On the Co-development of Children’s Foreign Language and Drawing Abilities and Its Enlightenment to Children’s English Teaching

CHE Huan-huan
Leshan Normal University, Leshan, China

In modern education, children’s cognitive thinking expression is first structured from their graphic language. Pictures are recognized as one of the most effective and vivid ways to communicate with children’s inner world. In light of language acquisition in cognitive linguistics and children’s drawing psychology, this paper first demonstrates the possibility of the coordinated development of children’s foreign language and drawing abilities from the aspects of acquisition mechanism, acquisition object, and acquisition method. Then combined with the cognitive characteristics of children of different ages in language and drawing, some suggestions for designing activities that combine “drawing” and “English” in children’s English teaching are given.

Keywords: cognitive linguistics, children’s foreign language ability, children’s drawing ability, children’s English teaching

Introduction

Children’s drawing is a symbolic impulse in the process of children’s ontology seeking confirmation, and it has the function of describing events and expressing emotions. Children’s drawings express their own understanding of the world through line, color, and other formal elements, and are close to language functions in the use of symbols. It is through the symbolic medium that children’s drawing and English learning can participate in the development of children’s cognitive psychology. The two are unified in children’s self-confirming through the form of symbols. In modern education, the combination of the two is conducive to the development of children’s thinking and the formation of their comprehensive personality.

Relying on visual materials as media, children’s graphic language carries out information transmission, and aims to help children develop cognitive thinking (Richard, 2018). In other words, graphic language is closely related to cognitive thinking. The development of graphic language can be traced back to the earliest prehistoric period. In that wild era, graphic was a tool for people to communicate and express, that is to say, the purpose of drawing was to express and communicate. In this sense, graphics are a bridge for communication between people. In the theory system of modern education, children’s cognitive thinking expression was first structured from the graphic language. Pictures are recognized as one of the most effective
and vivid ways to communicate with children’s inner world.

In related research field, the coordinated development of children’s foreign language ability and drawing ability has found some theoretical support. For instance, Willats, a scholar in the field of fine arts, tries to explain the principle of drawing with the principles of language. He functionally compares “shape modifiers” such as corner, curve, bump line to the adjectives in English (Willats, 1992). And “The Co-development of Child Drawing and Speech” is proposed by domestic art scholar Wang Dagen (1996). From the perspective of cognitive language acquisition and children’s drawing psychology, children’s foreign language acquisition and drawing abilities can make coordinated development. To narrow down the research to foreign language teaching, this paper mainly studies the positive transfer effect of children’s drawing ability on children’s foreign language acquisition ability and tries to apply it efficiently to children’s English teaching.

**Theoretical Foundation**

From the perspectives of the acquisition mechanism, the acquisition target, and the acquisition method, children’s drawing and foreign language abilities can develop together.

First of all, as to acquisition mechanism: Both activities are conceptual acquisitions based on universal cognitive abilities. Children’s drawings are the expression of concepts, and their nature and function are very similar to language. Luma calls it “graphic language”. “Meaning” is the core of common concern in children’s language acquisition and drawing. Cognitive linguistics believes that language acquisition is a cognitive behavior based on general cognitive abilities such as reasoning, generalization, deduction, memory, etc. This mechanism also emphasizes that drawing and language acquisition are not purely top-down human-specific capability. They are the results of the interaction of many factors and mechanisms, both subjective and objective (Robinson & Ellis, 2008). In the past, some scholars believed that children had a set of painting “programs” in their minds, and now there are many studies in different fields proving this statement is wrong.

Secondly, as to the target of acquisition: They both emphasize concrete shape and meaning pairing. Cognitive linguistics believes that language acquisition is a process from the concrete “shape and meaning pairing” to the abstract “language construction” (Su, 2008). As far as children’s foreign language acquisition is concerned, children’s image thinking ability is significantly advanced than their abstract thinking ability. Children’s drawing psychology points out that pictures are both objects and symbols that can refer to other entities, and children need a cognitive process to understand the dual attributes of pictures. This kind of cognition is very similar to the search for “shape and meaning pairing” in cognitive linguistics. The concept of cognitive language acquisition emphasizes the unity of language form and meaning, paying great attention to the process of cognitive participation in human perception of the real world. Cognitive linguistics emphasizes the progress of language symbols follow the “reality-cognition-language” process. Luquet, a master figure in children’s drawing research, points out that children do not draw what they see and children draw what they know (Richard, 2018), which can be described as “reality-cognition-drawing” process. Children do not draw from a visual angle for a long time, that is, realistically capture the appearance of things from an angle. Children draw according to the internal model of things they understand, that is, the characteristics that children think can define things. To prove this view, the “transparent drawing” stage is a good example. When children draw, they always think that everything existing objectively must be drawn. For example, although there are two overlapping things, they still do not block each other in the children’s eyes, and children do not consider...
the perspective phenomenon at all. This kind of transparent painting method, as if the children’s sight penetrates anything like X-rays, is really a good evidence for Luquet’s “children drawing what they know”.

Thirdly, from the perspective of acquisition method: They both emphasize insightful acquisition. Cognitive language acquisition emphasizes the insightful acquisition of the subject, not only the role of the objective world in cognition, but also the reaction of subjective consciousness to the objective world. It advocates the interaction between the objective world and the human subject, and considers language to be the result of subjective and objective interaction (Wang, 2007). This coincides with the principle of children’s drawing. For instance, the same scenery taken by different cameras is drawn and represented differently by different children. The reason is because graphic language is not a simple depiction of the objective world. It is the result of subjective and objective interaction. As John Dewey (2011) talks about the nature of fine art, he argues art is a vivid and tangible example that proves people can consciously and meaningfully reproduce the unity of feelings, needs, and impulses and the characteristics of life activities. The intervention of consciousness has brought about different laws, selection ability, and reprocessing of materials, which have changed art continuously.

In a broad sense, language includes not only social spoken language, but also actions, appearances, and other ideographic symbols. In this sense, first of all, children’s drawings can also be regarded as a kind of “graphic language”—a set of drawing language systems established by human symbol systems such as lines and colors. In other words, painting is a form of human language, and like social audio language, it is a way of human communication. People exchange ideas through language interactions, and gain an objective understanding and description of the real world on the basis of practice. Fortunately, although English and Chinese are two different languages, there is no difference in the “graphic language” between Chinese and British children, and it can serve as a bridge.

**Enlightenment to Children’s English Teaching**

In addition to the comprehensive characteristics of children’s psychological development, the various characteristics appearing in the development stage of children’s drawing are directly related to children’s language development. Children’s graphic language expressions show different characteristics with different stages of children’s growth. This is because children’s cognitive ability gradually develops with their age. For deeper understanding and researching the co-development of children’s foreign language ability and drawing ability and applying it efficiently to children’s foreign language teaching, this paper selects three typical age stages based on the representative periods in children’s cognitive development (Wang, 1996). They are: children’s “words” period (3-5 years old), children’s “sentence” period (5-7 years old), and children’s “statement” period (7-10 years old). There are some key concepts need to be pointed out: The children in this paper mainly refer to children aged from 3 to 10 years. Before three years old, children are still in the stage of “action representation”. The significance of their graffiti relies on the pleasure of waving a pen, which is to say they have not yet entered the stage of “symbolic representation”. After 10 years old, children begin to enter the stage of visual realism, which is similar to adult painting activity. Its cognitive mechanism is not typical in this research. Furthermore, the drawing referred to in this research is not viewed from an artistic or aesthetic perspective, but as a way for children to describe events and express feelings. The following pictures are from children in a kindergarten and a primary school of Leshan, which takes part in my research.
Children’s “Words” Period (3-5 Years Old)

From the perspective of language development, children of 3-5 years old like to create new words based on the words they have mastered. That is the so-called “phenomenon of coinage”, such as changing “a pair of pants” to “a piece of pants”. J. Piaget found that young children have an interesting phenomenon of “egocentric speech” (Piaget qtd. in Zhu, 1989, p. 182). It shows that it is the transitional stage of children’s speech function from communication to self-regulation. What’s more, the lack of coherent written expression is another feature of this age.

From the perspective of graphic language, children can autonomously control the purposeful activities of their hands at this stage, that is, the so-called consciousness of generating physical images. When the child is painting, he will describe the content to be drawn, and at the same time use the pen in his hand to describe the object. The shape can be roughly distinguished, such as: table, stool, sun, tree, sea water, etc. Sometimes the graphics are out of order, but all the graphics are basically independent. At this stage children do not pay attention to the whole picture and the association among things, and only express individual things. Therefore, this drawing phase is called the graphic period of words. This is similar to children’s language expression at this stage. When teachers design a learning activity that combines “drawing” and “English”, it is possible to encourage children to draw individual objects combined with crosswords games, which is a good English vocabulary learning strategy for children at this stage. The following picture is a good example.

![Children's drawing example](image)

Children’s “Sentence” Period (5-7 Years Old)

In this period, children’s drawings have concrete images, while there is no decent proportion and spatial relationship. Lines are often used to draw more complicated things, such as people, trees, houses, fish, cars, and ships. There are still more like symbols in the shape. Their drawings usually have a simple plot, rich in bold imagination and exaggerated image. In the early stage, children began to choose different colored pens to sketch various parts of the image; in the later period, different colors are painted in the sketched image to make the pictures look better. The pictures are slightly declarative, and it seems to be “speech”. It is similar to the function and meaning of “sentence” in speech. Children will tell us the vivid story in the picture, and those
specious images have their “specific” meaning. Because the monologue ability of preschool children is still underdeveloped, they need the support of images such as “watching pictures and speaking” when narrating more complex events. Children’s own drawings provide image support for the development of self-speech. Zhu Zhixian points out that children at this time have a positive attitude towards speech (1989, p. 379). They are believed to initially grasp some of the simplest written speech by the end of preschool. It is also believed that the true written speech of preschool children is their drawings, just like early human hieroglyphs, and children are at the stage of the so-called “calligraphy & drawing same source”. In this period, when we design a learning activity that combines “drawing” and “English”, it is possible for children to draw a picture more descriptive. And teachers should try to find appropriate combination point with the drawings: such as tense, part of speech, etc. For instance, in the picture below, as a lead-in, the teacher could ask the children to draw a picture to describe the following scene: A chair in the classroom is broken, and Xiao Ming comes to repair it with a hammer. The teacher gives the sentence “He is hammering the nail” at the same time. Thus the children can easily find the word “hammer” can be used both as a noun or a verb. Part of speech is particularly abstract for children of this age, but they can understand the grammar when combined with pictures drawn by themselves easily. Meanwhile, the present continuous tense is also well displayed clearly, which is also a difficult language point. Actually, this activity design is also inspired by the idea of “image schema” and “force dynamics schema” in cognitive linguistics.

![Example Image]

**Children’s “Statement” Period (7-10 Years Old)**

Although still simple, the children’s paintings of this period have specific characteristics. Children’s favorite things in life are emphasized in their works. What’s more, from the image point of view, their proportional control is basically correct, and the children also can grasp some features and details of what they draw now. The appearance of the picture is rich in bright colors to express their inner strife and their mood at the time of painting. At this stage, children’s graphic language has obvious features of imaginary painting and memory painting. The work has some prominent plots or specific expressions of certain things, with obvious characteristics of statement. Generally speaking, a scene or thing can be well displayed in their drawings. Of
course, they have not enough expressive skills at this time, and love to add some words to their pictures to express themselves more. Therefore, we call this period the “graphical period of the statement”. In this period, when we design a learning activity that combines “drawing” and “English”, teachers can encourage children to make simple picture books, combing the topics of their textbook, using expressions they have learned as much as possible ... the picture below is taken from a student’s picture book, which is about the topic “birthday”. The “red heart” has a clear “visual metaphor” function, which is very intuitive for children and easier for children to understand than “conceptual metaphor”. The “red heart” indicates the affective meaning of the word “cheer”. And with the help of the image of “cups”, the students are easy to understand how the countless noun “juice” becomes countable. 

Conclusions

After nearly 40 years of development, the connotation and extension of cognitive linguistics have been continuously deepened and expanded, and a cross-domain, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary research system has been gradually established (Wang, 2007). In the future, cognitive linguistics will further strengthen its interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary cognitive research in the fields of language, mind, culture, and society. From the perspective of cognitive language acquisition and children’s drawing psychology, children’s foreign language acquisition and drawing abilities can make coordinated development. When teachers design learning activities that combine “drawing” and “English”, they should design drawing activities based on the cognitive characteristics of children at different ages and try to combine drawing activities with different language skill training: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Lots of further research can be done in the future.

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