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TEACHING SPEAKING SKILLS IN EFL IN LOWER ELEMENTARY GRADES IN STATE SCHOOLS IN SERBIA

The aim of this paper is to look into the opportunities learners may have in lower elementary grades (namely 3rd and 4th grade) in state schools in Serbia for building and developing the speaking skills in English, the quantity and quality of exposure to English in class as well as into the results of methods which teachers use in the classroom when teaching the speaking skills. The paper further looks into the fluency, vocabulary and the range of constructions which learners use, and investigates whether the teaching methods comply with the needs of the modern global society, including the extent to which learners are instructed so that they may become competent speakers of English as a foreign language. At the same time, methods of instruction are examined in order to see if they match the level of cognitive development of young learners.

The methods of data collection are both quantitative and qualitative. They include questionnaires, class observations, semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews. The methods of data analysis include multiple regression (quantitative) and narrative (qualitative) analysis.

The results show that little systematic attention has been given to developing the speaking skills in 3rd and 4th grades of elementary schools. A limited exposure and use of the methods which do not focus on the systematic development of the speaking skills as well as a low demand for productive communication imposed on learners, jointly contribute to an underdeveloped level of the speaking skills. In the long run, such practices are inevitably futile: adult speakers of English as a foreign language may be cognizant of the English language system and at the same time exhibit low conversational capabilities.

Keywords: young learners, EFL, speaking skills, listening skills, accuracy, fluency, mixed methods

1. INTRODUCTION

It is believed that for most people speaking is the language skill which represents the main mode of communication. It is the first skill parents work on when teaching their babies in the mother tongue. By acquiring speaking skills children become an active part of a family and a community (Shin and Crandall 2011: 121). The same may be applied to the learning and use of a foreign language. Speaking is the skill used extensively; moreover, it is learnt

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first in the process of acquiring a foreign language. Taking into consideration that the pressure on the education system is to introduce English as a foreign language as early as possible, it is very important to analyze teaching speaking to young learners. The paper looks at the practices of teaching speaking at elementary state schools in Serbia.

2. THE ROLE OF ENGLISH

Today, it is estimated, a few billion people speak English "of some kind" (Crystal 2012). Apart from the countries in which English is the mother tongue, or those in which it has had a long history being used as a second language, the largest number, estimated at 500 million to one billion English speakers live in countries where "...English has no official function and opportunities to use English are usually only with those who do not share the same mother tongue" (Shin and Crandall 2014: 3-4). It is also estimated that there are three times as many non-native speakers as there are native speakers of English (Crystal 2012). As English becomes *lingua franca*, it also becomes part of regular instruction and educational systems of many countries all over the world.

In many countries learners begin to learn English as a compulsory subject at the primary level, and there is a tendency to start learning English at an increasingly younger age (Jenkins 2009: 15). In a recent survey of 55 countries around the world, more than 50% introduced compulsory English language courses by third grade (Shin and Crandall 2011: 119). This is the consequence of a growing demand for English by prospective employers and by parents who believe that English skills provide their children with better education and better employment opportunities (Enever and Moon 2009, Gimenez 2009).

There are opposing views as to whether learning a foreign language is more efficient if learners are young or older. However, there is a number of language policy documents which "explicitly state the advantages of early language learning"; the European Commission, for instance, identifies as benefits of early language learning "better language skills" and "favourable attitudes to other languages, people and cultures, if conditions such as trained teachers and small classes are in place" (Nikolov and Mihaljević Đigunović 2011: 98).

3. CHILDREN AS LEARNERS

Young learners' characteristics are widely known. They are first introduced to their mother tongue orally, and the same goes for learning a foreign language in a classroom context: they spend time learning a foreign language solely orally before reading and writing skills are introduced.

As learners they are inquisitive, ready to experiment and make mistakes, inventive and enthusiastic. They are willing to try out an activity even if they do not completely understand why and how. At the same time, however, children "also lose interest more quickly and are less able to keep themselves motivated on tasks they find difficult" (Cameron 2001: 1).

As for their cognitive development in lower elementary (in case of our research aged 7-12) they are not able to benefit from the meta-language that teenagers and adults can understand when teachers use it to explain grammar and discourse (ibid.). Harmer (2001: 38) points out that young learners often learn indirectly rather than directly: "their understanding comes not just from explanation, but also from what they see and hear and, crucially, have a chance to touch or interact with".

Children tend to transfer their drive for understanding and the instinct for interpreting the sense or meaning of a situation (Moon 2000: 5). Thus, in order to understand the world around them, young learners use all the knowledge they have about the society, the world and about how adults manage conversation. In this way children are able to perceive the language as a means of communication, because by using their knowledge and experience, they learn words and phrases in certain contexts (Cameron 2001: 53). While learning, children take an active part in re-constructing the meaning connected with the world around them focusing on the social element (Vygotsky 1962: 145). It has been noted that during this process children develop a so-called "learner language" or "language in construction". In order for the instruction to be effective it should undergo "scaffolding", that is, it should be tailored in such a way that it matches the cognitive level of development and needs of young learners (Bruner 1977: 271).

4. TEACHING SPEAKING TO YOUNG LEARNERS

Although this paper focuses on the speaking skills, it is worth noting that speaking and listening cannot be divorced either in real life or in the classroom. Much of the listening in real life is part of a two-way conversation which requires speaking in response (Shin and Crandall 2014: 120). As Cameron (2001: 40) notices, "Listening can be seen as the active use of language to access other people's meaning, whereas speaking is the active use of language to express meanings so that other people can make sense of them".

Speaking is considered to be a very difficult skill to learn due to the fact that speaking fluently and thinking occur at the same time. "As we speak, we have to monitor our output and correct any mistakes, as well as planning for what we are going to say next" (Pinter 2006: 55). In addition, there are affective factors which can create anxiety and prevent learners from speaking.

Despite the common belief that the longer exposure to a foreign language is, the better the speaking skills become, research shows that it is not enough to have long periods of exposure and that contextualization and scaffolding are also necessary (Gibbons 2002: 17).

Cameron (2003: 109) suggests that teaching the oral skills should be divided into teaching vocabulary and discourse as they both reflect children's focus on meaning. Discourse is defined as speaking in extended talk in an exchange while extended talk refers to stretches of conversation which are longer than a sentence. Songs, rhymes, chants and stories are regarded as examples of discourse. Conversation skills involve understanding and using phrases and sentences in interaction with others, children and adults alike.

As for the question of accuracy versus fluency Shin and Crandall (2014: 124) are of the opinion that the teacher's approach should be "more message oriented or based on meaningful activities with a realistic context".

Vocabulary in teaching speaking is considered to involve understanding and use not only of single words but rather of chunks of language (Cameron 2003: 109). Shin and Crandall (2014) agree, regarding teaching short, fixed chunks of language as necessary. Pinter (2006: 56) believes that these unanalyzed chunks[2] are "the first building blocks that allow children to move from listening to speaking and to begin to participate in interactions with others".

Shin and Crandall (2014: 124-125) further suggest that in order to help learners develop their speaking skills, teachers should try and use every opportunity to build real communication in the classroom. They point out that speaking activities should be fun, keeping learners active, and even if a lot of repetition is used, it has to be meaningful. They propose seven principles to be taken into consideration when designing activities for young learners of English as a foreign language (EFL):

1. Build classroom activities in English

2. Use speaking activities that reflect real-life communication

3. Use speaking activities that are developmentally appropriate

4. Use a variety of activities to improve both accuracy and fluency

5. Build classroom interaction by giving students plenty of opportunities to participate

6. Keep speaking environment active – do not correct errors explicitly

7. Equip your young learners with negotiation strategies.

5. THE SAMPLE

The paper analyses the teaching speaking practices of EFL in state schools in Serbia. The research was carried out in classes of 3rd and 4th grade in different schools all over Serbia. It covered 71 different teachers and 1316 learners (50,91% girls and 49,09% boys). The sample included 779 3rd graders and 537 were 4th graders (Matić 2015: 208-210).

The method of gathering and analyzing data included classroom observations, interviews with teachers, focus-group discussions with young learners and questionnaires for teachers and young learners.

6. THE RESULTS

Based on the results of the quantitative data analysis (as stated in the questionnaires by the teachers; cf. Larsen-Freeman 2003: 5), the following classroom techniques are used according to their frequency: *reading*

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2 Also known as "formulaic language" (see Brewster *et al* 2004:105) and "formulaic sequences" (Cameron 2001: 50).

comprehension and answering the questions (grammar translation method), *reading out loud with reinforcement* (the direct method), *dictation* (the direct method), *fill in the gaps* (grammar translation method), *deductive grammar* (grammar translation method), *role play* (the communicative method), *questions and answers by using complete sentences in order to practice the target grammar* (the direct method), *sentence translation with the aim of practicing vocabulary and grammar* (grammar translation method).

As can be seen from the range of methods used, it is only role plays that focus on an extensive use of the speaking skills. Reading out loud, another widely used technique, promotes speaking skills development to a very limited extent as it improves the pronunciation, and intonation to an extent. Since listening and speaking influence each other, we would also like to point out that the listening skills are, apparently, only practiced in dictation. Although this technique is carried out in the observed state school classrooms in Serbia, we consider it not to be sufficient for the development of the listening skills.

The classroom observations show that class time is predominantly teacher-centered and carried out in Serbian. The amount of time spent in exposure to and in the active use of English is, on average, 12-17 minutes (out of 45). The instances in which English is used are mostly divided between reading aloud, teaching and learning grammar and listening and speaking (according to the time spent on the respective activities). Finally, the class observations have attested the use of the abovementioned methods and techniques.

The speaking activities used in the English classes of 3rd and 4th graders in state schools in Serbia include sporadic routines, such as greetings (*Hello, Good morning, Good afternoon, Good bye!*) and functional language (*May I go out? Who is absent? See you on Friday! How are you?*). However, according to the teachers' own statements and opinions given in the interviews, these are not systematically carried out, built on, or even perceived as proper opportunities to use (teach or learn) an authentic contextualized language. Furthermore, young learners in state schools in Serbia show reluctance and lack of ease in responding in English even in these basic speaking instances. They also seem not to realize that the activities are simulations of real-life communication.

Total physical response (TPR) is also used as a predominately listening (listen and do) and partly speaking activity, and is organized in such a way that (in most cases) teacher is the one giving commands and students respond in performing the activities. In cases when teachers use English for organizational purposes, such as to open and close (activity) books, work in groups, draw, colour, match, fill in the gaps, answer the questions, etc. (e.g. *Open your books, page 47*, *Otvorite knjige na strani 47*), we have noticed that teachers give commands in English and immediately repeat them translated into Serbian. Young learners are, therefore, not motivated to respond to the English commands given that they can immediately get the same information in their mother tongue. In consequence, they lack valuable practice and are inevitably robbed of speaking fluency, turn-taking and responding in English (Matić 2015: 312).

Instances of speaking also include reading out loud texts from textbooks and quasi role plays. Young learners find them the most interesting types of activity in English classes. The language used is not only contextualized reflecting real-life situations, but is also developmentally appropriate. However, the role-play activity is strictly limited to the textbook lines (i.e. to short English sentences) and as such does not give learners the opportunity for expressing their personal preferences or in any way contribute to the contents of the conversation. Judging by the way these quasi role-play activities are carried out in state school classes in Serbia, they turn out to be too controlled to cater for the development of the speaking skills let alone build competent English language users.

Storytelling as a means of developing both speaking and listening skills seems to be underused in lower elementary grades in state schools in Serbia. Although it also gives opportunities to use and explore interesting topics for young learners, and is appropriate for their age and level of cognitive development, it is, nonetheless, organized by the state school teachers mostly in such a way that the role of learners is rather passive; for instance, they are not asked to tell parts of a story or the entire story later on, or to contribute in any personalized way to the content of the story. Furthermore, chunks, repetitions, rhyme and other vocabulary devices that a story offers, which may teach learners chunks of language and build on their vocabulary, are rarely used by the teachers or not used at all.

The same is true of pairwork and groupwork activities in Serbian state schools. In activities in which speaking, listening and conversation are used at all, the language is partly contextualized and controlled although there are cases in which the foreign language is freely used (e.g. in questionnaires about likes and dislikes, free time activities, etc.). Still, we have noticed that young learners find them difficult because they do not have enough practice in such activities, especially in asking questions and giving short answers, and also because teachers do not provide enough pre-task preparation activities. Given that teachers do not stress the importance of such activities, young learners quite often discontinue their English exchanges and turn to Serbian.

7. CONCLUSION

As can be concluded from the above, young learners in state schools in Serbia do not have enough opportunities to use English and develop their speaking skills. They are assigned a rather passive role by their teachers. In the majority of cases the quantity and quality of the exposure to English is not sufficient, graded or systematic. Low demands on the learners' production of English and a lack of contextualized English along with a constant use of Serbian do not contribute to the development of the speaking skills of young learners in Serbia.

In the long run this way of teaching and learning produces adults who know a lot about the language itself but are not competent foreign language users ready for the global community and global labour market. What we

need, instead, is a systematic attention to activities that enhance the listening and speaking skills of young learners as well as constant and consistent practice if our educational system is to succeed in this most important task.

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NASTAVA VEŠTINE GOVORENJA NA ENGLESKOM KAO STRANOM JEZIKU U NIŽIM RAZREDIMA OSNOVNE ŠKOLE U SRBIJI

Rezime

Cilj ovog rada jeste da se istraže mogućnosti koje učenici u nižim razredima osnovne škole u Srbiji (tj.u trećem i četvrtom razredu) imaju da razviju i izgrade veštinu govorenja na engleskom jeziku, kvantitet i kvalitet izloženosti engleskom jeziku u učionici i rezultati koje daju metode i tehnike koje nastavnici u učionici koriste kada podučavaju veštini govorenja.

Rad dalje istražuje fluentnost, vokabular i opseg konstrukcija koje učenici koriste i pokušava da utvrdi da li i u kojoj meri su one u skladu sa potrebama modernog, globalnog društva i u kojoj meri se ostvaruje cilj da se učenici osposobljavaju da koriste engleski jezik samostalno. Uz to, rad takođe istražuje u kojoj je meri način podučavanja i predavanja u skladu sa kognitivnim razvojem učenika.

U radu je primenjena metodologija kvantitativnog i kvalitativnog sakupljanja podataka: višestruka regresija (kvantitativni metod) i narativna (kvalitativna) analiza. Dobijeni rezultati pokazuju da se malo sistematske pažnje posvećuje razvoju veštine govorenja u trećem i četvrtom razredu osnovne škole u Srbiji.

Ograničena izloženost i upotreba metoda koji se ne usmeravaju ka sistematskom razvoju veštine govorenja, kao i niski zahtevi za komunikacijom koji se postavljaju pred učenike, govore u prilog nedovoljno razvijenog nivoa veštine govorenja te dugoročno ne stvaraju nezavisne, odrasle govornike engleskog kao stranog jezika nego odrasle govornike koji imaju znanja o sistemu engleskog jezika.

Ključne reči: učenici na mlađem uzrastu, engleski kao strani jezik, govorenje, slušanje, tečnost, tačnost, kombinovane metode