

ACQUIRING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN THE KINDERGARTEN WITH THE HELP OF GOUIN-METHOD

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In 2009-2010 there was an initiation of the Practicing Kindergarten of the University of Kaposvár, and Pumuckl-kindergarten took off to provide an opportunity for children to get to know German language. The thematic outline of the sessions is based on the Gouin-method. I created my methodology with respect to the specialties and activities of the age group of kindergarten children – it is based on games. My primary aim is language acquisition focusing on capabilities and enforcing positive attitudes. The teacher explains the games to the children on their mother tongue, then plays it, saying what she is doing meanwhile, then the children have to copy her. These lines of activities are repetitive, then they widen, following the line of Gouin-rows.

Keywords: kindergarten, early language education, Gouin-method, methodology, German

Entering the European Union means the easier movement of different cultures, and so nowadays it is crucial to know at least one language. The primary and secondary schools provide wider and wider range of facilities: there are specialized classes from the very first class, and bilingual education also exists. But in spite of these facts children do not like foreign languages, as they feel the force for learning – and the result is a huge amount of diplomas remaining in the locker because of the lack of language exams. The idea of my research was given by the research of one of my colleagues in German education, who wanted to find out if those high school-students, who have received foreign language lessons in their early ages in primary school have any advantages of this later on. The children uniformly answered that at the beginning they had a positive relationship with languages, they could remember playing, singing and matched positive experiences to the language lessons. They could recall the words they learnt first and the visual aids used. However, the positive emotional relationship of the beginning started to turn into a negative one with the time passing, and it was caused by the structure of the lessons, the amount of written tasks, the continuous testing and the fear from linguistic mistakes and bad grades.

The children's opinion is supported by the research of László Budai (2006) according to which in the linguistic education of small children rationality and emotions are the most important. It means that the child has to understand what the teacher says, and has to see it as an experience. We must not teach the children expressions, which are too complicated; they just

have to acquire those situations, words and sentences that they can use in everyday life. We have to make them realize that what we teach is useful.

Segalowitz (1997) collected the factors of successful language acquisition in his study and revealed the importance of individual properties. Within this category he highlighted age, linguistic skills, motivation and methods of learning, confidence, emotional status and personality. He regards strategies and mechanisms of learning important as well.

The acquisition of foreign languages in the kindergarten has an important role in grounding the further, successful language-learning. Among the factors mentioned above the individual differences will soon get into the foreground. At this age we can predicate a positive attitude, therefore the adequate motivation and the good emotional status is as important as the personal factors. This theory is proved by Péter Medgyes (1997:148-149) as well: according to his opinion those, who develop a positive attitude towards the people speaking the given language and accept the culture of that country will acquire the pronunciation better too.

Historical outline

After examining the ideal educational model of different historical ages it became clear that knowing foreign languages was regarded as a value even hundreds of years ago. In some ages it was considered as natural that children spoke at least two languages fluently. Teaching languages to children at a very early ages was regarded as the most effective and successful method. In the medieval ages squires and the children working as scouts did not have any difficulties with languages, they learnt the language naturally, from their masters during the educational process of squires. At higher social levels it was the task of the governesses to teach the children to talk in foreign languages. The people of each layer of the society found a way to provide their children with the opportunity to acquire foreign languages from early childhood – which was crucial for their well-being later on. At the beginning of the XX. Century because of the changes in the European society language learning became a mass phenomenon.

In Hungary not the foreign languages; but the ‘caring’ and the preparation for school stands at the first place in the list of roles of kindergartens. From the seventies in Hungary and in the neighboring countries the focus in foreign language education shifted to the children in kindergartens – although the aims of these countries were completely different (Lengyel, 1999:71). It was a real breakthrough, when the Hungarian government started to promote language education in earlier age than the fifth class of primary school – as early as possible. We have to mention the Waldorf and Montessori schools, where they educate on the basis of a personality-centered method, and they regard language education as a thing that should be started as early as possible. József Zsolnai, an outstanding character of the practical education in Hungary found it desirable that children acquire at least two foreign languages fluently during the eight years of a personality-centered communicational program (Czachesz & Zoltán, 1997:9).

To my way of thinking it is important to emphasize that nowadays many bilingual kindergartens and schools work in Hungary efficiently, where the students not only gain a language exam certificate, but an applicable knowledge of a language as well.

Acquiring or learning languages in kindergartens?

By foreign language education in kindergartens I mean the regularly organized language sessions for the children between the ages 4 and 6. These are consciously organized lessons that take the children's characteristics at this age, their needs and individual level of development.

It is scientifically proved that during chirping children can form all the sounds of any language in the world, and this ability remains alive till the age of six. If we use this period well with the help of games and role-plays, we help them to acquire the language similarly to the mother tongue (Kindergarten Life).

At the age of kindergarten-children we do not speak about learning, but acquiring languages, as it is not a conscious process. This process of acquiring languages is similar to that of the mother tongue in its unconsciousness. Children get repetitive verbal stimuli connected to different situations. They do not apply rules consciously, and the performance is not measured, the environment is full of affection, happiness and experiences. There are no marks, so children are allowed to make mistakes, they communicate in a calm atmosphere with no stress (Kovács, 2003:10-11).

Learning a language is a conscious process, during which the students get acquainted with the sounds, structure and the dynamics of the language, they learn the grammatical rules, words and phrases. They find out more about the facilities of learning a language in the given culture (Bárdos, 1988:184-216).

The aim of language teaching in kindergartens is not to educate interpreters, but to improve linguistic skills, to create a positive emotional relationship with foreign languages and to help in acquiring the phonology and recognizing that there are other languages besides the mother tongue. The primary goal of the language sessions in kindergarten is to make children like languages and to create a positive emotional relationship with foreign languages. It takes years to acquire our mother tongue, so we cannot expect immediate results in the case of a foreign language either; the emphasis is on tiny successes that provide a basis for further language-learning. A fluent knowledge of the language can be reached only after long years of hard work.

The question can be raised, whether acquiring a foreign language affects negatively the children's ability to acquire the mother tongue. According to the kindergarten teachers there was no change in the children's skills in Hungarian language, as the mother tongue acts as a base when acquiring a second language. It does not matter whether the child is moving from the mother tongue towards the foreign language or the other way around, the mother tongue still remains as the base (Habók, 2005:71).

Preparedness of the pedagogue

The language sessions in the kindergarten can be lead by a teacher or a kindergarten teacher as well; the only important thing is that they have to take the children's properties of age, their needs and interests into account; and they should know the content of the sessions held in the mother tongue as well. It is a basic requirement for the pedagogue to speak the language at a high level, in a grammatically correct way and have a required level of vocabulary. However, expert level language knowledge is not enough to be able to transmit the knowledge to children successfully. It is important to be

able to transmit emotions, motivate children and to be able to handle conflicts as well. She has to be an individual who likes children, likes to be with them and knows them. The teacher holding the sessions has to be able to mediate the language towards the children as a positive experience in all situations. She has to be aware of the methodology and tools necessary for providing an education that fits to the children's characteristics at this age; so that she can be finally successful.

German language in the Pumuckl-kindergarten with the Gouin-method

In 2009-2010 there was an initiation of the Practicing Kindergarten of the University of Kaposvár, and Pumuckl-kindergarten took off to provide an opportunity for children to get to know German language.

Once a week children between the ages 5 and 7 take part in a half-an-hour long session in small groups.

The thematic outline of the sessions is based on the Gouin-method. Francois Gouin created his acting and dramatizing method for language education in 1880. It did not become popular in Hungary, apart from some fractions of the transmitting method, which is mentioned in a book created for beginners in the 1920s. The Gouin-method is an intensive, dramatizing, acting method of language education. The sessions start with a situation explained by the teacher in their mother tongue, then the teacher plays it, saying in the foreign language what she is doing meanwhile. The children have to copy these situations in the foreign language and repeat them many times. The Gouin-rows consist of 18-30 sentences, focusing on five big topics. This method is based on children's innate activity and willingness to play, the essence of language learning is association, repetition and memorizing (Bárdos, 1992).

I created the outline of the sessions based on the Gouin-method, taking children's properties at this age into account. The situations and tasks stand on the children's most basic activity: playing. I decreased the number of Gouin-rows to 5 or 6 and matched the thematic to the world of kindergarten children. The situations are based on real life events, scenes that the children experience in their everyday life – and so they know how they would react in their mother tongue.

My primary aim is language acquisition focusing on capabilities and enforcing positive attitudes. The children do not learn grammar consciously, they acquire only full sentences. At first I present my students the scenes, I explain them in Hungarian, and then I play it, saying in the foreign language what I am doing – then the children have to copy and repeat the activities. The effectiveness of these series of activities is enhanced by conscious copying, mimics and gestures.

The sessions are not exclusively held in the foreign language, but also in Hungarian and German at the same time, as this is the only way we can keep track of what meaning the children match to each foreign phrase. Only showing them things is not enough, as dividing speaking and acting makes the translation necessary even at this early stage. If children do not understand the phrases properly, they can use it incorrectly later on. They are interested in the content of the songs and poems as well, they like to know what they play and speak about. When they do not understand something that can lead to misunderstandings, and later they can make the phrase impossible to use correctly. The rows of acting are repetitive and widen with time, following the pattern of the Gouin-method. The vocabulary is based on

the environment of children in kindergarten and their everyday life. The content of the foreign language sessions is related to the sessions of the kindergarten in their mother tongue. However the aim is not direct teaching, but to provide a global understanding.

During acquiring a language, language and behavior are linked; the essence of the method is association, imitation and memorizing. Acquiring is made easier and the knowledge deeper if children use all their senses and receive many stimuli. We have to use equipment that requires seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting as well. The best example of this is when children learn the names of fruits by connecting them to flavors, colors and meals, while tasting them at the same time. „*Das ist der Apfel. Der Apfel ist rot und gelb. Ich esse den Apfel. Der Apfel ist süß. Der Apfel schmeckt mir.*” The children learn the names of clothes by matching them to colors and clothing. *Das ist mein Pullover. Mein Pullover ist blau und gestreift. Mein Pullover ist dick. Ich ziehe meinen Pullover an.* These rows of activities can be enriched, accommodated to the age of children. At this age they like to hear and repeat the learnt phrases many times – it gives them a feeling of success and ensures them that they know such things as adults do.

Obviously there are objects we cannot take into the room to be touched, so we have to use tools for demonstration, which are good substitutes for the object and motivate the children to be active.

The German language gets into the children’s brain ‘through their ears’, the reality of the activities is enhanced by mimics and gestures. During the sessions the children get to know a new animal, color and count in connection with them. They play the rhymes and songs belonging to every topic. . The children learn whole sentences in a form that they can use in real situations as well. There is no grammatical analysis or explanation. At the sessions children are not passive receivers, but active participants of the acquiring process.

The didactical outline of the sessions is a bit different from the usual: revising, acquiring new material, summary. The children are the most relaxed at the beginning of the 30-minute-long class, they can sit and pay attention. Using this opportunity; after a short song or poem comes the new material. Obviously only the 15% of the courses is new material and the rest is revising continuously. The outline of the sessions has to be diverse enough to be able to keep the children’s attention for the whole time. The short games and activities are built on each other. To keep the children active for 30 minutes, the sitting activities at the beginning have to be followed by games that require moving to provide the children an opportunity to jump, crawl and run. The best way of this is to use singing games and poems with gestures and acting.

At the end of each session they can take the ‘Pumuckl-pages’ home, which contain all the new phrases in German and in Hungarian too – it is rather an aid for the parents, so that they can help the children play the games at home. All the pages contain a coloring picture for the children too, with which children play at home, and recall the songs, verses and phrases meanwhile. This new method for acquiring languages is based on experience, as the knowledge based on positive impression is stored in their long term memory, and remain usable for a long time. The early acquiring of foreign languages helps to develop the sound system of that language and gives a good basis for language education in primary schools.

The results of Pumuckl-kindergarten; based on the opinion of parents and children

Children like to attend the German sessions, so they do not have to be forced to do so: they run into the room right before beginning and prepare with their drawings and toys. Any time on lesson is not held because of a break or other reasons; they miss Pumuckl and his games. Right after the third session the children, who were about to leave for school claimed that they will return next year as well. During the classes all the children sing and count together happily. However, in the case of role-plays the level of activity is more diverse: two of the oldest ones apply continuously for playing, some younger only when they are asked to, and the smallest ones would rather play in group. The top students are able to answer the questions of the learnt situations in German, while the others can repeat the questions by the end of the semester.

I made an oral interview with the parents of the children in Pumuckl-kindergarten. They told me that the children teach the German songs and verses to their siblings at home. What they have learnt the best were the instructions of the pedagogues, they use it during their Hungarian games as well. They know the exact meaning of the phrases, as they make their toys do the correct thing. They use and say the lines of activities correctly: Ich gehe, ich laufe, ich stehe, ich sitze...

The parents experienced that when children hear a German word they have learnt in the songs, verses or situations; they start to say the relevant phrases and situations in the language. During the sessions the games, songs and verses acquired after each other become linked in children's mind, and one stimulus is enough to recall the knowledge.

Summary

The primary aim of early language learning has been fulfilled, as a positive attitude has been developed in the children towards the German language. Not only their language knowledge, but also other skills were developed during the sessions: they have become more disciplined and their ability to concentrate was improved. Later they will benefit from early language learning, as they will find it easier to acquire other languages than their peers. The children's pronunciation is very good, they use the sound-system of the new language correctly. Learning languages is the first step in developing a multicultural attitude, with the help of it the world widens and children will be able to look into other cultures. While playing the customs and habits in a foreign language; they will accept that unknown things that people label as 'different' are not necessarily bad. They have to know things better to be able to decide whether they truly can be regarded as values. Children will recognize that other countries, languages and cultures exist as well, not just their own; and that they can be just as interesting and diverse as their own. They will become aware of the fact that there are kindergarten children in many other countries as well, whom they might meet and build contacts with later on.

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