



From Language Learning to Meaning-Making: Early Childhood Language Education, Cultural Identity, and Lived Experiences

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ABSTRACT: This article seeks to explore the relationships among early childhood language education, cultural identity, and lived experiences, and further considers how early childhood language education can move beyond “language learning” toward “meaning-making,” positioning language as an important medium through which young children understand their lives, connect with culture, and develop a sense of self and cultural identity.

INTRODUCTION

If early childhood language education is understood merely as the development of vocabulary, sentence structures, literacy, and writing skills, language can easily be reduced to a body of knowledge and skills that children are expected to acquire. However, for young children, language is not only an object of learning but also an important medium through which they understand everyday life, express their experiences, establish relationships with others, and participate in cultural life. From a sociocultural perspective, language development does not occur in a vacuum detached from children’s lived experiences; rather, it gradually develops through children’s ongoing interactions with adults, peers, and their cultural environments (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990). Therefore, early childhood language education should not focus solely on the question of “What do children learn?” but should also consider “What do children experience through language, and how do children use language to understand their lived worlds?” Young children’s lived experiences are inherently intertwined with diverse cultural contexts. Cultural identity therefore becomes an important dimension through which young children come to understand themselves and others in the course of their everyday lives and language experiences. Through ongoing interactions with family members, peers, teachers, and community cultural environments,

children gradually encounter and develop an understanding of the cultural contexts in which they are situated, thereby forming their perceptions of themselves, others, and their cultural communities (Rogoff, 2003; Wenger, 1998). In other words, children's language learning is not separate from their lived worlds and cultural experiences; rather, it develops within specific sociocultural contexts through the use, exchange, and interaction of language, enabling children to gradually construct an understanding of their lived worlds. From this perspective, early childhood language education should not be regarded merely as the acquisition of linguistic knowledge and skills. Rather, it should be understood as an important process through which young children come to understand themselves, recognize others, connect with their lived worlds, and construct cultural identities (Norton, 2013; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978;). Accordingly, this article seeks to explore the relationships among early childhood language education, cultural identity, and lived experiences, and further considers how early childhood language education can move beyond "language learning" toward "meaning-making," positioning language as an important medium through which young children understand their lives, connect with culture, and develop a sense of self and cultural identity.

FROM LANGUAGE LEARNING TO MEANING-MAKING

Traditional early childhood language education has often regarded language as a tool that children need to learn and master, with instructional emphasis primarily placed on the development of vocabulary, sentence structures, phonological awareness, language comprehension, and expressive abilities. From this perspective, young children are primarily viewed as learners of linguistic knowledge and skills, while teachers assume the roles of providers of language input, models of appropriate linguistic forms, and designers of learning activities. From a sociocultural perspective, however, language is not merely a symbolic system that individuals acquire independently; rather, it constitutes an important psychological and social tool through which individuals participate in social interactions, understand culture, and construct knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Accordingly, when language is understood within the context of young children's lived experiences and sociocultural environments, it should not be regarded merely as an "object of learning" but rather as an important medium through which children understand the world, express their experiences, establish relationships, and develop an understanding of themselves. From this perspective, early childhood language education needs to move beyond language learning toward meaning-making. This shift does not diminish the importance of linguistic knowledge and skills; rather, it calls for a reconsideration of the purposes and nature of language learning. Bruner (1993) argued that human beings understand the world through symbolic systems and narrative forms provided by culture, and that meaning does not simply reside in external objects or events but is constructed through interactions between individuals and their cultural contexts. Accordingly, children's language learning should not be understood merely as the accumulation of vocabulary or the mastery of grammatical rules. Instead, it should be viewed as a process through which children use language to understand experiences, express perspectives, and construct meaning. Meaning-making therefore involves more than expanding children's repertoire of words, sentence structures, or linguistic symbols; it refers to the ongoing process through which children engage with lived experiences, social interactions, and cultural contexts through language and gradually develop understandings of "who I am," "how I am related to others," and "what meaning the world in which I live holds" (Bruner, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, children do not simply passively receive linguistic meanings predetermined by adults. Rather, through interactions with parents, teachers, peers, and their social environments, they actively interpret experiences, negotiate meanings, and construct understandings of the world. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized

that children's cognitive development is deeply rooted in social interaction and the use of cultural tools, while Rogoff (2003) further argued that children's learning and development occur through their participation in cultural activities. Accordingly, children's language development cannot be separated from the social relationships and cultural contexts in which they are situated. Instead, it should be understood as part of children's participation in shared activities, interactions with others, and gradual development as participants in their cultural communities. From a sociocultural perspective, language is inherently cultural. It is not merely a means of transmitting information but also carries the values, worldviews, and ways of life of particular communities (Gee, 2014). The words, stories, forms of address, patterns of dialogue, everyday narratives, and symbolic expressions that children encounter and use may all embody particular cultural values and social meanings. Thus, while learning language, children are simultaneously learning how to understand their families, communities, cultures, and social relationships. Rogoff (2003) noted that through participation in everyday cultural activities, children gradually acquire the language, values, and ways of acting characteristic of the societies in which they live. From this perspective, children's language learning is simultaneously a process of cultural learning and socialization. For example, through family stories, local legends, festivals, everyday conversations, picture-book reading, and interactions with their communities, children learn not only new vocabulary and ways of expressing themselves but also gradually develop understandings of family relationships, social norms, cultural practices, and collective values. Such learning is not simply a one-way transmission of culture. Rather, children gradually develop their own understandings of cultural experiences through participation, dialogue, and interpretation (Rogoff, 2003). Language learning can therefore be regarded as an important pathway through which children enter and participate in the sociocultural world. More importantly, meaning-making is closely connected to children's lived experiences. Children's understandings of the world do not arise solely from the transmission of abstract knowledge but are grounded in the people, events, objects, and situations they encounter in their everyday lives. Dewey (1938) argued that educational experiences should be connected to learners' actual experiences and that experience itself possesses continuity and developmental potential. From this perspective, lived experiences provide important resources for children's meaning-making, while language enables children to describe, express, reorganize, and interpret those experiences. When children describe a family trip, share experiences with grandparents, discuss events that have occurred in preschool, or re-express their lived experiences through drawing, play, drama, and storytelling, they are doing more than practicing language skills. They are also reinterpreting their experiences and transforming individual and sometimes fragmented experiences into understandings that carry personal and social meaning. Bruner (1990) particularly emphasized the importance of narrative in human meaning-making, as people frequently use stories and narratives to organize experiences, understand actions, and construct a sense of self. Accordingly, children's storytelling, conversations, and narratives of everyday experiences should not be regarded merely as exercises in language expression; they can also be understood as important means through which children make sense of their experiences and construct meanings of self. This perspective also redefines the purposes of language education. The value of language education should not be confined to enabling children to "speak, listen, and read"; rather, greater attention should be given to how children use language to understand and interpret their lived worlds and to establish relationships with others. Language thus serves a dual function: on the one hand, it is a tool through which children express their thoughts, emotions, and experiences; on the other hand, it is a medium through which they understand others, negotiate meanings, and participate in sociocultural life (Gee, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). When children express

their ideas in dialogue, respond to others' perspectives, raise questions, or reinterpret an experience through language, their language use has already moved beyond the practice of linguistic forms and become a form of social interaction and meaning negotiation.

THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN THE SHIFT FROM LANGUAGE LEARNING TO MEANING-MAKING

This shift also entails a reconceptualization of the teacher's role. Teachers should no longer function merely as transmitters of linguistic knowledge or models of correct linguistic forms; rather, they should become supporters, dialogic partners, and co-constructors of children's meaning-making. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory suggests that children's learning and development are progressively shaped through interactions with more knowledgeable or capable others, while the support provided by adults can enable children to engage in more advanced forms of thinking and action. Accordingly, teachers need to create open, authentic, and meaningful language contexts in which children have opportunities to describe their lived experiences, ask questions, express perspectives, listen to others, and respond to different viewpoints. The teacher's primary task is not to immediately provide predetermined answers but to use questioning, follow-up questions, responses, and extensions to support children in thinking more deeply about and reinterpreting their experiences. Therefore, meaning-making represents a deepening of language learning rather than a rejection of language learning. Children still need to develop vocabulary, grammar, phonological awareness, language comprehension, and expressive abilities. However, the educational value of these linguistic competencies ultimately lies in their capacity to support children in expressing ideas, understanding others, interpreting experiences, and participating in sociocultural life. Linguistic form and meaning-making should not be regarded as dichotomous; rather, they are mutually constitutive: linguistic competence provides children with the tools for meaning-making, while meaning-making gives language learning its purpose, context, and connection to lived experience. Accordingly, the central concern of language education should not simply be how much language children acquire, but also what they are able to understand and express through language and how they use language to develop understandings of themselves and the world. Furthermore, the shift from language learning to meaning-making highlights the importance of cultural identity in early childhood language education. Cultural identity should not be understood as a fixed or predetermined characteristic; rather, it is continually formed and negotiated through language, cultural practices, social interactions, and historical contexts (Hall, 1990). Through language, children encounter family stories, local cultures, home languages, and multilingual environments, gradually developing understandings of "who I am," "which groups I belong to," and "how I am connected to this place." Language is therefore not merely a communicative tool but also an important medium through which cultural memories, values, and collective identities are transmitted and reconstructed. This perspective is particularly relevant in Taiwan, where multilingualism, multiple ethnic groups, and cultural diversity constitute important features of the sociocultural context. When preschools incorporate family languages, local cultures, community experiences, and children's everyday stories into language curricula, language learning can become an important process through which children understand themselves, understand others, and establish connections with their cultural communities. Such a curricular orientation not only supports children's language development but also enables them, through encounters and dialogue with diverse cultural experiences, to gradually develop an understanding of their own cultural positioning and that of others (Rogoff, 2003). Early childhood language education can therefore be understood as an interconnected process involving language development, social participation, and cultural identity formation.

CONCLUSION: THE INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE EDUCATION, CULTURAL IDENTITY, AND LIVED EXPERIENCES

In the process of learning multiple languages, children are exposed to different cultural backgrounds and modes of communication, which not only enhance their language proficiency but also foster their understanding and respect for cultural diversity. At the same time, this learning process helps children develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as they need to switch and adapt between different languages and culture (Liu et al, 2025; Shih, 2024, 2025; Shih et al, 2025). 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 (Shih, 2026a, 2026b). Over the past three decades, increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in schools has generated significant scholarly interest in how educational approaches can meaningfully address multilingualism and multiculturalism (Takasu et al, 2026). Early childhood language education, cultural identity, and lived experiences are deeply interconnected dimensions of young children's learning and development. Language is not merely a tool for acquiring vocabulary, grammar, or literacy skills; it is a fundamental medium through which children communicate, express experiences, and construct meaning in social and cultural contexts. From a sociocultural perspective, children's language development occurs through participation in meaningful social interactions, in which communication with adults and peers contributes to the development of both language and thinking. Lived experiences provide the contexts in which language becomes meaningful. When children talk about their families, engage in play, participate in classroom activities, and share everyday experiences, language is used for authentic communicative purposes rather than learned as isolated linguistic knowledge. Such experiences enable children to connect language with meaningful activities and social interactions, thereby supporting language development through participation in everyday contexts. In this sense, language learning is closely connected to what children experience, do, and communicate in their everyday lives (Bruner, 1983, 1986, ; Halliday, 1975; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1999). At the same time, language is closely related to the development of cultural identity. Through stories, conversations, family interactions, cultural practices, and community experiences, children encounter culturally situated ways of communicating, thinking, and understanding the world. Language therefore functions not only as a means of communication but also as a means through which cultural meanings and identities are expressed and negotiated. When children are encouraged to express their own experiences and cultural backgrounds, language education can provide opportunities for them to develop a sense of belonging and identity while learning to recognize and respect perspectives different from their own (Halliday, 1975; Rogoff, 2003). The relationship among these three dimensions can therefore be understood as a dynamic and reciprocal process: lived experiences provide meaningful contexts for language use; language enables children to interpret and communicate their experiences; and these processes of meaning-making contribute to the development of cultural identity (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003; Wells, 1999). This relationship is not linear. Rather, children's cultural identities also influence how they interpret experiences and participate in communicative interactions, while new experiences and interactions may continually reshape their understandings of themselves and others. Accordingly, early childhood language education should move beyond the transmission of vocabulary, grammar, or literacy skills and create authentic, inclusive, and dialogic environments in which children can use language to express lived experiences, interact with others, and construct meaning (Brune, 1983, 1986, 1993; Wells, 1999). Such an approach recognizes children not simply as language learners but as active participants in social and cultural

worlds. Ultimately, meaningful early childhood language education emerges when language, lived experiences, and cultural identity are brought together through authentic communication and social interaction, allowing children to use language not only to communicate but also to understand themselves, others, and the world around them.

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