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THE STORYLINE APPROACH – CREATIVE TEACHER-LEARNER COOPERATION IN THE PROCESS OF EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

The introduction of creative behaviour to learning and teaching process allows learners to best use their abilities. It requires the right attitude of a teacher, who should be capable of and willing to notice every learner's uniqueness, and who should not be afraid of dangers resulting from the implementation of open teaching concepts. Such an attitude is especially important in the process of early foreign language learning. The article focuses on the essence and advantages of the Storyline Approach. This open concept, integrating various teaching themes and based on creating a story together, presents a good method of creative foreign language learning.

Key words: *Storyline Approach, early foreign language learning, creative learning and teaching,*

Впровадження творчої поведінки для навчання і навчального процесу дозволяє учням краще використовувати свої здібності. Він вимагає права ставлення вчителя, які повинні бути здатні і готові відзначити унікальність кожного учня, і які не повинні боятися небезпеки в результаті реалізації концепції відкритого навчання. Таке ставлення особливо важливо в процесі раннього навчання іноземних мов. У статті розглядаються сутність та переваги Сюжет підходу. Ця відкрита концепція, інтегруючи різні теми навчання і заснований на створенні історії разом, являє гарний метод творчого вивчення іноземних мов.

Ключові слова: *підхід «сюжетна лінія», раннє вивчення іноземної мови, творче навчання і викладання.*

Stymulowanie kreatywnych zachowań w procesie uczenia się i nauczania pozwala na optymalne wykorzystanie potencjału drzemiącego w uczniach. Proces ten wymaga jednak odpowiedniej postawy nauczyciela, który musi być jednostką potrafiącą i chcącą dostrzec wyjątkowość każdego ucznia. Nie może on też obawiać się zagrożeń wynikających z otwartych koncepcji nauczania. Taka postawa jest szczególnie ważna w procesie wczesnej nauki języka obcego. Artykuł analizuje istotę i walory podejścia storyline w procesie wczesnej nauki języka obcego. Ta otwarta koncepcja nauczania integruje różne treści tematyczne i bazuje na procesie wspólnego tworzenia historii przez uczniów. Stanowi ona zatem dobrą metodę kreatywnej nauki języka obcego.

Słowa kluczowe: *Podejście storyline, wczesna nauka języka obcego, stymulowanie kreatywności*

1. Introduction

The continuous development of teaching process as well as continuous reflection on the performed actions is a teacher's duty. Certainly, nowadays nobody would dare deny the necessity to carry out such actions. However, educators still cannot provide an unequivocal answer to the following question: Do the teacher's efforts to teach a good lesson really pay off? It is hard to empirically state to what extent the very quality of the lesson influences a learner's success. The opinions to date concerning the issue differ considerably.

Jencks et al. claimed that only 1-3 % of the learner's success results from the lesson [1]. Rutter attributed to it much greater, although still not admirable, efficiency in relation to the learner's success, namely 10 % [2]. At present the world of didactics to a larger extent believes in the efficiency of good teaching. Meyer, e. g., holds a view that 20-40 % of the educational success depends on the quality of the teaching process the learner was subjected to [3].

One can easily doubt these proportional values if we take into consideration the fact that many times the teacher's input does not balance the effects resulting from the work, but is much greater. Thus, the educators claim that much more important variables influencing the learner's success should be looked for

in his/her individual talents as well as in the family and social environment [4]. However, those views cannot push into the background the fact that the teacher possesses the power to determine at least 20 % of the learner's chance of success, which can be made the most of or entirely wasted. That is why, the optimisation of teaching and learning process deserves the search of new solutions. Finding ways of enhancing creativity seems to be the best chance for the effective foreign language learning and teaching. Delegating the sole responsibility to the teacher will not influence the optimisation of teaching. The activities based on teacher-learner cooperation appear indispensable, which means the activities the learner takes responsibility for from the very beginning. The Storyline Approach enables the efficient accomplishment of the aforementioned principle.

2. What is Storyline?

The Storyline Approach was developed in the 1960's and 70's in the Jordanhill College of Education in Glasgow. Its authors intended to create an efficient way of teaching integrated subjects in the mother tongue. A target group consisted of Scottish primary school pupils [5].

At first the authors of the method did not have foreign language learning and teaching in mind, however its potential was noticed by foreign language teachers and glottodidactic experts. The Creative Dialogues Project, part of Socrates Comenius 2.1., served as a good example of that interest. The three-year project aimed at examining the efficiency of the Storyline Approach in the process of foreign language learning and teaching of children in a transitory stage (in case of Polish primary schools the transition from form 3 to 4) as well as the development of the foreign language teachers' educational strategy in the Storyline Approach. The project was carried out in 2003-2006. The author of this article was a member of the project group. The group worked out the Storyline modules for learning and teaching English and German. The project results, e. g. the storyline modules, are available at www.creativedialogues.lernnetz.de.

The Storyline Approach is based on the learners' previous knowledge and abilities. Thus, it is not possible to start learning a foreign language using the Storyline method. The introduction of the first Storyline module should take place at least after a year of language teaching. The second year of teaching may be started in this way. Using the Storyline Approach is especially beneficial at the end of a school year as it gives an opportunity to consolidate new material [6].

The Storyline Approach is an open concept requiring very detailed teacher's planning. The assumptions are fulfilled using modules of indefinite duration. The work on the module at school may last a few hours, days, or months.

The first element of the Storyline module planning is the choice of the key topic. It has to meet two conditions, namely it has to correspond to the requirements of the national curriculum and to the interests of a given target group. Next, the teacher creates a draft of planned steps. Anticipated actions should include the development of different aspects of the key topic and enable the acquisition and development of abilities and knowledge. The teacher must also remember about the necessity to relate to the real-life situations. Independently of the thematic context, the following elements should be established:

→ characters
→ setting
→ time
→ incidents.

While creating the module, it is especially important to define a sequence of contents because the result of the teacher's planning should be the project of thematically linked episodes creating one inspiring story, including startling elements and leading to a logical conclusion. It differentiates the Storyline Approach from the more traditional integrated teaching where various aspects of a topic are discussed, however, they do not make one story. The teacher must remember that respective incidents should be planned so as to enable the incorporation of various skills and forms of interaction. This project prepared by the teacher is new to the learners. This situation is mostly caused by the willingness to motivate the learners to work creatively by means of the element of surprise and the anticipation of the continuation of the story [7].

The respective incidents are introduced by means of key questions or other teacher's stimuli. These main elements of the module define the development of the undertaken actions and enable their diversity. Phrasing the appropriate key questions is one of the most difficult elements of the planning process. The key questions do not aim at the correct reproduction of the acquired knowledge, therefore, it is not about receiving a so-called correct answer. They may be compared to the bridge between the learner and reality, which aims at stimulating creative thinking. The key questions should activate the learners' previous personal knowledge or their personal experience and encourage them to fulfil a given task on their own. One cannot provide only one answer to the questions posed in such a way. Thus, they are supposed to help the learners realise a difference between their own and unfamiliar understanding of different aspects of life. The key questions should allow the presentations of various answers/solutions, support multi-faceted problem considerations and «enforce» new tasks. It can be achieved by means of questions such as:

– What, in your opinion, may a castle hotel look like?
– How can we invite guests to our hotel?
– What may happen during a long journey?

It is also possible to ask questions that would give the decision-making power to the learners, e. g.

–What should we do/ plan now?

In this way the learners are encouraged to learn on their own and they realise that by incorporating their own ideas they influence the work on the Storyline. Steve Bell, a member of the Storyline project group, often mentioned as its author, claims that such a way of constructing the Storyline module creates a sort of

paradoxical but also optimal situation. He means the situation where on the one hand, the teacher maintains control, but on the other hand the learners are convinced that they create their own story [8]. The learners engage in particular activities based on figments of their own imagination, and that is the reason why, they willingly take part in such activities.

The teacher's stimuli can also assume other forms. The existing school practice, observed while working on the Creative Dialogues Project, demonstrated that another form of the teacher's stimuli is beneficial, especially in the process of foreign language learning and teaching. Introducing a story or its following stages, e. g. by means of a letter, a short fairy tale, a song or a short press article, appears a very good solution.

While working on the Storyline module the learners, inspired by the teacher's stimulus, together:

− create characters appearing in a given setting and time. It is necessary at this stage to define the size of the characters. Otherwise, they will be of various sizes, which may be discouraging for the learners who made small-size characters. It is good to use the characters' outlines whom the learners give individual features and to whom e. g. a cardboard handle is attached. It is possible to use other techniques, e. g. painting a character, cutting it out and attaching a handle. In case of older learners a collage technique may be used.

− give names and surnames to their characters. Although, it is necessary to provide the learners with lists of male and female names that occur in a given country. While giving surnames, a telephone directory may be used.

− define personal biographies of the respective characters, their personality traits, appearance, relations between them, e. g. kinship and their contacts.

− design institutions and other settings, e. g. a house, a school, an office building, a street with buildings, a shop, a company, and a hotel.

− analyse and role-play possible conversations/ incidents, and thus they build interactions and construct, comprehend and acquire knowledge.

− anticipate problems, suggest possible solutions and try to achieve them.

− create word banks, which are an indispensable element in case of foreign language content. The word banks created by the learners and the teacher, containing vocabulary or expressions connected with the central theme, are placed where they are visible at least for all the time devoted to the work on the module. They are useful when responding to the key questions or creating characters, settings and situations.

The characters, settings and situations created while working on the Storyline module are given an individual character. Different points of view do not pose an obstacle, as the results of individual work develop a common high-quality product, e. g. the learners in their group decide what workers should be employed in their company, and then individually, they create one of the workers, thanks to which a different staff group is formed every time.

Through the presentation of the results of each group's work, e. g. on big boards, records of the whole story are created. All the time the learners can observe and compare the results of their work, which increases their motivation. Both the learners and the teacher are motivated in this way. Such a creative teaching process also educates its organiser and initiator. The teacher can clearly recognise the learners' skills and potential and stimulate them accordingly. The teacher must very precisely develop the plan of the module, give a good deal of thought to the key questions and to the techniques of achieving particular language aims, and must control the whole process so as accidental language intentions are not fulfilled, but only the ones meeting the requirements of the national curricula. These are not the only advantages of the Storyline Approach. The teacher cannot limit their language preparation only to the content included in a coursebook. The teacher has to take into account the fact that the learners, e. g. while working on the travel Storyline module, may not choose typical destinations and instead, they will be willing to go round the world, or spend some time on Mars or the North Pole. Moreover, the teachers get used to the thought that they may be asked an inconvenient question, or the question they will not be able to answer. The teacher should, however, carry on a conversation, and the result will depend on the teacher's communicative skills both verbal and non-verbal. Such teacher's competence is very important. According to Langier (2006, 423), the teacher's ability to communicate with a child determines teaching and that is why, it is indispensable for the process of preparing teachers to work with children [9].

3. Storyline and creative learning and teaching

Supporting the learners so as they could fully develop their potential is a prerequisite for the creative learning and teaching process. Thus, the appropriate teacher's attitude is necessary. The teacher must be able and willing to notice every learner's uniqueness. Such an attitude often requires a lot of courage. The teachers aiming at stimulating a creative learning and teaching process cannot be afraid of their learners' questions. Neither should they strive to keep absolute control over the whole process at all costs. The lack of time or fear of having too little time interferes with the creative learning and teaching process, which makes the teacher offer some easy solutions.

Landau stressed that a creative attitude to education means a discovery, release and support of a teaching and learning individual's potential [10]. According to her, the teacher is an organiser and initiator, who perceives the learner not only as a learning, but also thinking individual. Landau enumerated six points making up a set of beliefs of creative education such as:

− striving for individualism, and not conformity;

− deriving pleasure from the process, and not its results;

− teaching questions, and not only facts;

− developing an interdisciplinary way of thinking, and not a narrow one relating to only one discipline;

− enabling orientation towards the future, and not the past;

− using games, and not only traditional teaching methods [11].

Landau also stressed one more very important aspect of creative education. The learners should know that creative behaviour is expected from them at school. However, neither demands nor any pressure to achieve the best results should accompany these expectations [12]. As long as the aforementioned fact is not made obvious, the learner might demonstrate a tendency towards conformity.

The Storyline Approach fully reflects the creative teaching elements specified by Landau. While working according to the rules of the Storyline Approach one can notice a craving for individualism. Enforcing conformist behaviour is definitely made difficult. The aforementioned idea creates very good conditions for individualisation and differentiation of the teaching process. The differentiation of tasks allows a better examination of personal interests and potential. While working on the Storyline module the learners feel confident because everyone can contribute. The acknowledgement of the learners' personal experience leads to the reduction of fear of the teacher's reactions. The learners more openly manifest their interest and thanks to that, they find it easier to derive pleasure from the process, and not from results. The mutual trust is growing and everybody profits from the situation because only in the atmosphere full of mutual trust one may encounter some minor linguistic inhibitions enabling a better reception of the language offer. The friendly learning conditions result from a clear reference to real situations, which may be associated with the means opposing the artificiality of the teaching and learning process caused by the school's isolation. The learner is not afraid to formulate hypotheses and experiment, which facilitates work corresponding to the idea of teaching questions, and not only facts stipulated by Landau. This way an indirect language created by the learner becomes more complex.

While working on the Storyline, the learners create their own story, initiated, outlined and partly controlled by the teacher. Language production is experienced as authentic language use as the learners enrich the storyline with numerous ideas of their own drawn from reality, providing new stimuli for speaking and writing. In this way their attention is focused on what may happen, namely on the future, and not the past.

Thanks to the learners' ideas, or thanks to the episodes suggested by the teacher, surprising humorous situations are simulated, which may change the course of events and decidedly creates a beneficial learning atmosphere [13]. Thus, the Storyline Approach is not a rigid working method. However, it does not exclude an educator's responsibility for shaping the teaching and learning process. Thanks to the development of the detailed plan of the module and expert control of the whole process by means of appropriate key questions, accidental language intentions are not fulfilled, but the ones meeting the requirements of the national curricula. Nevertheless, thanks to placing them in the Storyline context, they are not perceived as part of the compulsory material by the learners [14].

The Storyline Approach meets the requirements of developing an interdisciplinary and not limited, connected exclusively with one discipline, way of thinking. It was the major premise of the Storyline concept. As Fehse stated the Storyline Approach is a model aiming at holistic, integrated and thematic teaching [15]. Through the integration of various themes creating one inspiring story, a broad context is offered, which makes it easier to acquire and assimilate knowledge, acquire different abilities, form associations, reflect on the incidents, connote similarities and differences, develop the ability to solve problems, or comprehend cause-and-effect relationships existing in the real world in given situations. The context may appear a useful aid because in the contemporary world the abilities and skills based on extensive knowledge are in demand. Such a working method creates favourable conditions for the development of practical intelligence, which, as Sternberg noticed, plays an important role in achieving success in personal and professional life [16]. The situation takes place because this type of intelligence enables an efficient way of solving life's problems. It is responsible for, e. g. the ability to develop one's ideas optimally, to act consistently, and to plan well. These abilities, which should be stimulated from the beginning of school education, are developed while working on the Storyline module.

4. Why Storyline in the process of early foreign language learning?

Viewing language as a system of symbols unambiguously transmitting well-defined information would be a comfortable answer to a question concerning the essence of its functioning. Such an interpretation would greatly facilitate the definition of one universal language learning and teaching method. However, the observation of life, or rather a great variety of lifestyles, does not allow us to accept that simplified perspective. In the world around us, it is impossible to separate language from the culture in which it functions. This product created by a particular social group is characterised by differences and communicative ambivalence, rather than by homogeneity and immanent acceptance [17]. The codes used by a speaker in order to give particular information may be interpreted differently by a recipient. What delights and convinces some people, may embarrass, or even discourage, others. The process of language learning and teaching must involve the elements of introducing a child to a different culture – to a way of thinking, acting and speaking of the people who represent it [18]. Bleyhl rightly observed that the process of foreign language learning is all about developing the ability to act based on understanding texts and situations [19]. At the same time he draws attention to the fact that in the very process a person oriented towards contacts with other people and the awareness of operating conditions and linguistic means, as well as tact and empathy, are crucial [20]. Thus, language learning is influenced by various processes linked with each other, which everybody must face. That is why, from the very beginning of the child's contact with a target language, an environment should be created where content will be of the main importance.

Natural curiosity, readiness to adapt to new situations as well as an urge to imitate are just some of children's traits at elementary school level, which are the chief assets in the language acquisition process. The last feature often influences the fact that teachers believe in the imitative language acquisition model, they plan their lessons accordingly and they expect from the children full reproduction of the presented language offer. The learners are not able to meet their teacher's expectations, which often leads to mutual disappointment and discouragement. This situation may be avoided if the teacher understands and accepts the fact that the language acquisition process should not be associated with the process of imitation, during which the learner absorbs everything that was offered and is almost immediately able to produce what was absorbed. Language acquisition is a process of construction, continually requiring creative behaviour [21]. During that process the learner tries to construct a new internal language system, change its structure or create subsystems. So-called «material presented during a lesson» does not automatically become knowledge or abilities. The language offer presented to the learner is subject to internal processing. The internalisation of many structures requires a lot of time. Frequently for a long period of time one may observe modifications perceived by many teachers as mistakes that should be removed immediately, however in reality, they signify creative language processing. Thus, the opinion of Huneke et al should be accepted, according to which, knowledge and abilities cannot be inculcated directly into the learners' heads or easily elicited from them [22]. They claim that both the knowledge and abilities are created over and over again depending on a situation. Thus, it is necessary to adjust a didactic process to widely-understood children's needs related to their age. Such a didactic process takes place when «children can recognise from their emotionally safe place how the world functions, how things and words are connected with one another, how people treat other people and things, and when language is necessary» [23].
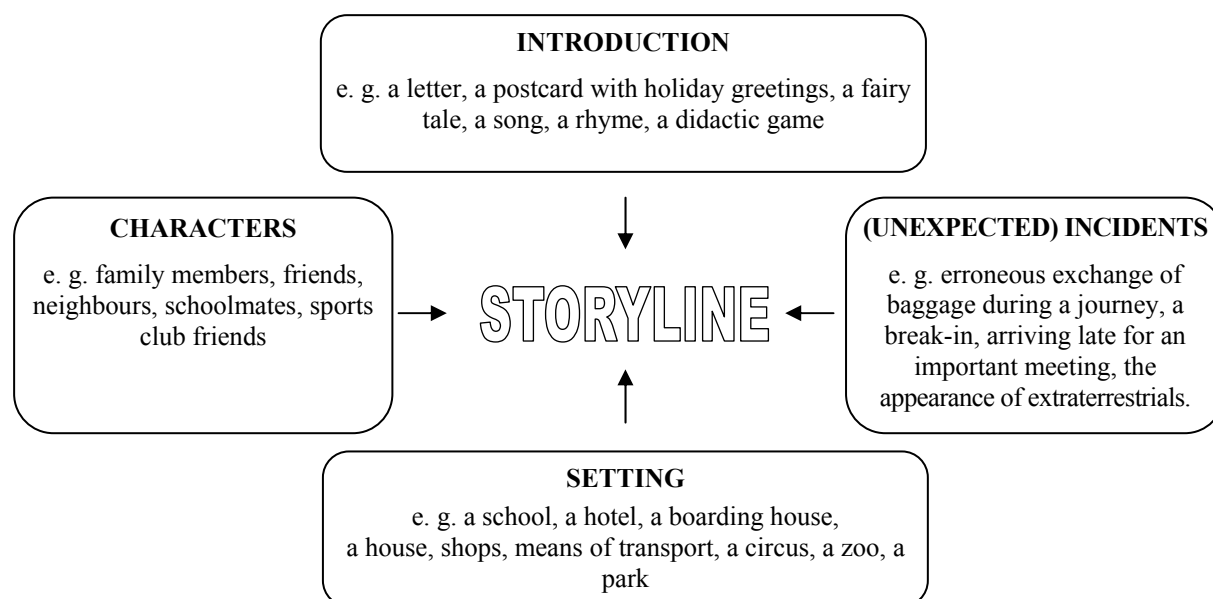
The necessity to implement methods stimulating creative behaviour in the content-related process of early foreign language learning arises from the above-mentioned deliberations. An environment that makes it possible to formulate, examine and, if necessary, revise hypotheses connected with the new world should be created for children. One should also take into consideration that all the processes often require plenty of time. It is essential when one wants to create an optimal situation for learning and teaching a language – the situation in which the learners' cognitive abilities from the beginning of their encounters with the new world are stimulated to implement the process of self-organisation and of changing the existing structures [24]. Such procedures may be successfully employed while working according to the rules of the Storyline Approach.

5. Conclusions

The Storyline Approach enables a three-dimensional language reception, i. e. the simultaneous reception of form, semantics and pragmatism. The intense and long-term processing of the above language aspects allows a child not only to acquire knowledge and to recognise the possibility of its employment, but also to decode the meaning correctly. While working on the Storyline, the situations filled with the content provided by a child are created and thus related to the child's interests. In such optimal situations the child uses language as a tool for learning about the new world.

From the point of view of cognitive psychology the acquisition of permanent abilities is realistic only in case of using methods enabling the intense language processing in the situations in which the learner is fully involved [25]. The creation of such situations requires the employment of open concepts supporting the development of such involvement, which will lead to the intense language processing. The Storyline is a useful example of the approach satisfying the afore-mentioned condition.

Storyline module structure

INTRODUCTION

e. g. a letter, a postcard with holiday greetings, a fairy tale, a song, a rhyme, a didactic game

CHARACTERS

e. g. family members, friends, neighbours, schoolmates, sports club friends

STORYLINE

(UNEXPECTED) INCIDENTS

e. g. erroneous exchange of baggage during a journey, a break-in, arriving late for an important meeting, the appearance of extraterrestrials.

SETTING

e. g. a school, a hotel, a boarding house, a house, shops, means of transport, a circus, a zoo, a park

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