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## Introducing very young children to English as a foreign language

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This article describes how two very young Polish children were introduced to English through children's animation series, with meaning being made clear through translation. The children were first exposed to English input at the age of 21 months, and when they were four years and three months old, all their English utterances were collected over a period of six weeks. The children's use of language is compared with utterances produced by children attending monolingual English instruction in a formal setting. The comparison shows a more spontaneous and creative use of English by the children in this study. This indicates that a bilingual approach in which children simply experience a foreign language at home may be more effective than monolingual teaching in a formal setting.

**Keywords:** very young learners, English as a foreign language, children's animation series, mother tongue in language teaching, bilingualism

### **Monolingual and bilingual first language acquisition**

Children are successful language learners. If they are born in monolingual families, they normally acquire the language spoken by their parents and become fully proficient users of that language, both in comprehension and in production. If they are born in bilingual families and are exposed to two languages from birth, they typically either become active bilinguals and both understand and speak two languages or they become passive bilinguals and they understand two languages but speak only one. The process is often referred to as bilingual first language acquisition or BFLA (De Houwer 2009: 2-3).

The mechanism behind the acquisition process in childhood is a matter of debate in which two main positions can be distinguished. On the one hand, there are those who argue that children are born with an innate Universal Grammar (UG), which provides them with general guidance as to what language can be like (e.g. Chomsky 1986; Meisel 2011). In this view, the linguistic input that children are exposed to basically serves as a trigger of the relevant principles. On the other hand, there are linguists (e.g. Tomasello 2005) who reject the possibility of genetically transmitted linguistic knowledge and who claim that children construct language structure on the basis of input and language use.

Regardless of how the UG issue is finally settled, there is substantial evidence that input and interaction have a major impact on how language acquisition proceeds, both in the case of monolingual and bilingual children. There are correlations between the amount of input and type of interaction on the one hand, and language development in the areas of vocabulary and grammar on the other: children develop language the most efficiently if they spend a lot of time in joint attentional interaction with their parents / caregivers, and if they often have their output rephrased (e.g. Farrar 1990; Hart and Risley 1995, Pearson et al. 1997). If a child is severely deprived of personalized

input, then language development can suffer considerably, as evidenced by cases of non-deaf children of deaf parents (Sachs, Bard and Johnson 1981). In bilingual families, the amount of exposure children receive and the types of interaction that occur are often determined by parental attitudes and beliefs about language learning. For children to become active bilinguals, their parents need to have a positive attitude towards the two languages and they need to have “an impact belief” about their children’s language development (De Houwer 2009: 86-98). This means that they will, for example, support the children’s speaking of both languages when the children start attending school and one of the languages becomes dominant in their environment. If the natural process of BFLA does take place, then bilingual children pass through the same stages of development as monolingual children do (De Houwer 2009: 37-41).

### **Early foreign language learning at school and at home**

As King and Mackey (2007) say, there are many parents who share the same language and have only limited foreign language (FL) skills but who would still like to raise their children bilingually. In many countries in the world, parents want to introduce their children to English, and in general terms, they can achieve this in two ways. First, they can make use of English instruction which is offered by language schools or which is provided in nursery schools. Second, if they know English well enough, they can take matters into their own hands and try to teach their children English themselves by speaking English to them and by providing them with other sources of input. In this section, some of the options available in these two areas are presented and some of the problems with their assumptions and implementation are discussed.

#### The school setting

Courses which are offered to very young children in international language schools normally try to imitate monolingual first language acquisition in at least one important aspect: in the instruction process, children are supposed to be immersed in the new language and the native language is not supposed to be used. Some of these courses are based on methods designed specifically for children, for example, the Helen Doron Method. Others are courses derived from methods which cater for the needs of both children and adults (e.g. the Berlitz Method). Here, we will focus on the Helen Doron Method, as its effectiveness is relevant to the results of the study reported in this article.

Helen Doron schools run programmes for children aged from three months up to around eighteen years of age. According to Doron (2011), her method replicates first language acquisition by “creating an immersion system”. This immersion system is supposed to be created by exposing children to background listening of the new language at home. Children should listen to recordings twice a day while being engaged in their daily routines, with their attention to the audio material being only peripheral. The language of the recordings, which mostly consist of songs, will become clear as it is repeated in various activities in the classroom. No native language of the children is used in the classroom.

The effectiveness of the Helen Doron Method in the Polish context has been examined by Rokita (2007). As part of her study, Rokita (2007) followed the development of five Polish children whose progress in English she monitored for periods from 14 to 24 months. The study focused on the children’s lexical development but Rokita also analysed English utterances produced spontaneously by the children. All the children attended English instruction in a Helen Doron school and every other week

Rokita observed the children's behaviour in class. She also asked parents to make notes of their children's spontaneous use of English and she interviewed them every two or three months. Below, the cases of two children from Rokita (2007) will be presented, as they correspond quite closely to the children in this study in terms of starting age and the length of exposure.

The first child, Konrad, started learning English at the age of two and his linguistic development was observed for 24 months. Konrad attended classes at the Helen Doron school regularly and participated eagerly and successfully in class activities. For example, he was generally able to carry out the teacher's commands and to identify objects shown on flashcards. At home, he did not receive any support from his parents in terms of additional input or reviewing class material. The only other sources of input were English tapes, which he listened to twice a day in the car on the way to and back from nursery school.

Konrad produced very little English outside the classes. The few instances reported by his father, who was an upper intermediate user of English, concern Konrad's use of English words to label objects and his production of fixed patterns from the classes. For example (Rokita 2007: 105):

Konrad (2;10): *Daj mi mój bus* 'Give me my bus.' (asking for a toy bus)

Konrad (3;0): *Let's sleep.*

The second child, Ada, started attending the course when she was two years and five months old. She also attended the course regularly, but in addition to that she practised English and was exposed to it at home. Ada's mother knew enough English to recreate some of the classroom activities at home with her daughter, and to review vocabulary and listen to the tapes with her. Ada also watched children's programmes and cartoons on the BBC Prime Channel. Contrary to Konrad, she did produce some spontaneous English utterances at home: she sometimes initiated classroom type activities with her mother, labelled objects in English, used mixed utterances and, on a few occasions, described her actions in English. For example (Rokita 2007: 86-87):

Ada (3;7): *I'm sleeping.* (pretending to lie down and sleep)

Summarising all the children's linguistic development, Rokita (2007: 128) concludes that their elicited and spontaneous production was "restricted to single words, established formulas or memorised sentence patterns" which they mostly produced in class. She did not find any evidence of acquisition of grammatical rules or inflectional morphemes. The children's use of inflected verbs was restricted to those they had been exposed to in class. Further, they treated English as an object of study: when Rokita (2007: 129) asked Ada (3;11) what English was for, Ada replied that she needed it in order to study.

### Parents as foreign language teachers

As De Houwer (2009: 7) says, the family is the "primary socialization unit" for bilingual first language acquisition. There are numerous publications aimed at helping parents to raise their children bilingually, most of which, however, focus on children raised by multi-lingual couples. A recent self-help book for parents which includes a

treatment of foreign language instruction for children in monolingual families is King and Mackey (2007). The authors (2007: 21) claim that “with the right foundation of knowledge, any parent can raise a child who knows more than one language, even if that parent is monolingual”. What is crucial is that monolingual parents know how to make use of the resources that can be harnessed to support their children’s FL instruction.

King and Mackey (2007: 101-103) say that “in optimal circumstances” exposure to a foreign language should begin in the first months of the child’s life. Parents who know “only bits and pieces” of the foreign language can use that knowledge and sing FL songs to their children or memorize some simple phrases and use them in meaningful contexts. Parents with “very basic proficiency levels” can read simple picture books to their children in a foreign language. It is not much of a problem that the language the children hear is not perfect in terms of accent: what matters is that the exposure they receive is meaningful. Such exposure is, of course, much easier to provide in mixed language families, that is, in those in which one of the parents is a competent user of a foreign language. In such families, parents should integrate a foreign language into as many of their daily activities as possible.

While encouraging parents to help their children with foreign languages, King and Mackey (2007: 101) also suggest that the FL input that parents themselves provide should be supplemented by input coming from other sources. This could be done, for example, by hiring a foreign language speaking babysitter or nanny, enrolling the child in foreign language classes or using modern technology. However, King and Mackey (2007: 135- 140) warn that this last option should be employed sparingly with young children: they point out that according to Patterson (1998) watching TV does not result in toddlers increasing their vocabularies. Television programmes could be used, King and Mackey (2007:139) say though, as a springboard for parent-child interaction in the foreign language and in this way contribute to language acquisition.

### Natural language acquisition

The exclusion of learners’ own languages is one of the elements which is supposed to make the FL learning process resemble monolingual first language acquisition. One may wonder, however, why monolingual first language acquisition should be a model for foreign language learning. It seems that a natural model for very young foreign language learners should be bilingual first language acquisition (BFLA), in which two languages are acquired simultaneously. As Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009: 217-227) show, in BFLA, children use a number of interlingual strategies. For example, children ask for equivalents out of pure curiosity, compare expressions to separate and order the two linguistic systems, and search for equivalent expressions to confirm understanding. Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009: 223) conclude that “[t]he natural strategies of young developing bilinguals make the exclusion of the MT from the FL classroom seem almost perversely wrong”.

In naturalistic settings, there is a positive correlation between the amount and quality of input children receive and the amount of language they produce (e.g. Pearson et al. 1997). Consequently, parents who want to teach their children a foreign language are also advised to maximize exposure to that language. For example, King and Mackey (2007: 99) state that successful acquisition depends on “rich, dynamic, engaging interaction”, which in effect means immersing “your child in language all day”. They (2007: 102) also claim that this is a simple matter for parents, even if these parents are

not proficient in the new language: all it involves is “memorising some key phrases or silly songs” which are then used instead of those in the mother tongue.

It seems, however, that surrounding children with a foreign language at home may be much more difficult than King and Mackey (2007) claim. First, as the report below indicates, addressing one’s own children in a foreign language may be very awkward even for a parent with a high level of competence. Second, a handful of “key phrases” will not suffice to immerse children in the new language. Research shows that in first language acquisition children receive massive input: Cameron-Faulkner, Lieven and Tomasello (2003: 866) estimate that every day children hear around 7,000 utterances, “including about 2,000 questions, about 1,500 fragments, about 1,000 copulas, and about 400 complex utterances”. Surely, this cannot be replicated in a foreign language context in which parents have at their disposal a limited repertoire of phrases which they direct at the child from time to time.

In addition to being addressed by parents, children may also be exposed to CDs containing foreign language input in the form of songs or nursery rhymes. It is doubtful, however, whether such exposure can have much impact on children’s development. In Tomasello’s (2005) account, children acquire language when they participate in “joint attentional frames” with adults. These frames create common ground for communication, which enables children to understand adults’ communicative intentions expressed within them by linguistic utterances. None of this takes place when children hear songs on a CD at home or learn nursery rhymes in an English class: the utterances they hear are disconnected from any communicative context in which their attention is shared with an adult speaker whose intentions they are trying to understand.

## **Introducing children to English through animation series**

### The background

In this introductory section, it is described how the author introduced his own twin children to English through children’s animation series. The study that is reported later presents the children’s spontaneous use of English triggered by the input sources and compares it with spontaneous English utterances produced by children attending formal English instruction.

The author is a native speaker of Polish and a lecturer in English at a Polish university. Despite being a proficient user of English, the author himself could not simply provide the children with input and interaction in English: the idea of using a foreign language for personal communication with one’s own children, as recommended by for example King and Mackey (2007), seemed very unnatural. Instead, the author decided that the children should watch British children’s animation series: Peppa Pig, Humf, and Ben and Holly’s Little Kingdom. The selection of these particular series was motivated by the fact that they were aimed at pre-school children and mostly depicted daily lives of the main characters that children should easily be able to relate to. The author hoped that the series would expose the children to language and non-violent content appropriate for children that age, and that it would provide opportunities to interact in English with them.

The content of Peppa Pig episodes, which was by far the most frequently viewed series by the children, centres around the title character, who is an anthropomorphic little pig. Peppa and her parents are usually involved in everyday activities typical of families with pre-school children (e.g. playing games, going to the playground and visiting grandparents), which is obviously reflected in the vocabulary of the series.

In terms of vocabulary variation, the language of the series is comparable to that of conversation, which means that the variation is low. A type-token ratio was calculated for a sample of 1000 words randomly selected from ten episodes (100 words from each) that the children watched. The ratio that was obtained was 33.9%, which is comparable to the 30% ratio for the same sample size from English conversation in Biber et al. (1999: 53).

The children started to view the Peppa Pig series in January 2010, when they were 21 months old. For about a year, the children watched from two to four episodes at a time, each episode being approximately five minutes long. The children watched the series almost every day, often with the author (and sometimes with the author's partner) watching with them and translating into Polish some of the key lexis and sentences in each episode. The translations focused on the actions performed by the characters, on their characteristics and on the objects involved in the actions. After about a year the children also started to view the Humf series and Ben and Holly's Little Kingdom. On average, in the two and a half years leading up to the study, the children spent about forty five minutes a day exposed to English on television. Until recently, the three TV series just mentioned were the only children's programmes the twins watched. In addition to that, they were often read to in Polish, and from time to time, the author also read to them and told them bedtime stories in English. The books were mostly Peppa Pig publications, and the stories were typically based on episodes from that series.

The study described in this article did not originate as a research project. The author started to expose his children to English hoping that it might help them take their very first steps in English. Once it was clear that the procedure was having an impact on their linguistic behaviour the author began to record the children's progress. The fact that the children's exposure to English was not strictly controlled is a limitation of the study. However, the study shows very clearly what can be achieved in foreign language learning in a real home setting.

In the description below, the general stages through which the children passed from January 2010 to August 2012 are described first. This is followed by a detailed account of the English utterances produced by the children in the six weeks between 1 July 2012 and 14 August 2012, which the author was able to spend with them, and in which he attempted to record in writing all the English they produced. In the report, the children will be referred to as A (female) and K (male).

### General stages

#### 1 The silent period (January 2010 – June 2010)

For the first six months of being exposed to English through the Peppa Pig series, the children did not produce any English. One can say, then, that they first went through a silent period, which is a well-known phenomenon in child second language acquisition (e.g. Tabors 1997). However, they watched all the episodes with interest and were happy to listen and respond to the author's comments in Polish on the main characters and their actions.

#### 2 Imitation and word play

After six months, in June 2010, the children made their first attempts at imitating some of the English words and phrases they heard. The first attempt that the author witnessed was when A tried to repeat Peppa's introduction of her family members. Initially, the

children repeated words immediately after hearing them in an episode. Later, they would often do it on their own when walking around or playing, without any visible stimulus present. The first items they produced designated objects and included *glasses*, *rainbow*, *car*, *car-wash*, *flower*, *swing*, *see-saw*, *slide*, *Peppa's house*, *teddy*, and, inevitably, *dinosaur* and *muddy puddles*. Similar instances of word play can still be seen in their verbal behaviour today.

### 3 Labelling objects

In September 2010, the children began to use their English vocabulary to spontaneously label various objects around them. Since the words produced in this way were nouns, this may be seen as confirmation of the so-called noun bias in children's early linguistic production (e.g. Gentner 1982). To some extent though, this may have been a reflection of the available input and the translations that were provided. Many new lexical items appeared in their output at that time, which encouraged the author to continue providing them with input and translating parts of it. In the translations the author frequently used the sandwich technique (Butzkamm and Caldwell 2009: 33-35), which consists in first giving an FL language word or expression, then the mother tongue equivalent, and finally the FL item again. The author normally performed the technique while watching an episode with the children, with the first FL item being delivered in the story itself.

### 4 Interaction and commenting on events

It was also in September 2010 that for the first time the children spontaneously employed an English expression while interacting with their parents. It happened during a visit to a playground when both A and K exclaimed *Higher! Higher!* while being pushed by us on a swing. Not long after that, English expressions began to appear in which the children commented on their own actions or on situations in which they participated. For example, they would exclaim *Too scary!* while chasing each other or *Delicious!* to describe the food they were eating. From then on there has been a steady increase in the number of such expressions and in their complexity.

## **The study**

### July and August 2012

Throughout 2011 and in the first half of 2012, the author continued to introduce the children to English in the ways described above. The children enjoyed watching the series selected for them and continued to play with new words, label objects with them and comment on events. The words that they produced came from all the series that they watched. Some of the exchanges in that period, which were normally related to topics from the English sources, were initiated by the author. In July and August 2012, when the children were four years and three/four months old, the author kept a daily written record of all the English utterances they produced. All of the ones that were recorded are provided in Appendix 1 together with contextual information and translations in the case of mixed utterances. Examples from each category that was distinguished are provided below. Because the focus of the report is on the children's spontaneous use of English, instances of immediate repetitions of items from any of the input sources are excluded from the data. The children's pronunciation was mostly clear and accurate. It was only in a few cases that the author was not completely sure what they said, and

such utterances have also been excluded. The constructions which are incorrect from the point of view of adult grammar are marked with asterisks.

#### 1 Sentential constructions

A: *It's broken.* (upon destroying a toy house)

K: *\*I jump on the bed because it's a bouncy bed.* (jumping on his bed)

#### 2 Nominal expressions

A: *My hands, sticky hands*

K: *Naughty messy Mummy, naughty messy Daddy, naughty messy A*  
(lying in bed in the morning)

#### 3 Various expressions

A: *Ready or not, here I come!* (playing hide and seek)

K: *To the rescue!* (playing in a pretend fire engine)

#### 4 Mixed utterances

##### Inserting lexical items

A: *To są moje wriggly worms. Tutaj leżą.* (playing with paper strips)

'These are my wriggly worms. They are lying here.'

K: *Princess Holly uderzyła o kamyk swoją wand i się zepsuła.*

'Princess Holly hit her wand against a stone and it broke.'

##### Switching from one language to the other

A: *Delicious! Smakują mu Twoje włosy. Jump! Jump! Kot skacze na twojej głowie.*

(playing with a toy cat and addressing the father)

'Delicious! He likes your hair. Jump! Jump! The cat is jumping on your head.'

#### 5 Exchanges in English or in mixed utterances

Father: *George is a little piggy.* (after telling a bedtime story)

K: *Daddy Pig is a big piggy.*

K: *A lot of snakes*

A: *Wszystkie snakes*

'All the snakes'

(playing with paper strips)

#### Comprehending English input

The focus of this article is the children's spontaneous output. On a number of occasions in July and August 2012 the author also performed informal comprehension checks to find out how much English A and K actually understood. These were usually simple *wh-* questions which the author asked in English while we were watching Peppa Pig

episodes and which concerned the content of specific episodes, for example actions that the characters performed or some of the objects that they had. The children had never been asked these questions before, but in all the cases they were able to provide correct answers. They mostly answered in Polish, and it was K who was almost always the first to respond. For example:

Father: *What is he looking for?*

K: **For** *latarka*. 'For a torch'

Father: *Where is the engine?*

K: **At the back**.

Father: *Who works there?*

K: **Mr Rabbit**, *królik* 'rabbit'

Father: *Who else?*

K: *Jeszcze Daddy Pig* 'Also Daddy Pig'

Father: *What are they wearing?*

K: **Costume** 'swimming costume'

Father: *What does Richard Rabbit have?*

K: *Konewkę* 'Watering can'

Father: *Can they make sandcastles?*

K: **No**.

Father: *Why not?*

K: *Bo to nie jest taka plaża z piaskiem.*

'Because it is not a beach with sand.'

K: *What is the book about?*

A: **\*Red monkey**.

These comprehension checks may indicate that the children's ability to understand English based on their input sources is quite high. This ability certainly deserves a thorough investigation and it might be expected that the amount of English the children comprehend significantly exceeds what they can produce (e.g. Tomasello 2005).

### Discussion

The data collected in the observation period show that the children can use numerous lexical items and expressions to describe their own actions and situations in which they participate. This means that they generally use English words and phrases in an event-bound way, which is quite common in monolingual and bilingual first language production (e.g. Tomasello 2005; De Houwer 2009). Further, many of their utterances seem to be memorized chunks, the structure of which is probably not apparent to the children. Such heavy reliance on memorized chunks, however, may not necessarily be a bad thing. First, the importance of chunks or fixed formulas has for a long time been recognized as an important element of native speakers' production: as, for example, Pawley and Syder (1983: 213) say, native speakers know "hundreds of thousands" of such items, and this enables them to produce fluent speech. Second, in the usage-based

view of language acquisition (e.g. Dąbrowska 2004; Tomasello 2005), such items contribute to language development. According to Tomasello (2005: 38), the majority of children start their linguistic development by learning “unparsed adult expressions” like *I-wanna-do-it* or *Lemme-see*, which they gradually analyze in order to determine which of the elements correspond to which communicative intentions. Tomasello (2005: 38) says that this is particularly common in the case of “later-born children who observe siblings”. Dąbrowska (2004: 182-183) discusses the development of *wh*- questions in the case of a girl named Sara. Sara’s acquisition of such questions began when the girl was around 2.5 years old with two fixed formulas, *who did it/that?* and *who broke it/that?*. These formulas were then partly generalized by freeing the verbal slot, i.e. *who transitive verb it/ that?*, and finally the abstract template *who verb phrase* was reached.

Some of the expressions produced by the children in this study can be analysed as (partly) generalized formulas. For example, in A’s output, the following are possible candidates:

- 1 Modifier + nominal (*sticky hands, my hands, beautiful aeroplane*)
- 2 **It’s** + past participle / adjective (*gone, broken, clean*)
- 3 **I love** + nominal (*dancing, aeroplane*)

In K’s utterances, there are a number of fully fledged clauses with first and third person subjects, and there are also some nominal expressions. They can perhaps be represented by the following frames:

- 1 I + verb phrase (*I make, I like, I jump*)
- 2 Name + is (*George is, Daddy Pig is*)
- 3 Modifier + nominal (*sticky hands, sticky miodzik ‘honey’, healthy naughty cow*)

The sentential constructions produced by the children contain three types of subjects: first person subjects, third person subjects and dummy *it* subjects. The fact that Polish is a pro-drop language did not seem to influence the children’s production: there is only one example in which a first person pronominal subject was dropped (together with an auxiliary verb). The contracted form *it’s* functions as an unanalysed unit as there are no instances of the uncontracted sequence *it is*. Another fixed formula is the progressive construction which appears once in A’s output. It seems, however, that A has some recognition of the suffix *-ing* expressing actions in progress as she uses it on two other occasions:

- A: **\*Building aeroplane**  
 A: **\*I hiding**

She is not consistent, though, as she also uses a non-progressive form in the same context. K also uses non-progressive forms to refer to actions in progress:

- A: **\*I hide.** (hiding behind a tree)  
 K: **\*I make hamster cage.** (while playing with building blocks)

One inflectional feature that is used correctly on a number of occasions is the plural suffix: it is used in the right contexts, there is a singular – plural contrast (*stick – sticks*), and in mixed utterances Polish plural verb forms appear with English plural nouns, as for example in K’s question *Co to są brakes?* – ‘What are brakes?’.

Finally, it seems that A also recognizes *will be* as an indicator of future time, and *K don't* as a negative marker:

Father: *A will be first.*

A: *And K will be second. A potem will be czytanie.*

'... . And then there will be reading.'

K: *I don't like my stabilizers.* (comment about his bicycle)

Father: *I don't like dirty teeth.*

K: *I like dirty teeth.* (expressing unwillingness to brush his teeth)

The lexical items attested in the children's speech can be grouped into categories which are commonly found in the speech of children acquiring language in naturalistic settings (e.g. Tomasello 2005). They include general nominals (*aeroplane*), specific nominals (*Daddy Pig*), action words (*jump*) and modifiers (*sticky*). One category that is underrepresented is social words like *thank you*, *please* or *bye*. Such words are present in the series that the children viewed but did not feature prominently in the translations that they received. In social situations which required the use of such expressions, the children always resorted to Polish.

Both children in the study produced mixed utterances, i.e. "utterances with surface realization that clearly includes lexical items or bound morphemes (or both) from two languages" (De Houwer 2005: 42). These utterances in general confirm research findings in the area of bilingual language acquisition: as De Houwer (2005, 2009) reports, the items that are most commonly inserted by children are nouns and noun phrases. The following is a typical example from A's output:

A: *Wejdę w muddy puddle.* (putting on her boots)

'I am going to walk into a muddy puddle.'

However, in A's spontaneous output there are almost as many mixed utterances as unilingual ones. This is significantly higher than what is normally found in bilingual children's speech, in which mixed utterances do not usually exceed 35 per cent (De Houwer 2009: 44). A's output also contains mixed utterances in which a phrase in one language (usually Polish) is followed by a phrase in the other language with the same or a very similar meaning. A possible motivation for such repetitions may be emphasis, for example:

A: *Spaj nieboraku. Go to sleep.* (playing with the father)

'Sleep, you poor thing.'

The amount of English produced by the children in this study may seem very little compared to what children normally produce at age 4;3 - 4;4. Also, most of the children's English utterances were comments on specific situations rather than interactions with the parents or with each other. The English data that was recorded is, of course, a tiny fraction of what A and K said in Polish during the observation period. However, one must not forget that English is not the language they use for everyday communication and that the amount and type of exposure were different from those that children receive in naturalistic settings. A point of reference could perhaps be linguistic behaviour of children the same age attending some other type of English instruction in a

foreign language setting, as for example reported for the Polish context by Rokita (2007) and discussed in an earlier section.

The output of the children who are the focus of this study shares a number of characteristics with that produced by the subjects of Rokita's (2007) investigation. These include using English to label objects, using fixed formulas, and producing mixed utterances. However, there are also two significant differences: first, A's and K's spontaneous output was much more abundant, and second, some of the utterances may be partly analyzed formulas.

One reason for these differences seems to be that A and K found it easy to relate the English they heard in Peppa Pig episodes to their own experience. This is hardly surprising as Peppa's world reflects very closely the reality of a small child: the child's parents, the bedroom, the house, the garden, the grandparents, the playground and so on. Consequently, it seems that children need not be *taught* new lexical items and sentence patterns through songs, nursery rhymes and games, which is normally the case in classroom-based instruction. Instead, they may be exposed to meaningful input describing situations of immediate relevance to them, with meaning being made clear through translation. Such meaningful input may also give parents opportunities to address their children in English: the interactions in English that the author initiated with his children were directly related to the situations familiar from the series. Yet, participating in interaction is not a necessary condition for acquiring FL expressions: many of the ones used by the children never appeared in any of the exchanges between us. Therefore, the claim by King and Mackey (2007) that television does not contribute to young children's linguistic development may be too strong. It seems that it may contribute provided that children observe situations in which they can make attempts at understanding other peoples' communicative intentions. As Tomasello (2005: 66) reports, there is some evidence that this can happen in real life, that is, that "some children at an early age, and all children at later ages learn new pieces of language from observing third parties talking to one another – outside the prototypical joint attentional frame between adult and language-learning child" (e.g. Akhtar, Jipson and Callanan 2001). The present study shows that the same process may be induced by certain types of TV programmes. In more general terms, it demonstrates for very young children what has been shown for adults and older children, namely that watching FL television programmes with some form of translation provided results in the acquisition of L2 vocabulary (e.g. d'Ydewalle and Van de Poel 1999).

The bilingual approach used with the children seems to have two very clear advantages over monolingual instruction adopted in standard courses for pre-school children. First, it is a simple and natural way of satisfying the children's curiosity about the meaning of the language they are exposed to. Its naturalness is evident in questions of the what-does-it-mean type, which were frequently asked by both A and K. Second, the range of lexis and ideas that children can be introduced to in this way is much greater than in monolingual instruction: there is a limit to what can be explained through pictures and miming. So, in this study, the children were able to learn, for example, what *brakes* are, and in general, to express meanings that could not have simply been picked up from the context. They were also able to respond correctly to a range of *wh*- questions they had never been exposed to before. There are a number of recent publications which question the monolingual principle and review the evidence for applying a bilingual approach to FL instruction (e.g. Butzkamm and Caldwell 2009; Cook 2010). The data in this study may be seen as preliminary evidence that a bilingual approach is also effective for very young learners.

## Conclusion

This article describes the process of introducing two very young children to English as a foreign language through watching children's animation programmes, and to a much lesser extent, through interaction, reading and telling stories. It seems that the process was a success and it can be recommended to parents by English teachers working with pre-school children. There are many parents all over the world who know English well and who could use it in the way described here to make their children experience English (or any other language) for the first time. The parents need not be as proficient in English as the author: much less English will suffice to follow the language of Peppa Pig episodes and to be able to explain it to children. The language of the series is for the most part relatively simple and the narrator's comments further clarify what is happening and how the characters feel.

The Peppa Pig series is, of course, also suitable for classroom use: it could be watched by children with the support of their teachers. For this to happen, though, a public performance license would have to be obtained by teachers or by their schools. However, on the basis of the report in this article, it seems that exposure should start early, perhaps around the age of two, so that Peppa Pig is the first animated series the child is exposed to.

In this article, various options of introducing young children to English have been presented. Selecting the right option is an important decision for parents because it involves an investment of time and resources. Also, as the example of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography shows (quoted in Brumfit 1991: 29), early language learning experience may be something a child remembers for a long time:

I learned to read English before I could read Russian. My first English friends were four simple souls in my grammar – Ben, Dan, Sam and Ned. There used to be a great deal of fuss about their identities and whereabouts – ‘Who is Ben?’ ‘He is Dan’, ‘Sam is in bed’, and so on. (...) Wanfaced, big-limbed, silent nitwits, proud of their possession of certain tools (‘Ben has an axe’), they now drift with a slow-motioned slouch across the remotest backdrop of memory;

It seems that for the children in this study their first four English friends will be a cheeky little piggy, her sweet little brother and their Mum and Dad. They all make the new language experience real: A and K believe that Peppa lives in England and want to go and visit her. They realize that Peppa speaks a language called English, which they need to know if they want to communicate with her. When asked the same question about English as Ada from Rokita's (2007) study, that is, what is the English language for, K (4;6) answered that it is “for speaking English”. For K, then, English is not a school subject but a tool we use to communicate with others.

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## Appendix

A's (4;3-4;4) English utterances

1 Sentential constructions

*It's gone.* (upon wiping a table)  
*It's broken.* (upon destroying a toy house)  
*It's broken now.* (upon destroying a toy tower)  
*It's clean now.* (upon cleaning a toy car)  
*It's night.* (upon closing the door in the bedroom at bed time)  
*It's raining.* (followed by covering the load on a toy lorry)  
*\*It's sunny day.* (in a conversation about the weather)

*\*Building aeroplane* (while building a toy aeroplane)  
*\*I love aeroplane*  
*I love dancing* (while dancing)  
*\*I hide* (hiding behind a tree)  
*Daddy Pig is fun.* (after watching the episode Daddy Pig's Birthday)

2 Nominal expressions

*My hands, sticky hands*  
*My aeroplane*  
*Beautiful aeroplane*  
*Smelly socks!* (waving her brother's socks)  
*Traffic jam* (playing with toy cars)  
*Seaside* (to describe a structure made out of building blocks)

3 Various expressions

*To the rescue!* (playing with a toy helicopter)  
*Ready or not, here I come!* (playing hide and seek)  
*All wet* (after making a toy car wet)  
*Bye, bye everyone* (playing with toy cars)  
*Stuck in the mud* (about her toy wheelbarrow)  
*Stop! Traffic jam!* (playing with toy cars)  
*Higher! higher!* (on a swing)

A's mixed utterances

1 Nominal insertions

*To są moje wriggly worms. Tutaj leżą.* (playing with paper strips)  
'These are my wriggly worms. They are lying here.'

*Mój stick!* (upon finding a stick)  
'My stick!'  
*Zobaczcie! Mam dwa sticks!*  
'Look! I have two sticks!'

*Pada snow. I like snow.* (playing with paper strips)  
'It is snowing.'

*Wejdę w muddy puddle.* (putting on her boots)

‘I am going to walk into a muddy puddle.’

*Widziałam butterfly.* (during a walk)

‘I have seen a butterfly.’

*Jutro pójdziemy znowu na roundabout.*

‘Tomorrow we will ride on the roundabout again.’

*Mam dla Ciebie aeroplane. Proszę aeroplane.*

‘I have an aeroplane for you. Here is your aeroplane.’

*Jesteś real dinosaur, the best ever.* (addressing the father)

‘You are a real dinosaur...’

*Jesteś snow, Twoja koszulka jest jak snow.* (addressing the father)

‘You are snow, your T-shirt is like snow.’

2 Adjectival / adverbial insertions

*I love the czerwony car.*

‘I love the red car.’

*Idzie potwór, scary potwór.* (addressing the father)

‘Here comes a monster, a scary monster.’

*Bossy, bossy, bossy.*

*Ty jesteś bossy, tata jest bossy.*

‘You are bossy, Daddy is bossy.’

*Tata jest Big Bad Barry*

‘Daddy is Big Bad Barry.’

(lying in bed in the morning)

*Zbyt high* (walking down a hill)

‘Too high’

*Sticky auto. Sticky car.* (upon making a toy car sticky)

3 Switching from one language to the other

*I got stuck. To auto utknęło.* (playing with a toy car)

‘...This car is stuck.’

*Delicious! Smakują mu Twoje włosy. Jump! Jump! Kot skacze na twojej głowie.*

(playing with a toy cat and addressing the father)

‘Delicious! He likes your hair. Jump! Jump! The cat is jumping on your head.’

*Wypiłam. Finished!*

‘I have drunk everything. Finished!’

*Do piaskownicy. In the sandpit* (at a playground)

‘To the sandpit’

*Jesteś pająk. Spider!* (playing with the father)

‘You are a spider. Spider!’

*Spaj nieboraku. Go to sleep.* (playing with the father)

‘Sleep, you poor thing.’

K’s (4;3-4;4) English utterances

1 Sentential constructions

*It’s broken.* (about a structure made out of building blocks)

*\*I make hamster cage.* (while playing with building blocks)

*\*I jump on the bed because it’s a bouncy bed.* (jumping on his bed)

*I don’t like my stabilizers.* (comment about his bicycle)

*\*Abracadabra make you into frog.* (addressing the father)

2 Nominal expressions

*Naughty messy Mummy*

*Naughty messy Daddy*

*Naughty messy A* (lying in bed in the morning)

*Snaky, snaky!* (playing with a tailor’s tape)

*Queen Thistle* (sitting at a table)

*Healthy naughty cow* (in bed in the morning)

3 Various expressions

*Ready, steady, go!* (before jumping off the couch)

*To the rescue!* (playing in a pretend fire engine)

K’s mixed utterances

*the biggest ever potwór* (pointing at me)

‘the biggest ever monster’

*Princess Holly uderzyła o kamyk swoją wand i się zepsuła.*

‘Princess Holly hit her wand against a stone and it broke.’

*Chcę na see-saw* (at the playground)

‘I want to play on the see-saw.’

*Sticky hands, sticky miodzik.*

‘..., sticky honey.’

Exchanges in English or in mixed utterances

Father: *George is a little piggy.* (after telling a bedtime story)

K: ***Daddy Pig is a big piggy.***

Father: *I don't like dirty teeth.*

K: ***I like dirty teeth.*** (expressing unwillingness to brush his teeth)

Father: *Sticky hands*

A: ***Sticky table***

Father: *What are you building?*

A: *Garaż*

'A garage'

A: *A Ty co building?*

'And what are you building?'

A: ***\*I hiding*** (hiding behind the sofa)

K: ***\*I'm found you!***

K: ***A lot of snakes***

A: *Wszystkie snakes*

'All the snakes'

(playing with paper strips)

A: ***Gdzie jest Frank the Farmer?***

'Where is *Frank the Farmer?*'

K: ***Frank the farmer is here.***

A: ***Snaky, Snaky, snakes*** (playing with strips of cheese)

Father: *How many snakes?*

A: *Dwa.* 'Two'

K: ***I like jumping in muddy puddles.***

A: ***Me too!***

A: ***I'm first.***

Father: *Tak, jesteś pierwsza.*

'Yes, you are first.'

A: ***And K is second.***

(while brushing their teeth)

Father: *A will be first.*

A: ***And K will be second. A potem will be czytanie.***

'... . And then there will be reading.'

A: ***Over your head***

K: ***\*Over Tatusiek's head, over A head*** (playing with a ball in the garden)

A: ***You must be quiet. Tata jest chory.*** 'Daddy is ill.'

Father: *A co to znaczy?* 'And what does it mean?'

A: *Trzeba być cichutko.* 'One should be quiet.'

