

ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECTS OF EFL ACQUISITION BY VERY YOUNG LEARNERS

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After having an overview concerning the history of Hungarian EFL teaching I would like to investigate some socio-cultural and anthropological aspects of L2 acquisition in kindergartens in general and in a Croatian kindergarten in-particular on the base of my EFL kindergarten observation what took place 17-22 December 2007 in a small village not far from Opatija in an affiliated EFL kindergarten.

Further in my presentation I will deal with teaching and learning English language to children of very young age. I am paying special attention to this particular age group and see how anthropological and socio-cultural factors may influence very young learners' acquisition both in Croatia and Hungary. Kindergarten children's second language acquisition itself is socio-culturally dependent. It is the purpose of my paper to investigate how these domains 'operate' both in an international and the home, i.e., Hungarian setting, what directives are to be considered and how they are to be carried out effectively by EFL kindergarten teachers.

Keywords: socio-cultural aspects, attitudinal and behavioral phenomena, language as "bridge" between two cultures, creating language learning experience, cross-cultural orientation

Earlier there was experienced big effort even in kindergartens to teach children a particular foreign language and there were published great amounts of papers dealing with teaching and learning the mentioned language by very young learners.

At the level of scientific approach everything was of higher quality but concerning everyday classroom work in the kindergartens, the effectiveness of the effort put into the acquisition was questionable.

As my main orientation is English language teaching and learning concerning very young age, further in my presentation I would like to pay special attention to this particular age group and see how anthropological and socio-cultural factors may influence very young learners' acquisition both in Hungary and abroad (Croatia).

First of all it is necessary to mention that the very young learners' second language acquisition itself is socio-culturally dependent. Earlier there was experienced in Hungary and Croatia big effort even in kindergartens to teach children a particular foreign language and there were published great amounts of papers dealing with teaching and learning the mentioned language by very young learners.

At the level of scientific approach everything was of higher quality but concerning everyday classroom work in the kindergartens, the effectiveness of the effort put into the acquisition was questionable.

Probably some socio-cultural aspects played a significant role in the mentioned attitudinal and even behavioral phenomena concerning the language to be acquired. There was put incredible effort on learning grammar of the language and interaction took very rarely place in the classes. The children could not really use the language for interaction. They were not able even to ask for a glass of water, using the target language.

All this resulted the following: the language did not dominate as "bridge" between two cultures (the culture of the people speaking the target language and the one of the learner's) but played a totally different role. There instead of "bridging" cultures, happened a kind of "gapping" of them. There were no central directives like the Bologna one at the time of teaching and learning the mentioned language.

The study

In our case there are projects (Nikolov, M., Mihajlevic J., D., Mattheoduakis M., Lundberg G., Flanagan T., (eds.)(2007) supported by different bodies the aim of which is to investigate the present state of L2 acquisition. Depending on the findings there will be implemented changes both concerning curricula and material to be taught.

According to the Bologna process training foreign language teachers and learning languages from an early age are two central issues in language education across Europe. The members of the Council of Europe put forward early language learning as a main priority in European education.

This socio-cultural approach gives of course a frame for implementing the mentioned directives. The content within this frame is to be worked out according to the specific cultural and anthropological characteristic features of the given countries (Hungary and Croatia) where the investigation is going on.

The questions are:

- where do specialists come from to carry out the mentioned researches;
- what kind of financial support is provided to the specialists to do research;
- how can research results be implemented in the kindergarten L2 acquisition practice,
- how can the teachers, dealing with very young learners, be prepared;
- how can the curriculum developers and syllabus designers cooperate with the researchers.

These questions are to be answered by the participants of the Bologna Process if we really want our second language acquisition to be successful.

In 2002 it was stated that it is important to teach at least two foreign languages in Europe beginning from a very early age. (Eurydice (2005). The same goals were expressed in the action plan, emphasizing the need for training teachers who will work on early acquisition. (Commission of the European Community (2003)

Having experienced in the past, for decades, a not effective second language teaching and learning the specialist will add to these directives: for the sake of the country not the teaching of foreign languages itself is

important but the effectiveness of it. Here comes the socio-cultural approach of the phenomenon and looking back into the history and past experiences concerning foreign language teaching and learning and drawing conclusions.

Only after a careful consideration of all the above mentioned phenomena can the curriculum developer and syllabus designer complete his/her work successfully. Of course looking at and studying second language acquisition in the kindergarten in different countries is a necessary part of the work.

A kind of new socio-cultural identity is in the process of formation in this respect. The formation of the identity of specialists (linguists, curricula developers and syllabus designers) who will be able to better understand his/her country's special anthropological and socio-cultural phenomena after a careful studying of anthropological and socio-cultural perspectives in different countries.

As remarks Kramsch (1998), the words people utter "express facts, ideas or events that are communicable because they refer to a stock of knowledge about the world that other people share... language expresses cultural reality." (p.3.)

In our case, speaking about the words and attitudes towards using words of another culture, we face a specific phenomenon: the communication in another (in our case English) language is produced by children of very young and sensitive age. Consequently, besides the well known age factor concerning communication there is another one: the parents' (and in most of the cases grandparents') socio-cultural behavior and beliefs play a significant role. This kind of cultural reality cannot be neglected while speaking about L2 acquisition by children of very young age.

What other force or "power" can be considered in the case of e.g. Croatian young children to learn English five days a week and five-six hours every day, if not the mentioned parents' attitude? Of course the socio-cultural and anthropological characteristic features of the country itself determine a good deal the mentioned attitude as the people cannot be imagined without special time and space and of course without the socio-cultural and economic state of the country they live in.

Having observed Croatian children of very young age I was a witness of tremendous efforts made first of all by the children I observed, and the parents as well.

The organizers expressed their special effort to invite specialists from very different fields, e.g. speech therapists, psychologists, a professor from Zagreb university, etc. Of course they wanted the Croatian children to be controlled and being helped by different specialists as they needed.

This approach of the main kindergarten authorities gives remarkable results not only in long term, but in the very close future. Generations after generations are taught foreign (mainly English) languages according to a well elaborated socio-cultural orientation.

As mentions Kramsch (1998) the "members of a community or social group do not only express experience; they also create experience through language." (p.3.) This kind of "creating experience" is of course not a one way process speaking about the process of teaching the language. While the teacher of the language creates experience in the very young learners' minds the socio-cultural and anthropological features of the learners can also create a kind of experience in the mind of the teacher and can influence his/her socio-cultural orientation as well.

The formulation of the so called social identity is influenced in this way while teaching and learning any second language to very young learners. In this process the language and its acquisition are necessary elements of the mentioned process going on in a second country as mentioned above. A kind

of cross cultural experience is being worked out in this way. Giving benefit for those children being taught and the teachers as well who can later base his/her teaching methods on the experiences got facilitating the cross-cultural orientation of the kindergarten children' SLA in the future.

About the so called cross-cultural adaptation or becoming intercultural Wierzbicka (2006), writes the following: "In our increasing "global" world successful cross-cultural communication is essential for nations, ethnic and social groups, and individuals." (p.20) Of course throughout communication there develops the language knowledge of the communication (supposedly the partners speak the same language but the symbols of the language used can be sometimes totally differently understood).

The right interpretation of the language symbols or codes is an essential part of authentic knowledge of the target language . In the kindergartens the whole system of the acquisition is based on this right interpretation of symbols and codes. There are mainly no explicit but implicit acquisition is going on in the kindergartens giving chance to children to acquire the language (sometimes even unconsciously) in a way that the socio-cultural content of the language is properly understood.

The question is: how can all these be achieved in our EFL kindergartens, let are the be in Croatia or Hungary or any other European country. Of course we need EFL kindergarten teachers who have excellent knowledge of the language and appropriate orientation concerning socio-cultural phenomena of the people whose language is being taught.

While I have been observing kindergarten EFL classes in a small village called Ičić in Croatia the teacher showed excellent rapport concerning the above mentioned phenomena and the language itself. It is not surprising that her children speak the language quite fluently after three years being spent in the kindergarten.

The parents of the children want first of all that their sons and daughters get appropriate socialization skills during EFL classes in the kindergarten. The knowledge of the language itself is of second importance. They consider the kindergarten EFL classes as a compensational "element" of the small village's not too busy and interesting social and cultural life. This socio-cultural situation can be imagine in any small village both in Croatia and Hungary, and probably in other European countries as well.

Considering the above observation it is evident that just like in Croatia the kindergarten EFL teachers in our country also have to create their own working experience and working conditions as well, based on cross-cultural experiences. The curricula of the training of would be EFL kindergarten teachers have to contain elements dealing particularly with the mentioned phenomenon.

EFL kindergarten teachers working in any country of the European Community have to consider this cross-cultural phenomenon because only by a profound understanding of it can the new generation become the citizens of the European Union where there are no boundaries not only economically but culturally as well.

While speaking about cross-cultural adaptation we, whose main orientation is early EFL acquisition, always have to bear in mind the child him/herself, who is the subject of this adaptation and whose language acquisition is a key factor of it. In his paper Salzmann (2004) mentions the following: "if for most adults learning a foreign language is a major task and only relatively few attain actual fluency in a second language, how is it that small children learn a language, or even two or more as effortlessly as they do?" (p.31). Further he speaks about the skill of discriminating among very similar sounds and relating them to the vocal system of the target (English)

language. Categorical perception is going on in the child's mind while discriminating among different sounds, mentions the author of the paper. He says that "infants only one month old appear to be able to distinguish two synthetic consonant-vowel syllables different only in the initial consonants *p* and *b*." (p.32)

The question is concerning this phenomenon: can it be required from the EFL kindergarten teacher to clearly see and understand what is going on in the children's mind while working (of course in playful way) on the acquisition of any (in our case English) language? The answer is quite straightforward: Of course it can be one of the basic requirements. Here rises another question: How can we require from the mentioned specialists to be the holders of all this knowledge? At this point it is necessary to speak about the responsibility of the pedagogical institutions dealing with preparation of kindergarten EFL teachers.

Conclusion

As a conclusion we can say that while examining the language and young learner in anthropological and socio-cultural context it is necessary to think about the influence of anthropological and socio-cultural factors concerning second language acquisition by young learners. They may cause quite significant influence concerning the young learners' communicative competence and the effective acquisition of any second language. As anthropological and socio-cultural factors are significant parts of our lives it is evident, that while we are speaking about language acquisition by young learners these factors cannot be neglected in the era when cross cultural dimensions open day-by day and more and more families have been taking advantage of economic and cultural possibilities they provide.

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