

# Let's Do Language With Each Other! Looking at a Language Education Approach from a Cultural-Historical Perspective

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*This article investigates an approach to language education for young children situated in a cultural-historical tradition. This approach recognizes the fundamental situatedness and dialogicality of language learning. It views language learning as a joint activity which is located within daily routines and social practices that are meaningful to young children and their care givers. It looks at the nexus of social, cognitive and linguistic development and accentuates the key role of the care giver. An approach to language education for young children with a cultural-historical perspective demands a high level of professionalism in early childhood settings. This implies a concept of professional training for child care providers which offers knowledge, skill training and reflection on individual belief systems. The article suggests directions for further research on professional training of child care providers based on a cultural-historical perspective.*

## 1. Introduction

Language development in the early years has been of interest to various research disciplines for many centuries. In recent years, early childhood research in Germany has generated a special interest in how child care providers in day care can be a powerful resource for early language learning of young children before school. Stressing the importance of the early years and the key role of language skills to fight social, cultural, or gender related disadvantages has heightened efforts to improve the quality of day care, since increasing numbers of young children in Germany spend the majority of their waking hours in day care. Unfortunately, day care centers in Germany vary widely in terms of their quality (Tietze 1998; Egert & Eckhardt 2010).

As a result, many language programs have been developed for early childhood education in Germany in recent years with rather different ideas on how to promote language skills successfully. These differences can be explained with different views of, and theories about, the nature of language and language learning, which again has led to different goals of language programs. As van Oers et al. (2008) point out, “the goals of learning especially can have decisive influence on how the actions are organized and regulated and what strategies are selected for the accomplishment of one's goals” (p. 10). It is highly problematic that most programs do not relate to an explicit theoretical framework on the nature of language and only present a taken-for-granted position that assumes that the chosen approach on language education will successfully promote young children. While there have been heated discussions about different findings based on *empirical data* and their implications for language education in day care, there is little debate about differences in *theoretical perspectives* on the nature of language within the research community.

This paper introduces a study (Sens in prep.) that aims, firstly, to systematically analyze the theoretical perspective on the nature of language and language learning of an approach developed by Jampert et al. (2006, 2009, 2011). This approach to early language education can be situated in a cultural-historical tradition once some of the underlying principles and paradigms have been made explicit. Hence, they are discussed by addressing specifically the cultural nature of language education in the institutional context of early childhood. The terms ‘language learning’ and ‘language education’ are used because this article refers to language activities within the institutional context of early childhood (day care) with an educational focus. The article also addresses the implications for professional training of day care providers. On the theoretical grounds of cultural-historical psycholinguistics the study from Sens (in prep.) aims, secondly, to discuss adequate research strategies to evaluate the dynamics of in-service training.

## **2. A language education approach for young children linked to cultural-historical psycholinguistics**

In 2005, the German Federal Department of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, BMFSFJ) commissioned Germany's largest non-university research institute, the German Youth Institute (Deutsches Jugendinstitut, DJI), to develop a framework for language education in day care which was published by an interdisciplinary group of researchers (Jampert et al. 2006) and further developed into a practitioner's guideline for language and literacy education in the early years (Jampert et al. 2009, 2011). Jampert et al. considered a number of ways in which the framework can be implemented in day care settings. In the current phase of the project, a model for a 12 months in-service training is being developed. As previously mentioned, the study by Sens (in prep.) is being conducted to learn more about the dynamics and outcomes of this particular in-service training model. The publications by Jampert et al. (2006, 2009, 2011) have a number of underlying principles in common which constitute an approach clearly linked to cultural-historical psycholinguistics.

The approach by Jampert et al. looks at the nexus of social, cognitive, and linguistic development, in relation to the ways in which children act and think; the aim being to clarify the ways in which differential linguistic abilities – word meaning, syntactic ability and so on – develop over the ages of zero to six years. For this, the long-term nature of the process of children's language acquisition was carefully taken into account. Furthermore, the framework establishes language activities within broader educational areas and daily routines for children from naught to six in early childhood settings.

One can establish a link to cultural-historical psycholinguistics because the approach by Jampert et al. presupposes that language development is embodied and embedded in interaction and everyday practices. By emphasizing embodiment and embeddedness of language, Jampert et al.'s approach thus accords with the view of language as "situated within life activity of situated and positioned, mutually oriented societal individuals, it is not abstractable from these individuals, nor from their activity" (Bertau this volume). Jampert et al. concluded that the level to which language abilities of young children develop depends on the availability of a

stimulating other person and an environment in which a child's curiosity can flourish. Thus, the approach by Jampert et al. begins by viewing children in their comprehensive development as expressive personalities who are not merely capable of learning, but are positively eager to learn and who are situated in a social environment within a community with a set of specific cultural routines and rules.

Jampert et al.'s view of language shows a close similarity to Linell's (2009) view, as it "implies establishing and sustaining relationships with or within the environment. It does not consist merely in the internalization and retention of some objective 'input', as some monologist learning theories would have it. Instead, we are often faced with active sense-making practices, in which apprentices appropriate aspects of the environment, aspects which are actively brought in and created, shared and used under the guidance of the teacher or in interaction with other learners" (Linell 2009, p. 86). Jampert et al.'s rejection of "monologist learning theories" can hence also be related to an accentuated dialogic understanding of the language activity (Bertau this volume): Jampert et al. thus speak of a fundamental "dialogic attitude" (*Dialoghaltung*) towards the developing child.

This cultural-historical perspective on (language) learning contrasts with the view that the language development of young children can be promoted *aside* from daily routines, dismembered from other curriculum areas and social practices and specifically taught for certain hours of the day by one language expert through practicing grammatical rules and labeling words with young children. Alarmingly, this perspective is still widespread in the scientific community in Germany and results in many different training programs for young children aside from daily routines and meaningful social practices (for an overview of the most prominent language programs in Germany for day care see Jampert et al., 2007). If one acknowledges that young children act fundamentally social in dialogic exchange with their caregivers, peers and their environment one must neither artificially confine language education to a small time frame nor support the idea that only experts can, and indeed are eligible to support young children's language learning. Even more so from a cultural-historical perspective on language learning, one has to argue clearly against the idea that children's language learning is facilitated best by some kind of monologist input that will effectively stimulate the child as long as it is applied as often as possible in a particular systematic manner.

Another key component of the approach by Jampert et al. (2011) refers to the role of child care providers such as nursery teachers and how they can be a powerful resource for early language learning in day care (see also Best et al. 2011). The assumptions are based on the interactive language stimulation model for in-service training that is frequently used in the United States (Cole et al. 1996) and Canada (Weitzman 1992). It trains child care providers to use naturalistic interaction strategies that are associated with accelerated language development. Theoretically, the model stems from social interactionist perspectives of language development that attribute a major facilitatory role to the caregivers' ability to provide responsive social contexts and a linguistically stimulating environment (Bruner 1983; 1981; Hoff-Ginsberg 1986). A significant number of studies have reported that children who engage mainly in such responsive, elaborative interactions with adults display higher levels of language development than children who are exposed to a directive interactional style (Barnes et al. 1983; de Kruif et al. 2000; Hoff-Ginsberg 2000; Snow & Ferguson 1977). This, in turn, highlights the role of the dialogic quality of language activity as previously mentioned.

Girolametto, Weitzman & Greenberg (2003) identify three main clusters of caregiver strategies within the interactive language stimulation model as adapted by Jampert et al. (2011) and Best et al. (2011):

- *“Child-oriented techniques* that are designed to promote frequent episodes of joint activity around the child's interests (e.g. wait for children to initiate, follow their lead)
- *Interaction-promoting techniques* that are intended to encourage balanced turn-taking and peer interaction among children (e.g. pause to allow children to talk turns)
- *Language-modeling-techniques* that provide developmentally appropriate language models (e.g. labels, expansions of children's utterances)” (p. 300).

These techniques demand a level of professional development for child care providers that involves the reflection of their behavior and their attitudes towards young children. To be *child-oriented* and to *promote interaction*, child care providers have to be aware of the dialogical nature of language education and acknowledge that language learning entails learning how to engage in conversations and

how to form and shape dialogues with others. They also have to become sensitive towards the ways they address and talk to young children. And most importantly, they have to reflect to what extent they responsively listen to young children because “the addressed listening other is the necessary condition to any speaking and also to any clear, articulated thinking” (Bertau this volume). Language skills can only flourish and develop if and only if they can be addressed towards an interested other. This is a crucial point for language education in day care settings because it demands that child care providers facilitate the participation and interaction of all children in their group. This can be a particular challenge since most activities in settings for young children are organized as group activities. Therefore child care providers need to engage with all children on a regular basis and encourage them to participate in dialogues.

Furthermore, it is necessary that child care providers develop an *attitude* that appreciates contributions from all children to the class room dialogue, because “the infant’s will, initiatives and intrinsic motivations are constantly encouraged by caregivers, or discouraged, if the behaviors are undesired by them. In these processes of continuous interplay, children are enticed into perceiving the same aspects of the environment as the caregivers, and their behaviors and actions get channeled and calibrated into patterns” (Linell 2009, p. 256). It is also necessary that child care providers critically reflect the socio-cultural-context in which language practices are positioned and how or whether this context reflects the family and community experiences of all children in an early childhood setting. This corresponds closely to what Jampert et al. label “dialogic attitude”.

*Language modeling techniques* have to be seen within a broader view of language and language development that takes the formative function of language for communicative and psychological processes into account. Then, language modeling involves more than teaching grammatical structures or words to young children. “They [the adults] teach the child how to mean [...], and the child learns how to ascribe intentionality to actions and utterances. A parallel line of development involves collaborative games, such as peekaboo, in which infant and caregiver enact primitive forms of turn-taking (response, initiative, reciprocation)” (Linell 2009, p. 256). Hence language education has to support children to make sense of the world and to think through practices that are mediated through language. This

involves experiencing different genres of acting in social contexts while being supported to acquire the rules and practices of the community in order to participate independently, critically, and creatively within the borders of the community's practices (van Oers et al. 2008).

Summarizing the approach by Jampert et al. (2006, 2009, 2011), one can state that the authors assume that

- one needs to look at the nexus of social, cognitive, and linguistic development when wishing to assess language learning in the early years,
- language learning takes place within broader educational areas and daily routines and
- the caregiver plays a very important role for language learning by providing responsive social contexts and a linguistically stimulating environment.

Arguing from a cultural-historical psycholinguistic perspective, this recognizes the fundamental *situatedness* and *dialogicality* of language learning. It highlights the social context between the children and their care takers, and it underscores their dialogues as fundamental to children's overall development.

### **3. Implications for professional training in language education for young children**

A major focus of the current debate about quality of day care in early childhood research is on the role of professional development for child care providers. Even though about 80 different professional degrees in the area of early childhood education and care have been developed at German universities over the past decade, most practitioners who currently work in a German day care setting do not hold an academic degree. This is one of the main reasons why current research in early childhood education investigates the potential and the outcomes of in-service training (Fröhlich-Gildhoff, Nentwig-Gesemann & Pietsch 2011; Egert in prep.).

All of the underlying principles of the approach by Jampert et al. demand a high level of professionalism by child care providers if they are expected to be established on a day to day basis in day care settings. Even more so, if child care providers are supposed to provide meaningful dialogues that can foster language skills of young children within every curriculum area and a huge variety of social practices.

For this reason, we will discuss and critically reflect on the implications of a cultural-historical psycholinguistic perspective for the professional development of child care providers (Sens in prep.).

One of the most significant indicators of quality in early childhood settings is the extent to which child care providers receive specific training in child development, including language development (Doherty et al. 2000). Hence the curriculum developed by Jampert et al. (2011) provides child care providers with theory-based knowledge to help them (1) to better understand the strategies and milestones in language development in the early years and (2) to establish developmentally appropriate language practices.

Even though child care providers with specialized training are more likely to provide responsive social contexts for language learning, Girolametto, Weitzman & Greenberg (2003) discovered significant differences in the teaching outcomes of child care providers that have participated in specialist training based on the model of interactive language stimulation even though there was an overall positive effect and all participants of the in-service training were able to adopt a number of techniques from the program outline. "The individual data indicated that the child care providers were very selective about the program strategies that they acquired and the contexts in which they made improvement. (...) Caregivers did not blindly 'learn their lessons'. Rather, the majority of the child care providers appeared to individualize the instruction" (Girolametto, Weitzman & Greenberg 2003, p. 309). This could indicate that the child care providers participating in this study carried different belief systems, some which matched the main ideas of the in-service training program, and others that conflicted with these goals. Van Oers et al. (2008) emphasize that "Educators' interactions with children are directly based upon their belief systems and theories about the nature of children, child development, knowledge, society, pedagogy, and so on. And different interactions tend to result in different developmental outcomes" (p. 4).

Approaches to teacher education or to in-service training must therefore not only focus on the delivery of knowledge and skill training, but have to take into account the reflection and development of developmentally appropriate beliefs and practices. According to Phipps (2010), research on conceptual change leads to the conclusion that the following strategies in teacher education can promote changes in



teachers' beliefs and practices: "reflecting on concrete teaching experiences, helping teachers explore the beliefs underlying their practice, helping create dissatisfaction with existing beliefs, offering alternative theories which are intelligible and plausible, considering the advantages of new practice, seeing examples of this new practice, experiencing the new practice as learners, and providing support and guidance to integrate new practice into their own teaching" (p. 23).

Hence, in-service training in the area of early language education needs to provide individual support for child care providers and the possibility to carefully investigate the reasons why certain areas of the program outline are adapted while others are neglected. Consequently, in-service training has to be provided with a coaching structure, which leaves room for individual development and has to be organized as a long-term provision. The training must further offer knowledge about language development and introduce principles of effective teaching based on research findings on the one hand. It has to be inquiry-oriented on the other hand, thus "encouraging teachers to reflect on their own teaching and developing their ability to do so, and is constructivist in that it acknowledges the importance of cognitive processes of learning to teach" (Phipps 2010, p. 21).

#### **4. Conclusion**

First of all, a more thorough explication of theoretical assumptions on the nature of language and language learning is a condition to understand conceptual differences in language programs in the early childhood sector in Germany. Hence, scientific questions on how to support language learning in the early years and how to facilitate professional development in teacher education in this area must not only be answered with empirical data. Such an inquiry also demands that a theoretical stance be taken on the nature of language and language learning. We have argued for the need of an approach to language education that is based on the perspective of cultural-historical psycholinguistics and thus acknowledges the fundamental *situatedness* and *dialogicality* of any language activity. We have stressed, that this implies a high level of professional development for child care providers. This would involve not only the delivery of knowledge and skill training but, even more importantly, a reflection on one's individual belief systems by child care providers and, if necessary, conceptual change.

Secondly, any research in the area of language education in early childhood has to critically reflect on the methodological questions of the research design. This involves discussing the theoretical implications of a particular research design and evaluating the kinds of outcomes which are produced by using certain methods and types of data. The underlying assumption is that every research design incorporates a certain theoretical view on the nature of (language) learning and therefore only generates outcomes in the light of this particular perspective. Hence, one must critically analyze which kind of outcomes are measured and in which way they relate to the theoretical perspective underlying a program under investigation. One can certainly not apply a solely pragmatic approach by applying methods and instruments that are at hand, ready to be used and easy to apply.

Yet at this point in time, further research is needed to investigate how child care providers can benefit from an in-service training model such as the one suggested by Jampert et al. (2011), which offers a perspective of cultural-historical psycholinguistics in language education. A study that aims to investigate language learning from a cultural-historical perspective needs to critically reflect how 'outcomes' can be measured and which methods that can be used or have to be designed to shed light onto the specific manner. Looking at current research findings, one also needs to investigate individual differences in outcomes of in-service training in early language education.

The exploratory study by Sens (in prep.) aims to address these aspects by analyzing how in-service training with the approach by Jampert et al. (2011) can support child care providers in their professional development. The case study at hand investigates patterns of teacher interaction in early childhood settings. It is designed to provide an in-depth understanding of how early childhood teachers perceive and make sense of their own interactions with young children. Based on quantitative and qualitative research methods, the aim is to identify in which ways interactional styles and belief systems of child care providers change through the in-service training model developed by Jampert et al. (2011). Methods such as questionnaires, video analyses of child care providers' behavior and instant video revisiting are used to explore the connection between the child care providers' beliefs and their interactional styles. The study is conducted in a pre-post-design

and uses theoretical sampling as a strategy to gain a deeper understanding of the different types of child care providers.

With this case study, we assume to be able to gain a better understanding of the dynamics underlying in-service training and to identify the key reasons that lead to effective pedagogical practices through in-service training. The results of this study will be used to improve the in-service training and professional development of child care providers to facilitate children's language learning. It will also be devoted to address methodological questions in research on outcomes of language programs in early childhood education.

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**Keywords**

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