CHILDREN AND EFL- PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS

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Abstract :Around the age of four and a half, a child will still have errors in his or her speech but the basic grammar needed for a daily, habitual communication would have been acquired by now in his or her first language. Children learning English as a second language will make the same errors at a later age; however, mistakes can be a sign of active learning and also mean that children are interiorizing the target language, trying to figure out how the language system functions. Errors can provide a good opportunity to see how much have children acquired so far and what should be corrected in the future. Furthermore, learning a second language follows the learning of a first mother tongue, a fact that developed certain skills in the case of young learners. Teachers should take advantage of this fact and rely upon it, exploiting the knowledge of the world and the already acquired abilities of the children.

This article aims at pointing out how this can be put in practice with success and to present some practical examples of activities that have proven helpful in the case of the author.

Keywords: young learners, teaching English

The approach of teaching English as a foreign language, representing the system for teaching the language in class, is based on a particular theory of language or on a particular theory of learning, or both of them at the same time. Scott Thurnbury[1] argues that *method*, nowadays mainly known as *approach*, should not be confused with methodology, the second representing the sum of classroom practices, for example classroom management, independent from the method of choice for teaching. Some well-known and wide-used such theories are audiolingualism, which draws on the structuralist description of language, in other words, draws on linguistics and behaviorist perspectives on learning; grammar translation, its name being self explanatory; the direct method; the silent way; the communicative approach. These theories influence the choice of syllabus in

[1] *Thornbury, Scott, An A-Z of ELT, Macmillan Education, 2006, pp. 131*

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teaching, of materials and obviously, of activities used in class. This article draws largely on the communicative approach, which will be discussed in more detail and will highlight some examples of teaching and some lesson ideas, based on this approach. As Thornbury suggests, nowadays it is widely recognized that language learning is such a complex process that no single approach can and should be used; the tendency today is towards *eclecticism*[2] and towards customizing teaching approaches to accommodate the specific needs of the learners; in practice, teachers tend to still draw on a single approach, the one they have been studying mostly - the author of this paper has been CELTA and CELTA YLE trained through the university of Cambridge and therefore favors this particular method of teaching, which will reflect in this article, as well.

Bringing children literature into the English as a Foreign Language class means bringing enjoyment, too. It is up to the teacher to exploit this positive feature of the children books as skillfully and imaginatively as possible; with all available methodologies and teachers' books and resources, there are basically no limits. This thesis viewed the use of some important American children writers in the young learners EFL classes in the city of Iasi, Romania and it draws upon the personal teaching experience of the author. This teaching had taken place both in public and private schools and dealt with students aged from 5 to 14*. The most common children's literature excerpts have been, in Romanian schools, taken from the classics of the Romanian literature such as Ion Creanga or Petre Ispirescu; some of the textbooks used in public schools in Romania are still tributary to the Communist era and although extensive changes have taken place, there is still room for improvement. In public schools, children are not exposed to the latest pieces of literature adapted to their age and sometimes there is quite a gap between the effervescent book market for young ages and what the Ministry of Education has chosen to include in the textbooks for young ages. Far from being a critique, this statement merely aims at pointing out the need for improvement and to point out that social and power changes within the post-Communist society have reflected in a specific ways on the children literature classically included in official textbooks. If the regime of Ceausescu intended to indoctrinate students from the earliest phases of their education with conventional, ideological texts or pieces of literature that reflected the only accepted point of view, nowadays the alternative textbooks in Romanian schools try to introduce up-to-date characters and authors, succeeding to a far greater extent as time passes. Still,

[2] *Ibid.*

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Romanian students are quite foreign to significant children authors as Dr. Seuss, still not at all translated into Romanian or Franck Baum with his astonishingly rich collection of Oz books, out of which only the classical 'Wizard of Oz' is familiar to Romanian children; and these are just two examples.

Drawing on studies famous worldwide, this paper aimed at practically analyzing the impact of high-quality excerpts of children literature, together with their visual representation on young learners both in the context of a public school and that of a private school which offered more resources and possibilities of exploring the pieces of literature. In this respect, two classes of mixed abilities were selected from the public school, while in the case of the private school two different age groups were analyzed. The data collected referred therefore both to mixed abilities and to different ages, as both aspects are relevant for such a research. The study-lessons were occasionally inserted into the curricula, in order not to affect the general flow of teaching and the research and data gathering lasted for at least two teaching years (a teaching year meaning 10 approximately ten months of continuous teaching input, from September to June). The classes focused mainly on vocabulary, reading and writing and several classes of story-telling were inserted as well in the study. Data analysis included detailed observations of the whole class and 10 selected students (6 in the public school and 4 in the private one). These selected students represented the case studies and they were also interviews by the teacher at the end of each of such study-lesson; their parents were also interviewed in order to assess the impact of teaching methods and their success. Observations followed the participant-observer model, meaning the teacher as observer recorded the process without making judgments. The one to one interviews of the students were also as unbiased as possible, aiming to assess the real impact of children literature in an EFL class through record sheets and verbal interviews. Photography and video recording were also used in certain cases, with the parents written consent. A research study of a specific intervention or phenomenon such as this should include pre-tests and post-tests; however these were not used in all cases as some of the selected students from the private school ceased coming to classes and therefore were not post analyzed. However, the author developed a simple yet relevant questionnaire that was applied to several ESL teachers in the area in the form of a Monkey Survey available online, a questionnaire aiming to find out about some significant teaching experience using children literature in the case of other fellow teachers. The questionnaire was disseminated via e-mail to different

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categories of teachers from the 'Alexandru I.Cuza' University of Iasi and a total of 53 teachers offered their valuable feedback. The study has of course its limitations and a larger number of students and ESL teachers included in the study would have made it more relevant. However, the results and feedback were consistent throughout the study and a high percentage, of more than 95% of the respondents students, their parents and fellow teachers responding positively in regard to the success of teaching through children literature; students enjoyed this teaching approach in all cases and offered positive feedback at all times, parents were happy with the idea and the results reflected in the students' responses in their home environment, fellow teachers answered in an overwhelming majority that they have also observed positive results while teaching with the use of children literature. The conclusions of the study also emphasized that the type of children literature selected is of little importance as long as the activities devised in relation to it are of good quality, engaging and interesting for the students. Even if the literary excerpt used was less appealing, such as in the case of a longer piece of prose for a group of 3rd graders or a poem in the case of the 2nd graders, if the lesson plan managed to envelop the piece of literature in fun teaching activities, the students enjoyed the lesson and offered positive feedback in the end of the lesson and at home to their parents afterwards. However, the better selected the piece of literature, the better the feedback- the relation between the two being pretty straightforward. Furthermore, in the case of very young learners, children texts and books are to be used in all cases. Therefore, for a totally successful lesson, both ends should meet: the literary excerpt should be as appealing as possible and the lesson plan as diversified, interesting and well-developed as possible.

Literature is represented by those texts carrying a mainly expressive function and regularly do not occur so often in English language teaching textbooks or class, particularly in those dedicated to young learners. First of all, because literary texts are viewed as being difficult -language-wise and meaning-wise. Nowadays, however, the whole concept of literature is being re-assessed, as Scott Thornbury asserts.[3] The numerous qualities once considered purely literary such as the figures of speech of playful uses of the language are today used by other genres, as well, such as advertising - and advertisements can be successfully used in the EFL class, even at younger ages, in video, audio or written form. Furthermore, what is nowadays considered mainstream literature, apt for being brought to class, has undergone a lot of changes and the pieces of literature

[3] *Thornbury, Scott, An A-Z of ELT, Macmillan Education, 2006, pp. 125*

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readily available for classroom use are as diverse, interesting and appealing to young students as can be. Even more, their screen adaptations, electronic extensions such as games, applications or internet sites are increasingly popular, sometimes even more than the literary piece itself, and technology is something very much used in the EFL class of today. Moreover, as Thornbury points out[4], literary texts are treated as equal to all authentic texts used in the classroom - gone are the reverence and fear that were sometimes inspired by lengthy, complicated literary texts from the dusty old textbooks of older generations. Today it is all about communication and increasing the engagement of the student into his or her own learning process. There are even schools that apply the system of negotiated curricula, involving students in their own teaching. Bringing their favorite piece of literature to the EFL class may well be such an act of influencing the school curricula. Of course, a very important aspect to be considered while using literary texts in class is to bear in mind that literature is very much about the meaning and that it conveys its message through non saying things as much as about saying them. Thornbury rightfully suggests[5] encouraging students to read between the lines and to fill the gaps of the literature excerpt. This implies for learners to identify the point of view of the writer, the addressee, the mood and tone of the text (humorous, reflective, ironic, etc). Identifying and discussing the figures of speech and the instances of the language (figurative, playful, ambiguous etc.), the expressiveness of the texts, the emotional responses of readers versus those aimed by the author are important aspects and obviously these are not at all suitable in the case of the younger students. Young students may often be of pre-primary or primary age, therefore the literary text brought to class should respect their needs and learning abilities. For sure a lengthy, complex text they do not understand, even if read or told by the best story-teller available, will not keep the very young pupils attentive and interested for long. The teaching in such contexts should be aware that children are still developing concepts and language simultaneously and their memory is still developing; moreover, children do not understand language as an abstract system; they learn in chunks and cannot be attentive for long periods of time; they are not at all motivated by extrinsic factors such as the need to pay attention to a famous poem by a much appreciated writer, but they rather go for the intrinsic factors like their inherent interest in engaging in games or fun activities. In conclusion, there are some significant rules about using literature in

[4] *Ibid., pp. 126*
[5] *Ibid.*

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the EFL class with young ages. First of all, one should carefully select the range of texts to be used in teaching young learners. Simple, amusing, interesting texts are the best. Stories familiar to children, with characters they know and identify with are also a good idea. Illustrations are also extremely helpful, as well as screen adaptations, particularly if they are not too long. Probably excerpts or short fragments are advisable in both cases. Next, situating the content of the texts in the world of the children is also helpful, as well as providing opportunities for pupils to use the texts rather by doing than by formal, systematic study. Another rule of thumb is to keep it simple and varied so that students would not get bored. Devising interesting lesson plans that engage learners in using language for reasons they can relate to, such as songs, games, fun follow-up activities such as those involving total physical response and addressing the multiple intelligences is a must, as well. All these rules to be considered are in line with the communicative approach guidelines of teaching and they emphasize doing rather than studying per se. They are, in the experience of the author, real rules of thumb to be followed for the success of any EFL class.

There can be no more important part of education than developing in young children the enjoyment of reading. Reading is their own window on the world: it is more individual and personal than any computer game or TV programme. Reading stimulates imagination, empathy, and awareness. Reading gives them the early opportunity to develop the most significant elements of language awareness, text awareness and cultural awareness, whatever language in which they are reading.[...] Is there any parent or teacher who would actively deny their children the joy of reading books[...]? [...] the whole wonderful world of reading opens up… and should never end. (Professor John McRae)[6]

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