The Teaching of Shanghainese in Shanghai Kindergartens

Yan-Yan LI
Shanghai Normal University, Tianhua College, Shanghai, China
leeyeanyean@126.com

Keywords: Shanghainese, The Teaching of Shanghainese, Kindergarten.

Abstract. The Shanghainese language is currently in danger of becoming extinct. The Shanghai government officially issued a paper on the teaching of Shanghainese in Shanghai kindergartens in May, 2013 as a way of maintaining and developing Shanghainese. As a result, 20 public kindergartens were selected to start the teaching of Shanghainese on a trial basis in September, 2014. The purpose of this study is to document the implementation, understanding and perceptions regarding the teaching of Shanghainese in Shanghai kindergartens by making a multi-case study. By applying Krashen’s acquisition and learning hypothesis and input hypothesis, the teaching of Shanghainese is implemented with an attempt to create an acquisition-rich learning environment for children to acquire Shanghainese with sufficient comprehensible input. However, there is much more that needs to be done in creating an acquisition-rich learning environment and for there to be a sufficient and quality comprehensible input in helping children learn Shanghainese.

Introduction

Quite a number of languages and local dialects are disappearing around the world. China is no exception to this phenomenon. It is reported that China has 129 different languages along with numerous regional dialects[1]. Out of the 129 languages, 117 languages are on the decline or in danger of extinction[1]. Twenty-one languages are now on the verge of actual extinction and 64 are on the path towards extinction, while 24 are in decline, and 8 have no communicative functions[1]. For example, Lao minority language, Manchu minority language, Hezhe minority language, Su minority language and Xiandao minority language are almost on the verge of actual extinction. With regard to dialects, Fuzhou dialect, Kejia dialect, Suzhou dialect and Shanghainese are on the decline[2].

The Shanghai government officially issued a paper on the teaching of Shanghainese in Shanghai kindergartens[3] in May, 2013 as a way of maintaining and developing Shanghainese among its young population. Twenty public kindergartens were selected as the first schools for the teaching of Shanghainese on a trial basis, hoping to later promote such programs in Shanghai and in other parts of China. In regards to this new program, how the teaching of Shanghainese was implemented in the kindergartens is critical. Thus, the focus of this study is concentrated on the teaching of Shanghainese in Shanghai kindergartens.

Shanghainese belongs to the Wu Chinese dialect and is spoken in Shanghai and the areas around it[4]. For the purpose of my dissertation study, Shanghainese only refers to the local and standard Shanghainese spoken in Shanghai. The purpose of this study is to document current implementation, understanding, and perspectives on the teaching of Shanghainese in order to reveal insights into the teaching of Shanghainese in Shanghai kindergartens. The specific questions to be answered by this study are: 1. How is the teaching of Shanghainese implemented in Shanghai kindergartens? 2. What challenges are Shanghai kindergarten teachers facing as they implement the teaching of Shanghainese into their curricula? 3. What are the perspectives of kindergarten teachers, administrators, and parents with regard to the teaching of Shanghainese in Shanghai kindergartens?
Methods

My purpose is to document the implementation, understanding and opinions on the teaching of Shanghainese in Shanghai kindergartens. Case study seemed to be the best choice for making a holistic study and a multiple-case study best suited my purpose.

In terms of sampling selection procedures, I employed a maximum sampling strategy to identify three kindergartens, one from each level of kindergarten (one demonstration kindergarten Qing, one first-level kindergarten Peng, and one second level kindergarten Spring) in Zhabei District in Shanghai, to conduct my study. Zhabei District is an urban district with one of the largest populations in Shanghai and predominantly inhabitants who are native Shanghainese, with 27% of the population being New Shanghainese. These three kindergartens started to implement the teaching of Shanghainese from September 2013 on a trial basis.

In each kindergarten, the principal recommended one third-grade classroom in their kindergartens. Two teachers were responsible for each classroom. Thus, I identified two kindergarten teachers in each classroom. The kindergarten teachers recommended two parents, one was native Shanghainese and the other was New Shanghainese. Thus, three principals, six kindergarten teachers and six parents were involved into this study. In total, I had 15 respondents. They provided their insights and understanding of the teaching of Shanghainese in their kindergartens.

In terms of data collection procedures, I collected data through observations, interview and documents. I used the process of triangulation and member checking to validate the accuracy of the data.

The data analysis procedures in this study were guided by the research questions and pattern, theme and content analysis this analytic strategy. The strategy used for this study provided a framework for the overall direction of the study and guided decisions and actions in order to integrate individual activities toward a common purpose.

Results

Basically, the three kindergartens were integrating the teaching of Shanghainese with daily activities (life, games, sports and study) throughout the school day. However, due to different foci and collective competence of the children in each kindergarten, the teaching of Shanghainese in the three kindergartens varies from one to another. For example, Kindergarten Qing focuses on the development of basic mathematical skills and the great majority of the children are native Shanghainese. Shanghai culture is an integral part of the teaching of Shanghainese in Kindergarten Qing. Kindergarten Peng focuses on performing arts and relatively a great number of the children are native Shanghainese. Learning the ballads in Shanghainese is the most striking feature of the teaching of Shanghainese in Kindergarten Peng. Kindergarten Spring focuses on Wushu (a martial art). Due to the lower language competence of Shanghainese of the children, teaching of daily use of Shanghainese is the most salient feature of the teaching of Shanghainese (Fig.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus in the teaching of Shanghainese</th>
<th>Kindergarten Qing</th>
<th>Kindergarten Peng</th>
<th>Kindergarten Spring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus in Shanghai culture</td>
<td>Shanghai culture</td>
<td>The ballads in</td>
<td>Teaching of daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Shanghainese</td>
<td>use of Shanghainese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Mathematical skills</td>
<td>Performing arts</td>
<td>Wushu (martial art)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Focus and the focus in teaching of Shanghainese in three kindergartens.
The teaching of Shanghainese in Kindergartens Qing, Peng and Spring were first described and then analyzed to a limited extent through the lens of Krashen’s acquisition and learning hypothesis and input hypothesis. To various degrees, the teaching of Shanghainese is largely integrated with daily activities throughout the day at the schools. Though the three kindergartens are implementing the teaching of Shanghainese in different ways, they share some common themes regarding the implementation of the teaching of Shanghainese, the challenges kindergarten teachers face and the perspectives of kindergarten teachers, principals and parents. Being an outsider, I made a comparison across the three kindergartens as explained in detail below.

Regarding the implementation, in looking for the common themes the three kindergartens share, an increase in the daily usage of Shanghainese and of Shanghainese ballads and playing Old Shanghai alley games are identified (Fig. 2). According to Krashen’s acquisition and learning hypothesis and input hypothesis, children would be expected to be exposed to Shanghainese and to develop a sense of it, to understand it, and to try to speak and finally acquire it automatically under an acquisition-rich environment. However, the three kindergartens are not living up to Krashen’s ideals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>School Kindergarten Qing</th>
<th>Kindergarten Peng</th>
<th>Kindergarten Spring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Playing games in Shanghainese</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An increase in daily use of Shanghainese</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The use of ballads in Shanghainese</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing Old Shanghai alley games</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching the daily use of Shanghainese</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental involvement</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. The implementation of the Teaching of Shanghainese across Three Kindergartens.

Regarding the challenges, based on the descriptions of the challenges kindergarten teachers face, they have three common challenges when they are implementing the teaching of Shanghainese into their curriculum: minimal training for teaching staff, no Standard Shanghainese, and many parents’ lack of enthusiasm (Fig. 3).
Regarding the perspectives, in general, kindergarten teachers, principals and parents are tolerant and positive towards the teaching of Shanghainese across the three kindergartens. However, there are some subtle differences amongst them regarding the teaching of Shanghainese. I made a comparison between them regarding the teaching of Shanghainese in the following part (Fig. 4).

Unfortunately, on the whole, the teaching of Shanghainese in the three kindergartens appears unstructured and unsystematic. The amount of teaching of Shanghainese in the curricula is quite limited for both Kindergarten Qing and Kindergarten Peng, no more than 5%, and Kindergarten Spring, no more than 2%. Applying Krashen’s acquisition and learning hypothesis and input hypothesis, the three kindergartens are expected to do much more regarding the provision of what Krashen called “sufficient comprehensible input” because of the limited time available in the curriculum for Shanghainese. Also, it appeared that more could be done to create a natural learning environment, such as speaking more Shanghainese in the kindergarten.

It seems there is unanimous agreement that the teaching of Shanghainese in Shanghai kindergartens is worth trying among kindergarten teachers, administrators and parents. However, they insist that the kindergarten must teach Putonghua and accept Shanghainese. They believe the schools should teach children Putonghua, which will be an asset in their children’s future professional careers.
Conclusions

The observations and interviews with kindergarten teachers, principals and parents led to a number of conclusions about the teaching of Shanghainese in Shanghai kindergartens.

First, kindergarten teachers are in urgent need of practical theories for Shanghainese language instruction and teaching pedagogies. Efforts should be made to develop a curriculum specifically focused on the teaching of Shanghainese and on the pedagogies of second dialect teaching.

Second, the teaching of Shanghainese is at its infant stage, segmented and unsystematic. Efforts should be made to develop a method for the systematic and integrated teaching of a standard Shanghainese and also to address the lack of Shanghainese instructional materials.

Third, the implementation of the teaching of Shanghainese increases in difficulty in proportion to the number of children in the class who have no familiarity with Shanghainese. These children may need extra help or specific training in elementary Shanghainese vocabulary or expressions in order to catch up with the children who have learned Shanghainese at home.

Last, the teaching of Shanghainese needs parents to be involved. The more parents are involved, the better the teaching of Shanghainese will be. Different ways need to be explored to motivate parents to be involved in the teaching of Shanghainese. For example, parents could be invited to learn the ballads in Shanghainese with their children and observe Huju.

Implications and Recommendations

In this study, I described the implementation of the teaching of Shanghainese in Shanghai kindergartens and made a deep analysis of it. Here are some implementations and recommendations:

First and foremost, the teaching of Shanghainese may possibly adopt the instrumental approach. In so doing, Shanghainese can be adopted to serve as the medium of instruction in the classroom. In such an approach, first graders and second graders would not be expected to speak Putonghua in Shanghai kindergartens and when it comes to the third grade, Putonghua could be adopted for teaching. Shanghainese could be seen as a transitional prop in the acquisition of Putonghua.

Second, there is a need to increase the proportion of the teaching of Shanghainese in the curriculum in Shanghai kindergartens. Additionally, there is a need to multiply the number of situations in which Shanghainese can be used both actively and passively in the kindergarten. In accordance with Krashen’s hypotheses, an increase in the proportion of the teaching of Shanghainese in the curriculum makes it possible for creating an acquisition-rich environment and providing comprehensible input in the class.

Third, besides pronunciation, Shanghainese pedagogical training, including both practical and theoretical training should be included in teacher training programs. Kindergarten teachers need practical coaching and supervision from experts. They also need to be well informed with theories. “Shanghainese” should be a topic in teacher training and in-service teacher training as well.

Fourth, there is a need to define Standard Shanghainese. Until Standard Shanghainese is defined, it will be impossible for kindergarten teachers to develop appropriate strategies and pedagogies for the teaching of Shanghainese.

Fifth, Shanghai cultural awareness activities should be an integral part of the teaching of Shanghainese in Shanghai kindergartens. Shanghainese and Shanghai culture is inseparable. Schools must bear in mind the necessity of teaching both language and culture together.

Last but not the least, the mainstream is of great importance and Shanghainese should be allowed in more situations in the society. The more people speak Shanghainese, the better Shanghainese is preserved. Thus, Shanghainese should be allowed to be spoken in more public situations. More television programs in Shanghainese, as well as more videos and books in Shanghainese, are critically needed. In line with Krashen’s input hypothesis, exposure to Shanghainese outside of school is critical for creating an acquisition-rich environment and providing comprehensible input.
Political, social and demographic factors, as well as cultural and linguistic ones, cause language shift, even language death[5]. However, language lies at the heart of education, culture and identity. When a language dies, so does a considerable amount of the culture, identity and knowledge that has been passed down from generation to generation through and within that language. It is the same with Shanghainese. Therefore, Shanghainese teaching is both beneficial and worth trying to implement and expand upon. Though it is still in its infant stage, we can see a growing number of kindergarten teachers are speaking Shanghainese more frequently in their classrooms. An increasing number of parents realize the importance of Shanghainese and some subtle change is happening.

References