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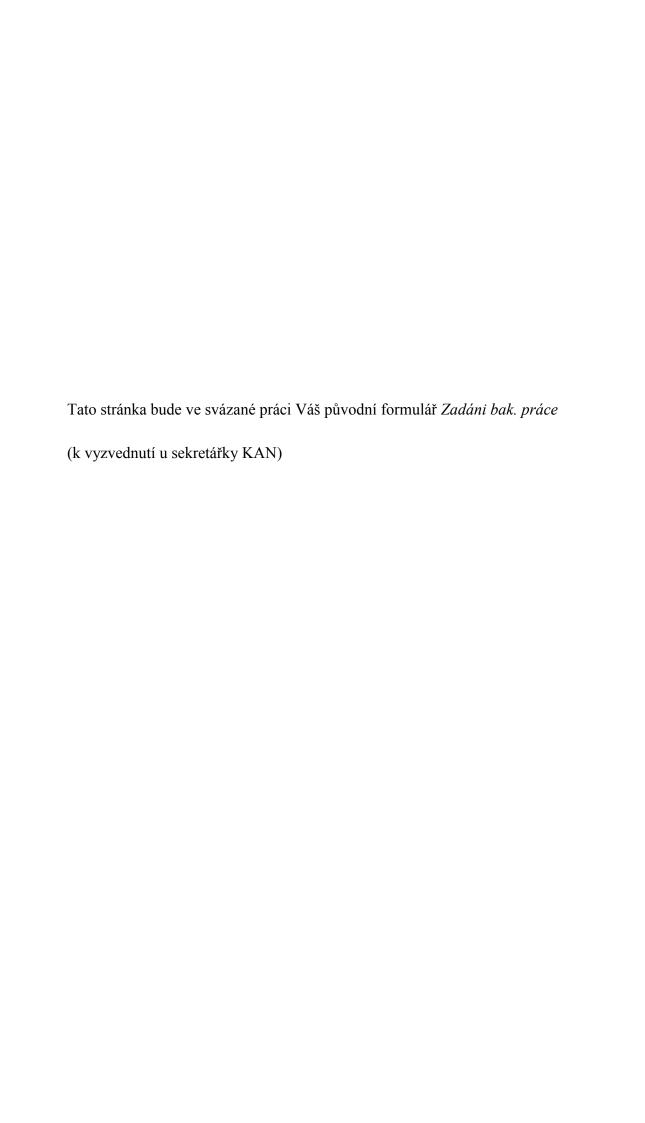
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Undergraduate Thesis

CAN PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN "LEARN" A FOREIGN LANGUAGE?

Ivana Gálová

Plzeň 2012

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Ivana Gálová

ABSTRACT

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This thesis addresses the question whether pre-school children can learn a foreign language. It is focused solely on pre-school children whose first language is other than English. These children learn English as a foreign language in pre-school programmes or in kindergarten but do not use this language as a natural means of communication. This piece of work demonstrates how the age at which a person is exposed to a foreign language influences the learning process. The age issue is related to child's levels of development and other characteristics significant for pre-school learners. Furthermore, the thesis offers a summary of key aspects connected with teaching methods suitable for pre-school children. The included discussion aims to identify different attitudes to foreign language education at pre-school age. The main purpose of the work is to provide an evidence for the fact that learning a foreign language at pre-school age is possible and meaningful.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis addresses the question whether pre-school children can learn a foreign language. It is focused solely on pre-school children whose first language is other than English. These children learn English as a foreign language in pre-school programmes or in kindergarten but do not use this language as a natural means of communication.

The aim of this work is to demonstrate how the age at which a person is exposed to a foreign language influences the learning process. The age issue is related to child's levels of development and other characteristics significant for pre-school learners. Questions associated with appropriate teaching methodology arise immediately. This thesis offers a summary of key aspects connected with teaching methods suitable for pre-school children. The included discussion aims to identify different attitudes to the question whether children should begin learning a foreign language as young as pre-school. The main purpose of this thesis is to provide an evidence for the fact that learning a foreign language at pre-school age is possible and meaningful.

The thesis comprises of four main sections. In the first section fundamental terminology related to the topic is clarified. The second section provides an overview of the distinctive features of pre-school learners. They are analysed from different perspectives related to child's levels of development. The third section is focused on teaching methodology. It includes organisation issues related to teaching and offers a list of activity types suitable for pre-school learners together with their aims. The fourth section is dedicated to the discussion about introducing English as a foreign language into kindergartens.

There are several reasons why I became interested in this topic. First of all, I was inspired by my teaching practice, since I have been teaching English in a kindergarten for five years. The opportunity of learning English for pre-school children was received very positively by some parents whereas others were sceptical. In most cases I experienced that people have a negative attitude to teaching foreign languages to pre-schoolers because they do not have relevant information. This was a significant impulse for me to start gathering more information in order to be able to offer suitable response. Moreover, I hope this piece of work will be interesting and useful for anyone who is involved in teaching children.

1. TERMINOLOGY

The terminology used in language pedagogy is often ambiguous and sometimes confusing. To prevent or at least minimize possible misunderstanding, the following chapter provides the explanation of how some terms are used in this thesis.

1.1 Pre-school age

In the broad sense of the word, pre-school age represents a time period from the birth of a child to the beginning of compulsory schooling (Langmeier & Krejčíková, 2006, p. 87). However, according to Langmeier and Krejčíková (2006), this definition ignores the fact that developmental needs of toddlers and needs of children aged three to six are substantially different. Consequently, it is necessary to deal with both periods separately with respect to their distinctive features. Then, in the narrow sense of the word, pre-school period refers to children from three years old (p. 87). The upper end of the pre-school age range is difficult to establish since it varies from country to country. The term pre-schoolers can therefore mean children up to the age of seven, eight or even nine. Since formal schooling in the Czech Republic starts at the age of six, this work is focused on children between the ages three and six. They are called 'pre-schoolers', 'pre-school children' or 'pre-school learners' in this thesis.

1.2 Foreign language

Since this work deals with learning a foreign language, the term 'foreign' needs to be explained as well. The distinction between the terms 'native language', 'second language' and 'foreign language' is made.

Terms such as 'native language', 'first language' or 'mother tongue' can be used as synonyms. They represent the language a person has acquired in infancy and generally within the family (Stern, 2009, p. 10).

Second language learning and foreign language learning differ in their purposes. According to Littlewood (1991), "a 'second' language has social functions within the community where it is learnt, whereas a 'foreign' language is learnt primarily for contact outside one's own community" (p. 2).

Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) offered a more specific definition:

> Learning a foreign language is learning a language not used (by the speaker or by others) in the immediate environment as a daily means of communication. It may, of course, be used in the mass media, but there will be no naturally occurring daily need to use the language for purposes of communication.
>
> Learning a second language, on the other hand, is learning a language used daily in the speaker's own environment, perhaps not in the immediate environment, at least in early childhood, but at any rate in the larger community. As soon as one is outside one's own home, there will be a chance to use the language actively, or at any rate one will hear it used. (p. 141)

1.3   Language learning

Finally, there is a need to clarify what the term 'language learning' means. It is most widely used in contrast to 'language acquisition'.

In the 1970s these two terms were contrasted by the American applied linguist Stephen D. Krashen. He uses the term 'language acquisition' to describe "a process similar, if not identical, to the way children develop ability in their first language" (Krashen, 1987, p. 10). He mentions that language acquirers usually do not realise the process of acquiring language. They are only conscious of being able to communicate in the language. Language acquisition, then, is subconscious (Krashen, 1987, p. 10).

On the contrary, the term language learning denotes "conscious language development particularly in formal school-like settings" (Stern, 2009, p. 20). According to Krashen (1987), language learning refers to "formal knowledge of a language, or explicit learning" (p. 10).

Since our knowledge about what is conscious and what is subconscious in foreign language learning is too unclear for us to use the distinction between the terms 'learning' and 'acquisition' reliably (Littlewood, 1991, p. 3), this thesis is not focused on their differences. Although learning a foreign language is mainly conscious process, acquisition takes part as well. To what extent it is learning or acquisition is therefore left for a discussion and it is not the subject matter of this work.

The term 'learning', if used in this thesis, refers to learning which has been deliberately planned. In other words, it is learning in response to teaching. For this situation the term school bilingualism can be used as well. School bilingualism is "the result of learning a foreign language at school by formal teaching and it implies that the learner has not had much opportunity, or indeed any, to use the language as a natural means of communication" (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981, p. 95).

The school type of learning is in contrast to the term natural language learning or natural bilingualism which refers to the process of learning two languages without formal teaching. Natural learning is a part of individual's everyday life. Such individuals use both languages as their natural means of communication and thus they can be called natural bilinguals. This happens for example in the family where the parents speak different languages, or if the community speaks a different language from the family (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981, p. 95). This work does not deal with such cases.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF PRE-SCHOOL LEARNERS

Language learning cannot be separated from child development as a whole. For teachers it is therefore very important to be aware of what a child at a particular age is able to understand and do, both mentally and physically. (Lewis & Bedson, 2008, p. 18). "It makes no sense to introduce a game requiring simple addition if the children can't count. Nor would a directional game work with children who do not know left from right" (Lewis & Bedson, 2008, p. 18). Consequently, it is necessary to describe developmental levels and needs of pre-school children in order to provide a theoretical basis for lesson planning. Teacher should learn as much as they can about child development to be able to adapt learning activities precisely to pre-school learners.

Dunn (1983) agrees that teachers must be aware of learners' stages of cognitive, language, physical, social, and emotional growth. Only on the basis of this knowledge an effective learning programme can be planned. If a child is asked to learn something new without reaching the point when he/she is ready and has got appropriate skills, he/she will probably fail. This can cause child's disappointment and sometimes even loss of interest and enthusiasm. Since such children tend to be restless, discipline problems can occur. For that reason, it is necessary for a teacher to recognise children's level of development in order to choose the activities which correspond to their developmental stage. If they cope with this problem, children will be motivated and they will feel successful (pp. 8-13).

Nevertheless, it is important to mention that pre-school children are not identical and age is only a relative indicator of child development. There are big differences between three to six years olds but also "there could be a wide gap between different children of the same age" (Reilly & Ward, 1999, p. 11). Scott and Ytreberg (1990) supported this opinion by saying that "some children develop early, some later. Some children develop gradually, others in leaps and bounds" (p. 1).

However, it is possible to find some general characteristics of pre-school children which are important for language learning and teaching. They are divided into four areas of child development: cognitive, physical, social and emotional, and language development. All of them play an important role in determining what activities are right for young children and thus should be considered by language teachers.

2.1   Cognitive Development

The language-learning abilities are connected with the rest of child's mental growth. It is, therefore, very important for a teacher to choose learning activities which are appropriate to children's level of cognitive development, thus based on concepts children are familiar with. Teachers then, naturally, need to learn what concepts children already know (Dunn, 1983, pp. 10-12).

Reilly and Ward (1999) state:

> First of all, most children of this age cannot yet read and write, or make the kind of abstract deductions that even a child of seven can make. The children will still be gaining basic skills such as holding a crayon or pencil, colouring in, relating the real thing to a pictorial representation of it, being able to recognize shapes, sorting and classifying, recognizing similarities and differences, using scissors, glue, and other implements. Any syllabus will have to take all these things into consideration. (p. 13)

Langmeier and Krejčíková (2006) describe children's level of cognitive development, their knowledge of the world and of themselves. According to them, pre-school children know their full name, recognise the basic colours, they can define familiar things (by their purpose, material or shape), and know how to count up to ten. At the age of six most children are able to say how many items they see (if there are about ten items). Besides, pre-school children distinguish what is small and what is big (p. 89).

2.1.1   Concentration span

Another important issue a teacher should be aware of is the length of time a child can concentrate on doing one thing. In general, pre-school children's concentration span is short but, according to Dunn (1983), it can vary from child to child. While some of them can pay attention only for about five minutes, others can manage to concentrate on one activity for much longer time - up to fifteen minutes (p. 9).

According to Holden (1991), one of the reasons of short concentration span is the constant exposure to new things and experiences. Since children are able to receive new

information only to a certain extent, they may feel unable to receive any more at some point (p. 7).

What is important to know is that once children got bored and lost interest, it is useless to continue an activity. In that case it is better to cease doing it and try something else (Holden, 1991, pp. 6-7). According to Reilly and Ward (1999), a teacher must not interpret it as a personal rejection. "It is very difficult to hold the attention of a whole group of small children and the best way to do it is to ring the changes every five to ten minutes" (p. 7). Dunn (1983) adds, "It is best to change the activity before children lose interest so that they are left wanting more and looking forward to the next opportunity to do the same activity. Over-exposure to an activity leads to boredom" (p. 10).

2.2 Physical Development

Not only cognitive development but also physical development should be considered when preparing an effective learning programme for pre-school children. A teacher needs to count with the fact that it is quite difficult for small children to sit still. They want to move and touch things around them. According to Millar (as cited in Dunn, 1983):

> The fact that children find it less easy than adults to sit still for long periods, not to bang their heels against a chair, not to jump up, or move their arms, or touch objects, to execute fine movements with their fingers and modulate voices, is not a question of having more energy to spill, but of comparative lack of integration and control of movement systems. (p. 14)

Therefore language-learning activities should allow children to move. Learning games, songs, or rhymes can contain physical activity like jumping, dancing or acting.

Every healthy child has a need of movement. However, this need is not the same for all children. There are some children with hypermotoric behaviour who need to move much more than others. A teacher has to understand that these children are not naughty. They only need to move very often. A teacher should not forbid them to move because they can then feel unsatisfied and they can interpret it as a lack of teacher's understanding and love (Koťátková, 2005, p. 24).

2.3   Social and Emotional Development

It is difficult to examine all characteristics of child's emotional development. Not all aspects, therefore, are described in this chapter. The following features were chosen because of the fact that both of them play an important role in language learning process.

2.3.1   Temperament and mood

According to Dunn (1983), it is important for a teacher to realise that children can differ in temperament. Not all children are assertive and energetic. Some of them are shy or even fearful of making a mistake. Temperament can influence their involvement in learning activities and therefore it is useful for teachers to find out what sort of temperament each child has. A teacher than knows which children need more encouragement than others, for example. On the basis of this knowledge he/she can choose suitable language-learning activities as well (p. 14).

Apart from child's temperament, the mood is another factor which can influence the learning atmosphere. According to Reilly and Ward (1999), children may not always be in a good temper. They can be withdrawn, bad-tempered, or upset sometimes. This can be caused by events at home, such as the birth of a new baby in child's family or moving the house. Children can be strongly affected by such changes. In this case, teachers should notify the parents (p. 8).

Holden (1991) states, not only individuals can influence the lesson. Also the mood of a whole class can change from time to time. Sometimes children will be calm and quiet, while next time they will be very energetic and they will not sit still for a while (p. 7). Dunn (1983) argued this factor should not be overlooked. Children can be, for example, influenced by weather conditions or they can be excited by a planned birthday celebration or an approaching festival. Since they are excited, it is difficult for them to concentrate. Sometimes it can happen that one or two children spread their mood to the rest of the class. Consequently, children are not still and do not want to do quiet activities. In this case the activities for particular day need to be adapted according to the actual mood of a class (pp. 12-13).

2.3.2 Cooperation not competition

When working with children a teacher has to face two basic principles of group activities: cooperation and competition. Each of them is connected with different social experience and they should, ideally, be balanced. In reality, it may be difficult for a teacher to achieve this goal with children. According to Koťátková (2005), competition is given to children from nature whereas cooperation has to be learnt (p. 43).

Reilly and Ward (1999) admit that children can be selfish and they sometimes do not want to cooperate. They are not very interested in other child's feelings and therefore they will hurt another child if they want to get something. They may sometimes have a temper tantrum and they may also scream or even bite (pp. 7-8).

Scott and Ytreberg (1990) remark that a teacher should keep in mind that some children will not want to work in pairs or groups immediately. "Particularly five and six year olds are often happiest working alone, and are not willing to cooperate and share. They will want to keep all the cards, read the book alone, play with all the toys in the English corner, etc." (p. 15).

A teacher should be the one who stimulates the cooperation during the lessons. He/she should appreciate children's cooperative effort each time and so strengthen it (Koťátková, 2005, p. 43). To support cooperation he/she should group the children together whenever possible. They do not have to work in groups all the time but they feel better when other pupils are close by. For children it is good to sit together, for example in a circle. Sitting with other children stimulates cooperation. Nevertheless, a real cooperation has to be learnt and it is usually the result of a long process. (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, p. 6).

Pre-school children are not good losers as well. Therefore a teacher should better avoid organised competition in the class. At the beginning it can be a very funny activity for children and it motivates them to be involved but at the end of the game there is always a winner and a loser (or a winning team and losing team). The losers can feel that they are not good at language learning and this situation can cause the loss of their motivation (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, p. 11).

Physical rewards or prizes should be rather avoided. If some children do not get a reward or a prize, they will feel sad. This situation tells them that they have not won and it certainly does not help them to learn with joy. There are other forms of encouragement which are much more effective (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, p. 11).

Giving children a verbal praise is much better. Children want to know how they are doing and so a teacher should talk to them regularly and encourage them as well. This can be realised in very simple terms or phrases such as: *Very good. Well done! That's a nice picture.* The positive side of things should be always emphasised and a failure should be better played down (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, pp. 7,11).

2.4 Language Development

Šulová (2010) states that general improvement of language skills is a characteristic feature of pre-school age. Children's vocabulary develops and semantic and syntactic structure of their language becomes more complex. Preschool children are able to use basic grammar rules such as conjugation, declension or comparative and superlative forms of words. Their interest in the speech is getting greater. Language serves as a useful and fundamental tool for communication in this period. Besides communicative function of language, cognitive component of speech develops as well. Growth of knowledge and experience is closely connected with language development (p. 16).

According to Genesee (1994):

Preschool-aged children already have substantial, although not complete, control over their first language. Normally developing children of 3, 4, and 5 already understand what language is for and know a good deal about how their first language works. They have developed an extensive vocabulary, they can use all of the basic grammatical structures and they have begun to learn when, where, and with whom it is appropriate to use certain language forms. All of these linguistic skills will, of course, continue to increase in sophistication during the school years, but the foundations have already been developed by the time a child is of preschool age. (p. 104)

Nevertheless, there are differences between three to six-years-olds. Three years old children do not pronounce well yet. They often replace syllables by other sounds or pronounce them incorrectly. At the age of four and five this deficiency is eliminated (Langmeier & Krejčíková, 2006, p. 88).

Marxtová (2010) deals with child's development in connection with foreign language learning and emphasizes that child's level of language development plays an important role in foreign language learning process. According to her, the age of five seems to be the most appropriate age to begin with foreign language learning because child's mother tongue becomes an essential means of communication. Five years old children have sufficient vocabulary in their mother tongue and use it to satisfy their needs and to express their wishes. Besides, they can pronounce almost correctly at this age. (pp. 156-157).

Moreover, pre-school children typically show extraordinary sensitivity to language stimuli, spontaneity of speech and minimal social inhibitions or even their absence. Preschool children also have exceptional imitation skills, audio differentiation ability and dominance of mechanical memory. From the language skills point of view, pre-school age is, therefore, a suitable period for learning a foreign language (Marxtová, 2010, p. 157).

Finally, pre-school children with defects and disabilities of speech or small vocabulary in their mother tongue should be mentioned. According to Marxtová (2010), it is advisable for such children to wait with learning a foreign language at a later age. First of all, they should focus on right pronunciation in their mother tongue and improve it before entering a primary school prior to put their effort into another language (p. 157).

3. TEACHING ENGLISH TO PRE-SCHOOLERS

The implication of the previous chapter for language teachers is that teaching methods should be developmentally appropriate to pre-school language learners and should correspond to children's needs, interests and skills. According to Reilly and Ward (1999), a teacher should help the child's progress in all areas of his/her development (p. 8). "Anything the children learn is a gain" (Reilly & Ward, 1999, p. 7).

3.1 Key aspects of teaching

The success of a learning situation depends not only on suitable teaching methods. There are other elements that can help to create the best conditions for learning. These key aspects of teaching process are mentioned in the following chapters.

3.1.1 Classroom arrangement and atmosphere

A suitable organisation of the classroom where lessons take place can contribute to successful course of lessons. Since most of the activities and games are active, an ample space is required for a lesson to be realised. Most of the time children will not sit at desks but move. An area with a carpet can provide a suitable place, where children can play games and sit as well, if needed. Nevertheless, for working with textbooks, desks will be also necessary (Harper, Covil, & Reilly, 2007).

Dunn (1983) proposes a list of basic needs for a young learner's classroom. It needs not only a place where children can sit on mat or carpet round the teacher and a place for playing games. Desks or tables are also required to provide appropriate surface for handwork. Besides, the classroom organisation does not refer only to suitable places for particular activities, but also to equipment. According to Dunn, a teacher needs a blackboard (low enough for children), a cassette recorder[1] for listening activities, and

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[1] Since the work was written in 1983, the word cassette recorder is inappropriate in today's context. Nowadays, teachers use a CD player rather than a cassette recorder.

some basic equipment for handwork, such as paper, crayons, scissors, paste, stapler, etc. (p. 31).

Reilly and Ward (1999) also emphasises the importance of some space in the classroom, particularly for physical activities such as dancing and other active games. According to them, activities such as listening to stories or taking a register should take place on a carpet as well. Sitting in semicircles facing the teacher seems to be the best arrangement which allows children to communicate easily.

Furthermore, a teacher should try to create an English atmosphere in the classroom. Dunn (1983) offers several suggestions that can be adopted in order to achieve success in this area:

> It is possible to create an English atmosphere in a classroom with pictures, posters, notices and books in English or by playing English songs on a cassette. The 'warming-up' period at the beginning of phase one also helps to create an atmosphere and get children into the mood for using English. (p. 30)

Similarly, Scott and Ytreberg (1990) assume that physical surroundings could create a good class atmosphere. Young children feel pleasant in a classroom, where calendars, posters, postcards, children's drawings, and other pieces of work are presented. They add character to the room and so do some plants and other interesting objects. In the case of not having a chance to decorate the whole classroom since it is used for other subjects or other classes as well, a teacher should at least manage an English corner or a section of wall. (p. 11). Reilly and Ward (1999) agree that "it is important to have a place where children's work can be displayed. If the classroom is used for other subjects perhaps there could be an 'English corner'" (Reilly & Ward, 1999, p. 15).

3.1.2   Lesson planning

To make children interested and involved in English learning a lesson plan must be prepared carefully.

According to Scott and Ytreberg (1990), planning can be divided into three stages.

At the first stage, long term planning is realised. It takes place either before or at the beginning of the term. Aims, methods and topics to cover should be planned. If possible, a teacher should involve the children in planning process and give them a chance to choose the topics according to what they prefer. If a teacher uses a topic-based course book, he/she can look through the list of contents and select the topics or change their order. Then a teacher should decide how many lessons each topic will cover (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, p. 98).

Long term planning is followed by more detailed short term planning. The lessons on one topic or the lessons for one month are planned ahead. The language items a teacher is going to teach should be selected and activities suitable for the topic should be found. In a course book most of planning for this stage is provided. Experienced teachers can change the designed plan according to their needs. They can, for example, choose different timing. Moreover, assessment should be considered and included in teacher's plan as well (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, p. 100).

At the third stage, lesson planning takes place. It has to be done before every lesson. Teachers need to have a clear idea of how to organise the classroom, decide the activities and indicate how much time each activity will take. They should better prepare more activities than they think they will need. Each lesson should be linked with the previous one and the next lesson should be considered as well when making a lesson plan. At the beginning lesson plans are very detailed but they become less detailed with practice. As teachers become more experienced, they do not have to note all the details (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, p. 102).

Dunn (1983) mentions three phases into which a lesson can be divided.

Phase one takes place on a carpet or a mat. Learners sit round the teacher making a circle which enables them to hear clearly and see his or her face and mouth movements. It is necessary for proper imitation and self-correction. At the beginning the warm-up activities including revision of rhymes, songs and vocabulary is realised. Through these activities children improve their hearing, understanding and using English and become more familiar with the language. The revision is followed by introducing new vocabulary which is then practised through suitable activities (p. 28).

During phase two children sit at tables or desks. Activities such as colouring or working with textbooks are included in this calm period. This is an opportunity for a teacher to talk to each child about the activity and provide words of encouragement (pp. 28-29).

Since children are getting tired and lose their interest by the end of the lesson, games and activities which enable them to move are optimal. Phase three can, therefore, include drama or activities which involve running, jumping and other types of movement (p. 29).

For pre-school children it is also important to understand how the lesson is organised. Therefore, teachers find it helpful to establish routines which are followed in each lesson. If children know what to expect, they will feel more secure and confident. If they can predict the situation, their concentration on the activity they are involved will be much better and the sense of security will help them to learn more easily. With established routines it is also easier for a teacher to organise the children (Dunn, 1983, p. 26). Dunn (1983) states that "The calmness of a class that is used to a routine is quite noticeable, especially when compared with a class haphazardly planned with a little or no regular routine" (p. 26).

In order to indicate the following activity, it is useful to establish the transition markers for each phase of the lesson. For example, a familiar greeting song might indicate the beginning of the lesson followed by 'circle time', drum or ringing the bell might introduce 'table time' and a familiar bye-bye song might be a signal of the end of the lesson (Harper, Covil, & Reilly, 2007)

The lesson plans may differ from teacher to teacher. Even the lesson plan of one teacher can be modified to fit different aims of the lesson. To provide some examples, two possible lesson plans are proposed.

Hennová (2010) suggests how a lesson might be planned.

1. Greeting, polite questions and routine phrases such as 'How are you?' or 'Is everybody here?'
2. Familiar songs or chants
3. Warm-up activity including vocabulary revision
4. New language
5. Activities connected with the new language
6. Assessment (p. 14)

According to Reilly and Ward (1999), a possible lesson plan might be as follows:
1. A familiar song
2. New language
3. Craft activity connected with the new language
4. A song, rhyme or chant connected with the new language
5. A familiar active game or activities with Total Physical Response[2]
6. A familiar story (p. 15)

Since there is no prescriptive syllabus for pre-school language teaching, teachers can design their lesson plan according to themselves. Nevertheless, as mentioned in previous chapters, teaching strategies have to correspond to children's developmental needs and interests. At the same time, it is important to have a clear idea of what linguistic aims to achieve. If these conditions are fulfilled, children should make progress.

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[2] More information provided in chapter 3.2.1 Total physical response

3.1.3   Classroom language

Pre-school language teachers are often uncertain whether they should use the mother tongue in the language class or not. When giving instructions it is important to make everything clear for children. Since explanation in English can be incomprehensible or time-consuming, teachers may find easier to give the instructions to pre-school learners mainly in the mother tongue. On the other hand, this can be a wasted opportunity for natural communication in English.

Gill and Lenochová (2009) believe that "simple instructions and commands are one of the ways in which real and natural communication in the English lesson can begin" (p. 3). Using phrases such as "Stand up" or "Open your books" make children feel that they can understand a foreign language even if they cannot speak the language much yet (Gill & Lenochová, 2009, p. 3). "When children start learning English, they obviously need to be given language before they can produce it themselves. Language has to go in before it can come out" (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, p. 34).

A teacher should use English as much as possible because children most likely do not have the opportunity to hear the foreign language somewhere else than during the lesson. A teacher should use simple but natural language, suitable for children's level. Body language and tone of voice can be very useful, since they convey the meaning of words (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, p. 18).

Reilly and Ward (1999) support this opinion and suggest how the mother tongue can be avoided. Since very young learners rely on gesture and facial expression, body language can help a lot with communication. English greetings, instructions, rhymes, stories, or songs should be accompanied by gestures, mime, and pictures to help children understand their meaning. When speaking English, a teacher should use familiar gestures related to children's culture (p. 5).

Hennová (2010) agrees that children are able to understand English through nonverbal communication and gestures. A teacher can put a finger over his/her mouth while telling children to be quiet, make a thumbs-up gesture while saying "Well done" or move his/her palms upwards to gesture to stand up (pp. 12-13).

A teacher should encourage learners to speak English as well but not tell them to speak only in English during the language lesson. Since they are not able to communicate in English yet, it actually means for them to be quiet. This rule can make a relationship between a teacher and his/her pupils worse. Small children sometimes need to impart information and it is important for them to know that their teacher listens to them. They can also give the teacher a useful feedback about their feelings and impressions. That is one of the reasons why he/she should sometimes accept the communication in mother tongue (Reilly & Ward, 1999, p. 5).

Besides, there are some other situations where using the mother tongue can be helpful. More complicated games or games including concepts children have not yet learnt can require a mother tongue explanation. Otherwise, children are confused because they do not understand what their teacher is trying to say and what their task is.

> We may want to organize a game or explain how to make something. We often spend a long time trying to get the message across in English (and probably failing) when a couple of words in the mother tongue would make everything clear. (Reilly & Ward, 1999, p. 5)

In such a situation a teacher should instruct the children first in English and then repeat the instructions in the mother tongue. Later, when they are familiar with the particular game or activity and English phrases, the mother tongue can be omitted (Reilly & Ward, 1999, p. 5).

Holden (1991) introduces another situation suitable for using the mother tongue in the language class. It is often within a very first lesson, when the reasons why children should learn a foreign language are discussed. If a teacher wants to make children interested, he/she can speak about eventual travel or work in a foreign country, about communication with foreign tourists, understanding pop songs and other situation where knowledge of a foreign language could be useful. Obviously, this discussion has to be done in the mother tongue (p. 6).

3.1.4   Motivation

For pre-school children, it is very important to have motivation to learn a new language. First of all, it is important to realise that for pre-school children language learning itself is not the key motivational factor. "Games can provide this stimulus. The game context makes the foreign language immediately useful to the children. It brings the target language to life" (Lewis & Bedson, 2008, p. 5).

Hennová (2010) believes that motivation is very important factor in foreign language learning and according to her, to motivate pre-school children is rather easy. Entertaining activities and learning through play provide the main motivational factor. If the atmosphere is friendly and children enjoy learning, they will be motivated (p. 11).

Hanšpachová and Řandová (2005) also emphasise the importance of games in teaching because they are full of adventure, surprise and fun which is very motivational for pre-school learners. Children need to play and games provide a natural and joyful way of learning (p. 9).

Furthermore, the relationship between learners and their teacher is regarded as another significant factor affecting children's attitudes towards foreign language learning (Janíková, 2011, p. 89). It helps a lot if teachers have a sense of humour, are adaptable, patient and open-minded. Children need to know that their teachers like them and respect them. But they have to appear to like all learners equally. Young children have a very keen sense of fairness (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, p. 9).

Tiedeman (1942) agrees:

> If pupils and teachers work in harmony, with a mutual feeling of understanding and cooperation, a friendly atmosphere will result which is conducive to effective learning. Teachers that are aloof, unfriendly, and otherwise irritate and antagonize their pupils, destroy interests and incentives for learning. (p. 657)

Moreover, children need positive feedback and encouragement. From the very beginning a teacher should talk to the children about their work and encourage them. He/she can do it in very simple terms but always the positive side of things should be stressed, since positive assessment increases motivation. Children should be told that making mistakes is all right and everyone makes mistakes when learning a new language (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, pp. 7-11).

According to Janíková (2011), insensitive corrections of linguistic mistakes may result in aversion, fear and stress and, therefore, in a decreased motivation. Then such conditions may lead to child's resignation and cause his or her negative attitude to the language itself (p. 90).

Finally, Skehan's (1990) view of four possible influences on motivation can be mentioned.

1. One source of motivation might be the learning activity itself. If a learning situation is attractive for children, their interest will be stimulated. Classroom, if it is a nice and pleasant place, will contribute to motivation as well.
2. The amount of success achieved by learners is another motivational factor. Learners who do not well will be discouraged, while those who do well will be persistent in their efforts. In this case, motivation would be a result rather than a cause of success.
3. The stimulus for motivation can be provided with rewards and sanctions. Both of them influence learner's performance.
4. Finally, learners are influenced by external circumstances and have their own goals and orientations which lead to motivation and higher achievement (pp. 49-50).

The role of teachers seems crucial in the whole motivational process, since a teacher is a person who arranges the learning conditions and circumstances. He/she should select suitable learning activities that would be attractive for his/her group of learners and create a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere, to which his personality contributes as well. If words of encouragement are added, there will be optimal conditions for motivation.

3.2   Activities and their aims

Dunn (1983) suggests how activities can be planned for language lessons. First of all, they should correspond to child's level of development. Short concentration span should be considered in particular. Moreover, it is very useful if the same activity is repeated at least twice during different lessons because the first time children rather concentrate to its organisation than language used. If activities are familiar to children, the maximum language profit will be provided. Nevertheless, a teacher should use various activities within one lesson, both familiar and new. Since children like routines which give them a sense of security, there should not be more new activities than familiar ones (pp. 33-35). "Repetition within an activity does not bore young children in the same way as it appears to bore older children and some adults. Repetition seems to give children a feeling of satisfaction and achievement which helps to motivate" (Dunn, 1983, p. 53).

According to Hanšpachová and Řandová (2005), child's first exposure to foreign language often determines his/her further motivation and willingness to learn it. If a child is simply bombarded with new vocabulary, it will be not enjoyable for him/her. Similarly, difficulties with grammar make children stressed and demotivated. Learning through games is natural way of making foreign language attractive to children (p. 9)

Wright, Betteridge, and Buckby (1994) add that language learning requires effort. Understanding, accurate repeating and using newly presented language can be demanding for children. Suitable language activities and games provide encouragement and make learners interested and involved. They also create context in which the language is meaningful. If the language is experienced in games, children will remember it better (p. 1).

There are many types of language games and activities and not all of them can be mentioned here. Wright, Betteridge, and Buckby (1994) introduce, for example, picture games, card and board games, story games, word games, memory games, question and answer games, guessing and speculating games and many others. Lewis and Bedson (2008) mention movement games, card games, board games, drawing games,

guassing games, role-play games, singing and chanting games, team games or word games (pp. 16-18).

It is important to know what types of activities are available in order to plan a balanced lesson. According to Lewis and Bedson, some games are useful when children are tired and a teacher wants to wake them up. For this purpose movement games or competition games are suitable. They can be called 'rousers'. On the other hand, to make children calm so-called 'settlers' can be used. Craft activities, listening activities or board games can serve as examples (Lewis & Bedson, 2008, p. 7).

Reilly and Ward (1999) believe that "the main emhasis should be on the type of activities which children normally do at pre-school, adapted to language learning" (Reilly & Ward, 1999, p. 9). Following chapters provide an overview of such activities together with their aims.

3.2.1 Total physical response

Pre-school learners are not able to produce much of the target language at the beginning. However, they can respond to instructions, since they understand much more than they can produce. There is an extremely successful teaching technique based on this principle called TPR (Total Physical Response). With TPR children learn a foreign language by listening to their teacher who tells them what to do, and then do it. Context, facial expression, gestures or tone of voice helps them understand the meaning of words. If a teacher says: 'Sit down' and children sit down, that is an example of total physical response, since children expressed the meaning by appropriate physical movement. If vocabulary is repeated regularly, the passive language knowledge will naturally become active (Hanšpachová & Křížová, 2009, p. 9). Following instructions in a game or craft activity is not the only way of using TPR in language teaching. Children can mime a song, rhyme or act out a story as well (Reilly & Ward, 1999, p. 9).

3.2.2   Pictures and flashcards

Pictures and flashcards are used for various aspects of language teaching and there are many occasions for teachers to use visual stimulus. Pictures or flashcards can serve as an illustration of something being talked about or as a background to a certain topic.

Probably the most obvious thing to do with pictures is naming and describing things children can see in them. When new vocabulary is presented to pre-school learners, a teacher can hold up a flashcard to illustrate the meaning. Later he/she can simply point at the picture and ask learners 'What is this?' in order to revise vocabulary. Moreover, children can describe faces, places, objects, their shape, the size and the colouring. Besides, they can speak about what people are wearing and what they are doing. Describing objects within a context is much better than simply name them because it has more intrinsic communicative value.   (Hill, 1990, pp. 17-19). Lewis and Bedson (2008) agree, "Unfortunately, producing a lot of individual words looks good at parents' meetings but does not show a child how to communicate in English" (p. 16).

The story telling can be accompanied by a set of pictures as well. They are used to show a number of incidents in a story presented to learners. Alternatively, children can be asked to determine a chronological sequence of pictures (events) before telling the story (Hill, 1990, p. 9).

Furthermore, pictures can provide culture background related to language, since teaching language is also teaching the culture of people who speak that language. They can refer to objects, places, customs, habit or traditions. If the target language is British English, for example, pictures can represent typically British food (fish and chips, English breakfast), places (suburban housing, park, and football grounds), people (police officers, fox hunters) and so on (Hill, 1990, p. 15).

Moreover, flashcards and pictures are often components of various games. According to Lewis and Bedson (2008), the cards can simply serve as symbols for objects or actions but they can also have a meaning in a game. Children can collect, give away, exchange, sort or count them (p. 17).

Wright (1989) states that pictures can motivate learners and make them want to pay attention and to participate in such activity. Besides, they "contribute to the context in which the language is being used. They bring the world into the classroom" (p. 17).

3.2.3   Songs and rhymes

Songs and rhymes should be used in language learning as well because they are easily available examples of spoken English. They help children's language development and convince learners of the way English is pronounced. They are helpful for their physical development as well, since they are often used in conjunction with movement, dance and mime.

Reilly and Wright (1999) summarise why songs and rhymes are useful for pre-school language learners:

> One of the linguistic advantages of songs, chants, and rhymes is that learners will happily repeat the same structure, even the same words, over and over again without getting bored. Songs, chants, and rhymes are particularly useful in stress-timed language such as English because the rhythm forces us to put the stress in the right places and to observe the strong and weak forms. At the same time pronunciation is improved as the students are concentrating on sound rather than meaning. Young children are excellent mimics, although you cannot expect perfect pronunciation, especially if they cannot yet produce all the sounds of their mother tongue. They are particularly good at copying intonation. (p. 23)

Similarly, Dunn (1983) states that songs and rhymes "introduce children naturally and effectively to the complete sounds of English as well as to stress and intonation" (p. 80). He adds that learning rhymes and songs is easy, quick and enjoyable for children. Reilly and Wright (1999) offer an explanation: "When words are linked to rhythm and music they seem to have more emotive and personal significance and so are remembered better" (p. 23).

Moreover, songs and rhymes contribute to children's confidence. When they can say an English rhyme or sing an English song, they feel they can speak a lot of English (Dunn, 1983, p. 80). Wright (1991) also claims that "Songs and rhymes give the child feeling of producing a flow of English" (p. 65).

Particular songs and rhymes should be selected for their suitable language content. They can provide excellent opportunity for learning vocabulary related to topics of the lessons. They can be focused on colours, animals, family members, etc. Special songs for festivals can be selected. However, to make the words in songs and chants meaningful and easy to remember for children, they should be accompanied by illustrations or movements. Children can mime, dance, jump, stamp their feet, clap hands or turn around while singing or listening to songs (Hanšpachová & Křížová, 2009, pp. 10-11). If a teacher can speak the mother tongue of his/her learners, it is useful to give a rough translation of a song or rhyme in the children's mother tongue (Dunn, 1983, pp. 82-85).

According to Dunn (1983), rhymes and songs can be applied to situation in the classroom. For example, a particular rhyme or song can be used to begin every lesson. If the situation is the same each lesson, children will know what to expect. Routines help them to feel secure (pp. 80-82). When children are colouring by the end of a lesson, it is another situation when songs can be used. Instead of simply letting children colour, a teacher can take advantage of this opportunity to play familiar English songs and rhymes for them (Harper, Covil, & Reilly, 2007).

If a teacher is not a good singer and cannot even play any musical instrument, recordings of English songs can be used instead of his/her own voice. However, a teacher should rather select those with tunes already familiar to learners, since they are easier to teach and remember (Wright, 1991, p. 65). Recordings are also useful for those teachers who are uncertain of their own pronunciation. Nevertheless, according to Dunn (1983), teachers should first try to work with the recording in order to improve their own English and then introduce the rhyme or song to children personally. Personal relationship is very important in learning (p. 83). "Once the children have learned the rhyme with the teacher, they can listen to the recording and refine their own pronunciation from the recorded model" (Dunn, 1983, pp. 83-84).

3.2.4   Art and crafts

According to Wright (2001), "Children learn by doing" (p. 5). He points out that incorporating art and craft activities in the pre-school learner curriculum provide children with an excellent opportunity to learn a foreign language while developing social and creative skills.

As children listen to instructions in the target language in order to learn how to do an activity, they associate the language directly with objects, actions, and experiences. The material presence of objects is important for pre-school learners, since abstract expressions and general principles are not yet fully meaningful. "For example, the word 'me' on its own is worth little or nothing, but written below a self-portrait of a child it becomes meaningful, and is much more likely to be remembered" (Wright, 2001, p. 5).

The art and crafts activities should fit into a lesson plan and refer to the topic learners are familiar with. It makes no sense for children to draw a train while the rest of a lesson is focused on animals. According to Wright (2001), a story invented by children during a lesson can serve as a good linking theme for various activities. Vocabulary included in the story can be practiced through creating drawings or posters related to a particular topic (p. 9).

Not only topical vocabulary is practised when creating art. Children are exposed to a wide range of language and hear much repetition of key terms such as colours, shapes, size or expressions of politeness or praise from their teacher. Children can be encouraged to use English actively as well. Since their vocabulary is limited and they are not able to make full sentences yet, their active use of the language has to be realised in simple terms. Children can be taught how to ask for items in a polite manner (say please and thank you) or how to talk about their picture or craftwork by describing the objects, colours, size, etc. (Wright, 2001).

It could seem that there is too little time for English when making art and craft. Wright opposes: "If the activities engage children, and if they really experience the language, the quality of learning will out-balance the time spent on the art and crafts activities" (Wright, 2001, p. 7).

4. DISCUSSION

English as a foreign language in a kindergarten has become an increasing trend in many different countries all over the world (Reilly & Ward, 1999, p. 2). It naturally leads to the question: Should children learn a foreign language at pre-school age? An overview of the selected opinions on foreign language education at an early age is given in this chapter. This overview is by no means exhaustive but rather aims to show the diversity of approaches related to this phenomenon.

In this discussion children raised in a bilingual family are excluded as well as those who attend bilingual kindergartens based on so-called immersion method, where situation similar to natural bilingualism is simulated. As the rest of the work it is focused solely on children who learn English as a foreign language in kindergartens or in pre-school programmes offered by educational institutions or language schools. At the beginning, pre-school education in the Czech Republic will be described.

From April 16 to May 2, 2008, The Bell School, an international language school, in the assistance of DBM agency, accomplished a survey on the significance of learning foreign languages at pre-school age. An on-line questioning addressed headmasters of Prague kindergartens that have the authority and power of decision in foreign language learning in the particular kindergarten. Responses of 95 directors were received (The Bell School, 2008).

The following results were found:

- Teaching of foreign language at Czech kindergartens is regarded as a standard these days (Teaching of foreign language is provided in 85% of examined sample).
- English is the most frequent language.
- The first contact with the language at pre-school-age facilities helps foreign language learning in elementary school where the subject is obligatory. Besides, these children are not afraid to use it.
- Teacher is expected to have an excellent knowledge of the foreign language as well as a good command of the psychology of pre-school children.

- According to the respondents, an optimal way of teaching a foreign language is through games.
- The most often teacher in the kindergartens is a Czech instructor from a language school with pedagogical education or practice.
- Most often the foreign language is taught once or two times a week in a group of six to ten children.
- According to the respondents, 5 years is an optimum age to start. (The Bell School, 2008)

Marxtová (2010) agrees that learning a foreign language should begin when a child is approximately five years old because five years old children have sufficient vocabulary and their mother tongue becomes an essential means of communication (p. 156). Her opinion was already mentioned in previous chapters.

According to Met (1999), the age issue may not be the most important issue in this discussion. There are some other factors that affect pre-school learner's achievement. All of them can be summarised into four main categories:

- Age
- Developmentally appropriate teaching methods
- A qualified teacher
- Intensity and time devoted to language learning

Teaching methods and age issue related to child's development were both described in detail in previous chapters. It was stated that "a foreign language should be experienced as part of the child's overall development" (Wright, 2001, p. 9). Teachers' qualification and intensity and time devoted to language learning need to be considered.

According to Met (1999) a qualified pre-school language teacher:

- understands and likes children
- is proficient in the foreign language and knowledgeable of its culture
- is skilled in managing an elementary school classroom
- understands issues in the development of foreign language literacy in learners still developing literacy in English

- understands the precepts of communicative language teaching, is familiar with theories of second language development in children, and has a repertoire of instructional approaches for translating theory into classroom practice
- knows the elementary school curriculum, instructional strategies for implementing it, and can integrate these into the foreign language program.

Reilly and Ward (1999) believe that language teachers in kindergarten education are not adequately trained. Either they are not experienced enough in teaching this particular age group or they have not appropriate language qualifications. "Many teachers who trained to teach adults and teenagers are finding themselves with classes of very young learners. At the same time many primary and pre-school teachers whose first language is not English are being asked to teach English too" (p. 3).

New and Cochran (2008) describe Czech language teachers in kindergartens as follows:

Due to the lack of foreign language teachers even at higher levels of school these classes are often taught by persons without the necessary linguistic and pedagogical qualifications. They are mostly qualified teachers who, however, do not know the foreign language well enough, or teachers who know the foreign language well but do not have the pedagogical qualification. This problem has to do with the fact that most of the teachers currently employed finished their studies before 1989, when foreign language teaching (apart from teaching Russian) was a rather marginal affair. We may nevertheless predict a significant improvement in this area, to go hand in hand with an increasing language competence of the Czech population. (p. 1052)

Approaches to intensity of learning are very similar:

According to Marxtová (2010), children should have an opportunity to practise the foreign language every day in an ideal case. If possible, learning should be related to everyday activities in class. One or two lessons per week are not sufficient for pre-school language learners (p. 158).

Hennová (2010) agrees that English should be ideally incorporated during the day. English can accompany morning exercises or games and also instructions can be sometimes given in English, for example when dressing up or washing. Regular practise should take place several times a week (pp. 13-14).

Dunn (1983) claims that "Lessons which are too short do not give children enough time to get 'warmed-up' or for sufficient experiences to take place for adequate acquisition and consolidation" (p. 29). According to him, "lessons should last forty-five minutes and should be more frequent than once a week" (Dunn, 1983, p. 29).

In conclusion Reilly and Ward (1999) can be quoted:

It is vital to remember that the children are very young and that we are aiming to make their first exposure to English an enjoyable one. They have many years of learning ahead of them and they will have enough hurdles to jump later on. If their first experience of English (or any other language) is pleasurable, they will have a positive attitude towards it for the rest of their lives. (p. 14)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to compare the results of this work with the aims described at the beginning. It can be stated that the aims have been successfully fulfilled.

In the first section fundamental terminology related to the topic was clarified in order to prevent possible misunderstanding. The second section provided an overview of the distinctive features of pre-school learners analysed from different perspectives related to child's levels of development. In the third section teaching methodology appropriate for pre-school language learners was described. Key aspects of teaching process together with the list of activity types suitable for pre-school learners were included. The fourth section introduced several opinions related to the matter of learning English as a foreign language at pre-school age.

It was demonstrated that language learning cannot be separated from child´s development as a whole. For teachers it is very important to be aware of what children at pre-school age are able to understand and do both mentally and physically to be able to adapt learning activities precisely to their needs, interests and skills. Moreover, it was shown that the success of a learning situation depends not only on suitable learning activities. Aspects such as lesson planning, classroom arrangement and atmosphere, motivation or classroom language are other key aspects of teaching process and can help to create the best conditions for learning.

The main purpose of the thesis was to provide an evidence for the fact that learning a foreign language at pre-school age is possible. The answer for the question whether pre-school children can learn a foreign language is obvious and confirmed throughout the entire work. Several learning activities were described to serve as examples. Moreover, it was shown that if teaching methods are developmentally appropriate, learning a foreign language at pre-school age will be not only possible, but also meaningful.

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SHRNUTÍ

Tato práce se zabývá otázkou, zda se předškolní děti mohou učit cizímu jazyku. Je zaměřena výhradně na děti předškolního věku, jejichž rodný jazyk je jiný než angličtina a angličtinu se učí jako cizí jazyk v mateřské škole. Práce pojednává o tom, jak může věk dítěte ovlivnit proces učení se cizímu jazyku. Otázka věku je spojena s problematikou vývojových charakteristik předškolního dítěte a dalších rysů významných pro učební proces. Ukazuje se, že proces učení se cizímu jazyku nelze oddělit od stupně vývoje, ve kterém se žák nachází. Práce dále nabízí přehled klíčových aspektů spojených s výukovými metodami vhodnými pro děti předškolního věku. Součástí práce je i diskuse, která má za cíl identifikovat různé přístupy k otázce výuky cizího jazyka v předškolním věku. Hlavním cílem práce bylo prokázat, že učit se cizí jazyk v předškolním věku je nejen možné, ale i smysluplné. Cíl byl úspěšně naplněn.