

The ecological perspectives in early language education

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The growing diversity of preschool educational programs in the past two decades has increased research worldwide, focusing on early language education (e.g., Otto & Cortina-Pérez, 2022; Schwartz, 2022). In this monograph, Mila Schwartz presents *ecological perspectives on early language education* that conceptualize interactions between child language-based agency, teachers' agency, peers' agency, and parents' agency. It furthers insights into young children's lives growing up in multilingual homes and environments. This education targets children aged 0–6/7 who are learning two or more languages at home, preschool, or in the community in parallel or sequential ways.

Building on language ecology (Haugen, 2001), Bronfenbrenner's human ecology theory (1979), and agency in language learning (e.g., van Lier, 2010), the book highlights the interdependent nature of ecological factors influencing early language learning and education. This threefold tenet results in three original models the author has developed, which she presents in *Chapter 1* and describes in *Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6*: (1) Model of Ecology of the Child's Early Language Learning, (2) Model of Ecological Perspectives in Early Language Education: Parent, Teacher, Peer, and Child Agency in Interaction, (3) Model of the Child's Mediated Agency.

Drawing on research evidence, the book explores teachers', families', and peers' strategies and practices to enhance children's interest in home language maintenance and enrichment and in novel language learning. It considers international evidence of children's language from diverse socio-linguistic backgrounds and indigenous, endangered, heritage, regional, minority, majority, and marginalized languages, as well as foreign and second languages in education at home and out-of-home settings. The author claims that only

through collaboration between teachers, families, peers, and a close environment can the child be engaged in early language learning and fully experience his or her potential to act as an agent in novel language learning. One can assume that young children can develop competence, skills, and capacity to enact their agency, which would reflect on their own best interests if significant caregivers provide affordance for this enactment. To act as agents in early language learning, children need to feel intrinsic motivation, which refers to the experience of pleasure, joy, and curiosity to engage in language learning activities.

The researcher thoroughly examines a widespread claim that “children are like sponges” and learn languages quickly, criticizing this oversimplified view. She brings growing data that even after more than two years of significant teacher input in the target language, many children fail to progress in productive language use, as anticipated by teachers and parents. Since the book forwards an ecological approach towards early language learning, Schwartz highlights the quality of teaching and the teacher–child interaction as potential factors that may explain, in part, children’s engagement (or disengagement) in target language learning. Regarding classroom instruction, the author emphasizes the essential role of providing socio-emotional support to children in addition to instructional and classroom organization support. These supports are significant in triggering young children’s engagement in early language learning and determining the target language use, creating a language-conducive context (Schwartz, 2018).

The book deepens our understanding of early language education as a broad research area concerning how languages are learned, maintained, enriched, and taught at an early age. As a relatively novel field of inquiry, it is characterized by a “distinctive and interdisciplinary nature” (Schwartz, 2022; pp. 3–4).

This monograph is relevant to scholars and all levels of students studying second/foreign language teaching, bilingual/multilingual education, early childhood education and care, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and psychology, with a special interest in early childhood development and education in multilingual and multicultural societies. They may also use it for study, research, and teaching. In addition, this volume is of special interest to a wide range of professionals, such as preschool educational psychologists and speech therapists, due to the rich, up-to-date empirical data and field implications it provides.

References

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