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Specificity of teaching foreign language skills to young learners

Article deals with the specificity of teaching foreign language speech skills to young learners. Authors studied and analyzed works of Kazakhstan and foreign scholars on research problem; identified factors of ensuring successful learning and mastery of foreign language speech skills by young learners; also in accordance with their psycholinguistic and age peculiarities reasoned the necessity of beginning teaching from speaking and listening, followed by writing and reading skills.

Key words: 12 year compulsory education; young learners, childhood foreign language acquisition, listening and speaking skills, written forms of communication, physical development, psycholinguistic features, social developmental characteristics, appropriate tools and methods, content of teaching sources.

The necessity of learning English as a foreign language is increasing with English becoming an international language. Knowledge of English is important as Kazakhstan is a representative of a world community and a part of the global arena, and also due to the fact that all information including education, science culture, etc. is mostly given in English at a current time. The widespread need for knowledge of English along with the Kazakh as the state language and Russian as a language of interethnic communication was ranked among the tasks of national importance [1].

Introduction of the 12 year compulsory education has caused some changes, and English has begun to be studied from the first grade since year 2013–2014.

The main reasons of making English as a compulsory subject at the primary school are aimed at accomplishment of the following goals:

- development of communication skills in English for improvement of pupils cognitive activity in all types of speech (listening, speaking, reading, writing), also learner's abilities in English graphics and technology, elementary reading according to the age peculiarities of young learners;
- development of the child individuality: his speaking skills, memory, thinking ability; moral and aesthetic qualities of a young language learner by means of studying English as a means of communication;
- ensuring communicative and psychological adaptation of a pupil to the new language environment to overcome different barriers in foreign language communication;
- familiarizing of children with culture, traditions and realities of a studied language, etc.

Peculiarities of English teaching and learning at a primary level has been highlighted by a number of Kazakhstan researchers as Amandykova G.N., Mukhtarova S.E., Sarsembaeva A.Z., etc.; Russian researchers: Azovkina A.N., Bim I.L., Borisova A.N., Galperin P.Y., Leontyeva A.A., and also by foreign educators: Butler, 2009; Gimenez, 2009; Ho, 2003; Y.Hu, 2007; Nikolov, 2009; Brumfit, Rixon, 1999; Nikolov, 1999; Cameron, 2003; Moon, 2005; Pinter, 2006; Nunan, 2011 etc.

Concerning the starting age for learning a foreign language — «the younger the better» is a belief that has dominated pedagogical agendas in foreign language education globally. However, according to Linse, contrary to popular myth younger children learning English «do not develop English language skills more readily than older learners» [2]. Thus, as we see there are peculiarities and difficulties in assimilating English by young learners.

It should be kept in mind that the primary aim of learning language is ability to communicate in a language. Therefore teaching foreign language in the initial phase of the secondary school is considered as a period of learning a foreign language, which allows to make the foundations of the communicative competence, necessary and sufficient for their further development and improvement in the course of studying this subject. Young learners should learn a foreign language for communication purposes only.

Due to Piaget's (1959) theory of cognitive and language development and Vygotsky's (1986) socio-cultural theory, children are developing as language-users and therefore not yet fully competent in understanding and using language as effectively as older children or adults might [3]. Low level proficiency learners in our case cannot be expected to achieve high level of linguistic accuracy.

Hence, it should be noted that we cannot expect advanced communicative skills from young learners at early stages of language learning. At beginning levels and during early weeks of teaching we should first get them acquainted to short segments of a language that they can use in the future.

As regards young learner's foreign language skills in the first year of training, listening and speaking are supposed more dynamic for oral speech development. As Philips rightly said, «it would be best to introduce English through listening and speaking first, then reading and writing last. Process of training in written forms of communication is slowed more down because pupils don't own the corresponding abilities even in the native language» [4]. Young learners have limited reading and writing even in a mother tongue, which is also still being developed.

Reading is considered as a set of skills that helps meaning making by decoding the printed word. On the one hand, foreign language (English) decoding process of primary school children has some difficulties posed by the difference in calligraphy between Kazakh (Russian) and English. On the other hand, cognitively children can only understand the meaning of the given information that exists in their mind already or based on their previous experience. So, as Brewster and Ellis suggests, it is important to introduce reading after students have basic knowledge of the spoken language so that it quickly becomes meaning based and not only decoding [5].

For young learners writing in a foreign language (English) is the most difficult skill to develop for many reasons. Apart from the difficulty, posed by the nature of the language being learned, children's personal features cause additional problems that hinder their development in writing. Chastain claims that «writing is difficult even under the most supportive and natural circumstances, hence «students» psychological and emotional attitudes toward written communication assignments cause reducing or eliminating their potential and negatively effect the student's attitudes» [6].

Young learners foreign language acquisition process should be viewed in as close association as possible with linguistic development in the mother tongue. Children acquire their mother language during the first years of their lives. The acquisition of the first language occurs naturally and unconsciously.

As Pinter claims learning of English (as a foreign language) should be started with an emphasis on listening and then speaking, just as in mother tongue. In a parallel vein, Davies and Pearse also claim that children begin to learn their mother tongue by listening before they speak [7].

How children learn their mother language? At the beginning of learning a mother language, children hear mainly through their ears, that becomes the main source of the language [5]. With the first mother's words, children are familiar with listening, which meaning they are not quite able to understand. They hear language over and over again. Even if they don't yet speak, they are learning and processing, eventually recognize them in speech. At first they can catch certain sounds or words. After a word building stage, follows the word structure level, then they can understand the whole sentence. As understanding precedes speech, young learners will be involved in speech to comprehending and at least will be capable to pronounce them correctly.

Findings from research on language acquisition and from brain research have produces evidence that the acquisition of an unfamiliar language should take place as early as possible in order to master phonetics of the language learned. It has been shown, for instance, that children up to the age six can learn to speak a second language without an accent [5].

As argued by Linse, the main reason for the teaching listening skill at first is that listening may be a foundation for other language skills. You need to hear a word before you can say it; similarly, Cook points out that before babies can comprehend words, they listen to the rhythm and melody of the language and have some awareness of interaction and relationship with a speaker [7].

Young beginners need to start with plenty of listening practice, and opportunities to listen to rich input will naturally lead to speaking tasks. In this way, listening and speaking are truly integrated in the primary English classroom.

As Phillips claims «Listening tasks are extremely important in the primary language (foreign language) classroom, providing a rich source of language data from which the children will begin to build up their own idea of how the language works. This knowledge forms a base or resource, which they will eventually draw on in order to produce language themselves. Listening is a receptive skill, and receptive skills give way to productive skills» [4]. Besides, as argued by Sharpe, the promotion of children's speaking and listening skills lie at the heart of effective learning in all subjects of the primary curriculum.

All things considered, it seems reasonable to assume that starting foreign language teaching with listening and speaking is very important, so the next step is to define appropriate tools and methods to use in the

classroom. In this process we have to take into consideration their physical, social, emotional, cognitive developmental peculiarities such as short-term memory, instability of attention, visual ability, predisposition to kinesthetic forms of work, etc.

Psychologists and physiologists reason the introduction of early foreign language teaching due to children's natural disposition and their emotional readiness for learning and mastery of a new language. It is commonly known, that in the given case sensitivity of primary school children to language learning is taken into account, particularly to the foreign language mastery. It is at this age children demonstrate natural curiosity and need in cognition of new knowledge. At this period of development they are also characterized by fast and flexible assimilation of language material. Becoming older, gradually person's ability to imitate and perceive sounds desensitized; his short-term memory and visual ability weaken [8].

Psycholinguistic features of primary school children are characterized by limited amount of memory and fast forgetting, prevalence of mechanical memory than logical. While learning foreign language in the classroom, young learners try to repeat some of the utterances they hear. Repeating a set of phrases may not make the learners conversant in English overnight, but it might be helpful too. Slattery and Willis argue, repetition help learners communicate in different ways: by helping them get used to saying English, by allowing them to practice the intonation pattern and by enabling them to gain confidence, especially if the teacher offers a lot of praise. We don't have to forget that repetition should be meaningful. Davanellos (1999) argues that songs can provide examples of everyday language and present the natural opportunity for meaningful repetition. That is why in a class of young learners, there is a variety of fun songs and chants, that help children learn vocabulary and grammar, while improving their oral skills. Songs can be utilized as a beneficial teaching and learning tool (Millington). Songs can help young learners enhance their listening skill and pronunciation. Purcell stresses that students can become demotivated by continually listening to narration or dialogue when they try to comprehend the meaning of new words or phrases in context. However, listening to a song over and over again can be more colorful due to the rhythm and melody [9].

Storytelling is another effective technique for improving listening skills of young learners. Paul emphasizes that teachers can read stories to young learners from storybooks, memorize the stories then share their content with pupils or let pupils to listen to a tape [10]. When reading stories from storybooks, teachers can change stress, pitch and intonation patterns or tone of voice to refer to different characters of the story, so young learners can have better chance to experience the suprasegmental features of the target language. Content of the texts may offer new facts to learn, that simulates children's experience. Content may be striking and fun to develop interest and motivation.

The traditional storytelling has a new face with the fast developing computer technology today. Digital story telling is one of the new twists of the technology. *It refers to using new digital tools to help ordinary people to tell their own real-life stories.* Digital stories are considered as a useful language learning tool that provides context that is enriched with texts, pictures, videos, and sound and can be very helpful in promoting young learners listening skills [11]. They are inclined to be visual, interactive and reiterative. The interactivity of internet based stories may pave the way to learning, when children are actively engaged in decoding and comprehending the story. At the present time videos are accepted as fruitful resources of vocabulary learning, especially for young learners simply because they expose young learners to colorful and enjoyable scenes in which the language is used in communication. Cartoons are especially useful for young learners' classroom since they supply audio-visual input, reflect native-speaker talk, and are fun for children watch.

Physical development of young learners predisposes them to kinesthetic forms of work. Children acquire knowledge from active interacting with the physical environment in developmental stages. They learn through their own individual actions and exploration. We can use listening exercises and do activities, as children like learning by doing, such games as TPR (total physical response), where children listen to commands in a target language and then immediately respond with an appropriate physical action. When those commands become familiar, the teacher remains seated and only the students will continue to respond to the teacher's commands. As their listening comprehension develops, there is a point of readiness to speak in which the children spontaneously begin to produce utterances.

Games are considered as one of the most effective teaching and learning techniques. Children, especially aged 5–9, tend to play games in their real life and usually familiar with terms of structure, rules, etc. — it maximizes young learners motivation greatly, increase positive feelings. At the same time they improve children's self-confidence, because learners are not afraid of punishment or criticism while practicing the target language freely. Games encourage learners to direct their energy towards language learning by provid-

ing them meaningful contexts. Therefore, it is important not to see games as time fillers or tools designed for fun only, but integrate them into their foreign language programs [9]. Listening games help children also to promote their ability to distinguish the dissimilarities and similarities between sounds, while speaking games encourage them to communicate with each other easily and to produce the foreign language without any pressure.

Primary school students are also characterized by short attention spans, so it is necessary for children aged 5–7 keep activities around 5 and 10 minutes long, for ages 8–10 keep activities 10 to 15 minutes long. One way to capture their attention and keep them engaged in activities is to supplement the activities with lots of visuals, toys, puppets, or objects. As Scott and Ytreberg describe, «Their own understanding comes through hands and eyes and ears. The physical world is dominant at all times» [12]. Visual materials should be bright and attract the viewer's attention. As for listening strategies, they can be developed by encouraging young learners to guess from the context and also supporting their listening comprehension by using visuals, mime, and facial expressions. Also, demonstrating language by using realia in contexts are of interest to children or personalizing a context can also be effective. Cartoon films can be used, because young learners have the chance to listen to the language within a visual context. They can better comprehend what they listen to. These can also help make the language input comprehensible and can be used for follow-up activities.

One of the social developmental characteristics of primary school children is the prevalence of dialogic speech from monological. It is also helpful to teachers as well, they are always ready to interact with each other, to talk about one topic in pairs, in group. Pair and group work activities are quite popular. Of course it is not easy to involve young learners in group work. There are two major problems that teachers can encounter. Firstly, disciplinary issues can arise like too much talk and noise. Secondly, children tend to switch to their mother tongue and neglect using the target language for accomplishing the given tasks. To resolve these problems during group and pair work activities, teachers should monitor each pair and group effectively, make sure foreign language is used as much as possible. Teacher intervention in such cases is not always a bad thing. While monitoring children, teachers can spot mistakes in language use and can provide input, guidance, and feedback.

According to the curriculum children have to express their ideas and share opinions about on topics in different situations without preparation. These situations should be connected with their education, games, everyday life. Conversation should consist of at least right constructed 2–3 phrases and completed with description (things, pictures) or narration (about family members, friends, pets, etc.) [13].

Particular attention has to be paid to the content of teaching sources. Themes and contexts in home country or culture can help young learners connect English with their background knowledge, which is limited because of their young age and inexperience. Teachers can choose materials, which can improve their cultural awareness of the target language: for instance, listening and speaking songs of different cultures and guessing their meaning, listening stories and fairy tales in a studied language, learning or playing traditional games of other countries. In this way children can improve not only listening and speaking skills, but also understand mentality of people of different countries, while doing creative and fun activities.

While developing young learners' communicative skills we should take into account that a typical lesson in current teaching materials involves a three-part sequence consisting of pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening activities (Field, 1998) [5]. They are as follows:

Typical pre- listening activities

- Pictures to activate background knowledge;
- Brainstorming what students know about the topic with a word map;
- Exhibiting real objects related to the topic;
- Pre-teaching vocabulary (with pictures, realia, examples in context).

Typical while listening activities:

- Listening for a gist;
- Listening to background noise to create setting and topic;
- Describing specific words;
- Raising hands when catching certain words;
- Matching;
- Finding mistakes;
- Indicating stress or intonation.

Typical follow-up listening activities presuppose development of young learners' speaking skills:

- Discussion about the topic;
- Role playing;
- Short reading or writing about the topic;
- Designing a poster.

At the last practice stage children need teacher's help more. Especially in oral practice, which involves active speaking, teachers should circulate and when necessary help learners when they are stuck. Also oral production activities should be based on 'language that is slower than the language used in intensive study' (Clavery, 2001 [5]). Teacher should pay attention to the children's ability to recall and use the necessary words and structures to be used in the activity easily.

The proposed techniques and activities were applied in teaching practice within an academic subject «teaching English to young learners» (Turkey Republic, Uludag University) and in Kazakhstan primary schools.

To conclude all above mentioned, we focus on listening and speaking skills to begin young learners foreign language teaching and learning. Taking into account age and other psycholinguistic peculiarities of young learners in language acquisition, it will be more beneficial to train them first in listening and speaking and further develop their reading and writing skills.

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Кіші жастағы оқушыларды шетел тілі біліктеріне оқытудың ерекшелігі

Мақалада 12 жылдық білім берудің негізінде маңыздылығы артқан кіші жастағы оқушыларды шет тілі біліктеріне оқытудың ерекшеліктері баяндалған. Қарастырылған мәселе бойынша қазақстандық және шетелдік ғалымдарының еңбектеріне талдау жасалды. Шет тілін ерте жастан бастап үйренуші оқушылар үшін оқыту процесінің тиімділігін арттыратын факторлар анықталып, оқушылардың жас ерекшеліктеріне орай шет тіліне оқытудың алғашқы сатысында тындап түсіну және сөйлеу біліктері басты назарда болу керек екендігі тұжырымдалды. Авторлармен кіші жастағы оқушыларға аталған шет тілі біліктері меңгерілгеннен кейін жазу және оқу біліктеріне оқыту қажеттілігі түсіндірілді.

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Специфика обучения иноязычным умениям младших школьников

В статье рассмотрены особенности обучения младших школьников иноязычным речевым умениям в контексте 12-летнего образования. Авторами изучены и проанализированы научно-литературные источники казахстанских и зарубежных ученых по исследуемой проблеме; определены факторы, обеспечивающие успешное обучение и овладение иноязычной речью младшими школьниками; также обоснована необходимость развития у младших школьников умений аудирования и говорения на начальном этапе обучения, с последующим переходом на чтение и письмо.

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