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English Workshops for Primary School Children in Romania – A Privileged Didactic Activity

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Abstract

The main aim of the present article consists in highlighting the advantage of teaching English to second language learners within workshops. Among all types of learning activities, workshops have a privileged place, i.e., they do not imply high difficulty examinations and they take place in a relaxed and joyful atmosphere. Our work is intended to emphasize the range of extracurricular educational offers and pinpoint the methods of teaching English as a second language within a borderline educational activity: the workshop. The deliberate and meaningful choice of content, ambience and methods represent important elements meant to grant the success of such types of activities.

Keywords: English workshops; second language learners; Romania; primary school children; non-formal education

1. Introduction

“Manuel Vazquez Montalbán, a Spanish writer, used to say that we humans are made by two constitutive elements that lead us to build our world: memory and desire. Memory meaning what we are, our values, our history and identity. Desire meaning the inner fire that moves us toward the unknown, the dreams and achievements of the future.” (Davide Tonon)

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It goes without saying that very often some children tend to refuse anything that has to do with the idea of learning and school, precisely because of the constraints of the formal education. Much homework to do, difficult tests and little time for what they really like doing, are the reasons why some pupils fail to get involved in further educational activities. The present paper is aimed to bring to the fore a type of activity which has become more diversified in Romanian society: English workshops for pupils (“Ateliere de limba engleză”). One can notice a wide variety of such offers nowadays. The products they offer is one of the facets of the issue approached by us: they promise activities full of fun and relaxation. In the same time, they anchor pupils in profitable activities that will make them able to communicate in a foreign language. Another aspect taken into account is the type of preparation required: teachers have to choose appropriate methods and techniques. These workshops have been labeled as “privileged didactic activities” with a view to giving prominence to the motivational element as far as pupils are concerned (they are popular among children because there are no tests or school atmosphere). Such extracurricular activities offering English language and culture courses advertised on the internet represent the starting point of our paper. By analyzing the products offered we intend to highlight the high value of such activities and discuss the most common and efficient methods.

2. Methodology

In this section there will be outlined the method of researching the place occupied by English workshops within other educational activities as far as method and approach are concerned and also there will be presented the results of the steps undertaken.

2.1. Purpose of the Study

English workshops are a valid alternative to formal learning of English. They are non-formal activities which offer a type of activity situated in between the classroom and the outside world. The methods chosen by the foreign language teacher differ at a certain extent from the formal English class and they are in accordance with the interaction theory of language learning (Richards & Rogers, 21).

2.2. Research Methods and Findings

The research method used takes into account the themes proposed by Owen Egan to be taken into consideration when teaching in the primary school: children’s rights, childhood as a cultural entity, the mind of the child, affective and functional education. Children’s rights must be fully respected and the term “formal” should not come to mean “authoritarian” when speaking about education. The workshops respect the principle of childhood as a cultural entity in that they promote traditional games and folklore of the childhood. As far as the theme of the mind of a child is concerned, the trainer/teacher should be prepared to follow the trend of the child’s thinking, moving from one subject to another if necessary. The last two themes (affective and functional education) refer to the need to find more dedicate more time to poetry, music, dancing and drama and to the necessity to make pupils learn from direct experience (Egan, 1981). There will be taken into consideration all the announcements of such English workshops and each of them will be analyzed in terms of the degree in which they comply with the principles stated above, and in terms of the aims and methodology proposed.

Throughout the present research there will be answered some questions meant to organize results and to verify the following hypothesis:

English workshops prove closer to the principle of affective and functional education than formal English lessons at school;

Respect for childhood as a cultural entity and for children’s rights are well represented in non-formal English activities.
2.2.1. Formal / Non-Formal Education

Formal education involves a government that recognizes the value of and supports school systems. It is defined as “the hierarchically structured, chronologically graded educational system from primary through to tertiary, higher education institutions.” (Unesco 2013) The characteristics of the formal education can be easily contrasted to those of the non-formal education: it takes place in a class setting, the content is predetermined, there is a pre-established hierarchy between teacher and student, tests or proofs of knowledge are usually the form of assessment. The same source (Unesco) defines non-formal education as an activity “which is organized educational activity outside the established formal system that is intended to serve an identifiable learning clientele with identifiable learning objectives”. The features of the non-formal education are: learning by doing, process-oriented learning, learner-centricity, participation, voluntary nature etc.

The non-formal education differs both in content – which is organized on areas of interest, not on years of study or academic subjects and in the way it is structured: all the educational activities take place in other institutions excepting school: museums, libraries, etc. The atmosphere of the workshops is less rigid than in formal education, although the results are often similar (Mitulescu & Simache, 2008).

2.2.2. English Workshops in Romania

The necessity of such types of non-formal activities resides in the nature of the product offered: entertainment and education. The analysis of the workshops advertised though the internet will sort out the categories of such activities, the methods advertised and will identify the advantage of such activities over the classical English classes at school.

In order to achieve the goal of the present study, several questions have been taken into consideration:

1. What activities are offered and brought to public notice?
2. Where do they take place?
3. Which are the methods used in such activities?

2.2.3. Findings

According to the type of product offered, the English workshops analysed fall into seven categories:

- Workshops offered by renowned linguists: Helen Doron English Team;
- Workshops focusing on theatre: Kidolino – Theatre Acting Club, Alchemy Kids Theatre Club, Courses of Theatre in English;
- Workshops focused on reading: The Little Readers’ Club;
- Workshops focused on grammar: Grammar Workshop;
- Workshops focused on conversation: Conversation in English for Children;
- Workshops focused on creativity and English: Learn English Differently (“Învați Engeza Altfel”), Design and Modelling;
- General workshops aimed at personal development, education and entertainment: ASA Learning – English Workshops: Living and Working in London; Shakespeare School Association (Ziggy & Zaggy – Adventures in Englishland); Sunrise Club, English Workshop (Atelier de limba engleză), Join the Scouts’Club.

All these activities use only English for communication and as far as their location is concerned, pupils are invited to special places (Helen Doron English Centre), situated mainly in downtown areas (ASA Learning Centre organizes the workshops in the neighborhood of Kiseleff Park, Shakespeare School for Education organize their “Happy Hour with Ziggy and Zaggy” at the Suspended Library in Kids Town). Within such recreational actions education extends beyond what can be done in the classroom.

The aims of these workshops are different: for example, the Thanksgiving Day English Workshop promises the discovery of thousands of reasons to be thankful. The method developed by Helen Doron imitates they way in which babies learn their mother tongue. The British linguist created her own materials to help children understand and speak English. As in schools English was taught only through reading and writing, she decided to focus on different abilities. The result is represented by a protective atmosphere which imitates the natural process of mother tongue...
learning. The lessons are funny and full of life stimulating emotional, physical, creative and intellectual wellness of the young pupils. The methods include songs, poems and tales and learning is done through encouragement and repetition.

Another workshop which is based on conversation and game is offered by ASA Learning and it is entitled “Living and working in London”. It is made up of two groups of children: “The Warriors”(the beginners group) and “The Wizards”(the advanced group). Everybody takes part with great pleasure because the themes are attractive (Halloween, British Traditions, American vs British English, Books vs Movies, Cartoons, Romans vs Greeks, Good Manners in the Past and Now, Sea Travel, Resolving Conflicts) and the interactive method generates interest and motivates. According to Rivers, in interactive language teaching “comprehension and production retrieve their normal relationship as an interactive duo. To achieve this, we need an ambiance and relations among individuals that promote a desire for interaction.”(1990) By proposing such themes and by building up confidence and enjoyment in what they are doing, workshops manage to reach this goal. It is also worth mentioning the intercultural approach: learners come in to a deeper understanding of “how the target language is used to achieve the explicit and implicit cultural goals of the foreign language community” and that they should be “prompted to reflect on the ways in which their own language and community functions”(Corbett, 2003). The communicative approach helps children learn a lot, opening a wider perspective on language which is considered “not only in terms of its structure (grammar and vocabulary), but also in terms of the communicative functions that it performs.”(Littlewood, 1981)

A similar offer is that of Shakespeare School Association for Education: the non-formal education methods will be liked by small children (game role playing, songs, contests and other entertaining activities). Ziggy (the smart squirrel) and Zaggy (the funny beaver), the stars of the English activities, are two characters already known by children from the book Ziggy& Zaggy – Adventures in Englishland and from the English radio shows Radio Itsy Bitsy.

Sunrise Club aims to improve fluency and pronunciation in English through attractive themes related to the world: Trips around the World (habitats of the planet, visits to different countries), Old Civilizations. The communicative approach and the tales, games and funny activities promise very much to those involved. In the same line, the Scouts’ Club broadens the horizons of the pupils interested in science, geography and history. Attractive themes such as geographic discoveries, inventions and small scientific experiments presented in simple words, various activities and exercises are meant to arouse their interest and encourage them to communicate in English.

All the workshops intend to contribute to the personal development of the children, amplifying the mechanisms of socialization, group integration and communication with the other members of the team. The new words and phrases will be learnt through games and dance.

The Little Readers’ Club promises to make reading an interesting experience. It proposes to enlarge the participants’ vocabulary, to develop their communication skills, creativity and fluency in English. Through interactive exercises, audio and video activities, colorful representations of heroes, children are encouraged to read, communicate and in the same time to learn a foreign language. Such activities develop and shape the small participants’ personality, teach them to interact, offer them courage to express ideas.

The Grammar Workshop is structured in modules, focusing on tenses, aspects, mood, voice and hidden meanings. Experts will disclose to participants what they did not manage to understand at school. The pupil will thus have the possibility to exercise the structures learnt at school, taking part in various communication activities in order to feel more confident. The possible similarities and differences between Romanian and English will be occasionally explained in Romanian in order to consolidate the participants’ knowledge better.

Another category of workshops combine arts and crafts with English. The activity entitled “Design and Modelling” aims to stimulate the children’s ability to communicate and express their personality, emotions and imagination, contributing in the same time to the development of a specialized language in English. Exercising conversation means interaction, whose focus can either be the exchange of information - the so-called transactional function of conversation -, or establishing and maintaining social relations - the interactional function of conversation. (Richards, 1990) Through drawing, working and joining things together, participants are encouraged to communicate, to interact and speak English. There is a variety of themes to be approached: environment, nature and animals, man and the relationship with the environment, friends, school, etc. Related to this type of activity is the workshop named “Learn English in a Different Way!”. It is primarily intended to help the personal development
of children, amplifying the mechanisms of socialization and integration into teams, of communication with the other members. The words and phrases are learned through games, and are then reinforced through the artistic creation activity. There are a great variety of relaxed activities: communicative games and socialization activities, individual and group projects, theatre and role games, the magic world of tales, audio-video displays, arts & crafts, handwriting, etc. This interactive workshop proposes a theme, wild animals, for example. There will be songs and poems about animals and at the end the participants will manufacture their favourite animal and will take it with them at home.

Games are a very useful method because they help and encourage learners to sustain their interest and work. The motivational facet must not be neglected: the learners want to take part and in order to do so they “must understand what others are saying or have written, and they must speak or write in order to express their point of view or give information.”(Wright & Betterige & Buckby, 1983)

Last but not least, the theatre workshops contribute to the personal development of the little actors, offering them a motivating learning experience adapted to their age and personality. The most striking advantage is vocabulary and grammar structures improvement by practicing English in a real communication context. By participating in theatre workshops children will associate English language with pleasant activities in their education and they will become able to interact and empathize easily with the others. They will get rid of stage fright and perform better, being able to focus on their mind, body and voice simultaneously. Also, creativity and imagination will develop through the plays written by the participants under the guidance of their trainer. By offering them the chance to write, the teacher “withdraws creatively”, and psychologically speaking this means that he/she leaves pupils “room to think, to mull over what has been said, to make decisions” (Spaventa & Melville 1980).

Beside improving their pronunciation and acquiring a large number of words and phrases, there are an important number of other benefits for the children:

- increase in self-esteem: by assuming and performing a role (in class or on the stage), children will trust their ideas and abilities;
- imagination development: through the roles they get, participants will learn to make creative decisions, develop new ideas and interpret a text in their own style;
- empathizing skills: the roles will place them in different situations, and thus they will be able to perceive reality in a sympathetic way;
- increase in the level of socialization an collaboration with the others: English activities combine creative ideas with their abilities, helping them improve verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal communication skills;
- emotions control: through games and role play participants express ideas freely, get rid of anxiety and fear of speaking in public, thus reducing the antisocial behavior;
- improvement of concentration and memory skills: by playing, rehearsing and performing;
- entertainment and relaxation: through humour and funny activities;
- inducement of values and aesthetic sense: the workshops offer plenty of educational tales and information about the whole world.

The methods used by trainers take into account the fact that learning can be done by retaining what is read, heard, seen, seen and heard, done in actual. Practical experience is the greatest asset of English workshops. Young students learn best in an atmosphere of warmth and encouragement. Role playing is a very rewarding method where children act out ideas and reactions. By doing they gain self satisfaction and self-esteem and surely learn much more than just merely sitting and watching. Mention should be made of a reality: such extracurricular activities are so popular among pupils also because they lack formal assessments. The fact that trainers do not test formally is not a los at all, on the contrary: evaluation can sometimes offer a one-sided answer about the students’ progress overall. Informal assessments may offer more clear data regarding their misconceptions or inabilities that could not be detected through ordinary tests. When children prove they can communicate, perform and produce there is no longer need to give stressful tests. Learning by practicing and proving that they can put theory into practice is the best test. The voluntary nature of these activities, that fact that the pupils are not punished for missing a class, the methods used, the attractiveness of doing rather than learning about doing are strong points of these successful activities.
3. Conclusions

The classic English lesson is considered by Byrne (1991) to be “non-privileged”, in that it doesn’t offer proper classroom conditions. The approach to language learning can generally be described through the sequence “presentation – practice – production” (Byrne, 1991). The situation is different within English workshops: the size of the groups is smaller, the arrangement of the room facilitates communication, there is no syllabus requiring examinations. Last but not least, communication is favored by the activities proposed by the trainers. Effective oral practice is by far the best background for learning.

By using dance, songs, tales, theatre, people have used non-formal education methods to transmit ideas, experience and wisdom and they have thus ensured that the next generations would not lose anything from the harmony, stability and wisdom of their predecessors. By using the same methods, nowadays trainers help students, within non-formal activities as well, to acquire skills, to develop oral productive skills in English, to gain self-confidence and the pleasure to speak a foreign language.

The world of teaching has dramatically changed, and as the world is changing rapidly and is becoming smaller, faster and more competitive; approaching education through non-formal activities is a reasonable attitude, sustaining the importance of extracurricular education for knowledge and skills development on the one hand, and for the personal growth of pupils on the other. Only by paying the due attention to such non-formal types of learning opportunities will the educational system gain more value and variety.

References

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