

TEACHING ENGLISH TO CHILDREN: USING CHILDREN'S OPERAS AT EARLY AGE

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Abstract: *this article invites teachers to consider how to strengthen links between English, music, arts, acting, maximizing the potential for children to become successful language learners at a young age. It will be shown how children's opera can act as a catalyst for learning and using the language. The findings demonstrate that teaching English with a children's opera allows to develop the basics of elementary communicative competence as it has everything what children of this age like: rhythm, melody, story and acting.*

Keywords: *elementary communicative competence, children's opera, conscious learning, music, interactional context.*

Parents want their children to start English early. It is a fact that the idea of teaching English to very young children is now attracting the attention of many teachers, linguists and psychologists. Interest in this subject in Russia has developed over the last years from ad hoc, individual research efforts into the setting up of formal, professional research programs. Today children start English in the first grade (6-7 years old). Lyceums and gymnasiums run courses of English beginning at the age of five. In kindergartens children are very often exposed to English from the age of three.

Most discussed questions in teaching foreign language to children. The majority like school and are ready to do "something real". At early start in teaching English is viewed as one of the means of fostering and enhancing language training. Furthermore, pre-school childhood is considered to be a favorable period for acquiring a foreign language (FL) [5]. Before I go any further, I would like to identify some of the most discussed questions in teaching foreign languages to very young children in Russia today:

- *When should teaching start? And could it be harmful for the child's development?
- *What kind of motivation should teaching be based on?
- *Should learning be through unconscious imitation or conscious mastering of the language?
- *With such an early start, can the problem of continuity be solved [3, 4, 5]?

Research has identified the following views and approaches to teaching English to the very young in Russia today:

1. Effective learning of a FL by pre-school children can be achieved if we provide a conscious and purposeful system of forming FL skills (children at five are fully ready for conscious learning).
2. Learning should rely on the motivation of play; all activities must be game-like activities.
3. The development of native language skills and foreign language skills in kindergarten occurs simultaneously.
4. The use of imagery (tales, stories, rhymes, favorite characters) stimulates the acquisition of the foreign language by pre-school children [1].

Practical outcomes. Taking into consideration the approaches and strategies developed with young learners and relying on our personal experience with children, we came to some of our own conclusions. Effective teaching of the foreign language to the very young should be:

- *conducted with varied activities, natural to the child: drawing, dancing, movement, listening to stories, drama, modeling – all, in fact, means of communication;
- *organized in accordance with the child's natural need for self-expression through music [1].

Music has been viewed by many authors as means of fostering personal, social, communicative and linguistic competence at pre-school age [2]. Research into the connections between the mechanisms of production and the perception of music and speech at this age shows, that they are very similar. In watching children, we see that they naturally switch from singing to talking and back. They translate music into dance. They like to experiment with rhythm, tempo and intonation in speech and music. Therefore we are convinced that music should be the leading means in the exposure of children to a FL.

Children's opera (a musical tale where story, dance, acting, singing and talking, drawing and modeling all go together) is means of combining teaching with all the natural activities of the child. The result of our research can be presented as follows:

Children's opera: music + interactional context + combination of activities familiar to children from a very early age = successful learning.

Additionally, children's opera provides the interactional context that builds phonological awareness, necessary for the acquisition of pronunciation and speech. In the interactional context, speech functions become obvious. The approach is to use opera in both languages, first Russian and then in English. This immediately

produces ideas and the concept of plot. Transfer into the foreign language will then occur with pleasure and without any difficulty. This approach first produces conditioned manner and behavior in the child's native language. This manner and behavior are then easily transferable into the foreign language.

Demonstration of the approach. Usually, frequently occurring vocabulary is quickly learned by children, but it does not always matter whether they use it naturally and appropriately, as at this age they are not very experienced in the acquisition and activation of new vocabulary in their native language. For example, if we take as a context as opera, Goldilocks and The Three Bears, there is scene where Goldilocks meets and talks to the house. Using this approach, we should first explore the situation in Russian: What did Goldilocks tell the house? How did it greet her? What do people usually say when they meet? How do they move and look?.. The children would then act out the parts of the house and Machenka (the Russian Goldilocks), after which they will be prepared to perceive the same situation in the new language. Music, with its emotional nature, makes exposure to a new language desirable, interesting and as we observed, easy for children. Movement, "decorations" and singing will serve as reference points, which make learning effective.

Using children's opera gives us the opportunity to teach communication from the very first class. A top-down perspective allows children to focus their attention on the interactional dynamics of the communication process. This approach allows us from the very first lesson to introduce authentic language in stretches of discourse. Characters from opera greet, request, agree and question, which makes the new language natural and communicative from the very beginning.

Some ideas about the methodology. Music furthers the natural self-expression which makes the child move naturally while using the language. Thus, kinetics (or body language) goes together with speech and speech goes together with kinetics. Melody sets the tempo and aids fluency. This is what authentic language requires. Melody provides the keys for the child's self-control. Everyone has experienced this process: begin a melody and the words swim out from the memory. Consequently, when we ask the pupils to draw or model, we switch on the tape with the music from the opera and children, of course, unconsciously repeat it.

Courses based on one children's opera over three months with two 45-minute classes a week give us the opportunity to introduce about 200 words and 50 functions, related to a child of pre-school age (eg: introducing, requesting, questioning, expressing joy, arguing etc). Such a course includes a learner-oriented syllabus (where students act instead of the characters doing so), making English words and sentences their own, which motivates them to continue their studies and provides them with an encouraging start.

The very young, especially, need to express themselves from the very first lesson: singing and speaking out, dancing and acting with decorations they have prepared. This is inspired by the magical force of music and the sound of a new language. In this way, the question of continuity in teaching communicative is resolved.

Conclusion

I hope I have shown the teaching very young children is not solely a preparatory phase. It is rather an important process of immersing a child in the ocean of real speech. S/he will then be bathing with pleasure in the waves of melodies and rhythm and will float to the surface, purposefully and consciously, with the teacher, who enjoys the process as well!

References

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