FORMATION OF A LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE OF PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN THE LANGUAGE LEARNING DEVELOPMENTAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: The problem of early language education is discussed in the paper. The components of the linguistic competence of pre-school children are described. Definitions of such concepts as the environmental approach and the Language Learning Developmental Environment (LLDE) are given. The article also focuses on the LLDE components illustrating theoretical data with practical examples.

Key words: early Language Teaching, Linguistic Competence, Environmental Approach, Language Learning Development Environment (LLDE), Object Orientated Activity.

Introduction

What is the purpose of early language education? This is the question, which is often asked by educators, psychologists, and speech therapists all over the world. Particularly, one of the most common arguments against early language learning is that early language acquisition causes speech problems, such as native language delay. However, L.S. Vygotsky wrote in his article "The Question of Polylingualism in Children", that it is not only speech purity, which directly influences speech, but also the child's intellectual development, character features, and emotional development. There is a separate scope in a child's psyche for each of the two languages, which prevents the languages from simple mechanical crossing [4, p. 597]. Logopathy is the developmental disorder caused by various diseases. Sometimes bilingualism is to blame for dyslexia, for example, but this juxtaposition is too flat. To support this idea we refer to Lubov Mitnik's opinion who establishes linkage between dyslexia and neuro-psychological factors – not bilingualism [11].

We define **early language teaching** as the process of interaction between an educator and a child, through which we target the child's language skills (which are mostly receptive) and competence development from the age of two years old, attracting a child to foreign culture – English folk songs and nursery rhymes, every day behaviour, games and signs; developing the child's personal qualities such as curiosity, empathy, commutability, collaboration and developing psychic processes, such as attention, imagination, thinking, perception, sensory sphere and phonemic awareness.

From our point of view, early language education promotes, first of all, the formation of a positive motivation towards learning a foreign language. Secondly, familiarizing a child with a different culture also has a positive impact. The importance of early language education is realized in many parts of the world including Europe, Thailand, China and India, to name a few. Although bilingual kindergartens are mostly private in Asian countries, this tendency is indeed very encouraging. We cannot help but mention the European non-commercial project supporting multilingual education «LIGHT (Language for Integration and Global Human Tolerance)». The objectives of the project are the opening of two-language kindergartens in the participating states and the development of a universal educational model applicable to all European countries [17]. The countries participating in the project are as follows – Austria, Germany, Finland, France and Cyprus. Nowadays it is an obvious truth that a modern

person should speak not only his or her native language, but at least two foreign languages as well. That is why it is recommended to start learning a foreign language since early childhood. [19].

Thirdly, the range of sources available to pre-school children for the practice a foreign language has widened. One can watch English educational programs or cartoons via satellite TV or the Internet, listen to original fairy-tales and poems, read English books and talk with peers via Skype or any other chat program. The best option, however, is to go abroad and to immerse oneself in the natural language environment, which is the powerful mechanism that enables passive knowledge of the language to become transferred into an active one. All the factors mentioned above signify the possibility of early language education.

However, the most solid argument, in our opinion, supporting the idea of early childhood education, is brain development. It is a scientifically proven fact that the left hemisphere of the brain is responsible for speech. Due to its fast development, children are sensitive to their mother's speech even while being in her womb. It has also been stated that different parts of the brain produce different language phenomena [7, p. 259]. As researcher Fred Genesee points out: recent findings indicate that the specialized functions of specific regions of the brain are not fixed at birth but are shaped by experience and learning. There is direct evidence that when learning occurs, neuro-chemical communication between neurons is facilitated, and less input is required to activate established connections over time. New evidence also indicates that learning creates connections between not only adjacent neurons but also between distant neurons, and that connections are made from simple circuits to complex ones and from complex circuits to simple ones. When a child is exposed to unfamiliar speech sounds the brain registers this exposure as undifferentiated neural activity. As exposure continues, the listener (and the brain) learns to differentiate among different sounds and even among short sequences of sounds that correspond to words or parts of words. With further exposure, both the simple and complex circuits are activated at virtually the same time and more easily. As connections are formed among adjacent neurons to form circuits, connections also begin to form with neurons in other regions of the brain that are associated with visual, tactile, and even olfactory information related to the sound of the word. These connections give the sound of the word meaning Effective teaching should include a focus on both parts and wholes [18].

This only shows that any knowledge should be supported by revisions, repetitions and connections with the real world. Educators should pay attention to both individual differences of the children and general things such as creating meaningful environments, exploring kids' opportunities, teaching skills in integration, etc. The first six years are sensitive for speech acquisition, whereas the age period from three to six is the time of linguistic competence development [7, p. 324]. Nina Spada and Patsy M. Lightbown in the work "How languages are learnt", emphasize the fact that the process of a foreign language acquisition in the childhood follows the path of the native one, which stimulates the idea of early childhood education [20].

Definitions of the concepts of "Linguistic Competence" and "Language Learning Developmental Environment (LLDE)"

Having analyzed the concept of competence (based on the works of E.A. Bystrova, N.D. Galskova, V.V. Safonova), K.B. Zhigaleva defines linguistic competence of the 6-year old children and presents the indices of the linguistic competence formation. The researcher considers linguistic competence to be the structural component of communicative competence, which is recognized by the academic society. According to the author, "*linguistic competence is a complex of components including both knowledge of vocabulary, grammatical structures, phonetic norms, words with cultural semantics and ability to consciously use them expressing child's own desires and thoughts in an aural-receptive and productive ways* [6, p. 11]". Thus linguistic competence can be presented as a three-component structure (Fig. 1).
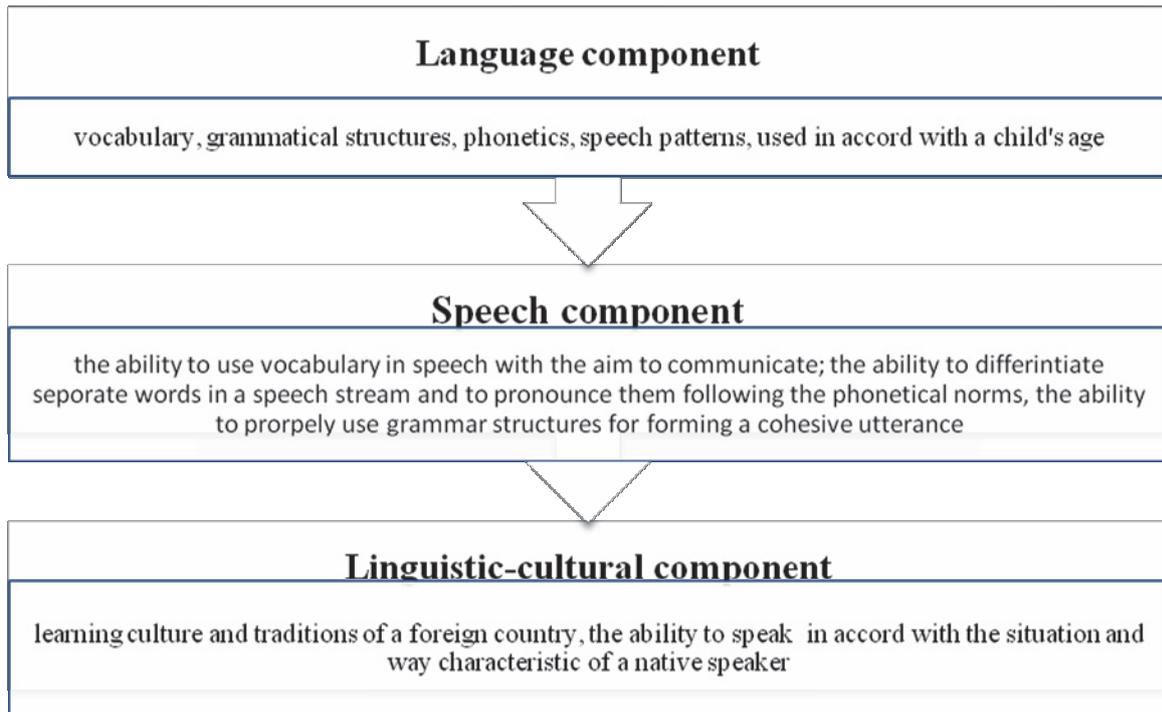
Fig. 1. Structure of Linguistic Competence.

Relying on the research of I.V. Vronskaya [3], E.U. Protasova [14], K.B. Zhigaleva [6], and taking our definition of early language teaching as the basis, we have worked out the components of early language teaching content:

• *cognitive component* - seen as the integrity of the language aspect - vocabulary, phonetics, grammar; speech aspect–speech patterns, courtesy phrases , clichés; developmental tasks;

• *culture-oriented component* – represented by songs, poems, games and plays, signs, holidays and traditions of the country studied**;**

• *emotional component* – expressing itself in stimulating environment, various musical background, positive thinking, numerous feelings a child experiences during the interaction between her/him and a teacher, between him/her and the peers.

The next two concepts we would like to focus on are also related to early language learning and the formation of linguistic competence – these are Environmental Approach and Language Learning Developmental Environment (LLDE).

From the point of view of *Environmental Approach* (D. Bruner, S.F. Sergeev, V.A. Yasvin [2; 15; 16]), the environment itself enables child's activity. Playing and working with different objects and toys, participating in all object-oriented activities, a child is immersed into the language developmental environment and acquires skills and abilities to work with these objects, as well as he learns and acquires English words denoting these objects and actions, gets acquainted with the cultural phenomena and habits of people speaking a different language.

The best way to learn a foreign language is to immerse a child into the artificially created Language Learning Developmental Environment. What do we understand about this concept? There are different types of environment. On studying the definitions of the «Environment» by N.B. Krylova [8], "Educational Environment" by S.F. Sergeev and V.A. Yasvin, "Learning Environment" by N.M. Alexandrova [1], "Developmental environment" by L.S. Vygotsky, V.V. Davydov [5], V.A. Petrovsky [12], "Emotional Environment" by L.A. Maksimova [9], "Language Environment" by N.A. Malkina [10], we define the Language Learning Developmental Environment as the environment of developmental education in the integrity of its components: the space-and-object component, the technological component, the developmental and social components which provide favourable conditions for early language learning within the process of object-oriented activities, thus creating a positive emotional atmosphere and

promoting the child to acquire skills of direct communication (without translation) (Fig. 2).
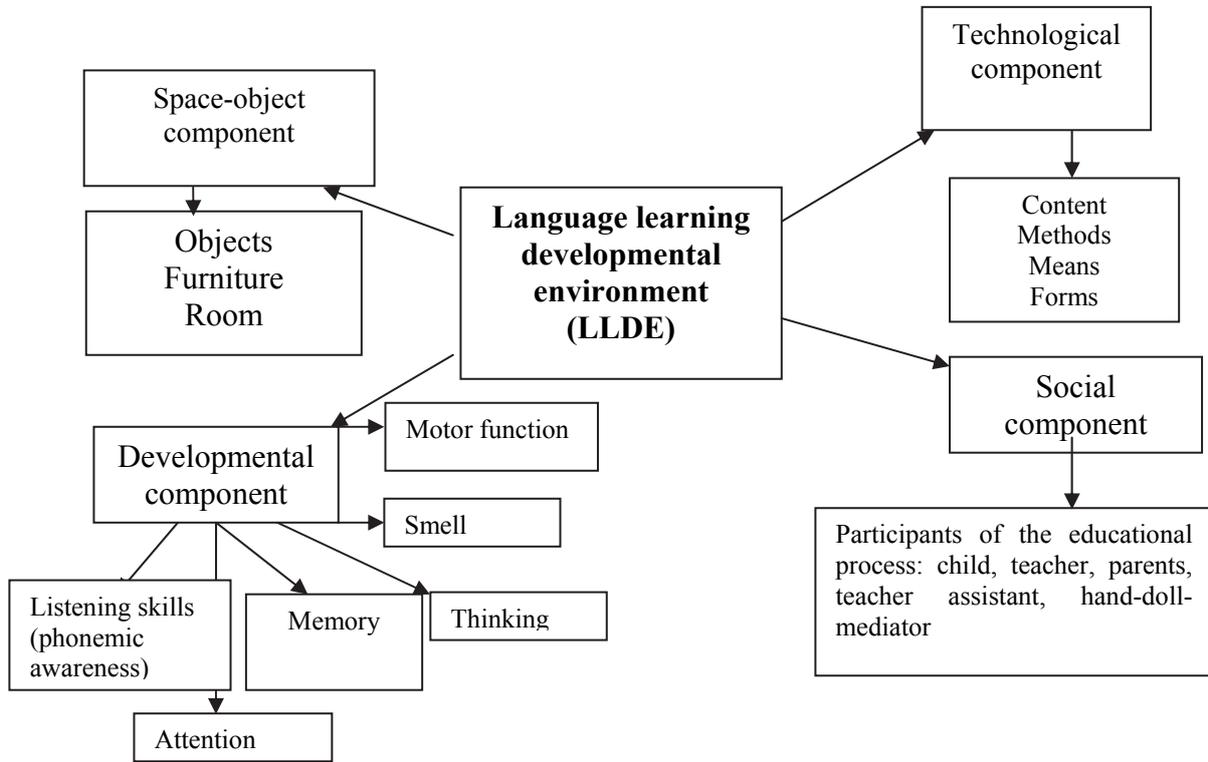
Fig. 2.Model of the LLDE

The Space-object component of LLDE

The Space-object component includes objects, furniture, room and space. During the early years objects are the main source of acquiring knowledge about the world around. The principle form of thought at the age of 2 is the visual-active thought, when a child learns how to use objects to help solve problems. The development of the object-oriented activity is connected with acquiring cultural ways of working with a variety of items [13, p. 40], that is why we propose to use all the surrounding objects to create the LLDE. The classroom concerned has the English corner where the walls are decorated with pictures of favourite English speaking cartoon characters; there is a bookshelf with English books; there are toys and dolls. In addition, the room is divided into several zones in which the immersion is realized. We utilize a wide variety of other items and substances such as: toys, cones, buttons, sticks and stones, sand and water, grain and beads etc. in order to facilitate the learning of a foreign language.

The technological component of LLDE

The technological component consists of the program content, methodology, technology, techniques, and means and forms of teaching. Teaching is realized through a natural method or immersion in the basis of real-life and educational situations. The choice of vocabulary and situations is realized in accord with the principles of frequency and compatibility. The majority of situations is close to natural ones. The advantage of the LLDE is that we can teach English in real-life situations such as routine time – greeting in the morning, washing in the bathroom, breakfast, getting dressed, etc. A very important role is given to nursery rhymes and songs, which create both a favourable atmosphere during the lesson and help to reproduce the authentic nature of the English culture.

We emphasize that each type of object-oriented activity transforms into independent forms of language teaching (Fig. 3). By stressing this, the importance of each activity is implied. A child is able to express itself in all of them due

to the vital nature of each activity available to it. He becomes active while drawing or modelling, playing with cones, or singing. A child does not realize that at this very moment the process of education is being held and consequently is very responsive to what appears real and interesting to it.

Integration of activities is another characteristic feature, which is worth mentioning in this context. It often occurs when children draw something and listen to the music, or when they play with toys and follow the teacher's instructions (Fig. 3).
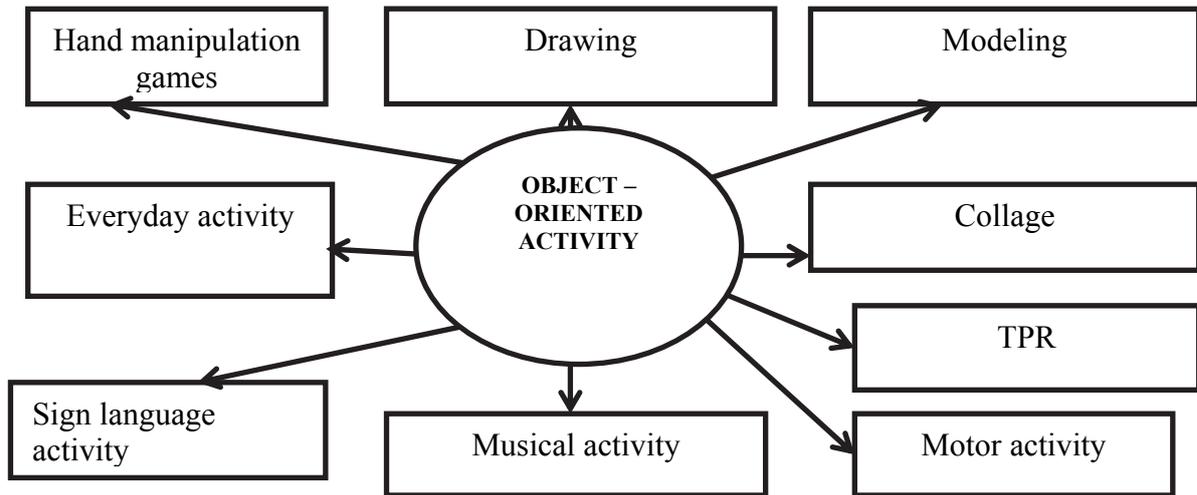

Fig. 3.Types of object-oriented activity at English classes involving early aged children

The social component of LLDE

The social component comprises emotions and forms of subject-subject interaction within the educational process. The epicentre of this interaction is the child as a language personality. By the end of the second year of life a child becomes egocentric and mentions itself frequently in speech. This is the period when a child adapts to the norms of a society, learns to control its own incentives and tries to establish autonomy from adults. The role of adults in this period consists in providing support for the child and helping it to acquire these norms by organizing a language developmental environment for the child in order for it to realize itself within this setting as a little personality. The participants in the educational process are not only teachers and children, but include also teacher-assistants, parents, and other pedagogues. Children are apt to copy adults by following their behaviour. The forms of subject-subject interaction are illustrated in Figure 4.
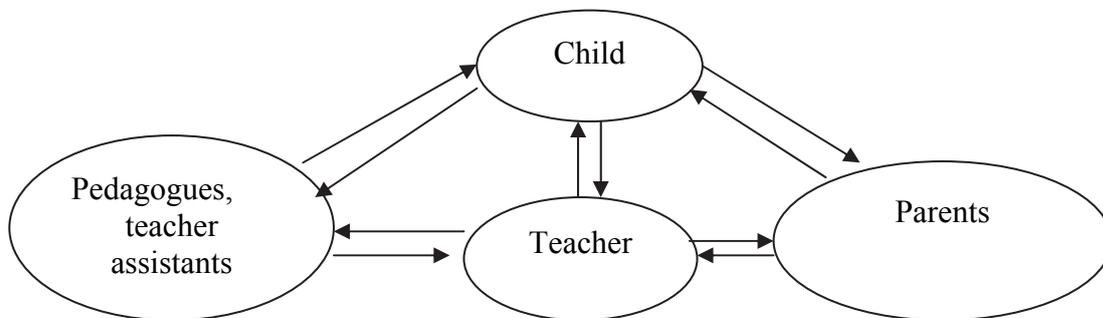

Fig. 4.The forms of subject-subject interaction in the language educational process

The developmental component of LLDE

The developmental component includes a complex set of tasks and exercises aimed at the development of phonemic awareness, visual and aural memory, motor skills, smell skills, sensory sphere, attention, imagination, and thought.

Early language education is implemented either at individual classes "mother + child" or at in-group classes. In the first case the mother participates in all types of tasks showing a child her interest and thus stimulating it towards activity. In-group classes are usually held at day care or language centres. Parents are recommended to attend practical seminars in order to get some information and knowledge of the educational process and of the LLDE. At the seminars they are given recommendations on how to make language learning more effective and support the LLDE at home.

Language education is performed in one-hour lessons-immersions. The approximate structure of a lesson is shown in Tab. 1.

Tab. 1.Structure of a lesson

Stage 1 Code switching	Stage 2 Finger plays, motor developing tasks	Stage 3 Creative	Stage 4 Sound games, action-songs and dramatizations	Stage 5 Book time	Stage 6 Relaxation and saying good-bye
Warming-up	Introducing the new vocabulary or revising the learnt one through task developing motor skills	Productive activities: drawing, modeling, gluing, etc.	Children play games-imitations, listen to various sounds and match sounds and objects	Children learn to work with a book, learn book vocabulary, widen their knowledge of the language	Listening to a soothing song, saying good-bye, back code switching

Conclusion

The Language Learning Developmental Environment (LLDE), from our viewpoint, is the most efficient means of early language learning and of forming the linguistic competence of pre-school children. The Language Learning Developmental Environment makes it possible to integrate all types of activities characteristic of a child from ages two through six. It creates conditions favourable for the acquisition of a foreign language. The positive result of the formation of a linguistic competence in pre-school children depends on many factors, most notably during the preliminary period of early language teaching (from two to four years old), when the educator's competence, the learning conditions, the participants' interactions, and the local authorities' contribution to the language policy and support in the LLDE organization are all vital.

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