

Foreign Language in the Albanian Primary School, Benefits and Problems			Linguistics
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Abstract			
<p>Learning a foreign language in the Primary School is already an incontestable reality not only in European countries, but also in Albania. This is conditioned by different factors such as political, economic, social and cultural factors. This article focuses on the foreign language learning benefits and problems in the Albanian primary school. -What are some of the scientific data to the benefit of the foreign language learning at an early age? What is the attitude of the students who are now studying at the second level of the 9-year-long school? -Is the formation of the foreign language teachers in the Primary School a problem that calls Education Offices' attention due to the specific nature of that teaching? What are the pedagogical methods that should be applied to an active, motivated, rich and full of variety teaching? -What is the ratio of oral learning to written learning? Is the continuity between different levels of the 9-year-long-school taken care of? After a long-lasting fieldwork through studying, analysis, reflection and questionnaires among pupils and teachers involved in the foreign language learning and teaching process in the primary schools and the second level of the 9-year long schools of the town of Gjirokastra as well as these pupils' parents, we have tried to resolve some of the problems pointed out in our paper.</p>			

Learning foreign languages in primary school is a very current concern. Nowadays, the need for early acquisition of foreign languages is an inevitable process in school life. The main objective of this teaching / learning process is to favour balanced bilingualism in order for children to be able to use both languages (or more) learned in school later in life.

Claude HAGEGE (1996) in his book "L'enfant aux deux Langues" is of the opinion that any child who is confronted with a foreign language early in his/her life will learn a second foreign language more easily than another child." The success of a bilingual early education provides us in a way with a security contract for the later multilingualism.

Issues such as

- Must a foreign language be taught in primary school?
- Does early bilingualism pose advantages or disadvantages for children's development?
- Must we encourage learning foreign languages in elementary school?
- Does early learning of foreign languages impair children's cognitive and general development?
- Does a child learn a foreign language better and faster than an adult?

have been addressed even in Albania, in the 1998-1999 school year with the generalization of the experimentation during the 1992-1993 school-year about the introduction of foreign language learning in primary school. According to the decision of the Ministry of Education "Albanian children will benefit from learning foreign languages since the third grade of primary school, with two classes per week" (MASH, 1998) "Foreign language is considered as a separate subject, with defined objectives and well defined programs" (MASH, 1991).

What are some advantages of learning foreign languages in elementary school?

- Children who start learning a foreign language at an early stage will be likely to not have a strong native accent.

It must be said that it is easier to get into a foreign language when one is young and has confidence in him/herself, when there is no fear of disrupting social image if one makes an error or you are not afraid of someone's gaze, which at a more advanced age you might consider as critical.

- There are sure advantages on the intellectual plan related to personality development. The introduction of early foreign language learning leads to higher performances in the native language as well provided that competence in the native language is at a higher level at the moment foreign language learning starts.
- We also need to emphasize the importance on the personality plan. By exploring another language and culture rather early, children will experience an intellectual openness and will have chances to understand the others. They will also have access to new elements which will help them take others into account and will appreciate harmony and adaptation.

Primary school children are taught foreign languages in order to understand that:

- Their native language is one among many other different languages.
- There are other people speaking other languages.
- Foreign languages can be learned; this is so true that their teacher serves as a model.

Early foreign language learning is favoured by many general and special factors.

Firstly, by the psychological advantages of children in the process of learning. The neurologists Penfield and Roberts (1959) and Lennerberg (1967), as well as other scholars such as Oyama (1976/1979), Scovel (1969/1981), use the term sensitive period to characterise a time period during which children display a higher ability of language acquisition than during other periods of life.

Secondly, the social-cultural factor also plays a decisive role, because, among others, it could encourage or impair foreign language learning. This is a theoretical stance embodied in three types of practical positions.

- Tolerance towards what is different.
- Interest in what is different.
- Acquisition of cultural models of what is different.

Isn't learning a foreign language the best way of getting acquainted with another culture? The foreign language class is the moment when the culture of a given country gets in touch with the foreign culture that is being taught. This recognition of "otherness" constitutes the first step towards socialization and the removal of social prejudices like racism, lack of tolerance, fear of the other.

Thirdly, the development of the children's personality. An individual who speaks a foreign language possesses a supplementary tool for satisfying his/her curiosity (to explore people, places), for reflection and creativity (to produce texts in a foreign language). Foreign language learning plays a complementary role in the civic education. Those who speak foreign languages are in a better position to benefit from the advantages of the European citizenship and from the right to freely circulate in the European Union.

Fourthly, it is the political factor. The place where our children grow up in not just their birthplace, but also united Europe and as Europeans, not as Albanians or French, they should take it into account along with the globalization of markets, services, people.

To transform an Albanian, Italian or French child into a European child is possible only if the process starts in time because his/her social identity is formed before the age of ten. If we want a child to grow up feeling potentially bilingual, then the primary reason for teaching foreign languages at primary school is clearly political.

Fifthly, the environmental factor plays an important role in favour of learning foreign languages from the primary cycle. Children grow up in an environment where, apart from their mother tongue, through various sources they come into contact with other languages that they would be willing to learn. Thus, the radio, television, press, computer, adds, magazines etc create a “foreign” microclimate to which children get accustomed very quickly. The geographical factor on the other hand has its own impact on the children’s ear as to the neighbouring languages. Multiple exchanges in people, goods, cultural and linguistic values, preference for music, movies, literature from neighbouring countries facilitates the acquisition of the language of the neighbouring countries a great deal. There are numerous examples in this respect in the acquisition of the Italian and Greek language.

The selection of a foreign language at primary school is not done merely for children’s scholarly and professional future, it is rather done so that they develop a linguistic ability that will enable continuation with other languages.

Extensive reading on this problem, the questionnaires for sixth-grade students in 9-year schools of the city of Gjirokastër (we selected this age to look at specific results of this process as well as to identify problems), talks with the teachers who teach foreign languages at this level as well as with various parents enable us to raise some hypotheses on the conditions of success in learning foreign languages at primary school.

First hypothesis

Classes at this level should be short and frequent in order to facilitate students’ short term memory. Of special interest are answers that more than 75% of the students would wish that the foreign language was taught more than 3 times a week.

Second hypothesis

It is not necessary that writing is introduced too soon. During early teaching of foreign languages it is speaking that should be privileged for at least three reasons:

- a. Language is first and foremost used for mainly oral exchanges.
- b. Our main pedagogical objective is to learn to communicate and oral communication situations far outnumber written ones.
- c. The memory of children aged 8-10 is mainly auditory.

However, to give priority to speaking does not mean to forget writing. It should be emphasized, though, that perception precedes production. During the early stages, children, themselves, will want to write what they hear. A good deal of the surveyed think that more work should be devoted to writing. We wholly support this because written exercises enable the achievement of three main objectives.

- Children become aware of the differences between their mother tongue and the foreign language.
- Writing helps develop in students the ability to know how to find information in foreign texts.
- It reinforces children’s motivation as it enables the creation of various communication situations such as writing letters to pen friends etc.

Writing and speaking are closely related to each other. However, at primary school language learning should start orally and writing should be introduced at a later stage.

During the first stage, class should be entirely oral based on listening, visual stimuli and other nonverbal elements that accompany speech. Attention during this phase is paid to the pronunciation and learning of words/sentences.

During the second stage, the development of the lesson will be based on listening-picture-label in order to gradually link speaking to writing. The students should be encouraged to pay attention to the graphical words and then to write the names of the characters, countries and actions that they remember from the labels. This work is mainly based on imitation and habit formation.

During the third stage the gradual link between speaking and writing occurs along with necessary explanations about the way the graphical system functions. Also the common points with and differences from the corresponding native system are identified.

During the fourth stage writing is introduced as an activity in its own right. During this stage written reproductions or productions are done as well as questions, answers, written exercises, stories, letters etc.

Third hypothesis

During the lesson, while we need to draw the students' attention, we should also take their differing abilities into account. It would be better if during a lesson the number of the methodic activities was as large as possible. The more they are, the greater the children's chances for success would be in at least one of them. So the students would not fear failure. They find in this case language learning valuable. Moreover, the children would not be bored during the class as they will be doing a different activity every 50-10 minutes.

The foreign language class should be considered as transferring a part of their life to the class setting, especially for primary school children who are so related to the concrete and need a context or familiar element to relate to in order to learn (Dhima: 2004).

Fourth hypothesis

The various learning activities need to be supplemented with non-verbal tools such as:

1. Auditive tools

Voice recording is necessary especially in case the teacher is not a native speaker of the language that is being taught. Video-audio tapes/ CDs play a crucial role in the correct perception and understanding of the foreign language. Recorded materials should be accompanied by visual elements in order to help those children who have a visual-cinesthetic memory. It should be noted that the new and the unknown that these materials contain should become known to the students preliminarily by the teacher.

The auditive tools could be songs, rhymes which should be accompanied with the right movements and gestures or they could be danced to. These are indispensable in teaching foreign languages because

- a) children love songs and rhymes.
- b) Through them children acquire the prosody of the foreign language. 90% of the surveyed support this.

We believe that the objective of use of these auditive stimuli is threefold.

1. It helps in listening to and perceiving the spoken foreign language.
2. it helps in the acquisition of the phonology, syntax and the vocabulary used in the spoken language.
3. They are also aesthetically pleasing.

2. Visual tools

They underlie one or more pictures in illustrated manuals, movie sequences, video-tapes, cartoons, movies for kids etc. It also presupposes real situations with gestures or concrete movements as well as real objects. Balbi (1997) calls these realia. They are widely used during the lesson to support activities such as:

- the presentation of the vocabulary
- interactive practice
- puzzles
- identification/description practices, role plays, story telling etc.

Their use enables an instant establishment of the relation between the word and its meaning at the sentence level. Visual tools also help memorization as they can be seen, felt and used by children.

As an illustration of the fact that in teaching a foreign language a good teacher should know how to combine what is necessary with entertainment is the positive answer that students gave to the question “Do you like playing in foreign language learning”

However, this has to be done very carefully, not play for the sake of play but it should be utilized for the achievement of the program objectives. We emphasize that the teacher should know well the rules and strategies of the play, their typologies according to the children’s age, preferences and topics. The play supports the interactive, communicative activities because it serves the children as a tool for the discovery of the world and requires the use of the already acquired skills. It is used not only for understanding, but also for making oneself understood in a foreign language.

Fifth hypothesis

We are of the opinion that some new activities in the form of a ritual should be introduced in foreign language classes.

- Dramatization: at the beginning of each class the students should “appear on the stage”. In this way they will be given the chance to develop the ability to express themselves orally without any fear of erring. Through dramatization, the word is accompanied by the gesture.
- Description of the weather. Each day a student should describe the weather for that day.

Sixth hypothesis

Despite the efforts to bring it closer to real communication situations, learning a foreign language in a class setting remains a relatively artificial process. The need to speak in a foreign language is not felt immediately, therefore the students’ motivation is an important factor.

Some students seem to be motivated from the beginning; they are attracted by the prestige of the foreign language they are going to study, they often see a social need to write to a pen friend, to travel.

They may even be encouraged by their family. Foreign language learning should strive to arise interest through the use of entertaining learning activities and the use of audio-visual means.

These hypothesis, we believe, would constitute a big part of the conditions leading to success in foreign language learning in the primary school level. However, the reality of the foreign language classes in the schools where our survey took place indicates that we are faced with shortages and difficulties of various natures.

- The classrooms where the foreign language is taught is no different from the other classrooms where the other subjects are taught. The creation of a “foreign microclimate” is motivating to the student as well as the teacher. The teacher should have all the necessary didactic equipment in order to be able to convey the content of the foreign language lesson and to achieve his/her objectives.
- The number of the students in the classroom is problematic. A class of 32 students is rather difficult to manage as it can be too noisy and tiring. The creation of small groups of students would be of great help.
- The teachers’ constant qualification. There are hardly any qualification courses for teachers teaching at this level.
- Motivation should affect teachers as well as students. The students are often as motivated as their teachers. It is a common fact that enthusiasm can be conveyed. A teacher’s bad mood can affect his/her students too for in this way he/she may reduce chances of success. For teacher to feel motivated, the creation of a suitable working environment and material stimulation are necessary. However, these are shortages that are found not only in the city of Gjirokaster and they need immediate solution.

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