The role of teacher imagination in conceptualising the child as a second language learner

Ewa Guz
John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin
ewasik@o2.pl

Małgorzata Tetiurka
John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin
mtetiurka@kul.pl

Abstract

In order to initiate and maintain meaningful interaction in a young learner L2 classroom, an adult teacher needs to approach children in ways consistent with their developmental profile and adjust teaching methodology so as to accommodate young learners' current skills. This requires the ability to predict the child's possible responses to classroom events by imagining what s/he might think and how s/he might behave when presented with specific instructions. Bearing in mind that the teacher's perception of the world is purely and completely adult in nature, in order to be effective, educators need to create a mental image or a concept of a young learner by gathering knowledge about his or her developmental characteristics and fully grasping the pedagogical implications of this knowledge. In this paper, we aim to explore the role of imagination in the conceptualisation of a child as a second language learner amongst university level pre-service teachers involved in an early primary EFL education programme. We report on qualitative research based on data obtained in the course of a two semester teacher training course of 35 BA and 30 MA students majoring in English. In the study, we focused on the working image of the child's developmental characteristics created by the participants and their ability to employ this in their teaching. Our data show a substantial discrepancy between the participants' theoretical conceptions concerning the business of teaching and the actual actions undertaken during lessons with young learners. Although participants were able to successfully identify the most distinctive devel-

opmental characteristics of primary-level learners, they experienced difficulty with integrating them into actual classroom practice.

Keywords: young learners, cognitive development, teacher beliefs, teacher cognition, imagination

The conceptual core and major part of the discussion presented in this paper have been informed and motivated by our belief that imagination (and imagining) constitute an indispensable part of the business of teaching. Imagination, which is essentially the ability to envisage the possible by forming images in the mind, enhances rational thinking and stimulates invention, novelty, and flexibility (Egan, 2008). The creative and innovative potential of imagination offers considerable benefits to education (Egan, 1992, 2005). Egan (2005, p. xii) refers to imagination as "the main workhorse of effective learning" and argues that engaging teachers' imaginations in teaching (as well as students' imaginations in learning) lies at the core of any meaningful educational practice irrespective of the area/skill taught and the profile of the learner. In fact, virtually every act of pedagogical planning, from designing a curriculum or a syllabus to drawing up a lesson plan or a particular classroom activity, depends on the teacher's ability to imagine the possible outcomes of his/her choices, decisions and actions (Bullough, 1989). Creating an imaginary teaching scenario typically requires establishing a number of learning goals, selecting relevant materials and developing activities which promote learning. While the first two procedures require little or no imagination from the teacher (the goals and materials being institutionally determined rather than selected by educators), planning for the actual classroom interaction requires that the teacher imagines the possible behaviours and responses of the learners. In this sense, any educational procedure undertaken in the classroom is determined, to a great extent, by the teacher's pre-conception of a learner in terms of his/her overall development and the way s/he thinks, behaves and learns.

With an increasing number of European countries adopting an early start policy towards L2 education, the profile of an average L2 learner has recently undergone a radical change (Cameron, 2001, 2003; Ellis, 2004; Enever, 2011; Enever & Moon, 2009; McKay, 2006; Szpotowicz 2011, 2012). Cameron (2003, p. 105) reports that lowering the age of the child entering the system of mandatory second language education has led to a considerable increase in the number of children learning English within a formalised and institutional setting. The year 2008 marked the introduction of an early start policy in Poland with English being selected as the obligatory second language by nearly

80 % of institutions (Szpotowicz & Szulc-Kurpaska, 2009, p. 11). The expansion of EFL in the Polish primary school setting has created a very specific, continually growing and particularly learner-sensitive educational context, which presents all those involved in early language education with new challenges. One of the principal effects of lowering of the average age of an EFL learner has been an increased demand for professionally qualified and efficient educators who possess both the knowledge and skills critical to becoming what Brewster, Ellis and Girard (1992, p. 269) refer to as "teachers of language and teachers of children." They emphasise that creating an educational setting conducive to teaching a foreign language to a primary learner is contingent not only upon the teacher's command of the target language but also his/her ability to adjust the methodology to the needs and abilities of a child. Enever and Moon (2009, p. 10) express similar concerns about "teacher quality" and stress the need for providing professionals with qualifications appropriate for teaching primary learners. In fact, it is emphasised by the majority of researchers involved in investigating early L2 pedagogy that being a children's language teacher requires an ability to perceive children as active recipients of instruction and to create an appropriate learning environment (Cameron 2001, 2003; Dimroth, 2008; Haznedar & Gavruseva, 2008; Moon, 2000, 2005; Nicholas & Lightbown, 2008; Phillips, 1993; Slattery & Willis, 2001; Vale & Feunteun, 1995). Considering the developmental gap between an adult teacher and a young learner, primary-level classrooms represent a particularly challenging educational context, in which the teacher's conceptualisation of the learner (the child) and his/her needs constitutes an issue of paramount importance. The major challenge facing L2 teachers at the primary level is the need to imagine what it is like to be a child and a learner and integrate this knowledge into their professional practice. To create a working image of a child learner at the primary level, the teacher has to acknowledge their unique developmental characteristics and preferred ways of learning. What these are will be discussed in the following sections.

Children's Developmental Characteristics

Following the definition proposed by McKay (2006, p. 1), by young learners we understand those who are learning a foreign language during the first six years of formal schooling, in other words, primary school children. Teaching primary-level learners is particularly challenging for a number of reasons. Not only do they differ significantly from other age groups, but they are also characterised by great individuality among their peer group (Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou 2003; Moon 2000; Phillips, 1993). What is more, they are in the process of

constant cognitive, emotional, social and physical growth (McKay, 2006, p. 6), which requires on the part of the teacher the skills of both observation and flexibility. The child's growth is far from harmonious and highly unpredictable (Moon, 2005). A child who performs adequately in one area (for example, oral language expression) may experience difficulties in another (for example, lack fine motor skills and struggle with written expression) and require extra support. However, it is generally acknowledged that a primary teacher is responsible for the overall development of a child, as is expressed in the notion of holistic teaching (Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou, 2003; Phillips, 1993; Wright, 2001). Consequently, a teacher cannot fall into a routine while teaching primary children but needs to constantly resort to his/her imagination to predict possible outcomes, challenges and limitations of classroom instruction. In the paragraphs that follow, we will briefly characterise the most prominent features of primary children as learners, focusing on their physical, emotional, cognitive and social development. These will be followed by a brief outline of the main principles of teaching English to young learners (TEYL).

Primary children can vary dramatically as far as their physical development is concerned. This is manifested not only in their different pace of physical growth (with boys falling approximately 18 months behind girls) but also in the extent to which they have mastered fine and gross motor skills (McKay, 2006). An early-years teacher may find herself/himself confronted with children who still have difficulties holding a pen or operating scissors alongside those who are competent writers and art makers. However, the majority of early primary children display a great need for movement, physical expression as well as a constant yearning for kinaesthetic play (Read, 2007). The period of a typical school lesson is usually too long for early primary pupils to remain still at their desks (Halliwell, 1992; Scott & Ytreberg, 1990). Children at this age fail to concentrate on a task for longer than several minutes and have no inhibitions about expressing boredom or a lack of interest openly (Moon, 2005). Although the exact duration of the child's attention span depends on his/her personality or attitude towards learning, it is estimated that the approximate time of concentration on a single question is elongated by three minutes with each year of the child's maturation (Cohen, 2002).

Throughout the primary years, children are usually unstable emotionally, though at different periods for different reasons. Young children rely to a great extent on adult support and, initially, they might feel insecure in a school situation (Hyson, 2004). Hyson (2004, p. 34) observes that securing an emotionally stable environment is the key to providing young children with opportunities to explore and learn. This can be achieved by uniting learning experiences with positive emotions, assisting children in understanding their emo-

tions as well as supporting the regulation of their own feelings. Adults can also assist children in other aspects of their overall development. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning takes place in a social context with more able others who make learning possible for the child (Gajdamaschko, 2006). Any task performed with the support of someone more knowledgeable moves a child to his or her zone of proximal development (ZPD) bringing better results than if the child was left to his/her own resources (Daniels, 2011). This is not to say that primary children are ready to work closely with their peers (Fontana, 1995). On the contrary, sharing and cooperation must be gradually learnt through the spirit of competitiveness, which is usually present even in small children (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990).

At the onset of primary school, the child's thinking and intellectual development is marked by the most dynamic growth and changes. In the course of primary education, children only begin to learn to think in an abstract way (Fisher, 1990; Piaget, 1969; Wood, 1998). The early days of schooling are marked by the reliance on concrete thinking, which is expressed in the children's ability to grasp only what is here and now, and learn from direct experience (McKay, 2006). As Williams and Burden (1997, pp. 204-208) put it, children can only understand and focus on what is "meaningful to them" and in ways that are "meaningful to them." Also, they are naturally and instinctively inclined to make attempts at understanding the surrounding world (Moon, 2005, p. 31). Their thinking and behaviour are meaning-oriented, which is why any message they receive is subject to "searching for meaning and intention" (Cameron, 2003, p. 11). The child's thoughts and mental representations at the age of seven or eight are concrete in nature and based on the resources and knowledge available at the time. These include a limited inventory of familiar objects, situations, events, experiences and people (Donaldson, 1978). Gathering direct, hands-on experiences and exploring the environment allow children to build expertise and develop new ways of thinking (Robson, 2006, p. 6-7). Higher-order thinking skills such as predicting, classifying or hypothesising develop around the age of eleven (Bloom, 1956; Fisher, 1990). However, as more abstract forms of reasoning come into use, children still tend to rely on and benefit from concrete and reality-based thinking.

Children as EFL Learners

The special developmental characteristics of primary-school children have direct implications for L2 teaching methodology. Some researchers argue in favour of a task-based (Cameron, 2001; Carless, 2002; Carless & Gordon, 1997; Szpotowicz & Szulc-Kurpaska, 2009) or project-based approach (Hedge,

1993), which advocate the use of goal-oriented activities promoting active pursuit of meaning. The selection of tasks reflects the child's natural predisposition for play, drama, movement and music-based activities (Cameron & McKay, 2010; Moon, 2000; Williams, 1991). As regards the child's linguistic development, the onset of EFL instruction occurs at a time when a primary child's knowledge of the mother tongue is incomplete and a number of its aspects are still developing. Although the majority of primary children have developed their L1 oral competence, their literacy may have not been established (Pinter, 2006). As far as the second/foreign language is concerned, children see it "from the inside," as a means of getting or expressing a message, rather than "from the outside," as a formal and abstract system (Cameron, 2003, p.11). Therefore, the use of metalanguage and explicit language instruction in a primary classroom must be limited to the minimum.

The Role of Teacher Beliefs

We have argued in the introductory section of this paper that teacher imagination plays a significant role in shaping classroom practices of individual teachers by allowing them to formulate mental preconceptions and images of future and possible classrooms events. The imaginary concepts are underpinned by the teacher's current knowledge, experiences and beliefs about teaching (Bullough, 1989; Werbińska, 2004). Current research defines teacher beliefs as a tacit but practical knowledge concerning a variety of aspects of teaching, such as the target language itself, the learners, the institutional policy, the professional context, the methodology, the didactic materials and instructional activities (Borg, 2006, 2011; Peterson & Comeaux, 1987; Tsui, 2003). A whole array of factors is listed as contributing to building teacher preconceptions of teaching. These range from the context of work, professional training, work experiences and target language awareness to personal background and individual life circumstances (Murray & Christison, 2011; Trappes-Lomax, 2002). Most importantly, however, these beliefs shape the teacher's understanding of what constitutes good or bad teaching and determine particular actions and decisions undertaken during L2 lessons (Borg, 2003; Widdowson, 2002).

Considering the unique nature of the maturational needs of young learners, adult teachers need to be particularly aware of these developmental characteristics. Moon (2005) observes that educators need to acknowledge that children are in constant flux as regards their cognition, command of L1 as well as their physical and emotional condition. Similarly, Scott and Yrtreberg (1990, p. 9) highlight the transitory nature of child development, which necessitates a highly utilitarian approach to instruction on the part of the teacher.

Halliwell (1992) advocates the use of constructive realism, which involves careful planning for the child's actual engagement and occupation during the lesson based on a thorough understanding of his/her mental as well as physical profile. Linse (2005, pp. 1-17) describes the main principles of "developmentally appropriate instruction" which, as she claims, should be informed by the teacher's awareness of the child's psychological and physical needs.

To conclude, researchers agree that effective instruction of young learners cannot take place if the designed activities are beyond the child's conceptual ability (Williams, 1991). To make any predictions about what is (un)doable for primary learners, adult teachers (and novice ones in particular) have to rely on their imagination. Seen in this light, teacher imagination emerges as a powerful instrument, which allows teachers to envisage possible classroom scenarios and anticipate children's thoughts, actions and verbal responses.

Method

The underlying rationale of this paper is that the major challenge facing teachers of primary children is the need to temporarily step out of their adult shoes and look at the world through a child's eyes, and for teachers of young learners, that imaginative leap is even greater than for teachers of other age groups. The question of whether (and if so, to what extent) such a shift in thinking is feasible constitutes the major issue raised in this paper.

Our primary concern is to consider the extent to which pre-service teachers are successful in creating the concept of a child as a learner and complying with it in their instructional practice. To address this issue, we postulate the following research questions:

- RQ 1: What are the characteristics of the "imagined image" of a primary learner constructed by pre-service teachers?
- RQ 2: How successful in terms of practical implications are adult pre-service teachers in conceptualising young children as second language learners?

Participants

The participants of the study were 65 Polish pre-service trainee teachers with no prior teaching experience in formal contexts. They were all university-level students working towards their degree in English literature, linguistics or applied linguistics. The group included 35 BA students (25 female, 10 male) and 30 MA (27 female, 3 male) students. The instruction the participants were exposed to over a period of two semesters included: 120 h of input classes in TEYL, 90 h of lecture on young learners' characteristics, 30 h of observation

practice and 90 h of teaching practice in grades 1-3 and 4-6. The goal of the course was to prepare participants for teaching EFL in Polish primary schools. The topics covered during the course included, among others, the cognitive, social and emotional characteristics of the child, paying particular attention to the differences between children and other age groups. Special emphasis was placed on the practical dimension of TEYL, with trainees taking on the role of children and discussing the practical implications of doing so.

Data Collection

Data collection continued over a period of one academic year. The data were drawn from a variety of sources obtained in the course of the TEYL instruction and included:

- notes and reports from participants' observation practice which involved observing eight different expert, full-time TEYL teachers (with minimum five years of experience) working in primary schools and evaluating various aspects of their instruction; no limitations were imposed or guidance offered as to the content and length of answers;
- lesson plans based on adaptations of selected children stories for classroom use prepared by participants;
- lesson plans in which participants were asked to re-design an unsuccessful lesson;
- video recordings and transcripts of lessons conducted by participants during their teaching practice.

Prior to the study, participants were given extensive information about the character and purpose of the research. Written permissions were obtained to indicate explicit consent to participate in the study.

Procedure

In the introductory part of this paper, we argued that in order to provide a full picture of the learning space created by a particular teacher, we need to consider both his/her pedagogical intentions (based on his/her theoretical preconceptions) and the actual classroom events, decisions and learning outcomes. In other words, the planned needs to be juxtaposed with the enacted. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the data gathered were grouped into three categories: opinions, ideas and practices.

The first category, which can be described as reflective in nature, consisted of participants' observation notes and reports based on their comments, reflections and evaluations concerning various aspects of the observed

lessons conducted by expert teachers. For the purpose of this study, we analysed data from a task in which the participants were instructed to pay attention to and describe the most effective classroom practices in the observed lessons. Effective practices were defined as ones which activated and motivated young learners the most and created opportunities for the meaningful use of L2. The second category (labelled as conceptual) consisted of lesson plans prepared by participants. To obtain data for this category, participants were asked to adapt a children's story for classroom use by preparing a set of pre-reading vocabulary activities, while-reading comprehension activities as well as post-reading speaking activities. The third category was based on the actual teaching experiences of the participants and included transcripts and video recordings of their lessons. We analysed teacher instructions, teacher and student initiations and responses, teacher feedback as well as the pedagogical context in which these came about (elements of task design and the didactic aids used). Our focus here was twofold. Firstly, we were interested in the teacher's ability to carry his/her message across on the verbal level and engage primary learners in classroom goings-on. To investigate the quality of teacher-learner communication, transcripts were analysed in terms of any communication breakdowns and misunderstandings between the participants of discourse. Secondly, teacher talk was examined in terms of the teacher's conceptions of a child as a young L2 learner.

Results and Discussion

Our first research question sought to identify the conceptualised image of a young EFL learner created by the participants as reflected in their opinions, ideas and practices represented in the data.

Imagining a Child as a Second Language Learner: Opinions

As regards the reflective part of the data, a fairly consistent picture emerged from the participants' observations of the lessons conducted by expert teachers. As we have already pointed out, the focus here was on the most effective activation techniques that allowed the observed teachers to involve children in the lessons and successfully pursue their learning goals. Table 1 shows the inventory of classroom practices which were listed by the pre-service teachers as the most effective for successful language learning among young learners along with the percentage of participants who indicated them.

Table 1 Reflecting on young learners' classroom activity

Type of activity	Participants (%)
Team games involving an element of competition and/or a reward	92
Tasks involving movement/physical activity	62
Guessing-based activities	59
Singing and reciting rhymes	59
Activities based on visual stimulation	52
Variability	48
Multi-sensory stimulation	17
Drawing	17

As shown in Table 1, a number of key elements were identified by participants as crucial in activating young learners during English lessons both in grades 1-3 and 4-6. First of all, it was reported that the learners participated most willingly in game-based activities which contained elements of teamwork, rivalry and the anticipation of "something winnable." Despite the controversy over the use of instrumental motivation in teaching (see, for example, Kohn, 1993), awarding prizes to winners was found to be particularly appealing and motivating. Overall, participants pointed out that competition increased learner motivation and the amount of L2 output produced, at the same time ensuring maximum participation. Another technique which maximised the learners' involvement in the lessons involved some form of kinaesthetic or tactile activation. Tasks based on movement and physical activity (for example, pointing, miming, gesturing, dancing, cutting, inserting stickers in the notebook, etc.) were found engaging by more than half of the observers. As one of the participants put it, "*children are full of energy and cannot sit still for a long time, movement gives them an opportunity to behave naturally.*" The last category of activities, which were identified as effective activators by nearly half of the participants, included singing, recitation of memorised rhymes and tasks which involved guessing and some form of visual stimulation (flashcards, pictures, posters, puppets, video clips, images projected on walls).

Apart from specific types of classroom practices, participants pointed out two other aspects of TEYL. Firstly, it was observed that children immediately lost interest when faced with routine and excessive repetition. Therefore, participants emphasised the need to diversify activities, introduce some novelty to break the predictable course of classroom events as well as combine various types of sensory stimulation to make the activities appealing for the largest possible group of learners. Finally, the teacher's attitude was considered significant as, to use a quotation from one of the participants, "*students intuitively feel when the teacher is bored or absent-minded and quickly assume a similar stance towards the lesson.*"

In sum, our results show that pre-service teachers were able to identify a number of procedures and activation techniques which, in developmental terms, are the most appropriate for primary-level learners. This allowed them to form some preconceptions concerning young learners' expectations, preferences and abilities. The working image of a young learner that emerged from the participants' reflections was that of a learner who eagerly engages in a variety of games and competitions, which are preferably not too long and involve some sort of physical activation intertwined with visual and/or aural stimulation. These observations are in line with the findings of recent research, which suggest that while the visual modality develops gradually throughout the primary school, the ability to learn and retain information through the auditory channel appears around the age of ten or eleven (Price, Dunn, & Sanders, 1980). Therefore, young learners benefit most from the concurrent activation of the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic channels (Iliuk, 2002, p. 43). Indeed, generally, the human brain tends to favour multisensory over unisensory training as the simultaneous activation of a number of senses facilitates the development of new neural connections which enhance language learning (Shams & Seitz, 2008; Wrighton, 2010).

Imagining a Child as a Second Language Learner: Concepts and Practices

Of major interest from the point of view of this study is whether the participants' reflections and observations concerning the developmental profile of primary learners have any bearing on their actual pedagogical practices. The conceptual and experiential part of our data (including story adaptations, lesson plans and lesson recordings along with their transcripts) shed further light on how the beliefs during the observation practice translate into the participants' pedagogical activity.

One of the major observations made in this part of our analysis is that the working image of a child observable in the participants' lesson designs and classroom practices was highly variable and far from consistent. In particular, our data showed a huge degree of variation in the preconceptions and actions of individual participants. Not infrequently, the tasks and materials designed by an individual teacher as part of a single lesson alternated between fairly adequate and effective to completely unsuited to the needs and abilities of young learners. This might suggest that the beliefs and conceptions of pre-service teachers concerning the child as a language learner are not firmly established and, thus, inconsistently applied. Also, the participants were highly varied in terms of their ability to conceive a mental image of a child as a participant of an EFL lesson. Nearly two thirds (69%) of the analysed lesson plans and 60% of the lesson tran-

scripts contained examples of activities and formulations indicating the participants' failure to recognise the developmental characteristics of children and their pedagogical implications. This mismatch between the intended and the enacted was manifested most vividly in the teachers' selection of language used to address the learners. To illustrate these points, we will now look at some examples of the participants' misconceptions of young learners as manifested in the elements of lesson design and classroom discourse.

Misconceptions of a Child as a Second Language Learner

One of the findings of this part of our investigation is that participants experienced considerable difficulty with conceptualising children's cognitive skills and tended to endow young learners with the intellectual capacities of adults, which was reflected in the way they planned and conducted their lessons. Not infrequently, the teacher's reluctance to acknowledge the fact that they are in a young learners' classroom was clearly noticeable already in the initiating parts of the lessons. Extract 1 below, which comes from the beginning of a lesson in the second grade of primary school, is highly representative of teachers' unrealistic expectations towards children's contribution to the lessons (T stands for Teacher and S for Student):

Extract 1

<T>   *Kto zapisze temat lekcji?* [Who will write the subject of the lesson on the *blackboard*?]
<S1>   (volunteers and is appointed for the job)
<T>   (dictates the subject) *Utrwalanie czasownika* have got. [The verb *have got*: consolidation.]
<S2>   *Proszę Pani co to znaczy utrwalanie?* [What does *consolidation* mean, Miss?]
<T>   *Zapamiętanie, uczenie się.* [Memorising, learning.]
<S2>   (nods but is clearly confused)
<Ss>   (take seven minutes to copy the subject to their notebooks in silence)
<T>   *Czasownik....* [The verb...]
<S3>   *Proszę Pani, jeszcze nie skończyliśmy!* [We are not done yet, Miss!]
<T>   *Dobrze, dobrze.* [Okay, okay...]
<T>   (waits another minute and resumes speaking)
       Czasownik.... have got *oznacza 'mieć,' 'posiadać' i ma dwie formy* has got *i* have got. Have got *występuje w pierwszej i drugiej osobie liczby pojedynczej oraz we wszystkich osobach liczby mnogiej.* Has got *występuje tylko w trzeciej osobie liczby pojedynczej: she has got, he has got, it has got. A teraz zrobimy sobie ćwiczenie...* [The verb *have got* means 'to own,' 'to possess,' and it has two forms *has got* and *have got*. *Have got* appears in the first and second person singular and all persons plural. *Has got* appears only in the third

person singular, for example: she has got, he has got, it has got. And now we are going to do an exercise...]

<T>	(distributes handouts with a gap-fill exercise entitled "How many eyes?")
<Ss>	(take about seven minutes to fill in the gaps with the forms of *have got*)
<T>	*Okay. Sprawdzamy.* [Okay. Let's check your answers.]
	(appoints individual students to read out their answers, most students provide wrong answers and need to be corrected)

In this part of the lesson, the teacher's pedagogical objective was to revise and practise two forms of the verb *have got*. Judging from the students' responses, the teacher failed to meet the learning goal set for this part of the lesson as the majority of learners came up with incorrect answers. As far as the learners' involvement in the lesson is concerned, the 15 min covered in Extract 1 (nearly one third of the lesson) proceeded with the majority of learners being passive. The learners' contribution to the lesson was minimal and involved copying from the blackboard, listening to the teacher's explanation of the target structure, reading out answers from a notebook and filling in gaps in a grammar exercise. Individual students were appointed to move and speak, while the rest of the class remained still and silent throughout. As regards the presentation of the target structure, the teacher lectured about its formal aspects paying virtually no attention to its meaning or the context in which it could be used. No examples of the target structure were provided and the majority of the teacher's explanation was based on metalanguage (a verb, singular, plural, forms, the first, second and third person). Also, the length of the teacher's explanation exceeded the actual attention span of a primary school child. The teacher expected the learners to pick up the forms of the target language through copying text from the blackboard and discussing abstract grammar rules. The target language was presented to learners as passive knowledge made up of decontextualised, abstract generalisations whose understanding required higher order thinking skills such as theorising and hypothesising. Form was favoured over meaning and the functional dimension of the L2 was completely neglected. Evidently, the procedures outlined above are at variance with the developmental characteristics of a child and the principles of the TEYL methodology outlined earlier in this paper. For example, a primary child approaches the surrounding world as a tool for conveying meaning rather than as an abstract structural concept. Replacing concrete and tangible experiences with decontextualised, metalinguistic explanation focusing on the formal nuances of language deprives the learner of genuine learning opportunities. As we have already pointed out, nearly 60% of the transcripts of lessons carried out by the participants contained recurrent examples of abstract terms (appearing typically in teacher instructions or explanations)

whose understanding involved mental operations typical of adults such as theoretical and abstract reasoning. Classroom discourse, or more specifically, constructing coherent and understandable teacher talk, proved to be a major stumbling block in teacher-child communication. Extract 2 below provides a good example of the application of excessively complex language when simple, down-to-earth formulations could easily have been used.

Extract 2

(The teacher points to a poster on the blackboard with two big circles on it. He wants learners to guess that all the objects are divided according to colour and type of food.)

<T> (points to the poster) *Let's play a game. We are going to guess what might be the criterion here. The first student to guess wins.*

<Ss> (start shouting out names of objects they can see in the circles) *Banana, apple, lemon...*

<T> *No, no, no. Don't tell me what you can see. Tell me, what do you think, which criterion I used?*

<Ss> (silent and clearly confused)

<T> *Focus on the appearance!*

<Ss> *Ale proszę pana, co mamy robić?* [But Sir, what are we supposed to do?]

Although in theory the teacher planned well in terms of activating the children (by incorporating elements of visual stimulation, guessing and competition), he has clearly failed to verbalise his message in a way comprehensible to young learners. Eager to take part in the game, the learners relied on the context and the teacher's gestures (pointing to the pictures) and wrongly presumed they were to name the objects. Instead of following the children's lead and letting them name the objects, the teacher repeated his earlier instructions using the word *criterion* in his questions, which caused confusion and deemed the task undoable. The additional instructions provided later to prompt the learners ("*Focus on the appearance*!") were too abstract and caused further misunderstanding. This resulted in a communication breakdown and the children demanding a straightforward explanation. In sum, the teacher showed a great deal of awareness of the developmental characteristics of his students, but failed to convey his message on the level of discourse.

The findings presented so far are further corroborated by the suggested classroom procedures included in the lesson plans designed by the participants. Below are a selection of extracts from different lesson plans intended for grades 1-3 (6-9 years) which show examples of classroom procedures suggesting an overall lack of (or very weak) awareness of the developmental characteristics of children on the part of the pre-service teachers:

1. T asks learners to work individually with dictionaries to make a list of ten activities that can be performed in a garden. They are to write these activities in their notebooks.
2. T presents new lexical items (22 words denoting kitchen utensils) by writing them on the blackboard, reading them out slowly and loudly and translating them into Polish. Learners read the words loudly and slowly and write them down in their notebooks.
3. While T is reading a story, the pupils are following the text in their copies and match cards with names of days of the week with cards showing pictures and animals.
4. T asks learners about the techniques they use for learning and memorising new information and choose the technique that is the best.
5. T explains the meaning of new words (*sparkling* and *dull*) and asks children to make sentences with them asking volunteers to come up to the black board and to write down sentences they came up with.

As evidenced in 1-5 above, participants were found to resort extensively to activities requiring intellectual involvement, the use of literacy skills and abstract thinking. The procedures outlined above require the learners to: cope with large portions of new material (1, 2), perform a number of activities simultaneously (3), formulate and voice their opinions on unfamiliar and abstract topics (4), show an increased awareness of grammar and grammatical terminology (5). Although these activities could be easily performed by an adolescent or adult learner, they clearly exceed the cognitive and conceptual capacity of a child. Once again, these data show the teachers' unrealistic expectations and unsuccessful conceptualisation of the children's attention span, thought processes, language learning strategies and the mastery of academic skills. They imply that the teachers have not been able to fully "imagine" what it means to be a young child learning a foreign language.

Based on the data presented above, we have compiled a list (see 1-12 below) of young learners' developmental characteristics, skills and abilities that pervaded the participants' opinions, ideas and practices. These characteristics form the core of the conceptualised image of a child created by pre-service teachers analysed in our study:

The working image of a child as a language learner:
1. Children can remain still for longer stretches of time.
2. Children can read and write with ease and good speed.
3. Children rely on literacy skills in their learning.

4. Children have a long attention span.
5. Children can understand abstract terms including grammatical terminology.
6. Children can follow abstract explanations and grasp their practical implications.
7. Children can use deductive logic and apply rules to examples.
8. Children see language as an abstract concept.
9. Children pay attention to language form, rather than meaning.
10. Children need to be informed about the learning objectives of their lessons.
11. Children do not need explicit instructions.
12. Children are autonomous when it comes to organising their classroom work and learning.

The image presented in the list above is truly adult-like in nature. Children are portrayed here as passive recipients or vessels into which the teachers pour their knowledge. Cognitively speaking, they are imagined by the pre-service teachers as being capable of performing highly advanced mental operations involving theoretical and hypothetical reasoning and deductive logic. They are imagined as form-orientated, autonomous learners who appreciate form-focused instruction and are in full control of their minds and bodies. Sadly, the description of a child outlined above makes no allowances for children's playful disposition, their natural curiosity and the drive to search for meaning in every-thing they do. It fails to acknowledge as well the children's need to move and explore the world through concrete experiences activating all the available sen-sory channels. To put it simply, it fails to appreciate the child itself.

Conclusions

In this paper, we set out to investigate how pre-service teachers imagine young EFL learners. We attempted to gain insight into the "imagined concept" of a child as a second language learner as constructed by pre-service teachers in the course of their training. Our findings indicate that the participants' pre-conceptions of the developmental characteristics of children are not yet firmly established. Also, a high degree of variation in the perception of young learn-ers was observed across and within individuals. The most common and persis-tent misconceptions of the child's developmental profile identified in the course of this study concern the child's cognitive potential and the preferred classroom activities. Participants were found to make excessive use of activi-ties requiring theoretical and abstract thinking and tended to rely heavily on the use of literacy skills. Our data also point to a discrepancy between teach-ers' theoretical orientations and their actual classroom practices. In particular, most participants experienced considerable difficulty on the level of classroom

discourse and failed to select appropriate language as a means of expressing their pedagogical intentions.

To conclude, we feel that the focus of TEYL instruction should be shifted from theoretical to practical issues. Currently, the majority of tertiary-level TEYL training programs in Polish educational settings (including the one mentioned in this study) can be described as structured along a presentation-practice-production (PPP) paradigm, in which the provision of theoretical knowledge (concerning child development, teaching methodology, the principles of L2 acquisition, etc.) precedes any actual classroom-based experiences such as observation or teaching. In other words, the foundations of the imagined profile of a child learner created by pre-service teachers are derived from theoretical claims and other people's statements about the nature of a child and instruction rather than direct hands-on classroom experiences. Perhaps, if we complemented practice with theory (rather than theory with practice), we could prevent some of the practical difficulties, which have been exposed in the course of this investigation. Clearly, this is not to say that the provision of the theoretical background is unnecessary. On the contrary, theoretical knowledge constitutes a vital element in developing the teachers' awareness of young learner characteristics. However, we believe that the theoretical statements concerning the developmental profile of young learners should be directly linked to classroom experiences to ensure that the working image of a child as a second language learner captures both the conceptual and practical aspects of young learners' instruction. Intertwining theory with practice throughout the instructional period would allow trainee teachers to find their individual ways of bridging the gap between theory and practice through interacting with children and developing personal routines and teaching strategies.

References

Ahmadi, S., & Gilakjani, A. (2011). The effect of visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic learning styles on language teaching. *International Conference on Social Science and Humanity IPEDR, 5*, 469-472.

Bloom, B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives. Handbook I: The cognitive domain*. New York: David McKay.

Borg, S. (2003). Teacher cognition in language teaching: A review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe and do. *Language Teaching*, *36*(2), 81-109.

Borg, S. (2006). *Teacher cognition and teacher education: Research and practice*. London: Continuum.

Borg, S. (2011). The impact of in-service education on language teachers' beliefs. *System*, *39*(3), 370-380.

Brewster, J., Ellis, G., & Girard, D. (1992). *The primary English teacher's guide*. Harlow: Pearson Education.

Broom, C. (2011). Second-language learning through imaginative theory. *TESL Canada Journal/Revue TESL du Canada, 28*(2), 1-10.

Bullough, R. V. (1989). *First-year teacher: A case study*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cameron, L. (2003). Challenges from the expansion in teaching children. *ELT Journal, 57*(2), 105-112.

Cameron, L., & McKay, P. (2010). *Bringing creative teaching into the young learner classroom.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carless, D. (2002). Implementing task-based learning with young learners. *ELT Journal, 56*(4), 389-396.

Carless, D., & Gordon, A. (1997). Primary English teachers' attitudes towards the implementation of task-based teaching. *Journal of Primary Education*, *7*(5), 32-49.

Cohen, D. (2002). *How the child's mind develops*. New York: Taylor & Francis.

Daniels, H. (2011). Vygotsky and psychology. In U. Goswami (Ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell handbook of childhood cognitive development* (pp. 673-696). Malden: Blackwell.

Dimroth, C. (2008). Perspectives on second language acquisition at different ages. In J. Philp, R. Oliver, & A. Mackey (Eds.), *Second language acquisition and the younger learner: Child's play?* (pp. 53-79). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Donaldson, M. (1978). *Children's minds*. London: Collins/Fontana.

Egan, K. (1992). *Imagination in teaching and learning: Ages 8-15*. London: Routledge.

Egan, K. (2005). *An imaginative approach to teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Egan, K. (2008). *The future of education: reimagining our schools from the grounds up*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

Ellis, G. (2004). Introduction. In G. Ellis and Morrow, K. (Eds.), *ELT Journal. Year of the young learner* (pp. 1-2). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Enever, J. (2011). Policy. In J. Enever (Ed.), *ELLiE. Early language learning in Europe* (pp. 23-42). London: British Council.

Enever, J., & Moon, J. (2009). New global contexts for teaching primary ELT: Change and challenge. In J. Enever, J. Moon, & U. Raman (Eds.), *Young learner English language policy and implementation: International perspectives* (pp. 5-22). Reading: Garnet.

Fisher, R. (1990). *Teaching children to think*. Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes.

Fontana, D. (1995). *Psychology for teachers*. London: Macmillan.

Gajdamaschko, N. (2006). Theoretical concerns. Vygotsky on imagination development. *Educational Perspectives, 39*(2), 34-40.

Halliwell, S. (1992). *Teaching English in the primary classroom*. Harlow: Longman.

Haznedar, B., & Gavruseva, E. (2008). *Current trends in child second language acquisition: A generative perspective*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Hedge, T. (1993). Key concept in EFL: Project work. *ELT Journal, 47*(3), 275-277.

Hyson, M. (2004). *The emotional development of young children*. Amsterdam: Teachers College Press.

Iliuk, J. (2002). *Jak uczyć małe dzieci języków obcych?* Katowice: Gnome.

Ioannou-Georgiou, S., & Pavlou, P. (2003). *Assessing young learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kohn, A. (1993) *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise and other bribes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Linse, C, T. (2005). *Practical English language teaching: Young learners*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

McKay, P. (2006). *Assessing young language learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Miyazaki K. (2010). Teacher as the imaginative learner: Egan, Saitou and Bakhtin. In K. Egan & K. Madej (Eds.), *Engaging imaginations and developing creativity in education* (pp. 33-44). Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Moon, J. (2000). *Children learning English: A guidebook for English language teachers*. Oxford: Macmillan Heinemann.

Moon, J. (2005). Teaching English to young learners: The challenges and the benefits. *In English, 7*, 30-34.

Murray, D. E., & Christison, M. A. (2011). *What English language teachers need to know. Volume II: Facilitating learning*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Nicholas, H., & Lightbown, P. M. (2008). Defining child second language acquisition, defining roles for L2 instruction. In J. Philp, R. Oliver, & A. Mackey (Eds.), *Second language acquisition and the younger learner: Child's play?* (pp. 27-51). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Peterson, P. L., & Comeaux, M. A. (1987). Teachers' schemata for classroom events: The mental scaffolding of teachers' thinking during classroom instruction. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 3*, 319-331.

Phillips, S. (1993). *Young learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Piaget, J. (1969). *The psychology of the child* (H. Weaver, Trans.). New York: Basic Books.

Pinter, A. (2006). *Teaching young language learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Price, G. E., R. Dunn, & Sanders, W. (1980). Reading achievement and learning style characteristics. *The Clearing House, 5*, 223-226.

Read, C. (2007). *500 Activities for the primary classroom*. South Yarra: Macmillan Education Australia.

Robson, S. (2006). *Developing thinking and understanding in young children*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Scott, A. W., & Ytreberg, L. H. (1990). *Teaching English to children*. London: Longman.

Shams, L., & Seitz, L. (2008). Benefits of multisensory learning. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 11*, 411-417.

Slattery, M., & Willis, J. (2001). *English for primary teachers: A handbook of activities and classroom language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Szpotowicz, M. (2011). Wyzwania związane z ocenianiem umiejętności językowych u dzieci. *Języki Obce w Szkole, 4*, 34-47.

Szpotowicz, M. (2012). Researching oral production skills of young learners. *CEPS Journal 2*(3), 141-166.

Szpotowicz, M., & Szulc-Kurpaska, M. (2009). *Teaching English to young learners*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Trappes-Lomax, H. (Ed.) (2002). *Language in language teacher education*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Tsui, A. B. M. (2003). *Understanding expertise in teaching: Case studies of second language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Vale, D., & Feunteun, A. (1995). *Teaching children English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society. The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Werbińska, D. (2004). *Skuteczny nauczyciel języka obcego*. Warszawa: Fraszka Edukacyjna.

Widdowson, H. (2002). Language teaching: Defining the subject. In H. Trappes-Lomax (Ed.), *Language in language teacher education* (pp. 67-81). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Williams, M. (1991). A framework in teaching English to young learners. In C. Brumfit, J. Moon, & R. Tongue (Eds.), *Teaching English to children* (pp. 203-212). Edinburgh: Longman.

Williams, M., & Burden, R. L. (1997). *Psychology for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wood, D. (1998). *How children think and learn*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wright, A. (2001). *Art and crafts with children.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wrighton, C. A. (2010). *Determining the effectiveness of a multisensory approach to teach the alphabet and phonemic awareness mastery in kindergarten children* (Doctoral dissertation). Argosy University. Retrieved from http://www.zoo-phonics.comimagesresearch_a_multisensory_approach_by_Charlene_Wrighton_10_ 10.pdf