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TÍTULO: Prácticas de multilingüismo en la educación temprana de idiomas.

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RESUMEN: El documento aborda el problema del multilingüismo en la educación temprana de idiomas. El multilingüismo se refiere al uso competente de más de un idioma. El documento describe las formas en que los niños adquieren idiomas y explica por qué es importante la educación multilingüe. Subraya la necesidad de aprender varios idiomas desde temprana edad y más compatibilidad con varios idiomas. El documento también se centra en la importancia de una transición suave entre los idiomas y las formas de preparar a los maestros para lidiar con esto de manera eficiente. Se presentan las oportunidades de introducir el multilingüismo en la enseñanza de la primera infancia.

PALABRAS CLAVES: multilingüismo, educación, primera infancia, adquisición del lenguaje, conciencia metalingüística.

TITLE: Multilingualism practices in early language education.

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ABSTRACT: The paper addresses the problem of multilingualism in early language education. Multilingualism refers to using competently more than one language. The paper describes the ways in which children acquire languages and explains why multilingual education is important. It underlines the necessity of learning several languages from early age and further multiple languages support. The paper also focuses on the importance of a soft transition between the languages and the ways to prepare teachers to deal with this efficiently. The opportunities of introducing multilingualism in early childhood instruction are presented. The paper gives examples of instruction that show the peculiarities of multilingual education. Several practical activities for multilingual primary classroom are described.

KEY WORDS: multilingualism, education, early childhood, language acquisition, metalinguistic awareness.

INTRODUCTION.

The term multilingualism which is the focus of this paper is a derivate of two Latin words “multi” that means many and “language” that means language (Bussmann, 1996). Multilingualism describes the ability of a person to communicate in several languages (native or foreign) with equal and native-like proficiency (Bussmann, 1996). Multilingualism is also sometimes interpreted as the coexistence of several languages in a society (Lyons, 1981).

As people use more than one language, then terms such as bilingualism, trilingualism and multilingualism may be applied. Sometimes the term “multilingualism” is used interchangeably with the term “bilingualism” (Lyons, 1981) that describes the ability of a person to speak two languages with native-like proficiency. In this paper multilingualism is seen as a general term describing the ability to speak two (bilingualism), three (trilingualism) and more languages.

According to the statistics, over a billion people worldwide speak more than one language fluently (Barasa, 2005). The population of people is growing rapidly in the world and the number of bilinguals may be now threefold. Jessner U. writes that English language can be seen as a factor responsible for creation multilingualism (Jessner, 2006).

DEVELOPMENT.

Over the past few decades much research has shown how important early language development is, because kids' skills acquired at this stage are responsible for their further literacy development and academic achievement.

It is widely accepted that kids are capable of acquiring more than one language in early age and a good linguistic base in the native language is favourable for studying other languages. Many studies have shown that early age is the "most important grade" due to its great influence on later academic achievement (Barnett & Hustedt, 2003). German scientists report that bilingual learners achieve better results not only in the target language but also in other disciplines (Lamsfuss-Schenk, 2008). The developmental nature of L2 (second language) acquisition has been scientifically proved (Seliger, 1988). Krashen S.D. notes that "Purely theoretical research doesn't have a direct impact on L2 classroom but adds to our knowledge of L2 is acquired" (Krashen, 1985: 46).

Multilingualism is a worldwide phenomenon, and kids around the world often have to differentiate home and pre-school/school languages. Children study in dominant language that is either their L2 or L3 (third language). Bilingual children demonstrate inhomogeneous progress in acquisition of several languages that may lead to a change of language dominance from the initially stronger minority to the majority language in middle childhood period (Jia et al., 2006).

The importance of continued support for language learning from early age is mentioned by many researchers. It is noted that kids who are exposed to high quality input in more than one language under the age of 3 (with further exposure) achieve better results in phonological awareness and

reading activities in comparison with children who are exposed to L2 only after the age of 3 (Kovelman et al., 2008). Research also indicates that kids can develop high level of competence in social and cognitive skills if high quality and supportive environment conducive to both languages is provided (Barac & Bialystok, 2012).

Multilingual curricula and approaches support kid's literacy and language development (August & Shanahan, 2006). Moreover, the development of these skills in one language positively influences the development of similar skills in another language (Brisk & Harrington, 2007).

Sometimes parents worry that learning L2 may have a negative impact on their child's L1. But numerous studies have shown that learning through medium of L2 improves communication awareness of L1 (first language).

Early childhood is a perfect period for not only enabling kids to foster their L1 base, but exposing them to another language which children can study simultaneously. Thus, the pre-school period is a good chance to help children to move smoothly from L1 to L2. Specialists motivate instructors and teachers to introduce L2 within this stage.

It is well known that once children have had a solid base in L1 concepts transfer to their L2. Surely, a new language should be introduced not at the expense of the native one. L2 can serve as a kind of strategy to motive multilingualism. If kids have to get full competence in L1 and L2, they need to have regular, long term and extensive exposure to both languages.

Studies show that bilinguals possess better cognitive strategies and are more flexible in the implementation of these strategies in problem-solving process. Such individuals demonstrate better results in the activities that require selective attention that consists of monitoring, inhibition and attention focus switching (Bialystok, 2001).

Recent studies indicate that kids raised in bilingual environment develop a special type of cognitive advantage during infancy, and that bilingualism may even protect against symptoms of Alzheimer's disease in older age (Bialystok & Viswanathan, 2009).

Until 1960s many studies showed that bilingual kids acquired languages more slowly than monolingual children and developed more limited vocabularies. More recent studies have found monolingual and bilingual children to be very similar in language and cognition processing (Costa et al., 2008).

There are some mentions of children being bilingually brought up in the classic literature (Ronjat, 1913). Negative results were sometimes observed due to personal, cultural, social factors but not to the bilingualism itself. Most researchers note the benefits of an early acquired bilingual competence that include high level of fluency and extensive vocabulary.

The arguments that child's brain is more "plastic" and receptive than adult's one, exaggerates the power of early language acquisition. Small children often lack cognitive experience that older learners have. Providing the necessary motivation, adults in their turn can become successful learners.

One of the advantages that bilingual learners have is related to metalinguistic awareness that presents the ability to be aware of the linguistic system to concentrate on the function and form of words (Gregory, 1996) and control the comprehension process (Bernhardt, 1991).

Research indicates that bilingual kids up to the age of 6 are likely to show better results in reading activities involving metalinguistic awareness (García, 1998).

According to some authors, who carried out research on bilingual and monolingual kids abroad, bilingual children who attended schools and those who didn't, had better intellectual and cognitive skills than their monolingual peers (Mohanty, 2006). Bilingual children also achieved better results in metacognitive and metalinguistic tasks.

Such kids also have the benefit of cross-linguistic transfer. Many studies on the phenomenon of cross-linguistic transfer are based on the idea that literacy skills developed in one language can move to another language (Cummins, 1986).

Further studies on children of different age groups have shown that bilingual learners can use strategies of translation, code-mixing, and code-switching applying cognates for crosslinguistic transfer (García et al., 1998). Some studies on cross-language transfer discovered that phonological awareness skills may transfer among languages, particularly from L1 to L2 (Chiappe & Siegel, 1999).

Taking into account the advantages of bilingualism mentioned above, it is important for educators to consider linguistic and metalinguistic factors by using texts that are conducive to comprehension (Droop & Verhoeven, 1998). In order to improve reading comprehension, it is important to develop vocabulary in L1 and L2 and metalinguistic skills at the word level (Carlisle & Beeman, 1999). The continued development of metalinguistic skills of kids in their L1 can help to acquire literacy skills in L2 (López & Greenfield, 2004).

Multilingualism also promotes creativity and intellectual flexibility. Recent research indicates that kids who are brought up in a supportive environment communicating in more than one language from an early age are more intellectually flexible and perceptive (King, 2007). By applying “double L1 acquisition” model (King, 2007), kids constantly speaking with parents’ different languages are likely to be comfortable and fluent with several home languages and will even be able to learn a third and fourth language in future.

A language and speech therapist Naude E. while conducting his research on multilingualism discovered that when parents motivate children to learn new languages then they are investing in them intellectually (King, 2007). Consequently, kids who are fluent in several languages are better lateral thinkers with good reasoning skills, have a better social adaptability, and their cognitive abilities are improved (King, 2007).

Two activities that can be used in multilingual primary classroom are presented below.

Activity 1 “Is that correct?”

The teacher demonstrates pictures of colours, animals, and familiar objects and names them in English. Having modeled the right answer, the teacher asks: “What’s this called in your language?” Then the teacher draws kid’s attention to any similarities or cognates (for instance, German “blau” with English “blue”) and differences in pronunciation.

The teacher can also show verbs like “hop”, “walk”, “crawl”, “run” by performing the actions and giving the word in English. After that, the teacher reads a story with the introduced vocabulary, desirably demonstrating a large picture or a book so that children can see the drawings and words and listen to the words in English.

At the next stage, the teacher in English introduces some verbs and colours as well as the names of objects and animals that can be found in the learner’s environment but not in the coursebook. The kids have to identify which objects or animals are green and which are not, which animals can run and which cannot, and so on.

Finally, the children work in mini-groups and either make a short sketch for other learners or draw a picture, including words and phrases they have studied. As a homework, the students can be asked to compose a short piece of writing or come up with extra animal features.

The activity presented above helps learners to find similarities and differences between words in English and other languages they speak.

Children can show understanding of English vocabulary and grammar by contrasting and comparing structures in different languages. Moreover, by analysing various language structures kids develop critical thinking skills.

Activity 2. “Everyone in the family”.

The teacher asks learners to brainstorm vocabulary they use to talk about their families and notes down the words for family relations on the board (e.g., mother, father, sister, brother, aunt, etc). After that the teacher uses pictures to demonstrate the learners a diagram of a family tree, presenting the terms for family members in English. Then, the teachers show the family members and describes them using adjectives and nouns in English (e.g., child is young, grandfather is old). Comparative and superlatives degrees of adjectives can also be part of the lesson (e.g., sister is younger, grandmother is the oldest).

For reading and writing aims, the teacher hands out the lists of terms and adjectives of different relatives. The teacher directs learners in a discussion on similarities and differences of family relation terms in English and other languages they speak. If there are differences, for instance, only one term for both “sister” and “brother” is used in the learner’s L1, then the teacher introduces the children to the words “sister and “brother” additionally to the general term “sibling” in English.

At the stage, each kid draws her or his own family tree using the diagram. Children label family members by name. Then, they work in pairs and come up with ideas for some changes in their partner’s family tress while the teacher walks around the class monitoring the task. After that, learners present their diagrams in front of the class and explain the words on the branches of their family trees. Finally, the teacher collects the family trees and assesses the general understanding of the assignment as well as the correct spelling and usage of the topical vocabulary.

In the activity presented above learners use all four skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing) to contrast and compare terms for family members in English and their L1. Children get acquainted with basic rules of genealogy by drawing and labeling their family trees. Moreover, kids compare their drawings with each other and revise the terms in English together.

CONCLUSIONS.

Multilingualism describes a person who speaks two or more languages or a group of people who together use more than one language. In case children are exposed to several languages in different circumstances with various people since early age, and if they need both languages to socialize with others, they will acquire both.

Research indicates that children who speak more than one language are more metalinguistically aware, have better problem-solving skills, show essential creativity. They also have better academic performance at school and demonstrate more tolerance to others in comparison with monolingual kids. The linguistic consequences of multilingualism incorporate the development of lingua franca, formation of mixed languages in a linguistic environment, enhancement of cross-cultural communication skills and strategies.

The advantages of multilingual education may include promotion of cultural awareness, improvement of educational and academic background, enhancement of creativity and appreciation of local languages.

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