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Teaching English in the Dalton Way, i. e. the Dalton Plan in English Lessons

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

Dalton Plan, Helen Parkhurst, English lesson, teaching, learning, early school education.

The Dalton Plan pedagogy was established by Helen Parkhurst 100 years ago, but it is still valued and commonly applied in preschool and early school education. In this article, I intend to present different ways of implementing the Dalton Plan in teaching English at these stages of education. First, I will discuss the history of the Dalton Plan, and then I shall describe its founder and outline the main assumptions of the concept. Next, I will present how the Dalton Plan has developed worldwide, in particular in Poland, and I will discuss the current application of the Dalton Plan in the school environment. In the second part, I will present Helen Parkhurst's practical teaching strategies which can be effectively used in teaching English to children. I intend this article to not only be an inspiration for teachers teaching different foreign languages, but also as an encouragement for practitioners to reflect on their work and perhaps expand their practice with new teaching strategies that would promote independence, responsibility, cooperation and reflection. Applying the Dalton Plan in everyday teaching allows teachers to personalise children's learning and supports the development of children's linguistic and social skills, which, in turn, facilitates the main objective of education, i.e. the child's comprehensive development.

The Dalton Plan – a historical outline

The Dalton Plan is an educational concept created by Helen Parkhurst who, like many creators of educational theories of the time (such as Maria Montessori or John Dewey) sought new ideas related to working with children. Her own school experience and the fact that, as a child, she often participated in courses for teachers, resulted in the fact that, as a small girl, she promised to herself that she would become a teacher. “Parkhurst mentioned that, when she attended the sessions for teachers in the Institute, she concluded that it was her obligation to become a teacher. She wanted to prove adults that children are actually not bad, but misunderstood” (Lager 1983: 63). Helen Parkhurst was certainly a critic of the traditional school system. She cooperated with Maria Montessori for a number of years, and many of her assumptions concerning education are in accordance with the ideas of the Italian educator. For example, Parkhurst believed that the traditional organisation of space in the classroom does not facilitate the process of learning. Desks which are fixed to the floor make it impossible to carry out group work, and changing the activities every 45 minutes hinders focusing on a given task and fails to take into account the individual approach to the child. Parkhurst was an advocate of the so-called new school; she wanted students to “be interested in what they do, to be independent, to feel free, to explore things and attempt to solve problems, to discuss, to be happy about their work, to work diligently, to be helpful in the group, especially to those who are weaker, to receive support from the stronger ones, and to do their best at school” (Śliwerski 2011: 15). That is why, while creating her educational model, Helen Parkhurst wanted to achieve a balance between each child’s talents and the society’s needs. In particular, the author focused on adjusting the curriculum to the needs, interests and individual abilities of students, promoting independence and trust in others, improving the students’ interpersonal abilities, and reinforcing the sense of responsibility for the whole community.

The concept of Helen Parkhurst was based on values such as freedom, responsibility and cooperation. She understood freedom as something that does not allow for recklessness or disobedience. She defined freedom in the following manner:

there is freedom in working on a subject by a student who is totally absorbed, because when he is interested in the work, he is far more intelligent, conscious and able to overcome any difficulties that he may come across. (...) If a student cannot acquire knowledge in the time he needs, he shall never truly learn anything. Freedom means working at one’s pace. Working under the pressure of time is enslavement (Parkhurst 1928: 17).

According to Parkhurst, freedom is the agreement on getting “immersed” in the acquired knowledge through the adjustment of the proper pace and independent choice of the contents. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to shift the emphasis

from the teacher's work to the student's work; from teaching to learning. The teacher is to transfer the responsibility for the learning process to the students; he/she has to move to the background. "The teacher's main task is to prepare the right conditions for the students' work, directing such work through giving advice and support, and, finally, controlling and evaluating the work" (Nawroczyński 2017: 169).

Another objective was to teach children how to cooperate with one another. The younger ones should work with older ones, and all children should be able to work in smaller or larger groups.

True social cooperation is more than a contact – it is mutual support and influence. (...) The Dalton Laboratory Plan creates the conditions in which the student has to act like a member of an organized society. He is accepted or rejected by that society, depending on whether his actions or behaviour are social or not (Parkhurst 1928:18).

Helen Parkhurst emphasized the meaning of proper cooperation between students and teachers. She believed that we cannot achieve the expected results without such cooperation. As Bogdan Nawroczyński explains: "She did not want teachers to separate from students with artificial seriousness. Instead, they should cooperate and live with the students just like parents live with their children, and just like elder companions live with the younger ones" (Nawroczyński 2017: 169).

Her third objective was to make students responsible for the process of learning. In order to achieve this, they had to know the objective and criteria of evaluating the task.

When the child is responsible for a choice, his/her brain acts like a powerful microscope that notices and weighs each side of the task they have to overcome to achieve success (...). Using the Dalton Laboratory Plan, the child is given a task and an objective to be achieved. Then, the child can work in the way which is best for him, and at the pace he/she chooses. The sense of responsibility for the results shall develop his/her hidden intellectual strengths as well as an independent and strong personality (Parkhurst 1928: 19).

"It is not good if the students follow the teacher blindly, not understanding where he/she leads them" (Nawroczyński 2017: 170). Those three main principles were interconnected and constituted a holistic image of the concept of Parkhurst's.

Innovative solutions of Helen Parkhurst

Helen Parkhurst was only 19 when she started working as a teacher in a rural school. She taught 40 students aged 6-16. It was a great organizational and didactic challenge, taking into account that her eldest students were just a few years younger

than her. First, she re-organized the classroom, removing all the desks, and preparing studying corners in each corner of the classroom. In the middle of the room she arranged a reading space. In this way, the students were able to work in small groups, adjusting time and place of work to their needs. Over the next few years, she sought to improve, verify and modernize her plan. She implemented the final version in a school in Dalton (Massachusetts, USA), where each classroom was a so-called laboratory, i.e. a properly arranged space adjusted to the subject taught in the room, where the students planned their work on their own and the teachers supported them developing freedom, responsibility and cooperation. In the following years, the Dalton Plan became popular internationally, with similar schools being opened in England, China and the Netherlands.

In Poland, some articles were published on this topic in 1920s. The pedagogue Rudolf Taubenzlag described the advantages of the system in “Pedagogical Movement” (“Ruch Pedagogiczny”) in 1929. The advantages included self-education, a love of books, independent work, individual work, learning one’s own personality, developing one’s interests, practicing internal discipline and obedience, focusing on the tasks and a great diversity of tasks. Jadwiga Młodowska noticed the value of this concept, too, and in 1926 she applied the Dalton plan in the State Teacher Training College in Chełm. The idea flourished after 2009, when Roel Röhner and Hanse Wenke (experienced Dalton teachers, promoters of this idea in Europe and beyond, as well as Dalton International consultants), during a conference organized in Łódź by OMEP – World Organisation for Early Childhood Education, presented the modern, Dutch reception of the plan. After the conference, the Polish Dalton Association was established which started promoting the concept in Poland, including giving special certificates to the institutions which started to implement the system. At present, in Poland there are more than 50 certified Dalton schools and preschools, and almost 50 more in the process of applying for the certificate (<https://dalton.org.pl/placowki-czlonkowskie/> [access: 25.11.2019]).

Contemporary fulfillment of the Dalton Plan

Polish educational institutions which work according to the assumptions of the Dalton Plan are based on four pillars: independence, responsibility, cooperation and reflection.

The previous “freedom” was replaced with “independence,” so that we can define freedom properly and not confuse it with recklessness. An additional pillar was discerned – reflection, which had not been specified as a pillar by Parkhurst, but which she often discussed and emphasized as important in the process of learning. According

to the assumptions of Helen Parkhurst, in each place these principles are adjusted to a given group of children with their particular needs and interests.

According to the philosophy of Helen Parkhurst, it is absolutely normal and right to test one's own principles and verify whether they are still compliant with the current reality. The Dalton plan is not a system; it is a lifestyle (...). Helen Parkhurst does not see her concepts as rigid schemes. They can be adjusted to the practice of each school, so that we do not destroy their foundations. The flexibility of the Dalton concept refers to the creative abilities of the student and the teacher. This aims at creating a school in which the student can truly learn (Röhner and Wenke 2011: 21).

The ways of the fulfillment of the Dalton Plan differ among various educational institutions, but the interpretation of the principles is similar. Independence is perceived as the autonomous obtainment of knowledge, without the constant supervision of a teacher; as searching for solutions on one's own; broadly understood freedom in thinking and acting; as well as proper functioning in a group and self-service. Responsibility means shifting the emphasis from the activity of a teacher to the student's activity, i.e. giving students the dominant role. Responsibility for the process of learning, for gaining knowledge, is more important than responsibility for the obtainment of a result. Cooperation is perceived as sharing learning and fun, sharing tasks and obligations, and responsibility for the group and the space in which children are staying. It is the cooperation of each student with another student, respecting differences, and the ability to reach a compromise. And reflection is the ability to look at one's work before performing a task and, after focusing on the goal, the knowledge of consequent, small steps to achieve the objective, and the evaluation of one's achievements. Working according to the assumptions of this concept inspires the students to creative and committed actions. Such a change is available to each creative teacher.

The subject and goal of the reflection

My subject of reflection is teaching and learning English with the use of the assumptions of the Dalton plan. The research focus will include the following question: how can we use tools compliant with the assumptions of the Dalton Plan during English lessons?

Foreign languages in early school education

The process of teaching foreign languages in elementary education must be compliant with the contents of the core curriculum for early education concerning the following subjects: Polish, mathematics, social education, art, technology, IT and music. Language teachers have to know the whole early education curriculum and trace its fulfillment to make sure that language teaching supports, and is supported, by the educational contents that are being taught at a given moment. This particularly refers to such basic skills as counting or writing. The methods and techniques of teaching languages are similar, focused on developing particular skills, and aiming at the achievement of the superior objective, i.e. supporting the student's overall development.

Using the elements of the Dalton Plan in teaching English in classes I–III. Practical solutions

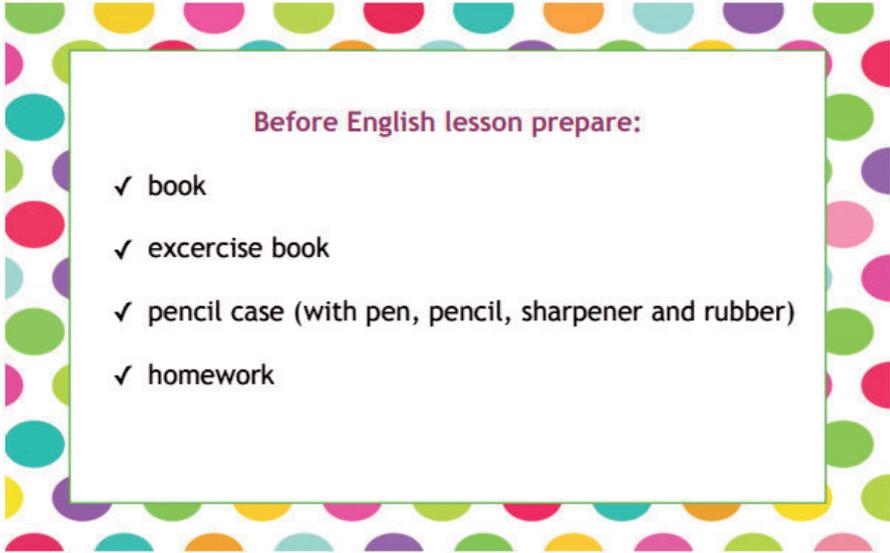
According to the assumptions of the Dalton Plan, while working in the classroom we encourage the students to develop their independence, responsibility, cooperation and reflection. A lot of tools used by Dalton teachers can be applied in teaching a foreign language. It would be perfect to introduce the principles of the Dalton Plan pedagogy both during integrated classes and during English lessons, but even a single-track solution shall be good for the students.

As I have already mentioned, the Dalton Plan is not a method, so there are no ready scenarios for carrying out a Dalton lesson. Also, there are no Dalton educational aids¹ but there are tools that can support the work of the teacher and the students. The following are example ways of teaching English that are compliant with the assumptions of the Dalton pedagogy.

Developing linguistic skills through the students' independent action may be achieved by preparing brief instructions the objective of which is to help the students to function in the classroom space and learn on their own. The instructions are the teachers' answers to the questions asked by the students most frequently. They can refer to organizational, didactic or upbringing issues. One of them may be a list of steps to make in a particular situation, e. g. like in picture 1:

¹ While writing about Dalton educational aids I mean tools prepared and patented by Helen Parkhurst. There are some tools typical of this concept, but using them during the classes does not mean that the lesson will be compliant with the assumptions of the Dalton Plan. While Maria Montessori prepared a lot of aids with the instructions on how to use them, Helen Parkhurst did not produce such materials.

II. 1. Instruction “*Before your English lesson prepare...*”



Prepared by M. Kwella.

With such a checklist, the students organize their space on their own before the lesson. They do not need the teacher’s guidelines and control, and they work in an individual, organized manner. If the students cannot read yet, each word should be accompanied by a picture. Make sure that there is always some writing under the picture because this way students memorize the words subconsciously. Another example is the instruction what the students should do after completing the task:

1. Read the instruction and your reply again. Evaluate whether you have fulfilled the task according to the instruction.
2. Check if you have fulfilled all the tasks.
3. Make sure that each sentence starts with a capital letter and ends with a full stop.
4. If you have completed the task earlier, take a book or another educational aid in English and work on your own.
5. Put your assignment in the proper place.

Using the instructions, after they have read the guidelines again and analysed their solution, the students often notice and correct the mistakes on their own. Also, a visualisation, accompanied by a brief sentence, is useful if the student does not know how to perform a task. Such a visual instruction may sound like this:

1. Read the instruction again.
2. Recall what the teacher said.
3. Search for the solutions in the materials.
4. Ask someone you are cooperating with for support.
5. Ask the experts for support.
6. Ask the teacher for support.

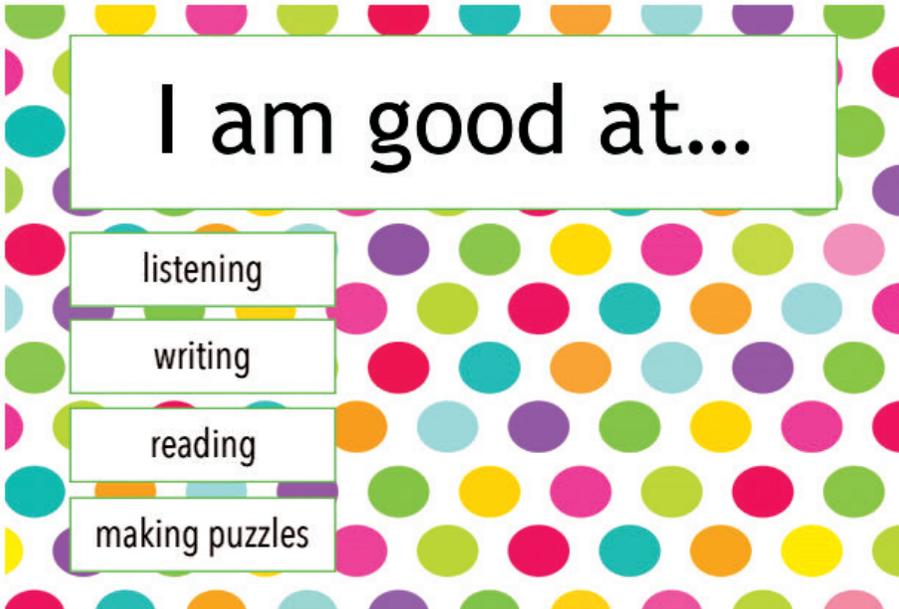
II. 2. Instruction: “What if I do not know how to perform the task?”; author: A. Juljańska



Each instruction we introduce must first be discussed. Then, we display it in a visible place in the classroom so that everyone can access it. The students have to know how to use it and what it is for. While preparing the instruction, the teacher should remember that each new tool introduced into the classroom must have a specific objective and develop the children’s real skills. While making the instructions, we should remember that they should be clear and understandable, they should include 4-6 steps, they should allow for independent work and proper functioning in the group.

Developing linguistic skills through cooperation can be supported by the use of the poster: “*I am good at...*”. In a visible place in the classroom we display the poster with the words: “*I am good at...*” and we write skills such as *writing, reading, listening, speaking, making puzzles, making laugh*, etc.

II. 3. Support tool: “*I am good at...*”



Prepared by M. Kwella.

The skills can be derived from the core curriculum. Additionally, it is worth extending the list by social skills, so that everyone can find a category he/she is good at. Each skill is accompanied by the name of the child who is good at it. If, during the lesson, children work on their own and need help, they can look at the poster and they know whom they can ask for help. In many situations the teacher is not needed and peers offer the required support. While preparing such a board, it is important to assign a skill to each child so that everyone feels needed, helpful and special. This facilitates the development of the students' self-esteem and sense of competence.

The students' responsibility can also be developed through teaching them how to plan their work. The Dalton Plan provides us with some inspiring tools. For example, once a week the teacher prepares the contents to be studied within the next five days. The students have a deadline to fulfil the tasks (e. g. 20 minutes, or a whole lesson) – it is determined by the teacher (it often depends on the number of English lessons in a week). In the planning sheet the time is specified as *IW* (*individual work*). It is important to note that the contents included in the planning sheet are not additional, but obligatory tasks. At the beginning, the teacher discusses the objectives for the week, so that the students know the goal and can determine how they can tell

if the goal has been achieved. Then, the teacher presents all the prepared materials. It would be perfect if each task was available at three levels (elementary, intermediate, advanced), so that the children can choose the level on their own. After the teacher discusses all the tasks, each student plans which task (on which level) she/he shall perform and when. Then, the student specifies whether he/she shall need any additional materials for the fulfillment of the tasks, so that they can prepare them earlier. This way, they shall not be distracted by searching for the proper data while working. After completing the tasks, the student marks when he/she actually finished each of them, and they give all of them to the teacher for verification. The biggest advantage of such work is developing independence, responsibility, cooperation, reflection and motivation. Students themselves decide what and when they shall do. They feel responsible for their work which makes them work more eagerly.

The following is an example planning sheet. The tasks it includes are strictly related to the core curriculum for classes I-III.

II. 4. Plannig sheet

November 11th-15th

Class 3

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
IW	30 min	20 min	30 min	35 min	20 min

topic My home, my family!

- goals**
- Czytam ze zrozumieniem
 - Utrwalam nazwy członków rodziny
 - Utrwalam nazwy części ciała
 - Słucham ze zrozumieniem

	 tasks (what to do)					
LISTENING	• Wysłuchaj nagraną przez nauczyciela instrukcję "Mój dom". Wykonaj budowlę z klocków. Sprawdź wykonanie z kartą samokontroli.	CD player, blocks	20 min			
	•• Wysłuchaj nagraną przez nauczyciela instrukcję "Mój dom". Wykonaj budowlę z klocków. Sprawdź wykonanie z kartą samokontroli. Następnie samodzielnie zaprojektuj dom i nagraj instrukcję dla kolegów z klasy.	CD player, blocks, dictaphone	30 min			
READING	• Przeczytaj komiks „My family” i zaznacz prawidłowe odpowiedzi na pytania do tekstu.	class book, pencil	20min			
	•• Przeczytaj komiks „My family” i odpowiedz na pytania. Odpowiedzi zanotuj w zeszyte.	class book, pencil, notebook	20 min			
WRITING	• Ułóż zdania z rozsypanki wyrazowej. Przepisz podane zdania do zeszytu.	worksheet, scissors, glue	15 min			
	•• Opisz jednego członka Twojej rodziny. Opis powinien zawierać 5 zdań.	Notebook, pencil	18 min			
SPEAKING	• Spośród wypisanych pytań wybierz te, które dotyczą tematu rodzina. Wytnij je, wklej do zeszytu a następnie przeprowadź mini wywiad z parą do współpracy.	class book, activity book pencil	20 min			
	•• Wymyśl 7 pytań tak by dowiedzieć się jak najwięcej o rodzinie Twojego kolegi z ławki. Zapisz pytania, poproś nauczyciela o sprawdzenie, a następnie przeprowadz z kolegą mini wywiad.	class book, activity book pencil	25 min			
GAME	Zagraj w Dobble Family. Wymieniajcie członków rodziny jedynie po angielsku!	Dobble Family	10 min			

Prepared by M. Kwella

The sheet includes example tasks. Some of them are to be written in the handbook, others – in a worksheet, and the game is available in the classroom.

What the student plans in his/her planning sheet is also displayed on the board located in the classroom since in this way the teacher can constantly control the students' progress. The board that has been completed raises the students' reflection after they finish work. Also, it is a good material for the teacher's reflections. The last element is talking about the tasks that have been completed. The students share their achievements, they discuss what they have learnt, what was easy, what they need to improve, and in which aspects they need support from a friend or a teacher. They discuss the contents of the tasks: whether they were interesting or quite interesting, whether they are looking forward to the next tasks, and whether it was good to cooperate with someone (was the cooperation good, ok, or whether it could be better?). Also, they evaluate their attitude towards work (did they work eagerly? Properly? Did they have negative feelings?). All the information is the teacher's basis for preparing further tasks that will match the students' needs and interests.

Summary

When we talk about teaching foreign languages in classes I-III, we mean education compliant with the holistic principles concerning the perception of the world. The objective of such an education is to give students the tools that help them not only solve school tasks, but, first of all, tasks of everyday life. Not only knowledge is important. What also matters is the development of skills and personality. Using the elements of the Dalton Plan in English lessons makes it possible for us to create tasks that not only develop the children's linguistic skills, but also facilitate their upbringing through the development of independence, responsibility, cooperation and reflection. Such a model of work is focused on the students' activity, communication, cooperation and independent problem-solving. Also, referring to the assumptions of the Dalton Plan during foreign language lessons intensifies the process of individualization of working with the student.

The objectives of teaching English in early education include developing the students' self-esteem and faith in their own linguistic skills; their responsibility, including gradual observation and analysis of their own achievements, as well as self-assessment; teaching them working in a group, in small task teams, in pairs; teaching them to organize their own work, as well as design their actions and efficiently use their time (Pamuła 2006: 55).

All the above objectives are included in the pillars of the Dalton Plan, which is why, while fulfilling the assumptions of the concept by Helen Parkhurst, we achieve them in a natural manner. In addition, we stimulate the harmonious development of the students and allow the teacher to prepare creative and interesting classes.

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