

Original Research Article

Strategies of Chinese family English enlightenment education for preschoolers under the theory of second language acquisition*Yuting Guan**Faculty of Education and Foreign languages, Wuhan Donghu College, Wuhan, Hubei, 430212, China*

Abstract: The study emphasizes the importance of parental involvement, highlighting the need for rich listening input and meaningful oral interaction during the critical period of language acquisition (ages 3-6). Practical strategies include using nursery rhymes, picture books, and simple conversations to provide comprehensible input. Parents are encouraged to create a pressure-free environment, respect their children's silent period, and optimize input through contextual anchoring and non-verbal participation. Emotional support is crucial to maintaining children's confidence and interest in learning English, with parents balancing accuracy and fluency through gentle correction and positive reinforcement. By leveraging these strategies, Chinese families can foster a natural and enjoyable process of English acquisition for their children. Early English enlightenment education not only enhances linguistic competence but also cultivates a lifelong love for learning, empowering children with the skills needed for effective cross-cultural communication in a globalized world.

Keywords: Chinese family English Enlightenment education; The theory of second language acquisition; Preschoolers

1. Introduction

With the development of globalization, more and more parents in China have recognized the importance of English enlightenment education and are concerned about how to start children's English enlightenment education in a proper and better way. Searching for "English enlightenment education" on social media, we can see thousands of posts sharing information such as English enlightenment learning institute recommendations, English enlightenment learning suggestions and English enlightenment online courses etc. However, some parents don't realize the key role that they play on the progress of children's English enlightenment. According to the theory of second language acquisition, there is critical period in children's second language learning. If parents want their children to learn a second language well, it is necessary to scientifically guide children in second language learning at appropriate time.

2. Theoretical foundations

2.1. Krashen's input hypothesis

Linguist Stephen Krashen (1970) developed the input hypothesis, also known as the monitor model, which is one of the first theories to explain the process involved in second language acquisition, and brought profound influence to language teaching. It consisted of five basic hypotheses, the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis; the Natural Order Hypothesis; the Monitor Hypothesis; the Input Hypothesis; and the Affective Filter Hypothesis.

Krashen holds that humans acquire a language only when he is able to understand the input of language. In other words, comprehensible language input is a necessary condition for second language acquisition. And the more interesting and relevant the input material is, the better it will be for language learners. Krashen also believes that there are two different processes in second language acquisition: acquisition and learning. In Krash-

en's theory, acquisition is a purely subconscious process while learning is a conscious process. "Acquisition" refers to the learners unconsciously absorb a second language and be able to use the language fluently close to "mother tongue". And "learning" refers to the learners who master a second language by using the rules of this language.

2.2. The critical period of language acquisition

American psychologist Lenneberg (1967) proposed and developed the Critical Period Hypothesis, and pointed out that the advantage of children learning language comes from the properties of the brain nerves. He holds that children have more advantages in learning language than adults. It will be the easiest time for children to acquire a second language during the critical period, but once they miss this period, their language acquisition ability will be limited. Montessori also pointed out that "the golden age for human language learning is between 2 and 7 years old. B.F. Skinner, the founder of new behaviorist psychology and a professor at Harvard University, believed that the acquisition of language ability in young children is the result of environmental stimuli and responses. Newport (1991) believes that younger individuals have immature cognitive abilities, and it is this immaturity of cognition that is beneficial for language learning. The cognitive characteristics of young children determine that they have extreme openness and willingness to accept any new experience.

2.3. Broca's area

Broca's area is a specialized area in the human brain responsible for language. The Broca's area begins to develop in early childhood and matures around the age of 12. As children grow up, the sensitivity of this area shows a decreasing trend year by year. When learning a language before the age of 12, language information is directly stored in the Broca's area. However, after the age of 12, when children use language, the Broca's area have to connect to the memory area, language information will be stored only in the memory area.

3. Strategies of Chinese family English Enlightenment education for preschoolers

3.1. The important role of parents

Parental awareness serves as the cornerstone of effective family-based English language initiation. Understanding the existence of a critical period for language acquisition is paramount; parents should leverage this window (particularly ages 3-6) to commence English exposure as early as possible. During this sensitive developmental phase, the educational emphasis must be placed squarely on rich listening input and meaningful oral interaction. This foundation is built through substantial, high-quality English exposure, utilizing resources like nursery rhymes, picture books, and simple daily conversation to foster an intuitive sense of the language from the outset.

While some parents may feel apprehensive about their own English proficiency hindering their child's progress, this need not be a barrier. Strategically utilizing curated online resources or dedicated language initiation apps can significantly enhance both the quantity and quality of input. Crucially, however, direct parental engagement remains irreplaceable. Active participation in interactive, relationship-building activities – such as shared picture book reading, singing nursery rhymes together, and playing language-based games – is essential. During these sessions, parents singing along, using expressive gestures, and employing exaggerated facial expressions not only aid comprehension but also transform learning into a joyful, shared experience within a warm, supportive atmosphere. These approaches simultaneously deepen the child's comprehensible input and strengthens the parent-child bond.

Picture book reading exemplifies a powerful method for introducing vocabulary and grammatical structures

naturally. Selecting books featuring vivid illustrations and repetitive patterns (e.g., the “Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?” series) maximizes effectiveness. Techniques like pointing to pictures, using gestures, and expressive reading reinforce understanding. Gradually, children become active participants, pointing to familiar objects or repeating known words.

It is helpful to integrate rhythmically engaging and melodious English nursery rhymes (e.g., Super Simple Songs, Cocomelon, Mother Goose Rhymes) into daily routines as background audio during activities like waking up, meals, playtime, or car rides. Active parental participation—singing and dancing alongside the child—dramatically increases engagement and comprehension.

Parents should select animated content characterized by slow narration, simple narratives, and clear visuals (e.g., Peppa Pig, Penelope, Maisy). Limit initial viewing sessions (10-15 minutes) to protect eyesight and maintain focus. Co-viewing is highly recommended: parents should watch with the child, using L1 (e.g., Chinese) or non-verbal cues to clarify key plot points and ensure understanding.

Audiobooks and stories are also good ways to help parents to give your children supplement input via high-quality audiobook apps or players. However, parental narration remains a valuable alternative, fostering closeness while providing tailored input.

In conclusion, despite the availability of numerous online and offline English programs and tutors, the unique, nurturing role of the engaged parent is fundamental and cannot be replicated.

3.2. Understand children’s period of silence

When young children are learning a second language, they usually go through a period of silence, which is a stage where they only listen and do not speak or speak very little. The silent period (typically weeks to months) represents a critical receptive stage where children’s brains actively decode phonological patterns, vocabulary, and grammatical structures without immediate output. But Silence is not “lack of Learning.” Instead of getting worried and anxious, parents should respect their children’s silence period and not force them to speak English. At this stage, parents can help their children accumulate language materials by increasing English input, rather than force them to speak out or follow to repeat words. At the same time, parents should encourage their children to use English through communicative practice in natural contexts, try to create chances of authentic conversation with native speaker or do role play with children.

3.2.1. Try to create a pressure-free environment

Don’t demand children do repetition, or correct “errors” or comparing output to peers, which really hinder beginner’s interest and confidence. Give your children more encouragements and normalize silence with phrases like, “It’s okay to listen first - your brain is getting ready!”

3.2.2. Optimize input for receptive absorption

To create contextual anchoring, for example, parents can pair English with tangible experiences: “Let’s pour water!” during bath time. Or use gestures, props, and visuals to reinforce meaning without translation. In daily routines, parents speak high-frequency phrases “More juice?”, “Balloon popped!” in daily to enhance input.

3.2.3. Encourage non-verbal participation and create low-pressure output opportunities:

Parents can encourage pointing, nodding, or handing objects in response to questions, for example “Where’s the cat?”, “Where is your nose?” Also, parents can use children’s familiar songs with motions (e.g., “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes”) to build motor-linked vocabulary. Try to create a low-pressure output by asking choices question, such as asking “Apple or banana?” while holding both, your children may respond with gestures or single words.

3.2.4. Create opportunities with native interaction:

Short, playful exchanges with native speakers are very helpful to reduce anxiety through authentic purpose. Get a native speaker as teachers if possible, 10-minute video or online class with teachers would be a great help.

3.3. Pay attention to children's emotional needs

Parents should also pay attention to their children's emotional needs so that children can learn English in a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere. Families should strive to provide positive encouragement and support, and enhance their children's confidence and interest in learning English.

Chronic anxiety elevates cortisol, directly inhibiting the hippocampus - the brain's language processing center. Conversely, joyful engagement triggers dopamine release, enhancing memory consolidation and neural plasticity. It is normal that children make mistakes during their learning, parents can correct the mistake by telling a right sentence and stress the mistaken word to make children notice it. If young children make mistakes in the process of speaking, do not immediately interrupt their speaking. Parents should wait until children's output is over before making corrections, which can maintain the continuity of their thinking during practice and speaking. Excessive criticism and blame will increase children's anxiety and harm their confidence, parents should mind the way and attitude when correcting mistakes.

Try to balance accuracy and confidence by doing these:

Child: "Doggie runned!"

Parent: "Yes! The doggie ran so fast!"

Parents put natural emphasis on corrected form instead of blaming or say "No, that is wrong". parents should Ignore minor errors during creative output e.g., storytelling. While preserving conversational flow, this approach naturally models correct linguistic structures to safeguard children's expressive confidence. It prevents cognitive overload through deliberate practice targeting key language points, aligning with patterns of child cognitive development.

3.4. Contextualized for authentic learning situations

In the home environment, parents can stick English word labels on daily necessities such as tables, chairs, televisions, refrigerators, etc. to help children unconsciously come into contact with and learn English. Parents can also use simple English conversations in their children's daily lives based on their English proficiency, helping them consolidate the knowledge they have learned and also facilitating their mastery of English communication functions. When children get older and their second language proficiency gets better, parents should provide immersive learning experiences such as attending English language camps, joining English corner, or participating in online English classes. These activities provide opportunities for children to interact with native speakers and practice their language skills in real-life contexts.

4. Conclusion

The English enlightenment education of children is receiving increasing attention from Chinese families. The families should understand that the learning of language is a natural process of acquisition. The language learning for children at every age should be set according to the actual needs and characteristics of their physical and mental development, accumulating and learning bit by bit, which can make more children interested in learning English and better cultivate their long-term learning interest. 3-12 years old is a critical period for language learning, and parents should seize this critical period to provide their children with English enlightenment. Chinese families can effectively implement various strategies to provide a rich and engaging English

enlightenment education for their preschoolers. By recognizing the critical role of parents, understanding the significance of the critical period, and respecting the natural language acquisition process, families can create an optimal environment for young children to thrive in their English learning journey. Emphasizing rich comprehensible input, supporting children through their silent period, and prioritizing emotional well-being are essential components that contribute to the success of this educational endeavor. As parents continue to engage with their children in meaningful and joyful interactions, they not only lay the foundation for linguistic competence but also nurture a lifelong love for learning. In an increasingly globalized world, such early English enlightenment education holds the potential to empower the next generation with the skills and confidence needed to communicate effectively across cultures and borders. By creating an immersive environment and incorporating interactive activities at home, parents can help nurture a love for the language and set their children on the path to lifelong learning.

References

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