# THE ROLE OF STORYBOOKS IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS

© Katalin LÁNG
**(Vitéz János Catholic College, Esztergom, Hungary)**

**langkata@freemail.hu**

*The first part of this paper gives a short background to the theoretical assumptions of early foreign language teaching focusing on the term CPH (Critical Period Hypothesis).The second part briefly looks at the theoretical underpinning of using literature as a resource for language teaching. The last section introduces the reader to two projects incorporating stories into the practice of the classroom.*

**Keywords**: teaching, language teaching, foreign language teaching, English teaching

## Young learners and second language acquisition

### The definition of the term: critical period hypothesis

One of the most hotly debated issues in second language acquisition (SLA) research is the *critical period hypothesis* (CPH). The term was originally proposed by two neurobiologists, Penfield and Roberts, but it is Lenneberg whose name is widely associated with it (see in Hakuta & Bialystok & Wiley, 2003). The critical period hypothesis states that "there is a specific and limited time period during which language acquisition is easy and complete... and beyond which it is difficult and typically incomplete" (Ellis, 1998:67).

Two additional points need to be mentioned: first, according to DeKeyser and Larson-Hall (2005), this hypothesis applies to both first and second language acquisition. Second, instead of the term *critical*, *sensitive* and *optimal* have also been used by several authors representing slightly different interpretations as compared to the original one, but the term *critical* has spread in the literature. (See the list of authors representing the different usage of the term in Nikolov, 2000:16.)

Debates have been going on into the notion of the CPH: several researchers have been attracted by it, arguing for and against the existence of CPH. Four different major standpoints exist in the literature which illustrates this uncertainty (Nikolov, 2000). The so called 'younger the better', the strong version of CPH, states that young children are generally more successful than older learners, only they can acquire native-like pronunciation, and after puberty a decline in SLA capacity begins. It is based on the public wisdom according to which children pick up the language quickly and easily when they are exposed to it. (Hakuta & Bialystok & Wiley, 2003; Singleton, 2001).The proponents of the second standpoint, 'the older the better' version claim just the opposite of the above mentioned one: late beginners have a faster acquisition rate, therefore they are more efficient language learners. Studies on primary school SLA, successful adult learners

and immersion programmes seem to support their view (Harley& Hart, 1997; Ioup & Boustagui & Tigi & Moselle, 1994). The third standpoint, 'the younger the better in some areas', the weak version of CPH, states that children are better only in the area of pronunciation. Finally, 'the younger the better in the long run' version assumes that, despite the initial advantages of adult learners in some areas, such as syntax and morphology, children can overtake adults in the long run achieving better results (Nikolov, 2000).

To sum up this review, although there is not sufficient evidence for the existence of CPH, the claim that there is an age-related decline regarding the success of achieving native-like proficiency in SLA seems to be supported. Further research needs to be carried out, with a special focus on pedagogical, psychological and sociological variables.

## Arguments for early second language teaching

However controversial the results of research are, there is some evidence which support the existence of CPH, therefore they can not be neglected when we argue for early foreign language education. Arguments for the introduction of early foreign language programmes in formal instruction can be grouped under four major headings: (1) cognitive reasons (2) neurological reasons (3) linguistic reasons and (4) social-psychological reasons.

# Explanations

## The cognitive explanation

There are several age-related changes in cognitive processes which underpin early foreign language teaching. Working memory capacity, cognitive processing speed, risk-taking, the ability of encoding new information and recalling details, all decline with ageing (Hakuta & Bialystok & Wiley, 2003). Based on the research in cognitive science, children favour implicit (procedural) learning - which is rather slow and requires intensive input and interaction- and mostly rely on their memory. Adults, however, tend to prefer explicit (declarative) learning and rely on their analytical abilities during SLA (DeKeyser & Larson-Hall, 2005). Harley and Hart (1997) also describe this phenomenon, differentiating between wholist (characteristic of children) and analytic (typical for adults) approaches in processing information. Although the difference between implicit and explicit learning does exist, it mainly has pedagogical implications, and does not prove children's success at SLA.

An additional argument for children's superiority at SLA is described in Hyltenstam's and Abrahamsson's study (2003:565): "Adult learners differ from child learners in that they no longer have access to the inborn *language acquisition device* [LAD - introduced in Chomskyan theory)] specified in UG [*Universal Grammar*] and instead have to rely on general problem-solving procedures".

## The neurological explanation

Since Penfield's and Roberts's publication on CPH, there have been biological explanations for children's greater success in language acquisition. They argued for the brain's steady loss of flexibility and *cerebral plasticity* - "the ability of neurons to make new connections"- with ageing (Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003:561).

Lenneberg referred to the process of *laterization* of the brain, during which the right and the left hemispheres become specialized, which happens around puberty, causing difficulties in language acquisition afterwards (see in Nikolov, 2000).

Neuroscience is a rapidly growing division of learning, more and more studies are dedicated to the investigation of the nature of language acquisition (Singleton, 2001).

## The linguistic explanation

Linguistic arguments regarding the age factor in SLA, mainly emphasize the role of environmental input children and adult experience. On the one hand, adults are likely to receive quantitatively less input, and qualitatively more complex input. On the other hand, children are provided with more input and less-complex, strongly simplified language from their caretakers (DeKeyser & Larson-Hall, 2005). This phenomenon probably also contributes to children's better attainment in the long run. Considering the amount of input, several studies examined the influence of *age of arrival* and *length of residence* on learners' achievement in their host environment.

## The social-psychological explanation

Several variables are listed by DeKeyser and Larson-Hall (2005) as predictors of success in SLA. Among these factors are integrative motivation, self-consciousness, risk-taking, attitude toward and identification with the target community and culture. What enhances children's success in SLA is their inherent motivation, their readiness to communicate and thus understand the world around them, and their lack of fear of making mistakes. Krashen's *Affective Filter Hypothesis* (1985) tries to give an explanation for children's low level of anxiety. He states that the affective filter is a mental block which prevents learners from using the input. If the acquirer is anxious and unmotivated, the filter is 'up', the input will not reach LAD. Krashen hypothesised that around puberty the effect of the affective filter gets stronger, which would explain the better achievements of young learners in SLA.

Considering the differences between young and older arrivals in a L2 environment regarding the level of the identification with the target community, the advantages of young learners seem evident. Because of their compulsory schooling, they more easily integrate into the target culture and acquire L2. Also, as their cultural and linguistic identity is less fully formed as compared to late arrivals, young learners' motivation to maintain their L1 is weaker (Singleton, 2001).

# Early foreign language programmes

In the previous passages I have introduced the notion of CPH and outlined the major arguments for early second language teaching. The aim of the next step in this chapter is to give a short summary of the tradition of early foreign language programmes.

By way of introduction I would like to clarify the difference between immersion programmes and foreign language (FL) programmes. In the settings of immersion education (originating from Canada) the target language of education is the one that is widely used in the social environment of learners; whereas in case of FL programmes, the usage of the

target language is mainly limited to the classroom, therefore it is not used in learners' everyday life. While in immersion programmes the target language is a medium of instruction partly or totally, in FL programmes it is taught as a school subject.

Considering the overall picture of early FL instruction, there has been a radically increasing interest in it in the past two decades all over the world. The publication of *Nikolov & Curtain* (2000) compiles eighteen studies introducing early FL practice from many different countries. Despite the fact that the contexts of these educational programmes differ to a great extent, they have one thing in common: they all accept and follow the assumption 'the younger the better' in their programme design. In her study, Nikolov (2000) calls attention to the danger of lack of continuity and transfer in early FL programmes with the suggestion of careful consideration of aims, expectations, methodology, and previous knowledge of learners.

It is also worth mentioning the results of the workshop in 1996 held in ECML (European Centre for Modern Languages, Graz) being dedicated to the issue of early foreign language learning. A group of international experts concluded their meeting by formulating some broad implications for early FL programmes. They derived their list of suggestions from the above theories:

➢ "Learning should be *child-centered* and *experiential*
➢ Children should be encouraged to be active and *constructive* in their own learning
➢ Learning should involve *social interaction*
➢ Language should be used as a *tool* to do things which are relevant and meaningful to the child
➢ Activities and tasks should present an appropriate level of *challenge*
➢ Effective "*scaffolding*" or "*mediation*" should be available to support learning
➢ Children should have lots of *opportunities to extend learning* through related activities and tasks
➢ Abstract, formal reflection on language should come *after* practical, concrete experience of using language" (Read & Ellis, 1996:4).

In my opinion, it would be instructive and informative to conduct more classroom-based research in order to reveal to what extent the curriculum design and FL classroom practice, such as methodology and choice of materials, is based on the above mentioned theories and follows these suggestions. The purpose of the following section is to highlight the essence of using literature as a resource in language learning with special focus on young learners' needs.

## Literature and language development

Maley (1989) makes a valuable distinction between the study of literature and the use of literature as a resource for language learning. While the former approach the text as a cultural piece of art, the latter considers the text a language in use which can be exploited for language learning purposes (Brumfit, 1989). In this study I will focus on the second interpretation and the role of children's literature, especially storybooks in early SLA.

Literature on the use of stories and picture books in young L2 learners' classrooms has been rich as educationalists are eager to develop techniques

and activities suitable for the particular target group (Garvie, 1990; Ellis & Brewster, 1991, 2002; Brewster & Ellis & Girard, 2002; Mourao, 2006, among others). Literature, telling and reading stories for children, has an immense value for children, parents, teachers and educators. It plays a strong role in child language, cognitive, personal and social development both in mother tongue acquisition and SLA. It motivates and instructs at the same time. It stimulates different kinds of development, it transmits knowledge, values and believes, and it supports and expands imagination and creativity. As Collie and Slater (1987) formulate the benefits of literature for teachers: it can serve as a valuable authentic material, as a cultural and language enrichment, and above all, through working on any literary piece of work, immense opportunities are being created for learners' personal involvement.

## Storybooks and the teacher

Shifting from the arguments mounted to support the idea of using literature in early foreign language education, now I am considering the ways how storybooks can be exploited in the classroom in company with their pedagogical values. To broadly define the term 'storybook' in this study, let me elicit some examples for it from the rich variety of genres of children's literature: classical fairy tales and folktales, fables, contemporary retellings of fairy tales and fables, animal stories, rhyming stories, comics, everyday life or fantasy.

During the sharing experience of reading and listening to stories, audience can take up more than one subject position and learn basic concepts or facts about the world. According to Stephens (1992:162-163) 'a picture is a frozen moment in time… can reveal things that words do not,…can powerfully inscribe both explicit and implicit ideologies.' Stephens (1992) claims that during this process the audience will become an expert in language and in interpreting visual images. They have to decode verbal text and also understand how to read pictures. Thus using books several thinking processes like observing, comparing, and organizing can be developed. Children can recognize, find and name objects, describe colour, size, mode, emotions and generally what is happening in the picture, observe and compare details, make predictions and tell their own stories which all stimulate oral language development thus expand their vocabulary. "Moreover, since story-telling traditionally is not associated with 'learning', the 'affective filter' is low and this is also an advantage in the learning process..." (Kolsawalla, 1999:19).

Stories can also motivate children to write dialogues and dramatize them, compose group stories, write a different ending to a given story, write a letter to or in the name of one of the characters. Teachers can also ask children to sequence pictures or captions of a story after the discussion of the plot. Some books are especially suitable for presenting and discussing conflicts and ways of problem-solving. Children can see examples and share solutions with each other. Adults' reading aloud serves as a model for reading and provides listening practice and also motivates children to learn to read for themselves. All in all, the ways of utilizing storybooks are inexhaustible and mainly depends on the professional experience and the creativity of the teacher.

Stories, representing a theme or topic, naturally let themselves to be thoroughly exploited during series of lessons, therefore story-based language teaching in primary education has become fashionable in recent years. Further on I will introduce and summarize the results of two projects, both incorporating stories into the practice of FL classroom.

## Introduction of two projects

The first study I would like to give account of was carried out by Lugossy and Nikolov (2003). It focuses on using authentic reading materials in lower primary FL lessons. The aim of the project was to describe and analyse how children and their teachers have benefited from using authentic books as supplementary materials. The paper also examined the effect of the project on children's siblings, peers and teachers' colleagues. Participants were children between the ages of 7-10, who had no access to English outside the classroom. The two teachers involved had different language proficiency and professional backgrounds, one working at a large, prestigious school in a city, whereas the other teaches at a small, village school with children coming from a disadvantaged socio-cultural background. During the two years of the project, teachers were given 22 richly illustrated, authentic books to read in the lessons. The special feature of the project was that children could take the books home to re-read them. Data collection has been organized using qualitative techniques: on-going self-observation by the two teachers, lesson observations by an external observer twice in the classroom, teachers' diaries and two semi-structured interviews with the teachers at the end of each school year.

As for the attitudinal and motivational outcomes for children, both teachers and external observers experienced an overwhelming enthusiasm, and they claimed that it was a successful reading experience for the children. With regard to the attitudinal and motivational outcomes for teachers, both teachers reported changes in their professional lives, but in a different way. Whereas "T1 found the books "methodologically challenging", (Lugossy & Nikolov, 2003:7), T2 needed more time: at first she took the children's reading of storybooks as an occasion for her relaxation, but gradually she realized the potential that these readings provide, and felt the urge to create more interesting tasks on her own.

Results show a positive influence of this project on peers and siblings, as well. Colleagues in both cases were less responsive, and parents from the rural area were more supportive and grateful as compared to parents' reactions in the city school. Further development in the area of language outcomes and group dynamics have been outlined and emphasized by the authors.

*The second project* (Nikolov, 1998) reports on a study examining how young learners have been involved in the development of a negotiated story-based syllabus for English as a foreign language. Three groups of children between the ages of six and fourteen have been involved with the same teacher (the author) for a period of eight years in a Hungarian primary school. In the case of the first group the aim was to develop a process syllabus, whereas with the second and third group, the main goal was to pilot, assess and adapt the process syllabus to the needs of the new groups of children.

During this longitudinal ethnographic-like research, several issues were observed: participation, choice of tasks and materials, assessment, the role of mother tongue, and changes in the role of the teacher. Special emphasis was given to the technique of negotiation, and its changes due to the age of children. Data was collected through the teacher's self-reflection notes.

In my report on this project, I would like to focus on the issue of choice of tasks and materials. The author describes the process of negotiation on tasks and materials as follows: she offered alternatives to the children, through which children took an active part in the decision-making

considering the teaching and learning process. At the same time the teacher made it clear that she was ready to listen to children's opinions, and they should be responsible for their own language development. She reports that children's decisions mainly concerned the order of tasks, and not the tasks themselves. Later children also often felt the urge to formulate their own suggestions but they were generally open to making a compromise. The author gives the following reasons for story-based language teaching:

> ➢ the richly illustrated authentic materials are themselves motivating for this age group,
> ➢ some of the tales are well-known in Hungarian as well, thus serving as a useful background knowledge for learners in the English lesson,
> ➢ vocabulary and language functions are presented in a meaningful context through stories,
> ➢ stories can be exploited by designing great variety of tasks around them,
> ➢ both active and passive skills are developed,
> ➢ Stories are excellent tools for cultural enrichment of FL teaching.

During this project children were actively involved in the development of story-based syllabus: in lower primary they brought their own storybooks to the English lesson and they enjoyed listening to the same story again and again. The choice of books was based on voting. In grades 4 and 5, fewer and fewer children brought stories from home, they chose the story according to the sex of pupils or preference of topic. In grade 8 it occurred that children asked for a horror book, so the teacher offered them a choice between "Dracula", "Frankenstein" or "The Canterville Ghost". It is interesting to mention that, although they chose the third one, after finishing it, they voted for a detective story and not another horror story.

In the conclusion, Nikolov states the results of the project: children's positive attitude to the English language and their success as language learners in the long run, their confidence in and sense of responsibility for language learning. As a negative outcome the lack of continuity of this innovative project is mentioned.

# Conclusion

The aim of my work was to give an overview of early foreign language teaching, emphasizing the debate on the existence of critical period hypothesis (CPH). Deriving from the theoretical explanations for the introduction of early foreign language teaching I intended to summarize the assumptions and implications experts formulated for practitioner teachers. I tried to call attention to the value of literature in child development by discussing some advantages of storybooks and listing a few techniques of exploiting books in the classroom as well. In order to illustrate theory I introduced the reader to two projects which proved to be a successful realization of using storybooks in second language teaching.

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