

**THE SPECIFICITY OF EARLY LANGUAGE LEARNING (ELL)
WITH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF NEEDS AT PRE-PRIMARY LEVEL**

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ABSTRACT: *In the present day it is a must to know at least one foreign language. Most people choose English since it has become a global language and is present in almost every field of life. Researchers say that the best moment to start is in the childhood, yet they emphasize the fact that teaching very young children is challenging and needs to be planned with attention. This text aims to describe the specificity of teaching English to young learners and discusses some basic aspects of conducting child-friendly lessons together with some benefits of this approach.*

KEY WORDS: *foreign language, childhood, teaching English*

English is spoken as a second language by more and more people worldwide which appears to be an undoubtful fact. Numerous schools are being opened and new methods of teaching are constantly emerging. Clearly, English is present in all aspects of life and everyone at some point must have come across it. English has become a global language, thus in many parts of the world learning begins at an early age and is actively promoted by governments. This text aims to describe the specificity of teaching English to young learners and discusses some basic aspects of conducting child-friendly lessons altogether with some benefits of this approach.

Recently some of the European countries began to lower the age at which very young children start their second language acquisition. To begin with, the Barcelona European Council called for action “to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age”²⁶², making it the crucial aim of EU language education policy. As a result, in 2011 the European Commission approved a policy handbook entitled “Language Learning at Pre-Primary School Level: Making It Efficient and Sustainable” as the outcome of national debates that outlines the present issues in the matter of pre-primary language awareness and acquisition. This is why the concept of Early Language Learning (ELL) at pre-primary school emerged and can be defined as follows: “ELL means systematic

²⁶² *Barcelona European Council 2002, Presidency Conclusions;*
http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/69871.pdf; (dostęp: 23.05.2016).

awareness-raising or exposure to more than one language taking place in an early childhood education and care setting in a pre-primary context”²⁶³. In 2014 Poland also started to progressively promote teaching English to this group as compulsory and therefore many children began their language education in kindergarden²⁶⁴. The benefits of this approach are numerous and will be briefly described in the next lines. But firstly, some general characteristics of children as language learners will be presented.

First and foremost, children have a unique capability of learning a foreign language which is not likely to be found at any other time of life²⁶⁵. Early language learning studies declare that there is a “critical period” which means that there is a limited developmental period during which it is possible to acquire a language to nativelike levels. Once it passes however, the ability to master languages gradually declines or is less likely to occur with ease²⁶⁶. Very young children often learn indirectly rather than directly – that is, they “pick up” the language from everything around them, especially from the materials that can be touched and interacted with²⁶⁷ rather than discussing abstract ideas. In addition, children respond to meaning even if they do not understand individual words and rarely become frustrated or inhibited by errors (as much as older learners do). Children will try to do the tasks even if they do not understand the instructions precisely or are not exactly sure of how to use new language structures or words. They are excited about learning and want to be rewarded by the teacher. On top of that, children’s second language acquisition is comparable in many ways to the acquisition of their mother tongue, which is natural and effortless. However, children have short attention span and if the tasks are far beyond their level they are less likely to stay motivated. The abovementioned characteristics are just some generalizations that most children share, yet seem to be important from the language learning perspective.

As far as the benefits of Early Language Learning are concerned, it should be highlighted that foreign language study increases not only communicative skills but also cognitive abilities. Researchers agree that the children who study a second language are more inventive and solve problems better than those who do not²⁶⁸. This happens because the former are exposed to various meaningful sounds, which are different from their native ones, and

²⁶³ *Langage Learning at Pre-Primary School Level*, 2011.

²⁶⁴ *Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z 30 maja 2014 r. zmieniające rozporządzenie w sprawie podstawy programowej wychowania przedszkolnego oraz kształcenia ogólnego w poszczególnych typach szkół*; Dz. U. z dn.18 czerwca 2014r., poz. 803.

²⁶⁵ *Early Language Learning Research, White Paper Report*, 2008.

²⁶⁶ D. Birdsong, *Second Language Acquisition and the critical period hypothesis*, New Jersey 2009.

²⁶⁷ J. Harmer, *The practice of English language teaching*, London, 2001.

²⁶⁸ J. Stewart Hostler, *Foreign Language Study in Elementary Schools: Benefits and Implications for Achievement in Reading and Math*, "Early Childhood Education Journal" vol.33:1 August 2005.

between which they distinguish and have to induce the meaning. They not only expand the ability to reproduce those sounds in a meaningful way but also begin to compare and contrast the ways different patterns of letters and sounds are used to generate the meaning. What is more, the knowledge of foreign languages gives students access to greater opportunities in higher education and beyond, not to mention potential employment. In today's world of over-testing and constantly increasing competition young people need every single advantage they can get. Apart from the less tangible profits of "better memory, problem-solving skills, cognitive abilities, and cultural understanding, the study of a foreign language leads to real results when it comes to higher education"²⁶⁹. The most prestigious European universities require the knowledge of a minimum one foreign language. There are also exchange programmes e.g. Erasmus, scholarships available for those who speak the target country's language. Obviously, knowing a foreign language gives an access to fascinating cultures around the world and can literally alternate the way of seeing the world. Overall, there is a wealth of cumulative mental and emotional benefits to language study and so it is definitely worth time and effort.

Indisputably, there is a great number of benefits of ELL but in order to gain them the lessons should be carefully planned and incorporate activities that comply with certain rules ought to be included. Namely, they should foster languages in a specific way, that is not as an additional subject to be learnt but as a communication tool to be used in other contexts such as everyday or playful situations²⁷⁰. Children are eager to interact with others that is why communication is of vital importance in the learning process. Yet, requiring them to use only English is a naive idea. Using mother tongue is not advisable but not in all cases; for example giving instructions in the beginning stage will save time and make everything clear. There are also some methods that help the teacher to avoid the mother tongue namely: gesture, using English words that are similar to native language, applying international English words (hamburger, jeans, T-shirt) or the so called "English Hat" which when worn by the teacher signals he understands only the target language at that moment²⁷¹. The kinds of classroom activities that address children directly and enhance communicative skills are multifarious – "games and songs with action, total physical response activities, tasks that involve colouring, cutting and sticking, simple repetitive stories and speaking exercises"²⁷² just to name a few. If

²⁶⁹ *Early Language Learning Research*, op. cit., 2008.

²⁷⁰ *Language Learning at Pre-Primary School Level* 2011.

²⁷¹ S. Ward, V. Reilly, *Very young learners*, Oxford 2003.

²⁷² S. Philips, *Young learners*, Oxford 1993.

the tasks are entertaining and pleasurable the children will undoubtedly maintain a high degree of motivation²⁷³, which in turn proves to be very rewarding for the teacher.

Taking into consideration the complexity and value of pre-school education the prominent role of the teacher should be highlighted here as well²⁷⁴. In her article states that the main aim of all teachers is interrelating knowledge and upbringing. Assuming that up to the point of formal pre-school education the children learn mostly at home, teacher's roles should resemble closely the competencies of a skilled parent who introduces a foreign language practice. Therefore, it is not only a good command of English but also ability to create child-friendly atmosphere that does the trick. It is advisable that the teacher supports the notion that every child is endowed with a certain talent or talents so as to create various learning opportunities giving them the opportunity to reach their fullest potential. As for the atmosphere it is the safety and peace that are of vital role²⁷⁵. One of the ways to accomplish that is setting a classroom routine as children feel more secure when school environment is predictable because they are "creatures of habit and enjoy having the security of planned expectations"²⁷⁶. Naturally, children must have the right to express their objections or dissatisfaction without feeling rejected but this approach does not imply the lack of discipline. The teacher is a crucial component of pre-primary classroom as he/she organizes almost every aspect of the learning process. Overall, he/she must have not only proficient command of English, especially pronunciation but also be emotionally grounded and ideally, be a parent who has observed children's development stages and is both aware of their needs and knows how to cater for them.

Piotrowska-Skrzypek describes in details actions that can be undertaken to address all students' needs on the basis of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The needs are as follows: physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem and self-actualization. Physiological needs are at the bottom of the triangle because they are very basic and deal with biological needs i.e. eating, drinking, sleeping etc. To address this need in pre-primary context means to make sure whether pupils got enough sleep and are not hungry just to name a few. Next is the need for safety. Researchers²⁷⁷ postulate it as one of the essential aims of the present day school. Mazur (2014)

²⁷³ Ibidem.

²⁷⁴ M. Piotrowska-Skrzypek, *Kompetencje nauczyciela języka obcego w przedszkolu*, "Języki Obce w Szkole" 2015, nr 1, s. 23-30.

²⁷⁵ Ibidem, s. 23-30.

²⁷⁶ S. L. Krogh, P. Morehouse, *The Early Childhood Curriculum: Inquiry Learning Through Integration*, New York 2014.

²⁷⁷ P. Mazur, *Zdrowie i bezpieczeństwo uczniów na przestrzeni wieków-zarys zagadnienia*, in: *Bezpieczeństwo dzieci i młodzieży*, ed. B. Komorowska, P. Mazur, Chełm 2014; J. Andrzejewska, *Nauczyciel przedszkola – kreator*

points that throughout the history the scholars did not address the issue often enough but fortunately the situation is changing. Andrzejewska (2014) enumerates some aspects such as praise, encouragement, dedication, self-assessment, support and eclecticism that help to maintain the atmosphere of safety and tolerance which naturally lowers inhibitions and makes the learning process more appropriate. On the third level described by Maslow there is love and belonging that is, interpersonal need for acceptance among social group. These needs are paramount especially in childhood which is why they should be addressed with attention. To cater for them the teacher may start his classes with a warming welcome both verbal and non-verbal, solve conflicts by listening to everyone involved and be eager to listen to children so that they feel respected. One but last in the hierarchy is esteem. Generally speaking, it is the need to have confidence in oneself and a belief in one's own qualities and abilities not to mention being valued by others. In the school context it means praising students for their accomplishments²⁷⁸, yet applied with much thought as excessive praise can be harmful. A good way to either praise or reprove is by describing the occurrence without judging anything so that the children can formulate conclusions on their own²⁷⁹ but, most importantly, the comments and approvals must be sincere and meaningful to be important for the pupils. On top of the hierarchy Maslow puts the level of self-actualization which is about reaching one's full potential. In this environment, it is advisable that the pupils fulfill simple classroom duties like wiping the board or watering the flowers so that they feel reliable²⁸⁰ and therefore use all their abilities to be everything that they possibly can in the future. Generally speaking, it is vital that the teacher recognizes and addresses his/her pupils' needs so that learning a foreign language is both enjoyable and effective. At the same time, it requires broad psychological knowledge and experience on the part of the teacher which shows how difficult and complex teaching very young people is.

All things considered, Early Language Learning appears to be now a very popular concept as being able to speak foreign languages is highly promoted by the European Union. It should also be noted that teaching English to the present day children is an extremely demanding and difficult piece of work. Nevertheless, pre-school classroom education, when properly organized can be the right place for effective language learning. Careful

bezpiecznej przestrzeni edukacyjnej, in: *Bezpieczeństwo dzieci i młodzieży*, ed. B. Komorowska, P. Mazur, Chełm 2014.

²⁷⁸ M. Piotrowska-Skrzypek, op. cit., s. 23-30.

²⁷⁹ A. Faber, E. Mazlish, *Wyzwoleni rodzice, wyzwolone dzieci: twoja droga do szczęśliwszej rodziny*, Poznań 2014.

²⁸⁰ M. Piotrowska-Skrzypek, op.cit., s.23-30.

implementation of students' needs into English language lessons and the appropriate choice of tasks are of vital importance in supporting learner's both confidence and motivation for learning. Indeed, the contribution of a teacher in constructing and enriching the whole process must be clearly highlighted and never underestimated.

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