

I train kindergarten teachers in teaching English to pre-school children, and the teachers often ask me when the best time to start is.

The public opinion tends to go in two opposite directions. Some say that teaching English to little children is rubbish, since they haven't fully mastered their mother tongue, that we steal their childhood away from them and so on. Others cannot wait to enrol their toddlers in the first course they can find. My experience so far makes me favour the golden mean.

First and foremost, it needs to be said that activities linked to children's acquisition of a foreign language are not a burden to them, but rather an appealing game. Thoughts of "stolen childhood" are completely misguided. Children learn to use languages parallelly, so they do not need to wait until they have mastered one to start with the other. On the contrary, if they have problems pronouncing certain sounds in Czech, they might be stars of their English class since such pronunciation suits English very well.

Although experts find that the height of human ability to absorb a language is during the first two years of life, I would probably not take children to a course to watch them "drive" with a wheel made from a paper plate in their tiny hands, babbling *brrrrrm, brrrrrm* "in English" as soon as they can walk. Children simply don't understand why they should say that this is "red" when their grandmother says its "červené". They do repeat it after the lady from the course, but they don't get why it should be so important. Of course, the situations when a family is "naturally bilingual", for example when one of the parents is of a different nationality, are a completely different matter.

A four-year-old can understand quite well already that not all people in the world use the same language to communicate and that it is necessary to acquire the other language. And this is the key word: we do not teach English, we present it. And children do not learn, but acquire the language. But that's the rub. Parents tend to have the impression that it's enough to tell their children isolated words so that the children may parrot them just like that. But there is nothing to be gained from such an approach. They acquire the language through a very different means – listening. They are able to get the meaning without understanding all the words. They understand phrases, they cannot join or differentiate words in a sentence. This implies that children are able to understand a text without knowing the individual words. They need a comprehensive explanation, though, such as a "translation" through gestures, miming and facial expressions. Children are sensitive to intonation, the tone of the voice and pronunciation and thus they learn to imitate them well. This magical property, however, will only last till the seventh year of age. After that, words will become an obstacle that needs to be dealt with and overcome, and sometimes not overcome at all. If we start teaching language later than this, the chance of the child learning to use the language properly rapidly diminishes; only children from a stimulating environment can do it, the average children may accomplish it with some difficulty, but the ones from a non-stimulating environment will not stand a chance.

All this implies that starting to learn a foreign language at a pre-school age is not only desirable, but highly beneficial. We must, however, be very careful and adapt to the children's level of perception. How do we do that, then?

First and foremost: we must talk to the children. It is not important whether the child can understand everything you say; if you accompany the sentence by an eloquent movement, a gesture

or a grimace, they will understand what you want from them. The TPR (Total Physical Response) technique is especially desirable. The teacher gives tasks to the children and then helps them perform these tasks, thus helping them to react spontaneously and relay the tasks further to their friends in class. A short while of physical education in English, offers instructions in the target language, which the teacher follows and the children repeat after him/her. This helps them to get used to taking in English content. Games involving movement are very attractive for children of this age; why not do a little exercise with them at the end of the lesson?

Verbal formations such as poems and chants are valuable sources of collocations and phrases. By repeating them, children practise pronunciation, connecting suitable words together, rhythm and intonation, not to mention the content, which focuses on various areas of children's interest. There is danger in that children don't like endless repetition, they are eager for new content. But to fix the original content in their minds, we need to repeat quite a lot. We trick this by requiring a different expression and tone: "Oh, you can say it now, can you? And can you say it like an angry tiger?" Before the child makes a proper angry tiger, they repeat the text several times without realising it. Then you can try for the expression of a sleepy bear, a busy bee, a lazy tortoise or a coiled snake. Who decides whether the snake is coiled the right way? The teacher, of course 😊

Songs are a valuable source of language material; apart from bearing content they also use the melody to tie the text together. A word can easily be lost from a poem, while melody won't allow that too easily. If we give basic musical instruments to children, too, asking them to give us a beat, we will distract them from learning a new language to concentrating on playing. In such a way, the use of language is automatised (it is used without hard concentration), which is precisely what we want.

Personally, I have very good experience with "eliciting", which is manipulating with objects and pictures, commenting on what I am doing, what I can see, what I am moving somewhere else or turning around. I ask children questions so they can react in a simple way to what they can (not) see, what is hidden, what colour the objects are, where they are and so on.

Another well-tested method is storytelling. Such stories are usually simple, with a repeated plot; children hear the same words or sentences several times and they soon understand what the story is about. Stories also tend to contain dialogues, which help the children with their communication skills. You can let the children re-tell the stories, and thus make them use simple phrases and sentences in a coherent flow. If we involve a puppet, we gain an attractive ally, which cooperates with the children and motivates an exchange of simple sentences.

What is therefore my recommendation to teachers who would like to teach English in pre-school establishments?

Firstly, make sure your English is excellent; work on your skills continuously. Concentrate on correct pronunciation especially, and on the ability to formulate your thoughts simply clearly. There is nothing more tragic than the teacher's mistake handed over to pupils and turning into a landslide. Increase and maintain the level of your English as well as teaching skills by participating in language and methodology courses.

Look for new language materials, songs, poems, fairy tales, chants. Have a suitable text prepared for every opportunity. Focus on obtaining as many sound recordings as you can – children need a wide range of speech stimuli.

Plan the most suitable activities for your children – adequate to their age and capabilities, suitable for the occasion and events at the right time, right for the theme you have set as well as the immediate mood of the children.

Learn to plan your activities according to the children's concentration span (which is very short), switch to different pace appropriately.

Think about how you are going to involve the parents – informing them of your approach, of the children's progress, of the group's needs, of the ways they can contribute to the course of events within the group.

Keep yourself in good mood and maintain a positive attitude!

+ This technique was explored and described by the American psychologist James Asher in 1980s.