

Language Teaching: Discontinuities and Problems in Language Teaching Going From Kindergarten to Elementary School

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to highlight the discontinuities that arise if one studies the teaching of the language in the kindergarten and the teaching of the language in the first Primary School, mainly through the study of the respective curricula. First we will refer to the curriculum of the Kindergarten, DEPPS and Kindergarten Teacher Guide, presenting the theoretical framework and the proposed activities. Immediately afterwards we will refer to the Teacher and Student’s Books for the first grade and how they deal with the issue of language teaching, theoretical models and practical application. Finally, we will try to answer the question whether there is continuity and common points in the curricula of the two levels both in terms of theory and in terms of practice in the classroom.

Key words: language teaching, kindergarten, elementary school, transition

1. Introduction

In a modern educational environment, issues related to language teaching at all levels should appear at the center of educational reflection, given the importance of language in preventing school failure. Theories that support language teaching appear to play an important role in the learning process. In addition, the continued application of teaching methods and strategies is essential for the creation of a generation of capable language users, who are called upon to successfully cope with the different linguistic environments of an ever-changing social context.

2. Language Teaching in Kindergarten: Theory and Modern Trends

Regarding the issue of language in the DEPPS of the Kindergarten (2002, pp. 2–3) it is stated that:

“The Kindergarten Language program is based on the view that knowledge and language are built gradually, through supportive communication relationships. One of the central axes of the approach is that children build knowledge by making inevitable mistakes in the process, but mistakes that this approach allows us to see as expressions of their quest to acquire knowledge. Therefore, it is natural for these mistakes, which are related to the developmental course of children, to be accepted to a certain extent, at the same time being a starting point for the planning of the learning process that aims to overcome them in the long run. For the drafting of this program, the findings of the research were taken into account and the language related programs of other European countries were studied. They emphasize in particular the important role that Kindergarten can play in preventing school failure, which at an early age is mainly associated with the child’s lack of familiarity with language aspects related to written

language. And this, as it is known, concerns more the children who come from unfavorable pedagogical and social environments. We believe that this program can contribute to a perspective of better preparation of children for their integration into a society of written communication, such as today”.

From the above, the proposed approach is evident and concerns the structural approach, where it supports the parallel development of knowledge and language, which are based on the axiom “we learn from our mistakes”. Also central is the support of communication relationships in the pursuit of language functions in kindergarten and the functional approach (practical importance of language). The fact that education is flooded with a specific language code (elaborated language code) that is often different from what children speak in their families (limited language code) leads children from disadvantaged environments to school failure (Bernstein, 1989).

The issue of literacy is of course part of the child's wider language development. The field of language education is one of the most important fields of research in theory and in educational practice. Key terms could be the functional approach and the supportive communication relationships mentioned above as well as the term “emerging literacy”. “Emerging literacy or literacy” refers to the behavior of young preschoolers that develops as a pre-existing stage of conventional literacy. Most children who come to kindergarten already have a set of knowledge about speaking, listening, writing and reading. It is necessary to use this set of knowledge in preschool education, starting from the already existing language experiences of young students (Koutsouvanou, 2000; Papoulia-Tzelepis, 2001).

The time sequence between writing and reading skills was not always the same. The assumption that children first learn to read and then write has been prevalent for several years. However, a reversal of the above hypothesis was expressed by Chomsky (1971), who suggested that the process of reading should be based on writing.

According to researchers Cochrane, Cochrane, Scalena & Buchanan (1984), Clay (1975), Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982), there is agreement on the existence of stages in the development of reading and writing. Indicatively, for reading, we could mention the following stages:

1) Magic stage; 2) Reader self-perception stage; 3) Bridging stage with the reader; 4) Reader take-off stage; 5) Independent reader stage.

For writing, respectively, we could mention the following:

1) The smudging stage; 2) Linear repetitive stage; 3) Random letter spelling stage; 4) Name letter stage; 5) Transitional spelling stage; 6). Conventional spelling stage (Koutsouvanou, 2000).

The above stages — of course — should not be used for monitoring and evaluation of children. This knowledge should simply allow us to approach individual growth rates with respect, to provide encouragement and help at all stages, so that children can move forward in building knowledge.

Great theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky point to a developmental trend in cognitive functions. The influence of Piaget leads to very familiar conclusions such as that children should be actively involved in the learning process as explorers, through experimentation, problem solving and social negotiation through activities related to writing and reading. The structure of language, like the whole mental edifice, is “built” through an endless transaction of the organism with the environment. The way the child learns concerns the attempt to balance between the mechanisms of assimilation and compliance (Maratou, 2000). Assimilation is associated with the signifier, while compliance with the signifier. The infant’s mental development also guides the development of the language tool, through a continuous negotiation with the environment.

Vygotsky believes that children learn by internalizing social interactions. An adult or competent interlocutor can help the child, within the zone of imminent development (ZPD), acting as a model for writing and reading.

Gradually, support becomes less and less necessary and frequent and the child acts alone (Doliopoulou, 2004).

If we accept that the preschooler is already a good user of the language, then the terms “emerging literacy” and “language as a whole” are the basic terms of language teaching. The “language as a whole” approach focuses on the unified practice of writing, speaking, listening and reading. Goodman (1981) as a proponent of this approach believes that language is best learned in a context that makes sense to children and not as a demonstration of language exercises. The bottom line is that students need to be actively interested in reading and writing experiences, not just practicing skills. Children must first understand the practical importance of writing and reading (functional approach) by understanding that they are forms of communication. Thus, e.g., meaningful stories and texts for children help them acquire comprehension strategies of writing and reading. Therefore, it is important during the preschool period, which is characterized by intense language development, to continue the natural development of comprehension and use of language (Fragoudaki, 2003). In other words, to strengthen emerging literacy, in a social context that makes sense for children (Koutsouvanou, 2000). It is also important to always keep in mind that language is not and should not be a separate subject. Language permeates all activities in kindergarten and literacy takes place through social interaction. For example, through an activity whose main goal may be the environment and its protection, surely the language penetrates more or less effectively the activity in relation to the children's interest in the subject. Language is communication and children communicate when they make a group collage about the forest, when they hear stories about the extinction of species on the planet, etc.

Another factor that seems to have a positive effect on the acquisition of writing and reading is the translingual ability of phonological awareness or phonological awareness. Phonological awareness refers to the child's ability to understand that oral speech consists of phonological units and his ability to distinguish them within words (Tafa, 2001). The connection of letter-phoneme (sound) through all kinds of games, but also the emphasis on language games that include rhymes, word production by changing the initial letter, the division of a sentence into words, the analysis of a word in its phonemes (phonemic awareness) help significantly in the development of language skills.

Our materials and the educational environment — which we need to create — must serve the above. The writing and reading corners should be attractive. It is necessary for the classrooms to have rich printed material based on the interests of the children but also on material created by the children. Our materials will be books with beautiful illustrations, traditional fairy tales, stories based on songs, catalogs, magazines, instructions for use (construction manuals and toys), letters and books written by children, posters, newspapers, advertising material, signs, recipes, plays, maps, computer and of course paper and pencils. Children need to experiment to understand the communicative use of speech, the use of writing and reading for personal purposes, for enjoyment, knowledge acquisition, satisfaction of innate curiosity.

Oral language skills are the basis for the development of writing and reading. Children with developed vocabulary show a more favorable attitude towards reading. Here the role of the educator is crucial. The educator acts as a language model, motivates the children in oral communication, through appropriate questions, communicates with the children in an atmosphere of trust and does not rush to correct the children's language mistakes. Children feel comfortable expressing themselves in a climate of pedagogical freedom (Tafa, 2001).

Writing and reading and, in general, language activities permeate the entire curriculum and are the key to children's subsequent school success. The good theoretical training of kindergarten teachers in this issue is important, as well as the application of new ideas and methods in educational practice, always in a critical spirit, as befits today in the profile of the educational researcher.

3. Application of the Theoretical Framework in the Kindergarten Classroom

The indicative activities included in the Kindergarten Teacher's Guide, but also in the DEEPS are in line with the above theoretical framework. According to this, activities such as:

- 1) To write a letter that we will send to a friend
- 2) Record or edit different types of directories
- 3) To use reference tables (names, seasons, colors, etc.)
- 4) Listen to stories and fairy tales, write their own as they can and read them to others in their own way
- 5) To make invitations
- 6) Create posters
- 7) To record recipes
- 8) To write poems
- 9) Write their names in their drawings and give a title each time
- 10) To write announcements
- 11) Read instructions
- 12) To follow the rules of democratic dialogue
- 13) To play games that promote phonological awareness
- 14) To choose activities in the corner of writing and reading

The above activities are indicative of those included in the curriculum for kindergarten. The way the above activities are organized is through interdisciplinary programs or Projects that emerge from the interests of the group of children and the teacher (Chrysafidis, 1996). In this context, the role of the kindergarten teacher is clear. He has to get out of the teacher-centered profile and become an assistant, collaborator, coordinator and co-researcher, thus meeting the new theories and the appropriate development programs.

4. The Transition to Primary School: Problems and Discontinuities

On the other hand, in the new language textbooks of the first grade, the theoretical framework looks similar to the one we developed above. The teacher's book also talks about language for the purpose of communication, about the functional use of language, about meaningful texts, about the connection of everyday life with teaching, about building on pre-existing knowledge from Kindergarten. It is typically stated that: "Often writing and reading are synonymous with the mechanisms of coding and decoding respectively. In languages with alphabetic writing, such as Greek, the correspondence of sounds to the letters is essential for the effective relationship of children with the written word. But at the same time, writing and reading are processes with meaning and interrelated actions. Because writing means producing texts while reading -respectively- means understanding texts.

The school must build the child's perception that: a) he/she writes in order to convey a message, and not just to transcribe it b) he/she reads in order to understand the content of a text, and not just to identify sounds and letters. It must be made clear that postponing the construction of meaning for later, that is, when the learning of the alphabetic system has been completed, makes it difficult for the child instead of helping him, with the risk of "losing a reader of tomorrow" (Teacher's Book, 2006, p. 8).

Regarding the issue of teaching methodology, the teaching model proposed in the teacher's book is the adoption of a combined model for the teaching of writing and reading, which should combine elements from the analytical-

synthetic method, but also from the methods of the emerging writing and the overall approach of the language. Therefore, the teacher is called upon to combine, on the one hand, practices related to phonological awareness and the matching of sounds and letters, and on the other hand, didactic strategies that reinforce the view that reading and writing are meaningful acts, so they must serve real communicative purposes. prior knowledge of children.

The application of the above theoretical principles is sought at two levels: On the one hand in the instructions given to the teacher in the “Teacher’s Book” and on the other hand in the correspondence with the content of the “Student Books” and the “Workbooks”. Studying, therefore, all the textbooks that were written for the teaching of the language in primary school, we come to the following conclusions:

1) By carefully studying the two “Books for the student” it is obvious that the elements of the analytical-synthetic method dominate. This is followed by the teaching of letters or two letters in order and the majority of the exercises that accompany the teaching each time concern the completion, recognition, analysis, composition, replacement. Even the instructions given in the “Teacher’s Book” for the workbook prove the dominance of the analytical-synthetic method.

In the two-page exercises the students:

- recognize the letter under processing through authentic functional texts of everyday life,
- practice letter writing in an organized space,
- identify, isolate and circle the letter / summary being processed into familiar and new words,
- practice in the analysis and synthesis of a word,
- fill in the missing letter in words as well as in phrases,
- compose with syllables or letters the words known from the text,
- compose with the help of syllables known from the text new words which they are able to read,
- with the help of the teacher, isolate syllables and then letters, and compose new words that they are able to read,
- place confused words in the correct position within a phrase they are able to read,
- distinguish and write combinations correctly such as: ts-st or ta-tz
- write captions and create their own texts,
- are intuitively acquainted with the spelling of linguistic types, such as the third person singular of the present tense of active verbs and the plural of nouns (Teacher’s Book, 2006, pp. 18–19).

As can be seen from the above only two or three of the types of exercises suggested concern language issues for the purpose of communication.

2) The role of authentic texts which is a key component of modern theories and methods for teaching language is in fact degraded. While an effort is being made by the textbook writing team to introduce texts related to posters, invitations, letters, etc., this effort actually serves only the purposes of the analytical synthesis method and the teaching of individual letters or two letters. In addition, the introduction of the original texts is essentially observed in the last four sections, after the basic conventions and rules of the language code have been taught.

3) The functional use of language and language as a whole in a context that makes sense for children finds perhaps its best application through interdisciplinary approaches and projects as mentioned above. This is an element that is not mentioned in the books of the first grade, while on the contrary it is used extensively in the educational level of the kindergarten.

4) One of the basic principles of emerging writing regarding the importance of prior knowledge that children bring from the family and Kindergarten, is not mentioned anywhere and no specific instructions are given on how

the teacher could use the previous knowledge of learn the language and build new knowledge on the old.

5. Conclusions

Based on the above, it is obvious that there is a discontinuity between the official curriculum of the Kindergarten for the teaching of the language and the corresponding one of the first Primary School. The theoretical framework concerning the newer and more “modern” views on how children learn, while it seems to find suitable ground in the DEEPS of the Kindergarten, does not happen the same as the DEEPS of the next level. This finding alone is important, in our view, mainly for two reasons. The first is the difficulty created in the transition of the child from Kindergarten to Primary School, where such discontinuities in teaching methods can only create problems and confusion for our young students. The second concerns the confusion and confusion that can be created in the teachers themselves through such contradictions, referring to the teachers of both levels. In this short article we have chosen to focus exclusively on the official curricula, knowing, however, that they are not the only factor influencing the outcome of the educational process in terms of language teaching. Another important factor is the teacher himself and his views, but also whether he adheres “literally” to any curriculum either in kindergarten or in elementary school. But this issue needs research and is definitely the subject of a new article.

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