

*The Psychosocial Aspects of Foreign Language Learning In Small Children*

**Introduction**

A fluent command of foreign languages has become an unquestionable necessity in an era of globalization. The only questions that arise concern the starting age for foreign language instruction in children and what languages should be taught. A number of solutions have already been proposed and implemented as part of teacher training standards. Teaching graduates are expected to have a fluent command of English.

The fall of socialism in 1989 brought a radical increase in the demand for foreign language teaching of both children and adults in Poland. Globalization saw the emergence of English as the most popular foreign language in many countries around the world, including Poland. Until 2008, compulsory foreign language curricula were introduced starting from the fourth grade of primary school. As of 1 September 2008, foreign language instruction became obligatory already from grade one, i.e. at the age of seven. It should be noted that many parents want their children to begin learning a foreign language already at pre-school level. Foreign language instruction is optional in kindergartens, and it is available at an additional fee which is paid by the parents. A similar situation was observed in the first grade of primary school before foreign language teaching became compulsory. Children attended extracurricular courses organized by the school or learned foreign languages outside of the school, mostly as part of private tuition. Vast disproportions in language learning options were noted between children from urban and rural areas. Very few rural schools offered additional language learning courses, and this fact additionally deepened the already wide divide in educational opportunities. In view of the above, the Polish authorities' decision to begin foreign language instruction already in the first grade of primary school seems to be justified. Legislative changes created a demand for teachers specializing in elementary education. Specialist courses training teachers of English for the youngest students have been offered by the British Council in Poland since the 1990s. Those courses enjoy undying popularity as it took Polish universities a long time to realize that elementary education experts were in very short supply. Language training costs are higher than in other social and humanities fields, and universities are reluctant to train "dual-subject" teachers, especially

when experts have to be transferred between departments<sup>1</sup>. Most universities (except for vocational schools of higher education) train students of philological departments, while teaching qualifications are acquired mostly in special interdepartmental units or faculties that offer courses in education. Language teacher training colleges were started in the early 1990s, and they somewhat addressed the problem of soaring demand for foreign language teachers. Those colleges were founded with the aim of training teachers, not linguists. They are not authorized to award Bachelor's degrees, the first level of formal qualifications which must be attained for the purpose of employment in a school. Those institutions thoroughly prepare future teachers as regards practical language instruction, but they have to rely on the academic prowess of universities for theoretical knowledge and professional titles. This form of teacher training is likely to disappear in the future, and in 2008, a relevant project has already been proposed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education for the consideration of the academic community.

This study discusses the most important psychological and social aspects of teaching/learning a foreign language. It contains an overview of various concepts referring to the role of age in foreign language acquisition based on the identified psychological and social factors. Subsequent sections of this study present several examples of teaching English to pre-school students in view of the psychological and social aspects of foreign language learning in children. The concept of "teaching/learning", rather than "teaching", was used intentionally to bring attention to the learner's central position in the process. In line with the principles of humanism which assert an individual's right to satisfy own needs, the teacher's role is to induce learning in students and preserve the teacher's autonomy in the process<sup>2</sup>.

### **Psychological aspects of foreign language acquisition**

The psychological factors of foreign language learning/teaching are:

- intellectual processes (explication and induction) – the learner's discovery of grammatical rules and structures by self-analysis;
- memory – indispensable when language appears and is to be mastered;
- motor skills – successful pronunciation of second language sounds, especially in the context of the speech organs (tongue, mouth, lips, vocal chords);
- motivation;

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<sup>1</sup> This observation has been made based on the author's personal experience.

<sup>2</sup> W. Wilczyńska, *Uczyć się, czy być nauczonym? O autonomii w przyswajaniu języka obcego*, PWN, Warszawa – Poznań 1999.

- attitude to a foreign language<sup>3</sup>.

Intellectual processes – according to W. Wilczyńska (as cited in S.P. Corder): *foreign language acquisition is principally an inductive process which is supported at the right moment by descriptions and explanations adapted to the learner's level of maturity and knowledge*<sup>4</sup>. As regards explication, which is inseparable from the understanding of grammatical rules, researchers<sup>5</sup> have noted that while explanation can be used in teaching certain elements of a foreign language to adult and adolescent learners, it is not a valid instructional method for children. The above especially applies to children younger than 4 or 5 who already have a working knowledge of the native language, but are unable to comprehend explanations such as: *use a plural form* or *use the past perfect tense*. Those children assimilate language by induction and the self-discovery of grammatical rules and structures. Children exposed to a foreign language are able to analyze and discover the general rules of a given language. This is a natural form of language acquisition which enables children to apply the discovered rules in new situations.

Memory – is of key importance in the learning process. Memory is needed for learning even the simplest foreign words, associating the heard word with its designatum through the use of sight, touch, smell, etc. Memory also plays a very significant role in learning grammatical structures and rules which provide the learner with an extensive knowledge of speech. Experts note, however, that *it is not enough to remember entire phrases or sentences, the learner has to remember situations in which those sentences and their syntaxes were correctly used*<sup>6</sup>. This type of memory is known as episodic memory. To illustrate, a student has to remember who said what in a foreign language outside of the classroom environment, in what circumstances and what that person's status was. Children under 7 have a truly phenomenal memory which is of paramount significance in foreign language learning.

Motor skills of speech organs – motor skills are very important for correct pronunciation which is an important part of foreign language learning. In turn, better pronunciation in a foreign language is a prerequisite for successful communication with others. The articulation of speech sounds requires control over the muscles that move the speech organs. Those articulatory muscles have to be used correctly and at the right time (e.g. opening the mouth

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<sup>3</sup> This classification has been suggested by: D.D. Steinberg, N.V. Sciarini, *An Introduction to Psycholinguistics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Pearson Education Limited, Great Britain 2006.

<sup>4</sup> W. Wilczyńska, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> D.D. Steinberg, N.V. Sciarini, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit, p. 126.

correctly, placing the lips and the tongue in the right position)<sup>7</sup>. Children have more flexible articulatory muscles than teenagers and adults. The above most probably explains why young children are able to assimilate the accent in a foreign language much more easily than adults, and with the same mastery that is demonstrated in their mother tongue. Accent becomes stabilized past the age of 12. It is roughly at that age when motor skills, including the activity of the articulatory muscles, begin to deteriorate (e.g. vocal chords gradually lose their flexibility).

Motivation – is yet another important aspect of the teaching/learning process. At the age of 2, a child does not feel the need to learn a foreign language, which is why it is exposed to that language spontaneously and naturally. A young child assimilates a foreign language as if automatically, even in unfavorable circumstances. All that is needed is a good model of spoken language (a child needs a role model) and the right linguistic "proofing" in the form of social and physical surroundings. A 4 to 5-year-old needs motivation to learn and is aware of the adults' attitude to a given foreign language. During both planned and spontaneous kindergarten activities, children can choose between the type of activity they want to be involved in. Children choose activities that are attractive and capture their attention. Small children are guided by emotions when making choices, which is why their motivation may be lowered if they do not like the foreign language teacher. At the pre-school age, referred to by J. Piaget as the stage of autonomy, a child begins to understand the consequences and intentions of own and other people's actions<sup>8</sup>. Most teachers realize that motivation is built by many factors, and they resort to various means that reinforce the motivation to learn. In short, external motivation should evoke the student's internal motivation, subject to the child's age and level of development. This becomes possible only at the stage of formal operational thinking approximately at the age of 10.

Attitude – the learner's attitude to a foreign language significantly determines the success of the learning process. A negative attitude to a foreign language or its speakers may result in reluctance towards learning that language, while a positive attitude can contribute to a student's greater involvement in classroom activity and successful language acquisition. Attitude is also capable of influencing memory. Researchers<sup>9</sup> have noted that children as young as 4 begin to develop an attitude towards a foreign language, especially by observing the behavior of adults. Children who use a different language at home and in school may be

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<sup>7</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> J. Piaget, *Rozwój ocen moralnych dziecka*, PWN, Warszawa 1967.

<sup>9</sup> D.D. Steinberg, N.V. Sciarini, op. cit.

reluctant to speak the native language because they want to be a part of the peer group in the classroom. The above often applies to children who are part of national minorities.

### **Social aspects of foreign language acquisition**

Social aspects include situations, places and interactions involving a foreign language where an individual's experiences may affect foreign language learning. They are, in particular:

- natural setting (family, play, work place);
- classroom setting;
- social context (community).

A natural setting for foreign language learning is similar to the setting in which the native language is acquired. This implies that language is experienced together with daily life situations and objects. It is acquired through interaction with others, for example during play. D.D. Steinberg and N. V. Sciarini<sup>10</sup> quote the example of a 5-year-old girl, a native speaker of English, who learned Japanese while playing with Japanese children during less than one year's stay in Japan. Older children may be reluctant to identify with the new community, and they resist learning a second language. They want to preserve their own identity and culture, and they avoid situations in which they would be forced to self-assert their identity. As observed by Preston<sup>11</sup>, children who have not yet fully developed a sense of self-identity find it easier to adopt the norms of a new language community. Adults have fewer opportunities to learn a second language naturally, and they are not as open as children. Interacting with foreign language speakers while shopping or visiting the bank may support language learning, but similarly to interactions with foreigners in the work place, it poses certain limitations. The number of opportunities to experience language in a natural setting decreases with age.

A classroom setting is a place where language is learned in a planned way, therefore it differs from a natural social setting. In the classroom, the teacher is usually the only speaker of the learned foreign language. Students learn the language not by self-analysis, but by following the teacher. All aspects of school life serve the ultimate goal of learning. As members of the school community, students are involved in the process of social adaptation, and they work not only for own benefit, but also for the benefit of the group. In a classroom setting, students have to observe specific learning procedures, they are expected to have a

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<sup>10</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> As cited in: D.D. Steinberg, N.V. Sciarini, op. cit.

long attention span, wait their turn and do their homework<sup>12</sup>. Language learning skills in a classroom setting increase with age.

The social context implies shared situations in which a language, for example English, is used as the native or the foreign language. A situation in which English is a foreign language in a school for foreign students, for example from Poland, is more likely to benefit the learning process than when English is learned in a Polish school.

The effect of psychological and social factors on foreign language learning in children and adults is presented in the table below.

**Table 1. The significance of factors contributing to foreign language learning**

Age	Psychological factors				Social factors	
	Intellectual processes				Setting	
	Induction	Explication	Memory	Motor skills	Natural	Classroom
<b>Children under 7</b>	High	Low	High	High	High	Low
<b>7-12</b>	High	Average	Average/ High	Average / High	Average	Average
<b>Older than 12 (adults)</b>	High	High	Average	Low	Low	High

Source: own findings based on D.D. Steinberg, N.V. Sciarini, op. cit.

What is the critical age for foreign language learning? The answer is complicated and ambiguous. As shown in the above table, children learn better in a natural setting, while adults score less satisfactory results in this environment, but they are characterized by a high level of induction and the ability to learn through explication (explanation). Unfortunately, a high level of induction does not support the learning of syntax rules because it lacks a reference to a natural setting which is a source of linguistic and non-linguistic data for analysis. Grammatical rules are not explained in a natural setting either. Due to average memory and lower flexibility of the articulatory muscles, adults are less successful in assimilating a foreign language than children. Children have better memory and they learn syntax rules more easily. In a classroom setting, older students and adults are better than children not only because they have a greater capacity for understanding grammatical explanations, but also because they

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<sup>12</sup> Op. cit.

know how to be students. They are familiar with the requirements of classroom instruction, they have a longer attention span and a longer cognitive experience (including in the native language).

Below is a description of two case studies investigating the discussed aspects of foreign language learning in children

### **Exemplification of psychological factors – music aptitude and English language acquisition**

Studies investigating the connection between language skills (reading, reading comprehension, knowledge of spelling and grammatical rules) and music aptitude have confirmed the existence of this dependency<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, the existing sources of reference do not support an unambiguous conclusion that would point to a strong correlation between music aptitude and the degree of fluency in the English language. An attempt to find the connection between music aptitude and the level of English proficiency in 12-year-old students was made by one of my students in a Bachelor's degree thesis. The students' music aptitude was investigated with the use of the IMMA (Intermediate Measure of Music Audiation) test developed by Edwin E. Gordon which measures tonal and rhythm music aptitude. Language skills were measured by a language achievement test designed by the author of the Bachelor's thesis based on the results of English language tests. The language achievement test covered five sub-tests:

- 1) a grammar test comprising 4 problems where a total of 17 points could be scored;
- 2) a vocabulary test comprising 4 problems and a total of 27 points;
- 3) a writing skills test comprising 4 problems and a total of 24 points;
- 4) an oral skills test comprising 4 problems and a total of 19 points;
- 5) a listening skills test comprising 4 problems and a total of 23 points.

A maximum of 110 points could be scored in the language achievement test. Students could score up to 80 points in E.E. Gordon's test.

Unlike the IMMA test, the language achievement test was not a standardized tool, therefore the obtained results were compared without computing a correlation index. In addition to the above test, which for reasons of methodological accuracy should be referred to as a competence quiz, the author analyzed the students' written work which consisted of regular quizzes. The author interviewed the students and the English teacher for additional information on the learners' individual involvement, assimilation of different aspects of the

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<sup>13</sup> Ref. M. Suświłło, *Psychopedagogiczne uwarunkowania wczesnej edukacji muzycznej*, Wyd. Nauk. UWM, Olsztyn 2001.

English language and their level of motivation. Although a sample comprising 20 students should not constitute a basis for formulating far-reaching conclusions, the reported results could provide the teacher with valuable material for follow-up work. The results obtained with the use of both tools were grouped on three levels: high, average and low. And so, children with a high level of music aptitude showed a high level of achievement in English, scoring 14 points more on average than students with an average music aptitude. Only a single student scored low in the written skills quiz. This seemingly simple correlation between music aptitude and language achievement was distorted by the results of one of the girls who, despite a low level of music aptitude, scored 100 points (out of 110) in the language quiz due to her long exposure to English. The girl began to learn English at the age of 3 in kindergarten. She then attended private lessons and was enrolled in an English class as of the fourth grade of primary school. She is reputed to be an ambitious and hard working student. She had traveled a longer way than some of her peers, and she was able to score such high results due to the motivational factor and continued exposure to English.

This is how the analyzed group's English teacher interpreted the students' achievements:

*Musically gifted children show a greater talent for languages than students with low levels of music aptitude. They find it much easier to pronounce words, phrases and full sentences at different levels of difficulty. The energy of the perfect pitch in music supports problem-free perception of the most difficult sounds. A child with a high level of music aptitude will describe the sound as nice, ugly, melodious or not melodious. This child will get pleasure out of reading, speaking or listening to a foreign language. The student will attempt to correctly reproduce every sound. In phonetics classes, only musically gifted students are able to take down the phonetic transcription of particular words because they clearly recognize every phoneme in the English language. [...] Their auditory skills enable them to judge whether they can correctly repeat a given phrase or perform a listening and speaking exercise. Language proficiency is the ability to communicate through speech which requires correct hearing perception<sup>14</sup>.*

#### **Exemplification of the social context – situational teaching/learning of English at pre-school level**

The two social contexts, i.e. the natural setting and the classroom setting, can be combined in a pre-school environment during spontaneous activities that are not planned,

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<sup>14</sup> L. Numminen, *Słuch muzyczny a zdolności językowe (na przykładzie uczniów szkoły podstawowej)*, Bachelor's thesis written under the supervision of M. Suświłło in a non-public university in Olsztyn, 2003.

occur at various times of the day and in different places of the kindergarten facility. Such events can take place during indoor or outdoor play time, during meals, during the afternoon nap time, in the changing room, bathroom, hobby area, etc. This type of instruction may be referred to as the "situational introduction of language". The "situational" method was used during an experiment involving pre-school students between October 2002 and March 2003<sup>15</sup>. It was a quasi-experiment in education, conducted on a single group of students without initial testing. Sample group students were selected on the assumption that they had not previously undergone any type of English language instruction. The applied research strategy was participant observation to avoid the need of correcting the children's incorrect linguistic habits. At the end of the experiment, the level of language proficiency was tested with the Child's Detailed Skills Charts and the Child's Activity Charts.

Below is a description of selected contexts in which situational English teaching strategies were deployed by the researcher.

Situation I – children arrive at the kindergarten. When eight children arrive, the teacher suggests a game of Lotto, and starts with a rhyme in English. The teacher tickles the children and says that those who laugh the loudest will be the first to start the game. The selected student receives a set of large cards with the same pictures that were previously distributed to other children. The chosen student, Alicja, shows a card with a picture of a car and asks: *Who's got a car?* Marek, who has the same picture, answers: *I've got a car*, and returns the picture saying *Thank you*. Alicja responds with a *Thank you*. Marek goes back to his seat, and the game continues until all children have shown their pictures. At the end of the game, children say out loud the names of the objects shown in the pictures, for example, Basia: *I've got a car, a dog, a teddy bear*; Jola: *I've got a doll, a train, an apple*. The children want to play again. The group grows as more students arrive at the kindergarten. As every day before breakfast, the teacher initiates a ball game during which children imitate the movements of different animals displayed in a series of pictures. The students have to give the animal's English name and mimic the way the animal moves.

Situation II – washing hands in the bathroom (before breakfast). The teacher instructs the children to line up and follow her (in English). She claps her hands (the students follow her) and says in English: *One, two, three, we go to bathroom, one, two, three, to wash our hands*. She then shows the children what to do by gesticulating and using English words. The children repeat after the teacher: *I'm soaping my hands*. This is followed by a rhyme about

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<sup>15</sup> Research for a Bachelor's thesis, K. Ostowska, *Sytuacyjne nauczanie języka angielskiego*, written under the supervision of M. Suświłło in a non-public university in Olsztyn, 2003.

breakfast which is especially popular among the girls: *One, two, three, we go to dining room. One, two, three, to eat our breakfast.* When one of the boys spills his soup at breakfast, the teacher responds in English, asking the boy to find the service room and bring back cleaning utensils. The teacher tells the children in English what the breakfast is made of, and the students repeat after her. As noted by the researcher, during meals, children can practice the use of nouns (names) as well as entire phrases which describe tastes (*It smells like...*), smells, favorite foods, etc.

Situation III – a compulsory class (language instruction in a classroom setting) is part of the curriculum and it has a clearly set goal: to develop or support the growth of developmental skills, for example, intellectual, artistic (musical, drawing) and motor skills. The teacher begins with a short talk about the weather and encourages the children to join in and use English weather terms. She then starts a game of Chinese whispers with a short English sentence about the weather. The game is followed by an exercise in visual perception during which the students have to complete a pattern drawn on a piece of paper. The teacher approaches every student, says out loud the names of geometric shapes displayed in the patterns and asks the children to repeat those names in English. The class ends with a short riddle about an egg.

Situation IV – outdoor games (in the school garden). Outdoor games are a daily activity in the kindergarten. Children can play in the snow at the temperature of  $-2^{\circ}$  C. The teacher says in English: *Let's make a snowman.* She gives the students further instructions, she names the snowman's body parts in English and assists the children in their work. After decorating the snowman, the students learn a short rhyme, they throw snowballs at the snowman and knock off its hat. Situations like these evoke highly positive emotions in children and they reinforce the learning of foreign vocabulary and phrases.

The researcher describes many other situations in which a child learns a foreign language through the use of words and phrases in an applicable context, as well as the students' responses to such situations. Yet it is not the objective of this study to present the researcher's findings in their entirety. The results of the cited experiment indicate that this type of instruction enables children to acquire a foreign language in an environment that is similar to the natural setting. It provides the teacher with an opportunity to observe the progress made by the students. The results of a language skills test performed after the experiment have the following implications for practical instruction:

1. *The teaching of a foreign language to children should rely predominantly on play.*
2. *Language acquisition takes place through language games and song learning.*

3. *Learning should be based on activity, movement, exercise and a full body response.*
4. *A child has to develop a versatile set of linguistic skills which are accompanied by other activities, such as drawing, coloring in or physical activity.*
5. *Children have to express themselves through various means, including drama, art and music.*
6. *The learning process should relate to specific objects and situations.*
7. *Learning takes place through multiple repetition<sup>16</sup>.*

### **Final conclusions**

To conclude, it should be noted that the above factors conditioning the process of teaching/learning a foreign language have been presented solely from a psycholinguistic perspective<sup>17</sup>, and that they never occur in isolation. Learning is usually the product of interactions between various psychological and social factors. Other skills required for effective language learning include music aptitude, perceptiveness and emotional readiness which activates the willingness to learn. Subject to the students' age, the learning context has to feature instructional methods that are attractive for children. The humanistic approach to language learning requires a high level of professional competence on the teacher's behalf in the following areas:

- 1) intellectual competencies – general knowledge of the social, natural and technical world;
- 2) specialist competencies, including a high level of linguistic competence (both in the native language and in the foreign language), the knowledge about language, speaking, reading, writing and listening skills, the knowledge and the skill of introducing children to a foreign language (including open style and flexibility);
- 3) psychological and teaching competencies related to personal traits which are required in the work with small children (e.g. friendly attitude, openness, empathy, etc.), the knowledge of child development and education, interpersonal skills, computer literacy, organizational skills, the ability to motivate;
- 4) ethical competencies derived from a personalistic approach to education where the learner is perceived as an autonomous individual who constantly develops the self, but also lives in a society and shares his knowledge and skills with others.

In general, the above skills make up a complete set of teaching and linguistic qualifications.

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<sup>16</sup> K. Ostowska, *Sytuacyjne nauczanie języka angielskiego*, Bachelor's thesis, p. 66.

<sup>17</sup> A slightly different set of factors conditioning the acquisition of a foreign language is proposed by cognitive psychology, but a separate study would be needed to discuss them in detail. Ref. W. Wilczyńska, *Uczyć się, czy być nauczonym? O autonomii w przyswajaniu języka obcego*, PWN, Warszawa – Poznań 1999.