

Engaging Strategies for Early Childhood Foreign Language Acquisition: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

The most appropriate period for learning a new language is considered the early childhood period, when children can learn languages easily and instinctively without, for instance, having to go through tedious textbooks. The objective of this review is to identify the best practices aimed at fostering foreign language acquisition by drawing upon previous empirical studies. The results indicate that the children's language skill development is greatly enhanced when the learning process is made fun through playful activities, and the singing and telling of stories. Structured approaches such as Total Physical Response (TPR), bilingual education, and even the active participation of the parents in the home language environment have been noted to foster language learning as well. Supporting early childhood learners and teachers with creativity and flexible instruction tailored to the rapidly growing characteristics of the children results in effective language acquisition, hence emerges as a key pillar on guiding principles towards successful language mastery. This review indicates that purposely designed instruction towards learners in their early years enhances teaching effectiveness yielding improved results while the use of active, direct, and fun-filled strategies yields better results in mastering languages.

Keywords

Bilingualism, Early Childhood Education, Engaging Methods, Foreign Language Acquisition, Language Learning Strategies

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of learning foreign languages in early childhood has become a critical issue in global education conversations because of the potential long-term benefits of multilingualism (Lightbown & Spada, 2020). Early childhood is widely known as “golden age” or the age when the brain develops at an amazing speed and really receptive to different stimuli, language is one of them (Lenneberg, 1967). Children of this age have a high level of cognitive plasticity which makes it possible for them to learn foreign languages much more easily and intuitively as compared to adults (Gass & Selinker, 2008). With these development features, it is evident that teachers should formulate developmental respectful language teaching methods for young children.

For this purpose, Surahmat (2023) creatively suggest meaningful and adaptive techniques as a response to these educational changes. These elements serve as crucial foundations for creating appropriate strategies related to the development of children as they make them enjoy learning foreign languages. Unlike strategies for adolescents and adults, teaching a language at an early age necessitates an intuitive pedagogy aimed at young children.

An effective strategy in skill development should include social-emotional, cognitive, and motor domains of child development (Brewster, Ellis, & Girard, 2002). Therefore, methods centered around the child's play, learning media, and fostering a positive atmosphere are also equally important (Cameron, 2001). When these factors are incorporated, the process of language learning becomes easier for the children and more enjoyable, helping them relate to the lessons better.

Among these strategies, the integration of appealing instructional media has the most impact. These tools not only facilitate the acquisition of new vocabulary but also help in the development of communication skills through active, purposeful learning (Sunardi, 2025). If these resources are selected properly, considering the wishes of the children, they will enhance foreign language teaching and contribute positively to the overall growth of young children.

Earlier studies noted Total Physical Response (TPR) as well as the use of songs and storytelling, in addition to project-based learning, as approaches which enhance students' interest and proficiency in foreign languages (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). Nonetheless, strategies effectiveness often differs based on cultural context, teachers' prior training, and the extent of environmental aids. This accentuates the need to conduct reviews using existing literature to take a look at the myriad approaches that have been employed to foster foreign language acquisition among young learners in early childhood settings.

It is possible that the systematic review will help in achieving the intended understanding of effective practices in teaching foreign languages to children of preschool age. With regard to the target audience dealing with early foreign language learning, the outcomes are expected to be of significance for teachers, researchers, and parents in respect to meaningful and developmentally appropriate ways to help children acquire foreign languages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Effective Strategies in Early Childhood Care and Education

In regard to early childhood education, effective strategies relate to not only engaging early learners, but also fostering teaching techniques that align with the child's natural development, as well as offer hands-on learning experiences. Developmentally appropriate strategies go beyond the mere presentation of information; they are holistic in nature and match children's natural proclivity towards play, social interaction, and hands-on exploration.

Active, play-based learning approaches "support the child's holistic development," Hurlock (2005) states. And are best achieved when integrating social, emotional, and cognitive elements with active participation from the learner. Encouraging the use of songs, language games, and movement-based storytelling significantly raises young learner's motivation and interest in foreign languages (Cameron, 2001).

Moreover, active participation of parents in the educational process is another effective strategy that broadens the scope of education known as constructivism. The combination of what children encounter at school and at home enables optimal learning outcomes. As Anam and Afroni (2021) cite, parents' inclusion, particularly in language acquisition through everyday use and practice at home, enriches learning outcomes and cultivates an active language environment to achieve consistent educational results.

2. Foreign Language Proficiency in Early Childhood

Proficiency in a foreign language during early childhood pertains to a child's capacity to understand and utilize a foreign language, such as English, at a basic level by listening, speaking, observing, and mimicking. This stage of development is popularly known as the golden age, a stage when there is rapid brain development and increased sensitivity to linguistic sounds and patterns.

According to Krashen (1982), second or foreign languages can be acquired naturally in young children given the presence of interaction and abundant language in the environment. Bilingual teaching, singing, telling stories, and acting out situations in the target language are a few techniques that can promote vocabulary acquisition and internalization of grammar without direct teaching.

Most importantly, studies show that exposing children to a foreign language at an early age does not impede the development of children's first language abilities, but rather enhances cognitive flexibility and even creativity (Zobi, 2019; Rizka, 2024). Despite that, the consideration of young learners' developmental limits is crucial in making sure that learning is effortless and tailored to children's needs.

RESEARCH METHOD

Systematic Literature Review (SLR) refers to a coherent, rigorous process of identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing the outcomes of several studies. This particular approach endeavors to gather and interpret existing relevant literature in order to determine potential and important avenues for future researches (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Therefore, SLR does not only act as a starting point in the research process, but

also enables researchers to establish a sound theoretical foundation and a comprehensive conceptual framework.

For this research, the literature search was completed using the Google Scholar database. The search was conducted using keywords that were specifically tailored to predetermined criteria. From this search, six articles were identified that met the criteria and analyzed as material to build the subsequent research framework. The selection of articles is essential for credibility as relevance and quality impact the literature review in ongoing research (Kitchenham, 2004).

This study aims to eliminate as much bias as possible from subjective selection of literature while still offering a comprehensive overview of the topic through the SLR approach. The objectives of SLR as a transparent, replicable, and structured method are met (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). Thus, the expectation for this research is to meet the reliability standards to further expand existing knowledge.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The systematic review process yielded six relevant studies that met the inclusion criteria, representing a comprehensive examination of effective strategies for early childhood foreign language acquisition. These studies, conducted by Indonesian researchers between 2022 and 2024, provide valuable insights into developmentally appropriate pedagogical approaches specifically tailored for young learners. Table 1 presents a detailed overview of the selected studies, including author information, research focus, and key findings that contribute to our understanding of optimal language learning strategies. The diversity of approaches examined across these studies offers a robust foundation for identifying common themes and best practices in early childhood foreign language education.

Table 1. Overview of Selected Studies on Early Childhood Foreign Language Learning Strategies

No	Writers	Title	Result
1	Nazwa Aliya, Waldo V. Harianja, Vina E. Kacaribu, Yoel Panjaitan, Ayu N. Wulandari	<i>Strategi Menyenangkan untuk Mengembangkan Kemampuan Berbahasa pada Anak Usia Dini</i> <i>Fun Strategies for Developing Language Skills in Early Childhood</i>	Language development strategies are implemented through playing, storytelling, singing, role-playing, and cooperative learning. Language skills are divided into listening, speaking, reading, and writing, which should be nurtured from an early age.

2	Dian Ayu Ningsih, Sholeha, Gabe D. Sihombing, Siti A. Azarah, Siti A. Pancenang, Yesi Novitasari	<i>Strategi Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris Anak Usia Dini Melalui Pendekatan Gerak dan Lagu</i> Strategies for Teaching English to Young Children Through Movement and Songs	Children show variations in participation in learning. The use of songs and movements supports pronunciation and comprehension of vocabulary. The role of parents is also important in supporting learning at home.
3	Dwi Maya Novitri, Anugrah Setiawan	<i>Pemrolehan Bahasa Asing pada Anak Usia Dini: Tantangan, Strategi, dan Penerapannya</i> Foreign Language Acquisition in Early Childhood: Challenges, Strategies, and Its Implementation	First language acquisition occurs naturally. The bilingual approach (mother tongue + foreign language) is effective without sacrificing the mother tongue. One or two foreign languages are sufficient for optimal results.
4	Ihya Ulumudin, Rian Herdiyana, Neneng Siti Nurfatimah	<i>Pentingnya Strategi Pembelajaran Vocabulary Bahasa Inggris pada Anak Usia Dini</i> The Importance of Vocabulary Learning Strategies in English for Young Children	Mastery of vocabulary is important in all language skills. Creative learning strategies through songs, videos, and visual expressions encourage children's interest in learning, although there are still constraints in teacher competency and facilities.
5	Fitriyani, Na'imah	<i>Strategi Pengenalan Bahasa Inggris Anak Usia Dini</i> Early Childhood English Language Introduction Strategies	The strategies applied include singing, playing, visual media, and puzzles. Singing has been proven to enhance memory, while playing creates a fun learning atmosphere and encourages children's participation.

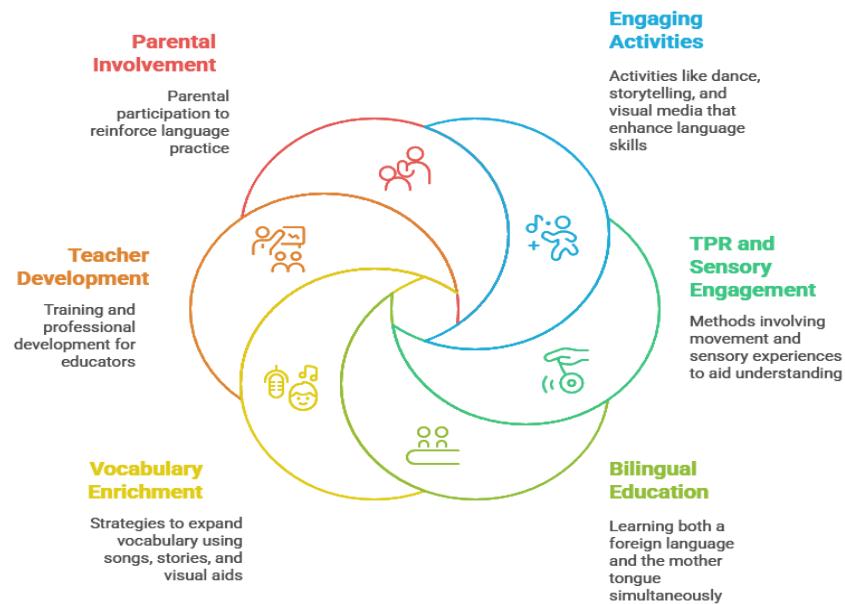
6	Farida Samad, Nurlela Tidore	<i>Strategi Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris yang Menyenangkan untuk Anak Usia dini</i> Fun English Learning Strategies for Early Childhood	Early childhood children are in a sensitive period. Fun strategies such as Total Physical Response (TPR), stories, and songs help children enjoy learning English effectively.
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The analysis of six relevant studies reveals a consistent emphasis on play-based and multimodal approaches to early childhood foreign language learning, with all researchers highlighting the effectiveness of engaging, developmentally appropriate strategies. Common themes across the studies include the predominant use of songs, storytelling, and movement-based activities (TPR) as core pedagogical tools, reflecting a shared understanding that young children learn most effectively through active, sensory-rich experiences. Five of the six studies specifically mention the importance of vocabulary development as a foundational component, with researchers consistently advocating for creative delivery methods such as visual media, role-playing, and cooperative learning to maintain children's interest and participation.

Additionally, three studies explicitly acknowledge the crucial role of parental involvement and supportive home environments in reinforcing classroom learning, while also identifying common implementation challenges including limited teacher competency in foreign languages and inadequate educational facilities. The convergence of findings across these studies strongly supports the effectiveness of holistic, fun-centered approaches that integrate multiple learning modalities while recognizing the importance of environmental support systems in successful early childhood foreign language acquisition.

From the analysis of six journal articles, it was determined that effective learning strategies for early childhood should be fun, engaging, and appropriate for the child's level of development. Dance and movement as well as the telling of stories and use of visual media (Nazwa Aliya et al., 2022; Fitriyani & Na'imah, 2022) have proven effective in enhancing children's language skills. These activities evoke active participation and the learning experience becomes part of life and not a chore. This is in accordance with Vygotsky's social constructivist theory which underscores the significance of sociable and purposeful engagement for effective learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Figure 1. The visualization of enhancing early childhood language learning based on the review



Additionally, the TPR approach, songs, and storytelling were the most dominant methods in some studies (Farida Samad & Nurlela Tidore, 2022). These methods align with the theories which argue children learn more effectively with the combination of language, movement, and sensory engagement. Action alongside speech aids children in understanding the meaning of words through direct contact which supports the theory of embodied cognition (Wilson, 2002).

Moreover, Dwi Maya Novitri and Anugrah Setiawan's literature (2024) emphasizes the importance of bilingual education, which refers to learning both a foreign language and the mother tongue simultaneously. This technique fosters proficiency in foreign languages while also nurturing the local language skills. This is in line with Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis which claims that mastery of the first language aids in the acquisition of the second language (Cummins, 2000).

Another notable finding is the significance of vocabulary knowledge as an essential component of learning a foreign language (Ihya Ulumudin et al., 2023). Hence, teachers are expected to broaden their creativity and provide more options on how to teach vocabulary like in the case of capturing their attention. Nation (2001) notes that songs, stories, videos, and cartoon characters can be valuable resources in the teaching process.

Ulumudin et al. (2023) point out a list of problems which include a lack of coherent application of the strategies, poor facilities, and limited proficiency of the foreign language by the teachers. These problems highlight the need for ongoing training and professional development in foreign language teaching strategies for educators working in early childhood education.

Additionally, Dian Ayu Ningsih et al. (2023) highlights the significance of parental participation in aiding children's achievement in foreign language learning. Even short bouts of parental assistance reinforce a child's tendency to regularly practice the language, which supports Bronfenbrenner's family systems theory regarding the role of family context in child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Synthesizing the results of the six articles, it appears that a comprehensive approach that is enjoyable to the child and incorporates active participation from the entire ecosystem, including family, peers, and educators, is necessary for effective foreign language instruction at the preschool and kindergarten levels. Optimal learning outcomes are attained through creative acts of teachers in selecting suitable teaching strategies.

CONCLUSION

The review of the studies on foreign language learning for young learners within the context of their age suggests that the level of mastery of a foreign language is largely dependent on the strategies tailored to the needs and characteristics of the learners. The relevant strategies include active and pleasurable techniques such as playing, singing, visual media, and even dance (Ningsih et al., 2024; Fitriyani & Na'imah, 2023).

The authors also noted the significance of teachers cultivating a creative and innovatively open lesson plan for every foreign language lesson as the most potent motivating factor during the entire foreign language teaching and learning exercise (Ulumudin, Herdiyana, & Nurfatimah, 2024). Furthermore, it has been shown that the bilingual approach-using a native language and a foreign language at the same time-enables children to master two languages without interfering with their native or regional language skills (Novitri & Setiawan, 2024).

Also, the application of Total Physical Response (TPR), stories, and songs aids in children's retention, recall, pronunciation, and recognition of vocabulary (Samad & Tidore, 2024). Parents' involvement at home is equally important to accelerating the acquisition of a foreign language, which points to the value of an effective supportive environment outside the classroom (Ningsih et al., 2024). To sum up, the playful and age-appropriate strategies for teaching foreign languages to preschool children are highly effective in developing their language skills, interest in learning, and both verbal and written expression skills.

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