



Family Involvement in Second Language Learning

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Abstract

This chapter describes a study based on teaching foreign languages to very young learners, carried out in three different European Countries: in Romania by EuroEd Foundation, in Slovakia by Budatko Mother-Child Centre and in Italy by the University of Rome 'Sapienza', as part of a European funded project, Bilfam (Let's become a bilingual family!). The Bilfam project proposes a program for learning a foreign language within the family. This language learning program, the Narrative Format, first developed for teaching languages at school or in the kindergarten, proved to be flexible enough to promote a family-initiated language learning activity.

Field research results, which used online tutoring to inform and coach families and questionnaires and blogs to collect data, have shown that parents with little or no foreign language competence, provided with the necessary tools and strategies, can be involved in their child's foreign language learning. Both child and adult benefit from the experience because adults can follow the development of their child throughout the year offering long-term and frequent input. Results have also shown that parents feel encouraged to improve their own language learning as they teach their children. Furthermore, family foreign language learning creates a positive attitude towards multilingualism, developing better contextual conditions for multilingual education.

1. Introduction

Encouraging bilingualism is a EU main objective because it best serves work mobility. Scientific literature has found out that FLL before the age of 8 in the context of informal education (learning by doing) can develop native speaker competence. Moreover, research on the Narrative Format methodology (done by the Psycholinguistic Faculty from the Sapienza University in Rome) has shown that the affective relationship between the adult as model and children weighs a lot in foreign language learning.

2. The Narrative Format

Parental involvement in children's learning represents a key factor at an early age as it determines the child's language and development. Programs on family learning environment should enhance parents' ability to support their child's education creating a culture of learning and helping them to improve their skills. Learning more than one language should not be the exclusive prerogative of those who live in a bilingual environment; school is committed to language teaching, but the results are not satisfactory, due to the teaching methods used.

A second language teaching method that has proved to be successful with young children, motivating them and their teachers to learn and start speaking in the new language, is the 'Narrative Format' [1, 2]. This approach is strongly linked to several aspects related to the nature of human communication skills and of human learning processes. The method relies on interactional strategies such as reciprocal intersubjective gazing at, drawing attention to a common focus of interest or creating a group by sharing repeated experiences in the form of a story, which is acted out as a mime theatre. Mime elements (iconic gestures, voice intonation and facial expressions) are cues helping children decode the meaning of the unknown words. They are immediate learning processes and therefore very easy to acquire [3]. In the Narrative Format the stories are easy to understand, being based on children's previous life experiences. The stories are then linked to each other, thus creating a series of adventures: 'The Adventures of Hocus



and Lotus', two little dinocrocs that children like and identify with. The necessary repetition is achieved through engaging activities such as acting out, singing, reading the illustrated story, retelling the adventure experienced and watching the cartoon of the same story at home. The Narrative Format also uses an effective bilingual strategy: while doing the activities the participants wear a special T-shirt with the "magic power" of enabling the teacher to speak the language of the dinocrocs. Holding hands and closing eyes when starting the acting out is a further communicative strategy, which enhances group cohesion and group complicity. The Narrative Format for schools relies on 5 activities mainly because of the small amount of time allotted to teaching second languages. In order to provide children with a wider second language contact, the Narrative Format was tested within the family learning context through the bilingual family project (the Bilfam project).

3. The Bilfam project

Parents and children spend a lot of time together, which builds strong affective and long-term relationships. As a result they can be involved in activities implying good emotional communication, which plays an essential role in motivating people to learn a language [2]. Notwithstanding these advantages, usually parents do not have the specific competences or the resources required to teach a second language at home.

The Bilfam project is focused on the educational model of intergenerational learning and aims at two different target groups: children under the age of 7, who are at a critical time of language learning, and their parents, who need a good motivation to learn a new language. The Bilfam project provides families with training, tools and a tutor's support to start using the language. The Narrative Format for families was enriched with exciting activities: e-books, puppets, speaking Voki Avatar, Dinobooks, Bilfam video, H&L board game, video-conference or Dino quiz, which families can do to create daily experiences in the second language [4].

Most families involved in the project chose English as the second language to be learned and received the Narrative Format materials, strategic training and access to the Bilfam website (forum and blog). They found downloadable materials, asked for and received support from the tutor and the other families. Parents were also asked to produce videos of their activities and write about their experiences in their blogs [5].

In the present study results of three Bilfam partners are shown: Romania, Slovakia and Italy. The families' attitudes towards the activities, involvement during the project, motivation to go on, participation on the website and the blog are analysed.

4. Research methodology

Research regarding learning in institutional settings and in the family belongs to the area of field research, which has the advantage of studying the phenomenon in its usual life context and has the lack of standard scientific measurements as its disadvantage [6]. The observations were gathered from comments posted by the participants. The complex family learning process could therefore be followed from the beginning throughout the entire period of time [7].

Two methods for collecting data were used: a questionnaire and materials uploaded on the platform such as blog posts and films. The questionnaire was administered to families 8 months after the beginning of their activity in order to have comparable results among groups in the process of introducing a new language in the family's life.

The 22 items of the questionnaire explored parents' and children's attitude towards the program, their preference for specific activities, the difficulties and the solutions found. The quantitative analysis of the families' contribution to the Bilfam website considered the number of posts and comments published in the family's blog and the number of videos and vokis uploaded. The qualitative analysis of the blogs was carried out through a coding system that focused on the linguistic clauses of the posts. A linguistic clause is defined as a syntactic unit having a predicate, representing an event, a condition or a process. According to their content, clauses focused on theoretical and practical issues (the Narrative Format principles, second language learning, project activities), evaluation (opinions about activities and children's learning process), suggestions (new strategies or activities), interaction with other families (requests, proposals, comparisons) or social issues (greetings and introductions, encouragement and praises).



The questionnaire analysis and the quantitative analysis of the families' contribution were performed on the data collected in the three countries: Italy, Romania and Slovakia while the qualitative content analysis of the family's blogs was carried out on the content of the Italian and Romanian blogs.

5. Results

5.1. Analysis of the questionnaires

The questionnaires were answered by 28 families in Italy, 19 in Romania and 22 in Slovakia. All respondents stated that they were generally happy with the project: enthusiastic, interested or proud to help children [5]. Parents' favourite activities were: the sing along, the cartoons and the puppet theatre and children's favourite activities were: the cartoons, the puppet theatre and voki.

Regarding the problems encountered with the activities, 15 families did not report any problem and 16 families reported initial problems with the program; 26 families had a good start but they subsequently began to have problems. It was noticed that summer and Christmas holidays represented an interruption of the families' routines that made it difficult to start again afterwards. Introducing a new language with the Bilfam program required parents to learn a series of strategies and the language of the stories; it took some time for the language to be acquired and integrated into the pre-existing family practices. In some cases this integration was achieved by the parents 'adapting' Hocus and Lotus to the family's habits and preferences.

The analysis of the questionnaires shows that the families appreciated their participation in the project and the activities. However, they had some problems in managing the activities mainly because of their lack of time and difficulties in involving the children in some of the activities [7].

5.2. Analysis of the parents' contribution to the Bilfam website

In Italy a total of 239 posts and 309 comments were uploaded on the website. As to participants' reactions to comments, 51 posts did not receive any comment. For 179 posts the comments/commentators ratio is 1. Only 4 posts showed a dialogical exchange between two users (ABAB) while 7 posts showed a three-turn interactional exchange (ABA). At the end of the period of activity families uploaded 60 videos.

In Romania the 25 participant families published 286 posts on the website and 599 comments. Most posts got 2 comments, the highest number being 10; 44 posts triggered a dialogic communication (ABAB). An almost immediate comment (5 minutes to one hour) was provided for 123 posts whereas others got a delayed reply, mainly because several posts were uploaded at the same time and only one of them caught parents' attention. In addition, they uploaded 26 videos and 29 vokis.

In Slovakia the analysis of the families' blogs showed 625 posts, there were 17 vokis produced by 9 families and 67 videos made by 14 families.

For the content analysis of the Italian and Romanian blogs 3.862 and 2.100 linguistic clauses were analysed. The research analysis showed a few comments on theoretical issues, the most commented of which being language learning present in 14.03 % of the clauses in Italy and 15 % in Romania. The most frequent comments were on the project activities where the acting out activity (45.6 % Italy; 40.20 % Romania) was top of the list.

In the clauses where the parents addressed the theoretical principles and the activities they mostly talked about their practice not about their evaluation. There were few metacognitive clauses or reports of alternative activities. In addition, when parents addressed the topic of language learning they talked mainly about evaluation or practice.

In Italy and in Romania the clauses on interactional actions were mostly used to make requests and in fewer cases to make proposals or give advice. In Italy there were 738 clauses including social aspects; most of them (55.7 %) were life events shared among the families and a few (4.7 %) encouragements and praises. In Romania, where most parents knew each other, there were only 300 clauses related to social aspects: the fewest (10%) were events shared with other families, and the most were about encouragement and praise (77.70 %).

6. Conclusions

The research has shown that, in the countries considered, parents are motivated in engaging themselves to teach their children a new language while, at the same time, deepening their own language competence. The Narrative Format performance proved to be totally new and very challenging for both



adults and children due to participants' expectations and experiences. Success depended on how parents themselves reacted to the novelty and prepared their children to enter the game. The Narrative Format can be easily experienced as a very unusual situation which one needs to get acquainted with before accepting it. The other activities were less demanding and less surprising entailing therefore little or no difficulty.

The research has shown that this totally new way of becoming a bilingual family through the 'Narrative Format for the Family' is feasible and can therefore possibly be proposed at a larger scale, at least to the population of the countries analysed. In fact, in European countries standard monolingual families are indeed interested in multilingualism so much that they may manage to dedicate some time daily to learning a new language.

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