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About Some Topical Ideas and Trends in Foreign Language Education of Children

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interprets and prepared the manuscript.

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Commentary

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ABSTRACT

This article presents some topical ideas about effectiveness of foreign language education of little children and some trends in this sphere. The special attention is paid on bilingual education of children at preschool and elementary school age. The author underlines the strategic importance of early foreign language education connected with the contemporary principle of lifelong learning education.

Keywords: Foreign language education; children; topical ideas; trends; bilingualism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary global and dynamic world communication skills and knowledge of foreign languages is a main necessity. This fact is connected with forming of communicative language competence from early childhood. In the present article a short review of some topical ideas and trends in teaching foreign languages to young learners at preschool and elementary school age has been done.

Review of literature. About some topical ideas of early language acquisition by little children
Today more and more scientists accept the fact that the child's potential of language acquisition is enormous and that the most suitable age is the period before 9-10 years. Neuropsychological and pedagogical researches during the last 80 years give many proofs that children under 10 acquire foreign languages easier than later [1,2,3,4,5,6,7]. Precisely the first 10 years are the best period to start foreign language lessons in physiological aspect. Typical for this period are: high flexibility of articulation apparatus, great memory and imitation skills that are very important for language acquisition. These skills decline gradually with the child's growing-up and are replaced by other skills [5,4].

The question of lower age limit in foreign language learning is still discussed. According to Vygotsky [1] and his followers this limit is the age of 3 years old because then language might be acquired spontaneously. At the age of 3 the semantic system of mother tongue in general is formed and on this base it is possible to introduce a new language code. The followers of early bilingualism, for example British methodologist Doron, German methodologist Taeshner, French linguist Dalgalian think that children from the earliest age can accept 2 and more languages simultaneously and acquire them spontaneously as a mother tongue. This colorful language environment makes children more acceptable, develops their intellect. "When language acquisition is a conscious, wanted and structured process, for example at the age of 7, it keeps other rules in comparison with language acquisition at an earlier age, (i.e. together with common language capacity). In this case the process of learning is spontaneous, it runs in natural situations in a family and a kindergarten. This is not learning in the narrow sense of the word yet but language acquisition without mediation of mother tongue [2:129].

According to the newest investigations of American scientists in Washington University, it is experimentally proven that children can differ mother tongue from other languages from an earliest age. According McElroy [6] babies start to learn mother tongue still in mother womb. They distinguish sounds of mother and foreign languages. Babies "absorb" languages still they are in the womb, earlier than is thought until now. During the last 10 weeks of pregnancy babies can hear their mother tongue and in the moment of birth they show that they have heard it before. As a support of this the investigations of American neuropsychologist P. Kuhl, the co-director of the Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences at the University of Washington are cited.

2. TRENDS IN EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING OF CHILDREN

Foreign language education of children is based on the leading principles of contemporary education: lifelong learning and development of multilingual and multicultural competence. In many European countries children meet foreign languages still in the preschool age but this is not obligatory and it is chosen by parents. Dominant trend is that this education is obligatory still at elementary school: 5-10 year olds start learning a first foreign (second) language and 10-15 year olds start learning a second foreign (third) language. The topical is

the idea of game as a main educational strategy in language learning in general. [8,9]. Mostly it is valid for language education of children because of its relevance to child nature and to the way children learn. Game strategy is based on games, role-plays, simulations, quizzes, dramatization on fairy tales etc.

During the last 20 years in European countries there is an increasing interest in bilingual education. This is a consequence of dynamic economical and social integration of people of different nationalities. Good practices in early bilingual education of children are observed in Germany. In Berlin and Wolfsburg there are bilingual schools from the 90s of XX century. Today there are 18 schools in different language combinations: German-French, German-Italian, German-Spanish, German-English, German-Russian, German-Polish, German-Turkish and German-Greek. They are connected in a State European school in Berlin. The reason of creation bilingual schools is, on the one hand, to help integration of emigrants children, and on the other hand, to give German children chance to acquire intercultural experience. Typical for these schools is their equal staff: each class consists of a half German students and a half students of other language communities. The same situation is in the teachers staff. Learning time is equally divided between both languages. Besides these bilingual schools there are bilingual groups in 4 kindergartens. They work in collaboration with corresponding schools and they have common concept which is based on tolerant and positive attitude towards other cultures and languages. Main characteristics of education in bilingual kindergartens are following: whole learning, immersion in foreign language and culture, comparison between 2 languages, keeping principle "one language – 1 teacher", using adopted authentic materials [3]. The author of a present article supports given point of view: in bilingual school it is not appropriate to realize learning second language only by immersion. It is recommended to combine it with learning mother tongue by relevant exercises. Using parallels between both languages is useful. As it is noticed, in kindergarten most of language classes are in a playful format. Repetition of everyday activities and rituals are given in both languages. All the children have help and support in language dominant at the moment.

Equal state of both languages and supporting emotional environment in bilingual education of children are important factors of motivation and of whole children development.

According to German researcher Doye [3], who participates in cited projects in Berlin and Wolfsburg, bilingual education of children gives good results:

- At the end of education in kindergartens children have created a base of communicative competence, in which it is possible to build education in elementary school.
- Most of children are very motivated for meeting language as a partner, learning both languages is joyful for them.
- Parents support opening of bilingual kindergartens. The number of candidates is more than perception capacity.

The convinced follower of bilingual learning from early age is British methodologist H. Doron [4]. Her method is wide spread in many European countries. According to Doron bilingualism is something natural and completely accessible for children. Leading principle in this practice is following: the earlier the better. Doron makes experiments with 3-month babies and proves that they identify and react to rhymes and songs which they hear periodically. According to this method little children acquire foreign language/languages as a mother tongue, in one and the same time, this is a bilingualism in natural environment, in the sphere

of everyday activities. It means periodical presentation and repetition of words and phrases in rhymes connected with corresponding action and visual means: every day or 2-3 times a week.

Special attention deserves also T. Taeschner's method [10] of early foreign language education of children. It is experimentally proved in Italy. This method is based on concept of teacher-magician and learning as a magic. Children like unusual tales and objects, in this environment they easy and with pleasure learn foreign languages. In Taeschner's opinion children easy learn languages and it is necessary to use methods which are adequate to their psycho-social and cognitive capacity and to create a positive emotional environment. This is proved in researches published in 1996 [10]. According to them 5-year old children which learn foreign language during the period of 2 years learn more than children of 8-9 years, taught by standard methods. In the explored kindergarten children were taught by fairy tales and narrative environment as a methodological base. Precisely narrative format is seen by Taeschner as innovation in early foreign language education of children and in preparation of teachers for this process. Learning model includes a complex of connected short stories for telling, each of them is easy to be accepted by little children. These stories consist of limited number of words and collocations and children have to repeat them at least 15 times in order to remember. In cited book Taeschner shares her researcher's experience, describes teachers preparation for working on this method. The author claims that 30 of 120 teachers, participants in this training, did not speak corresponding foreign language before course starting and after that they teach 3,4 and 5-year old children with great success. Teachers and children experience tales together by entering into unusual world of main characters Hotus and Lotus and their magic park where only foreign language is understandable. During the classes on the territory of magic country mother tongue is not used. This way is created a context connected only with a new language and children are stimulated to take part in this common experience by means of foreign language. In this magic world children have magic features, escape from the problems and fears of real life and have a chance to acquire a new language.

Good traditions and practices in foreign language education, including education of little children, there is in Bulgaria. As well as in many European countries in the last 2 decades in Bulgaria has been build the system of early foreign language education, obligatory starting is at the age of 8 years old in elementary school. Mostly as a foreign (second) language is taught English. Foreign language as a chosen subject become more and more popular from the first class in schools and earlier, in kindergartens of big Bulgarian cities. This is not only English but Russian, German, French as the second languages. For example, the author of a present article has explored technologies of early Russian language education of Bulgarian children in kindergarten and is one of the authors of a hand book for teachers in this sphere. [11] It is necessary to disseminate good practices and methodological experience on the base of different languages created in many countries all over the world. In order to improve methodology of early language education.

3. CONCLUSION

Early foreign language learning plays strategic role in spiritual development and social adoption of children in present situation of multicultural education. In examined sphere are important the following factors:

- * Developing, creative and supporting environment
- * Positive emotional commitment between children and learning languages
- * Learning languages through playful interaction in interactive environment

- * Methodologically prepared and inspired teachers
- * Preschool and primary school age is the most sensitive period for starting foreign language lessons
- * Bilingualism is one of the efficient trends in early foreign language education.

Some topical ideas and new trends analyzed in this article are important factors for developing foreign language education of children. This knowledge might be useful for educational practice in many countries and for future collaborative researches in this strategic sphere of present education.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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