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Initial English language competences in elementary state schools in Macedonia

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Abstract

Macedonia has recently introduced compulsory English language classes in the obligatory elementary education, taking into consideration the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The contemporary foreign language teaching process for pupils between the ages of 6 and 14 determines the already acknowledged purpose for oral and written communication competences of the foreign language expanded with reading, socio-cultural and intercultural competences. CEFR is used as an orientation concerning the levels of language competences that the pupils and students are expected to acquire during their obligatory education. CEFR differentiates the following levels of competence: the elementary level (A1 Breakthrough and A2 Waystage), the level of independent use of the language (B1 Threshold and B2 Vantage) and, finally, the level of competent use of the language (C1 Effective Operational Proficiency and C2 Mastery). This paper presents the goals, the grammatical structures, the lexical units, etc. that are expected to be acquired from the first to the third grade of the obligatory elementary education i.e. a partial acquisition of the A1 preparation level.

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1. Introduction

The English language subject, as a first foreign language is now part of the nine-year primary education commencing from the first grade. This subject was included in the curricula of each school year, with the alterations of the law of primary education which was passed in 2007 in R. Macedonia. The nine-year primary education was intended to include the pupil from their sixth year of age in the first grade. This new nine-grade primary education now differentiates three periods of development: from 1-3 grade; from 4-6 grade and from 7-9 grade. The teaching process is organized according to needs of the pupils and the corresponding period. This concept offers the pupils to learn the Macedonian language more strongly, the English language from the first grade and another, second foreign language from the sixth grade. With the introduction of the nine-year primary education, the primary education in general has changed essentially. The focus is now on development; in the first three years the focus is primarily on skills, in the next three years on values, and finally on knowledge in the last three years. Only the first two periods

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of development will be discussed in this paper. Learning English since first grade offers pupils to have more information from the global world available to them.

The coursework classes features basic studies in English, as well as special interest areas such as family, school, pets, etc. Many seminars and workshops were organized to provide the teachers of English with a firm base in practical methodology along with a strong foundation of goals and tasks.

2. The goals of the subject English language from first to fourth grade

The change to implement the subject of the English language in the curriculum of every grade in primary education was partly due to the contemporary tendencies of the educational systems in most countries of the European Union where special attention is paid to the first foreign language. Namely, the process of learning the first foreign language commences from the earliest age, i.e. from the first year in the compulsory primary education.

The modern teaching process of foreign languages for the students of 6 to 14 years of age determines the widely accepted goal for oral and written communicational competences of foreign languages complemented with reading, socio-cultural and intercultural competences. The teaching process is completely focused on pupils, their cognitive-affective-social development, i.e. the development of their independence while learning and acquiring learning strategies as a base of their lifelong learning.

The English language subject in the first grade is taught once a week, i.e. 36 lessons a year and it has the status of a compulsory subject. The number of lessons per week is increasing in the following three years. The foundation for planning the teaching curricula for the first four grades of the nine-year primary education is based on: the Concept of the nine-year primary education (content and organization of the teaching process) from 2007 and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the theoretical basis and goal of the modern teaching of foreign languages and levels of competences for the communicational use of the foreign language.

2.1. Levels of competences acquired from I to IV grade

Directions from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which differentiates six levels of communicational use of a foreign language have been used as an orientation concerning the levels of language competences that the pupils should acquire by the end of certain educational periods in primary education. This framework is a practical tool for setting clear standards to be attained at successive stages of learning and for evaluating outcomes in an internationally comparable manner.

In the domain of basic level the CEFR differentiates the following levels A1 (Breakthrough) and A2 (Waystage) the level of independent use of the language B1 (Threshold) and B2 (Vantage) and, finally, the level of competent use of the language C1 (Effective Operational Proficiency) and C2 (Mastery).

The conditions of learning foreign languages in the Republic of Macedonia for pupils in the first three years of learning a foreign language can partially reach level A1 (Breakthrough).

2.1.1. Goals of the English language subject for the period of development of skills from I to III grade

In the period of development from I to III grade the attention is mostly on motivating pupils to learn a foreign language. Great attention is also paid to the development of the listening skill, as well as understanding simple language statements. This period is also important for the development of the ability to express themselves orally in accordance to the pupils' developmental period. They should also be able to use simple vocabulary, learn the alphabet and its correct use in a way of writing familiar words by spelling. In this period certain elements of culture of the English speaking countries are also introduced, again in accordance to the pupils' developmental period.

Some of the goals of this period include the pupils' capability to recognize a word by hearing or seeing it, to the level of understanding the meaning in the later stages of this period. Another goal of this period is also the pupil's ability to lead a simple conversation with the acquired vocabulary to a level of recognizing the graphics of that vocabulary and being able to spell it. Concerning the culture elements, the goal is to lead the pupils toward gaining interest in other cultures, toward learning information about that other culture, later in the III grade.

2.1.2. Goals of the English language subject for the second period of development in the IV grade

The main purpose of the teaching process of the English language subject in the IV grade is to introduce the pupils to the simple structures and vocabulary and teach them how to apply the structures and vocabulary in simple communicational situations.

The tasks in this next period of development are also expanded; the pupils should now be qualified to read and understand simple sentences with a correct usage of punctuation and intonation.

3. Concrete goals in every aspect of the language

In the first period of development i.e. from I to III grade the following components are taught with the corresponding goals:

The goal concerning lexical units begins with understanding and producing lexical units in the I grade to the competence of being able to use them in appropriate speaking situations in the III grade.

When grammar is concerned, in the beginning of this period the attention is on qualifying the students to understand and use the forms of the verb 'to be', to understand the meaning of the verb 'have', using nouns in singular and plural, personal pronouns, possessive adjectives, adjectives that describe the noun, question words, numbers, etc. By the end of III grade the pupil should be able to use all these structures in communicational situations with constant expanding of the knowledge, for example irregular plural, adverbs of time and place, etc.

As for the language functions, the curricula includes elements of personal introduction, basic models of polite behaviour (please, thank you), etc. By the end of III grade the pupil is intended to be able to give better description of themselves and others, use better models of polite behaviour (here you are, you are welcome), giving orders, telling the time, etc.

In the component about listening and understanding, in the beginning the pupil is able to understand simple lexical units and statements (repeat please, stand up), which is further on expanded to differentiating the phonemes from the mother tongue and the English ones, such as /ð/ in 'this' and /d/ in 'day' for example.

From the speaking component the abilities of the pupils move from pronouncing simple lexical units to correct pronunciation of the English phonemes as well as using the simple lexical units to produce short statements.

The reading and writing skills are introduced in III grade since by this stage the Latin alphabet is introduced to the pupils.

The culture component is not taught separately but as part of all other components.

In the next period of development, in the IV grade more specifically, all the four communication skills are taught, correct formation of the words (fish, kangaroo), introduction of the new letters that are not part of the Latin alphabet, like q, w, x, y. In the beginning of the second period of development the pupils are taught to lead simple communication in appropriate speaking situations by applying the communication models of this level of language acquisition i.e. close to the age of the pupils.

The pupils of this age should be able to understand and correctly apply the grammatical elements in communication situations in English. On this level the well prepared application of the grammar material in a form of a dialogue, stimulating and as much as possible relate it to real life situation.

A lexical fond of 80-100 words is intended to be acquired by the pupils for this period of development and age and to use it both receptively and production in appropriate communication situations.

The components of culture are expanded and more thoroughly taught. Pupils now create sensibility for seeing and understanding the cultural differences and similarities as a base for creating tolerance and empathy towards those who are different from them (for example, through names, holidays, models of cultural behaviour, food, songs, communicative models, para-lingual elements, etc.). Some of the competences that are acquired in this period, or at least in its beginning, in the IV grade, are the following: capability to recognise the intonation patterns, the rise and fall of pitch; correct application of grammatical structures, errors are expected but without interrupting the meaning of what is said.

4. Didactic recommendations and evaluation of the acquirements

In the first period of development, when the content of the curriculum of the subject is planned, the inter-subject correlation is being taken into consideration. The teaching process in the beginning of the first period is based on a

multisensory (visual, auditory, tactile) and holistic learning which occupies the cognitive, affective and motor aspects of the pupils, i.e. the teacher integrates the different components so the language is taught in a functional manner. In this very early period of learning the foreign language the planning of the lessons is based on oral presentation, through games, dramatization, songs or movements (with reproduction), but the important thing is to convey the message and the meaning including cultural elements.

The acquirements of the pupils is being constantly followed and evaluated by collecting indicators for their activities, motivation, cooperation, etc., (formative evaluation). Any kind of activity during the lesson represents a language activity, whether it is a receptive, reproductive or a productive activity which provides an opportunity to notice the progress of that particular pupil. Check lists are available to teachers to mark the progress and keep record of everything the pupil does. This means that the evaluation is done during the lesson and not an isolated act. It is of great importance for this age not to use different methods or techniques to do the evaluation, i.e. the pupils should not notice that they are being evaluated.

It is also important to put the accent on the positive aspects of pupils improvements, i.e. what the pupils know, not the things they do not. Positive reactions, gestures, a smile, a smiley or any other positive feedback is recommendable having in mind the age of the pupils.

The evaluation is done descriptively, the teacher keeps records of every progress the student makes as well as the problems they might have in acquiring certain aspect of the language.

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