



From “Learning Language” To “Learning the Lifeworld through Language”: Problems and Reflections on Early Childhood Language Education in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT: Early childhood language education plays a fundamental role in children’s overall development because language serves not only as a means of communication but also as an important medium through which children understand their experiences, interact with others, explore the world, and construct meaning. This article argues that early childhood language education should return to children’s lifeworlds and move beyond the narrow goal of linguistic skills acquisition toward enabling children to learn about life, understand the world, and construct meaning through language. Based on this perspective, the article examines four major issues in early childhood language education in Taiwan. First, an excessive emphasis on literacy and writing may narrow language education into skills training while reducing opportunities for oral expression, listening, storytelling, imagination, and social interaction. Second, the article proposes a shift from teacher-directed language instruction to child-centered language interaction, emphasizing children’s linguistic agency, dialogue, participation, and collaborative meaning-making. Third, the functions of the language learning area should be strengthened by transforming it from a space for storing instructional materials into a rich learning environment that supports autonomous reading, storytelling, symbol exploration, creative writing, dramatic play, peer interaction, and meaning-making. Fourth, children’s literature should be recognized as an important medium for language, emotional, imaginative, and value exploration rather than merely being used as a tool for teaching vocabulary, literacy, or moral values. Taken together, these four issues highlight the need to reconsider the

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purposes and practices of early childhood language education in Taiwan. The article concludes that early childhood language education should move from skills to experience, from instruction to interaction, from materials to meaningful learning environments, and from the instrumental use of literature to literary and aesthetic experience. Ultimately, the goal is to move from “learning language” toward “learning the lifeworld through language,” enabling children to understand themselves, communicate with others, explore their surroundings, and construct meaning through meaningful linguistic experiences.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Early language education policy should not be understood merely as a set of regulations that determines what languages young children should learn or what linguistic competencies they are expected to develop. Rather, it should be understood as a multidimensional concept encompassing policy planning, educational practices, and language ideologies. In other words, language policy is not limited to what is articulated in official policy documents; it is also enacted through curricula, teaching materials, teachers' instructional practices, learning environments, and assessment practices in early childhood settings. Therefore, understanding early language education policy requires more than examining what policies state. It also requires examining how policies are interpreted and enacted in practice, as well as what linguistic values, beliefs, and assumptions are communicated through these practices (Palviainen, & Curdt-Christiansen, 2022). Language is an important medium through which young children understand, express, and construct their lifeworld, and the development of language competence plays a crucial role in children's overall learning and holistic development. Through language, children communicate with others, express their thoughts and emotions, understand the people, events, and objects around them, and gradually construct their understandings of themselves, others, and the world through ongoing social interactions and everyday experiences. Therefore, early childhood language education should not focus solely on the development of language skills such as vocabulary, literacy, phonetic awareness, and writing. Rather, it should place greater emphasis on children's experiences of using language for communication, thinking, expression, interaction, and meaning-making in authentic life contexts (Bruner, 1983; Ministry of Education, 2017; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, for young children, language is not merely knowledge and a set of skills that need to be “learned”; it is also an important medium through which they understand everyday life, make sense of others, express themselves, and construct experiences (Bruner, 1983; Wells, 1999). However, in the practice of early childhood language education in Taiwan, language instruction may still be influenced by tendencies toward academic subject orientation and schoolification, with excessive emphasis on literacy, phonetic symbols, writing, and the training of language skills, while comparatively neglecting the communicative, interactive, experiential, and creative dimensions of children's language development (Ministry of Education, 2017). When language learning is excessively transformed into operationalized and measurable skills training, the scope and meaning of early childhood language education may consequently become restricted, weakening the connections between language and children's life experiences, emotional expression, social interaction, and meaning-making (Dewey, 1934; Bruner, 1983). As a result, children may “learn” certain linguistic forms without necessarily being able to use language effectively to understand their own lifeworld or establish meaningful relationships with others through language. This raises an important question for reflection: Should early childhood language education primarily focus on “teaching children to learn language,” or should it enable children to learn to understand themselves, others, and the lifeworld through language? This question concerns not only the selection of language-learning materials and teaching methods but also how we conceptualize the relationships among the child, language, and education. From this perspective, the core of early

childhood language education should not be limited to developing children's abilities to "speak, read, and write." Rather, children should be supported in using language within authentic and meaningful life contexts to understand the world, engage with others, express themselves, construct experiences, and gradually develop an understanding of their lifeworld and its meanings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dewey, 1934; Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003). Accordingly, the focus of early childhood language education can shift from "learning language skills" to "understanding the lifeworld and constructing meaning through language." Such a shift also implies that early childhood language materials and pedagogical practices should place greater emphasis on children's life experiences, social interactions, play, storytelling, literary engagement, and self-expression, thereby making language an important medium through which children come to understand themselves, others, the world around them, and their lived experiences (Bruner, 1983; Ministry of Education, 2017). Based on these perspectives, this article adopts "From 'Learning Language' to 'Learning the Lifeworld through Language'" as its central theme to re-examine the curriculum and pedagogical practices of early childhood language education in Taiwan. It reflects on whether current language education places excessive emphasis on the transmission of linguistic skills while overlooking the relationships among language, children's lived experiences, social interactions, cultural contexts, and meaning-making. This article argues that early childhood language education should return to children's lifeworlds and enable language to serve as an important medium through which children understand their own experiences, communicate with others, explore the world around them, and construct meaning. In this way, language education can move beyond "teaching children to learn language" toward "enabling children to learn about life, understand the world, and construct meaning through language."

2. PROBLEMS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN TAIWAN

2.1 An Excessive Emphasis on Literacy and Writing in Early Childhood Language Education

In Taiwan, one important concern regarding early childhood language education is that educational practices may place excessive emphasis on literacy and writing. Influenced by parental expectations, academic competition, and the perceived need to "prepare children for elementary school in advance," some preschools may place greater emphasis on character recognition, phonetic symbols, writing, vocabulary memorization, and worksheet-based language training. Although emergent literacy is an important foundation for children's language development, an excessive focus on literacy and writing may narrow the scope of language education and reduce children's opportunities to develop oral expression, listening, storytelling, imagination, communication, and social interaction skills (Ministry of Education, 2017). Furthermore, some early childhood language education practices may be influenced by elementary-school subject-based instructional models, resulting in an early emphasis on phonetic symbols, character recognition, handwriting, reading, and paper-and-pencil exercises. Consequently, language learning may gradually become oriented toward skills training, while the communicative, expressive, interpretive, and meaning-making functions of language development may receive comparatively less attention. When early childhood language education primarily evaluates learning outcomes according to how many characters children can recognize, whether they can write correctly, or whether they can complete language-related assignments, language may be reduced to a set of skills that children are expected to memorize, practice, and demonstrate. In this process, its role as a medium through which children understand experiences, express emotions, interact with others, and construct meaning may be overlooked (Bruner, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1999). From a developmental perspective, children's language development does not emerge simply through memorizing linguistic symbols or practicing language skills. Rather, it develops gradually through social interaction, cultural participation, and everyday experiences. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the close relationship between language development, social interaction, and cognitive development. Bruner (1983) highlighted that language is acquired and used through social interaction and shared activities, while Rogoff (2003) further argued that children's learning and development are embedded within cultural and social participation. Therefore, when early childhood language education places excessive emphasis on literacy and writing, language learning—which is inherently social, interactive, and cultural—may be narrowed into individualized skills training (Bruner, 1983; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, an excessive emphasis on

literacy, writing, and paper-and-pencil activities may reflect a tendency toward the schoolification of early childhood education. When preschools extensively introduce curricular content and instructional practices associated with elementary schools, children's learning may gradually shift away from play, exploration, storytelling, dialogue, and everyday experiences toward learning outcomes, task completion, and demonstrations of academic skills. This tendency warrants further reflection because language learning during the preschool years should be closely connected to children's lived experiences and social interactions, enabling them to understand and use language in authentic and meaningful contexts rather than using the ability to recognize written characters or complete writing tasks as the primary criteria for language learning (Ministry of Education, 2017; Wells, 1999). From an educational-philosophical perspective, Dewey (1934) emphasized the close relationship between education and experience, arguing that children's learning should be grounded in authentic life experiences and interactions with their environments. Therefore, when literacy and writing are detached from children's lived experiences, the connection between language and everyday life may be weakened. For young children, language is not merely a set of symbols and skills that must be "mastered"; it is also an important medium for understanding experiences, expressing emotions, communicating with others, and constructing meaning (Bruner, 1983; Wells, 1999). Therefore, the issue is not whether young children should learn literacy and writing, but rather how literacy and writing should be positioned within early childhood language education. In other words, literacy and writing should be regarded as components of children's language development rather than the sole or primary objectives of language education. According to Taiwan's Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework, language learning encompasses dimensions such as understanding and expression, communicative interaction, and the use of linguistic symbols, while also emphasizing connections with children's everyday experiences (Ministry of Education, 2017). Accordingly, in addition to literacy and writing, early childhood language education should provide children with abundant opportunities for listening, dialogue, storytelling, reading, play, drama, picture-book appreciation, and self-expression, enabling them to use language in authentic and meaningful life contexts. From this perspective, what Taiwan's early childhood language education needs to reconsider is not simply "whether literacy and writing should be taught," but rather "why they should be taught, how they should be taught, and how literacy and writing can be connected with children's lifeworlds." Early childhood language education should gradually move beyond "learning language skills" toward "understanding the lifeworld through language," so that literacy, reading, and writing become media through which children understand themselves, interact with others, explore their environments, and construct meaning, rather than becoming the ultimate goals of language education. More importantly, the core of early childhood language education should not be determined simply by "how many characters children can recognize." Instead, attention should be given to whether children can express their thoughts and feelings, understand others' language, participate in dialogue and discussion, use language to solve problems, and construct experiences and meanings through language. Therefore, the value of language education should not be measured solely by how much linguistic knowledge children possess, but also by how they use language and how language becomes an important medium through which they understand themselves, others, and their lifeworlds.

2.2 From Teacher-Directed Language Instruction to Child-Centered Language Interaction

In early childhood language education, an important issue concerns the relationship between teacher-directed language instruction and child-centered language interaction. Traditional language instruction often positions teachers as the primary providers of knowledge, while children are expected to learn through listening, repetition, answering questions, and completing predetermined language tasks. Although teacher guidance remains important in early childhood education, excessive teacher direction may limit children's opportunities to initiate conversations, express their own ideas, ask questions, negotiate meanings, and use language for communication in authentic contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1983; Wells, 1999). Therefore, the issue is not whether teacher guidance should be eliminated, but how the teacher's role can be reconceptualized and gradually transformed from a transmitter of linguistic knowledge into a facilitator of children's language interaction and meaning-making. From a sociocultural perspective,

children's language development gradually emerges through continuous interactions with adults, peers, and their cultural environments. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that children's higher psychological processes develop through social interaction, while Bruner (1983) highlighted the importance of shared activities and social interaction in children's acquisition and use of language. Rogoff (2003) further argued that children's learning and development are embedded in culturally organized activities and social participation. These perspectives suggest that language learning should not be understood merely as an individual process of acquiring linguistic knowledge, but rather as a socially and culturally situated learning process through which children participate in meaningful interactions, develop language abilities, and construct understandings of themselves, others, and the world (Bruner, 1983; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Accordingly, teacher-directed language instruction needs to move beyond the one-way interactional pattern of "teacher asks–child answers–teacher evaluates." Within such a structure, children's language may be primarily limited to providing answers predetermined or expected by the teacher, leaving fewer opportunities for them to express their own lived experiences, perspectives, and feelings. Although teacher questioning can support children's vocabulary development and language comprehension, sustained language development requires abundant and extended opportunities for linguistic interaction, including narrating experiences, explaining ideas, asking questions, responding to others, and participating in collaborative discussions (Wells, 1999). Therefore, the quality of teacher-child interaction is an important factor in creating a learning environment conducive to children's language development. In contrast, child-centered language interaction emphasizes children's active participation, linguistic agency, and right to express themselves. Teachers can create open and meaningful language contexts that provide children with opportunities to initiate conversations, ask questions, share experiences, tell stories, explain ideas, express emotions, and respond to peers. Rather than completely controlling the direction and outcome of conversations, teachers can use open-ended questions, elaborative responses, linguistic prompts, and sustained shared conversations to support children's extended thinking and language expression (Wells, 1999). In this way, children's language is no longer merely a tool for answering teachers' questions but becomes an important medium for exploration, interpretation, negotiation, and meaning-making. Furthermore, child-centered language interaction does not imply a reduction in the teacher's role or the disappearance of pedagogical guidance. Rather, it involves a reconceptualization of the teacher's role. Teachers remain important sources of linguistic support, but their primary responsibility is no longer simply to transmit predetermined linguistic knowledge. Instead, teachers need to listen attentively to children's expressions, understand their interests and lived experiences, respond to their ideas, and provide appropriate linguistic scaffolding when necessary, enabling children to develop increasingly complex forms of language and thinking through interaction (Bruner, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978). In this process, teaching and learning are no longer understood as one-way transmission but as an interactive process through which teachers and children co-construct meaning through language (Wells, 1999). This shift also corresponds closely with the central argument of this article: "From Learning Language to Learning the Lifeworld through Language." When children are able to talk about their families, play, emotions, peer relationships, natural environments, and everyday experiences, language is no longer merely curricular content but becomes an important medium through which children understand their experiences, establish relationships with others, explore the world around them, and construct meanings in their lives. In other words, early childhood language education should gradually move from "teachers telling children what to say" toward "supporting children in expressing what they think, what they experience, and how they understand their lifeworld through language." Therefore, the shift from teacher-directed language instruction to child-centered language interaction does not reject the professional role of teachers. Rather, it involves rethinking the relationship between teachers and children in language learning.

2.3 Strengthening the Functions of the Language Learning Area

In early childhood language education, the language learning area should not be regarded merely as a classroom space for storing books, word cards, teaching materials, or worksheets. Rather, it should be understood as a learning environment that supports children's autonomous exploration, language interaction, emergent literacy experiences, and meaning-making. Children's language

development does not occur solely through formal language instruction; it also takes place through play, reading, peer interaction, storytelling, role-playing, and everyday life experiences. Therefore, the design of the language learning area should gradually shift from a “space for displaying instructional materials” toward a “learning environment in which children actively use language” (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1983; Rogoff, 2003). First, the language learning area should provide rich and diverse linguistic stimuli. In addition to picture books, illustrated books, and storybooks, it can include word cards, picture cards, story characters, dramatic props, writing materials, children’s self-created works, signs and symbols, and language-related materials connected to children’s everyday experiences. These resources enable children to encounter and use language through reading, observation, listening, manipulation, and expression. More importantly, the language learning area should emphasize children’s autonomous exploration and freedom of choice. When children can independently select picture books, decide what to read, tell stories with peers, or use images, symbols, and written language to express their experiences, language learning is no longer merely a teacher-prescribed activity but becomes an experience of active participation. From Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural perspective, children’s learning develops through interactions with others and through the use of cultural tools. Rogoff (2003) similarly emphasized that children’s learning and development are closely connected to their participation in cultural activities and social interactions. Therefore, the language learning area should become a space for children’s active participation, interaction, and collaborative meaning-making. Furthermore, the language learning area should move beyond the traditional “reading corner” and develop into a multifunctional language interaction environment. For example, it can include a story-reading area, storytelling area, dramatic-play area, symbol-exploration area, creative-writing area, and children’s work-display area. After reading a picture book, children can retell the story, create alternative endings, engage in role-playing, or use images and written language to create their own stories. These activities integrate reading, oral language, writing, visual representation, play, and social interaction into a unified learning process, enabling language to function as an important medium for children’s expression, creativity, and meaning-making (Wells, 1999).

2.4. Early Childhood Literature as an Important Medium for Language, Emotional, Imaginative, and Value Exploration: Bridging the Gap between Children’s Literature and Language Education

Early childhood literature is an important resource for language education. Literary forms such as stories, picture books, nursery rhymes, children’s songs, and poetry not only provide rich language experiences but also encourage children to engage in emotional experiences, imagination, value exploration, and meaning-making. However, in preschool teaching practices, children’s literature is sometimes instrumentalized, becoming a tool for achieving specific instructional objectives. For example, teachers may use picture books to teach character recognition, vocabulary, counting, moral norms, or other forms of knowledge. Although such approaches may serve certain educational purposes, an excessive emphasis on the instrumental function of picture books may overlook the literariness, imaginative potential, emotional richness, and aesthetic value inherent in children’s literature (Nodelman, 2008; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001; Shih, 2024, 2025). From a developmental and educational perspective, literary reading is not merely an activity for acquiring language skills; it is also a process through which children experience the world and construct meaning. When listening to or reading stories, children can enter different imaginative worlds through characters, plots, language, and images while developing an understanding of others’ feelings, perspectives, and life experiences. Bruner (1986) argued that narrative is an important means through which human beings understand experience and construct meaning. Similarly, Rosenblatt’s (1978) transactional theory of reading emphasizes that literary meaning emerges through the dynamic relationship between the reader and the text. Therefore, children’s literature should be regarded as a medium for meaning-making, rather than merely as instructional material for language skills (Bruner, 1986; Rosenblatt, 1978). Furthermore, picture books possess the distinctive characteristic of integrating linguistic and visual representations, providing children with diverse experiences of meaning-making. Children can understand stories through words, images, characters, plots, and narrative structures while bringing their own life experiences into the reading process. Nikolajeva and Scott (2001) pointed out that words and images in picture books interact in

constructing narrative meaning, requiring readers to interpret and negotiate meaning across different representational modes. This suggests that children's engagement with picture books is not a passive reception of story content; rather, children actively construct meaning through their own experiences, imagination, and interpretation (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001; Kiefer, 1995). More importantly, children's literature can serve as an important medium for emotional exploration and social understanding. Characters in stories may encounter experiences involving loss, friendship, conflict, loneliness, family relationships, growth, and decision-making. Through these experiences, children can explore different emotions and perspectives. When teachers do not immediately tell children "what the story is supposed to teach," but instead invite them to discuss questions such as "Why do you think the character acted this way?", "What would you do if you were the character?", or "Have you ever had a similar experience?", children's literature can move beyond knowledge transmission toward emotional expression, perspective sharing, and value exploration (Bruner, 1986; Rosenblatt, 1978). Therefore, early childhood literature education should not place excessive emphasis on finding a **"correct answer."** The meanings and values of a story can remain open to interpretation, and different children may develop different understandings based on their own life experiences. Such opportunities for multiple interpretations can support children's independent thinking and expression while transforming literary reading into a dialogic learning experience. From this perspective, the teacher's role is not to provide children with a "standard interpretation" of a story, but to support them through questioning, listening, and dialogue so that they can articulate their own understandings and exchange different perspectives with their peers (Rosenblatt, 1978; Shih, 2026a, 2026b; Wells, 1999). Children's literature can also establish meaningful connections with children's lifeworlds. When stories are connected with children's families, communities, cultures, natural environments, and everyday experiences, literature is no longer merely instructional material but becomes a medium through which children understand their own lives. Dewey (1934) emphasized the close relationship between education and experience, while Rogoff (2003) argued that children's learning and development are embedded within cultural and social participation. Accordingly, children's literature can serve as an important bridge connecting texts, children's experiences, and their lifeworlds (Dewey, 1934; Rogoff, 2003). From this perspective, there should not be a significant gap between children's literature and language education. Language education should not merely use literature to "teach language"; rather, it should use literature to enable children to experience language, engage with emotions, develop imagination, understand others, explore values, and construct meaning in their lives (Bruner, 1986; Rosenblatt, 1978; Wells, 1999).

3. CONCLUSION

The importance of developing early language and literacy skills is acknowledged by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a global human rights issue. Indeed, research suggests that language abilities are foundational for a host of cognitive, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes. Therefore, it is critical to provide experiences that foster language acquisition across early learning settings (Chen-Hafteck, 1997; Finders, Wilson & Duncan, 2023).

Early childhood language education is fundamental to children's overall learning and development. It not only contributes to the development of language and emergent literacy skills but also has important implications for children's cognitive, emotional, and social development and meaning-making (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1983; Rogoff, 2003). Children's language development does not occur simply through the acquisition of linguistic symbols and the practice of language skills; rather, it develops gradually through continuous interactions with adults, peers, and cultural environments (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1983). Furthermore, rich language environments, extended conversations between adults and children, and children's use of language in authentic everyday contexts are important conditions for promoting language and emergent literacy development (Wells, 1999). However, current practices in early childhood language education continue to present several issues that warrant careful consideration and reflection. For example, some language instruction may place excessive emphasis on literacy, phonetic symbols, and writing skills. Influenced by schoolification and parental expectations regarding academic learning, children's language learning may gradually become

oriented toward operational and measurable language skills, while comparatively neglecting experiences involving oral expression, listening, storytelling, dialogue, imagination, and social interaction (Ministry of Education, 2017). In addition, when teacher-directed language instruction places excessive emphasis on patterns of teacher questioning, children's responses, and teacher evaluation, it may limit children's opportunities to initiate expression, ask questions, negotiate meanings, and collaboratively construct understanding (Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1999). At the same time, the learning environment and use of instructional materials in early childhood language education also warrant further examination. The language learning area should not merely function as a space for storing books, word cards, and teaching materials; rather, it should become a learning environment that supports children's autonomous reading, storytelling, symbol exploration, written representation, and peer interaction (Rogoff, 2003; Wells, 1999). Similarly, children's literature should not be regarded merely as a tool for teaching literacy, vocabulary, or moral values. Instead, it should serve as an important medium through which children engage in language, emotional experience, imagination, and meaning-making (Bruner, 1986; Rosenblatt, 1978; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001). Therefore, language ability plays a major role in children's future development, and early childhood language education needs to reconsider its educational purposes and curricular practices. The central question is not simply "How can we teach children to learn language?" but also "How can we enable children to understand themselves, others, and the lifeworld through language?" In other words, early childhood language education should gradually move beyond simply "learning language" toward "learning the lifeworld through language," enabling language to become an important medium through which children express themselves, understand others, explore the world, participate in society, and construct their life experiences (Bruner, 1986; Burger, 2015; Dewey, 1934; Dolean, 2015; Rogoff, 2003; Shih & Kao, 2026a, 2026b; Thieme et al, 2022; van der Wilt et al, 2019; Waddington, 2022).

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