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A look at AUA pre-school English program through the lens of Montessori pedagogy

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Abstract

This paper aims at investigating the pedagogy of the AUA Pre-school English program from the perspective of Montessori Method. To reach the aim of the study the convergences and divergences between the Montessori and foreign language pedagogies were investigated in terms of teacher and student roles, materials and environment, sensory development and language use by both the teachers and learners. The mixed methods type of research was chosen for the study, where the qualitative analysis was done through classroom observation checklists and interviews with the program teacher, and the quantitative analysis was done with audio-video recordings. The findings of the research showed that the implementation of the Montessori Pedagogy in the “AUA Pre-school” English program is quite possible as the convergences outweighed the divergences.

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Keywords: Montessori pedagogy; AUA pre-school English program; didactic materials; the prepared environment; sensory development.

1. Introduction

The Montessori Method, which originated in the 19th century, is one of the successful methodologies in the history of pedagogy that has been developed throughout time and till today is in active use in different parts of the world.

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The aim of the study is to see how the Montessori Pedagogy and foreign language pre-school pedagogy interact in the AUA pre-school English program. Thus, the research question is the following: *How do Montessori and foreign language pedagogies converge and diverge in the context of the AUA Pre-school English Program from the perspectives of: 1) Teacher and student roles, 2) materials and environment, 3) sensory and language development, 4) target language production by students and teacher, 5) direct and indirect exposure to the target language, 6) the vocabulary use by the teacher.* This is the first study to investigate Montessori Pedagogy in an Armenian educational context.

2. Literature review

Maria Montessori (1870-1952) was an Italian medical doctor and educator. She is famous worldwide for Montessori philosophy of education and her writings on scientific pedagogy. According to Brown (1994), the Montessori Method of education, developed by Dr. Montessori, is a child-centered educational approach, which is based on scientific observations of children from the birth to adulthood. It is a view of the child as one who is naturally eager for knowledge in an authentic and collaborative environment. It helps children to develop creativity, problem solving, critical thinking and time-management skills, care of the environment and each other. Lillard (2011) states that Montessori mainly concentrated on the needs of the learners and on the goal of education, rather than its methods. The methodological factors that make her pedagogy unique are *the observation of children, the prepared environment, the prepared adult, child freedom, didactic materials, sensory and language development, intrinsic motivation, mixed age-group classes and collaboration.* The basis of her approach was to observe the children and identify their needs (Lillard, 2011). According to Montessori (1917), children have the innate ability to ‘absorb’ the culture. They are destined to follow the particular roads of development.

According to Goonetilleke (2013), the main three components of Montessori Method are the child, the prepared adult and the prepared environment. The role of the prepared adult in the Montessori environment is to function as a connector between the child and the prepared environment. Moreover, Lillard (2011) mentions that the adult educator’s aim is to observe children so as to watch for the moments of concentration and help children toward independence and the establishment of their autonomy. Moreover, according to Montessori (1914), it is essential that the environment should be rightly organized. According to Pouzar-Kozak (2008), the Montessori environment is adjusted to the child’s emerging sensibilities and interests as well as is supportive to the child’s needs for independence and self-reliance. The environment should have the components of everyday life and should give the child the opportunity to live in a natural way (Montessori, 1917). The Montessori environment is furnished with the aim of providing communicative learning environment and enough space for children to feel free to go and come. It has a direct contact with an open-air space, there are no desks, or stationary chairs. There are light tables and chairs of different shapes. There are different pictures of nature on the walls. The floor is convenient for the children to sit and work. The furniture and materials are wooden.

In a Montessori classroom the discipline comes through liberty, and the discipline is needed to exercise responsibility (Lillard, 2011). The concept of active discipline gives freedom to the children, which is the key of child’s self-formation.

According to Lillard (2011), children are introduced to the didactic materials in an orderly sequence and logical progression. They teach the children to observe and categorize. Sensorial materials train the five senses. Each material isolates a certain quality, e.g. “*The Red Rods*” focus attention on length, “*The Brown Stair*” on width and height. The written language is developed with the help of “*The Sandpaper Letters*”, the “*Small Alphabet*”, etc.

In a Montessori classroom a lot of attention is given to intrinsic motivation, and there are not any extrinsic rewards. According to Montessori (1914), classrooms are designed to have three-year age mix classes. In this kind of classrooms the children benefit from each other, as younger children learn from the elder ones, and the elder children teach the younger children, thus reinforcing their knowledge. In addition, Lillard (2013) states that Montessori environment is interactive where the communication skills are fostered rather than competition.

3. Methodology

The research was conducted in “Sprout” AUA pre-school English program which was opened in February, 2014.

The program is designed for children, from 2 to 5 years old. The classes are scheduled for 3 hours per week. There are four groups in the program, and the number of children is from 4 to 6 in each playroom. The type of the research is mixed-methods. The purposive sampling was chosen for the study, where the participants were all the teachers ($n=2$), and the children from 2 to 5 years old who attend the classes. Four groups were included in the study, and each one of them was observed for three times. The qualitative data was collected through 12 observation checklists (with 32 criteria of Montessori pedagogy) and one-to-one interviews, while the quantitative data was collected through audio-video recordings of the play sessions. The interviews contained 26 semi-structured items which were mainly helpful for clarifying the emergent patterns found out during the observations of the classes. Four out of the eight audio-video recordings were transcribed for investigating the language use by the teachers and the children. The qualitative data was analysed through identifying the themes in the observation forms and categorizing the responses of the interviews, and the qualitative data was analysed through the transcripts, Excel program and Vocabulary Profiler.

4. Results

Through observation and interview analysis it turned out that it is quite possible to implement Montessori Pedagogy in AUA Pre-school English Program. The convergences that were found outweighed the divergences. The convergences were mainly found in terms of the prepared environment, the roles of the prepared adult, freedom, motivation, the interaction of children, issues of social responsibilities, their care and respect towards both the environment and each other and also some aspects of language teaching (storytelling, repetitions, vocabulary). However, the research showed that giving children too much freedom and providing enough meaningful linguistic input do not always work together well enough, for example, by getting too much freedom children sometimes fail to receive language input. Freedom should be limited at some points so as to keep the balance between the freedom and language exposure.

The *divergences* from Montessori Pedagogy were found in terms of providing the uninterrupted work cycle, sensory education and teaching writing before reading and reading through writing. In a Montessori environment the sensory development is carried out through specific didactic materials, which indirectly prepares children for language, while in “Sprout” the main focus is on giving comprehensible input to the learners through speaking and playful learning before transitioning to writing and reading. When it comes to the teaching of writing before reading, the main focus is on listening and speaking. But whenever they teach literacy skills they do not have clear distinction of doing writing before reading. The children’s work cycle is often interrupted because of both the children and teachers. E.g. it happens when children misbehave or don’t stay long in the playrooms without their parents, also when the teacher asks them to go and have the snack because of the fixed snack time.

Both *convergences* and *divergences* were found in the following aspects: teacher guidance, children’s responsibility of finishing the started work, usage of didactic materials for the development of language and senses, focusing on phonics, children’s being activated by collaborative works. In terms of teacher guidance they do a lot of modeling, which corresponds to Montessori pedagogy, however the teachers should not say expressions of forbidding something or expressions of praising a lot, which either kills the interest or makes them become used to extrinsic motivation. The case of finishing the started work is activity-specific and also depends on the child’s patient and perseverant character. There are materials for language education and a few materials for sensory development, however Montessori materials are different and key to her Pedagogy, besides, she provides only one sample from each material. When it comes to teaching phonics, in Pre-school the focus is on the written form of the phonics and not on the sound of the phonics through visuals. Finally, the activation and motivation of children through group work depends on the group and on the children’s mood and individually.

To answer the research question we also tried to measure such things per session as the amount of total words, the amount of teacher words, the amount of student words (English and Armenian), the length of English language exposure (direct and indirect), most frequent K1 (1-1000) words used by the teacher (also Content : Function ratios). Through the recordings and transcripts it was possible to quantitatively analyse them and find the results (see Table 1).

Table 1. Target language production, direct and indirect exposure, vocabulary use by teachers

Group #	# of Ss	Dur. (mins.)	Total words	Teacher words (%)	Student words (%)		Total FL exposure (mins.)		Most frequent 1000 words used by the T in %	Content : Function
					Eng. words (%)	Arm. words (%)	Direct exp. in mins. / # of children	Indirect exp. in mins. / # of children		
Saturday Age:2-2.7	3	70	3167	2807 (89%)	360 (11%)		30.5		84.96%	
					56 (16%)	304 (84%)	15 / 3	13/1; 2.4/2		
Friday Age: 3-5	4	70	3144	2669 (85%)	475 (15%)		29.3		78.45%	
					113 (24%)	362 (76%)	16.4/4	5.6/2; 6.8/3		
Thursday Age: 3-5	4	70	3837	3186 (83%)	651 (17%)		34.3		81.76%	
					192 (30%)	455 (70%)	11.3/4	4.5/3; 5/2; 11.7/1		
Sunday Age: 3-5	3	70	4698	3866 (82%)	832 (18%)		40.2		77.31%	
					291 (35%)	541 (65%)	26.4/3	2/2; 11.8/1		

5. Conclusion

The results of the qualitative analysis showed that Montessori and AUA Pre-school English Program pedagogies interact by mostly converging with each other, especially in terms of the environment and general development of children rather than in terms of sensory or language development. The results of the quantitative analysis showed that the children receive lots of language input and learn through lots of repetitions by the teachers. Eventually, the research showed that Montessori education develops children as individual and independent people with the sense of responsibility. It is an environment where the children can do the same work as long as they want and to satisfy their curiosity. And finally, it is an environment where they can naturally develop such skills as motor, sensory, linguistic, math and cultural.

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