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## **Teaching Early-level Foreign Languages to Pupils with Impaired Pronunciation Abilities**

Review of a scientific article

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### **ABSTRACT**

Today, teaching and learning early-level foreign languages has become a common issue often discussed by specialists. This article deals with the problems of foreign language pronunciation for primary level pupils with impaired communication abilities. The article includes findings from special education and psychology reports along with a definition of the term impaired communication ability and the phonetic-phonological impact it has on learning a foreign language. The conclusion presents some chosen methods for teaching drama and theatre projects that deal with proper pronunciation training and the results of related research investigations.

**Keywords:** special education needs, specific learning difficulties, impaired communication ability, early-level foreign language learning, methods of teaching drama, research

## **Pouk zgodnjega učenja tujega jezika pri učencih z moteno komunikacijsko zmožnostjo: urjenje izgovarjave**

Pregledni znanstveni članek

UDK: 81'342:376

### **POVZETEK**

Pouk zgodnjega učenja tujega jezika v zadnjem času spada med zelo aktualne teme, še zlasti v strokovnih krogih. Čeprav spodbujamo zgodnji začetek tujejezikovnega pouka, tako iz izobraževalno-politične kot tudi iz učno-psihološke perspektive, moramo ob tem upoštevati določeno problematiko. V okviru metodološko-didaktičnih konceptov zgodnjega učenja in poučevanja tujega jezika, na primer upoštevanje načela prednosti govornih zmožnosti – skupaj s pravilno izgovarjavo – pred pisnimi zmožnostmi, lahko motena komunikacijska zmožnost pri učencih, ki se učijo tujega jezika, povzroči velike težave. Članek je osredotočen na učne težave pri urjenju pravilne izgovarjave pri tujem jeziku, in sicer pri učencih z moteno komunikacijsko zmožnostjo na razredni stopnji osnovne šole. Navajamo izbrane specialno-pedagoške in psihološke vidike. Pojem "motena komunikacijska zmožnost" je glede na pričakovane težave pri razvoju pravilne izgovarjave podrobneje predstavljen. Prav tako predstavljamo nekatere dramsko-pedagoške vaje/aktivnosti za izgovarjavo, ki zmanjšujejo učne zavore pri učencih ter zvišujejo njihovo mo-

tivacijo za učenje tujega jezika. V zaključku predstavljamo delne rezultate preproste empirične raziskave.

**Ključne besede:** specifične izobraževalne potrebe, specifične učne težave, motene komunikacijske zmožnosti, zgodnje poučevanje tujega jezika, metode poučevanja drame, raziskava

## Introduction

Why do some pupils have problems concentrating during lessons? Why is it that they can tolerate only a few minutes of intense problem solving? Why do they often do something completely different from what they should be doing during lessons? Why do their results often not correspond with the effort they made? Why do they remember only a small part of what they learned in their subjects? Why is their motivation to learn so poor? These and other similar questions often occupy the minds of language teachers who teach foreign languages in the first grade of primary school. They are, on the one hand, well aware of the fact that each pupil may experience certain momentarily phases of "learning weariness" when confronted with a new subject like a foreign language. But on the other hand, there have been a growing number of pupils with diagnosed learning difficulties that have appeared in classes lately. Impaired communication ability is among these learning difficulties and causes a number of specific problems during the process of learning a foreign language. With regard to this group of pupils, it is necessary that teachers think of this issue more deeply and try to find ways to help these pupils efficiently.

## Educational and psychological findings

The increased attention given to pupils with specific learning difficulties during foreign language learning is in compliance with new pedagogical trends, "which, at present, strive to transform the traditional school system by searching for innovations that will humanize the process" and create a teaching environment in which "integrative and gestalt pedagogy can take part as well" (Skalková 1995, p. 50). These two concepts have brought new ideas into the educational process, especially the ideas of C.A Rogers (1998) and A.S. Maslow (1968), who are among the most significant representatives of humanistic psychology. Maslow's legacy in the field of teaching foreign languages to pupils with learning disorders can be seen namely in the fact that he has brought an overwhelming number of theories and concepts into pedagogy, such as:

- Theories based on adaptation
  - Theories based on the unilateral and strict treatment of a subject
  - Preference for unilateral-cognitive orientation
  - Emphasizing the category of performance and competence unilaterally
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In this context, his conviction that insufficient, as well as excessive care for a pupil can interfere with their own development, is up-to-date, too. Therefore, it is not appropriate to concentrate on a pupil's insufficiencies caused by learning disorders too much, nor to ignore them completely. Adequacy and balance are always important.

Concerning the ideas of C.A Rogers, an inclusively conceived approach for teaching foreign languages to pupils with learning difficulties should especially adhere to his following "message" for educational processes:

- the need for a change of feeling at school and improvement in class relations
- the need to form creative work conditions so that pupils will like learning
- the need to not emphasize cognitive learning only
- the need to develop the pupils' whole personality
- the need to support pupils' curiosity and self-confidence
- the need to develop pupils' creative potential in both individual and team activities (cp. Skalková 1995)

The concept of the so-called *integrated education* (G.I.Brown) is particularly relevant here because the given target group of pupils for this concept emphasizes the interconnection of emotional and cognitive aspects. In this way, the information transmission does not take place just during the process of learning and gives the pupils a feeling that they are actually living the topic. Efficient techniques of integrated education include projection methods, creative exercises and games, role-playing, etc. (cp. Skalková 1995).

## **Impaired communication ability and language learning**

Here it is necessary to mention the very close relationship of acquiring a mother tongue and learning a foreign language. If a pupil experiences disturbances due to learning difficulties while learning their mother tongue, a parallel problem can be found when learning a foreign language.

Impaired *communication ability*, which is closely connected to speech development problems, can be one of the primary difficulties in learning foreign languages at the primary level. Learning languages at this level is, by its methodological approach, based on the auditory-speech principle, the same one employed during the learning of a mother tongue. *Disturbed speech development*, according to Mikulajová and Kapalková (2005, p. 33), can be characterized as "a kind of disturbed communication ability. It is becoming a common problem and displays a variety of symptoms by which it is manifested. We understand it as a system disturbance in one or more areas of child speech development (development of language abilities), as it applies to the chronological age of a child." Concerning the pathogenesis of disturbed speech development, it can be classified as a major disorder (such as hearing impairment) or as a hypothesis based on the symptoms it produces. For example, Bishop (1992) developed the following theories:

1. Linguistic competence is undisturbed; it concerns a disturbance of the transmission from language knowledge to speech signal
2. Disturbance of auditory perception (which is not a language deficit), influencing the course of language development
3. Isolated disturbance of specialized language abilities (e.g. during syntactical development);
4. A deficit in concept-forming development, which influences language functioning as well, but is not limited to it
5. Learning strategies are abnormal
6. Limited speed and capacity of information processing, not in connection to individual types of mental operations

The contemporary understanding of the term impaired communication ability is in full compliance with linguistic and psycholinguistic findings that support a communicative approach during foreign language learning. This approach can clearly be seen in a definition of communication disability given by V. Lechta (2003, p. 17). This prominent Slovakian speech therapist starts from two points of view when defining it. He says that we can 1. specify it as a divergence from the established (or codified) linguistic norms in a certain language environment or 2. as an individual's intention when communicating. Lechta combines these two meanings to form the following definition: *"Man's communication ability is disturbed when some level of his language expressions (or several levels at the same time) causes interference regarding the communication intention"* (Lechta, 2003, p. 17). As it relates to psycholinguistics, this deals with the situation when a producer (sender) sends a speech signal to a recipient (receiver). However, when dealing with impaired communication ability, the signal's decoding of the actual utterance of the producer's communication disability is perceived by the recipient as interference (Nebeská, 1992 in Lechta, 2003, p. 18). During communication in a foreign language, we also maintain a relationship with the intention of the communicator, mostly because the aim is to come to an understanding with the communicator, to realize the communicative intent.

If we want to clarify the term impaired communication ability, several language levels must be taken into account during the acquirement of a foreign language: the phonetic-phonological level, the morphologic-syntactical level, and the lexical-semantic or pragmatic level. In regard to communication forms, these levels deal with verbal, non-verbal, written and spoken communication; regarding the communication process, both its production and reception may be disturbed. Also in foreign-language education, it is necessary to bear in mind that this individual and multidimensional phenomenon should be approached in the same way during educational practice.

Impaired communication ability can be categorized as a speech handicap or an acquired speech disorder (Lechta, 2003, p. 18). Naturally, this problem is quite evident during communication in a foreign language, as well. Specific forms of communication disabilities are present in learning a foreign language because pupils are

confronted with different language codes at the same time. This communication disability is either permanent or temporary (repairable). If the foreign language teacher has a basic knowledge of the causes and development of disturbed speech development, they can work much more efficiently when teaching pupils who have a speech disorder. For example, if a child's disability is caused by a less serious form of cerebral dysfunction, which probably influences the so-called speech zones of the left hemisphere, they will automatically activate the right hemisphere much more, so as to compensate for the left hemisphere's deficiency during the development of acquiring a foreign language (e.g. by means of non-verbal communication).

The most common type of impaired communication ability is *dyslalia*.<sup>1</sup> If this disability is not given adequate attention when learning a mother tongue, it can be very likely that it will cause even more significant difficulties during the learning of a foreign language, especially pronunciation. Considering the use of language, it holds true that an individual who makes mistakes in pronunciation, such that their speech becomes less understandable, will communicate even less clearly with a native speaker, even if their language use is both grammatically and lexically on a level that would not disturb communication (cp. Gúthová/Šebianová, 2005). And if, for these reasons, a child has more difficulties communicating in a foreign language (as well as in their mother tongue), it might have an impact on their psyche – they may become silent and/or unnecessarily concerned about verbal communication.

The significance of the phonetic-phonological level as a basic prerequisite for acquiring a foreign language is mentioned, among others, by Sellin (2004), who is very actively engaged in the issue of foreign language acquirement by pupils with specific learning disorders. In her opinion, the following prerequisites for acquiring a foreign language include:

- Proper control of mouth movements and accurate placement of the tongue and its contact with the teeth and mucous membrane, which is the basic prerequisite for producing correct speech sounds and proper pronunciation at an adequate pace. Disorders in one or both of these fields can lead to problems with language production, e.g. with voiced and voiceless consonants b/t/k and p/d/g, both in written and spoken language.
- Adequate speed of articulation of a foreign language's more complex sounds.
- Very good auditory processing and well-developed phonological awareness.
- Comprehension and retention of spelling rules that are different from the rules of the mother tongue and the foreign language's sound coding – e.g. a graphic shape

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1 Dyslalia is an articulation disorder caused by the disturbance of one sound or group of sounds pronounced in the mother tongue; other sounds are pronounced correctly in accordance with the respective pronunciation norms. The sound is formed at the wrong point. Regarding the terminological point of view, it is necessary to separate pathological pronunciation (dyslalia in its true sense) from incorrect pronunciation (physiological dyslalia), which is a natural physiological symptom up to a certain age. In our case, we focus on the first category - i.e. the pathological pronunciation of sounds, how they are grouped together and the entire vocabulary of a foreign language.

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of long "eh" in German has more variants: gehen, leer, as well as the English long "i": even, to mean, people, to achieve, to receive.

- Proper intonation, which can be exercised by the reproduction of a foreign language sentence-melody and by dropping and raising the voice according to the contents of a sentence.
- Ability to reproduce proper sentence and word stress using the correct language rhythm.
- Ability to sufficiently concentrate and have a good working memory so that it will be possible to keep enough necessary content for the formation of adequately correct pronunciation.
- The last ability is related to language analysis and deals with synthesis automation, during which the proper sound shape of a foreign language can be perceived and produced in the given language (cp. Janíková 2003, 2008).

The above-mentioned list of the main prerequisites for mastering a foreign language's correct pronunciation shows clearly that this could cause serious difficulties for pupils with various learning difficulties, especially those suffering from impaired communication ability. In developmental psychology the most efficient method of correct pronunciation training for pupils at the late elementary school age is by simple imitation. And it has been confirmed that the younger the student, the easier the foreign-language acquirement. However, in the case of our target group, these type of results cannot be reached without any further assistance. The teacher's duty should then be to find new appropriate ways of helping pupils with speech difficulties, even if it might consist of using the new methods and techniques of teaching drama education. This will be dealt with in the following section.

## **Practicing foreign language pronunciation by means of methods used in drama education**

When teaching proper pronunciation to early-level foreign language pupils with communication disabilities, it has been proven that one of the most efficient educational methods include techniques used in *drama education*.<sup>2</sup> These findings are based on theoretical knowledge, empirical research results and experience in educational practice. This type of learning has a much more intense effect on the emotional part of education, giving more attention to a pupil's individual needs and

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2 In the field of drama education, we encounter several typologies of method and technique, which can be identified individually in learning activities and correspond to current methodological-didactic concepts of foreign-language education. Valenta (1998, p. 259-263) divides these methods and techniques into the following categories: I. full game method II. pantomimic-motive methods III. verbal-sound methods IV. graphic-writing methods V. material-factual methods. In regard to our issue, verbal-sound methods are especially relevant - the author classifies these (as well as others) with the following: common speaking in pairs, successive speaking in pairs ("the alter ego speaks"), silent reading, dialogue, speaking objects, speaking through a puppet or person, invisible voices – communication in the dark (with back turned to the others), alternative speech – senseless sounds, singing and musical expression.

prerequisites for future study. This not only facilitates their education, but also increases the pupil's motivation to learn. According to developmental psychology, using plays as a dramatic education method is a natural activity for the age-level of the pupils concerned here (7-10 years).

Already, by glancing at the given issue, we can determine a number of factors that the principles of drama and foreign-language education have in common. Both cases (during the acquirement of language in its spoken form) work with voice, pronunciation, fluency, expression, communication content, verbal and non-verbal locution, etc. In connection with the acquirement of proper pronunciation, the following fields are involved:

### **Voice and pronunciation**

During stage performance, in any language, pronunciation can be very expressive and distinct, sometimes even unnatural in comparison with the pronunciation used in common communication. This is done so that the spectators can understand everything that is taking place on the stage – the same is true when we communicate with another person in a communicative situation, whether in a foreign language or in a mother tongue. Working with the voice and proper articulation is a significant part of an actor's preparation. In order to achieve correct pronunciation in a foreign language, we can make use of special voice, speech and articulation exercises, just like the ones actors use. It is best not to view these exercises as a separate "speech tool", but as complex activities that include both the overall expression and listening with repetition.

### **Common relationship between breath, voice and movement**

The voice and gestures condition each other. They form a relationship between the voice, breathing and movement, with breathing being the most important means of forming expression. Breathing is interconnected with muscle activity on the one hand and with the psyche on the other (for example, we can see it when the breath is held during extreme tension or as a sigh when the situation is gloomy or depressing). Therefore, the voice and articulation practices go arm in arm with muscles and breathing. Posture is, in the sense of psychic and muscular unity, a prerequisite for proper breathing and thus supports the quality of the voice. The way in which posture (or working with posture) influences the formation of voice tension can be seen during exercises that focus on breathing and muscle tension awareness. Both minimum and maximum tension is unfavorable for articulation/pronunciation.

Strained muscles can be relieved and a wider space for inner resonance can be extended by means of exercises that include working with posture, during which breathing in is combined with a period of relaxation after breathing out. It is easier for most people to have control over various states of muscular tension than it is to have auditory control of their voice. Therefore, a rhythmically motivating aid, like sweeping a rope, is appropriate for the formation of tone quality.

## Voice and rhythm

The coordination of breathing, vocalizing and forming a sound image is best performed in a certain rhythm (such as using work songs), in which rhythmic tension and muscle relief occur. Nevertheless, it is also possible to obey one's inner rhythm (endogenous rhythm) or outer rhythm (exogenous rhythm – e.g. repeating after a teacher) (cp. Vaninetti, 2005).

## A few ways of using proper pronunciation exercise by means of methods and techniques in drama education

During the process of educating pupils, the teacher must concentrate on working with phonetic exercises. Depending on the pupils' individual needs, they must choose a method that will facilitate the implementation of pronunciation rules and at the same time make it diverse. Current foreign-language textbooks already offer a wide variety of phonetic exercises, however, it is necessary that teachers create them on their own. It has been proved that the methods and principles in dramatic education can considerably reinforce the cognitive, social and emotional levels involved in learning foreign languages. In the following summary, there are examples of such educational activities. Most of them were tested in the situation of learning German as a foreign language.

### Word and sentence exercises

These exercises can be utilized for the development of speech fluency as well as speaking by varying volume and stress intensity. In regard to these, special attention is paid to pronunciation; it is important that a sense for each spoken concept is supported by the way it is pronounced. If the understanding of certain concept is clearer, then the articulation of the concept is more distinct in a foreign language.

*Example: Reading a text out loud accompanied by changes in the voice.*

Pupils read various words or short texts aloud in various ways, e.g. sadly, cheerfully, tearfully, slowly, quickly. This is especially relevant when it concerns pupils with a communication disability. This activity is easiest accomplished when performed in groups or in a chorus – individual reading in front of the whole class may be stressful for these pupils.

### Whispering

Pupils sit or stand in a circle; the teacher whispers a word or a sentence to one pupil, who then passes it on to his or her neighbor. This continues until the last pupil tells what he or she heard.



## Calling

Pupils are divided into two groups that stand at opposite walls so that each pupil has a partner facing them. Each pair starts calling a text to each other simultaneously – e.g. short sentences in a foreign language. After that, the partners tell each other what they understood or whether they could understand it at all. The same can be performed at varying distances (to determine at which distances the information is easy and difficult to understand).

A similar activity can be performed by giving a partner various instructions (e.g. two steps left, one step forward, etc.). A comprehension "check" is made by their correct or incorrect accomplishment of the instructions.

## Identification of sounds

A foreign-language text (or single expressions) is read to pupils slowly. Before the activity they are told to focus on the identification of a single chosen sound and, if hearing it, they should react non-verbally (e.g. raising their hands, standing up, clapping their hands, etc.)

## Literary text

Utilizing texts is a natural part of current foreign-language education, namely in connection with the wide range of educational objectives. Texts in themselves are an indispensable part of dramatic education and are also useful for developing speech skills and widening the pupils' social-cultural knowledge. These texts can include tales, essays, short stories, poems or songs; even simple tongue twisters or casting-off rhymes can help too. If these texts can be "dramatized", i.e. by using drama methods and techniques during didactics, we can then facilitate and ease the process of learning the pronunciation of a foreign language for pupils with communication disabilities.

## Research investigation

In our research, titled *"Special Needs of Pupils within the Framework of the Educational Program for Basic Education"*, we carried out an empirical investigation with the intention of determining how pupils with communication disabilities respond to dramatic education methods and techniques when learning proper German pronunciation as a foreign language. We also tried to determine if this method positively motivates them in learning a foreign language. The pupils involved in our research were in the 4<sup>th</sup> class of primary school and had been learning German as their first foreign language since the second year.

Twelve of the pupils involved in our survey came from the regular language classes (arranged in divided classes), whereas three of them were diagnosed with dyslalia. The research was carried out in the following way: the test-group of pupils were given pronunciation exercises taken from dramatic education methods (e.g.

dramatization of tongue-twisters, expressively reading a poem, pronunciation accompanied by a movement – various sound qualities were assigned to various movements, pronunciation of individual sounds in the role of a puppet, etc.) that were implemented over a three-month period of their foreign language education. The research method consisted of observation by the teacher and a questionnaire (including open answers) prepared for the pupils, which was given to them at the end of the three months. The teacher was asked to arrange flash-evaluations (momentarily feelings, satisfaction with the type of activity, etc.) after each dramatically assembled phonetic activity. This was done because we anticipated that the pupils would be less capable of reliably reflecting on all the items in the questionnaire that were essential for our research. Before the research was carried out, the pupils were asked, by means of a questionnaire and discussion, to express their individual difficulties during the process of learning pronunciation in a foreign language. They were also asked to give their opinions about actual phonetic exercises and to think about the way they learn pronunciation the best (cognitive learning strategy).

It is also necessary to emphasize the fact that this investigation was performed on an entire class without breaking them up into groups. This was done to prevent the possibility of "segregation" occurring among pupils with speech disorders.

The results of our investigation (analysis of pupils' statements in both partial flash evaluations and final questionnaires) confirm hypotheses that phonetic exercises using dramatic education elements are very positively accepted by pupils, of course providing that the teacher carefully plans lessons and respects the age, interests and individual abilities of the pupils.

The following is a positive example (slightly modified) of the type of comments we received. They were given by three pupils with impaired communication ability (dyslalia) and dealt with an activity<sup>3</sup> that helps pupils to express a foreign language authentically.

- *I really enjoyed today's exercise – it wasn't boring at all. The best thing was that I only whispered, and I was able to make faces while doing it.*
- *I didn't even think that I was learning pronunciation. It was fun.*
- *I didn't feel ashamed at all that I can't pronounce very well, and neither did the others. Nobody minded it, and I think that I made an improvement.*

## Conclusion

There are increasing efforts being made to intensify support given to pupils with specific learning difficulties for the purpose of learning foreign languages. And it has

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3 In this case, it concerned an activity where pupils form a circle, in which they are divided into groups of three. Each trio was given three cards with difficult sounding German words (difficult for Czech pupils learning German as a foreign language). Each trio's task was to "recite" these words to the "public" at varying paces and voice power (silently, very loud, in a whisper, as a song). They were allowed to accompany their words with mimics and gestures.

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become necessary to immediately apply differentiated and individualized education methods to help implement such support. This concept should be orientated very clearly. It should put more stress on pupils' needs and interests and should also try to develop their personality in connection to the social and emotional situations around them. In order to facilitate this process and make it more efficient, foreign language teachers can look for "help" in the field of drama education. Drama techniques are especially helpful during the process of learning how to pronounce foreign languages. The results of our empirical research confirm the following hypotheses:

- Learning through experience increases the pupils' motivation when learning foreign language pronunciation.
- A relaxed and friendly atmosphere helps to get rid of exaggerated fear of making mistakes and/or individual difficulties.
- Utilizing drama education elements during the process of learning pronunciation gives pupils a stronger sense of success, which increases their self-confidence.
- Utilizing drama education elements can contribute considerably in integrating pupils with specific learning disorders (communication disabilities).
- During the utilization of drama education elements, a multi-sensory learning process is stimulated – enabling proper pronunciation to be acquired cognitively, emotionally and kinesthetically.

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