

## Achieving Bilingualism in very Young Learners of EFL through Real-Life Experience

Edita Hornáčková Klapicová<sup>1</sup>

Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*Activities simulating real-life experience in the EFL classroom for very young learners may strongly contribute to the acquisition of language skills on multiple levels. This effective teaching method provides learners with the opportunity to become immersed in a natural speaking environment and allows them to acquire and practice the following language forms and skills: pronunciation and other phonological features, vocabulary and meaning, grammar and sentence structure, style, listening and speaking skills, communicative and social skills, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. The aim of the present paper is to offer some tips for teaching EFL through real-life experience, which may lead to achieving bilinguality and proficiency in English as a foreign language in very young learners.*

**Keywords:** *bilinguality, communicative approach, EFL, natural approach, very young learners*

### 1. Introduction

“After early childhood few people have enough muscular and nervous freedom or enough opportunity and leisure to reach perfection in a foreign language” [1]. Since the beginning of the twentieth century scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, such as psychologists, linguists, neurologists and educators, have paid attention to the development of bilinguality; and at the end of the century, there has been a research explosion on the subject. During the first half of the century two types of studies were prominent: a) carefully documented child biographies, such as those by Ronjat [6] and Leopold [3], and b) comparative psychometric studies of school tests obtained from bilingual and monolingual children.

The concept of bilingualism refers to the state of a linguistic community in which two languages are in contact with the result that two codes can be used in the same interaction and that a number of individuals are bilingual (societal bilingualism); but it also includes the concept of bilinguality (or individual bilingualism) [3]. Bilinguality is the psychological state of an individual who has access to more than one linguistic code as a means of social communication; the degree of access will vary along a number of dimensions which are psychological, cognitive, psycholinguistic, social psychological, social, sociological, sociolinguistic, sociocultural and linguistic [3].

The definitions of bilingualism vary from author to author (e.g. Weinreich [7], Bloomfield [1], Hamers [3], Myers-Scotton [5]). Bilingualism can generally be considered as the use or the presence of two languages. Myers-Scotton defines bilingualism as “the ability to use two or more languages sufficiently to carry on a limited casual conversation” [5]. Bloomfield explains bilingualism in the following way:

In the extreme case of foreign-language learning the speaker becomes so proficient as to be indistinguishable from the native speakers round him. This happens occasionally in adult shifts of language and frequently in the childhood shift just described. In the cases where this perfect foreign-language learning is not accompanied by loss of the native language, it results in bilingualism, native-like control of two languages. Of course, one cannot define a degree of perfection at which a good foreign speaker becomes a bilingual: the distinction is relative [1].

A distinction must first be made between childhood bilinguality, adolescent bilinguality and adult bilinguality. In the first of these bilingual experience takes place at the same time as the general development of the child; in other words this bilingual experience occurs at the time when the various developmental components have not yet reached maturity and can therefore be influenced by this experience. Myers-Scotton claims that young children are able to acquire two (or even more) languages simultaneously with native-like competence [5]. They can do it as long as they are exposed to them, although they tend eventually to develop dominance in one of them because it's used more. Monolingual children and children who are early bilinguals go through similar stages of acquisition.



They develop general learning mechanisms through analogical thinking and other forms of associationism [5]. Critical age hypothesis is often attributed to Lenneberg (1967), who was most specific about suggesting the time around the onset of puberty (or age 13) as the end of language of acquisition [5].

With the appropriate approach, preschool children are capable of achieving proficiency in a foreign language and become bilingual, as long as they are exposed to real language in context for meaningful communication. This presupposes taking the social aspect of language into consideration. Learners acquire a new language when they are exposed to it in a natural way, through real-life experiences and hands-on instruction. Learners must be given the opportunity “to use language in order to learn language” [6]. Integrating different subjects, such as language, math, art, literature, science, music, and physical education is a very effective technique used in the foreign language classroom. Very young learners learn efficiently through play, skits, drama activities, gestures, role-play, songs, rhymes, and TPR activities. New vocabulary is best learned and practiced through visual, verbal and physical support.

The present paper brings to light how hands-on inquiry instruction, exploration-explanation instructional sequence and multisensory strategies support learning not only new vocabulary but also help learners understand how the world works through active involvement of the learners.

## **2. Aims of research and methodology**

The present paper is based on a three-year research carried out in a kindergarten in Lower Austria. The primary aim of the research was to find out whether and how it was possible to achieve bilinguality and proficiency in English as a foreign language in mostly German speaking preschool children attending English lessons for the period of three years. There were two groups of children aged 3 to 6 and the number of children in each group was 25. The English lessons took place once a week for the period of 45 minutes. The instructor adopted the communicative approach and natural language teaching during the English lessons. The students were immersed in a natural speaking environment and exposed to authentic language used in meaningful communication through a variety of multisensory activities, pictures, objects and other visual aids, skits, role-plays, stories, drama activities, songs, rhymes, TPR activities, motions, play, games and multiple interactive activities, experiments and other scientific context embedded activities, real-life and hands-on experiences. The classroom environment was friendly and relaxed, in order to enhance positive experience from learning and avoid any possibility of fear or anxiety in the learners. The instructor adopted the role of a facilitator and students were constantly invited to participate in interactive activities, which provided them with the opportunity to acquire and practice the foreign language on multiple levels through social interaction with the instructor and their peers. Data were collected in form of audio and video recordings and a diary containing notes taken during observation. Assessment was carried out through vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure oral and picture-based tests.

## **3. Types of strategies and acquired skills**

### **3.1 Sink or float**

#### **3.1.1 Procedure and technique**

An intriguing activity, always captivating the attention of the child and immersing him into the world of science is the “sink or float” experiment performed with different objects placed in a transparent plastic or glass container filled with water.

The following props were used in the experiment: two large plastic containers filled with water, a number of objects different in weight, shape, material, and color.

Learners were introduced to the activity by first reviewing some vocabulary words, such as water, container, transparent, full, heavy, light, plastic, glass, etc. Consequently, the words sink and float were introduced and explained through visual demonstration. Learners were invited to first observe how the experiment was done – by placing different objects into the containers filled with water and testing which of them went to the bottom of the container – or sank, and which stayed on the surface – or floated. Later on, individual learners were invited to pick an object and put it in water, while the rest of the learners were asked to guess whether that particular object was going to sink or float. The learners cooperated extremely well in this activity either through the physical action of choosing an object and placing it in the container or by engaging in a vivid conversation about their guesses on which objects would sink or float.



### 3.1.2 Acquired skills

Through this activity, the learners were able to achieve the following skills:

- a) Phonological features: pronunciation, prosodic features: stress, rhythm, and intonation; aspects of connected speech: assimilation, elision, and linking;
- b) Vocabulary and meaning: sink, float, water, container, transparent, full, heavy, light, plastic, glass, guess, think, pick, choose, rubber duck, car, doll, cup, coin, pencil, paper, lemon, comb, brush, egg, ball, heart, etc.
- c) Grammar: the simple past tense, the present participle forms, auxiliary verbs, the active voice and the passive voice of verbs, singular and plural forms of nouns, regular and irregular forms of verbs, pronouns, quantifiers, etc.;
- d) Sentence structure: statements, forming questions, prepositional phrases, word order, noun phrases, verb phrases, adverbial phrases, etc.;
- e) Style: the colloquial style, the polite style, common expressions, expressive vocabulary, etc.;
- f) Pragmatic aspects: turn-taking rules; speech acts of asking questions, etc.;
- g) Listening skills: through listening to the instructor and peers;
- h) Speaking skills: through interaction with the instructor and peers;
- i) Social skills: through active participation in the activity, responding to questions, taking part in actions, interaction with the instructor and peers;
- j) Communicative skills: providing answers to questions, engagement in dialogues;
- k) Sociolinguistic competence: providing the appropriate words or expressions in a given context;
- l) Discourse competence: through the exposure to the structure of a longer text in speech, and
- m) Strategic competence: through the learners' attempt to maintain communication.

## 3.2 The four senses

### 3.2.1 Procedure and technique

Very young learners can learn new words and acquire their meaning more easily when they can experience them through their senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. The words *see*, *hear*, *smell*, *taste* and *touch* were introduced and practiced through a number of visual aids: a colourful soft ball, a lamp, several stuffed animals (an elephant, a fox and a cat), jingle bells, a xylophone, a flute, a toy cupcake, a toy ice-cream, a basket filled with candy, a pair of socks and a perfume.

The learners were invited to use their sense of sight when looking at the props and seeing their colors and size. Specifically the ball and the lamp were used to demonstrate how the learners could use their eyes to see the different colors on the ball and see the light when the lamp was turned on. The learners were able to learn and practice the pronunciation and meaning of the words *see*, *color*, *light*, *on*, *off*, *turn on*, *turn off*, *lamp*, *ball*, and the names of different colors. With the use of the three stuffed animals, the learners were able to use their senses of sight and touch and acquire the pronunciation and meaning of the words *touch*, *stuffed animal*, *elephant*, *fox*, *cat*, *soft*, *white*, *pink*, *grey*, *tail*, *big*, *small*, *see*, *touch*, *feel*. Jingle bells, the xylophone and the flute were used to introduce the sense of hearing and enable the learners to acquire the pronunciation and meaning of the words *hear*, *jingle bells*, *xylophone*, *flute*, *instrument*, *play*, *music*, *loud*, and *soft*. The toy cupcake and ice-cream as well as the candy were used to introduce the sense of taste and enable the learners to acquire the pronunciation and meaning of the words *taste*, *cupcake*, *ice-cream*, *candy*, *sweet*, *sour*, *flavour*, *vanilla*, *strawberry*, *apple*, *lemon*, *yogurt*, *chocolate*, *nut*, *mango*. The socks and the perfume were used to introduce the sense of smell and to enable the learners to acquire the pronunciation and meaning of the words *smell*, *nice*, *sweet*, *flower*, *stink*, *wash*, *clean*, *dirty*, *put on*.

### 3.2.2 Acquired skills

Through this activity, the learners were able to achieve the following skills:

- a) Phonological features: pronunciation, prosodic features: stress, rhythm, and intonation; aspects of connected speech: assimilation, elision, and linking;
- b) Vocabulary and meaning: *see*, *hear*, *smell*, *taste*, *touch*, *color*, *light*, *on*, *off*, *turn on*, *turn off*, *lamp*, *ball*, *stuffed animal*, *elephant*, *fox*, *cat*, *soft*, *white*, *pink*, *grey*, *red*, *blue*, *yellow*, *green*, *tail*, *big*, *small*, *see*, *touch*, *feel*, *jingle bells*, *xylophone*, *flute*, *instrument*, *play*, *music*, *loud*, *cupcake*, *ice-cream*, *candy*, *sweet*, *sour*, *flavour*, *vanilla*, *strawberry*, *apple*, *lemon*, *yogurt*, *chocolate*, *nut*, *mango*, *nice*,

*sweet, flower, stink, wash, clean, dirty, put on.* The acquisition of meaning of new words was enhanced by hands-on activities with the use of the five senses.

c) Grammar: the simple past tense, the present participle forms, auxiliary verbs, the active voice and the passive voice of verbs, present tenses and past tenses, singular and plural forms of nouns, regular and irregular forms of verbs, pronouns, quantifiers, articles, etc.;

d) Sentence structure: statements, forming questions, prepositional phrases, word order, noun phrases, verb phrases, adverbial phrases, etc.;

e) Style: the colloquial style, the polite style, common expressions, expressive vocabulary, etc.;

f) Pragmatic aspects: turn-taking rules; speech acts of asking questions, etc.;

g) Listening skills: through listening to the instructor and peers;

h) Speaking skills: through interaction with the instructor and peers;

i) Social skills: through active participation in the activity, responding to questions, taking part in actions, interaction with the instructor and peers;

j) Communicative skills: providing answers to questions, engagement in dialogues;

k) Sociolinguistic competence: providing the appropriate words or expressions in a given context;

l) Discourse competence: through the exposure to the structure of a longer text in speech, and

m) Strategic competence: through the learners' attempt to maintain communication.

#### 4. Conclusion

Hands-on inquiry instruction, exploration-explanation instructional sequence and multisensory strategies may greatly contribute to achieving proficiency and fluency in English as a foreign language in very young learners and thus accelerate their process of becoming bilingual.

The first activity described in the paper was the "Sink or float" experiment. This "hands-on" activity provided a real-life experience through which the learners were able to learn new things about the functioning of the world with the use of the target language. English as a foreign language was not an obstacle, while the learners were discovering new things around them and labelling them with names in English. The learners soon comprehended the meaning of the verbs sink and float and actively used these words in their discussion.

The second activity provided the learners with the opportunity to acquire new vocabulary and structures through a real-life experience, while using their five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. The learners were exposed to authentic language through visual aids, actions, spoken discourse, seeing, hearing, smelling and tasting things around them and thus developing not only their linguistic skills but also learning about how their bodies and the world around them function.

During these activities, learners were engaged mentally, physically, emotionally, and socially, while acquiring new linguistic skills. Both teaching strategies also had a positive influence on building the learners' self-confidence in using the target language in communication and on eliminating the learners' anxiety from learning. The atmosphere in the classroom was relaxed and friendly, providing the learners' with the opportunity to acquire the target language in a natural, spontaneous, and stimulating manner.

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