APPLYING THE MONTESSORI METHOD IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Based on Matea Klubička's Master's Thesis (2020)

Abstract. *This paper explores the application of the Montessori Method in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), emphasizing its alignment with natural language acquisition processes in early childhood. Based on Matea Klubička's thesis and related studies, the paper analyzes how Montessori principles—such as the prepared environment, sensitive periods, self-directed learning, and tactile materials—support EFL learning. Comparative analysis with alternative pedagogical approaches (Waldorf, Reggio Emilia, and Helen Doron) highlights both strengths and limitations of Montessori in language instruction. Empirical findings suggest that Montessori-based EFL programs enhance learner autonomy, motivation, and vocabulary acquisition. However, challenges include a lack of standardized materials, teacher training gaps, and limited communicative practice. The paper concludes with recommendations for curriculum development and teacher education to support broader implementation of Montessori-informed EFL instruction.*

Keywords. *Montessori Method; English as a Foreign Language (EFL); alternative education; early language learning; child-centered pedagogy; language acquisition; prepared environment; language teaching materials; comparative education; learner autonomy.*

Introduction

The global dominance of the English language has led to a sharp increase in efforts to introduce English as a foreign language (EFL) in early childhood education. Traditionally, language learning has relied on grammar-translation and repetition-based models. However, modern educational theories emphasize the importance of child-centered approaches, experiential learning, and the alignment of pedagogy with developmental psychology. The Montessori Method, developed by Dr. Maria Montessori in the early 20th century, embodies many of these ideals, offering an

alternative educational model grounded in the belief that children learn best through freedom within structure, sensory exploration, and active participation (Britton, 1995; Klubička, 2020).

Although initially created for children with developmental delays, the Montessori Method proved effective for all learners and evolved into a global educational movement. Despite its popularity in early education, its application to foreign language learning—particularly English—remains under-explored. This paper investigates how Montessori principles can be adapted to EFL instruction and compares this with other progressive educational approaches such as Waldorf, Reggio Emilia, and the Helen Doron method. Special attention is given to empirical studies and the Croatian educational context.

Methods

This paper synthesizes theoretical and empirical content from Matea Klubička's 2020 master's thesis, alongside primary Montessori texts and comparative pedagogical literature. The methodology is a qualitative document analysis of Montessori-based EFL practices, combined with literature review techniques that draw on studies from international contexts.

The theoretical foundation includes Montessori's concepts such as sensitive periods, prepared environment, and auto-education (Montessori, 2003). The empirical portion is based on several case studies and action research reports (e.g., Adisti, 2018; Jendza, 2016; Ghaffari et al., 2017), examining classroom implementation and learning outcomes. The study also draws from comparative analysis with Waldorf, Reggio Emilia, and Helen Doron pedagogical models (Edwards, 2002).

Results

Montessori Principles and Language Acquisition

Montessori identified sensitive periods during which children are naturally predisposed to learn specific skills. The period for language acquisition spans from birth to approximately age six, during which children absorb language through environmental interaction rather than direct instruction (Britton, 1995; Philipps, 1999). The Montessori classroom supports this through indirect methods: spoken language activities, storytelling, rhymes, and phonetic games using tactile materials like sandpaper letters and the moveable alphabet (Klubička, 2020, pp. 24–26).

Language development progresses in four stages: listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Montessori materials are designed to support each stage gradually. For example, the Object Game and Silence Game promote auditory discrimination, while metal insets and writing cards facilitate writing mechanics (Britton, 1995). Foreign

language materials often mirror these in structure but lack standardization across Montessori schools, as noted by Winnefeld (2012).

Empirical Evidence

Studies across diverse educational contexts show that Montessori-based EFL instruction supports learner autonomy, motivation, and retention. For example, Adisti (2018) found that incorporating Montessori values into English instruction in Indonesian kindergartens resulted in greater student enthusiasm, participation, and independent learning. Similarly, Ghaffari et al. (2017) reported that students in Montessori classrooms outperformed peers from traditional settings in standardized English tests, especially in vocabulary acquisition and oral fluency.

In contrast, Jendza (2016) argued that traditional Montessori materials were often either too simplistic or overly complex for foreign language learners. The materials lacked cultural relevance, particularly when imported from English-speaking countries, and did not sufficiently support interactive or communicative competence, which is critical in EFL.

Comparative Approaches

The Waldorf Method, created by Rudolf Steiner, shares Montessori's focus on developmental stages but emphasizes imaginative play, rhythmic repetition, and teacher-led storytelling (Edwards, 2002). Unlike Montessori's structured independence, Waldorf teachers remain with the same class for years, providing continuity and moral guidance.

Reggio Emilia, another child-centered approach, focuses on collaborative learning, artistic expression, and project-based exploration. While Montessori emphasizes individualized learning, Reggio stresses group dialogue and documentation (Edwards, 2002). Both use prepared environments, but Reggio classrooms evolve with children's interests.

The Helen Doron Method is perhaps closest to Montessori in practice, especially in its use of positive reinforcement, repetitive listening, and tactile props. However, it is more commercially structured and scripted, using standardized audio-visual materials and songs to enhance language retention (Doron, 2010). Doron herself cites Montessori as a major influence, particularly in promoting independence and respect for each child's pace.

Discussion

Montessori's approach aligns strongly with natural language development, particularly in early childhood. Its emphasis on hands-on, multi-sensory materials, freedom of movement, and intrinsic motivation make it an ideal framework for initiating EFL instruction. The use of language materials like phonetic puzzles,

naming cards, and three-period lessons ensures that learning is concrete and self-correcting (Philipps, 1999).

However, practical challenges remain. The lack of a formal EFL curriculum within Montessori institutions creates inconsistencies in implementation. Teachers often need to design or adapt materials, requiring a high level of linguistic and pedagogical expertise (Klubička, 2020). Moreover, Montessori-trained teachers may lack familiarity with modern second language acquisition theories and communicative language teaching methods, limiting their ability to foster real-time interaction (Jendza, 2016).

In Croatia, Montessori schools like the Barunica Dedee Vranyczany Primary School have begun integrating EFL instruction into their Montessori-based Cambridge curriculum, teaching English alongside science and math in immersive environments (Klubička, 2020, p. 23). Yet, broader adoption across the national curriculum would require policy reform, teacher training, and material development.

Conclusion

The Montessori Method offers a developmentally appropriate and engaging approach to early English language education. Its success in fostering independence, critical thinking, and sensory integration aligns well with the needs of young EFL learners. Nevertheless, more structured research and curriculum development are needed to adapt it effectively across diverse educational settings. Future work should focus on creating Montessori-aligned EFL materials, training bilingual teachers, and integrating communicative activities within the Montessori philosophy.

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