

Katarzyna ROKOSZEWSKA

THE PRINCIPLES OF THE HELEN DORON METHOD

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to characterize the Helen Doron Method and place it in the broader framework of applied linguistics and language teaching methodology. The secondary aim is to provide the outline for a future Ph.D. dissertation researching the effectiveness of the Helen Doron Method. Also called Helen Doron Early English (HDEE), the method is one of the most recent developments in language teaching methodology, and is directed at children from as young as 1–14 years old. It is rooted in the Humanistic Approach, is learner-centred and fosters cognitive, emotional and physical development. As it is focused on young learners, it raises the issue of how children acquire first and second languages.

Helen Doron studied Linguistic Science and French at *Reading University*, England, and taught English at *Poitiers University*, France. She developed her method from observing her children learn Hebrew as their second language and teaching English to Israeli children. The method has been used in private afternoon classes in many countries for 16 years. Overall HDEE has been widely perceived as a success, but is little researched; this will form the basis of the dissertation mentioned above.

First and second language acquisition in children

First language acquisition is explained by three different theories. Behaviourism emphasises the importance of language environment. Innatism puts the main emphasis on the child's innate capacity. The mid-position between these is taken by interactionism which emphasises the interplay between the two factors (Brown 2000). Second language acquisition is explained by different schools in educational psychology, namely, behaviourism, cognitive psychology, constructivism, and humanism (Brown 2000).

Considering how children learn a second language, it is important to discuss the benefits and constraints which result from age. Research shows that the starting age does not affect the route but the rate of learning (Ellis 1985). In grammar and vocabulary adolescents are better than children or adults, the length of exposure being the same (Ellis 1985). Furthermore, the number of years of exposure contributes to the success in communicative fluency and the starting age determines the levels of accuracy, especially in pronunciation (Ellis 1985).

These findings can be explained in terms of a number of neurological, cognitive, affective and linguistic factors. The latest neurological research shows that different aspects of a second language are learned at different ages. Lower-order processes like pronunciation depend on early maturing neural circuits whereas higher-order processes like semantic relations depend on late maturing neural circuits (Walsh and Diller (1981)). Thus, the critical period refers mainly to native-like pronunciation since after the lateralisation process the brain loses its plasticity. It is also claimed that children benefit from right-hemisphere involvement before the process of lateralisation (Brown 2000). Language learning, which after the process of lateralisation is located in the left hemisphere, is assisted in children with physical movement, emotions, social and artistic skills.

In the cognitive domain, the difference between the child and adolescent or adult is the ability to comprehend language as a formal system and to study its rules consciously (Ellis 1985). This is so since it is at the age of 11, i.e. with the onset of the formal operational stage, that one becomes capable of abstract thinking (Piaget and Inhelder (1970)). A strong meta-awareness at this stage is said to inhibit natural learning (Brown 2000). Thus, while children easily acquire a second language without the help of abstract thinking, adults benefit from grammatical explanations and deductive thinking (Ausubel 1964).

As for the affective domain, children are more predisposed to successful language learning since they are not inhibited, do not have negative attitudes towards the target language community, and are strongly motivated by the need to be accepted by peers (Ellis 1985).

In the view of linguistic factors, it is said that children who learn two languages simultaneously acquire them by the use of similar strategies and build two meaning systems for different contexts. They are called coordinate as opposed to compound bilinguals who have one meaning system from which two languages operate (Brown 2000). Furthermore, research shows that there is a common order of acquisition among children speaking different native languages similar to the order for children acquiring English as their first language (Brown 2000).

In the HDEE all these factors are taken into account. With respect to neurological factors Doron (2000:1) says that *the younger learner does have a distinct advantage in accent and the long-term mastery of grammatical structures*. She points out that the study by Johnson and Newport (1989) proves

that the critical period for the native-like mastery of a second language is around the age of 7. With respect to cognitive factors, it can be said that starting to learn a foreign language at a young age enables effortless acquisition as opposed to conscious learning. The method may be said to foster both cognitive and neurological development since it has been proved that learning a language before the age of 6 increases brain growth and general intellectual capacity. With respect to affective factors, it is clearly observable that the age of HD learners facilitates learning since it excludes the negative influence of such affective factors as inhibition, high ego-boundaries, negative attitudes or lack of motivation. Furthermore, the method aims at minimizing the child's anxiety by creating a friendly learning environment, and at maximizing the child's motivation and high self-esteem by offering a success-oriented practice. Finally, with respect to linguistic factors it is important to notice that children who start learning the target language at a very young age simultaneously develop two separate regions in the brain corresponding to two language systems. As a result, the target language is not the translation of the mother tongue.

The Humanistic Approach

The term *humanism* has been used in a variety of ways. It denotes human as opposed to animal or brutal quality. Furthermore, it emphasises the importance of human interests, studies of Greek and Roman literary culture, rejection of religion, and finally it refers to some educational movements in 15th and 18th c. (Stevick 1990). However, it is the educational movement called Confluent Education and the Humanistic Approach which gained prominence in the 1970s of the 20th c. that are of major interest for the purpose of this article.

The Humanistic Approach has complex origins. Firstly, they are connected with the social revolution which started in the 1960s in the United States and which, generally speaking, opposed dehumanisation of institutions, spiritual impoverishment and exploitative attitude to nature. Secondly, they are connected with a number of influential publications which gave rise to a new educational movement known as Confluent Education, the pedagogic vehicle for humanistic thinking. The two pioneers of the humanist school are Erik Erikson and Abraham Maslow. Erik Erikson (1963), drawing on Freud's work, created a theory based on eight maturational stages of human psychological development as linked with one's educational development. Generally speaking, education is seen as a lifelong cumulative process which involves the whole person, i.e. not only intellect but emotions and feelings as well. Abraham Maslow (1968) is the author of the hierarchy of needs. According to his theory, being needs, which include cognitive needs, aesthetic needs and the need for self-actualisation, can be satisfied on the condition that deficiency needs, which include basic

physiological needs, needs for safety, security, interpersonal closeness and self-esteem, are met as well. The theory shows the dependency of successful learning on the fulfilment of basic needs. Another important figure in this movement is Carl Rogers, a psychotherapist, an author of *The Client-Centred Therapy* (1951) and *On Becoming a Person* (1961), who believed that humans have a natural potential for learning, and who advocated holistic, personalised and experiential learning in a non-threatening learner environment. Still another important person is Perls (1951), the author of Gestalt Therapy in which behaviour is studied as undivided wholes or gestalts, i.e. patterns. Gestalt Therapy emphasised the following concepts: organism-as-a whole, organismic self-regulation as the basis for learning and growth, awareness of here and now, learning through sensing and experiencing, and responsibility with its additional meaning as response-ability. One of the most influential supporters of the Humanistic Approach was Moskovitz (1978) who proposed a model of communication according to which the main function of humanistic communication activities is to make information not known to or hidden from one or all participants known to all in the process of self-disclosure and feedback.

Although the Humanistic Approach constitutes a crucial contribution to ELT, it is often criticized for ambiguous and emotional description (Stevick 1990), imprecise language goals and the use of quasi-therapeutic techniques (Legutke and Thomas (1991)).

HDEE belongs to the Humanistic Approach of language acquisition and teaching for a number of reasons. Firstly, Doman's Gentle Revolution, which underlies the theory of HDEE, is rooted in the humanistic thinking since it dates back to the 1960s and exemplifies a movement for the fulfilment of all human potential. Secondly, the method fosters holistic, personalised and experiential learning. The learner is treated as the whole person since not only intellectual but emotional and physical development is considered important. Consequently, language learning is skilfully linked with music, artistic abilities and physical movement. Furthermore, the syllabus provided is relevant to children's needs, and the principle of learning by doing and by the activation of all senses is seen as essential. Thirdly, the method creates a learner-friendly environment thanks to the following factors: learning in the form of playing on the carpet, having the right to pass, being tested in an informal way, being assisted by a friendly teacher and, in case of two-year olds, by parents. Finally, HDEE belongs to The Humanistic Approach since communication is seen as the most important.

The Helen Doron Method – the approach

Helen Doron Early English (HDEE) is a natural method. Children acquire the target language in the way they acquire their mother tongue, i.e. by repeated

hearing and positive reinforcement (Doron 2000). Both these concepts had been earlier used by Dr Suzuki from Japan who taught two year old children to play violin by ear, without any notations. Children heard the music, tried to imitate it and were always positively reinforced for their attempts. Applying repeated or background hearing, HDEE constitutes an immersion system (Doron 2000). Listening to a tape at home twice a day without focusing, children absorb the sounds and intonation of the target language, then come to class where they learn the meaning of sentences and songs from the tape (Doron 1993).

Language is seen as a system consisting of the following levels: intonation (prosody), pure sound (phonetics), sound system (phonology), word structure (morphology), sentence structure (syntax), meaning (semantics). Thus, learning a language means transition from the intonation and sounds of the foreign language to the level of meaning.

In showing the meaning, a multi-sensory approach is used. In accordance with the mother tongue principle, children get to know the surrounding world in English via the activation of all senses. It is important to notice that background hearing blurs the boundary between foreign and second language acquisition since learning English, a foreign language in Poland, is assisted at home by audio cassettes.

Being a natural method, HDEE follows the natural order of language skills. Children first listen, then speak and at later stages they read and write. What is more, children are granted silent period, i.e. they start speaking when they are ready. Children are positively reinforced for any attempts to speak, which gives them the feeling of success. Success is the basis for the child's high motivation, high self-esteem, high capability of learning, and low anxiety (Doron 1993). It gives the child a lasting love for the language (Doron 1993).

It is important to add that the method fits into the framework of a Communicative Competence Model of teaching methodology since functional use of spoken English is of primary importance, whereas learning grammar of secondary (Doron 2000).

HDEE is addressed to one or two year old children. Two arguments are provided for the choice of age group. Firstly, the child acquires the language in a natural and effortless way, including good pronunciation (Doron 1993). Secondly, by learning another language before the age of six, the child's brain growth and general intellectual capacity for all life are increased (Doron 1993). The balance of research into child neurolinguistic development shows that all significant growth of the human brain is finished by the age of 6 (Doron 1993). It is also said that the regions of the brain are developed systematically and thus there are critical windows for the opportunity of learning. As far as language learning is concerned, recent research (Johnson and Newport (1989)) shows that the critical period for native-like mastery of a foreign language is before 7.

With respect to neurolinguistic research, the method is also based on the work of Glenn Doman, a physical therapist, who worked with brain-injured children, and gave rise to The Gentle Revolution. The main aim of the revolution was to show parents how to make their children highly intelligent. According to Doman, the brain growth is stimulated and the baby's intelligence multiplied at the age of 12 or 18 months by early reading, early maths, encyclopaedic knowledge, music, physical excellence and learning a language (Doman and Doman (1994)). In order to teach reading, maths and encyclopaedic knowledge Doman used flashcards which were shown to a child for a flash of a second three times a day, and which are extensively used in HDEE. It is important to add that Doman's philosophy is in opposition to the Waldorf method and other techniques popular in kindergartens according to which studying interferes with the child's development of the imagination and emotional side.

The Helen Doron Method – the procedure

HDEE offers 5 levels of spoken English and 2 levels with reading and writing. The long term goal of the method is native-like mastery of L2 since the child is given the opportunity to take part in the immersion program very early. The immediate goal of the method is to be able to use the target language communicatively. Since the method is based on the mother tongue principle, it is hoped that learning will be natural and effortless. The method also aims at manual, physical and intellectual development.

The role of the teacher may be described as that of a facilitator in the immersion program. The teacher has two main functions. Firstly, to show the learners in the most efficient way the meaning of what they have already absorbed from the tape and secondly, to stimulate them to speak. The teacher-student relationship resembles a parent-child relationship in that the teacher shows the meaning of L2 and reinforces any attempts to speak just like parent does in L1. The teacher also responds to the child's physical and emotional needs in a parental way.

The main characteristics of the teaching-learning process are background hearing and positive reinforcement. As it has been already pointed out, children, having absorbed the sounds and rhythm of the target language from the tape, are shown the meaning, are stimulated to speak and are positively reinforced. Each class begins with the question if children listened to the tape. The meaning is shown directly through context and situation as opposed to translation. For this purpose the following means are employed: flashcards, props, actions, miming, intonation, and workbook exercises like colouring or finding a hidden object. A very important principle is learning by doing, e.g.,

when children learn a sentence like *I'm sleeping* they pretend to go to sleep, when they learn *I can taste chocolate* they really taste it. No mother tongue is used in the classroom except at the beginning when children act out a journey to an English speaking country and are told that from now on only English is spoken. Children are stimulated to speak but if they are not ready they have the right to pass. Correcting errors is gentle and unobtrusive. The main idea is to provide a success-oriented practice, i.e. to stimulate the child to provide the correct answer and to reinforce it. Interaction changes with age groups. With two-year-olds, who are mainly exposed to the target language, the teacher asks questions and answers them for the children and for the glove-puppet. Later there is more teacher-students and student-student interaction. Generally, the amount of interaction is facilitated by the small size of the groups (4 to 8 children).

Another main characteristic of the teaching-learning process is learner-centredness. HDEE is a learner-centred method in that it treats the learner as the whole person, taking into account not only intellectual but also emotional and physical aspects. Positive reinforcement, positive thinking – addressing the learner with positive not negative sentences, sitting on the carpet in a colourful room as if playing at home, a smiling and attentive teacher, parents' presence in the class in the case of younger children, informal tests in the form of a game or competition, all create a non-threatening, friendly learning environment. It is important to add that *Paul Ward*, a recently published course designed for teenagers, is based on Suggestopaedia.

In order to provide a comprehensive description of the method, language skills and areas, evaluation and the role of the target language culture need to be considered. As far as the skills and areas are concerned, listening and speaking are emphasised. Pronunciation and rhythm are important from the very beginning. Vocabulary is characteristic of children's everyday language, for example children learn the word *belly button* instead of *navel*. At the same time, in accordance with Domain's encyclopaedic knowledge principle, children learn not only words that denote objects from their immediate surrounding but also other sets of words, for instance names of different musical instruments. Grammar is appropriate for the child's communicative needs (Doron 2000). It is taught inductively, by repeated hearing and oral use. Spiral syllabus being used, each lesson consists of 75% of old material revised in a different form and 25% of new material. Evaluation starts at the age of 5. The method uses continual assessment. The aim of the test is to check the child's progress. In the first five courses, tests of oral and aural comprehension are used. It is worth adding that the role of the target language culture is not neglected in HDEE. Culture refers to everyday life of the native speakers of the target language. At later stages elements of geography, history and tradition of the English-speaking countries are introduced.

The effectiveness of the Helen Doron Method – research

As it has been already pointed out, the Helen Doron Method has been used for 16 years in Israel and other countries. It has also gained significant popularity in private afternoon classes in Poland. The results of teaching English this way seem satisfactory. However, the effectiveness of the method has not been empirically tested yet. Since there is a need for such a study, the author of this article will endeavour to conduct research in this field.

The method of the study is quantitative following the general hypothesis that subjects taught according to HDEE are more successful at SLA than subjects taught according to traditional methods. Furthermore, not one but a number of subjects are studied at the same time. More specifically, the method employed is an experiment since it will involve control and experimental groups. The study, which will last for at least a year, will focus on two Helen Doron beginner courses for different age groups, namely *English for All Children* (EFAC) designed for 5 to 6 year old children and *Botty the Robot Teaches You English* designed for 8 to 14 year old children. The experiment will involve 4 experimental groups, including 2 groups taught according to EFAC and 2 according to *Botty*, and 2 control groups taught according to course-books by popular publishers, each corresponding to the HD course. There arises a need to involve two experimental groups of each HD course since the groups may have only 4 to 8 students.

The subjects of the study will be 5, 6 and 8 year old children. The choice of 5–6 year old subjects is motivated by two factors. Firstly, it is possible to compare only children aged 5 or 6 taught according to HDEE to children taught according to popular course-books since the latter do not start learning English earlier. Secondly, it is assumed that the critical period for native-like mastery of a second language is before the age of seven. The choice of 8 year old subjects is necessary in order to give a more comprehensive view of SLA. This is so since EFAC course is based on spoken language only whereas *Botty* course would provide insight into reading and writing as well as acquisition of more grammatical items.

The aim of the study is to measure the subjects' success at acquiring vocabulary, some basic grammatical items and some language functions. The study will focus mainly on listening, speaking and pronunciation. It will measure the percentage of successfully acquired language items with respect to a number of language items introduced in a given course. For this purpose, for 6 year old subjects tests of oral and aural comprehension will be used whereby children are required to respond verbally to flashcards, pictures, or verbal clues or carry out commands through actions or pen and pencil. For 8 year old subjects some written tests may be used. In this way, the study will attempt to verify the effectiveness of the Helen Doron Method.

References

- Ausubel, D.** 1964. "Adults vs. children in second language learning: Psychological considerations" [in:] *Modern Language Journal*. 48. 420–424.
- Brown, H.D.** 2000. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. New York: Pearson Education.
- Diller, K.C.** (ed.). 1981. *Individual Differences and Universals in Language Learning Aptitude*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House
- Doman, D.** and **J. Doman.** 1994. *How to Multiply Your Baby's Intelligence: More Gentle Revolution*. United States: Avery.
- Doron, H.** 1993. "Teaching English to infants and primary schoolchildren in Israel – A special project" [in:] *Educational Media International*. 3. 119–123.
- Doron, H.** 2000. "Rationale" [in:] *English for All Children. A Teaching Guide*. The Israeli Early Development Centre. 1–11.
- Ellis, R.** 1985. *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Erikson, E.** 1963. *Childhood and Society*. New York: Norton.
- Johnson, L.** and **E. Newport.** 1989. "Critical period effects in second language learning: The influence of maturational state on the acquisition of English as a second language" [in:] *Cognitive Psychology*. 21. 60–99.
- Legutke, M.** and **H. Thomas.** 1991. *Process and Experience in the Language Classroom*. New York: Longman.
- Maslow, A.H.** 1968. *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Moskowitz, G.** 1978. *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class. A Sourcebook on Humanistic Techniques*. Rowely, MS: Newbury House.
- Pearls, F.** 1951. *Gestalt Therapy. Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*. New York: Dell Publishing.
- Piaget, J.** and **B. Inhelder.** 1969. *The Psychology of the Child*. New York: Basic Books.
- Rogers, C.** 1951. *Client–Centred Therapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Rogers, C.** 1961. *On Becoming a Person*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Stevick, E.W.** 1990. *Humanism in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Walsh, T.M.** and **K.C. Diller.** 1981. "Neurolinguistic considerations on the optimum age for second language learning" [in:] K.C. Diller (ed).
- Williams, M.** and **R.L. Burden.** 1997. *Psychology for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.