

## **Do We Teach English Well?**

Media often present to us results of tests which show us how our children cope with English – their compulsory foreign language. These results are quite discouraging. Let us look into the causes of such disappointing state of affairs.

English teaching undoubtedly stands and falls with the qualities of teachers. And what are the teachers like? At my courses I meet teachers who are keen, devoted and would love to be more creative, but they feel they have reached their creative limits and could do with some sort of a “boost”, they look for ways of broadening their horizons and sacrifice their free time and often no small amounts of money in search of better teaching materials. Such teachers are, however, something of an exception rather than regular occurrences.

### **Types of Teachers**

There are, in contrast, many teachers who are convinced that they do it well and feel no urge for further self-improvement. “I’ve taught this way for 15 years, therefore it must be right!” I heard an unpopular teacher say once when I had invited her to come participate in a workshop to provide her with new methods and ideas.

Furthermore, there are still such teachers who had decided to learn the language for their own sake, and suddenly there is no one else at their schools who could teach it. These teachers do take language courses for adults but with them take on the way of teaching language to grown-ups, which they use on their children in an unaltered way. (“Open your textbooks, page 35, exercise 4, you read and you translate.”) Who will tell them how children are supposed to be taught?

It often happens that teachers from 6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> grade “take a break” to go teach in the third-graders or fourth-graders, because low-grade teachers cannot speak the language. Such teachers tend to introduce the strict textbook-workbook regime to the lessons, not taking into account the differences in the way younger children learn a language. They do not understand that the children will learn nothing while incessantly fed new vocabulary, diligently written down in columns in their notebooks with their Czech equivalent and even pronunciation transcription. From these words, children are supposed to put together sentences, following some grammar rules which had been occasionally relayed to them in scarce lectures. Then these teachers wonder why the children do not really take the language in. This is not the way young children perceive language – and we cannot blame them; it is equal to their age.

### **Children Start Learning a Foreign Language Late**

The ideal age by which children should be introduced to (not taught!) a foreign language is seven years old (according to S Krashen, American psychologist and linguist). Until this age children are able to take in the sound of the language, its different intonation and phrasing, to guess at a meaning of the message although they do not understand every single word of it, to imitate the right pronunciation, to

react naturally to stimuli. To miss this stage or to have inadequately high demands on children during this period (forcing reading and writing on them) has fatal consequences; a few talented pupils will succeed, but even an average one will not be able to follow and end up deeply frustrated.

The compulsory English lessons in the first grade onwards would be a solution, and favouring playful methods with listening to fairy tales, playing games with English dialogues, physical activities with English instructions, arts or music in English, playing with words and the like. Hold off reading and writing until the third year. Children at that time have already mastered both these skills in their mother tongue, they are familiar with sound of the foreign language, they are in no danger of “written pronunciation” and they have developed their communication habits.

### **Big Groups, Old Textbooks**

There is a tendency among teachers to maintain that there need to be at least 24 pupils in the class to allow splitting them into two groups. The law states, however, that in such cases splitting is compulsory, whereas the sheer possibility is there with as few pupils as eight. Headmasters often “misinterpret” this rule for fairly justifiable reasons. How is a child supposed to learn a language, though, when the teacher has no opportunity to talk to them during a lesson? Language is a matter of communication and without individual approach and supervision the pupil is in danger of using it incorrectly. Private language schools guarantee their adult students groups of eight at most; why should children be disadvantaged in this regard?

At some schools there are even three age groups within one class – the third, the fourth and the fifth grade, while the number of pupils is extremely high (I came across as many as 22 in one group). Textbooks a decade old or even older are quite usual. But language is a living entity, and children should learn to react to current situations even in the foreign language. We need to explain to teachers the necessity of a more flexible approach to buying new textbooks. We need to enable them to get to know the available titles out there, to give them an opportunity to choose and compare various textbooks.

### **Why Is the Approach to Teaching English Non-Uniform?**

The answer is quite simple: because we lack a thorough and elaborate methodology which would take into account the age and development distinctions in children and provide enough materials for speech advancement. There is a lack of quality methodologists at universities who would train future language teachers. It is no secret that there are universities in this country where methodology of foreign language teaching is conveyed through reading foreign methodologies, where lecturers grab new ideas from students who already have experience from good language courses and these lecturers often hand these ideas on (citing the source in better cases). Some methodologists learn by heart some world renowned approach and then virtually demand the same from their students.

It is generally known that universities which can train good quality language teachers in this country are very scarce (if any). At this level of education, “academic” knowledge triumphs over practice; definitions, theses and theories recited by heart are valued much more than the ability to make these theories function in real life. How else could you explain that at one of our largest universities you get ten semesters of grammar (lexicology, morphology, stylistics, text analysis) and only 90 minutes (!) of how to teach grammar at primary schools (grade notwithstanding)?! How is it possible that knowledge of literature is required in elementary details while you only have one semester to learn how to work with literature in your own English lessons? A lot of practical subjects are only semi-voluntary. Why do you not learn during your psychology seminars how to work with a kid who needs their “silent period” – that is a passive perception of the language without joining in the activities with the rest of the class (while the ministry would have them examined by the same standards as the others), and what do you do with a kid who wants to express their strong personality even at the expense of all the others and often even good behaviour and the subject itself? Why do students spend hours learning about the life events in Comenius’s life instead of learning about the relevance of his ideas and their importance in today’s education? You could go on, but improvement is very far away still. As long as academic title is valued more than practical skills, the situation will never get better.

### **Useful Approach to Teaching**

Children learn a language differently, therefore, in this case, we use the term “adopt”. They learn while we subject them to natural situations, entertaining listening, caring verification. When a teacher offers manipulating games with objects or pictures in their lessons, complemented by basic sentences commenting their actions, children can soon react to simple questions by answers they had heard the teachers utter several times previously. In a similar situation they will use the same sentence, thus learning to use the language (not by putting crammed vocabulary together). Children ought to learn a foreign language the way they learned their mother tongue. Let us think on the way they do that. The mother caringly surrounds the little one with simple words without explaining how the child should or should not say them, she patiently repeats everything and praises every good (or close enough) attempt, adding to the knowledge little by little every day. She doesn’t lecture the child on the form of a verb in a particular type of sentence, she doesn’t explain that the pronoun and the verb must correspond with the person in question and that the subject must be at the very beginning of the sentence. She doesn’t force the toddler who is just making its first steps in pronunciation to write down the transcript of the sounds, she doesn’t supply the baby with columns of neatly written words to examine later if they have learned them all already. She doesn’t wait for the child to assemble its first grammatically correct sentence out of ten words; she doesn’t hand out punishments for a sentence which is written incorrectly.

Why can't teachers build up a friendly atmosphere where we talk a bit differently, where we try to give different names to things and try to react to a situation by different words than we were used to in our mother tongue? Why can't we play, sing, recite in English without the threat of exams and dictations? Why can't we engross in an intriguing story, even though it is in another language? Is it that we can't tell any such story to children with limited vocabulary? Complement the story with gestures and mimics and let them re-tell the story in Czech. You will be surprised how much they actually took in. It is not an empty saying that words are just 20% of communication, and the rest is gestures, expression, stance and a whole lot of other components.

### **How They Teach English in Spain**

During my many visits abroad I came across various approaches to teaching language. I can describe two basic ones, very different from each other.

In Spain, children start learning English very early, at the age of three. They have compulsory English courses at kindergartens. The Spanish are very eager in teaching the language, as they themselves feel it doesn't go as smoothly as they would wish it to. The results of their striving are in no way proportionate to the effort or financial costs (you will meet perhaps three times more Spanish teachers at courses abroad than those of any other nationality). However, I also met a teacher (British Council Madrid) who proudly introduced essays written (!) by six-year-old children (My shoes. I like my shoes. They are red and blue. They have laces.). Children obediently do whatever the teacher asks them to do. But for how long? Until they are fed up with it, because at an early age they perform tasks they still have plenty of time for. And then? Boredom. Nothing new. You want them to answer you? Or talk to a friend? How? And couldn't they write it down first? It is a well-known fact that in this country, you are lucky to get basic directions in the street (like, for example, directions to where the bus leaves for the airport in a tourist information office in Seville, population 700 thousand).

### **A Norwegian Example**

Children in Norway start learning English as they start their compulsory school attendance – that is, at six years old.

Do you read? Write? – No way! – What do you do in lessons, then? – Why, we talk, we play, we recite, we sing, dance, act out little scenes, count, look through books. – Textbooks and dictionaries? – I beg your pardon?

There was another gripping moment during my Norwegian visit. As part of our course on reading techniques (reading in general, not specifically in English) there was an excursion to a local school. There we noted that children worked with great concentration, carefully, with no evasive or disturbing manoeuvres such as we are used to in children here in the Czech Republic. With 16 children and often two

teachers and up to six assistants (!) in each class, of course, that was nothing unusual, but we all agreed that children did not know much. Their peers at our respective schools (there were teachers from eight countries there) are much further. We pointed that out rather mischievously to the chief of the programme and he replied with a surreptitious smile: “Yes, and how is it that we have the most university professors in Europe?”

I had no trouble communicating in the streets, in shops, they reacted to my “Excuse me, do you speak English here?” with almost an indignant “Of course!” (how can you even ask?).

So, is it possible that less is more yet again?

### **A Question at the End**

Is it really necessary, thus, to rush our children, to overwhelm them with requirements of what they need to know and achieve by a certain age? Those in favour of this approach argue quite sensibly that children can do it. Yes, they can, the way Spanish children can read and write in English in first grade. But how long can this enthusiasm and diligence last? And how do we achieve this with children from non-incentive environment, for whom learning is not motivation for reaching higher goals? Of course children can do a lot! But in the case of English, it is just the matter of the brightest kids with parents who realise the importance of education and know well enough to instil this belief to their children. The average ones soon begin to gasp for breath, and the slower ones? After one or two failures they give up and English becomes “that awfully stupid and dull thing”. Our teachers cannot teach English.

And I add to that: it is because they cannot work in suitable conditions – education, access to information, motivation, good working and study conditions, social prestige and general appreciation of their difficult task. But the last ones mentioned are owed only to the best of them; those who constantly strive to find ways to teach better!

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