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EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN CROATIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

We give here an account of the 1973 Zagreb project introducing early learning of English because a number of strategies used then served to a certain extent as a model for the 1991 project. Also, a number of tentative conclusions about the process of children's acquisition of a foreign language reached then are tested in the present project.

In the years following World War II compulsory primary education was extended from four to seven and soon to eight years. Russian was introduced as the compulsory foreign language in the fifth grade of primary school. But in the first grade of secondary school children could choose English, German or French as a second foreign language. Year 1949 saw the Cominform events and the split between former Yugoslavia and former USSR. Russian lost its priority and became only one of the foreign languages to be chosen from. It was then that English began to dominate the educational scene in Croatia and became the first and most popular foreign language. In the course of time foreign language learning was moved back from grade five to grade four (age 10).

In 1973 a pilot project was organized in Zagreb to investigate the possibilities of foreign language introduction at a still earlier age. The pilot dealt predominantly with English, but some classes of German and French were included at a later stage.

The ultimate aim of introducing early learning of a foreign language was the production of competent bilingual speakers throughout the country.

Our concern was when and how to start a foreign language to ensure a sound basis for realizing our goal – a bilingual speaker. Appealing though the idea of a community of bilingual children might be, we are, for reasons of economy, interested in it only marginally – as a possible by-product – our main target is the bilingual adult capable of using a foreign language in his life and work.

The reasons for an early start seem to stem from three different sources:

- the findings of neurophysiology, and developmental psycholinguistics
- empirical and experimental evidence derived from the results of acquiring a second language by groups and individuals through a variety of immersion programmes organised in the countries where the target language is indigenous
- empirical and experimental evidence derived from the results obtained by formal classroom tuition in different sociocultural settings in the learners' mother-tongue environments.

We must be cautious in considering neurophysiological evidence which, as Roberts (1973:105) has already cautioned, is derived from the study of the abnormal. Devel-

opmental psycholinguistics, on the other hand, observes the behaviour of children acquiring their first language (L1), thus neither of these investigations is directly connected to the acquisition of a second language (L2). Nevertheless, a number of hypotheses (highly relevant for the study of acquisition of an L2 at an early age) about the linguistic and intellectual development of the child can be drawn from the evidence collected by both neurophysiology and developmental psycholinguistics.

Experimental and empirical evidence from different programmes conducted in the L2 country, used in designing programmes for formal classroom teaching in the learners' L1 country, can be vastly misleading, as so many environmental and operational factors are as a rule entirely different – time of exposure to L2 and the sociocultural setting in which learning takes place being the most obvious. But once differences are identified, evidence from such programmes can be utilised in classroom situations, especially when it offers insights into the acquisition of an L2, which seems to have – from the little we know about it at present – certain universal features.

Experimental and empirical evidence from classroom teaching of an L2 in the learners' own country should not be generalised before the conditions in different programmes have been identified and verified, the variables being so different. Differing motivation and attitudes of learners towards a particular L2 can account, for example, for differences in the results obtained.

The only logical conclusion that can be inferred from what has been said is that, valuable as it is, evidence stemming from any sources must be treated with caution and regarded as raw material needing to be further processed and investigated rather than used as a premise on which to build theories about L2 acquisition at an early age. And if it ever comes to theories, it will probably be possible to prove them only in specific social, linguistic and cultural setting in which the research was conducted.

In 1973 a project began in Zagreb with the aim of providing evidence concerning the process of learning English at an early age in the formal school environment.

In the first stage, completed in school year 1973-74, research was conducted to find out to what degree (if any) children learn English with more ease before puberty than learners who have passed Lenneberg's "critical period" (1967). Sixty beginners aged nine and 60 beginners aged 17-19 were supplied with the same language material, taught by the same method and approximately the same techniques of work, for the same period of time. Care was taken that both materials and techniques used should suit learners of both age groups - pedagogically an almost impossible task.

The results proved that there were differences between the pre- and post-puberty groups. The post-puberty group had certain advantages, such as more insight into the functioning of language, the experience of studying their mother tongue and some other language, intellectual maturity, and so they were faster learners of structures and

vocabulary. The pre-puberty group were far superior in mastering the phonetic system. On the level of pronunciation the most striking differences were noticed between two groups: the older group as a rule used mother tongue approximations of English phonemes. The deviations from the norm were such that they sometimes blurred the meaning of utterances. The younger group reached a considerably higher standard of pronunciation, using the authentic English phonemes and intonation patterns in most cases.

The findings of the investigation were consistent with Lenneberg's statement about "language learning blocks", which become frequent after puberty (Lenneberg, 1967).

The result of the investigation led us to conclude that learners should start foreign languages well before puberty. This would provide them with sufficient time to attain a good command of the phonetic system with a limited corpus of structures and vocabulary, and provide them with a feeling of security and self-confidence as regards the foreign language. Once they pass the age of the "maturation of the brain" they will be able to proceed to more subtle and abstract uses of the foreign language (Vilke, 1976a).

The second stage of the Project started in 1975, the aim of the investigation being to find out at what age between six and nine it would be best to start a foreign language at school, and what factors play a role in the learning process at this age.

Seventy children aged six to nine were observed during a year-long English course at a language school in Zagreb. The results provided the tentative answer that eight to nine would be the optimum age at which to start English for most children, and that six to seven would suit those of above average intelligence. But these results were valid only in the particular sociocultural environment in Zagreb and should not be generalised without further research. The children in question came from middle-class families who had sent their children on an English course for a variety of reasons, one of them being realisation of the need to be able to communicate in a foreign language (especially English), and another "to keep up with the Joneses", whose children also studied English.

As at this stage the project was conducted in a foreign-language school where the courses were not part of the compulsory educational system provided by the government for the entire population, it was evident that the motivation to study English (which could not have automatically been expected in this age group) came from parents. The parents' attitude was positive, and this was helpful in the initial stages. During the course of study, however, the children developed their own attitudes towards English which very largely depended on their personal attitude towards the teacher. It was observed that an easy relationship, and a positive emotional link with the teacher, accounted for the greater part of the success of individual children.

Children progressed through the language corpus making their own discoveries of its system (for example "It must be *cars* for three"). They were guided through it by the teaching materials designed to provide an appropriate context for the five functors first found by Dulay and Burt (1973) to be internalised by groups of Spanish and Japanese children acquiring English in the U.S.A.

Unfortunately, the "natural order hypothesis" worked only where there was no negative transfer from L1. Both interference and developmental errors were observed, which was not in keeping with one of Dulay and Burt's statistics in which they found only 3% interference errors (Vilke, 1976b). So the empirical evidence supported the view that acquiring a second language and learning a foreign language are different processes, and it may be dangerous to confuse the two.

The third stage of the project started in 1977. English was introduced for children in the second grade (eight years old) in five primary schools in Zagreb, on an experimental basis.

The schools chosen for the experiment were situated in suburban areas in which there was little tradition of communication in any foreign language. On the other hand, the situation in these schools would resemble fairly accurately the situation in any suburban area or village in the country, and therefore should be valuable as a pilot experiment prior to the introduction of foreign languages into the second grade on a large scale.

Motivation

Before we started any teaching we tried to obtain certain clues about the attitude of our students to things English. Every child was interviewed by a member of the project, but not his future teacher.

Children were asked 13 questions – nine of them connected with the child's idea of English and the English, and four in connection with their parents' and friends' attitudes to English. Gardner and Lambert (1972) have in the course of their studies proved that "parents who are instrumentally oriented appear to pass their orientation on to their children" (p. 128). We could not expect to have parents motivated with respect to their children studying English, but we feared a negative attitude on their part which might cause very serious damage to the entire undertaking.

Analysis of the interviews showed the following attitudinal characteristics of our potential learners:

1. They were looking forward to the English classes.
2. They expected routine school work.
3. A minority of children realised that learning English could be useful. As a rule children displayed instrumental orientation towards the language.

4. They did not show much desire to visit English-speaking countries.
5. The subjects gave a relevant opinion of English spoken in Croatia.
6. In the children's families there was no tradition of cultural influences coming from English-speaking countries. Parents were fairly indifferent to their children studying English: they did not encourage it, but neither did they oppose it.

All this led us to conclude that the task ahead was a very responsible one. The raw material we had to mould was in the hands of teachers. If they managed to motivate children to study English at that early age, it might have a life-long beneficial effect not only on their ability to use English but also upon their attitude to foreign languages and other nations in general. One school year should suffice to find out if the learners had become used to the new subject and developed their own attitudes towards it.

Each group of 12-15 students had two periods of English per week on a regular basis. Another interview on motivation was conducted at the end of May 1978. The objective was to find out whether attitudes towards English classes had changed and, if so, in what direction. This time they were given nine questions, from which a picture of their likes and dislikes could be formed. It was considered important to hear their explanation of what they liked, and what they found difficult in English lessons. The parents' attitude was tested again to find out whether it had changed in the course of the year's study.

Analysis of the second interview answers indicated that a year-long learning of English had changed the children' attitude of moderate curiosity to a desire to proceed with learning English.

1. Approximately 70% of the children liked English classes because the content was adjusted to their interests and because they felt free and encouraged by the teacher. Thirty percent of the children enjoyed them because they felt they were getting somewhere in their attempt to learn how to communicate in English.
2. The attitude of the parents changed from one of general disinterest to encouragement of children to go on.

One general conclusion drawn from both interviews was that even in environments where there was no positive orientation towards a foreign language, children could be motivated to study it if they were approached in the right way, and their motivation could influence their parents' attitudes towards it. This, in turn, could have a beneficial effect on the international orientation of the whole community. In our particular case the process was somewhat different from that observed by Gardner and Lambert in which "parents with positive attitudes towards the other language community more actively encouraged their children to learn that language" (Gardner

& Lambert, 1972:6), as here it was the motivation of the children that caused a change of attitude in the parents.

Van Parreren (1976) argues that an early start in teaching foreign languages may create motivational problems: learners would have to spend such long time in learning that they would lose enthusiasm for the language. A later start and a more concentrated effort could avoid problems of long range motivation. However, this is not a convincing argument. The basic idea of introducing English into school curricula on an experimental basis at an early age was to motivate learners to make use of the language. It seems only natural that the more familiar they become with it and the better they can manipulate it, the more willing they are likely to be to use it.

Motivation to learn English, after a year of study, developed significantly. Ninety-nine percent of the children at the end of the first year of learning expressed a strong desire to continue.

We hope that this has had a strong effect on moulding their life-long attitude towards English as a foreign language and foreign languages in general, preventing the development of ethnocentric tendencies later in life. (Ethnocentrism is defined as stereotyped negative feelings toward foreign countries and peoples).

Our young learners have become acquainted with the concept of English in a way that corresponds to their ideas of "interesting" and "amusing". Most associations with it have been pleasant: no fear of punishment (bad marks, ridicule, etc.) – so often a permanent companion of school activities – has been present, and even influence of their orientation has been observed in the changed attitude of the parents. In this respect, the project can be said to have been a success.

No "balance effect" was observed in our learners. The balance effect is a hypothesis that the more time one spends on L2, the less well one learns L1, with consequent detrimental effects on the native language, on education and on the intellectual development of the child (Jakobovitz, 1971:52).

Learners' intelligence was tested by verbal and non-verbal intelligence tests in the experimental as well as the control groups. It was observed that success in learning English positively correlated with the learners' intelligence. At the end of the first year of teaching the teachers were asked to evaluate impressionistically the children's achievement by marks from 1 to 5. Correlation between intelligence and success in learning was measured by the rank correlation method, and it varied for different classes between 0.58 and 0.67, which proved to be significant. This relatively high correlation is probably due to the fact that learning was designed as a cognitive rather than a habit-forming process. In Jakobovitz's well-known table showing the contribution of factors decisive for success in learning, intelligence accounts for 20% of the variance, which is less than in our case where the children whose intelligence was lower than average achieved very poor results (Jakobovitz, 1971:98). But this is probably

due to the fact that Jakobovitz had in mind a learning process based on habit-forming, which requires a smaller input of intelligence on the part of the learners.

Sources of difficulties

Performance difficulties in learning a foreign language can be expected on the level of pronunciation, command of structures and use of vocabulary, if we take in consideration a narrow linguistic (and not a wider, sociolinguistic) aspect of performance. This is the aspect that will be discussed here, as the subjects of our investigations were for the time being limited to classroom performance and the linguistic content of the course. (The content was communicatively based but most learners had no chance to test its effectiveness in real life in the immediate future.)

In our Motivation Interview, only 9% of the children claimed that they had difficulties with pronunciation. A guess could be ventured that the percentage of adult beginners who have difficulties with pronunciation would be much higher.

Observation of children's performance proved once again that they can master the phonetic system of the foreign language provided they have good models to imitate. Accordingly, complete accuracy in pronunciation, rhythm and intonation patterns should be insisted upon with no fear of overloading the learners, who should make most of the advantages their age offers. It should be remembered that one of the reasons for introducing a foreign language at this early age is to familiarise learners with a pronunciation system different from their own, at an age when they do not feel threatened by it.

Contrary to the case observed in practising the elements of English pronunciation, it was observed that some words were learned with ease, whereas other words present difficulties. In the second interview on motivation, 32% of the children complained about difficult words.

In an experiment specially devised to test this phenomenon we opposed two pairs of words, the first pair being *bottle-kettle*, and the second *television-fireplace*. Learners from three of our five experimental schools were included in the experiment – 80 children altogether. The vocabulary items were practised over the same period of time, and more or less identical techniques and aids were used. Neither children nor teachers were informed of the content of the experiment beforehand, so they could not have had any additional practice. The subjects were shown a bottle and a kettle and asked what the English words were for the objects. Fifty-six examinees were questioned on the *kettle-bottle* pair: one class did not have sufficient practice beforehand, so their answers were not accepted. Thirty children remembered the word *bottle* and only seven remembered *kettle*. It was repeated with the words *television* and *fireplace*. Out of 80 children, 74 could use the word *television*, and only 22 *fireplace*. *Kettle* and

bottle were selected because on the phonological level they are similar; in both, the same consonant cluster /t1/ occurs, and neither consist of phonemes that do not appear in our own phonological system. *Fireplace* and *television* were selected as both words are compounds: neither presents any special phonological difficulty and their length is approximately the same. However, teachers reported difficulties in practising the words *fireplace* and *kettle*. What is the source of difficulty? We hypothesised that it was due to the fact that neither fireplace nor kettle present concepts familiar to the children. (In this country, homes are rarely heated by means of fireplaces, and a kettle is not a common object in most households as we are a nation of coffee-drinkers.) The teachers found the same sort of difficulty in words like *mantelpiece, chest of drawers* and many others that would be perfectly simple for a child coming from a British cultural background.

This finding was, we thought, helpful in two ways: first it contributed a little to our understanding of the way children learn a foreign language: they seem to transfer the concepts they have acquired in their L1 into their L2, L2 being a foreign and not a second language. In this particular case they re-named spontaneous concepts with foreign names if they were identical, and had to develop non-spontaneous concepts (which are, according to Piaget, influenced by adults) if the concepts were non-existent or different in their L1 culture, this being a more complex process. One could call it a negative transfer from L1 on the conceptual level.

Several items were designed to probe children's ability to comprehend and produce structural categories. They were tested on the production of plural forms, the comprehension of spatial relations expressed by the preposition *on*, and on pronominalisation.

In front of them there was one apple, and a little further away three apples placed next to each other. They were asked to name one apple first (to recall the word) and three apples after that. Three variants of the answer were accepted as correct: *apples, three apples, these are three apples*. Only 27 out of 80 children offered a correct answer, but 95% (76 out of 80) of children used one signal of plural (*three apple, these are apple*) in their answer. It seems that children in their process of learning a foreign language understand the concept of plurality, they feel it must be marked, and they mark it, but leave out whatever (to their mind) is redundant.

A practical hint for teachers would be that they should not insist on all the plural markers when teaching this age group, and that they should be content with some signal for plurality if the child wishes to convey his own thoughts and ideas. Intensive practice of the correct forms will come at a later stage, when the child's mind works more systematically.

They had to perform two commands to show their comprehension of *on*. After the bottle and the kettle had been identified, the children were told: *put the bottle on the*

floor, put the kettle on the chair. Both commands were performed correctly by 94% of the subjects, which obviously shows that they understood the relations expressed by *on*.

Children are reluctant to use the pronouns *he* and *she* and they much prefer using nouns. The task of the test was to either confirm or reject the observed characteristic of children's speech as a regularly occurring pattern. In the test they were presented with the picture of a boy with a red ball and the picture of a girl with a blue flower. The examiner asked "Who has got the red ball – he or she?" and "Who has got the blue flower – he or she?". Eighteen children used *he* or *she* in their answers, 32 answered *boy* or *girl*, and 6 children confused the pronouns. Only 56 answers were accepted, as in one class the teacher who was present was trying to help and so influenced the children's answers. These answers could not be regarded as spontaneous, and they were not accepted.

The conclusion of the test, prompted by the observations during the lessons, is that most children understand what *he* and *she* stand for, but prefer using nouns, which probably look less abstract. This is in keeping with Carol Chomsky's investigation in which she found the process of pronominalisation in English as L1 still in the state of development in 6-7-year-old children (Chomsky, 1969). As children learning a foreign language cannot be expected to process successfully those features of language not fully mastered by their peers in their mother tongue, it would be advisable to postpone pronouns until a little later. In this way the frustrations of both teachers and learners would be avoided.

In the test several features of children's speech were observed.

1. The continual misuse of articles, which they used at random: sometimes as part of the noun, much more often not using them at all, or using them incorrectly – e.g., indefinite article with the plural – *three an apple*. This is probably due to heavy interference from the mother tongue, in which the articles do not exist. The children showed a complete inability to establish a frame of reference for articles, which Duškova (1969) considers to be the gravest form of interference. This characteristic of children's speech has been discussed in some other articles (Vilke, 1976b).
2. The existence of "prefabricated patterns", which Hakuta (1974) found in acquiring English as L2, was found in our case, too. He defined them as one of the possible strategies employed by learners when they wish to express thoughts in the target language but do not yet know the forms. In our corpus we found *Mary sit down* (after the command *Sit down*), *it's (I can see it's a cat)*, *I've got (This is I've got a flower)*. They seem to be a sign that the student tries hard to express his ideas in the foreign language.

Observations and the results of tests administered in the course of the project seem to indicate that there were several characteristics of children's performance in English as a foreign language that constantly recur in the course of the learning process:

1. They can master the phonological system of English with the greatest ease.
2. Vocabulary items for which they have not developed concepts in their own culture present difficulty.
3. They can understand basic relationships in a sentence, especially spatial relationships expressed by prepositions, and the concept of plurality, etc.
4. Difficulties in learning structural elements stem from two main sources:
   a) interference from the mother tongue (this can be seen in the use of articles):
   b) immaturity, which makes certain concepts in both the primary and secondary language hard to grasp.
5. Interference from the mother tongue manifests itself at both the linguistic and the conceptual level.

The successive years of the project were not as productive as we expected them to be. We did not get much support from the educational authorities. In some schools the teachers were replaced, in some schools new pupils joined the classes. However, the early learners completed their second and third grade highly motivated, feeling that they had done a good job. The project suffered the first serious blow when the educational authorities refused to make any allowances for the results achieved in the course of two years, and all the pupils in their fourth grade were obliged to continue their English course according to the curriculum and the materials prescribed for beginners starting in the fourth grade. Both the learners and teachers then lost their enthusiasm for work. When at the end of that school year the early starters (second grade) and the regular starters (fourth grade) were submitted to tests, the results showed no significant differences in favour of the early starters. Needless to say, the tests were designed in the routine way to score the number of correctly acquired vocabulary and structure items. It was an additional reason for the educational authorities to abandon the project completely. However, in some schools it continued on a semiprivate basis due to enthusiasm of teachers and a strong desire of parents for their children to start early. A sort of public opinion was formed in the course of the years that those primary children who start early become very promising English students in their teens: their motivation is high, their listening comprehension and pronunciation generally very good, and there is "something" in their performance that, regardless of the number of the correct vocabulary and structure items scored on the tests, enables them to become communicatively competent.

The project provided us with more insight into the different aspects of children's learning of English. We presented some of the findings, because the present project

is in a way a continuation of what has been done before. In 1991 we had a fairly clear concept of how to organize the new project.

The present project has been in progress for about one academic year and a half. It is too early to assess its results. From what has been observed we can say that children progress in their foreign language amazingly well, that they seem to enjoy their classes and that the organizational scheme of one daily period in a group of 12 to 15 pupils works very well. More can be read in the reports of the participants of the project and seen from the video-films made to illustrate the work.

Plans for the future

It has been planned that every new academic year additional schools introduce a foreign language in the first grade. (The research procedures will cover only the first two generations of learners). The scheme of small groups and five periods per week will be held hopefully (finances permitting) up to the fourth grade, when all the pupils will have three periods of a foreign language per week. The early starters will be provided with the different language material that will ensure the continuation of the process. Their present successful teachers will have to take the role of advisers to those who start teaching the first graders. The ultimate aim of the project is to provide data and materials to include a foreign language into the first grade curriculum for the entire population. However, a lot of problems must be solved before it is done. One of the most serious ones is the production of teachers properly suited for the job. Presently the task is in the hands of secondary language teachers graduated from the foreign language departments of the universities and who specialised in early foreign language teaching. As long as their number amounts to 10 teachers per language, it can be done. But if early teaching becomes a part of the first grade curriculum for every primary school in the country, it can not be done for a variety of reasons, financial ones being the first obstacle. In this case primary teachers trained to teach the foreign language from the first to the fourth grade would be the only solution. It would have a number of advantages:

1. There would be practically no technical problems regarding the timetable.
2. Primary teachers are by definition educated in developmental psychology and other disciplines related to the growing and developing child.
3. They are well acquainted with each individual child in the class, his/her needs and problems.
4. They can easily teach the parts of other school subjects through the medium of the foreign language if they are properly trained for the task.

It is a lucky coincidence that in Croatia teacher education has been extended from two to four years by a recently passed law. Steps are being taken to include the study

of the foreign language the students learned throughout their primary and secondary education as a part of their curriculum in the course of their four-year study. A specially devised language curriculum aimed at qualifying students for the task of a foreign language teacher teaching learners in grades 1-4 could help solve the problem. In the fifth grade the job would be taken over by the secondary teachers according to the existing practice.

The entire undertaking would not cost more than the salaries of the language teachers at the teacher training colleges. The gain, however, would be substantial. Maximum care should be taken that the teachers are properly trained to fulfil the needs of their profession. For example, the early starters' prospective teachers should have very intensive courses of pronunciation practice as they will in many cases present the only models for their learners to imitate. One of the requirements is that the teacher should attain near-native pronunciation of the foreign language, which is not easy. The language training of the primary teachers should be carried our professionally and with due care and precision, and the trainees should be made aware of the responsibility of the job.

An early start to foreign languages could mean in the long run bilingualism for the entire population. Many countries which, unlike Croatia, were fortunate enough to have freedom and peace have almost achieved this end. One feels it almost a patriotic duty to contribute to this goal and help the generations that will make citizens of a better Europe in the 21st century to understand one another better.

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