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Zmiany w systemie nauczania języków obcych w edukacji przedszkolnej i wczesnoszkolnej w kontekście godności dziecka

Changes in teaching foreign languages in preschool and early school education in the context of child dignity

STRESZCZENIE: Celem artykułu jest zaprezentowanie zmian, które zaszły w nauczaniu języków obcych w edukacji przedszkolnej i wczesnoszkolnej w ostatnich latach. W pierwszej części zostały opisane próby odnalezienia uniwersalnej metody nauczania oraz najbardziej popularne podejścia, które rozwinęły się w drodze poszukiwań. Następnie, przedstawiono problemy dotyczące omówionych metod. Przeszarżałe tradycje nauczania okazały się nieefektywne, a dawne środowisko stwarzane podczas nauki nie wpływało pozytywnie na zdrowy rozwój i wychowywanie dzieci. W artykule poruszono działania ruchu na rzecz praw dziecka ze względu na jego wpływ na współczesne podejście nauczycieli do uczniów i sposoby, w jakie dostosowuje się metody nauczania do ich potrzeb. W dalszej kolejności zaprezentowano współczesne podejścia. Aktualna metodologia nauczania języków obcych celuje w zapewnieniu uczniom wiedzy, przydatnych umiejętności, wszechstronnego rozwoju i szacunku dla ich godności.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: nauczanie, języki obce, przedszkole, edukacja wczesnoszkolna

ABSTRACT: The aim of the article is to present the changes that have occurred in teaching foreign languages in preschool and early school education in the last years. In the first part, attempts to find a universal teaching method were discussed and the most common approaches that developed at the time of this search were discussed. Further, the problems with the discussed methods were named. The outdated traditions of teaching have proved to be ineffective and the classroom environment did not use to be beneficial for the children's healthy growth and upbringing. In the article, the children's right movement's input was mentioned as it has influenced the way teachers nowadays approach their students and adjust their methods to their needs. Last, modern methods and approaches were presented. The current methodology of teaching foreign languages aims to provide learners with knowledge, useful skills, all-round development, and respect for their dignity.

KEYWORDS: teaching, foreign languages, preschool, early school

Even though teaching foreign languages has a long history, it has only recently become popular in preschool and early school education. Previously, language learning was not considered suitable for such young learners and its beginning was reserved for secondary school. Preschool and early school children can be groups of slightly different ages depending on the country, but it can be generally said that preschool children are the ones at the age of three to six years old, while early school children belong to the age group of seven to nine. The age gap between a three-year-old child and a nine-year-old child is big so it is safe to assume that the needs and abilities of the learners change quite drastically at this stage as they grow. However, it is not uncommon for teachers to use similar methods with both preschool and early school learners. Certainly, a lesson in a preschool group will not and should not be identical to the one in a classroom at a primary school. Teachers make adjustments based on the age and individual needs of their groups, but their general approach, attitude, and role can remain the same.

As Brewster et al.¹ state, there are many European countries with a long tradition of teaching foreign languages to children. The first

¹ J. Brewster, G. Ellis, D. Girard, *The Primary English Teacher's Guide*, Harmondsworth 1992, s. 16.

attempts to teach foreign languages to primary students were made after the First World War by the Foreign Language in Elementary Schools movement. After that, many teachers of different nationalities put their efforts to teaching languages to young learners. All the attempts were evaluated in order to draw conclusions from the experiences of the teachers and students. As it turned out, primary students' abilities may allow for laying the ground for effective teaching of foreign languages at further steps of their education.² As Brumfit³ points out, young learners need to be exposed to the language as early as possible. Additionally, it gives learners the opportunity to get more time for their language education than if they started, for example, in secondary school.

Language teachers and experts in the field of methodology have searched for the perfect teaching method probably for as long as teaching languages has been taking place. Nunan⁴ explains that there was a long period of time when language teachers were certain that there was a method that would fit all the learners in all contexts once it was found. It has been proved, however, that such a universal method does not exist and is therefore impossible to use on all students in the same way.

Nunan⁵ describes and criticizes old teaching methods, including audio-lingualism, which belongs to the psychological approach. It is important to note that the psychological tradition derives from general theories of learning which were not developed for teaching foreign languages.

Audio-lingualism was a method developed in the 1940s and 1950s. It was, in fact, a reaction against previous methods and was supposed to be based on science. The method implied that the language is speech rather than writing. According to it, the language is a "set of habits" and students should be taught the use of the language, not the theory about the language. Audio-lingualism also meant that the language is

² Ibidem, s. 19.

³ C. Brumfit, *Introduction: Teaching English to Children*, [w:] C. Brumfit, J. Moon, R. Tongue (red.), *Teaching English to Children. From Practice to Principle*, Harlow 1997, s. 6-8.

⁴ D. Nunan, *Language Teaching Methodology. A Textbook for Teachers*, Hertfordshire 1991, s. 228.

⁵ Ibidem, s. 229-232.

what is naturally used by its native speakers and not what is claimed to be correct according to experts. Lastly, in the audio-lingualism method, it was stated that all languages are different. In the method, the stages of presentation and practice were crucial. In its pure form, audio-lingualism implied that the teacher would give a model for a piece of speech and the learners were supposed either to repeat it or to produce a slightly modified utterance. The problem was, however, that learners taught through audio-lingualism tended to have difficulties transferring the language to natural speech. Though audio-lingualism was criticized and rejected, the method had a big influence on modern teaching. The method of Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) derived from audio-lingualism and is nowadays widely used with different age groups.

The oral approach, also called Situational Language Teaching, is another method of teaching foreign languages that is considered outdated. As Rhalmi⁶ explains, the approach focused on vocabulary and reading as the most significant features of effective teaching. The method also implied that learners should analyse and be able to classify grammar rules in order to fully understand and produce the language. Even though the oral approach got replaced by more effective methods, it still finds its followers, who are encouraged mainly by its emphasis on oral practice. It also turns out to be useful in teaching and practising grammar rules. However, it is not uncommon for learners taught with this method to not be able to produce spontaneous and natural speech.

Another teacher-centred method that is worth mentioning is Grammar Translation. Its assumptions included explaining the theory of particular grammar rules, usually in the native language of the learners, and then allowing the students to apply them to standardised questions and exercises. The method is still commonly used, for instance during lessons of modern languages in Poland, though it will not be discussed in more detail in this paper, as it does not apply to such young learners as preschool or early school children, who only start learning to read and write.

⁶ M. Rhalmi, *Situational Language Teaching (Oral Approach)*, <https://www.myenglishpages.com/blog/situational-language-teaching-oral-approach> [dostęp: 14.05.2021].

The above-mentioned methods are only examples of outdated approaches to teaching foreign languages, not only to young learners. The problem with the old methods is that the students were treated for many years as passive objects of the lesson, while the teacher was the main active participant. All the students, including the youngest ones, were supposed to sit quietly, listen, and occasionally repeat the teacher's words. Therefore, the learners had neither a good background nor effective practice to naturally use a foreign language. As a result, the schools produced young adults who had spent years of their lives in the language classrooms only to enter the world without any communication skills in the foreign language.

People's lives have changed in the last years and, therefore, children's behaviour changed, too. According to Nelsen⁷ children have changed because adults have changed. When a child looks at his or her role models, he or she does not see a mother who is submissive and obedient to a dominant father. Children neither observe, nor copy this model. Moreover, children see their fathers being able to stand up to their bosses, women learning to say 'no' to their husbands. Children, being human themselves, also want to be autonomous and equal to other members of society. The world has changed due to the actions taken by the children's rights movement. Since the children have changed, the people working with them also required a change in approach and methodology.

Another significant change in the world of education was that teaching foreign languages to very young learners has been proved effective. According to Brumfit⁸, exposure to foreign languages and cultures at a very young age proves to be helpful in raising tolerant and sympathetic people. Moreover, many different theories and suggestions have appeared in the last years about children's probable natural abilities to acquire a new language. It is widely believed that the younger the learner, the more adaptable his or her brain is and, therefore, learning a new language is supposed to be easier and less conscious than after puberty. Moreover, as Rodríguez López and Varela Méndez⁹ state, young children love speaking and

⁷ J. Nelsen, *Pozytywna Dyscyplina*, Warszawa 2020, s. 36.

⁸ C. Brumfit, *op. cit.*, s. 6.

⁹ B. Rodríguez López, R. Valera Méndez, *Models of Teaching Foreign Languages to Young Children*, "Didáctica. Lengua y Literatura" 2004, t. 16, s. 165.

therefore this is the perfect age for them to get enthusiastic about a foreign language.

Teachers and methodologists have understood that the role of the teacher is far more extensive than only to present the theory of the taught language. Many modern methods and techniques require the teachers to have particular qualities, such as compassion, understanding, or patience. Learners are no longer supposed to be forced to learn, but encouraged and motivated by the attitude of the teacher and the fun that comes from participating in the lesson. A modern classroom environment, not only in the context of teaching foreign languages, should be friendly and allow the learners to feel safe. It is the teacher's responsibility to support the development of such social skills as assertiveness. As Fontana¹⁰ points out, basic skills associated with assertiveness, including the ability to say 'no', make requests, and express positive as well as negative feelings, too commonly used to be the skills that were suppressed and discouraged in children. Even though it is still a practice in some school and preschool environments, it has significantly changed over the years. Nowadays, most teachers are aware of the importance of assertiveness as a skill that provides dignity, not only to adults. Teachers are trained and required to understand that a child is as much of a human as an adult and, therefore, has a right to be independent enough to be allowed to be assertive when the situation requires it. Additionally, children who have learnt to be assertive have been proven to be more confident and have higher self-esteem. As a result, their learning process turned out to be more effective. Fontana¹¹ describes another important aspect of children's dignity and comfort that can be provided in the classroom, which is the application of punishment. It tends to be impossible to teach a group of very young learners without the right amount of discipline. It is, however, crucial that the consequences of the children's bad behaviour are appropriate to their age, needs, and personal emotional sensitivity. When a child feels that he or she has been treated unfairly by the teacher, or that the punishment was supposed to be humiliating for him or her, the relationship between the learner and the teacher might be quickly damaged forever. Young

¹⁰ D. Fontana, *Psychology for Teachers*, Leicester 1998, s. 289.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, s. 334.

learners not only trust their teachers, but they also tend to treat them as role models and quite often love them almost as much as their parents. When the teacher wants to keep discipline in the classroom by giving unfair or unearned punishments, all the respect and trust disappear. The child is at this point taught that it is acceptable for the stronger to misuse the tool of punishment against the weak, for instance, in order to show their power. In the context of teaching, it results in worse performance in the learning process, while in the context of raising a young person, it results in a painful and undesirable life lesson.

Modern methods of teaching foreign languages to children were developed in order to meet the needs of modern children. The learners' emotions, engagement and comfort are taken into account. A child needs to feel safe and encouraged to learn for the learning process to be effective. There is a range of methods that belong to the humanistic approach which focuses on the learners' individual needs. The common point of all the methods in the tradition is that the learning environment, as well as encouragement and motivation, are the key to successful learning. The humanistic approach implies that not only should the learners have the right attitude towards the learnt language and culture, but also that their emotional response to the teacher and the group plays a crucial role.¹²

The natural approach successfully rejected the majority of previous methods, including audio-lingualism and the oral approach. This modern method was developed by Tracy Teller and Stephen Krashen in the 1970s and 1980s. As the name suggests, the natural approach is focused on the way people naturally learn their mother tongues. It borrows techniques from methods such as Total Physical Response (TPR) or the Direct Method which explain language and elicit speech through body language and context. As Vos¹³ points out, for children, the process of learning a new language is easy and quick. It is natural for them to explore the world around them through playing and using their senses. By the age of six months, babies are able to produce all the sounds that can be made by the human vocal apparatus and only then

¹² D. Nunan, op. cit., s. 234-235.

¹³ J. Vos, *Can Preschool Children Be Taught a Second Language?*, <http://www.frenchforlife.ca/documents/How%20Children%20learn%20languages%20including%20timeline.pdf> [dostęp: 20.05.2021].

they apply those to speech, which are required for the language they are learning. Furthermore, by the age of four, children can learn up to two thousand words in their mother tongue. According to Rodríguez López and Varela Méndez¹⁴, children at preschool and early school age are able to learn indirectly. They can get creative in different communication situations as well as grasp a gist of a message they hear. Thereupon, there is no reason not to use their natural abilities to also let them acquire a foreign language in the same, natural way.

The natural approach was used by Helen Doron in 1986 when she developed her method of teaching English as a foreign language to very young children. The method includes background hearing, i.e. allowing children to hear natural language in songs and cartoons without focusing on the aim of learning, which is exactly the way children learn their mother tongues while hearing their parents speaking the language. The Helen Doron method is also connected to the humanistic approach, since it focuses not only on children's language goals, but also on their comfort, emotions, and motivation. The learners are encouraged to learn through games and songs which is another similarity to the process of learning their mother tongue. The method also puts great emphasis on the relationship between the learners and the teacher. As for the humanistic tradition, the learners' approach towards the people around them, i.e. the teacher and fellow learners, is equally important to their approach towards the language.

Another very popular and developing modern method of teaching foreign languages is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). It aims to teach particular content using the learners' target language. The content can be very diverse and include subjects such as mathematics, geography, or physics, while the language can be taught simultaneously. The method gives unlimited possibilities to the teachers as their language class can become a lesson about social studies in Australia, as well as a cooking course. As Herrera¹⁵ points out, there is also no limit on the age group. Since the subjects are limited only by the teacher's creativity, there is no reason for the

¹⁴ B. Rodríguez López, R. Valera Méndez, op. cit., s. 165.

¹⁵ M. Herrera, *Using CLIL to Keep Young Learners Engaged*, <https://www.english.com/blog/using-clil-keep-young-learners-engaged> [dostęp: 17.05.2021].

method not to be applied in a group of learners as young as preschool children. It is not uncommon for the language teacher to adjust the content of the lessons to the curriculums of other subjects the students learn. Therefore, if the children are currently learning addition and subtraction with their mathematics teacher, it is good practice to train those skills also in the language class. Not only does the use of this method engage and motivate the learners, but it has also been proved to be highly effective, not only in terms of the taught content but, mostly, in terms of the language.

Teaching foreign languages is constantly changing. Since the idea of applying the methodology to groups of young learners is fairly new, the upcoming changes are inevitable. Even though great efforts were made in order to find a unique method that would work for every student, all the methods developed on the way proved to be ineffective. As the work of the children's rights movement has been developing and proving children's needs to be equally important to those of adults, teachers have been adjusting and constantly searching for the way to both teach a language to young learners and respect their rights. Modern methods are effective and it is the teachers' responsibility to provide the learners not only with knowledge but also with a friendly and comfortable environment where they can grow and learn with dignity. It is, however, most probable that in the next years, many more updated methods will be developed and they might replace the ones that are currently considered as valid and sufficient, possibly including those described in this paper.