Early childhood educators’ language training competence in relation to their language proficiency

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What kind of knowledge do early childhood educators need to support children with linguistic deficits? On a basic level, they need language proficiency in the target language. A Dutch study (Kuiken 2014) showed that this premise is not always met, because half of the tested educators did not reach the required competence levels in Dutch (B2, cf. CEFR). However, being a proficient speaker of a language does not guarantee that this person is able to provide successful language support for learners. Hopp et al. (2010) postulate that educators need language training competence (LTC) which comprises knowledge about language, second language acquisition (SLA) processes, and multilingualism (i.e. metalinguistic knowledge) as well as specific abilities, e.g. to select and apply diagnostic tools.

Studies have shown a positive relationship between metalinguistic knowledge and language proficiency, but this study is the first to investigate this relation for the professional group of educators. It is hypothesized that LTC increases with language proficiency. In a cross-sectional study we plan to assess LTC of 60 educators with a standardized test. The test contains 35 multiple-choice questions tapping knowledge about language, SLA and language training plus 18 situational judgement tasks focusing on strategic and methodological abilities. Language proficiency will be measured by a yes/no-vocabulary test. Scores will be correlated to reveal the relationship between metalinguistic knowledge, didactic abilities and language proficiency. Results will be discussed with respect to language support practices in early childhood education and in the light of current efforts to qualify volunteers lacking explicit linguistic knowledge and didactic skills to teach German to refugees.


Keywords: educator, language proficiency, language training competence, early childhood education.