THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING ENGLISH AT AN EARLY AGE

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Abstract: Teaching and learning English is becoming more and more popular all over the world, as well as in Uzbekistan. The recent changes in the curriculum are based on the hypothesis that children have very effective language acquisition when they are young, especially before the age of puberty, due to the lateralization processes in the brain. This hypothesis is usually called the critical period. This article provides information about researcher views on the importance of early-language learning process and teaching methods for young learners.
Key words: curriculum, acquisition, early-language learning, cognitive skills that work side by side: a rule-based system, action-based, computing, well-formed, declarative system.

Previous research has partially shown that early foreign language learning does not diminish first language skills and positively affects foreign language skills, especially speech and oral language skills (de Bot 2014; Nikolov and Mihaljevic Djigunovic 2014). However, other studies have shown that "students in their early teens are quicker and more effective second language learners in the classroom than, for example, seven years old" (Yule 2014: 188). The critical period hypothesis has been under heated debate on the accuracy of its characterization that early language acquisition is the limit for native-like proficiency, as later studies show that late learners can learn just as well or are more proficient in different types of language skills (Nikolov 2009; Muñoz and Singleton 2011). The more common terminology used for this period is the sensitive period, where the criticality of the period is not given such a large emphasis (Dufva 2018). Despite the differences in view and terminology, it has been proven that young children have a lot of potential for learning language effectively, especially in terms of oral skills. The Uzbek educational board is not only attempting to utilize this ability of early language learning, but raising the opportunities for learning foreign languages equally for every learner, despite their gender, ethnic background, or region.

This is of great importance in the reform of the education of young learners. Adding to the distinction accepted by cognitive science is the theory of second language acquisition reflecting on two different dimensions of cognitive skills that work side by side: a rule-based system that operates in computing well-formed sentences, and a declarative system that uses memory for operating large chunks of information (Nikolov 2009: 2). Reflecting on this information, Nikolov (2009: 2) exclaims that "young language learners use memory-based processes, whereas adult language learners rely on rule-based learning".

Teaching methods for young learners: Before discussing teaching methods, one has to know how to define a teaching method. The term method is defined by Larsen-Freeman and Anderson as "a coherent set of links between the actions of the teacher in a classroom and the thoughts that underline the actions." They include that the teachers' own understanding, beliefs, style and experiences form and shape different teaching methods, and they will not become standardized despite the imposing of different methods. In other words, the teacher's own views on foreign language teaching shape how they implement defined teaching methods, and why they choose to use them. Furthermore, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson add that the teacher is not the only one affecting the implementation of the teaching method in the classroom, but the pupils have a role in it as well.

Young learners are still learning the most effective methods for holding and using new information so there are very different teaching methods in use when it comes to young learners versus older learners. Not only are young learners observed as better oral learners when young, but their literacy skills, such as reading and writing, are also not often capable enough to be effective in teaching based on those tasks (Huhta and Leontjev 2019). With young learners, it is suitable to use age-appropriate teaching methods that are playful in nature and activate young learners' interests and improve their social skills (Huhta and Leontjev 2019). Young children also have shorter attention spans, so it is usually more suitable to switch between multiple tasks during one lecture. Oksanen (2019) discusses that teaching in primary school should always be action-based, since the younger the pupils are, the shorter the time is for sitting still during a lesson.

Action-based teaching is defined by Jaakkola, Liukkonen and Sääkslahti (2013: 668) as learning where problems, questions, and tasks are solved through physical actions. From the teacher's perspective, Inha (2018) concludes that there is not only an addition to the pupils' work during lessons, but also more structural and pedagogical changes - with the new curriculum, early language teaching has changed to a more functional and student-oriented direction - where the students themselves can play an active role, and where teaching is based on students' own motivation and enthusiasm. Van Lier (2007) has also noted that in recent 6 years the focus has shifted towards learner's active participation in meaningful activity. Inha (2018) also writes that functional learning methods for young children include games, songs, drama, and music, which are action-based teaching methods described both by Oksanen (2019) and Jaakkola et al. (2013). The teaching methods are constructed to be age appropriate and hold the interest of the learners for as long as possible. Young learners still have very limited literacy skills and therefore a big part of teaching is based on oral skills such as pronunciation or dialogue (Huhta and Leontjev 2019). This also ties into what Nikolov (2009: 2) explained above in how teaching young learners is mainly memory based in terms of songs and vocabulary instead of rules and grammar.

Teaching materials used with young learners are constantly evolving, and with early language learning it is fairly versatile. Huhta and Leontjev (2019) researched that many of the teachers do not use readily available teaching materials for teaching language for their pupils such as text- or exercise books, but lean more on the internet, social media, and their own exercises for the students, such as games, songs, or using physical examples. The teachers that use available teaching materials like textbooks use them together with the aforementioned teaching materials in conjunction with available digital materials and exercises. Digital materials and technology have been indeed constantly increasing in the language teaching of all age groups. According to Huhta and Leontjev (2019), most teachers see versatile teaching materials and methods effective for teaching young learners, especially if they lean on oral skills and playfulness. Oksanen (2019) also adds that the lesson is not usually functional if only exercises from the textbooks are in use, since children usually get excited from creative teaching methods, especially when the differ from the usual textbook approach. Early language teaching is an important part of the learner's experience as a student and as a person. Koivula et al. (2017) write that early language teaching not only affects the well-being of the student, but also gives the child meaningful experiences about their involvement, progress, and sense of community. The importance of early language learning has for a long time been a topic of discussion not only in the pedagogical community but also in politics and economic research. With teaching young children, the role of the teacher gets more important with the methods and language proficiency. The teacher's role could be either leader of the young learners or as part of their communicative practices, as was introduced by Nikolov and Mihaljevic Djigunovic (2011).

In conclusion, as Nikolov (2009: 10) mentions that the "reason why early language learning is a great initiative is that by early exposure children may enjoy the potential advantages of starting

young, as well as profit from what they experience at later stages in their language learning". In other words, children can profit from the information and skills they gather in the early point of their education such as pronunciation, motivation, the amount of background information, literacy, and learning skills and strategies that they can use in their future studies.

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