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PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' BELIEFS ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING ABILITIES OF PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

Abstract. The aim of the study was to examine the pedagogical situation in the preschool institution and to answer the following research questions: 1) What do preschool teachers believe in terms of learning English vocabulary at preschool age? 2) How many English words do children know before starting the first grade of primary school? 3) What category these words belong to? For the purpose of this paper, the author analysed teaching practices and beliefs of 20 preschool teachers from Jagodina, Serbia, and their beliefs about teaching English to very young children within the frame of early childhood education principles. One of the data gathering instruments in this study was a questionnaire (both Likert-scale and open-ended questions) that inquired the preschool teachers' beliefs related to the pre-schoolers' abilities to learn a foreign language. Finally, in order to see whether participants' beliefs matched with the actual practices in the kindergartens, 20 children were questioned of how many English words they know and what categories these words belong to (numbers, animals, food items, colours etc.). The participants' responses were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The results showed that preschool teachers believe in pre-schoolers' ability to learn English words and also pointed out that their ability should be taken into account with regards to their age, level and interest through using different activities and materials suitable for teaching English to very young learners. The research also showed the mismatch of preschool teachers' opinion on the range of English vocabulary, i.e. the number of words children know. The data gathered from preschool children indicated that these children are exposed to English vocabulary on a daily basis through media but these children are not guided properly through L2 acquisition except those who attend private language schools.

Keywords: learning English vocabulary, pre-schoolers, early foreign language education, teachers' beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

Preschool, as well as other educational institutions, is a place which provides the ground for development of all participating subjects and has the

decisive role in the education and training of preschool children. One of the many roles of preschool institution is to create environment for a normal development in all areas of preschool children, exploiting the physical and mental potential of each, taking into account the child's own pace, his emotional needs and his central activity – game. Speech development of children is achieved progressively by increasing the verbal relationships with others and in some other daily activities such as objects' manipulation, manifested curiosity for the origin and cause of the phenomena, during motor games where children develop physically and didactic games which focus on mental development of children. Didactic game is usually designed as a means of training and education, as a methodological process of solving concrete tasks for the purpose of broadening the knowledge and development of the wider psychophysical capabilities at all levels and therefore that of language (Moldovan, 2015). The language is in close relationship with all human mental processes and characteristics (ibid. 99). Humans learn vocabulary of their mother tongue and the rules for the use of language in early childhood and then enrich the experience throughout their entire life. At the age of 0–1.5 years occurs the first contact with words and the pronunciation of them, at the age 2–4 years the child learns to name objects and at the age of 5–7 the child learns simple schema of language and learn to use sentences. After starting the primary school at the age of 7, children learn to write, read and their vocabulary of the mother tongue (L1) enriches massively. This is the age when children start learning English as the foreign language (L2) which is introduced in all schools as the obligatory subject. For the purposes of this paper, the author will focus only on foreign language vocabulary acquisition of preschool children, age of 6 and teachers' beliefs on foreign language learning abilities of pre-schoolers.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Foreign language learning has always been a crucial concern and English is accepted as the most widely studied foreign language in the world and therefore the importance given in teaching English as L2 increased enormously (Crystal, 2003; Ellis, 2008; Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, 2003; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Learning a foreign language in the preschool age emerged as the new area of study (Ellis, 2008; Cheatham & Ro, 2010) and it has long been discussed that children learn a foreign language better than adults and this is often used to support the early introduction of foreign language teaching (Crain, 2005; Larson-Hall, 2006; Pinter,

2006; Eyres, 2007; Ellis, 2008; Dekeyser et.al, 2010; Er, 2014). According to Chomsky, every child was born with a gift of language learning ability so the linguistic progress of a child is natural and automatic (Bongaerts, 2005). According to Reilly and Ward (1997), children between the ages of 3 and 6 who haven't started primary school are called very young learners and this population is different not only from adolescents but also they differ a lot according to their age, to be more precise, 3 year olds differ from 4 year olds, 4 year olds differ from 5 year olds and, there is a huge difference between children of 5 and children of 6. Children at the age of 6 belong to the preschool group and daily activities in this period focus on the adequate preparation of a child for school, while younger children have sleeping time and time for play with smaller number of learning activities. Thus, pre-schoolers are introduced to mother tongue alphabet and numbers, some main natural processes and the phenomena from their surrounding (Golubović - Ilić, & Cekić-Jovanović, 2011). During the activities in the preschool period, the child is ready to make the transition from perception to representation, to acquire a superior tool of investigation and knowledge of the surrounding world (ibid.) and also to develop the ability to pick up a foreign language. Moldovan (2015: 100) believes that something similar happens with L1, language retains the character of the situation, but as the life experience is enriched in the communication process with adults, contextual language develops and helps children to explain and understand better the natural surroundings. In this case, words of L1 are adjusted to intellectual activity of children (Kelemen, 2007) while the L2 vocabulary is mostly at the beginning phase of development. Preschool children in Serbia are very much exposed to English through media, for example, children watch cartoons in English, play video-games which instructions are in English as well, use PC and internet, and some children already go to private language schools where they learn English by the help of an English teacher. These schools offer very good background and the foundation of the L2 vocabulary which children practice mostly through songs, rhymes and stories in English (Li & Seedhouse, 2010). Stories are directly related to language and literature and they offer numerous opportunities for children to learn the target language since they have rich vocabulary, surprise in the plot, repetition of language, rhymes, metaphors and dialogues (Cameron, 2001). Pre-schoolers are easily engaged in the vocabulary activities, when the chosen story is appropriate to their age level and interest and if it is the one they like and maybe already read in mother tongue. Children, age of 6, can easily combine their thoughts with the story by acquiring the language naturally in a contextualized way (Garvie, 1990) and one of the

main methods that is used for teaching foreign languages to very young and young learners is Total Physical Response (TPR) which is just like the way children acquire their native language (Asher, 1977). TPR is about speech and action at the same time and it is also a game. According to Larsen-Freeman (2000), learners' role in TPR is to listen and perform what the teacher tells, teacher is the model and the director, native language is used for instruction and observation is used as an assessment tool. Introducing English vocabulary to pre-schoolers should be done by the use of authentic materials, bright and colourful posters, pictures and flash-cards (*ibid.*).

In Serbia little is researched on foreign language learning in pre-school age while in Croatia there is a study published by Andreja Silić in 2007. She explains the way children learn English in a natural way by using didactic materials and she believes that this learning could be very successful if the surrounding is adequately equipped and if the teachers are skilful enough.

Regarding the fact that there have been limited amount of research studies in Serbia in learning vocabulary of English as a foreign language at preschool age (we found none), this study attempted to contribute to the field through examining the beliefs and practices of preschool teachers in Serbia and the real situation by examining preschool children. The aim of study was also to compare teachers' beliefs about pre-schoolers' potential to learn English by examining how many words children know before starting the first grade of primary school.

RESEARCH METHOD

In the inquiry, the author used a mixed-method approach. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from the participants. The author used a questionnaire with both Likert-scale and open-ended questions to examine the preschool teachers. Children were interviewed and examined by the author herself who used flash-cards to find out how many words children know before starting primary school at the age of 7. Also, the author wanted to research what category these words belong to. The study focused on vocabulary learning instead of general language learning since vocabulary learning is widely regarded as a crucial task for foreign language learners in their attempts to improve their linguistic competence (Brown & Perry, 1991; Fan, 2004; Gu, 2003, 2005).

Research questions of the study were the following: 1) What do pre-school teachers believe in terms of learning English vocabulary at pre-

school age? 2) How many English words do children know before starting the first grade of primary school? 3) What category do these words belong to?

The study involved a total of 40 participants, namely, 20 preschool teachers from and 20 preschool children (6 years old) from Jagodina, Serbia. Preschool teachers from Jagodina were surveyed and interviewed by the author in order to find out and present their beliefs on vocabulary learning and overall foreign language learning abilities of pre-school children.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In line with previously said, a questionnaire, with both Likert-scale and open-ended questions was administered to preschool teachers of the preschool institution "Pionir" in Jagodina, Serbia. Open-ended questions from this questionnaire were used for the purposes of researching preschool teachers' beliefs on how many English (as a foreign language) words children know at the age of 6 and what category these words belong to?

The questionnaire were consisted of 10 Likert-scale questions concerning beliefs on vocabulary learning. The responses were coded in the following way: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = somewhat disagree; 4 = somewhat agree; 5 = agree; 6 = strongly agree. It was created by the author for the purposes of this research. The questionnaire used here does not resemble Gu's (2005) questionnaire but his questionnaire was used as a model in the starting point of this research.

An exploratory factor analysis of the quantitative factor was used to generate 10 questions in the questionnaire data. As can be seen from Table 1, the participants (preschool teachers) have higher means (5.75 and 5.45) for items 2 and 5, which means that preschool teachers believe that repetition is the most useful way to learn a foreign language and that media is very helpful in this area. This was also found in research conducted in China and Hong Kong where teachers said that repetition is very useful and that media is a valuable source of English vocabulary (Qing Ma, 2011). Serbian preschool teachers' beliefs could be explained by the Serbian educational context, namely, children in the preschool age do not read or write in their mother tongue, they are just being introduced to the basic literacy such as developing awareness of words' concept and recognizing letters and numbers in form of graphic preparation for writing tasks (Kopas-Vukasinovic, 2014: 59). For this reason, teachers believe

that by repeating English words children will remember them easily and repetition is, according to them, the most appropriate strategy in foreign language learning at this age. Further, preschool teachers believe ($M = 5.45$) that children at the age of 6 mostly acquire English words through media (cartoons, video-games, chants etc.). Some of the questioned teachers said that the reason for this could be the lack of time that parents dedicate to their children at home due to their long working hours. Similar result was found in kindergartens in Ankara, Turkey, where 85% of participants (preschool teachers) said that video and visuals are the most effective means of acquiring English words at preschool age (Er, 2014). The next mean score, $M = 5.35$, resembles preschool teachers' beliefs on item 6 (Pre-schoolers acquire English words in language schools). In order to explain and back up this belief, the data gathered from 20 preschool children from Jagodina, Serbia, will be presented in Table 2..

Table 1. *Beliefs about vocabulary learning: Likert-scale responses*

Belief items	Responses						M
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
1. Learning vocabulary at preschool age is important for learning a foreign language.	0	0	0	7	5	8	5.05
2. It is important for pre-schoolers to repeat and practice English words a lot when they are learning a foreign language.	0	0	0	3	8	9	5.75
3. Pre-schoolers can acquire a large vocabulary by memorizing lots of individual words.	0	0	0	4	9	7	5.15
4. Pre-schoolers can acquire a large vocabulary by learning words in the context.	0	6	7	3	2	2	3.35
5. Pre-schoolers acquire English words mostly through media.	0	0	0	0	11	9	5.45
6. Pre-schoolers acquire English words in language schools.	0	0	0	0	13	7	5.35
7. Pre-schoolers acquire English words by the help of an older brother/sister.	0	0	0	6	5	9	5.15
8. Pre-schoolers acquire English words in the preschool institution.	12	3	5	0	0	0	1.65
9. Education of pre-schoolers' parents is the predictor of children's motivation to learn English.	0	0	0	0	17	3	5.15
10. Teaching English vocabulary in preschool age is a good foundation for primary school language learning.	0	0	0	0	16	4	5.20

Table 2. *Private language schools*

	Number of children	Number of English words they know	%
Children who do not attend English Language schools	14	113	34.56
Children who attend English Language schools	6	214	65.44
OVERALL	20	327	100

As could be deduced from Table 2, it is obvious that children who go to private language schools has a greater range of vocabulary items than those who don't. Namely, pre-schoolers from Jagodina (N = 6) who attend language schools have the range of 214 words of English vocabulary which is 65.44% of the whole number of words the group of examined children have. Pre-schoolers (N = 14) who do not attend private English language schools possess smaller range of vocabulary (113 words) which is 34.56%. These results are not surprising because organised and carefully planned learning in early ages would surely bring to successful learning outcomes (Ćirković-Miladinović & Milić, 2012). According to Subaşı, Caner & Kara (2010: 71), specific training programme is necessary for teaching English to very young learners because they face some difficulties while they start learning foreign language in the early grades of primary education.

This idea was also proposed in the open-ended questions for pre-school teachers who stated that they believe that children at the age of 6 would greatly benefit from learning English and that these children's potential should be used in this stage when they are not overburdened with school demands and tasks. Mean score in the questionnaire (M = 5.2) supports this pre-school teacher's belief (item 10: Teaching English vocabulary in preschool age is a good foundation for primary school language learning). In Table 1, item 1, preschool teachers also pointed out that learning vocabulary at preschool age is important for learning a foreign language (M = 5.05). The outcomes of the study conducted by Breslin, Morton & Rudisill, 2008) presented results of teaching English in early classes in primary schools that was very fruitful due to learning English at preschool age and enthusiasm of the learners. The lowest mean score (M = 3.35) was given to item 4, (Pre-schoolers can acquire a large vocabulary by learning words in the context) where we can see that teachers do not agree that children are able to learn vocabulary in the context at this age. Thus, preschool teachers emphasized in the open-ended questions that learning vocabulary in the context is not an effective technique at this stage and they believe that memorisation and repetition of English words would be more effective strategy to learn new words.

The questionnaire also examined (item 9) whether the education of pre-schoolers' parents is the predictor of children's motivation to learn English. Relatively high mean score (M = 5.15) represents preschool teachers' belief that this is true. This result from a questionnaire was checked during the interview conducted with 20 preschool children where we gathered the data on the social status and parents' profession. To be precise, parents' professions of those children who attend private language schools are the following: teachers, preschool teachers, physi-

cians, and police officers. On the other hand, children whose parents are unemployed, housewives or work as manual workers in local factories or building sites, do not attend these schools. This picture is not surprising either because language classes are expensive and unemployed parents or parents with low monthly incomes cannot afford them.

Preschool teachers were also interviewed and asked to answer the following questions: 1) How many English words preschool children know before starting the first grade of primary school? 2) What category do these words belong to? Preschool teachers' answers were grouped into categories and presented in Table 3. According to examined teachers (N=20), children who attend private language schools know from 20 to 30 words (14 teachers possess this opinion) while other children know less, around 10 words (16 teachers believe that children who do not attend private language schools know around 10 English words) and 3 teachers think that these children know 5 words at the most. 14 teachers said that children's range of words is between 20 and 30 but this was not the case in this group of children. Only one teacher said that she thinks that children who go to language schools know more than 30 words supporting this belief by giving an example of one child from her group (participant of this research) who knows around 60 words which was the biggest number of words found out in this research.

Table 3. *Teachers' beliefs on how many English words children know at the age of 6*

Number of words	Children who go to private language schools	Children who don't go to private language schools
0-5	0	3
5-10	2	16
10-20	3	1
20-30	14	0
30 and more	1	0

Further, in order to present the data gathered in the interview on the categories English words belong to, the author will group and present them in Table 4. Furthermore, with the purpose of comparing preschool teachers' beliefs with the exact group of children the author present here the data gathered from children on the number of words they know and the categories of these words.

Table 4. Teachers' beliefs vs. real situation

Category	Number of teachers who selected this category	Number of words children know in this category	%
Numbers	14	139	6.95
Animals	7	57	2.85
Colours	3	39	1.95
Family	5	27	1.35
House	0	25	1.25
Food	0	14	0.7
Body parts	0	12	0.6
School	1	8	0.4
Nature	0	5	0.25
Holidays	0	1	0.1
Toys	8	0	0.0
Overall		327	100

Note: Some teachers selected more than one category

The content analysis of the preschool teachers' answers to the open-ended questions regarding vocabulary teaching belief revealed a complex picture of differences and similarities to the one that resembles the real pedagogical situation in foreign language learning of preschool children. Based on the results given in Table 4, it could be concluded that there is a mismatch between teachers' answers and children's knowledge of words in categories *school* and *toys*. One preschool teacher believes that children know the biggest number of words related to school life and equipment while this is not the case when the author questioned preschool children. According to the number of words in this category, it is the eight category in rank. Further, eight teachers believe that children know many words in English that are connected to toys, but this is not the real situation. Examined children did not show knowledge of English words in the category of toys. Five teachers believe that children know more words related to family than colours but this is not the case in the examined group of children. Children know 39 words (1.95%) in the category of *colours* while they know 27 words in the category of *family* (1.35%). Positive match was found in the categories of numbers and animals. Namely, 14 teachers believe that children know the biggest number of words in the category of *numbers* and 7 teachers state that the biggest category of words is *animals*. Teachers' beliefs collaborated with the empirical data. The number of words that children know in the category of numbers is

139 (6.95%). Actually, most examined children know to count to ten and some to eleven. Then, in the category of *animals* children know 57 words which is 2.85% of the whole amount of words. Some children who attend language school were able to name animals that even were not offered in the flash-cards by the researcher showing that their knowledge of English vocabulary in this category is systematized and well-practiced (Ćirković-Miladinović, 2009).

Based on the results from the above-mentioned analysis, it could be concluded that the findings are indicative of profound contextual mediation on the preschool teachers' belief that learning English at preschool age is useful and necessary for the first grade of primary school, on one hand, and children's ability to master English vocabulary, on the other.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The major findings in this study is that preschool teachers believe that the most effective strategy for English vocabulary acquisition is to repeat and practice English words in order to memorize them. Following this statement, preschool teachers also believe that going to language school and watching media in English are of the biggest help to children to learn a foreign language. This goes in line with the real situation of the examined children. Children who attend private language schools have bigger range of vocabulary (65.44%) than those who don't (34.56%). The examined teachers do not think that learning words in the context is useful in this age. One of the mismatches was that 14 (out of 20) teachers believe that children's range of words is between 20 and 30 but this was not the case in this group of children. The biggest number of children belong to the group of 5 to 10 English words in range. In addition, the main mismatch was found in the categories of English words. Interviewed teachers believe that children do know English words that are connected to toys and school, but this was not the situation in the questioned group of children. Children did not show knowledge of English words in the category of toys and only 8 words they know in the category of school. On the other hand, significant overlap was found in the categories of numbers, animals and colours. Children do know the biggest number of words in the category of numbers (6.95%) following with the category of animals and colours. The approximate number of words one child knows in this examined group is 16 (this number was rounded) and it may be concluded that preschool teachers' opinion that stressed the importance of learning vocabulary in the preschool stage, should be seriously taken

into account. This idea is underlined by many FLA/SLA scholars, such as Laufer, (2010), Beglar (2009), and Nation & Beglar (2007), to name just a few. Learning English vocabulary at the age of 6 could be a good preparation for learning L2 in primary school. Very young learners have the potential of learning foreign language in preschool institution but this ability is not properly used due to the lack of preschool teachers' training to teach English. This is something preschool teachers, language teachers, parents and related department of the National Education Ministry could take into consideration in order to provide effective, nurturing environments and linguistically appropriate education of preschool children. Certainly, foreign language instruction in preschool age should consider children's cognitive and language development, of both L1 and L2, learning conditions and types of instruction that best meet their needs.

To sum up, preschool teachers believe that it is possible to teach English vocabulary to pre-schoolers by using effective techniques and motivating material. Examined children who attend language schools expressed very high interest for English classes and they also pointed out that they would like to learn English in the kindergarten. Therefore, future preschool teachers should be given a chance to be educated in teaching English as well, because, as they argue, they already know learning abilities and potentials of children at the age of 6 and they have knowledge of preschool pedagogy, psychology and methodology of teaching this group of learners. The starting point could be to provide preschool teachers with seminars which could help them learn the best teaching strategies in teaching English to very young learners. What is important is to acknowledge that learning English and exploring it at early ages is a continuous process and not an end in itself, but a beginning.

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MIŠLJENJA PREDŠKOLSKIH VASPITAČA O SPOSOBNOSTIMA PREDŠKOLACA ZA UČENJE STRANOG JEZIKA

Apstrakt. Cilj ovog rada je da ispita pedagošku situaciju u predškolskoj ustanovi putem odgovora na sledeća pitanja: 1) Šta misle predškolski vaspitači u vezi sa učenjem engleskog jezika na predškolskom uzrastu? 2) Koliko engleskih reči predškolci znaju pre polaska u školu i 3) Kojoj grupi reči te reči pripadaju? U svrhu ovog istraživanja, autorka je analizirala mišljenje 20 vaspitača u predškolskim ustanovama u Jagodini (Srbija) i njihove stavove u vezi sa učenjem i podučavanjem engleskog jezika na predškolskom uzrastu. Jedan od instrumenata kojim je autorka prikupila podatke je bio upitnik sa pitanjima višestrukog izbora u vidu Likertove skale procene i pitanjima otvorenog tipa kojim je ispitano šta vaspitači u predškolskim ustanovama misle o tome da deca na uzrastu od 6 godina uče engleski jezik i kakve su sposobnosti i potencijali dece za to. Konačno, da bi se utvrdilo da li se mišljenja predškolskih vaspitača poklapaju sa stvarnom situacijom u vrtićima, ispitano je dvadesetoro dece s ciljem da se utvrdi koliko reči na engleskom jeziku predškolci znaju i kojoj grupi imenica te reči pripadaju (brojevi, životinje, hrana, boje, itd.). Odgovori učesnika istraživanja analizirani su kvantitativno i kvalitativno. Rezultati istraživanja na ispitanom uzorku su pokazali da vaspitači u predškolskim ustanovama smatraju da deca na uzrastu od 6 godina imaju sposobnost da uče strani jezik i da je podučavanje engleskog jezika moguće ako se uvažavaju uzrasne karakteristike dece, nivo znanja i motivacija i ukoliko se pripreme izazovne aktivnosti i materijali koji inspirišu učenje engleskog jezika na tom uzrastu. Istraživanje je takođe pokazalo da postoje mimoilaženja u nekim mišljenjima ispitanih vaspitača i broja reči na engleskom jeziku koje ispitanu deca zaista znaju. Ispitani predškolci su pokazali da dosta gledaju televiziju na engleskom jeziku kod kuće ali da nisu metodički usmereni na učenje engleskog jezika ukoliko ne pohađaju privatnu školu.

Ključne reči: učenje engleskog vokabulara, predškolci, učenje engleskog jezika na ranom uzrastu, mišljenja predškolskih vaspitača.