

Girls have harder time than boys adjusting in language-learning environment

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Girls who don't share a common language may have more difficulty adjusting socially than boys, according to surprising new Michigan State University research looking at language acquisition among young children.

A study of 3- to 6-year-olds attending an international school in Beijing found that in general, girls had more social adjustment problems than boys. The students, representing 16 nationalities, were immersed in both Chinese and English, meaning each child was learning at least one new language.

"In early childhood, we know from previous research that girls are more verbal and more social than boys, generally speaking, but what we found in this study is that girls had a tougher time with social adjustment in the classroom," said Anne Soderman, MSU professor emeritus of family and child ecology and lead researcher on the project.

The study, published in the latest issue of *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, found that girls who did not understand teachers or classmates at the 3e International School tended to act out or withdraw more than their male peers. Students at the "dual immersion" school are taught in Mandarin during the morning and English in the afternoon.

Soderman, a consultant at the school, studied preschoolers and kindergartners last school year using more than 100 two- to three-hour

observations in the classroom and teachers' perceptions of the children's social adjustment on the Social Competence Behavior Evaluation scale.

The study, which continues this year, also found that young children overall have a more difficult time learning a second language than many people believe, Soderman said.

"There's a wide-held perception that if children are very young, learning language is extremely easy for them – that they are like sponges – and that is just not true," she said. "Their motivations for doing so are very different from those of older children or adults."

Soderman said it's important teachers are properly trained to teach a second language and that they make the children comfortable as they go through the often stressful process. A child who acts out may be doing so because of the language barrier, she noted.

"While teachers may see these students as oppositional or significantly withdrawn, sometimes it's just due to the fact that they really don't understand what someone wants them to do. They also become frustrated when they aren't able to communicate their needs and wants to peers and adults," Soderman said.

By observing the students in a unique language-acquisition environment, she added, researchers are also able to identify valuable teaching strategies for children who differ by gender, culture, age, language ability and experience.

Source: Michigan State University

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