

Foreign Language Teaching Methodology

Metodika 21 (2/2010), page 341-351
Preliminary communication
Paper submitted: 13th July 2010

DO YOUNG LEARNERS LIKE TEXT-BASED TASKS IN EARLY ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING?

**Alenka Mikulec
Ivana Carević**

Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb

***Summary** - In early English language learning the emphasis is mostly on two basic language skills – listening and speaking. However, beginning with the third grade the emphasis shifts towards the language skills in reading and writing, which are developed through various text-based tasks.*

The assumption is that learners will not be equally motivated for all activities. In order to assess students' task motivation, third and fourth grade learners from one elementary school in Petrinja and one in Zagreb were asked to complete a questionnaire. The results were analysed regarding gender, age and place of residence.

***Key words:** early English language learning, language skills, task motivation, text-based tasks*

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important goals in foreign language teaching should be creating competent foreign language users in terms of language and communicative competence. Depending on the age of the students, all four skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing are taught at all levels of the education system to a

greater or lesser extent. The difference in the prevalence of language skills in foreign language teaching has been most visible in early learning, i.e. from the first to the fourth grade. More specifically, in the first and the second grade the emphasis is mainly on developing listening comprehension skills and speaking, while reading and writing skills are gradually introduced in the second half of the first grade. Reading and writing skills are taught and developed more systematically and intensely only in the third and fourth grade. This difference in the teaching of language skills at an early age has been introduced thanks to Piaget's theory on the division of cognitive and social development of children in stages (Piaget, 1963).

As reading and writing are complex language skills, it is necessary to know a language at all its levels: phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, semantic and even extralinguistic in order to fully understand the text. Developing reading and writing skills, competent foreign language users, who are ready to experience the original text as a challenge regardless of the setting being classroom/didactic or natural/authentic, are also being developed.

Reading and writing in foreign language teaching

Numerous studies have shown that without sufficient exposure to a foreign language there is no successful learning of the foreign language. This refers not only to exposure to speech, but to written text, as well. Therefore, reading and writing in foreign language teaching are very important skills to be developed from an early school age. In addition to acquiring a language in all its aspects (from phonological to extralinguistic one), reading and writing skills also open a new window into the world, the world of literature and culture of the country whose language the foreign language learners are learning.

Reading is a complex cognitive process in which, apart from the reader and the text itself there is also the writer of the text present. The reader is the one who tries to understand the text, usually by performing multiple activities simultaneously, such as recognition and decoding of written symbols, interpreting the meaning of the message, recognizing the intention of the writer, etc. Therefore, reading is an interactive process that includes all three components –the reader, the text and the writer (Celce-Murcia, Olshtain, 2002).

In order to accomplish this cognitively demanding task, students must master certain skills and various types of knowledge, for example, automatic recognition skills at the level of letters and words, furthermore, they must acquire knowledge of vocabulary and structure, knowledge about the formal structure of discourse, knowledge about the subject matter or knowledge of the world, the skills or strategies for the synthesis and evaluation of the meaning of the text, and finally, metacognitive knowledge and skills (Grabe, 1990, in Jelić, 2004).

Developing students' reading comprehension skills is a demanding process in which the ability to understand the written text is being developed along with the

adoption of a new language system. In other words, without acquired linguistic system there would be no understanding of a written text. In the process of reading, foreign language system is constantly being contrasted with the language system of students' mother tongue, with the aim of better foreign language acquisition and understanding. In this process the students consciously or unconsciously use comparing and contrasting techniques so as to identify any similarities and/or differences between already acquired concepts in the mother tongue and those that still have to be acquired in a foreign language. In this way the existing ties between the two languages are being created and deepened in order to facilitate the acquisition of a foreign language. It should be noted that the acquired concepts in the mother tongue do not necessarily match those of the foreign language. Such a method of expanding or narrowing the concepts leads to learning (Vilke in Vrhovac et al., 1999). The thesis that language learning is based on the creation of associations was already set up by Henry Sweet (Darlan, 1969).

Writing is as reading a complex cognitive task. In order to master the writing skill, the student must master a series of minor skills such as graphic and orthographic knowledge according to the current language norms that is, according to the orthography of the language (technical aspects), knowledge and selection of vocabulary and grammatical forms and their proper selection and usage at the sentence level (linguistic aspect), adjusting the writing style to a particular communicative situation, knowledge of the rules of the text organization in order to achieve cohesion and comprehensibility (content-based aspect) (Kruhan in Vrhovac et al., 1999, Petrović, 1988) and the possession of the metacognitive knowledge in terms of planning, setting goals and organizing writing strategies.

If spoken and written communication is compared, additional demanding elements can also be found in achieving an understanding of a written text. For example, longer and more complex sentences in the written text, the prevalence of affirmative sentences, while in spoken communication incomplete sentences, sentences with the wrong beginning, short answers, etc. can be found (Petrović, 1988).

All of the above supports the hypothesis that reading and writing skills should be carefully developed bearing in mind the age of the students and their cognitive and language development.

The development of foreign language reading and writing skills

Although there are divided opinions about when to introduce reading and writing in foreign language teaching, the prevailing opinion nowadays is that they should be introduced from the moment students master them in their mother tongue, namely around the middle of the second half of the first grade. The types of tasks should be adapted to the cognitive and language development of the students. Kruhan (in Vrhovac et al., 1999) suggests the following: first, global reading should be introduced, i.e. recognizing a picture and a word learned at the aural

level and then linking them together. After that, the pictorial sentence with inserted words follows. Furthermore, pictures and suitable words below them allow building up sentences, i.e. blending them together. Next, the students match the appropriate pictures with the sentences formed by word cards. Finally, the sentence may appear only in written form. After such a preparation students can make sentences on their own using word cards. Gradually, the reading of short sentences is directed towards dialogues and short texts.

Writing also begins with global reading. This means that in the initial learning of foreign language writing, students only copy words, recognize pictures and words acquired at the aural level and are ready to link them together. After copying words, the students can continue copying words and shorter sentences. It is important to note that the teacher and the student should be actively involved in the development of writing skills. In other words, it is necessary to gradually make students aware of structural elements at all language levels so that they can analyze them, and contrast them with the same elements in their mother tongue. Such an approach can contribute to better understanding and acquisition of a new language system.

Motivating role of a task

Although one could say that the time when classes were teacher-centred are a distant past, it seems that the adaptation of teaching to match the students' needs requires a lot of time before it can become widely used. This adjustment to the student's needs should imply a better understanding of cognitive, affective, and sociological aspects of students' developmental stages.

This paper presents the affective component of young school-age students with the aim of developing reading and writing skills, primarily because the initial stage of learning a foreign language is considered extremely important for establishing motivation, and in addition, it presents the basis for building and shaping students' attitudes towards learning a foreign language, towards the speakers of the foreign language, etc. It is also the period when the teacher's role is very important in terms of positive impact on the perception of foreign language teaching, the role of teachers in general, developing self-confidence and a positive self-image among students, control of their emotions, perceptions of success and failure in learning, etc.

Motivation is inevitably one of the key factors in learning a foreign language. During the 1990s, with the shift towards cognitive psychology, and an increasing number of studies in the field of neurobiological science, new directions of research in the field of motivation have emerged. Dornyei (2001) gives an overview of the major novelties in the field: social motivation, motivation from a process-oriented perspective, the neurobiological basis of motivation, L2 motivation and self-determination theory and task motivation.

The studies conducted at the level of task motivation mainly show that not all assignments are equally motivating for all students. Mihaljević-Djigunović (1998) lists four factors that affect motivation: attention (interest), relevance, self-confidence (expectations) and satisfaction (results).

Task characteristics should therefore contribute to these factors, i.e. have a positive impact on them. In reality, it is difficult to devise a task that would equally, not only satisfy all of the above requirements on a global, but also at individual level. It is for this reason that research in the field of task motivation can be considered a challenge.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Aim

The aim of the study was to determine the following:

- a) task motivation¹ for certain types of text-based tasks related to reading and writing skills in an English lesson among the third and the fourth graders
- b) the differences in task motivation for individual types of text-based tasks with regard to gender, age and place of residence (urban and rural area)

Subjects

The study was conducted in two elementary schools - Elementary school Dobriša Cesarić in Zagreb and Elementary school Dragutin Tadijanović in Petrinja. The study included a total of 140 male and female third and fourth grade students.

Instruments and procedures

For the purposes of this research a questionnaire was designed comprising 19 questions relating to the types of tasks connected with the development of reading and writing skills with the aim to determine task motivation (according to Dornyei, 2001). Types of tasks listed in the questionnaire were generally of the receptive type (connecting parts of sentences, reading texts aloud or silent reading, role play reading....). The questionnaire was filled in by male and female students of four third and four fourth grades in June 2007. Each type of task was assessed by students on a scale from 1 to 3 if it was the type of task they were familiar with, and for the types of tasks they were not familiar with, they were supposed to indicate

1 Task motivation in this paper refers to students' preferences for the types of text-based tasks given in the questionnaire used in this research

whether they would like this type of task to be used in their English language lessons.

Results and discussion

The obtained results were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Mean values and standard deviation according to age, gender and location of school (Zagreb and Petrinja) were calculated and t-test was used to calculate significant differences between groups. The statistical analysis included items 1-16 as for questions 17-19 (reading picture books and journals, and correspondence with peers in English) students generally indicated that these are types of tasks which they were not familiar with, but would like it if these types of tasks were included in the teaching process.

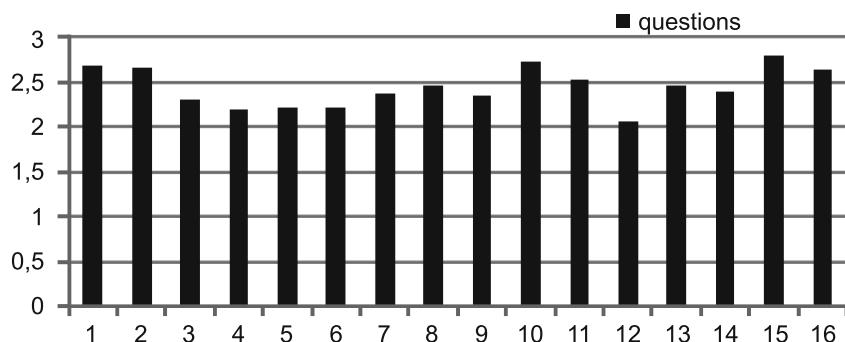


Figure 1 Mean values obtained for questionnaire items 1-16

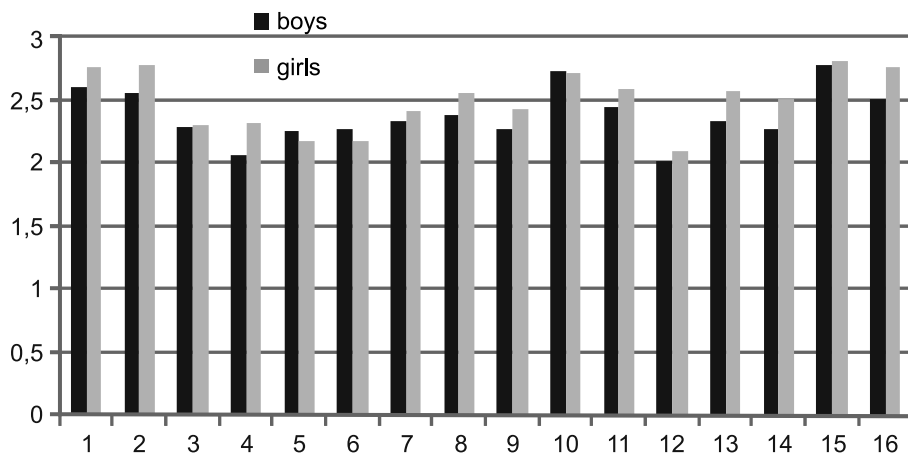


Figure 2 Mean values obtained for boys and girls for questionnaire items 1-16

According to the first analysis (Figure 1), it was found that the obtained values were somewhat lower for items related to reading a text (aloud, silent and choral) and independently writing sentences, while the higher values were obtained for the reproductive types of tasks both regarding writing and reading skills (reading a comic, role play reading, connecting pictures and words, finding words in the crosswords and in a word snake).

The following analysis (Figure 2) compares the mean values for given items regarding gender. The results show that on three types of tasks almost identical mean values were obtained: reading a story in which words are replaced with images, connecting images and words, finding words in the crossword. For five types of tasks differences with regard to gender were obtained: role play reading, reading aloud, finding words in the word snake, writing words from jumbled up letters and making sentences from jumbled up words. It is interesting that the mean values were generally higher for girls, except for two types of tasks: choral and silent reading of the text, where the mean values are somewhat higher for boys, but the difference was not statistically significant (+ 0.08 and +0.07).

Since the research was conducted in two different areas: urban (Zagreb) and rural (Petrinja), mean values obtained for the questionnaire items for these two areas were also compared (Figure 3 and Table 2). Significant differences (above 0.22) were found for the following types of tasks: reading aloud, connecting parts of sentences, completing words by filling in letters, ordering pictures, independently writing sentences, writing words from jumbled up letters and writing sentences from jumbled up words. It is interesting that the mean values were generally higher for Petrinja, except for reading stories in which words are replaced with pictures, silent reading and completing sentences with words.

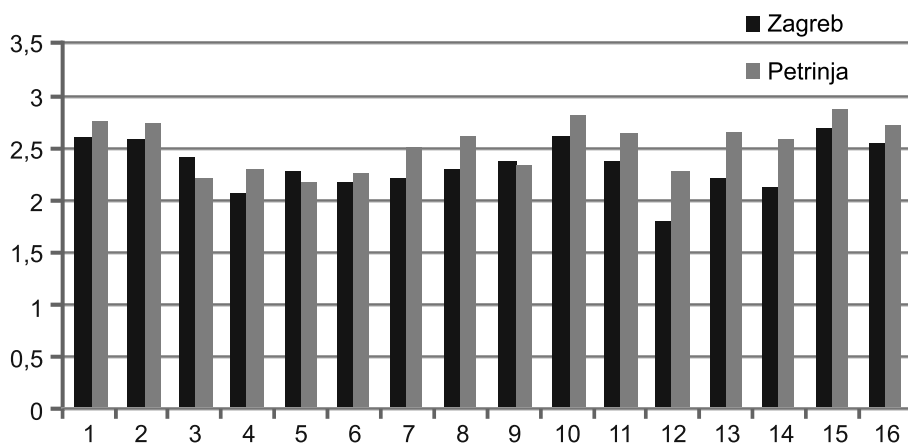


Figure 3 Mean values obtained for Zagreb and Petrinja on questionnaire items 1-16

Table 1 shows the values obtained by comparing the results with regard to gender and age. As seen from Table 1 and Figure 1 statistically significant difference exists between the third-grade boys (M = 2.335417) and fourth-grade girls (M = 2.534926).

For other groups t-test showed no statistically significant difference (Table 1). However, if we compare gender differences, it can be observed that the mean values for boys were lower in comparison with girls both in the third and the fourth grade. It is also interesting that the values obtained for the third grades were lower than the values obtained for the fourth grade.

The following analysis compares the mean values according to gender and age with respect to place of residence (Table 2, Figure 5).

Table 1 Mean values according to age and gender with the results of t-test

Compared groups*	N1	N2	M1	M2	t-test	p	SD1	SD2
A	42	34	2,410714	2,534926	-1,292650	0,200155	0,431943	0,396538
B	30	34	2,335417	2,461397	-1,484010	0,142873	0,334559	0,342677
C	42	30	2,410714	2,335417	0,798409	0,427334	0,431943	0,334559
D	34	34	2,534926	2,461397	0,818078	0,416256	0,396538	0,342677
E	30	34	2,335417	2,534926	-2,159380	0,034697	0,334559	0,396538

* (Compared groups A boys 4th grade and girls 4th grade; B boys 3rd grade and girls 3rd grade; C boys 4th grade and boys 3rd grade; D girls 4th grade and girls 3rd grade; E boys 3rd grade and girls 4th grade; N1 and N2-Number of students in the first/second group, M1 and M2-mean results)

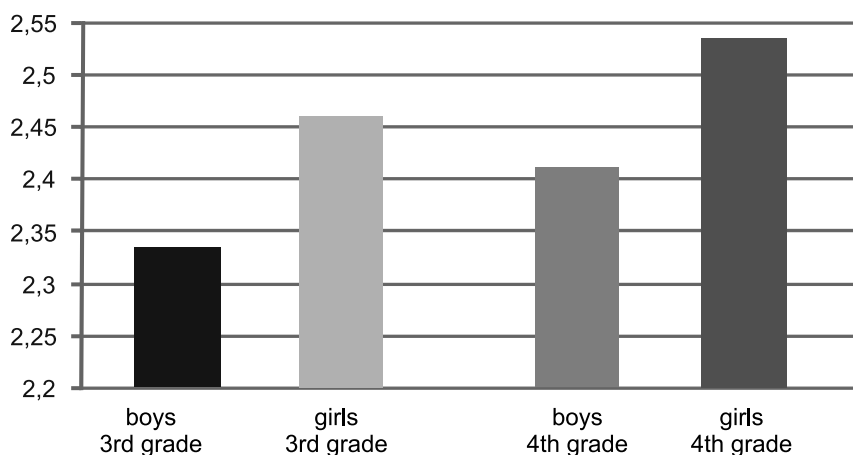
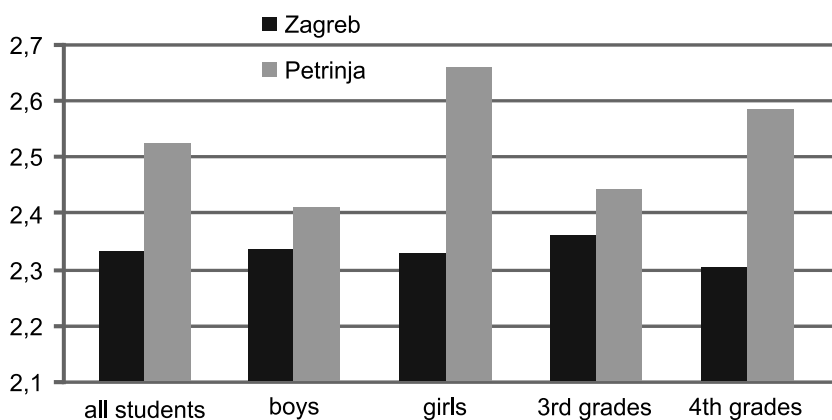


Figure 4 Mean values according to gender and age

Table 2 Mean values according to gender and age with respect to place of residence and t-test results

Compared groups*	N1	N2	M1	M2	t-test	p	SD1	SD2
A	63	77	2,332341	2,522727	-2,989880	0,003306	0,421485	0,331946
B	30	42	2,337500	2,409226	-0,760219	0,449677	0,443645	0,356025
C	33	35	2,327652	2,658929	-4,107500	0,000113	0,407160	0,241749
D	31	33	2,360887	2,441288	-0,938677	0,351539	0,290344	0,384940
E	32	44	2,304688	2,583807	-3,023320	0,003434	0,521646	0,274902

* (Compared groups A Zagreb-Petrinja all students; B Zagreb-Petrinja boys; C Zagreb-Petrinja girls; D Zagreb-Petrinja 3rd grades; E Zagreb-Petrinja 4th grades; N1 and N2-Number of students in the first/second group, M1 and M2-mean results)

**Figure 5** Mean values according to gender and age with respect to the place of residence

T-test showed that there is a statistically significant difference between Zagreb and Petrinja ($p = 0.003306$). Statistically significant difference by gender was also found for girls ($p = 0.000113$), while the comparison with regard to age showed statistically significant difference between the fourth grades ($p = 0.003434$).

One of the reasons for the differences between urban and rural area could be the fact that children in urban areas are generally more exposed to foreign language; hence their expectations of language teaching in schools might be higher than in rural areas. The difference could perhaps also be attributed to the fact that two different teachers, i.e. different teaching styles were involved.

It needs to be noted that the data provided here are insufficient to make generalizations since the number of types of tasks used in the questionnaire is relatively

small, but also because a single research method (a questionnaire) was used to obtain the data. In addition, the obtained data are a result of the respondents' self-reports. Therefore we should not exclude the possibility of error, due to subjectivity, i.e. there is a possibility that the respondents gave answers in line with what may be considered desirable, thus actually losing credibility.

CONCLUSION

The obtained results show that the tested sample expressed a relatively high level of task motivation for the text-based tasks given in the questionnaire (mean value of 2.437 compared to the maximum value of 3). However, more detailed analysis of the results showed no statistically significant differences in task motivation for individual types of tasks, but the obtained values were somewhat higher for the reproductive types of tasks both regarding writing and reading, while for independent sentence writing, i.e. productive types of tasks, the obtained values were lower. The reasons can be found in the fact that the subjects in our research were early English language learners, due to whose developmental abilities at this age the teaching focus is mainly on reproductive activities.

Apart from the difference regarding types of tasks, the difference in task motivation was also found regarding gender, with the obtained mean values being lower for boys compared with girls in the third, and the fourth grade. Another interesting finding is the statistically significant difference between rural and urban area, where higher values were obtained in the rural area. However, this aspect should be explored in more detail using a larger sample of respondents, a larger number of research instruments and including a higher number of relevant factors.

Despite the above mentioned limitations, we believe that the results obtained in this study certainly open possibilities for further, more comprehensive research in this area.

REFERENCES

- Celce-Murcia, M., Olshtain, E. (2002). *Discourse and Context in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Darian, Steven (1969). *Backgrounds of Modern Language Teaching: Sweet, Jespersen, and Palmer*: U: *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 8, pp. 545-550. USA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Dornyei, Z. (2001). *New Themes and Approaches in Second Language Motivation Research*: U: *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 21, pp. 43-59. Cambridge University Press.
- Jelić, A.B. (2004). *Vještina čitanja na stranom jeziku: Teorijska ishodišta*: U: *Strani jezici*, Vol. 33, No.1-2, pp. 19-33. Zagreb: Odjel za strane jezike Hrvatskog filološkog društva.

- Kruhan, M. (1999). Vještine čitanja i pisanja u nastavi stranih jezika: U: Vrhovac, Y. i sur. *Strani jezik u osnovnoj školi*, pp. 139-157. Zagreb: Naklada Naprijed.
- Mihaljević Djigunović, J. (1998). *Uloga afektivnih faktora u učenju stranoga jezika*. Zagreb: Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu.
- Mihaljević Djigunović, J. (1999). O afektivnim aspektima: U: Vrhovac, Y. i sur. *Strani jezik u osnovnoj školi*, pp. 31-38. Zagreb: Naklada Naprijed.
- Petrović, E. (1988). *Teorija nastave stranih jezika*. Zagreb: Školska knjiga.
- Piaget, J. (1963). *Origins of intelligence in children*. New York: Norton
- Vilke, M. (1999). Obrada rječnika: U: Vrhovac, Y. i sur. *Strani jezik u osnovnoj školi*, pp. 179-186. Zagreb: Naklada Naprijed.
- Vrhovac, Y. i sur. (1999). *Strani jezik u osnovnoj školi*. Zagreb: Naklada Naprijed.