Montessori and Conventional Teaching Methods in Learning English as a Second/Foreign Language: An Overview

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Abstract

Providing a meaningful and experiential English learning environment for all students has long created a concern for alternate ways to teach students who are reportedly demonstrating non-mastery on standardized assessments. As the benchmark for showing successful academic achievement increases, so does the need for discovering effective ways for students to learn second language effectively. The Montessori teaching method has been in existence since the early 1900s when Montessori made her discovery of the student learning process. Montessori connected the context of the classroom to the laws of nature and the environment for creating students who are problem-solvers with critical-thinking skills. The Montessori Method is designed to promote independent learning and support normal development in children. A Montessori lesson is defined as any interaction between an adult and a child; it incorporates techniques that are defined to serve as guidance for the adult personality in working with the child. To fully understand the Montessori Method, also known as individual learning or progressive learning, it is necessary to trace the history and development of the philosophy, and review the various principles and uses of the teaching methodology with special education programs. Studies show that Montessori students tend to achieve at a greater rate than students in traditional programs; however, critics say that the method is insufficiently standardized, and its efficacy has not been deeply evaluated.

Keywords: Montessori education, conventional methods, second language

INTRODUCTION

Providing a meaningful and experiential learning environment for all learners in general and L2 language learners in particular, has been a global goal of all concerned individuals. In preparation for life, learners need education that supports their natural environment to assure their curiosity and to promote intrinsic learning. Therefore, they can be

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engaged in the training of becoming self-reliant human beings. The growing emphasis on student-centered approaches to learning has promoted a corresponding interest in the affective dimension of the foreign language (FL) learner. In fact, scholars have been concerned with identifying the reasons why some students feel more anxious, less motivated and less self-efficacious in FL modules than in other subjects. They have also been concerned with creating a learning environment that contributes to lowering students'anxiety and fostering their motivation and self-efficacy. As Oxford (1990) insightfully pointed out, ''the affective side of the learner is probably one of the very biggest influences on language learning success or failure. Good language learners are often those who know how to control their emotions and attitudes about learning'' (p. 140). Additionally, Myers (1992) point out that when students understand how they learn best, they are likely to become more autonomous and responsible learners. Additionally, Carrell, Prince and Astika (1996) maintained that language teachers should recognize their students' individual differences and apply different techniques to cater for their needs.

Researchers also assert that special attention should be paid when designing and implementing instructional materials. Oxford (1992), for example, argues that ''if language activities are perceived as irrelevant or uninteresting, or if they conflict with the learner's particular style, the learner might tune out or lower the level of involvement'' (p. 33). More recently, Pallapu (2007) points out that ''knowing the learning styles of the learners aids the designer or instructor to develop a curriculum to address various needs of the learners in a group or class'' (p. 34). Relatively, an effective teaching style is required for the learning environment that offered interactive yet independent learning opportunities. Due to the present researchers' studies, it seems that the Montessori Method, also known as individual learning or progressive learning in comparison to conventional methods of teaching of English language as a second language is helpful for this purpose. Therefore, it is necessary to trace the history and development of the philosophy, and review the various principles and uses of Montessori teaching methodology.

BACKGROUND AND SETTINGS

In the early 1900's, Italian educator and physician Maria Montessori developed an innovative teaching methodology for children that left an indelible mark on education curricula throughout the world. Montessori education is a sensory-based pedagogy that is based on the belief that children learn at their own pace through manipulation of objects (Lopata, Wallace, and Finn, 2005). Montessori (1996) initially devised her teaching philosophy in 1896 while working with special needs children in the Psychiatric Department at the University of Rome. Although her patients were diagnosed as mentally deficient and unable to learn, within two years of Montessori's (1996) instruction, the children were able to successfully complete Italy's standardized public school exams (International Montessori Index, 2006). Through her research and study in the field, Montessori (1996) observed that in this ''educational playground'' children could choose from a variety of developmental activities that promoted learning by doing. Montessori

(1996) believed that it was necessary to train the senses before training the mind (Lopata, Wallace and Finn, 2005). By using this "self-directed" individual learning approach, Montessori's students were able to teach themselves through critical interaction in a 'prepared environment' containing interconnected tasks which gradually required higher levels of cognitive thought. This method was designed to create a task-oriented student who is "intrinsically motivated to master challenging tasks" (Rathunde & sikszentmihalya, 2005, p. 345). The Montessori Method was a radical philosophy at the time which contradicted and challenged many of the existing beliefs about 'whole-class learning' the acquisition of knowledge and the development of early human cognition.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

In preparation for life, students need education that supports their natural environment to ascertain their curiosity and to promote intrinsic learning and also to foster independence among learners. It seems that comparing Montessori methods of teaching and conventional methods be helpful for introducing an effective environment to teachers and curriculum developers. Therefore, the present study hopes to challenge many teachers of the existing beliefs and direct them toward focusing on individual learning and critical thinking which are the major goals of Montessori methods.

MONTESSORI METHOD AND ITS CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Montessori (1996) believed that children were not a blank slate and that the traditional learning methods such as recitation, memorization and conditioning failed to develop necessary life skills and individual abilities. She believed that each learner is a unique being, and he/she can surprise us with unique and unseen potential. In order to fully develop that unseen, she insisted that instructors must give learners freedom of choice to explore their environment. Teachers can assist them with sensory-based teaching methodology, also, this method promotes independent learning and self-discovery. Montessori teaching provided the conceptual framework for the study. The International Montessori Society (IMS) illustrated 20 protocols that "provide a contextual control of error for conducting experimental interactions with children" (Havis, 2006a, p. 15). The Montessori protocols are: 1) well-being of total environment; 2) least amount of adult involvement; 3) present moment; 4) no negative attention to misbehavior; 5) don't correct child; 6) basis of interest (ask; touch/look); 7) model good behavior; 8) eye contact before talking; 9) don't interrupt concentration; 10) be friendly – get acquainted; 11) enhance independence; 12) no rules for children; 13) emphasize main points isolate variable; 14) child watching; 15) same routines all the time; 16) take out everything; 17) from the shelf; 18) lay out randomly; 19) simplify complexity – hint; 20) confirm accuracy – clarify/expand (Havis, 2006a, p. 28-30).

TRADITIONAL TEACHING METHODS IN COMPARISON TO MONTESSORI METHODS

The Montessori self-directed and independent way of learning through peace with the environment contradicts the traditional method of instruction, which is teacher directed

and leaves little for a child to learn naturally. She acknowledged a child's natural eagerness to learn and supports that desire with a carefully prepared environment which results in students who are grounded in self-discovery and trusting of their own abilities (Black, 2011). It is the Montessori belief that a prepared environment for learning allows children to learn when they want to learn; therefore, enabling a trained teacher to match the curriculum to the child instead of the child to the curriculum, as done in traditional schools (Miller, 2009). Also, when students are seated in rows and listen to lectures, as in traditional methods, they are deprived of the opportunity to discover learning on their own. In addition to lecture style seating arrangements, "Learning in traditional schools comes largely from books, even during years when children in traditional schools are not yet particularly good readers" (Lillard, 2005, p .13). Lillard (2008) reported:

The very structure of schools, from physical arrangements to schedules to the ubiquitous use of textbooks and tests, supports behaviorist techniques and thereby leads teachers to take a fundamentally behaviorist approach. If the teacher has a desk in front of a blackboard at the front of the classroom and students are seated in rows facing the teacher, small group or individual work is unnatural (p. 13).

According to the National Research Council (2000), a division of the National Academy of Sciences, "traditional education limits students' opportunities to understand or decipher what is taught because many curricula emphasize memory rather than understanding. Students are assessed on their abilities to remember facts that have been memorialized" (pp. 8-9). Lopata, Wallace, and Finn (2005) described the traditional teaching method as one where teachers were in control of the environment and the students. The purpose of instruction was to develop academic and social skills. Instruction was provided primarily through lecture. Evaluation of learning usually consisted of written assignments, and tests were often multiple choice, fill in the blanks, and written essays. Greater emphasis was placed on dispensing and delivering information in the traditional method. Competition rather than cooperation among students was prevalent.

Research suggested that "teacher lecture was the methodology most often used to teach" (Cuban, 1993, p. 37). That method of teaching and learning indicated students recited what they memorized, textbook assignments made by the teachers, teachers asked questions, and the teachers provided explanations. That form of teaching and learning constituted the standard methodology of teaching and learning in classrooms. If the criterion of learning was factual information only then that methodology of teaching lecture and discussion was effective (Kulik and Kulik, 1980). This method is "teacher-centered with students providing answers to questions asked by the teachers" (Cuban, 1993, p. 37).

While the Montessori Method of teaching was completely different. The teaching method in Montessori was constructed to produce flexibility for the students, to foster individuality, and to provide opportunity to explore, develop, and grow which in turn produced learning. The prepared environment was the first stage in the education process (North American Teachers' Association, 2006). The classroom environment provided for maximum independent learning and exploratory learning activities by

children. The prepared environment was designed to enhance exploration and stimulate learning. The prepared environment consisted of the classroom space, class size, work centers, indirect preparation, and processing of learning. Children's natural propensity for learning evolved in prepared environments that produced continuous learning passages called a continuum.

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Students are assigned their own personal workstations designed with educational items that correspond to the daily lesson plans and activities. Students are responsible for setting up the work area, choosing the learning activity, applying the physical materials, and returning the materials back to the shelves (Pickering, 2004). Children are always free to move around the room and are not given deadlines for the various learning tasks. The amount of teachers in the classroom varies based on class size, but usually two teachers are used for sections. Montessori (1996) stated that '' an adult environment is not a suitable environment for children'' (p. 109) .She believed that little children should not have to live in an adult environment, instead, there should be an environment specially prepared for them.

Additionally, Montessori (1912) stated that in order for children to develop properly it is necessary to reduce all obstacles around them to a minimum. The office sized furniture pieces originally placed in the traditional classes were too big and too heavy for the little children. The children could not reach the high shelves nor could they move the large chairs. Dr. Montessori designed and had manufactured little furniture such as chairs, tables, washstands and cupboards that preschool children could use easily. Hooks on the walls were placed low so that children could reach them without any assistance from adults. The small chairs were light enough for a child to lift and carry to another location.

In the Montessori environment, Orem (1965) stated that the furniture fits the child because it is small just like the child. The educational décor is simple yet attractive. In Montessori classes simple pictures hang on the walls above the shelves where the learning tools are placed. Montessori (1996) kept the objects in the ''Children's House'' organized; there was a place for everything. Everything was marked (a simple outline of the object was drawn directly under the object) so the children could easily put away every tool they used. In the ''Children's House'' there were different types of workspaces such as: a chair by a small table or a carpeted floor .Everything was designed so it would be the best for the child. The outdoors of the class was also carefully designed. For the outdoors Montessori designed playgrounds and gardens with varieties of trees and flowers. There were pathways for children to take walks, small benches to sit on, and objects such as hoops to play with. Originally a medical doctor, Montessori, took great considerations for the child's physical as well as mental development.

MONTESSORI TEACHING MATERIALS VERSUS CONVENTIONAL METHODS

The second phase of the Montessori learning was the materials. Unlike traditional methods materials which were books, notebooks or ultimately video tapes, the materials

were arranged attractively and purposefully on open shelves to isolate one quality so the concept that the student was to learn was evident (North American Teachers' Association, 2006). Work centers were arranged based upon subject matter and the students were allowed to move freely and work on an existing task without time limitations. A student worked with the materials as long as the interest was maintained and when the student was finished with the material he returned it to its correct place.

Materials were designed to be self-correcting and induced students to use logical deductive reasoning to solve the problem which minimized teacher direct involvement or teacher correction (North American Teachers' Association, 2006). As exploratory and discovery skills were mastered, ongoing materials interrelated and built upon the next level or concept. Order and discipline were required behaviors in the prepared environment which produced discipline. The process of independent problem solving created self-confidence and critical thinking skills.

THE MONTESSORI TEACHER

The primary role of a Montessori educator is to carefully observe while creating a cooperative and supportive setting that is well organized and aesthetically pleasing to the learners. The teacher performs the ''overseer role'' by directing the ''spontaneous'' actions of the students (Ruenzel, 1997). According to Montessori, "education is not something which the teacher does, but rather a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being" (cited in Weissglass, 1999, p. 45). Montessori teachers introduce materials with a brief lesson and demonstration and then passively guide the audience through a period of student-centered inquiry. The objective of the instructor is to motivate students, ''allowing them to develop confidence and inner discipline so that there is less and less of a need to intervene as the child develops'' (Edwards, 2002, p. 6). On average, the most teachers spend less than one hour of the daily class on group instruction (Lopata, Wallace and Finn, 2005). Curriculum topics are strategically linked by the teacher so that no subject is taught in isolation. When introducing new subjects instructors use demonstration lessons that increase in complexity as the students are able to advance in the sequence of self-correcting problems and tasks (Humphryes, 1998). Lessons at school settings cover an eclectic mix of disciplines such as geometry, sensory development, language acquisition and expression, literature, science, history, government and life skills.

Also, the teacher's role as intervener and rather than the central point in the learning process or as the direct disseminator of knowledge was pivotal in the learning stages in Montessori education (North American Montessori Teachers' Association, 2005). The exception was the 0-3, 3-6, and 6-9 years of age planes of development, wherein the teachers had more active roles by demonstrating how to use the resources and present activities based on each student's assessment and needs.

This differentiation was a very important distinction between teachers' roles in Montessori education and traditional classrooms and traditional teaching environments (North American Montessori Teachers' Association, 2005). Also, it allows teachers to use

a variety of teaching methods to teach according to the students' learning styles, to meet the students' needs, and to accomplish requirements to increase academic achievement.

THE MONTESSORI CURRICULUM

In Montessori schools, students spend the majority of their time participating in different sessions of uninterrupted activities that last approximately three hours. These projects consist of independent and group problem-solving tasks and other sensory activities related to math, science, language, history, geography, art, music and nature.   The integrated curriculum follows a chronological order based on Montessori's Five Great Lessons: the story of the universe, the timeline of life, the story of language, the story of numbers, and the timeline of civilization. According to Montessori, from birth to age 3 the child learns primarily through the "unconscious absorbent mind". During education in the first three years, Montessori believed that it was necessary for the parents to develop in the role of unobtrusive educator; there to protect and guide without infringing on the child's right to self-discovery (Crain, 2004). This early developmental model enabled children to learn their own skills at their own pace. During the ages of 3 to 6 the child begins to utilize the "conscious absorbent mind" which prompts students to participate in creative problem-solving consisting of wooden and metal objects of various sizes and shapes, personally designed by Montessori. If a problem becomes too difficult or overwhelming for the student, the teacher delays the project for a future day. Children also engage in practical work consisting of household tasks and personal maintenance. In both developmental mindsets, "the child seeks sensory input, regulation of movement, order, and freedom to choose activities and explore them deeply without interruption in a carefully prepared environment that helps the child choose well" (Edwards, 2002, p. 6). Students between the ages of 6-18 are required to complete a series of small group tasks in their surrounding communities as well as the classroom. During this age grouping, "children are expected to explore a wider world and develop rational problem solving, cooperative social relations, imagination, aesthetics, and complex cultural knowledge" in order to "reconstruct themselves as social beings" and "humanistic explorers, real-world problem solvers, and rational seekers of justice" (Edwards, 2002, p. 6). Principles taught in the K-12 programs: self-discovery, sensory learning, independent growth, and individual learning (Pickering, 2004). Montessori's pedagogy has also been successful in the treatment of Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia (Bruck, 2001).

ASSESSMENT METHODS

Holfester (2008) stated that in a Montessori classroom concepts such as textbooks, grades, exams, punishment, rewards, and homework are rarely embraced or applied. Unlike traditional methods of instruction, the progressive approach focuses on cooperation rather than competition and personal growth rather than peer evaluation. Students are assessed based on a descriptive summary of the child's daily interactions and performance on independent and collaborative tasks. A child's individual and group creations are organized into a portfolio and progress report for parents to evaluate during specific periods of the year. It is the responsibility of the teacher to individually

assess each student through critical observation so that individual plans can be devised to help students overcome specific areas of deficiency.

ADVANTAGES OF MONTESSORI METHODS IN COMPARISON TO CONVENTIONAL ONES

Montessori classrooms produced results that were found to be academically and socially superior to traditional programs. Montessori students were also better at "controlling their attention during novel tasks, solving social problems and playing cooperatively" (Bower, 2006 p. 212) Upon the completion of kindergarten, Montessori students scored higher than their peers in public and private schools on standardized math and reading tests. Upon completion of elementary school the Montessori students were able to write essays with more imagination and depth than their peers in public and private school (cited in Bower, 2006, p. 212).

Research indicated that Montessori students performed well on standardized tests and demonstrated higher levels of learning than their peers when tested later in life (Schapiro, 1993). Recent empirical data suggested that some young Montessori children were able to master reading and writing before age 6 (Edwards 2002). Furthermore, a comprehensive evaluation of middle school programs in the U.S. showed that, "Montessori students reported greater affect, potency, intrinsic motivation, flow experience and undivided interest while engaged in activities during school" (Rathunde and Csikszentmihalya, 2005, p. 363).

Moreover, the Montessori philosophy and education have broad foundations that were predicated on the premise that each child developed naturally and that naturalness promoted learning, growth, and self-development in uninhibited environments (American Montessori Society, 2005). According to it, the Montessori philosophy of education purported that children learned in part from their interests and independent of assistance from adults. The primary purpose of Montessori education was to assist each child with the development task of inner self growth from childhood to adulthood (American Montessori Society, 2005) which was one of the reasons for the success of Montessori education. The education approach was a methodology of observation that supported children's natural development. The Montessori philosophy enabled the naturalness of the child to progress with unrestrictive freedom. The education approach enabled children to learn how to solve problems, developed social responsibility, time management skills, and become fulfilled adults within their time (North American Teachers' Association, 2007). According to Marsha Enright with the Atlas Society through its Objectivist Center (2005), Montessori education advocated the presentation of knowledge as an integration of the learning process, emphasized conceptual relationships between the different learning planes, and placed historical knowledge in perspective.

Montessori education has been identified as a form of differentiated instruction that enabled children to learn how to solve problems, develop social responsibility, and time management skills (American Montessori Society, 2005). Therefore in comparison to

conventional methods, Montessori stage two constructs which were designed to help students to process information, develop an understanding of concepts through work, experimentation, and creation. Montessori stage three constructs were designed to help students (a) demonstrate understanding through the ability to pass assessments with confidence, (b) develop the ability to teach other students, and (c) communicate confidently and comfortably to others what had been mastered (American Montessori Society, 2005).

LIMITATIONS

Although the Montessori Method has been largely embraced, its pedagogical principles have never been formally accepted by administrators and policymakers in traditional/mainstream school systems. Due to its lack of academic assessment, it is largely neglected by scholars. Programs are also restricted due to the lack of trained Montessori professionals, the costs of implementing and maintaining new programs and the reluctance of administrators to embrace an ideology that deviates so far from traditional subject-based pedagogy. Other limitations result from Maria Montessori's belief that she was the only person who was qualified to train other Montessori educators, and that learning tools must be limited to the original objects she designed (Crain, 2004). Despite these limitations, Montessori programs continue to flourish in all levels of private and public schools systems in different education centers.

CONCLUSIONS

Socializing among students requires more work, and discipline is still an issue of concern . Surely, the Montessori Method of teaching/learning offers us some help especially in L2 learning context. Especially, when one of our purposes is to enhance our understanding of individual differences among English learners by considering environmental factors. In any case, more changes are needed to be brought about if we are to improve our educational system and through it our society. Our children are our future which everyone must recognize. As Montessori so beautifully stated, ''Intelligence, a balanced personality and the unity of all mankind as a single organism are man's wealth. What is therefore needed today is an education that will lead the human personality to recognize man's grandeur'' (Montessori, 1972, p.118).

Montessori Method as described above has the potential to bring about some positive changes not only to our education system but also to society at large. The question then remains, if the Montessori Method offers such a potential for success why is it not used in every school across the world? One very simple answer is that not every educator is familiar with the Montessori Method.

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