

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274373006>

Challenges of Teaching English at Primary Level

Article in *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* · March 2015

DOI: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.01.914

CITATIONS

9

READS

24,453

1 author:



Zuzana Strakova

University of Presov in Presov

14 PUBLICATIONS 131 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



VLE and interaction [View project](#)



The effect of extensive reading on foreign language production of lower secondary students [View project](#)



ELSEVIER



Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 174 (2015) 2436 – 2443

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

INTE 2014

Challenges of teaching English at primary level

Zuzana Straková*

University of Presov, Faculty of Arts, 17novembra 1, Presov 080 01, Slovakia

Abstract

Teaching English at primary level is a challenging task in most European countries. The opinions vary on when the instruction should start, which approaches and techniques work best at this level, what kind of outcomes are desirable as well as what kind evaluation process should be applied. Recent findings of research studies support early beginning on one hand, however, the results show that the instruction must have clear aims, otherwise it can be even contra productive.

This article describes the situation in teaching English at primary level in Slovak schools. The author considers both benefits and constraints of introducing English language as a compulsory subject to primary education. The most serious concern is the lack of qualified teachers but at the same time the author underlines the lack of tried-and-tested experience which would be available to teachers. Even though there is an effort to help teachers become qualified for teaching at primary level there are many problematic issues concerning target group of teachers, especially the level of their language command. On the other hand the author appreciates the possibility to start teaching foreign languages to early language learners since there are a lot of benefits learners can gain. The author describes a case study where young learners involved in meaningful learning experience demonstrate how far such experience can take them.

© 2015 Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Peer-review under responsibility of the Sakarya University

Keywords: teaching English language at primary level, foreign languages in Europe, young learners, teachers of foreign languages

* Corresponding author.: Zuzana Straková. Tel.: +421-51-7570631

E-mail address: zuzana.strakova@unipo.sk

1. Introduction

Language diversity and the support of the language education has been a priority of European countries not only due to the results and outcomes of various EU Council Conclusions (e.g. in 2002, 2008 or 2011) but also as a natural condition for the citizens to be equipped by at least two languages other than their own mother tongue. Recently there have been many changes in language education in different European countries with the main aim to lower the age of the beginning of language education. Early foreign language learners used to be a matter of exclusivity twenty years ago. However, nowadays more and more European countries seem to incorporate foreign languages already into primary curriculum to make sure they provide as much space for learning languages as possible.

The project directed by Hope, M. *Language Rich Europe* (Extra, G., Yağmur, K., 2012), involved 24 countries/regions with the aim to “promote greater co-operation between policy makers and practitioners in Europe in developing good policies and practices for multilingualism” (ibid p. 6) and the findings reveal there is a tendency to start rather early in many countries. 12 out of 24 countries/regions have foreign languages (mainly English, French and German) taught from the first year of primary education and seven from the mid-phase and three from the final phase of the primary education (ibid p.8).

The issue of starting to teach foreign languages in the formal education is rather complex and besides highlighting the positive aspects of early start, several problematic areas have to be mentioned as well. To start with the positive aspects, the main benefit of learning a foreign language at primary level is generally attributed to the fact that learners of this age to certain extent can make use of the natural process of acquiring the language. Children can acquire the language to which they are exposed in sufficient quality and quantity without the need to systematize the knowledge about the language. Most definitions of language acquisition describe it as a process in which learners master facts, rules or skills subconsciously, unaware of the reception process and without the connection to formal instruction. School context, however, place children mainly in the learning situations, which according to Krashen (1982) differs from acquisition with the conscious focus on mastering new facts, information or a skill. Ellis (1997, p.3) defines the second language acquisition as “the way in which people learn a language other than their mother tongue, inside or outside of a classroom”. In this context he uses the term 'second' not to contrast with the term foreign but to express that whether people learn languages through the direct experience – living in the country, or as the result of the classroom instruction, “it is customary to speak generically of second language acquisition” (ibid.). Still different, however, is the situation in which children are to learn the language which is used exclusively in the school environment and is not spoken in out-of-school environment. Dörnyei (2009, p.136) suggests the implicit-explicit dichotomy in specifying how these two processes differ. His understanding of explicit learning is as the process which is generated and directed by the learner's intention to understand the rules or regularities in order to master the concepts presented to them. It is mainly connected to the school context. On the other hand implicit learning is seen as the process in which the learner makes no conscious attempt to learn the material although, as Dörnyei underlines it is not unattended learning, i. e. there needs to be some kind of stimulus in the environment.

Language acquisition, however, becomes reality on condition that learners are exposed to the target language sufficiently. Children need to see and hear sufficient amount of examples so that their brain can systematize language samples and derive the rules of how something is used and in what circumstances. That is true about both first and second/foreign language acquisition. While conditions for first language acquisition are clearly and easily imaginable, the conditions for foreign language acquisition are more difficult for teachers to depict.

The first problem is the amount of time allocated for teaching languages at primary level. In general the amount of time allocated for teaching foreign languages varies from 1 lesson per week up to 5 lessons per week and this variability depends often on the school priorities, so this number can vary also within the same country. The lower amount of teaching foreign languages in school setting means the lower exposure. This time can hardly be considered sufficient and as Lightbown and Spada (1999, p.165) call it a “drip-feed approach” can in fact have a negative impact on learners who realize that for many years that have remained at the same level or are making only very limited progress. On the other hand, even though the time for language teaching is rather limited, the most important seems to be what teachers do to support acquisition of the target language in the classroom. As the most crucial for language acquisition seems to be:

- Listening to the (high quality) target language
- Reading picture books (with assistance)

- Using language in natural contexts (experiential learning)
- Using/recycling language in a variety of contexts

While building a course on these premises it also has to be taken into account that the dominant classroom activities should be based on such activities that children like and naturally incline to even outside the classroom context. They need to experience learning through games, songs, stories etc. and it is not enough for them to use a textbook and a practice book during their lessons.

Another important condition of allowing children to benefit from early learning experience is the awareness of teachers that language develops in certain stages and a child has to go through each one while learning the language. Language development of early language learners is divided into several periods and the teacher has to respect the specificity of each of these periods. They are similar to the periods of language development of a child acquiring the mother tongue. However, they differ in length, especially in the initial stage.

- *silent period* – is the period of adaptation and accommodation to a new language; the children have to figure out what is expected from them, the meaning of words and phrases in given linguistic contexts, etc. However, teachers usually try to engage children in classroom activities where some kind of response is expected from children from the very first encounters with the target language. There are clear signs of this period present in child's hesitant and non-responding behaviour during the lessons. This means they need to be given more time to get acquainted with the language and see more examples on which they could build their confidence. It is never effective to push the child too much. There are many examples of children who hesitate to speak English during the first lessons not because they might be less able than others but simply because they need a longer period to adapt to the foreign language environment.
- *reproductive period* – seems to be one of the longest periods in the school environment. It is the period when the child responds to the stimuli usually repeating what was said by the teacher or other children. The child speaks or writes although it is not a real production. Children need a lot of examples, guidelines and hints in order to achieve a task.
- *repro-productive period* – is usually reached in the higher levels of primary education. Children still need a lot of examples and cues, however, they are able to modify them and say something that they really want, i.e. what is true about them and their world.
- *early production period* – this is the typical borderline of the primary education and the lower secondary education where children are able to produce pieces of spoken and written communication after sufficient practice of certain language samples.
- *productive period* – starts after child's development of abstract thinking has been completed, i.e. usually at the lower secondary level. The child is able e.g. describe a picture using certain cues whether in written or spoken form or perform a dialogue in a familiar situation.

Understanding this natural language development can help teachers to state realistic aims for their teaching as well as realistic expectations from their learners. Being clear on the above mentioned principles, i.e. being aware of the child's cognitive, psychological, physical and social development as well as the development of language, will allow the teacher to start building positive attitude of children towards learning a foreign language in general. This is very important since the area of measuring the outcomes of the learning process seems to be still rather problematic. Published data which come from different socio-political contexts (Cameron, 2001, Lightbown and Spada, 1999, Lojová, 2005) indicate that children who experience an early start benefit most in the area of listening comprehension and pronunciation, however, learning systematically grammar of the language seems to be hindered due to the underdeveloped abstract thinking of early learners. As Cameron (ibid. p.17) highlights "receptive skills are likely to remain ahead of productive skills, and grammatical knowledge, which is linked not just to language development but to cognitive development, is likely to develop more slowly for younger learners." This fact has to be taken into consideration not only when planning activities for early language learners but also when selecting which areas should indicate the progress made. That seems to cause a lot of confusion, especially among teachers of lower secondary level who take over young learners and feel there should be a lot to build on. However, often their expectations put on the young learners in the area of production are unrealistic and therefore unmet. Foster-Cohen (1999, p.9) uses the distinction of 'competence' and 'performance' which was introduced by Noam Chomsky and

which reflects the problem of what children can do with the language in contrast of what they actually do in some situations (Straková, 2009).

2. Teaching English at primary level: the case of Slovakia

English language is a part of primary education in Slovak schools and there has been a lot of discussions about pros and cons of this change. Transformation of educational system in Slovakia has brought a completely different situation to teaching foreign languages. English is taught as the first foreign language from year 3 as a compulsory school subject. However, the policy since they change the their decision about which language should be taught as the first compulsory a from which year it should be taught rather frequently.

However, the most serious problem in incorporating the ideas of change into Slovak educational system is the lack of sufficient number of qualified teachers in the field of primary education. There are many schools where lower secondary teachers of English teach also at primary level. Even though that is better than having non-qualified teachers teaching, there is too much lower secondary interference in such cases which might be de-motivating for young learners. That is especially typical for teaching grammar and in testing learners in general. Lower secondary teachers do not know the characteristics of young learners and they often do not choose appropriate techniques for helping learners learn since something that works for older learns might cause problems to the younger ones.

On the other hand lower secondary teachers of English have usually better command of the language and that can be helpful for the learners who need a lot of target language exposure. Training of primary teachers who need to learn English as well as learn how to teach it, or in other words the so called “fast track” training, can bring questionable results and there is a worry that this training can actually make the situation worse since a lot of “qualified” teachers of low quality will be in teaching practice. Universities as well as the Ministry of Education propose different training programmes for primary school teachers who are qualified for general teaching at this level but lack the qualification to teach English. These teachers demonstrate a high level of creativity and competence for working with young learners. They have a tendency to transfer activities which are successful in learning other subjects into English and thus direct the learning process to the real needs of young learners. On the other hand their level of language command is in general rather low so they fail to provide necessary model and exposure of children lacks high quality language samples. These teachers need a lot of language support and refreshment courses so that they can constantly develop and improve their language competence. Besides that they need a lot of examples of good practice and tried-out experience which can be shared among teachers. Building a programme for young learners of foreign language needs to incorporate key principles which would enable the enhancement of early start benefits. Cameron (2001, p. 19), e.g. mentions principles such as:

- Awareness of how children try to construct meaning
- Awareness of space children need for language growth
- Understanding that language in use carries cues to meaning that may not be noticed
- Understanding that children’s foreign language learning depends on what they experience.

Teachers have to be clear on how to apply these principles in every-day teaching. Most of them, however, rely on textbooks they use and believe that textbook authors are authorities who know how teaching of young learners should happen. Deep understanding of conditions for acquiring the language should be the prime aim of training courses where teachers should master the ability to plan systematically for reaching language aims.

Another worry that has to be expressed is connected to qualified lower secondary teachers who are involved in primary ELT. Their command of language is much higher, however, they lack the understanding of the age specificity of primary learners. As it has already been mentioned, these teachers have a tendency to overlook the difference between the acquisition and the learning process and expect that young learners will demonstrate the same skills as older learners. It is difficult for them to imagine how to introduce a language structure without explaining the rules. These strategies and techniques - such as using context for inductive teaching – should therefore become the prime focus in training courses for lower secondary level which aim to extend their qualification also for primary level.

Tertiary education of teachers-to-be with specialization on teaching foreign languages seems to clash with traditional understanding of what should be a part of educational package for language teachers. Universities in Slovakia tend to keep to traditions and find it difficult to understand that teachers undergoing training or

requalification might have different needs than undergraduate students with no experience of teaching. Therefore, we hear a lot of complaints from various sides that courses which aimed to solve the problems with the lack of qualified primary teachers, are not extremely successful.

2.1 Background of the case study

The following case study presents the results of a longitudinal research conducted during the period of two years at a Slovak primary school. It was focused on the implementation of a reading programme with the aim to prove its impact on the level of general understanding of children as well as the width of their vocabulary. The experimental reading programme was implemented into the year three and year four, it means for 8 and 9 years old learners. They have started to learn English in the first year of their schooling and the classes were taught within the school hours. The time allocated for English was one lesson per week in year 1 and year 2 and three lessons per week in years 3 and 4.

In year 3 the experimental reading programme consisted of regular reading assignments given to children with a new topic usually once a month. Each assignment consisted of a set of books which children were asked to read and make a record of the books they have read into a reading diary. The books were at the beginning very simple – there were single words or simple sentences accompanied by pictures demonstrating the meaning of the words and sentences. Children were first given time to get acquainted with the books at home since it was an online programme. After this time the teacher had a lesson with the focus on checking the understanding and pronunciation in the lesson. The reading programme of year 4 consisted of in-class reading – an activity in which children read a complete storybook divided into parts – and online reading assignments. In-class reading was organized through Reading Days, which were repeated regularly throughout the school year. Each Reading day had the same structure – lead-in, pre-reading task, individual reading, post reading activities consisting of comprehension check and summarizing of the text read.

Besides Reading Days learners continued with online reading assignments from the previous level where the learners as on-line readers each month received a new assignment – they read a selected book, listened to a recorded version of the book, answered the quiz questions or filled in a worksheet. The online programme allowed the teacher to monitor individual learners' progress since every activity (number of readings, number of quiz points, number of retakes...) was recorded and displayed to the teacher.

Through the presented reading programmes learners were exposed to the higher extent and a wider variety of texts in comparison with the amount of texts presented by their textbook. In order to see the impact on the ability to understand the texts and see the growth of their word stock the experimental group was tested at the end of two-year pilot period. The instrument selected for measuring this impact was based on Cambridge Young Learners English Tests – Starter level, which was given to both the experimental and a control group.

The sample consisted of 55 children in the experimental group (E) and 55 children in the control group (K). Children in the control group did not come from the same school although the conditions of learning were very similar to the experimental group. The learners were in their fourth year, they started to learn English in year 1 with 1 lesson per week and from year 3 they continued with three lessons per week. Both groups were taught by qualified teachers from the beginning and used the same textbook. Selected children had no other extracurricular classes focused on learning English. Those children who attended language school or private language lessons were excluded from the sample. There was an intention to have the same number of children in each group and they were chosen randomly. The test tasks were focused on reading comprehension checked through matching tasks, fill-in tasks, look and name tasks and answering tasks. The results from the sample groups were compared using the Mann-Whitney U test to confirm that there was significant difference ($p= 0,000780$) between the groups. The box-and-whiskers graph (fig. 2) presents the overall reading results distributions in the group. The mean value in an experimental group was 18,60364 and in the control group it was 17,09091.

Table 1.

Type=K Frequency table: RWPT (stat_der.sta) K-S d=,15452, p<,01

Category	Count	Cumulative Count	Percent of Valid	Cumul % of Valid	% of all Cases	Cumulative % of All
10,00000<x<=12,00000	1	1	1,81818	1,8182	1,81818	1,8182
12,00000<x<=14,00000	4	5	7,27273	9,0909	7,27273	9,0909
14,00000<x<=16,00000	10	15	18,18182	27,2727	18,18182	27,2727
16,00000<x<=18,00000	29	44	52,72727	80,0000	52,72727	80,0000
18,00000<x<=20,00000	9	53	16,36364	96,3636	16,36364	96,3636
20,00000<x<=22,00000	2	55	3,63636	100,0000	3,63636	100,0000
Missing	0	55	0,00000		0,00000	100,0000

Table 2.

Type=E Frequency table: RWPT (stat_der.sta) K-S d=,12146, p> .20; Lilliefors p<,05

Category	Count	Cumulative Count	Percent of Valid	Cumul % of Valid	% of all Cases	Cumulative % of All
8,000000<x<=10,00000	0	0	0,00000	0,0000	0,00000	0,0000
10,00000<x<=12,00000	3	3	5,45455	5,4545	5,45455	5,4545
12,00000<x<=14,00000	3	6	5,45455	10,9091	5,45455	10,9091
14,00000<x<=16,00000	8	14	14,54545	25,4545	14,54545	25,4545
16,00000<x<=18,00000	13	27	23,63636	49,0909	23,63636	49,0909
18,00000<x<=20,00000	7	34	12,72727	61,8182	12,72727	61,8182
20,00000<x<=22,00000	13	47	23,63636	85,4545	23,63636	85,4545
22,00000<x<=24,00000	7	54	12,72727	98,1818	12,72727	98,1818
24,00000<x<=26,00000	1	55	1,81818	100,0000	1,81818	100,0000
Missing	0	55	0,00000		0,00000	100,0000

As indicated in the categorised histogram (fig.1) the distribution of the pupils according to their results in the experimental (E) and control group (K) differ. The mean value in the experimental group is 18,60 and in the control group is 17,09. It is equally important to take into consideration median (see fig.2) in this context, that is in this case similar to the mean - 18,5 in the experimental and 17,0 in the control group. Out of 39 pupils who reached more than 18 points there are 11 students from the control group and 28 from the experimental one. Out of 29 pupils who had less than 16 points there are 15 pupils from the control group and 14 from the experimental group (see tables 1 and 2).

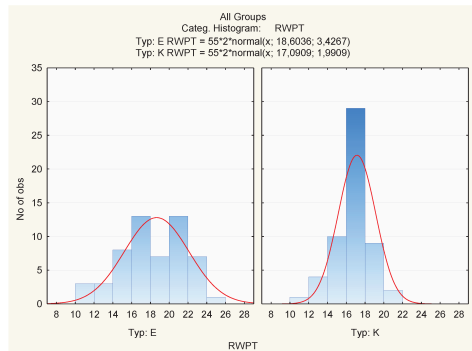


Fig.1

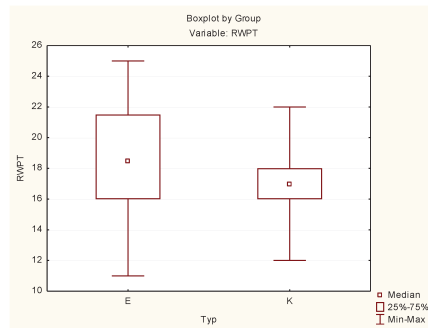


Fig.2

The results and experience gained from this experimental project disclosed encouraging findings, which support the initial hypothesis that the development of reading as a skill from the early beginning significantly influences the ability of learners to understand foreign language texts and helps to widen the vocabulary of children. Reading programmes, if implemented into the learning process as a regular and systematic element, provide the space and opportunity for gaining desirable reading habits. Children step beyond the textbook limits and have a chance to acquire words they would otherwise never come across. At the same time such activities offer exposure to the (high-quality) target language which sets the basis and stimulation for both acquisition and learning. Last but not least they represent meaningful activities for learning about the world around. These can also help learners to proceed from receptive to productive stage in their learner development much earlier.

3. Conclusion

The introduction of early start into the system of education in Slovakia can be viewed in the context of complexity of this introduction. There are many positive aspects and as it has been presented there are good practices, which can be viewed as beneficial for the learners when it is accompanied by a qualitative change of approaches to teaching young learners. The factors which influence the success in learning need to be considered thoroughly by educators who design training and qualification programmes for teachers. The key principles underlying good practices of early language learning must not only be incorporated into the documents but they need to be understood and accepted by the teachers themselves in order to reach desirable outcomes.

Many opponents of early language learning claim that the process of introducing foreign languages into primary level is too demanding and the effort is not worth it. It would be difficult not to admit the truth of these arguments especially after naming all problematic aspects above. It really is difficult to guarantee the high quality of foreign language education in conditions where there are so many constraints. It seems that the most problematic point is that teaching foreign languages has become a compulsory for all primary schools. If left on the decision of each school director the start of foreign language teaching would reflect more realistically the conditions, which schools have. Those schools where there is no lack of qualified teachers and which have had some experience with teaching foreign languages even in the past might continue teaching with ease. On the other hand if the school faces crucial problems such as e.g. no qualified language teachers for primary level at school, teaching could start later. Global decisions – whether for or against teaching foreign languages at primary level – seem to be extremely problematic in Slovak environment and they seem to bring more constraints than opportunities.

However, the case study results presented in this article point to a very important fact. If teaching process is set appropriately, keeping all principles of early language learning in mind, the results can be rewarding for both teachers and learners. Children have positive attitude towards learning the language, they have confidence in their skills and will probably proceed more promptly in the following years. This stage of early learning is absolutely essential as pre-production stage and children cannot produce the language unless they have spent enough time in pre-production stage. Moreover, very early they will have to cope with age constraints – children becoming less and less communicative in pre-puberty age. To sum up, losing the opportunity to start with early language learning would deprive children from using potential for natural learning and natural use of language in a given context.

Acknowledgements

This article presents partial findings collected while working on project KEGA 006PU-4/2012 that is supported by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic.

References

- Brewster, J., Ellis, G., Girard, D. (1991). *The Primary English Teacher's Guide*. London: Penguin English.
- Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cimermanová, I. (2005). Aplikácia teórie rozmanitých inteligencií v školskej praxi. *Škola očami dnešného sveta [elektronický zdroj]: zborník príspevkov z medzinárodnej konferencie*. Metodicko-pedagogické centrum, 109-115.
- Djigunović, J.M. (2012). Early EFL Learning in Context – Evidence from a country case study. *ELT Research papers* 12-05.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2009). *The Psychology of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Ellis, R. (1997). *Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Extra, G., Yağmur, K. (2012). *Language Rich Europe: Trends in Policies and Practices for Multilingualism in Europe*. Cambridge University Press and British Council.
- Foster-Cohen, S. (1999). *An Introduction to Child Language Development*. Essex: Addison Wesley Longman Limited.
- Garman, M. (1991). *Psycholinguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Homolová, E. (2003). *Autentický materiál ako prostriedok rozvoja jazykových a komunikatívnych kompetencií žiakov*. Banská Bystrica: Univerzita Mateja Bela.
- Hudson, T. (2007). *Teaching Second Language Reading*. Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Krashen, S., (1982). *Principles and Practice in Second language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon Institute of English.
- Lightbown, P., Spada, N. (1999). *How Languages are Learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lojová, G. (2005). *Individuálne osobitosti pri učení sa cudzích jazykov*. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského.
- Pinter, A. (2006). *Teaching Young Language Learners*. Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Pokrivčáková, S. (2009). *Vyučovanie cudzích jazykov v triedach s individuálne integrovanými žiakmi s poruchami učenia a pozornosti. Cudzí jazyky a kultúry v modernej škole*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita.
- Sepešiová, M. (2012). *Sú učitelia primárneho vzdelávania pripravená implementovať obsahovo a jazykovo integrované vyučovanie? Rozvíjanie cudzojazyčných zručností u detí v školskom a v rodinnom prostredí [elektronický zdroj]: Staňme sa dvojjazyčnou rodinou! Staňme sa viacjazyčnou spoločnosťou!* Bratislava.
- Straková, Z. (2009). Early language learning in the context of a modern school. *Linguistics and Didactics in the 21st Century – Trends, Analyses and Prognoses II*. Praha: Kernberg Publishing, s.r.o., 91-97.
- Straková, Z. (2011). Hoping against hope in primary ELT. *Current issues in teaching foreign languages*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2011, 43-58.