Foreign languages
in the Montessori environment:
A participatory action research – the first cycle

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Abstract

The article presented is a research report conducted in a Montessori elementary schools with the use of a participatory action research strategy. The first part of the text is devoted to a synthesis of the key Montessori pedagogy principles. Then the author describes the methodological assumptions of participatory action research. However, the essential part of the article consists of the research results and outcomes that show that it is advisable to implement immersion foreign language programmes in such schools. It is also necessary for foreign language teachers to be familiarised with this pedagogical approach apart from being English teaching methodology educated. The research reveals a necessity for the thorough and alternative pedagogical education of L2 teachers.

Keywords

Langues étrangères dans l'environnement Montessori: d'une recherche-action participative

Résumé

Le présent article est un compte-rendu d'une étude qualitative interprétative qui recourt à la stratégie de la recherche-action participative réalisée dans une des écoles élémentaires basée sur la pédagogie de Maria Montessori. La première partie présente une synthèse des principes de la pédagogie montessorienne. Ensuite, on présente la méthodologie de la recherche-action participative. La partie la plus importante du texte concerne les résultats obtenus qui montrent la nécessité de mettre en œuvre des programmes d'immersion linguistique dans les établissements de ce type. Les recherches montrent les risques qui peuvent se produire si on néglige les principes de base de l'éducation selon le système Montessori pendant les cours des langues étrangères réalisés par les enseignants spécialisés dans la langue, mais sans préparation pédagogique de Montessori. L'article souligne la nécessité de former les enseignants des langues étrangères dans le domaine des pédagogies alternatives.

Mots-clés

éducation précoce alternative, enseignement de l'anglais, méthode Montessori, recherche-action participative

Języki obce w otoczeniu Montessori: Partycypacyjne badanie w działaniu – pierwszy cykl

Abstrakt

Przedstawiony artykuł jest sprawozdaniem z interpretatywnego badania jakościowego wykorzystującego strategię uczestniczącego badania w działaniu zrealizowanego w jednej ze szkół podstawowych działających w oparciu o pedagogikę Marii Montessori. Pierwszą część tekstu stanowi synteza głównych założeń pedagogiki montessoriańskiej. Następnie przedstawiono założenia metodologiczne partycypacyjnego badania w działaniu, lecz kluczową częścią sprawozda-

nia są uzyskane wyniki badań, które wskazują na konieczność wdra-
żania immersyjnych programów nauczania języka obcego w placów-
kach tego typu. Badania wskazują na możliwe ryzyka zapoznawania
podstawowych zasad edukacji w systemie Montessori w sytuacji rea-
lizowania zajęć z języka obcego realizowanych przez nauczycieli wy-
specjalizowanych w języku obcym, ale niebędących pedagogami Mon-
tessori. Tym samym wskazano na konieczność kształcenia nauczy-
cieli języków obcych w zakresie pedagogii alternatywnych.

Słowa kluczowe

alternatywna wczesna edukacja, metoda Montessori, nauczanie języ-
ka angielskiego, uczestniczące badania w działaniu

1. Introduction

The article consists of three parts. The first one is devoted to
a brief description of the Montessori method (pedagogy) as an
alternative approach to teaching/learning with special focus
on foreign languages in early childhood and lower elementary
education. The second outlines the methodological foundations
and the procedure of a participatory action research project
that the author has been part of from 2014 to 2016 in a Mon-
tessori primary school in northern Poland, as well as its socio-
pedagogical context. Finally, some of the major but as yet pre-
liminary research findings and conclusions based on the first
cycle of the project are presented. The article should therefore
be treated as a single step in a longer lasting procedure or
a "snapshot" taken at a specific moment (i.e. the end of the
first cycle of the research project) rather than a typical empiri-
cal project report, which – if action research is the method –
incurs the risk of reaching foregone conclusions. In other
words, the main focus of the text is to present the preliminary
findings of a research strategy that is cyclical in nature and
whose details shall be described further in the article, as well
as to outline the basic principles of the Montessori method

with special focus on teaching foreign languages in Montessori educational institutions.

Before the Montessori pedagogy is characterised, it is worth beginning with an observation. This method of teaching appears to be one of the most popular alternatives to mainstream education in terms of early childhood and elementary schooling. The number of crèches, kindergartens and lower and upper elementary schools of this type is rapidly increasing not only in Poland but – to some extent – globally. Every year hundreds of Montessori teachers are certified and new societies and organizations are established. Meanwhile, the scientific pedagogical discourse around this method has also developed rapidly (Dybiec 2009: 33-50). However, the issue of teaching languages in such schools seems to have been neglected by most educational researchers.

Since the method itself is relatively well known, the approach will not be characterised here in great detail. However, some of the fundamental prerequisites must be enumerated and briefly described so as to give the reader an idea of what Montessori education entails and to frame the theoretical context for the research procedure and findings. All the basic assumptions presented below will first be referred to this pedagogical method in general and then linked to the main issue under discussion here, i.e. foreign language teaching.

2. Montessori pedagogy and foreign languages

The aim of the section below is to present the essential prerequisites of Montessori pedagogy and to map them onto the duties that any foreign language teacher wishing to meet the requirements of this approach would need to fulfil. In doing so, special regard will be given to the specificity of teaching English as a foreign language within this philosophy of education.

Maria Montessori, a world-renowned Italian psychiatrist and pedagogue living between 1870 and 1952, created her revolutionary system of education as a result of dissatisfaction

with conservative schooling and the belief that children naturally wish to learn and are inherently good (Kramer 1976: 21-62; Röhrs 1999: 51-69). Her pedagogy is based on eight general principles (Lillard 2007: 38-324), which shall be outlined briefly with reference to language education, especially in connection with foreign language acquisition and learning.

First of all, polysensory education is essential for effective learning. In other words, movement, feelings and understanding are very closely interrelated. Montessori's intuition and observations concerning the importance of movement in both the general development of the child and educational processes (Montessori 1995: 136-147) have been confirmed by contemporary scholars (Lillard 2013). Following this principle, Montessori foreign language teachers need to organize a learning environment that is abundant in concrete and authentic language materials that can be physically manipulated (Gausman 2007: 45-104) as well as offer activities involving a great deal of motion and physical activity, which makes the Montessori approach, especially in early childhood education, similar to the method developed by Professor James Asher and known as Total Physical Response (Asher 1996).

The second principle that must be followed in Montessori education is the issue of freedom of choice. Montessori (1989: 26) writes that

> [...] children have free choice all day long. Life is based on choice, so they learn to make their own decisions. They must decide and choose for themselves all the time and so they develop these qualities. They cannot learn though obedience to the commands of another.

The prerequisite above results in a very important shift in the role of the teacher, who is no longer in charge of the children but rather acts as a facilitator of the learning process, ready, at times, to be abandoned by the learners. As such, instead of preparing a lesson as it is traditionally understood, the teachers focus on careful methodical observation of their students

so as to prepare an environment that can be intriguing, attractive and linguistically varied. The activities constructed by the teacher are thus *offers* for the children who have the right to accept them or not.

Principles three and four pertain to motivation and eagerness to learn or acquire new knowledge, including that of a new (foreign) language. Gandini (2011) describes another Italian educational methodology, i.e. 'the Reggio Emilia approach', quoting its founder Loris Mallaguzzi, the author of a poem dealing with the one hundred languages that children speak, pointing to varied and various learning styles (Dyrda 2004) that must be taken into serious consideration by teachers if they wish to spark their students' interest, that is their internal motivation to learn. At the same time, it is forbidden in Montessori pedagogy to use external rewards such as marks or symbolic grades or any other prizes and punishments, which are so widespread in traditional schooling (Montessori 1912: 21-24). There is rather a seed of interest in every child, we – the teachers – just need to awaken and stimulate it (Montessori 1967: 1-2). Therefore, if the learners do not feel like taking part in a given activity, it means that the teacher has not found a suitable stimulus.

Although it is a common misconception that the Montessori method is individualistic, with children working alone, in fact peer learning constitutes the fifth essential principle of the approach. That is also why Montessori classes consist of children of three subsequent age groups in kindergarten, where, within one group, an equal number of pupils at the age of three, four and five can be found, while in elementary schools it is six to nine. It is true, however, that individualised instruction is believed to be much more effective than work with the whole-class. A foreign language teacher must, therefore, bear in mind that they are going to work with multi-age groups of unique individuals at completely different levels of personal development and, what is more, of diverse interests. Thus the Montes-

sori environment can be seen as combining individual peer tutoring with collaborative learning (Lillard 2007: 192-223).

Another important factor in the environment under discussion is the meaningful context of learning. In other words, the contents of foreign language activities must be connected with students' everyday life and their everyday needs – it must be something that is comprehensible and important for the learners (Montessori 1972: 134, 2008: 12-13). Lillard (2007: 230-231) states that

> [w]hen one is already familiar with something, it has meaning. Even mere familiarity with the tasks or objects one is learning about assists performance on cognitive tasks. […] what is interesting to adults is not always the same as what is interesting to children, what adults think is familiar is not always familiar to children.

Following this principle requires careful observation and appropriate reaction to spontaneous student behaviour on the one hand, and, on the other, flexibility on the teacher's part allowing a certain degree of pedagogical improvisation (Montessori 2007: 98-210) and didactical chaos (Klus-Stańska 2010: 30-31). This might be a hard task to fulfil for those teachers who are afraid of experiencing this kind of uncertainty. From this perspective, the teacher's job is also to contextualize the content of the (foreign) language curriculum so that the learners perceive it as comprehendible, important and interesting (Montessori 1995: 10-18).

The next prerequisite is connected with the optimal quality of both parenting styles and teacher aptitude in terms of building and maintaining relations with children and their primary caregivers. This is because the outcomes of the practices of learning/teaching/upbringing have been proven to be largely dependent on the relations between at least three subjects of education, i.e. pupils, parents and pedagogues. Clichéd as it may seem, this aspect tends to be neglected in traditional schools (Poraj 2011: 18-21). As Montessori states (1956: 76),

the teacher must be "[…] ready to be there whenever she is called in order to attest to her love and confidence. To be always there – that's the point". In this sense, a good Montessori teacher is full of warmth and attentiveness to students' and parents' needs so as to know, for instance, when to withdraw from his or her intervention. This principle entails not only an open, tolerant and people-loving personality on behalf of the teacher but also highly professional pedagogical and linguistic competences on his or her part. Fulfilling this requirement, therefore, involves a revision of foreign language teacher education aimed at striking a balance between a focus on language accuracy and fluency (linguistic and communicative competence) on the one hand, and, on pedagogical and psychological education on the other. Such a model of professional training is also likely to be conducive to enriching the teachers' awareness of the social, political and cultural contexts of education.

The eighth principle of Montessori pedagogy is connected with the notion of order. Montessori schools need to be thoroughly organised. However, this order needs to be understood in a particular way, which is very different from what it denotes in traditional education, where it usually goes hand in hand with the much appreciated discipline. In the Montessori environment there is usually no fixed plan for the day, as the curricula are personalised, so that most students do what they feel like doing throughout the school year. And yet, order is ensured as an essential component of the process (Lillard 2007: 290). Let us quote Montessori again (1967: 173):

> Just as the child has learned to put everything in its place in its surroundings, he succeeds through the education of his senses in ordering his mental images. This is the first act of ordering in his developing mind, and it is the point of departure since the psychic life develops by avoiding obstacles.

In this context each and every didactic material has its own place in the environment and should be placed back there af-

ter having been used by the child. The didactic aim inscribed in the material must be clear and isolated, which means that it develops a single major capability. The role of the teacher is thus to eliminate all the obstacles from the environment so that nothing that might distract the students is present in the classroom. At the same time, everything that possesses an educational potential for a specific pupil and the entire group has to be there. Fulfilling this requirement means that the teachers have to modify the surroundings continuously and with due consideration. For a foreign language teacher this would mean performing a multidimensional analysis of their classrooms, taking into consideration, apart from the obvious and clear class organization (for example: the furniture arrangement), also the *hidden curriculum* of the educational spaces (Meighan and Carber 2007).

3. Participatory action research
   ## as a methodological strategy.
   ## Research questions and the stages of the project

Participatory action research as a methodological strategy has an extensive history in social sciences but its beginnings are usually assigned to Kurt Lewin – a social psychologist born in Poland in 1890, who coined the term *action research* (1946: 34). In his article Lewin sketches a spiral of steps typical for this kind of scientific inquiry. These are: (1) (re)planning, (2) acting & observing, (3) fact-finding, and (4) evaluating, following upon which the cycle is repeated (1946: 37-38). Since the mid-1940s, this strategy has been repeatedly modified and developed by various authors (Kemmis and McTaggart 2007: 272-278) but the key inspiration for the project presented in this article is the idea of classroom action research as well as some of the prerogatives addressed in participatory action research projects presented in two recently published monographs (Cervinkova and Gołębniak 2010, 2013).

According to Kemmis and McTaggart (2007: 273) typical classroom action research "[...] involves the use of qualitative interpretative modes of inquiry and data collection by teachers (often with help from academics) with a view to teachers making judgements about how to improve their own practices". This type of research is, therefore, purely practical and the academics who are involved in it, ought to play an ancillary role to the practitioners (2007: 274). Thus, the objective of such research is, by nature, utilitarian (Mettetal 2001: 7; Ferrance 2000: 1-2), and such was our intention at the outset of the first cycle in the spiral.

More precisely speaking, the process was not originally planned as a research project. At that time, the main task was to create a curriculum for the school, which was then being established. However, it turned out that the parties involved had different concerns. The authorities were mainly interested in a curriculum that would be accepted by the Ministry of Education, and, therefore had to comply with legal requirements. Some of the teachers wanted to be Montessori orthodox, while the desire of the academics (myself included) was to expand their knowledge about the method and to modify it if need be.

It can be said, therefore, that six types of interests were represented among the participants: formal, pragmatic, ethical, scientific, critical and emancipatory. This mixture of viewpoints and expectations as well as the intentional democratisation of relations between the interlocutors opened up a communicative space leading to consensus (Kemmis 2001: 100), which is by no means essential in participatory action research (Wicks and Reason 2009: 243-245). It is the scientific, critical as well as emancipatory interests that were of greatest importance for the author of the present text, however, which resulted in the formulation of two general research questions of two different types. The emancipatory interest (Boucher d'Argis 2006) emerged in the research question as follows: In what way could the participants of the research project transcend their *tacit knowledge* (Polanyi 1966) concerning foreign

language education? Or, to put it differently, how is it possible for the interested parties to challenge their professional habits formed by their educational biographies in order to free themselves from them, and thus open a space for a creative interpretation of the method (Rzeplińska and Jendza 2013)? The scientific and critical interests (to be understood as synonymous here) played a central role and led to the formulation of the following research question: How do all the interested parties understand their own practices in the context of a given field (Kemmis and McTaggart 2007: 290)?

When referring to the technical component of collaborative and participatory action research one has to bear in mind that the well-established opposition between objective strategies and subjective approaches, resulting in the use of either quantitative or qualitative tools, loses its significance. Following this prerogative, we used various techniques for gathering data at different stages of the project.
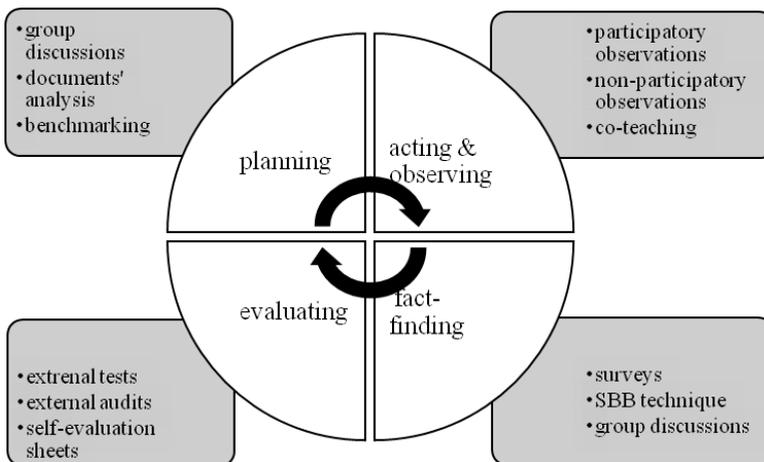
Figure 1

The spiral of the participatory action research project
with the tools and techniques used

During the first phase (planning), the community involved used mainly a group discussion format. The discussions were video or audio recorded and then transcribed. At this stage, concepts, notions and claims had to be confronted and aligned. For instance, we had to agree on what it means: "to know a foreign language", "to support learners' (linguistic) needs", "to follow children's interests", etc. Documentation analysis involved reading and interpreting external legal regulations, the national curriculum for primary schools, etc., whereas benchmarking included researching other schools' ideas for dealing with various organisational issues. For the second phase (executing the plan/acting and observing) two types of observations were of greatest importance. Here we used ideas proposed by Epstein (2012: 85-120) as well as co-teaching combined with after-class one-to-one thought exchanges. The fact-finding stage required extensive cooperation with parents and children, and included distributing surveys among both groups as well as the SBB technique. The latter stands for 'suitcase-bulb-bin': where the suitcase refers to the knowledge that the children find useful and wish to take to the outside world, the bulb represents new interesting and intriguing ideas worth deeper investigation, and the bin corresponds to a waste of time – the activities or topics that should be eliminated from the environment in the future. The images of these three objects were placed each Friday in accessible and visible places, and students were asked to stick slips of paper on them with their opinions. The results were later analysed both by the school board as well as teachers and students.

The evaluation was performed from internal and external perspectives. The external tools included tests measuring the competences of the students after three grades of primary school education and covered a foreign language (*The Cambridge English   Placement Tests for Young   Learners*)**,** maths, Polish and science (OBUT and OPERON tests for year 3). The school staff also had an opportunity to fill in self-

evaluation sheets and to discuss them with an external supervisor. It needs to be noted at this point, however, that the particular stages presented in Fig. 1 do not occur in isolation. In fact, in most action research projects, the phases of the spiral do overlap, and thus some of the techniques and procedures described are applied concurrently. This was the case in the project under discussion.

The socio-pedagogical context of the research is closely related to the location of the school, i.e. a relatively rich Polish city. The school is private and the socio-economic status of most parents is high. These conditions mean that, on the one hand, the Montessori education offered in this case has to conform to the national curriculum, which is fairly conservative and traditional following a behaviouristic idea of development. On the other hand, it has to meet parents' needs concerning the educational process their children participate in revolving around measurable and sometimes quite spectacular outcomes. This, in turn, is quite an uneasy situation if we take into consideration the deeply humanistic understanding of education emphasised in the Montessori pedagogy.

4. Research findings and conclusions

Before some of the research findings are presented, it must be stated again that this type of research is *cyclical* (not linear) in nature. This means that an answer to any of the research questions provokes other questions opening a new spiral of the procedure. In other words, such research is aimed at raising issues and uncertainties rather than the construction of powerful and lasting conclusions; a type of scientific thinking which in the humanities is sometimes called *questioning reasoning* (Derrida 2015: 15-31). Thus all the research findings are to be treated as *local* theorising. As such, we do not claim that these conclusions may be objectified and extrapolated since the research has been conducted in *one* of the Montessori schools by a *specific* group of people in a *specific* cultural

and historical context. Nevertheless, we believe that it is worth raising some questions for further reflection, discussion and modification.

With regard to the above, the Montessori method, complete as it may seem, contains a number of issues either insufficiently characterised or simply omitted by its author. Therefore, it calls for post-conventional (in Kohlberg's sense) reasoning, i.e. creative inspiration and enrichment rather than a strict application of the method (Kohlberg 1981). Competences such as visual and new media literacy (at least at the primary school level) are absent in the approach, education for democracy is not as visible as it might and perhaps should be, while maths text tasks are not represented in the Montessori material at all. In the methodology of this pedagogy teaching foreign languages also seems to be too mechanical and lacking in sufficient educational opportunities for real communication. Paradoxically, it fits into the neoliberal model of schooling very well (Potulicka and Rutkowiak 2010) advocating individualism. In addition, Montessori has become a well-known brand, a logo that is desired by the privileged social classes. That is why a number of the conflicts and problems within Montessori schools must remain hidden and knowledge about the method is an elite product that is not to be questioned or made public (Jendza and Zamojski 2015). In the quest for effects that will be attractive and satisfying for parents, however, there is not enough time for observation of the children and, therefore, the modifications of the learning environment and the materials do not meet the requirements of Montessori's basic principles.

In terms of the inquiry, the plan and the execution of the English immersion programme did not bring about the expected effects mainly due to the period of the children's development in which the programme was introduced. In other words, it was implemented too late. Therefore, in the future, consideration must be given to launching the programme for children at the age of three, that is in the kindergarten which is a part of the school,. The teachers, some of whom are native

English speakers, must also be encouraged to think thoroughly about an intentional use of language so as not to create an atmosphere of incomprehensibility resulting in learners feeling anxious.

Moreover, the linguistic material offered by the Montessori environment, in terms of foreign language teaching, has certain characteristics which are an obstacle to the smooth running of the learning process. Indeed, it can be intriguing for students of a specific age group, but at the same time too lexically and grammatically complex, or it is linguistically too easy and not interesting for the children. In relation to this, all the language materials are imported from Anglo-Saxon countries and designed for learners whose mother tongue is English. Therefore they are meaningful and authentic for a different group of students living in a different context. In connection with this, the children in this particular school should be provided with materials corresponding to both their personal needs and English language competences, which might mean a customisation of didactic aids.

Finally, teachers who limit their knowledge to the Montessori method should be given a chance to familiarise themselves with alternative methods as well as with general contemporary theories of education and psychology. Moreover, greater energy should be spent on cooperating with parents since quite often they present parenting styles that are in conflict with the Montessori approach, the latter being a holistic, humanistic and personalised didactic system which deserves to be implemented in a fully supportive environment.

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