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## Foreign Language Education of Seniors

**Summary:** A beginner level English language course organized as part of the *@ktywny Senior* programme is the topic of the present article. The participants' motivation to learn foreign languages and the basic aims of the course and its curriculum are discussed. The classes and the results of evaluation are described further. The main difficulties of foreign language education of seniors along with their influence on the course are presented.

**Key words:** education, seniors, English language.

### Introduction

Foreign language acquisition requires a prolonged effort that tends to be wearisome. Furthermore, the forgetting of once learned material is bothersome, with the process becoming manifest even during short breaks in studying. However, the motivation to learn foreign languages is high nowadays. In the case of those

of the pre-working and working age the main motivating factor is the willingness to acquire professional qualifications. In the case of seniors the incentives are quite different. The participants of English language course organized as part of the @ktywny Senior programme mentioned the following motivating factors.

1. Language-related factors:
  - improving communication during trips abroad,
  - writing letters to friends abroad.
2. Factors unrelated to language
  - general willingness to acquire new skills,
  - willingness to go out and be with people,
  - willingness to keep being intellectually active.

The organisation of the course was different for each of the groups, especially in relation to its duration. In the case of the first group the course took six months, with the second it lasted two months, and with the third four weeks long workshops were organised. These differences resulted in differences in the curriculum and in the forms of the classes. The following terms are used further in the text: the term "course" is related to classes organised for the first two groups, the term "workshops" is used for the third group, and the term "classes" is used in the broad sense.

### Aims of the curriculum and the form of the classes

In the case of the organisation of language courses it is essential that the level of language skills of the participants be sufficiently determined. First of all, the level of all the members of a group should be as similar as possible, and secondly, it should be taken into consideration while developing the curriculum. Low and very low English language competence appears to be predominant among seniors in Poland. That is why the present courses were tailored for those with no knowledge of the language whatsoever, or who studied English in the past, but have forgotten most of what they learned before. The participants were, therefore, informed before the start of the classes that no prior knowledge of English was obligatory and that is what they had to bear in mind when making the decision to take part in the course. That is why there was no need to organise an entry test.

The *New English File Beginner*<sup>1)</sup> textbook, published by Oxford University Press, with its methodology outlines constituted the basis of the curriculum. The teaching materials included: a student's book, a teacher's book, and CDs with listening and comprehension exercises. The curriculum would vary greatly depending on whether it was prepared for the courses, or for the workshops. In the case of courses a balanced development of all the essential language skills as well as founding a basis for further study were the priorities, whereas in the case of workshops the curriculum was, in

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<sup>1)</sup> C. Oxenden, C. Latham-Keonig, *New English File Beginner Student's Book*, Oxford 2009; C. Oxenden, C. Latham-Keonig, *New English File Beginner Teacher's Book*, Oxford 2009; C. Oxenden, C. Latham-Keonig, *New English File Beginner Class Audio CDs*, Oxford 2009.

fact, more of a presentation – a few areas of vocabulary and grammar were demonstrated through the use of communicative exercises and activities. It was not necessary for the participants of the workshops to buy the student's book, which was an obligatory element of the course classes.

According to the prepared curriculum, the following language competences were developed during the courses:

- 1) vocabulary,
- 2) use of grammatical structures,
- 3) reading and comprehension,
- 4) listening and comprehension,
- 5) speaking.

In the case of workshops the main emphasis was put on learning vocabulary, with few reading and comprehension exercises.

### The courses and workshops curriculum

The curriculum included the following issues.

1. Vocabulary:
  - a. expression used for greeting and getting to know people,
  - b. numerals 1 to 100,
  - c. names of selected countries and nationalities,
  - d. the alphabet and spelling,
  - e. items of everyday use,
  - f. people and family members,
  - g. colours and common adjectives,
  - h. basic verbs describing states and activities,
  - i. foods,
  - j. jobs and places of work,
  - k. telling the time,
  - l. everyday activities.
2. Grammar:
  - a. personal pronouns,
  - b. the verb "to be" in all plural and singular persons in the present simple,
  - c. singular and plural noun forms,
  - d. possessive adjectives,
  - e. position of adjectives in a sentence,
  - f. present simple – the use of verbs other than "to be".
3. Pronunciation:
  - a. pronunciation of common sounds: vowels, diphthongs, consonants,
  - b. differences between similar sounds,
  - c. pronunciation of the sounds that do not appear in Polish,
  - d. syllable stress in single words,
  - e. word stress in typical sentences, the rhythm of sentences,

- f. pronunciation of the third person singular "s" in the present simple and of the plural "s".
4. Speaking, communicative tasks:
  - a. greetings, introducing yourself,
  - b. spelling names, surnames, and common nouns,
  - c. giving personal information (age, address, phone number, etc.),
  - d. describing family members,
  - e. describing your job and working hours.
5. Listening:
  - a. recordings exemplifying the use of acquired vocabulary, expressions, and grammatical structures in real life situations,
  - b. authentic recordings of people met in the street.
6. Reading:
  - a. simple texts related to the studied vocabulary,
  - b. texts adapted from newspaper articles.

In the presented curriculum emphasis was put on the construction of proper routines from the very beginning. Teaching correct pronunciation of English words is essential in this context. By making it clear which sounds to use and how they are different from the sounds in Polish the practise of approximation of the newly learned sounds with use of the ones the students already know – a common mistake among student of English of beginner as well as advanced levels – is avoided. Likewise in the case of acquiring basic grammatical structures the used curriculum makes it possible to explain the presented notions without getting into unnecessary details.

Due to the limited time scope the workshops curriculum was greatly shortened in comparison to the courses curriculum. Emphasis was put on teaching a few basic areas of vocabulary as well as communicative expressions.

### Adaptation of the classes to the needs of seniors

The classes were planned specially for senior participants. In regard to the organisation it was important to make sure the groups consisted of people of that age exclusively. As the participants themselves mentioned, when discussing their previous language learning experiences, they had attended groups with members of different ages, with the teaching methods adapted to the needs of the younger students.

Adaptation of the classes to the needs of seniors consisted of the following elements:

1. The choice of a student's book suitable for the use by people with poor eyesight. The selected student's book, even though not tailored for the seniors, had clear illustrations and a sufficiently large font.
2. Adjusting the pace of the classes to the perceptive competence of the participants.
3. Frequent repetition of the introduced topics in order to allow the students to memorise them better.

## Realization of the classes and the difficulties observed

The most important of the difficulties expected when organising successful language courses for seniors was finding an effective pace of the classes. Difficulties with overcoming the participants' communication barriers, unwillingness to practice pronunciation due to self-consciousness or difficulties in the acquisition of grammatical structures. It was obvious that in relation to the reading skills, and especially the listening and comprehension activities, the limited time scope would make it hard for all the participants to make their first attempts at establishing contact with such texts and recordings.

Keeping an effective pace in introducing new material made it necessary for the teachers to constantly monitor the acquisition of skills defined in the curriculum by the participants in order to continuously adjust the pace of the classes. First of all, the point was made to constantly revise the previously presented information. In practice the pace turned out to be approximately 30–40% slower than in the case of groups of teenage or non-senior adult students with a similar level of language skills.

Especially during the first part of the classes it was necessary to overcome the barriers in communication; the teachers attempted to achieve this starting with the very first class. The expressions used for greeting others and introducing oneself that were presented to the participants instantly became the subject of communicative exercises. Similar approach was taken to all the newly discussed information that could possibly be used in an interaction, however basic. Overcoming the communication barrier turned out to be easy. The communicative exercises were presented to the participants in a fun form, with emphasis put on the importance of such activities in the use of a foreign language in everyday life.

Encouraging the participants to make attempts at pronouncing the sounds typical of the English language – especially those that are not present in Polish – turned out to be more problematic. First and foremost the difficulty lay in the "listen and repeat" exercises when the participants were to listen closely to the sounds of the newly introduced words or phrases presented by the teacher or by means of a recording and then to try to pronounce the words or phrases themselves. In order to encourage the participants this exercise was done as a group rather than individually. In order for the activity to be effective it needed to be explained to the participants that learning correct pronunciation is important from the perspective of successful language acquisition. The participants, initially reluctant to take part due to certain embarrassment related to the fact that they thought that repeating words together as a group resembled classes for children eventually accepted that form of pronunciation practise. The teachers paid great attention to precise pronunciation of the sounds typical of the English language as well as vowel length. The newly introduced sounds were explained in relation to the sounds of the Polish language, with necessary emphasis put on the differences. During the communicative exercises the teachers monitored the pronunciation and the sounds produced by the participants. Approximation of new sounds by those already known was

observed; however, thanks to the method of correcting students individually the problem was reduced. Although the participants never acquired a perfect pronunciation of the new sounds they managed to start to produce them in a different way than with the use of Polish sounds, which should allow them to improve the pronunciation with further practise.

Grammar is usually perceived as the most difficult aspect of foreign language acquisition, which is an exaggeration and a stereotype. It is doubtless, however, that it is hard to learn grammatical structures that are completely new, especially if these are distinct from the forms present in one's first language. As presented in the formerly discussed curriculum, in relation to grammar emphasis was put on basic structures necessary for producing simple utterances. An attempt was made not to spend too much time discussing grammar; however, the area was not ignored. During the classes it turned out that grammatical structures were the most difficult for the participants to learn, which is why the method of constant revision of the formerly introduced information was put to maximum use. Satisfactory results were observed in making the participants understand that certain grammatical structures exist and that many of the rules are different from those governing the use of Polish. However, a successful acquisition of the structures and of the skills necessary to use them effectively requires a lot of practise and may be achieved during further study.

An important aim of the organised courses was to make an attempt at providing the participants with basic skills and knowledge necessary for individual, independent work with texts and understanding speech. In the student's book that was used there are many texts' with those at the beginning very short and relying on limited vocabulary, consisting exclusively of words that were formerly introduced to the course participants. With progress in learning the texts would become longer and adaptations of real newspaper articles were introduced. The vocabulary used in the text would eventually go beyond the previously acquired words in order to teach a strategy that is essential in working with texts which is for the reader to focus on the understandable expressions with the meaning of the others worked out from the context or even ignored, provided that they are not crucial in understanding the text as a whole.

The listening and comprehension exercises were of two sorts. The first type included those that were used while introducing new expressions. These consisted of simple, carefully pronounced conversations, where the expressions would often appear for the first time during the course. Their meaning was made evident through the context constructed of previously acquired expressions as well as ambient sounds (e.g. sounds one can hear in a lift, in a hairdresser's). In this way an opportunity was provided for the participants to actively and, in part, independently find out the meaning of the new expressions, which facilitates memorisation. The second type of listening and comprehension exercises consisted of those that were used during the phase of the revision of the formerly introduced expressions. First of all,

they facilitate the revision and memorisation process; however, their aim was mostly to prepare the students to take part and deal with real life communication, because these recordings were not made by professional readers; instead, they consisted of the utterances of native speakers who provided spontaneous answers to questions. At his level of language skills understanding these recordings turned to be difficult, if not very difficult; however, it provided an invaluable opportunity for the participants to listen to everyday language. Furthermore, it constituted an important motivating factor, because when at least a part of such a conversation was understood it allowed the participants to feel that the skills they had acquired may be useful outside the class environment.

### **Evaluation of the classes, feedback from the participants**

During the classes constituting the courses evaluation questionnaires were distributed. The participants' rating of the courses was very high, with all the grades given situated between 8 to 10 points out of 10. The teachers were awarded the highest grades by the majority of participants, with the lowest grade being 9 out of 10 points. In no way do these results constitute an objective indicator; however, they give information of the positive impressions of the participants.

The questionnaire included questions related to the course curriculum, as well, where the participants could state which of the elements were overrepresented, and which there should have been more of. Majority evaluated the curriculum as sufficient, although some answers suggested that there should have been more speaking exercises; some even said that there should have been more grammar practise. The pace of classes was seen as optimal. In the questionnaire the participants were also asked to estimate the progress that they made in the particular areas of language competences. In this many participants were quite modest, with medium or lower grades given (4–8 out of 10 points).

It was also possible to provide longer written assessment of the courses. These answers were positive, some even enthusiastic and, last but not least, indicated that the participants were glad to have had the chance to participate in the organised courses. It proves that nowadays there is a demand for English language courses for seniors which is not satisfied or the opportunity to participate in such courses is not being sufficiently promoted.

The last, perhaps the most important question was related to the willingness to continue learning English and the expectations as to the types of skills to be developed further. There were many affirmative answers, with the need to learn the "everyday language", the informal language, emphasised.

The participants were expected to take final tests, which constituted yet another element of the evaluation, which was important for the seniors themselves. The results of the tests were positive, with all the participants receiving at least satisfactory grades. Most scores were within the 60–80% scope. The tests were given back to the participants after grading and the most common mistakes were discussed.

## Conclusions of the organised classes

The fundamental conclusion to be drawn from the organised courses and workshops is that among seniors there is a demand for foreign language courses. Furthermore, it has been proven that it is possible to organise the courses in such a way that they are effective from the perspective of an objective evaluation of acquired skills (test results) as well as from the point of view of the subjective assessment of the participants (questionnaire answers). Providing further opportunities for language education of seniors as well as promotion of active use of the acquired language skills, e.g. on the internet – in the case of seniors who also made an effort to learn computer skills – should be considered.

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