Pre-primary educators and the use of digital resources to raise early foreign language awareness

Adriana Lazăr*

University of Pitești, Pitești 110044, Romania

Abstract

The present paper will look at various ways in which digital resources can be used in the Romanian early childhood curriculum to raise early foreign language awareness of preschool children. We will first explore the context of introducing foreign languages at an early age in Romania where recent political changes have opened up new educational perspectives. Then we will highlight the multiple benefits of using digital resources when teaching foreign languages to preschool children. After presenting the language context in the country and the various advantages of incorporating digital material into the preschool curriculum, we will focus our attention on a series of activities using digital resources that can be easily introduced in preschool education to foster foreign language learning. We will conclude with recommendations for preschool educators on using technology to bring added value to children’s learning.

Keywords: early education; foreign languages; language awareness; preschool children.

1.1. Introduction

Current research demonstrates that young children gain knowledge of languages in intuitive ways, such as creative exploration motivated by curiosity. If children are exposed to different languages at an early age, their ability to develop a feeling for the rhythm, the phonology and the intonation of these languages increases. Digital resources and technologies are being incorporated into early childhood curriculum to meet the demands of 21st century education.

* Adriana Lazăr.
E-mail address: adriana.lazar@upit.ro
century early learners. These technologies are being used to improve programme quality and accessibility and to encourage the involvement of parents as the primary educators of pre-school children. The use of digital resources to raise pre-school children’s awareness for foreign languages needs to follow the existing model of Language Awareness-raising or Exposure approach. The central purpose of this approach is “to develop the perception and recognition of different sounds and concepts of one or more languages and the ability to understand and reproduce them in an interactive way” (EC, 2011:15).

Online interactive games and activities, and other digital resources such as e-books, videos and songs can motivate learning, improve critical thinking and stimulate curiosity in children from an early age. In today’s modern era, where digital technologies, e.g. personal computers, tablets and smart phones have become ubiquitous in our everyday lives, we shouldn’t ask ourselves if we should use digital technologies for early education but rather how these should be integrated into the early education curricula. Traditionally, early childhood education and care has been a ‘low tech’ segment, where educators and care givers preferred face-to-face interaction, relationships and high-touch exercises to improve motor skill development in pre-school children. However, childcare professionals and early educators are gradually turning to technology to develop children’s critical thinking competence. Research shows that digital resources can also help to improve children’s abilities in problem-solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, and to develop civic and cultural awareness as well as a sense of social responsibility.

The present paper will look at ways in which digital resources can be used in the Romanian early childhood curricula to raise early foreign language awareness of preschool children. We will first explore the context of introducing foreign languages at an early age in Romania where recent political changes have opened up new educational perspectives. Then we will highlight the multiple benefits of using digital resources when teaching foreign languages to preschool children. After presenting the language context in the country and the various advantages of incorporating digital material into the preschool curricula, we will focus attention on a series of activities using digital resources that can be easily introduced in preschool education to foster foreign language learning. We will conclude with recommendations for preschool educators on using technology to bring added value to children’s learning.

1.2. Introducing foreign languages at an early age, in Romania

In Romania, there is a National Curriculum Board composed of specialists in education, Ministry inspectors, researchers, university professors, and teachers. Their task is to devise the compulsory National Curriculum for each subject. It is meant to be a guideline for teaching and for textbook writing since there are now alternative textbooks for each subject. It also forms the basis for evaluation. However, in order to encourage school autonomy and local educational policies, approximately 30% of the curriculum is devised by schools, according to student interests and local needs. Each school offers a range of optional subjects from among which students may choose two or three.

In what foreign languages are concerned, at kindergarten level, there is no national curriculum. There are broad guidelines from the Ministry of Education that basically include topics and grammatical points to be covered in one 45-50 minute period a week. Teaching at this level is a real challenge, as teachers have to devise their own curriculum and create their own materials. Another challenging issue is the fact that teaching has to be done orally only. The market offers a variety of books, but for most children their price is prohibitive.

From the ‘preparatory class’ (ages 6-7) until the 3rd grade, the study of a foreign language is optional. The Ministry of Education has developed, in 2012, a National Curriculum for this discipline, which is included in the curricular area Language and Communication. Children can start learning a foreign language as an optional subject in the ‘preparatory class’ if it is included among the school’s optional subject offerings. Parents have the right to take their children to those schools that offer the subjects in which they are interested. As most of them want their children to study English, schools try hard to meet their expectations.

The curriculum is structured for 1-2 hours a week study and represents a first step in familiarizing the children with a form of communication other than the native language. This includes:
- general skills: reception of simple oral messages, oral expression in common communicative situations, reception of simple written messages, writing of simple messages in common communicative situations.
specific skills: offering adequate reactions to greetings, questions short instructions/demands; recognizing different objects, numbers, etc., reproducing small pieces of information, songs/ rhymes, poems, offering personal information (name, age, etc.), participating in communicative games by reproducing/creating small messages or rhymes, showing interest in decoding small written messages, participating in simple group projects,

examples of learning activities: miming an action, completing an instruction, indicating an object, drawing, repeating after the teacher, playing chain games, finding rhyming words, finding small written messages around the classroom/school, asking for the meaning of certain words/concepts, manufacturing of posters on different topics by sticking and cutting,

methodological suggestions: using the nonverbal to deduce the meaning of certain concepts; a playful approach; learning through context;

elements of milestones to be followed by teachers in order to help children acquire the foreign language skills in oral reception (What should children listen to?, How do teachers motivate them to listen?, etc.), oral expression (How to develop a good pronunciation?, What should children produce orally?, How to make children communicate in the target language?, etc.), written register (How to stimulate curiosity for books?, What kind of projects do we ask from children?, etc.), evaluation (examples of evaluation grids, examples teachers’ feedback, children’ self-evaluation techniques, etc.).

According to the National Curriculum, only primary school children start the compulsory study of the first foreign language in the 3rd grade (ages 8-9) and the discipline is called Modern language I.

Although the study of a foreign language at pre-primary level in Romania is optional, there are an increasing number of kindergartens that optionally organize courses in a foreign language and parents must pay for them. There are also private kindergartens that organize the entire education in English, French or German.

Preschool foreign language teachers are usually debutants, in their first years of teaching, or teachers that could not fill their didactic norms with their employer or even substitute teachers that couldn’t find a job in a kindergarten or school. Some preschool teachers can also teach a foreign language to their class if they have a diploma in Educational Sciences and have followed the Foreign Language Module, which is optional and includes Practical courses in a foreign language, Morphology, Syntax, Culture and civilization, Methodology of teaching the foreign language to children, etc. Students following one of these university studies can also teach a foreign language in kindergartens as substitute teachers, if the parents and preschool teachers agree.

The foreign languages usually introduced in Romania are English, Spanish, French, and German. The length of foreign language lessons in kindergartens depends on the age of the children, ranging from 15 to 30 minutes, one or two times a week in groups of 10 to 15 children. The foreign language lessons can last a whole semester or even the whole three years of preschool, depending on the parents’ choice. There are also some private kindergartens following intensive foreign language programs where teachers only speak the respective foreign language to their children.

The curriculum for this optional discipline is part of the current thematic plan and corresponds to the age of a group/class. The purpose of teaching a foreign language to preschool children is mainly to develop foreign language awareness through a variety of activities, such as:

- introducing children to the phonemic system of the foreign language in order to develop their phonemic hearing for particular foreign language sounds;
- learning basic concepts in a foreign language, following different topics: the weather, the family, fruits, numbers, vegetables, etc.;
- motivating children to learn a foreign language from an early age and getting them to like studying a foreign language, arousing their interest in the respective language;
- helping children produce minimal sentences in order to have small conversations in the respective foreign language: answer questions like What’s your name? How old are you? Do you have any pets?, asking for different things, etc.

Some teachers may also introduce written words in the respective language and have children (during the ‘big class’) recognize them in books, images or other printed or digital materials. Some parents have their children pass the Cambridge certification in English, Cambridge Starters or Movers at the British Council or other foreign
language certificates available in specialized institutions in Romania. The most common early foreign language teaching methods used in Romanian education are:

- TPR activities;
- picture books, illustrated dictionaries, short videos, songs, games, pictures, posters,
- daily routines;
- exposure to native language speaking: videos, songs, native language speakers;

1.3. Advantages of using digital resources in early education

The teacher-centered learning approach is no longer present in the Romanian educational system. At present, Romanian teachers are much more focused on a student-centered approach. There are now various digital resources available online, designed to help preschool teachers to cope with this shift in focus. Educational websites, apps, videos, and social media sites have all been developed to help teachers to motivate young learners and to bring fun and play into the classroom through the use of technology. The use of technology has also led to young learners becoming more engaged in learning activities in preschools and at home. Young children are no longer developing as passive learners, but rather they play an active role in their education and learning process through using interactive tools which challenge them and then provide feedback on how they have performed. Although digital resources and technologies have offer many benefits for early education, they need to be properly used by teachers and parents. If they are used intentionally and appropriately, digital resources can be effective tools in supporting children’s learning and development. Whereas technology should always be used moderately, particularly with infants and toddlers, there can be little doubt that the integration of technology into early education curricula and daily routine has a positive impact on a child’s learning and development.

It is common knowledge that pre-school years are the most important stage for a child’s learning development and that positive experiences provided at this time have a lifelong influence. To make sure that early education is fun, motivating and interactive, ever more parents and early education professionals are turning to technology and multimedia to improve early learning curricula. The wide range of interactive games and activities, specially designed for children, that educators and parents can access online and use with their preschool children can help to develop children’s strategic and critical thinking and turn them into innovative and resourceful thinkers and learners.

For children to get the full benefits of digital media resources and technologies, parents and educators are responsible for finding a balance between maximizing their child’s development aided by exposure to technology and becoming over-saturated with access to technology which can lead to a child not being fully able to develop fine motor skills. While there is a lot of concern and speculation in early education regarding the lack of fine motor skill development of children whose only form of play is through a tablet, smart phone or personal computer, there are strategies and mechanisms for parents and preschool professionals to monitor the use of digital technologies in young children, and to help them to maximize the benefits of technology by taking part in fun, interactive and educational games and activities online.

Recent research in the field of early education concludes that digital resources can help to support social, cognitive and linguistic development in children. As well as supporting language development, research shows that the use of these technologies through targeted, age-appropriate games and resources can increase children’s ability to understand reading, writing and narrative. Learning to use digital resources in today’s world has been compared to learning to hold a pencil in years gone by: the ability to use technology is a vital skill in our modern technology-based society. However, it is worth remembering that not all tools and resources are of benefit to young children. In order to reap the benefits from technology digital tools and resources should be educational and interactive. The more a child can receive feedback from a tool, the better the child will learn. It is also worth noting that technology is not here to replace the figure of the teacher or the parent. Digital resources should be used by children with the support of their parent or teacher, with the adult at all times guiding the child’s learning.

The use of digital resources from an early age can encourage children to open up to a world of information, different people and different cultures. Technology can be seen as a key tool in ending cycles of social exclusion of parents and children from disadvantaged areas. While access to computers is sometimes limited, many public
libraries and playschool offer the use of these technology resources where teachers and parents can use digital resources with their children. Digital resources also encourage children to learn about the world around them and to become active digital citizens and tolerant of other cultures. The emergence of these technologies into early education has meant that children now have access to information and learning opportunities at any time and in any place.

1.4. New digital resources available in Romania that can be easily introduced in preschool education to foster language learning

In this section we will describe the digital products produced by The AlphaEU European project where the University of Pitesti is one of the partners. The Alphabets of Europe project (531092-LLP-1-2012-1-CY-KA2-KA2MP, www.aplhaeu.org) - focuses on the European Commission’s priority of “Promoting early language education.” It aims to promote the acquisition of multilingual awareness and language skills of pre-school children in various European countries, by developing, piloting, and implementing digital alphabet books and alphabet-related games and interactive activities. Targeted alphabets/languages include: English, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, and Romanian. Bringing very young children into contact with foreign languages may result in faster language learning, improved mother tongue skills, and better performance in other areas. The innovative aspect of AlphaEU is that active and creative language learning is channelled through digital media that encourage children to approach European languages and alphabets in a comparative manner, identifying differences and similarities and beginning to formulate general ideas about how languages work. An AlphaEU guide introduces kindergarten teachers, parents and caregivers to the project’s approach and material. E-learning modules have been developed to inform and train adult mediators in utilizing digital alphabet books and activities. The project encourages involvement of family members in supporting language learning, enabling an effective integration between school and community. The digital alphabet books and activities were implemented with preschool children in all participating countries and case studies are being publicized on the project website. The AlphaEU project is expected to have a positive impact on pre-primary language education across the EU.

AlphaEU digital alphabet books were mainly designed to raise preschool children’s awareness of foreign languages and develop their intercultural competence. They enhance interactivity, stimulate curiosity, and encourage preschool children to explore differences and similarities between languages and begin to develop sensitivity to various ways of using languages, their mother tongue(s) and others. The point of alphabet books is not to teach a foreign language, but to create a linguistic context within which children can get accustomed to move between the print and the linguistic environment, which is highly visual. All the digital alphabet books playfully invite children to develop their vocabulary associated to own interests while simultaneously getting acquainted with the form/design of letters/words and their sounds. They are accompanied by a set of 30 digital activities that help children learn about the alphabets of different countries in meaningful ways through play. The AlphaEU consortium designed and developed 30 digital alphabet books in 6 different languages, based on five themes. All books have the same storyline, featuring the two protagonists, a girl named Alpha and her dog, Zara, who explore different settings, taking photos for their own alphabet books.

These playful alphabet books fall under 5 different themes that are quite popular in preschool education around the EU: Home, School, City, Farm and one intercultural alphabet book on each project partner’s country: Ireland, Austria, Cyprus, Italy, Portugal and Romania. Each book features native speaker voices who recite the letters, the words and the intros on each page. Teachers and parents can browse through the alphabet books and choose any language.

Each alphabet book generally features each letter of the alphabet on a page, using an attractive cartoon design. Each page contains two or three words per letter. Users have to browse through all the images on a page to find objects (2, 3 objects) starting with the respective letter. When clicking on an object, they can hear the word in the native language and see the written form of the respective word.
Teachers can integrate the AlphaEU digital alphabet books into the daily routines of classroom activities in order to develop preschoolers’ language and communication competence, to enhance social interaction, motivation, and attitudes toward learning. The teachers can plan a schedule for integrating these activities in the curricula, while providing interactive learning opportunities and selecting developmentally appropriate computer-mediated activities for the preschoolers. Teachers can take advantage on the thematic organization of the digital alphabet books as well as of the digital activities that are available. The alphabet books could be introduced following the week’s theme, as their preschool curricula are designed (one theme is developed throughout a whole week). For example: if the weekly theme is Autumn, teachers could help children look for words in the digital alphabet books that connect to this theme, for each letter of the alphabet: falling leaves, migratory birds, fruit, etc. Teachers could start from the native words and then introduce the same words in other languages (maximum two at a time), then use the reinforcement digital activities. Or, younger children could just be invited to recognize certain objects they may find in the digital books and pronounce the respective words in different languages; the elders could be invited to do these activities and even come up with other words connected to the weekly theme, or give the plural for each word, in the native language.

As preschoolers start learning the alphabet letters in school, parents could start doing reinforcement activities at home, while looking at one or two pages of the digital alphabet books at a time. Parents could help their children explore the letters that they have already learnt at school or the initial letter of their names, in each digital alphabet book. They could explore the different sounds at one point; or a specific theme at another time. Since one of the advantages of early contact with a foreign language is native-like pronunciation, children should be encouraged to repeat words as much as possible. It is important for children to play on the computer with some words and then reuse them often in play; or both parents and children can explore a language that is unknown to them — this would indeed show the child that learning foreign languages is valuable and entertaining.

Here are some examples of activities: after going through the alphabet book, children can be asked to draw certain objects the parent pronounces in the language chosen; children can be asked to look for objects under the Home alphabet book, while the parent pronounces it; when finding an object, children are asked to repeat the pronunciation in the language chosen.

The AlphaEU consortium also designed one digital alphabet book about each project partner country in order to raise children’s curiosity about different nations and cultures. Each book contains words referring to specific national items that can interest children from all partner countries. The two characters, Alpha and Zara, visit the different countries and take photos of the items included in the books. Children may have visited foreign countries, or may be taken on a virtual visit of a new country through the alphabet books. These digital alphabet books are very rich in content and should be explored slowly – one page at a time or cross-culturally, through exploring animals in all of them or boats, capital cities, or any other common object that is represented differently across cultures.

The digital alphabets are accompanied by a set of interactive activities which aim to help children review the vocabulary covered in the five themes of the Alphabet books. For each language 3 different types of interactive activities provided, two are monolingual and one is bilingual (English and the national language are compared). Once the children have completed the alphabet book for the language of their choice, they will have hopefully learned key vocabulary items for the theme covered by the specific book. In order to enrich their knowledge of the words and comprehension of what the words refer to, they can practice through the digital activities developed. All the activities have a Title page, a Help page and the main menu provided in the different national languages of the partners involved in the project.

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