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EXPLAINING UNFAMILIAR WORDS IN THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT

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***Summary** – The need for explaining unfamiliar words in the classroom context usually arises when learners work on literary-artistic texts in their mother tongue literature lessons. If learners encounter unfamiliar words in literary texts, it is the teacher's task to explain their meaning to them. Thus the teacher has to be familiar with the lexical level of literary works. The teacher can approach the explanation of unfamiliar words in different ways. Complex lexical definitions have to be adapted to younger school children.*

This paper presents the main criteria for defining unknown and less familiar words to younger school children in primary school.

The aim of the research described in the paper was to establish how students – prospective teachers explain unfamiliar words to younger primary school children. The author analyses the students' lesson plans for teaching the Croatian language in which they were asked to predict which words might be unfamiliar to learners and, in that way, impede comprehension, negatively influencing the experience of a literary work. The successful realisation of the lesson stage of explaining unfamiliar words has been evaluated in the students' (prospective teachers for younger school children) direct work in the classroom, teaching Croatian language lessons.

Key words: *explaining unfamiliar words in the classroom context, unfamiliar words*

INTRODUCTION

Speakers of one language never speak in completely the same way. The differences in their language can be barely noticeable, but they still exist. The distinctions involve their pronunciation, word forms, sentence structure, lexis and speaking style. The differences can also apply to determining word meanings. In one speaker's mind a word can have a very different meaning when compared to the meaning attributed to it by another speaker of the same language. (e.g. the phrase *I like you* can be understood by some as expression of love, by others as expression of strong affection, friendship or liking. Or, the word *poor woman* can mean for different speakers: an underprivileged woman, a widow, a pitiful woman, a woman who is not very smart). In fact, "...in their mind every speaker has their own dictionary of synonyms (Bréal, 1897 in Tafra, 2005: 218), so even impossible synonymisation (assigning the same meaning to two words which have different meanings) becomes possible as well as desynonymisation (assigning different meanings to one member of a synonymy group)". Language is a communication sign system which is divided into its subsystems (Babić, 1994). This stratification can be territorial (different dialects), social (resulting in sociolects), functional (language divided into different functional styles) and individual (individual language of a person, i.e. idiolect). "Idiolect changes with time (when a person is old, they have slightly different speaking habits and above all a significantly different lexis than when they were young..." (Zgusta, 1991: 159). A person functionally uses different communication subsystems switching from one system to another depending on the communication situation and its participants.

Speakers of any language also differ in relation to the number of lexical units which they actively use in speaking and writing. This means that active and passive lexis characterise all speakers regardless of their age and the language they speak. Lexical units which are actually used in speaking and writing belong to active lexis. Those lexical units which are not used in speaking and writing, but are understood by a speaker belong to passive lexis.

THE MAIN CRITERIA FOR DEFINING WORDS

When an average native speaker (not a lexicographer) defines the meaning of a word within a language system, he does it in accordance with his own native speaker's language competences. In other words, a speaker relies on the knowledge of his own language when defining words. Zgusta states that, when determining the meaning of words, a speaker relies on the knowledge of things which exist in the extralinguistic world by establishing the connection between a word and a denotat. Since the relationship between a word and a denotat is not direct, a speaker creates

a designat¹ of a denotat, a “notion of a certain ‘thing’, as understood by speakers of a certain language” (Zgusta, 1991: 33).

Lexical units which have clearly expressed denotats in the extralinguistic world can be described by so-called ostensive definitions (Zgusta, 1991: 238, 241) (an ostensive definition gives one or a few examples from the extralinguistic world.) For example, *white colour* can be described as *the colour of snow* or *the colour of salt*. The choice between these two ostensive definitions depends on the speaker’s experience within a certain language system. If we explain the word (“*white snow*”) to speakers who have never seen the colour of snow, it is better to describe the word *white* as *the colour of salt*.

When a lexicologist defines a word, he identifies only the most important semantic characteristics of the defined word, and these are the characteristics which differentiate this word from all other words (lexical units).

When defining a word, one has to make sure that the explanation does not contain a more difficult word than the one being defined, or an unknown word. For example, the word *gleeful* should not be explained as *elated*, but: *cheerful, joyful*. *Miss* should not be explained as *lass* (a regional word for *girl* in Scotland); A better explanation: *a young unmarried woman*. Also, *inhabitants* should not be explained as *residents* (better: *population*). Definitions should not contain words which have low explanatory power and which require further explanations. Nouns are usually defined by nouns, verbs by verbs, in other words, a word is defined by another having the same grammatical status. One should also avoid defining words by other words which do not belong to the same functional style (e.g. *decease* (formal) – *kick the bucket* (informal, humorous), better: *die – pass away*). Furthermore, archaic, old-fashioned words should be avoided in definitions, since they may impede speaker’s comprehension of the meaning, for example (*celebration – beanfeast*, old-fashioned), better: *party, festival*.

When defining a word (lexical unit), one should start from its denotative (basic) meaning and then name all other connotative meanings which a word can have (for example, *die – pass away – expire – drop dead – kick the bucket*). Partial synonyms are closer in their denotation than in connotation.² Connotative words (words which carry “additional information” because they convey supplementary, usually emotional meanings, or have additional expressive quality)³, are defined by giving

1 *Designat* – the same as “labelled”, i.e. notion, meaning of a word or a sign. It is named like this since the notion or the meaning is “labelled” by a word as a sign; in a speaker’s mind, notion which he is about to convey to a listener. According to: Rikard Simeon. *Enciklopedijski rječnik lingvističkih naziva*. Volume: A-O, Matica hrvatska, Zagreb, 1969, p. 226., 1008.

2 The degree of meaning similarity can be increased by the degree of expression’s abstractness. The closer the expression is to denotation, and farther from connotation, the higher is the degree of partial synonymy (Znika 1995: 389)

3 In literature connotation is also often referred to as expressiveness

their denotative, neutral, impartial meaning (for example: *maiden* (a connotative word) is explained by a denotative word *young girl*, *heaven's gate* (connotative syntagmatic structure) is defined as *heaven's door*, *pig-headed* (connotative) can be explained by the denotative word *stubborn*).

When defining a word it is sometimes crucial to explain the field of usage since two or more words can be differentiated in this sense. For example, the words *freshman* – *student* – *senior* denote persons who study at university having a student's status, but they are used in different situations: *freshman* – a student in the first year of a college or university (*Rječnik hrvatskoga jezika* 2000: 105), *student* – one who studies at a college or university (*Rječnik hrvatskoga jezika* 2000: 1190), *senior* – a student in the final year of college or university (*Rječnik hrvatskoga jezika* 2000: 32). These words have a different range of content of meaning. Or: the words *path* – *road* – *way* are differentiated by the range of their content: *way* is a partial synonym having broader meaning than *road* or *path* (Tafra, 2005).

When explaining a word it is beneficial to give its register features, to say whether it belongs to standard or literary language, dialect, jargon, etc.

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF WORD MEANINGS

The structure of a linguistic sign⁴ is described as a relationship between the expression of a linguistic sign (A), the content of a linguistic sign (B) and the named object (C). The expression of a sign or the signifier is its material quality which is realised in speech as a series of established sounds/phonemes or a series of graphemes in writing. The content of a sign, or the signified, is the notion of an object in extralinguistic reality existing in a speaker's mind (Samardžija, 2003: 2). Understanding word meaning occurs in a speaker's mind if the connection between all three components of the communication triangle (A, B and C) is established.

The acquisition of linguistic signs in the early language development stage is slightly different. When acquiring the meaning of a word it is possible that one component of a linguistic sign (A, B or C) is only partially formed in relation to the other two components. Pavličević-Franić (2005) discusses different levels of forming linguistic sign components, i.e. a specific structure of linguistic signs in early language development and suggests the following possibilities of linguistic signs formation in the early language development stage:

- incomplete formation of component A (due to the phonetic and phonological systems which are still being developed) and completely formed components B and C
- partially or completely acquired component A (depending on the level of phonetic and phonological development), component B not acquired, situational acquisition of component C

4 A language sign usually corresponds to the term *word*.

- completely acquired component A, components B and C not acquired
- completely acquired components A and B, component C not acquired in cases when component C has a metaphorical meaning; the acquisition does not occur since metaphorical meanings are usually not deciphered in the early language development stage (Pavličević-Franić, 2005: 46).

Some ways of acquiring linguistic signs in early language development will be exemplified in the paper. If a child uses a certain word in speaking it does not necessarily mean that (s)he understands its meaning. A child can, for example, loudly repeat a word that (s)he hears from an adult (assuming his/her phonetic and phonological system of Croatian is developed), which means that a child has acquired component A of a linguistic sign. If a child fails to link the spoken word to the real content, i.e. if there is no real connection between the expression and the content, between the signifier and the signified (A and B) and the named object (C), this means that component A of a linguistic sign is acquired, but components B and C are not, or component C is characterised only by situational acquisition. For example, when first-graders retell the fairy tale of *Little Red Riding Hood*, they can say that she used a *shortcut*, (children repeat the sound structure of a linguistic sign), but they do not understand the meaning of the word (component B is not acquired and the usage of component C is influenced by situational context) (Pavličević-Franić, 2005: 46). This phenomenon in a child's vocabulary is called empty verbalism (a person utters words which they do not understand) (Puljak, 2008: 19-20).

If a child defines the meaning of a word based on the experience gained from communication and interaction in which (s)he participated without abstract and logical thinking, (s)he uses words not as terms, but as complex structures (generalisation, classifying more objects into the same category based on previous communicative experience) (Vygotsky, 1977 in Puljak, 2008: 22). Pavličević-Franić explains that this is “the content which a child attributes to a certain expression and in that way creates a component of temporary usage...” (Pavličević-Franić, 2005: 47). Thus, a child's understanding of the meaning can be the outcome of a word's similarity to some other word (*canteen is a can, easel means easy*)

When a child defines a word with regard to the function of an object, when (s)he explains what an object does or is used for, this means that this characteristic, or function, is for some reason privileged or dominant in a child's mind, and in this way the meaning is distinguishable. In this case, a child has acquired component A of a linguistic sign (the expression), but components B and C (content and the object) have limited meaning and use. For example, in a child's early language development the word *student* denotes a person who studies Law, a person who studies a lot or a learner who sings. All these explanations of the word *student* confirm that a child still has not acquired the meaning of the word. A child uses words as potential terms.

Vygotsky sees acquisition at the moment when a child starts to understand new words, their meanings, when (s)he tries to define them (what might a word mean) and when (s)he observes their meanings within a context on the basis of which (s)he derives a conclusion about whether a word changes its meaning in different contexts. A child has acquired a term (the meaning of a word) when, based on common characteristics, (s)he classifies a number of objects into the same category by thinking logically and abstractly. In other words, the meaning of a linguistic sign is acquired if the connection between its all three components is established: expression (A), content (B) and object (C). The following examples confirm the acquisition of meaning in early language development: *exam term* is the time when you take a test or when you are orally examined, this a certain time at university, how long an exam lasts, *student* is a person who studies, *student's book* is a book where students' grades are written.

STRATEGIES FOR EXPLAINING THE MEANING OF UNFAMILIAR WORDS IN THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT

The lexical level of a literary work (poetry/prose/drama) can be one of the obstacles to understanding, experiencing and interpreting texts with younger school children. Therefore, the interpretation of literary works in literature lessons (as well as in all other encounters with a text) requires the teacher's explanation of unfamiliar and less familiar words to pupils. In this way, we can predict and eliminate difficulties in understanding and experiencing literary works (texts).

If a literary text contains words unfamiliar to pupils, it is the teacher's task to explain the words. This means that the teacher has to be familiar with the lexical level of the text. The teacher's task is, among others, to "predict the pupil's linguistic projection in the field of limited understanding of lexis, phraseology and semantics" (Nikolić, 1998: 214). The following step is to reveal and precisely determine the meaning by predicting and explaining words, taking into account pupils' age, i.e. their cognitive abilities. The explanation of unfamiliar words has its methodologically elaborated steps which are well-designed and should not be reduced to lexico-semantic practice.

The teacher can approach the explanation and definition of unfamiliar words in literary texts (or any other) in different ways.

Explaining the meaning of a word involves stating the basic, fundamental meaning and all or at least a few other meanings which a word can have. Of course, here it is important to emphasise that the meaning of a word is revealed in a context. A child, when trying to define a word, starts from the use of the word (term) in a real experiential situation, i.e. from the word's context. Hence, in a realistic context the child will notice that *sheet* refers to *sheet of paper*. In some other situations or contexts (s)he can notice that the same word has a different/new meaning: *sheet* can refer to *a large piece of linen used as bedclothes*. All other, new commu-

nicative situations will provide the child with a broader meaning of the word: *sheet* is a *broad flat surface*, a *tabloid* and a *panel*. By revealing these meanings a child encounters the linguistic concept of polysemy (a word having multiple meanings).⁵

In order to make the explanation of unfamiliar words clear in the classroom context, a definition of a word does not necessarily have to be the one found in a dictionary or a lexicography handbook. When defining more complex words, the teacher will look for simpler expressions, i.e. (s)he will tend to use common, everyday expressions relying on the most frequent elements of meaning which indicate the most common usage of a lexeme. Therefore, definitions in the classroom context will be cognitive-semantic⁶ rather than lexicographic. In that sense the teacher should not give a dictionary definition if (s)he presumes that a child cannot understand it. For example, instead of explaining *exotic* by means of the dictionary definition “the entirety of qualities and characteristic of faraway or unknown places and people” (*Rječnik hrvatskoga jezika*, 2000: 234), *exotic* can be defined by means of a cognitive-semantic definition as “something is exotic when it is strange, unusual or interesting because it originates or comes from faraway countries and other civilisations” (Žic-Fuchs, 1994: 278). The dictionary definition of *resourcefulness* as “the characteristic of one who is resourceful” and *resourceful* as one who is “able to act effectively or imaginatively in all situations and work; ingenious, imaginative, capable” (*Rječnik hrvatskoga jezika*, 2000: 1153), can be replaced by a cognitive-semantic definition: “Resourcefulness is the ability to get desired results or avoid the unwanted after quickly estimating a situation or despite difficult conditions” (Žic-Fuchs, 1994: 279).

Determining the meaning of a word can sometimes be subjective since speakers of one language do not have and do not have to have the same linguistic and communicative experience and, consequently, do not speak in absolutely the same, identical way. Being subjective is recognised in determining the meaning when speakers attribute different basic, fundamental denotative meanings⁷ to a word. When asked what *wise* means, some speakers will say it means to *show or possess wisdom*, whereas others will say *shrewd, crafty*. When defining a word in the classroom context the teacher starts from the pupils’ experience and sense for language. Children’s definitions are the ones which can show to the teacher the fundamental meaning that they attribute to a certain word. In other words, such definitions

5 Lexical concepts like synonymy, homonymy, polysemy, antonymy, hyponymy, etc., can be regarded as lexical universalities. Most commonly, they are the subject matter of lexicology and lexicography research.

6 Cognitive-semantic definitions involve the knowledge of the world which usually dictionary definitions lack (Žic-Fuchs, 1994).

7 Moiser states that words have two meanings: a constant part of the meaning representing the common meaning of a word and a variable part which contains individual interpretations of the meaning. Communication between a speaker and a listener will be more successful if the constant part of the meaning prevails over the variable part (Stančić-Ljubešić, 1994).

show how a child links expressions to their equivalents in the extralinguistic world. Determining the basic, fundamental, dominant meaning of a word⁸ does not have to overlap with the first, original meaning that the word used to have. (The first, original meaning is “the meaning which a certain lexeme had when recorded for the first time or when it came to existence”) (Samardžija, 1995: 14). For example, *tell* originally meant *count*. Thus, the diachronic meaning of a word does not necessarily have to overlap with its synchronic meaning.

One of the most common techniques in explaining unfamiliar words is giving their synonyms or partial synonyms. It is important to bear in mind that only a small number of words have absolutely the same meaning (usually some specific terms). In most cases, we can say that synonyms have closely related meanings, or that there is a similarity in meaning.⁹ Synonymy usually refers to words being absolutely identical, whereas when words are very similar we can use the term partial synonymy, i.e. synonymy in the broader sense. (Tafra, 2005: 215). Absolute sameness of meaning can be illustrated by the following examples: *pharmacy* – *drugstore*, *movie theatre* – *cinema*, *polyglot* – *multilingual*. A close similarity between the words can be exemplified by partial synonyms: *sign* – symbol, mark, clue, *refuge* – harbour, asylum, *uproar* – disturbance, tumult.

When explaining unfamiliar words by giving their partial synonyms, one should follow these criteria and give:¹⁰

1. Synonyms which can be replaced in a certain context: *bold* – courageous, *crafty* – cunning, shrewd.
2. Synonyms which have a different range of content: *path* – road – way.
3. Synonyms, one of which belongs to a standard language and the other to a regional variety: *loch* (Scottish) – *lake* (standard), *beck* (BrE. dialect) – *a small river*; *stream* (standard).
4. Synonyms, one of which belongs to standard and the other to informal, colloquial language or jargon. The meaning of the word is determined by labelling, i.e. by giving synonyms from other functional register with the recommendation to explain an informal word by a standard one, not the

8 From a psychological perspective, a dominant meaning is the one which most speakers of a certain language think of when a word is presented in isolation, without any context (Zgusta, 1991: 66).

9 Zgusta states that words being absolutely identical includes all three components of their meaning (designation, connotation and use). Only then can we have real synonymy. If there is a difference in at least one of these components, then the words are partial synonyms. (Zgusta, 1991: 88-89). If word pairs overlap in their meaning and use, and have the same denotative meaning, connotative meaning and the same communicative value, they can be referred to as absolute or real synonyms. In partial synonyms or quasi synonyms the overlapping is limited. (Hudaček-Mihaljević, 2008: 168).

10 Description criteria for synonyms according to: M. Samardžija. *Leksikografija s poviješću hrvatskoga jezika u XX. Stoljeću*, Školska knjiga, Zagreb, 1995.

other way round. For example: *buck* (informal) – *dollar* (standard), *baloney* (slang) – *nonsense* (standard).

5. Synonyms, one of which belongs to passive lexis and the other to active. Words from passive lexis are labelled as old-fashioned or archaic: *thee* (old use) – *you* (standard), *milord* (old use) – *nobleman* (standard).

For a lexicographer or a lexicologist it is important to set criteria for a valid description of synonymy, such as the separation of diachrony and synchrony (units of a synonym series should belong to one language system in its synchronic review) (Tafrá, 2005: 218). From a stylistic (as well as methodological) point of view, synonymy can be observed as a phenomenon of territorial and temporal stratification of language (units of a synonym series do not have to belong to the same linguistic system in its synchronic review, but can belong to territorially and temporally divided lexis). This applies to the explanation of words whose synonym pairs can belong to diachrony, and not only to synchrony.

If an unfamiliar word is a diminutive, it can be defined by its root synonym. A diminutive is described by giving a neutral synonym pair: *duckling* – (*young*) *duck*. The same applies to augmentatives: *megastore* – (*very large*) *store*, *shop*.

When defining a word, one can start from a superordinate term or a subordinate term. For example: *rose* – *a type of flower* (*rose* is a hyponym, a subordinate term in relation to *flower* which is a hypernym, or a superordinate term). In the same way, we can explain *swallow* (hyponym) as *a type of bird* (hypernym), *surgeon* (hyponym) – *a physician* (hypernym).

If unfamiliar words are explained to younger school children we usually start from describing a person or an object, i.e. by describing the function of an object (what it is used for). This method is the closest to children since they usually use the same strategy when trying to define a word. Consequently, the meaning of a word can be defined:

1. descriptively (a group or series of words, so-called descriptive definition), for example: *girl* – *a young unmarried woman*, *provincials* – *people who come from somewhere in a country outside its capital city*. We can add a synonym to the group of words: *girl* – *a young unmarried woman*, *miss*; *agony* – *extreme mental or physical pain*, *suffering*; *range* – *the limits within which something can be effective*, *reach*; *strand* – *the land bordering a body of water*; *a beach*.
2. by explaining the function of an object (what an object is used for, so-called definition of function), for example: *plume* – *a group of feathers often used as decoration and usually worn on heads or hats*; *rucksack* – *a bag carried by a strap on your back*.

The meaning of a word can be described by giving its opposite meaning, or its antonym. The word A should not principally be defined as “what B is not”, but from the methodological point of view, when explaining unfamiliar words in the

classroom context, we can explain *evil* as *not good*, *moody* as *not cheerful*. Words in antonym relations can overlap only with one meaning of their antonym pair. For example, the antonym of *pure* is *dirty* (but this does not refer to the expression *pure coincidence*, so we cannot say that this is an absolute antonym), or, *wild* is opposite of *tame* (but it excludes *wild guess*) (Šarić, 1994).

Explaining unfamiliar words in the classroom context often involves the explanation of idioms/fixed expressions. Idioms are set expressions in which at least one word changes its meaning, so “the meaning of an idiom does not correspond to the sum of the meanings of its components” (Menac et al., 2003: 6). This means that idioms consist of units which have altered or even lost their meaning (at least one unit) so “the meaning of the whole structure is not the result of the meaning of its components” (Menac, 2007: 9). An idiom is a combination of several words in which one or more of its components lose their original meaning. Since idioms have a metaphoric, connotative meaning, we can expect that for younger school children they can represent an obstacle in communication. The expressive value of an idiom can also remain concealed or unrecognised. Explaining unfamiliar and less familiar words in the classroom context includes established relationships of a word with the altered meaning of at least one component: *a rotten apple* – a single bad person or thing, *tighten one’s belt* – spend less money, economise (*Hrvatski frazeološki rječnik*, 2003: 253), *tail between legs* – feeling ashamed, *bite off more than one can chew* – to be overconfident. At the same time, these idioms can exist as free combinations of words whose components maintain their lexical meaning (Menac, 2007). One can assume that these flexible connections are understood by learners and there is no need to explain them: *rotten apple* (decaying apple), *tighten one’s belt* (to make tight, fasten), *tail between legs* – (based on the behaviour of dogs, who will put their tails between their legs when someone speaks angrily to them). Since the connection between words can at one time be flexible and fixed at another, a broader context will determine the type of expression: a fixed or free word combination. A fixed expression can then be recognised as an idiom.

An idiom should not be explained by a paraphrase which does not have a transparent meaning: *be skin and bones* – be as thin as a rake (better: to be unusually thin, lean).

In a literary text, a conscious reader will pause at the meanings of words, reflecting an author’s own linguistic creation. Samardžija (2003a: 11) emphasises that in their artistic works authors try to extend the boundaries of linguistic possibilities offered by a language standard, and expand them by using the possibilities of a language system. These expanded language boundaries are visible in an author’s *own language creation*. It refers to an author’s single use of words for stylistic reasons called *hapaks* or *occasionalisms* (Muhvić-Dimanovski, 2005: 7). Naturally, the number of these words is limited; otherwise it would be almost impossible to understand a literary work. Semantic deviations from a standard require the teacher’s thorough immersion into the linguistic structure of a literary text and

additional interpretation regarding lexical style, which is a result of the author's choice provided by a language system.

Based on the abovementioned facts it is evident that we can explain unfamiliar words in classroom communication in several ways. These are:

1. Giving the basic, fundamental meaning of a word and all or at least a few other meanings which a word can have (this develops linguistic awareness of polysemy). Denotative meaning does not have to correspond to the first, original meaning of a word. Connotative words are explained by denotative ones;
2. Giving synonyms and partial synonyms; synonymy relations can be expressed by synonym pairs or a series of synonyms. Synonym pairs do not have to belong to the language system in synchrony (under the condition that archaic words or those belonging to dialects are explained by a synonym from a standard language and not vice versa). Synonym pairs can refer only to one meaning of a pair. Diminutives and augmentatives are explained by a neutral synonym pair;
3. Describing a person or an object, describing its function (what it is used for). After giving a definition, we can also give a word which is a synonym of a defined word;
4. Giving antonyms;
5. Describing the expressive, metaphorical and connotative meaning of an idiom/fixed phrase. As a rule, an idiom should not be explained by another idiom;
6. Explaining unfamiliar words which are an author's own creation, reflecting his entire worldview, and they are the result of choosing lexical units provided by a language as a system and not as a standard.
7. The acquisition of the meaning is tested by using words in a communication situation (spoken or written). Using new words in a certain communicative context facilitates long-term retention of words. Therefore it is vital to insist on using new words in sentences, which is actually the functional application of the acquired subject matter.¹¹

11 A contemporary approach to language learning emphasises the importance of a functional approach to language learning, i. e. the use of the acquired subject matter in concrete, everyday, active and functional communication. In institutionalised language learning, such as in schools, first we should attempt to achieve communicative competence at the level of functional language use (especially with younger children), whereas linguistic awareness (learning a language as a system) should be developed gradually in the upper grades of primary school. For more information see: Dunja Pavličević-Franić: *Komunikacijom do gramatike. Razvoj komunikacijske kompetencije u ranome razdoblju usvajanja jezika*, Školska knjiga, Zagreb, 2005.

RESEARCH INTO HOW STUDENTS-PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS EXPLAIN UNFAMILIAR WORDS IN THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT

Research methodology

Research problem

The interest for the language of a literary work is a result of observing a literary work as a linguistic work of art. A work of art consists of words and sentences, it is realised exclusively through linguistic material. “Everything that a reader can find in a literary work is conveyed through the medium of language” (Katičić, 1971: 191).

The approach to a literary work, the understanding and experience of it are the result of its language structure. In a literary work the author’s choice of language units becomes a fact which can be evaluated. The choice of language units is a useful analysis tool which “in many cases can shed light on expressive means of a language and how an author uses them... (Ullmann in Lešić 1975: 174). In their own creation authors choose those units which help them best express what they intended to say. Authors choose those “expressions which at a specific time best correspond to their communicative intentions” (Bagić, 1997: 10).

When discussing school interpretation of a literary work, the question is to what extent younger school children can understand literary creations if unknown or less familiar words represent one of the obstacles to experiencing and understanding the text. Therefore it is vital that the teacher should explain unfamiliar words when interpreting a literary work. In the classroom context, good communication between work, author and reader depends (mostly) on the teacher’s approach to this work.

The purpose of the research

In order to read, accept or experience a literary work, one has to understand it. The research has been conducted with the aim of establishing how students – prospective teachers explain unfamiliar words to younger school children, whether they are precise enough when determining the meaning of a word and whether the explanation of unfamiliar words affects the understanding and experience of a literary work. Although explaining unfamiliar words usually occurs in literature lessons, it can also be realised, whenever there is justification for it,¹² in grammar and

12 It is justified to explain unfamiliar words whenever pupils encounter a text (either as a linguistic model or literary work) and come across words which they do not understand

media studies lessons or during oral and written practice. Students who taught literature, grammar/orthography, communication and media studies in lower grades of primary school participated in the research.

Research instruments

The following instruments have been used in the research: analysis of written documents (students' lesson plans for teaching the Croatian language, special attention has been given to techniques used for explaining unfamiliar words), systematic observation and recording of lessons (recording the techniques used for explaining unfamiliar words in the classroom context).

Research methods

The following methods have been used: content analysis, observation and statistical data analysis (expressed in percentages).

Research sample

The research involved 66 students in the fourth year of the Faculty of Teacher Education in Osijek who taught Croatian in the lower grades of the primary school "Retfala" during the first term of the school year 2009/2010.

Premise

In the classroom context, the teacher can use different techniques for explaining unfamiliar words. Pupils' understanding and experience of a literary work depend on the teacher's planning and understanding of that work. Theoretical knowledge related to explaining unfamiliar words should be empirically tested and applied in the classroom context.

Hypotheses

- H-1 In their lesson plans for teaching Croatian the students – prospective teachers predict the stages of explaining unfamiliar words by listing those words which they presume might be unfamiliar to younger school children. They also write down their meanings.
- H-2 The students – prospective teachers use different techniques when explaining unfamiliar words, paying attention to children's cognitive abilities for understanding the meanings of words.
- H-3 After presenting a literary text (text as linguistic-methodological model) to pupils, the students proceed to explain unfamiliar words.
- H-4 If the explanation of unfamiliar words is successful it is presumed that pupils will understand the text experientially and cognitively.

Research procedure

The research has looked into the students' methodology techniques for explaining words which they presumed might be unfamiliar or less familiar to younger school children and, in this way, impede understanding or experience of a text. The choice of techniques has been recorded in the students' lesson plans. After that, the students have been observed in the classroom context and the efficacy of their explanation has been assessed. The explanation is regarded as successful if thereafter there are no unfamiliar words which might impede pupils' understanding of a text. We have also examined if there have been any other unfamiliar words which the students did not predict and include in their lesson plans. It has also been recorded if a student has neglected the predicted stages of a lesson.

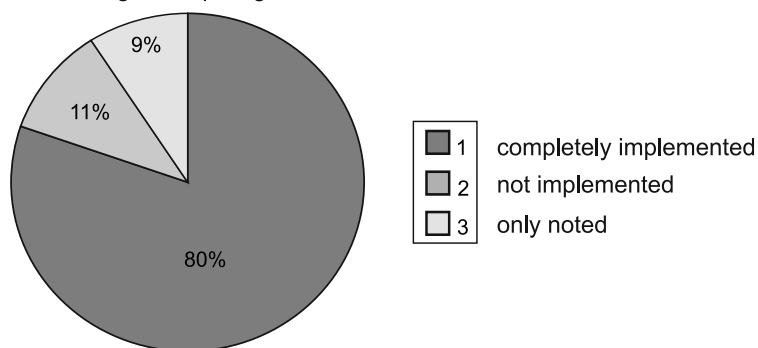
Results analysis and interpretation

The analysis of the students' lesson plans indicates that the students, when preparing for Croatian lessons, predicted which words might be unfamiliar to pupils and, by choosing techniques for explaining them, they also recorded their meanings. They have taken into account pupils' age and adapted definitions to children's understanding. Sixty-six (66) lesson plans for teaching the Croatian language in the first four grades of primary school have been analysed. The largest number of lesson plans (40) refer to *literature* lessons, 18 of them are for Croatian language (*grammar; orthography*), four are for *beginning reading and writing*, two for *communication* lessons and two for *media studies*.

Only seven (11%) out of 66 analysed lesson plans, have neglected the lesson stage of explaining unfamiliar words. This stage has not been recorded in four lesson plans for teaching grammar, one for literature and one for communication. Since in these lessons pupils encounter a text both as a linguistic-methodological model and a literary work, it is the teacher's/student's responsibility to check the pupils' understanding of words in the text. Six lesson plans (9%) contain a list of unfamiliar words, but not their meanings. For example, the students presume that pupils will not understand words *sneakily, whisk, grumble, waddle, tardily, laundry, carve, stare*, but they have not written down how to explain them in the classroom context. This means that the lesson stage regarding explaining unfamiliar vocabulary is only noted, but not accurately described in their lesson plans. (Picture 1)

In most cases, the students explained unfamiliar words by giving synonyms, i.e. exact synonyms (rarer), partial synonyms (more often). They demonstrated synonymy by giving a synonym pair or a synonym series. For example: *nimble* – light, agile, quick in movement or action; *finally* – at last, eventually; *generosity* – kindness; *rest* – leisure, sleep; *submission* – giving in, obedience; *drowsy* – sleepy; *ember* – a glowing piece of coal; *marble* – a glass ball; *looter* – thief, stealer; *misfortune* – bad luck; *nibble* – bite; *entire* – full, total; *insatiable* – greedy; *temper* – mood; *sombre* – sad; *reputedly* – supposedly; *cater* – provide, serve; *tease* – annoy; *instant* – moment; *wither* – dry, fade; *vacant* – empty; *swivel* – turn round; *lecture*

Lesson stage of explaining unknown words



Picture 1. Implementation of the lesson stages of explaining unfamiliar words in the classroom context

– teach; *pane* – window; *crimson* – red; *relentlessly* – continuously; *malice* – spite; *pence* – coins; *merciful* – full of mercy, kind; *chilly* – cold.

Regarding different possibilities of explaining unfamiliar words to younger primary school children, besides giving synonyms, the students also used a descriptive definition, describing a person or object, and a functional definition, describing the function of an object (what it is used for). When defining unfamiliar words, the students simplified more complex lexicographic definitions.¹³ The students explained the following words by using descriptive and functional definitions: *crack* – a partial split or break; *selfish* – one who is concerned only with oneself; *temptation* – something which attracts us and is difficult to resist; *gold-plated* – covered with gold; *discouraged* – one who does not have confidence, hope or spirit; *flutter* – flap the wings without flying; *stare* – look directly; *recline* – to rest or lean; *praise* – say nice things about somebody’s work or behaviour; *knight* – an honourable, brave man; *grind teeth* – rub teeth harshly together; *carve* – cut into something, for example into wood; *igloo* – Eskimo house made of ice; *scented* – having a pleasant smell; *edge* – the end of something, border; *burrow* – a hole in the ground where small animals live; *soot* – black powder left after the burning of wood, coal; *flash* – appear suddenly; *trade* – a job requiring skilled work, for example: tailoring trade.

In addition to a descriptive definition, words were also explained by giving their synonyms (descriptive definition + synonym), for example: *envy* – a bad feeling which makes us think badly about other people, jealousy; *flash* – a sudden light, brightness.

¹³ We can assume that students used contemporary lexicography handbooks, above all *Rječnik hrvatskoga jezika* and *Rječnik sinonima* (*Dictionary of Croatian language* and *Dictionary of synonyms*).

More complex definitions sometimes have to be simplified for younger school children so that they could understand and remember the meaning of a word with more ease. Even when the teacher explains the meaning of a word, it does not necessarily mean that children have acquired its meaning and that they will know how to use in other contexts. If we approach the explanation of unfamiliar words only lexicographically, we can assume that younger school children will still not be able to fully understand the meaning of a word. The analysis of the students' lesson plans for teaching Croatian indicates that in some cases the students adopted complex dictionary definitions. Exact dictionary definitions have been recorded in one lesson plan (1.51%): *telepathy* – transferring thoughts and feelings without direct person's presence (without speaking, touching or looking); *doubt* – be in the state of insecurity between two opinions or decisions; *hobby* – leisure activity, when an individual goes in for free activities which give him satisfaction and do not have financial gain. These definitions should have been simplified and adapted to younger school children.

Augmentatives were explained by giving neutral synonyms: *huge eyes* – big eyes.

A literary work also required explanation of expressive, metaphorical and connotative meanings of idioms. The students explained these idioms: *look daggers at somebody* – look very angrily at someone; *heavenly music* – pleasantly sounding music; *your heart skips a beat* – you are suddenly surprised, frightened or excited.

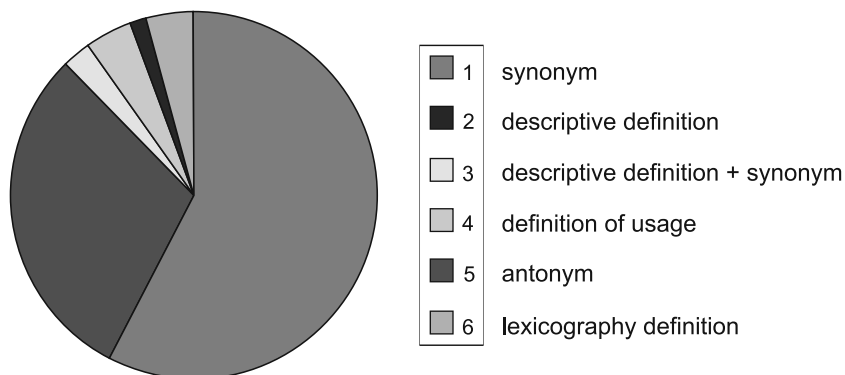
In some examples, an unfamiliar word is the result of the author's own language creation. The meaning of such words reflects the author's worldview and is a consequence of the author's choice of lexical units offered by a language as a system and not as a standard. The students explained the word '*lagarija*' (*liary*) as *lies spread by talking*. The fact that the word has been invented by the author has not been mentioned. The word '*zatatiti*' (*daddying*) was explained in the context of a literary text as *doing what dads usually do*. In this case the students mentioned that the word was invented by the author.

The students rarely used antonyms when explaining unfamiliar words. One student explained *tepid* as *something that is not too cold and not too hot*.

The analysis of the students' lesson plans for Croatian language indicates that the students have used different methodology techniques for explaining less familiar and unfamiliar words to younger school children. The research shows that out of a total of 73 words, 41 were explained by synonyms (56.16%), 22 were followed by a descriptive definition (30.14%), for two words a descriptive definition + a synonym were given (2.74%), the definition of use was given for 3 words (4.11%), the antonym for one word (1.37%) and the augmentative for one word (1.37%). The usage of exact dictionary definitions has been observed in explaining three words (4.11%). (Picture 2)

The research has confirmed the hypotheses. The students, when preparing for Croatian language lessons, planned the lesson stage of explaining unfamiliar vocabulary. The stage has been recognised as an integral part of lessons dealing with

Techniques for explaining unfamiliar words



Picture 2. The students' choices of techniques used for explaining unfamiliar words to younger school children

literary texts interpretation. The research has also determined that the students have partly left out the stage of explaining unfamiliar words in grammar and communication lessons, i.e. when working on texts as linguistic-methodological models. This suggests that the students require additional instructions; they have to be made aware of the necessity and importance of explaining unfamiliar words to younger school children, not only when working on a literary text, but also when working on texts as linguistic-methodological models. In other words, this stage should be part of literature, grammar, communication and media studies lessons.

Furthermore, the research has confirmed the hypothesis that the students use different techniques for explaining unfamiliar words taking into account children's cognitive abilities. Inadequate explanation by giving complex dictionary definitions has been observed only in a few examples.

By successfully implementing the lesson stage in which they explained unfamiliar words, the students have enabled pupils to understand a text and immerse in it, and, above all, in the language of a literary work. This can be confirmed by the observation that in the following lesson stages there have been no other unfamiliar words impeding pupils' comprehension.

CONCLUSION

Speakers of the same language can be very different. Among other things, they can significantly differ in the number of lexical units which they actively use in speaking and writing. This means that active and passive lexis characterise all speakers, regardless of their age and mother tongue. Active lexis includes those lexical units which a speaker actually uses when speaking or writing. Those lexical

units which a speaker does not use in speaking or writing, but he/she understands them, belong to passive lexis. The borderline between passive and active lexis is not firmly fixed since lexemes can be transferred from active lexis into passive and vice versa. These lexemes are called “crossing” lexemes. The major part of such lexis consists of archaic words, coinages and neologisms.

Children’s usage of lexical units in communication differs from adult usage. If a child uses a certain word when speaking, this does not necessarily mean that (s)he understands its meaning. Studies show that when children try to define the meanings of some words, they rely on their previous communication experience and interaction with adults or peers, without abstract and logical thinking. This means that a child initially does not use words as terms, but as complex structures.¹⁴ When a child describes a word in terms of its function, when (s)he explains what an object is used for, this means that the described quality or function is for some reason privileged, dominant in the child’s mind and in that way provides a distinctive meaning.

Explaining unfamiliar words to younger school children is an important teaching procedure. It usually occurs when interpreting a literary text during literature lessons. This lesson stage enables pupils to understand and experience a literary work (text). However, it is important to emphasise that the teacher should explain unfamiliar words not only in literature lessons but also in grammar and orthography, communication and media studies lessons, in other words, whenever a pupil encounters a text. When explaining unfamiliar words, the teacher has several options: stating the basic, fundamental meaning of a word and all or at least some other meanings a word can have (in this way children become aware of polysemy), giving synonyms – exact synonyms (rarer) or partial synonyms (more often), describing a person or an object by describing their function (what it is used for), giving antonyms, describing the expressive, metaphorical and connotative meaning of fixed phrases/idioms.

This research has been conducted with the aim of establishing how students – prospective teachers explain unfamiliar words to younger school children. It is based on the analysis of the students’ lesson plans for teaching Croatian language and on the observation of immediate student – pupil communication in the classroom context. The results indicate that the students have successfully implemented explaining unfamiliar words. They have applied their theoretical knowledge in practice.

The research has not included the assessment of long-term retention of the explained words. One can assume that the exposure to different communicative interactions would facilitate the use of newly learned words in speaking and writing.

14 In linguistics a *complex structure* is a group of interconnected words which have become a unit. According to: Rikard Simeon. *Enciklopedijski rječnik lingvističkih naziva*. Volume A-O, Matica hrvatska, Zagreb, 1969, p. 679.

Further research might explain how younger school children use newly learned words in everyday communication.

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