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FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN PRESCHOOL

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Abstract. *This article explores the benefits and strategies for implementing foreign language learning in preschool settings. It highlights the unique window of opportunity presented by the preschool years for language acquisition and emphasizes the importance of catering to young learners' developmental needs.*

The article outlines key objectives of preschool foreign language programs, such as fostering intercultural understanding, nurturing basic oral skills, and establishing foundational language knowledge. It emphasizes the effectiveness of play-based approaches that incorporate games, songs, stories, and interactive activities to make learning fun and engaging.

Educator autonomy is presented as another crucial factor for successful language learning. When empowered to choose curriculum and materials, educators can tailor instruction to individual needs and learning styles, fostering a dynamic and responsive learning environment.

The article concludes by emphasizing the importance of understanding children's developmental stages to optimize learning outcomes. It stresses the need for early exposure to correct pronunciation and age-appropriate pacing, while advocating for play, visuals, communication, and positive reinforcement as key elements for effective language learning in preschool.

Key words: *foreign language learning, preschool, young children, language acquisition, teaching methods, learning styles, developmental stages, curriculum, educator autonomy, interactive activities, playful learning, games.*

Introduction

The popularity of foreign language instruction during the preschool years has grown significantly in recent times, leading to the emergence of diverse authorial programs and methodologies within the preschool education landscape. These approaches, each with their unique merits, contribute to the overall goal of fostering language acquisition and intercultural understanding among young learners.

Guided by the overarching goal of promoting language proficiency and cultural awareness, foreign language learning in preschool encompasses a range of specific objectives [1]:

1. *Cultivating interest, respect, and tolerance.* Instilling an appreciation for diverse cultures, traditions, and customs associated with the target language.
2. *Introducing socio-cultural elements.* Exposing children to the social and cultural aspects of countries where the target language is spoken.

3. *Nurturing basic oral skills.* Developing foundational oral language skills, including listening and speaking abilities.

4. *Establishing communicative competence.* Enabling children to engage in basic communication using the target language within a child-centered context.

5. *Acquiring initial linguistic knowledge.* Introducing elementary linguistic concepts, such as vocabulary and grammar structures.

6. *Enhancing language abilities.* Fostering overall language development, including phonological awareness, fluency, and narrative skills.

7. *Leveraging native language experience.* Utilizing children's existing communication skills in their native language to facilitate foreign language acquisition.

8. *Promoting open and respectful communication.* Nurturing a culture of open communication and respect for diverse perspectives.

To achieve these objectives effectively, educators can employ a variety of strategies that align with the developmental characteristics of preschoolers:

➤ *Playful and engaging activities.* Incorporate games, songs, stories, and other interactive activities to make learning fun and engaging.

➤ *Multisensory approaches.* Engage multiple senses, such as sight, sound, and touch, to enhance learning and retention.

➤ *Visual aids and real-life objects.* Utilize visuals, such as pictures, flashcards, and real objects, to support comprehension and maintain focus.

➤ *Positive reinforcement and encouragement.* Provide frequent praise and positive reinforcement to motivate and encourage continued learning.

➤ *Individualized instruction.* Recognize individual differences in learning styles and adapt instruction accordingly.

➤ *Culturally immersive experiences.* Create opportunities for exposure to authentic cultural elements, such as music, art, and literature.

By implementing these strategies and embracing the unique developmental stage of preschoolers, educators can foster a stimulating and supportive learning environment that promotes language acquisition, intercultural understanding, and a

lifelong love of learning.

Main part

Psychologists and physiologists advocate for early foreign language learning, citing children's innate linguistic abilities and emotional readiness for language acquisition. The preschool years represent a sensitive period for language acquisition, encompassing both native and foreign tongues. Researchers offer varying estimates for the duration of this sensitive period, generally placing it between the ages of 4 and 8 [2].

During this unique developmental stage, children exhibit a natural curiosity and a strong desire to learn new things. They possess an exceptional capacity for language acquisition, demonstrating a deeper and more rapid grasp of linguistic concepts compared to later stages in life. As individuals age, this aptitude gradually diminishes. Sensitivity to sound perception and imitation abilities decline, while short-term memory and both visual and auditory processing capabilities weaken.

Preschoolers undergo a period of rapid and intense psychological development, characterized by significant qualitative shifts in their cognitive processes, including perception, memory, thinking, attention, imagination, and the emergence of voluntary behavior regulation. Attention, a crucial factor in successful foreign language learning, exhibits notable features during this developmental stage [4].

Attentional characteristics of preschoolers are:

➤ *Limited sustained attention.* Preschoolers possess a developing ability to focus their attention, but their concentration spans are relatively short. They may struggle to maintain attention on a single task for extended periods.

➤ *Shifting attention.* Preschoolers are easily distracted and prone to attention shifts. Their attention is often drawn to novelty, salient stimuli, and changes in their surroundings.

➤ *Involuntary attention.* Preschoolers' attention is largely involuntary, guided by external stimuli and immediate interests. Sustained attention and purposeful engagement require conscious effort and strategies.

Despite these attentional limitations, preschoolers exhibit a natural curiosity and

openness to learning new things, including languages.

The primary mode of foreign language instruction for preschoolers is through language classes [3]. These classes provide a structured and engaging environment where children can actively learn and practice the target language.

The optimal frequency of language classes for preschoolers varies depending on the specific circumstances:

✓ 2-3 classes per week. This is recommended for group settings with multiple established subgroups of children.

✓ Up to 4 classes per week. This is suitable for situations with fewer subgroups, allowing for potential one-on-one instruction within the educator's schedule. Additionally, this frequency is appropriate when the language classes are conducted directly by the preschool teacher with their assigned age group.

Considerations for class frequency:

✓ *Attention spans.* Preschoolers have shorter attention spans, so classes should be short (15-20 minutes) and frequent to maintain engagement.

✓ *Individual differences.* Educators should consider individual learning styles and preferences when determining class frequency and structure.

✓ *Curriculum goals.* The frequency of classes should align with the overall curriculum goals and the desired level of language proficiency for the children.

To maximize learning outcomes, language classes for preschoolers should follow a structured yet engaging format:

✓ *Warm-up and review.* Begin with a brief warm-up activity to review previously learned concepts and get children energized for the lesson.

✓ *Introduction of new material.* Present new vocabulary, grammar structures, or concepts in a clear and engaging manner, using visuals, songs, or games.

✓ *Practice and application.* Provide ample opportunities for children to practice using the new material through young children, such as games, role-plays, or storytelling.

✓ *Wrap-up and review.* Conclude the class with a summary of the key concepts and a review of the activities, reinforcing the learning.

In preschool foreign language learning, the optimal group size plays a crucial role in maximizing learning outcomes, fostering individual development, and ensuring a positive and engaging learning environment. Educators should strive to create groups that are small enough to allow for personalized attention and support while maintaining a dynamic and interactive atmosphere.

Research suggests that an optimal group size for preschool foreign language learning ranges from 6 to 8 children, with a maximum of 10. This smaller group size enables educators to:

✓ *Provide individualized attention.* Each child receives more focused instruction and support, catering to their unique learning styles and needs.

✓ *Facilitate active participation.* All children have ample opportunities to engage in activities, discussions, and practice, ensuring active involvement and maximizing learning opportunities.

✓ *Foster a supportive environment.* Smaller groups create a more intimate and supportive atmosphere, reducing shyness and encouraging children to participate freely.

✓ *Promote personalized feedback.* Educators can provide timely and personalized feedback, addressing individual strengths and challenges more effectively.

When forming foreign language learning groups, it is essential to consider factors beyond just the number of children. They are:

✓ *Parent requests.* While accommodating parent preferences is important, it should not be the sole determinant.

✓ *Children's interests and abilities.* Grouping children based on their interests, abilities, and learning styles can enhance engagement and promote a more cohesive learning experience.

✓ *Voluntary participation.* Children should not be coerced into attending foreign language classes, especially if these classes are offered on a paid basis. Respecting individual choices and preferences is paramount.

By adhering to the recommended group size and carefully considering the

factors involved in group formation, educators can reap a multitude of benefits:

➤ Enhanced learning outcomes. Children in smaller groups demonstrate better language acquisition, improved communication skills, and increased confidence in using the target language.

➤ Nurtured individual talents. Smaller groups allow for the identification and support of individual talents and abilities, enabling children to shine in their own way.

➤ Personalized approach. Educators can tailor instruction and activities to meet the specific needs and interests of each child, maximizing their potential.

➤ Positive learning environment. Smaller groups create a more positive and supportive learning environment, fostering a love of learning and a sense of belonging.

A significant advantage of teaching foreign languages in preschool lies in the inherent playful motivation of young learners [3]. This intrinsic motivation provides a fertile ground for organizing foreign language instruction as a natural means of communication, mirroring the process of acquiring one's native language. By harnessing playful motivation and carefully designing language learning activities, educators can create a stimulating environment that fosters effective language acquisition and a lifelong love of learning.

Through carefully structured play-based activities, educators can transform language learning into a natural and engaging experience for preschoolers. This approach aligns with the developmental characteristics of young children, who learn best through play, exploration, and interaction.

To effectively leverage playful motivation in foreign language learning, educators should adhere to the following principles:

➤ *Create a supportive and playful environment.* Establish a classroom atmosphere that encourages exploration, creativity, and a sense of fun, fostering a positive association with language learning.

➤ *Incorporate a variety of play-based activities.* Utilize a diverse range of play-based activities, such as games, songs, stories, and role-playing, to cater to different

learning styles and interests.

➤ *Align activities with developmental levels.* Design activities that are age-appropriate and match the developmental level of preschoolers, ensuring they are engaging and accessible.

➤ *Provide opportunities for active participation.* Encourage active participation from all children, ensuring ample opportunities for practice, interaction, and language use.

➤ *Offer positive reinforcement and encouragement.* Provide frequent praise and positive reinforcement to boost motivation, confidence, and a love for language learning.

By carefully designing play-based activities, educators can transform practically any language unit into a valuable communicative tool for preschoolers. This can be achieved through:

✓ *Contextualized language use.* Embed language units within meaningful and engaging contexts, such as games, stories, or everyday routines, making them relevant and memorable.

✓ *Repetitive practice and exposure.* Provide ample opportunities for repetitive practice and exposure to language units through various activities, reinforcing their understanding and usage.

✓ *Encouraging natural language use.* Encourage children to use the target language naturally in the context of play, fostering spontaneous communication and authentic language development.

In the realm of preschool foreign language education, play emerges as a powerful tool for fostering language acquisition and nurturing a love for learning among young learners [5]. To effectively harness the power of play, it is crucial to structure foreign language classes in a way that aligns with the developmental characteristics of preschoolers and maximizes their engagement and learning outcomes.

Preschool foreign language classes should incorporate a diverse range of playful activities that cater to different learning styles and interests. These activities can

include:

✓ *Storytelling and role-playing* – engaging children in storytelling and role-playing activities immerses them in the target language, providing opportunities for natural language use and contextualized learning.

✓ *Theatrical performances* – encouraging children to participate in theatrical performances allows them to showcase their language skills in a fun and creative manner, boosting confidence and self-expression.

✓ *Didactic games* – utilizing a variety of didactic games, including verbal, board, and toy-based games, provides a structured and engaging context for practicing vocabulary, grammar, and communication skills.

✓ *Movement games and songs* – incorporating movement games and songs into the curriculum adds a kinesthetic element to language learning, making it more enjoyable and memorable for preschoolers.

✓ *Computer-based activities* – introducing age-appropriate computer-based activities can provide interactive and engaging practice opportunities, while also familiarizing children with technology.

✓ *Musical activities* – integrating musical activities, such as singing and playing instruments, adds a fun and creative dimension to language learning, enhancing engagement and retention.

To ensure that playful activities effectively promote language acquisition, educators should consider the following guidelines:

➤ *Clear learning objectives.* Each activity should have a specific learning objective, ensuring that children are actively acquiring targeted language skills.

➤ *Age-appropriateness.* Activities should be designed to match the developmental level and interests of preschoolers, incorporating elements that are engaging and accessible to their age group.

➤ *Variety and creativity.* A diverse range of activities should be employed to maintain interest and cater to different learning styles.

➤ *Clear rules and instructions.* Activities should have clear rules and instructions that are easy for preschoolers to understand and follow.

➤ *Active participation.* Activities should encourage active participation from all children, providing ample opportunities for practice and interaction.

➤ *Positive reinforcement.* Educators should provide positive reinforcement and encouragement throughout the activities, fostering a supportive and motivating learning environment.

Varying the types of tasks and activities within each play-based session ensures that children are exposed to a broader range of language skills and contexts. This variation can include:

✓ *Listening tasks* – engaging children in listening activities, such as listening to stories or songs, helps develop their auditory processing and comprehension skills.

✓ *Speaking tasks* – providing opportunities for speaking tasks, such as role-playing conversations or answering questions, promotes oral language fluency and confidence.

✓ *Reading tasks* – introducing age-appropriate reading materials, such as picture books or simple texts, encourages early literacy development and exposure to written language.

✓ *Writing tasks* – incorporating simple writing activities, such as tracing letters or labeling pictures, can lay the foundation for future writing skills.

Incorporating games into foreign language learning for preschoolers offers a multitude of benefits:

✓ *Enhanced motivation.* Playful activities naturally motivate children, making language learning a fun and enjoyable experience.

✓ *Improved engagement.* Games capture children's attention and keep them actively engaged in the learning process.

✓ *Effective language acquisition.* Games provide a context for practicing and reinforcing vocabulary, grammar structures, and communication skills.

✓ *Holistic development.* Games promote not only language skills but also cognitive development, social skills, and emotional intelligence.

✓ *Positive attitudes towards language learning.* Positive experiences with language games foster a positive attitude towards foreign language learning, setting

the stage for lifelong language proficiency.

Games serve as a cornerstone of effective foreign language learning in preschool, transforming language acquisition into a joyful and engaging adventure. By harnessing the power of play and carefully designing games that align with the developmental needs of preschoolers, educators can nurture a love for languages and lay the foundation for successful communication in an increasingly interconnected world.

In the realm of preschool foreign language learning, educator autonomy plays a pivotal role in fostering effective and engaging learning experiences. By empowering educators with the freedom to choose curriculum, distribute material variably, and employ diverse teaching methods and tools, we can create a dynamic and responsive learning environment that caters to the unique needs and interests of young learners.

The benefits of empowering educators with autonomy in preschool foreign language learning are multifaceted:

➤ *Enhanced engagement and motivation.* Educators who have the freedom to design and implement creative lessons are more likely to engage and motivate their students, leading to a more positive and productive learning experience.

➤ *Tailored instruction.* By understanding their students' individual needs and interests, educators can tailor their instruction to maximize learning outcomes and foster a sense of personalization.

➤ *Professional growth and development.* Educator autonomy encourages creativity, experimentation, and professional growth, as educators are empowered to explore new approaches and refine their teaching practices.

➤ *Responsive learning environment.* A flexible and responsive learning environment can adapt to the changing needs and interests of students, ensuring that all learners feel challenged and supported.

Conclusions

Taking into account children's psychological and physiological characteristics is key to successful foreign language acquisition.

Understanding children's developmental stages is crucial for educators to

effectively guide them in learning a new language [2]. This includes:

➤ *Determining the optimal age to introduce a foreign language.* Early exposure to a new language can have significant benefits for children's cognitive development and language learning abilities. However, it's important to consider the child's readiness and individual pace.

➤ *Selecting appropriate teaching methods and materials.* Engaging and age-appropriate methods, such as games, songs, and stories, can make learning fun and effective for young learners. Educators should also use authentic materials that reflect real-world language use.

➤ *Pacing the curriculum.* Children have short attention spans, so lessons should be short, dynamic, and varied. Educators should also consider the child's individual learning style and adjust the pace accordingly.

➤ *Focusing on proper pronunciation from the start.* Early exposure to correct pronunciation is essential for children to develop native-like speech patterns. Educators should be proficient in the language they are teaching and model correct pronunciation consistently.

Here are some additional points to consider:

➤ *Children learn best through play.* Incorporate playful activities and games into language lessons to make learning enjoyable and engaging.

➤ *Visual aids can enhance learning.* Use pictures, flashcards, and other visuals to help children grasp new concepts and vocabulary.

➤ *Encourage communication.* Create opportunities for children to practice speaking the language with each other and with the teacher.

➤ *Positive reinforcement is key.* Praise children's efforts and progress to boost their confidence and motivation.

➤ *Make it fun and engaging.* Children are more likely to learn if they are having fun. Use creative and engaging activities to keep them interested and motivated.

Thus, educators can create effective and enjoyable foreign language learning experiences for young children, setting them on a path to successful language acquisition.

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