

Vol. 14, No. 5  
pp. 83-108  
November &  
December  
2023

## Teaching English to Very Young Learners: A Case Study of Two Three-Year-Old Twins

Zahra Ghaffari Saravi<sup>1</sup> , Mojgan Rashtchi<sup>2\*</sup> , & Arshya Keyvanfar<sup>3</sup> 

### Abstract

Children need to start learning English from a very young age in this fast globalizing world. The knowledge of the English language can assist in providing several opportunities for them in the future. It is also essential to know how very young children acquire a foreign language and which content and activities should be selected for their age. This study aimed to observe and describe the procedure of the language development of very young children. Researchers employed a descriptive case study design to portray and assess foreign language learning of two three-year-old twins' grammar acquisition, vocabulary gains, and fluency in the early years of life (3-4/5). Besides the methods firmly associated with qualitative study and case studies, there were four sources of data collection: observation, audio-video recordings, and diary records. The central unit of the twins' language development analysis was their utterances. The findings supported using a naturalistic environment where very young children could be exposed to the English language informally in everyday contexts and activities. This research can share its findings with education communities and very young children's teachers to promote a new professional development model for fostering language development in very young learners' classrooms, assessments, and curricula.

**Keywords:** early foreign language learning, teaching English, very young learners

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. Candidate in TEFL, TEFL Department, North Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran; **ORCID ID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5701-3748>

<sup>2</sup> Corresponding Author: Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, TEFL Department, North Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran;

**ORCID ID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7713-9316>; *Email:* [mojgan.rashtchi@gmail.com](mailto:mojgan.rashtchi@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics, TEFL Department, North Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran; **ORCID ID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2803-5910>

## 1. Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language has become integral to everyone's daily lives (Derakhshan & Shakki, 2020). Approaches and methodologies for learning and teaching English have significantly undergone reformations over the last decade pertaining to its importance and world wideness (Shakki et al., 2021). Teaching English to very young children as a new arena of research has been the focus of many researchers (Abello-Contesse, 2009; Ellis, 2008; Krashen, 1982) since the assumption is that children are better language learners than adults, a premise which is frequently utilized to support early language teaching (Cameron, 2003; Crain, 2005; Dominguez & Pessa, 2005; Eyres, 2007; Fayyazi et al., 2017; Pinter, 2006).

A wide variety of programs worldwide have emerged to construct linguistic resources for very young children (Enever, 2018). However, the policies on teaching English to learners are commonly simplistic, and the complex nature of the teaching procedure is often ignored (Emery, 2012; Rich, 2018; Rixon, 2017). Recent studies have indicated that teaching English to young learners (TEYL) is not merely an issue of constructing linguistic sources but has significant learning outcomes, for instance, in the literacy area (G. Ellis, 2018), intercultural education, and universal matters (Bland, 2016). In addition, persuasive usage-based activities like “interactive games, songs, reading aloud, and storytelling,” suggested by Muñoz and Spada (2019, p. 238), can contribute to the benefits of TEYL. Contrary to the misunderstanding that teaching English to very young learners is easy, Rich (2018) claims that the younger the learner, the more challenging the activity: “TEYL is a demanding and skilled process, particularly with children in the early grades of primary school” (p. 49).

The results of undervaluing the complex facets of teaching to very young learners bring about a shortage of success in the majority of early teaching programs. Rixon (2017) contends that “even the most carefully planned, widely welcomed and feasibly scoped of policy innovations may still be a complex matter” and believes “fundamental shifts in attitudes, teacher knowledge, and teacher skills” are needed (p. 82). Muñoz and Spada (2019) argue that the necessary factors for teaching young children are the amount of time devoted to primary English and the teachers' qualifications and motivation.

Even though there is widespread attention to very young children's English learning worldwide, research in the Iranian context is defiantly rare. Consequently,

further research into uncovering productive and valuable pedagogies, enhancing teacher education, and providing appropriate resources for teaching English to very young learners seem necessary. This study is significant since it portrays how mother-child interactions and the employment of different procedures in a natural setting can lead to very young learners' foreign language learning. The study mainly focuses on the techniques and strategies that can be beneficial at very early ages, a relatively new domain in the Iranian context. Therefore, the researchers formulated the following research question:

**RQ1:** What techniques and strategies can develop very young children's foreign language skills and competencies?

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Young Learners***

Many researchers have attempted to clarify the concepts of 'very young learners' and 'young learners' since the notions are broad and cannot be marked in fixed age brackets. Scholars have different views regarding the boundaries for early childhood, and it may range from ages two and a half to eight. Some educators and school systems consider three to six as a unified and defined development time and distinguish significant developmental and cognitive changes in this period (Lillard, 2007; NAEYC, 2009). According to Slattery and Willis (2001), children between seven and twelve are young learners, while children under seven are very young learners. However, Ersöz (2007) believes that very young learners are three to six years old, young learners are seven to nine years old, and ten to twelve are late or older learners.

### ***2.2. The Benefits of Early Language Learning***

Although there is no unanimous agreement among scholars regarding the most appropriate time to start teaching English and controversies exist about the learner's age and educational instructions, learners are engaged in studying the English language at younger ages in many countries (Shakki, 2023). English may be obligatory in some countries in the early fundamental grades (Nikolov, 2009; Pinter, 2006). Shin (2014) emphasizes early learning for young learners and states that such education leads to physical, cognitive, and personal growth. Indeed, in

countries where families might select a second language for their youngsters to learn, English is “overwhelmingly the first choice” (Garton et al., 2011, p. 5). The increasing need for English and parents’ conviction that English proficiency paves the ground for their children with superior education and enhanced occupation occasions have resulted in a growth in EYL programs (Enever & Moon, 2009).

### ***2.3. Language Teaching to Young Children***

Teaching English to very young children is noticeably challenging and requires cautious planning to involve them in learning activities. Teachers have to be competent enough to teach very young learners professionally (Derakhshan & Shakki, 2019). They should understand the foundations of theoretical knowledge (Cameron, 2001), present language to the very young, and develop proper instruction (Linse, 2005). According to Scott and Ytreberg (1990), the rapport established by teachers of very young learners gives children the feeling that their teachers are there to play with them. As Rashtchi and Keyvanfar (2001) put forth, play as an innate mechanism enables children to establish connections with their environment and encounter various learning situations. It facilitates personal relationships and gives the children chances to discover and build knowledge. Thus, teachers and caretakers should be ready to play with children to foster their development.

In teaching English to children, teachers also should follow specific principles. First, they should create an enjoyable, relaxed atmosphere to motivate language learners (Hymes, 1971) and establish good relationships (Al-Moghani, 2003). Moon (2000) highlights that activities and tasks should be fun and entertaining for children to keep them interested. Second, children should be supported and guided to get involved in an activity and get help overcome their frustration during the learning process (Cameron, 2001). Third, a vital principle that is always the focus of attention is creating and encouraging cooperative work among very young learners. Children need to have the opportunity to socialize with others. As Vygotsky puts forward, “All cognitive development, including language development, arises as a result of social interactions between individuals” (Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p. 44). Vygotsky considers a child as initially doing things in a social setting, with other individuals and language assistance in numerous ways, progressively shifting away from dependence on others to autonomous action and reasoning (Cameron, 2003).

#### ***2.4. Studies on the Early Foreign Language Learning***

Even though the age of compulsory foreign language education has been lessened to elementary school in many countries, numerous parents believe in beginning foreign language learning as early as possible, even before the compulsory age (Enever, 2011). The enthusiasm for early foreign language learning has raised main issues among researchers and educators. De Bot (2014) reported several early English learning/teaching projects in the Netherlands. These projects emphasized the influence of English on the development of the first language and the improvement of foreign language skills. The findings revealed no negative impact on the mother tongue, and the achievements in English proficiency were substantial.

Early research on language learning points to a “critical period” (Lenneberg, 1967; Penfield & Roberts, 1959) and a “sensitive period” before adolescence in which children can obtain native-like skills in a foreign language. Though the advantages of acquiring another language are inherently beneficial, there is slight evidence to side with the critical period assumption for foreign language learning (Garton et al., 2011; Nikolov & Mihaljevic Djigunovic, 2011).

#### ***2.5. Studies on L1 Use in the Early Language Learning***

Some use of L1 is broadly advocated; however, concerns remain about what might count as adequate or practical use. The results of Tekin and Garton’s (2020) study on using L1 in foreign language classes demonstrated that, regardless of some negative attitudes towards L1 use, teachers utilized it to various degrees and for different purposes, including posing questions, giving instruction, and providing feedback. They concluded that L1 is an inseparable part of L2 classrooms. Aminifard and Mehrpour (2019) also showed that teachers relied extensively on Persian in all circumstances except helping learners and emphasized prudent use of the mother tongue with young English learners. In addition, Scheffler and Domińska (2018) examined first language usage in teaching English to very young learners. The key assumptions arising from teachers’ interpretations were that children’s first language contributed significantly to English teaching for young learners and choices about its usage were encouraged by both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects.

## 2.6. Studies on the Activities and Methods for Teaching English to Young Learners

Taghizadeh et al.'s (2015) study revealed no significant differences in the vocabulary knowledge of preschool learners who learned vocabulary through games, songs, and flashcards. The researchers recommended that using various techniques in the classroom following children's interests and needs could develop young learners' vocabulary knowledge. Tavit and Işisağ (2009) demonstrated that using songs and games was essential in teaching English because they could enhance children's learning. Songs assisted in understanding words, while games were attractive and inspiring and offered practice through entertainment. Tavit and Söylemez (2008) also showed that telling stories would provide children with context, and therefore, it helped put new items in the long-term memory. Besides, stories that created a positive atmosphere were authentic and allowed learners to use language. Coyle and Gomez Gracia (2014) also revealed that instructing new language via songs might enhance learners' receptive vocabulary knowledge. Nevertheless, exposure to the song input was inadequate to improve most learners' productive knowledge.

## 3. Method

The current research utilized the social-constructivist research paradigm to explore twins' language skills development. A descriptive case study research design was employed to attain the study's purpose of embracing a sociocultural approach, investigating very young learners' language learning procedures. A qualitative framework is, by and large, characterized as an in-depth investigation of a phenomenon by gaining perceptions about the meanings individuals give to the world (Denscombe, 2010). The present descriptive study lasted one and a half years; it treated an individual entity as the case and described the participants' teaching, learning, and interactions.

### 3.1. Participants

The participants were Middle East Asians named Sam and Sara (self-chosen pseudonyms), the son and daughter of one of the authors. The three-year-old twins were born to a middle-class family in Mazandaran, Sari, and their first language was Persian. Their parents were native speakers of Farsi, and the twins' mother was

working on her Ph.D. research in TEFL. The study started when Sam and Sara were three years old. Exposure to English as a foreign language began before the beginning of the study. They encountered English when they were almost two years old through songs, cartoons, and storybooks. The study aimed to observe and describe how the twin's foreign language skills and competencies could develop throughout the research.

### **3.2. Data Collection Instruments**

Different data collection procedures were employed to provide an in-depth answer to the research question. Besides the methods firmly associated with qualitative study and case studies, the study benefitted from five data collection sources: observation, audio-video recordings, diary, and oral vocabulary test.

#### **3.2.1. Diary Records**

The mother kept a diary book to record events related to the twins' language development; it also contained notes and observations throughout the research. The mother kept records of the twins on a daily basis in different situations. Notetaking was more frequent (daily) than the other data collection ways. Observations of Sam and Sara's language and cognitive development were recorded in different situations. Samples of different types of information the mother-researcher recorded included cartoons or CDs the twins watched and how often they addressed each other, textbook selection, their ability to make meaningful sentences in English, types of storybooks, and the like.

#### **3.2.2. Audio-video Recordings**

The recordings began when Sam and Sara were aged three and lasted until the end of this research. Weekly recordings ranging from 5 to 30 minutes were used to analyze the mother-children's interactions.

#### **3.2.3. Oral Vocabulary Test**

An oral vocabulary test prepared by the researchers was used for examining the



children's vocabulary development since such tests were not available for the age group under scrutiny. Besides, the current research intended to evaluate language production rather than passive knowledge; thus, developing a vocabulary test was necessary. The test content was based on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn & Dunn, 1997). Like the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, time limitation was not a factor in the newly-developed test; cued and free recall were employed to obtain data. Unlike receptive vocabulary tests, the new test did not have distractors since it did not aim at recognition. The children answered the test verbally. The mother presented a set of photos to each of them. Four images were on a page, with a number on each. The mother said a word describing one of the images and asked them to utter the number of the image that the word defined. The twins' vocabulary knowledge was measured based on twenty categories; colors, numbers, farm animals, zoo animals, relationships, fruits, vegetables, body parts, toys, objects, foods, shapes, clothing, vehicles, around the house, weather/seasons, adjectives, actions, feeling and emotions, and jobs. The twins were tested every six months.

### 3.3. *Materials*

The researchers decided to use more sources to prepare well-organized materials. Based on worldwide preschool lesson themes, they selected two leading textbooks, *Little Pockets* (Herrera, 2009) and *Hooray! Let's Play* (Puchta & Gerngross, 2012). The books are appropriate for three-to five-year-old age groups. Despite various available materials and activities on the Internet, the researchers selected a few favorite pages from which they could take ideas, clues, songs, rhymes, and games. Furthermore, it was essential to be equipped with many toys and realia to utilize activities and games. The realia contained all types of transport, tea sets, plastic fruits and vegetables, animals, cooking utensils, and flashcards of different sizes.

### 3.4. *Research Procedure to Develop the Twins' Foreign Language Learning*

Preparing a language program for very young learners is very challenging. Learning is a natural process for very young learners; thus, games play a significant part in teaching. The most fundamental issue is to discover an enjoyable natural way of teaching. Play-based language instruction is age-determined and differs across age groups. A significant part of the learning in this age group (up to 6) happens through play. Preschool language learners lack literacy skills (even in their native



language) and become familiar with the language incidentally. In line with Pinter (2006), the current study's researchers assume that language learning means processing meaning without focusing on the language structure.

This research aimed to set circumstances and utilize meaningful activities and materials to support the twins' development. Language development resulted in meaningful and natural language acquisition activities and techniques, including songs, short stories, and educational games. Considering Helen Doron's Methodology, the researchers adopted a specific lesson plan to teach English to the twins (Appendix A). The research continued for approximately one and a half years, one lesson a week on Saturdays from 10:30 to 11:15. Each lesson was practically applied by the mother and analyzed by the three researchers.

### **3.5. Content Specification of Lesson Plans**

The twins were exposed to English words, phrases, and structures based on a lesson plan prepared by the researchers during the study. Every lesson took two weeks for the mother to teach. Sometimes, it seemed to the mother that the children did not learn anything since they said nothing. However, the twins acquired receptive language and began producing something when ready. That is why productive and receptive language were differentiated in the lesson plan. The productive language contained words and phrases the twins should learn and say in the lesson. However, the mother produced receptive language. The receptive language also consisted of the words and phrases experienced through songs and chants.

### **3.6. Types of Games**

Games played a significant role in the twins' learning program. They worked as a tool to entertain, teach, and develop fluency. Also, the mother-researcher encouraged the twins, provided scaffolding, and helped them find a solution when they were engaged in playing alone or together. Some language games that she mainly used are as follows:

- *Sorting, ordering, or arranging games*
- *Search games*
- *Matching games*

- *Labeling games*
- *Exchanging games*
- *Role-play games*

### 3.7. *Songs and Chants*

The mother included songs/rhymes in the weekly learning processes to improve the twins' oral and listening skills. Some of the songs had a supporting role in other activities. Some had a primary role, and the twins had to listen, repeat, and sing them. The researchers selected songs with repetitive structures. To introduce a new rhyme/song, the mother repeated it clearly and gradually, concentrating on accurate pronunciation and intonation. The mother did not provide a Persian translation; instead, she tried to describe and elaborate the meaning with gestures or showing pictures.

### 3.8. *Storytelling*

The twins enjoyed storytelling. The mother made the twins sit quietly during storytelling to experience a motivating and relaxed atmosphere. The stories' plots conformed with the themes and topics of the weekly lesson plans. The twins got involved in a variety of activities after each story. The mother did not force the twins to retell stories but asked some thought-provoking questions associated with the stories to foster interaction. Storytelling sessions contained pre-reading and post-reading activities. Before reading the storybook, the mother-researcher drew the twins' attention by asking literal questions. After reading aloud, she asked more questions referring to different pages of the storybooks. The number of the twins' responses to the literal questions shows that they were capable of replying to the literal level questions in English (they gave short answers, e.g., Yes/No, or It is a ..., or this is a ...), the following samples of questions clarified this activity more fully:

- *What do you see the bird doing in this picture?*
- *Is it a tree?*

- *What color is the bird?*
- *Is the bird happy to make a nest?*
- *What does the bird see next to the tree?*

#### 4. Results

The central unit of the twins' language development analysis was their utterances. According to Lanza's (2004) definition, an utterance is a "single word or combination of words with a single intonation contour" (p. 123). Therefore, speeches could differ in length. Due to the unsteadiness of the first production criteria, some studies use detailed mechanisms to identify possible first words (Vihman & McCune, 1994). However, others develop more general standards (Cruz-Ferreira, 2006). There is a consensus that words prompted by an adult or replicated after an adult are not regarded as part of the child's active vocabulary. Cruz-Ferreira (2006) suggested that words are active when the child can utter them spontaneously with an apparent purpose in a particular context.

##### 4.1. Vocabulary (*oral vocabulary test and observation*)

Multiple data sources, such as observations, audio-video recordings, field notes, and reflections from various times and settings, were available to analyze the twins' vocabulary acquisition and use descriptively. Also, the *researchers-devised oral vocabulary test* was used to evaluate their vocabulary use. A recognition test was usually performed to check the twin's understanding of some newly-learned words, encouraging them to recall them in different accessible visual materials, like books, cartoons, and some realia around in and out of the house.

Children's word uptake, presented in Table 1 (20 content areas), was achieved using one image for each lexical item as a clue. Also, the mother permitted the children to have a free remembrance of the vocabulary since upon identifying the images in a semantic category existing in pictures (e.g., category of colors), the children frequently continued making a list of the words they knew (e.g., blue, black, yellow). As perceived from percentages of word uptake in each category, vocabulary in particular categories (e.g., category of objects) was more simply recalled cothers (Jafari & Ghiasi Zarch, 2018). As Rice and Woodsmall (1988) claim,

“object, action, and attribute words were amenable to quick comprehension,” whereas “affective-state words were relatively resistant to quick interpretation” (p. 426). Therefore, in line with the stages of child development, the twins proceeded from happy and sad feelings when they were four years old (Widen & Russell, 2003) to recognizing an entire of six emotional feelings at the age of 4;6.

**Table 1**  
*Total Number of Lexical Items at Three Data Collection Moments*

Category	6 months	12 months	18 months
Colors	7	11	16
Numbers	10	16	20
Farm animals	10	14	20
Zoo animals	8	18	25
Relationships	4	6	8
Fruits	4	10	17
Vegetables	3	7	11
Parts of body	8	22	30
Toys	4	8	12
Objects	5	10	20
Foods	2	4	10
Shapes	1	3	7
Clothing	1	12	19
Vehicles	3	9	25
Around the house	1	7	10
Weather/seasons	0	7	14
Adjectives	4	17	22
Actions	2	5	11
Feeling and emotions	2	3	6
Jobs	1	8	16
Total Active Vocabulary	80	197	319
Total Vocabulary	150	250	450

Nevertheless, low percentages in some word categories, like jobs, clothing, or food, were due to the limited words presented during the research period. Besides, a restricted but steady word uptake from the category of ‘relationships’ was compatible with other research studies in which four-to six-year-old children could easily recall vocabulary representing family relationships (Alexiou, 2015).

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, after six months, the total number of words the twins actively utilized in the twenty content areas was 80 (Table 1). Still, at the end of the research procedure, that number increased to 319 (Table 1), or a total

vocabulary gain of 298.75 percent (Table 2). This finding shows that from the age of 3;6 till 4;6, they picked up an average of 6.25 words each week. In the last six months of the study, the mother used recycled input to help the children forget fewer vocabulary.

**Table 2**  
*Oral Vocabulary Test Findings*

Age	Data collection moments	*Exposure hour	Overall vocabulary gain	Vocabulary gain by period
3;6	6 months	100	53.33%	۵۳.۳۳%
4	12 months	210	146.25%	7۸.۸%
4;6	18 months	321	298.75%	84%

Exposure hour: Average of 30–45-minute exposure to English every day

The observation records also revealed that code-mixing, which might have been an issue as the ‘one person–one language’ method, which was not utilized in this research, happened in a few instances in both directions (from L1 to L2 and vice versa). On some occasions, the vocabulary from children’s L1 or L2 was combined in a sentence by the other language’s grammatical rules. The researchers assume that translanguaging can have a role in learning, as “new language practices can only emerge in interrelationship with old ones, without competing or threatening an already established sense of being that languaging constitutes” (Garcia & Wei, 2014, p. 79). For instance, once the mother and the twins were busy reading a picture book, she asked some literal questions to check their understanding of the text; some lexeme replacements were observed in their English language:

**Mother:** “Look, Sara, what’s it?”

**Sara:** “*This is a ‘sandali.’*” (Persian equivalent for a chair.)

**Mother:** “*And what do you see in this picture, Sam?*”

**Sam:** “*mibinam (I see) two red cars.*” (Persian equivalent for I see).

**Mother:** “Well done.”

Besides, observations showed that in many cases, the twins could reproduce some previously learned lexical chunks in authentic contexts, for example, while

involved in an entertaining activity. The twins could understand the mother when she spoke in English. They followed the instructions and answered questions. She used direct speech and natural repetitive language. She mainly used English to communicate with the children, except when explaining new games or giving unfamiliar instructions or commands when they did not understand mimes, gestures, or pictures. Through the language learning procedure, the children gradually extended their vocabulary range, learning colors, numbers, farm animals, zoo animals, fruits, vegetables, parts of the body, shapes, clothing, toys, objects, adjectives, jobs, transportation, weather, and seasons, various actions, feeling, and emotion words. The frequency of occurrence helped them learn words quickly.

#### 4.2. Grammar (*observation*)

The primary data collection source was the mother's observations of the twins' interactions with each other and their mother in naturalistic contexts. They could help the researchers analyze the twins' grammar acquisition descriptively. Regarding teaching resources, the mother used various materials to make learning more involving and exciting. She typically employed flashcards, stories, animations, songs, and games. The mother provided the materials in an organized way. As a result, she could observe phases of meaningful learning. Children's language development was apparent since the mother followed them for a long time.

The hearing was present as the twins listened to recordings, and the mother spoke in English. Her talk provided valuable opportunities for the twins to pick up the language. Word repetition after the mother helped the children practice pronunciation. They were repeatedly exposed to the target words in different contexts, such as songs, conversations, stories, art crafts, and games. The twins showed their understanding as they complied with the mother's instructions, answered her questions, and participated in different games. For instance, the mother asked the twins what color was their favorite, how old they were, and where the object was, and the twins could answer based on their prior language knowledge not related to the current activity. The twins could establish a correspondence between English words and objects they encountered (in flashcards, in and out of the house, etc.).

Sam and Sara also used learned expressions in proper contexts spontaneously. For instance, once Sara took a teddy bear, hugged it, and began to sing "My teddy

bear two eyes,” although the mother did not ask her to do it. The twins also used English in everyday circumstances. For example, once the mother asked Sam to look outside the window to see whether daddy had returned home, he immediately looked out and answered: “Look, no.” Gradually the twins began to build up short phrases and sentences (“This is a car,” “What’s it?” “It’s a yellow ball,” “Let’s go,” “a black and white cat”) in conversations or as unexpected statements.

Another interesting finding in observing the twins’ grammar acquisition was that they did not memorize or imitate the words or phrases without understanding their meaning. They did not merely repeat the new structures, as is common in rote learning; rather, the twins tried to pick up the language and could create phrases from the vocabulary. Their understanding was always greater than speaking, and they used context clues to understand their mother speaking in English. However, they might not comprehend everything they heard; they could grasp the gist. They could understand a few main words and decode the rest, using various clues to interpret the meaning.

The twins were not corrected because any error correction could immediately demotivate them. Most of their mistakes were related to their attempt to work out English grammar rules or pronounce them. “It’s a red” soon became “It’s red” if the twins heard the mother repeating a word or phrase so many times, “Yes, it’s red,”; or if the mother heard “[siri] cars,” she repeated “three cars” to allow the twins to listen to the same piece of language correctly, and helped the twins self-correct in their own time.

#### **4.3. Fluency (*observation*)**

The twins could occasionally demonstrate a code-switching ability, even though they had not been acquainted with the ‘one person – one language’ method. Linking an imaginary situation or, somewhat, a set of topics or themes to English appeared more beneficial as it was less restrictive. Since the selected topics and themes in the researchers’ lesson plan covered most of the very young children’s life situations (e.g., at the grocery store, in the park, and the like), the twins began speaking in English to the mother at any time they felt like it in each of such circumstances. In another instance, once the twins were involved in the song, which included role-plays, the mother chose `Sara to act like a monkey and Sam to be a crocodile. However, their language use was at a minimum level while role-playing; the twins



were very motivated and created their play to act like a lion, tiger, rabbit, and snake. The mother observed that they enjoyed their time making sentences such as “I’m a rabbit.” “Hop, hop,” “I’m a lion, growl....”

Besides speaking in an imaginary situation, the twins could reply to anybody who talked to them in English in a real context. This ability to take advantage of their English language knowledge is unlike children whose L2 use is accustomed to a person. They occasionally display behavior that confirms that the second language is aimed merely for ‘internal’ use and set aside for interaction with the selected persons. Those children’s language choice depends on various aspects, like peers, teachers, and media, which “affect the child’s attitudes, preferences for identity and sources of self-esteem” (Baker, 2007, p. 14).

A further significant argument to mention was L1 usage. Whenever the children needed to know an English equivalent of a Persian word, they spontaneously asked their mother to translate the unfamiliar vocabulary. This fact is evidence against eliminating L1 in teaching a foreign language (Cameron, 2001). As long as the very young learners achieve their aim effectively and preserve their enthusiasm for using the second language, L1 and L2, it should be regarded as a natural phenomenon in teaching young learners.

## 5. Discussion

This study observed and described the language development process of two three-year-old twins. The teaching process appeared to be advantageous in several areas. The twins’ language skills gradually improved; they actively engaged in learning, overcame their fear of speaking a foreign language, and gained motivation. Through several methods and activities, the mother provided an excellent opportunity to build on the twins’ prior knowledge and create further progress. The twins could also experience physical and cognitive skills development. Given the reduced exposure to the foreign language related to non-native contexts, the mother used age-appropriate instruments like games, short stories, and songs to prepare meaningful input for the twins while involving their consideration in developing their target vocabulary and language structures( . Lexis has been known as one of the most significant constituents of language skills (Carter & McCarthy, 2014). The amount (Bowers & Vasilyeva, 2010) and the quality of language input young learners are exposed to have been positively associated with vocabulary growth

(Weitz et al., 2010).

Research conducted on young learners has revealed that songs can affect the receptive vocabulary knowledge of five-year-old children in Spain (Coyle & Gómez Gracia, 2014) and the receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge of eight to eleven-year-old Taiwanese learners (Chou, 2014). Similarly, in evaluating vocabulary acquisition by monolingual children via exposure to either songs or stories, Joyce (2011) found no differences between both tools. This finding advocates that songs can be as valuable as verbal texts (Davis, 2017). On the contrary, in research on three to five-year-old French-speaking learners, Leśniewska and Pichette (2014) reported a substantial advantage for stories over songs highlighting receptive vocabulary acquisition. This result seems to oppose the generally held assumption that songs assist the acquisition of unfamiliar English words more than stories.

Studies on comparisons of songs and stories remain, thus, underdeveloped. Although there are plentiful studies on monolinguals and second language learners (Collins, 2010; Lugo-Neris et al., 2010), considerably fewer are recognized regarding foreign language learners. Variances in the size of the classes also make generalizations from existing research problematic, with several treatments in small groups (Leśniewska & Pichette, 2014; Lin, 2014) and others with many participants (Coyle & Gómez Gracia, 2014).

In addition to using stories and songs, game-based learning can be an appropriate strategy for enhancing young learners' vocabulary acquisition. Ragatz (2015) showed that game-based learning increased learners' motivation and enhanced total awareness of target vocabulary. Kinzie and Joseph (2008) claim, "Children love to play games and are highly motivated to engage with them" (p. 643). Tuan (2012) also proposes various games to provide a fun and relaxed learning atmosphere where learners can focus on teamwork and collaboration.

The review of the research on language games indicates that games are indispensably significant in language teaching/learning in various fields. Besides its advantage in developing vocabulary knowledge mentioned before, other significant areas are utilizing games in instructing grammar to very young children (Bekiri, 2003; Nedomová, 2007); aspects to consider while selecting games; resolving which game to employ (Nedomová, 2007); teacher's preparation (McCallum, 1980); and the efficiency of utilizing games in instructing grammar (Deesri, 2000;

Gunn & McCallum, 2005).

Nowadays, game-based pedagogy is a well-documented language learning that has held its prominence in young learners' curricula worldwide. Enever (2011) asserts that "communicative, playful practices" are currently as widespread as traditional ones. Based on teachers' reports collected across 144 countries, Garton et al. (2011) declared that most (69,9%) of the respondents used creative activities like games during almost every lesson. These results propose that games and playing are no longer a sporadic innovation but an ordinary practice in early language instruction.

## 6. Conclusion

Informed debate and research into teaching English to very young learners have displayed rapid development in current years, mirroring the growth in the numbers of very young children interested in the English language globally. Several persistent challenges in teaching English to young learners have been identified in the literature. English is often a compulsory subject at school, and there is no consideration of who is appropriately qualified to teach it. However, the methods, strategies, and techniques suggested in the literature to help ESL/EFL teachers foster language skills in very young ESL/EFL learners are rare. Further investigation, quantitatively and qualitatively, is necessary to reconsider and explore the benefits and shortcomings of very young children's early language learning. Empirical evidence of educational and sociocultural advantages or disadvantages of early education is defiantly scant.

Another fundamental concern is that there is too little knowledge about influential pedagogies for teaching English to young learners, especially in classrooms. One reason is that teachers lack appropriate training and are not aware of the practical applications of the proposed theories. Therefore, very young children's teachers might find it challenging to implement the current methods and practices adequately. As a result, more research into finding effective pedagogies, improving teacher education, and preparing adequate resources and textbooks for teaching English to very young learners is necessary.

The results support the recommendation that teachers be provided with practical strategies and techniques that can simply be applied within the existing curriculum. Besides, teachers should be well-equipped with suggestions or examples for

activities and games that can be added to present learning tasks to provide a naturalistic environment where very young children could be exposed to the English language informally in everyday contexts and activities. It is also recommended that very young learners' teachers should be provided with professional learning opportunities to collaborate in lesson planning, observing, and reflecting on their and others' teaching procedures. The current study may suggest valuable sources for teachers involved in teaching English to children aged 3-5, both in kindergartens and nurseries. It might also be a beneficial source of information for instructors of other educational stages and individuals, especially parents concerned and interested in early education.

A limitation necessary to mention is that the present research was a case study with two participants living in Sari, Iran. Thus, the results and implications may not be generalizable to a broader population or context. However, the teaching strategies and techniques found in the study were effective and practical in their respective contexts, although their application to other contexts should be considered cautiously.

**References**

- Abello-Contesse, C. (2009). Age and critical period hypothesis. *ELT Journal*, 63(2), 170–172. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccn072>
- Alexiou, T. (2015). Vocabulary uptake from Peppa Pig: A case study of preschool EFL learners in Greece. In C. Gitsaki, & T. Alexiou (Eds.), *Current issues in second/foreign language teaching and teacher education: Research and practice* (pp. 285–301). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Al-Moghani, M. (2003). *Students' perceptions of motivation in English language learning in Libya* [Doctoral dissertation, Durham University]. <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1745/>
- Aminifard, Y., & Mehrpour, S. (2019). Mother tongue use in young Iranian EFL learners' classroom: Helpful scaffold or debilitating crutch? *The Reading Matrix: An International Online Journal*, 19(2), 77-85.
- Baker, C. (2007). *A parents' and teachers' guide to bilingualism*. Multilingual Matters.
- Bekiri, R. (2003). Playing with questions- A game for young learners. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 1(8), 25–31.
- Bland, J. (2016). English language education and ideological issues: Picture books and diversity. *Children's Literature in English Language Education*, 4(2), 41–64.
- Bowers, E., & Vasilyeva, M. (2011). The relation between teacher input and lexical growth of preschoolers. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 32(1), 221–241. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0142716410000354>
- Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cameron, L. (2003). Challenges for ELT from the expansion in teaching children. *ELT Journal*, 57(2), 105-112. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/57.2.105>
- Carter, R., & Mc Carthy, M. (2014). *Vocabulary and Language Teaching*. Routledge.
- Chou, M. (2014). Assessing English vocabulary and enhancing young English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' motivation through games, songs, and stories. *Education 3-13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education*, 42(3), 284–297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2012.680899>

- Coyle, Y., & Gómez Gracia, R. (2014). Using songs to enhance L2 vocabulary acquisition in preschool children. *ELT Journal*, 68(3), 276–285. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1093/elt/ccu015>
- Crain, W. (2005). *Theories of development: Concepts and Applications*. Pearson.
- Collins, M. F. (2010). ELL preschoolers' English vocabulary acquisition from storybook reading. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 25(1), 84–97. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2009.07.009>
- Cruz-Ferreira, M. (2006). *Three is a crowd? Acquiring Portuguese in a trilingual environment*. Multilingual Matters.
- Davis, G. M. (2017). Songs in the young learner classroom: A critical review of evidence. *ELT Journal*, 71(4), 445–455. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccw097>
- De Bot, K. (2014). The effectiveness of early foreign language learning in the Netherlands. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 4 (3). 409–418. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.2014.4.3.2>
- Deesri, A. (2002). Games in the ESL and EFL class. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 9(9). Retrieved on January 1, 2012, from <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Deesri-Games.html>.
- Denscombe, M. (2010). *Ground rules for social research: Guidelines for good practice* (2nd ed.). Open University Press.
- Derakhshan, A., & Shakki, F. (2019). A critical review of language teacher education for a global society: A modular model for knowing, analyzing, recognizing, doing, and seeing. *Critical Studies in Texts and Programs in Human Sciences*, 19(6), 109–127. <https://doi.org/10.30465/crtls.2019.4378>
- Derakhshan, A., & Shakki, F. (2020). [Review of the book *Worldwide English Language Education Today: Ideologies, Policies, and Practices*, by A. Al-Issa & S. A. Mirhosseini]. *System*, 90. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2020.102224>
- Dominguez, R. & Pessoa, S. (2005). Early vs. late start in foreign language education: Documenting achievements. *Foreign Language Annals*, 38(4), 473–480. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2005.tb02514.x>
- Dunn, L.M., & Dunn, L.M. (1997). *Peabody picture vocabulary test* (3rd ed.).

American Guidance Service.

- Ellis, G. (2018). The picture book in elementary ELT: Multiple literacies with Bob Staake's *Bluebird*. In J. Bland (Ed.), *Using literature in English language education: Challenging reading for 8–18 year olds* (pp. 83–104). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
- Emery, H. (2012). *A global study of primary English teachers' qualifications, training and career development (ELT Research Papers, 12-08)*. British Council.
- Enever, J. (2011). *ELLiE. Early language learning in Europe*. The British Council.
- Enever, J. (2018). *Policy and politics in global primary English*. Oxford University Press.
- Enever, J., & Moon, J. (2009). New global contexts for teaching primary ELT: Change and challenge. In J. Enever, J. Moon, & U. Raman (Eds.), *Young learner English language policy and implementation: International perspectives* (pp. 5–21). Garnet Education.
- Ersöz, A. (2007). *Teaching English to young learners*. EDM Publishing.
- Eyres, I. (2007). *English for primary and early years*. SAGE.
- Fayyazi, R., Sahra-Gard, R., Rovshan, B., & Zandi B. A. (2017). Comparative study of the impact of bilingualism and gender on bilingual and monolingual learners in linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences. *Language Related Research*, 8 (2), 225-248. <http://dorl.net/dor/20.1001.1.23223081.1396.8.2.8.8>
- Garcia, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Garton, S., Copland, F., & Burns, A. (2011). *Investigating global practices in teaching English to young learners (ELT research papers, 11-01)*. British Council.
- Gunn, C., & McCallum, A. (2005). Climbing grammar mountain: An interactive learning experience. *English Teaching Forum*, 43(4), 38–41.
- Hymes, D. (1971). *On communicative competence*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Jafari, F., & Ghiasi Zarch, A. (2018). The role and method of teaching vocabulary for the Chinese learners of Persian as a second language. *Language Related*



- Research*, 9 (2), 111–137. <http://dorl.net/dor/20.1001.1.23223081.1397.9.2.1.8>
- Joyce, M. (2011). *Vocabulary acquisition with kindergarten children using song picture book* [Doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University]. <https://repository.library.northeastern.edu/files/neu:1137/fulltext.pdf>
- Kinzie, M. B., & Joseph, D. R. D. (2008). Gender differences in game activity preferences of middle school children: Implications for educational game design. *Educational Technology, Research, and Development*, 5(6), 643–663. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-007-9076-2>
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon.
- Lanza, E. (2004). *Language mixing in infant bilingualism A sociolinguistic perspective*. Oxford University Press.
- Lenneberg, E. (1967). *Biological foundations of language*. Wiley.
- Leśniewska, J., & Pichette, F. (2014). Songs vs. stories: impact of input sources on ESL vocabulary acquisition by preliterate children. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 19(1), 18–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2014.960360>
- Lightbown, P., & Spada, N. (1999). *How languages are learned*. Oxford University Press.
- Lillard, A. S. (2007). *Montessori: The science behind the genius*. Oxford University Press.
- Lin, L. C. (2014). Learning word meanings from teachers' repeated story read-aloud in EFL primary classrooms. *English Language Teaching*, 7(7), 68–81. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v7n7p68>
- Linse, C. T. (2005). *Practical English language teaching: Young learners*. McGraw-Hill.
- Lugo-Neris, M., Wood Jackson, C., & Goldstein, H. (2010). Facilitating vocabulary acquisition of young English language learners. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 41(3), 314–327.
- McCallum, G. P. (1980). *101 word games: For students of English as a second or foreign language*. Oxford University Press.

- Moon, J. (2000). *Children learning English*. Macmillan Heinemann.
- Muñoz, C., & Spada, N. (2019). Foreign language learning from early childhood to young adulthood. In A. De Houwer & L. Ortega (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of bilingualism* (pp. 233–249). Cambridge University Press.
- NAEYC. (2009). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8*. National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Nedomová, A. (2007). *Teaching grammar to young learners* [Unpublished master's thesis, Masaryk University]. [https://is.muni.cz/th/44537/pedf\\_b/bachelor\\_thesis.pdf](https://is.muni.cz/th/44537/pedf_b/bachelor_thesis.pdf)
- Nikolov, M. (2009). *Early learning of modern foreign languages: Processes and outcomes*. Multilingual Matters.
- Nikolov, M., & Mihaljevic Djigunovic, J. (2011). All shades and every color: An overview of early teaching and learning of foreign languages. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 31(2011), 95–119. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190511000183>
- Penfield, W., & Roberts, L. (1959). *Speech and brain-mechanisms*. Princeton University Press.
- Pinter, A. (2006). *Teaching young language learners*. Oxford University Press.
- Ragatz, C. M. (2015). *Playing vocabulary games and learning academic language with gifted elementary students* [Doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University]. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/79576111.pdf>
- Rashtchi, M., & Keyvanfar, A. (2001). The role of play in children's cognitive and language development. *Language and Literature*, 14 (3), 13–35.
- Reilly, V., & Ward, S. M. (1997). *Very young learners*. Oxford University Press.
- Rice, M. L., & Woodsmall, L. (1988). Lessons from television: Children's word learning when viewing. *Child Development*, 59(2), 420–429.
- Rich, S. (2018). Early language learning teacher education. In S. Garton & F. Copland (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of teaching English to young learners* (pp. 44–59). Routledge.
- Rixon, S. (2017). The role of early language learning teacher education in turning policy into practice. In E. Wilden & R. Porsch (Eds.), *The professional development of primary EFL teachers: National and international research* (pp.

79–94). Waxmann.

Scheffler, P., & Domińska, A. (2018). Own-language use in teaching English to preschool children. *ELT Journal*, 72(4), 374–383, <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccy013>

Scott, W. A., & Ytreberg, L. H. (1990). *Teaching English to children*. Longman.

Shakki, F. (2023). Investigating the relationship between EFL learners' engagement and their achievement emotions. *Porta Linguarum An International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning*, 40(2), 275–294. <https://doi.org/10.30827/portalin.vi40.27338>

Shakki, F., Naeini, J., Mazandarani, O., & Derakhshan, A. (2021). Instructed second language pragmatics for the speech act of apology in an Iranian EFL context: A meta-analysis. *Applied Research on English Language*, 10(3), 77–104. <https://doi.org/10.22108/are.2021.128213.1709>

Shin, J. K. (2014). *Teaching young learners in English as a second/foreign language settings*. In M. Celce-Murcia, D. M. Brinton, & M. A. Snow (Eds.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (fourth ed., pp. 550–567). National Geographic Learning.

Slattery, M., & Willis, J. (2001). *English for primary teachers: A handbook of activities and classroom language*. Oxford University Press.

Tavil, Z. M., & Söylemez, A. S. (2008). Vocabulary teaching through storytelling to very young learners in kindergartens. *Ekev Academic Review*, 12(35), 371–382.

Tavil, Z. M., & İşısağ, K. U. (2009). Teaching vocabulary to very young learners through games and songs. *Ekev Academic Review*, 13(38), 299–308.

Taghizadeh, M., Vaezi, S., & Ravan, M. (2017). Digital games, songs and flashcards and their effects on vocabulary knowledge of Iranian preschoolers. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*, 5(4), 156–171.

Tekin, S., & Garton, S. (2020). L1 in the primary English classroom: How Much, when, how and why? *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, 8(3), 7–97.

<https://doi.org/10.30466/ijltr.2020.120935>

Tuan, L. T. (2012). Vocabulary recollection through games. *Theory and Practice in*

*Language Studies*, 2(2), 257–264. <https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls2.2.257-264>

Vihman, M. M., & McCune, L. (1994). When is a word a word? *Journal of Child Language*, 21(3), 517-542. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305000900009442>

Weitz, M., Pahl, S., Flyman Mattsson, A., Buyl, A., & Kalbe, E. (2010). The Input Quality Observation Scheme (IQOS): The nature of L2 input and its influence on L2 development in bilingual preschools. In C. Kersten, A. Rohde, C. Schelletter, A.K. Steinlein (Eds.), *Bilingual preschools* (pp. 5–44). Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier.

Widen, S.C., & Russell, J.A. (2003). A closer look at preschoolers' freely produced labels for facial expressions. *Developmental Psychology*, 39(1), 114–128. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.39.1.114>

### About the Authors

**Zahra Ghaffari Saravi** is a Ph.D. candidate in TEFL at Islamic Azad University, North Tehran Branch. She is an instructor at Mazandaran Islamic Azad University. Her research interests include early education and teaching thinking skills.

**Mojgan Rashtchi** is an associate professor of Applied Linguistics in the faculty of Foreign Languages of Islamic Azad University, North Tehran Branch. She has taught a variety of courses related to English language teaching to students at different levels. She has published several articles and books and has participated in several local and international conferences. Her primary areas of interest include English language teaching methodology, theories of first and second language acquisition, teaching language skills, and research in education.

**Arshya Keyvanfar** is an assistant professor of TEFL at Islamic Azad University, North Tehran Branch. She researches language assessment, teaching grammar, and CDA. Her current project is anthropology and CLIL.