

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Teaching foreign languages to young learners requires an approach that recognizes and accommodates their level of beginning language skills as well as their developmental needs as young children. Strategies that are effective for older learners are often not applicable or feasible for younger learners. This chapter examines the theoretical framework in which this project is based, followed by a section reviewing the evidence from relevant research for the effectiveness of specific strategies demonstrated to be effective with young learners learning a foreign language. The review is followed by a summary and a conclusion.

Theory/Rationale

The theoretical framework for this project is based on the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky and the second language acquisition theories of Krashen. Vygotsky contends that people learn and develop through social interactions. In this view, language is not merely a skill to be learned cognitively, but language is also a tool that constructs thinking and helps the child to develop. As Gibbons (2006) points out, this theory puts particular emphasis on the role of the teacher in a school setting as involved in a process of co-construction of students' thinking through language and carefully regulated social interaction. According to Vygotsky's theory, learning takes place in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which he defines as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-

solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more able peers” (Vygotsky 1978, p.86). This idea carries the implication that teachers in second language contexts will carefully and intentionally arrange the environments to provide learning support, or scaffolding, in classroom interactions, facilitating comprehension in contexts just beyond a child’s current achievement level in order to bring about learning within the ZPD (Gibbons, 2006). Teachers will also provide opportunities for students to gradually internalize this learning by interacting meaningfully in pairs and groups, with the goal of achieving independence and self-regulation (Takahashi, 1998).

Although Vygotsky developed socio-cultural theory to explain how learning occurs, his theory remains general and must be complemented with one that addresses the specific field of second language learning. The Language Acquisition theory of Stephen Krashen (1982) includes five main hypotheses of second language learning: the Acquisition-Learning Distinction, the Natural Order Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis, the Input Hypothesis, and the Affective Filter Hypothesis, but the two which are most relevant to the framework of this project are the concept of Comprehensible Input and the concept of the Affective Filter. Krashen proposes that language acquisition occurs naturally when sufficient comprehensible input of language is provided to activate the innate capacity of all humans to learn languages. He analyzed caretaker speech, which is the speech that humans use with very young children learning their first language, and found that it was modified to a child’s level,

that it focused on objects and events in the immediate environment and was centered on communication as its primary goal; he proposes that these same characteristics of speech modifications promote second language acquisition. He emphasizes the comprehensibility of the language input as essential for the acquisition to take place, which means that teachers of beginning second language learners must not simply talk to the learners in the target language, but must design interactions with comprehensibility in mind. Krashen's Input Hypothesis connects with the Vygotskian concept of the ZPD in the sense that Krashen contends that once the learner has acquired a concept, extension with new learning must follow, and his term for this is $i + 1$.

The second hypothesis of Krashen's (1982) theory relevant to this project involves the potential negative impact of anxiety, disinterest or other negative emotional states to impede acquisition of the input. This is what Krashen terms the Affective Filter. He notes that a low-anxiety environment, self-confidence and motivation strongly contribute to lowering the affective filter, which facilitates acquisition, so it can be concluded that students learn best when they are feeling successful, interested, and unthreatened.

While the theoretical framework of Vygotsky's sociocultural emphasis on learning as occurring through social guidance and interaction within the ZPD and Krashen's Comprehensible Input and Affective Filter concepts combine to form the foundation for the strategies outlined in this project, there have been more recent findings in the field of second language acquisition which add important additions to

this framework. A follow up to a longitudinal study of young learners by Lightbown, Halter, White & Horst (2002) reveals that while comprehension based instruction is effective for helping beginning level students gain proficiency, it can result in students failing to notice features of the target language which would increase their accuracy in areas other than listening, suggesting that some instruction which focuses on language form should be included. Cameron (2001) and Lightbown & Spada (2006) support the conclusion that students will benefit by being taught to notice forms and salient cues in the target language. Although very young language learners have not sufficiently developed their cognitive maturity and linguistic awareness to engage in formal grammar study (Lightbown & Spada, 2006), the concept of comprehensible input combined with guidance to learn to notice language features when appropriate describes how young learners can successfully begin to gain proficiency in the target language in instructed language settings.

In conclusion, the instructional practices outlined in this project will provide teachers with practical ideas to create a learning community where language learning will be co-constructed through social interaction with appropriate scaffolding to ensure comprehensibility within a positive emotional climate so that acquisition can take place. The strategies will provide for learning within the ZPD to ensure that learners are challenged and motivated to become increasingly self-regulating in language learning.

Research/Evaluation

The following review of important literature related to this project will be organized into sections beginning with a section examining foundational effective practices for cultivating a language learning community in the elementary foreign language classroom. This is followed by sections examining the effectiveness of strategies in the specific areas of interaction, listening, gestures, songs, stories and games.

Cultivating a Community of Learners. Teachers of young language learners must understand effective practices to create an environment in which learning can take place. The following two studies provide evidence for strategies to facilitate this goal. In a qualitative study involving Chinese Kindergarteners within an EFL classroom context, Wu (2003) measured the effect of instructional practice on motivation, which is an essential element in the cultivation of a successful learning community. The instructional practices in the study included a predictable learning environment, giving support when needed, providing moderate challenge in activities, and providing evaluative feedback which emphasized self-improvement. These practices clearly relate to the Krashen's concepts of affective filter, comprehensible input and the goal of self-regulation in language learning and also Vygotsky's concepts of scaffolding and ZPD. Cameron (2001) adds that the repeated language activities set up in classroom routines set a predictable environment with space for growth in the ZPD. In Wu's study, student interviews revealed that these practices were found to raise students' sense of competence, which increased their motivation

in the language learning environment. Additionally, the study noted that when elements of freedom in student choice and strategy instruction were included in instruction, the student's reported increases in their perceived autonomy, contributing to their growth in independence as learners. This study gives empirical evidence for the effectiveness of several foundational concepts for creating a motivational and engaging language learning environment which will be incorporated and developed in this project.

Along with maintaining a lowered affective filter, Krashen emphasizes that teachers also need to maximize the amount of target language input the students receive in order for acquisition to occur. This implies that the teacher must also understand how to make the target language input comprehensible to their students. Crichton (2009) undertook a qualitative study examining how five Scottish foreign language teachers used high amounts of the target language effectively in their classrooms, making it comprehensible and eliciting meaningful interaction, and then examining how students responded to it. Through analysis of audio recordings and the subsequent student interviews, Crichton observed that teachers established a warm atmosphere in which students felt cared about and in which they felt safe to take risks and make mistakes in interaction attempts, indicating a lowered affective filter. Teachers in the study also established routines which included a time of authentic interaction among students using learned formulaic phrases of greetings and opinion sharing which students were given regular opportunities to practice and internalize these structures. Teachers utilized comprehension checks with a focus on

meaning, intentionally communicating an expectation of participation and engagement through these practices. The study by Crichton showed the students responding positively to the target language use when the teacher intentionally supported learners in these ways, indicating that these strategies are effective for creating a community of learning and language acquisition with high amounts of comprehensible input in a low anxiety, high-interest environment. The goal of the language teacher is to create this kind of learning community, and strategies for language teaching need to contribute to this goal.

Interaction. A key characteristic of learning environments in the Social-construct framework is social interaction, and this element has been evident in the previous two studies. This section examines characteristics of classroom interaction which contribute to language growth. Although context of the following two studies differ from the primary foreign language classroom, the analysis of effective teacher prompts to promote learner centered negotiation and processing can be applied to the young learner context with appropriate expectation modifications, as the final studies in this section show.

Terrell (1982) observes that the affective filter is lowered by involving students personally in class activities, producing an environment of genuine interest in the interactions that take place there. To explore this concept, Anton (1999) analyzed the interaction devices employed in two beginning foreign language university classes between both teacher and students and between students themselves, qualitatively comparing the effectiveness of a teacher centered approach

and a student centered approach. In the teacher centered class, the interactions were initiated by the teacher with a focus on correct grammar and there was no pair or group work. This resulted in far fewer episodes of interaction and scaffolding within the ZPD. In the student centered class, the teacher also focused on the grammar objectives, but the classroom interactions were more collaborative, with teacher prompts that promoted continued interaction, such as “How might you answer that?” or, “Is that right?” This strategy was shown to promote increased student involvement in the lesson and scaffolding within the ZPD. In a similar study of interactions in two beginning university foreign language classes, Toth (2011) compared descriptive qualitative and quantitative data measuring student involvement in a class in which the teacher asked questions to individual students and providing corrective feedback with student involvement a class in which the teacher tried to elicit multiple responses to question prompts and promoted collaborative problem solving for corrections. The results indicated that the teacher who opened the interaction to collaboration achieved more interaction and more engagement in the process of learning. Toth also noted the importance of clear learning objectives as a contributing factor to student confidence in interaction. These two studies give a clear picture of the importance of a student-centered approach to constructing learning and the power of collaborative scaffolding.

In an effort to examine this concept of collaborative scaffolding in the context of primary foreign language classrooms, Ellis & Heimback (1997) collected pre- and post- test quantitative data to determine the extent of children’s participation in

meaning negotiation, its effect on both comprehension and production of vocabulary words, and to discern the relationship between these factors. Ten kindergarten age children in an EFL program in Japan participated in the study in which they were given two listening tasks. The first was given individually with opportunity to request support from the teacher, and the second was given in a group of five students with opportunity to request support from teacher or other students. The results showed that young students choose to participate in negotiation somewhat infrequently, but are more likely to do so in a group setting rather than individually with a teacher. It was also shown that students benefited from the negotiations of the other students, even when they did not directly participate in the interaction. Comprehension was increased in the group task, but production was not achieved in either group. This underlines the importance of including group work even at young levels, but also demonstrates that very young students are still learning to learn and have limited metacognitive awareness, and also that students need to be exposed to a sufficient quantity of input before they can demonstrate acquisition by producing language. Therefore the interaction must be carefully scaffolded to a young child's ZPD.

A final study in this section gives a perspective of student growth over time when meaningful interaction in a collaborative community is established in the classroom. In a qualitative observation study of a Japanese foreign language elementary program in Pennsylvania, Takahashi (1998) explored how K-4th grade students' interaction changes over time and how it contributes to their language

development. Two classes were observed at one year intervals for three years. The analysis of observation transcripts showed that students clearly benefited from scaffolding provided by both teachers and peers in the ZPD, enabling them to achieve more language interaction than they could individually. It also indicated that the students' ability to provide support and scaffolding to one another also increased over time, and that they eventually were able to scaffold each other without the teacher's involvement. Interestingly, the students used phrases they had heard the teacher use in their scaffolding of each other. This gives compelling evidence of the co-construction of learning in a language classroom and underlines the importance of the teacher's vigilant efforts to facilitate collaboration in the learning community.

Listening. Recognizing the importance of engaging students with comprehensible input in the learning community of the classroom, it is important to also examine the strategies which help students actively listen to that input. In a meta-analysis of second language listening comprehension research, Vandergrift (2007) notes that beginning level language learners are limited in their ability to process the input they hear, and they need to consciously focus on listening in order to benefit from the exposure. Given that young language learners are only beginning to develop listening skills in their first language, it follows that they would also require scaffolding in listening in the foreign language classroom, where listening can be an overwhelming experience. A mixed method study by Goh & Taib (2006) involving ten older primary school students learning English in Singapore sought to identify students' metacognitive knowledge of listening and to determine the

perceived usefulness of the strategies for listening they were taught as well as its impact on listening test scores. The results showed that all students perceived an improvement in their listening skills after the strategy lessons and also improved their actual scores. They reported a wider range of listening strategies than before the instruction. In a similar qualitative study of 4th-6th grade beginning level French students in Canada, Vandergrift (2002) used reflection questionnaires to gather evidence of student understanding of the process of listening and effective strategies for comprehension. He concludes that self-reflection raised awareness of what is required to listen successfully and helped them to identify goals for future listening. Although the two studies involved slightly older learners than those in early primary settings, the value of helping students become aware of their listening and to learn to focus on what they are hearing can be adapted to even the very young language learners. The teaching of listening strategies can increase the impact of comprehensible input and classroom interactions, and can also serve to build self-regulation in students' language learning, and raise the affective filter by giving students a sense of control over their learning success.

Gestures. As McCafferty (2002) notes, Vygotsky recognized the value of gesture in facilitating learning, as illustrated in even very young children learning the power of gesture to communicate needs to their caregivers. Gesture is an important element scaffolding comprehension in the beginning stages of language learning as well. This section first examines two studies in an adult context which speak to the

effectiveness of gesture in facilitating both social interactions as well as in language learning.

McCafferty investigated the role of gesture in social interactions to facilitate communication and creating ZPD's for language learning and teaching. He videotaped and analyzed two university student English language learners' use of gesture in interaction over 15 sessions. He found that language learners rely on gestures to help convey meaning, but also that the use of gestures in the interactions served to transform the interaction by giving the speakers problem solving tools to facilitate their communication. Although not directly informing instructional practice in primary language classrooms, this study provides valuable general evidence of gestures' facilitation of ZPDs in language learning within the socio-cultural framework.

Taking the examination of gestures into the classroom setting, a qualitative microanalysis by Lazaraton (2004) explored the role of teacher gestures in vocabulary explanations in the context of a university ESL classroom. The teacher was videotaped for 3 classes and the video was analyzed to determine the impact of gesture as part of the input. The teacher used gesture to facilitate comprehension in teaching and interaction and led the researcher to pose the question of why the use of gesture is not more widely studied as an obvious component of teacher input. The results relate to the current project by confirming the role of gesture as facilitator of meaning in language learning contexts, demonstrating their effectiveness in scaffolding comprehensibility in the input.

The previous studies examined the role of gestures in interaction, but gestures have also been shown to facilitate memorization of vocabulary. Two related studies shed light on the usefulness of iconic or representational gestures in foreign language vocabulary learning. The first examined the impact of enacted gestures on the vocabulary word learning in 20 Kindergarten aged French English language learners. Building upon earlier research on gestures in word memorization tasks, Tellier (2008) investigated the impact of performing gestures versus using pictures in the foreign language word memorization of 20 five year olds in France who had no knowledge of English. Children were divided into two groups and given equal exposure to the words, with one given vocabulary instruction using pictures and the other using enacted gestures. Assessments were given and qualitative data gathered to determine whether students were able to identify the word, produce the word, and retain it after a week. The results showed that while groups performed equally in the passive vocabulary learning (identifying the word), the gesture group was significantly more successful in producing the word and also in remembering it after a week, demonstrating the effectiveness of engaging both visual and motor modalities as a strategy for language learning.

The second study, undertaken by Macedonia, Müller and Friederici (2011), lends further evidence to this claim, but attempts to determine whether movement apart from meaning association could produce the same effect as movement which signifies meaning. In a qualitative study, 35 adult subjects were taught 92 nouns in an artificial language using either representational gestures or meaningless gestures.

Results of tests demonstrated a positive impact of representational gestures over meaningless gestures on memory. These findings were also confirmed by brain imaging data analysis in this study. The importance of these findings for foreign language classrooms is the strong evidence that vocabulary learning can be facilitated by the use of iconic gestures in instruction.

These studies indicate that the incorporation of gestures can not only facilitate interaction and scaffold comprehension in instruction, but can also be used as a “tool” to increase vocabulary retention, as well as increasing engagement and motivation if the gestures are perceived as fun to the students. However, while the importance of making input comprehensible has been established, Igarashi, Wudthayagorn, Donato & Tucker (2002) caution that the language teacher needs to guard against the overuse of gestures and other visual representations to convey meaning over too long a period, because ultimately this will impede language acquisition and growth in the ZPD if learners are focusing more on the non-linguistic cue than on the language itself. The effective use of scaffolding in second language learning leads to the gradual lessening of learning support as students gain proficiency, with the goal of helping them become increasingly independent and self-regulating in their learning, and language teachers must keep this progression in mind as they work to make the input comprehensible and facilitate growth in the ZPD, continually asking themselves what the child can learn next.

Stories. A powerful medium of natural and engaging input is the story. This section examines relevant studies of the use of stories in foreign language learning.

In Vygotsky's framework, children are viewed as active meaning constructors, but Cameron (2001) notes that they can also mask true comprehension in their natural desire to please the teacher, so the teacher needs to be aware and consciously check for understanding.

In an experimental study of primary language learners in Spain, Cabrera (2001) sought to examine the effect of three common interactional modifications used by teachers on student comprehension in two linguistically simplified story presentations. Sixty students were randomly divided into two groups, with the control group listening to the stories with only oral input and the experimental group listening to the stories presented with the inclusion of planned repetitions, gestures, and comprehension checks. Analysis of quantitative test data revealed that students in performed significantly better on comprehension tests when they could benefit from these interactional modification to make the input from the story comprehensible. While this study shows the effectiveness of these scaffolding tools, Cameron (2001) adds an important caution: that young learners may be able to "follow" the meaning of a target language story through mental processing in their first language without benefiting from the target language input, because their attention is not focused on the language, but on the meaning. She suggests always extending a story activity with further language activities and repetitions that can focus on the language in the input.

Examining the use of story in language teaching further, a multiple case study by Li & Seedhouse (2010) explores the impact of a story-based approach which

incorporates Cameron's three stage task framework of Preparation, Core Activity and Follow Up (2001, p.32) on classroom interactions. The study analyzed transcripts from two classes of 10 year old language students in Taiwan, comparing interactions during a standard language lesson and a story based lesson. The results showed that during a standard lesson, there is more teacher-controlled interaction, but in the story based lesson there was a higher level of student participation, a higher incidence of student initiated interaction, and students received more exposure to unplanned discourse driven by the motivating purpose of the story format. This study supports the use of story in the context of sequenced language learning activities within a social-construct framework. Additionally, this study gives evidence to support the idea that strict teacher-led turn taking in language class interactions can impede the development of natural interactional skills, suggesting that the language classroom needs to include times of more spontaneous interaction in the target language.

In addition to providing opportunities for motivating student interactions, the use of stories can provide a positive and engaging environment with a low affective filter for increased language acquisition. The study of a story based project designed by Georgopoulou and Griva (2011) involving a class of Greek first graders learning English was designed to determine the effectiveness of the use of story on students' oral language development. The project used original stories developed using criteria from relevant research with student language level and interest in mind. The stories incorporated elements of a child's daily life and interests as well as humor to increase motivation and interest. The stories were kept short and were put in comic book form

with speech bubble dialogs to enable dramatization activities, and also contained common greetings and classroom language throughout the story along with repetitions of important vocabulary. Having prepared this story and accompanying lesson plans, the project was implemented over the course of a school year, beginning with a vocabulary learning stage before the story presentation lessons began. The students were given many varied opportunities to interact with the story including groups of students dramatizing the story for other classmates. Pre and post test data showed that the story project implementation had a positive effect on students' receptive and productive oral skills. Analysis of student interviews indicated a high level of positive attitudes and motivation from this kind of playful, interactive learning environment. This study further confirms the effectiveness of using story in the language classroom, and additionally serves as a valuable resource for the teacher who desires to create effective story lessons for young language learners by teachers.

The previous studies focused on the use of stories as language input and its impact on measures of comprehension, interaction and oral language development. This is developmentally appropriate, according to Cameron (2001), who observes that young language learners who are still developing literacy skills in their first language will find it easier to learn the target language through listening and speaking. However, a case study by Dlugosz (2000) questions this methodology of focusing exclusively on listening and speaking, by examining the potential value of exposing children to printed text along with stories, even before literacy skills are developed in their first language. The multimodal study involved pre-reading Polish Kindergarten

English language learners who were divided into control and experimental groups. The control group was given traditional instruction of listening and speaking using games, songs and drawing activities around the theme of a story. The experimental group received the same instruction, but during the activities was given exposure to the written text of the story and activities that involved various repetitions of reading the story together. The students were tested for long term retention after 10 months and it was shown that the group with the written text exposure showed higher increases in both understanding (receptive language) and speaking (productive language), and additionally demonstrated the ability to read words from the studied text. He suggests that the increases may be due to engaging two channels of perception when text is used, thus increasing the power of the input and facilitating long term memory storage. He also proposes that the presence of text helps students isolate individual words in oral language input, thus facilitating comprehension and production skills. Repetition was also noted to be an effective component of the lesson format. The study provides evidence that foreign language instruction can benefit from the inclusion of written text and reading activities because they contribute to the goal of making the input comprehensible and scaffolding language acquisition in the ZPD.

A final study in the area of using story in effective language teaching examines the effect of using nursery rhymes, a unique form of brief story, on students' phonemic awareness and reading development in the foreign language. Building on research in first language literacy development on the effectiveness of

nursery rhymes in increasing phonemic awareness and reading readiness, Baleghizadeh and Dargahi (2010) implemented an experimental study of 20 young Iranian English language learners, aged 7 to 9, dividing them into control and experimental groups to examine the impact of using nursery rhymes on the learning of letter sounds and reading ability in the foreign language. The control group was taught the letter sounds using traditional explicit instruction of letter sounds with reading practice using pictures. The experimental group used nursery rhymes as a context for the words and target sounds of the lesson. Post test scores revealed that students in the nursery rhyme group scored higher than the control group on reading ability and appropriate sound pattern production. The students were also observed to display high motivation and positive participation in the nursery rhyme group. The results suggest that nursery rhymes, in addition to conventional stories, can be an effective strategy for language learning and literacy development as well as a motivating source of comprehensible input.

Songs. Another way to provide a source of engaging input for young language learners is the use of songs in the target language. Paquette and Reig (2008) observe that children's earliest exposure to patterned text in their first language occurs in songs, rhymes and chants, and that exposure to this kind of language in the target language can also prepare learners for more complex second language exposure. They also note that social bonds are formed through music, implying its usefulness in creating an interactive language learning community. But it is important to review the research to examine how and if the use of songs facilitates

language learning beyond the enjoyment factor, to establish its effectiveness for instruction.

In an effort to provide empirical evidence for the facilitation effect of music in foreign language phrase learning, Ludke, Ferreira and Overy (2013) conducted an experimental study in England with 60 recruited adult subjects who listened to 15 minutes of Hungarian phrases paired with English translations in audio tape format under three variable conditions. One group heard the phrases spoken normally, one group heard the phrases spoken rhythmically, and the third group heard the phrases sung. All groups were given prompts to repeat the Hungarian phrases. Five tests measured receptive and productive phrase recall, and the results showed that the singing group performed better in four of the five tests and equal with the speaking group on the other test. These results indicate that songs can be an effective medium for facilitating recall and production of the language, but this study measured this impact in a laboratory setting, and these conclusions need to be further explored by studies conducted in the setting of classroom language learning.

The next study brings the examination of impact of songs in language learning into the classroom context. Jarvis (2013) studied 12 young beginning French learners in a qualitative study to determine the impact of the use of songs and rhymes in vocabulary learning as compared to the use of flash cards. Post test results indicated improved vocabulary learning when songs and rhymes were used as compared to flash cards. Questionnaire data indicated a higher degree of enjoyment and motivation when songs were used, indicating that songs are an effective source of input for

acquisition and contribute to a low affective filter and a motivational environment for learning.

Adding to the evidence that songs facilitate vocabulary acquisition in classroom settings, Legg (2009) sought to determine whether vocabulary phrases are learned more quickly using songs as opposed to conventional word games or reading review. His experimental study in England involved 62 French language learners, aged 12-13 divided into two groups. The control group studied phrases from a French poem text, receiving traditional teaching practices of re-reads and word games while the experimental group learned and practices the phrases in a song version of the poem over the same number of lessons. Analyzing the pre and post test data, he concluded that the music group learned the phrases more quickly and securely indicating a facilitative effect of using music to learn vocabulary phrases.

Although making language gains more quickly is a worthy goal, the final study of this section provides a perspective on the reality of the factor of time in the process of language learning and acquisition, especially in young children. In a qualitative study of a group of 25 Spanish students, aged 5-6, who were learning English, Coyle and Gracia (2014) examined the effects of using song based activities on vocabulary learning in 50 minute lessons over three days. The students heard the song seven times over the course of the three days and participated in additional review activities which focused on the five target vocabulary words in the song. The results of pre and post vocabulary tests showed that students made gains in receptive vocabulary acquisition, but less pronounced gains in productive vocabulary

acquisition. It was suggested in the discussion that this may be due to what Krashen refers to as the “silent period” in language acquisition, in which learners need time to absorb the input before being ready to produce language. It also demonstrated that in the span of three days and three lessons, a teacher cannot realistically expect that young students will be producing much language. An interesting finding from this study is that the results of a second posttest five weeks later showed significant additional improvement in receptive language vocabulary acquisition even though the song and vocabulary were not reviewed again in that time. The authors suggest that this is related to research indicating that children need time for input to “sink in” and become integrated into their existing knowledge. Along with adding to the evidence from the first two studies of the effectiveness of using music to facilitate language learning by providing comprehensible input along with creating a positive emotional environment for the social construction of language learning within Vygotsky’s theoretical framework, this study suggests that expecting too much acquisition too soon ignores the realities of the time required for the process of language acquisition in children.

Games. This final section of the review of literature relevant to the project goal of identifying research based strategies for providing comprehensible input in an interactive learning context examines the role of games and playing in the learning process of children. Drawing on her teaching experiences in pre-primary classrooms in Portugal and data collected from ongoing research projects, Mourão (2014) examines the power of play in early language learning contexts. She begins by

making a strong case for play as learning in Vygotsky's framework of social construct of learning as a source of development in the ZPD, as children practice and explore interactions in meaningful contexts. She discusses preliminary observations of a research project involving eight Portuguese pre-primary language teachers who set up carefully planned English learning centers in their classrooms to promote opportunities for language development in the context of child "free play." These centers were designed to promote language use during a portion of the language lesson time, using materials such as puppets for role plays, flashcards for interactive games, and story areas for literacy development. In surveys, teachers reported that as students played in these centers, they re-enacted English lessons using phrases the teachers used in lessons, sang songs learned in lessons, played familiar classroom games together, provided scaffolding for each other with corrections and reminders of words, and actively used language they had acquired from classroom activities, showing a high level of engagement and motivation as they attempted to play together in the target language. She emphasizes the careful planning, preparation and conscious teaching of interactive phrases required to ensure comprehensibility and maximum language growth in the child's ZPD in these learning centers. This suggests that part of the co-construction of learning within the zone of proximal development in early language classrooms involves the planned inclusion of opportunities for child-initiated interaction in play-based games and activities.

Offering further empirical evidence to the effectiveness of play with slightly older learners, a mixed methods study by Griva and Semoglou (2012) involving 44

second grade language learners in Greece sought to examine the effect of multisensory game based language activities on oral skill development. The control group received traditional classroom instruction methods involving presentation, practice and production of target words and phrases several times a week over 16 weeks. But the experimental group was instructed during that period using interactive and role play games along with physical activities to create a playful context for learning. Pre- and post- test measurements of comprehension and production showed greater gains for the game based instruction group in every measure. Evidence from collected journal data showed high interest and enthusiasm in the game group, as well as increased student interaction and participation, even by more shy and less confident students. These findings give evidence that the inclusion of games is effective in supporting children's interactive language growth and supports the inclusion of this strategy in effective practice for language teachers.

Additionally, the importance of providing children with necessary opportunities to practice vocabulary in a variety of contexts was the expressed motivation for a quasi- experimental study by Tuan (2012) to examine the effect of games on vocabulary recollection. Seven year old English language learners in Vietnam were divided into an experimental group of 32 students who received vocabulary instruction that included review using games and a control group of 31 students who received instruction that included review in the form of traditional exercises. Results of pre- and post-tests and a delayed post-test showed that the experimental group scored higher in vocabulary recall in both immediate and delayed

post-test assessments, indicating that games are an effective strategy for vocabulary review and internalization in language teaching practices.

Using games and play in the early language classroom is a developmentally appropriate and engaging way to provide comprehensible input with a lowered affective filter while providing genuine opportunities to construct meaning in social interaction within the ZPD. This section provides research evidence for the inclusion of play and games as an important strategy in this project.

Summary

Approaching the challenge of teaching young language learners from a social-construct framework with a focus on increasing comprehensible input requires that teachers provide a low anxiety, highly motivating environment as a context to engage students in meaningful interactions to achieve growth in their ZPD leading them to increasing independence and self-regulation in language learning and interaction. The review of the relevant research provided evidence of effective strategies to reach this goal.

Studies by Wu (2003) and Crichton (2009) demonstrate that several key strategies contribute to successful use of high levels of target language use in instruction along with high motivation and perceived competence in young learners, providing comprehensible input and a low affective filter to maximize learning. The key factors include a predictable learning environment with established routines involving the regular use of learned phrases, and moderately challenging tasks with

comprehension checks in a supportive interactional setting. The research focusing on interaction demonstrated that even young children benefit from a carefully created learning environment in which interaction and negotiation of meaning are collaborative and socially constructed (Antón, 1999; Takahashi, 1998; Toth, 2011).

Listening is a key component in language acquisition and research demonstrates that the explicit teaching of listening strategies to children increases student's sense of autonomy and competence to become successful language learners (Goh & Taib, 2006; Vandergrift, 2007).

One important way to make language input comprehensible is the use of gestures, which research shows to be an effective strategy to convey meaning and facilitate comprehension in the social construction of meaning (Lazaraton, 2004; McCafferty, 2001) as well as to improve vocabulary learning and recall (Macedonia, Müller & Friederici, 2011; Tellier, 2008).

Another effective way to provide comprehensible target language input is through the medium of stories. Research indicates that the careful use of interactional modification such as repetitions, gestures and comprehension checks scaffolds comprehension in the use of stories (Cabrera, 2001). The use of stories was also shown to increase motivation and participation by students in meaningful classroom interactions (Georgopoulou & Griva, 2011; Li & Seedhouse, 2010). Additionally, the inclusion of written text in story based activities is shown to not only increase comprehension and language production, but also to increase reading skills in the target language (Dlugosz, 2000).

The use of the medium of songs in the language classroom promotes social bonds (Paquett & Reig, 2008) as it aids vocabulary learning and provides a positive atmosphere for learning (Coyle & Gracia, 2014). Additionally, research shows that using songs as a means for language learning improves performance in vocabulary testing more than instruction using only speaking or reading and the use of flash cards (Jarvis, 2013; Legg, 2009).

Finally, the use of games has been shown to increase gains in vocabulary learning (Tuan, 2012) and oral skill development (Griva & Semoglou, 2012) over more traditional teaching and practice activities. Additionally, games provide important opportunities for engagement in student-initiated interactions in a meaningful and motivating context (Murão, 2014).

Conclusion

Effective strategies for teaching young foreign language learners must contribute to the goal of providing high levels of comprehensible input, scaffolding comprehension, providing a positive, low stress atmosphere, with teacher and students co-constructing learning through meaningful social interactions. The research reviewed has provided evidence of the effectiveness several important strategy areas which are shown to contribute to this goal.

In creating a community of learning for very young learners with little knowledge of the target language, it is important to provide an environment of predictability and routine. Through the repetitions of language in these contexts,

students become comfortable with the predictable language of the routine, but have ample opportunities to construct learning in the ZPD through daily variations in lessons and activities. Comprehensibility is achieved through the strategic use of gestures, visuals and physical objects. It is important to teach functional phrases which will give students a target language “voice” in classroom interactions and use these regularly in meaningful exchanges to establish a learning environment with high target language use which is comprehensible.

Teachers can also help students become active and self-regulating learners in the classroom environment by conveying clear learning objectives in language activities, by providing students with specific listening strategies and by helping them notice important linguistic features of the target language when appropriate. Frequent and carefully planned student to student interaction opportunities will help students realize that they are active participants in their learning.

Throughout the literature the importance of establishing a playful and motivating environment was shown to increase achievement and meet the developmental needs of these young language learners. But it was also evident that there is more to the effective use of songs, stories and games than simply to “fill class time” and entertain children. These elements must be carefully placed in the context of well-designed activity sequences in order to achieve clear learning goals and truly contribute to language acquisition goals. When games, stories and songs are incorporated with scaffolding of comprehension, guided interaction and plenty of opportunities for repetition in meaningful contexts, they are effective for learning.