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Multiculturalism: The Challenge of Matching Language Learning to Early Childhood Education

Introduction

Recently, there has been increasing interest in early foreign language learning (ELL) and very early foreign language acquisition (VELL), with particular reference to the need to employ the most appropriate and effective methods with children of different age-groups. However, the increasing demand of early language education has led to a greater demand for qualified professionals at the nursery and pre-school level. One of the challenges facing education and training providers is to devise and offer effective education programmes which contain instruction in language, methodology and early childhood pedagogy.

In Bulgaria, “St. Kliment Ohridski”, the University of Sofia, followed by a few other universities in the country, have offered degree programmes which aim to combine successfully expertise in language teaching and early years pedagogy. These programmes are popular and match language teaching to early childhood education.

Background

“European policy for multilingualism is built on the values described in the documents of the EU and is applied through a set of principles within the framework of the Bologna Process for over 10 years now. They are the basis of a “smart” growth strategy in “Europe 2020” (Shopov, & Sofronieva, 2011, p. 362).

The EU language education policy emphasizes the need to start teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age (Barcelona European Council, 2002). The European strategy for multilingualism emphasizes the importance of teaching a wide range of languages from an early age and lifelong language education (2008). Maalouf's report to the European Commission states that "for the people of Europe, old and young alike, intensive and in-depth knowledge of a language and all the culture that it transmits is a major factor of fulfilment." (Maalouf, 2008, p. 9). The strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (2009) lists language skills as being among the key skills to focus on.

As a result of the raised interest in and the current needs for early language education and awareness, the European Commission issued a Policy Handbook, entitled "Language learning at pre-primary school level: making it efficient and sustainable" in 2011. This Operational Handbook reflects the work of a group of national experts from twenty-eight countries who have exchanged experience and knowledge, examples of good practice and academic evidence and provided guidelines and recommendations on:

- a) "early teaching of a second/foreign language to children"
- b) "early teaching of the language of instruction and of a second language to children with a minority or migrant background" (p. 5).

The authors of the Handbook employ the term *pre-primary school level* to denote "any kind of settings (nursery, kindergarten, etc.) where learning takes place before primary school" (p. 4).

The concept of *foreign language* used in the Barcelona conclusions (2002) is "understood in a broader sense", corresponding to *the target language* defined by the authors and quoted in full below along with some other definitions of relevance to ELL (pp. 5–6):

'Early Language Learning (ELL) at pre-primary level' means the systematic raising of awareness or exposure to more than one language taking place in an early childhood education and care setting in a pre-primary school context.

'First language/mother tongue' means any language first acquired by a child.

'Language of instruction' means the dominant language formally used in the pre-primary school setting.

'Second language' means the language of instruction for children with minority backgrounds, if it is different from their first language/mother tongue. It means the language of instruction in the case of children with migrant backgrounds. In multilingual countries, it means that the language of instruction is different from the children's first language/mother tongue.

'Foreign language' means any language used in the pre-primary school context other than the first language/mother tongue, the language of instruction or the second language.

'Target language' means any language other than the first language/mother tongue used in the pre-primary school.

The benefits of early language learning

There have been numerous debates regarding *if* and *when* small children should start learning a new/foreign language. Indeed, these debates have been going on for a very long time. The opinions of different people vary with regard to what is the most appropriate age between two polar beliefs: one view is that young children should not be exposed to a foreign language, and the other is that it is best for children to be exposed to a foreign language from as early as possible.

As a result of the dynamics of the new century and the globalisation of Europe, more and more people have come to realise that young children need to learn new languages and to be "open" to new language experiences. The Council of Europe has also emphasised the importance of early language teaching, and these changes and needs have been felt in most European countries.

Recent research in neuroscience also provides evidence in support of ELL and it provides indications as to the optimum age. Its findings have

been widely disseminated. Daloiso (2007, pp.12–13) summarises them when he clarifies the term “early”: “The latest research in the neurosciences afford us a much more precise definition of the term, beginning with the recognition that there are *critical periods* and *sensitive periods* in LA (Agloti and Fabbro 2006), and that they are determined by specific neuro-developmental phenomena (myelin formation, a decrease in metabolic activity, and a decrease in synaptic genesis).” The two critical periods when a child can acquire a foreign language and achieve competence in this language that is equal to their competence in their mother tongue are between 0–3 years of age and between 4–8 years of age. Excellent acquisition is possible within the two periods, but during the second one a greater degree of energy will be required “to activate the cerebral regions wherein languages are represented.” The third period is described by the author as a sensitive period which lasts from 8 to 22 years of age and is a period in which individuals can still develop a good linguistic competence “but it becomes extremely difficult for this competence to equal that of the mother tongue. A more or less strong foreign accent, in fact, penetrates – the morphological-syntactic competence can still be well developed, although it requires more work – while there are no particular difficulties in the lexical acquisition of open class words.”

“Early childhood is the best period for becoming bilingual, because the brain is highly flexible and children are very interested in learning language. Children can learn two or more languages if they have enough input and they have enough motivation and enjoyment. Speaking two languages brings several social and cognitive advantages” (Pirchio, Passiatore, Tomassini, & Taeschner, 2012, p. 10).

The authors of the Policy Handbook also recognize the existence of *a critical period* of developing one’s mother tongue and the relevance of this theory for learning another language which differs from the mother tongue. “Younger children who are exposed to languages have a greater ability to develop a feeling for the rhythm, the phonology and the intonation of the language. Their potential to grasp the language structure later is also greatly enhanced” (p. 10). According to the authors, some of the benefits of ELL are:

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- increasing children’s capacities of empathy by opening children’s minds to other languages and cultures,
 - enhancing communication competences and interaction with others,
 - increasing children’s ability to concentrate and their self-confidence,
 - raising awareness of diversity and cultural variety and fostering understanding and respect,
 - shaping children’s overall progress.

Challenges to early language learning

Early foreign language education should aim to develop language skills, on the one hand, but on the other it is also necessary to place language learning into a more general framework that adds to the overall development of the children. Early childhood educators suggest a more complete approach to ELL, which includes activities such as singing, dancing, role-play, modelling, application, crafts and so on, in order to motivate children and give them opportunities to express and develop their potential. The general aim is to inspire children and instil a love for the new language as a means of an intra- and inter-cultural communication. Lack of anxiety and a pleasant environment is viewed as being essential, along with repetition of structures in meaningful situations which will lead to the consolidation of learned material and knowledge. Learning poems and songs, playing games and other activities are integrated in most language classes. There has been increasing interest in the role of games and play when it comes to children’s development within a new intercultural environment.

A pleasant and playful environment is undoubtedly of primary importance in early language education, but at the same time the goal to be achieved in these classes is successful language acquisition. Singing different songs and playing various games, as pleasant as they may be for children, are not sufficient for achieving this goal. On the other hand, time allocated to learning languages in a pre-school and school environment

is far from sufficient. Activities like drawing, painting, using computers and other new technologies in the language classes can be useful if interaction does not take place in the mother tongue, but which is rarely the case. "There are many techniques on offer that can be applied and integrated into language classes, but in most instances there is lack of a consistent and holistic language methodological framework to bind all of them together" (Sofronieva, 2012b, p. 213). The authors of the Handbook also argue that language education at pre-primary level should be structured, and more empirical evidence is needed on children's results, especially when new approaches are introduced. Serious research and sound scientific validation of data should lie in the theory and practice of ELL.

Existing models of good practice that are presented in the Handbook range from approaches that aim to raise children's language awareness to exposure to bilingual approaches and full immersion programmes like, for instance, *CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning)* and *language tandems*. Some examples of such good practice are:

- Let's play in English (Awareness raising — *Italy*),
- Multicultural teaching (Language tandems — *Poland*),
- Inglegoiz (CLIL — *Spain*),
- Children's heart (CLIL — *Belgium, French Community*),
- The scientific approach (CLIL — *Belgium, French Community*),
- Mathematics (activity in the target language) (CLIL — *Belgium, French Community*).

However, the principal objective of language awareness raising or exposure approaches is to help children prepare to learn a new language rather than aiming to exploit the full capacities of children at this age to acquire languages. On the other hand, CLIL for pre-school children are usually adapted approaches because CLIL is mainly applied at higher levels of education, i.e. primary and secondary schools. This approach aims at using a foreign language as a medium in teaching non-language contents, e.g. mathematics. Language tandems as an example of bilingual exposure can be tandems of staff using different languages with children in their

everyday classroom activities. They follow the principle “one person-one language”. But such tandems are not easy to apply in either pre-primary or other school settings for a number of reasons. Employing two specialists for the same classes is, on the one hand, costly, and on the other hand, it would involve finding yet a greater number of qualified professionals in the field, a task hard enough to fulfil in general in many countries without having to apply an instruction by two teachers in “tandem”. This brings us to another significant challenge in ELL, namely, the qualifications and skills of staff required for implementing an effective ELL.

As the authors of the Handbook debate, the level of qualification requirements of staff who are involved in pre-primary education varies significantly in different countries. Some countries require a degree level of education, whereas others simply require vocational training and there are countries that have no specific requirements in relation to staff. The recent growing interest in ELL is creating new demands for qualified professionals in the field.

Ideally, such professionals should have fluency in the foreign language and a solid knowledge of the processes involved in language acquisition, and in particular early language acquisition. They need to have a thorough understanding of children’s developmental processes and of current language teaching methods, approaches, principles and techniques.

However, practice shows that to find a sufficient pool of early language education experts is still a demanding and not easily attainable goal. “In some cases ELL is practised by staff with good pedagogic skills but low language proficiency; in others it is practised by language teachers lacking an appropriate pedagogical background. In both cases, only a few may be aware of how young children’s cognitive processes develop, particularly in the case of second/foreign language acquisition. Both pedagogical and language skills are essential if ELL is to be effective” (Handbook, p. 18).

Respectively, the language education and training programmes should include modules in linguistics, early childhood education, methodology and didactics. Education and training programmes should be

designed to develop ELL staff language competence, early childhood pedagogy skills and intercultural competence. "The development of staff skills in ELL should be regarded as a long-term investment, so that the skills acquired remain relevant and consistent with the ELL objectives, with continuing emphasis on upgrading skills and making language awareness a priority. This long-term commitment will serve to retain the motivation of both staff and children and ensure the quality and efficiency of ELL" (Handbook, p. 21).

Early language teaching degree programmes offered at Sofia University

"St. Kliment Ohridski" University of Sofia (SU) is the oldest and largest University in Bulgaria, and a centre for scholarly work and research. The University has sixteen faculties spread in different areas of the capital which offer a wide variety of degree programmes to the young people in the country.

The Faculty of Primary and Pre-school Education is one of the youngest faculties at the university, but it nonetheless has a long tradition. At present, there are six departments, namely, the Departments of Pre-school Education, Primary School Education, Special Education, Art Education, Social Education and Social Work and Music. Ten BA degree programmes and more than twenty MA programmes are offered within the Faculty.

Pre-school Education and Foreign Language Teaching (1997), Primary School Education and Foreign Language Teaching (1997) and Pedagogy of Mass and Artistic Communication (2007) are three relatively new BA degree programmes which train professionals in the field of pre-school and primary school education and early foreign language teaching. In order to enrol on these programmes, students must pass university admission exams in English, German, French, Italian, Spanish or Russian respectively, or alternatively they compete for admittance by their scores in the national school exams in the respective language. On a broader

scale, students are trained to become qualified professionals in the field of pre-school and primary school education on the one hand, and specialized foreign language teachers on the other hand. These new programmes have been designed to satisfy the growing demand for language teachers, and specialists in the field of education at this level in Bulgaria. Although the academic records show that the majority of the students enrol on the programmes with the English language, the Faculty, in order to encourage language diversity, puts time and effort into supporting the other language programmes as well. Graduates have a wide range of job opportunities within the private or state schools, educational and cultural institutions, social, administrative and managerial structures, etc. They can work as teachers, language teachers, advisors and experts in their respective fields of expertise. The related MA programmes provide further training and expertise.

Early language teaching programmes offered at post graduate level at Sofia University

There are two types of language teacher retraining programmes offered at Sofia University at the postgraduate level. One is offered at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology and is designed for teachers who would like to gain extra qualifications in teaching foreign languages at all levels of schooling. The other one is the early language teacher retraining programme, offered at the Faculty of Primary School and Pre-school Education. The applicants are predominantly teachers from nurseries, pre-schools, primary schools and institutions. The objective of this programme, which lasts one year, is to retrain these teachers so that they are able to teach foreign languages along with the other subjects they teach in their educational institutions. It provides opportunities to graduates who work as teachers in nurseries and primary schools and who have sufficient language knowledge to receive “a qualified language teacher” status (for this level of schooling) on successful completion. The learning modules are spread throughout the whole year of studies, and

are mainly delivered at weekends so that the training is in accordance with the teachers' working commitments. All teachers are highly motivated and many of them commute extensively from all over Bulgaria to attend the weekend classes at Sofia University.

These programmes are part of the general policy of lifelong learning and language teacher training in Bulgaria. They are steps taken towards satisfying the demand for teachers in the country. They are also an attempt to offer different and better programmes to teachers, thus propagating and implementing the current policies of lifelong learning at the national level.

Good practice in applying existing models of ELL at University level

Having the necessary skills and qualifications is essential for pre-primary staff in order to ensure the most favourable ELL. Early language teachers and educators should also be supplied with effective language models which they can successfully implement in their work with the children. And it is a responsibility of the educational and training institutions to offer such good models which are sound and based on ample empirical evidence.

Sofia University, in collaboration with Sapienza University of Rome, have taken steps towards the introduction of such a model in Bulgaria, an example of good practice in early language acquisition. The Narrative Format model, developed by Prof. Traute Taeschner (Taeschner, 2005) was introduced as an instructional tool for initial teacher education at the Faculty of Primary and Pre-school Education in 2009. It is an effective and innovative psycholinguistic model of teaching languages to children that has been applied successfully in many nurseries and school classrooms, as well as in the home environment in different countries all over the world. Some of the characteristics of the model, which are in accordance with the guidelines for effective ELL, stated in the Handbook are: the focus of education is not on the new language itself, but rather the new

language is used as a tool for communication in that new environment; language acquisition is spontaneous and effortless, it happens in meaningful, emotionally charged contexts which mirror children's everyday experiences and playful situations; an engaging environment for both children and teachers is provided by a series of narrative stories and all the specific strategies and techniques for "acting" these stories out and sharing experiences of numerous adventures, pleasure, trouble, challenges and joy in the new language. The model is rooted in the principle of good communication and empathy in language education. It fosters teachers and children's capacities of empathy, and enhances their communicative competence and interaction with others. Provided that relevant training in the model is received, teachers who are fluent and teachers who are not experts or fluent in foreign languages can work equally successfully on it with children (Taeschner, 2005). It is also appropriate for practice in a home environment (e.g. Pirchio, Passiatore, Tomassini, & Taeschner, 2012). The model can be and has been successfully applied to children from minority or migrant backgrounds (e.g. Daveri, 2011), as well as with children with learning difficulties. Two studies evaluated its implementation for the linguistic treatment of children with Down Syndrome in a rehabilitative clinical setting (Lerna, Massagli, Galluzzi, & Russo, 2002; Lerna, Massagli, Russo, Taeschner, & Galluzzi, 2006); and another study verified its effectiveness for fostering first language development of a school aged child with cognitive delay in a "natural", and integrated classroom context (Pirchio, & Taeschner, 2011). There are numerous research findings which validate the Narrative Format model's usefulness and effectiveness among children and teachers (e.g. Taeschner, 2005; Taeschner, & Pirchio, 2009; Pirchio, Passiatore, & Taeschner, 2011; Daveri, 2011; etc.). For more information on the model see the official website <<http://www.hocus-lotus.edu>> and the book "The Magic Teacher" (Taeschner, 2005).

At Sofia University, the Narrative Format model was incorporated into the general linguistics course of the regular BA students of Preschool Education and Foreign Language Teaching and Pedagogy of Mass and Art Communication. Additionally, weekly hours of practice on the model were allocated for the task at university partner nurseries, thus

binding theory and practice of the model with students and children. As a result of the students' positive evaluation of the Narrative Format model at the end of the first academic year, and their willingness to continue their study and practice on it, it has been integrated into their linguistics curriculum and practice for a second successive year. In the years which followed, it has been integrated into the university module of early foreign language teaching methods. Recent research conducted in Bulgaria (e.g. Sofronieva, 2012a & 2012c) confirmed the effectiveness of the model as an instructional tool at university level.

Conclusion

Sofia University shares the Policy Handbook authors' view that the education and training of staff in ELL should be viewed as a long-term investment. It strives to offer education and training programmes which develop, on the one hand, the language and intercultural competence of future early foreign language teachers, and on the other hand, their pedagogy skills. It recognizes the challenge of matching language learning to early childhood education and takes appropriate and efficient steps towards resolving the long-lasting dilemma: who should we turn to without having to compromise in early language education – language teachers with an insufficient pedagogic background of early childhood education, or specialists in early childhood education with insufficient language knowledge and low language proficiency? Furthermore, the University experts are applying an innovative and effective model of good practice of ELL, incorporating it successfully into the language and methodology modules of students and in their ongoing practice with children from nurseries and kindergartens, thus allowing both students and children to experience the joy of language learning and ensuring that it is beneficial at both levels of the educational system.

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Abstract:

The increasing demand for early language education creates a greater demand for qualified professionals at the nursery and pre-school level. One of the challenges facing education and training providers is to devise and offer effective

education programmes. These programmes should incorporate instruction in language, methodology and early childhood pedagogy.

“St. Kliment Ohridski” University of Sofia, followed by a few other universities in Bulgaria, have offered degree programmes which provide combined expertise both in language teaching and early years pedagogy.

Keywords: multilingualism, early language education, language education programmes and training, the Narrative Format model of early language acquisition

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