Technological University Dublin

ARROW@TU Dublin

Conference papers

Social Sciences

2008-01-01

Strategies in Working with Children Learning English as a Second Language

Maire Mhic Mhathuna
Technological University Dublin, maire.mhicmhathuna@tudublin.ie

Una Hill
Bonnybrook Day Nursery, una.hill@live.ie

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/aaschsslcon

Part of the Sociology Commons

2008-01-01

Strategies in Working with Children Learning English as a Second Language

Maire Mhic Mhathuna
Dublin Institute of Technology, maire.mhicmhathuna@dit.ie

Una Hill
Bonnybrook Day Nursery, una.hill@live.ie

Strategies in working with children learning English as a second language

Máire Mhic Mhathúna and Úna Hill

Dublin Institute of Technology.

Introduction

Recent changes in Irish society and the growth in the economy have impacted on aspects of Irish life and these changes can be seen in the early years services who work with non-English speaking immigrant or newcomer children and their families. Working with the early years sector in Dublin, we have been aware of how services have adapted to a new role of assisting the children and their families to adjust to their new lives in Ireland and to learn English as an additional language.

A great deal of practice and research on children learning English as a second language in early years settings has taken place in North America and to a lesser extent in the U.K. (Tabors 1997, Tabors and Snow 1994, Siraj-Blatchford, 2000). This exploratory research project sought to draw on this practice-based research and on the Irish experience of second language early education in the naíonraí or Irish-language immersion preschools (Hickey 1997, Mhic Mhathúna 1999, 2004), in order to investigate the experience of Irish practitioners who are supporting children learning English as a second language. The aim of this research project was to listen to the voices of experienced practitioners as they related their experiences of working with children and families new to this country. We wanted to identify the strategies used by practitioners to assist the process of second language learning and to draw on their experiences in order to assist other services who may be just starting on this process.

Methodology

This study was undertaken in four early years' settings who provide practice placements for Early Childhood Education students in the Dublin Institute of Technology and who had experience of supporting second language learning. Three centres were based in similar areas of socio-economic disadvantage in Dublin and one centre was attached to a service offering English language classes for adults.

A list of themes and strategies used by adults in supporting young children learning a second language was collated from the literature (Tabors 1997, Weizmann and Greenberg 2002, Wesche, 1994, Browne, 2001). This was sent to each centre and arrangements were made in April 2006 to interview the staff to discuss their views and experiences. A semi-structured interview schedule was devised as it was hoped to "approximate the feeling of the unforced conversations of everyday life" (Wilson 1998, p. 95). This allowed participants to follow the natural flow of the discussion and to outline areas of particular significance to them. The staff teams and the researchers knew each other well, having worked in partnership on student placements for many years and the aims and possible outcomes of the research were explained clearly to them at the outset. Based on the high level of personal and professional cooperation, very interesting and insightful discussions took place and rich descriptions of the respondents' experiences in relation to working with children learning English as a second language emerged.

Three of the interviews were audio-taped and one was videoed. The interviews lasted for about one hour. The total number of staff interviewed was 25, with 11 practitioners having studied a module on bilingualism during the BA in Early Childhood Care and Education degree programme. The total number of children in the nurseries was 206 and of these, 45 children or approximately 20%, were learning English as a second language.

Each interview was transcribed and the analysis of the data focused on the responses of each centre to questions on the following areas of interest:

- Social and linguistic factors affecting the children

- Process of learning a second language

- Language support strategies of early years practitioners

- Classroom organisation

- Ongoing contact with parents

- Challenges and issues

We asked the staff for their views on the usefulness of the strategies that had been sent to them and for examples from their own practice. In addition, we asked them to identify the current issues for practitioners and how they thought they might be addressed. Full confidentiality and anonymity were assured. It will be seen that there was a great deal of variety in the answers, reflecting the diversity of the practitioners' experiences in working with newcomer children and their families.

Children's social and linguistic backgrounds

Best practice in Early Childhood Care and Education and in Second Language Acquisition practice (Siraj-Blatchford 2000) holds that practitioners should start with understanding the child and his/her family. This means collecting basic demographic information such as the country of origin, religious beliefs and practices, the languages that the child understands and speaks as well as the parents' expectations of preschool and any additional information that would help the staff to get to know the child and the family. In two of the nurseries in this study, the parents were happy to provide basic information about their country of origin, languages and medical/health information.

The other two nurseries encountered some difficulty in accessing background information, with some parents reluctant to say which country they came from or the languages that the child could speak. The staff felt that this reluctance stemmed from the wider socio-political context and in particular the rules and regulations regarding refugees and asylum seekers. The parents in these two nurseries also asserted that the children were fluent speakers of English and that they did not speak any other language. It subsequently emerged that this was not the case and the staff thought that the parents might be afraid that a place in the nursery would not be offered if the child was perceived

as being more "trouble" than other children. They also said that there is strong expectation of fluency in English in the labour market in Ireland and this might have influenced the parents' expectations of what was required to gain a place in a childcare service.

All the nurseries had devised a number of strategies for explaining the policies and procedures of their services to all new parents. One nursery provide a Parents' Handbook in English and read out the most important sections at a general meeting for all new parents. They had originally devised the strategy to help parents with literacy difficulties but found that it was also helpful to newcomer families with limited experience of childcare in Ireland and/or of English. Another nursery provided a Russian translation of the enrolment form and many of the parents found this very helpful. They based their form on the templates provided by Fingal County Childcare Committee (www.fingalcountychildcare.ie) and Galway County Childcare Committee (www.galwaychildcare.com) in 10 different languages and added additional sections to suit their own requirements. They felt that in many cases a great deal of time was required to assist newcomer parents understand what was involved and that this affected the amount of time available for other parents.

Process of learning a second language
The literature describes a series of stages that children go through when they are learning a second language. The staff clearly recognised the main stages of second language acquisition outlined in the literature (Ellis 1994, Tabors 1997) and gave examples of their children progressing through these stages.

a)   Non-verbal period: All recognised this beginning stage and said that the children used physical means of communication such as pointing, crying, using gestures, taking toys and objects sometimes without the consent of other children. This was true in relation to their interaction with other children and with adults. Some cultural aspects of behaviour may also be involved as some African children were also more tactile or needed less personal space than other children.

b)   Telegraphic Speech: Staff said that when the newcomer children started speaking English, they sounded like younger Irish children beginning to talk, for example, "Me want" or "Me play." They used "chopped sentences" with the names of toys and other objects or said one word utterances such as "yes," "no," or " stop."

c)   Formulaic speech / short useful phrases: The children acquired rote phrases for their basic needs such as telling staff that they needed to go to the toilet, that they were hungry or thirsty or that they wanted a turn in a game or activity. Several children knew quite a lot of advertisements from television in relation to toys or food and some knew many songs and nursery rhymes. All the children spoke with the local Dublin accent and some had picked up a number of colloquial sayings such as "Janey mack."

d)   Creative Speech. Not all of the children reached this stage but some were very proficient speakers and could speak English in an age-appropriate way. During planning time in the High/Scope approach (Hohmann and Weikart 1995), some children could describe exactly what they would like to play with and in what order. Staff felt that many of the children would take another year to reach this stage. In the case of children with language difficulties in their mother tongue, it would take a good deal more time for them to make progress.

Language strategies of early years practitioners
Most of the children began attending the service together at the beginning of the year and the newcomer children were part of the new group learning how to adjust to preschool. Staff felt that the way they modified their language for newcomer children was more an extension of how they related to other children rather than something new in itself. The practitioners emphasised that there was no one right way to facilitate second language learning because each child is unique. They tried to respect the personality and individuality of each child and work accordingly.

One staff team had participated in a Marte Meo training programme (www.martemeo.com) and found the method's observation and communication strategies particularly useful. Marte Meo is a video-based interaction programme that provides practical support to adults on supporting the social, emotional and communication development of children during daily interactions. The practitioners adapted the strategies to suit second language children's interactions, e.g. naming what the target child was doing and describing the ongoing action. They also directed the child's attention to other children nearby and talked about what they were doing. This meant that the child got a lot of verbal description about concrete experiences that he/she was involved in and was encouraged to observe/interact with other children.

The staff in the nursery that had a high number of Russian-speaking children had learned some basic words of Russian themselves and found that this was very useful when children were settling into the nursery. They sometimes used the Russian word sandwiched between two English versions of the word when talking to new children and found that this helped build communication quickly. They had devised a set of Russian flashcards for themselves, written phonetically according to the English language system and this caused a great deal of amusement among the Russian-speaking parents, who complimented them on their oral language but not on the written form!

However, one of the most useful strategies for communicating with children and parents was photography. In one of the nurseries run on High/Scope principles, they made extensive use of photographs to label storage boxes for toys and equipment, make a poster of the options for free-play and as a communication tool in the Plan-do-Review cycle. This form of visual communication was available to all the children and facilitated independent choice and play. The staff used the camera to document many forms of play and learning and could then use the photographs with the children for discussion and elaboration. They could also show the photographs to the parents to explain what the children had been engaged with during the session.

Classroom organisation

The staff felt that a stable and predictable routine helped all the children, particularly newcomer children, to know what was going to happen next and what was expected of them. They said that the newcomer children often reminded them if they passed over part of the Circle Time routine or missed a verse of a nursery rhyme or song. One nursery incorporated a counting routine into the preparation for lunch and counted up to ten in English and Irish. They had a French-speaking student on placement for some weeks and expanded the counting languages to include French. Long after the student had returned to college, one of the newcomer children continued to count in French. The staff did not know if the child spoke French at home, but it had become part of the routine and could not be skipped.

Stability and regularity was also an important factor for a newcomer child who asked a practitioner to read the same book to her every day for a week, in exactly the same way. The book was a simple picture book about food and colours and the child mimed the same actions of eating the food each time the book was read and did not want any pages skipped. She could name the colours, in one-word utterances and thoroughly enjoyed the predictable activity of reading the book in this manner with the practitioner. This echoes the strategy of rereading certain books for language acquisition purposes outlined by Dickinson 2000 and Mhic Mhathúna 2003.

The "Russian" nursery promoted literacy through wordless picture books, simple books in English and dual language books in English and Russian. They also made their own books, using photographs of activities in the nursery and some of the parents provided copies of children's books in Russian. The staff photocopied the pictures and translated the text into English in an effort to provide culturally appropriate material. This succeeded up to a point, but they felt that some of the essence and richness of the original language was lost in the process. This was particularly true in relation to the attempts to translate songs and rhymes from Russian to English and from English to Russian.

Ongoing Contact with Parents

The staff in the four nurseries felt that they had very good relationships with all their parents, including the parents of children who were learning English as a second language. When communication difficulties arose, other parents were sometimes asked to act as translators, or older children were asked to explain. The staff recognised that this practice might give rise to problems if sensitive issues were involved and several nurseries said that they felt very isolated in relation to language help and support. They cited the limited facilities available to colleagues in the health and school systems, but said that no assistance regarding translation existed for practitioners in early years services, who were often the first point of contact for children and their families with the Irish system.

The nurseries sent home written notes with important information or events and parents could then get help if they needed someone to read/translate it for them. However, occasionally last minute changes occurred and this sometimes posed problems of understanding exactly what was involved as some beginner learners of English could understand the gist of what was being said but not the precise point. When all else failed, the staff said that they resorted to gesture and mime, leading sometimes to feelings of inadequacy and a loss of dignity for all concerned.

Photography was also a very useful tool in relation to ongoing contact with parents. One particular baby took a long time to settle in and her mother, who was just beginning to learn English, was upset at leaving her distressed child every morning and worried about how she was getting on during the day. The staff took many photographs of the baby during the day and her mother could see exactly how happy she was after a certain length of time.

The challenge of understanding World Englishes was cited by two of the nurseries. They said that this was a particular challenge in relation to the variety of English spoken in Nigeria (Mann 1996) as these parents had very fluent English, but the different stress and intonation made it difficult for Irish people to understand. They thought that the Irish dialect might also pose challenges for speakers of other dialects!

Challenges and issues

One of the major challenges faced by practitioners was accessing help for children with developmental problems or language delay. This can be difficult for Irish children and their parents, but when languages other than English are involved, it can be particularly challenging to find a specialist who can understand the child or have access to a suitable translator. Parents sometimes act as translators but this is not ideal as they have a different role to play in what can be a demanding and emotional situation for themselves.

Cultural information was also difficult to find. Staff said that they were learning through experience about different cultural norms regarding eating, politeness and discipline, for example. They had found that in some cultures the accepted polite way to eat is with the hands in a certain way, but as is the Irish norm, the practitioners had insisted on even the youngest children learning to eat with a spoon. Showing respect to an adult was another area of cultural difference. Some cultures frown upon children looking directly at adults in certain situations, but staff said that they insisted on children looking them in the eye when they had to speak to them about unacceptable behaviour. They were concerned about the mixed messages that the children were receiving and felt that had they known about these types of cultural difference, they might have approached the issues in a different way.

Other differences arose in relation to discipline. Some cultures find it acceptable to chastise children physically and this was not acceptable to the staff in the nurseries. This led to serious disagreement between staff and several parents and staff were very concerned about the consequences of bringing children's misbehaviour to the attention of some parents. On the other hand, some of the newcomer parents felt that the issue of discipline was overstated as language was sometimes used metaphorically. The staff said that they were shocked when they heard some newcomer parents saying "I'll beat you" to their children but were somehow less concerned when some Irish parents said "I'll kill you" to their offspring!

Procedures for collecting children at the end of sessions could sometimes be problematic. According to national child protection guidelines (Department of Health and Children 1999), parents are responsible for collecting their child or must nominate another person and inform the centre. Parents from cultures who adopt a wider view of childcare in the extended family/community sense, found it difficult to accept that their relations and friends were not allowed to take the child home. This created considerable difficulties in some cases.

Some parents had different expectations of preschool to the staff. In one nursery, a parent insisted that her child sat down and did her "school work" and invigilated closely from outside the window. Another nursery had the same problem but explained their emphasis on social development to parents who were then happy to accept this.

Occasionally difficulties arose in relation to equality of opportunity with the local communities. In some areas of Dublin, there is a long waiting list for housing and some families were aggrieved that newcomer families were being housed in preference to local people. Some complaints were also received about newcomer children getting places in the nurseries, again in preference to local families. In general, the practitioners felt that relations between the local parents and the newcomer parents were good, with all parents being accepted according to their personality and their efforts to be friendly. Some newcomer families knew other families from their own country in the neighbourhood and could share their experiences and language skills if required.

Conclusion

The above account of the strategies employed by practitioners shows that they were drawing on their existing knowledge of Early Childhood Care and Education in their work with children learning English as a second language. Several practitioners said that the knowledge and understanding of second language acquisition gained in their degree level training was invaluable to them when they first started working with children learning English as an additional language. The discussion showed that they were aware of the importance of responding to the children's initiatives in communicating through a

range of verbal and non-verbal means, that they were sensitive to the cultural differences that emerged and that in many cases, they had formed close bonds with the newcomer families. The major difficulties that they saw were in relation to finding out about cultural practices and in accessing help for second language children with developmental or language problems. Access to translators for communication with parents was also a problem.

This paper has focused on one particular context, that of children learning English as an additional language in areas of socio-economic disadvantage in Dublin. In order to gain a greater understanding of the issues and practices involved in this growing area of early childhood education, it will be necessary to extend the scope of the study to include a range of social backgrounds and contexts. It is anticipated that some similar and some different issues will emerge from a wider study and that a greater understanding of the issues facing practitioners across a wide range of contexts will assist both practice and training. Underlying issues such as the tension between valuing the host community while resisting the trend towards assimilation of the newcomer cultures, the visibility of newcomer languages and cultures and the perspectives of the children and their parents need to be investigated and discussed. The experiences of early childhood practitioners from other cultures working in Ireland also need to be explored.

In spite of some difficulties, the practitioners in this study were extremely positive about their experience of working with second language children and their families and regarded their inclusion as an opportunity to learn about other cultures and languages. They felt that they were coping well in that they were learning how to extend their practice to take account of the new issues involved. In one sense, they had learned how to facilitate children learning English as a second language *because of* and not *in spite of* the language and cultural differences. We would like to thank them for participating in this project and for sharing their experiences of working with newcomer children and their families. They have extended our knowledge on strategies in working with second language children, given vivid descriptions of inclusive and innovative practice and have identified some of the underlying issues that need to be addressed if the young children

who are learning English as an additional language are to be facilitated in reaching their potential in a culturally diverse Ireland.

References

Browne, A. (2001). *Developing Language and Literacy 3 – 8*. (2ⁿᵈ ed.). London: Paul Chapman.

Department of Health and Children. (1999). *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children*. Dublin: Stationary Office.

Dickinson, D. (2001). *Beginning Literacy with Language*. Baltimore: Paul Brookes.

Ellis, R. (1994). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hickey, T. (1997). *Early Immersion Education in Ireland: Na Naíonraí*. Dublin: Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann.

Hohmann, M and Weikart, D. (1995). *Educating Young Children*. Ypsilanti: High/Scope Press.

Mann, C. (1996). Anglo-Nigerian Pidgin in Nigerian Education. In T. Hickey and J. Williams, (Eds.), *Language, Education and Society in a Changing World* (pp. 93-107). Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual World.

Mhic Mhathúna, M. (2003). Narrative in a Naíonra. In N. Hayes and M. Kernan (Eds.), *Transformations: Theory and Practice in Early Education* (pp. 187 – 196). Cork: OMEP Ireland.

Mhic Mhathúna, M. (2004). *Storytelling as Vehicle for Second Language Acquisition*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. Dublin: University of Dublin, Trinity College.

Siraj-Blatchford, I.. and P. Clarke (2000). *Supporting Identity, Diversity and Language in the Early Years*. Bucks: Open University Press.

Tabors, P. (1997). *One Child, Two Languages*. Baltimore: Paul Brookes.

Tabors, P and Snow, C. (1994). English as a second language in preschool programmes. In F. Genesee (Ed.), *Educating Second Language Children* (pp. 103 – 126). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weizman, E. and Greenberg, J. (2002). *Learning Language and Loving It*. Toronto: Hanen Centre.

Wilson, M. (1996). Asking Questions. In D. Sapsford and V. Jupp (Eds.), *Data Collection and Analysis,* (2nd edition). London: Sage/Open University Press.

Wesche, M. (1994). Input and interaction in Second Language Acquisition. In C. Gallaway and B. Richards (Eds.).   *Input and Interaction in Language Acquisition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

www.fingalcountychildcare.ie : website of Final County Childcare Committee.

www.galwaychildcare.com : website of Galway County Childcare Committee.

www.martemeo.com : website of Marte Meo approach.