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TEACHING ENGLISH TO VERY YOUNG LEARNERS

DIPLOMA THESIS

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Zásady pro vypracování:

Diplomand se bude ve své práci zabývat problematikou výuky anglického jazyka u dětí předškolního věku. V teoretické části práce nejprve provede charakteristiku žáka této věkové skupiny. Dále bude diskutovat procesy osvojování cizího jazyka a uvede souhrn základních principů i příkladů specifických technik relevantních pro cizojazyčnou výuku u dětí předškolního věku.

Cílem empirického šetření bude zjistit, do jaké míry jsou tyto principy respektovány ve výuce angličtiny ve vybraných mateřských školách. Pro realizaci vlastního výzkumu diplomand využije observace, analýzu videozáznamu a strukturovaný rozhovor.

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ABSTRACT

The thesis deals with teaching English to preschool children. Firstly, the fundamental theoretical issues connected to the topic are discussed. A particular attention is devoted to the question of optimal age for second language learning and to ELT methodology for the target age group; briefly, the role of a foreign language teacher in the process of very early foreign language learning is addressed. Secondly, the empirical research is conducted with the aim of discovering whether the key didactic principles for teaching English to preschool children are followed in the classroom practice in the selected nursery schools. The research utilises structured observations based on the video recordings, unstructured observations and an interview to elicit valuable data on the investigated phenomena. The obtained results are evaluated and compared to the theory outlined in the first part of the paper.

Key words: very young learners, critical period hypothesis, very early foreign language learning, second language acquisition theories, ELT methodology, English teacher

ABSTRAKT

Diplomová práce pojednává o výuce anglického jazyka u dětí předškolního věku. Nejprve jsou diskutovány fundamentální teoretické otázky spojené s daným tématem. Zvláštní pozornost je věnována otázce optimálního věku pro cizojazyčnou výuku a lingvodidaktické problematice výuky cizího jazyka u této věkové skupiny; stručně je také diskutována role učitele cizího jazyka. Následně je realizován empirický výzkum s cílem zjistit, do jaké míry jsou základní lingvodidaktické principy pro velmi ranou cizojazyčnou výuku respektovány ve výuce angličtiny ve vybraných mateřský školách. Pro realizaci vlastního výzkumu je využito strukturovaných observací založených na videozáznamu, nestrukturovaného pozorování a rozhovoru. Získaná data jsou srovnána s teoretickými východisky diskutovanými v první části práce.

Klíčová slova: děti předškolního věku, hypotéza kritického období, velmi rané učení se cizímu jazyku, teorie osvojování cizích jazyků, metodologie výuky anglického jazyka, učitel anglického jazyka

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Introduction

European integration, development of electronic communication and the increasing globalisation of the world have initiated a constantly growing interest in learning foreign languages. Learning a foreign language, notably learning English as lingua franca, has been placed in the centre of attention of researchers and scholars; many of them trying to discover the ways how to ease the long-term and often demanding process of learning an additional language. In an attempt to increase the effectiveness of foreign language education many European countries including the Czech republic have lowered the age at which foreign language education starts in the hope of making use of children's potential to learn a language with a success and remarkably effortlessly. Thus, teaching English to younger and younger children has become highly topical issue also in the Czech socio-educational context.

The present thesis addresses this educationally significant topic by focusing on teaching English to very young learners. The paper primarily aims at analysing the crucial pedagogical determinants in the process of very early foreign language learning. More accurately, reviewing the empirical research into age-effects in second language learning, the paper identifies age-appropriate methodology including a foreign language teacher as one of the key determinants of effective very early foreign language education and further examines and discusses the methodology by attempting to integrate the findings from the age-related research and developmental psychology while placing a strong emphasis on the role of a teacher in the whole process of very early foreign language learning.

Following the introduction, the key terminology is operationalised in order to avoid the potential discrepancies in its usage. The first chapter centres on the role of age in foreign language learning; the popular belief the sooner the better is confronted with empirical evidence, the plurality of opinions on the issue is highlighted and the conclusions relevant for the Czech socio-educational context are drawn. The psychological characteristics of very young learners as a basis for creating age-appropriate methodology are discussed in the second chapter. The third chapter deals with ELT methodology for very young learners; firstly, the goals of teaching English to the target age group are described subsequently followed by a detailed discussion of the fundamental aspects of English lesson for very young

learners and an outline of the main principles and methods to be employed when teaching English to pre-school children. The theoretical part of the paper ends with an analysis of English teacher for very young learners being presented as a unifying element bringing together all the significant variables analysed in the previous chapters.

The practical part is tightly interrelated with the theoretical part and presents a small-scale research primarily investigating the extent to which the key principles outlined in the theoretical part are followed in the classroom practice in the selected nursery schools. Firstly, the aim and underlying research questions are presented and the research design and methodology are described. Secondly, the research procedure is briefly discussed and the obtained data are analysed, interpreted and the relevant conclusions are drawn. The practical part is followed by the final conclusion addressing both parts of the paper.

Terminology

The term *very young learners* (hereafter VYLs) refer to the pre-school children aged from 3 to 6. Similarly, in this paper, *very early foreign language education* is understood as teaching a foreign language to pre-school children.

First language or mother tongue denotes the native language that is acquired first. A certain terminological discrepancy may arise from the usage of terms second language and foreign language, for some authors use the term *second language* to refer to a non-native language learnt and spoken within one country, whereas the term *foreign language* is referred to as language of speech community outside the national boundaries of the given country (*see* Crystal 1997). Nonetheless, throughout this thesis, these two terms are used interchangeably to refer to any other language learnt after the mother tongue.

Following Krashen (1982), language *acquisition* refers to a natural subconscious process occurring as a result of exposure to comprehensible input and using the language for meaningful communication. In contrast, language *learning* is a result of conscious attention to the language form, formal instructions and error correction and is characteristic of explicit knowledge of the target language rules.

1. The optimal age to learn a foreign language

The question of optimal age for second language learning is undoubtedly one of the most debated issues in the field of foreign language teaching. For hundreds years, it has been observed that children seem to be at a certain advantage over adults who have to make considerable effort to learn a foreign language particularly its pronunciation. This every-day-life observation has also been supported by some practical classroom experience and more importantly by some research evidence. Thus, many language teachers, educational policy makers, some scholars and most notably, the general public hold the belief that *the sooner the better* for foreign language learning. Therefore, the following chapter attempts to untangle whether it is desirable or even necessary to start learning a foreign language in pre-school age and identifies the conditions under which such very early foreign language learning is beneficial. More precisely, the chapter examines age-effects in second language learning by analysing the most fundamental theoretical constructs related to the issue; special attention is devoted to the critical period hypothesis and the related empirical research; subsequently, second language acquisition theories and their contributions to the question of optimal age are discussed and finally the implications relevant to the Czech socio-educational context are drawn with a particular emphasis on highlighting the crucial determinants to be considered when the decisions about the starting age for second language learning are to be made.

1.1 Critical period hypothesis

The term critical period is widely used in the study of biological development of various species. Atkinson et al. (1995, p.72) define it as a crucial time period during which particular developmental events must occur in order for the development to continue in a normal way. Similarly, Říčan (2006, p.40) explains that there exist critical periods in which an individual is highly sensitive to particular influences and only if these influences are present, the development can follow the genetically determined schedule. In other words, critical periods can be characterized as being

of limited duration within predictable termini and also as being related to specific capacities and types of behaviour. Říčan (ibid.) further stresses that the consequences of the lack of stimulation of a specific capacity during its critical period are hardly retrievable.

A number of cases of behaviour affected by the critical periods can be found in ethology. An illustrative example is that of imprinting in ducklings. Newly born ducklings become irreversibly attached to the very first moving object, which is usually the mother duck. However, this behaviour can occur only in a limited time after hatching; later the ducklings develop a fear of strange objects, which results in retreating rather than following (*see* Říčan 2006; Singleton, Ryan 2004). However, Říčan (2006) and Atkinson et al. (1995) maintain that regarding human psychological development, the existence of critical periods has never been satisfactorily proved and therefore it is more accurate to use the term sensitive periods rather than critical periods. According to these authors (ibid.), sensitive periods are optimal for particular developmental processes to occur due to the greater sensitivity of brain but if these optimal periods are missed it is still possible to develop particular behaviour later. Nevertheless, beyond the optimal periods, a specific skill may not be developed to its full potential or its development can be more effortful. The preference for the term sensitive periods as opposed to critical periods to describe human psychological development is also shared by Vágnerová (2005) and Čačka (1997). In pedagogy, the concept of sensitive periods has been dealt with by some educationalists, notably by Marie Montessori (*see* Zelinková 1997).

The existence of critical period has been proved valid for the mother tongue acquisition; most authors agree that the acquisition of the mother language is deeply affected by the critical period (Vágnerová 2005; Lightbown, Spada 2006; Koukolík 2002). Lightbown and Spada (2006, p.17) state that the research evidence clearly indicates that children who had no access to language for a long time in infancy or early childhood will never fully acquire language. The evidence is mostly based on the cases of abused children deprived of contact with language or on the cases of deaf children.

In the field of foreign language learning, critical periods have been devoted a considerable attention; an immense body of research has been conducted to investigate age-effects on second language learning. The early elaborations of the critical period effects on second language learning originated in the writings of the neurophysiologist Wilder Penfield, who on the basis of differential recovery prognoses between children and adults suffering from damages to speech areas in the brain suggested the optimal period for second language acquisition[1]. Having researched the ability of a young child's brain to compensate for the loss of speech functions, Penfield hypothesised that "for the purposes of learning languages, the human brain becomes progressively stiff and rigid after the age of nine." (Penfield, Roberts 1959, p.236) Penfield further insists that if the second language is introduced after the age of nine, good results can hardly be achieved since it is unphysiological (ibid., p.255).

According to Stern (1991, p.362), Penfield's findings were influential in spreading the view that young children learn a foreign language rapidly and effortlessly. The opinion that there is an optimal or even critical period for second language learning became very popular during the fifties and sixties (ibid.). Nonetheless, Stern (ibid.) also expresses some reservations about the validity of Penfield's results and indicates that "it [Penfield's argument] was not based on the direct evidence of the greater effectiveness of early language learning."

Further support to the existence of 'language learning blocks' determined by age was added by Eric Lenneberg, who postulated *the critical period hypothesis* (henceforth CPH), which claims that there is a fixed span of years during which language acquisition is natural and effortless and after this point is completed language acquisition becomes difficult. Lenneberg (1967 in Hyltenstam, Abrahamsson 2003, p.540) put it:

> Automatic acquisition from mere exposure to a given language seems to disappear (after puberty), and foreign languages have to be taught and learnt through conscious and labored effort. Foreign accents cannot be overcome

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[1] Penfield discovered the ability of children to transfer speech mechanisms from injured parts of brain to healthy ones without any observable consequences in their speech production or perception. In Penfield's observations, adults were incapable of such transfer and the brain damage usually resulted in inescapable deficits in speech production (*see* Penfield, Roberts 1959).

easily after puberty. However, a person can learn to communicate at the age of forty. This does not trouble our hypothesis.

Compared to Penfield, who did not specify the onset of critical period, Lenneberg (1967) proposed not only an arrival of puberty as a closure of the critical period but also the age of two as the onset; his arguments were based on neurobiological plasticity of a young child's brain and the closure of critical period was linked to the finalisation of lateralization process[2].

In the light of Lenneberg's findings many investigations have been conducted to identify the precise point in which lateralization is completed. Krashen (1973 in Stern 1991, p.362) argues that lateralization reaches its climax around the age of five, which is much earlier than originally proposed by Lenneberg, and claims that its closure does not cause loss of any abilities. Stern (ibid., p.363) reacts to these findings by indicating that if Krashen's (1973) conclusions are valid, such neurological arguments represent poor support for the CPH.

Since then, the arguments supporting the CPH have been advanced considerably; they can be further subdivided into the three main categories – neurobiological, cognitive-developmental and affective-motivational. In the present paper, each category will be dealt with separately and most influential evidence will be presented.

1.1.1 Neurobiological arguments

Penfield's (1959) and Lenneberg's (1969) discoveries represent the core of neurobiological arguments, though challenged by many researchers. More recent neurobiological evidence presented by Pulvermüller and Schumann (1994) attributes the cause of critical period to the process of myelination in the brain[3]. Pulvermüller and Schumann (1994, pp.710-713) explicate that even though myelination positively contributes to an effective transfer of information at larger celebral distances, at the

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[2] Laterralization can be defined as "the specialization of the dominant hemisphere of the brain for language functions." (Singleton 2005, p.271).
[3] Myelination is, simply put, "a physical-chemical process in the brain in which glial cells wrap the axons of the neurons with myelin." This results in the increased ability of neurons to conduct electrical signals more rapidly, which enables an effective transfer of information. The process of myelination is believed to be fully completed around puberty (Hyltenstam, Abrahamsson 2003, p.560).

same time, it makes the local neural connections difficult owing to the reduction of their plasticity; this leads to the decreased neural potential for making new connections or modifying the existing ones. The authors (ibid.) argue that the acquisition of phonology and syntax rely on the local neural connections located in lower parts of the brain, which are myelinated earlier than the neural connections in upper brain parts, which are connected with the acquisition of semantic knowledge. According to their view, "[…] starting language acquisition late will lead to difficulty in storing phonological and syntactic knowledge." (Pulvermüller, Schumann ibid., p.713)

1.1.2 Cognitive-developmental arguments

Motivated by unsatisfactory justifications of neurobiological arguments for the CPH, many researchers proceeded to interpret the CPH in terms of different cognitive orientation to language learning between children and adults. Rosansky (1975, p.96) relates the CPH to Piagetian stages of intellectual growth and argues that changes in cognitive development account for the difficulties with which post-puberty learners learn language. In Rosansky's view (ibid.), the arrival of the Formal Operations stage is a critical point since it changes the way in which individual approaches language learning. Rosansky (ibid., p.97) stresses that "[…] the young child does not generally know that he is aquiring a language, and he cannot step back to observe his accomplishment." This lack of meta-awareness determined by the stage of cognitive development is also confirmed by most developmental psychologists (*cf.* Vágnerová 2005; Říčan 2006). According to Rosansky (ibid., pp. 97-99), the Formal Operational stage brings increased decentration, awareness of differences between languages and hypothetico-deductive logic, which makes a learner approach language learning as a problem to be solved; these all together impede automatic and natural language acquisition.

Ellis (1985, p.109) criticises this explanation and states that "Rosansky's arguments are based on the false assumption that post-puberty learners are less efficient and less successful than younger learners." Further criticism is added by Singleton and Ryan (2004, p.103), who note that "[…] one does not have to be

a Piagetian to recognise that the conscious, deliberate dimension of learning in *all* domains increases as the cognitive development advances."

Felix (1981 in Singleton 2005, p.276) also reconciles the CPH with Piagetian Formal Operation stage and maintains that problem-solving cognitive structures present in adult language learning compete with innate language-specific structures employed in a child's language acquisition. There seems to be a partial consensus between Rosansky (1975) and Felix (1981), for both the authors perceive the use of analytical learning abilities as deleterious to natural language acquisition.

A diametrically different view is proposed by Ellis (1985, p.109), who speculates that analytical thinking constitutes an advantage. Having reviewed the research results that adolescents are superior to pre-puberty children and adults in the rate of second language learning, Ellis (ibid.) suggests that "[n]ot only can the adolescent pick up language like a child, but he can supplement this process by conscious study."

A recent cognitive account of maturational constraints in second language learning is provided by Dekeyser (2003) defending the idea that the CPH relates only to implicit learning mechanisms, which belong to general cognitive systems. Dekeyser (ibid., p.335) further posits that "[…] somewhere between early childhood and puberty children gradually lose the ability to learn a language successfully through implicit mechanisms only." The author (ibid.) further explains that post-pubescent learners learn a language through explicit learning mechanisms only.

1.1.3 Affective-motivational arguments

Some scholars see the causes of the decreased ability of older learners to learn a foreign language as lying in the affective domain.

Krashen (1985, p.13) claims that the onset of Formal Operation stage results in strengthening the level of affective filter:

> While the filter may exist for the child second language acquirer, it is rarely, in natural informal language acquisition situations, high enough to prevent native like levels of attainment. For the adult it rarely goes low enough to allow native-like attainment.

Krashen (1982, p.31) explicates that if the level of affective filter is high, "[…] the input will not reach the parts of the brain responsible for language acquisition, or the language acquisition device." As argued by the author (ibid., p.45), such explanation of child-adult differences in second language learning is powerful due to its claim that "child-adult differences in attainment are not due to any change in the "language acquisition device" (LAD) but are due to the filter, a factor that is, in a sense, external to the LAD." It should be accentuated that feelings of stress and anxiety are detrimental to all kinds of learning since in such situations, human brain switches to different functioning mechanisms used for escaping or coping with the potentially dangerous situation (*see* Vester 1997).

Schumannn (1975, p.229) pinpoints the role of attitude, motivation and acculturation[4] in second language learning and suggests that "[…] language learning difficulties after puberty may be related to the social and psychological changes an individual undergoes at that age." The author (ibid., pp.229-235) further indicates that children under the age of ten are less likely to be hostile to foreign cultures and are more emotionally and socially open to languages than adolescents or adults. The social and emotional 'flexibility' of young children is also frequently mentioned in the works of developmental psychologists (*cf.* Vágnerová 2005; Šulová 2004) and can be regarded as conducive to foreign language learning.

1.1.4 Counterevidence to the CPH

Having analysed various arguments from neurobiological, cognitive and affective domains, Stern (1991, p.363) expresses certain doubts on the validity of such lines of reasoning:

> […] based on the assumption that children are in effect better language learners than adolescents or adults. They [the arguments] do not constitute proof that this is so nor do they provide concrete evidence of the specific characteristics of such early second language learning and of the differences in the learning process between earlier and later learning.

Furthermore, it should be noted that there also exists considerable evidence undermining the presumption that children are superior to adolescents or adults in

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[4] Acculturation refers to "social and psychological integration of the learner with the target language group." (Schumann 1986, p.379).

foreign language learning. Ellis (1994, p. 491) and Krashen, Long and Scarcella (1979 in Krashen 1982, p.43) reviewing comparative studies of children and adults conclude that as far as the rate of language learning is concerned, adults seem to progress more rapidly through the initial stages of the process. Ellis (ibid., p.493) ascribes the initial advantage of adults to the greater cognitive maturity and to the fact that adults usually experience more negotiation of meaning and hence better language input. Similar explanation is advanced by Krashen (1982, p.44), who claims that despite simplified input typically addressed to children, adults possess 'conversational competence' enabling them to get more 'comprehended' input, a key element for successful acquisition[5]. Ellis (ibid.); however, also adds that adults' initial advantage "[…] may not be sufficient to guarantee high levels of second language proficiency." Moreover, Lightbown and Spada (2006, pp.72-73) stress that children finally surpass adults if provided with the adequate amount of exposure to the target language. This, according to Ellis (ibid., p.492), is more likely in natural setting than in formal ones since the needed amount of exposure to the target language is usually insufficient in the latter.

After a detailed analysis of comparative investigations of children and adults, Singleton and Ryan (2004, p.81) comments on the existence of the CPH as follows:

> […] the notion that L2 learning capacity peaks before and declines after puberty does seem to be undermined by adult studies cited in this section, which, on the face of it, appear to suggest a continuing improvement in L2 learning capacity at least through teens.

1.1.5 Multiple critical periods for various language aspects

While Lenneberg, Penfield and other researchers maintain that the critical period affects language as a whole, there have been suggestions that only certain language aspects are influenced by the critical period. Selinger (1978 in Ellis 1994, p.492) proposes that there may be multiple critical periods for different aspects of language closing at varying times. This view is supported by Scovel (1988) gathering multidisciplinary evidence to argue that the critical period is limited only to pronunciation. According to this author (1988, p.101), phonology is the language aspect which is particularly sensitive to age effects because of being tightly bound

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[5] The role of language input in foreign language learning is discussed on pp. 18-19.

with the neuromuscular processes, which differentiates it from grammar or vocabulary. Najvar (2008, p.43-45) also examines the investigations dealing with how age affects the acquisition of pronunciation and concludes that if there exists a sensitive period for second language learning, pronunciation is the area in which age-affects are most apparent. Likewise, Ellis (1994, p.492) sees pronunciation as highly sensitive to age and maintains that "[o]nly child learners are capable of acquiring a native accent in informal learning contexts." Nonetheless, while admitting that research results show a certain advantage of children in the acquisition of phonology, Singleton and Ryan (2004, p.87) are rather careful about drawing definite conclusions:

> With regard to L2 acquisition, even in the studies which seem to indicate that younger learners acquire a native-like accent more efficiently than older learners, the evidence is for a trend, rather than for inexorable law.

Regarding other language aspects, mainly grammar has been devoted adequate research attention. On the basis of empirical evidence, Ellis (1994, pp.492-493) considers grammar as less sensitive to age and sets its critical period around 15 years. The influential studies lending support to the existence of the critical period also for grammar are Patkowski's (1980) research and Johnson and Newport's (1989) study, both of which show that critical period does not apply exclusively to phonology but may influence also other language aspects (Lightbown, Spada 2006, pp.69-72). Nevertheless, it should be noted that both of these studies were conducted in informal immigrant settings or in the situation of long-term residence in the target language country and therefore the results are contextually bound.

Bialystok (2001, p.87) is; however, somewhat dubious about positing multiple critical periods for different language aspects and argues that such segmentation brings a problem of integration. In Bialystok's (ibid.) view, even if the language components are divided by the influence from the critical period, language still needs to function as a coherent whole.

1.1.6 Varying external conditions

Turning attention to different learning conditions available for children and adults, Lightbown and Spada (2006, p.68) suggest that children's greater efficiency in

second language learning may be caused by qualitatively different environmental factors:

> They [children] often have more opportunities to hear and use the language in the environments where they do not experience strong pressure to speak fluently and accurately from the very beginning […] their early imperfect errors are often praised or, at least, accepted. […] Adults are often embarrassed by their lack of mastery of the language and may develop a sense of inadequacy after experiences of frustration trying to say exactly what they mean.

This view is supported by Bialystok and Hakuta maintaining that "social factors conspire to ease the effort for young children by providing a nurturing environment, simplified input, educational opportunities, cooperative peers […]" (1999 in Hyltenstam, Abrahamsson 2003, p.570)

Singleton (1989 in Ellis 1994, p.492) also notices qualitative divergences in the learning conditions and puts a question whether the differences between children and adults are consequences of differing environmental factors available for the two groups or caused by maturation changes affecting language learning.

To conclude, from the above, it is obvious that scholars considerably vary in their interpretations of the causes of critical periods in second language learning, nor do they agree on the language aspects under the influence of critical periods or on the precise time when the critical period closes; furthermore, research has also generated substantial counterevidence to the existence of critical periods in second language learning; thus there exists a wide variety of views on the issue, many of them are strongly opposing and contradictory.

1.2 SLA theories and their implications for the 'age issue'

In order to present a complex view on the role of age in second language learning, the above discussion of age-effects in second language learning needs to be set into a deeper theoretical context of second language acquisition theories explaining diverse processes present in second language learning.

Bearing in mind an abundance of various theories of second language acquisition categorised in varying taxonomies, I have decided to cover only the underlying ones which are relevant with respect to the primary aims of the paper.

1.2.1 Behaviourist theory

Behaviourist view of the second language learning is rooted in behavioural psychology, whose origins are often linked to the experiments by the Russian scholar Pavlov, who coined the term classical conditioning (*see* VanPatten, Williams 2007, p.18). According to Williams and Burden (1997, p.9), the founder of modern behaviourism is F.B. Skinner, the author of the operant conditioning, which explains human learning in terms of receiving reinforcement on the response initiated by the given stimulus. In Skinner's view, if a response to a particular stimulus receives a positive reinforcement, the likelihood of its subsequent occurrence is increased; on the other hand, if a negative reinforcement follows the response, its reoccurrence is decreased. The underlying feature of behaviourist theories of learning is exclusion of the internal cognitive process of a leaner and high reliance on the external environment as a key determinant for learning (ibid., pp.10-13).

From the behaviourist perspective, second language learning is seen as a formation of a new habit through mimicry, practise and reinforcement (Lightbown, Spada 2006, p.34) [6]. The authors (ibid.) further explain that "a person learning the second language would start off with the habits formed in the first language and these habits would interfere with the new ones needed for the second language." Behaviourist theory is often criticised for its over-reliance on the external environment as the only source necessary for language learning. Brewster and Ellis (2002, pp.16-17) accentuate that behaviourism does not explain the empirically confirmed children's ability to creatively manipulate the language. Children's capacity for creativity in language learning is also pinpointed by Lightbown and Spada (2006, p.14), who maintain that behaviourist claim that children just passively try to imitate what they hear in their surrounding is highly inaccurate since children

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[6] Behaviourist view of the second language learning motivated the development of audiolingual method for language teaching placing a strong emphasize on memorization, pattern drills or choral repetition of structural patterns, which should together with the consistent reinforcement lead to the formation of habit of the correct use of a foreign language (*see* Richards, Rodgers 2001, pp.50-67).

not only vary in a degree of imitation and seem to imitate selectively but also are capable of creating new forms or uses of words and generalizing them to new contexts; thus producing structures which could not be acquired through imitation since not being present in the environment before. Despite apparent shortcomings of behaviourist theory of second language learning, Lightbown and Spada (ibid.) admit that behaviourism may throw some light on "[…] how children learn some regular and routine aspects of language, especially at the earliest stages."

Regarding the relation between the behaviourist theory of language learning and the question of the optimal age to learn a foreign language, it should be reiterated that behaviourism excludes the internal cognitive processes of a learner as invalid for human learning and holds the external environment with provision of stimuli and reinforcements as crucial; thus the age of a learner becomes insignificant. Looked through the lens of behaviourism, potential differences amongst learners are caused primarily by varying environmental stimuli available for different learners (e.g. different levels of reinforcement or exposure to the target language models) but not by the internal maturation processes determined by age.

1.2.2 Nativist theory

Nativist view of language acquisition originated in the work of Noam Chomsky, whose theory on how languages are acquired not only challenged the behaviourist perspective but more importantly, meant a revolutionary change in how language acquisition may be perceived. In Chomsky's view, children are highly active in discovering how the language works and are capable of distinguishing between grammatical and ungrammatical sentences despite being exposed to language input which naturally contains many false starts, grammatically incorrect reformulations, incomplete structures or slips of tongue (Lightbown, Spada 2006, p.15). This would be hardly possible without the inborn mechanisms responsible for language acquisition. Chomskyan view posits that children are predisposed with a specific innate capacity to discover the underlying rules of any language to which they are exposed. His theory supports the view that language acquisition depends on a specific module of the brain and thus being separated from a general cognitive system (ibid.). This innate mechanism originally referred to as Language

Acquisition Device became to be known as Universal Grammar (henceforth UG) because "it consists of the sorts of grammatical categories and principles that are common to all languages." (O'Grady 2005, p.184). Ligthbown and Spada (ibid., p.16) explicate that UG enables acquisition of highly complex grammar of the target language which would hardly be acquired only through imitating and practising the structures available in the input. As apparent, unlike the behaviourist theory, Chomskyan view severely limits the role of the external environment merely to providing the language input, while the rest needed for language acquisition will be done by the innate mechanisms of UG. Nonetheless, as Brewster and Ellis (2002, p.18) note, Chomsky's concept is often criticised for being too preoccupied with the structural view of language while neglecting the social aspects of the language use.

The possible implications of the nativist view of language acquisition for the 'age issue' are analysed by Ellis (1994, pp.453-456), who indicates that the access to the innate mechanisms UG can be different at various times in life. Hence, there might be a common ground between the concept of UG and the existence of the critical period for second language learning, which can also throw some light on the question of why acquisition of grammar which is possibly governed by UG seems to be affected by the critical period at a different time than the acquisition of the sound system of the language. Ellis presents several types of access to UG:

- *Complete access:* the access to UG remains intact throughout the whole life.

- *No access:* first language acquisition and second language acquisition are viewed as fundamentally different processes. UG is no longer available to adults who have to rely on general problem-solving skills.

- *Partial access*: in this view, some components of UG become inaccessible in later life and a learner has to rely on general learning strategies. This view partially accords with the cognitive arguments in favour of the CPH, which also claim that later language learning is approached through general learning mechanisms.

- *Dual access*: in later life, both innate language acquisition capacity and general learning mechanisms are available. However, general learning mechanisms may block the innate capacities and thus prevents a learner from fully reaching the aim.

(adopted from Ellis 1994, p.453-456)

On the basis of the above contradictory opinions of the role of UG in second language learning, Ellis (ibid.) says that the role of UG in language learning has not been sufficiently explained.

1.2.3 Krashen's theory

Krashen's theory of the second language acquisition, noticeably influenced by the nativist views of language acquisition, is most ambitious and highly influential model developed specifically for the second language acquisition. Its profound and significant impacts on the world of foreign language teaching are undeniable. Krashen's theory consists of five interrelated hypotheses analysed below.

The Acquisition- Learning Hypothesis

Krashen's distinction between two independent processes present in internalising the knowledge of a foreign language is central to his five hypotheses. In Krashen's view, acquisition is subconscious process resembling the way in which children acquire their mother tongue. In order for acquisition to take place a learner's attention must centre on the conveyance of meanings or messages and not on the structural forms of language. Put another way, acquisition arises if language is used for meaningful communication. In contrast, learning refers to the conscious study of language, which results in the ability to explicitly verbalise the language rules (Krashen 1982, pp.10-11). In this respect, learning can be seen as conscious effort to understand and memorise the language rules. The key point which should be accentuated here is Krashen's claim that learning cannot be converted into acquisition through practice or using the given structures in communication; thus for Krashen, acquired and learned knowledge is totally separate and distinct categories (ibid., p.21). While the distinction between implicit/acquired knowledge and explicit/learned knowledge is widely accepted in cognitive psychology (*see* Dekeyser 2003), Krashen's claim of their mutual independence is rather controversial. An alternative model allowing mutual interdependence of the two kinds of language knowledge was proposed by Bialystok, who as opposed to Krashen, maintains that explicit knowledge can become implicit via formal

practising (see Ellis 1994, p.357). For Krashen the only kind of interaction between the two kinds of knowledge is revealed in his next hypothesis discussed further.

The monitor hypothesis

As implied above, this hypothesis attempts at illustrating the possible correlation between acquired and learned knowledge of a foreign language. According to Krashen (1982, p.15), "[n]ormally, acquisition "initiates" our utterances in a second language and is responsible for our fluency." The only role attributed to learning is that of a Monitor or editor correcting the potential deviations in speech or writing before the actual production. Krashen further severely limits the role of learning by suggesting three conditions under which the monitor can be used. Firstly, a sufficient amount of time needed to consult the rules and use them appropriately. Secondly, a leaner must be deliberately concerned with the form of the utterances. Finally, a learner needs to know the specific rule(s) to be employed, which can be rather demanding task in view of the high language complexity and the existence of abundance of grammar rules (ibid., p.16). Furthermore, Krashen (ibid., p.19) also presents the notion of individual variation in the use of Monitor and distinguishes Monitor over-users, who constantly 'filter' their output through their explicit knowledge, which often hinders the fluency of their production; the next type is Monitor under-users strongly relying on their acquired knowledge rejecting or avoiding the learned knowledge even if the conditions permit; the last type is the optimal user of Monitor, who effectively utilizes both kinds of knowledge by using Monitor (i.e. the learned knowledge) only in situations when it does not constraint communication (e.g. in writing or careful speech). Krashen (ibid.) himself stresses that production of such users should be one of the central pedagogical goals.

Natural order hypothesis

This hypothesis states that "[…] the acquisition of grammatical structures proceeds in a predictable order." (Krashen 1982, p.12) Although there is not total agreement among individual learners there are statistically significant similarities (ibid.). Reviewing various longitudinal studies, Krashen (ibid.) presents the general order of

acquisition of grammatical morphemes for English as a second language7 and says that in the case of mother tongue acquisition many features are hold common but copula and auxiliary verbs seem to be acquired later in the first language than in the second language. Moreover, it is essential to note that Krashen does not recommend using the knowledge of the natural order to grammatically sequence the teaching syllabi, for any kind of grammatical sequencing is not conducive if the primary aim is foreign language acquisition (ibid., p.14).

The Input hypothesis

Hardly any second language acquisition researcher would disagree with the statement that the input hypothesis is perhaps together with the learning-acquisition distinction the most fundamental to Krashen's theory of second language acquisition. The input hypothesis, which as said by Krashen, relates only to acquisition not to learning, makes the following claims:

1. Acquisition takes place via understanding language input which contains structures slightly beyond the learner's current level of competence (i+1). Such input becomes comprehensible as a result of contextual and extraliguistic clues as well as linguistic simplifications.

2. I+1 will be automatically provided when communication is successful, when the input is understood and when there is enough of it.

3. Production ability emerges. This means that speaking is the result of acquisition not its cause, which indicates that it cannot be directly taught. The learner will start to produce in a foreign language only when the stage of 'production readiness' has been reached.

(Krashen 1982, pp.21-22)

While it is widely accepted by many researchers that input slightly exceeding the learner's present language competence and made comprehensible to learners is of prime importance for foreign language learning, the nature of its possible modifications may vary. Long (1985 in Ellis 1994, pp.273-277) stresses the importance of the interactional modifications such as paraphrasing, asking for clarification, comprehension checks or other strategies used to both simplify the input and negotiate meaning if communication breakdown occurs. In Long's

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[7] For a description of the hierarchical order of grammatical morpheme acquisition see Krashen (1982, p.13)

opinion, even though grammatically simplified input and context certainly play a role in making input comprehensible it is the interactive input that is more beneficial compared to the non-interactive one (1985 in Ellis 1994, p.273). Ellis (1994, p. 276) reviews a number of studies on the effect of input on second language learning and summarizes the findings as follows:

> […] there is mixed evidence regarding the value of linguistically simplified input for promoting comprehension. Whereas speech rate does have a clear effect, grammatical modifications do not always result in improved comprehension. Firmer support exists for the beneficial effect of interactionally modified input on comprehension.

Undoubtedly, the input hypothesis has a significant bearing on the classroom practice; its pedagogical implications are further discussed in the relevant parts of the paper (*see* p.39).

The Affective Filter hypothesis

The last of Krashen's hypotheses reveals the role of affective variables in the process of learning a second language. Based on this hypothesis, the affective variables can be categorised into three subgroups: motivation, self-confidence and anxiety (1982, p.31). Krashen (ibid.) hypothesizes that the learners with high motivation, good self-confidence and positive self-image generally achieve better results in a second language acquisition. Additionally, low personal anxiety and together with anxiety-free learning environments are believed to be conducive to acquisition as well. Krashen (ibid.) further says that the concept of attitudinal factors is valid only for acquisition not for learning. The correlation between the comprehensible input and affective variables is strong one; The Affective Filter hypothesis suggests that exposure to adequate quantity of comprehensible input is vital for language acquisition but not sufficient since a learner needs to be 'affectively' predisposed to 'let in' the input and allows it to enter the Language Acquisition Device. In the light of both The Input hypothesis and The Affective Filter hypothesis, Krashen (ibid., p.32) argues that "[t]he effective language teacher is someone who can provide input and help make it comprehensible in a low anxiety situation." The Affective Filter hypothesis also accounts for the individual variation

in success in a foreign language learning because different individuals may vary in the strength of their affective filter considered together with comprehensible input as the major causative variables in a foreign language learning (ibid., p.31).

Such a comprehensive and ambitious theory of second language acquisition, as Krashen's model certainly is, naturally evoked an enthusiastic debate in the field of second language acquisition research. In the present work, only the main critical views will be briefly foreshadowed. Not surprisingly, the main sources of criticism are the two major hypothesis of Krashen's theory, namely The Acquisition-Learning hypothesis and The Input hypothesis. The former was strongly attacked by the psychologist McLaughlin, who emphasizes that Krashen does not sufficiently operacionalise what is meant by 'subconscious' and 'conscious' nor does he precisely identify the processes involving acquisition and learning (1987 in Ellis 1994, p.359). The latter is criticised particularly for being supported largely by indirect evidence[8] and therefore Krashen's claim of comprehensible input as the major cause of acquisition is challenged[9].

To sum up, despite heavy criticism, Krashen's theory has influenced language teachers probably more than any other. It cannot be disagreed with VanPatten and Williams (2007, p.25), who rightly say:

> It [Krashen's theory] has been particularly influential among practitioners and laid foundation for contemporary theorizing within SLA. Its broader success rests in part on its resonance with experience of language learners and teachers. An understanding of this theory is crucial to understanding the field of SLA theory and research as a whole.

Regarding the implications of Krashen's theory for the 'age issue', some of his views on the role of age have already been described (*see* p.8). For the complexity of this concluding part of the analysis of Krashen's theory, it should be very briefly reiterated that Krashen sees the onset of puberty as a point at which the level of affective filter increases, which, in his view, blocks natural acquisition that is typical of children. On the other hand, he admits the initial adults' rate advantage in second language learning and ascribes it to their ability to negotiate meaning and thus make

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[8] Ellis (1994, p.277) presents a summary of the sources of evidence in support of the input hypothesis as put forward by various authors including Krashen.
[9] For concrete counterevidence to The Input hypothesis and alternative suggestions see Ellis (1994, pp.278-280).

the input comprehensible for them. To summarize his view on the role of age, he hypothesizes that age in itself is not the predictor of success in foreign language learning; in his view, the presence of comprehensible input is the crucial causative variable and not age *per se* (Krashen 1982, p.44).

In addition to the theories analysed above, there are two other highly significant views on language learning relevant for the paper, namely the cognitive-developmental perspective of Piaget and the social interactionist view of Vygotsky. These; however, relate to learning and psychological development in general; therefore they will be devoted attention in the corresponding parts of the paper (*see* pp. 30-32).

In conclusion, it needs to be clarified that a comprehensive theory explaining all aspects of second language learning is absent. To properly understand the present stage of knowledge, it is convenient to imagine a second language learning as a mosaic in which each language acquisition theory represents one or more pieces together creating more complex picture which is; however, still unfinished.

1.3 Summary of opinions on maturational constrains on the second language learning and the implications for ELT

As apparent from the core part of the first chapter (pp.3-12), the role of age in foreign language learning is of central interest to language acquisition researchers and has been devoted considerable attention. The research results on the existence of the CPH are; however, far from being consensual. Rather, the presence of the immense amount of contradictory findings seem to make the issue even less transparent. Ellis (1994, p.484) does not consider the varying results surprising and accentuates the fact that the studies investigating the CPH have employed different methodology and noticeably varied in how learning outcomes were measured. Furthermore, Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson (2003, p.539) underline that "[…] different researchers have implicitly based their research on conceptually different interpretations of the CPH." Consequently, it is rather problematic to compare the results and reach a consensus.

Broadly speaking, the existence of the critical period for the second language learning has not been unambiguously supported by the research evidence. In fact, the CPH has been seriously challenged and cast legitimate doubts upon, which motivated the lack of consensus in the professional community. In spite of the great plurality of opinions amongst experts, a certain common ground emerges from the research:

1. If the rate of second language learning is concerned, adults and adolescents seem to go though the initial stages faster and therefore in this respect they are superior to children

2. Those initiating second language learning in the childhood are generally more likely to achieve higher level of language proficiency than those starting as adults

3. Children are more likely to acquire authentic pronunciation, which is; however, observable mainly in informal learning settings

4. The route of second language learning appears not to be affected by age, both adults and children seem to pass through similar developmental patterns

(based on Ellis 1994; Krashen 1982; Singleton, Ryan 2004)

In the light of the above conclusions, it seems that although adults may be superior in the initial rate of second language learning children generally achieve higher command of language in the long run. However, Singleton and Ryan (2004, p.100) underscores that the studies providing support to a general long-term advantage of those starting in the childhood were mostly conducted in natural learning settings. In the case of formal instructional settings, Harley, who draws on the studies from the school settings, maintains that "older learners eventually catch up to those started learning L2 at a younger age." (1986 in Singleton, Ryan 2004, p.98) Consequently, it seems that the long-term advantage of children is not observable in formal learning environments. According to Singleton and Ryan (ibid., pp.98-100), it would be; however, immature to conclude that formal instructional settings produce different age-related results than the natural ones. The authors (ibid., p.99) compare the intensity of exposure in the two settings and stress that "[c]learly, a period of, say, five years of natural exposure to L2 would in most circumstances involve much more exposure than five years of formal instructions […]." Taking this into account,

Singleton and Ryan (ibid.) further argue that the evidence from the research into the formal instructional settings does not undermine children's long-term advantage since the studies in such settings up to date "have not extended over sufficient period of times for exposure to be comparable with that involved in long term naturalistic studies." Thus, as concluded by Singleton and Ryan (ibid., p.100), the empirically confirmed children's long-term advantage in natural settings is not invalidated by the results of studies from formal settings owing to the varying intensity of exposure factor.

Despite a great body of empirical research with contradictory or often even mutually exclusive results as regards to the existence of the CPH, I tend to concur with the conclusion of Moyer, who posits:

> […] multiple factors, in combination with one another, may account for age effects to a statistically significant degree […] Those initiating language acquisition after puberty may be subject to an especially complex combination of influences from social, psychological and cognitive realms.
>
> (2004, p.138)

Nonetheless, regardless of my inclinations to Moyer's conclusion, if all the findings and arguments explored in this chapter are objectively analysed and evaluated, it is rather hard to disagree with one of Stern's summary points:

> Language learning may occur at different maturity levels from the early years into adult life. No age or stage stands out as optimal or critical for all aspects of second language learning.
>
> (1991, p.366)

Regarding the foreign language education, the absence of consensus in relation to the existence of the critical or sensitive period for second language learning has a considerable bearing on the opinions on what stage of curriculum foreign languages should be introduced. Ligthbown and Spada (2006, p.74) differentiate through learning goals:

> When the objective of second language learning is native-like mastery of the target language, it may indeed be desirable for the learner to be completely surrounded by the language as early as possible. […] When the goal is basic communicative ability for all students in an educational system and when it is assumed that the child's native language will remain primary, it may be more efficient to second or foreign language teaching later.

It should be stressed here that native-like mastery of foreign language is neither fully realistic nor a necessarily desired aim of foreign language education, which primarily aims at the development of communicative competence[10].

More accurate answer is proposed by Ellis and Brewster (2002, p.21), who on the basis of absence of sound evidence in favour or the CPH, emphasize that age is not the only factor to be considered if early language education is concerned:

> We can only conclude that an early start is not, in itself, automatically an advantage; an early start is influenced by many learner factors which play a great part in the success of L2 learning. These include motivation and confidence, differences in language aptitude and personality.

Likewise, Edelenbost et al. (2006, p.147) reject the age as the only factor affecting the success in foreign language learning and have the following to say:

> An early start by itself however guarantees nothing; it needs to be accompanied minimally by good teaching, by supportive environment and by continuity from one year to the next, taking children smoothly from pre-primary to primary, and from primary into secondary education.

Hanušová and Najvar (2006, p.147) hold a similar view and strongly advise against overemphasizing the age factor if the decisions on early foreign language education are concerned:

> A very complicated issue [early foreign language education] should not be reduced to that of age. The assumed positive effects of early and very early language instruction seem to be levelled with other important variables that intervene in the long process of learning a foreign language.

Moreover, it should be pinpointed that many research studies confirming the presumption of a long-term advantage of those starting foreign language learning in early childhood were conducted in natural settings such as long-term residence in a foreign country or total immersion programmes. These are; however, absolutely different from the Czech socio-educational context.

From the above, it becomes obvious that low starting age *per se* is not warranty of success in second language learning, nor the only variable on which the decisions as to the introduction of foreign language education into pre-primary or early primary education should be based.

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[10] For a detailed analysis of communicative competence see Bachman (1990).

Educational authorities accentuate various criteria to be met if very early and early foreign language education is to be effective. The underlying ones which are also highly relevant for the Czech socio-educational context are:

- adequate quality of early language teaching: this encompasses a provision of qualified teachers with both sufficient command of the target language and received training in teaching a foreign language to very young or young learners; continuing professional development for teachers in post

- specialised methodology for the target age group drawing on learner-centred approach and fully respecting developmental specifics of very young or young learners; provision of sufficient material resources

- sufficient overall time available for acquiring/learning a foreign language: children need to be provided with an immense amount of the language input[11]

- coherence between pre-primary and primary education: it should be ensured that individual educational stages create a unitary continuous 'path' through the process of second language learning (i.e. if teachers at higher educational levels cannot effectively build on what and how a learner are able to do in a foreign language, the potential positive effects of early foreign language education may go wasted)
(based on Brewster, Ellis 2002; Lojová 2006; Vojtková 2006; Johnstone 2002)

It is apparent enough that if the above-stated conditions are not fulfilled or approximated just to a minor extent, early language education cannot bring the expected and desired results. Nikolov (2000 in Johnstone 2002, p.10) even claims that if any of the key conditions is missing, early second language education should not be introduced since the negative initial experience may have a harmful bearing on children's attitude to the target language and to learning languages in general.

1.4. Advantages and disadvantages of an early start

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[11] Curtain (2000 in Johnstone 2002, p.18) has researched the elementary school foreign language programmes in USA with the aim of finding any correlation between the time available to learners and the levels of the target language command. The study results show positive correlation between the number of English classes per week and the learnes' achievements in the language. The key message of Curtain's research is her conclusion that irrespective of how early a foreign language education is introduced, there appears to be a minimum amount of allocated time under which SLA is not conducive at all.

In view of the serious lack of consensus on when foreign language education should begin, it would be unwise to postulate the positives of very early and early foreign language learning just on the basis of the existence of certain evidence in favour of the CPH. Rather, the potential advantages below may emerge if the key conditions for very early and early foreign language learning are present.

Potential advantages of early foreign language education:

- early starters in the long run generally achieve higher levels of foreign language command

- early starters seem to be at psychological advantage lying in the affective domain: very young learners tend to be less anxious in the process of foreign language learning. Thus, the affective filter is low enough enabling them to absorb the language rather than block it. Moreover, it is widely accepted that very young and young learners are less likely to hold negative attitudes to foreign languages and cultures

- in the early childhood, there seems to be a relative ease of acquiring a high command of the sound system of the language

- early second language education provides an opportunity to employ a wide range of acquisitional processes: largely intuitive processes at an early age, which are complemented or substituted by more analytical ones later. Consequently, a foreign language becomes more deeply embedded in the learner

- early start provides formative educational experience and contributes to the formation of multilingual and intercultural identity

- early exposure to the foreign language helps to raise the learner's general language awareness through the comparison of the mother tongue and a foreign language

- early starters have a more overall time available to acquire the desired foreign language command

- early foreign language learning seems to be facilitative to the overall cognitive development of learners[12]

(based on Johnstone 2002; Vojtková 2006; Nikolov 2009)

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[12] A number of studies show noticeable positive effects of early foreign language education on the learner's achievements in mathematics, reading and writing in the mother tongue or social sciences (for an authoritative overview of such studies see Taylor-Ward 2003, pp.54-70). These studies reject the commonly held concern that early foreign language education may be detrimental to learning the minimum skills (e.g. reading, writing) in the mother tongue or may hinder the healthy overall cognitive development resulting in the deficits in achievements in other school subjects.

Potential disadvantages of early foreign language education

As stressed earlier in the paper, the adequate conditions for a foreign language acquisition/learning are equally important, if not more, as the starting age. Keeping this fact in mind, the Czech educationalists rightly express serious doubts about the readiness of the Czech educational system for the introduction of foreign languages to pre-primary and the very early primary educational stages (*cf.* Fenclová 1994; Dvořáková 2006; Havlíčková 2006).

There seems to be a common view that the two key conditions are not fulfilled. Firstly, there is an alarming lack of the qualified English language teachers in primary schools[13]. The situation seems to be even worse in kindergartens where language courses are often taught by qualified pre-primary teachers, who are trained to teach very young learners and know their needs and developmental specifics; thus can manage them easily but lack a sufficient command of the target language, which highly decreases the efficiency of such courses. Another face of reality in nurseries is when very young learners are taught a foreign language by professional language teachers, who have the required command of the language, but lacks a knowledge of methodology for working with the target age group and applies methods which are inappropriate for preschool children.

Secondly, a continuity between individual educational stages is missing, though declared as the key condition for the long-term advantage of early starters to emerge (Dvořáková 2006, p.62). The problem of coherence in the individual educational stages is a central concern in many other European countries being aware of the possible detrimental effects on the learners' motivation (*see* Nikolov 2009).

Another objection frequently raised against early second language education is that of the potential danger of so called subtractive bilingualism, which refers to a negative impact of bilingualism on the learner whose mother tongue language skills are not fully developed and acquiring another language may lead to the loss of the first one (Lightbown, Spada 2006, p.26). Nonetheless, it should be noted that such situation may occur in the bilingual settings (e.g. immigrants trying to

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[13] Faklová (2000 in Dvořáková 2006, p.62) accentuates that "more than three quarters of the language teachers at primary schools are unqualified."

assimilate into the new language community) which have little in common with the Czech socio-educational conditions available for the foreign language education.

1.5 Conclusion

Since Lenneberg's postulation of the CPH there has been a great body of research investigating the existence of maturational constrains on second language learning. Studies of various types using varying research methodology have, not surprisingly, generated not unanimous results. The arguments and counter-arguments in relation to the CPH have been advanced extensively by various authors suggesting even different interpretations of the same research results. This has inevitably had an impact on the world of foreign language teaching. Educationalists, methodologists and language policy makers have been turning their attention to the field of empirical research in the hope of obtaining an answer on when foreign language education should start. Based on the current state of knowledge, a unitary answer to this question seems to be nonexistent. Although there exists legitimate evidence in favour of the existence of maturational constraints on foreign language learning, it draws on the research conducted in naturalistic settings which are, particularly in terms of quantity and quality of the language input, radically different from the linguistic environments in the countries where a foreign language is taught as one of the school subjects. Therefore, as already stressed in the paper, it is more accurate to talk about the optimal conditions rather than about the critical age at which foreign language education must necessarily start if the young children' potentials for acquiring/learning the second language are not to be wasted. In other words, contrary to the popular belief *'the younger the better'*, it is the availability of the key conditions outlined earlier in the paper (*see* p.25) which makes early language education effective. This view is consistent with most authorities on teaching languages to very young and young learners (*cf.* Johnstone 2002; Nikolov 2009; Moon 2005; Cameron 2003). In harmony with these authors, I believe that if the key conditions are respected and fulfilled, early foreign language teaching may activate the innate intuitive language acquisition capacities, which may lead to acquiring

high commands of the sound system and presumably other components of the target language.

Furthermore, most research studies examining the age effects on the second language learning are primarily concerned with identifying the causal relation between the starting age and learning outcomes in the target language. This, in my subjective opinion, neglects the psychological influences on a learner inherent in early foreign language teaching. Put another way, even if that the strongest rejecting views on the maturational constrains on foreign language learning were admitted and if it was accepted that adolescents and adults are not subjects of maturational changes causing a decline in the second language acquisition ability or even have certain advantages over pre-puberty learners, early foreign language teaching may still favourably contribute to enhancing the efficiency of learning a foreign language. If early foreign language education is in accordance with the key conditions (p.25), particularly if the target age group specialised methodology based learner-centred approach is applied, it may have highly positive impacts on learner's attitude, motivation and self-confidence as for the target language, which may intensively modify the affective 'grounds' on which further foreign language education is built.

Reflecting the fact that success of very early and early foreign language education is not automatically guaranteed by low starting age, the next chapters of the paper examine the most significant pedagogical determinants of effective very early language teaching, namely specialised methodology for VYLs and English language teacher for the target age group. Before these two key determinants are explored in detail it is nevertheless desirable to present the concept that underlies both of them – a thorough knowledge of the developmental characteristics of the age group.

2. Psychological characteristics of VYLs

Having identified the age-appropriate methodology as one of the key conditions necessary for exploiting VYLs' potential for foreign language learning, it is essential to outline the most significant developmental specifics of the target age group since as underlined by Lojová (2005, p.134), a thorough knowledge of the developmental characteristics of VYLs should determine the aims, content and the methods of teaching a foreign language to VYLs.

In this paper, for the sake of clarity of the presentation, psychological development of VYLs is further subdivided into three main sub-areas – cognitive development, social and emotional development and psychomotor development; however, in classroom practice, all these three sub-areas should be viewed as mutually interacting rather than separate.

2.1 Cognitive development

Cognitive development of children is the area which has been attracting the attention of scholars for many decades; nevertheless, there are two distinct figures whose contributions are far-reaching, namely Jean Piaget, the Swiss epistemologist and Lev Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist.

In Piaget's view, a child is an active explorer using his[14] experiences to actively construct the personal understanding of the surrounding world. Being mainly concerned with the process of learning, Piaget sees cognitive development as maturation process in which genetics and experience interact and the new knowledge is constructed though the contradictory as well as complementary processes of assimilation and accommodation. The former refers to the situation when the incoming information is in harmony with the existent schema of knowledge and therefore after being subjectively modified and adopted, it can be incorporated resulting in the quantitative extension of the current knowledge schema. On the contrary, the latter denotes the situation when the new information

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[14] From now on, the child will be referred to as he/his/him.

does not fit into the current schema; thus, the existing knowledge schema must be qualitatively changed in order to incorporate the new information (Williams, Burden 1997, pp.21-22; Čáp, Mareš 2001, p.412).

Furthermore, Piaget also identified several distinct stages of cognitive development through which an individual passes; following his suggestion, VYLs are at the Pre-operational stage of cognitive development, which means that their thinking and understanding is primarily based on what they can observe and manipulate with at the given time (Čáp, Mareš 2001, p.393). This inevitably needs to be reflected in the design of language teaching methods, materials and activities.

The aforementioned Piaget's findings clearly indicate that a child is not just a passive recipient of knowledge; rather he is highly active in making his personal meanings of the outside world. This notion of children as meaning-seekers is pinpointed by the majority of educationalists who stress that foreign language classroom should build on children's exploratory 'instincts' by providing enough opportunities for experiential learning (*cf.* Cameron 2001; Moon 2005; Brewster, Ellis 2002). Moreover, as indicated by Williams and Burden (1997, pp.22-23), language tasks should match the current level of cognitive development of a learner so that the task is neither too abstract nor too simple and provides learners with target language experiences reflecting the aspects of the child's own world.

Regarding the language development, Williams and Burden (ibid., p.23) exemplify the application of the concepts of assimilation and accommodation by describing that while listening to conversation and thus obtaining new language input one needs to modify or reconstruct the current knowledge of the language (accommodation) in order for the new information can be subsequently incorporated (assimilation). The authors (ibid.) further draw an analogy between these processes and interlanguage theory stating that "[…] a learner's knowledge of language is gradually reshaped as it more closely approximates to the target language." Additionally, for Piaget, language development and cognitive development are closely interrelated because language is used to represent concepts and knowledge already acquired via interaction with the physical world (Lightbown, Spada 2006, p.20).

As opposed to Piaget viewing a child as an independent explorer, Vygotsky sees learning (including language learning) as a result of social interaction between two

interlocutors of unequal skills and knowledge (e.g. a parent and child). Central to Vygotskyan theory is the concept of mediation referring to the role of more knowledgeable significant others (e.g. parents, teachers, peers) functioning as mediators helping and enabling a child to progress to the next stage of knowledge or competence (Williams, Burden 1997, p.40). Vygotsky coined the term the zone of proximal development (henceforth ZPD) denoting "[…] the layer of skill or knowledge which is just beyond that with which the learner is currently capable of coping." (ibid.) In other words, it refers to what a child can currently manage with the support of a parent or a competent peer. Following Willams and Burden (ibid., p.66), Vygotskyan social interactionist theory implies that a teacher should set language learning tasks slightly exceeding the learners' current level of competence and find tools of helping them to manage the tasks.

As for language development, according to Vygotsky, language evolves primarily from social interaction held in the supportive interactive environment. Lightbown and Spada (2006, p.20) reveal that the fundamental difference between Piaget and Vygotsky lies in the fact that from Piagetian point of view, language is a symbol system used to express the known; in contrast, in Vygotskyan perspective, development of thoughts is a direct result of internalised speech emerging in social interaction.

Having outlined the two immensely influential views on a child's cognitive development, the underlying features of VYLs' cognitive development can be discussed, preferably those having a direct influence on foreign language learning.

Developmental psychologists consensually explain that VYLs' memory is largely unintentional or unconscious; if they remember anything, it happens spontaneously without the previous intention (Šulová 2004, p.64; Vágnerová 2005, p.191). Vágnerová (ibid., p.192) maintains that in pre-school age, unintentional remembering is more effective that intentional one since VYLs are incapable of using any strategies for effective information coding. Furthermore, Šulová (ibid., p.68) underscores that the memory is mainly mechanical with relatively high capacity enabling VYLs to memorize the whole dialogues or the whole atlas of mushrooms together with their Latin names. The author (ibid.) further explains that VYLs' memory is concrete and short-term; this means that VYLs remember

concrete events from their life rather than abstract verbal description and tend to forget quickly unless given opportunities for the constant revisiting of the learned items. Moreover, Lojová (2005, p.175) pinpoints that the memory at this age is highly emotive; hence children remember the stimuli which are emotionally attractive to them and associated with positive emotions.

Another defining cognitive characteristic of VYLs is low concentration span; VYLs can concentrate just for short periods of time; their attention is unstable and often unintentional; they can be easily distracted by other stimuli from the environment (Lojová 2005, p.175). However, if the activity is attractive, meaningful and relevant for a child, he can be absorbed by the activity and concentrate for surprisingly long time; this phenomenon was discovered by Marie Montessori, who referred to it as polarization of attention – a time during which even a little child is capable of strong and relatively long-term concentration at the activity, which facilitates his inner development (*see* Zelinková 1997).

The role of fantasy and imagination in VYLs' cognitive development is indisputable; VYLs live in their own world where there is no clear demarcation line between reality and fantasy. In fact, VYLs very often use fantasy and imagination to compensate for the lack of understanding of reality and introduce fantasy elements to make the outside world more comprehensible (Vágnerová 2005, p.182). Foreign language teaching should fully respect VYLs' 'fantasy world' by introducing storytelling technique, activities provoking imagination or various mimetic games with fictional characters.

Pre-school age is often labelled as the period of activity and initiative; VYLs enthusiastically try to explore and understand the causal relations in the outside world; typically, they constantly keep questioning WHY? They need to be active not only mentally but also physically; VYLs feel a strong need to be physically engaged in some motor activities (Šulová 2004, p.71). Thus, an effective foreign language teacher of VYLs builds on children's natural curiosity, provides them with enough opportunities to be not only mentally active but more importantly, physically active by incorporating movement-based activities into lessons.

Another label associated with the pre-school age is a period of play. Lojová (2005, p.134) accentuates that playful activities represent for VYLs the main source of

exploring the world and serve as a main means of satisfying a pre-school child's needs. According to the author (ibid.), even the process of playing brings feelings of satisfaction to a child. Hence, a foreign language needs to be meaningfully interrelated with playful activities; otherwise, language learning would become purposeless for children. The nature of VYLs' play is often affected by their tendency to be self-centred supposing that everyone shares the same opinion, emotions and the same view on the situation; thus, they find it hard to cooperate, share things and lack a sense of empathy for others (Vágnerová 2005, p.174; Lojová 2005, p.135).

2.2 Social and emotional development

VYLs have many emotional and social needs which need to be considered in foreign language teaching. Šulová (2004, p.71) stresses that in pre-school age, children do need to have a sense of security, stability, certainty and permanency and only then they become curious and want to experiment as well as explore the outside world. Bearing this in mind, it is vital for a foreign language teacher to establish emotionally positive rapport with learners and set foreign language teaching in a structured supportive environment which is easily 'legible' for children and thus safe.

Another aspect of social and emotional development deserving attention is remarkable emotional excitability of VYLs; their emotional experiences are intensive but short-term and variable (e.g. happiness can easily turn into anger). Furthermore, the evoked emotions in VYL are usually directly connected to a concrete activity in which a particular need is being satisfied or unsatisfied (Vágnerová 2005, p.196; Šulová 2004, p.72).

As mentioned earlier, pre-school age is known as a period of activity and initiative; therefore, self-fulfillment is of crucial importance to VYLs. They need to have a chance to prove their qualities and show that they are competent and subsequently receive praise, appreciation and admiration for their efforts and results from the significant others (e.g. parents, teacher). A sense of being appreciated and successful leads to strengthening their self-esteem (Vágnerová ibid., pp.219-221).

Concerning development of self-understanding and self-respect, preschool children tend to approach themselves uncritically and often overestimate their skills and abilities; the strongest influence on their self-respect is represented in the opinions of adults, particularly parents; VYLs are fully dependent on such opinions and accept them uncritically as universal truth (Vágnerová ibid., p.229).

Consequently, apart from creating safe and supportive learning environment, foreign language teaching should present activities evoking a wide range of positive emotions and provide VYLs with opportunities to prove their competencies and thus receive a recognition from their language teacher, peers and most importantly, from parents.

2.3 Psychomotor development

Pre-school age is a period during which the overall neuromuscular coordination considerable improves; movements are more accurate, quicker, smooth and generally more elegant. Pre-school children are skilled at observing and imitating movements and thus the period seems to be suitable for introducing sports. The enhanced quality of neuromuscular coordination also stimulates a need for involvement in activities connected with movements. Moreover, in the period, there is a noticeable development of fine motor skills; therefore, VYLs are attracted by the activities enabling them to touch and manipulate things such as working with plasticine. The improving fine motor skills are also connected with gradually developing ability to draw; VYLs are usually very spontaneous and creative in their artwork if provided with suitable and stimulating materials (Šulová 2003, pp.11-12).

Regarding foreign language teaching, the aforementioned characteristics of VYLs' psychomotor development accentuate the already mentioned necessity to introduce movement-based activities in lessons. Furthermore, language learning activities should draw on the development of fine motor skills by involving learners in art and craft activities with a particular emphasis on addressing the tactile sensation.

3. ELT Methodology for VYLs

Having been identified as one of the key determinants for effective very early foreign language education, ELT methodology for VYLs represents the core part of the paper. Given the limitations of Czech socio-educational context compared to bilingual settings, the question of how to teach a foreign language in the available socio-linguistic conditions is of prime importance. Therefore, the next chapter focuses on the underlying constructs in ELT methodology for VYLs. As stressed in the previous chapter, ELT methodology for VYLs should primarily draws on the developmental specifics of VYLs; however, to be more accurate, the methodology is highly interdisciplinary in its nature. It combines the findings from the research into the role of age in second language learning, particularly the importance of quantity and quality of input, language aspects sensitive to age, differences in learning mechanisms between sooner and later language learning, contributions of various SLA theories and approaches to study of language acquisition as well as the knowledge from the development psychology, pedagogy and didactics.

3.1 Goals of teaching English to VYLs

Before the ELT methodology for VYLs is introduced, it is desirable to outline the primary aims addressed by very early foreign language education.

In Europe, there seems to be a wide variety of foreign language programmes for young learners including VYLs; the organization and aims of such programmes vary from those aiming at raising general language awareness to those based on the principles of partial immersion (*see* Edelenbos et al. 2006). The official European language policy documents advocate an early start of foreign language education by stating that "[…] key attitudes towards other languages and cultures are formed, and the foundations for later language learning are laid.[15]" The importance of affective

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[15] Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006. [online]. Available from: WWW: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2003:0449:FIN:EN:PDF>, cited 11.11. 2009.

aims is further reflected in the Czech document *Národní plán pro výuku cizích jazyků* drawing on the above cited document and formulating the primary aim of very early and early foreign language education as follows: "Language education in nursery and primary schools forms key attitudes to languages and cultures and creates the basis for life-long language learning." (Hlavičková 2005, p.4) Additionally, The Framework Education Programme for Pre-primary Education[16] addresses learning a foreign language in one of the key competences stating that in the domain of communicative competence, children should become aware of the existence of various languages as means of communication and the basic foundations for future language learning should be laid (p. 11).

Generally speaking, the priority of affective aims seems to be pinpointed by many experts on teaching languages to very young and young learners (*cf.* Cameron 2001; Dunn 1983; Moon 2005). It is also supported by substantial research evidence verifying the affective gains of an early start and thus giving relevance and credibility to the priority of affective aims in very early and early foreign language education (*see* Edelenbos et al. 2006, pp.67-69).

Concerning VYLs, Lojová (2005, p.134) rightly refers to nursery foreign language education as 'preparatory period' in which linguistic aims are subordinate since the principal aim of pre-primary education is a healthy overall development of children. Therefore, as regards VYLs, shaping positive attitudes to the given language as well as to learning languages in general and to foreign language cultures should go hand in hand with the favourable contributions of foreign language education to VYLs' general personality development in all domains (i.e. cognitive, affective and psychomotor). If foreign language cognitive aims are concerned, it is apparent that the main aim is the comprehension of the spoken language together with the training of ear; which should not; however, be taken for granted by assuming that native-like pronunciation spontaneously emerges after receiving enough language input as it is often the case in immersion settings. Rather, it does need to be addressed intentionally and systematically through the age-appropriate activities aiming at

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[16] Framework Educational Programme for Pre-primary Education [online]. Available from WWW: <http://www.msmt.cz/vzdelavani/ramcovy-vzdelavaci-program-pro-predskolni-vzdelavani>, cited 22.1. 2010.

raising phonological awareness, the language area for which the CPH is generally regarded to be valid.

3.2 English lesson for VYLs

3.2.1 Motivating VYLs

Educationalists specialised into teaching English to VYLs agree that the younger the children are, the more unlikely it is that they feel a need or a particular reason to learn a foreign language (Lojová 2005; Moon 2005; Dunn 1983). It is widely accepted that their motivation is tightly bound with activities associated with foreign language learning and with their relationship to the language teacher rather than with learning a language as such. Šulová (2007, p.55) explains the VYLs can be very strongly motivated if a particular language leaning activity contains an element of game and is realized through social contact with the peers. At the stage of development, motivation is concrete, short-term and the learners need to see immediate results of their efforts. VYLs are motivated if they can see clear objectives, which are easily achievable and the outcomes are immediate (Dunn 1983, p.2; Lojová 2005, p.135). Furthermore, it should be reiterated that preschool children feel a strong need to explore and understand the outside world and the developmental period is typical of a child being active and questioning WHY? (*see* p.33). Thus, foreign language teaching should fully build on this by introducing elements of novelty, surprise and variety of materials and activities into language lessons (Lojová 2005, p.135). The author (ibid.) further explicates that VYLs can be motivated through the exposure to novel stimuli creating positive and stimulating learning environment and by the use of attractive teaching aids such colourful pictures, interesting toys or games, all of them interconnected with a foreign language.

Another significant determinant influencing VYLs' motivation is a teacher. Bearing in mind a need for emotional support from adults (*see* p.34), VYLs are dependent on a teacher in all initial stages of their learning; they need to create a personal relationship with a teacher who praises them, encourages them and positively reinforces their first attempts to speak the language as well as pinpoints

and appreciates their strengths so that the learners experience success in learning a language from the very beginning. Dunn (1983, p.16) emphasizes that "[t]hrough this personal relationship [between a teacher and learner], attitudes to learning English and English culture appear to be transmitted from teacher to child." Moreover, the author (ibid.) also adds that the research results clearly say that the home and parents represent the strongest and most intensive influence on a child; thus, parents' interest in and appreciation of a child's achievements in the language are likely to have highly motivating effect on a child.

3.2.2 Number of learners in the class

When deciding about the optimal size of the group, it is necessary to bear in mind that VYLs feel a strong need to receive a teacher's attention, support and appreciation as often as possible; therefore, it should always be considered if the number of learners makes it feasible for a teacher to devote individual attention to each learner. It needs to be stressed that unsatisfied need for personal contact with a teacher may lead to frustration or anxiety, both of which are detrimental to language learning. Regarding the question of the optimal group size, I conquer with the view of Marxtová (2003, p.188), who suggests that the group should generally contain not more than ten children but the ideal number seems to from five to seven; only then children's attention does not fade so easily owing to the intensive interaction with a teacher and their developmentally determined needs may be satisfied.

3.2.3 Exposure to a foreign language and classroom language

As stated earlier, the potential advantages which children may have in a second language learning emerge only under certain circumstances (*see* p.25); from the research, it is clear that adequate quantity and quality of a foreign language input represent an absolute must. In order to identify the necessary qualities of foreign language input it should be referred back to Krashen's Input hypothesis (*see* pp.18-19) determining the underlying features of the input which is beneficial to foreign language acquisition.

When teaching VYLs, not only should a teacher try to use English as much as possible but also she should be able make the input comprehensible. To do so,

teachers may find inspiration in the first language acquisition research offering extensive evidence on the phenomenon of so-called caretaker talk or motherese (*cf.* O'Grady 2005; Ellis 1994). In the caretaker talk, a parent's primary aim is effective communication with a child; thus certain modifications in the speech are inevitable to make it comprehensible. Empirical research evidence shows that parents adjust their speech by using higher pitch of voice, exaggerated intonation, slow and careful articulation, longer pauses and fewer words per minute; modifications are also discernible at lexical and syntactic level in the use of more content words, shorter and less complex sentences and also commands and simple questions as the prevailing types of communicative acts (Ellis 1994, pp.248-251; O'Grady 2005, p.176). Moreover, these linguistic aids to comprehension are often accompanied by nonverbal signals as gestures or facial expressions and by the utilization of the 'here and now' principle – talking about things which children can see, hear or interact with at the given time or about actions taking place at the time (Ellis 1994, p.249). O'Grady (2005, p.178) accentuates that "[ch]ildren need to hear sentences that they can understand without knowing a lot about the language they are trying to learn." This is perfectly provided by the extralinguistic support of the 'here and now' principle. Ellis (ibid.) further adds that caretaker talk is also characterized by the interactional modifications[17] and explicates that "[c]aretakers make special efforts to ensure that what they say is understood by their children by frequently checking comprehension and repeating […]"

The above findings should be reflected in a teacher's talk to VYLs; a teacher's primary task is to provide the input which is made comprehensible via the use of linguistics and extralinguistic strategies as well as by means of interactional modifications with an emphasis on the constant comprehension check and negotiating meaning if necessary. This undoubtedly requires a teacher to have well developed diagnostic skills and a deep knowledge of the learners because as underlined by Ellis (ibid., p.250), the degree of the modifications is determined by the extent to which a child can comprehend the input and the extent to which a child signals understanding or lack of it. The crucial aim is therefore to make the

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[17] The significance of intractional modification has already been discussed (*see* pp.18-19).

communication successful only then the I+1 will be provided automatically (Krashen 1982, p.22).

Furthermore, employing the above-outlined strategies corresponds to the fact that children are excellent observers capable of grasping meaning from a variety of sources; hence, they can fully make use of such modifications (Brewster, Ellis 2002, p.40). To make the 'picture' more complex, Piaget's notion of a child as an explorer trying to actively construct the meaning should be reiterated here to support the empirically proved tendency of children to focus on meaning rather than form when being exposed to a new language (Moon 2005, p.31). Children's natural search for meaning in language is concisely depicted in the words of Lynne Cameron (2003, p.107):

> [...] children see foreign language 'from the inside' and try to find meaning in how the language is used in action, in interaction, and with intention, rather than 'from the outside', as system and form. [...] Good YL [young learner] teaching will provide opportunities for children to construct meaning in the language they encounter by incorporating it in purposeful action and interaction.

Thus, it is obvious an English teacher of VYLs should try her best to provide children with a rich variety of meaningful comprehensible input, which builds on their natural 'instincts' to search for the meaning in the language and subsequently leads to their understanding, which as hypothesized by Krashen, is the main perquisite for successful acquisition: "We acquire by "going for meaning" first, and as a result, we acquire structure!" (1982, p.21)

As indicated earlier, English should be the dominant language in lessons but there may arise situations where insistence on its usage can be counter-productive. In view of the dynamic emotional and social needs of VYLs, it is advisable to use mother tongue if necessary in order to prevent increasing their affective filter. Nonetheless, this does not mean that a teacher can use the mother tongue to ease her job, rather mother tongue usage should always be judicious and followed by a reflection if its use was effective or whether any other strategy could have been used to convey the meaning. On top of that, Dunn (1983, p.50) proposes that if mother tongue is used, it should be tone in a different tone of voice to indicate to children that this is an uncommon situation in the lesson.

So far the discussion has been mainly centred on the quality of the input but it is apparent that even lessons conducted entirely in English and held several times per week do not sufficiently meet the 'quantity requirement'. Therefore, special effort should be made to maximize the exposure to the target language by incorporating it into the daily routine of children in nurseries. Havlíčková (2006, p.84) suggests integrating English into the regular activities such as eating, dressing or bedtime in order to simulate bilingual environment rather than organizing separate English lessons. Increasing the overall exposure time can also be realized through an active involvement of parents who may use English at home or at various occasions outside the nursery. Nevertheless, Phillips (1993, p.8) explains that children need clear guidelines on when it is expected of them to use the target language and when the mother tongue is preferable. Similarly, stressing the necessity of clear rules on when a foreign language is used, Šulová and Bartanusz (2003, p.174) present three possible approaches how to achieve it. Firstly, the authors (ibid.) suggest applying so-called Grammont's rule – one person, one language (i.e. English is used by one of the parents or by one of the nursery teachers but the person must be consistent and not to switch from one language to another). Secondly, they propose associating a foreign language with a specific place; this might be an English corner or room. The final suggestion concerns connecting a foreign language to a particular activity (e.g. reading a storybook) or to a specific time. These strategies should help VYLs to differentiate between the two languages and should also facilitate the development of their ability to subconsciously and spontaneously switch from one language to another.

3.2.4 Language learning activities

VYLs learn a foreign language through their involvement in the activities in which the language is meaningfully incorporated; they do not learn a foreign language by consciously focusing on language as such (Moon 2005, p.31). To be able to fully exploit children's learning potential, it is desirable to be aware of Piagetian view of a child (*see* pp.30-31), which if transferred into pedagogy, clearly indicates that children will work hard to discover meanings and purposes of leaning activities presented to them; moreover, this needs to be coupled with Vygotskyan ZPD (*see*

p.32) to see that a learning activity should be at the appropriate level of challenge if further language learning is to occur. Consequently, when designing language learning tasks a teacher needs to draw on her knowledge of the learners to be able to set the optimal balance between task demands and the provided support. The issue of adequately challenging tasks is also addressed by Cameron (2001, p.27), who explains:

> In trying to strike a balance between demands and support, we can apply what cognitive scientists call 'Goldilocks principle': a task that is going to help the leaner learn more language is one that is demanding but not too demanding, that provides support but not to much support. The difference between demands and support creates the space for growth and produces opportunity for learning.

Regarding VYLs, care needs to exercised over structuring learning demands; preschool children are likely to create a learning group with enormous differences in all levels of psychological development, which makes it rather difficult to construct tasks appropriately challenging for one learner but not too demanding for another one. Furthermore, given the priority of affective aims, VYLs should feel successful in language learning from the very beginning; therefore overloading them with cognitively too demanding tasks would have noticeable detrimental effects.

The next important consideration should be the one concerning variety and timing of activities in order to cater for low concentration span of VYLs. Timing of activities is undoubtedly of great importance since it directly contributes to keeping learners attentive and motivated; the precise length of individual activities is hard to universally determine because it largely depends on the activity-type, learners' current psychological state and a teachers' teaching competence. Nonetheless, as far as VYLs are concerned, I broadly agree with Holden (1980, p.6), who suggests that "[i]t is essential to divide one's lesson into a series of activities each lasting, perhaps, no longer than 5 or 10 minutes."

Concerning variety, Dunn (1983, p.36) recommends changing activities to give the lesson energy and a certain momentum so that the learners are maximally involved all the time allocated for a lesson. Activities can be varied in many respects – different skill/subskill addressed, varying demands, organizational forms, teaching aids used etc. However, if the focus is on VYLs, lessons should be varied primarily

by establishing the balance between 'stirring' activities in which learners are physically engaged and calming activities. Systematic alternation between physically engaging activities and steady ones is a must due to VYLs' strong need for motor actions. Variety can also be achieved by presenting new activities which bring a sense of novelty into lessons; however, Dunn (1983, p.34) warns that "[n]o lesson should consist of more new experiences than familiar ones as this would be confusing for children […]" Although the word variety denotes something being changed, it as underscored by Halliwell (1992, p.27), does not necessarily mean jumping from one topic to another: "We won't help the children to develop their capacity to concentrate if we jump inconsequentially from one topic to the next." Hence, it is much more beneficial for VYLs if the lesson activities are mutually integrated within one topic relevant for the learners.

3.2.5 Lesson routines

If VYLs' need for feelings of security, stability and certainty is to be satisfied (*see* p.34), it is necessary to incorporate some routines or ritual activities into lessons so that children know what to expect; situations where VYLs have no idea of what is going to happen can make them frustrated and strengthens their affective filter. It is advisable to use familiar activities, little rituals (e.g. a song to open or close a lesson), familiar and predictable procedures (e.g. sitting on pillows in a circle for story time) or any other repeatedly introduced situations enabling children to know the rules and be familiar with the situation (Brewster, Ellis 2002; Scott, Ytreberg 1991). Incorporating routine procedures and familiar situations into lessons should not nevertheless be mistakenly understood as not introducing new things. In fact, the reverse is true; routines can create a space for introducing new or more complex language in situations familiar to children, which helps learners to comprehend the new language due to knowing the situation and context well.

3.2.6 Error correction

As mentioned earlier, children are largely acquirers using implicit and probably inborn learning mechanisms to acquire a language. After sufficient amount of exposure to comprehensible input, they get over the silent period and start to

actively produce the first utterances in a foreign language; these are; however, highly unlikely to be error-free. First language acquisition research clearly indicates that parents do not generally correct grammar mistakes in a child's speech, and if any form of correction occurs, it is highly inconsistent and only indirect with the primary aim to communicate successfully (Ellis 1994, p.250; O'Grady 2005, p.168). O'Grady (ibid.) further explains that parents "[…] pay little attention to how their children said things, although they did seem to care about what their children said." This should be transferred also to very early language teaching because as pinpointed by Krashen (1982, p.11), if the aim is language acquisition as a subconscious process, error correction is of little or no effect. Moreover, Scott and Ytreberg (1991, p.5) explain that children have a strong tendency to experiment with language, which is common in first language acquisition but also a natural development in the initial stages of foreign language learning. Therefore, error correction on the language form might be harmful and might hinder learning a language. The type of error correction which may be facilitative, is the use of recasts (i.e. repetitions of children's incorrect utterances in the correct form), whose main aim is not to correct a mistake but keep the conversation going (O'Grady 2005, p.168). However, O'Grady (ibid. p.174) reveals that the efficiency of recasts is just relative and explains that children seem sensitive to recasts that "offer a direct and immediate contrast between the child's way of saying something and the adult way." In addition to this, the author (ibid, p.175) informs that recasts appear beneficial only for the structures already acquired as they seem to help a child to become consistent in using the correct form. Alternatively, in instructional settings, when a mistake of meaning occurs a teacher may appropriately encourage self-correction or peer-correction.

3.3 Principles and techniques

3.3.1 Multisensory learning

Considering the stage of cognitive development (*see* p.31), it is obvious that VYLs' understanding of the world around them mostly comes from what they can see, hear or interact with. Authorities on teaching foreign languages to VYLs

unambiguously agree that children learn through using all their senses and also pinpoint the finding of cognitive psychology that the more senses are employed in storing the information, the better retention and subsequent retrieval of the given information (*cf.* Cameron 2003; Brewster, Ellis 2002). Therefore, language learning activities should provide opportunities to employ as many senses as possible whenever feasible. Moreover, as noted by developmental psychologists, stimulation of children's perceptive functions at an early age positively contributes to their development and enhances the overall quality of perception (Langmeier, Krejčířová 1998, Vágnerová 2005). Thus, there are no doubts that as far as VYLs are concerned, multisensory approach combining auditory, visual and kinaesthetic input is a must.

3.3.2 Silent period

The phenomenon of the silent period was evidenced in the child first language acquisition as well as second language acquisition. The term refers to a situation when a child acquiring language remains silent or produces very little for several months since the first exposure to the language (Krashen 1982, p.26). If there is any output, it usually consists of chunks of the language or whole sentences learned and often used as one word (ibid.). Asher explains that the silent period is a decoding process in which a child tries to develop a linguistic map of how the target language works; when enough language has been internalised the production is spontaneously triggered[18]. The key message of this finding is that during the silent period a child does learn a foreign language despite not producing actively (Ellis 1994, p.277). Krashen (ibid., p.27) strongly agrees with the significance of the silent period for a second language learning and explicates that "[…] the child is building up competence in the second language via listening, by understanding the language around him." Also, it is important to be aware that the length of the silent period is determined individually (ibid.). This means that it would be detrimental to foreign language learning to force a child to speak in the language before he internalises enough of the language and feels ready to do so. Considering the above findings, it

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[18] *How to TPR Abstractions: The critical role of imagination* [online]. Available from WWW: <http://www.tpr-world.com/abstractions.htm>, cited 18.1. 2010.

can be postulated that in very early foreign language learning, comprehension should proceed production, whose emergence may occur at different times in individuals.

3.3.3 Constant recycling

Provided VYLs are given adequate learning opportunities corresponding the characteristics of their memory (*see* p.32), they can remember things relatively quickly and effortlessly. Nonetheless, Lojová (2005, p.175) rightly accentuates that VYLs tend to forget things as quickly as they learned them. Therefore, systematic and constant revision of already learned language is absolutely necessary if long-term retention of language information is to occur. Experts agree that the learned language should be recycled in new contexts through new games and novel activities so that repetition is meaningful and motivating for children (Brewster, Ellis 2002; Dunn 1981). Mcllvain proposes the spiral model of lesson planning rather than a linear framework, which enables to make links between individual topics and progress from more concrete ones (e.g. Fruit Shop) to more general ones (e.g. Food) while constantly building on and extending the previous knowledge[19].

3.3.4 Total Physical Response

TPR is a foreign language teaching method which originated in the writings of James Asher, American psychologist. He bases his method on the assumption that a second language teaching should imitate the first language acquisition. Similarly to Krashen (*see* p.46), Asher underlines the significance of the silent period by his inclinations to the existence of the inborn bio-program determining language learning sequence in which comprehension occurs before production. This biologically predetermined order is, in his opinion, resistant to age; thus being valid for learners of any age (Richards, Rodgers 2001, pp.73-74). However, Asher also hypothesizes about the mode of how the target langue is decoded by a child before the production emerges. He proposes that a child acquires the first language through the motor movements drawing on the right-hemisphere brain activity. This motor

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[19]*Teaching English to Very Young Learners* [online]. Available from WWW: <http://www.pearsonlongman.com/englishadventure/pdfs/Teaching_English_to_Very_Young_Learners.pdf, cited 28.1. 2010.

activity should proceed the right-hemisphere language processes used for production (ibid., p.75). Simply put, considering verb and particularly its imperative forms as the core of language and pinpointing the high percentage of occurrence of commands in the speech of caretakers, Asher suggests that "[t]he decoding [of the target language] is not achieved with "translation" from one language into another but with what I call "language-body" conversations[20]." In other words, the author believes that a child responds physically to the language full of commands coming from the caretakers and thus gains and demonstrates comprehension before being able to produce verbal responses. In the classroom practice, a teacher usually utters commands to learners but they remain silent and respond with physical action; thus the main role of a teacher is that of a language model and learners act as listeners and performers (ibid., p.76).

TPR is a powerful method for teaching VYLs especially due to its respect to the silent period and the provision of comprehensible input – 'here-now' principle is utilized to convey the meaning of commands; physical actions are used as means of making input comprehensible. Moreover, TPR activities and other motor activities are of prime importance for teaching VYLs because as stressed by Scott and Ytreberg (1991, p.22): "The younger your pupils are, the more physical activity they need." To conclude, TPR is undeniably a legitimate method for teaching VYLs, though as Asher himself acknowledges, it should be used in association with other methods, techniques and principles (Richards, Rodgers 2001, p.79).

3.3.5 Storytelling

The educational value of storytelling and its favourable impacts on learners' cognitive, affective and language development are widely recognised; therefore, storytelling has also become a common technique in foreign language teaching.

Cognitive and emotional benefits

Storytelling encourages the use of imagination and fantasy; children often become personally involved in the story and identify themselves with the characters while

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[20] *How to TPR Abstractions: The critical role of imagination* [online]. Available from WWW: <http://www.tpr-world.com/abstractions.htm>, cited 18.1. 2010.

trying to interpret the narrative. Such experience in which imagination is exercised fosters the development of their creativity (Ellis, Brewster 1991, p.1). This merit of stories is also noticed by Mattheoudakis, Dvorakova and Láng (2007, p.59), who draw on the studies from cognitive psychology and explain that stories function as schemata helping learners to frame, organise and interpret their experiences; therefore, systematic exposure to stories may be facilitative to the children's cognitive development since it not only deepens their current schemata of how the world functions but also helps to interpret new experiences. Additionally, stories foster the development of positive attitude towards the target language because they are motivating and fun and children are familiar with the act of storytelling from their mother tongue acquisition (Ellis, Brewster 1991, p.1).

Language learning benefits

The fact that children prefer stories to repeated over and over again allows the new language items to be acquired while the mastered ones to be reinforced in a new, meaningful and memorable context (ibid., p.2). Moreover, children's listening skill, comprehension and concentration skills are fostered. Most importantly, storytelling provides children with comprehensible input through the use of visual aids (e.g. flashcards, picture books), through a teacher's storytelling technique (e.g. gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice) and through children's prior knowledge of how the language works and their general knowledge. Finally, storytelling contributes to raising children's phonological awareness at both segmental and suprasegmental level, which is highly important in view of the implications of the research into the CPH (*see* p.11).

The organic part of effective storytelling is the utilization of supplementary exercises aimed at development of a wide range of language skills and subskills. An excellent overview of the complementary activities flexible enough to be used with almost any story is offered by Ellis and Brewster (1991, pp.33-61); many of them can be adopted to suit the learning needs of VYLs.

Read or tell the story?

A common question raised by teachers is whether it is better to read the story or tell it; Wright (1995, p.10) answers this question as follows: "We need both salt and pepper in our cooking. Why should we want to say that one is better than the other? Telling and reading aloud both have their strong points." Clearly, both approaches are legitimate; a teacher's decision should reflect the individual specifics of the given group, aims and the type of a story. Nonetheless, in the case of VYLs, I conquer with the opinion of Phillips (1993, p.18), who maintains that if the story is to be effective, it should be told. Telling the story enables a teacher to keep the eye contact with the learners and more effectively utilize the strategies for intiating and sustaining attention and the strategies used to facilitate learners' understanding – using gestures, facial expressions, smooth manipulation with visuals conveying meaning etc.

Establishing the mood for storytelling

It is advisable to help learners to realise that it is story time, for example, by making them sit into a semicircle around a teacher seated in the armchair or by associating story time with some signal such as ringing a little bell or playing special music. Any agreed ritual action is useful for making learners aware that the special moment of storytelling is coming.

Facilitating children's comprehension

Strategies to be used to support children's understanding can be further subdivided into those introduced before storytelling (preparatory strategies) and those employed during storytelling (while-comprehension-support strategies). The former aim at preparing learners for the language of the story by revising or pre-teaching the key vocabulary and also at familiarising learners with the content of the story through setting the context, introducing main characters, relating the plot to children's experiences, introducing the necessary concepts from the story. The latter centre on narration technique; the most important aspects are narrating slowly and clearly so that pupils have enough time to think, varying the pace or tone of voice, adopting the voice to characters, keeping eye contact, using and effectively operating with visuals, employing nonverbal communication such as gestures, facial expressions,

pausing to give a dramatic effect, involving learners in storytelling (*see* Ellis, Brewster 1991, pp.25-30).

Teacher's attitude to storytelling

Authors dealing with storytelling often pinpoint a teachers' reluctance to use storytelling in the language classrooms; it is assumed to be primarily caused by teachers' insufficient methodological knowledge of how to read or tell stories aloud and how to further build on storytelling in the lesson (Mattheoudakis, Dvorakova and Láng 2007, p.61). Doláková (2006, pp.18-19) conducted research into what inhibits language teachers to use stories in lessons and identified several obstacles: teachers' language competence, lack of material, suitable books, sources for studying the method, insufficient time allocation in curriculum and lack of time in lessons, difficulty of storytelling for children owing to their limited vocabulary and shame to speak. Undoubtedly, teachers' training in storytelling is an area which deserves a systematic attention.

3.3.6 Songs and rhymes

Songs and rhymes have a stable place in teaching a foreign language to VYLs; their power lies in the fact VYLs are used to listening and repeating them when acquiring their mother tongue; thus many find it relatively easy to transfer this 'habit' into foreign language learning. Nonetheless, it is useful for a language teacher to be aware of their various benefits for the learners so that their full potential can be exploited[21].

Bearing in mind children's perceptive sensitivity to pronunciation as an area for which the CPH is most likely valid, it is obvious that apart from the function of a vehicle for introducing or recycling vocabulary or chunks of language, songs and rhymes should aim at raising phonological awareness of the language. Brewster and Ellis (2002, p.164) acknowledge the importance of rhymes for 'ear training' (e.g. counting how many times a word with particular sounds occurs in rhyme); for the

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[21] Brewster and Ellis (2002, pp.162-163) provide an excellent framework dividing the learning benefits of songs and rhymes into linguistic, psychological/affective, cultural, cognitive and social domains.

development of a sense of rhythm (e.g. clapping at stressed syllables) or for raising awareness of language intonation patterns.

Moreover, the authors (ibid., pp.165-169) further say that songs and rhymes can perform various functions in the lesson such as a warm-up, closer, vehicle for introducing, practising or revising language, a change to the classroom mood, regulating other activities (e.g. eliminating children when deciding who will start) or alternatively they may be integrated within another activity (e.g. in storytelling).

3.3.7 Game-based activities

Game-based activities should play a central role in teaching VYLs since at the given developmental stage, a play represents not only a natural way of exploring the world but also may become a source of learning a foreign language. Apart from the benefits to general psychological development of a child, organised and structured playful activities serve as a vehicle for not only introducing new language but also for 'hidden' practice of particular language items. As explained by Brewster and Ellis (2002, p.174), games are activities in which the primary focus is on getting things done rather than learning or practising language for its on sake. Thus, they foster foreign language acquisition; a child concentrates on the task and tries to meet the aim of the game while implicitly acquiring the language as a by-product of the activity. Additionally, many games allow for a constant repetition of the language chunks in a memorable and contextualised environment. Regarding the management of game-based activities, the crucial part is instructional stage. In the case of VYLs, it is recommendable to select games which are short, easy to set up, perform and explain. Instructions should be kept simple, clear and divided into several steps; they maybe given in the target language using a limited number of the key phrases with the help of gestures, mime or visuals conveying the procedure; alternatively they might be given in the mother tongue and then checked using English or vice versa (Brewster, Ellis 2002, pp.183-184). However, as for VYLs, the most effective way of giving instructions seems to be a clear demonstration of the activity and allowing the children to try it out so that the instructions are conveyed by showing and doing.

4. English Teacher for VYLs

So far the issues of starting age, developmental specifics of VYLs and age-appropriate methodology have been discussed in detail; however, they per se do not make very early foreign language teaching effective and beneficial for children; someone is needed to bring all these variables together – a language teacher, the crucial determinant in the whole process of learning a second language. Therefore, the last chapter deals with a foreign language teacher for VYLs and examines the fundamental questions relating to the issue.

4.1 Foreign language command

General public and even some teachers and teacher trainees hold a belief that anyone can teach little children because a teacher can manage just with the elementary command of langue conducting lessons based just on playing. In the following lines, I will attempt to contradict this view by confronting it with the empirical findings and theory already introduced in the paper.

It should be realised that in the Czech sociolinguistic context, a language teacher is the principal, if not even the only, source of the exposure to a foreign language. This needs to be considered together with the fact that VYLs are predominantly acquirers 'picking up' language via meaningful interaction in the target language where the focus is on getting things done in diverse social situations. Hence, a teacher needs to be a competent user of the language so as to able to participate in genuine communication and thus providing learners with opportunities for acquisition. Even though a teacher's language output may seem simple at the first sight, it is modified and simplified on purpose (*see* pp.18, 19, 40) in order for children to comprehend what is being conveyed. Following Krashen (1982), such modifications for the sake of comprehensibility are inevitable if foreign language acquisition is to occur. Moreover, given the empirically verified sensitivity of children to pronunciation (*see* p.11), it is absolutely necessary to provide them with a good pronunciation model if their age-limited potential is not to go wasted.

Negative influences of an inadequate foreign language command are also noticed by Vojtková (2006, p.94), who argues that "[i]f the teacher cannot communicate in English with ease it would be very difficult for her to apply appropriate methods." The author (ibid., p.95) further stresses that if a teacher is uncertain in using a foreign language it is likely to create tension in lessons, something that can be easily passed to learners.

As apparent, there are multiple reasons why a teacher's foreign language command should not be approached as insignificant part of the professional competence. To sum up, I cannot but agree with Vojtková (ibid., p.94), who says that "[i]n the productive skills area the most important words are "spontaneity", "fluency" and "flexibility". In practical terms it means that the teacher should feel comfortable using English, should be able to adapt the language for the children's needs."

4.2 Teaching competence and personal qualities

Besides an adequate command of a foreign language emphasized above, a teacher of VYLs should have a profound knowledge of the developmental specifics of the target age group and more importantly, should understand their implications for teaching. This enables her to set the relevant and attainable goals, select age-appropriate activities (i.e. their types, timing and variety), establish the optimum balance between demands and support as well as apply suitable procedures for classroom management. Nonetheless, such general pedagogical-psychological knowledge is not sufficient. What makes a 'general' teacher a foreign language teacher is not only competency in the target language and the general pedagogical-psychological knowledge but a knowledge of how to teach the language. Therefore, a language teacher of VYLs ought to have a deep understanding of how languages are acquired – what processes are involved, what the similarities and differences between mother tongue acquisition and foreign language learning are, what can be done to facilitate the process of foreign language learning etc. This should interact with ELT methodology knowledge so that a teacher knows how to present activities fostering language learning, what the most suitable foreign language teaching

approaches and methods are with respect to the age group, how to deal with mistakes and so forth.

When teaching a foreign language to VYLs, it is vital to realise that the principal aim is the whole personality development of a child and not just linguistic outcomes such as an amount of learned vocabulary. Hence, a foreign language teacher of VYLs has a much wider responsibility – to educate the whole child. The priority of educating the whole child should be reflected in the professional competencies of a teacher. Gillernová (2003, p.27) proposes the professional competence model of a nursery teacher where the subject-matter, methodological and diagnostic knowledge interacts with the social-psychological competence seen as crucially important by the author. The competence encompasses, for instance, respecting personality differences of children, colleagues and parents, empathy for children as well as parents, congruence and authenticity of verbal and non-verbal reactions, reciprocity, understanding of nonverbal signals of others, supporting self-control and self-regulation in self and others or coping with conflict and stressful situations. Based on my personal experience, social-psychological competence is of prime importance when communicating with parents of VYLs; many of them expect their children to become bilingual overnight and have unrealistic expectations, which often leads to their disappointment further transferred to the children. Thus, it is a teacher's task to clearly explain what the aims of the language course are, what methods are to be employed and how parents can contribute to make foreign language learning both effective and generally beneficial for children.

As regards a teacher's personal qualities, the most important ones seem to be patience, empathy for children, personal interest in educating the learners, highly positive attitude towards children and working with children in general and commitment to teaching profession. It should be reiterated that many children like foreign language lessons because they like the teacher; therefore, a teacher and his personality is a significant source of motivation for VYLs. Without the above-mentioned qualities a teacher would hardly meet the developmentally determined needs of VYLs and would struggle to make foreign language learning enjoyable experience for both children and herself.

5. Research

The practical part of the paper tightly correlates with the theoretical part serving as a theoretical basis on which the small-scale empirical research draws. From the discussion on maturational constrains on second language learning (*see* pp.3-29), it is obvious that based on the present state of knowledge in a given field, the existence of critical or optimal period for all language aspects has not been empirically verified. Hence, considering the limited access to foreign language input determined by the Czech sociolinguistic environment, low starting age as such does not automatically guarantee successful and natural foreign language acquisition as it is often observable in naturalistic settings. The success of very early foreign language education is dependent on the presence of the key external conditions already outlined in the paper (*see* p.25). The present research examines the fundamental pedagogical determinant vital for children's potential for language learning to be exploited, namely ELT methodology for VYLs. More precisely, the research aims at investigating whether and to what extent the key didactic principles for very early foreign language teaching (*see* pp.38-52) are followed in the classroom practice in the selected nursery schools. The research results may contribute to identifying the main methodological areas on which further education of foreign language teachers should focus so as to enhance the quality of pre-primary foreign language teaching.

As indicated above, the researcher asks a question: *To what extent are the key didactic principles[22] for very early foreign language teaching followed in classroom practice in nursery schools?* This underlying research question is further subdivided into a series of subquestions covering the most significant didactic aspects[23] of teaching English to VYLs:

> *1) What is the dominant language in the lessons? If the mother tongue is used, what are the typical situations in which it is preferred to English?*

> *2) What strategies do the teachers use to make the input comprehensible?*

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[22] For the purpose of this paper, didactic principles are used as a comprehensive term signifying the crucial didactic aspects of teaching English to very young learners as they are discussed in chapter 3.
[23] Only the aspects which can be empirically investigated within the limits of the research are selected.

3) How do the teachers react to the mistakes in learners' speech?

4) Do the teachers provide the learners with the opportunities for multisensory learning?

5) Do the teachers respect VYLs' short concentration span by the appropriate timing of activities?

6) Do the teachers respect VYLs' need for motor activity by alternation between 'stirring' and calming activities?

7) Do the teachers introduce novel activities to achieve variety in the lesson?

8) Do the teachers use storytelling in their lessons? If so, are any of the guidelines and techniques for effective storytelling followed?

9) Are rhymes and songs used in the lessons? What are the functions of rhymes and songs in the lessons?

10) Are there any activities interconnected with rhymes and songs aiming at raising phonological awareness?

11) Are there any routines or ritual activities in the lessons?

All the above research questions are formulated on the basis of the theoretical discussion on ELT methodology for VYLs in the first part of the diploma thesis.

5.1 Research design and methodology

As explained by Gavora (2000, p.26) and Hendl (2006, p.1) research aims and research questions predetermine the methodology of research to a considerable extent. Hendl (ibid.) stresses that a particular research method is not good or bad in

absolute terms; rather its effectiveness is governed by the extent to which it is suitable to a specific research problem. The present research employs multiple research methodology combining both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. Firstly, quantitatively oriented research strategy is utilized via the use of highly structured observations with roughly given categories corresponding to the individual research questions. These observations are conducted to analyse the video-recordings of the lessons with the aim of obtaining data with a certain degree of objectivity and neutrality while primarily focusing on the presence, nature of existence and frequency of the phenomena in question. This approach is supplemented with a qualitative strategy based on an in-depth semi-structured interview whose principal goal is to bring deeper insights into how the classroom processes focused on by the structured observations are subjectively perceived by their participants (the teachers); the interviews aim to reveal teachers' subjective understandings and interpretations of their own teaching. Qualitative strategy is also used to enrich the data from the structured observation by means of reanalysing the video recordings through unstructured non-participant observations. The multiple research methodology enables the researcher to investigate the given phenomena from the outside (structured observations) as well as from the inside (through the eyes of the concerned teachers).

   The research uses a strategy of methodological triangulation by combining various means of data collection; the presence and nature of the didactic principles for very early foreign language teaching is researched by structured observations based on video recordings; these observations and supplemented by unstructured non-participant observations drawing on the reanalysis of the video recordings, which should help to decrease the potential danger of overlooking important causal relations and other phenomena when focusing just on the categories determined by the structured observations. The third research tool is an in-depth semi structured interview, which should throw some light on how the teachers' beliefs about their teaching are reflected in their classroom practice. In this research, the methodological triangulation is; however, not primarily used as a strategy of increasing research validity but in accordance with Švaříček (2007, pp.204-205), it

is employed in order to cover more aspects of a given reality and thereby broadening and deepening the insights into the phenomena under investigation.

5.2 Data elicitation instruments

In the following lines, the structure of individual research instruments is presented with a particular emphasis on clarifying why a particular research instrument is used to investigate the research questions.

5.2.1 Video recordings and structured observations

Miková and Janík (2007, p.192) explain that any research reduces the complexity of the investigated reality by focusing on specifically formulated research questions, selecting a particular sample of population and by specific methods of data collection and their analysis. The authors (ibid.) accentuate that video recording helps to prevent such reduction of the complexity of investigated reality since it depicts audiovisual data set in situational contexts. According to their view (ibid., pp.199-200), the research potential of video recordings lies in the fact that it gives a researcher time flexibility in analysis and allows for an ex-post multiple analysis focusing on different aspects of the investigated reality depicted in its complexity. This merit of video recording as a data elicitation instrument corresponds to the main aims of the present research since it enables to focus on different didactic aspects of the observed lesson and conduct a multiple analysis thanks to the possibility to revisit the recording centring on different phenomenon each time; this is something that would be hardly possible in a direct in-class observation.

As indicated earlier, the video recordings are to be analysed by means of structured observation sheets. These directly correspond to individual research questions and include specific categories largely drawing on the theoretical part of the paper. The observation sheets based on event sampling were created and tailored to the purposes of the paper.

They can be divided into several thematic areas as follows:

Classroom language

Q_1: What is the dominant language in the lessons? If mother tongue is used, what are the typical situations in which it is preferred to English?

The primary aim of this observation is to identify the overall proportion between the mother tongue and English; video recording enables to count the exact amount of time when each of the languages is used. If the mother tongue occurs, the recording will be reanalysed to identify the typical situations and stages of the lesson in which it is preferred to English (*see* Appendix 1).

Comprehensibility of input

Q_2: What strategies do the teachers use to make the input comprehensible?

To answer the above question, a teacher's communication in the target language needs examining. For the purposes of the observation sheets, the strategies are categorised into five sub-groups drawing on the theoretical part of the paper (*see* p.11):

- **Linguistic (1)**: slow and careful pronunciation, exaggerated intonation, less complex words and sentences
- **Nonverbal (2)**: gestures, mimics, facial expressions etc.
- **'Here and now' principle (3)**: talking about things which children can see, hear or interact with at the given time or about actions taking place at the time
- **Interactional modifications (4)**: comprehension checks, paraphrases and repeating, negotiating meaning
- **Interplay of the strategies (5)**: e.g. 1+2; 1+2+3

The basic unit for the analysis is a communicative act (i.e. a question, command and statement). The analysis should reveal whether and how the teachers make their foreign language input comprehensible to children and what the most frequent strategies or their combinations are (*see* Appendix 2).

Error correction

Q_3: How do the teachers react to the mistakes in learners' speech?

The observation sheet (*see* Appendix 3) centres on how the teachers approach mistakes; as explained by O'Grady parents "[…] pay little attention to how their children said things, although they did seem to care about what their children said." (*see* p.33). Therefore, the mistakes are divided into mistakes of form and mistakes of meaning. This is similar to Edge (1990) but for the purpose of the research the denotation of the terms is narrowed to two distinct situations:

- **Mistakes of form:** a child uses linguistically inaccurate utterance but it is comprehensible due to being correct in terms of child's intentions or referential object (e.g. a child saying 'Jumpings horse' while looking at a horse that is jumping).
- **Mistakes of meaning:** a child uses linguistically accurate utterance but semantically wrong with respect to his intentions or referential object (e.g. while pointing at a cat – It's a dog).

The researcher is aware that there will not be much learners' oral production and thus little error correction but the aim of the observation is to discover if any teacher's reaction follows and in what form.

Multisensory learning

Q4: *Do the teachers provide the learners with the opportunities for multisensory* learning?

Given the importance of multisensory learning for VYLs (*see* p.45), the main target of this observation is to investigate how many sensory systems are stimulated in the individual activities presented in the lessons. The activities in each lesson will be coded with respect to the categories from the observation sheet (*see* Appendix 4) to discover if the learners are given opportunities to employ several senses at the time.

Timing and variety of activities

Q5: Do the teachers respect VYLs' short concentration span by appropriate timing of activities?

Q6: *Do the teachers respect VYLs' need for motor activity by alternation between 'stirring' and calming activities?*

Q7: *Do the teachers introduce novel activities to achieve variety in lessons?*

Firstly, timing of activities is researched; the observation sheet (*see* Appendix 5) includes three distinct categories: activities lasting from 0 to 5 minutes, activities from 5 to 10 minutes and activities longer than 10 minutes; each activity in the lessons will be categorised according to the above criteria.

Secondly, based on the observation sheet, the activities will be grouped into two separate categories: 'stirring' activities (i.e. those engaging learners primarily physically – jumping, mining physical movements, TPR activities) and calming activities (i.e. those engaging learners primarily mentally; motor activity may be involved but it is not so dominant); subsequently, their mutual proportion in the lessons will be identified.

Thirdly, the presence of novel activities will be investigated; the activities will be categorised into the new activities and into the known activities on the basis of learners' reactions, length and depth of instructional stage etc. In view of the fact that this is high-interference category, the proper categorisation of activities will be validated in the interviews by asking a teacher whether the same activities categorised by the researcher as new or know really correspond to the teacher's plan.

Storytelling

Q8: *Do the teachers use storytelling in their lessons? If so, are any of the guidelines for effective storytelling followed?*

The observation sheet (*see* Appendix 6) attempts not only to find out if storytelling is used and the main guidelines and techniques followed but also which of them are favoured by the teachers and which seem to be neglected; what techniques are used to make the learners aware of storytime and what activities are utilised to prepare learners for the language or the content of a story.

Songs and rhymes

Q9: *Are rhymes and songs used in the lessons?*

Q10: *What are the functions of rhymes and songs in the lessons?*

Q11: *Are there any activities interconnected with rhymes and songs aiming at raising phonological awareness?*

The principal goal of this observation sheet (*see* Appendix 7) is to identify the frequency of occurrence of rhymes and songs in the lessons; subsequently, the functions of rhymes and songs will be investigated. Finally, the observation sheet also addresses the presence of activities interconnected with songs and rhymes being primarily intended to develop phonological awareness of the learners.

Lesson routines

Q$_{12}$: *Are there any routines or ritual activities in the lessons?*

This question is researched via semi-structured observation sheet (*see* Appendix 8) in which the researcher tries to identify any routines or ritual activities in the lessons. Being high interference category largely based on the researcher's opinion drawing on the learners' reactions and the teacher's behaviour, the validity of the finding is established in the interviews by comparing the researcher's identification of routines with the teacher's view.

5.2.2 In-depth semi-structured interview

In literature, there does not seem to be a consensus on what is understood under the term semi-structured interview; Nunan (1992, p.149) defines a semi-structured interview as follows:

> In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer has a general idea of where he or she wants the interview to go, and what should come out of it, bud does not enter the interview with a list of predetermined questions. Topics rather than questions determine the course of the interview.

On the other hand, Chráska (2007, p.183) defines it as an interview in which an interviewee is given several alternative answers to each question and is further asked to explain or state the reasons for a particular answer. A plausible resolution of this terminological discrepancy is offered by Gavora (2000, p.111), who explains that a semi-structured interview can be placed on the continuum from the more structured forms to less structured forms with respect to a particular situation. The author (ibid.); however, seems to agree with Chráska (2007) by stating that in a semi-structured interview, an interviewee can choose an answer from several options but is subsequently asked to clarify his/her choice. All the cited authors

share the view that a semi-structured interview gives a researcher a high degree of flexibility and deepens the insights into the investigated problem.

The fact that a semi-structured interview enables to deeply explore the investigated phenomena while giving a researcher a great deal of flexibility is the main reason why this research tool is utilised in the qualitative phase of this research. Moreover, it suits the research aims well thanks to the possibility to change the course of the interview or modify/reformulate the questions if needed and thus respect the fact all the investigated teachers are individual personalities; a roughly standardised questionnaire-like interview would reduce the authenticity as well as breadth and depth of the data. Compared to a questionnaire or to a highly structured interview, a semi-structured interview gives the teachers enough space to freely express their views while the researcher being able to individualise the interview and control its course respecting the primary aims of particular questions.

The content of the present semi-structured interview (*see* Appendix 9) corresponds to the content of observation sheets described above and it primarily aims at eliciting teachers' subjective understanding and interpretation of their own teaching.

The interview consists of three sup-parts; the first one deals with the general issues of very early foreign language education focusing on the fundamental questions of optimal age for second language learning, coherence between pre-primary and primary education and 'readiness' of nursery schools for foreign language teaching. The main aim of this part is to set a general context/background to a given topic as well as discover the teachers' views on these general but significant issues. The second part addresses the representativness of the recorded lessons since as underscored by Janík and Najvar (2008, p.18), the lessons which are video-recorded are may not be authentic owing to a teacher trying to teach an ideal or perfect lesson approximating 'social desirability' rather than performing his/her typical lesson. The most extensive part of the interview addresses didactic aspects of very early foreign language teaching; the questions in this part are grouped in thematic clusters corresponding to the observation sheets.

The interview uses a combination of closed questions (multiple-choice) and open questions; their choice often reflects the type of information elicited by a given question but in most cases the closed questions are followed by open ones

stimulating an interviewee to further comment on his/her choice, clarify his/her answer or state the reasons. Furthermore, special care is exercised to avoid the usage of suggestive questions leading an interviewee to a particular answer.

5.2.3 Unstructured non-participant observation

As stated earlier the primary function of the structured observations is to elicit data with a certain degree of objectivity and neutrality while 'keeping distance' and examining the classroom processes from the above or from the outside. Nonetheless, as underscored by Nunan (1992, p.110), observations are always subjective to a certain degree since they "[…] act as mental blinkers on the user. They also encapsulate the author's ideological beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning." In order to eliminate the potential danger of overlooking significant relations while coding the lessons processes according to the established categories non-structured participant observation is employed. However, in the present research, this research tool is just of secondary function primarily aiming at enriching the data gathered through structured observations, for this data gathering method normally needs a long-term systematic observation of the given research subjects if it is to bring valuable information. In this research, the video recordings will be reanalysed and the researcher will make a thorough description of the process in the given thematic areas (e.g. classroom language) while not focusing exclusively on the categories from the observations. This might help to reveal some important causal relations which were 'filtered out' through the structured observations. Nevertheless, the aim of this research tool is to keep the focus on the research questions and the research aim and therefore only the information deepening understanding of the investigated phenomena will be used in the analysis, the rest which would just broaden the focus of the research will be excluded.

5.3 Research procedure

5.3.1 Selection of subjects to the research

From literature, it is obvious that quantitative and qualitative research traditions use different criteria for sampling; this is caused by the fact that both of the approaches investigate reality in a different way (*cf.* Chráska 2007; Švaříček, Šedová 2007). The present research is based on the so-called convenient sample (*see* Gavora 2000, p.64); the researcher selects nursery schools which are technically relatively easily accessible and thus does not have to travel long distances to negotiate the research realisation and subsequently to collect the data. The researcher is aware that such sampling considerably decreases the external validity of the research but the research does not primarily aim at generalising the results to larger samples of population. Rather, the results should be understood as strongly contextually bound.

As regards the procedure of negotiation, firstly, the researcher made a phone call to the nursery schools organising English courses to ask for cooperation in the research. He introduced the main aims and reasons for the research as well as arranged a personal meeting with the language teacher and the leadership of a particular nursery. At this meeting, the researcher introduced the background and the aim of the research more thoroughly and explained means of data collection and more importantly, how the obtained data will be used. It should be emphasized that it proved extremely difficult to persuade the teachers to agree with being video-recorded. In fact, out of 20 nursery schools in which the personal negotiations were conducted, only 7 teachers agreed with video-recording; 10 teachers were willing to allow the research to visit and observe the lesson but without recording it; 3 teachers refused any observer in the lesson and agreed just with participation in the interview. Most of the teachers accepting video-recording; however, insist on keeping the recording just for the time necessary and using it exclusively for the purposes of this paper and then they want it back or to be destroyed. Such procedure was offered by the researcher at the initial stages of the personal meetings and the teachers clung to it and some even conditioned their participation in the research with the above-described procedure[24]. Consequently, the researcher signed the official declaration agreeing to follow the procedure.

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[24] It should be also stressed that majority of the nursery schools needed the approval of video-recording from the children's parents so the whole process of negotiations was rather long.

5.3.2 Pre-testing and piloting phase

All the research instruments were pre-tested and subsequently piloted so as to increase their content validity; minor changes were made to the observation sheets; the ways of coding in some sheets were made more effective by introducing abbreviations/symbols. More significant changes were made to the interview – some question were simplified, shortened and made more interviewee-friendly; more importantly, some were reformulated since the interviewees in the pre-test tended to understand them in a different way and thus gave the answers with different information differing from the aims of the question as intended by the researcher. Despite the endeavour to avoid suggestive questions when constructing the interview, some of them did prove suggestive; hence, they were modified or changed.

Concerning the technique of video-recording, the main advice given by Miková and Janík (2007, pp.198-199) was followed. However, the pre-testing stage also revealed the importance of being familiar with the teacher's lesson plan and with physical conditions in the room otherwise the researcher can hardly react to the very dynamic nature of lessons (e.g. rapid changes in organizational forms). Being flexible enough in changing positions with respect to the course of the lesson is necessary if all the aspects of the lessons are to be depicted.

5.3.3 Conducting the research

The proper video recording fully utilised the experience from pre-testing stage; the researcher was explained the lesson plan (positions for various activities, basic procedures etc.) in order to be able to choose the suitable positions to remain as unobtrusive as possible while obtaining a good depiction of the lesson in its full complexity. Furthermore, the researcher was introduced to the children, who had been informed of the purpose of his presence and were given some time to get to know him (they could ask any questions they wanted etc.).

As for the interviews[25], the researcher tried to respect the principal presumption for an effective interview – establishing a positive rapport with interviewees (*see*

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[25] The interviews were conducted either immediately after the lesson or in the following few days based on the teachers' decisions.

Gavora 2000; Nunan 1992). These authors consensually stress that emotionally positive rapport between the interviewer and interviewee(s) is absolutely necessary if the interview is to bring authentic and valuable results. Therefore, the researcher starts the interviews with commenting on the positive or interesting parts of the lessons showing interest and admiration; this often initiated a brief discussion based on exchanging experience between the researcher and the interviewee. Then, the researcher made the interviewed teachers familiar with the structure of the interview and possible ways of answering the questions. Apart from the initial general questions and those addressing the authenticity of the lesson, the order of other questions (thematic areas) differed in individual interviewees fully respecting their development. All the interviews ended with expressions of thanks to the teacher for her cooperation in the research.

5.4 Analysis and interpretation

Firstly, the analysis deals with the introductory part of the interview – teachers' general opinions on very early foreign language learning and the degree of authenticity of the recorded lessons. Subsequently, the didactic aspects of the lessons are analysed using the data from all the research tools.

5.4.1 Interview data

Teachers' opinions on very early foreign language learning

The first question attempts to discover the teachers' opinion on the optimal age for second language learning; on the basis of the obtained answers, the teachers can be divided into two groups: those stating that foreign language education should start at the age of three and those who think that the age of five is optimal. The accurate proportion between these two opinion groups is displayed in Graph 1.

Graph 1

The optimal age for second language learning

29%

71%

■ at 5
□ at 3
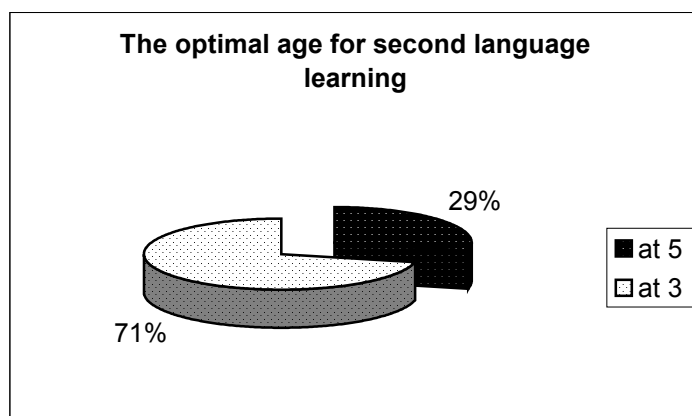
As apparent from the above graph, the majority of the teachers seem to consider the age of three as optimal for starting learning a foreign language; they consensually justify their view by claiming at this age a child learns effortlessly and naturally through play and they also add that children's brain is sensitive to a language. Those preferring foreign language education to start at the age of five maintain that children need to reach an adequate command of mother tongue before a second language is introduced.

Regarding the following question concerning the 'readiness' of nursery schools for foreign language education, all the interviewed teachers unambiguously declared that the Czech nursery schools were anything but prepared for teaching a foreign language. The reasons given by the teachers can be grouped in the three broad categories displayed in Chart 1[26].

Chart 1

Reasons	Specification
Qualified foreign language teachers	Most teachers have an insufficient command of a foreign language; an experienced nursery teacher with a good command of English is uncommon
ELT methodology	Absence of coherent ELT methodology for the age group, which is easily accessible and contains a specific description of teaching procedures supplemented with a databank of practical activities as well as other supplementary materials (CDs, worksheets etc.)

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[26] The reasons are presented according to the frequency of their occurrence in the interviews starting with the most frequent ones to the least frequent ones.

Further education	Lack of opportunities for further education in a given field; there should be more foreign language courses specifically focused on practical speaking skills as well as regular methodology seminars or workshops with practical content (e.g. a collaborative analysis of the lesson representing an example of 'good practice'), both of which financially acceptable

As for the last question on the general issues of very early foreign language learning, all the teachers share the view that there exists no coherence between pre-primary and primary foreign language education. On the basis of their experience, two situations can be identified – either there is absolutely no cooperation in any form or elementary schools keep informed about the existence of foreign language teaching in nurseries and offer optional English courses from the first grade but without being interested in what the pupils already know and what teaching methods they are used to.

To sum up the first part of the interview, it is obvious that most of the teachers support the view *the sooner the better* believing in children's biological sensitivity to a language and 'naturalness' as well as 'effortlessness' of the learning process. At the same time, they seem to be aware of serious drawbacks in pre-primary foreign language education and are able to suggest possible improvements. Broadly speaking, it seems that from the teachers' point of view, the key conditions for very early foreign language education (*see* p.25) are not sufficiently fulfilled.

Authenticity of the recorded lessons

The answers gained in the interviews are almost identical; all the teachers identified the recorded lesson as typical and the children's behaviour as unaffected by the presence of a camera. They slightly differ in their feelings when being video recorded; five teachers state that they were slightly nervous and two admit being nervous. Therefore, in the light of these answers, it can be assumed that the recorded lessons are representative to a high degree.

5.4.2 The key didactic principles in the lessons

5.4.2.1 Classroom language

Observations

Firstly, the lessons were analysed through the structured observations in order to discover whether the teachers use English as the main language for communication in the lessons and in what situations they tend to prefer Czech. Chart 2 displays the observed and subsequently measured proportions between the two languages.

Chart 1

Teachers	Use of English %	Use of Czech %
T1	81%	19%
T2	98%	2%
T3	7%	93%
T4	96%	4%
T5	19%	81%
T6	26%	74%
T7	86%	14%

As obvious from the above, the results are somewhat scattered; some teachers (T2, T4) conducted the lessons almost entirely in the target language, whereas others (T3, T5, T6) used English just to a minor extent. The third group emerging from the results are the teachers (T1, T7) using English as the dominant language with a minor support of the mother tongue. Because the mother tongue was present in all the lessons, the second observation focused on the situations and lesson stages in which the mother tongue was used.

Graph 2
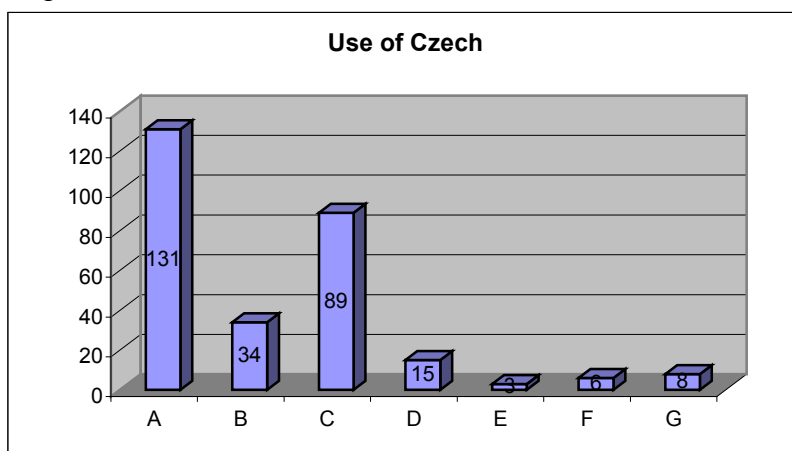
Graph 2 shows the situations in which mother tongue was used (axis x) and the frequency of its occurrence in these situations (axis y). Corresponding to the observation sheet, the situations are:

A: Giving instructions

B: Giving feedback

C: Asking questions

D: Motivating, encouraging, supporting

E: Checking understanding

F: Reaction to learners' immediate social and emotional needs

G: Others (mainly discipline maintenance)

The graph reveals the teachers' strong tendency to use mother tongue when giving instructions to the learners; in fact, according to the obtained data, giving instructions represent the most frequent situation in which mother tongue was used. The teachers also seem to frequently switch into mother tongue when asking questions or giving feedback to the learners. The other situations included in the observation sheets (D, E, F, G) appear to be of insignificant statistical distribution. Regarding the lesson stage, the data noticeably correlate with the above graph; the most frequent lesson stage in which mother tongue occurred was conducting the activity[27]; this stage encompasses the instructions given during the process of performing a particular task and the situations such as asking questions, giving feedback and motivating, encouraging and supporting. The second lesson stage typical of high occurrence of mother tongue was instructional stage before the activity as such. Mother tongue also quite regularly appeared during the transitions between individual activities and when closing the activities. Occasionally, the teachers also used mother tongue when opening or closing the lessons. The results from the observation sheets are transferred into Graph 3, which displays the accurate data on the occurrence of mother tongue in particular lesson stages.

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[27] It should be stressed that 'conducting the activity stage' and instructional stage represent the majority of the overall lesson time, which inevitably increases the likelihood of the mother tongue occurrence.

Graph 3

Lesson stages

Lesson opening: 3
Intructional stage: 94
Conducting the activity: 138
Closing the activity: 21
Transitions: 25
Lesson closure: 5
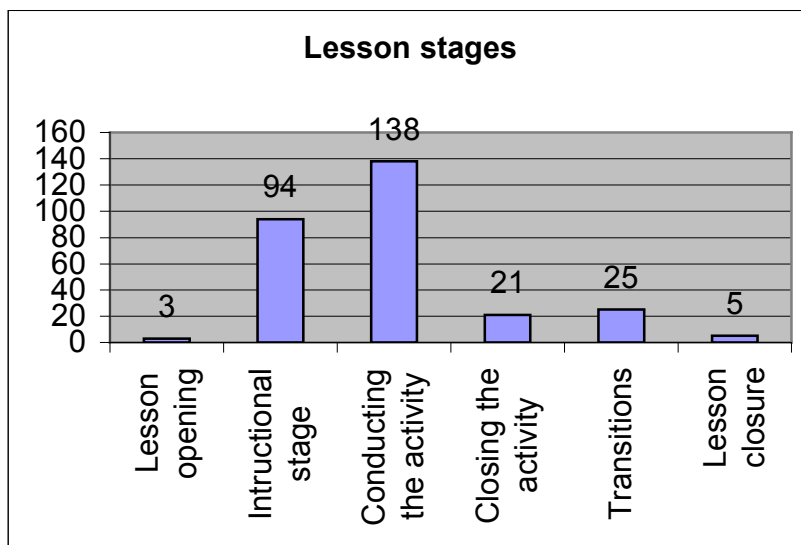
Interview data

The interviews brought interesting findings on the role of mother tongue in English lessons for VYLs as perceived by the teachers; most of the interviewed teachers (apart from T2 and T4) believe that lessons should be conducted mainly in the mother tongue or the proportion between the languages should be equal (i.e. 50% Czech and 50% English). This slightly contradicts the results obtained from the observations since with some teachers there seems to be a certain discrepancy between their beliefs and their classroom practice. Chart 2 offers a direct analytical comparison of the results from the two research tools.

Chart 2

Teachers	Observed use of English (observations)	Declared use of English (interviews)
T1	81%	up to 50%
T2	98%	90 %
T3	7%	up to 30%
T4	96%	90%
T5	19%	up to 50%
T6	26%	up to 50%
T7	86%	up to 50%

As obvious from the chart, there are often discrepancies between what the teachers believe to do and what they really do. The most obvious ones are the cases of T1 and T7, who were documented to use English more than 80% in the observed lessons despite stating that generally their use of English is 50% or lower. In fact, both of the teachers concerned acknowledged that the observed lessons had been based on the revision and on the activities familiar to the children, which undoubtedly considerably reduced the need to use the mother tongue. Based on the teachers' answers, the reasons for using mother tongue as the main language in the lessons can be divided into two groups; firstly, the teachers are limited by their insufficient command of a foreign language; they themselves admit not being able to conduct the whole lesson in English and use English at various situations which arise in the classroom. The second main reason is the teachers' belief that it is more beneficial for children if a foreign language is not dominant in the lessons; besides T2 and T4, all the interviewee seem to hold this view. For example, T1 states: "Mateřština je jim bližší (dětem), tudíž i já jsem jim blíže, což u těchto dětí důležité." Similarly, T6 says: " Učení cizího jazyka by mělo vždy probíhat za vydatné podpory mateřštiny, jinak by to bylo pro děti příliš těžké a matoucí, většině věcí by bez pomoci mateřštiny vůbec neporozuměly." Similarly, T5 argues: Vím, že někdo říká, že se na děti má mluvit jen anglicky. Podle mé zkušenosti to je však pro děti příliš náročné, jen pár těch chytřejší pochopí co chceme říct, ostatní ztrácí pozornost a začínají zlobit."

Graph 4
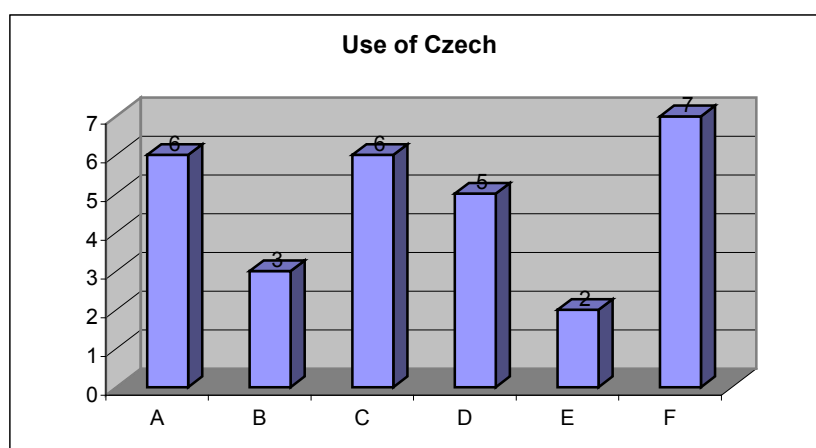
Graph 4 offers a quantitative depiction of the teachers' answers on when they usually prefer Czech to English (situations are labelled in the same way as on p.72). It clearly shows that all the interviewed teachers say that they prefer mother tongue when reacting to learners immediate social and emotional needs (F); almost all the teachers state that they usually opt for Czech when giving instructions (A) and when asking questions (C). Most of the teachers also admit using mother tongue for motivating, encouraging and supporting the learners (D). These results correlate with those obtained though observations to a high degree and therefore the validity of the research instruments is increased. As for the reasons for preferring mother tongue in the above situations, the teachers seem to present almost identical arguments which can be summarized in a few words. From their point of view, using English in the above situations (A, C, D, F) would hinder proper understanding of the message and the desired and immediate effect of the utterance would be lost, which would lead to confusion and children's loss of interest in the activity.

Unstructured observation

The unstructured observations based on a descriptive analysis of the classroom processes related to the classroom language have revealed a significant finding concerning the teachers' discourse in the target language. Apart from T1, T2, T4 and T7, the researched teachers seem to constantly switch between the two languages or even mix them together. The following excerpts from the video-recordings illustrate this phenomenon well. T5: "Když je jablíčko malé tak je little." "Když je něco veliké, tak je to big." T3: "Já řeknu blue a vy poběžíte k blue." "Kde je blue?" Many similar examples can be found in the video recordings. From a psycholinguistic point of view, it is quite interesting to observe an impact of such discourse on the learners; many learners are often confused by mixing the languages and seem not to understand what is wanted from them but more importantly, having an inconsistent language model, the children quite frequently do not differentiate between the languages and not surprisingly, mix them together while perceiving it as a normal situation.

When the obtained data from all the research tools are evaluated in the light of the theory introduced in the first part of the paper, it becomes apparent that there is

a substantial scope for improvement. The fact that most of the teachers believe that the use of the target language should not be higher than 50% (some even argue for lower) can be identified as an alarming finding. This belief seems to be directly reflected in the classroom practice of the observed teachers (especially T3, T5, T6); what is; however, more serious is the teachers' reasons for overusing mother tongue based on underestimating the learners' abilities to grasp the meaning from various sources and on the fallacy that conducting lessons in English would be too demanding for children and would make foreign language teaching less effective compared to the lessons where mother tongue is higher or equals with the use of foreign language. Moreover, mother tongue is preferred in the situations which are optimal for foreign language acquisition such giving instructions, asking questions, motivating, supporting and encouraging since in all these situations language is used for getting things done with a particular focus on the conveyed meaning rather than form. In addition to this, it can hardly be doubted that exposing children to foreign language models using a foreign language inconsistently and regularly switching and even mixing the two languages may have detrimental effects on very early foreign language development.

5.4.2.2 Comprehensibility of input

Observations

In the area of classroom language, the researcher also investigated the qualitative characteristics of the input provided by the teachers with the aim of discovering if the teachers made their input comprehensible to children and what strategies they employed.

Having considered the results from the previous analysis, three teachers (T3, T5, T6) are excluded from this analysis since they constantly switch between the languages and mix them together by incorporating English words into sentences in mother tongue; therefore, a proper analysis of the comprehensibility of their discourse would be pointless.

Chart 3 shows the analysis of the teachers' discourse by revealing the overall number of utterances in individual lessons and the number of those which were subjects to modifications and those in which no modifications were discernible.

Chart 3

Teachers	Lesson time	Overall number of utterances	Unmodified	Modified
T1	23:40	92	19	73
T2	31:30	223	71	152
T4	29:00	117	38	79
T7	33:00	63	27	36

As apparent from the chart, all the investigated teachers modify the majority of their utterances in a foreign language; Graph 5 depicts the types and frequency of the observed strategies for making the input comprehensible.

Graph 5
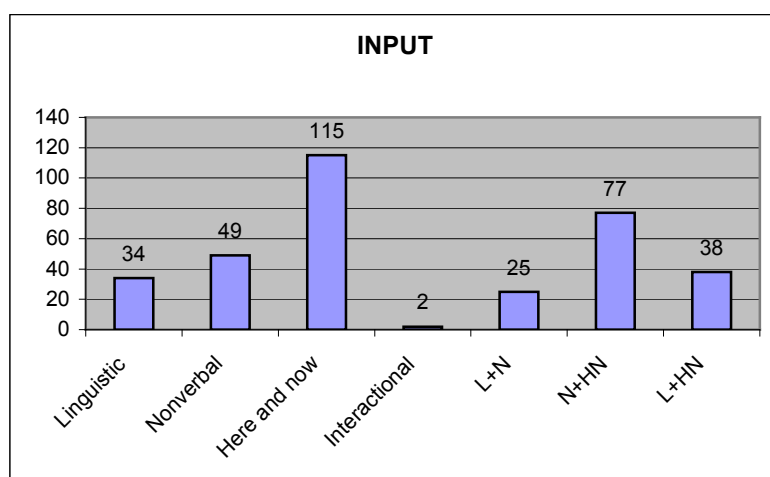
Obviously, the teachers use a variety of 'comprehensibility strategies'; except for interactional modifications, all the other types seem quite common; most teachers appear to prefer the 'here and now' principle or employ a combination of individual strategies, the most common one is the combination of nonverbal communication and 'here and now' principle (N+HN). The other observed combinations are utilising the linguistic modifications together with 'here and now' principle (L+HN) and also the interplay of linguistic and nonverbal modifications (L+N).

Interview data

In the interviews, three teachers identified linguistic, nonverbal and 'here and now' principle or their mutual combinations as their most common strategies and all supported their answers with a belief in a high degree of effectiveness and practicality of these strategies. Only one teacher stated that she usually used just the linguistic strategy. Interestingly, all the excluded teachers (T3, T5, T6) claimed that they used a combination of linguistic and nonverbal strategies together with 'here and now' principle to make the input comprehensible; clearly, this strongly contradicts the findings from the observations discussed earlier.

Unstructured observation

The only significant information brought by the unstructured observation is the one concerning T7, who seems to limit her input only to prefabricated language or isolated words and short phrases; this finding is also indicated by the relatively low number of utterances in a given time compared to other teachers with nearly the same overall lesson time (p.77). Although T7 modifies her input with multiple strategies, in the researcher's opinion, the input cannot be considered as I+1 and 'comprehensibility strategies' are often redundant in view of the high simplicity and artificiality of the input.

To sum up, out of seven investigated teachers, three were excluded for the reasons explained earlier; the remaining four seem to try hard to make their foreign language input comprehensible to the children, but only three appear to provide the children with the rich input that slightly exceeds their current language level while still being comprehensible, which is a vital condition for acquisition to be triggered.

5.4.2.3 Error correction

Observation

The researcher identified all the mistakes made by the children and classified them into the two categories as described earlier (p.61); the results are displayed in Graph 4.

Graph 4

Mistakes

Meaning
28%

Form
72%
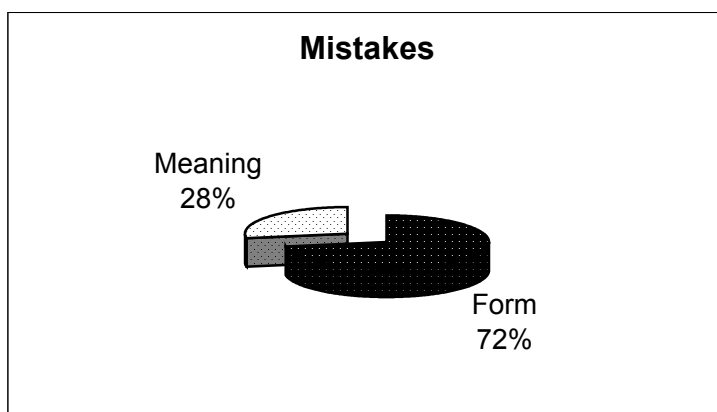
Subsequently, the teachers' reactions to the two types of mistakes were observed in order to discover if and how the teachers react to particular mistakes types. The two graphs below show the observed reactions and their overall frequency.

Graph 5   Graph 6

Mistakes of form

9

Recast   Self-correction   Direct explanation
          encouraged

Mistakes of meaning

3

Recast   Self-correction   Direct explanation
          encouraged
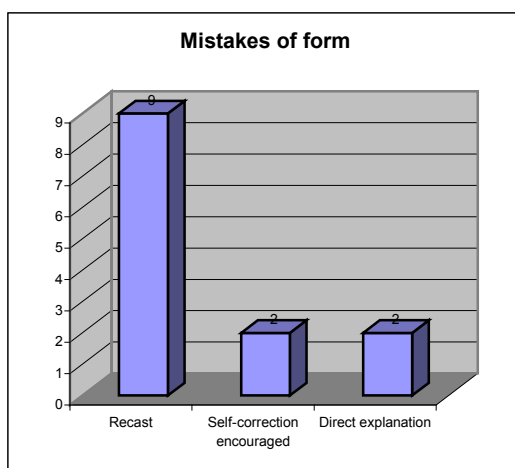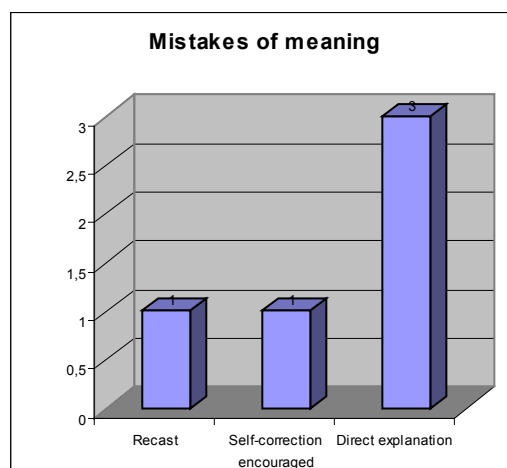
The above graphs reveal that the observed teachers did correct the children; no ignorance of mistakes was found by the observer. This can be motivated by the fact that most of the teachers perceive the classroom as the environment which should initiate learning and therefore they feel it as a part of their job to correct the children's mistakes. Regarding mistakes of form, they were mostly reacted upon by recasts, which corresponds to the theory introduced in the first part of the paper; occasionally, the mistakes of form were followed by direct explanation or the teacher encouraged self-correction. In contrast, mistakes of meaning were mostly reacted upon by direct explanation in mother tongue offering Czech equivalents to make the learner aware of the problems with meaning. This; however, is not

facilitative to children's learning; an appropriate way of encouraging self-correction or a recast would certainly have been more beneficial for the children.

Interview data

All the interviewed teachers identified recasts and encouraging self-correction as the correction techniques which they regularly employ; none of the teacher stated that she ignored the mistakes. As for the situations when they employ a particular type of correction, three teachers declared that they used the two types of correction more or less subconsciously and automatically without any specific reasons for preferring one to the other in a particular situation. The rest of the teachers said that they encouraged self-correction when practising 'old' language and recast if dealing with the new language not much internalised by the children.

Unstructured observation

Unstructured observation on error correction did not bring any information worth mentioning.

5.4.2.4 Multisensory learning

Observations

The principal goal of this observation was to investigate whether the individual activities presented in the lessons enable children to employ several senses at once. All the activities in each of the recorded lessons were coded according to the categories from the observation sheets to discover if the learners are provided with multisensory language learning experience, which is absolutely necessary in view of their developmental specifics. Graph 7 displays the results based on the analysis of 77 activities from all the observed lessons[28].

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[28] Corresponding to the observation sheet, V stands for visual stimulus; A for auditory and K for kinaesthetic /tactile stimulus.

Graph 7
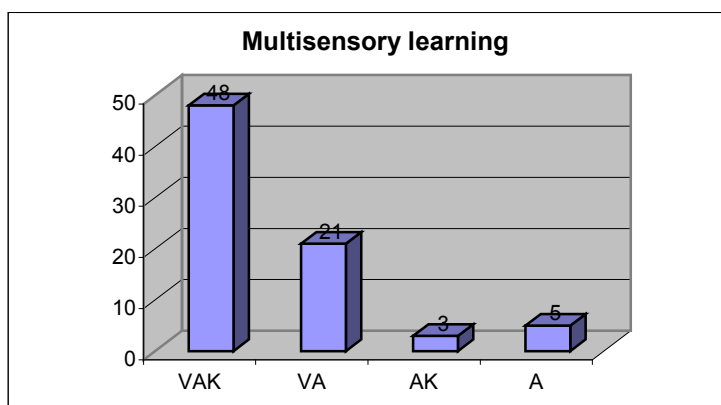
The graph clearly shows that the majority of the activities provided the learners with opportunities for multisensory learning; even though human experience in the world is generally multisensory in its nature most of the observed activities stimulated all the three senses at once.

Interview data

The data gained in the interviews fully correspond to the findings from the observations; all the teachers stated that they usually tried to employ as many senses as possible in the individual activities. In the teachers' view, it is absolutely necessary for VYLs to have a chance to see, hear and touch things if their learning is to be effective; moreover, in addition to this, two teachers also mentioned individual differences in learning styles as a reason for providing learners with multisensory learning experience.

Unstructured observation

From the researcher's notes, it becomes obvious that most of the teachers not only created multisensory learning activities but they very often actively encouraged the learners to employ all the senses (e.g. they encouraged the learners to engage also physically in the activities primarily based on visual and auditory stimuli).

To evaluate the research results on multisensory learning, it can be stated that all the teachers provide the learners with multisensory language learning experience, which is in accordance with the theory introduced earlier in the paper (*see* pp.45-46) and undoubtedly makes the children's foreign language learning more effective.

Moreover, as revealed in the interviews, all the teachers seem to be aware of the importance of 'learning through all the senses' for VYLs and fully reflect this belief in creating appropriate lesson activities.

5.4.2.5 Variety of activities

Observations

Through the observations the researcher analysed all the lessons from three perspectives. Firstly, the timing of individual activities was identified and then all the activities were categorised into three groups according to their length. Secondly, the overall proportion between stirring and calming activities in individual lessons was investigated. Lastly, the presence of new activities was researched and the ratio between known and new activities was measured. All the obtained results are summarized in Chart 4 below.

Chart 4

Teachers	Lesson time	Number of activities	Up to 5 min.	From 5 to 10 min.	More than 10 min.	Ratio between S and C	Ratio between K and N[29]
T1	23:40	10	9	1	0	4:6	10:0
T2	31:30	14	13	1	0	7:7	12:2
T3	34:55	8	6	1	1	2:6	7:1
T4	29:00	10	10	0	0	5:5	10:0
T5	34:30	10	8	1	1	5:5	9:1
T6	28:27	5	3	1	1	3:2	4:1
T7	33:00	20	20	0	0	9:11	19:1

As it emerges from the above results, with the exception of T6, all the teachers presented relatively high number of activities compared to the overall time of

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[29] In harmony with the observation sheet, S stands for a stirring activity, C for a calming activity, K for a known activity and N for a new activity.

individual lessons and therefore their lessons can be regarded as activity-based. Concerning the timing of activities, it is obvious that activities lasting up to 5 minutes are the most frequent category and undoubtedly represent the core of each of the observed lessons. The activities lasting from 5 to 10 minutes seem to quite regularly appear in the lessons but appear to be limited to not more than one occurrence. The activities longer than 10 minutes can be considered as rather uncommon. When the activities are analysed from a different perspective, it is obvious that both stirring and calming activities were frequent in the lessons. Considering the discovered ratios between these two activity types in the recorded lessons, it can be stated that the all the lessons offered regular alternation between stirring and calming activities. As regards the presence of novel activities, they appeared in five out of seven recorded lessons; therefore, it can be assumed that the teachers regularly introduce new activities in the lessons; the low number of the novel activities in the recorded lessons might have been caused by the presence of a camera.

Interview data

The data gained in the interviews are remarkably similar, if not almost identical. All the teachers said that they usually changed activities each 5 minutes in order to keep the children attentive; T3 and T6 admitted that occasionally, some activities in the lessons lasted about 10 minutes especially if focused on the new language. As for the stirring and calming activities, all the teachers consensually answered that they always made an alternation between stirring and calming activities; all of them justified their choice by stressing VYLs' low concentration span and three teachers also added that it was natural for VYLs to learn through movement. Lastly, according to all the interviewed teachers, English lessons for VYLs should be primarily based on the activities familiar to the children; their reasons can be categorised into two main groups. The most common argument is practicality of conducting a lesson based on the known activities; the teacher does not have to give so many instructions since the learners know what to do, which keeps the momentum of the lesson and the children are less likely to lose their attention. Furthermore, three teachers also stressed that children often 'got addicted' to certain

types of activities and that they required to play them again and again; therefore, as stressed by these teachers, it would be unwise to base the lessons primarily on the new activities.

Unstructured observation

No information that would deepen the insights into these aspects of the lessons emerged from the unstructured observations.

When the above results are evaluated, it can be concluded that all the lessons were activity-based and that timing of individual activities was appropriate with respect to VYLs' low concentration span; moreover, all the lessons were based on an alternation between stirring and calming activities, which broadly speaking, not only keeps the learners attentive but more importantly, it respects their strong need for motor activity. Additionally, most of the lessons encompassed a novel activity, which generally contributes to lesson variety and sustains learners' motivation. It should also be accentuated that the findings from the observations were confirmed in the interviews and thus their validity is increased.

5.4.2.6 Storytelling

Observations

Storytelling was used in none of the recorded lessons; the researcher initially assumed that it had been caused by the presence of a camera owing to the teachers' lack of confidence in using this technique but the interviews brought a different explanation.

Interview data

In the interviews, all the teachers under investigation declared that they did not use storytelling in their lessons. Even though not the part of the interview, the researcher attempted to elicit the reasons. Based on the answers, five teachers feel limited by their command of the language and hold the belief that storytelling is not a suitable technique for foreign language teaching due to its demands on the learners. Two teachers (T2, T4); explained that they had attended seminars centred on this

technique and that they had tried storytelling several times in their lessons but with no success. Therefore, the teachers seem to have rejected storytelling as an ineffective technique.

To sum up, despite general cognitive and emotional benefits of storytelling as well as its language learning benefits, the investigated teachers do not employ this technique in their teaching. More importantly, the teacher seem to hold a negative attitude towards storytelling regarding it as improper technique for foreign language teaching; it should be stressed that this finding confirms the concerns expressed by some authors discussed earlier in the paper (*see* p.51).

5.4.2.7 Songs and rhymes

Observations

Firstly, the presence and frequency of songs and rhymes as learning tools in the recorded lessons was investigated; the findings from the observations are summarised in Chart 5.

Chart 5

Teachers	Number of songs	Number of rhymes
T1	3	0
T2	2	1
T3	0	0
T4	4	1
T5	3	0
T6	2	0
T7	6	1

As obvious from the chart, except for T3, songs appeared in all the lessons; it seems that songs represent the core part of the lessons taught by the teachers T4 and T7; the other teachers used from 2 to 3 songs in the lesson. Regarding rhymes, they seem to be generally less common; moreover, compared to songs, rhymes appear to play a minor role in the lessons.

Since the observations found songs and rhymes to be of common use in the lessons, the researcher was interested in their functions; in accordance with the

observation sheets, the songs and rhymes in the recorded lessons were assigned to one of the five following categories:

W: Warm-up to the lesson

V: Vehicle for introducing/practising/revising the language

CH: Change to the classroom mood (e.g. to sustain the learners' motivation)

R: Regulation of other activities (e.g. a rhyme used to eliminate who will start as in a particular activity)

C: Closure to the lesson

According to the obtained results, songs are rhymes seem to be primarily used as a vehicle for introducing/practising/revising the language; another quite common function is that of a change to classroom mood in which the songs and rhymes appear to have more affective aims stimulating the learners to enjoy themselves in the lessons rather than specific language learning goals; four teachers also used songs to open or close a lesson. A more accurate quantitative depiction of the functions of songs and rhymes in the recorded lessons is offered in Graph 8 below.

Graph 8

Functions of songs and rhymes
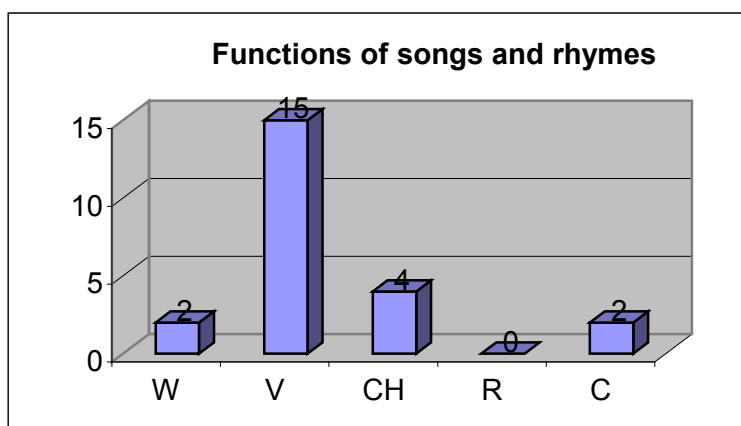
Lastly, the researcher focused on the presence of any activities connected with songs and rhymes aiming at raising children's phonological awareness of the language; no such activity; however, was present in any of the lessons.

Interview data

All the teachers stated that songs and rhymes normally appeared in each of their lessons. Based on their responses, they seem to be aware of multiple functions of

songs and rhymes; their answers as to which function songs and rhymes usually perform in their lessons are displayed in Graph 9.

Graph 9

Teachers' view
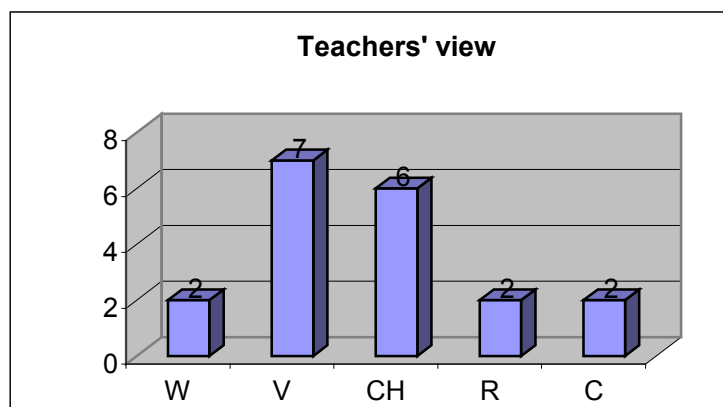
It is apparent that the teachers' answers correspond to the findings from the observations to a considerable extent; all of them responded that the primary function of songs and rhymes in their lessons was that of vehicle for introducing/practising/revising the language; the teachers' explanations for this can be divided into two distinct groups. Firstly, as stressed by the teachers, majority of materials for VYLs is built on songs and rhymes and therefore they are inherent parts of their lessons; this view is hold by all the interviewed teachers. Secondly, four teachers added that songs and rhymes provided opportunities for implicit learning in a child-friendly way. Furthermore, as obvious from the graph, most teachers used songs and rhymes as a change to the classroom mood; the teachers consensually explained that songs and rhymes were often very 'catchy' and motivating for the learners and that they could be accompanied by various activities just for pleasure and thereby being great to make 'cognitively tired' children loosing their attention prepared for the further work. A small number of teachers responded that they regularly used songs and rhymes as a warm-up or a closure to the lessons or as a regulation of other activities.

Regarding the phonological awareness activities, based on the obtained responses, none of the teachers seems to use any activities primarily intended to develop children's awareness about the sound system of the foreign language.

Unstructured observation

No findings directly linked to this research question were discovered through unstructured observation.

If these results are evaluated, it can be stated that the research findings are in accordance with the theory (*see* p.51); the songs are rhymes are commonly used as significant learning tools in the lessons and the teachers make use of their multiple functions. Importantly, the dominant function is that of a vehicle for learning the language, which fully corresponds to the specifics and needs of VYLs. From the researcher's point of view, the only thing to reconsider for the teachers is the absence of any phonological awareness activities. In view of the implications of the research into the CPH, learning pronunciation should be devoted a certain attention and not be considered as 'taking care of itself' as it is often the case in the settings with an immense exposure to the target language.

5.4.2.8 Routines and ritual activities

When the data from the observations and interviews are put together it emerges that all the teachers have three routines/ ritual activities in their lessons in common. Firstly, the lessons usually start in the same way; the form varies from one teacher another but the most frequent ways are sitting in a circle in which the children learn greetings and react to the basic questions; listening, singing and performing based on the songs or using puppets greeting children and talking to them in English. Secondly, almost all teachers (except for T4) introduce routine working with English notebooks, which is often held in a specific part of the room differentiating it from other activities. Thirdly, all the teachers close the lessons in the same way (e.g. Bye Bye song, circle time, puppets).

5.5 Conclusion of the practical part

Before the specific conclusions are drawn from the research results, it is necessary to reiterate the principal research question underlying the whole research: *To what extent are the key didactic principles for very early foreign language teaching*

followed in the classroom practice in nursery schools? In order to answer this question satisfactorily, the researcher conducted a multiple analysis of various didactic aspects of the lessons. On the basis of the obtained data, it can be stated that the extent to which the key didactic principles are followed varies with particular principles. Generally speaking, the researched teachers provide the learners with multisensory learning experience and base their lessons on a string of activities with not only appropriate timing but also with a balanced proportion between stirring and calming ones; moreover, it can be assumed that the teachers also regularly incorporate novel activities in their lessons to keep them varied. In addition to this, the teachers under investigation employ songs and rhymes as legitimate learning tools and seem to be able to exploit their various functions; the teachers also structure the learning environment for the learners by establishing certain routine/ritual activities. In view of the fact that most of the researched teachers are regular nursery teachers with long experience in educating VYLs, the researcher supposes that they have transferred their general pedagogical-psychological knowledge into foreign language teaching, which leads to respecting and following the above mentioned principles and techniques. On the other hand, except for T2 and T4, the teachers fail to provide the learners with sufficient input conditions for a natural foreign language to be triggered; they believe that the mother tongue should be used equally or even more than the target language and use the mother tongue ineffectively in the situations otherwise optimal for foreign language acquisition. More importantly, three out of seven researched teachers constantly switch between the languages and mix them together, which can have detrimental effects on the children's very early foreign language development. Furthermore, improper reactions on mistakes of form seem not uncommon. Finally, none of the teachers uses storytelling in their teaching practice and most of them have reservations to this technique or hold a negative attitude towards it not considering it suitable for VYLs.

All in all, in the light of the research results, it can be concluded that the recorded lessons may generally achieve attitudinal goals and the whole personality development goals (multisensory activities, motor activities improving eye-to-hand coordination and fine as well as gross motor skills etc.) Nonetheless, more than half

of the investigated teachers do not effectively teach a foreign language and thus children's potential advantages in foreign language learning in general and in learning pronunciation in particular go wasted. Hence, further education of pre-primary foreign language teachers should primarily centre on making teachers aware of the specifics of very early foreign language acquisition with a particular emphasis on highlighting the role of a teacher as a provider of comprehensible input; it should also introduce teachers to the research findings from bilingual settings and to their possible application in Czech socio-linguistic environment as well as familiarise teachers with particular methods (e.g. TPR) and techniques (e.g. storytelling) appropriate for teaching a foreign language to VYLs. Only then, very early foreign language education can go beyond attitudinal goals. Clearly enough, all of these would be pointless if teachers are not competent users of the target language.

6. Final conclusion

The thesis addresses the up-to-date issue of teaching English to preschool children with a primary focus on ELT methodology for the target age group. The first chapter examines the critical period hypothesis for foreign language learning in order to throw some light on the question of optimal or critical age for second langue learning. The important outcome of the chapter is highlighting the conditions under which children's potential advantage in learning a second language can be exploited. One of these conditions is age-appropriate ELT methodology for VYLs, which is dealt with in the subsequent chapters of the paper. Firstly, the developmental specifics of VYLs are discussed as a basis for formulating the main principles for very early foreign language teaching and subsequently the underlying constructs in ELT methodology for VYLs are presented. The final chapter of the theoretical part focuses on foreign language teacher as a crucial unifying element bringing together all the significant variables in the process.

In the empirical part, the research based on the multiple methodology investigates the extent to which the key didactic principles for very early foreign language teaching are followed in the classroom practice in selected nursery schools. The research results make it possible to draw several conclusions and generalisations which are; however, valid for the research sample only. The researched teachers seem to provide the learners with the conditions sufficient for building a positive attitude to the target language and for the whole personality development, both of which are the principal goals of foreign language teaching at this level. In the lessons, the teachers respected VYLs' developmental needs to a high extent by appropriate timing of activities and by a balanced alternation between calming and stirring ones. Also, the teachers provided the learners with enough opportunities for mulisensory learning and structured their learning environment with simple routines; moreover, the teachers effectively employed songs and rhymes as a vehicle for language learning. Although all the researched teachers prepared lessons in accordance with the development specifics of VYLs most of them did not provide the learners with foreign language input of sufficient quality and quantity and did

not follow certain methodological principles particularly in error correction, storytelling or utilisation of activities at phonological awareness. Consequently, particularly due to the lack of adequate exposure to the comprehensible input, it can be postulated that it is impossible for the children's potential for foreign language learning to emerge.

To sum up, having turned attention from the optimal age as such to the optimal conditions and having empirically investigated one of the key conditions (ELT methodology) and its utilisation in practice, it can concluded that although all the lessons meet the general aims of pre-primary foreign language education, most of them do not exploit the children's potential advantage in foreign language learning determined by age. To do so, pre-primary teachers would need to receive long-term and systematic education in foreign language pedagogy for the target age group, which should be; however, proceeded by the adequate training of teachers in foreign language as such.

7. Resumé

Předložená diplomová práce se zabývá tématem velmi rané výuky cizích jazyků, zaměřuje se primárně na výuku anglického jazyka u dětí předškolního věku. Práce je strukturována do dvou základních částí, teoreticko-přehledové (kapitoly 1- 4) a empirické (kapitola 5). V úvodu teoretické části autor nejprve zasazuje práci do širšího kontextuální rámce a poukazuje na celospolečenské proměny, které jsou nevyhnutelně reflektovány ve vzdělávání, včetně vzdělávání cizojazyčného, které se v reakci na stále rostoucí význam znalosti cizího jazyka snaží najít cesty, jak zefektivnit poměrně náročný a dlouhodobý proces učení se cizího jazyka. Jednou z možných cest k vyšší efektivitě je i postupné snižování věkové hranice výuky cizího jazyka s cílem využít rychlost a snadnost, s jakou si malé dítě osvojuje nové poznatky, kterým je v okolním světě neustále vystaveno. Lingvisté, didaktikové a psychologové poukazují na přirozenost a efektivitu, které provázejí osvojování mateřského jazyka a mnozí zdůrazňují, že i cizojazyčná výuka by měla těchto jevů typických pro rané dětství plně využít. Po tomto úvodním stručném zasvěcení čtenáře do dané problematiky autor vymezuje nosnou terminologii ve snaze omezit případné terminologické nejasnosti v následném textu.

První kapitola si klade za cíl osvětlit často diskutovanou otázku optimálního věku pro začátek cizojazyčné výuky. Nejprve je prezentována detailní analýza velmi vlivné hypotézy kritického období, která předpokládá existenci biologicky determinovaného období v lidském životě, ve kterém je jednodušší osvojit si cizí jazyk a po jehož uplynutí osvojování cizího jazyka probíhá již jen obtížně. Tato hypotéza se stala základní stavebním kamenem pro další empirický výzkum v dané oblasti. Autor předložené práce se pokouší o rámcové představení provedených empirických šetření, které se snažily verifikovat či vyvrátit platnost zmíněné hypotézy a snaží se prezentovat danou problematiku takovým způsobem, aby byla patrná značná pluralita výzkumných výsledků, deklarovaných příčin kritického období či platnosti hypotézy pro různé jazykové prostředky. Problematika optimálního či kritického věku pro výuku cizího jazyka je dále vsazena do hlubšího teoretického rámce relevantních teorií osvojování cizích jazyků se zvláštním

akcentem na přínos jednotlivých teorií pro otázku optimálního věku. V závěru kapitoly je nastíněn dopad současného teoretického stavu poznání v dané oblasti na cizojazyčné vzdělávání; autor se odkazuje na zahraniční i české autority v oblasti velmi rané a rané výuky cizích jazyků a předkládá výčet klíčových podmínek, které musejí být splněny, jestliže velmi raná výuka má z dlouhodobé perspektivy přinést kýžené výsledky.

Druhá kapitola charakterizuje dítě předškolního věku z pohledu vývojové psychologie. Autor nejprve zdůrazňuje význam respektování vývojových specifik předškolního dítěte pro formulaci cílů a základní principů pro cizojazyčnou výuku u dětí této věkové skupiny. Psychický vývoj je dále členěn do třech základních oblastí: kognitivní vývoj, sociální a emoční vývoj a motorický vývoj. V oblasti kognitivního vývoje autor nejprve poukazuje na přínos Jeana Piageta a jeho konstruktivistického pojetí učení a také na jeho teorii etap kognitivního vývoje. Piagetova koncepce je dále doplněna o teorii zóny nejbližšího vývoje, kterou postuloval Lev Vygotsky a která zdůrazňuje roli sociální interakce, sociálně významných druhých a stupně náročností požadavků kladených na osobnost v procesu učení. Autor se také snaží stručně nastínit názory obou výše zmíněných badatelů na procesy osvojování jazyka. Následně jsou diskutovány specifika paměti, pozornosti, fantazie a představ u dítěte předškolního věku, který je často označován jako období hry či období aktivity a iniciativy. V oblasti sociálního a emočního vývoje je nejprve zdůrazněna potřeba bezpečí, jistoty a stability, jejíž naplnění je základním předpokladem pro jakoukoliv poznávací činnost dítěte; dále je diskutována výrazná emocionálnost, potřeba seberealizace a vývoj sebepojetí a sebehodnocení u jedince předškolního věku. Poslední oblastí, které je věnována pozornost, je motorický vývoj, ve kterém v daném věku dochází především k celkovému zkvalitnění svalové koordinace a postupnému rozvoji jemné motoriky, to vše je provázeno výraznou potřebou motorické aktivity. Autor se u jednotlivých specifik psychického vývoje v daných oblastech také pokouší nastínit hlavní implikace pro velmi ranou cizojazyčnou výuku.

Kapitola třetí představuje klíčovou část teoretické části diplomové práce. Autor nejprve vymezuje hlavní cíle cizojazyčné vzdělávání u předškolních dětí a poukazuje na prioritu afektivních cílu a prioritu celkového rozvoje osobnosti

dítěte; jazykové cíle jsou v této rané etapě výuku cizího jazyka spíše druhořadé. Dále jsou diskutovány fundamentální aspekty výuku anglického jazyka u předškolních děti, autor se zaměřuje na lingvodidaktická specifika jako je motivace v procesech raného učení se cizího jazyka, počet dětí ve skupině, jazyk výuky, učební aktivity, oprava chyb či význam rutinních aktivit ve výuce. Následně je pozornost věnována obecnějším principům a specifickým metodám a technikám relevantním pro velmi ranou výuku cizího jazyka, zejména multisenzorickému učení, období mlčení (silent period), využití techniky „storytelling" či metody celkové fyzické odpovědi; diskutován je také význam hry jako vyučovací metody a využití písní a říkanek jako prostředků pro výuku cizího jazyka. Autor klade v dílčích částech této kapitoly zvláštní důraz na propojení poznatků vývojové psychologie s lingvodidaktickými zásadami pro velmi ranou výuku cizího jazyka.

Poslední čtvrtá kapitola teoretické časti diplomové práce analyzuje hlavní charakteristiky učitele cizího jazyka pro děti předškolního věku. Autor označuje učitele za klíčový determinant v procesu velmi rané cizojazyčné výuky a poukazuje na skutečnost, že právě v učiteli dochází k propojení a vzájemné integraci celé řady faktorů ovlivňující velmi ranou cizojazyčnou výuku. Hlavní pozornost je věnována učitelově komunikativní kompetenci v cílovém jazyce a jeho didaktickým kompetencím pro výuku cizího jazyka u dané věkové skupiny; stručně jsou také diskutovány i osobností předpoklady pro práci s předškolními dětmi.

Empirická část práce úzce koreluje s částí teoretickou, která vytvořila teoretický základ pro výzkumné šetření provedené autorem práce. V úvodu autor nejprve představuje výzkumný problém a formuluje hlavní výzkumnou otázku, od které se následně odvíjí primární cíle výzkumu a především zvolená výzkumná metodologie. Hlavním výzkumným cílem bylo zjistit, do jaké míry jsou principy pro výuky cizího jazyka u dětí předškolního věku respektovány ve výuce ve vybraných mateřských školách. Hlavní výzkumná otázka je následně rozčleněna do několika dílčích otázek zaměřujících se na vybrané jevy. Výzkum je založen na smíšené metodologii, jako metody sběru dat využívá videozáznam, který je následně analyzován prostřednictvím strukturovaných observačních archů a vybrané jevy ve výuce jsou kódovány dle předdefinovaných kategorií. Dále jsou využity kvalitativní metody sběru dat, tedy polostrukturovaný rozhovor, který obsahově koresponduje jevům

sledovaných v observacím a klade si za cíl vnést do výzkumu vhled subjektů přímo zúčastněných ve vyučovacích procesech - učitelů. Druhou kvalitativní metodou je nestrukturované pozorování, jehož prostřednictvím jsou videozáznamy znovu analyzovány s ohledem na dané výzkumné otázky, tato metoda sběru dat je však spíše sekundární a jejím hlavním cílem je eliminovat redukované poznání dané reality, ke kterému mohlo dojít při analýze pomocí strukturovaných observací.

Autor dále popisuje celý výzkumný proces tedy od výše zmíněná formulace výzkumné otázky a představení výzkumného designu a metodologie až po výběr výzkumného vzorku, jeho omezení a zdůvodnění pro zvolený postup a vlastní průběh výzkumu v terénu.

V druhé polovině praktické části jsou výsledky výzkumu analyzovány a interpretovány. Na základě výsledků provedeného výzkumného šetření v jednotlivých oblastech výuky se zdá, že většina učitelů účastnících se výzkumu vytváří dostačující a mnohdy i optimální podmínky pro splnění afektivních cílu velmi rané cizojazyčné výuky a pro celkový rozvoj osobnosti dítěte. Jak je z výzkumu patrné, učitelé volí vhodné časování i typologii aktivit (střídají klidové a pohybové aktivity), čímž respektují specifika koncentrace a potřeby pohybové aktivity dětí předškolního věku. Dále ve výuce vytváří dostatek příležitostí pro multisenzorické učení, hodiny obsahují dětem dobře známé rutinní situace a učitelé také efektivně využívají písně a říkadla jako prostředek pro učení se cizího jazyka. Všechny výše zmíněné jevy jsou v souladu si vývojovými charakteristikami dětí předškolního věku. Výzkum však také odhalil, že ve většině učitelů nesplňuje základní lingvodidaktická kritéria pro velmi ranou cizojazyčnou výuku a to především v oblasti promluvy v cílovém jazyce, která se zdá být v některých případech přímo nepřijatelná. Většina učitelů využívá mateřštinu jako dominantní jazyk výuky či ve stejném poměru s cílovým jazykem. Někteří tyto dva jazyky dokonce zcela nevhodně kombinují či neustále „přepínají" z jednoho jazyka to druhého. Žádný z učitelů nevyužívá legitimní techniku pro velmi ranou a ranou výuku cizích jazyků – „storytelling". Někteří učitelé také uplatňují nevhodné metody korekce chyb s ohledem na daný typ chyby. Na základě těchto zjištění prezentovaných v příslušných částech praktické části diplomové práce, autor konstatuje, že většina učitelů účastnících se výzkumu nevytváří dostatečné

podmínky pro využití potenciálních výhod, které může velmi raný a raný začátek výuky cizího jazyka mít ve srovnání se začátkem v pozdějším věku.

Diplomová práce je ukončena souhrnným závěrem, který se vztahuje jak části praktické tak i k části teoretické.

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9. Appendix

List of appendices:

1. **Classroom language**
2. **Comprehensibility of input**
3. **Error correction**
4. **Multisensory learning**
5. **Timing and variety of activities**
6. **Storytelling**
7. **Songs and rhymes**
8. **Routines and ritual activities**
9. **Interview (T7)**

APPENDIX 1: CLASSROOM LANGUAGE

Classroom language
(TNO)

T_4

Situations	Mother tongue	
Giving instructions	⫽⫽ ⫽⫽	6
Giving feedback	⫽	1
Asking questions	⫽⫽	2
Motivating, encouraging, supporting		
Checking understanding		
Reaction to learners' immediate social or emotional needs	⫽	1
DISCIPLINE Others	⫽	1

giv. instructions mej.

Stages of lesson	Mother tongue	
Lesson opening		
Instructional stage	⫽⫽ ⫽	4
Conducting the activity	⫽⫽ ⫽⫽	5
Closing the activity		
Transitions	⫽⫽	2
Lesson closure		
Others		

APPENDIX 2: COMPREHENSIBILITY OF INPUT

Comprehensibility of input

(handwritten data table with rows of values 1, 2, 3, 4 and dashes; hard to read in full)

Handwritten notes below the table:

allem : 223
unmodified: 71
modified: 152
2x (4)!

Linguistic (1): slow and careful pronunciation, exaggerated intonation, less complex words and sentences

Nonverbal (2): gestures, mimics, facial expressions etc.

'Here and now' principle (3): talking about things which children can see, hear or interact with at the given time or about actions taking place at the time

Interactional modifications (4): comprehension checks, paraphrases and repeating, negotiating meaning

Interplay of the strategies (5): e.g. 1+2; 1+2+3

APPENDIX 3: ERROR CORRECTION

Error correction

T₁

Time	Type of mistake	Teacher's reaction
1:45	F	SE
2:04	F	DE
4:28	M	PE
5:25	F	DE
6:58	F	R
8:28	F	R

T₂

Time	Type of mistake	Teacher's reaction
6:34	M	R
11:54	F	R
13:20	F	R
14:00	F	R
15:13	M	SE
28:00	F	SE

T₄

Time	Type of mistake	Teacher's reaction
		O

Mistake of meaning: **M**
Mistake of form: **F**
Teacher's reaction:
R – recast
I – ignorance
DE – direct explanation (e.g. In English, we say … but not……)
SE – self-correction encouraged
PE – peer-correction encouraged
O – other type (to be specified)

Multisensory learning

T_1

Activity	Visual input	Auditory input	Kinesthetic input	Total
WARM-UP	X	✓	X	A
FLASHCARDS	✓	✓	X	VA
CIRCLE	✓	✓	X	VA
BOARD	✓	✓	X	VA
SONG	✓	✓	✓	VAK
BOAT	X	✓	✓	AK
TPR	✓	✓	✓	VAK
GAME	X	✓	✓	AK
GAME FINGERS	✓	✓	✓	VAK
BYE BYE SONG	✓	✓	✓	VAK

VAK → 4x   A → 1x
VA → 3x
AK → 2x

T_3

Activity	Visual input	Auditory input	Kinesthetic input	Total
ANIMALS STICK	✓	✓	✓	VAK
ANIM. P.	✓	✓	X	VA
MIMING	✓	✓	✓	VAK
AN. REV.	X	✓	X	A
NOTEBOOKS	✓	✓	✓	VAK
TPR COLOURS	✓	✓	✓	VAK
COLOURS REV.	X	✓	X	A
BYE BYE C.	X	✓	✓	AK

VAK → 4x
A → 2x
VA → 1x
AK → 1x

APPENDIX 5: TIMING AND VARIETY OF ACTIVITIES

Variety of activities

T1		T2		T3	
Activity	**Type**	**Activity**	**Type**	**Activity**	**Type**
WARM-UP	C;K;1	WARM-UP	C;K;1	ANIMALS STICK	C;K;1
FLASHCARDS	C;K;1	CIRCLE RHYME COLOURS	S;K;1	ANIMALS	C;K;1
CIRCLE	C;K;2	ANIMALS	C;K;1	MIMING	S;N;1
BOARD	C;K;1	GUESSING ANIMALS	C;K;1	AN. REVISION	C;K;1
SONG	C;K;1	COUNTING	C;K;1	NOTEBOOKS	C;K;3
BOATS.	S;K;1	SONG INDIANS	C;K;1	TPR COLOURS	S;K;2
TPR	S;K;1	FAMILY	S;K;1	COLOURS REV.	C;K;1
GAME	S;K;1	BODY	S;K;1	BYE BYE	C;K;1
GAME FINGERS	C;K;1	LONDON BRIDGES.	S;K;1	(8)	
BYE BYE SONG	S;K;1	SMALL vs. BIG	S;N;1		
(10)		BALLOONS	C;N;2		
		TPR	S;K;1		
		FLASHCARDS	C;K;1		

GAME   S;K;1

(14)

Type: **C**- calming
S- stirring
N – new
K- known
Time: **1** (up to 5m.); **2** (from 5-10 m.); **3** (more than 10 m.)

APPENDIX 6: STORYTELLING

T1	Present	How/What
Help learners to realise that it is story time	√	Ringing a little bell + verbal signal: Now, it's time for storytelling
Activities aimed at preparing learners for language in the story	√	TPR activity for movements of animals
Activities aimed at preparing learners for the content of the story	√	Flashcards- main animal characters and their names
Story told or read	told	
Narration techniques		**Comments**
Speaking slowly and clearly	√	…
Using voice variation (adapting voice to different characters)	√	…
Keeping eye contact	√	…
Employing visual aids	‒‒‒‒	
Nonverbal communication	√	…
Making pauses to give a dramatic effect	‒‒‒‒	
Involving learners in storytelling	‒‒‒‒	
Activities supplementing storytelling		

APPENDIX 7: SONGS AND RHYMES

Songs and rhymes

T1

Song or Rhyme	Warm-up to the lesson	Vehicle for intr./pract./recycling the language	Change to the classroom mood	Regulation of other activities	Closures to the lesson
SONG COUNTING		✓			
BOAT SONG			✓		
BYE BYE SONG					✓

Phonological awareness activities

Song/rhyme	Description of the activity
	∅

T2

Song or Rhyme	Warm-up to the lesson	Vehicle for intr./pract./recycling the language	Change to the classroom mood	Regulation of other activities	Closures to the lesson
SONG INDIANS		✓			
RHYME COLOURS		✓			
SONG LONDON BRIDGE		✓			

Song/rhyme	Description of the activity
	∅

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APPENDIX 8: ROUTINES AND RITUAL ACTIVITIES

Routine and ritual activities

$\overline{1}_5$

Routine activity	Description
Lesson opening ✓	Circle on the carpet and greetings with two puppets (boy and girl) → puppets ask for name or about feelings and greet the children
WORKING WITH NOTEBOOKS	At field at the table; children automatically go their they expect drawing, sticking...
Lesson closure ✓	Bye Bye Song → singing and waving their hands; immediately recognised the song and made a circle wait for T her join

Interview

(T7)

Problematika velmi rané výuky cizího jazyka obecně

1) Kdy by dle vašeho názoru měla začít výuka cizích jazyků? Proč?

[handwritten response]

2) Co si myslíte o připravenosti českých mateřských škol pro výuku cizího jazyka?

[handwritten response]

3) Jaký je váš názor na návaznost mezi mateřskou a základní školou z hlediska výuky cizího jazyka?

[handwritten response]

Autentičnost zaznamenané hodiny

1) Označila by jste tuto hodinu za:
a) typickou
b) spíše typickou
c) spíše netypická
d) netypickou

2) Do jaké míry bylo chování dětí ovlivněno přítomností kamery:
a) velmi ovlivněno
b) ovlivněno
c) spíše neovlivněno
d) neovlivněno

3) Jak jste se při výuce cítila?
a) dobře
b) mírně nervózní
c) nervózní
d) silně nervózní

Lingvodidaktické aspekty výuky cizího jazyka u dítěte předškolního věku

Jazyk výuky

1) Který jazyk při výuce používáte jako dominantní? Proč?

[handwritten response]

✗ potřebuji rozumět obsahu *[handwritten]*

2) V jakých situacích nejčastěji upřednostňujete češtinu? Proč?

Situace	Proč ?
Zadávání instrukcí ✓	*musím obsahově porozumět, jinak přijdi motiv.* *[handwritten]*
Poskytování zpětné vazby	
Kladení otázek ✓	*— " —* *[handwritten]*
Motivování, povzbuzování, poskytování podpory	
Kontrola porozumění	
Reagování na okamžité sociální a emoční potřeby dětí ✓	*Aby bylo skutečné učení by bylo odloukavé a hodina by byla zábavou ✗* *[handwritten]*
Další	

3) Jaké strategie využíváte, aby vaše promluva v cizím jazyce byla pro děti srozumitelná?

a) Lingvistické

- pomalá a pečlivá výslovnost
- „přehnaná" intonace
- používání méně komplexních výrazů (jednoduché věty)

b) Prostředky neverbální komunikace

- gesta, výrazy tváře, mimika

c) Uplatňování principu „tady a teď"
- tzn. mluvit o objektech, které děti mohou v daném okamžiku vidět, slyšet, dotknout se, nebo o činnostech, které právě probíhají v daném okamžiku.

d) Uzpůsobení interakce jako celku
- neustálá kontrola porozumění, používání parafrází a opakování výrazů v případě, že děti nerozumí atd.

e) Kombinace výše uvedených strategií (respondent specifikuje nejčastější kombinace)
    A + B + C *[handwritten]*

4) Proč právě tyto strategie či jejich kombinace používáte nejčastěji?
- např. přesvědčení o jejich efektivitě na základě zkušeností, neuvědomované/implicitní preference aj.
    → pan snadné na provedení a efektivní *[handwritten]*

Oprava chyb

5) Jakým způsobem nejčastěji reagujete na chyby, které děti v cizím jazyce dělají?

a) ignorujete chybu
(b) recast (tazatel vysvětlí a uvede příklad)
c) přímé vysvětlení
(d) vybídnete dítě, aby opravilo samo sebe
e) vybídnete ostatní děti k opravě chyby
f) jiný způsob (respondent specifikuje)

6) Kdy a proč upřednostňujete daný/é způsob/y opravy chyby?

→ *spontánní rozhodnutí; většinou to dělám automaticky bez nějakého konkrétního důvodu*

Multisenzorické učení

7) Při plánování výukových aktivit obvykle kladu důraz na to, aby dětem umožnily:
   a) zapojení zraku
   b) zapojení sluchu
   c) zapojení hmatu a pohybu
   (d) zapojení co nejvíce smyslů (zrak, sluch, hmat/pohyb)
   e) kombinace z výše uvedených:

8) Můžete prosím objasnit/vysvětlit vaši volbu?

Pro tyto děti je to rutina; oni se od narození učí používáním svých všech smyslů; takže i v jazyce by to mělo být stejné.

Různorodost aktivit

9) Jak často střídáte aktivity v hodině?/Jak dlouhé jsou obvykle jednotlivé aktivity?

obvykle do 5 min. jinak by to nevydržely

10) V hodinách obvykle využívám:
    a) aktivity spíše klidové (např. děti pojmenovávají zvířátka na obrázcích)
    b) aktivity spíše pohybové (např.děti předvádějí pohyby zvířátek)
    c) kombinaci výše uvedených

12) Může prosím objasnit/vysvětlit vaši volbu?

→ udrž. pozornosti

→ učí se hlavně pohybem

13) V hodině obvykle využívám:
    a) (spíše)aktivity, které jsou dětem dobře známé
    b) spíše aktivity, které jsou pro děti nové
    c) větší množství aktivit pro děti známých a jen omezené množství nových
    d) větší množství aktivity pro děti nových a jen omezené množství již známých

14) Může prosím objasnit/vysvětlit vaši volbu?

→ usnadňuje to práci, děti akt. již znají takže nemusíte tolik vysvětlovat a taky můžete použít více AJ často se taky přímo dožadují od urč. aktivit (slep. bába)

15) Byla některé z dnešních aktivit pro děti úplně nová? (nutné k zajištění validity kategorie z observace zaměřené na využití nových aktivit a jejich poměr vůči „známým" aktivitám)

1 → colours (circle ....)

Písně a básničky/říkadla

16) Všiml jsem si, že jste v hodině použila píseň/báseň.
    Používáte obvykle písně/básně v hodinách? *ANO, skoro vždy*

17) Jaké funkce plní písně/básně nejčastěji ve vašich hodinách?

    a) „lesson warm-up" (rituální započetí hodiny; např. Hello song)
    b) prostředek k „prezentaci", procvičování či opakování cizího jazyka
    c) prostředek pro změnu aktuální atmosféry či nálady ve skupině
    d) prostředek k regulaci jiných aktivit (např. rozpočítávání a určení kdo bude první atd.)
    e) „lesson closers" (rituální ukončení hodiny; např. Goodbye song)
    f) jiné často využívané:

18) Můžete prosím více objasnit proč nejčastěji využíváte dané funkce?

→ učí. th. používám je na tom v podstatě postavená + je to pro děti přirozené nenásilné učení formou, je jim blízká

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19) Používáte nějaké aktivity přímo spojené s písněmi či básněmi/říkadly zaměřené na rozvoj povědomí dětí o zvukové podobě cizího jazyka (např.vytleskávání přízvučných slov v říkance)? *NE*

Vyprávění/čtení krátkých příběhů

20) Všiml jsem si, že jste použila „storytelling".
   Využíváte ve výuce„storytelling"?

NE, je to náročné na znalost jazyka a taky to je spíše vhodné pro starší děti (3 tř.) pro předškoláky je to příliš náročné

21) Jaké jsou na základě vašich zkušeností nejdůležitější kroky před vyprávěním příběhu a po něm?

22) Jaké techniky vyprávění nejčastěji využíváte, aby byl obsah příběhu pro děti srozumitelný a motivující?

Rutinní a rituální činnosti

23) Objevují se ve vašich hodinách činnosti, které by se daly označit jako rutinní či rituální? *(+ DNES N)*

→ hodinu oku skoro vždy stejně začí. i končím a vždy pracujeme u stolečků nebo na koberci se sešitama a děti vědí že to jsou sešitky jsou a někdo si vždy podle obrázku rozdá ostatním

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