Abstract

Our paper starts from the idea that the acquisition of language is not a unitary phenomenon. The curriculum for kindergarten education proposes a series of objectives that target the development of some linguistic aspects. We have concentrated this input into five levels of language which are constantly aimed at throughout a school year for each study level in kindergarten, 3-5 years, 5-6 years. Practice in kindergarten has shown that the didactic game is the main activity for this level of age, favouring both the informative as well as the formative aspects of the learning process. By means of the game the children are spontaneous, sincere, show their tendencies, interests, and abilities. The communication function of the language is efficiently developed through the didactic game as it contributes to a great extent to the formation and development of all aspects of language: phonetic, lexical, morphological, syntactic and stylistic. Our focus is on the degree of development of these linguistic levels achieved through the use of the didactic game in the language education activities. The research offers data on language development for each level of kindergarten age so that teachers and other practitioners should make the best decisions to improve preschoolers’ communication skills.

Keywords: Didactic game, Language education, Linguistic levels, Communication

1. Introduction

Children develop quickly in the early years of life and as such kindergartens aim to provide the necessary support to enable each child to fulfil their potential through a series of objectives which ensure children’s learning and harmonious development. Thus, kindergartens ensure small children a broad range of knowledge and skills that provide the right foundation for good future progress in school and life. One of the prime areas of learning and development that form the educational programmes in the early years is the communication and language area. The educational activities included in this area give children opportunities to develop communication skills through experiencing a rich language environment, through expressing themselves, through speaking and listening in a range of situations. The diversified input contained in the mandatory objectives from the curriculum for kindergarten education could be easily concentrated into five aspects of language constantly pursued throughout all early years of education programmes: phonetic, lexical, morphological, syntactic and stylistic.

Research has shown that the acquisition of language is not a unitary phenomenon. Lenneberg (1984) states that there are multiple critical periods for the acquisition of language aspects. Thus, phoneme acquisition starts in the first year of life and ends around five or six years old. During this
The sounds of the words undergo different changes: the speech tempo, the intonation etc. are often subjected to child’s moods. Teachers and other providers must take reasonable steps to provide opportunities for children to develop and use correctly the phonetic aspects of language.

Children acquire the vocabulary of a language in different stages. The first stage is passive: children learn words and their meanings, but they do not produce them. The second stage is productive: children utter words, but these ones have different phonetic and prosodic characteristics from the adults’ words (Enachi-Vasluianu, 2010). In the following stages words are proper used even if not always. At the age of 4-5 years old, the words are not used echoic anymore; the children can define them spontaneously. The rate of vocabulary growth increases in a significant way and it reaches its peak when the child goes to school (5-6 years). The acquisition of vocabulary continues through life, although slowing down with age. Mention must be made that vocabulary development is not an isolated act, but it is sensitive to phonological and morphosyntactic knowledge.

From a morphological point of view children starting from 3-4 years old, acquire consciously rules for expressing the number and gender of nouns, the gender and number agreement between noun and adjective, the tenses of the verbs, the pronouns, the adverbs, the correct use of the articles, overuse of interjections (to express personal feelings) etc. By the end of 5, children have adult-like knowledge of grammar of the language (Avram, 2002). From a syntactic point of view, they can use and understand complex sentences; they can use and understand passives, conditionals, relative clauses, sentences with multiple embeddings etc.

From a stylistic point of view, at the age of 5-6, children can deal with disambiguation, metaphors, jokes, or metalinguistic negation (they can deal with those phenomena which require an interpretative use of the language). Experiments (Hatch, Brown, 1995) have shown that they understand metaphorical relationships and when they learn new words, they already extend their meanings to new semantic fields. Children produce metaphors spontaneously when describing things, but they can not always provide explanations for the metaphor proposed (Enachi-Vasluianu, 2009).

The didactic game is organised in a relaxed atmosphere according to a certain structure, governed by certain rules in accordance to specific educational objectives. It is centred upon learning through discovery, through children’s active involvement in the process of acquisition. Playing is essential for children’s development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, to think about problems and to relate to others. Specialised literature classifies the didactic game in the language education activities according to the linguistic criteria into phonetic, lexical, morphological, syntactic and stylistic didactic games (Hobjilă, 2008). All the games in this classification aim at developing child’s linguistic skills, speaking, listening and understanding. As such, when speaking they distinguish the sounds that make up the words, they pronounce the words correctly, they use correct grammatical forms, they express personal opinions, develop their own narratives and explanations by making use of figurative speech. At the same time, children learn to listen attentively in a range of situations. They learn to respond to what they hear with relevant comments, questions or actions. They show awareness of listener’s needs.

2. Presentation of research

The objectives of our study are: a) to identify the linguistic aspects according to the mandatory objectives of the communication and language area contained in the curriculum for early education; b) to determine the degree of development for each linguistic aspect through the didactic game for the three levels of age, 3-4 years old, 4-5 years old and 5-6 years old.

The research instrument was a questionnaire analysing the opinions of the teachers in kindergarten regarding the development of each linguistic aspect through the didactic game. The respondents were asked to choose one of the following variants of a five-step scale: (1) to a very low
extent, (2) to a low extent, (3) to an average extent, (4) to a large extent, (5) to a very large extent, thus showing the degree of development for each linguistic aspect.

We used a sample of 150 kindergarten teachers from Vrancea County, Romania. The participants (all women) were 47 teachers with 10 to 20 years of experience in the educational system, 54 teachers with 20 to 30 years of experience and 49 teachers with 30 to 35 years of experience. The experiment lasted for one school year, 2016-2017. During this time teachers used mainly the didactic game in the language education activities. Mention must be made that in the Romanian educational system kindergarten period is structured into three groups of age: 3-4 years, 1st year of study, otherwise known as small children’s group; 4-5, 2nd year of study, medium-aged children’s group; 5-6, 3rd year of study, big children’s group. The analyses of the linguistic development were made on levels of age, as previously described.

In order to analyse the data collected we used the SPSS program, the t-test for the independent samples and Levene test. Descriptive statistics of the scores obtained are presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items of linguistic aspects developed through the didactic game</th>
<th>1st year</th>
<th>2nd year</th>
<th>3rd year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>phonetics</td>
<td>4.82 (0.43)</td>
<td>4.78 (0.41)</td>
<td>4.12 (0.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lexis</td>
<td>4.60 (0.75)</td>
<td>4.68 (0.51)</td>
<td>4.42 (0.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>morphology</td>
<td>4.24 (0.98)</td>
<td>4.18 (0.66)</td>
<td>4.52 (0.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>syntax</td>
<td>4.16 (0.84)</td>
<td>4.22 (1.00)</td>
<td>4.38 (0.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stylistics</td>
<td>4.00 (0.74)</td>
<td>4.04 (0.92)</td>
<td>4.20 (0.67)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We used the means from Table 1 to make a classification of the linguistic aspects developed through the didactic game in the three kindergarten levels, as presented in Table 2. Thus, the first rank is considered the highest degree of linguistic development, whereas the fifth rank shows the lowest degree of linguistic development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>1st year of study</th>
<th>2nd year</th>
<th>3rd year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>phonetics</td>
<td>phonetics</td>
<td>morphology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>lexis</td>
<td>lexical</td>
<td>lexical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>morphology</td>
<td>syntax</td>
<td>syntax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>syntax</td>
<td>morphology</td>
<td>stylistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>stylistics</td>
<td>stylistics</td>
<td>phonetics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 1 shows, all means are above 4, which demonstrates the consistence of the evolutions registered by preschoolers for all five linguistic aspects studied. The highest means were recorded for phonetics at the first year of study (m = 4.82) and the second year of study (m = 4.78) and for morphology at the third year of study (m = 4.52). So, teachers appreciated the phonetic aspect registered the greatest progress at 3-4 level of age and at 4-5 level of age, whereas the highest progress is registered for morphology at 5-6 level of age. The development of the lexical aspect ranks two for all groups of age, but the highest mean is recorded for the second year of study (m=4.68). This shows that, in teachers’ opinions, preschoolers acquire at a fast, constant pace elements of vocabulary through the didactic game (many new words, phrases each year). The lowest means were recorded for stylistics at the first year of study (m=4.00) and second level of age (m = 4.04), and for phonetics at the third level of age (m = 4.12). Although stylistics rated the fifth in the hierarchy, means above 4 underline the idea supported by the specialists in age psychology, linguistic psychology according to which language develops at a spectacular pace during the early age
education (Crețu, 2005; Zlate, Șchiopu, 1997; Slama-Cazacu, 1973; Avram, 2002). Although these observations are of general nature, our study particularizes and exemplifies these qualitative and quantitative linguistic boosts through the intensive use of the didactic game in the context of well-structured educational programmes.

We applied the T test for the independent groups in order to determine the differences among the linguistic aspects developed through the didactic game at the three kindergarten levels. So the analyses are realised between the first year and the second year of study, the first year and the third year of study, the second year and the third year of study. The significance level was set at 0.05. Starting from the significant differences from a statistical point of view among the appreciations of the teachers from the three kindergarten levels we can state the relevance of the linguistic aspects developed through the didactic game.

Analysing the items on levels of age, according to the criterion of statistically significant differences, we noticed that there were such differences between the medium-aged children’s group and the big children’s group for two items, phonetics and lexis (p < 0.05). For the phonetic level the highest mean is rated for the medium aged children’s group meaning that teachers consider that at this level of age the phonetic acquisitions are the most consistent. The high means for the lexical aspect at the medium-aged children group show that teachers consider that at this level of age the vocabulary acquisitions are the most consistent.

The analysis between the first year of study and the third year of study shows that there are statistically significant differences for only one item, phonetics. As the highest mean is registered for the first year of study this means the greatest phonetic progress is made by children at this level of age. There were no statistically significant differences between the first and the second year of study, which demonstrates convergence of opinions between the groups investigated.

Conclusions
To sum up, the process of language acquisition develops at an amazing rate in kindergarten. The dissociation among the linguistic areas, phonetic, lexical, morphological, syntactic and stylistic, is meant to be in support of our study, as language acquisition includes all aspects simultaneously, but at different rates of development. As for the activity in kindergarten, the didactic game offers a stimulating context for linguistic development in which the children acquire information in a relaxed, entertaining, less formal environment. Taking these into consideration we believe that choosing the didactic game as a form of realization of language education activities was helpful for the achievement of the objectives proposed by our study. In support of our observations teachers involved in the study stated that their experience in the educational system showed that the best results in the development of language were obtained when an activity was projected as a didactic game. The study could be completed with a comparative analysis of linguistic development through various form of realization of the language education activities, such as memorization, image reading, conversation, storytelling etc.

References