

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING TENDENCIES IN PRE-SCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

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Abstract. Teaching foreign languages to primary school pupils is a challenge because small children are more motivated than older students at secondary schools. Some years ago, the Bulgarian Ministry of Education decided that it is a necessity for young learners to begin studying foreign languages at an early age. There have been recent debates in the Bulgarian Parliament that children should start their school education at the age of four, a practice existing in many European countries. But does it turn out to be effective enough or it is more of a burden rather than a necessity? The paper deals with some interesting aspects as well as some tendencies in this type of education ensuing from the changes of the present times. Some ideas closely connected with these perspectives of pre-school education are presented in support of the above mentioned issues.

Keywords: pre-school education, early foreign language learning, educational games, primary education level, young learners' education

1. Theoretical background.

Foreign language acquisition is an important factor leading to a well-balanced and culturally-grounded school education. Bulgaria, being one of the European Union countries and an active participant in all educational processes taking place in Europe, aims at bringing the existing educational systems in line with European standards following some requirements of the European Commission, standards and regulations, such as Strategy 2020, the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020), etc. That was one of the reasons for the Bulgarian Ministry of Education, Science and Youth to introduce early foreign language teaching from grade 2 in the year 2002/3. Another step 'forward' is the recent initiative of the Bulgarian Ministry of Education for children to start their education at the age of four, a practice existing in many European countries. The reason for this action is that it is good for children to start preparing for their education proper at an early age and to get used to socializing and communicating with their peers, and what is more important 'to have an equal start' before becoming 1st grade pupils¹. All this is in line with one of the incentives and the policies of ET

2020 for children to learn from each other². These are all issues related to pre-school education although they will surely have crucial consequences for primary school education as training is an ongoing process. One of the benchmarks for 2020 is that “at least 95% of children between the age of four and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education”³. Another tendency in Bulgarian education is for parents to become active partners in early childhood education which will make education much easier but this means that parents will also be guided by teachers with regard to what activities children can be engaged in.

What is the situation concerning foreign/second language learning at an early age?

It is a fact that “learning languages helps increase listening ability, memory, creativity, and critical thinking - all of which are thinking processes that increase learning in general” as a US university director of foreign language education centre comments. She goes on by stating that “one of the key benefits, ... is the way a child looks at the world” which should be guided and taught respectively⁴. All this is true, along with the fact that small children have their own ways of looking at the world by watching TV programmes such as Cartoon Network. But this happens on a subconscious or even unconscious level. There is a big difference between this kind of perceiving the world which is somehow distorted by virtual reality and school-guided learning. It is true that video and Internet games are also guided but the educational aspect is missing in that case. Teaching children foreign language skills is even more important as they have some idea of the foreign language from various sources and they can even react to some questions in the respective language, in most cases English, but they lack all skills necessary for a proper learning of the foreign language.

Early childhood foreign language learning poses a lot of problems since there are some psychological and pedagogical particularities of children at these age groups (4-5 and 7-10 year olds) which should be taken into consideration. Up to year 2002/3 there were some optional classes for school children in Bulgaria in which English was mainly taught but there were no clear-cut requirements to follow. Another problem was the lack of enough trained foreign language teachers for that specific age group. Early foreign language acquisition puts an emphasis not so much on the acquisition of the language as on the fact that pupils should be aware of the existence of other cultures and should develop competencies for intercultural communication along with the development of their intellectual and linguistic abilities (see Parapulska 2001: 33-36).

2. Aspects of early foreign language learning.

According to most researchers in the field of psychology, children up to ten years of age have the intellectual abilities and emotional drive for acquiring foreign

languages. As for physiological arguments, some neurologists claim that the capacity of a year to a nine-year-old child's brain is such that children can remember information much more easily; so, that is the perfect time for them to start studying a foreign language together with the acquisition of their mother tongue. According to R. Stoichkov (2005: 22-23), small children can acquire skills for learning from an early age and this can be achieved through the study of a foreign language.

The aim of foreign language learning in the 1970s was for small pupils to learn how to communicate using the language. Since the 1990s the aim has been multiculturally oriented, i.e. the goal was communication across cultures through the foreign language. One may wonder how that is possible with the little store of knowledge about the real world small children at kindergartens and primary education levels have. However, they can be taught very simple but important things, e.g. how to greet their peers, elderly people or their teachers and parents; what polite language to use when asking for some help or favour; how people from different cultures celebrate their national holidays, etc. Again, by watching TV programmes for children they can easily acquire some everyday communication skills as they like to imitate other people, their parents and friends, their famous characters, etc.

There are cognitive, emotional and pragmatic aspects in learning a foreign language at an early age. Apart from learning English, children are emotionally open to find out things they do not know about other people in other countries, what their peers from these countries do, what they have for breakfast, how they celebrate their holidays, and so on and so forth. Only when a person has learned something about a certain way of life by constantly comparing it with information he/she has about their own standards and norms, can they be ready for intercultural communication. The pragmatic aspect is related to the reason why pupils should learn the foreign language. This also means that in order for them to be familiar with the other children's culture they should know the other children's language (see Hubenova 2002: 15-19). Another aspect, though popular in Western Europe but only recently introduced in Bulgaria on all levels is content and language integrated learning (CLIL). By using this type of acquiring language students should also learn a lot about the latest issues discussed worldwide such as environmental problems, greenhouse effect, animal protection and many others.

Early foreign language learning corresponds to the Common European Framework (CEF) of Reference for Languages introduced in 1998⁵. Its parameters are: multilingual communicative competence; life-long language education; constructing curricula; and achieving partial competence for various education goals. In the Common European Framework some case studies are presented and one of them is related to the Finnish educational system at the primary level. It gives a clear picture of what exactly stands at the core of early foreign language learning:

“At the primary level (ages 7-12), Finnish children start learning a foreign language at the age of eight or nine (grade 3). Their ways of learning are strongly

influenced by the individual stages of their mental development: young learners are still very holistic and concrete in their ways of thinking and learning; they are not able to approach learning analytically and what is more, in an abstract way. Therefore, in the beginning, the teaching of the first foreign language has to be strongly action-based” (op. cit. 42-43; see also Shopov 2002: 116).

One of the prerequisites to start learning a foreign language is that at the age between 4 and 10 children are very good imitators, which is brilliant for the acquisition of a foreign language. They can acquire native speakers’ pronunciation and intonation to the greatest extent without feeling embarrassment and frustration that they sound somehow odd. Another advantage is that children’s cognitive abilities can be developed for both the mother tongue and the foreign language simultaneously.

One of the methods that has been recently used in the FL classroom is closely connected with the Theory of Multiple Intelligences suggested by Howard Gardner in 1983 (see Gardner 1983) according to which learners should be taught the material in a different way depending on the inborn intelligence they have and hence according to their interests and motivation for studying. So, the learning styles, methodologies and activities should be different in the foreign language classroom and they should be activated in different situations and cultural settings, especially for young children whose attention is quite unstable. According to Gardner, the approaches used in this respect are analytic (logical, musical and naturalist), introspective (intrapersonal, existential and visual/spatial) and interactive (verbal/linguistic, interpersonal and bodily-kinesthetic). Young learners should be grouped according to their ability to remember information more easily and even though tasks could be the same for the whole class the way they should be fulfilled should be different. Thus, for example tasks for children with analytic abilities should be oriented to following instructions; children with interactive inclinations should be guided to ask their peers how to cope with the situation in question; and learners with introspective abilities should be left to do the tasks on their own until they reach the final goal. So, in a word, every child should be taught differently according to their individual intelligences.

If we have to sum up the aims of early FLL, we can say that young learners of English should be able to: react to what they are told by using very short answers; understand short adapted and abridged texts while listening to them; communicate using simple sentences and phrases; understand the main idea while reading short texts; and use glossaries, tables and graphs that go with their course books.

One of the disadvantages at this stage of people’s development is that most young learners are easily distracted and cannot concentrate for a long time (i.e. the ADD Syndrome/Attention Deficit Disorder Syndrome). That is the reason why they should be taught the language by using toys and games with a lot of motion and action. We are fully aware of the fact that nowadays small kids spend most of their time watching TV or playing computer games without paying attention to the real toys they have. This is something that should be given due consideration.

A drawback of the Bulgarian educational system at that level is that parents are not actively involved in their children's learning. Advising them or telling them what to do with their kids only would not help much.

4. Games for young learners of English.

We are not going to focus our attention on different theories about games and on various types of games because most academics doing research in this field are well acquainted with both. What matters is that humans of all ages like playing all sorts of games (see Todorova 2008). It is not instincts but drives that are at play. In most cases, games are played for pleasure not by necessity. They develop human thinking and imagination. Games also have an educational role because they are played by following certain rules, something connected with discipline. One of the most important components in games is related to curiosity because you never know what moves the other "players" will undertake and in what way the game will eventually end. Language games correspond to the emotional state of pupils and this is something which should be in unison with their age group characteristics and interests. Games stimulate children's cognitive activities and provide easier acquisition of language material as young learners do something they like most of all, enjoy it and feel pleasure and fun from it. Games provide entertainment together with learning the language and things about the world and children feel satisfaction from what they are doing because they perform different activities in a relaxed atmosphere and without any stress. Teachers at pre-school and primary-education level teach children not only the language material but the so-called "soft" skills (e.g. team work, cooperation, concentration, creativity, etc.), i.e. one of the priorities of the EC strategies for all education levels, communicative skills being one of them. In principle, children can be creative enough even in cases in which they follow certain rules. Moreover, learners usually get constant feedback from their teachers, which increases their self-confidence and motivation. Good conduct in games aims at solving various problems, something young learners do subconsciously. In most cases games are about creating a product, either concrete or abstract. What is more, children have to react accordingly and consider subsequent moves at every single moment, which means that they should be concentrated enough if they or their team want to win the game. In games, young learners get the feeling that they are controlling the progress of the game and that they themselves are masters of the situation.

Most games imitate real-life situations and in this respect the child learns how to react in similar situations in every-day circumstances.

Games are competitive by their nature and this fact may have positive as well as negative effects on children. There might be children who are always losers and children who always win. In this respect, it is not easy at all for teachers of a foreign language to decide what games to use, when to use them and in what order and participation. It all has to do with the psychology of games and the re-grouping of young learners at the same time. Teachers should never allow for a group of

children who always win to exist. They should give “losers” easier tasks to perform or activities that such children like doing. Although we all know these things we as trainers often tend to forget them.

Something not many teachers do while using games in the FL classroom is evaluating the process of playing games as well as the results of the game. However, it matters a lot for young learners’ education (see Todorova, Todorov 2010).

There are different classifications of games used in the FL classroom but the most common among them consists of 3 types: role plays, didactic games and language games. These types are all used in internationally recognized exams, one of them being PTE (Pearson Test of English, former London Test of English) for Young Learners. The format of the exam is in accordance with the age group characteristics, i.e. in the form of games. Though the exam is an hour long, since the children’s attention may waver, examiners are advised to stop the exam for a while, take the children out of the examination room, play other games with them in another room and then take them back to the examination room so that the exam could continue. In this case it has turned out that the duration of the exam is not a problem at all.

Games in FLT are a necessity, but they are definitely a challenge. They are social activities which teach children to do things not only on their own but in a group/team, which means that they will learn to show consideration for others. We as humans are inclined to think in frames. With games, situations differ each time a game is played and thus children need to react differently and adequately each time by thinking outside the box or the frame they are already familiar with and by enriching their linguistic knowledge much easily as well as their knowledge about the respective field the game is connected with. And yet, if there are too many games in the FL classroom children will lose interest in them, get lazy and bored and their motivational role will be brought to an end. They may lose interest, especially in cases in which games are one and the same or played monotonously and in the same way, with no variations at all. So, in this respect, games can become a burden for the young learners as well as for the teacher.

Conclusion.

Early childhood foreign language education is a good way of making children aware of the fact that they live in a global and constantly changing world. It is a way of teaching skills through a language that can help children acquire knowledge in other fields more easily either at an early age or at a later stage of their development depending on each child’s abilities, interests and social environment. Foreign language learning can help young learners acquire reading skills and comprehension skills while reading simple texts because one of the drawbacks of the Bulgarian educational system is namely learners’ illiteracy as stated by Bulgaria’s Centre for Demographic Policy in an EC report⁶. What is even more surprising as debated on TV is that Bulgarian children rank second after Belgium, Holland, Denmark

and Estonia in Internet use and first in Europe in Internet chat. This means that Bulgarian children are great at communicating in the virtual reality; they use the Internet as a main means of communication, for downloading all sorts of materials and files but they lose track of the real world around them; of real time; they can only communicate by using phrases they have learnt from the Internet; they do not have any time left for reading real books. This advantage of Bulgarian children's Internet skills should be used in the Bulgarian foreign language classroom and environment to the greatest extent possible. However, teachers of young learners should be taught or reminded how to use toys in pre-school and primary school education but not for the sake of just playing with toys. This usage should be guided and there should be a lot of activities with toys and games in the FL classroom to make children aware of the fact that real life communication is completely different from Internet communication. Children of the new era lack these skills and qualities. They should also be taught that each culture has its own specificities which should be studied and tolerated at the same time. All this can be achieved by using computer and Internet games as well as simple toy games.

NOTES

1. http://www.minedu.government.bg/news-home/2012/12-12-08_pozicia-4-godishni.html for more details
2. http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/framework_en.htm
3. http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/framework_en.htm
4. <http://voices.yahoo.com/early-childhood-foreign-language-development-7843392.html>
5. http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Portfolio/documents/case_studies_CEF.doc
6. http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=147520

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