



ERPA 2014

Social benefits of an English learning program for young learners

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to determine the effects of an English learning program on young learners' socialization process. To this end, 28 voluntary young learners were accepted to the language learning program which lasted 6 weeks. These participants were divided into two groups based on their ages. One group consisted 5-6-year old students while the other group consisted of 7-8-year-old students. There were 11 students (39,3%) in the 5-6-year-old group while there were 17 students (60,7%) in the 7-8-year-old group. Each group was taught English for 120 hours in 6 weeks. As data collection tool, students were interviewed both before the program and after the program. The items in the interview were developed by the researchers. As another data collection tool, the students were regularly observed by the researchers both in the instructional settings and in the social settings for four weeks. The data obtained through interview and observation were analyzed qualitatively. Moreover, percentage statistics were also used in the analysis of data obtained through interviews. The results of the analysis showed that an English learning program lasting 6 weeks significantly contributes to young learners' socialization process.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of the ERPA Congress 2014.

Keywords: young learners; socialization; English learning.

1. Introduction

Socialization is one of the most important processes in one's life. It is not confined to a single phase of life, but rather it is the result of an accumulation of experiences throughout life. Demirel (2004) confirms this stating that socialization is a life-long process, starting from infancy proceeding until one's death. With this confirmation in mind, it would be logical to expect that young learners can be helped to socialize in different settings whether this setting is a school setting or an alternative one. Socialization cannot be regarded as a quality gained with the

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individual passively observing the world around, rather it can be gained with the active participation of the individual and interaction with the outer world, or encouraging the individual to participate in interaction with others. Handel, Cahill & Elkin (2007) put forward that socialization occurs over time, through interaction with others, by means of communication and in emotionally significant contexts. From this statement, it can be seen that one always needs others and some form of interaction with others to socialize. Time alone would not suffice, therefore communication and interaction, which are interdependent on each other, and some contexts in which communication and interaction can be realized are must in socialization process.

As one can never achieve the expected phenomenon of socialization alone, some contexts and others are required in this process. Berns (2012) states that socialization takes place through family, school, peer group, community and media. As one is born, the only context in which socialization can take place in the first few years of life is the family. Grusec and Davidov (2007) maintain that there is a strong need for interrelatedness, which plays a major role in socialization process, and that this interrelatedness can already be found in parent-child relationship as the families try their best to nurture and raise their offspring. However, as stated above, this medium of socialization counts only in the first few years of life. As one grows, some other people surround that individual and they also directly affect the socialization process. As one reaches the school age and begins school, this individual is no longer the structure the family members have tried to form, rather the effects of school and thereby the peers the individual meets at school begin to shape that person's personality and socialization. With regard to the role of schools in socialization, Brint (2006) claims that even if schools have a secondary role to parents in socialization, an individual would not be prepared for adult life without benefiting from the socialization settings provided in schools. Brint furthers his ideas stating that individuals can learn behavioral conformity, moral conformity and cultural conformity in schools. These three conformity types as suggested by Brint are the basic parts of a healthy socialization process. As can be understood from this proposition, individuals learn to be social beings in schools.

In schools, it is beyond doubt that one is not only exposed to the socializing efforts of the teacher, but one also encounters other individuals, which are termed as peers. Peers are acknowledged to have significant effects on one's socialization, as well. Rubin, Bukowski & Parker (2006) suggest that peers can contribute to children's development in social aspects in various ways. Bukowski, Brendgen & Vitaro (2007) further add that peers are not only friends to an individual, they also function as socialization agents. Therefore, the peers an individual encounters in school setting should also be considered as one part of socialization besides family and schools.

In Berns' (2012) proposition, community and media are the other two agents of socialization. While media may have some negative effects on children, it can also help them to socialize. Dubow, Huesmann and Greenwood (2007) refer to the long-term effects of television on children's socialization while admitting the short-term effects. According to Dubow, Huesmann and Greenwood, only if new cognitions and behaviors can be gained through media exposure, can mass media exposure be addressed as an agent of socialization. Therefore, in order for media to be considered as an agent for socialization, it must change the way one behaves or conceptualizes the things around.

Considering the role of community, it would be logical to mention the role of language. Handel (2006) states that a child learns a language during socialization process and it is through this language that words are arranged in accordance with certain rules to make the individual understood and understand what's going on around. In order for an individual to mix in the community, language has a primary role. A community welcomes an individual as long as that individual can express the needs, strengths, weaknesses or anything to make a community work. It is the native language that is learned in the community that helps the individual express those entities. Besides the native language, according to Sayer (2012) some other languages can be learned after the early socialization process and those languages are generally acquired in formal school settings, as a result of which individual may begin to see themselves differently. Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) coined the term "language socialization" to refer to a two-way relationship between language and socialization, proposing that it is either that one may use language to socialize or it is that one socializes to use language. As can be seen from the related studies in literature, language is a basic element of socialization, whether this is a native language or a second language.

In this study, a foreign language learned in a formal school setting and its effects on young learners' socialization has been investigated. As is the case in Sayer's (2012) proposition, a new language learned after the early socialization process may contribute to children's socialization.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants of this study are young learners between the ages of five and eight. 28 young learners voluntarily participated in this study. Because of the high number of participants for a language learning program, they were divided into two groups based on their ages. 11 students (39.3%) were put into 5-6 year-old group while the remaining 17 students (60.7%) were put into the 7-8-year-old group. There were 17 (60.7%) female students and 11 (39.3%) male students. In the 5-6-year-old group, there were 5 (45.5%) female students and 6 (54.5%) male students; on the other hand, there were 12 (70.6%) female students and 5 (29.4%) male students in the 7-8-year-old group.

2.2. Data collection tool

The participants of the study were interviewed by the researchers both before the program started and after the program ended. As data collection tool of the interview, 11 interview questions developed by the researchers were addressed to the students. Of these interview questions, 3 were directly related to their expectations about socialization in this program before the program started and their gains about socialization after the program ended. It is important to note that the questions about socialization both in the pre-training interview and in the post-training interview were comparable to each other, with slight changes in the wording and tenses used. As another data collection tool, the students were observed by researchers both in the instructional settings and social settings from the second week of the program to the fifth week. The points on which the researchers focused were friendliness and respect towards adults and peers, and interacting properly with peers in social and instructional settings. Both the interview questions and the observation form were developed by the researchers.

2.3 Procedure

The participants of this study were taught English at Duzce University, School of Foreign Languages for 6 weeks during the summer season of 2013. For both groups of students, 2 native speakers of English taught English from Monday to Thursday, 5 hours a day. In total, the students received 120 hours of English instruction during the program. The students were taught Drama lessons 4 hours a week, Physical Education lessons 4 hours a week, Speaking lessons 3 hours a week, Drawing lessons 3 hours a week, Music lessons 3 hours a week, Social activity like visiting different faculties of the university 2 hours a week, and finally Chemistry and Physics experiments in the Chemistry Lab for 1 hour a week. As can be seen from the schedule, there was never any explicit instruction of English, but rather English was taught incidentally in different lessons and through various activities and tasks by 2 native speakers of English experienced in teaching for young learners. Before the program started and after the program ended, the participants were interviewed and the interviews were recorded by the researchers. For the recording, informed consent was obtained from the students and their parents. Furthermore, the Ethics Committee of Duzce University decided that no institutional ethics approval consent was required because of the research parameters of this study. During the program, from the second week to the fifth week, that is, for four weeks, the students were observed in their social settings during the break time or lunch time and in instructional settings at regular intervals. Two different researchers observed the students and took notes so that no researcher bias would interfere with the results.

2.4 Data analysis

All data obtained through observations were analyzed qualitatively. Moreover, in order to compare the results of the pre-training interview and post-training interview, percentage statistics were used because the number of students who took the pre-training interview was 25 while the number of students who took the post-training interview was 21. This can be attributed to the fact that there were some absent students both on the first, pre-training interview day and on the final, post-training interview day.

3. Results

The qualitative analysis of the data obtained through regular observations showed that both the 5-6-year-old group and the 7-8-year-old group students were very polite in addressing the teachers not only in instructional setting but also in social settings, addressing the teachers by their first names followed by the title teacher and also using first personal possessive adjective. 5-6-year-old group students were also observed hugging the teachers in some cases showing sympathy to them on the second week. On the third week, while all students but one boy in the 5-6-year-old group were very friendly toward the teacher showing the same tendency as in the second week, one boy started to have problems with the teachers saying that he did not understand their instructions and they should speak in Turkish. It is important to note that all other students in this group criticized the boy severely stating that they are the teachers and he shouldn't treat them this way. In the 7-8-year-old group, it was observed that even though some students clearly did not pay attention to what the teacher was saying, they still did not disrupt the lesson and only pretended to listen to the teacher. All students in this group were very friendly to the teacher. On the fourth week, the boy who was causing problems both in the instructional setting and in the social settings in the 5-6-year-old group was accompanied by a girl. Those two students always complained that they couldn't follow the teacher and so did not want to participate in activities even though other students were helpful to them. All other students in this group went to the teachers to tell them that they shouldn't worry about those two students. In the 7-8-year-old group, it was noticed that female students competed with each other to give a hug to the teachers showing sympathy while no such a tendency was observed in the boys of this group. The number of students who weren't paying close attention to the teacher instructions in instructional setting increased in this group on the fourth week but they still pretended to listen to the teacher keeping as quiet as possible, without causing any disruption. On the final week of the observation, the two students who caused problems in the 5-6-year-old group attempted to hit the teachers complaining that the teachers did not pay enough attention to them and the teachers always spoke in English both in the classroom and outside the classroom. Other students in this age group did not favor that tendency of two students and some students from this group even went to the coordinator of the program to complain about those students saying that they were not treating the teachers fairly but all other students loved the teachers very much. The students in the 7-8-year-old group began to show signs that they did not listen to the teacher but they were still respectful to the teacher making up some excuses like feeling sleepy because of a bad night or not feeling well due to certain health conditions so that the teachers would not feel sorry that they did not listen to them.

As for the attitudes of students toward their peers in instructional settings and social settings, 5-6-year-old group students were respectful to each other both in addressing and turn-taking during lunch time on the second week of the program; on the other hand, the relationship between 7-8-year-old group students turned more informal and there was constant betting and teasing about their favorite football teams particularly among boys. On the third week of the program, an unexpected tendency came along in the 5-6-year-old group. There was no cross-gender interaction between the students either in instructional setting or in social settings. Boys were always with other boys while girls were always with other girls. It is also interesting to note that rather than interaction with the other gender group in their classroom, they were in interaction with their own gender from the other classroom's students in social settings. During classroom tasks and activities, boys always wanted to be with boys and girls always wanted to be with girls. Whatever the teacher did to mix them during activities, they did not resist the teacher and reluctantly agreed to mix with the other gender but soon after the end of the activity, they immediately organized groups of their own gender. In the 7-8-year-old group, boys were observed playing aggressive games like hitting each other's shoulders but this did not lead to any unwanted consequences. An interesting finding of the third week for this group was that there emerged small close-friendship groups among girls. The members of the small group were always together both in instructional setting and social settings. However, it did not necessarily lead to a cut in interaction between different groups. They were still very friendly and respectful to each other. On the fourth week of the program, the tendency to engage in their own gender group was still the same for the 5-6-year old group. Whatever the teacher did to mix them did not work whatsoever. The only time cross-gender interaction was achieved was during folk-dancing in alternative sport hours. All students were very helpful to their own gender group. In the 7-8-year-old group, all students but few were observed using rude imperative sentences to each other particularly when the teachers were not paying close attention during social activities and lunch, however the students in small friendship groups were very helpful to each other. The boys in this age group were observed each favoring different small close friendship

groups formed by girls. There were 4 different small groups each consisting of two or three girls the previous week. On the fourth week, these groups were joined by boys and each group included at least one boy. On the fifth week of the program, which is already the last week of observation, the students in 5-6-year-old group displayed a surprisingly positive cross-gender interaction. The students in the 7-8-year old group were very friendly to other students in their own small groups but there was hostility to other students in the other friendship groups.

The analysis of the data obtained through interviews showed that of the 25 students who were interviewed in the pre-training interview, 22 (88.0%) of them stated that they were happy that they would make new friends in this program, 2 students (8.0%) stated that they did not need new friends, and 1 student (4.0%) stated that she was not sure about how she was feeling about making new friends in this program. Concerning the same question about their feelings about making new friends in this program in the post-training interview, of the 21 students who were interviewed, 20 (95.2%) of them reported that they were happy to have made new friends in this program while 1 student (4.0%) reported that he was happy only to have made one close friend in this program. Concerning the interview question who they would speak English with, the aim of which was to find out whether they would use English to socialize with new people, in the pre-training interview 8 students (32.0%) reported that they would use English to talk to their parents and friends; 4 students (16.0%) reported that they wouldn't use English to talk to anybody; 3 students (12.0%) reported that they would use English to talk their friends only; 3 students (12.0%) reported that they would use English to talk to their mother only; 2 students (8.0%) reported that they would use English to talk to anybody who knows English; 1 student (4.0%) reported she would use English to talk to parents and online foreign friends; 1 student (4.0%) reported she would use English to talk to tourists, and 1 student (4.0%) reported that she would use English to talk to online friends only. Therefore, 16 students (64.0%) reported in the pre-training interview that they would use English to make new friends and in social settings with their already existing friends. Regarding the same question in the post-training interview, 7 students (33.3%) reported that they would use English to talk to their friends and parents; 4 students (19.0%) reported that they would use English to talk to their friends only; 3 students (14.2%) reported that they would use English to talk to their friends and foreigners; 2 students (9.5%) reported that they would use English to talk to their parents only; 1 student (4.8%) reported that she would use English to talk to her friends and mother; 1 student (4.8%) reported that he would use English to talk to his friends and relatives; 1 student (4.8%) reported that he would use English to talk to his relatives and mother; 1 student (4.8%) reported that he would use English to talk to his brother and relatives, and 1 student (4.8%) reported that she wouldn't use English to talk to anybody. Therefore, 16 students (76.1%) reported in the post-training interview that they would use English to make new friends and in social settings with their already existing friends. While this figure showing the social benefits of an English learning program was 64.0% in the pre-training interview, it increased to 76.1% in the post-training interview. Regarding the last item in the interview about how this program and its results will help the students in their schools and with their peers, of the 25 students in the pre-training interview, 17 (68.0%) of them reported that knowing English would make them look cool with their peers at school; 6 students (24.0%) reported that they did not have any idea about its effects at school, and 2 students (8.0%) reported that they wouldn't show off their English knowledge at school. On the other hand, of the 21 students in the post-training interview, 12 students (57.2%) reported that knowing English would make them look cool with their peers at school; 4 students (19.0%) reported that they would show a higher performance in English classes and their teachers would appreciate them more; 3 students (14.3%) reported that they still did not have any idea about its effects at school, and 2 students (9.5%) reported that it wouldn't make any difference. Therefore, While 68.0 % of the students stated that this program and its results would contribute to their popularity with friends and teachers at school in the pre-training interview, 76.2 % of students stated that this program and its results would contribute to their popularity with friends and teachers at school in the post-training interview.

4. Discussion

This study was conducted to see how an English learning program would help young learners' socialization process. The results of the study show that some minor problems in the 5-6 years group did not prevent the other students from respecting adults and showing this as much as possible. Even if young learners may exhibit some gender preferences in their relationships, cross-gender activities in folk-dancing performed in sport hours enabled 5-

6 years group male students to mix with female students even though just the opposite was the case in the first 4 weeks. Good friendships formed in the 7-8 years group led to different small groups in the class, it was broken to a certain extent in the final week, though. As a result of this, there was more separation and also more attachment between the kids in the 7-8 years group. Even though these results show a negative attitude among young learners toward making only a few good friends and ignoring other peers, classroom activities can help young learners overcome hostility to others in the group if they are managed well by the teacher.

The rate of students who reported feeling happy about making new friends increased dramatically at the end of 6-week-training, and the bias incited by some students against new friends at the beginning of the training vanished at the end. As another point, it would be logical to conclude that at the end of the program, the rate of students who wanted to practice English with their new friends in the program increased dramatically. Some students also reported that they would like to meet new people thanks to English. In line with this conclusion, the rate of students who believe this English program will help them gain prestige in their friendship groups at school increased significantly at the end of the program. These results are also supported by Fogle (2012) who maintains that identity construction by participating in classroom settings will be of much help to young learners of second language even though the context of this study was English as a foreign language rather than English as a second language. As a last remark, combining Sayer's (2012) proposition about the effect of an additional language after early socialization and Schieffelin and Ochs' (1986) proposition about the two-way relationship between socialization and language, termed as language socialization, it would be safe to conclude that young learners greatly benefit from a foreign language learning program in socialization process.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported financially by DUBAP (Duzce University Scientific Research and Project Unit) with the project number: 2013. 04. 03. 157.

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