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Teaching English Elementary Pupils – Problems and Solutions

Nowadays teaching and learning foreign languages is very popular. Most people all over the world are bilingual; those who are monolingual are the exception. Today the world is multicultural and multilingual and we have to speak foreign languages to communicate to each other effectively. In Europe teaching young children English is especially popular as a first foreign language, with German and French being the next most popular languages. Learning a foreign language is obligatory from the first class of elementary education in most European countries, as has been the case in Poland since 2008/2009 (Roz. MEN z dn. 23.12.2003). The most common foreign languages in our country at that level are English and German. According to the National System of Educational Information, in Poland in 2011, the number of early education pupils (from the first to third classes) that learned English – 202 052, German – 163 301 and French – 6 289 (www.cie.men.gov.pl, access 20.08.2012). It shows that most pupils learn English as a second language. It is widely believed that starting language education earlier provides better opportunities in the future. If it takes place in an environment which supports a learner's progress and allows for the continuity of the target language throughout primary school and then secondary school classes.

Difficulties of learning and teaching the English language

Learning a foreign language is a long and complex process. Complete commitment, complete involvement, complete intellectual and

emotional responses are necessary in order to send and receive a message in a second language successfully. Learning a foreign language requires not only learning some words but also a new culture, a new way of thinking, feeling and acting (Brown, 2000, p. 1)

Teaching English to young learners can be difficult and ineffective for several reasons. We can divide them into two groups: those connected with the pupils and their inner-difficulties, and those connected with an inappropriate learning process.

It is important to explain the definition of *learning difficulties*. There are many descriptions of learning difficulties but the author has selected only a few of them. The National Joint Committee for Learning Disabilities claims: "learning disabilities is a genetic term that refers to the heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g. sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbances) or environmental influences – e.g. cultural differences, inappropriate institutions, psychogenic factors, it is not the direct result of those conditions or influences" (Nijakowska, 2011, p. viii).

According to K.J. Klauer and G.W. Lauth, learners that achieve low educational results "are not characterized by permanent deficiency of competences, but they do not learn effectively enough – they fail to use appropriate learning strategies (e.g. they guess the answer instead of remembering the contents that they had learnt before)". Kaner also claims that "teachers should remember that some learning difficulties are connected to the exact task only, but they may accumulate in some educational areas" (Werning, Lutje-Klose, 2009, p. 21).

Gifted young learners can also suffer from some learning problems. Some of them do not use their mental potential fully because of personal or social difficulties. When they achieve lower educational results they will think about themselves negatively and have low self-esteem. They do not believe in their potential. They might behave aggressively, have

a poor level of motivation for learning and do not show strong persistence of their school activities (Dyrda, 2007, p. 36–37).

As for external factors that make teaching and learning English difficult in our country we can enumerate:

- the poor integration of the English language into the primary curriculum (as opposed to e.g. the Czech Republic where English language is mostly integrated into primary curriculum);
- insufficient pedagogical and psychological knowledge of English teachers about the special educational needs of elementary pupils;
- the shortage of foreign language teachers, especially in the small village schools (many of them have opportunities to change their profession and move to international companies);
- a shortage of varied didactic devices;
- not enough time devoted to English teaching in the curriculum (as opposed to the Netherlands, Belgium or Luxembourg).

The specification of the English language can also cause some problems to elementary learners. Each foreign language is based on a constituent phonological system and the ability to distinguish between each sound is an important condition in order to use it properly. As for the English language, it is a West Germanic language that was first spoken in England and is now the first language spoken by the majority of several nations, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, Ireland and New Zealand). The English language has assimilated many words from many other languages through history. Modern English consists of a very large vocabulary with complex and irregular spelling, particularly vowels. There are twelve pure vowel sounds in Standard English. It means that there are twelve units that can differentiate word meaning. There are pairs of words, such as *ship* and *sheep* which can be distinguished by replacing one of these vowels by the other. Differentiating similar sounds is a quite difficult issue for elementary language pupils of English. Bad pronunciation can derive from bad understanding

(McMahon, 2002, p. 2–3; Nijakowska, 2007, p. 146). In the English language there is also dissonance between grammatical rules. Under no circumstances can English teachers teach elementary learners structural grammar or use some technical terms to refer it. Children do not learn the rules of spoken language by explicit instructions, but rather by coping what they hear, and building up a mental generalization based on their own experience.

Teaching English to elementary learners – the most significant factors of the influence of successful learning

The integration of English into the primary curriculum

Children learn holistically, and teaching English to them has to be embedded in their general primary curriculum. English lessons cannot be separate units which only present and practice a new language. Teachers of English have to take care to establish clear links between language lessons and the knowledge and skills children acquire at school (Szpatowicz, Szulc-Kurpaska, 2011, p. 29). Brewster sees the origins of integration in the fact that certain aspects of good primary practice are used in teaching English as a foreign language (e.g. the rules as practicality or regularity). The author claims that the phenomenon of primary teaching is “its emphasis on its learners-centredness and the creation of a supportive learning environment (Filipiak, 2012, p. 27). Moreover, S. Halliwell has presented some arguments for the integration of English into the primary curriculum. First of all, she believes that language learning should be natural and should not be “set apart from the rest of learning. The learners should see the language as something that they manipulate not only in the classroom but also outside (home, playground)”. Secondly, she refers to the language acquisition theory which stresses the importance of receiving and producing messages, as well as dealing with “the real meaning of the language rather than learning just words and structures for their own sake”. And finally, she stresses the practicality of this approach (Wood, 2006, p. 150–151).

Planning the didactic process is one of the most important factors to make teaching English successful. The English teachers should plan it carefully. There are two main concepts connected with designing courses and planning teaching – the learning process that needs to be explained. They are the curriculum (an educational programme which states: the objects of the programme, its educational purposes, the means used to achieve these ends and the means used to assess educational goals) and the syllabuses – a more restricted concept which usually refers to a description of the contents of the course and the order in which they are to be taught (Szpatowicz, Szulc-Kurpaska, 2011, p. 19). In the Polish education system a syllabus or a curriculum has to be closely related to “a core curriculum” or “a curriculum framework” (podstawa programowa), which is a law outlining the learning outcomes for all educational stages and all school subjects/areas of knowledge taught in Poland. Based on this law and one’s own experience, teachers write syllabuses. Apart from being consistent with the core curriculum, a syllabus should provide varied support for the teacher. It helps them to, for example, develop the learners’ key competences and abilities, develop the learners’ skills and abilities connected with the subject, plan lessons and prepare the scheme of work, teach the course contents by choosing the right methods and techniques and choose coursebooks and supplementary materials. When planning a syllabus, the teachers take into account more details related to planning specific aspects of the lessons which will be taught over a period of time (Komorowska, 2005, p. 74).

However, the fact of planning each lesson shows that the teacher is committed to his/her work and it suggests a high level of professionalism. For the teachers, the plan – however informal – gives the lesson/teaching day a framework. Of course, good teachers are also flexible and they respond creatively to what happens in the classroom. A balance has to be struck between the teachers’ attempt to achieve what they set out to achieve on the one hand, and to what pupils are ready to achieve at the moment on the other (Harmer, 2000, p. 121).

The process of teaching English language should be individual. Learning must be unhurried, with time to explore, develop and reflect on

ideas and feelings. Learning begins with the learner and “where the learner is”. Teachers should also recognize the individual style that young learners prefer. Visual learners tend to prefer reading, drawing and other graphic information, while auditory learners prefer listening to audio-tapes or CDs. Of course, successful learners must utilize both visual and auditory input, but slight preferences may distinguish one learner from another.

English teachers that teach elementary pupils should repeat the contents many times, but in different ways to make them interesting. Some learners need more exercises to understand the contents and to remember some new words. They ought to gradate the difficulty of the contents and start from the easiest to the most difficult.

To make the process of learning English more individual, the teachers need some special pedagogical and psychological knowledge. According to research, some English teachers would like to know more about the special educational needs of their pupils (especially about dyslexia) in order to teach a foreign language more effectively (Karbowiczek, Ficek, 2010, p.183; cf. Karbowiczek, 2012).

We also have to remember that there is no single method or technique of teaching a foreign language. Certain learners seem to be successful regardless of the methods or techniques of teaching that are used e.g. *Total Physical Response*, *Communicative Language Teaching*, *Situational Language Teaching*, *Direct Method* and so on. We should use both active methods and oral methods of teaching (Cohen, 2004, p. 42–43).

The multisensory approach is recognized as being suitable for elementary learners. It is assumed that the more senses that are involved in the process of learning a foreign language, the more effective it is. Multisensory methods activate simultaneous engagement of several sensory channels and the synthesis of stimuli coming from these channels. Teaching reading and spelling should be realized by the integration of visual, auditory and kinesthetic stimuli (Nijakowska, 2011, p. viii).

Children are active learners and thinkers. They construct knowledge from the active interaction with the physical environment in developmental stages (children are very much linked to their surroundings).

Young learners tend to have short attention spans and a lot of physical energy. They learn through their own individual actions and explorations. Activity (both physical and mental) and experience are fundamental to effective learning. Children must be encouraged to take risks and make mistakes in order to develop their independence. Mistakes are significant aspects of learning (Cohen, 2004, p. 42).

Cooperative learning is an important factor that helps to establish a good relationship in the classroom. While learning English, pupils should also work together in the small groups to accomplish shared goals. Putting learners into smaller teams enables them to learn a foreign language effectively. It is a “win-win” situation for all the participants. Underpinning Vygotskian theory is the central observation that development and learning take place in a social context, i.e. in the world full of other people, who interact with the child from its birth onwards. Whereas for Piaget, the child is an active learner alone in a world of objects, for Vygotsky the child is an active learner in a world full of other peers in the foreign language classroom. They play an important role in helping a pupil to learn new words, read stories, ask and answer the questions and find some solutions to problems (Cameron, 2001, p. 5–6).

Magdalena Szulc-Kurpaska encourages the teachers to perceive assessment as an integral part of learning foreign language. Assessment in education is the process of gathering, interpreting, recording and using information about pupils' responses to educational tasks. One reason to assess children's learning in a foreign language classroom is to match learning conditions to children's development and needs. English teachers undertake assessments in order to provide information to the class teacher, learning specialists and parents. They assess the acquisition of knowledge, the ability to apply to new situations, communication skills and attitudes. The assessment is through observation, an oral or written response (Schaffer, 2005, p. 219). The foundation of the assessment policy should be clear. Szulc-Kurpaska also proposes to involve children in the assessment process when it is possible. Foreign language teachers should allow their pupils to undertake self-evaluation. It empowers them to realize their educational needs (and also their

strengths and weaknesses) and they have control over their learning (Szulc-Kurpaska, 2003, p. 4–5).

Motivation, interest, engagement are also key components of learning English as a foreign language. There are several different views on motivation. They do not necessarily conflict with each other but rather complement each other because very often they focus on different aspects. Behaviourism lays emphasis on external rewards e.g. grades, test scores. According to this theory, children work to avoid being told off and to please the teachers and parents. The teachers who work with elementary pupils also use these methods to motivate their pupils and it usually works. However, one should realize that behavioral motivation is extrinsic, instrumental and beyond personal satisfaction (Cohen, 2004, p. 178). Learning a foreign language is a long and lasting process, and also requires more internal motivation. If motivation is to be successful then it must draw on a person and develop his/her self-esteem. It is important to note that self-worth is related to control over learning. "Maslow emphasizes the importance of pupils experiencing control over their learning process and sense of achievement, and being given rich and positive feedback." (Komorowska, 2005, p. 37; Mietzel, 2009, p. 368–370). A secure and caring environment and the promotion of pupils' self-esteem, sense of accomplishment of educational goals are essential ingredients for young learners (Cohen, 2004, p. 43). Many researchers claim that the best way to motivate learners is for the teacher to be motivated himself/herself to teach. Young pupils always sense if their teacher likes the subject that he/she teaches. When the teacher is really interested in teaching the English language, he/she will use interesting contents, various methods and didactic devices.

In conclusion, the United Europe offers Polish people much more education and employment opportunities. However, speaking at least one foreign language is a necessary condition to travel, work, study or live abroad. Polish teachers who teach foreign languages have a very important role when it comes to the foreign language acquisition of elementary learners. They should encourage them to learn English, a language that is very common across the world, throughout their lives. They

ought to adjust contents, methods, didactic devices, their knowledge and the right personal attitudes, to make the learning process successful. This short article consists only of some reflections that may inspire the readers to find some more solutions to overcome foreign language learning difficulties.

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Abstract:

The article investigates some problems that foreign language teachers may face when working with young pupils. They include especially poor memory, difficulties of distinguishing similar sounds, understanding the relations of a letter and a sound, decoding single words and so on. Some learners with learning difficulties and disorders present even more challenges for their language teachers. Furthermore, the author provides guidance for teachers that may help to overcome these problems. Thus, it is hoped the present paper will contribute not only to a better understanding of the problem area of difficult learners, but will also encourage teachers to implement some new solutions in their regular lessons.

Keywords: learning difficulties, learning disabilities, personal difficulties, social difficulties, integration English and primary curriculum, holistic learning, multisensory approach, cooperative learning, active learning

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