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“He speaks Russian – just like me”

How preschool programmes can support language learning

Children’s programmes offer opportunities to support the language learning of preschool children, especially the second-language acquisition of preschool children with immigration backgrounds.

For children, language is the key to the world. It enables them to get to know their environment and interact with it. In Germany, nearly 1 in 3 children in the 5-and-under age group has an immigration background, and surveys of linguistic proficiency show that a relatively high proportion of children are in need of extra support. This is partly connected with the fact that many children grow up in families in which German is not spoken as the family language (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2010; Haug, 2008). Many children with an immigration background learn German at preschool age outside their family environment, when they start daycare, and encounter the German language among their friends or when watching TV.

Here, TV can offer ways of supporting the process of language acquisition through informal learning – and can also reach children who do not attend a daycare facility.

Studies of foreign language or second language learning prove that TV can be beneficial for various sub-skills in language acquisition. In a study on the programme *Dora the Explorer*, for example, the emphasis was on vocabulary acquisition (cf. Linebarger,

2001). In the framework of the IZI study “English for Beginners”, Kirch and Speck-Hamdan (2007) investigated aural comprehension and aural-visual comprehension, as well as language awareness and attitudes or motivation with regard to languages and language learning. The study documented learning gains for all 4 preschool formats examined.¹ The programme *Between the Lions* (PBS) aims at promoting readiness to read, with a curriculum in the recognition of letters, sounds, and words, and demonstrably improves e.g. phonetic awareness and the ability to assign sounds to letters (Linebarger, 2004). In the context of the IZI study “Supporting language learning of preschool children with immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds with TV”, tests were carried out using the German preschool programmes *JoNaLu* (ZDF), *Die Sendung mit dem Elefanten* (“The show with the elephant”, WDR), *KiKANiNCHE*N (KiKA) and *Sesamstraße* (“Sesame Street”, NDR), to see how children can improve their language skills by watching specially designed items, and to what extent they benefit from the learning opportunities offered in the programmes.

Method

Native speakers of German and children learning German as a second language took part in language tests (before first watching the programme and after 4 viewings). The before-af-

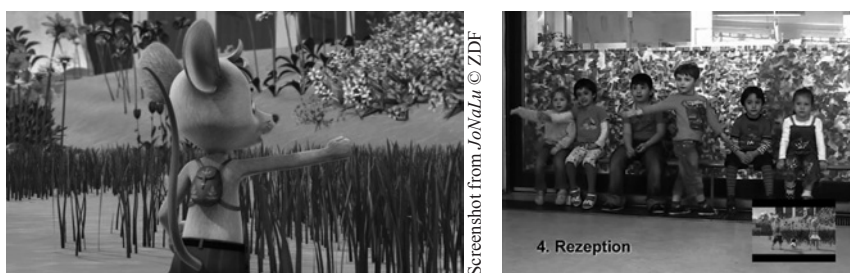
ter test was oriented towards various basic linguistic skills (cf. Ehlich et al., 2008), and included questions on vocabulary, semantic fields, awareness of sounds and speech rhythm. All 4 viewings were video-taped in order to record the children’s attentiveness and interaction during the programme. 227 children aged between 3 and 6 took part in the study, 147 of them were non-native speakers.

The following discussion uses examples to present aspects of language learning support in these preschool programmes.

Revealing the meanings of words through narratives

Children learn a language especially easily in contexts meaningful to them. On television, this works best in narrative formats offering connections with familiar material. The chances that content will be integrated into preschool children’s store of knowledge are particularly good if this content is placed in the dramatic climax of a story, and is given a positive emotional context (see Unterstell/Götz/Holler in this issue). Furthermore, particular words should be presented repeatedly, with corresponding images being shown more or less at the same time.

In an episode of the animated series *JoNaLu* (ZDF), one of the central elements of the plot is the search for a picnic. The protagonists are not quite sure what a picnic is, and try to work out the meaning of the term in the course of the story. At a dramaturgically well-chosen spot at



Ill. 1 and 2: At their fourth viewing, children imitate (right) how Jo demonstrates directions (left)

the end of the episode they learn what a picnic is.

We wanted to know whether the children already had an idea of what a picnic was, and to what extent their understanding was altered by watching the programme repeatedly. After the fourth viewing it was evident that those children who already had an idea of what a picnic was were able to expand their description by adding relevant details from the media text. Children without prior knowledge derived little from this learning opportunity. The explanation of the key item of vocabulary was given too casually for children who did not yet have a firm understanding of it, and it was only conveyed verbally.

Total Physical Response

Language acquisition can be encouraged by participatory engagement with the programme. For preschool children, opportunities to join in or carry on an activity are particularly attractive. These can be invitations to carry out actions, or strategies to get the audience involved, motivating them to move or communicate. In foreign language teaching, the inclusion of physical experience in language learning is associated with the “Total Physical Response” method (TPR). Learning processes are accompanied and intensified by movements, and success in learning is positively influenced by the use of movements as a means of communication and as a way of actively involving viewers (cf. Kirch/Speck-Hamdan, 2007).

In an episode of *JoNaLu* (ZDF), the directions “left” and “right” constitute a key learning opportunity. These are contextualised in various ways in the course of the story. For example, the boy mouse Jo demonstrates, using a mnemonic rhyme, which way is left and which is right: “Mit der Rechten fechten, mit der Linken winken” (“With the right you fight, with the left you wave”, see ill. 1). He then goes for a hike, placing sticks at the points where he turns off in a different direction, so that his friends Naya and Ludwig can follow him. The latter 2 then ask the viewers at each of these points to help them decide whether to go left or right – this is a direct invitation to the children to use the directions interactively (see ill. 3).

We asked the children, before the first viewing and after the fourth, to point out left and right. In the first interview just under a third of the children could correctly identify left and right. After the fourth viewing all children, but especially children with German as a second language, had benefited from the programme: more children had understood that left and right were directions, and half of the children could show the directions correctly. The recordings of the reception show that the audience takes up the opportunities for participation offered, directly and indirectly, by the programme (see ill. 2 and 4).



Ill. 3 and 4: Naya and Ludwig ask the way (left), the children answer at the first viewing (right)

Visualising variations of words

In comparison to children with German as a first language, the vocabulary of preschool children with an immigration background is often far less extensive (cf. Reich, 2009). By presenting a wide range of terms which do not appear frequently in everyday use, preschool programmes can promote vocabulary expansion and differentiation.

In one documentary segment in the *Sendung mit dem Elefanten* (WDR), various terms for the act of drinking are illustrated: for example, a dog slurps water from its bowl, a cat laps up a saucer of milk, and the horse sucks up water from a bucket. The girl protagonist, Saskia, can also drink in various ways, like the animals (see ill. 5 and 6).

Preschool children watching this item – which is thematically attractive for them – get to know various unusual terms for this activity in passing, while observing animals and the actions of a child of their own age. When asked what the animals are doing before viewing the item, none of the children with German as a second language and only a third of the native speakers of German give a synonym for drinking. After 4 viewings, over half of the non-native German speakers and over 3 quarters of the native speakers give various terms such as lapping, slurping, or sipping.

Learning is shown to be even more successful with children who have seen a different, more interactive contribution:

A mother and a daughter can be heard playing “I’m packing my suitcase”. The



Screenshots from *Die Sendung mit dem Elefanten* © WDR

Ill. 5 and 6: Exercise to expand the semantic field “drinking” (*Die Sendung mit dem Elefanten*) in documentary footage: the cat laps up milk from the saucer, Saskia laps milk from the cup

game involves recounting the “packing of a suitcase” and naming things that should be packed. In each new round, all the objects that are already in the imaginary suitcase are repeated, and another object is named, in this case the drinking animals: “I’m packing my suitcase, and I’m taking: a dog slurping water, a cat lapping up milk” etc. Every time a particular animal is named it is seen on the screen doing the corresponding activity.

The repetitions and the playful nature of the item improved the learning outcomes of children from both immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds. After 4 viewings, all the children with German as a first language and 7 out of 10 children with an immigration background can name at least one synonym for “drinking”.

Activating and expanding vocabulary by singing along and repeating aloud

By offering songs and language games which encourage children to sing along and to repeat things aloud, preschool programmes can make a strategic contribution to promoting basic phonic skills (perception, differentiation and production of sounds, syllables, and words) and expanding children’s active vocabulary. German children with an immigration background often have difficulties pronouncing certain combinations of consonants common in German (such as tr, fr, or fl).

In the preschool programme *KiKA-NiNCHEN* (KiKA) a small blue rabbit and his human friend Christian sing the flute-horn-drum song which contains

many words with these consonant combinations (e.g. Flöte, Tröte) in the musical zoo. After repeated viewings some children begin to sing along, playfully training the consonant combinations.

Phonic exercises on sounds can also be incorporated into programmes in the form of rhymes and tongue twisters. The reception recordings show that children with and without an immigration background repeat things aloud when the 2 presenters of the *Sendung mit dem Elefanten* (WDR) encourage them to do so by showing the corresponding objects and explicitly inviting them to participate: “Bäcker Braun backt braune Brezeln. Braune Brezeln backt Bäcker Braun” (“Baker Brown bakes brown pretzels”).

After 4 viewings, learning gains were evident. Some children who had been unfamiliar with key terms occurring in the items, such as “flute”, “drumming”, or “pretzel”, incorporated these into their active vocabulary.

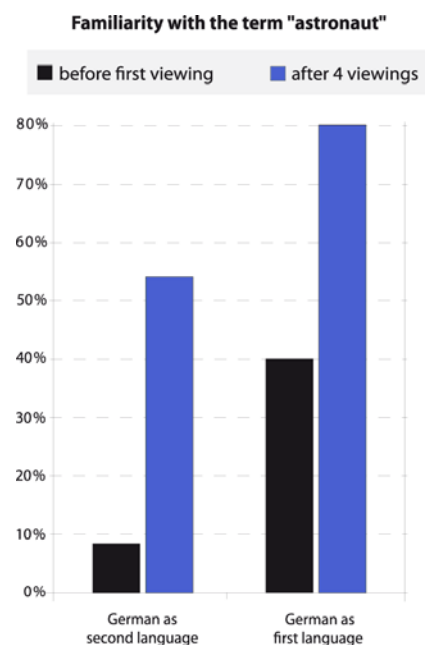
Fostering phonological awareness: words in rhythm

Music and opportunities to sing along are particularly attractive for preschool children. Rap, which gives melodic and rhythmic emphasis to the words, and accentuates syllables, is especially useful for memorisation and helps to foster phonological awareness, i.e. the ability to recognise the sound structure of the spoken language, an important precursor skill to written language acquisition.

In an episode of *JoNaLu* (ZDF), the word “astronaut” features throughout the story and is also the focus of a rap: “Who’s

climbing into the rocket? The astronaut!” Since the syllables are spoken with great emphasis – “as-tro-naut” –, the study investigated the extent to which children memorised sounds and word stress, and acquired a feeling for the rhythm of words. After being asked the meaning of the word, the children were asked to say the word “astronaut” out loud and clap the individual syllables.

Following the fourth viewing, twice as many children as before knew what an astronaut was and what he did (graph 1), and nearly all of them could clap the word’s syllables independently and correctly. Only a small number of the children who did not have German as their first language were familiar with the term before watching the episode. After 4 viewings 1 in 2 children knew the word and its meaning. Learning gains were also evident in the clapping of syllables. The children’s ability to remember a term and to repeat it, broken down into syllables, was improved by viewing the episode. The song’s rap form supports the sense of rhythm, both when listening and when singing along; several children swayed, danced, or “rapped” to the catchy beat of the “astronaut rap” while watching.



Graph 1: Children with German as first and second language expanded their vocabulary



Left: Screenshot from *Sesamstraße* © NDR, middle/right © IZI

Ill. 7-9: Children without (middle) and with an immigration background (right) like the green wolf from *Sesamstraße* who has Italian immigration background (left) because of his humorous communicative mix-ups

Positive characters with an immigration background

Encountering other languages reflects the reality of preschoolers' lives, and fosters linguistic awareness in relation to their own and other languages. One way to implement this experience in preschool formats is to have characters speaking foreign languages or speaking with an accent, and to position these as competent rather than problematic characters. For children with immigration backgrounds, the presence of such characters is an acknowledgement of their competence and a reinforcement of their identity. In every episode of the programme *JoNaLu* (ZDF) the protagonists encounter a friend who speaks a different language, e.g. a Turkish-speaking butterfly or a Russian-speaking mole. The reception recordings showed only positive reactions to these characters. Children who spoke the same language were delighted and commented spontaneously that the characters spoke like them or their families at home: "Turkish, like my language" (Erkan, 5 years old). Children with German as their family language also expressed positive attitudes towards these characters, e.g. Max (5 years old): "Because you always get Germans and it would be good to have other people, too." Children reacted particularly positively to a character from *Sesamstraße* (NDR), a green wolf who speaks broken German with an Italian accent (ill. 7-9). As a result of his not yet perfect knowledge of German, he experiences humorous misunderstandings and communicative

mix-ups, and is repeatedly involved in linguistic adventures. On repeated viewings of the episode, both children with German as their native language and – even more so – children with immigration background looked forward to the reappearance of the wolf, a character with positive significance for them, who deals competently and humorously with linguistic difficulties.

Conclusion

There are a number of possible ways to support language learning through preschool programmes. Opportunities to participate, giving children a chance to expand their vocabulary playfully, encourage language learning through active, participatory engagement with the programme. In particular, children without prior knowledge about a particular term or topic need clear illustrations and sufficient time to attribute relevance to these parts of the programme. Comprehension is facilitated by simple language, slow delivery, and chronological narration, and when the words being spoken are visible as objects or actions, repeated in varying ways and in contexts which are meaningful for the children. However, the aim should not be to develop programmes which explicitly address only preschool children with immigration backgrounds, or which problematise such children and their linguistic deficits, but to reflect human diversity, such as it actually exists, in children's programmes, and thus establish a firmer connection to the reality of children's lives. ■

NOTE

¹ Die Sendung mit dem Elefanten (*WDR*), Dora the Explorer (*NICK Jr.*) and Razzledazzle or Something Special (*both BBC*).

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