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## The Change in Approach to Preparing Children to Learn to Read and Write

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**Abstract:** Readiness to learn to read must be shaped at the level of pre-school education. One of the innovative methods of teaching pre-school children to read is the natural language teaching method developed by Wenda Pye. The programme consists in the teaching of listening, speaking, reading and writing using games and creative activities. The learning process is accompanied by children's creative activity. Therefore, the natural language teaching method is perceived not only as the process of language learning but also, and most importantly, as educating through language, where language is both a means of communication and a thinking tool.

The concept is based on the belief that child's language is a specific phenomenon determined, on the one hand, by natural child development and, on the other hand, by child's interactions with the environment. Consequently, child's language education should be enhanced by a subtle help from an adult, who – by the use of provocation, arrangement and gentle encouragement to take actions – opens up a new, unknown space to the child, i.e. the world of writing. Language plays a role of a factor that integrates various fields of knowledge and different types of child's activity in reality perception and acquisition. Natural situations used in the teaching of reading, which create occasional educational situations, inspire the child and simultaneously introduce him into the world of writing. Thus, learning to read should be accompanied by learning to write. The discovery of new values that the novel language of signs has with regards to information acquisition increases child's motivation to verbalise his own thoughts and to

learn to read and write. Emotional engagement facilitates memorizing a story or new vocabulary. It sensitizes the child to the graphical, phonological and semantic dimension of a given word by making a direct link between the graphical representation and the sound.

A point of departure for natural language teaching is a short and simple text and illustrations that highly relate to it. Texts form stories included in little books entitled "Sunshine Library". There is a series of 40 books designed for pre-school children self-study of reading. The books are graded at four levels of difficulty. Didactic aids used in the series are very well organised and introduce already consolidated semantic structures, providing new contents regarding language competence at a slow pace. Each book is composed of three stories. Typically, the first story includes one text with carefully selected new language structures. The following two stories serve the purpose of material consolidation. The essence of the books are pictures, which should be in line with the text because the basis of reading is to associate an image with its graphical representation. The print used in the books is large, legible, the words are clearly separated, and every sentence starts with a new line. The stories are simple and presented with repetitive sentence patterns.

Natural language teaching develops and deepens child's natural willingness to speak, read or draw graphical symbols. Speech is here not only the foundation of child's expression and learning to read and write, but also a support for child's paralinguistic activity.

The article presents the use of the natural language teaching method in pre-school children education.

**Keywords:** natural language teaching, method, pre-school, education

## Introduction

Preschool education primarily operates on the notion of upbringing. However, the specifics of the process of upbringing in the kindergarten means that this term also includes the education process. Currently,

preparing children for school is one of the most important educational tasks of the kindergarten. A readiness to learn to read and write must be shaped at the level of pre-school education.

Most of the methods of teaching reading and writing attempt to modify analytical-synthetic methods or global methods, as well as increasingly incorporating the dissemination of interesting foreign solutions for learning to read and write.

One of the innovative methods of teaching pre-school children to read and write is the natural language teaching method developed by Wenda Pye. The programme consists of the teaching of listening, speaking, reading and writing using games and creative activities. The learning process is accompanied by children's creative activity. Therefore, the natural language teaching method is perceived not only as the process of language learning but also, and most importantly, as educating through language, where language is both a means of communication and a thinking tool (Czerwińska, Narożnik, 1997, p. 7).

### **Natural language teaching method in pre-school education**

The concept is based on the belief that the child's language is a specific phenomenon determined, on the one hand, by natural child development and, on the other hand, by a child's interactions with the environment. Consequently, a child's language education should be enhanced by a subtle help from an adult, who – by the use of provocation, arrangement and gentle encouragement to take actions – opens up a new, unknown space to the child, i.e. the world of writing. Language plays the role of a factor that integrates various fields of knowledge and different types of child's activity in reality perception and acquisition. Natural situations used in the teaching of reading, which create occasional educational situations, inspire the child and simultaneously introduce them into the world of writing. Thus, learning to read should be accompanied by learning to write. The discovery of new values that the novel language of signs has with regards to information acquisition increases

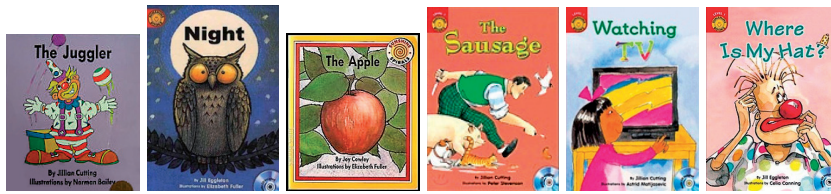
the child's motivation to verbalise their own thoughts and to learn to read and write. Emotional engagement facilitates the memorizing of a story or new vocabulary. It sensitizes the child to the graphical, phonological and semantic dimension of a given word by making a direct link between the graphical representation and the sound.

The basic strategy of teaching children to read employed in the method is the use of the child's cognitive processes, in particular its perception and memory. Preschoolers' perception is characterized by syncretism, i.e. they combine or merge whatever they perceive. This feature has been used to present words as whole, global language units, from which we get down to the level of components. In addition, the good visual memory of the pre-school child makes it is easier for them to remember whole words. Therefore, in the natural language teaching method the whole word method of literacy instruction coexists with the visual analytical-synthetic one, something which is particularly useful at early stages of education.

An integral part of the natural language teaching method is writing influenced by reading. Making graphical representations becomes a new way of communication for the child. The natural language teaching method assumes planning a series of activities which will step up the child's activity with regards to the acquisition of writing skills.

A point of departure for natural language teaching is a short and simple text and illustrations that highly relate to it. Texts form stories included in little books entitled "Sunshine Library"; a series of 40 books designed for self-study reading by pre-school children. All books are included in the four sets and are differentiated by their constantly increasing level of difficulty:

- **set 1:** Jillian Cutting – The Juggler, Jill Eggleton – Night, Joy Cowley – The Apple, Jillian Cutting – Sausage, Joy Cowley – Big Race, Jillian Cutting – Watching TV, Jillian Cutting – The Storm, Jill Eggleton – A Birthday Party, Jillian Cutting – The Balloons, Jill Eggleton – Where Is My Hat?;



- **set 2:** Jill Eggleton – A Journey, Joy Cowley – Elephant Walk, Jill Eggleton – At the Zoo, Jillian Cutting – Where is My Dad?, Jillian Cutting – The Space Monster, Jillian Cutting – Who Ate the Bananas?, Joy Cowley – The Dragon, Jill Eggleton – I Can Climb, Joy Cowley – My Bike Can Fly!, Joy Cowley – Dinner Time;



- **set 3:** Jillian Cutting – The Penguins, Jillian Cutting – The Speed Boat, Joy Cowley – Jack and the Giant, Joy Cowley – The Magic Machine, Jill Eggleton – The Sky Diver, Jill Eggleton – The Snow Race, Jill Eggleton – The Pirate, Joy Cowley – The Cow in the Hole, Jillian Cutting – The Hungry Lion, Joy Cowley – The Seals;



- **set 4:** Jillian Cutting – At the fair, Jill Eggleton – The Magic Tree, Joy Cowley – The Babysitters, Jillian Cutting – Sharks, Joy Cowley – Dr Sprocket Makes a Rocket, Jill Eggleton – Grandpa's New Car, Joy Cowley – I Like Worms!, Jill Eggleton – The Whale, Jillian Cutting – Moon Story, Joy Cowley – The Blueberry Pie.



Didactic aids used in the series are very well organised and introduce already consolidated semantic structures, providing new contents regarding language competence at a slow pace. Each book is composed of three stories. Typically, the first story includes one text with carefully selected new language structures. The following two stories serve the purpose of material consolidation. The essence of the books are pictures, which should be in line with the text because the basis of reading is to associate an image with its graphical representation. The print used in the books is large, legible, the words are clearly separated, and every sentence starts with a new line. The stories are simple and presented with repetitive sentence patterns.

Natural language teaching develops and deepens the child's natural willingness to speak, read or draw graphical symbols. Speech is here not only the foundation of the child's expression and learning to read and write, but also a support for the child's paralinguistic activity.

The objective of natural language teaching is:

- to support the child in the process of discovering, creating, and understanding the signs which serve as means of communication between people,

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- to help the child gradually gain independence in using such signs unassisted,
  - to provide the child with knowledge regarding the types of signs of the written and spoken language, their nature and possible applications,
  - to satisfy the need of understanding and being understood.

The task of the teacher following the natural language teaching method is to direct the didactic-educational process in such way that:

- the child can discover, get to know, and use various skills comprising the communication process,
- it creates opportunities for the child's free, unobstructed communication with others, for collecting, consolidating and broadening different experiences related to one's own activity,
- it yields a pattern of behaviour to follow, the essence of which is for people to communicate,
- it creates conditions which will allow the child to be successful in plumbing the mysteries of language communication between people,
- it organises situations through which the child can find the path of its own individual development and to explore its own predisposition,
- it positively reinforces the child's activeness,
- the cooperation with parents is active.

In order to accomplish goals and carry out tasks awaiting the teacher adopting the natural language teaching method the following materials need to be used in his daily routine:

- a series of little books by New Zealand writers entitled "Sunshine Library" and published by WSiP,
- the so-called "big books" (A3 paper size), which are enlarged versions of the "Sunshine Library" little books,

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- poetry cards including poems, nursery rhymes, lyrics, accompanied by corresponding illustrations,
  - books created by the teacher, supplementing the theme introduced by New Zealand writers,
  - books created with the cooperation of the children, using their works, constituting an expression of their creativity,
  - letter cards including block capitals, upper case and lower case letters,
  - the so-called “individual alphabet” assisting individual writing,
  - worksheets including graphical exercises and didactic tasks of various nature and level of difficulty.

All aids used in the natural language learning setting are properly arranged as the teaching area is divided into separate interest areas. The main purpose is to channel children’s interest in the world. The room arrangement gives children access to aids and an opportunity to use them freely. What is more, it offers the teacher a chance to observe their pupils. The following interest areas or corners are found in the room of a group working on the principle of the natural language learning model:

- reading area,
- letter area,
- writing and drawing area,
- listening area,
- maths area,
- arts area,
- theatre area,
- music area,
- science and research area,
- construction area (Czerwińska, 1995, p. 34–38).

A literacy teaching programme based on the natural language learning model includes three equivalent forms of operation of children and teachers:



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- teacher-dominated activities,
  - teacher-assisted activities,
  - unassisted activities.

In the natural language teaching method the teacher supports the child in his aspirations to discover the meaning of the reading process on his own. The process of learning to read is staged as follows:

- the emerging pre-reading stage,
- the early reading stage,
- the fluent reading stage.

Reading materials employed at the above phases are selected carefully for the child to succeed in learning. The natural language teaching method assumes the following types of activities regarding the learning of reading:

- joint reading,
- team reading,
- individual reading.

On the other hand, exercises aimed at teaching the children to write on the basis of natural language learning are as follows:

- writing for children,
- writing with children,
- individual writing.

Writing with children involves activities performed either with the whole group or small teams. Children try to write letters supervised and assisted by the teacher. During individual writing the teacher supports child's unassisted activity and motivates him to undertake writing attempts (Kamińska, 1999, p. 81).

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**Example methodological solutions of the natural language teaching method**

1. Theme unit based on the book titled "Underwater" (Ulita, 2011, p. 49–51):

the main letter: r, R,

the main word: ryba (fish),

repeat word structures: hunt(s), for.

Themes covered:

- types of reservoirs on earth, their location on the map – a characteristic colour scheme in map design,
- the Baltic Sea – the Polish sea, larger Polish rivers, lakes,
- underwater landscape – coral reefs, shipwrecks,
- aquatic flora and fauna,
- sea resources,
- food chains,
- measuring liquids – fun activities and experiments – conclusions.

Supplementary literature:

- "Great Undersea Search"
- "Sea" from the "Explore the World" series,
- "The Book of the Sea",
- "Sea Animals",
- "Whales" from the "The World Yesterday and Today" series,
- "Do Whales Need To Die?"

Reading and writing:

"Underwater" – working with a large format book, reading to children, reading with children;

discussing illustrations, predicting the ending, analysis and auditory synthesis of the word "fish";

spotting the letter *r* in the text and finding requested words;

analysis and auditory synthesis of selected vocabulary;

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individual reading to a group of children;

“R, r – ryba” (fish) – a word card – discussing the shape of the letter and the way it is written;

“Small fish” – poetry card – reading to children, reading with children, exercises involving spotting and indicating the letter r (ryba) in the text and marking vowels;

“Fish” – worksheet – filling the contours of the word with letter-like patterns vertically – the sheet is properly positioned.

Natural education:

“Inhabitants of the coral reef” – watching fragments of a documentary – systematizing knowledge, drawing attention to food chains.

Maths education:

“How much water is in the bottle” – research games – comparing capacities, drawing conclusions, attempting to justify them.

Artistic activities:

“Our aquarium” – cutting out, decorating fish, drawing and painting on a salt base, gaining experience – salt as a resource extracted from the sea.

Musical activities:

“Small fish” – rhythmical games played when listening to a song – determining the structure of the song, getting the rhythm, defining the meter of the song.

Motor activity:

Morning exercises and gymnastics of one’s own design.

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### Activities in interest areas

#### Reading area:

- reading in pairs and individual reading of stories selected by the teacher,
- reading out the names of reservoirs on the map,
- attempting to read out the names of fish in the book.

#### Writing area:

- joint writing of fish names – alphabet cards,
- making captions under individual works – ruling,
- mastering the writing of selected letters.

#### Listening area:

- listening to relaxation music – sounds of the sea,
- listening to “The Fisherman and His Wife”.

#### Maths area:

- classifying fish templates – creating sets,
- adding the scores in the Fisherman game.

#### Reading area:

- displaying books regarding the topic covered,
- browsing through picture albums and other publications about the underwater worlds – gaining information.

#### Science area:

- observing and feeding fish in the aquarium.

### An example of a lesson plan

Theme: Exotic animals – word and phonetic games (Ulita, 2011, p. 53–55).

**Aims:**

- children can find cards with their own names and read them,
- children try to “read” the book of the week pointing to the words as they read,
- children can recognize and name exotic animals,
- children can match pictures with correct words,
- children can indicate words with the letter: l,
- children perform an auditory analysis of words on the basis of pictures by searching for the sound “l” in initial positions.

Methods: natural language teaching/learning.

Forms: individual, team, group.

Didactic means: the book of the week “Who Ate the Banana?”, a letter card, pictures of animals, cards, a CD for games involving physical movements, various pictures, cards with various words, worksheets, hoops, animal tags.

**Class course:**

1. “Find your name tag” – a game involving physical movement.  
Children move as they listen to the music. When it stops, they find their name tags and stand by them. When the music is on again, the teacher swaps the location of the name tags.
2. Reading to children, reading the book of the week, “Who Ate the Bananas?”, together with children.
  - the teacher reads the text to the children at the same time showing the words read out,
  - the children together with the teacher read the text, the teacher indicates the words read,
  - individual reading attempts. Keen children “read” the book on their own and point to the words read.
3. Discussion regarding the content of the book. Phonemic awareness exercises.
  - What animals are hiding in our book?
  - Pointing to animals on the pictures and finding matching captions.

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- Dividing words into syllables.
  - Distinguishing the sound in the initial position.
4. "Exotic animals" – game involving physical movement and imitation.  
The children imitate movements of animals of their choice.  
Selecting adequate movement patterns to the accompaniment.
5. Small teamwork.  
The teacher divides the children into 3 groups.  
They children sit by the hoops away from each other.  
Every team is then joined by an animal (the teacher with a tag representing an animal from the book of the week) which gives them a task to do.  
Team I – the children are to group word cards so that words with the letter "l" are inside the hoop.  
Team II – the children are to group pictures so that inside the hoop are pictures with names with the sound "l" in the initial position.  
Team III – children are to read the words and match them to corresponding pictures.
6. Game involving physical movement.  
- drama technique "Animal sculptures" – pair work activity, one child is a sculptor, one – the material (role swapping).
7. Desk work.  
The teacher prepares worksheets of various difficulty levels:  
- Worksheet I – reading out and matching words and pictures,  
- Worksheet II – highlighting the letters: l, L from among other letters.

### **Conclusion**

Natural language teaching or learning is mostly about the unique way of organizing educational influence that favours the child's acquisition of knowledge and skills needed in concordance with his development level and interests. Learning is supported with children's activity and a passion for knowing. Didactic practices based on the described

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model allow us to draw the following conclusion: pre-school literacy learning may be nice and easy and children can find a lot of joy in it.

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