

# **LABOR et EDUCATIO**

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### **STUDIES**

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## **Elementary Children and their Abilities of Foreign Language Acquisition**

### **Dzieci w wieku wczesnoszkolnym i ich możliwości w zakresie nauczania-uczenia się języków obcych**

#### **Introductory remarks**

It is beyond dispute that a good command of a foreign language has now become an indispensable need in the competences of an educated individual. Regardless of age, education, work and life experience, people try to acquire foreign languages.

Nowadays, a foreign language opens the door to the culture of the country in which it is used, and it enables free communication with the members of its community through modern media.

There is a common belief that the best period to start learning foreign languages is childhood, and that the sooner a child starts to learn them, the

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better results are achieved. The prevailing stereotype that children learn more easily and faster affects parents' concerns about their children's start in life, which results in the fact that more and more children are beginning to learn a foreign language as early as kindergarten.

However, science does not entirely confirm that conviction because adults have a better memory, can concentrate better and for a longer time, and can carry out mental tasks more easily. They have also a much stronger motivation to learn than children, especially when a foreign language becomes an important element in the scope of their education and career. Yet, the advantage of children over adults consists in their ability to acquire a foreign accent more easily and speak with native pronunciation. Adult learners can rarely achieve that skill.

In foreign language learning, such intellectual predispositions, like general intelligence, musical intelligence and self-education, play an unquestionable role. If we assume that, in comparison with others, intelligent individuals are characterised by (according to psychologists) better concentration, sensual perception and cognitive control, as well as a larger scope of working memory, it means that they have higher general intelligence defined as human cognitive ability. The effect of that cognitive ability is general mental efficiency, consisting ease in carrying out a task, regardless of the content of its substance (for example, verbal or visual), and required or desired strategies of coping with the task (Nęcka, 2000).

Speaking of musical intelligence as a human cognitive ability, following the researchers of the cognitive psychology of music (Wing, 1971), one should assume that it consists of four factors that are very important in teaching a foreign language, namely: analytical hearing, height hearing, melodic memory and aesthetic sensitivity to sounds.

Thus, perception skills play a significant role in foreign language acquisition, but, in spite of those talents, not much can be achieved without the individual effort of the learner. It may be assumed that, quite frequently, acquisition of a foreign language is basically preconditioned more by persistence than by intellectual predispositions.

Nowadays, since parents understand the value of having foreign language skills and desire to prepare their children for the future as well as they can, schools cannot stay indifferent to the challenges posed by the reality of everyday life. In order to meet social requirements, they have to react adequately.

## **Possibilities and needs of the pupil at a younger school age**

A pupil's academic success is influenced considerably by intellectual predispositions specific for their age. When talking about their academic success, we refer to their school maturity, that is their physical, emotional, social and cognitive development. According to Szuman, school maturity means "achieving by the child such a physical, social and mental development that makes him sensitive and susceptible to systematic teaching and educating in the first class of the primary school. It is the point of balance between school requirements and development possibilities of the child" (Szuman, 1969).

A younger school age is the time of preparation for adolescence. Thanks to contact with the environment, there the spheres of visual, auditory and motor association are enriched in the child's brain development (Troczkome-Fabre, 1995).

The basis of a child's mental activity is their mental and motor development. They discover their environment through various forms of motor activity, like play or work. Therefore, the level of this development is determined by diverse motor exercises. The child's abilities of exertion are also favoured by different motor games. These games may be accompanied by music, which may have both a stimulating and calming effect, thus decreasing the pressure, as well as the stress for the child. In therapeutic practice, both music therapy and dance classes (choreotherapy), as well as other artistic activities like fine arts classes are known.

All of the activities listed above support physical development through the stimulation of visual and motor coordination, the development of a better ability to control one's own body and manual dexterity. From a neurological point of view, an intensive development of the child's visual sphere begins at a young age, which is responsible for perception, interpretation of images, identification of perceived forms, memorization and attention.

The needs of the child of the initial classes also result from the emotional development. According to Reykowski, emotional development is a mental process regulating the relationship between the individual and the world and being of crucial importance for the individual (Reykowski, 1992). Emotional processes receive information that has positive or negative meaning for the child. Therefore, they elicit increases or decreases of energy in the organism and expansive reactions. Psychological experiments confirm that sensual

impressions stimulate the nervous system and cannot be replaced by simple biological stimuli.

The child's emotional development is the result of his bonds with parents and other adult guardians, among others, his teachers. That bond is connected with fulfilling the need for security. Its result is relationship with different people in the future. The model of contacts with the closest relatives is duplicated in contact with other people from the child's environment. Impediments to the emotional development lead to disorders in proper adaptation (Vasta, 1995). The causes of such disorders include emotional deprivation, that is depriving the child of love or excessive love. The results of emotional deprivation in the form of depriving the child of love are: delayed growth, delay in physical, motor and intellectual development, delay in speech development and relations with other people (Żebrowska, 1997). It manifests itself in anti-social attitude or lack of ability to show feelings to others and to establish normal emotional relations. The opposite situation caused by excessive love leads to the child's shyness, lack of self-confidence or low self-esteem. The result of the disturbed emotional development is a lack of emotional immunity and inability to control emotions, and in further consequence – failures in relations with other people (Żebrowska, 1977). Therefore, both normal and abnormal emotional development of the child is reflected in his school successes and failures.

### **Mental development:**

At a younger school age, along with developing mental abilities of the child that are accompanied by the experiences gained at school, there take place new development achievements. Children become more fluent in speaking their mind by reaching higher language fluency, which is significant in a foreign language learning. Words and symbols gain new meanings for them and "the abilities to solve problems reflect higher levels. The progress in mental development at that time is intensified thanks to the abilities to deal systematically with numerous variables at the same time" (Turner, Helme, 1999 p. 287).

As psychologists' researches show, children at a younger school age also prove certain cognitive limitations. Although they are characterized by greater regularity and objectiveness than younger children, they are still unable to think abstractly. Abstract notions are entirely beyond their experience and children cannot grasp them through analogy. Cognitive successes come gradually and

in particular content issues may develop unevenly. It is worth emphasising that there exist statistically significant differences in mental activity among particular children at a younger school age (Kurcz, 2000).

### **Language development:**

Worth noting here are psycholinguistic researches that state that the child's development depends on numerous learning achievements. In the researches it has been proved that the rate of vocabulary acquisition after the pre-school period begins to slow down in spite of the fact that general psycholinguistic development still continues.

When turning 6, children practically know all alphabet letters, recognize a printed form of many words, understand certain definitions. Thus, at a younger school age, there increases in children the ability to use words as tools of expression. The language, in combination with cognitive abilities and experiences gained in the process of socialisation, becomes a means with which children reveal and confirm their observations and ideas concerning the world (Leaper, 1991).

Children's development of vocabulary at a younger school age shows its more distinctive relation with the cognitive development. When turning one, the child knows only a few words, depending on the environment he is being brought up. At the age of three, the number of words acquired by the child may increase to 900. At the age of six, according to the results of the research, the number of known words is about 2600 while at the beginning of sixth class, an active vocabulary contains about 50,000 words. It is the consequence of cognitive development, mainly memory abilities needed for memorizing and processing new words (Kail, 1990).

The speed of acquiring new words by children is fast at that age but understanding words and relations between them develops slowly. Abstract features of many words remain inaccessible for cognitive possibilities of the child.

With age, children get to know better the meaning of words and abstract relations between words. While talking, children of younger school age gradually overcome their egocentrism and begin more and more to take into account their listeners. They become more capable of observing the order of speaking during conversations.

It also results from the observation that they cope better with transforming information in order to adjust it to the needs of the listener. Moreover, if the situation requires it, most of them can assume the point of view of the listener (Żebrowska, 1997).

Not everyone in the society speaks the same language, or uses the same grammatical system or dialect. There occurs a phenomenon of language diversity defined as dialects. The basis of dialects is, generally, the same language but they differ in expressions and vocabulary details.

Dialect differences result from several factors, such as: age, geographical location, social class membership and language models taken from the family home. Those factors have an undoubted impact on the vocabulary development of the child.

Age is a particularly visible factor in the so-called "generation gap". Representatives of a younger age group like to use newly made-up words, whereas their parents do not always understand them and they tend themselves to use obsolete phrases. Geographical location of the place in which the child is brought up has also a big influence on dialects. We do not often understand certain words when we listen to dialect differences resulting from geographical location. The consequences of that are different names used for the same thing in different places of the same language area. For example, "potatoes" (in Polish "kartofle", "ziemniaki") are called differently in different geographical regions of our country: in the Podhale region they are called "grule", in Poznań – "pyry".

Class membership also affects language differences acquired by children. Educated people, as opposed to uneducated ones, use a more complicated and better structured language, richer in language subtleties. It is reflected in the models taken from their family environment. A lot of researchers reckon that people using a primitive language do not have deficiencies in their language skills so much, but rather use different, long preserved linguistic models and they speak the language adjusted to the environment in which they function. Their language is functional and complete in that environment and such a scope of vocabulary they hand down to their own children.

It should be remembered that learning does not come easily to all children in the same way. Some children experience difficulties connected with learning and those difficulties may influence a growing up child in many different ways. Learning difficulties mean problems connected with processing, recalling or providing information (Spionek, 1987).

It is known from the carried out researches that learning difficulties are not equivalent to mental retardation since children with difficulties usually have average or above-average intelligence. Researchers think that the problems connected with information processing result from abnormalities in functioning of the central nervous system. Generally, children of that kind show the so-called "uneven" abilities and discrepancy between the desired and actual performance of the tasks. The causes of those difficulties have not been sufficiently studied yet.

Numerous studies of various learning difficulties have shown, though that supporting home environment, motivation of the child to achieve goals with the use of appropriate intervention, may bring satisfying improvement (Spionek, 1970).

However, one should bear in mind that overcoming learning difficulties must have a very individualized character. The strategies used for one child may be inappropriate for another. Frequently, the needs of the child with learning difficulties require action with a well-defined substance and learning strategies. The strategies of such performances are usually carried out step by step and divided into small units, and they require not only the use of appropriate aids, but also lots of patience and teaching skills. It is important to reduce to the minimum the elements distracting attention. Moreover, active efforts are also essential in order to develop and reinforce herein mentioned important cognitive spheres, such as attention span, memory abilities and task-solving skills (Lelonek, Wróbel, 1990).

Development possibilities of the child's vocabulary, understanding, remembering and skills to use that vocabulary have a fundamental meaning for a foreign language acquisition and prediction of its effectiveness.

### **The concept of integrated education in classes I-III**

Integration in early-school education is a concept of child-oriented work, which means that the child is to be treated as a subject and individuality. According to it the child's individuality is perceived as a unique entirety in which individual differences resulting from individual "endowment of the child" are respected. In the child's individuality there are valued his development needs, talents, interests and personal experiences.

Assuming integration as a foundation of the work system with children of initial classes brought about certain consequences for the school practice. Those consequences are shown in an appropriate organization of lessons, their planning and execution of didactic and educational tasks. The character and organization of the educational process has changed in comparison with the previous one. School has resigned from the subject-lesson system, that is from the rigid delimitation, division of the child's activity into separate forms of activities: the Polish language classes, maths, fine arts classes and others, determined by 45-minute periods.

The child's day at school stopped being a collection of subjects and lessons. As a result, the organization and the pupil's activity have undergone significant change. The basic organizational structure of the educational process consists of topic units included in an integrated block or educational project. Organizing activities within blocks-subjects, or "areas" and "projects" is connected with the dependence on needs, individual possibilities of the child, interest in certain issues or development tasks, and invention of the teacher in that area. The whole education is subject to creating new zones (Misiorna, 1997).

Integrated teaching provided children of the initial classes with a possibility of creating a coherent image of the world and, also facilitated the teacher a better cognition of the child. Consequently, it has become more effective to adjust action to individual needs of the children. Also, attention is drawn to the emotional closeness of the child and teacher (Misiorna 1997). The teacher, indeed, creates the atmosphere of cooperation and support.

One of the vital tasks of integrated teaching is improving children's abilities to solve problems. Those tasks are solved, among others, through children's habits connected with learning. While growing up, most children learn, in the course of different dealings with problems, not only endurance and concentration, but also independence.

The progress that can be observed in the scope of problem-solving skills has also an impact on memory perfection. Children gain more and more agility in searching for and extracting information.

In mastering problem-solving skills, a significant role is played by the child's motivation. It means that the child takes action for a reward or pleasure. Children learn to find pleasure in the problems or situations which pose challenges for them and are subject to the results of their action. They may also display increasing interests in something they can discover and examine.



With regard to the development specificity of the children at a younger school age, integrated teaching set educational and tutorial tasks which comprise:

- Acquisition of written speech as a new language, which means acquiring basic school skills;
- Creation of a system of elementary scientific notions connected with reading, writing and counting;
- Mastering physical fitness and mental agility enabling participation in plays and team games;
- Development of the skill to cooperate with others;
- Development of the system of values;
- Learning to control one's own emotions and reaching relative emotional independence from others;
- Developing self-esteem less and less based on the judgement of other people, and more and more on the analysis of the results of one's own actions;
- Developing an image of one's own personality.

As a consequence of carrying out the above tasks, the child's experiences, his sensations and activity should be concentrated around integrated educational proposals and life going on around him. In order for the child to act in such situations, he must have set tasks the solution of which is an important experience for his development and educational way (Misiorna 1999).

The first school years of the child and his first school experiences have an influence on his development and shape his attitudes and personality. The role of extramural education is complementing school education as well as stimulating the child's development. Therefore, a foreign language has become an element of contemporary education of the child and should be of special importance in it.

"A foreign language teacher involved in integrated teaching is obliged not only to pursue the objectives in the scope of a foreign language teaching during his classes, but also to carry out general tasks of the school, defined for the first stage of education. Those objectives include: supporting comprehensive and harmonious development of the pupil, cooperation with parents, setting up conditions for acquiring knowledge and using it in everyday life, and also developing children's creativity, resourcefulness, autonomy and pro-social attitudes. It is also vital to adapt to the requirements set by the curriculum

and develop children's key competences: learning to think, self-improvement, communication, cooperation and action. All those elements should be incorporated in the foreign language classes which we offer to the youngest children" (Pamuła, 2006).

In a foreign language education, in the concept of integrated teaching, pupils must have secured a good start through appropriate teaching methods, their emotional engagement in the teaching process, motivation to learn a foreign language and encouragement to communicate in this language with others. It is also essential to use children's natural predispositions and their getting accustomed to the sound of a new language, as well as their sensitization to a new language code. A successful realization of those objectives, with the use of methods appropriate for children, will secure their motivation to get to know a chosen foreign language.

### **Conclusions from research studies**

According to Małgorzata Pamuła (O'Neil, in: Pamuła, 2006, p. 109) "linguists' and psychologists' research prove that in the situation of institutionalized teaching, children acquire foreign speech more slowly than teenagers or adults. However, while observing foreign language acquisition in the long term it may be undoubtedly stated that only those who start learning a foreign language early, master it to a degree similar to native speakers. They have a perfect pronunciation without a foreign accent and their scope of vocabulary and knowledge of morphology, syntax and pragmatic aspects of the language cause that it becomes a natural tool of communication.

On the other hand, other researchers, such as Luise Dabene (1991) (in: Pamuła M., 2006 p. 109) state that:

- The younger the child, the more naturally he acquires a second language, mainly thanks to his spontaneity. In the case of lack of spontaneity, children who treat learning as fun have better chances.
- Flexibility of phonic organs enables children to acquire a new phonological system, especially when it is introduced through activities known to the child, such as: singing, motion, dance, rhythmic exercises. Children can hear better, more than adults, and therefore, according to the researchers, they have fewer problems with producing new sounds.

There has been found a perfect ability to imitate in children at a younger school age.

Seven and ten-year olds have better easiness in communication with others because they are not shy to speak in a foreign language, they are not afraid of appearing ridiculous like older students.

Followers of an early start in foreign language teaching think that in the auditory sphere there is supremacy of children over teenagers or adults and therefore, at the first stage of their education it is necessary to concentrate on the development of their auditory sensitivity. Using integrated music, artistic and language classes may serve that purpose (Komorowska, 1995).

Researchers of that subject matter also confirm that later years, after an early school age, are not as effective. The moment of entering a phase of intensive physical development by the child is not always favourable for opening to learn a new language, and along with it, a new culture and, frequently, a way of thinking. According to Hanna Komorowska (1995) "an early start is advisable educationally and effective linguistically".

## Summary

The text of the present article deals with the problems of needs and possibilities of the child at a younger school age in relation to linguistic education. Therefore, it discusses a methodological concept of integrated teaching in classes I–III as an effective way to its efficiency. The final part contains conclusions from the research procedure, confirming the rightness of choosing a younger school age to start teaching foreign languages.

**Abstract:** The research paper includes information about the needs and abilities of elementary children in connection with foreign language learning. The paper includes information about incorporating foreign languages into integrated elementary education curriculum. The specific age of elementary children which is connected with the specific level of development needs to be taken to account when we talk about the specific educational tasks such as learning foreign languages. The paper describes the most important conditions of foreign language teaching, which are necessary for successful teaching elementary children.

**Keywords:** elementary children, foreign languages, teaching and learning

**Streszczenie:** W niniejszym artykule omówiono problematykę potrzeb i możliwości dziecka w młodszym wieku szkolnym w odniesieniu do kształcenia językowego. Autorka zaprezentowała metodyczną koncepcję kształcenia zintegrowanego w klasach I–III jako skuteczną drogę do podniesienia efektywności kształcenia językowego uczniów. W zakończeniu omówiono wnioski z postępowania badawczego, dowodzące słuszności wyboru młodszego wieku szkolnego do rozpoczynania nauki języków obcych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dzieci wczesnoszkolne, języki obce, nauczanie-uczenie się

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