

THE IMPACT OF THE CURIOSITY APPROACH ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN THEIR FIRST YEAR OF SCHOOL

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Introduction

This study considers the impact of the Curiosity Approach on English Language Learners. Whitehead (2010) underpins the importance of language to provide the foundation for academic success, substantiating the need to focus on this area.

Local Context

English Language Learners (ELL) in the Foundation Stage at Safa British School face distinct challenges in language acquisition, particularly in Literacy. With up to 30% of both Foundation Stage 1 (FS1) and Stage 2 (FS2) children identified as ELL learners, teachers face challenging scenarios in their classrooms.

Baseline data (September 2024) highlights that ELL students start school with significantly lower attainment in Literacy than their peers, with only 23% of FS1 and 39% of FS2 students attaining at or above expected levels. While progress is evident in Mathematics and Science, language proficiency remains a barrier to broader academic achievement.

Whitehead (2010) suggests that young children learn language through interaction and meaningful experiences. The Curiosity Approach, which prioritises child-led exploration, real-world experiences, and natural vocabulary development has been identified as a potential strategy to enhance language acquisition for ELL students. However, its direct impact on these learners requires further exploration to ensure its effectiveness in supporting language development within their first year of school.

Literature Review

Communication and Language is one of the prime areas of the seven areas of learning within the Early Years Foundation Stage framework (Department for Education, 2021). Developing language skills is proven to exponentially support raising attainment and progress across all areas of the curriculum (Department for Education, 2011). However, ELL learners have lower starting points, largely due to their lower language proficiency, which can have a negative impact on their ability to access the curriculum and participate fully in classroom activities (Whitehead, 2010).

Samuels (2021) argues that literacy approaches often fall short in meeting the needs of ELL learners. Highlighting the importance of the immersion environment for learners, Samuel argues that a student's self-esteem and ability to learn language is supported when the environment is positive. Teachers are realising that social and academic success are interlinked (Bell and Bogan, 2013). In light of this, there still is little evidence to support the impact of the Curiosity Approach directly on the acquisition of a second language. The Curiosity Approach (Bennett and Hellyn, 2017) emphasises active learning and fosters critical thinking in environments that support self-directed learning and the child at the centre.

There have been scarce attempts to investigate the impact of the Curiosity Approach specifically on ELL learners, with existing literature solely focusing mainly on inquiry based or curiosity driven learning. Arguably this could largely be due to the small number of accredited schools internationally, while the official website states 4000 practitioners have been signed up there is no declaration of how many schools or educators are already accredited (The Curiosity Approach, 2024).

The research questions proposed by this author will be strengthened through the careful implementation of the Curiosity Approach;

1. To what degree does a curiosity approach setting support ELL children in their first year of school?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of the progress of ELL children when following the curiosity approach principles?

Through focusing on embedding the Curiosity Approach in the Foundation Stage setting, the impact of the Curiosity approach on ELL learners will be addressed further.

Methods

This study alternates between inquiry and action; therefore, the multi-methods approach was chosen to highlight the improvement made due to the intervention to explore the impact of the Curiosity Approach on English Language Learners (ELLs) (Coe, Waring, Hedges and Arthur, 2017). A combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods was used to gain both breadth and depth of insight, aligning with the study's focus on both teacher perceptions and observed student outcomes. Participants included Foundation Stage teachers, all of whom had experience working within an Early Years setting that is in the process of adopting or becoming accredited in the Curiosity Approach. The sample included both FS1 and FS2 practitioners with varying levels of experience and exposure to ELL learners.

Data Collection

1. The quantitative survey was distributed to EYFS practitioners to gather quantitative data on teacher perceptions and practices. The survey included both closed-ended Likert-scale questions and one open-ended response question.
2. The qualitative semi-structured interview was conducted with one experienced practitioner. The interview explored personal experiences with ELLs, the perceived impact of the Curiosity Approach, and any noted differences in language development compared to more traditional teaching methods. Questions also focused on professional confidence, strategies used, and areas where further support is needed.
3. A focus group was held with two additional Foundation Stage practitioners. The session was guided by the semi-structured interview schedule but solely used as a prompt sheet to allow for open discussion. Participants reflected on environmental factors, language acquisition through play, and practical classroom strategies. The focus group provided deeper insight into collective practices and highlighted consistent themes across classrooms.

Results

The subsequent data analysis revealed several emergent themes concerning the impact of the Curiosity Approach on the ELL learners.

1. A Safe, Home-Like Environment Supports Confidence and Engagement

Both survey and qualitative data highlighted the significance of the learning environment in supporting ELL learners. Teachers described the setting as "home-away-from-home", stating that the familiar, cosy, and aesthetically inviting classrooms helped reduce anxiety for ELL students and encouraged exploration. This theme aligns with Whitehead's (2010) assertion that language develops most effectively in nurturing, interaction-rich environments.

2. Language Acquisition Through Child-Led Play and Meaningful Interactions

Practitioners overwhelmingly noted that child-led, play-based experiences in the Curiosity Approach foster natural and holistic language development.

“Children come in and explore in their own language first. Then, through curiosity and social interaction, they naturally start picking up English.” – Interviewee

3. The Role of Adults in Scaffolding Language is Crucial

Although the approach is child-led, the importance of adult intervention and co-play was strongly emphasised. Teachers shared that adult questioning, modelling, and knowing when to step back were essential for supporting language acquisition.

“Sometimes children don’t make the connection by themselves – they need an adult there to model or guide the interaction.” – Focus Group Participant

4. Comparison to Traditional Teaching Methods

Participants drew comparisons between the Curiosity Approach and more structured, teacher-led methods. Many noted that the traditional approach often led to disengagement, whereas the curiosity-based setting encouraged participation and spontaneous language use. Teachers reported higher levels of well-being, engagement, and sustained interest among ELLs in the curiosity-led environment.

“When they’re genuinely curious, they want to talk. Traditional lessons never gave them that spark.” – Interviewee

While the data supports the effectiveness of the Curiosity Approach in fostering ELL development, teachers acknowledged the lack of formal training and empirical evidence specific to ELL outcomes.

Discussion and Conclusions

This research project sought to investigate the impact of the Curiosity Approach on ELLs in their first year of school. The research has revealed promising insights into how this pedagogy can support language acquisition in young learners.

The findings demonstrate that the Curiosity Approach fosters an enabling and inclusive learning environment in which ELL children feel safe, motivated, and confident to communicate. Teachers reported increased levels of engagement, confidence, and spontaneous language use among ELLs compared to more traditional, structured teaching methods. This study echoes global frameworks like Kōwhiri Whakapae (2024), which highlight the importance of socially rich, play-based learning for additional language acquisition. The Curiosity Approach naturally integrates these practices, supporting confident, meaningful language development for second language learners.

Adult facilitation emerged as a critical component, with co-play, questioning, and responsive scaffolding identified as essential strategies. However, although teacher observations and classroom anecdotes suggest clear benefits, there remains a lack of formal research specifically measuring the impact of the Curiosity Approach on ELL learners.

This action research also has direct relevance to the UAE's evolving Arabic in Early Years policy (KHDA, 2023), which emphasises the importance of creating language-rich environments that nurture both Arabic and English from the earliest stages. The Curiosity Approach's emphasis on real-life materials, storytelling, and meaningful conversation could offer an ideal framework to support bilingual language acquisition.

In conclusion, the Curiosity Approach shows significant potential to support ELLs in their foundational year of education. Further research avenues should focus on determining and validating these findings and guide best practices for scaling and sustaining its impact.

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