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Teaching English to intellectually challenged learners in a special system of schooling on the basis of the Polish education programme

Streszczenie

NAUCZANIE JĘZYKA ANGIELSKIEGO UCZNIÓW Z NIEPEŁNOSPRAWNOŚCIĄ INTELEKTUALNĄ
W SPECJALNYM SYSTEMIE SZKOLNICTWA NA PODSTAWIE POLSKIEGO PROGRAMU KSZTAŁCENIA

Artykuł stanowi próbę przyjrzenia się sytuacji nauczania języka angielskiego dzieci z lekką niepełnosprawnością intelektualną w polskim systemie kształcenia. Okazuje się, że pomimo korzyści związanych z wprowadzaniem nauki języka obcego do programu nauczania w szkołach specjalnych pojawia się wiele wątpliwości dotyczących nabywania kompetencji lingwistycznych przez uczniów z lekką niepełnosprawnością intelektualną. Trudności te dotyczą nie tylko specyfiki kształcenia tej grupy dzieci i młodzieży, lecz także braku odpowiednich programów nauczania, dostosowanych podręczników, materiałów, pomocy naukowych, wypracowanych metod, technik i sposobów nauczania. We wprowadzeniu autorka wskazuje na znaczenie języka angielskiego we współczesnym świecie oraz porusza zagadnienia odnoszące się do kwestii polskiego systemu kształcenia specjalnego, a dalej podejmuje rozważania dotyczące specyfiki nauczania języka angielskiego dzieci z lekką niepełnosprawnością intelektualną oraz próbę wskazania kierunków działania w planowaniu nauczania, które powinny być uwzględnione wobec uczniów z tego typu dysfunkcjami.

Słowa kluczowe: niepełnosprawność intelektualna, kształcenie specjalne, nauczanie języka angielskiego uczniów z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną, metodyka nauczania dzieci z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną.

Introduction

English is one of the most important languages of the world today. It is now a major language of the army, science, technology and culture. It is also the language of business, tourism, travel, communication, technology, music/movie industry, and the commercial activities. Journalists' and writers' work is frequently based on international wire services, papers and magazines from around the world. Academic debates, conferences, journal articles and many branches of science and education use English as their main language. Moreover, the introduction of the Internet, which has its roots in the U.S., nowadays causes news to be reported mostly in English and it is making this language more 'popular' (Harmer 2007: 14–15).

Most of the best MBA programmes are taught in English, and more and more companies are being bought or are merged with foreign firms. Much of the technical terminology is based on English words, so many latest developments and discoveries are published in English, no matter whether the scientists who wrote them are from China or Norway. Not without the cause, scientists are increasingly concerned about the role of English in technology as the language continues to adopt to rapid scientific progress (Chapelle 2003: XI).

Due to the convenience of being able to communicate in a single language in many countries, as well as it being used as the language of economy, culture and science, it is estimated that there are currently around 1.5 billion of English speakers worldwide. Research shows that the number of people learning English as a second language is growing quicker (about 2.5 times) than it is for people using it as a first language. A fifth of the world speaks English, of whom only some 329 million are native speakers (Crystal 2003: 3–6, 69; Harmer 2007: 13).

Graddol (1997: 10) defines three types of English speakers in the world today, based on their relationship with the language. First-language speakers (375 million) are native speakers, living in countries which are dominated by cultures based on English, for whom this is the first, and often the only language. Second-language speakers (375 million) use English as a second or additional language, but they also might use a local form of it. The foreign-language speakers (750 million) are the third group of English speakers, and the number of learners is still growing. However Crystal (2003: 6) claims that "distinctions such as those between 'first', 'second' and 'foreign' language status are useful, but we must be careful not to give them a simplistic interpretation. In particular, it is important

to avoid interpreting the distinction between 'second' and 'foreign' language use as a difference in fluency or ability”.

Many specialists (Harmer 2007: 17–18; Graddol 1997: 10; Seidlhofer 2005: 339; Mauranen 2009: 1–2) are discussing the proportion of English native and non-native speakers in dynamic international communication. They usually call on Kachru's circle terminology from 1985 and 2004. In 1985, Kachru described the English users in terms of three circles. The inner circle contained countries where English is the first language, the middle circle – the countries where it is widely-used as a second language, and the outer, expanding circle marked the areas where English had become a foreign language. Later, in 2004, Kachru presented a revised circle diagram, where affiliation was less important than the speakers' proficiency.

The alteration of proportion of native and non-native speakers shows that second-language English users form the majority of English users. English is chosen as a means of communication by people who use a different first, or even second language. Mackay (2002: 24) claims that for a language to be international means that the language has developed to where it is “no longer linked to a single culture or nation but serves both global and local needs as a language of wider communication”.

Thus, English has become one of the symbols of our time (with globalization, networking, and economic integration) and it has gained the position of a genuine lingua franca (Mauranen 2009: 1). According to Seidlhofer, (2005: 339) “English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) has emerged as a way of referring to communication in English between speakers with different first languages”. She mentions the most often used terms for the description of this phenomenon: ‘English as an international language’, ‘English as a global language’, ‘English as a world language’, ‘English as a medium of intercultural communication’.

Concurrently, the authors point out that in teaching and learning global English the general principles are: cross-cultural encounters undertaken in national context (Mackay 2002: 100), socio-cultural norms of the society where the language is used (Yano 2003: 75), common interests (Tanabe 2003: 27), identity and motivation (Murray, Geo, Lamn 2011: 3).

All action in the classroom should be concentrated on helping students to accommodate and should be based on pedagogical questions, as defined by Brown (1980: 3), to the end of better understanding of the goals of language learning and teaching: “Why is the learner attempting to acquire the second language? What are the learner's purposes? Is he instrumentally motivated,

seeking a successful career or fulfilling a foreign language requirement? Or is the learner interactively motivated, wishing personally to identify closely with the culture and people of the target language? Beyond these two categories, what other affective, emotional, personal, or intellectual reasons does the learner have for pursuing this gigantic task of learning other language?"

The education reform in Poland and our joining the European Union in 2004 have caused many changes in education. One of the most important ones is the need to improve the education and opportunities for children with atypical development, needs and abilities. The consequence of these changes is compulsory language learning for all pupils, including those who have been exempt from it for many years. The opportunity to learn foreign languages is now given to special needs students as well.

Students with mild intellectual disabilities have significantly below-average general functioning. This is reflected in the slow rate of maturation, reduced learning capacity and inadequate social adjustment. It may also manifest itself in delayed conceptual development, difficulties in expressing ideas and a limited ability to abstract and generalize what they learn, limited attention-span and poor retention ability, slow speech and language development, and an underdeveloped sense of spatial awareness. Students usually experience difficulty with reading, writing and comprehension and have a poor understanding of mathematical and foreign language-related concepts.

My article is devoted to a discussion of the situation of teaching English to intellectually disabled learners in Poland.

Teaching intellectually dysfunctional learners English in Poland

Rehabilitation and education of intellectually disabled children from the nursery school age constitutes an integral part of the educational system in Poland. Education law organizes teaching and raising children and teenagers with intellectual disabilities, and makes it possible for them to receive education at the level adapted to their specific needs and capabilities, cover their weaknesses and receive specialist care. An educational system embraces all children irrespective of the degree of their disability (Piotrowicz, Wapiennik 2004: 74–75).

Thus, the educational system in Poland creates the possibility for intellectually disabled children and teenagers to learn in all types of schools, which means they have the right to receive their education not only in separate special

schools. Regardless of it, most of children with intellectual disability in Poland do go to special schools, and school type is based on the opinion about the need of special education issued by the psychological and pedagogical counselling centers. The structure of the organization of schools for pupils with intellectual disability at the first, second and third stages of education is the same as for regular schools (Piotrowicz, Wapiennik 2004: 75–76; Głodkowska 1999: 15).

Data from Central Statistical Office shows that in the school year 2012/13, 58,700 pupils with special education needs were taught in primary schools for children and teenagers. It constituted 2.7% of all pupils of primary schools for children and teenagers. There were 781 special primary schools, with a total of 23,400 pupils (i.e. 39.9% of all pupils with special education needs). Pupils with mild intellectual disabilities made up over 30% of children and teenagers with special education needs.

Research also shows that in 2012/13 50 thousand pupils with special education needs attended lower secondary schools (4.3% of all). Children and teenagers with mild intellectual disability constituted about 38% of them. Pupils with different education needs (27.9 thousand – 55.8% of all) went to 840 special lower secondary schools. Moreover, among special upper secondary schools intended for mildly intellectually disabled youth, vocational special schools in 2012/13 school year constituted 85.8% (301 schools).

Special primary school and lower secondary school for pupils with mild intellectual disability are obligatory, just as they are according to the core curriculum in regular schools. For the purpose of bringing pupils with mild intellectual disability closer to their peers without such, the 1999 reform of education added IT and a foreign language as subjects in special schools, as well as the same compulsory educational classes and the same system of assessing and classifying. But teaching intellectually disabled pupils demands an adaptation of contents, methods and the organization of work to their psychophysical possibilities (Piotrowicz, Wapiennik 2004: 76; Gajdzica 2007: 126).

When writing about children with intellectual disability, authors (Piotrowicz, Wapiennik 2004: 39–48, Gajdzica 2007: 77; Heward 2014) usually mention emotional balance (emotional liability), inhibition or hyperactivity, low level of motivation (which can result from the fear of failure), limited self-control, inappropriate self-assessment, retardation of higher emotions (low level of moral sensitivity), lack of empathy, low level of aspiration, fear, dependence on surroundings and learned helplessness, and waiting for the failure. Obaseki and Osagie-Obazee (2009: 230) claim that “children with intellectual disability will

have limited thinking skills, including the ability to reason (working things out) and remembering. They will have difficulties with attention and organizing information. Children with intellectual disability have trouble seeing how things or how events relate to each other.” These features limit the process of teaching and affect the pupils’ results. The difficulties are a consequence of the intellectual disability, which, as most definitions show, is characterized by an intellectual efficiency lower than the average. Specialists determine the term *disability* in various ways, for example: “substantial limitations in age-appropriate intellectual and adaptive behavior” (Heward 2014) or “synonym for people with significantly below average cognitive ability” (Obaseki, Osagie-Obazee 2009: 229), but the majority of them quote the definition offered by the American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR) – arguably the leading professional organization in the field of intellectual disabilities: “a disability characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills. This disability originates before age 18”.

Another frequently used definition comes from the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV), where a person is considered intellectually disabled if he or she is significantly limited in at least two of the following areas: self-care, communication, home living, social/interpersonal skills, self-direction, use of community resources, functional academic skills, work, leisure, health, and safety. There are four categories of disability: mild, moderate, severe, and profound. The children with mild intellectual disability, who have to cover the same core curriculum as pupils from regular school, get from 50 to 70 points on standardized Intelligence Quotient tests and are defined as ‘educable mentally impaired’ (Obaseki, Osagie-Obazee 2009: 229) or ‘mild general learning disability’ (Heward 2014).

Cognitive development of mildly intellectually disabled children is unsettled and proceeds at a slower rate. Deficits in learning include poor memory and range of vocabulary, slow learning rates, attention problems, difficulty generalizing what they have learned, speech disorder, and lack of motivation. Obaseki and Osagie-Obazee (2009: 230) write that they “have lesser capacity of abstract thinking and to correlate various experiences. They lack in reasoning ability. They lack the ability to think in abstract way.”

Children with intellectual disabilities have difficulties with remembering information. In particular, the majority of the mechanical memory accrues in their mind above the logical level (long-term and temporary). They also have

trouble retaining information in short-term memory and remembering a specific sequence of tasks. For this cause, mildly intellectually disabled children have an abnormal ability to remember things faithfully. It often comes at the price of quick forgetting, inaccurate reconstruction and memory lapses.

These difficulties in acquiring, remembering, and generalizing new knowledge and skills are compound and contribute to a student's attention problems. For this reason, mildly intellectually disabled children have difficulties with multi-tasking. As a consequence, they often have difficulty sustaining attention to learning tasks.

Moreover, perception of pupils with mild intellectual disability is inaccurate. They spot fewer objects than their peers in the intellectual norm and have difficulty in noticing resemblances and differences in their location in space. The process of abnormal thinking concerns the transition from sensory to rational cognition, from something concrete to the abstraction. This simplified form of thinking hampers establishing connections and relationships between particular concepts.

Low level of logical inference, reduced ability to understand symbols and signs, inability to understand communication and pinpoint these problems turns our attention on associations between the perception and the language of intellectually disabled pupils. These people frequently have problems with verbal expression and find it difficult to understand speech. For this reason, the rate at which individuals with mild intellectual disabilities acquire new knowledge and skills is well below that of normally developing children.

Lower level of linguistic competence, in case of persons with mild intellectual disability, is shown in poor vocabulary, short sentences (usually about three words long), various grammatical and syntax errors, as well as speech defects. Speech disorders are another obstacle in attempting to teach a disabled child a foreign language. But some specialists (Kusztal 2001: 114) note that since those children can master their native language, teaching other languages should also be possible with the proper teaching methods.

However, difficulties caused by disorders of the central nervous system, hearing and speech end up hindering the ability to focus on learning and lead to weakening of motivation for any kind of effort, including studying. Pupils of special schools, conscious of their disabilities, often have low self-esteem. They think that they are unable to learn anything, particularly foreign languages.

That low self-esteem, for most such children, comes from earlier experiences at home or in regular schools. Obaseki and Osagie-Obazee (2009: 232) write that

a child “lacks motivation to learn, either because his background has been too deprived, his home induced emotional problems are too severe or his learning attempts have received no suitable encouragement or consistence by the teacher. He has become failure oriented because of repeated defeats and thus no longer believes in himself capable of learning. He fears failure and lacks ability and confidence to initiate new activities.”

Additional difficulties of teaching concern the specificity of working in special schools. Kościelska (1984: 14) notes that these institutions are teaching children with different types of development disorders. They work with children with intellectual disabilities, but also:

- with lower level of the intellectual development (borderline intellectual disability),
- with developmental problems,
- with emotional disorders,
- with neurodynamic disorders (hyperactive, with limited self-control),
- with severe personality development disorders,
- with profound perception and motor disorders,
- with other, possibly undiagnosed disorders,
- asocial,
- neglected at home,
- not accepting school as their surroundings,
- not accepting special school as their surroundings.

However, educational aims and objectives of teaching a foreign language, although less demanding, require that children and teenagers in special schools have to be prepared to external standardized tests at the end of primary school (after grade 6) and at the end of the 3rd year of the lower secondary school.

Regardless of these difficulties, teachers of children with disabilities should be aware of individual problems, their specific educational needs, their capabilities, personality, contents of curriculum, etc. The aim of special schools is to train necessary skills, i.e. reading, writing, counting, and general education, thanks to which children gain knowledge about nature, social life, history of the country, citizens' rights and duties.

For Stawowa-Wojnarowska (in Gajdzica 2007: 146), content included in programmes of special schools should: support education, prepare the pupil for social life, facilitate the appropriate choice of an occupation, and constitute the basis for the vocational training. Westling has a similar opinion (1989: 21): “Major learning objectives should include language and communication, social

and self-help skills, as well as recreational, domestic, consumer, vocational, and decision-making activities.”

Therefore learning a foreign language in special schools gives the possibility of faster acquisition of social competence and a chance to avoid ostracization, but above all, it aids the understanding of the surrounding world, in which English could be said to have become a nearly global means of communication. However, the rate of realization of these aims should be adapted to a class of mildly intellectually disabled pupils, general goals should always be the same and include:

- achieving language skills at a basic level,
- forming the correct attitude and motivation for foreign language learning,
- making students more aware of resemblances and differences between the target language speakers’ culture and their own.

The starting point in planning every individually adapted process of educating is getting to know the pupil as well as possible. Owing to the understanding of individual problems of every person in the group it is possible to adapt the programme, methods, and teaching tools. The information concerning the pupil is of help in narrowing the scope of some contents and deepening other to an optimal level of usefulness after leaving the school.

It means that the programme must contain the aspect of practicality and teaching abilities useful in everyday life and in the prospective career. An overly difficult assortment of material (for instance, as a result of misdiagnosis) will discourage children from studying as well as deepen their feeling of helplessness. An optimal selection, on the other hand, will foster the feelings of success and achievement.

Komorowska (2003: 16–18) writes about the necessity of choosing the most needed abilities and determining the methods of overcoming them in planning the language course. The contents, in the case of foreign language learning, include: subjects, situations, grammatical structures, vocabulary, and communication. The author also underlines (2003: 14) that a good language teacher does not skip grammar.

In spite of methodological targets in teaching foreign language, teachers in special schools usually give up on teaching the structures and principles of formal grammar completely. That is because mildly intellectually disabled children and teenagers, however motivated they might be, are not able to learn all four basic skills of linguistic efficiency, i.e., speaking, listening, writing and reading. So, the teachers teaching foreign language at special schools mostly pay attention

to vocabulary and pronunciation, and limit spelling exercises to a minimum (Urbańska 2003: 37; Pelczarska 2003: 32; Kamocka 2006: 39–40).

It turns out that existing programmes and textbooks used in regular schools are too difficult for special schools' pupils, not only at the beginning of learning, but during the entire process. Foreign language teachers at special schools, therefore, choose the program most likely to work in a particular class. They usually have to mix and match it with content from other programmes. There are no programmes which will take into account to the difficulties of those children.

The most accessible parts, the basic linguistic lessons especially suited for intellectually disabled pupils, are included in programmes for children. However, books and other teaching aids for the youngest are too infantile for mildly intellectually disabled children and teenagers of the lower secondary school or a vocational school. Teachers who know the abilities and problems of their pupils usually select teaching aids from other textbooks, websites, magazines – or independently prepare their own material, i.e., teaching games, jigsaws, puzzles, notes for teaching language.

Adapting the programme to the specific needs and interests of pupils with respect to the subjects, texts, vocabulary, and the very methods of work, is a very tedious job, and one not always effective. Most teachers (Chabasińska 2004: 264; Zielińska 2001: 119) working with mildly intellectually disabled children and teenagers in special schools emphasize that the key to achieving satisfying results in teaching a foreign language to pupils with developmental problems is creating an appropriate pedagogic climate, an adequate atmosphere full of kindness and understanding, but also creating programmes suitable for the disabled. The unique role of the teacher in a special school is not, after all, a search for the right materials to work with in class or adapting the lessons to the pupils' needs. His/her role is to create the atmosphere for successful learning, to encourage the progress and to motivate the learners.

Foreign language learning is a long and difficult process. Even people in the intellectual norm have problems with achieving linguistic competence, and this problem is only more severe for people with developmental disorders. Pupils of special schools are usually haunted by their failures in their former regular schools. These experiences very often become the cause of the children's low self-esteem. Therefore, one of the teacher's primary roles is motivating them to learn, encouraging, and helping.

A teacher in a special school is not only a source of knowledge, an organizer of the learning process, but first of all a person who knows a lot about his or her pupil. Having earned the pupil's trust, he or she might be the only authority, confidant(e), or even just the person who would hear the child out. It is especially significant in the cases of children and teenagers coming from dysfunctional families. That is why Doroszewska (1989: 88) claims that fulfilling the role of a teacher of the disabled requires much more effort than other teachers need to put in.

The exceptional role of class tutors in educating and bringing up persons with disability is not questioned here, but, as research shows (Kuczyńska-Kwapisz & Czerwińska 2008: 176, 179), in special education as well as in inclusive education in Poland there are still not enough teachers with proper education. English teachers are often not prepared for working with children and teenagers with various special educational needs, and special education teachers are not prepared to teach foreign languages. This situation directly affects the teaching of foreign languages in special schools.

Conclusion

Intellectually disabled people have difficulties in understanding complex information, using logical thinking to plan ideas and solve problems, following directions and instructions, using judgment and abstract thought. Their deficits in cognitive functioning and learning styles include poor memory, slow learning rates, attention problems, difficulties with generalizing what they have learned, and lack of motivation. One of the most important and challenging areas of contemporary research in special education is the search for strategies and approaches for promoting teaching individuals with intellectual disability.

A student with a mild intellectual disability, with all sorts of cognitive difficulties, is not able to meet many social and educational requirements of the programme. Typically they cover programmes tailored to their needs, which, by necessity, do not include all the content. This is true not only for foreign languages, but also for other subjects especially difficult for intellectually disabled children, such as mathematics and physics.

Teaching students with intellectual disabilities does not need to be overwhelming or daunting. Educators should plan their teaching with individual goals

in mind, and use the tools at their disposal to help students reach their goals for the future. A wide range of learning materials and teaching and learning activities is needed to meet the needs of large group of individual learners within special schools and special needs classroom.

Despite many different school textbooks, curricula, and teaching aids for English language teaching present on the market, there is still a lack of textbooks and methodical, systematic study of teaching a foreign language to children with mild intellectual disabilities in special schools. In addition, the issue of students suffering from all kinds of educational problems is often overlooked in the education of future teachers.

Many mildly intellectually disabled pupils are educated in the segregated system of education, but there are not many teaching aids which could be used with those groups of students. The right handbook should not only be visually interesting for the child, but also have a variety of exercises requiring varied amounts of effort from the student. People with intellectual disabilities are very different, regardless of the indication of the same degree of disability. In a class group, there could be students who work only slowly and require a lot of repetition as well as ones that need a clearly defined pace of work and constant stimulation.

The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities from School Mental Health's website offers a few tips for teachers teaching students with disabilities:

- Learn as much as you can about intellectual disability.
- Recognize that you can make an enormous difference in this student's life! Find out what the student's strengths and interests are, and emphasize them.
- Be as concrete as possible. Demonstrate what you mean rather than just give verbal directions. Rather than just relate new information verbally, show a picture. And rather than just show a picture, provide the student with hands-on materials and experiences and the opportunity to try things out.
- Break longer, new tasks into small steps. Demonstrate the steps. Have the student do the steps one at a time. Provide assistance as necessary.
- Give the student immediate feedback.
- Teach the student life skills such as daily living, social skills, and occupational awareness and exploration, as appropriate.
- Work together with the student's parents and other school personnel to create and implement an educational plan tailored to meet the student's

needs. Regularly share information about how the student is doing at school and at home.

There is a wide variety of programmes, textbooks and teaching aids for language learners without special needs. Selection of teaching and learning resources is made depending on the characteristics of the group, type of course, and method with which the teacher will work. The latter are: textbooks, exercises, supplementary materials (providing additional, interesting types of material, thereby increasing the attractiveness of classes and complementing the shortage of textbooks), books and other teaching aids (in the visual form of materials: illustrations, maps, photographs, board games or video content and materials in the form of sound recordings, which are prepared by the authors as integral components of the textbook).

Teachers-practitioners who know the capabilities and problems of their students, anticipating the needs arising from any situation during lessons, usually modify existing programmes, selecting teaching aids and content from other books, websites, magazines (mostly addressed to children) or independently create reference materials. It seems that the general tendency should be to skip or greatly simplify, e.g. vocabulary, communicative elements, multimedia, syntax and grammar. The programme should include realistic goals which are possible to achieve within a specified time, at a specific stage in the specified group. In addition, the teacher should select the content relevant to the students' particular level and assess in that range he or she wants to pursue them. The selected content must be related to the surroundings of students and give them the opportunity to use that knowledge.

It seems that the most important issue of all should be the good of the child, who, on the one hand, has the right to understand the world (part of which is a fairly ubiquitous language), and on the other hand, wants to acquire the knowledge about what is surrounding him or her without frustration or effort beyond his/her abilities. The teacher, in planning school curriculum, linguistic contents and the subject of a lesson has to ask himself or herself: will my pupil use it (now and in the future) in everyday life in the surroundings closest to him or her? Certainly the most appropriate textbooks will be the ones which are properly constructed, diverse, adapted to the cognitive problems of pupils and which contain other helpful teaching aids. Unfortunately, they are still rather difficult to find on the publishing market.

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