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Sociocultural component in the content of teaching foreign languages to pre-school children

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Abstract

The paper is aimed at studying efficiency of learning languages by pre-school children. Different types of memory that are at high level of its development at this age promote children's abilities to acquire languages. Also psychologically, pre-school children are fit to develop speech and communication skills by using adequate materials and tasks. A set of criteria are evaluated to introduce socio-cultural content for promoting effective language learning.

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1. Introduction

Teaching a language as a means of intercultural communication and introducing those learning a language to the spiritual inheritance of the countries and people has had a great significance in the modern society where we can observe broadening and strengthening of the economic and cultural links between people. Choosing pre-school children as a target group is motivated by psychological and personal peculiarities of this age that allow them to learn foreign languages effectively and develop communication skills.

2. Psychological peculiarities of pre-school children

According to modern Russian educational concept in the area of language learning one of the basic goals of teaching the language is the development of children's abilities to use the language as the instrument of communication in the dialogue of cultures and civilizations of the modern world. This goal suggests correlated

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communicative and sociocultural development of children by means of foreign language for the preparation of intercultural communication in the sphere of pre-school, school and university education.

As many psychologists agree it is at the pre-school age when the most intensive development of man's abilities and talents occur. In spite of the fact that it is rather short time period in the development of the personality, during the time of pre-school childhood the person learns more than throughout the whole life. The 'program' of the pre-school childhood is really huge: development of attention, acquiring the speech, establishment of thinking, development of imagination, perception, forming of the relationships with other people - all these processes happen at this age.

By the term 'pre-school children' we mean children at the age of 5 up to the stage of entering school. Here we will distinguish young pre-school age - 5 years old and elder pre-school age - 6 years old. It is also important to realize that there are some individual differences of the children of the same age group so it is important to take them into account.

It is considered appropriate to address the psycho- physiological peculiarities of pre-school children with the goal to establish the possibility of teaching them foreign languages in the frame of sociocultural approach. We will analyze the development of speech and its functions, attention, memory and thinking.

In psychology attention is a form of a mental activity of a person which is characterized by concentration on the certain object. Psychology distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary attention.

Attention of the pre-school child is the reflection of his interest to subjects and phenomena of the surrounding environment. The child is attracted by everything new, bright, picturesque and unpredictable. They are concentrated till they maintain interest, until something else appears. This type of attention, called by newness, unusualness of a subject or environment and supported irrespective of conscious activity of the person is called involuntary attention. At pre-school age involuntary attention reaches the high level of development. Taking this fact into consideration it is necessary to use various bright pictures and toys, situations where puppets and personages from the fairy tales participate, various games while teaching children the language. Involuntary attention is being developed at the period of the whole pre-school period. And it is more developed than voluntary attention at this age.

When the new interests and new types of activity appear the child concentrates his attention on the spheres which were previously unnoticeable. Thus voluntary attention is also being developed at the pre-school age. The kids can play an interesting game, draw, and construct something for hours. The volume of attention increases as well. Following this lessons of foreign languages should involve typical for pre-school children types of activity: drawing, applique works, construction which helps creating real situations for communication and developing voluntary attention; on the bases of those elementary communicative skills in the foreign language are formed.

3. Memory development in pre-school children

Speaking about the peculiarities of memory development we should mention that the following types of memory are distinguished: motor memory, image memory, verbal-logical and affective memory types. Motor memory is revealed earlier than any other memory types. Different habits and skills which are developing during the whole period of childhood are the basic content of this memory type. Development of image memory has a special role because visual and aural images make up the basic content of children's memory.

Involuntary memory can be accurate and stable at the pre-school age. If the events of the childhood had emotional meaning and impressed the child, they could be contained in the memory for the rest of the child's life. The child better memorizes the facts that include certain interest for him and impresses him the most. The children do not have a special goal set before them to memorize something. The subjects are memorized in the process of practical activities with them. The child memorizes those things that were really interesting and impressed him. So the teacher should use tasks, methods and techniques connected with the sphere of life interests of the child, touching his feelings and emotions for better mastering the material at classes. These can be

bright toys, pictures, demonstrated by the teacher, tasks, connected with the desire of the child to help the toy personage.

The highest type of memory is verbal-logical or verbal type. This memory provides thinking and speech activity of the person; we often use this memory type. Pre-school age according to P.P. Blonskii is considered to be the age of climax development of the verbal memory (the so-called memory-repetition).

Because image memory prevails at the pre-school age, teaching foreign languages should be based on using visual aids from the very beginning. It is also important to use exercises aimed to develop aural memory. It is necessary to organize the activity of kids with material for them to memorize this material better. The researches show that the more actively the child works with the objects and the bigger role these objects play in his life the more successful is the development of involuntary memory. So one could notice the manifestation of different types of memory; but motor memory, image memory and emotional memory are the ones more developed at this age; and respectively less developed is the verbal memory type.

Taking all mentioned above facts into consideration it is necessary to encourage the children to combine the speech utterance with a certain non-verbal activity, for example, toy/picture demonstration. The descriptions in foreign language could be connected with the character traits of the fairy-tale personages of our home country and the country of the language the kids learn. The appearance of these personages in the correspondent communicative situations will help in firm and solid acquiring of the material.

It is also at the pre-school age when the intensive development of thinking occurs. The child learns the simplest ways of thinking, learns to analyze, synthesize, compare and generalize his observations. Role plays, used in the process of teaching foreign language will not only assist in developing visual - image thinking but further in better acquiring the language material.

4. Development of active imagination

Active imagination is developed in the subject-role play. Born in the play, active imagination is transferred to other types of activities - drawing, making up fairy tales and stories, construction. One can develop kids' creative imagination at the foreign language lessons by means of using subject-role plays on the bases of conventionally-real and imaginative situations, connected with the fairy-tales and cartoons heroes' adventures. Children's impressions from these types of activities could be displayed in the pictures, hand-made articles and expressed in the relevant speech utterances (Bakhtin, 1981).

To assist the child in developing his thinking it is required to set a new task before him, for the solution of which he could use the knowledge he has already had so he could apply it in the new situation. Organization of games and lessons in the form of games which pose cognitive tasks and make children think independently as well as using conventionally-real situations, encouraging kids to produce an oral utterance in a foreign language have a big meaning. Teaching pre-school children foreign languages cannot be successful without taking the peculiarities of the development of their speech in their mother tongue into consideration. Psychologists notice that at this age the so called 'feeling of language' is being formed. Mastering the language, the kids do not simply imitate the speech forms but creatively change the words on the basis of the 'feeling of the language' they have.

Pre-school children are aware of the speech stream, they can subdivide it, find subject and predicate in the sentence. By the end of pre-school period they can name all parts of speech and parts of the sentence. Reaching the age of 4-5 children master the rules of grammar in their mother tongue without any difficulties and without special training. The children at the age of 5 ask adults many cognitive types of questions, demonstrate great interest to the words. This age the psychologists call the sensitive period in the development of speech.

At this age the child's brain has a 'specialized ability to master the language' (V.Penfield, L. Roberts) because the brain mechanisms of speech are distinguished by high level of flexibility and adaptation to new conditions at this age. The possibility of comparatively easy mastering the foreign language the psychologists explain by the phenomenon of 'imprinting' which suggests quick memorizing and ability to operate the units on the level of

word combinations and the whole sentences in the speech activity. The child at pre-school age possess special skills to feel the phonetics and grammar in the language so he can master the basic laws of the foreign language.

One more special feature which plays an important role while teaching foreign language is the ability of the kid to imitate sounds. Thus all the above mentioned facts provide the ground for considering pre-school age as a very perspective period for mastering a foreign language. Taking the above mentioned facts into consideration, teaching pre-school kids a foreign language should be done taking the peculiarities of speech development, thinking as the instrument of speech, attention and memory into account.

5. Socio-cultural aspect of language learning

Nowadays the thesis about embodying culture knowledge into the programme of teaching foreign languages is supported by most methodologists. Culture knowledge is the basic richness of teaching the language. It is a generally known fact that the primary stage of education gives a start and influences a lot the following period of language learning. So it is important to form a solid foundation of all components of the content of language teaching including sociocultural. Sociocultural approach causes a new approach to the whole content of teaching where every component should be enriched by the culture knowledge including the native culture and culture of the target language to assist in the dialogue of cultures.

How effective might sociocultural approach be while teaching a language to pre-school children? According to the psychologists' view pre-school children are especially perceptive to a new culture and the earlier they get to know the other culture the more productive the influence to their image memory, artistic taste and development of thinking will be. Besides it will increase their motivation to learn the language.

'Dialogue of cultures' is the term introduced by M.M. Bakhtin and V.Bibler. For these Russian philosophers, dialogue is the very essence of humanity and mutual understanding: 'culture is a concentration of all other meanings (social, spiritual, logical, emotional, moral, esthetic) of human existence. The culture cannot be understood inside itself. It is realized when there is a dialogue of two cultures. The realization of somebody's own culture happens only in this case. As the person cannot apprehend himself without communicating to others so he doesn't apprehend his culture before he gets to know another one. Mastering the language through the apprehension of the culture of the target language can help children learn their own culture deeper. Every culture exists at the border of cross-cultural dialogue.

So there is a task set before the teacher of the foreign languages to teach the culture of communication, teach sociocultural skills, teach to accept and understand the culture of other countries, traditions of other peoples.

We have done an analysis of Russian and foreign textbooks for pre-school children in the light of their sociocultural approach.

Foreign language courses for pre-school kids we have analyzed are distinguished by the following factors:

- * they include different components of the course where there are teacher's books explaining the syllabus and methodology, course books, activity books, didactic material (posters, pictures, flashcards), audio and video materials;

- * they are oriented to 5-6 year old kids in the primary school;

- * they contain practical types of activity such as drawing, applique works, construction, handicrafts;

- * they contain some sociocultural content (information about holidays, birthdays etc.) but it is not represented systematically and consecutively, it is composed without taking into account speech development and general knowledge of the kids whose mother tongue is Russian.

The above mentioned peculiarities can lead us into conclusion that usage of foreign textbooks as they are do not seem to be possible because they are designed in the frame of different educational system and have their own specifics (Covill, 2001).

Russian textbooks for teaching pre-school children are mostly author's works which are the generalization of the experience of an author or a group of authors and they usually present teacher's notes for lessons. They are often presented without a theoretical basis of their approach which makes it difficult to adopt the textbook to other conditions of teaching. Secondly there are no goals and tasks for the lessons set in the Russian textbooks for

pre-school children or there are some but they have a declarative character which doesn't make it possible for the teacher to use this textbook. Another thing is that some textbooks orient to teach 5-6 year old kids the foreign language through reading while they still cannot read in their mother tongue. In the Russian textbooks for pre-school children sociocultural component doesn't exist at all or it exists but is introduced non-systematically.

A very important problem for creating curriculum for the course of foreign language studies is the problem of defining sociocultural component of the content of teaching. We have done a research in this sphere that showed that sociocultural component of the content of teaching foreign language to pre-school children has not yet been defined. So the question arises logically: according to which criteria we should define sociocultural component in the content of teaching.

6. Criteria of materials selection

Having taken the possibilities and spheres of cognitive interests of pre-school children into the account we define the following criteria when choosing the sociocultural content (Holderness, 1999):

- 1) Criterion of cultural value.
- 2) Criterion of typical usage.
- 3) Criterion of orientation to modern reality.
- 4) Criterion of accurate differentiation with the native culture.
- 5) Criterion of attractiveness.
- 6) Criterion of correspondence the material which has sociocultural value to the age of the child.
- 7) Criterion of functionality.

According to the first criterion those facts the knowledge of which assists in the increase of the level of general culture education are selected. This criterion reflects the information about the country of the target language including geographical factors, for example, the name and geographical position of the country of the foreign language, information about the most widespread holidays and traditions connected with their celebrations. Material offered to pre-school kids should have cultural value. Kids of this age express the interest to many things connected with other countries. Elementary knowledge about other countries will become a bridge to recognition the world of other cultures which leads to mutual understanding, tolerance to differences which exist between people. Interest and inquisitiveness further the effective mastering of the material.

Criterion of typical usage is aimed to choose the material which reflects the most up-to-date facts of the reality of the foreign language country and thus creating the most exact idea of the country.

The third criterion demonstrates the correspondence of the chosen material to the facts of the modern life of the country. It suggests introduction to the most typical facts of the country of the foreign language, for example, names of products, items of clothes, nicknames of pets typical for the target country. Taking into consideration the fact that many words crossed the border of one language and became international we think it would be appropriate to introduce into the content of teaching background vocabulary and vocabulary which does not have equivalents in other languages.

Criterion of accurate differentiation with the native culture of the child is caused by the necessity of prevention the transfer of facts from the habitual culture to the secondary culture. We should prevent the culture interference caused not by the influence of one language to another but the influence of one culture to another. We have semantic interference when we try to relate even simple words of two different cultures semantically. For example, Russians as well as Americans know very well the basic goal of the chemist's shop (drug store) which is a place where the medicine is being prepared and sold. That's why the request to go to the chemist's shop and buy some ice-cream will have no meaning for the Russian child when it is a natural request for an American. (In the Unites States one can buy make up, magazines, stamps, ice-cream etc. in the chemist's shop) So it is necessary to choose the phenomena which have different cultural backgrounds.

Due to the fact that foreign culture represents an element of exotics (attractiveness, interest) for the kids, criterion of attractiveness is one of the most important. The teacher can support and form the interest to the

language by means of demonstration unexpected and interesting sides of the subject itself. Attractiveness of the course will influence on forming positive interest to mastering a foreign language.

It is also necessary to have the criterion of correspondence the material which has sociocultural value to the age of the child. It is expressed in the introduction into the content of teaching lexical units which are reasonable for the kids of this age, which would define the spheres of foreign life having the greatest interest for pre-school kids, for example, nicknames of pets, names of kids, names of well-known fairy-tale personages, heroes of cartoons, games, children folk songs, items of food, drinks, items of clothes, typical for 5-6 year old kids of the country of the target language. This criterion is the basic one. The children of this age can master only the information and have communication in the frame of the topics which are understandable for them and cause their interest.

At the elementary level big volume of knowledge (especially background knowledge) will be introduced with the orientation to the reception only. For example, this knowledge will include factors about national culture - traditions, holidays, norms of behavior etc. With that there is a necessity to use some lexical units with national-cultural semantics, norms of speech etiquette and non-verbal behavior actively during the games and while communicating in the foreign language. That's why the criterion of functionality will be among the above mentioned criteria.

According to the defined criteria some content of the sociocultural component of teaching English to pre-school children has been defined. These are the examples from the vocabulary list including background vocabulary and vocabulary which does not have equivalent words in other languages. The words are grouped according to 10 topics suitable for teaching pre-school children: 'Food', 'Animals', 'Pet's nicknames', 'Clothes', 'Games', 'Toys', 'Family events, holidays', 'Men's names', 'Ladies' names', 'Fairy-tale's personages'.

Food: apple pie, biscuit, bubblegum, candy, candy floss, chips, coke, cornflakes, dinner, eggs and bacon, hamburger, hot dog, lollipop, lunch, pizza, porridge, pudding, sandwich, tea, toast, yogurt.

Animals: Buffalo, grizzly, guinea-pig, hamster, pet, polar bear, reindeer.

Pet's nicknames: Blackie, Brownie, Buddy, Fide, Fifi, Kim, Lassy, Lucky, Rex, Rover, Spot.

Clothes: Jeans, shorts, T-shirt.

Games: Baseball, climbing the monkey bars, cowboys and Indians, cricket, flying a kite, football, golf, 'Hare and hounds', 'I-spy', 'Oranges and lemons', 'Pig in the middle', playing hopscotch, roller skating, 'Twos and threes'.

Toys: Barbie, computer, Jack-in-the-box, Teddy bear.

Family events, holidays: Birthday, Christmas, holly, robin, Christmas Eve, Christmas dinner, Christmas pudding, Father Christmas (Santa Claus), Boxing Day, New Year's Day, St. Valentine' Day, Easter, Mother's Day, Father's Day.

Men's names: Ben (from Benjamin), Billy (from William), Bob (from Robert), Dick (from Richard), Don (from Donald), Jack (from John), John, Mike (from Michael), Sam (from Samuel), Ted, Tom (from Thomas).

Ladies' names: Ann, Jane, Kate and Kitty (from Catherine), Mary, May (from Mary and Margaret), Peggy (from Margaret), Polly, Sally (from Sarah).

Fairy-tale's personages: Alice, Brother Rabbit, Cheshire Cat, Humpty-Dumpty, Winnie-the-Pooh.

We also pick out speech etiquette (greetings; saying good-bye; expressing thankfulness, congratulation, a wish; expressing encouragement); no-verbal behavior (gesture of saying good-bye; prohibition gesture; gesture of counting using fingers; gesture 'everything is OK') in the separate groups of background knowledge.

Authentic material such as songs dedicated to holidays ('Happy Birthday', 'Christmas is coming', 'We wish you a Merry Christmas', 'New Year's Day', 'Mother's Day') poems, should be also included in the cultural component of teaching.

Presence of the chosen vocabulary material and background knowledge in the content of teaching English to pre-school children will require the mastering of the following knowledge and skills:

1) knowledge:

- background vocabulary and vocabulary which does not have equivalents in other languages in the frame of the topic,

- some sights of the country of the target language (also the name of the country, it's position on the map),
- children's folklore (games, songs etc.);
- 2) skills:
 - to use the formulas of speech etiquette in the situations of greeting people (saying hello, saying good-bye), congratulations, etc.,
 - compare the ways of celebrating New Year's Day and other holidays, birthdays in the country of the foreign language and in the home country,
 - play the authentic games.

The proposed content of the cultural component is flexible and can be varied. We would recommend a creative approach to the teachers while choosing the material.

We see that the basic condition of introducing kids to the culture of the country of the target language is in mastering the content of the cultural component. We view it as the way of having intercultural dialogue which has huge opportunities for creating sociocultural context for the development of the children's personality, introducing them to the universal values.

7. Conclusion

We have evaluated conditions and criteria of effective languages learning by pre-school children by focusing on peculiarities of personal and psychological development of the target group. Socio-cultural content of learning materials has direct relation to the interests and cognitive abilities of pre-school learners.

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