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Teaching Foreign Languages to Children – scientific articles

In Search of an Effective Method of Learning a Foreign Language in Early School – the Idea of Integrating Language Classes with Art Education

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

teaching a foreign language to early school children, integration of language education with art classes, advantages of combining language learning with art education, motivation to learn a foreign language, the role of emotions in teaching a language to small children

The objective of the article is presenting the advantages of combining language classes with art education at the early stage of students' language education. The author analyses the books that make it possible to notice the possibly high value of linking the process of a foreign language acquisition with art education. Referring to neurobiological, psychological and constructivist theories, as well as to the theories of creators of art education, the author presents a full range of arguments that emphasize the advantages of such a connection. All the arguments (related to the emotional, volitional and cognitive sphere) confirm the fact that the inclusion of art classes into the process of language teaching is justified and useful for the child.

Popularisation of the idea of teaching a language to small children

The changing reality of the present world includes: widespread migration of people in Europe resulting from the opening of job markets, the occurrence of the global language communication, and technological development. Such phenomena resulted in the increased need for mastering foreign languages. The problem of international communication has become one of the most important educational challenges, not only in Europe but also in other parts of the world. Developing foreign language skills and popularisation of multilingualism in international documents officially belongs to the political priorities of the European Union (future educational directions are determined by the European documents which emphasize the necessity to know one's native language, a language of the neighbouring country, and a foreign language which is recognised on the international level). Documents such as the Maastricht Treaty or the White Paper for Education and Development show the direction of future education for the united Europe. Maintaining a consistent policy related to foreign language teaching, the European Council treats this issue as one of the basics for international communication, cooperation, tolerance, openness and respect for the cultures of other nations (Krzemińska 1993: 78). The popularisation of language skills is not only perceived as the consequence of European variety, but also as an important condition for the economic and social progress (Wilczyńska 2008: 159). Thorough analysis of the political and economical situation results in the increase of social awareness of the importance of foreign language competences.

Following the suggestions of the European Council and social expectations, the Polish Ministry of National Education (MEN) issued a regulation on the school curriculum (23.08.2007) in which one of the assumptions of the amendment is transferring the obligatory English classes from class 4 to class 1 of the primary school, starting from the school year 2009/2010. The tendency to lower the age in which children start learning a foreign language is still valid. On the 1st September 2014 the regulation of MEN (of 26 May 2014) came into force in which the main objective of preschool education changes was the introduction of obligatory, free foreign language classes for all the children in preschool education (from 1 September 2015 for 5-year-olds, from 1st September 2017 to all preschool groups). Also, the regulation included the note that the task of preschool education is "creating educational situations facilitating the child's interest in a modern foreign language and the willingness to learn about other cultures" (regulation of the Minister of National Education of 14 February 2017 [item 356]), which means that teachers should take up actions towards shaping the readiness to learn a foreign language at school.

It makes it possible for us to conclude that one of the most important challenges of the Polish school and preschool is obligatory teaching foreign languages to small children. It is because we do not want our citizen's language barrier to become the "largest border in the Europe without borders" (Ereńc-Grygoruk 2013: 10).

While analysing the advantages and disadvantages of early language learning, it is worth to emphasize that the early contact with language extends the time of listening to it, which gives the learner a greater chance to master the language. We should take up a more thorough reflection on the ways of achieving that success. The document of the European Commission entitled: *Promoting Foreign Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity* declares that: "at the early stage of education, the person's attitude towards other languages and cultures is shaped, and the foundation for future language learning is created" (the European Commission 2011). The document also emphasizes the importance of proper care for the quality of language education in preschool. Thus, no wonder that teaching foreign languages in early education is now of great interest among linguists, pedagogues, psychologists and teachers. The knowledge of developmental psychology and early school pedagogy makes it possible to optimise the whole teaching process, as well as anticipate and prevent possible failures.

The idea of integrating language classes with art education

In 1999, Polish school underwent a transformation in terms of organisation and curriculum. As a result, so-called integrated education was introduced in teaching young learners. According to the assumptions of the reform, early school teachers gave up the division into particular subjects. Instead of the traditional organisational form of the teaching process, i. e. a lesson, teachers started to organise their days themselves, which was to result in a more intensive stimulation of the students' multifaceted activity (Więckowski 1998:35). In the curriculum of 15th January 2009, the term "early school education" re-appeared with reference to teaching in classes 1-3. However, integrated education is still associated with the form of fulfilment at this educational stage, and the idea of integration is one of its principal assumptions. The answer to the guidelines of the curriculum is the attempt to combine modern foreign language lessons with other areas of early-school education. Such method assumes including language education into different kinds of student's activities, i. e. making it a part of different areas of early education. The subject of the article refers to more and more popular attempts to introduce the method of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) at the stage of early school education.

The knowledge of pedagogy, neurology, psychology and didactics makes it possible for us to influence the process of teaching, making it more and more effective. The following arguments show the theories of learning and teaching to which the idea of combining language and art education in early school classes refers.

Psychological and pedagogical factors enhancing the concept of integration

One of the didactic rules concerning the sustained acquisition of knowledge is preparing the students for the reception of the new content, which means making them interested and willing to receive it by creating good emotions associated with learning new things. Human memory is selective and we remember best what is particularly important, interesting or emotional for us. Through the inclusion into the course of education of activities that children like, such as elements of art and music education, during which children paint, draw, stick, sculpt, dance, sing, play instruments, and watch paintings, we stimulate the students' emotional and intellectual activity. If children are truly interested in performing certain activities and if they get emotionally involved in them, they remember the content much better. The process of constructing knowledge is much faster if the organism is at the same time at the state of readiness and relax, i. e. the child experiences pleasant feelings and emotions. The role of emotions is particularly important for the brain and its processes (Michalak 2011: 106). If we include activities that are attractive to the child into language classes, we stimulate the activity of his/her brain.

The process of teaching that is full of varied activities influences the quality of information flow in the brain. "Even simple changes and differentiation of routine activities enforce the involvement of other areas in the brain. As a result, new neural connections appear, and the organ that manages our whole body becomes more plastic" (Michalak 2013: 134-135). Only varied activities lead to the creation of a thick network of neural connections. The integration of language and art classes makes it possible to stimulate the brain through the classes characterised by "volitional actions, motor exploration and creative learning about the surroundings, in which boredom and stress are eliminated" (Michalak 2013:136).

The child perceives the world in a polysensory manner, and his/her conclusions are shaped in the course of different kinds of activities which he/she takes up spontaneously, and which is the basis for studying, acquiring experience and creating one's identity (Rura 2011: 325). The readiness to prompt re-creation of experiences and the ability to describe them point to the flexibility of thinking. The research

carried out within the neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) analysis shows that there are three representation systems: visual, auditory and kinaesthetic one, and each person has their own, preferred channel through which they interpret and process the information from everyday, sensory experiences (P. Baldwin, K. Fleming) (Gałązka 2008: 99). The problem of modality has become the scientific subject of the American married couple Dunn (Dunn 1992:72), who came to the conclusion that each person has their preferred model of perception often linked with the second, slightly weaker model, which makes it possible to compensate for the perceptive insufficiency of the first one. Another conclusion from their research is the statement that in the traditional system of education children who learn through kinaesthetics and touching are more threatened with failure.

The combination of art education and language classes makes it possible for the teacher to “attack” all the child’s representation systems.

Art education is the area in which many different stimuli are provided to the children, e.g. sounds, colours, shapes, texture, light. The fact that many of the student’s senses are involved, results in the activation of many sensory channels – the visual, auditory, and the kinaesthetic one, which influences the effectiveness of memorising. The more sensory stimuli the child gets in the contact with the object of cognition, the richer and the more varied knowledge structures he/she obtains. It is because the receptors located in the organs of senses receive and transmit the information through a specific neural path (projection) to the proper place in the cortex (representation) where it is analysed. Several groups of neurons take part in the transmission of information. Those neurons send the information to different brain structures (sensory and motor ones) participating in the analysis of a stimulus. A lot of brain structures are involved in the process of analysing and transforming information. Such structures communicate with each other through neural connections (Michalak 2013: 105).

A large number of stimuli is good for the students with different strategies of learning. In the traditional approach to teaching languages the auditory system dominates. In the system in which all the senses are activated, children who prefer sight and movement have equal chances to learn a language in a fast and effective manner. The inclusion of musical elements into the language education content (songs, poems, chants, language raps, stories, dialogues, etc.) facilitates learning among the children with auditory modality. The use of pictures, posters, photos, drawings and films makes the process of memorising easier for the children with visual modality. Children with kinaesthetic modality need the involvement of gross motor skills in the process of learning (elements of dance, pantomime, movement improvisation), and children who learn through touching need fine motor activities (gestures, using hands

and fingers, playing with things held in their hands). The combination of the contents facilitates a large variedness of the tasks, taking into account all the modalities.

The integration of language and art classes is included in the concept of the modern school, which is focused on an individual, and in which multi-aspect approach to human intelligence is promoted. Such model was suggested by a cognitive psychologist – Howard Gardner. The scientist presented his theory in 1983. First, he suggested the existence of seven kinds of intelligences, then he added the eighth one, and now he is analysing one more kind – existential intelligence. H. Gardner claims that the list of intelligences that are possible to define is not closed, and at present he often uses the term “eight and a half intelligences” (Gardner 2009:52), each of them having a different neuro-physiological basis. If there are various kinds of tasks during the lesson, the teacher assumes that students have different abilities and each of them learns in a different manner. Extending the range of activities during the classes, we stimulate the student’s bio-psychological potential, increasing the probability of achieving success in various areas. The early school period is the time in which the child starts to discover their talents. At such an age, the child may get interested in such area of knowledge that may match their natural abilities. Diversity during the classes helps children discover their potential of which they have not been aware before. The task of education is not only to support the child’s strong points, but also to create conditions that support the development of his/her weaker kinds of intelligence (Suświłło 2004: 19).

Combining language and art classes is the educational process built on the awareness of the value of an individual. It helps to develop visual-spatial intelligence (through all kinds of artistic, construction, project activities), physical-kinaesthetic intelligence (elements of movement, dance, expressing various emotional states through the body, expression related to the narratives of songs or stories, improvisation, imitation), musical intelligence (singing, playing instruments, creating accompaniments for the songs, expressing emotional states and the image of the world through sounds), linguistic intelligence (reading books in the original language, creating poems, stories, descriptions), interpersonal intelligence (developing empathy, the skills of verbal and non-verbal social communication), and intrapersonal intelligence (exercises that develop self-awareness and self-reflection of the students, making it possible for them to know themselves better, as well as name and specify their emotions).

The combination of language classes and art education improves the individual’s creativity, as it makes it possible for the students to take up an external activity which is stimulated and directed by the teacher, as well as a spontaneous activity which is motivated and directed by the child. During those tasks, apart from the technical knowledge, students are encouraged to creative activity understood as fascinating play that evokes specific emotions related to the feeling of satisfaction and joy of creation.

Only then the meeting with art is a fascinating aesthetic and cognitive experience, and not just “another task to be fulfilled” (Mazur 2014: 11). During the classes children are stimulated in different areas of knowledge, as a result of which students may create linguistic, musical, artistic and technical products. Also, according to the experts in the psycho-pedagogy of creativity, the approach to language becomes creative (Nęcka 2005; Dobrołowicz 1995). Such creativity is achieved through improvising the situations that evoke spontaneous and independent utterances appropriate for the time, place, interlocutor and communicative situation. Also, creative activity is inspired by drama, improvisation, literary texts, art works, paintings, and films, with the use of which the teacher influences prompt acquisition of basic language by the children and develops creative thinking which is necessary for shaping the students’ creative attitude (Sufa 2011: 59). The use of art education makes it possible for the child to express themselves – it involves expressing thoughts and emotions that cannot be expressed in words. Artistic work makes it possible to show one’s feelings on paper, and music is an expressive and aesthetic experience reflected in sounds and gestures.

The introduction of different linguistic situations shapes communicative competences, as it offers many ways of overcoming the features of artificial communication typical of school education. Teacher’s utterances may be replaced by a natural dialogue, depending on the context of the tasks that are being fulfilled. The use of the drama method creates different situations in which language is used for a particular purpose, and it requires giving a reply, which forces the students to a more intensive work. Role-playing, pantomime and simulations encourage the children to speaking combined with paralinguistic behaviour adequate to the situation (Gałązka 2008: 42). Despite low linguistic competences, children often forget their shortages, trying to use the skills they have in the best possible manner (they use a strategic competence through applying description, emphasis, gestures). The inclusion of art education into language classes increases the number of situations leading to communication focused on the student by making it possible for the child to speak about his/her individual achievements. The analysis of an art work (made by a student or by a famous artist) enables entering the depth of language and applying vocabulary that had not been known to the child. Also, it is helpful to introvert students, people who avoid the risk of speaking, children who are shy and may be encouraged to speak through the creation of a visual utterance.

The teacher who combines art and language education may refer to texts that are rich from the cultural point of view, through which he/she may extend the cognitive content. The knowledge that children gain during the classes is of interdisciplinary nature. While working with a work of art, the student learns about its history (information on famous painters, sculptors, composers, trends in music and painting) and experiences it (he/she interprets the work, transforms or paraphrases it).

Analysing a particular work of art makes it possible for the students to raise introspective questions related to one's feeling and artistic choices. While teaching a foreign language, we may make the children sensitive to the structure, form, and the means of expression of art language (rhythm in music and visual arts, colour, colour of tones, harmony, composition). The child's experience derived from acting and perceptive knowledge shall be ordered and consolidated through the language of art and music. Such analysis helps to notice the similarities and differences for each of the kinds of art, and to find an individual interpretation for their language.

The success of human action depends on the cooperation of the emotional and rational brain. In the process of education, the teacher cannot only focus on the content. Apart from the cognitive areas of development, combining language and art education influences the child's emotional development. In his book *Emotional Intelligence* (1996), on the basis of his scientific research, Daniel Goleman proves that success does not only depend on our intellectual abilities, but also on the ability to manage emotions. It is a meta-skill which influences the ability to use other skills, including the intellectual abilities themselves. The student's emotional involvement increases the effectiveness of studying, and it is the basic condition of a cognitive activity. A student who is mentally involved is joyful, interested, astonished and convinced of the rightness of his/her actions. A "joyful brain" is, at the same time, cognitively organised in a more flexible manner, which helps it create amazing associations and creative solutions for the analysed problems. Also, the feeling of happiness makes the student willing to continue the activity and aim at higher objectives (Oatley, Jenkins 2003: 256-257). The content of art education refers to the student's emotions, and they are a perfect way to connect the didactic objectives with upbringing objectives. The richness of the children's experiences is the result of using the method and it is as important as the increase in the level of their linguistic competence.

Among the skills acquired in the process of a foreign language learning (listening, reading, writing and speaking), speaking is the source of various blockades and fears. Contrary to other skills, it requires the use of language in public. One of the basic conditions for making the student speak is creating such atmosphere in the class that can decrease his/her level of stress. Students with a higher level of stress often obtain worse results than those who are more relaxed, and fulfilling tasks in a foreign language evokes greater fear than speaking in a native language (Macintyre, Gardner 1991: 521). Art education offers a lot of possibilities to decrease the level of fear. The drama technique helps to decrease the fear of speaking, which is discussed by Alicja Gałazka in her book (2008: 29). The inclusion of movement into the classes helps the children to develop their self-esteem and self-confidence, as a result of which their stress decreases. Thus, it is a great technique of stimulation and encouragement for speaking, and associating words with actions helps the students to understand and memorise them.

Another impulse that can make the students speak during the classes is so-called elicitation (Komorowska 2001: 195). Image, word and sound are the impulses that encourage the students to speak most effectively. Pictures are very important in facilitating the verbal expression of an early school child. It is confirmed by the research carried out by Maria Kielar-Turska which presents the connection between the kind of the inspiring impulse and the narrative utterance of six-year-olds (Kielar-Turska 1989). The results of the data analysis show that visual impulses (a thematic picture, a picture story) are more productive than verbal impulses. The former make the children's verbal messages more developed, longer and full of meaning units (they are richer from the point of view of diversity).

An image directs the child's thinking. It is a perfect impulse for stimulating imagination and verbal expression. In order to understand a picture, the viewer has to see many things that are not presented in it. A picture or an illustration is an unmovable fragment of reality and it has to be subject to multifaceted interpretation so that we can draw proper conclusions concerning the topic or the "leitmotif" of a given work (Kielar-Turska 1989: 181). According to Stefan Szuman, "while watching pictures, a small child's mind does not only copy its particular elements, but it explores the image – it records different things, collects and classifies them, links them with one another, and on that basis the child draws his/her own conclusions and interpretations" (Szuman 1951). The objective of watching pictures should not only be careful analysis of what is visible, but also constructing precise utterances concerning what is happening in them. Therefore, understanding a picture is the result of noticing things, completing the content with imagination, abstract thinking and conclusions.

Due to the fact that the child may express themselves through a drawing (a picture story), his/her thinking becomes visible (it is easier for them to understand what they see) (Fisher 1999: 69). Also, the ability to produce ideas based on the picture is amazing. This way, art facilitates the development of speech and encourages the child to verbal activity (Fisher 2004: 86). Drawings influence shaping the ability to describe and create stories, and to formulate long communicative utterances.

The use of a visual impulse (painting, photograph, postcard, board) extends the spectre of language exercises, and it makes them varied and richer in content. The examples of such tasks include: creating titles of works, drawing conclusions based on the picture, role-playing related to the content, creating cartoon stories, or creating series of pictures related to the original picture (what preceded the situation presented in the picture and what was next). Also, we may encourage the children to speak through the recordings that include real-life sounds, fragments of music influencing the students' emotions, and song lyrics that may be the starting point for the students' utterances. The examples of such tasks include: recognising sounds, creating stories

based on the listening material, paraphrasing the lyrics, reading aloud with the whole group (it makes the children sensitive to the language rhythm).

The set of developmental features of an early school child results in the fact that the selection of activities for the student in classes 1-3 is more important than the measurable linguistic result. Such motivation is the foundation for the child's further and long-term work on the language, so it is a kind of a driving force that activates the actions he/she shall take up in future. Learning a language is a long process, so the students have to maintain their effort for a long time – often against their failures and difficulties. J. Harmer claims that motivation depends on three factors: the teacher, his/her method and social-existential conditions of the student (Harmer 1991). While discussing the effective and attractive methods of working with children, Mariola Jäder explains that the ability to motivate the student includes making it possible for him/her to make their own choices and decisions, taking into account the child's needs resulting from their development and interests, and stimulating the child's activeness and independence (Jäder 2010: 14-15). While choosing the method, the teacher should focus on the child's strong points which are related to developmental features (spontaneity, activeness, mobility, the willingness to take up new challenges). Also, the teacher should select such activities which the child finds interesting or which she/he likes. The inclusion of the elements of art classes makes it possible for the teacher to satisfy those needs, makes the content more interesting, facilitates activeness and inspires the students.

Alan Maley and Alan Duff explain that teaching foreign languages during school classes often kills the children's motivation by the separation of the intellectual aspects of language (vocabulary, structures) from the body and emotions (Maley, Duff 1978). Combining art and language education involves the use of both the body and emotions in the learning process, which is why the children's internal motivation is stimulated. Shaping a positive attitude to foreign language learning is the most important task at this educational level, as it opens the perspective of achieving success in the child's further process of language learning.

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