to call ourselves "a home away from home." Because of the fact that we are a fairly small school, Spanish class is given in their own classrooms and every room is configured differently.

This school year, there are two PreK3 classrooms with fifteen students and two teachers, and one PreK3 classroom with ten students and one teacher. Also,

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there are five PreK4 classrooms of one teacher per ten students, one Kindergarten of thirteen students, and a combination 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade class of eight students. Each classroom has Spanish twice a week for thirty minutes each time.

### **Puzzlement**

Learning a second language should be a very important step in every child's educational life, especially in this day of age when the world is becoming more diversified. One of the most important decisions that parents have been taking in the last few decades is sending their children to private schools that offer foreign language classes, so that their kids are exposed to this kind of instruction starting at an early age. However, it is up to their children to learn the second language.

It is said that young children are like sponges and that they can learn anything they are exposed to. As a foreign language teacher I have been able to see this happening with my students. I believe that the younger the children are, the better ability they have to learn new vocabulary and the easier it is for them to mimic a native-like pronunciation of the language they are learning. Yet, some students have it easier to learn a second language than others. In my eleven years of teaching Spanish, I have come to notice that some children learn the language with better ease than others, and I have always wondered the reason for this. Is it the way I teach? Am I doing something wrong in my practice? Or is there something different about every child that makes them unique when learning a second language?

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As part of this study, I researched some of my students' language and cultural background in order to find out if there was a correlation between their type of learning as a whole and learning a new language. I focused on two students who have it easy when learning Spanish and made a differentiation among them and two more students who have a hard time learning the language. Also, I researched some articles that explained to me how children learn a second language, how they become bilingual, and the motivation that exists when learning a foreign language.

### **What Is Known**

As mentioned above, I decided to focus my puzzlement on four students, two that learn a second language with ease, and two that have difficulties during Spanish class. It was a very hard task to pick only four students out of my current one hundred and eleven students, so I decided to focus my study, not only on preschoolers, but specifically four of my PreK3 students. The reason is because I believe that the younger the brains, the more information that can actually be absorbed. Maybe this is only my own assumption, but I see it every day in class: younger students retain new information effortlessly.

The first student that I picked for this study is Lauren, a bright three-year-old girl who does not smile very much, but enjoys participating in all kinds of activities, whether it is by singing all the songs, playing games, or coloring worksheets. Lauren's parents reported on their questionnaire (Appendix A) to be multilingual

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and multicultural, which makes me think that this plays a very important role in the fact that Lauren learns Spanish easily.

The second student that I picked is Tanya, a very stubborn three-year old girly-girl who is full of energy and loves to talk about her clothes and the fact that she picks them out herself every morning. Tanya is very independent and likes to do everything herself with no help whatsoever, but whenever she does not feel like doing something she makes a frown and puts her head down. Therefore, she does an excellent work participating during Spanish class when she feels like it, but many times she also puts her head down and waits for class to be over. Tanya's parents reported on their questionnaire (Appendix B) to be of Armenian descent and to speak several languages, which makes me think that the ease to learn a second language rubs on Tanya as well.

The third student that I picked is Suzie, a very smart and independent three-year-old girl whose speech is very advanced for her age. Suzie, who is of South Asian decent, enjoys telling anecdotes at school about home and, according to her mother, the other way around. But, it is the way she speaks that shows her speech maturity, because she uses words that normally a preschooler would not use. However, even though Suzie's parents reported on their questionnaire (Appendix C) to speak several languages as well, and the fact that she has an advanced English vocabulary repertoire, she gets easily distracted during class and is more worried about what is happening around her than singing songs and learning new vocabulary in Spanish.

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The fourth student that I picked is Caleb, a very serious and reserved three-year-old Caucasian boy who, even though puts a lot of attention during Spanish class, does not actively participate in activities like songs or games. Nonetheless, his mother, who reported in the questionnaire (Appendix D) to only speak English, has told me that Caleb constantly sings the Spanish songs at home.

### **Cultural Influences**

#### **3.4. How might students' experiences and meanings be contributing to the puzzling situation?**

In the case of Lauren, I chose her right away because I knew that her parents are not only multilingual but also multicultural, and I think that the ease of learning a new language transfers onto her in an inherited kind of way. Tanya has also been growing up in a multiple language environment. Therefore, it is very likely that she has an ear for learning new languages as well. On the other hand, Caleb has been brought up around only one language, and might not be that easy for him to learn a second language. Then again, in the case of Suzie, she also has been around multiple languages her whole life, but when she is in Spanish class, she has a hard time either learning the language or paying attention.

### **Connections to Literature**

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According to Ehrman, Leaver, Oxford (2003), there are “individual differences in language learning reflected in learning styles, learning strategies, and affective variables.” Also, “other major areas of individual differences relate to learning aptitude, gender, culture, age, and other demographic variables.” In other words, many factors play in the role of learning a language and, when children are learning a second language, we as teachers need to take into account these factors in order for us to transmit our knowledge to the students.

On the other hand, findings from the Noels study can tell us that “the more controlling the teacher was perceived to be, the less the students felt they were autonomous agents in the learning process, and the lower was students’ intrinsic motivation.” (2001) However, I do not consider myself a controlling teacher. In fact, the other way around, I adapt my teaching to all sorts of learning styles, especially in the preschool side. For example, if there are kids that do not feel like participating, I do not make them do it anyway, because I prefer that they enjoy learning a new language rather than getting a grudge just because the teacher is making them do something they do not want to do at the time.

Moreover, when teaching English Language Learners (ELLs) Goldenberg says that “there will probably never be a formula for educating ELLs, what we can do is provide guidelines about effective practices for teaching ELLs.” (2008) This can translate onto second language learners as well, in that teachers do not have a formula that we can use for every single student. Every child has a unique way to

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learn, not only a second language, but also any subject for that matter. Therefore, teachers need to find the best way to teach their subject as a whole class, as well as an individualized program.

Furthermore, Delpit (2002) mentions on her article the work of Stephen Krashen, who came up with the idea that “when affective conditions are not optimal, when the student is not motivated, does not identify with the speakers of the second language, or is overanxious about his performance, creating a mental block, which will prevent the input from reaching those parts of the brain responsible for language acquisition.” What this tells me is that maybe some of my students are just not motivated to learn a second language, even though I try to make my lessons as interesting to them as possible.

Dörnyei mentions on his article that “motivation has been widely accepted by both teachers and researchers as one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of second/foreign language learning. Without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals, and neither are appropriate curricula and good teaching enough on their own to ensure student achievement.” (1998) The question I asked myself after reading this was, what can I do to motivate my students, especially the younger ones who happen to go to school because their parents send them, not because they are old enough to understand that they will be learning new things.



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Then again, Noels, Pelletier, Clément, Vallerand (2000) wrote that “there are two types of motivation, one based on intrinsic interest in the activity per se and the other based on rewards extrinsic to the activity. Intrinsic motivation generally refers to motivation to engage in an activity because that activity is enjoyable and satisfying to do. In contrast, extrinsically motivated behaviors are those actions carried out to achieve some instrumental end, such as earning a reward or avoiding a punishment.” In regards to these types of motivation, I believe my younger students take both into account: Preschoolers enjoy the fact that Spanish activities are fun and that they will be getting a stamp on their hands as long as they sing along and pay attention to the teacher.

Additionally, Gardner (2007) states that “motivation plays a role in various ways in the process of learning a second language. The quality of the program, the interest, the enthusiasm, and skills of the teacher, the adequacy of the materials, the curriculum, the class atmosphere, etc. All of these can influence the student’s level of motivation in any school subject.” To these I have to say that I believe the interaction with my students, especially in a preschool setting is respectful, but at the same time fun and silly if you could say. Therefore, I believe that my students have a good time learning a second language.

Finally, Delpit says that “if we are to add another language to the repertoire, we must embrace the children, their interests, and their language. We must make them feel welcomed and invited by allowing their interests, culture, and history into

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the classroom. We must reconnect them to their own brilliance and gain their trust so that they will learn from us. We must respect them, so that they feel connected to us. Then, and only then, might they be willing to adopt our language for as one to be added to their own.” (2002)

### **Action Plan**

I believe that differentiation in the classroom is very important for the success of all students. Even though most of the activities have to be given as a group, the teacher can also incorporate some “individual” time into the curriculum. Therefore, as my Action Plan, I decided to include “one-on-one” activities into my lesson plan. What I did was to plan two different activities for one lesson plan. The first activity was a group activity, and the second one was an individualized activity that only a few students at a time took part on. Because I decided to focus my research study in the PreK3 program, I implemented my action plan within this group of students.

My Action Plan consisted of planning a simple group activity, so that the kids could still learn without me having to put all of my attention in them. This group activity colored a picture related to a previously reviewed topic. Meanwhile, I worked with a few students at a time on a Spanish app on the iPad, where they could individually review their animals, which was also a previously reviewed topic. The purpose of this Action Plan was to give some extra help to those students who

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were having a difficult time learning the topic as a group activity in general. Also, from this Action Plan, I was hoping to gain some insight on how these students, who are having a hard time during Spanish class, can better learn the language without so many struggles.

In order to get answers from this Action Plan, I collected data by observing how well the students did with the iPad Spanish app and how much information they got to learn from “one-on-one” teacher/student interaction. Finally, this data helped me understand my puzzlement by drawing conclusions on whether the children who have it easier when learning a second language are also the ones whose parents responded on my questionnaire to speak other languages at home. Moreover, I tried to find out if there was a correlation between children who have a hard time learning a second language and their cultural background.

### **Emerging Findings**

I implemented my Action Plan with PreK3 students during April, 2015. What I ended up doing was having the whole class work on a coloring page of farm animals, which they had previously learned in Spanish, and called a couple of kids at a time to work with me. These students worked on a game on the iPad, where they had to identify zoo animals in Spanish.

Overall, it was a successful activity that the students participated on voluntarily with a very positive attitude. What I noticed is that, while bilingual

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children identified the animals faster and with fewer mistakes, monolingual kids took longer to answer and got a few more mistakes. However, they all identified most of the animals, especially the ones whose names sound alike in English and Spanish, like elephant-*elefante*. Yet, whenever the students needed my help, it was when the name of the animal in Spanish was different from English, like shark-*tiburón*. Still, a couple of kids had trouble altogether and needed a lot of guidance throughout the activity process, but these children, even though not diagnosed yet, have some sort of a learning disability.

It is important to mention that, before starting this activity, I had the assumption that most of the monolingual children were going to have a hard time identifying the animals, and that I was going to have to help them most of the time. Nevertheless, although they needed a little more time to respond, they did really good by themselves.

As for Lauren, Tanya, Suzie, and Caleb, they did a very good job throughout the entire activity. All of them got to have a one-on-one time with me and they had about the same time to respond to the game. Although Lauren, Tanya, and Suzie responded faster than Caleb, he did very well by choosing almost all of the correct animals on the screen. Lastly, while Lauren and Tanya had no mistakes, Suzie had very few and Caleb had some incorrect answers. However, they both would correct themselves and do it right the second time around.

## **Conclusions**

There are many factors that play important roles when learning a second language, and teachers need to take these factors into account so they can spread their knowledge to their students. I personally adjust my teaching depending on my students' types of learning without trying to push them into it, since I rather transmit love for learning a new language. Then again, because of the fact that there is no formula for teachers to use with every single student, since every child learns differently, teachers need to find the best way to teach each student.

Motivation is one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of second language learning. There are two types of motivational behaviors: (1) the intrinsic motivational behavior, which refers to engaging in an activity because it is enjoyable and satisfying to do, and (2) the extrinsic motivational behavior, which is the action carried out to achieve an instrumental end, like earning a reward or avoiding a punishment. In my practice as a teacher, my students take both motivational behaviors into account, since I make my lessons fun for all children and they get rewarded.

Since my Action Plan was successful and the students participated in a very positive way, I am planning on doing more individual activities throughout my lesson plans. However, taking into account that monolingual kids took longer and had more mistakes than bilingual children, it is preferable to allocate more one-on

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one student/teacher interaction, so that the kids that have a harder time learning in a group environment, can still learn the information in a smaller type of setting.

### **Reflection**

When I first started thinking about a possible puzzlement for my study, I thought it was going to be a very difficult task to come up with, because I really had to think hard about what “bothers” me from teaching, and I love teaching, otherwise I would not be in this career at all. But then I thought about the things that I have been wondering for all these years about teaching, and all of a sudden my puzzlement came into mind. That is when I realized that it would not be that hard after all.

Then again, to learn about my peers’ puzzlements was a very eye opening experience as well, because they came up with puzzlements that even I have been wondering about throughout my years of teaching, and I thought I was the only one that would think about something like that. But to learn that I am not the only educator out there to think about these puzzlements is very interesting.

Therefore, this study has helped me to realize that it is normal to question situations that happen on a daily basis when teaching, especially in a multicultural environment, and that it is acceptable to question these situations. Consequently, the study has also taught me that there is a need for reading amongst educators, and that, in order to teach in today’s diverse schools, we as teachers need to be informed

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about other cultures and their way of educating their children as well. Thus, I see myself reading more articles about education and its cultural diversity, not only in the United States, but also worldwide, and I will be sharing these articles and new information with my colleagues.

Lastly, in my future years as a teacher, I will be thinking about my students' cultural background first and foremost, before jumping into conclusions and blaming learning differences either on my way of teaching or my students' learning abilities.

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**Appendix A.**

**Home Language and Cultural Background Questionnaire**

1. What language(s) is spoken in the student's home or residence?

English, French, Arabic

2. What language(s) are spoken most of the time to the student at home?

English and Arabic

3. What language(s) does the student understand?

English and Arabic

4. What language(s) does the student speak?

English and some Arabic

5. What language(s) does dad understand?

English, French, Arabic, and some German & Spanish

6. What language(s) does dad speak?

English, French, and Arabic

7. What language(s) does mom understand?

English, Arabic, French

8. What language(s) does mom speak?

English and Arabic

9. What is dad's cultural background?

French/Lebanese

10. What is mom's cultural background?

American/Syrian

**Appendix B.**

Home Language and Cultural Background Questionnaire

1. What language(s) is spoken in the student's home or residence?

Armenian / English

2. What language(s) are spoken most of the time to the student at home?

Armenian / English

3. What language(s) does the student understand?

Armenian / English

4. What language(s) does the student speak?

Armenian / English

5. What language(s) does dad understand?

Armenian, English, Greek, Farsi

6. What language(s) does dad speak?

Armenian, English, Greek, Farsi

7. What language(s) does mom understand?

Armenian, English, Spanish

8. What language(s) does mom speak?

Armenian, English

9. What is dad's cultural background?

Armenian grew up in Iran + Cyprus

10. What is mom's cultural background?

Armenian - grew up in U.S.

**Appendix C.**

**Home Language and Cultural Background Questionnaire**

1. What language(s) is spoken in the student's home or residence?

English

2. What language(s) are spoken most of the time to the student at home?

English

3. What language(s) does the student understand?

English + some Gujarati

4. What language(s) does the student speak?

English

5. What language(s) does dad understand?

English, Gujarati

6. What language(s) does dad speak?

English, Gujarati

7. What language(s) does mom understand?

English, Gujarati, French

8. What language(s) does mom speak?

English, Gujarati

9. What is dad's cultural background?

South Asian

10. What is mom's cultural background?

South Asian

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### Appendix D.

#### Home Language and Cultural Background Questionnaire

1. What language(s) is spoken in the student's home or residence?

English

2. What language(s) are spoken most of the time to the student at home?

English

3. What language(s) does the student understand?

English

4. What language(s) does the student speak?

English

5. What language(s) does dad understand?

English

6. What language(s) does dad speak?

English

7. What language(s) does mom understand?

English

8. What language(s) does mom speak?

English

9. What is dad's cultural background?

Mid Western / Southern ☺

10. What is mom's cultural background?

Jewish ☺