

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN AN INSTITUTIONALIZATION SETTING

Maja Grabić¹, Mirjana Nikolić², Marta Dedaj³, Aleksandra Vuković⁴

Abstract: The question of the institutionalization of the English language in a preschool institution represents an important aspect of acquiring a second language at an early age, given the fact that experts' opinions on this matter still differ significantly. The authors of this paper investigated different ways of a second language activities introduction into regular educational activities in preschool institutions, as well as the competences and motivation of preschool teachers to be engaged in the process of implementation of second language acquisition activities. The research results showed that preschool institutional management, as well as the preschool teachers are aware of the necessity of developing the communication in a foreign language at an early age and point out the need of re-examining the English Language curriculum at Vocational Colleges for Preschool Teachers, as well as the introduction of professional development programmes directed at strengthening the competence of communication in a foreign language.

Key words: early age, communication, competence, foreign language acquisition

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the English language has been experiencing an expansion, and an increasing number of non-native speakers have been acquiring it. Therefore, in the modern world, the trend for children to start learning English at a young age is beginning to prevail. To this day, methodologists, linguists and psychologists have not come up with a single answer to the question of what would be the optimal age to start learning a foreign language. The demand for English language teachers, both in private kindergartens and in state institutions, is growing more and more, but the problem we still face today is how to provide adequate teaching staff. Due to their developmental characteristics, children require a special way of working. During that period, special emphasis is placed on the overall development of the child, which would mean that the acquisition of a foreign language should be an integrated process, and not a separate activity. In this paper, we present contemporary theoretical views on the acquisition of a second language at an early age, research findings and inspiring practices and strive to connect them with the postulates of the New Foundations of the Education Program - Years of Ascent, which emphasizes the necessity for developing the communication in a foreign language at an early age [1]. In order to achieve this goal it is necessary to re-examine the quality of existing models and develop new models for the institutionalization of the English language. The theoretical starting points served as a basis for improving the real program, developing the competences of the educators, encouraging the understanding of the child and his way of learning, as well as the understanding and importance of acquiring a second language at an early age with a high-quality and adapted model.

2. THEORETICAL FRAME

2.1. Historical review - theories of acquiring a second language

Baker points out that language learning is no different from any other learning, as well as that good results can be achieved with intensive exercises and repetition [2]. Thus, the second language must be presented in small, highly sequenced doses with plenty of practice and confirmation. The individual parts should be carefully dosed in a precise sequence to build the skills and habits of a

¹ maja.grabic24@gmail.com, Professor of Applied Studies, College of Applied Studies – Sirmium., Sremska Mitrovica

² vs.mirjana.nikolic@gmail.com, Professor of Applied Studies, College of Applied Studies-Sirmium, Sremska Mitrovica

³ vs.marta.dedaj@gmail.com, , Professor of Applied Studies, College of Applied Studies-Sirmium, Sremska Mitrovica

⁴ aleksandravukovicsaska@gmail.com, Preschool teacher, DU “Dečija radost“ Irig

second language. This behavioral theory of language learning became part of audiolinguistics. He also points out that, according to audiolinguism, learning a second language is possible by acquiring a special set of speaking habits. Baker, according to Chomsky, suggests that human beings have a built-in cognitive readiness for language. Instead of language being a series of superficial patterns and habits, Chomsky emphasized the abstract, mentalistic and universal nature of rules that are subject to the linguistic competence of the individual [3]. The child has a gifted language acquisition system (LAD), which consists of an innate knowledge of grammatical principles. In the 1970s, an alternative approach to language teaching was developed. An alternative point of view was that language essentially refers to the transmission of meaning and partially moves away from the formal approach to learning a second language, as it emphasizes the communicative function. Sociolinguist Hymes claims that language is essentially communication[4]. Effective language does not imply grammatical accuracy or articulate fluency, but the competence to effectively communicate meaningfully. Singleton agrees with the hypothesis that those who start learning a second language in childhood achieve a higher level of language mastery in the long run than those who start learning later in life, it can be said that there is some good evidence in favor of this hypothesis, whereas there is no real evidence against her"[5]. Radić-Bojanić points out that age is a significant factor in language acquisition, both native and foreign [6]. The study she conducted shows that early language acquisition is necessary in order to achieve adequate pronunciation, and she also points out that the ability to acquire a second language decreases over time. She also points out that cognitive development affects the process of language acquisition. Therefore, older students who are cognitively mature progress faster, but only in the initial period, which is a short-term advantage compared to younger students

2.2 Models of encouraging the acquisition of a foreign language in preschool children

The models of foreign language acquisition that are most often applied are: The Audio-lingual Method), The Communicative Language Teaching, Total Physical Response or TPR, The Silent Way, and Community Language Learning or CLL. Jeremić claims that the models that stand out the most in the literature are Child-Centred Approach, The Communicative Language Teaching and Total Physical Response [7]. He emphasizes them because of their advantages and adaptability for working with children of preschool age, because they concentrate on play, listening, speech and movement. The Communicative Language Approach is aimed at learning a foreign, non-native language through experience. It is necessary for children to become aware of the meaning of a certain word, to know when and how to use it, to recognize words both in terms of vocabulary and grammatical accuracy in order to progress. When applying this method, it is necessary to introduce the foreign language through songs, puzzles and stories, as well as through movement and understanding the context of the words used. Addressing is exclusively in a non-native language, and children can use the language they want. In addition, it is extremely important not to translate words to children, but to present their meaning with the help of pictures, gestures and facial expressions. Jeremić points out that when applying this approach, the context is important, what the teacher provides, as well as mental effort, what is needed for the child to make progress on his own.

We can also connect this with the new Foundations of the programme, which introduce space as a "third educator" and emphasize the importance of its richness and stimulation for children in accordance with their age. Total Physical Response (TPR) is an approach that is based on listening and is associated with physical activity to determine understanding of terms or words. Movement is a key part of acquiring and learning a second language, because it encourages easier understanding and memorization, as stated by the founder of this model, psychologist James Asher.[8] Jeremić believes that this model is desirable for use at preschool age. It is based on the assumption that the human brain has a biological predisposition for acquiring any language, because as a child acquires and reacts to the mother tongue and this method is transferred to acquiring other languages, too. The goal is primarily to acquire the language on an unconscious level, which leads to long-term memorization of words and terms.

3. METHODOLOGICAL PART

3.1 Research problem

The subject of this research is how theoretical and practical knowledge can help in designing innovative approaches to the institutionalization of the English language in preschool institutions. Most preschool institutions offer English language "teaching" services through cooperation with private foreign language schools, whereby these activities are always organized at a precisely determined time, according to a fixed schedule and are not available to all children. Previous researches showed that pre-school institutions implement English language teaching at an early age but do not often consider the effects and consequences of this way of second language acquisition on the well-being of the child. [9]

3.2 The goal and tasks of the research

The aim of the research was to determine how pre-school institutions implement English language teaching and whether the child's well-being is taken into account when choosing the method of implementation of second language acquisition. The tasks of the research were to examine whether pre-school institution management is familiar with the way of implementing services (cooperation with private foreign language schools, engagement of educators, compliance with legal regulations), as well as to examine the level of competence of educators for implementing activities in second language.

3.3. Research sample

The research sample consisted of nine directors of preschool institutions in the territory of Srem (Indija, Irig, Ruma, Šid, Sremska Mitrovica, Stara Pazova, Novi Banovci and Pećinci) and 92 preschool teachers of preschool institutions in the territory of Srem (Indija, Irig, Ruma, Šid, Sremska Mitrovica, Stara Pazova, Novi Banovci and Pećinci).

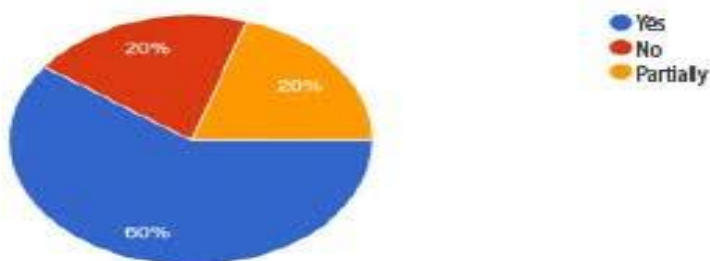
3.4. Research methods, techniques and instruments

In this research, a descriptive method was applied, which included the collection, processing and data interpretation. Google questionnaire was applied as a survey technique. The questionnaire was conducted in order to determine whether preschool institutions are familiar with the possible implementation of second language acquisition services, i.e. whether they cooperate with private foreign language schools, hire teachers, but above all whether they respect legal regulations. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions of the combined type. The research was conducted in the period from February 1 to February 11, 2024. The second questionnaire was created with the aim to investigate the competences of preschool teachers in the field of English and the research was carried out from May 31st to June 6th, 2024

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

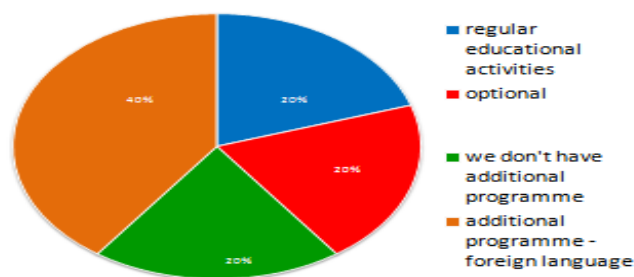
The survey included 9 directors of preschool institutions who have 11 – 25 years of work experience. The obtained results showed that the directors are familiar with the possibility of implementing the English language activities in their institutions and that kindergartens offer the opportunity to children to acquire and develop initial knowledge of the English language.

Chart 1. Do children in your institution have the opportunity to learn and develop their initial knowledge of the English language?



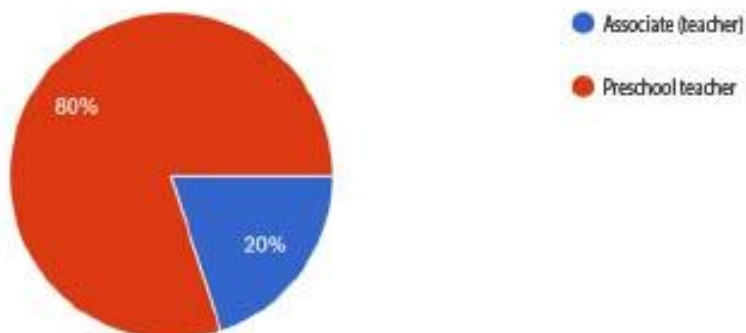
Our aim was to investigate in which manner are these activities implemented, whether they are organized as separate activities, carried out by English language teachers hired by private language schools, or if these activities are part of regular educational activities. The obtained results showed that children are mostly acquainted with English through additional programme, whereas, the equal number of institutions confirmed that these activities are either optional, represent part of regular activities, or that they are not organized in any of the suggested forms.

Chart 2. How is English language teaching implemented



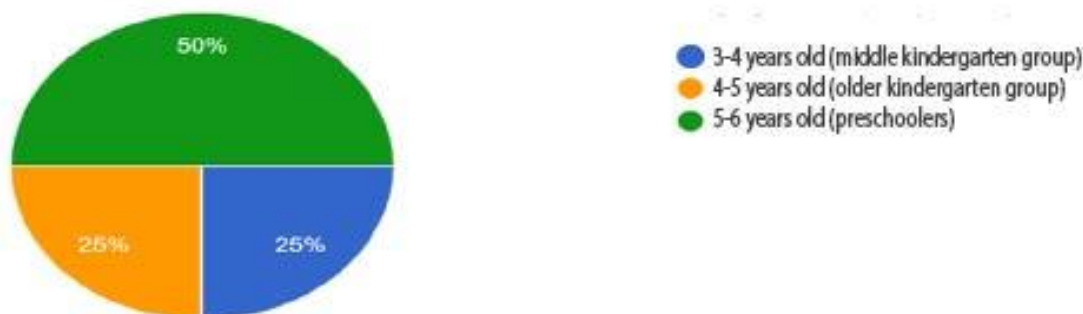
The results obtained also confirmed the results of the previous question since they showed that the second language activities are mostly carried out by English Language teachers engaged by private language schools

Chart 3 Who is the implementer of English language activities?



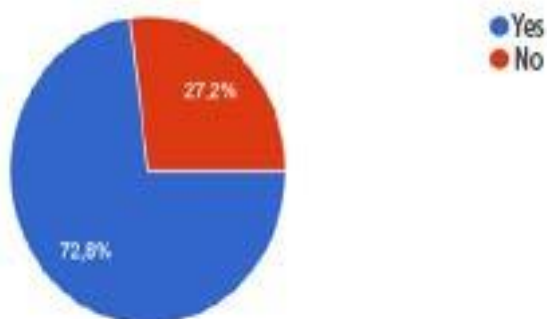
We also wanted to investigate at what age can children be included in these activities and the results showed that second language activities are mostly carried out in the preschool group (5-6 years old)

Chart 4. At what age can children apply to learn English within kindergarten?



When it comes to the results of the questionnaire for educators, which refer to the competences of educators in the field of English, 95.7% of female educators answered the questionnaire. The largest number of educators have work experience between 11 and 25 years (37%), followed by 23.9% of them with work experience from 3 to 10 years, and the remaining number of educators is almost equally distributed by the years of work experience. According to the criterion of the environment in which they work, the number of those who work in rural areas (46.7%) and those who work in urban areas (53.3%) is almost equal. According to the level of education, the largest number of educators have a higher education level, 34.8% of them have completed higher education, while the smallest number of those who have completed master's studies (9.8%). As far as the first question was concerned 72.8% of educators answered that they had the subject related to the English language during their studies, whereas 27.2% of them answered that they did not have the subject related to the English language.

Chart 5. During your studies, did you have a subject that was related to the English language?



The second question referred to the content of the English language course. More than 50% of the teachers answered that the subject in their studies was related to general knowledge of the English language, rather than to the methodology of acquiring a second language at an early age. We were further interested in the self-assessment of educators regarding their competence to introduce the English language into regular educational work. 43% of preschool teachers estimated themselves

competent to implement second language activities, whereas 8 % evaluated themselves competent enough for the realization of these activities. Their answers are presented in the following chart.

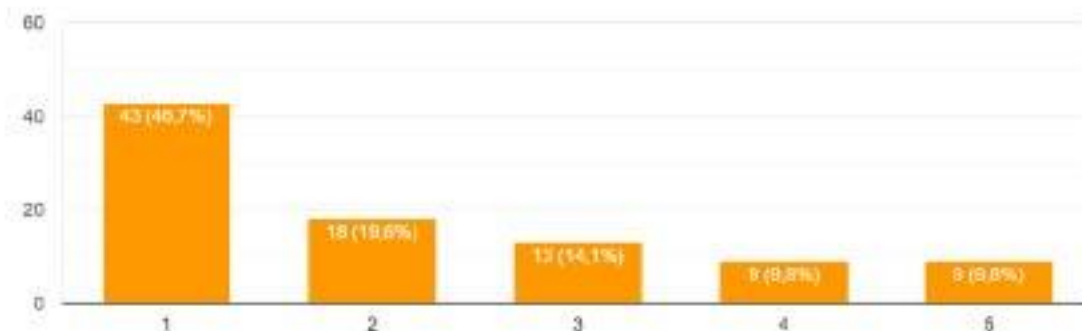


Chart 6. I consider myself competent to introduce the English language into my regular educational work

We found it significant that 32% of respondents stated that they need additional education in the field of second language methodology at an early age.

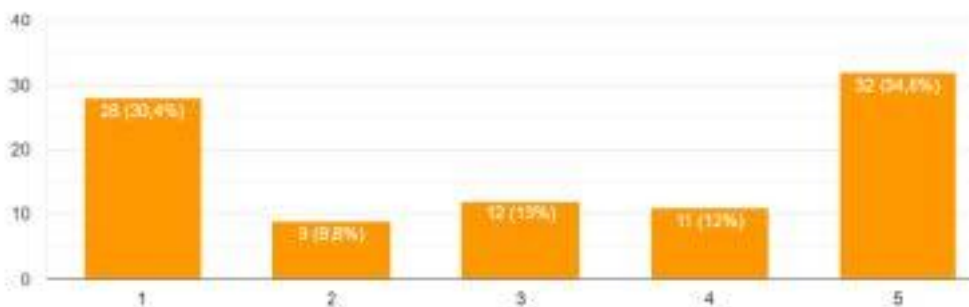


Chart 7. I think that I need additional education in the field of second language acquisition methodology at an early age

29% of respondents also agreed that training in the area of second language acquisition at an early age would help them strengthen their competences in this field.

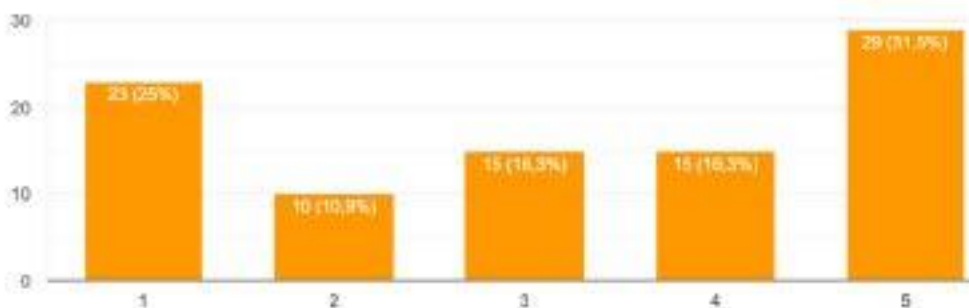


Chart 8. I believe that accredited training in this area would be the most adequate for developing and strengthening the competencies of educators.

We also find it significant that most of the respondents find the introduction of English language activities into regular educational work significant and in accordance with the need for developing communication skills in the second language.

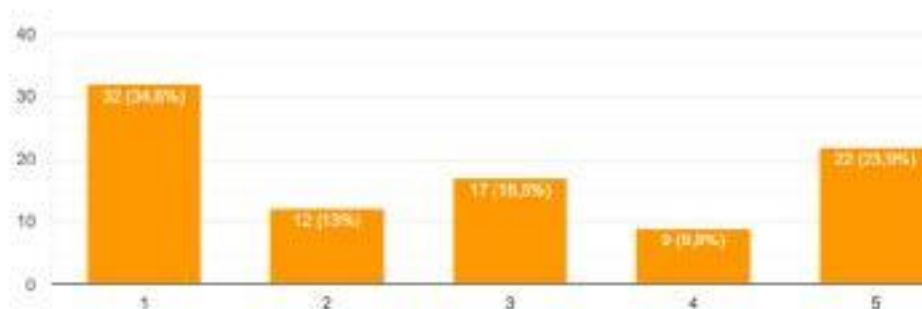


Chart 9. I believe that the introduction of the English language in the regular REW by the teacher is significant and desirable

5. CONCLUSION

In the initial phase, the teacher is the first and only model that preschool children meet. When introducing a foreign language, it is up to the teacher to decide how much of the general everyday language (instructions, questions, praise) will be in the mother tongue and how much in the foreign language, but it is recommended that the time the children are exposed to the foreign language be gradually extended. The teacher creates a relaxed learning atmosphere in which the children are not expected to understand every word, but only a global understanding of what they hear. It is important that the teacher supports understanding in various ways, using appropriate visual, audio and multimedia tools, facial expressions and body language. Although the teacher has various listening materials at his disposal that he can use, the teacher is still an irreplaceable source of foreign language in the interaction in a group of preschool children. The teacher is a useful speaker of a foreign language and provides students with the necessary non-linguistic context important for understanding the message. While telling or reading a story, he can interrupt it, check children's understanding, communicate with them, involve them actively in telling the story, providing them with forms of listening that they are exposed to in everyday, real life, encouraging imagination, different thought processes (reasoning, inference, associative opinion, insight causality of recent relationships), socially acceptable communication skills.

Children of an early age have not yet learned to read, so listening is the basis for acquiring a second language. In addition to auditory, it is necessary to provide them with as much visual learning as possible, through facial expressions, gestures, movements and images. It is very important that when we speak, we speak clearly and repeat several times, emphasizing the key elements. If we tell a story through pictures, we don't have to read it from beginning to end just as it is written, but we can start as it is written, and then we encourage the children to speak with questions, and in this way we tell the story through pictures together with them. It is necessary to create a positive and calm atmosphere during listening, because their attention and concentration are very short-lived. Also, sometimes it is necessary to introduce a change, to create an atmosphere for learning with movement, sound and a noisier environment. The younger the child, the more activities accompanied by movement are needed. In this way, we will see if the child understands what is said to him. This is an extremely interesting way of learning, especially for younger children. In this way, they can expand their vocabulary, orientation in space, counting. In this way, they can learn from each other, because if they did not understand what was said, they will notice how other children do it and repeat it, and then when we repeat the word, the children will associate it with a certain activity or movement and know what was said. When they have already adopted certain vocabulary, we can let them be the instructors themselves and assign new tasks, which will introduce an element of fun, competitive spirit and challenge.

6. REFERENCES

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