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IMPROVING THE PREPARATION OF PROSPECTIVE PRESCHOOL TEACHERS IN THE METHODOLOGY OF CHILDREN'S SPEECH DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. The quality of language interaction in preschool classrooms is one of the strongest predictors of children's later language and literacy, yet teacher preparation often treats speech-development methodology as a body of knowledge to be memorised rather than a practice to be mastered. This article describes an approach to improving the preparation of prospective preschool teachers in this area, developed and tested in preschool education retraining courses at a regional center of pedagogical skills in Uzbekistan. Methodological readiness is conceptualised as comprising four components: knowledge of speech ontogenesis, diagnostic skills, design-and-delivery skills (including the teacher's own speech as a model) and reflection. The approach rests on three practices: analysis of authentic recordings of children's speech, microteaching of core speech-development techniques – in particular dialogic reading – and mentored practice in partner preschools. Compared with trainees in a conventional course, trainees taught with this approach became more accurate in describing what a child can and cannot yet do in speech, asked more open questions, expanded children's utterances more often and gave children more time to speak. The findings suggest that preparation improves when trainees learn to "hear" children's speech and rehearse specific techniques before using them with children.

Keywords: speech development methodology; prospective preschool teachers; teacher preparation; dialogic reading; microteaching; child speech analysis; retraining.

1. INTRODUCTION

The preschool years are the period in which children's speech develops most rapidly. Between the ages of three and seven, a child moves from short phrases to connected narratives, masters the sound system of the native language, expands vocabulary many times over and learns to use language to plan, explain and negotiate. Much of this development takes place in conversation with adults, and for many children the preschool teacher is one of the most important conversation partners outside the family.

Research has shown how much depends on the quality of this conversation. Dickinson and Porche (2011) found that the kind of language children experienced in preschool classrooms – in particular, teachers' use of sophisticated vocabulary and extended talk – predicted their language and reading abilities years later. Whitehurst et al. (1988) demonstrated that a specific way of reading picture books with children, later called dialogic reading, produced substantial gains in children's expressive language within a few weeks. A meta-analysis by Mol, Bus and de Jong (2009) confirmed that interactive book reading in early education benefits oral language, especially when the adult invites children to talk rather than simply reading aloud. In short, what teachers do in ordinary activities, and how they do it, has measurable consequences for children's speech.

In Uzbekistan, the national preschool curriculum "Ilk qadam" (First Step) identifies speech, communication and early literacy as a distinct area of child development, and the Law "On Preschool Education and Upbringing" (2019) makes the quality of preschool education a state priority. The methodology of children's speech development is well established in the regional literature. Gvozdev (1961) described the stages of children's acquisition of grammar and sounds, while

Alekseeva and Yashina (2000), Ushakova (2001) and, in Uzbek, Qodirova and Qodirova (2019) set out the content and methods of speech work in preschool settings: developing sound culture, enriching vocabulary, forming grammatical structure and teaching connected speech.

Our experience of teaching speech-development methodology in retraining courses suggests, however, that knowing this content does not automatically translate into competent practice. Trainees could list the stages of speech development and name the main methods, but when they listened to a recording of a four-year-old, many could not say what was typical for the age and what needed attention. In their first sessions with children, they tended to speak far more than the children, asked closed questions with a single correct answer and corrected children's mistakes directly instead of modelling the correct form. Several said frankly that they did not know "what to do" when a child answered in one word or did not answer at all. Many trainees in retraining courses come from other professions, and the school-lesson model of teacher talk followed by pupils' answers was often the only teaching model they had.

These observations point to a gap between knowledge of the methodology and the ability to apply it. Approaches from professional education suggest ways of closing this gap: decomposing complex practice into learnable components and rehearsing them in safe conditions (Grossman et al., 2009), microteaching (Allen & Ryan, 1969) and learning from one's own experience, which is central for adult learners (Knowles, 1980). Such approaches are still rarely used in preparing preschool teachers for speech work.

The aim of this study was to improve the preparation of prospective preschool teachers in the methodology of children's speech development and to examine the results in a retraining context. The objectives were: (1) to define the components of methodological readiness for speech work; (2) to design an approach based on child

speech analysis, microteaching and mentored practice; and (3) to implement it and compare outcomes with conventional instruction.

2. METHODS

2.1. Setting and participants. The study was carried out in 2025–2026 in preschool education retraining courses at the Fergana Regional Center of Pedagogical Skills. Trainees in two course groups formed the experimental group (EG), and trainees in two other groups formed the control group (CG). Participants held higher education degrees in education or in other fields, and varied in age and work experience. Participation was voluntary, and all data were processed anonymously.

2.2. Components and instruments. Methodological readiness for speech work was assessed across four components: **ontogenetic knowledge** (knowledge of the age norms and stages of children's speech development); **diagnostic** (ability to analyse a sample of a child's speech and identify strengths and needs); **design and delivery** (ability to plan and conduct speech activities, including the quality of the teacher's own speech as a model for children); and **reflective** (ability to analyse one's own interaction with children and identify ways to improve it).

Data were collected through a knowledge test; a diagnostic task in which trainees analysed audio recordings of children aged three to six; activity plans; observation of sessions conducted during placements, with particular attention to the proportion of teacher and child talk, the type of questions asked and the teacher's response to children's errors; and reflective journals. Activity plans and observations were scored independently by two lecturers using a rubric prepared in advance.

2.3. The approach. In the EG, the course on speech-development methodology was reorganised around three practices, used throughout the course and the placement.

Analysis of authentic child speech. Each topic began not with a definition but with a recording. With parents' consent, short audio recordings of children talking,

retelling a story or describing a picture were collected in partner preschools. Trainees listened to them, transcribed short fragments and discussed questions such as: Which sounds does the child not yet pronounce, and is this typical for the age? What grammatical forms does the child use correctly and where does she make errors? Can the child tell a story with a beginning, middle and end? Gradually each trainee built a "speech profile" of one child, which later guided the planning of activities for that child. Comparing recordings of children of different ages helped trainees see the stages of development described by Gvozdev (1961) as living speech rather than as a list in a textbook.

Microteaching of core techniques. Instead of studying methods in general terms, trainees practised a small set of specific techniques until they could use them confidently. The central technique was dialogic reading, using the PEER sequence described by Whitehurst and colleagues (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998): the adult **p**rompts the child to say something about the book, **e**valuates the response, **e**xpands it by rephrasing and adding information, and **r**epeats the prompt so that the child uses the expanded form. Trainees also practised asking open questions, recasting a child's error without direct correction (Child: "Two foots." Teacher: "Yes, two feet – you have two feet") and waiting several seconds after a question before speaking again. Each trainee conducted a short episode of five to seven minutes with peers playing the roles of children; the episode was video-recorded and discussed against a simple checklist.

Mentored practice. During the placement, each trainee was paired with an experienced teacher in a partner preschool. The trainee first observed the mentor's speech activities using the same checklist, then conducted activities while the mentor observed, and finally discussed each session with the mentor and a fellow trainee. Trainees recorded their own sessions where possible and listened to them afterwards, paying attention to how much they talked and how they responded to children.

In the CG, the course followed the existing curriculum in the conventional format of lectures and seminars, followed by teaching practice without structured child speech analysis, microteaching or mentoring.

3. RESULTS

The initial assessment showed a similar picture in both groups. Ontogenetic knowledge was moderate: most trainees knew the general stages of speech development but were unsure about age norms for specific sounds and grammatical forms. The diagnostic task proved the most difficult. In analysing recordings, trainees typically gave general judgments ("the child speaks well", "the child's speech is poor") without pointing to specific features. In the first sessions they conducted, teacher talk clearly dominated, most questions were closed, and children's errors were usually corrected directly ("Not like that, say it properly").

By the end of the course, both groups had improved, but the changes in the EG were more marked, particularly in the diagnostic and design-and-delivery components.

In the diagnostic task, EG trainees described children's speech much more precisely. Instead of "the child speaks poorly", they wrote, for example: "The child replaces [r] with [l], which is still within the norm at four; uses mostly simple sentences; retells the story in the correct sequence but omits the ending." Their activity plans increasingly reflected such observations, with specific tasks for individual children.

Observation of placement sessions showed the clearest changes. In the EG, teachers asked more open questions, more often expanded and recast children's utterances and corrected errors by modelling rather than by direct correction. The balance of talk shifted towards the children, and trainees waited longer for answers. Dialogic reading became the technique that trainees used most willingly; several noted that it turned an ordinary book reading into a conversation in which children who usually stayed silent began to take part.

Reflective journals traced the same shift. One trainee, formerly a secondary school teacher, wrote: "When I listened to my recording, I counted how many times I said 'Correct!' and moved on. The children answered with one word, and I was satisfied. Now I try to add something to every answer and ask the child to say it again. It takes longer, but the children are really talking." Another wrote that analysing recordings had changed how she listened to children in general: "Before, I only heard whether the answer was right. Now I hear how the child speaks."

4. DISCUSSION

The results suggest that preparing teachers in the methodology of speech development requires more than transmitting knowledge about children's speech and methods of working with it. The CG also gained knowledge, but changes in their practice were smaller. The main difference arose in two areas: the ability to hear and analyse children's speech, and the ability to use specific techniques in live interaction. This supports the view of Grossman et al. (2009) that complex teaching practice is learned more effectively when it is broken down into components and rehearsed before it is used with real learners.

Analysing authentic recordings appears to have played a particularly important role. A teacher who cannot recognise what is typical for a child's age and what deserves attention is unable to plan speech work for that child; she can only follow a general plan. Working with recordings turned the textbook description of speech development into something trainees could recognise in real children, and this in turn made their plans more targeted.

The success of dialogic reading is consistent with international evidence on its effectiveness (Whitehurst et al., 1988; Mol et al., 2009). For trainees, its value lay also in its concreteness: the PEER sequence is easy to remember and gives a clear answer to the question "What do I do when a child answers in one word?" Recasting and expanding children's utterances, rather than correcting them directly, corresponds to the long-standing position in speech-development methodology that

the teacher's speech serves as a model for the child (Alekseeva & Yashina, 2000). Microteaching helped trainees turn this principle into a habit.

For adult trainees from other professions, mentoring and recording their own sessions helped them notice and revise habits carried over from previous work, especially the school-lesson pattern of question, single correct answer and evaluation. This is in line with Knowles's (1980) emphasis on adults' experience as both a resource and, at times, an obstacle to new learning.

The study has limitations. It was conducted at one center of pedagogical skills over a limited period, and groups were not randomly assigned. We assessed trainees' readiness and practice rather than children's speech outcomes, which would require longer-term follow-up. Some assessment methods were partly subjective, although the use of two independent raters reduced this effect.

In practical terms, the approach requires no additional teaching hours: it reorganises existing course and placement time. The collection of children's speech recordings, the microteaching checklists and the mentor observation form can be used in other centers of pedagogical skills, in university programmes and in in-service training for practising teachers.

5. CONCLUSION

Prospective preschool teachers' methodological readiness for children's speech development comprises ontogenetic knowledge, diagnostic skills, design-and-delivery skills and reflection. Preparation improves when trainees learn to analyse authentic samples of children's speech, rehearse specific techniques such as dialogic reading, recasting and open questioning through microteaching, and apply them under the guidance of an experienced mentor. The most important result was the change in trainees' interaction with children: they began to listen more carefully, talk less and help children say more. Future research will examine the effect of this approach on children's speech over a longer period and test it in other regions and in in-service training.

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