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Development of Linguistic-Communication Competences in Preschools.
Factors Influencing Language Competences – Their Level and Measurement

Abstract: Children entering institutional education can activate the linguistic and non-linguistic norms they bring from home. These norms, however, are very diverse in their nature and children from the same age-group remain at different levels in terms of language-acquisition. In our paper we seek to identify where and what sort of problems may arise in acquiring the mother-tongue, what factors may hinder the acquisition of the first language, what are the symptoms of backwardness in the field of linguistic–communication and which areas measuring tests tend to focus upon. Finally by presenting an indication system we would like to show what opportunities observation may have in purposeful development.

Keywords: native language acquisition, linguistic competence, measurement of communication skills, observation of children's language performance.

Introduction

The correlation between language and society preoccupied scholars in various disciplines for centuries but an empirical study in the context of mother-tongue development in institutional education was not carried out before the 1950s. Out of these, the most commonly shared and far-reaching, although criticised in many aspects, was Basil Bernstein's

research and the language sociological theory which was founded upon it (Bernstein, 1971). In his theory Bernstein connects special forms of linguistic communication with social class and family role, as well as school chances and achievement to social background. His theory made the assertion that the family's status in society and economy definitely determines a child's language development generally accepted together with the related idea that this has a considerable impact on his general achievement in educational institutions (preschool, elementary school). It is a commonly shared idea that advanced mother-tongue competence, the possession of speech, gives way not only to intellectual growth but social advancement as well, having a dominant influence on the development of the whole personality. Quoting Zita Réger's words: "the way to the language is, by the same token, a way to the world". When a child acquires his mother-tongue he becomes able to understand and interpret the linguistic and behavioural norms of his social environment and meet the requirements of the surrounding society even in his non-linguistic attitude (Réger, 1992, p. 88.).

Children entering preschool and elementary schools are at different stations on this "road". The surrounding adults and educators may help the children's successful progression or occasionally compensate for their problems if they take account of several conditions. Teachers should know and use optional tools of development in their everyday work which can only be effective if they are fully aware of the starting point: at which stage the child is blocked and what are the causes responsible for this.

Later on we seek to identify where and what sort of problems arise in the process of mother-tongue acquisition, what factors may hinder the acquisition of the first language, what are the symptoms of backwardness in the linguistic–communication field and what are the areas to which measuring tests pay special attention. Finally, by presenting an indication system, we would like to show what opportunities observation may have in terms of purposeful development.

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Non-negligible factors of acquiring native language skills

The child establishes communication with his environment as early as in the intrauterine phase and this disposition remains and even becomes stronger after birth. The interaction of more factors later enables children to complete their communication, which appears at the non-verbal level in its early form, with verbal channels, leading to learning their mother-tongue. Acquisition of a language requires the existence of certain anatomical–physiological conditions: the integrity of speech organs; the adequate operation of their neurological background ensuring their synchronization; the correct functioning of the perceptive basis in the brain, responsible for the detection of sounds and speech. In terms of other factors, seeing and touching play a decisive role in the formation of non-verbal communication in early childhood but they have a crucial impact on native language learning as well. The process of verbalization, extending from naming objects to formulating concepts, are deeply influenced by the establishment of a proper connection between visual–auditory and visual–tactile impulses (Dankóné, 2000; Bilibókné, 1981).

Few contest that language skills improve and function to a certain degree independently from other knowledge systems and general cognitive abilities (Győri and Hahn, 2006). Nonetheless, we should note that in diagnostics and therapeutic processes they cannot be divided from other cognitive and sensory-motor systems (Kas, 2009). The proper functioning of attention, memory and imagination attached to the group of general intellectual abilities plays a minor role in spontaneous language-acquisition but a crucial role in purposeful development.

Beyond biological factors, primary socializing environment also has a decisive impact on early language-learning. For a typical child it means the family where he acquires linguistic-stylistic patterns and social behavioural norms by imitation, those which he can activate when he enters other groups later. Therefore his chances for integration into a wider group and participation in a communication with grown-ups and contemporaries depend on how the language instruments acquired by him before are suitable for meeting the communication challenges he faces

in the new situation (Katona, 2000). If only a narrow range of patterns are available he may often feel incompetent either in terms of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic aspects or indeed in all of the above.[1] If this situation arises, the child will show backwardness in his communication and, potentially, his whole personality development as well (cf. Aranka Csertő).

Aranka Csertő calls attention to another psychological reason for the failure of speech activity: frustration in motivation. She claims that this barrier in speech goes back to an experience when "a child did not reach his goal with his communication, his demand, which prompted communication, was not satisfied" (Csertő, 1982, p. 3): e.g. a babbling, moaning infant was not attended to, or an inquiring child who regularly received either inadequate or no answers, or experienced even rejection or an aggressive reaction. This type of parental behaviour leads to "apathy, shortage of speech activity, or strong frustration blocking or suppressing any attempts to communicate even if the intention for verbal contact keeps alive for a while" (Csertő, 1982, p. 83).

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[1] See Reinhold Peterwagner, *What Is the Matter With Communicative Competence?: An Analysis to Encourage Teachers of English to Assess the Very Basis of Their Teaching*. Lit Verlag, 2005. Definition of the cited Canale and Swain's Model of communicative competences:

(i) **Grammatical competence** includes knowledge of phonology, orthography, vocabulary, word formation and sentence formation.

(ii) **Sociolinguistic competence** includes knowledge of sociocultural rules of use. It is concerned with the learners' ability to handle for example settings, topics and communicative functions in different sociolinguistic contexts. In addition, it deals with the use of appropriate grammatical forms for different communicative functions in different sociolinguistic contexts.

(iii) **Discourse competence** is related to the learners' mastery of understanding and producing texts in the modes of listening, speaking, reading and writing. It deals with cohesion and coherence in different types of texts.

(iv) **Strategic competence** refers to compensatory strategies in case of grammatical or sociolinguistic or discourse difficulties, such as the use of reference sources, grammatical and lexical paraphrase, requests for repetition, clarification, slower speech, or problems in addressing strangers when unsure of their social status or in finding the right cohesion devices. It is also concerned with such performance factors as coping with the nuisance of background noise or using gap fillers.

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If a deficiency goes back to anatomical-physiological reasons or affects certain areas of general intellectual abilities the educational institution should involve a professional expert for treatment. Backwardness stemming from the social environment of the child can be compensated for by teachers with controlled and purposeful development work, occasionally involving psychologists if the disorders indicate a level of background frustration.

Monitoring the level of linguistic competence

A child's successful integration into preschool activities and later his school achievements are considerably influenced by his linguistic-communicative competence. Institutional education plays a more and more important role in its development. This goes back not only to the fact that from September 2014 it has been compulsory for all Hungarian children to attend preschool from the age of three but also to a gradual change and re-interpretation of the family's role. Earlier it was the dialogues of the surrounding adults, the parents and grandparents, in which the everyday text types appeared in a child's primary socialization, while today their places have been taken over by mass communication – it is these models which now shape the typical speech genres of our children. The role of story-telling has been largely left by parents to television, video or computer devices, and family time at home is confined to silently staring at info-communication screens or short conversations limited to a few sentences. Another observable phenomenon is that some parents make do with a low level of speech culture for their own and their child's use. They are satisfied with situative communication which is only understandable in a given context by a narrow circle of people without considering the disadvantages of their child's low level of linguistic competence (cf. Réger, 1990). The facts above mean that preschool teachers should be aware of the relevant state of a child's linguistic-communication development from the first moments of their admission to kindergarten. Permanent monitoring and registration of the progression of these skills are also justified

by the fact that acquiring the basic forms of language skills has a universal impact: a disorder occurring in any areas affects all subsequent and more complex forms of communication.

There are two basic methods available for preschool teachers to determine the relevant level of linguistic-communication competence: situation analysis based on observation or survey examination carried out by test or measurement. Experts' opinions are divided with regard to which one we should use for evaluating 3–6–7-year-old children's performance. A group of professionals completely reject any evaluation based on measurement in preschools, while others tolerate these methods more readily. Stressing the primacy of observation, we need to note that measurement cannot be completely excluded from a preschool teachers' work. There are cases when only measurable results can show how to carry out a child's development and there are areas where the exact progression level cannot be identified exclusively by observations. But it should be emphasized as well that preschool institutions cannot be turned into "tiny schools" by the overestimation of measurement and that the misinterpretation of outcomes may occasionally produce a negative effect on children's development (Katona, 2007. p. 185).

Observation and measurement, and their correct evaluation, may give us a picture of children's achievement in the field of verbal communication. Moreover, at this age it is also important to monitor the progression of those partial abilities without which the writing-reading "mechanism" cannot be implemented in elementary schools. The preschools' responsibility in this field, in close collaboration with the family, is very complex nowadays: it should focus on developing communicative competences in a way that, on one hand, a child's oral performance should not be below what is expected of their age but, on the other, they must acquire the necessary basic skills for decoding and encoding written communication.

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Standard measuring tests, exercise types

Measurement is not a typical method in preschool education but in certain situations it is an unavoidable and useful tool. The series of various tests, orientating and screening examinations and diagnoses for determining the relevant progression of a certain area are endless. Some of them extend to the complete repertoire of basic skills, others focus narrowly on understanding speech or language skill development. Test items, however, show many similarities. Based on the tools typically used by preschool teachers in Hungary, we would like to present those areas to which measuring tests pay special attention.

Both speech perception and speech understanding have a decisive role in acquiring language and the series of the complex potential problems in these areas are usually monitored by tests and screening surveys. Some of these exercises concern the examination of **serial perception** which can be measured by repetition following the exact identification of meaningless voice series. Among them are the GMP-test, devised by Mária Gósy, and the language skills measuring part of the MSSST (Meeting Street School Screening Test),[2] which include exercises created to identify disorders in this field. Successful communication cannot be realized without the correct perception of not only a random series of voices but definite speech sounds as well. The spontaneously developing skill to either perceive speech sounds separately or in diverse sound-environments is optimally acquired in preschool age. However, 40% of the children entering elementary school have not developed this ability fully (Fazekasné Fenyvesi Margit, 2004) which is why it is important for preschool teachers to be aware of the children's relevant progression in this field as early as before their admission to elementary school. Tests of this kind examine the ability to differentiate speech voices by using changing tonic or oppositional word-pairs in a way that link certain subtests with pictures (DIFER).

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[2] Meeting Street School Screening Test (adapted for the Hungarian context by Mária Zsoldos, Kamilla Sarkady, 1997).

In addition to identifying various problems of perception, the GMP basic test system places great stress on discovering other difficulties associated with **sentence and text understanding**. The typical example for measuring the level of understanding a text is when children listen to an orally told text, typically a tale or a small story from his everyday life, and then answer questions relating to its contents.

The other large area is speech production, which can also be partially measured by tests. Tests of this kind are typically concerned with children's vocabulary. Small children, however, have more than a thousand words as early as preschool age and it is impossible to fully cover a child's **general vocabulary** by exact measurement due to the difficulties in recording the emergence of all words correctly. Compilers of the tests extract only a few language elements, typically nouns, and apply some special criteria. During the testing procedure children are required to recognize objects, animals in pictures, and the proportion of recognized elements forms the basis of a conclusion concerning the child's full vocabulary (PPVT,[3] PREFER). In addition to general vocabulary, there are approximately 300–400 words in all languages expressing correlations, called "relational words" (József Nagy), without which languages are unusable. Relational vocabulary tests seek to evaluate the process of the acquisition of words expressing spatial, temporal, quantity and similarity relations. These tests (PREFER, DIFER) fail to include the examination of suffixes, paying more attention to adverbs and postpositions. We also find different exercises concerning spatial relations in the PPL Language Development screening survey, including a process adapted for the Hungarian language in order to determine the level of grammatical consciousness in Hungarian children between 3–8 years. The examinations defined by the authors as "pre-screening process" include four subtests, the first of which measure the usage of noun-endings, the second the locative suffixes, the third postpositions and the fourth is an adaptation of the Token Test for children,[4]

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[3] Dunn (1958): Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (adapt. Csányi Yvonne 1974).

[4] De Renzi E, Vignolo LA. The Token Test: a Sensitive Test to Detect Receptive Disturbances in Aphasics. Brain. 1962.

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including various specific instructions which should be followed by the children.

But we need not neglect monitoring the partial abilities required to develop writing-reading skills in elementary school. For detecting weakness in terms of partial ability and exposure to learning disorders, preschool teachers in Hungary usually use a test book known as *What Preschool Teachers Need to Notice. Survey on 5–6-year-old Preschool Children's Ability and Skill Level*. In the test series we find exercises which can be done collectively by children: drawing the human body, form copying, visual discrimination, orientation in a square grid. There are also numerous simple exercises to be performed individually by children. In the field of visual perception the children should be able to recognize the difference between or identify concrete and abstract forms, assemble a whole from parts, determine the part–whole relation, identify object-pictures and arrange them under main notions. The test also focuses on visual memory by measuring the imprinting and retention of sequences. Exercises affecting auditory perception and memory work with word pairs in which only one sound is different or require children to repeat a longer word series. Regarding spatial orientation, the children should be able to solve tasks measuring the active and passive usage of postpositions and there are tasks for determining time correlations: whether the child is able to formulate and verbalize the subsequence of events, the temporal order of a story, the "cause and effect" relations. The method suggested by this edition helps to discover disorders in speech production and perception and also addresses the topics of visual perception, motorium, body schema, lateral dominance, memory, attention and time perception.

A method of observation: children's individual tale-telling

A preschool-age child should spend their everyday life playing, saying rhymes, listening to tales, moving, dancing – with a feeling of wonder towards the surrounding world. These experiences prepare children for school by extending their knowledge and improving their abilities.

Preschool teachers may get an indication of the relevant level of their communication and language progression by performing *observations* as well. A child's individual tale-telling for example may provide the educator with the opportunity to observe the syntactical character of the child's "half-reproductive" speech.[5]

Observation based on a child's tale-telling should be carried out by using a textological criteria-system including the presence or absence of titles ensuring the global cohesion of the text; the arrangement of the text into macrostructural units, meaning in this age whether the child uses the tale-beginning or tale-closing turns; types and frequency of the occurrence of semantic elements ensuring linear cohesion. The observation may relate to the elements attaching text sentences or limbs. Articles can also be regarded as an element creating cohesion. Observation may extend to the correct use of definite or indefinite articles in an individually created text during tale-telling. With regard to the integrity of the text the most typical connexion tool is the replacement by pronoun, by which word repetition can be avoided and co-references made to make the text more connected. In addition, pronouns in Hungarian may sometimes disappear if their role is taken over by deictic suffixes. Observation may show how correctly a child use linguistic references in his speech production.

Finally, the preschool teacher may observe how a child uses folk-tale patterns to ensure the stylistic coherence of the text during his individual story-telling. Observation of preschool-age children's individual tale-telling may help to develop the skills of text creation and prepare the foundation for later written text composition. The discovery of gaps, recognition of inappropriate forms and playful practice with correct expressions may all make children more competent in their communication.

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[5] Half-reproductive discourse occurs when the formulas of a known text and the speaker's own expression are mixed with each other. This type of text creation enables children to incorporate collocations, word combinations into the text and acquire different types of the laws of the language in an implicit way.

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