

Strategies for Teaching Indigenous Languages to Preschoolers in Taiwan: A Case of Language Immersion

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ABSTRACT: *While the indigenous population merely accounts for 2% of the entire Taiwanese population, it has constituted an important component of the multicultural society in Taiwan, and is a precious heritage of the multicultural world. However, indigenous languages, the carriers of these cultures and the symbol of the indigenous tribes, have currently encountered extinction. To save these dying languages, governmental and private factors have actively taken actions for vitalizing these languages. So far, the most effective method for vitalizing endangered languages is the immersion language teaching project. The most famous foreign cases are the Maori language nest and the Hawaiian experience, both of which attribute their success to the practice since early childhood. The present paper is to examine the strategies used in some successful immersion instances found in indigenous language teaching in preschool.*

In this paper, theories of immersion teaching, manuals of immersion teaching, and empirical studies of successful strategy for immersion teaching used by Taiwan indigenous peoples will be reviewed and summarized based on the factors like preschool students' ages and learning characteristics. The following are the 12 principles of a successful immersion teaching:

- (1) Teach based on content of preschool daily life and curriculum.*
- (2) Maximize the understandable input and output of target language.*
- (3) Use first language to improve second language learning.*
- (4) Build up an easy and understandable process of language teaching.*
- (5) Offer scaffold of language.*
- (6) Correct language errors in appropriate ways.*
- (7) Use body language, gestures or facial expressions.*
- (8) Use all kinds of teaching materials and aids.*
- (9) Offer opportunity for kids to tell stories or play.*
- (10) Use all kinds of language games and songs.*
- (11) Create a warm and friendly environment to speak target language.*
- (12) Cooperate with parents and community.*

It is hoped that the present study will help provide some useful strategies in improving the effectiveness in teaching indigenous languages to preschoolers.

Keywords: *Taiwan indigenous languages, preschooler, language immersion*

I. BACKGROUND/OBJECTIVES AND GOALS

The indigenous population accounts for only 2% of the Taiwanese population; nevertheless, it is a vital component of the multicultural Taiwanese society and is a heritage of our multicultural world. However, indigenous languages, the carriers of these cultures and the symbol of indigenous tribes, are nearing extinction. To save endangered languages, government and private sectors have been actively launching initiative store vitalize these languages. Thus far, language immersion teaching is the most effective method for revitalizing endangered languages.

Several researchers have indicated that early childhood is the most effective time for implementing measures to save endangered languages. For example, Chen(1998)reported that early childhood is the ideal time to learn an indigenous mother language. In addition, Civas(2006) argued that indigenous languages should be taught to young children at home and that the teaching should be continued until preschool education to maintain indigenous language immersion. After reviewing indigenous language teaching, Huang(2000)reported that for saving endangered indigenous languages, teaching them since preschool is crucial. Tiun(2011) discussed the case of Maori Language Nest of New Zealand and Hawaiian Language Nest and reported tha tmother language immersion teaching should be initiated from preschool to save endangered indigenous languages.

Tiun(2011)reported that the success of Maori Language Nest and Hawaiian Language Nest is attributable to indigenous language immersion teaching since early childhood. Similarly, the success of minority languages programs in Taiwan, such as the Hakka immersion preschool project, is attributable to language immersion teaching since childhood. However, few empirical studies have evaluated the success of indigenous language immersion teaching.

According to Chou(2015),at least seven factors contribute to the success of language immersion teaching programs in school: immersion model, immersion time, teachers, curriculum and material, teaching strategy, parents and community participation, and policy and resources. These factors cumulatively influence the success of language immersion teaching programs in schools.

Among these factors, this paper focuses on the teaching strategy. Since 2013,the author has been training preschool teachers of a language immersion program of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. The author observed that numerous preschool teachers lack effective language immersion strategies to improve students' listening and speaking skills in indigenous languages. Moreover, studies have reported that more attention should be focused on the teaching experience and in-class study and that teaching strategy is one of the most crucial factors contributing to the success of a language immersion program. Swain(1986) andPunchard(2001) reported that most language immersion studies have investigated the relationship between students' achievements and the target language, whereas few studies have examined the real scenario occurring in classrooms. However, Chaudron(2000) highlighted that some studies have shifted their focus from investigating students' output to evaluating "the process of producing outcomes" of teaching and studying in classrooms.

Swain(1996)conducted a practice study on language teaching strategies used in an immersion classroom and reported that third- and sixth-grade students could not speak the language being taught as fluently and accurately as their mother tongue because the teachers did not use effective language immersion strategies.

The purposes of this study were as follows: 1)to review literature regarding successful teaching strategies for language immersion programs in preschool;2)to investigate the principles of successful teaching strategies for language immersion programs in preschool; and3)to provide recommendations for preschool teachers regarding the implementation of teaching strategies for the success of language immersion programs.

II. METHODS

In this study, the author reviewed relevant literature and identified theories and manuals of immersion teaching as well as empirical studies on successful strategies for immersion teaching. Furthermore, the author summarized the principles of successful teaching strategies according to preschool students' age and learning characteristics.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

(1)Theories of immersion teaching

Four language teaching theories and their extended teaching principles or strategies are used in immersion teaching: language and content learning theory, language input and output theory, code-switching theory, and social cultural theory.

A. Language and content learning theory

In contrast to the bilingual teaching theory, the language and content learning theory integrates target language acquisition with content learning. Wang(2008)reported that content learning is the basis of target language acquisition. Immersion teachers should provide valuable and interesting content to their students, which consequently helps students understand and learn the structure and pattern of the target language. Thus, through learning the content, students can interact and discuss topics of interest by using the target language. This constructs a true and natural environment to use the target language for communication. In preschool, by using an integrated curriculum, immersion teachers can lead young indigenous students to learn indigenous languages in a natural communicative environment.

B. Language input and output theory

The language input and output theory emphasizes on successful language acquisition elements that simultaneously consider useful language input and output. In a French language immersion study, Swain(1986) reported that if teachers only maximized the input of French and provided few opportunities to students to answer questions, students would not receive adequate practice to learn complex and long sentences and thus would have minimized language output.

C. Code-switching theory

In immersion teaching or endangered language revitalizing theories, most scholars believe that the optimal way to recover a target language is complete second language immersion. However, practicing a second language is difficult and thus contributes little to second language acquisition. Therefore, some scholars have recently focused on flexible bilingualism(Adrian&Creese,2009).

On the basis of flexible bilingualism, Ciun(2016)believed that the first language can be abridged to learn the target language. He provided information regarding three code-switching teaching strategies, namely the sandwich technique, the translation method, and Jacobson's new concurrent approach.

a. Sandwich technique

Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009:33) reported that ease of learning through the sandwich technique, the steps of which are as follows: speak in second language, repeat in first language, and speak again in second language (L2 → L1 → L2). The steps of this technique in practical teaching are as follows: speak the target language → translate in the first language → repeat in the target language → teachers ask students to speak in the target language (Ciun, 2016).

b. Translation method

In addition to the sandwich technique, code-switching can be used in several translation methods, such as the concurrent translation method, the preview and review method, and the method integrates meaning translation and literal translation. The purpose of using any translation method is to use the best of the first language in target language learning and to use the first language as a powerful recourse of target language learning (Ciun, 2016).

c. Jacobson's new concurrent approach

Code-switching is common and does not require planning; however, Jacobson's (1990) new concurrent approach attempted to carefully control the code-switching process used in teaching. Code-switching takes place through some clues that are offered, and teachers who want to use this approach should be trained to identify and use the clues (Irujo 2006). Jacobson (1990) developed a series of language clues by including the following four domains: classroom strategy, curriculum, language development, and personal relationship.

D. Sociocultural theory

The sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1962 and 1978) indicates that social interaction is crucial for language learning. Teachers should provide a scaffold of language-related tasks to students to complete or collaborate with other students. Scaffolding occurs when a learner becomes a positive participator, but when a learner become a negative one. In addition, the sociocultural theory indicates that humans should communicate with themselves as well as interact with other people.

According to the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky, immersion teachers should understand the language level of the students and assign appropriate language learning tasks. The teachers should take advantage of scaffolding by including themselves and those students whose language is fluent and take cooperative assignments to improve learners' language. Moreover, the teachers should take advantage of students' knowledge and experience of their first language.

(2) Manuals of immersion teaching

Hinton (2002) reported the following ten points for successful language learning:

Point1: Leave English behind

Point2: Make yourself understood by using nonverbal communication.

Point3: Teach in complete sentences.

Point4: Aim for real communication in your language of heritage.

Point5: Language is also culture.

Point6: Focus on listening and speaking.

Point7: Learn and teach the language through activities.

Point8: Use audio taping and videotaping.

Point9: Be an active learner.

Point10: Be sensitive to each other's needs; be patient and proud of each other and yourself.

Because these ten points are applicable to adults and not to young children, some of the points should be adjusted. For example, complete immersion in the target language in the beginning is extremely difficult for young children; therefore, in the initial stages, teachers should take advantage of students' first language and code-switching between indigenous language and Chinese. Point 9 suggests that students should become active learners. Because it is difficult for young children to become active learners, teachers should encourage them to participate.

(3) Empirical studies of successful strategies for immersion teaching

In a French language immersion program, Genesee (1987) indicated that integration of language and content can improve the development of the first language and acquisition of the second language. He suggested the following four teaching strategies:

A. Students should use the first and second languages at the same time, at least in the beginning.

B. Teachers should train themselves to correct grammar errors of students.

- C. Teachers should use the second language as the teaching language for main courses.
- D. Second language teachers should behave like a single speaker but should be bilingual.

In another French language immersion program, Lapkin and Cummins (1984) reported that immersion teaching focuses on meaningful interaction and presents second language in a natural learning environment. In addition, they mentioned some teaching strategies that successfully improve second language learning, including having an appropriate facial expression and body gesture, using true materials, correcting students' vocabulary knowledge, using true experiences and contextual clues, correcting grammar informally rather than teaching grammar, and conducting group activities frequently.

In an experimental study, Day and Shapson (2001) selected 7 sixth-grade immersion classes as the experimental groups and other 7 sixth-grade non-immersion classes as the control group. After 6 weeks of experiments, they observed that the writing score of the experimental group was remarkably higher than that of the control group. This finding indicates that formal grammar teaching through communication activities and group learning can improve students' speaking and grammar.

Wang (2008) studied the teaching strategies employed in a private Chinese immersion school in California, USA, and included second-, third-, fifth-, and eighth-grade classes in the study. Wang observed one half-hour class every week for 8 weeks and reported that all teachers in the four immersion classes conformed to the theories of second language acquisition and immersion education as follows:

- A. by constructing a natural communication language group
- B. by offering understandable input and output
- C. by conducting constructive and meaningful interaction
- D. by practicing content-based teaching
- E. by having creative and hard-working teachers

Because of the implementation of these principles, the students in these Chinese language immersion classes could speak the language being taught as fluently as their mother tongue.

Relatively few practical studies on language immersion have been conducted in Taiwan. Jiang (2007) studied two indigenous language experienced teachers and conducted a long-term observation and an interview. She reported that the two teachers used the following six effective strategies:

- A. Allowing community residents to participate in teaching
- B. Integrating language and culture into the learning content of students
- C. Using oral story-telling and practicing story-telling
- D. Immersing students' life experiences into the curriculum
- E. Playing language games
- F. Providing video assistance in indigenous language teaching

Two practical studies have been conducted on immersion teaching strategies in preschool. Sung and Chung (2013) conducted a study on a Hakka language immersion program in preschool and observed that the preschool used several teaching strategies that were suitable for young children. For example, the immersion teachers used several types of teaching aids, such as vocabulary cards, hand dolls, and story-telling. The teachers also used Hakka cultural or historical relics and material objects in topic teaching. They communicated with students not only during learning activities but also in daily life activities. Moreover, the school held an exhibition of songs, dance, and drama to showcase the outcomes of the young children's Hakka language learning program and to provide opportunities to exhibit their Hakka language skills. Furthermore, to create a Hakka immersion environment, the teachers decorated classroom walls with several material objects and Hakka culture-related pictures that connected to Hakka language teaching.

In summary, this preschool used different teaching strategies that were suitable to the needs and age of young children, provided several opportunities for the input and output of the target language, and created a Hakka language immersion environment.

Chou (2015) studied teaching strategies of a Paiwan indigenous preschool for a year and observed that immersion teachers in this school used the following six teaching strategies:

- A. Practicing cooperative teaching by teaching in Chinese rather than code-switching in Paiwan at the beginning of the immersion program.
- B. Using Paiwan traditional teaching methods in language immersion teaching, such as using a model and observation to teach young children to traditional weave.
- C. Integrating suggested teaching methods into immersion teaching. For example, a teacher analyzes the language ability of young children and accordingly arranges their seating. The teacher asks students fluent in Paiwan to speak first, thus enabling students not fluent in Paiwan to listen to the language before they speak.
- D. Allowing young children to connect their life experiences with school learning through sharing vacation

experiences on Mondays. This activity provides more opportunities to young children to actively speak in Paiwan.

- E. Using video assistance in Paiwan language learning. During outdoor learning activities, teachers take videotapes and replay when they go back to classrooms to help young children learn what they sought or listened outdoor in Paiwan.
- F. Communicating with young children in Paiwan in daily school life, such as praying in Paiwan during lunch.

IV. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

From the literature review, the following 12 principles of successful strategies for immersion teaching in preschool were identified:

1. Teaching on the basis of the content of preschool daily life and curriculum
2. Maximally understanding the input and output of the target language
3. Using the first language to improve the second language
4. Building an easy and understandable process of language teaching
5. Offering a scaffold of language
6. Correcting language errors in appropriate ways.
7. Using body language, gesture, and facial expression
8. Using several teaching materials and aids
9. Providing opportunities to kids to tell stories or to play
10. Playing games and singing songs in different languages
11. Creating a warm and welcoming environment to speak the target language
12. Cooperating with parents and the community

These 12 principles can be used in indigenous language immersion programs. If indigenous language immersion teachers implement these principles and use comprehensive strategies and teaching methods that are suitable for different environment and students, they can enable young children to learn indigenous languages easily, happily, and successfully.

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