

From the Research on Linguistic Consciousness of Children

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The pace of the changes taking place in the world and the swift development of science and technology cause that the needs of contemporary people are different than in the previous millennium. It is not necessary to be an inquisitive observer to notice that the world is not motionless. The comprehensive development of the world is closely connected with the expansion of information technology, wide access to the Internet and satellite telecommunication. If we want to participate in the international circulation of information, as well as economic and cultural exchanges, we must know the languages of our European partners. The political changes in Poland, which began in 1989, initiated the process of our integration with Europe.

Language is an essential instrument in the mutual relations between people. United Europe is by definition multilingual. So if we want to eliminate linguistic barriers we ought to teach our children foreign languages since early childhood. This ability will enable them to function in both contemporary and future societies without any serious disturbances. Following the recommendations of the European Council we are supposed to prepare our pupils for communication with other people in their mother tongues (Komorowska 1996, Dobrowolska 1991).

The program of linguistic and cultural policy of the European Council takes into consideration all European languages and all the levels and methods of teaching. This program assumes that every European citizen should know at least three languages: his own mother tongue, the language of a neighbouring country and one of the languages used in the world (Krzemiska 1993).

The process of language learning is not only confined to the acquisition of knowledge about the language and the development of linguistic competence. It also gives many possibilities of self-realisation and gaining new experience. Children, together with language, develop their basic cognitive functions. And it is not enough for them to learn how to speak but also how to think in a particular language. Thus language may be perceived as a robe of a child's thoughts (Brzeski 1975).

We must remember that all glottodidactic procedures must be aimed at the pupil, so that he could make progress in the whole education process. This, however, depends on many factors, such as a pupil's attitude towards language, his learning strategies, motivation, time devoted to learning and organisation of individual work. But it also depends on the age of the pupils and their personality (Komorowska 1978).

The age in which a child begins systematic language learning is crucially important. Young children acquire a foreign language quicker than their older friends. They are also more receptive and liable to language internalisation. Being willing to imitate newly acquired vocabulary and phrases, children are not afraid of production in a new language (Brzeziski 1987). Apart from these aspects, learning another language at an early age is advisable for many other reasons: it makes the child become aware of many new problems and the ways of overcoming them, it helps to create a positive attitude towards other nations and, finally, develops certain flexibility of mind (Komorowska 1978).

Successful learning of a foreign language depends on motivation. Motivation encourages the pupil to put more effort into his work and thus accelerates the learning process. Children usually begin their language lessons because of their parents' wish. Independent motivation of a child practically does not exist in the pre-school period, and is quite limited in the first classes of primary school. Proper motivation and encouragement of the child's family may result in the development of interests in the language, geography and culture of a foreign country. By

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following the child's progress and appreciating his efforts the parents contribute to the future successes in the whole education process (Machura 1988). Apart from that, properly organised teaching methods improve the child's motivation. Children acquire new vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation of foreign words and phrases much quicker when they enjoy their classes. The hierarchy of the communication skills begins with understanding and should be followed by first attempts of speaking, then reading, and finally writing in the foreign language. That is why at the very beginning children must be given the right to remain silent. They ought not to be forced to speak or repeat new words and phrases until they decide themselves to do so. The period of listening only seems to be passive, as it is then that, thanks to various mental processes, a new linguistic system is being created. The new system will soon enable them to decode foreign speech. When children make first attempts to utter new words, their pronunciation is often incorrect. However, only through systematic repetition and oral exercises will they learn how to communicate in a new language. In order not to set back their speaking abilities, they must be given another right, the right to make mistakes.

Education at school should contribute to the development of mental, emotional and social processes. It ought to be the same with learning a foreign language. That is why the problem of optimisation between teaching methods, and the abilities of the group is widely discussed among methodologists. We should remember, that as quickly as children learn, they almost equally quickly forget what they have learnt. That is why the learning process requires many repetitions of the material. The efficiency of learning depends on the activity of the children. In order to make the classes interesting, various exercises must be included. The level of these exercises should be chosen individually for each pupil. Children are also very sensitive to all sort of criticism and signs of disapproval, so instead of making painful remarks we should praise them for their progress. As they may really surprise us with their rich imagination, and often love pretending to be someone else, they ought to be given the chance to use this ability and play different scenes. We must bear in mind, that although activities like playing, singing or drawing may not give immediate linguistic results, they certainly are not fruitless. Early contact with a foreign language determines future successes in this field. It also introduces numerous educational values. It helps in the development of the child's personality, makes him sensitive and tolerant towards different cultural values and stimulates critical and creative thinking (Komorowska 1992, Arabski 1997).

In order to determine the scope of linguistic consciousness in children, an experiment was made. The examined group consisted of 126 children at the level of third class of primary school. The children had language classes, but they did not have any influence on the choice of the language which was imposed by the headmaster, whose primary aim was to employ competent teachers. In the examined group 82.5% of pupils learn English and 17.5% have classes in German. 9.2% of the pupils participate in additional English classes financed by their parents.

The pupils were supposed to answer a few questions concerning their interests in a foreign language learning and the possibility of using it in the future.

The majority of pupils (92.3%) stated that they enjoyed learning another language. The reasons for putting effort in those classes were different and each child usually gave a few of them (the answers are presented in Table 1). The most common reason was the possibility of using a foreign language (in this case it was English) to play computer games and use multimedia programmes. However, the availability of computer programmes used for language learning was very low. Computers are not used for that purpose in that school, and out of the whole group only 17 pupils had access to them at home (13.5%).

The children of the first classes of primary school are more interested in their everyday life than in distant plans for the future. Their answers, however, are surprisingly clever. Many of them treat the command of a foreign language as an attribute which would enable them further education. Good education may provide them with better jobs and create more financial

advantages. These advantages, in turn, would create a possibility to fulfil their dreams, such as travelling the world.

Table 1 — The reason for learning a foreign language

No	Answers given by the pupils	Number of pupils	Percentage of pupils
1.	Gaining the ability to use computers; possibility of using English computer programmes.	122	26.6 %
2.	Possibility of further education in secondary and tertiary schools.	98	21.4 %
3.	Ability to understand English and German songs.	69	15.0 %
4.	Travelling around the world, ability to communicate with other people.	49	10.7 %
5.	Better paid job in the future.	47	10.2 %
6.	Desire to become a football player in a foreign club.	26	5.7 %
7.	Desire to become a teacher of a foreign language.	23	5.0 %
8.	Desire to become a singer.	14	3.0 %

Source: individual calculations based on a questionnaire.

However, although the children gave very clever answers, they are not aware of the fact that the process of acquiring linguistic competence is continuous and requires systematic work. Unfortunately, most of them limit the contact with a foreign language only to the classes, which take place once a week. 36.4% of the examined pupils devoted practically no time to it at home. 23.8% devoted only an hour, but it was confined to doing their homework and occasionally to exercises connected with reading, writing or learning new words by heart.

Many of the examined pupils rely in their language learning on family members (as indicated in Table 2), but about 40.5% of them do not receive any help. There are various reasons for such a result. Some children feel confident while working on their own and base their work on the material taught at school. Others cannot get any help because their parents, brothers or sisters do not know any foreign language themselves.

Table 2 — Family members who help children in language learning

No	Family members	Number of pupils	Percentage of pupils
1.	Parents	35	27.8 %
2.	Sister	17	13.5 %
3.	Brother	15	11.9 %
4.	Grandmother	8	6.3 %

Source: individual calculations based on a questionnaire.

In order to examine the attractiveness of language lessons the children were supposed to answer the following questions: "Do you think that the lessons of English/German are interesting? What do you like most in these lessons?"

The children mostly enjoyed those lessons which were based on singing, acting, dancing, drawing or puzzle solving. They definitely disliked the boring activities, like rewriting words or sentences. A conclusion may be drawn that children are more willing to learn a foreign language if their lessons are oriented towards entertainment rather than monotonous activities. They simply like learning through playing.

The changes taking place in the modern world are to a large extent reflected in the results of the experiment, which indicate that the linguistic competence of children in early classes of primary school is constantly on the increase. Pupils are aware of the fact that knowledge of a foreign language is a pass to the united Europe. They also realise that a good command of a foreign language may help them to enter university and find a better job. However, there were a few children (8.7%) who learn a foreign language only because their teacher or parents want them to do so.

I think that the material presented above proves that children from the third class of a primary school are really interested in learning a foreign language. Teachers and parents ought to do everything to take advantage of this positive phenomenon.

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