The Concept of Team – work in the Early Childhood: The Correlation between English Language Learning and Motor Pattern Efficiency
Case Study: Example of good Practice

Polona Oblak*, Matjaž Vehovar*
*II. gimnazija Maribor and Faculty of Education Maribor

Abstract

Collaborative teaching is used in many kindergartens, schools, colleges and universities around the world in order to foster learners’ enthusiasm, social skills and to promote interdisciplinary learning. In Slovenia the instruction to use this new method started in kindergartens and primary schools and two years ago in the secondary grammar schools around Slovenia. Unfortunately, team-teaching can sometimes be enforced and imposed onto professors with no firm aim or goal previously set. Such team-work can neither satisfy learners’ needs, nor can it offer a stimulating environment for the professors involved in this fairly new method. Team-teaching method was used in a pilot project with very young learners of English called ‘Sports and English’. It is believed that more professors working together can elaborate more dynamic, flexible, creative, interdisciplinary and methodologically demanding projects. Apparently, learning different skills by using various approaches in the early years helps with whole child development, because learning affects different fields of psychophysical development in similar ways. The key to this learning is the engagement of unconscious psychological processes, such as recognition, perception, etc. There are similar processes going on different learning activities, such as solving in problems through motor activities and foreign language learning. This research space focuses on the correlation between motor efficiency and the level of foreign language acquisition. The examples of good practice in the pilot project 'Sports and English' are presented in terms of team-teaching of two professors, and consequently cross-curricular disciplines and assessment. Not only does team teaching have a great impact on developing learners’ multiple intelligences and learning styles, it also develops social skills and the perception of individuals. Finally, correlation of the two disciplines with two professors contributes tremendously to whole child development.

Keywords: team-teaching, collaborative learning, holistic learning, early learning, cross disciplines, motor efficiency, language acquisition

1 Introduction

Movement from individualised teaching is a major element of the school organisational and curricular reform that is nowadays being strongly advocated in journal articles, in-service meetings and the educational media. The new model has been pervasive from kindergarten to the university level. In Slovenia the reforms started in kindergartens, primary schools and two years ago also in secondary grammar schools around Slovenia. However, in terms of language teaching only a few institutions in Slovenia focus on team work in the early years of child development, that is children aged 4 to 6. At the kindergarten level the team consists of the pre-school teacher and assistant pre-school teacher. In the primary schools there are teams of subject teachers. In the project ‘Sports and English’ there are two subject professors who have aptitude and a basic knowledge of teaching the other subject, which is beneficial. Namely,
when one learner might not be receptive to a certain teaching style, or a given teacher would be repelled by the learning habits of a particular learner, the other would be encouraging different learning styles and multiple intelligences in their learners. Team-teaching format, thus can decrease such intra-class friction. 

It is our duty to promote the healthy development and learning of every child as parents and professionals e.g. teachers, professors. Shore (1997) suggests that if the early opportunities to promote development and learning are missed, later remediation may be more difficult and expensive, and might be less effective given the knowledge, methods and settings that are currently available.

The ‘Sports and English project’, as the project was named, has been running since November 2002. The project was set in a sports hall with all the equipment (e.g. climbing wall, gym mats, climbing bars etc.) as well as, television, radio, posters cassettes, videos, CDs, and DVDs in English. In this project 4-to-8-year-olds are learning English as their first foreign language. They are split into three groups according to their age and motor ability. The length of the project is 40 lessons, each of which is 45 minutes long. They are broken down into 2 lessons per week. Two professors are engaged with a group of learners which is never larger than 12 children. The children are all native speakers of the Slovenian language and the first group learners have never learnt English before. The professors are usually both native speakers of Slovenian. The English professor is responsible for the English part of the lesson and provides the content the planning stage. The other professor is initially involved in organising the sports hall and its equipment providing the lesson with different sports activities, and is engaged in the sports part of the lesson.

In this paper some recent issues on team-teaching and its advantages and disadvantages are presented in chapter 2. The collaboration between the two professors on how they approach planning the lessons, the presentation stage and feedback are described in chapter 3. The common goals and the way activities overlap and the two disciplines collide into one lesson through some examples of good practise are the focus of the research in chapter 4. A description on what has been done on assessment and evaluation is summarised in chapter 5. Last but not least, some recommendations and conclusions are stated in chapter 6, since in this project the conjoined part of the lesson, where the two subjects overlap, was found to be the most challenging and open to improvements.

2 Collaborative teaching and learning

Team-teaching itself is a concept with several meanings. According to Shaffer (2000) team-teaching occurs when two or more professors are performing educational services in the same course.

2.1 Team-teaching

There are different ways of team-teaching. The first type of team teaching is traditional team-teaching in which both teachers actively share the instruction of content and skills to all learners. In differentiated split class team teaching, the class is divided into two groups according to a specified learning need. Parallel instruction is a third type of team teaching in which the class is divided into two groups and each teacher provides instruction on the same content or skills to one of the subgroups. This type can work well for activities such as solving math problems, completing research projects, or creative writing activities, as it enables teachers to work more closely with learners. In complimentary or supportive team-teaching, when one teacher is responsible for teaching the content to the learners, while the
other teacher takes charge of providing follow-up activities on related topics or on study skills. The fifth type of team teaching involves the monitoring teacher. In this approach, as one teacher assumes the responsibility for class-wide instruction, the other teacher circulates the room and monitors student achievement and behaviour as summarised by Maroney (1995).

In this paper the traditional approach is presented. Priority is given to one teacher as the principal deliverer of educational content, whereas the other member provides educational support service and skills development. However, team teaching also contributes to the development of synergy between learners and professors. This model furthermore enables the learners’ whole person development and equips the learners for life-long learning. According to Letterman and Dugan (2001), the innovative teaching formats foster learner enthusiasm and enquiry to promote interdisciplinary learning. Achieving these goals will be the main issue.

2.2 Advantages and disadvantages of team-teaching

Co-operation between teachers in early childhood education has been widely recognised as a powerful issue in teacher professional development. Two or more teachers can more effectively respond to the educational and psychological needs of the learners (Shafer, 2000). The virtues of working in a team are closer relationships between the team members, joint responsibilities, professional and personal growth, whereas the approach itself tends to be focused on collaborative planning which is presented through a more interactive approach. The team approach is not easy. For some teachers and professors it requires changes in professional attitudes and skills’ levels as well as trust-building among the team members (see Bergen D. 1994). It is important that both professors are actively involved in all the stages of the lesson: planning, presentation, feedback, assessment, and reflection. Discussions with colleagues prior to teaching and preparation time is as important as the teaching itself. Furthermore, Berger (1994) believes that team members have their own needs and it is of great importance to be aware of the personal needs, of other members and to support those needs, if possible.

There is no need to say that there are more advantages than disadvantages. According to Letterman and Dugan (2001), what helps is talking to experienced colleagues, reviewing the literature, becoming acquainted with one other’s teaching style, opening the channels for communication in order to cooperate, confronting, and critiquing in philosophical discussions. Furthermore, anticipation and planning the turn-taking is also important, as one should familiarise oneself with one’s social cognition, social skills and character in order to overcome sources of conflict and find one’s place in a team in order to avoid potential power dimension and create better group dynamics. All this can be used as a tremendous help for teachers to learn how to function effectively in teams.

3 Cross-disciplinary Connections Result in Holistic Learning

One logical consequence of team-teaching is setting of cross-curricular goals, aims and objectives between the two disciplines planned by a team of experts in different fields.

3.1 Collaborative disciplines
It is needless to say, every discipline has its own goals and objectives in the project ‘Sports and English’. The individual discipline goals must be determined beforehand in order to find common goals which will be looked at below.

3.1.1 Language Objectives

By creating a different environment, a positive attitude towards foreign language learning is established. The learner-centred approach encourages the learners to be creative and develop their imagination. The age of the learners is very important. It is remarkable, as Shore (1997) pinpoints that by the age of three, the brains of children are two and half times more active than the brains of adults and they stay that way throughout the first decade of life. Children’s brains at the age of three are developed in such a way that functions for learning the mother tongue and a foreign language are not yet differentiated. Learners at this age are more likely to acquire pronunciation correctly and easily. The learning of language relates more on acquiring chunks of language and grasping the meaning, rather than focusing on grammatical structures. Furthermore, it is in children’s nature to use their instinct for talk and interaction for foreign language acquisition, as suggested in Oblak (2003).

3.1.2 Sports and Dance Objectives

The main objectives of all sport activities are to influence the development of functional capabilities of cardio-vascular system, e.g. heart and lungs of the learners, as well as to foster the general psychomotor development of each and every individual according to their capabilities. Other aims are to learn the motor–physical skills through different activities. One of the aims of the project is also to relax and calm the learners down after doing the exercises. This is usually done in relaxation time with yoga for children. The main difference between is the energetic aspect of movement in sports and the aesthetic aspect fostered by dance. Furthermore, the main dance objectives are rhythm, posture and group-work and the appreciation for music is encouraged. The distinction between sports and dance is not clearly drawn at this age of learners and a lot of correlations can be drawn, such as the development of coordination, balance and rhythm.

3.1.3 Cross-disciplinary Objectives

The main objective of the whole project ‘Sports and English’ is to use the communicative approach. This is why the lessons are structured around one topic or content. The second objective is for the learners to be as active as possible through activities. For this reason, the method of the ‘Total Physical Response’ is used. The issue of satisfying different learning styles and developing children’s multiple intelligences is taken into consideration with the team-teaching approach (for more see Oblak, 2003). In order to make students feel comfortable, relaxed and calm, stimulative environment with interesting activities and authentic situations is created.

3.1.4 Future Objectives

Find more cross-curricular activities that would link sports/dance and English. Produce more authentic situations by including a native speaker with very young learners. However, application to other languages such as German, French and Spanish is necessary as the popularity of the project and the need for second language learning is greater than ever. Finally, write and publish own materials e.g. activities, tasks, audio-video…And last
but not least, to monitor progress it is necessary to develop methods of assessment and evaluation for very young learners.

3.2 Collaborative Work in a Team

The selection of compatible colleagues and ensuring their ongoing training opportunities is not enough to meet all the goals team teaching. There are a lot of team projects with no real purpose, following no real or feasible goal. There should be a professionally valid reason for every plan. According to Bergen (1994), most teachers have not learned how to use teamwork. Sometimes teachers are even forced into team teaching and projects against their will. As is known from the field of economics the method of team-teaching is often used as the last result, when other simpler and cheaper options are not solving the problems effectively. Therefore, a review of literature can prompt professors to consider or at least be aware of issues related to collaborative teaching according to Letterman and Dugan (2001).

3.2.1 Examples of Good Practice

Teachers used different approaches to team-teaching, one being the collaborative teaching, where both teachers are present at all times and share equal responsibility. Sometimes the learners were split in half and the teachers carried out their activities in groups (Sports group, English group), changing later groups. Several times the other teacher was an assistant in the learning process helping the principal deliverer of knowledge, the other teacher.

Based on our own experience, in accordance with the social skills of the teachers, the best team consists of a very open and talkative teacher, on the one hand, and more reticent teacher on the other, regardless on the discipline taught. In the case of two very strong and communicative teachers, the discussions are wilder and more confrontational, so there may be more tension in planning and carrying out the project. It goes without saying that the team with two very reserved and non-communicative teacher would not function successfully, especially not with the very younger learners. The best team combination is a combination of an outspoken, direct, energetic sports teacher and a very communicative easy-going and open-minded language teacher.

Meeting to plan the activities is an important step in the process. Concept meetings are quite productive as the two responsible teachers develop the concept of the whole programme. Once the topic is chosen, different activities are matched to find the correlations between the movement/sports and language. This is done through different activities such as high jump, summersault, and climbing, as well as simple choreography, miming of different animals etc. The English teacher usually provides the topic introduction, numbers, colours, and simple instructions, while the sports teacher considers the activities that would match the needs of the learners. The goals and objectives of the course are always clarified in advance as stated in Letterman and Dugan (2001). This is why each team meets once per week to plan activities well ahead of time and do the reflection immediately after the lesson. It is also important that both professors meet their personal and professional needs before they start carrying out the project. Some of the problems that appeared between the two colleagues have included the same goals but different approach in how to achieve them. Second, time limitations were sometimes set with great difficulty because the teachers prioritised their own tasks e.g. how much time should be spent for one activity. Third, teachers had different approaches in how to
discipline the learners. Finally, however, all obstacles were overcome with discussions and analysis of the lessons.

3.3 Collaborative Activities and Skills

The main issue in the project ‘Sports and English’ are solving problems through the motor activities while acquiring the target language. In this section, the correlations between motor efficiency and the level of foreign language acquisition is discussed.

The syllabus for young learners covers simple instructions, greetings, numbers, colours, animals, parts of the body, fruit, toys and holidays (Christmas and Easter). Here some examples of numbers and parts of the body will be listed. There are many activities, for example, that go with numbers. Counting, counting down, from 20 to 1, repeat the activity a number of times (circle your head,…), games like hide and seek. There are even more activities connected to body parts. For instance, circle your body, lift your hand/leg, or hide your arm, leg, foot, colour teddy’s arm, leg, …stand on your arms, head, hands, and so on.

On the social level one can say that the learner-teacher relationship is improved if working in a more relaxed atmosphere. Teachers tend to forget that learner should be the centre of attention, as the success of learning depends on learners’ cooperation and involvement. Furthermore, if there is chemistry between the learners and the teachers the learners will learn more. Teachers can influence the ‘spark’ by planning interesting and challenging activities. The activities can be held in a sports hall where the learners’ concentration span is longer, because of the bigger space and learners’ need to move around. The activities were changed every 10 to 15 minutes. So, the learners who were four years old could easily attend 90 minute lessons. Some of the learners of the project were only 2.5 to 3.5 years old. They had not attended the kindergarten yet, so they were not socialized at all. Throughout the course they have found friends who were the same age and gender and were not shy. Furthermore, team-taught learners have the chance to experience multiple perspectives from the different disciplines through different settings for the activities and tasks.

4 Assessing Young Learners

Child assessment is a vital component of all high-quality early childhood programmes. Assessment is important in order to recognise the stage of young learners’ development. It is also essential to document and evaluate how effectively programmes are meeting young learners’ educational needs.

4.1 Assessment and Evaluation

There is a difference between assessment and testing. Epstein et al. (2004) defines assessment as a process of collecting, synthesizing and interpreting information to aid classroom decision-making. Furthermore, she suggests that assessment includes the information gathered around pupils, instructions and classroom dynamics.

On the other hand, testing can be a formal process. So called ‘standardised testing’, or an informal, naturalistic observation. Formal testing is a systematic procedure for gathering a sample of pupils’ behaviour. The results of a test are used to make generalisations about how pupils would have performed with similar but untested behaviours. In other words, testing is only one form of assessment. It usually involves a series of direct questions to children to
perform, within a set period of time, specific tasks designed and administered by adults with predetermined correct answers. By contrast, examples of informal testing include structured observations, portfolio analysis of individual and collaborative work, and teacher and parent ratings of the children’s behaviour through questionnaires. Furthermore, the fundamental difference between formal and informal assessment is the degree of constraint placed on children’s behaviour.

However, it must be guaranteed that assessment reflects our highest educational goals for young learners and neither restricts nor distorts the substance of their early learning. This is why the questionnaire containing grading system was created and will be presented in the next chapter.

4.2 Assessment in the project ‘Sports and English’

Assessment was carried out in two parts. Firstly, the informal testing took place where questionnaires and interviews with learners’ parents were carried out. The learners were assessed throughout the year by their teachers in a descriptive written form. (for the results, see Oblak, 2003). Secondly, the learners were assessed in a formal set of standardised questions with predicted answers, in a friendly environment. As it is known that performance of young learners is influenced by their emotional and motivational states and by assessment conditions themselves, the risk of creating a harmful situation was minimised in order to gain reliable results.

For one thing, the learners were not told that they were taking the test, they thought that this was simply their regular practise. Second of all, all the groups of learners were tested by the same teacher, so the protocol teacher was highly objective when the testing was taking place and when analysing the results. As a result, some of the learners did not know who the teacher was. Furthermore, the testing situation looked like a one-to-one activity with the teacher and the learners liked spending time on their own with the examiner as it enabled them to be in the centre of attention. Finally, the questions were structured in the same way as their activities with sounds, miming and flash cards, and the testing took no longer than 15 minutes for an individual. Testing that took place covered seventeen learners from ages of 4 to 7 years, so the sample was quite small. All in all, the teachers were extremely happy with the structure of the questions and the formal testing method. Comprehensive assessment normally requires a multi-method approach in order to encompass the many dimensions of children’s skills and abilities. The knowledge measured and skills tested in the testing situation were transferable and applicable to real-world challenges that a child might face at home or at school. The tests were accomplished successfully by a great majority of the learners, as it is evident from the research done by Vehovar (2006), but it is too early to draw any generalisations as the sample group was quite small.

5 Recommendations and Conclusions

Formal and informal assessment methods can each have strengths and weaknesses, so in the project ‘Sports and English’ a process of combining and balancing was used. We were hoping the tests would provide a throughout evaluation of children across the cognitive, emotional, social and biological strengths and needs. However, for more reliable data, larger population of children should be tested. Furthermore, the age of students is important, as it is known that the younger the child, the more difficult it can be to obtain valid scores (Epstain et al., 2004). This is why it can be claimed that the statistically important data within our sample
does not support the thesis that learners with better aptitude for learning languages are better in sports activities and vice versa, so further research will be made in this area. Improvements can also be done in the way the assessment is set. Shorter time sequences are recommended with not more than 10 minute sessions. Furthermore, as far as the two disciplines sports and English are concerned, new and different links could be found in accordance with the overlapping of the activities and language structures so much more work should be focused on the testing questionnaires themselves.

The integral theory offers evidence of emotive, physical, intellectual and social development in the early years. This can only be achieved through the interdisciplinary correlation of disciplines with two or more professors, that is if team teaching is well structured. Years of experience were needed to establish the bank of materials, activities, games, songs and rhymes that would cover one topic. The first step has been taken. It might seem minute, but actually it is a huge step for our team as the results show us the way to approach things in the future. In the future new topics will be covered, new situations set, therefore, the two professors will never stop planning and drawing correlations between the two disciplines, but they will be richer for years of experience in their personal and professional development.

Collaborative teaching reveals benefits and pitfalls. Learning the artistic and scientific values of team teaching is a worthwhile activity not only for professors but also for all the individuals in our society. If teachers function well as a team and are able to tackle different problems and obstacles, they can provide good models of such teamwork. Only then can learners transfer the positive experience of holistic learning into cooperative play, and go on to demonstrate those skills in the larger community and the world.

6 References

Letterman M. R. (on line: accessed on 1.9. 2006) Team Teaching a cross-Disciplinary Honours Course: Preparation and development


