Difficulties in Collecting Data From Children Aged 7–12

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ABSTRACT

Collecting data from children who learn a foreign language is a complex and problematic area when considering their lack of proficiency in the target language and their cognitive, psychological, and social development. In addition, research shows that the number of studies that focus on the problems related to scale administration to younger language learners is fairly limited, while studies on the foreign language context mainly concentrated on issues related to adult and proficient learners. Thus, this study aims to explore the difficulties in collecting data from Turkish children aged 7 – 12 in a foreign language context. The study was designed as a qualitative case study and involved reflections, an interview, and a diary kept by the subject. Findings indicated that the problems with data collection from children were related to time and space, the lack of coordination, children's cognition levels, teacher effect on children's behaviors, and physical environment. In light of the results, some practical recommendations were presented.

KEYWORDS

Children, Data Collection, English as a Foreign Language

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to investigate the potential problems during the process of data collecting from children between the ages of 7 and 12 in a foreign language context due to several reasons. First of all, in the broadest perspective, data collection from children seems a problematic, complex and difficult area regarding their cognitive, linguistic and social development when compared to data gathering from adults in an educational context. For instance, within the scope of the foreign learning process, it is evident that data collection is a considerable problem as they have not completed

their language proficiency regarding not only in the target language but in their native language. Additionally, it is obvious that the level of their social development may constitute a barrier to collecting data. The level of their cognitive development may be another problem regarding clarifying the aims of research activities, introducing the ethical issues, carrying out experiments and motivating them. The second reason is that while the numbers of children enrolled at primary and secondary schools increases gradually at not only at national but at a global scale, research on children mainly concentrates on adult learners. Specifically, in the Turkish research context, research on educational issues mainly use adult participants due to practicality and logistical issues. However, it is clear that there have been radical changes in education systems all over the world, while research activities remain too limited to reach conclusions in terms of children in realistic and natural education settings. Thus, within the scope of examining the difficulties during the process of data collecting from children between the ages of 7 and 12, first, this section briefly introduces the rationale behind the study. Then, the paper presents a brief research synthesis on the issue. Finally, an overview of the research is presented regarding the conclusions of the studies reviewed.

Collecting data from children is a potentially challenging area, considering that large gaps exist in the related literature due to the lack of research on the problems regarding data collection from children (Mauthner, 1997). What is more, participants in scientific studies are generally chosen from the adult population and adolescents, while children are neglected (Scott, 2008). However, while children were thought of as untrustworthy sources of data before the 1990s, it has started to change and gain importance due to shifting children's role from passive recipients to the informed participants (Davis, 2007). In other words, today, this shifting paradigm demonstrates that children are essential for obtaining rich and relevant data (Mayaba & Wood, 2015). This shows that methods and scales should be carefully designed and planned. In addition, special attention should be given to children's psychological, cognitive and social developments during research. On the other hand, the number of studies on data collection from children is quite limited. For instance, certain factors such as children's limited lexical competence, difficulties of gathering data and their limited attention span have remained untouched research areas. Moreover, the related literature lacks research on methods and techniques to collect data from children and the properties that make children different from adults in the research process (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Punch, 2002). The most considerable point is that it is not possible to carry out research in regard to providing research context and developing research tools and settings without answering the question of what problems are encountered during data collection from children. To conclude, collecting data from children today is still a complicated field and requires research in terms of the problems encountered (Punch, 2002).

Another complicated and problematic area is collecting data from children who learn a foreign language due to several reasons. First, one of the problems is their deficient linguistic competence (Scott, 2008). In other words, it is nearly impossible to collect valid and reliable data from children who have difficulties in comprehending statements properly, conveying meaning in both written and oral discourse and inefficiency in listening and reading skills. Thus, it is necessary to collect data from children by using their native language, as their foreign language incompetence causes scale administration in the target language to be more complex and vague. Second, in a foreign language context, some more factors affect the data collection process. For instance, children learn indirectly rather than directly and cannot focus on the precise topic. Thus, they need visual, oral and physical interaction for a better understanding. In addition, they need individual attention and approval from their language teachers and have a limited attention span (Harmer, 2007). It is possible to conclude that not only their linguistic competence but also the above-mentioned issues require special attention while collecting data from children.

Research related to children in a Turkish EFL context is significant because EFL is a required class at primary and secondary schools in Turkey. After radical changes in the Turkish primary and secondary education system in 2012 English became an obligatory course for students in all grades, with the exception of first graders. According to the new regulation, obligatory education increased

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