

Teaching English to young learners in Osijek

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The question of an optimal age for foreign language learning has been in the focus of interest of both linguists and educationalists for a long time. The fact that young children when exposed to a language in a natural environment acquire it with almost no effort to a high degree of fluency influenced the spread of the view that an early start of foreign language learning in a classroom setting could also be advantageous.

With the development of psychology and psycholinguistics many empirical studies were undertaken in all parts of the world, based on the hypothesis that young children are better language learners than older children and adults.

In spite of systematic research the question of optimal age for foreign language learning has not yet been answered. However, in many countries the introduction of a foreign language in the early school years has been seriously considered.

Early foreign language learning projects are still in progress. Very often they are obstructed by difficulties. Some of these projects and the problems related to them are discussed in this paper.

In the late sixties two enthusiastic kindergarten teachers, who were also trained primary school teachers of English, started a project of teaching English in Osijek kindergartens. The project was sponsored by the Osijek factory SAPONIA, and both the parents and the children were very happy. The children learned some English rhymes, they played games and sang songs in English. Imitating their teachers and tape-recorded models, the children acquired some English rhythmic patterns and the pronunciation of English sounds. This could have been a good start for further learning of English if it had been immediately followed up by systematic tuition.

However, when these children left kindergarten and entered primary school, whatever they had learned in English was soon forgotten, because it was not before the 4th grade that they started learning English as a school subject. In order to bridge this long gap and provide continuity in English language learning, a primary school in the centre of Osijek introduced English in the first grade. This was done in 1972/73, in agreement with and at the expense of the children's parents, since the school could not provide any other means of payment for the tuition.

Two years later this example was followed by another primary school, which introduced English in the third grade. The young learners in both schools met their English teachers twice a week for 45 minutes. The basic material used in teaching was *Time for English*, designed for teaching children in a Zagreb language school.

In 1976/77 the pupils who had started learning English in the kindergarten and continued learning it in the first grade of primary school were in the fifth grade. So were the pupils of the other school, who started learning English in the third grade. It was hypothesized that different length of tuition in a formal classroom setting might show differences in achievement results. Therefore it was decided to carry out an investigation in which the results achieved by learning English as a school subject for five, three and two years would be compared. Six classes from five primary schools were chosen to be tested by the same measuring instruments. 63 of the selected pupils had been taught English for five years, 68 for three years and 94 for two years. All of them were approximately of the same age, eleven years, and attended the fifth grade of primary school.

The teachers were consulted about the topics and the vocabulary that was covered by their teaching and the pupils were observed in class for some time before the measuring instruments were decided upon. Four sets of tests were prepared. The first three, which were intended for testing listening comprehension, reading comprehension and competence in some basic grammatical structures, were administered to all pupils and the data were collected in written form. For the fourth test, which was an interview, only a limited number of pupils was selected, not more than ten from each class. The pupils chosen to be interviewed were the ones who had been learning English only in school, who had no private lessons or any other kind of tuition apart from school. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. In all four sets of tests visual materials were used as stimuli or prompts.

The data collected by testing were thoroughly analysed and mutually compared. The analysis showed some instability, probably because significant variables, like general intelligence, motivation, language aptitude had not been considered. In spite of that, the investigation revealed the expected differences in achievement results. The differences were greater in receptive skills, which shows that longer exposure to a foreign language in a formal classroom setting influences the devel-

opment of receptive skills to a higher degree than that of productive skills. This could be explained by too many pupils in each class, often more than thirty.

It was interesting to notice that some structures were better acquired on the productive level by pupils who had learned English for a shorter period of time. This is probably because they had been exposed to intensive grammatical drills in the 4th and 5th grade.

The tendency to omit function words in elicited utterances was strong with all the pupils involved in the project.

The findings obtained by this investigation were taken as a hypothesis to be proved by another project. In 1979/80 the pupils involved in the former project were in the 8th grade of primary school. It was agreed with the teachers that the same pupils should be tested again, to see whether the differences in their knowledge of English increased or, perhaps disappeared. It must be mentioned that the same textbooks and teaching materials were used with all the pupils of parallel classes, without regard to length of previous tuition.

The testing was carried out in three steps. First, the listening comprehension of the pupils was tested, then their reading comprehension, and finally, their competence in use of basic grammatical structures. The data this time were gathered only in the written form. The corpus of the data was compared to the data of the earlier investigation and the comparison revealed the following:

- a) Pupils that had started learning English in the 4th grade achieved significantly poorer results in the listening comprehension test, both in the 5th and the 8th grades. This proves that longer tuition in a formal classroom environment has a very positive effect on the development of listening comprehension ability.
- b) Differences in the reading comprehension ability in the 8th grade were found to be strikingly small. This was probably caused by intensive use of written English texts in the higher grades of primary school.
- c) The results of the test in grammatical competence indicated that some basic structures had been better acquired by pupils with a shorter tuition period. This refers especially to irregular forms. Pupils that had learned English for eight years showed a stronger tendency towards false analogy and intralinguistic errors.
- d) In the grammatical competence test the pupils were asked to translate ten simple sentences from Croatian into English. The sentences formed a dialogue and they contained only such structures and vocabulary whose equivalents were judged to be well known to all the pupils because they were using them correctly in elicited speech acts. This task proved to be the most difficult one for all the pupils. Not more than 15% of the pupils examined translated the sentences of the dialogue in an acceptable way. This fact should not be surprising if we have in mind that in the sixties and seventies translation was very rarely used in the classroom. Grammatical forms and structures were practised and drilled in grammatical dialogues prompted by visual aids.

e) A thorough analysis of language errors made by the pupils examined indicates that a longer classroom tuition period helps the learners to induce rules by which the foreign language functions, which often causes intralingual errors.

In spite of some deficiencies in the measuring instruments applied, the findings based on the data give some insight into early language learning and its positive effects on foreign language acquisition.

In 1977/78 five primary schools in Osijek joined the Zagreb project of early language learning and introduced English in the 2nd grade, as the project required. Without any financial stimulus the teachers worked on the project with great devotion.

Longitudinal observation of young learners in class inspired in 1979 an investigation focused on auditory perception of young learners. It is often supposed that children, unlike adults, can perceive and repeat foreign language utterances accurately. However, observing nine-year-old learners it was noticed that they very often wrongly identify the utterances. When repeating phrases or shorter sentences after their teacher or a recorded model, the young learners showed a tendency towards omitting most of the function words. In addition, if they heard a content word for the first time, they often identified it either as an English word they already knew, or as a Croatian word which sounded similar. The English word »hide« was identified as the Croatian word »hajde«, »run« as »vrana«, »rooster« as »luster« and so on. To get more insight into this phenomenon a study was undertaken to investigate the relationship between elicited imitation and comprehension of utterances. Two sets of controlled imitation tests, combined with picture identification tasks, were administered to 73 nine-year-old learners of English. The results revealed that with young learners accurate repetition of perceived speech correlates with language competence and comprehension just as it does with older learners. It was noticed that the written form of words and phrases could help the learners in identification of words in the correct segmentation of speech sequences. Therefore it is advisable to make the period between pure oral tuition and the beginning of reading as short as possible.

In the eighties there was no investigation concerning early language learning in Osijek.

In 1993/94 some Osijek schools joined the new Zagreb project focused on the development of communicative competence. Three primary schools introduced English to one class of first graders, and three schools introduced German. The first source of difficulty was to find trained teachers of these languages who would, with no previous experience and completely unprepared, venture to start teaching these young learners. Luckily, the already experienced teachers in Zagreb offered great help in the form of demonstration classes with their pupils. The videocassette »English with first graders« also served as a useful guide. Nevertheless, some of the teachers who initially planned to carry out the practical side of the experiment gave

up. Of the three teachers that started working with the first graders only one kept on, and she now successfully teaches the second graders.

In one school the teacher who gave up was replaced by an undergraduate student of English, who had just returned from England where she had worked as an au pair. Although it was meant to be a stopgap arrangement, it became a satisfactory long-term solution. Her enthusiasm, her love for children, her readiness to experiment and gain experience have made this young trainee teacher into a very successful teacher of English to young learners. This year she teaches both the first graders and the second graders in her English classroom, which she has painted and decorated with the help of her small pupils.

The Osijek experience indicates that lack of competent teachers may wreck all the good results of a project. Whatever results the project might achieve, foreign languages cannot be introduced into the first grade curriculum if there are no teachers able and willing to teach young learners.

One of the solutions to this problem is the possibility to allow some undergraduate students specialization in early foreign language teaching. This could be done by offering them related elective subjects in the final year of their studies. Students who were willing and felt fit to teach young learners could in that way gain some experience and the necessary training. This would be an opportunity for them to put to the test their own skill and aptness for such work.

To confirm this hypothesis, the English Language Department of Osijek University carried out an experiment. In the spring term of 1994/95 an elective course in teaching young learners was offered to the 3rd and 4th year students. Not more than ten students were expected to sign up. Contrary to all expectations more than twenty student expressed their wish to take this course. Since the group for this course has to be small for practical reasons, only 12 students were admitted, and the 3rd year students were promised to have a similar course next year. Although all the students in the group showed great interest for teaching English to young learners, it is impossible to know how many of them will after graduation take up early language teaching, but if some of them do, they will at least not be completely unprepared.

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NASTAVA ENGLSKOG JEZIKA UČENICIMA MLAĐE DOBI U OSIJEKU

Prva istraživanja nastave engleskog jezika učenicima ranog školskog uzrasta u Osijeku su započela 1976/77. Uspoređivani su rezultati postignuti nastavom engleskog jezika kod učenika petog razreda osnovne škole koji su učili taj jezik u različitom trajanju, tj. pet, tri ili dvije godine. Isti učenici testirani su ponovo u završnom razredu osnovne škole. Oba ispitivanja pokazala su da rano uvođenje stranog jezika u nastavne programe ima određenih prednosti.

1993/94. nekoliko osječkih osnovnih škola pridružilo se zagrebačkom projektu koji ima za cilj razvijanje komunikativnih sposobnosti učenika u stranom jeziku od prvog razreda osnovne škole. Realizacija projekta otežana je zbog nedostatka nastavnika stranih jezika osposobljenih za nastavu učenicima mlade dobi.