

## **The usage of the computer games in the early-school teaching spelling**

All teachers, especially those dealing with early-school teaching, do not imagine teaching not supported with different didactic tools and means which are particularly essential at the early stage of education due to the substantial character of the cognitive processes of a child. Direct learning about reality and acquisition of skills and habits will facilitate receiving of sensorimotor stimuli. Such didactic means which would allow to release children's activity during the class and stimulate pupils' interests would also create appropriate conditions to influence child's personality.

Learning progress should be based not only on knowledge consolidation but first of all on raising its contents value. The analysis of the results of the research related to spelling proves that the received results do not usually correspond with the results intended or expected within this skill. The level of teaching is however evaluated not only in keeping with the final result, but also accordingly to the ways of achieving it. Searching for appropriate strategies, the most optimum and efficient ways of spelling skill acquisition should be the subject of interest of all teachers. Among different ways of supporting teacher in improving pupils' spelling skills may become didactic games available as computer programmes<sup>1</sup>.

Recently computers have been used in teaching more and more frequently. They have also become useful in improving spelling skills of pupils and students of all teaching levels. Unfortunately not every school has a computer, but still increasing number of children have got the opportunity to play didactic computer games, also those related to spelling, at home or in local clubs of extra activities. Thanks to computer spelling programmes pupils treat learning of spelling as a perfect form of entertainment and fun. Working with a computer causes positive emotions and desire to improve their results.

The spelling programmes can be divided into three categories:

1. educational programmes – including mainly the computer games based on the form of home video games.
2. didactic programmes – written mainly to test spelling abilities (testing results) and to improve them in the course of school education.
3. tool programmes – computer spelling dictionaries used for checking written texts (texts correction)<sup>2</sup>.

Nowadays the most popular are educational programmes. However, from the didactic point of view, not all of them are the appropriate help in teaching of correct spelling. Usually those programmes are used by children at home. Not always teachers have the opportunity to become familiar with various computer games offered by different editors, and therefore they cannot evaluate the usefulness of those programmes as far as the teaching of spelling is considered.

Most of available educational programmes related to spelling are similar to each other. The task is to complete gaps put instead of these part of the word which are considered to be difficult to spell correctly. A child should chose the correct letter from the letters shown below the word using mouse or cursor, or fill in the gap using keyboard. To

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<sup>1</sup> A. Jakubowicz (2000), Zabawy i gry ortograficzne w edukacji wczesnoszkolnej ARCANUS Bydgoszcz, s. 7.

<sup>2</sup> E. Polański, A. Jakubowicz, F. Dyka (1996), Ortografia i interpunkcja w nauczaniu początkowym, JUKA Łódź, s. 156.

make the drill more difficult the correct letter changes its place – sometimes it is on the left sometimes in the middle or on the right.

The user of the programme has the possibility of choosing from different letters correct as well as incorrect. Making a child choosing this way may arouse many doubts. Considering their choice pupil are likely to make a mistake while having no letters proposed they would spell the word correctly. For older pupils, who have already acquired basic spelling rules, this kind of game may be treated as practising of conscious choice of letters in keeping with the acquired rules, however when teaching younger children using of such programmes should be carefully considered.

A computer responses relatively to correct and wrong answers. This reaction is shown on the screen and sometimes intensified with appropriately matched sounds. Words are chosen at random by the computer from the specified set. If a pupil makes a wrong choice the programme uses to those words more frequently making the user choose again. Most of the programmes avoid projecting on the screen words that are spelled incorrectly, though there are some negative exceptions.

The positive influence of the spelling computer games on the spelling skills of pupils needs fulfilling of all the basic conditions and requirements essential for spelling teaching and learning. Considering determinants while working on computer spelling programmes should be the very first step for any programmer preparing such a programme, only then there is a chance for achieving positive didactic results.

Remembering the significance of visual memory<sup>1</sup> in the process of correct spelling acquisition we have to mention disadvantageous influence of spelling mistakes appearing on the screen, especially when these are spelling mistake made by author of the programmes themselves, what does happen. For example in one of such programmes (officially propagated) 7 flagrant spelling mistakes (among them with h, ch, and with the negation “nie” which may be spelled dependently separate or not) and some of punctuation<sup>2</sup>. The computer programmes with such defects should be undoubtedly disqualified as didactically damaging.

The advantage of those programmes is that the words difficult to spell are presented as clear and readable inscriptions. Often the part of the word which is difficult is additionally distinguished with a different colour. As a consequence of pupil's mistakes computer presents the difficult word longer and more frequently.

For children aged from 7 to 11 there is a programme in which a funny worm “eating” letters appears on the screen. A player is supposed to move the worm so it reaches the letter missing in the word displayed in the upper left corner of the screen. The worm comes across correct and wrong letters. After “eating” the correct letter the worm gets longer while “swallowing” a wrong one makes it shrink. If the worm becomes too short the game is over, but if the player does not make mistakes the game becomes more difficult as the longer the worm gets the more difficult it is to direct it. The game has been divided into several levels of difficulty. After mastering one of the levels the player passes to the next one which is more complicated although the level of difficulty is not related to the spelling. The player must deal with the letters moving faster or additional obstacles which the worm is supposed to omit. So as to make the game easier the programme displays an illustration picturing the meaning of the word with the gap, which may help the player to memorize the word.

The described programme is one of the entertaining programmes which arise pupils interests. Unfortunately it tends, as well as the others of the kind, to overstress the reaction to mistakes made by a pupil using different kind of audio – visual effects often much more interesting then those used in case of correct answer. Consequently the player may be interested in making mistakes on purpose. Another disadvantage of the entertaining programmes is they do not give the player the opportunity of noticing the ortograms in the

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<sup>1</sup> A. Jakubowicz (1994), Strategia organizowania materiału a efektywność nauczania ortografii w klasach początkowych, WSP Bydgoszcz, s. 26.

<sup>2</sup> E. Polański (1994), Dydaktyka ortografii w latach 1990-1993. "Polonistyka", nr 5.

context of a sentence or deducting rules of Polish orthography. Therefore these programmes may be classified only as intended for simply mechanical learning of some language facts without giving pupils knowledge of including those facts into their supply of previously acquired skills and habits.

That is why the programmed “Dyktando” (Dictation) is worth mentioning. The authors of the programme decided that didactic correctness is their main goal. Working with the programme is not stressful – it does not require parent’s or teacher’s supervising. The infinite patience of the computer makes possible repeating the same exercise for many times without the threat of loss of face, reprimand or other unpleasant sanctions. While evaluating the programme is precise and objective. The speed of dictation is appropriate for the individual abilities of the pupil which is usually impossible with traditional dictations. The programme repeats each sentence as many time as it is necessary without urging on. It also offers a flexible configuration of the different kinds of evaluation. A pupil, especially of the early level doesn’t have to be stressed with negative marks, instead he or she may receive detailed list of mistakes he or she made and also verbal evaluation of the results encouraging and stimulating to further efforts. There is also possible the detailed observing of one’s own progress, based on reports which include information about all previous tests. These reports may be stored in computer as long as it is necessary, revised and printed. The mistakes made by the pupil are projected on the screen only as short as it is necessary so that the process of visual memorizing has been limited which is impossible with traditional tests. Dependently on the used mode the programme may correct mistakes immediately or after certain number of words or sentences, it also may correct them after writing complete texts similarly to the classroom procedures. It must be mentioned that mistakes are corrected through replacing the incorrectly written words with words written correctly and distinguishing them visually from the rest of the faultless text. The programme “Dyktando” has introduced a new type of dictation (which was not included into traditional division of drills and exercises of the kind) which could be labelled as preventive – consolidating. A person who is writing the text cannot make a mistake either of spelling or punctuation because the programme accepts (and projects on the screen) only the text which is written correctly. Elimination of incorrect spelling prevents a pupil from making mistakes, moreover because only the correct spelling is projected a pupil memorizes the ortograms in their proper forms. The possibility of writing the dictation from memory (visual) is undoubtedly an innovatory approach towards writing dictations. The text of the dictations is presented on the screen divided into parts, e.g. single sentences, during the certain time (directly proportional to the sentence length) and then vanishes. A pupil is supposed to write this part of the text, which he or she has seen for a while, at the same time the text may be repeated by a lecturer though it is not obligatory. Additional advantage of this mode is that spelling test may be conducted by deaf-mute people.

In the early-school teaching a computer may be a useful and helpful tool which makes the learning processes easier and more interesting. It has also a significant influence on activating pupils’ involuntary attention favouring their interests in acquired materials, which is computer great advantage. Using this for of teaching draws children attention and becomes fun for them, thanks to innovatory ideas such programmes may interest children even when they present orthographically difficult materials.

Recognizing all the advantages of using computers in didactic processes it is however essential to remember some rules of working with a computer programme. Those rules are at the same time instructions for people preparing such educational programmes.

The basic rules which should be characteristic for a proper didactic programme of spelling teaching may be described as the one which makes possible:

1. deduction of relations existing within the language and related to spelling, which should be supported if it is possible with explanations of the spelling rules through defining the grammatical forms of the words, exercises of declination and modification, word-formation etc.;
2. improving of motorial memory through writing whole words or completed sentences using computer keyboard;

3. association the words with meaningful context;
4. controlling the correctness of the words by using computer spelling dictionary.

Despite some reservations computer games may be excellent tool, very helpful in spelling teaching. They make possible some longer contact with difficult ortograms which helps consolidation of their spelling form. Such games prompt pupils' activity, consciousness, ambitions and interests especially when children have some problems with spelling acquisition. Nevertheless the postulate of substantial verification done by experts in orthography should be complied.

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