

EARLY EXPOSURE TO A FOREIGN LANGUAGE - DEVELOPMENTAL EFFECTS, EXPOSURE METHODS AND THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTAL MEDIATION

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PËRMBLEDHJE

Ky punim trajton ndikimin që ka ekspozimi i hershëm ndaj një gjuhe të huaj në zhvillimin gjuhësor, njohës dhe social të fëmijëve. Në kohët e sotme, fëmijët janë gjithnjë e më shpesh në kontakt me gjuhët e huaja, jo vetëm në shkollë, por edhe përmes teknologjisë, mediave dhe ndërveprimeve të përditshme. Kjo temë shqyrton jo vetëm nëse ky ekspozim është i dobishëm, por edhe si mënyrat e ndryshme të ekspozimit ndikojnë në rezultatet e mësimin të gjuhës.

Përmes një qasjeje të kombinuar kërkimore, janë mbledhur të dhëna nga një pyetësor me prindër dhe dy intervista: njëra me një mjeke logopede dhe tjetra me një familje emigrante shqiptare që po rrit fëmijët në Shtetet e Bashkuara. Rezultatet treguan se fëmijët që ekspozohen ndaj gjuhës së huaj në moshë të hershme dhe në mënyrë të rregullt e ndërvepruese zhvillojnë më mirë shqiptimin, aftësitë metakognitive dhe përmirësojnë edhe ato sociale. Ndërkohë, fëmijët që mësojnë përmes mënyrave pasive si videot apo filmat vizatimorë tregojnë përparim më të kufizuar.

Gjetjet theksojnë gjithashtu rëndësinë që ka angazhimi aktiv i prindërve në këtë proces. Studimi përmbillet me rekomandime praktike për të mbështetur zhvillimin e hershëm gjuhësor si në shtëpi ashtu edhe në shkollë, duke inkurajuar ndërveprim të drejtpërdrejtë, bashkëpunim më të ngushtë mes familjes dhe institucionit arsimor, si dhe përdorim më të dobishëm të mjeteve digjitale.

Fjalët çelës: ekspozim, përvetësim, fleksibilitet, përfshirje, përshtatje,

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how early foreign language exposure influences young children's language skills, cognitive skills, and social development. With early exposure becoming more common, often through media, technology, or daily interactions — this study examines not just whether it helps, but how different methods of exposure shape outcomes. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining survey data from parents, with insights from two interviews: one with a speech-language therapist, and another with an Albanian family raising their children in the United States and navigating between the native and foreign language. The results show that children who are introduced to a foreign language early, especially through regular and meaningful interaction - tend to develop better pronunciation, stronger language awareness, and more social confidence. On the other hand, children exposed only through passive methods like videos or cartoons often show more limited progress. The findings also highlight the importance of active involvement from parents supporting language learning from an early age. The study ends with practical recommendations to help improve early FL learning at home or in the classroom, encouraging interactive methods, stronger home-school collaboration, and more intentional use of digital tools.

Keywords: exposure, acquisition, flexibility, involvement, adaptability.

Introduction

If there is one thing that has changed dramatically in the past decade, it is how early children start speaking words that their parents do not even understand. From toddlers singing along to *Coco Melon* to pre-schoolers giving instructions to Alexa in English, early exposure to foreign languages has quietly become part of everyday childhood. What used to start in a classroom now often begins in the living room - sometimes even before a child can properly pronounce words in their native tongue.

This rise of early foreign language (FL) exposure is not just a modern trend; it is reshaping how we think about language development. Children are now surrounded by foreign-language input through cartoons, games, songs, and digital devices. Researchers call this “ambient language learning” (Lambert, 2021) - basically, learning without really trying. But the real question is: how much of this exposure actually sticks, and how much floats past them like background noise?

Science has already shown that the early years are a golden window for learning languages (Lenneberg, 1967; Kuhl, 2013). Kids' brains are like little sponges - but as every parent knows, sponges can soak up both water and mess. So, while many children pick up foreign words naturally from screens and media,

what truly shapes their development may not be just what they hear, but how and with whom they experience it.

That is where the grown-ups come in. Parents are usually the ones holding the remote, the phone, or the bedtime storybook - and often without realizing it, they are also holding the keys to their child's language growth. Studies (De Houwer, 2007; King & Fogle, 2013) show that children's language progress depends strongly on how involved and supportive their parents are. Yet, many parents think exposure is enough: "*He watches English cartoons every day - he'll be fluent in no time!*" (If only Netflix counted as a tutor.)

The truth, as newer research suggests, is a bit more complicated. Passive exposure through screens may boost vocabulary recognition, but it does not teach real communication unless it is paired with meaningful social interaction. In contrast, when children are exposed to a new language through conversation, storytelling, or play - what we might call interaction-based exposure - they develop not only better pronunciation and grammar but also stronger cognitive and social skills.

This study explores exactly that intersection: how the type of early foreign language exposure and the level of parental involvement shape children's development. Using both surveys with parents and interviews with professionals, it examines how different exposure methods - technology-based versus interaction-based affect language, cognition, and social adaptability in young children.

The research is guided by three main questions:

- What developmental changes are most commonly observed in children who are exposed early to a foreign language?
- How does the method of exposure (technology-based vs. interaction-based) affect their language growth?
- What role do parents play in guiding and supporting this process?

By diving into these questions, the study hopes to paint a clearer picture of what early foreign language exposure really does - and what makes it effective. After all, it is not just about starting early; it is about starting right.

Literature review

Research on early foreign language exposure has long shown that the younger a child is, the more naturally they pick up new sounds, words, and structures. But while most experts agree that "earlier is better," they also remind us that the how matters just as much as the when. The following section explores the main perspectives that shape our understanding of this topic - ranging from biological readiness and sociocultural context to children's individual learning traits and the often-overlooked role of parents.

1. Early Language Learning: A blend of Nature and Nurture

Language learning starts before we even realize it. According to García Mayo (2017) and Singleton & Lengyel (15), early instruction sets the foundation for long-term fluency by taking advantage of children's natural sensitivity to sound and rhythm. The idea goes back to Noam Chomsky's theory (1972) that children are born with an innate ability to learn language - a kind of built-in "language machine."

However, later scholars, including Magda Ponce (2021), argue that biology isn't the full story. In her research on preschool classrooms, she emphasizes that environment, social support, and daily interaction all play a crucial role. This echoes Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which views language learning as a social act: children do not just absorb words; they co-create meaning through interaction with others. In other words, a child might have the perfect brain for language learning - but without a meaningful environment to activate it, the process can remain dormant. Language, then, grows at the intersection of nature and nurture.

2. The Critical Period: Why early exposure works best

Neurolinguistic research adds a fascinating layer to this discussion. Lenneberg's (1967) Critical Period Hypothesis suggests that there is a biological window - roughly from birth to puberty - when the brain is most flexible and receptive to new languages. More recent studies confirm that early learners use the same brain regions for both their first and second languages, while adults rely on different and less efficient pathways (Kim, 2020).

Patricia Kuhl's (2013) work further shows that babies can distinguish between sounds from multiple languages during their first year of life, but this ability fades without continued exposure. Similarly, Dao (2019) and Hartshorne et al. (2018) found that after age seven, the brain's plasticity begins to decline, making native-like pronunciation harder to achieve. So yes - children really do learn languages more easily than adults. Unfortunately, they also forget socks, lunchboxes, and homework with the same enthusiasm.

3. Children's unique strengths as language learners

Young children do not just learn languages - they play with them. Hofherr (2020) explains that traits such as curiosity, imagination, and fearlessness make them natural language explorers. They can understand meaning through gestures, tone, and context even before they fully grasp vocabulary. Unlike adults, children do not panic when they do not understand every word - they simply guess, giggle, and move on. This tolerance for uncertainty, combined with their instinct

to interact, allows them to pick up language patterns intuitively. Read (2003) calls this the “window of imagination,” where language learning happens through storytelling, play, and pretend scenarios rather than formal drills. These strengths mean that exposure does not have to look like a traditional lesson. Singing a song, playing with toys, or chatting about a cartoon can be just as powerful as any classroom exercise - if not more so.

4. Parents’ perspectives and real-world challenges

While biology and curiosity give children a head start, parents often determine whether that advantage truly takes root. De Houwer (2007) and King & Fogle (2013) both highlight that parental attitudes, consistency, and support strongly influence children’s progress. Parents who view foreign languages as important tend to create richer environments - whether through bedtime stories, songs, or daily routines in another language.

However, research also shows a gap between ideals and reality. Schwartz and Moin (2012) found that while many parents believe early foreign language learning is beneficial, their day-to-day practices do not always match those beliefs. Victoria Benz’s (2015) study *Dynamics of Early Bilingual Child Education* goes further, revealing that parents often view language learning as a path to broader opportunities - better jobs, more education, or cultural openness - rather than as a goal in itself. In practice, however, maintaining exposure can be hard. Busy schedules, limited programs, and overreliance on digital content can lead to what Benz calls “symbolic bilingualism” - where the idea of learning a language matters more than the actual learning. As she puts it, families often start with good intentions, but without sustained engagement, progress fades quickly.

Methodology

To explore how early exposure to a foreign language affects children’s development, this study used a mixed-methods design - a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Numbers can tell part of the story, but people’s experiences often fill in the rest. By using both, the research aimed to capture not only measurable patterns but also the emotions, challenges, and context behind them.

The quantitative side consisted of a structured questionnaire for parents of young children who had been exposed to a foreign language. This provided a broad view of exposure types, frequency, and observable developmental changes. The qualitative side added depth through two interviews: one with a speech-language therapist and another with an Albanian family living in the United States, raising bilingual children. Together, these methods offered both statistical

trends and human stories that bring the data to life.

- **Participants**

The participants were 30 parents of children between ages 0 and 8, all of whom had experienced some degree of early foreign language exposure - either through technology (cartoons, games, songs) or direct human interaction (conversation, storytelling, guided play). Parents were reached with the help of local preschool and elementary teachers who distributed the online questionnaire.

For the qualitative part, two interviews were conducted:

Interview 1: With an Albanian couple, Alma and Arjan, raising two children in the United States. Their differing experiences with early exposure (one child exposed early through interaction, the other later through media) provided a valuable comparison.

Interview 2: With Dr. Nensi Tufa, a licensed speech and language therapist who has extensive experience working with multilingual children and families. Her insights helped interpret the patterns found in the parental data.

- **Procedure**

Data collection followed three main steps:

- Distribution of the questionnaire through preschool networks and online parent groups. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.
- Individual interviews conducted via video call and in person, lasting about 40 - 60 minutes each.
- Data analysis combining descriptive statistics for the questionnaire and thematic analysis for the interviews. The goal was to identify recurring themes such as interaction vs. technology, parental involvement, and developmental outcomes.

- **Ethical considerations**

Ethics were treated with the seriousness the topic deserves - especially since the research involved children's experiences, even if only through their parents' perspectives. All participants were informed about the study's purpose and assured of full anonymity. No personal identifiers were collected, and participants were free to withdraw at any stage. For the case studies discussed by Dr. Tufa, all names and details were anonymized. By combining quantitative breadth with qualitative depth, this study aimed to offer a well-rounded understanding of early foreign language exposure - one that recognizes both the numbers and the nuanced human stories behind them.

Results and Discussion

- **Overview of exposure patterns**

The questionnaire data revealed that early exposure to foreign languages is

becoming increasingly common among Albanian families, even when parents are not fully bilingual. Among the 30 participants, over two-thirds (68%) reported introducing a foreign language - mainly English - before their children turned five.

However, how children were exposed differed sharply. About 45% said their child's main exposure came through technology-based methods such as cartoons, YouTube videos, or mobile games. Meanwhile, 38% relied mostly on interaction-based exposure, including direct conversation, storytelling, or play in a foreign language. The remaining 17% reported a mix of both.

This finding reflects a broader global trend: as technology becomes a natural babysitter, children are absorbing foreign languages earlier - but often passively. As one parent humorously commented in the open-ended section:

"My daughter speaks English with Peppa Pig's accent but still answers me in Albanian!"

It's funny, but it also hints at a deeper issue - exposure alone does not guarantee meaningful learning.

· *Linguistic and cognitive development*

Across all exposure types, parents noticed positive outcomes in pronunciation, vocabulary, and listening comprehension. Around 73% observed that their children could understand foreign-language phrases or recognize words even before learning to read. Many also noted small but visible cognitive benefits: better memory, focus, and problem-solving. These findings align with previous studies (Dao, 2019; Kuhl, 2013) suggesting that early exposure sharpens phonological awareness and stimulates executive functions. However, the quality of exposure made a big difference. Children who experienced foreign languages through play, dialogue, or shared activities showed richer verbal interaction and more confidence in experimenting with new words.

Dr. Nensi Tufa, the speech-language therapist interviewed, emphasized this distinction clearly:

"Children don't just need to hear the language - they need to use it, even imperfectly. Language grows through communication, not repetition."

In other words, Peppa Pig can spark curiosity, but it is the conversation that follows that builds real learning.

· *The role of parental involvement*

One of the strongest themes to emerge from both the quantitative data and interviews was the central role of parents. Children whose parents actively engaged - by repeating words, translating phrases, or playing bilingual games - were described as more confident and enthusiastic learners. In contrast, when exposure was left entirely to screens, progress was slower and more superficial.

As Dr. Tufa noted, “*The device can provide sound; the parent provides meaning.*” This distinction echoes Vygotsky’s idea (1978) that learning flourishes through guided social interaction.

Interestingly, even parents who were not fluent themselves managed to contribute effectively. Simple strategies - like watching shows together, asking “What did that mean?”, or singing along - helped transform passive exposure into active learning. This supports De Houwer’s (2007) and King & Fogle’s (2013) findings that attitude and consistency matter more than perfect language skills.

· *Technology vs. Interaction: two sides of the same coin*

While interaction-based exposure produced deeper learning, the study does not portray technology as the villain. Many parents admitted that digital media made early exposure possible in the first place, especially when they could not offer direct language input. The problem, as several noted, was not the screen - it was the absence of follow-up interaction. For example, one family in the U.S. described how their daughter, Siera, began learning English through cartoons and preschool interactions at age three, while their younger son, Siar, was introduced earlier and more intentionally through games and daily conversation. The difference was striking: Siera developed confidence and fluency faster because her exposure combined digital and social learning.

This supports Dao’s (2019) conclusion that successful early foreign language learning depends not just on exposure quantity, but on contextual engagement - that is, whether the language is connected to real experiences. Simply put, watching Dora the Explorer is helpful; actually exploring the world while using the words is better.

· *Social and emotional dimensions*

Beyond language skills, parents observed emotional and social benefits. Children exposed early to foreign languages tended to show greater curiosity, cultural openness, and social adaptability. Some parents mentioned that their children were more confident when meeting foreigners or participating in mixed-language activities.

These findings echo Hofherr’s (2020) and Read’s (2003) work on how language learning enhances social imagination. When children play, sing, or role-play in another language, they are not only learning words - they’re also rehearsing empathy, perspective-taking, and creativity. However, a few parents also mentioned confusion or temporary language mixing, especially in children under four. This “code-switching” phase, though often misunderstood, is a normal part of multilingual development (Genesee, 2008). It does not indicate confusion; rather, it shows that the brain is managing multiple systems at once - a skill that, over time, strengthens cognitive flexibility.

· *Summary of Findings*

The findings suggest that early foreign language exposure can positively influence children's linguistic, cognitive, and social development, but the benefits depend on how the exposure occurs. Interaction-based exposure leads to stronger pronunciation, richer vocabulary, and higher confidence.

Technology-based exposure can be beneficial, but only when paired with parental guidance or meaningful engagement. Parental involvement consistently emerges as the most influential factor - regardless of the method used. These results reinforce what researchers like Kuhl (2013) and Vygotsky (1978) have long suggested: learning thrives when language is social, interactive, and emotionally meaningful.

Conclusions

This study set out to explore how early exposure to a foreign language shapes children's linguistic, cognitive, and social development — and what makes that exposure truly effective. The findings make one thing very clear: it's not only about starting early, but about how and with whom children experience a foreign language.

Children who were exposed to another language through interaction — conversations, storytelling, songs, and play — showed stronger progress than those who learned mainly through technology-based methods like videos or mobile apps. Interaction provided not only linguistic input but also emotional engagement, which helped children build confidence and curiosity. Meanwhile, screen-based exposure, though useful for introducing sounds and vocabulary, often lacked the context and feedback needed for deeper learning.

Perhaps the most important takeaway concerns parents. Regardless of their own fluency, parents who took an active role — talking about what their children watched, repeating words, or playing games together — helped transform exposure into learning. Their involvement made the experience meaningful and connected, turning passive listening into active communication. As Dr. Tufa wisely noted, *“Devices cannot replace dialogue.”* From a broader developmental perspective, the study highlights that early foreign language learning can boost more than just linguistic ability. It can nurture attention, memory, and social adaptability, while also encouraging empathy and cultural openness. These are skills that reach far beyond language itself.

For parents and educators, the implication is simple but powerful: early exposure works best when it is interactive, consistent, and emotionally engaging. Technology can be a useful tool, but only if balanced with genuine human connection. For researchers, the results open space for future studies comparing

how these patterns evolve as children grow — especially as technology continues to play a larger role in early education. In short, early exposure to a foreign language can be a gift for a child’s development — but like any gift, it matters how it is given. A tablet might introduce the words, but it is a parent’s smile, a shared story, or a playful exchange that makes those words come alive.

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