

MAGDALENA OLPIŃSKA-SZKIEŁKO

Uniwersytet Warszawski
m.olpinska@uw.edu.pl

Teaching materials for English in the primary education – also for the pre-school education?

ABSTRACT. The objective of the article is to analyse some selected materials for teaching English as a foreign language, designed mainly for grade 1–3 of the primary school, with the goal to answer the question whether these materials could be also used successfully and efficiently with 3–5-year old children. Early English learning materials are compared with Polish integrated learning materials. The analysis results in some conclusions for the didactic process in kindergartens. In accordance with the theoretical issues some principles for the shaping of didactic materials, teaching forms and activities, adequate tasks and contents of a language lesson are described.

KEYWORDS: teaching materials; early English learning; language sensitivity period; natural language learning situation; pre-school education; kindergarten.

1. INTRODUCTION

The objective of this article is to analyse some selected materials for teaching English as a foreign language, designed mainly for grade 1–3 of the primary school (for 6–9-year olds), with the goal to answer the question whether these materials could be also used successfully and efficiently in pre-schools with 3–5-year old children. The question seems to be very important in the moment when – beginning from September 2015 – a first foreign language (presumably English in the majority cases) should be obligatory taught to 5-year olds, and beginning from September 2017, to all pre-school learners in Poland. It means that all kindergartens, as well as the primary schools which offer the preparatory courses obligatorily for all 5-year old children who do not attend the kindergarten, will have to organize for-

eign language lessons as an integral part of the curriculum. One could, of course, ask a justifiable question whether these lessons must be unavoidable based on traditional teaching methods and materials. The practice shows, however, that teachers do usually use teaching materials in the form of e.g. workbooks, worksheets, activity sheets or recordings. The use of prepared teaching materials makes the planning of both a particular lesson and the whole course easier and provides better control over the learning progress. From this point of view, it is very important to inquire into the question which qualities the teaching materials for pre-school learners should have and whether these teaching materials, momentarily accessible in the Polish book market and applied in primary education, do have these qualities.

The analysis was performed on 7 sets of teaching materials containing (varying from set to set) a course book (a class book), a pupil's book (a workbook with worksheets, press-outs, flash cards, stickers etc.), a teacher's book, an audio CD and a song CD (see *References*). For comparison, the analysis was also performed on one set of teaching materials for German as a foreign language consisting of 4 parts: 2 class books for grade 1 and 2 - for grade 2 (Grucza *et al.* 2001-2003) and some examples of integrated learning materials in Polish language that are used in pre-school education of 4 and 5 year olds (see *References*).

2. LANGUAGE SENSITIVITY PERIOD

The age between 3 and 5 years is a very important learning period in the child's life. In this period an intensive cognitive, emotional, social and physical development takes place and the child achieves gradually a stage of the so called "school maturity" when he/she is ready to fulfil requirements of the school education (cf. Kwiecińska 2015). The moment in the child's life when he/she has reached that level of development and begins his/her education in the first grade of the primary school is a crucial turning-point in life. That suggests that the pre-school education, including pre-school language education, cannot be founded on the same principles as the primary school (language) education.

However, it shall not be concluded, based on the fact that the cognitive development of kindergarten learners is less advanced than that of the school pupils, that the requirements towards the pre-school children, where language learning is considered, should be reduced in comparison with primary school children. On the contrary; to postulate that the amount of language material (e.g. words and phrases) should be more restricted, that

more repetitions, less complicated tasks and slower learning progress should be adopted, would be false.

The period between 3 and 5 years of age belongs to the so called “language sensitivity period” (the “sensitive period”) in human life when the acquisition of his/her first language takes place and when also a second language can be acquired more successfully than later in life (for references, see Olpińska 2013). In that stage of life, “foreign languages are acquired under proper conditions easier, faster and more efficiently than at later age” (Lang 2014: 48; translation mine, MOS). It is possible because children in the sensitive period can learn a new language using the same inborn strategies of perception, processing and accumulation of linguistic data that they employed so successfully and efficiently in the acquisition process of their first language (“the language learning ability”, see Wode 2000, 2004). Accordingly, the sensitive period is the most suitable stage for the beginning of an intensive foreign language learning process not only under natural conditions (e.g. in a bilingual family), but also in the educational environment. In that period, learners can meet higher requirements than in the later stages of learning.

Linguistic research into bilingualism and bilingual education can supply numerous valuable instructions how to design the learning environment, how to compose teaching material and which techniques, learning forms, types of activities, tasks and contents would be adequate to conduct the learning process during the sensitive period successfully (see Olpińska 2013, 2014). In the further sections of the article, I will attempt to examine whether or to what degree the early English teaching materials available in Poland fulfil requirements resulting from that research and consequently, are adequate for teaching English to pre-schoolers.

3. NATURAL LANGUAGE LEARNING SITUATION

A fundamental principle of early language learning that arises from the experience of bilingual education programmes tells that language learning – independently of the intensity and frequency of the contact with the foreign language – must be conducted under specific conditions and in specific settings. Generally speaking, the foreign language learning situation should correspond, to a large extent, with the conditions of the natural first language acquisition process. In that process, language interactions in which the child participates always take place in a real communicative situations, are “immersed” in a concrete and clear situational and communicative context. On the ground of that context, the child who recognizes and under-

stands the events and actions that happen around him/her is able to reconstruct the meaning of concurrent utterances (words, phrases, language structures), unaided and without any formal instructions or explanations.

An integrated part of language development is the experience and understanding of the surrounding world by the child. For a reconstruction of the meaning of words, the child needs a rich and various experience that his/her environment supplies: for instance, a word like "milk" will not make sense to the child until he/she knows how the item – represented by the word – looks like, how it smells, how it tastes and what happens when a glass of it falls down. In other words, in order to learn a name for a thing, the child must experience it with all his/her senses. The development of language skills is not isolated, but integrated with the development of other skills the child acquires: his/her other cognitive skills, but also his/her physical, emotional and social competences. Language utterances that a child hears in his/her environment serve not the purpose of presentation of particular words and phrases but the purpose of communication – the utterances are authentic and play the role of communication means.

The process of the first language acquisition takes place not only in the child's family. A 3 year old child that starts his/her pre-school education has admittedly acquired all basic knowledge of the language and developed all basic language skills but it doesn't mean that the process is completed. On the contrary, during the whole period of pre-school and primary education, a very intensive language development takes place. The child's vocabulary increases immensely, his/her sentences (utterances) become longer and more complex. At that stage, the child becomes familiar with some new language means like a metaphor or an irony, learns also a new variant of the language (the "written language"), comes in contact with the metalanguage (the language that describes language, the language about language) and specific organization forms of speech (a story, a summary etc.).

The main aim of the pre-school education is to support the child's development in all dimensions and in every sphere of his/her activity, among that also his/her language activity (in the first language). The learning situation in kindergarten is undoubtedly natural – it fulfils all the characteristics of a natural language learning situation as described previously – despite of the fact that it takes place under educational conditions and is often supported by teaching material (integrated learning materials in Polish). When we assume that the teaching materials in Polish are suitable for children at that age (4 – 5 year olds; in 3 year olds teaching materials in traditional printed form are seldom used) and so composed that they stimulate the children's development in an appropriate way, we could also expect teaching materials for early foreign language learning to have the same character-

istics; namely, they should be adequate for that stage of child's development as well. In the following sections of the article I try to find an answer whether it is really so.

4. SELECTION OF LANGUAGE LEARNING CONTENTS AND TOPICS

In the analysed early English and German teaching materials, the selection of learning contents is very similar. The majority of issues refer to the child's nearest environment, his/her basic interests and needs like, for example, *family, food, pets, wild/exotic animals or animals in the zoo, toys, body parts, clothes, nature (garden, forest), seasons of the year, weather, birthday, festivals* etc. In the German course books that are dedicated to the first and second grade of the primary school (Grucza *et al.* 2001-2003) and in several English teaching materials (Leighton 2011; Dyson and Pogłodzińska 2012; Appel and Zarańska 2007; Heath 2013; James 2014) topics connected with school are also present: for instance, *school utensils, classroom, lesson plan / schedule* etc. Only in one of the books (Selby 2012), two chapters deal with the kindergarten matters: *playroom* and *playground*. Such selection of learning contents seems to be legitimate for a kindergarten learning process in every respect and concurrent with the selection of contents in teaching materials in Polish (apart from the "school-topics"; besides, the Polish integrated learning materials include some "more complicated" and "more difficult" themes like, for example, *the solar system, dinosaurs* etc.). The difference, however, lies in the range and complexity of the contents represented in those materials. In the English teaching materials, the presentation of the contents is limited to a few selected linguistic items (words, e.g. Simmons 2012, *Chapter 1: Animals in the zoo*: names of animals – *lion, tiger, snake* etc.; names of same characteristics of those animals – *long, big, little, tall, brown, yellow*; names of typical actions and sounds of the animals – *roar, stamp, wiggle, stretch, sss, ugg* etc.), whereas Polish materials concentrate usually on a non-linguistic problem, e.g. *why should one not leave his trash in the woods? how can one help animals in winter? what are the life conditions in the jungle, in the desert, or on the north pole like?* etc. The problem is presented to the children by means of both illustrations and texts (stories, narratives, poems, songs etc.), whilst in the early English materials, there are much more illustrations than language that is represented by very short and uncomplicated texts like simple rhymes, chants, mini-dialogs, single sentences or even single words. The analysed early English teaching materials (with one exception, Selby 2012)

do not include longer texts. As a result, presenting the children with new, unknown topics is almost impossible. The subject-matters presented in English must be based on the knowledge and experience that the learners already have because it is not possible to deliver that knowledge and experience with language structures that are so limited. In consequence, the children learn only a few new names for concepts that are (theoretically) already known by them. Eventually, they (have to) translate the words from Polish into the foreign language. The cognitive operations that are required to accomplish these tasks are too complex as to be executed by pre-schoolers who have not built yet concepts and cannot therefore process them (for details of cognitive development and references, see Olpińska 2013). That “method” does not conform to the principles of the natural language acquisition, too. In the following section, I will try to explain this using examples from both the early English and Polish integrated learning materials, i.e. how these just outlined problems manifest themselves in the learning process.

5. PRESENTATION OF THE LEARNING CONTENTS

In the analysed early English and German teaching materials, in comparison with the Polish integrated learning materials, two main problems occur which lead to some doubts about their usefulness for pre-school education. On one hand, it is the problem that was previously referred to, i.e. the problem of too high expectations towards the pre-school children in the cognitive processing of language data and handling concepts which is in principle metalanguage processing. I will try to explain that problem on the example of the acquisition and commemoration of some selected names of colours. When we first examine the relevant chapter of a Polish book (*Colours* by Małgorzata Strzałkowska, in: Bobryk and Krzywicka 2007: 94-95; Illustration 1), we may think that it is much more complicated linguistically due to the significantly larger number of words and expressions while comparing to the English materials (Appel and Zaráńska 2007: 18, Illustration 2; Dyson and Poglodzińska 2012: 58, Illustration 3). But then we may realise that in the first case the aim of the presentation is to stimulate and to support the child’s cognitive processes leading to a formation and consolidation, or extension, of the concepts of a particular colour. That’s why so many objects representing that colour are named. The editors, however, seem neither to intend the children to remember, nor even to recognise all of them (e.g. “beads” of a turkey, algae, mummy’s eyeshadow, larkspur [*Delphinium*] etc.)



Illustration 1: Colours by Małgorzata Strzałkowska, (in:) A. Bobryk, M. Krzywicka, Entliczek Pentliczek. Książka dla starszego przedszkolaka. Pięciolatki, 2007: 94-95.

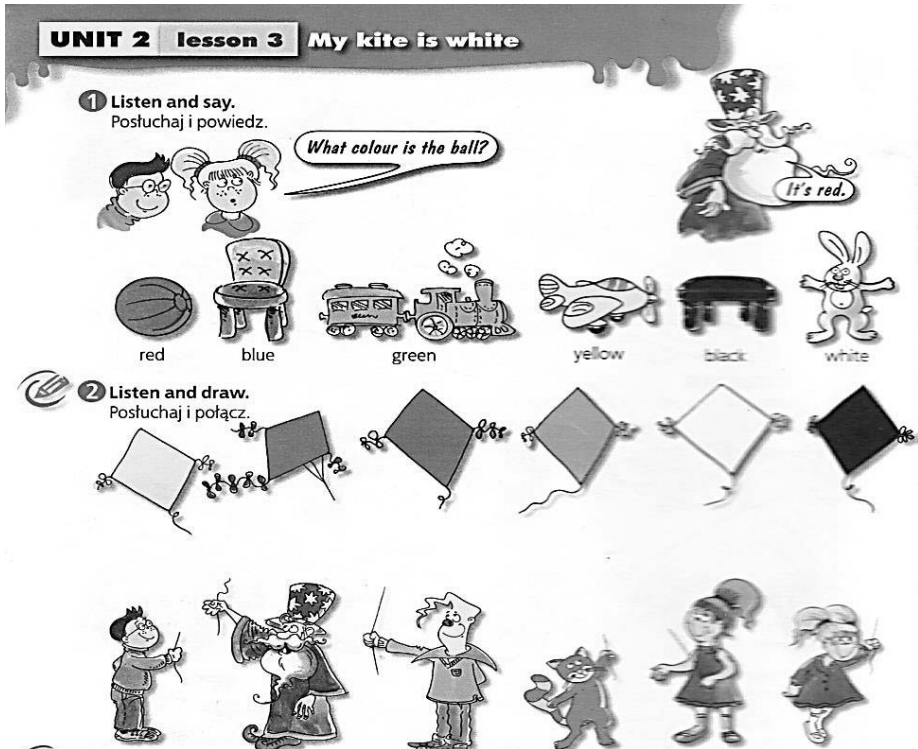


Illustration 2: Colours, (in:) M. Appel, J. Zarańska, Hocus Pocus 1, 2007: 18.

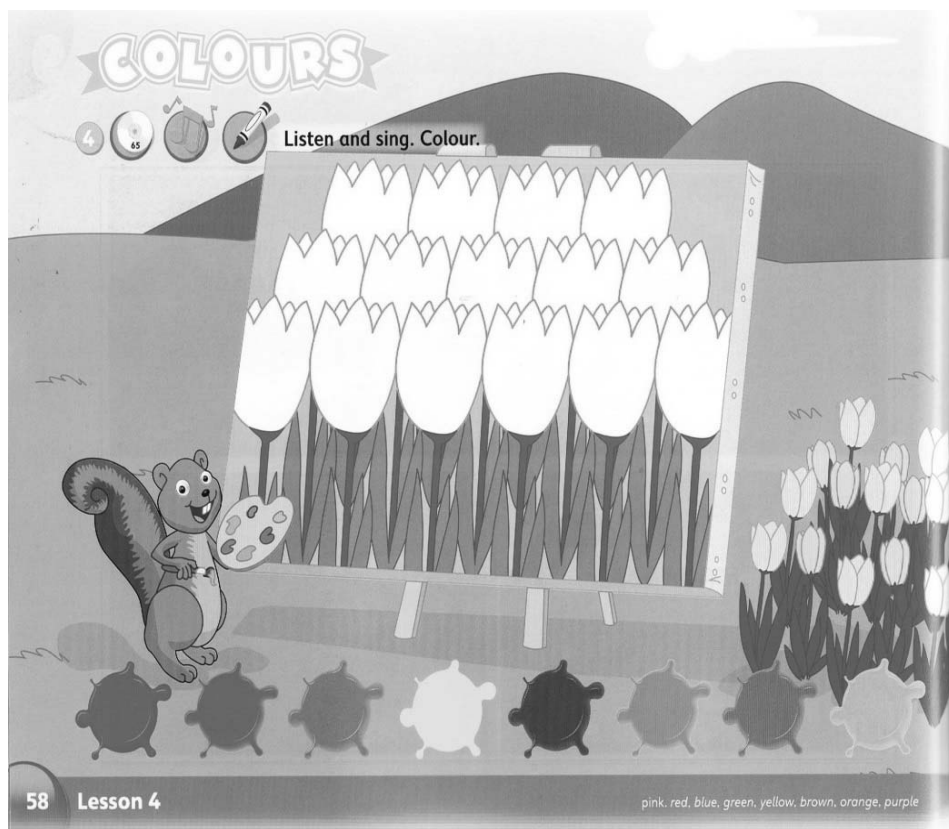


Illustration 3: *Colours*, (in:) L. Dyson, K. Pogłodzińska, *Our Discovery Island Starter*, 2012: 58.

although in the majority of cases they refer to the items well known by the children and coming from their nearest environment. The task that follows the text and is to be performed by the children consists of matching stickers with images of other objects of the same colour to the given samples. In the case of the early English teaching materials, there are no references to the real world: a plane is yellow and a ball is red on one page and yellow on another page – although we know that there are not very many yellow planes (not even among toys) and balls are usually not of one particular colour, as is the case of e.g. oranges or strawberries. The task that follow the presentation of the colours consists of matching particular names of colours to objects that do not differ from each other in any other quality (like size, shape or type) but just colour (kites, flowers), therefore it concerns only the strictly linguistic analysis. If a child does not recognise the name of a colour, he/she will not perform the task. On account of that, it seems that in the first

case – thanks to the reference to the child’s experience in exploring his/her environment as well as thanks to a richer language contexts (cf. Duszak 1998: 167), the task of remembering the names of colours will be much less difficult.

It is characteristic for the early English and German teaching materials that the learners do not receive an opportunity for self-conducted effort of reconstructing language expressions and structures on the basis of the communicative or situational context (due to the lack of it). The teaching method is to present, to repeat frequently and to imprint in the children’s memory – using a variety of techniques – a strictly limited amount of lexical and grammatical structures that are simple and short (mostly single words). It seems that it is not a proper method to be applied in the sensitive period, and its effectivity can be as limited as the language contents of the course. The application of that methods could even impede the language learning process first, because it prevents the children from the use of their inborn “language learning abilities” (see Wode 2000, 2004); and secondly, because it requires from them to adopt advanced cognitive and metalinguistic processing (based on the conceptual thinking) that goes beyond the cognitive abilities of a pre-schooler.



Illustration 4: *Animals in the jungle*, (in:) E. Zgondek, L. Kołodziej, *Entliczek Pentliczek. Kajecik 2. Pięciolatki*, 2007: 60-61.

On the other hand, an easily recognised quality of the analysed early English teaching materials is a very low level of non-linguistic cognitive and manual requirements towards the learners. There is a lot of solving problems activities in both the English and German teaching materials (e.g. matching a shadow to a shape, fitting two or more elements together,

excluding unfitting elements, finding a way in a labyrinth etc.), but the level of difficulty of that tasks varies very much from the level of similar tasks that can be found in the Polish integrated learning materials and consequently, from the level of children's abilities at that age. Let us compare two examples of the same type of task: matching several small missing pieces of a picture to the gaps. In the first case (Zgondek and Kołodziej 2007: 60-61, Illustration 4), there are 10 missing parts of the main picture, there is no help in form of a contour showing the shape of the matching piece; the pieces are selected and "taken away" from the main picture "at random" – showing not particularly distinctive elements of it. The pieces must be cut out and glued in the proper place single-handedly by the child. In the second case (Simmons 2012: 6, Illustration 5), there are only 4 missing elements (one of them is already placed as an example to indicate how the task should be performed). There are outlines showing how to fit the particular parts (although the images of the animal's heads are rather suggestive) which are stickers very easy to handle even by a much younger child. It is also important to say that in both cases, the success in doing the task is absolutely independent of language skills.

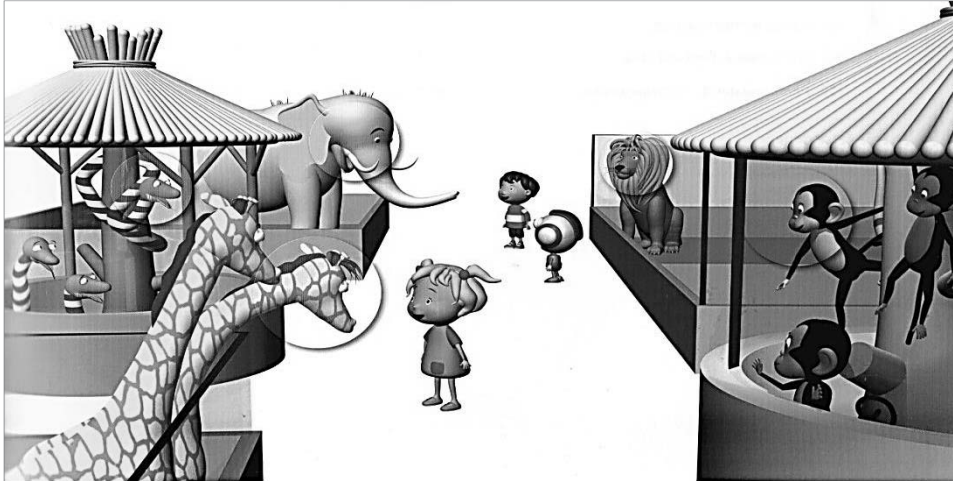


Illustration 5: *Animals in the zoo*, (in:) N. Simmons, *Ricky the Robot 2*, 2012: 6.

The analysed early English and German teaching materials include also – among many other various types of activities – numerous exercises for drawing and writing following a line. That kind of tasks are appropriate for pre-schoolers who are preparing themselves for learning to read and write

in the grade one of the primary school. But there are also tasks that require reading and writing skills (e.g. *cross-word puzzles*, *letter-and-picture puzzles [rebuses]*, *letter-snakes* etc. – first of all Grucza *et al.* 2001-2003 and Appel and Zarańska 2007), as well as mathematical skills (addition and subtraction – mainly Grucza *et al.* 2001-2003) and therefore are suitable for pupils of the first grades of the primary school who at that time are developing those skills intensively, rather than for the pre-schoolers.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The analysed materials are generally representative for early foreign language teaching materials that are accessible in Poland. They are only partly suitable for pre-school language education. The above materials (some parts of them) could be used as additional materials, but the whole teaching process cannot be based on them. Teaching materials founded on the linguistic research on bilingualism and bilingual educational programmes that would be more suitable to apply in kindergartens should be designed and composed. They should take into account the fantastic language learning abilities of children in the sensitive period which is the only phase on which the fundamentals for successful language learning can be established.

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