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*Interrelations Between Politics
and Education: Teaching English
in Hungarian Kindergartens Since 1989*

ABSTRACT

The study explores changes in the Hungarian education system after the political change that occurred in 1989–90. The paper focuses on changes in kindergarten language teaching practices and how the significance of learning another language at an early age arose. As part of the review of the literature on the topic, we draw attention to the European trends and principles in terms of early language teaching as well as foreign language teaching both before and after 1989 in Hungary. Another important date in the process is 2004, when Hungary joined the EU, which deeply changed the nation's attitude to learning foreign languages. It influenced policy makers, teacher preparation, (early) language expectations and future fundings as well. We can see in the case of Hungary that political changes in society may dictate or indicate a shift in societal needs and expectations for how children should be educated.

KEYWORDS: early language learning; expectations; attitudes; society; European context.

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 21st century, one central question is the value of language skills, and, in particular English language competence. The globalization of English contributes to the spread of English as a second or a foreign language. According to Kachru's (1985) classification, there are *inner circle countries* where English is generally the first language (L1), *outer circle countries* where English plays an institutional role as a second language (L2). In the *expanding circle countries* English is learnt as a foreign language (Murray, 2006). For many Europeans, however, English is often learnt as a third language (e.g. Finland).

English is also used as a *lingua franca* as it is a world language, the language of cross-cultural communication (Domagała-Zyśk & Podlowska, 2019). It is the primary language of business, media (e.g. films, music, online games) and tourism as well. English is used in business conversations around the world, and not just between business partners one of whose first language is English. What is more, English has dominated as a means of communication in this era of industrial revolution 4.0 (Oktaviandari, 2022). English is also used as a working language by many multinational companies. English is also the common ground of business meetings, emails and international communication, and it is possible to follow a wide range of different courses in English at many universities around the world.

Whether it is a good idea to start learning languages in a pre-school/kindergarten at an early age, has been under constant debate. In this paper I combine these two, currently central issues: the change of the political regime in Hungary and early childhood language-learning, focusing on learning English. I present a European picture of teaching English at an early age, discussing the advantages and disadvantages of an early start. Then I discuss the issues of English activities in Hungarian kindergartens since the change of political regime in 1989 as only limited research is

available about this era. Also, I briefly present the results of my empirical research carried out in kindergartens in Debrecen and Nyíregyháza, which focused on early second language learning. Throughout this paper I will use the terms 'kindergarten' and 'preschool' as synonyms to indicate the sector in focus referring to institutions working with children from the age of three until the start of compulsory schooling in Hungary (ages 6–7).

1. EUROPEAN CONTEXT

Early language learning has a long history in Europe as language learning enhances children's equal opportunities and social mobility and may also provide a handhold in case of an unforeseen future. Comenius believed national languages are suitable in the first six years of schooling, although, Latin is indispensable to be successful in life. In the first three decades of the 20th century the role of Latin faded somewhat but still was used in education. Children of the aristocracy had to learn languages from an early start, e.g. German, French and/or English. After the first World War it was hard to find native au-pairs and even the wealthiest families could hardly afford to support their children living abroad (Kézi, 2014).

From the 1950s to 1980s, a number of pilot studies were carried out in various European countries that resulted in some regions and individual schools establishing foreign language provision for the 9–11 years age group or even younger. In the 1980s, several national policies introduced compulsory foreign language provision at primary school level and the issue grew in importance throughout the 1990s until the first few years of the 21st century (Enever, 2014, p. 15).

A transnational study called Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE) was carried out between 2006 and 2010 to highlight the current knowledge on pre-primary provision as well as to

propose what can be done to provide quality in the countries involved (Croatia, England, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden). The longitudinal framework made it possible for the team to track the progress of learners and the research was ground-breaking as provided new insights, and inspired new research within a European context (Enever, 2014).

A European expert group established in 2009 noted varied provision of foreign languages in curricula as well as a demand from parents to provide early language learning (Enever, 2014). Also, within the multilingual European Union, every EU citizen is supposed to speak at least two languages apart from his L1 (M+2 rule). Since the expectations for language learning in the European Union are high and in order to achieve M+2 rule, the EU launched the Piccolingo programme in 2009 to promote early language learning. The programme suggests that parents start early language learning with their children as early as possible because the susceptibility of the early years, and the flexible neuron network never come back. Due to the brain's plasticity, the younger a child starts learning a language, the more successful she will be in that endeavour.

The provision of an early second and foreign language in Europe has been a priority especially following the publication of the Lisbon Strategy (2000). It has also been discussed that additional languages can be introduced based on the effectiveness of the shift in language policy (Enever, 2014). The Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education specified a target for 2020: "At least 95% of children aged between four and the age in which compulsory primary education starts should participate in early childhood education" (Council of the European Union, 2009) (Enever, 2014).

However, research shows that an extensive and easy access to English in many European countries (e.g. Belgium, Netherlands, France, Germany) in schools and out of schools leads to different groups of language learners creating their personal language

environments due to their needs and capacities (Murray, 2006). In today's globalised world, with the expansion of the Internet, it is very easy to get access to foreign language media, whether a moving picture, interactive or written content. One of its advantages is that it supports the acquisition and the passive use of foreign languages. Media consumption is largely a deliberate process that requires strong motivation on the part of the user (children and adults alike), such as the desire to research materials related to one's interests, being up-to-date with media products, etc. Countless pre-teens and teenagers watch their favourite series and streams in English in their free time and pick up the language unconsciously.

2. EDUCATION SYSTEM IN HUNGARY

Education in Hungary is compulsory for all children between the ages of 3 to 16. While crèches (*bölcsőde*) are available for children aged below the age of three, children are required to enroll in kindergartens (*óvoda*) at the age of 3, where they receive professional day care, emotional security and basic education preparing them for school. They also develop several skills such as social and communication skills, hand-eye coordination.

When the research was undertaken, regular public education system in Hungary was composed of the general (or basic) school (*általános iskola*), from the age of 6–7 to 14 as primary education lasts for 8 years. At the age of 14 children could choose between the general secondary school (*gimnázium*), the vocational secondary school (*szakközépiskola*) and the vocational school (*szakmunkásképző iskola*). Those who attended secondary grammar school planned to continue their studies at university or college. However, vocational schools prepared students for the job market. The education system was predominantly public, though there were several private and church-funded preschools, as well as primary and

secondary schools too. The system was partly flexible and some bridges existed between the different types of schools. Also, parents could send their children to bilingual or international schools where the language of teaching was different from the majority language of the country.

2.1 Changes in the Hungarian education system in the 1980s

During the 1980s not only the Hungarian education system but also Hungarian Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) saw great changes. Zoltán Báthory (2003) writes about it in connection with the Public Education Law introduced in 1985: “1985 is an important date in the history of Hungarian education and pedagogy. It marks the end of an era in which in the name of Marxist-Leninist ideology and the socialist state the education system was governed by the decrees of the Hungarian Communist Party” (p. 3). Hungarian schools moved away from a wholly centralised system to a more localised one and schools had to develop their own local curriculum programmes (Enever, 2020). Also, in the 1990s reformed pedagogical programmes such as Montessori and Freinet spread rapidly all over the country and the first Waldorf School was founded. State preschools created their own image and innovation that became the fundamental elements of local programmes as well. There was also an interest in language activities held in kindergartens, as their appearance can be linked to the change of the political regime. Imréné Náduvvari taught Russian in a preschool for two years, and as a result she was able to support the theoretical part of her work with her first-hand empirical experiences: the children involved were able to acquire more than 300 Russian words and expressions with play-based language practices (1975). She emphasizes the importance of visualisation, and the use of new and unexpected stimulation to keep the children’s attention. The most important goal of preschool foreign language activities is the improvement of listening skills. She also claims that imitation has proven to

be the most useful method: repeating and chanting rhymes and sentences together helps to acquire the phonological system of the target language at the beginning of the language learning process (Nádudvariné, 1980).

2.2 Language learning in Hungary before 1 May 2004

Hungary is a largely monolingual country in Central Europe. Unlike many other countries where a large proportion of the population speaks at least one language other than their L1, the average Hungarian would hardly ever encounter a bilingual person and had no, or very little, personal experience of bilingualism until the EU accession in 2004 (Navracsics, 2000).

Between 1949 and 1989, learning Russian was obligatory in Hungary for every school pupil. However, in 1989 only 1.2% of Hungarians stated that they were able to speak Russian (Medgyes, 2012). This data can be partly explained by the fact that most language learners believed learning Russian was a burden and never used Russian outside the classroom. In the 1950s, Hungarians had very limited opportunities to keep in touch with Western countries as postal correspondence was also controlled, and very few citizens had a chance to travel abroad. In those days it was pointless to learn languages. Even Western research was available only for a limited number of researchers who were reliable politically (Kézi, 2014). However, since the 1980s knowledge of languages has been appreciated. Speaking languages has become a large-scale requirement that the old-fashioned schools were unable to meet (Kézi, 2014). Before the change of the political regime, in the 1980s, the first language schools were opened, where secondary school students in the main, as well as some adults, went to study German or English, whereas there were hardly any applicants for Russian courses (Medgyes, 2012).

Median, the Hungarian national polling institute, carried out its own research in 2004 (Szénay, 2005) with tests to collect precise data about the language competence of Hungarians. It turned

out that almost half of the respondents (45%) between 15 and 44 had very little and 30% had low foreign language competence. According to the authors, problem lies in the historical past; the unique vocabulary of Hungarian and as a result, its linguistic isolation, plus the methodological failure and the lack of language strategy in public education. Moreover, Hungarian is a Finno-Ugric language and its grammatic structure is different from the Indo-European languages: therefore, a Hungarian speaker has to make serious efforts to learn English or German due to the different linguistic elements and rules (Kézi, 2014). On top of all that, early language teaching was abandoned for a long period of time (Szénay, 2005). Most adults have no personal experience in connection with early language learning as they started learning a foreign language at the age of 10 in primary school and do not have good memories in terms of language classes. On the other hand, according to a Eurobarometer survey, in which the data are based on self-declaration, half of the respondents living in the European Union are able to have a conversation in at least one language other than their first language (European Commission, 2012).

2.3 Learning languages after 1 May 2004

Since Hungary joined the European Union on 1 May 2004, language learning has played an ever increasing role. As a result, programmes developing communication competencies such as TEMPUS, PHARE and Socrates have become available to popularize and help with language learning. Families temporarily living abroad and international marriages have become more and more common. The number of employees working at foreign establishments was a few thousand at the end of the 1990s. Their number reached 20,000 in 2004 when Hungary joined the EU and has been growing since then. In 2010 more than 51,000 employees mentioned Austria, Germany, United Kingdom, or other European Union country or non-EU country as a place of work. By 2013 the number went up to 98,000 (Lakatos, 2015). Languages

are not only required for the sake of travelling or studying at foreign universities, but those possessing a high level of language knowledge also have an edge in the labour market in Hungary. Talking of the job market, in multinational companies, language knowledge is a basic requirement.

Following the political changes in the 1990s Hungary also began to expand teaching English at primary level. The Hungarian Ministry of Education and Culture established a cooperation with the British Council to include English in teacher education in Hungarian Lower Primary Teacher Training Colleges. It means Hungary was the first country in Central Europe to include a speciality for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in their course for generalist kindergarten/primary teachers (Enever, 2020, p. 168). Also, in-service courses were available to teachers and primary schools as they rapidly began to teach English to 6–10-year-old children. These initiatives suggest a firm commitment to establish an early start programme in public education. However, in 1996 the Hungarian Ministry of Education and Culture published a new National Core Curriculum recommending compulsory foreign language teaching *no later than 11 years*. Views about an optimal start age were quite diverse at this time, fluctuating between 9 and 11 years. It has also been said that a lot depended on personal views and little pedagogical evidence was presented (Enever, 2020).

Also, many teachers were familiar with an intensive model of language teaching only, focusing on teaching every word mentioned in the course book. They were not aware of English as a *lingua franca* across Europe either. The final decision can be interpreted as a new approach to early language teaching (Enever, 2020). Many schools no longer provided English lessons in the first four years of primary school which resulted in unemployment among teachers and parent's disappointment. Enever describes this situation as "*a policy to have no policy*" and underlines that the decision contrasts the neighbouring countries

which were planning to lower the age of introducing foreign language lessons in compulsory schooling in accordance with the soft policy of the European Union.

When EU member countries have been lowering the start age in compulsory schooling, on the contrary, Hungary supported a later compulsory policy of 10/11 years. From the above-discussed point there have been a number of revisions, but according to the Hungarian National Core Programme (NAT, 110/2012 (VI.4)) every school child has to start learning a foreign language in the fourth grade of primary school (at the age of 9/10). However, circumstances permitting, language teaching can start earlier. There are primary schools offering language classes for children one, two or three years before the obligatory start (Józsa & Nikolov, 2005). Western languages are present in primary and secondary schools all over the country as well. The National Core Programme (NAT, 110/2012 (VI.4)) states that children are obliged to have language classes on their timetable and it is obligatory to take GCSE equivalent in one foreign language. The level of the test is lower-intermediate, known as B1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, meanwhile an A-level exam equates to B2 (upper-intermediate). What is more, since 1996 Hungarian university students cannot graduate without a successful intermediate level language examination, known as B2 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. However, a lot of students are not able to fulfil the requirement in a foreign language as a result can not get their degree.

The decision described above limited the availability of foreign language learning in lower primary schools, affecting mostly the rural, poorer regions of the country. As an unintended outcome, parents in more urban regions wanted to ensure a better future for their children and were willing to pay for early English education (Enever, 2020). It can also be observed that, since the 1990s, a significant proportion of Hungarian parents have been striving for their children to learn a foreign language as early as possible

(Kolozsár, 2010). From the 2000s, state-run kindergartens and crèches have appeared where the teaching of foreign languages starts at a very young age. Moreover, several early learning language schools are available in Hungary, for example Helen Doron Early English, Mortimer English Club, English Gym & Fun, Katedra Kids & Teens. Helen Doron Early English opened its first learning centres in Hungary in 2002 and has been present in the country since then. The basic principles of Helen Doron Early English courses for children are positive reinforcement; the lessons are funny, dynamic, playful and they activate all the senses (Doron, 2010). Helen Doron learning centres admit children as young as three months old, and they can continue learning English with them until they are 18 (www.helendoron.com). They offer afternoon classes for small groups in learning centres and courses for larger groups in preschools too. Another example of shadow education is the Kids Club which also deals with young English learners. The method, based on first language acquisition, was developed in 1988 by Linda Ellis, a UK language teacher. The Kids Club has courses for children from as early as six months old

Some parents hire an English speaking babysitter or a private tutor to improve the child's language competence. The popularity of private lessons and language schools may be accounted for because the teaching process is more individual, and tuned to the needs of that individual child or a few children only. On the other hand, English activities in preschools and primary schools focus on the needs of the group. Also, it is more difficult to take individual needs into account in a preschool group or in a class, whereas, in a private lesson children can develop according to their abilities and at their own pace.

3. PRE-SCHOOL FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING, PARTICULARLY ENGLISH BEFORE AND AFTER 1989

Enever (2020) analyses patterns primary foreign language policy around the world referring to local histories and politics. The writer takes into account the ecological and an agentic perspective as well to understand the realities of policy construction, soft policy and its implementation. Also, she discusses three countries (Hungary, Vietnam and Uruguay) in detail because they introduced teaching English to young learners in the mid-1990s (Enever, 2020).

In Hungary, after the change of the political regime, the changes in the preschool life gave the managers of kindergartens an opportunity to launch sports, handicraft or foreign language activities. The new law made it possible to organize mainly English and German activities for children with the permission of the authority responsible for the educational settings in the town. Since 1990, the number of kindergartens offering play-based foreign language practices has risen gradually. The provision of early foreign language could promote equal opportunities and the extension of preschool education could play a crucial part in the process (Kézi, 2014).

The most difficult task was to provide educational personnel (that is find qualified teachers). At that time usually primary school or secondary school teachers worked with preschool children and not methodologically competent Early Childhood Educators. In the 1990s very few kindergarten educators could speak English and even primary schools lacked language teachers. The British Council organized the very first young learners training for 14 Hungarian higher education lecturers and primary school teachers who did their MA in methodology of teaching English to children at the University of Leeds. They were the first qualified professionals in that emerging area in Hungary

and started working with teachers and students interested in the field (Kovács, 2003).

Bauer (2000) emphasises that personal conditions of language activities are varied in preschools: foreign languages activities are led by other kindergarten educators, primary and secondary school teachers or university lecturers. However, for that role a well-qualified Early Childhood Educator with a good command of English would be the most suitable person, as practiced by several countries such as Germany, France or Bulgaria.

In the 1980s, in several kindergarten teacher training colleges attempts were made to improve the quality of teaching languages to young learners (Pásztor, 2019). Nowadays there are several higher education institutions (Eötvös Lóránd University, Budapest; Szeged University, Szeged; Kodolányi János College, Székesfehérvár, etc.) that train students to be able to organize language activities for preschoolers. However, there is no single body that coordinates or controls such work.

The Tempus Foundation advertises a 30-hour-long training course for those Early Childhood Educators and primary school teachers who are interested in teaching children aged 3–10 (I1). Another programme called *angolkalauz* run by Melinda Fűrész-Mayernik is supported by the Education Office, too. Early Childhood Educators, qualified English teachers and primary school teachers are welcome at the training course, which lasts 52 hours and is held online. Speaking English at an intermediate (B2) level is a prerequisite, as the languages of the training are Hungarian and English (I2).

4. EARLY ENGLISH IN EASTERN-HUNGARIAN PRESCHOOLS

There have been some research and observations concerning foreign language activities in Hungary but no precise data is available. It is particularly significant that by 1997 ministry statistics

confirmed that 15% of pupils in the first grade were learning a foreign language, while in the third grade over 40% had such provision, although their earlier start was two years below the National Core Programme (Enever, 2020, p. 184). Early foreign language learning at pre-primary stage is a less regulated sector across Europe and gives more varied provision. Piker (2013) underlines that the social context must contain three components to successfully learn L2: the *learner* who realizes they must learn the L2 and are motivated; *speakers* of the L2 who know the language well enough to provide access to the target language and help the learner to learn it; the social *setting* that brings learners and speakers into regular frequent contact. Besides, it seems likely that early provision will grow continuously resulting in a demand for compulsory provision at a pre-primary phase across Europe (Enever, 2014). Judit Pásztor (2019) summarizes the present situation like this: “In Hungary, if the maintainer of the preschool is able to finance it and the institution has a competent Early Childhood Educator, then it is allowed to provide foreign language activities with the necessary quality control” (p. 79). There are no records relating to kindergartens offering early English activities. Also, we have no information about their content, quality, output and pedagogical work either (Pásztor, 2019). Preschools do their best to be attractive in the eyes of parents and children. It is estimated that in 2005 about 10% of kindergartens offered foreign language activities to children (Varga, 2005). The activities (e.g. folk dance, English, football, etc.) offered by a kindergarten play an important role when choosing a preschool and parents still prefer institutions where foreign language activities are available once or twice a week.

We were interested to know when the first English sessions were introduced in Hungary therefore we contacted managers of preschools in two cities in the East of Hungary. We analyzed our data in the framework of early second language learning. Our research was carried out within the Early Childhood Research

Group run by the Faculty of Education for Children and Special Educational Needs of the University of Debrecen. The first research was carried out between in January 2017.

In Debrecen, which is the second largest city in Hungary with a population of about 200,000, in 1990 some kindergartens launched different, fee-paying activities, such as folk dance or English, in which children could take part. It was the time when the pedagogical principles of preschools were being changed as part of a paradigm change in education and from a uniformized adult-centred pedagogy the system was on its way to a child-centred pedagogy (personalistic education) that accepts the characteristics of a 3–7 year old child and finds the individual differences natural (Molnár et al., 2015). In 2013, Gabriella Muszka contacted all 46 kindergartens in Debrecen, and found that English language education was offered in 25 of them (54%). In 2020, Viktória Lilla Nagy contacted all 53 preschools to find out the present situation of early foreign language activities. Although her research was complicated by COVID-19, still 72% of the kindergartens filled in the online questionnaire (38 kindergartens). Based on the results, she came to the conclusion that almost 60% of preschools offer such activities (22 out of 38). English activities are available in these preschools, though German activities are offered in two preschools. Most of the professionals leading the activities are Early Childhood Educators (14, 64%). Eight of the professionals speak English at an advanced (C1) level (8, 36%) and 14 professionals have an intermediate level (B2) language exam (14, 64%) which means the language skills of the professionals should be improved. In most preschools (15, 73%) there is at least one foreign language activity a week. In one-third of the preschools the activities are in the mornings (32%), in three of them during the afternoon nap (14%), but in most of them they are after the afternoon nap (12, 54%). These figures show us that preschools fulfil the parents' demands but are unable to provide the two or three activities a week suggested by researchers.

In 2017 we contacted institutions in another Hungarian city in the Eastern region, in Nyíregyháza which is the cultural and economic center of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County and the seventh largest city in Hungary. The city of 120,000 inhabitants has institutions of primary, secondary and tertiary education, including the University of Nyíregyháza, which has a long history and trains students in several fields. Thanks to continuous investments and modernizations, Nyíregyháza is a modern and welcoming city in Hungary's easternmost county. During our research project it was revealed that in 1990, the very first playful language classes were organized in one kindergarten in Nyíregyháza at the request of parents. The sessions, offered at cost price, were held as an "extra-curricular" activity in the afternoon. In 2017, in Nyíregyháza were 34 state-run kindergartens of which 23 organized English activities for children (68%). Since 1990, the number of kindergartens where kindergarten teachers offer early foreign language development has been steadily increasing.

5. THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF AN EARLY START

Teaching a foreign language to preschool aged children appears also in Óvodai Nevelés [Preschool Education]: "Several kindergartens seem to be seriously interested in language teaching, some preschools even urge launching language programmes without any reason at all" (Fülöp, 1982, p. 75).

In Hungarian pedagogical literature there has been an ongoing debate about the advantages and disadvantages of an early start. Within the community of Early Childhood Educators and scholars working in the field of Early Childhood Education, the research and policy tend to focus on whether it is beneficial or not for a child to start learning languages at an early age in educational settings. There have been arguments about the age, regularity and

circumstances of early language activities (Furcsa et al., 2014). It goes without saying that in our ever-changing world, speaking foreign languages is necessary, and it is worth taking advantage of brain plasticity of the early years. At that age children are not aware of acquiring a language and the plasticity of muscles and their absorbing mind means children are capable of acquiring a native-like accent. Besides, children memorize more easily and an early start can contribute to young learner's attitudes and motivation (Koloszár, 2010). Since children take part in a foreign language activity as a group, it can develop basic interpersonal communication, problem solving and prosocial skills too. Furthermore, creating a positive and safe emotional climate for learning is essential. James Asher, a professor of psychology at the State University of San Jose California concluded that emotional factors are very important, meaning that language learning by involving games, singing and telling stories will reduce the pressure of learning (Oktaviandari, 2022). Whenever a child feels safe, they are more eager to show their full potential.

Hajdú, a language expert of the 1990s, argues that “possibly with acquiring the first language, the growing child should get other language input as well” (Hajdú, 1999, as cited in Kézi, 2014). According to Judit Kovács (2003), the goal of early language teaching is not only acquiring the language skills but also to raise motivation and improve learning strategies. Whenever teaching English to young learners the focus is always on oral communication (Oktaviandari, 2022). Classes are held in small groups of 10–15 children where the Early Childhood Educator serves as a language model and pronounces the words and sentences clearly but without exaggeration. Even if the child has problems while listening to rhymes or watching English cartoons, tales, language input provided by the Educator (especially when using non-linguistic signals like mimics, laughter, facial expressions, body language, signing or gestures) might be recognised and used for wider language understanding. Also, it is more important to

develop a process in which children understand that there are other languages apart from their mother tongue/first language than to achieve spectacular language results. Early Childhood Educators use the strategy involving as much of personally meaningful content as possible, e.g. focusing on children's everyday experiences or choosing topics relevant to their interest such as animals, bodyparts, parts of the house, flowers. The main rationale behind this strategy is to appreciate the young learners' efforts to use a foreign language for communication. When they need and want to talk about their personal interest and experiences, it is much more motivating for them. The Early Childhood Educator provides some new vocabulary every time with which they can describe their feelings and thus learn new words and expressions. An Early Childhood Educator is usually the primary conversational partner for the children, which is why it is important for him to be open both to asking and answering engaging questions (Konishi et al., 2014).

Developing soft skills such as intercultural competence is vital, as children will accept people who are different without prejudice too. Moreover, children get to know another culture and are going to be more open-minded and tolerant adults. Children can realize that language is a tool in everyday life. One of the most significant motivating factors for learning language communication is the desire to engage in real-life conversations with native speakers e.g. asking for an ice cream during a holiday abroad without the parents' help. Also, young learners might meet children who do not speak their native language (e.g. in a playground) which creates possibilities for learners to use their English and enjoy such opportunities. Learning languages at an early age has positive effects on the child's analysing abilities and metalinguistic development (Bialystok & Craik, 2010). Furthermore, the child's intellectual abilities and the joy of articulation influence the success of early language learning positively (M. Batári, 2008).

6. CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, we can refer to Konishi and colleagues (2014) for a list of six principles of second language development:

- children learn what they hear best,
- children learn words for things and events that interest them,
- interactive and responsive rather than passive contexts promote language learning,
- children learn words best in meaningful contexts,
- children need to hear diverse examples of words and language structures,
- vocabulary and grammatical development are reciprocal processes.

As for the disadvantages of an early start, it is often mentioned that children's attention span is limited and they are highly centred, being able to focus on only one dimension at a time. At preschool, the language competence of peers is generally poor and the English activities lack real communicative situations. Children bring their own repertoire of home language skills and usage into the classroom where they are supposed to learn new forms of language and ways of interacting. What is more, the lack of cognitive, linguistic and conceptual domains complicates the process. Another argument against the early start is that children have to acquire their mother tongue first as this is indispensable, rather than learning a second language (Vekerdy, 1989). A lot of parents agree with this idea and are convinced their child has to master her first language and then start learning other languages. They also think children are unable to switch between two or more languages and it has a negative effect on their emotional or cognitive development. However, it does not lead to language confusion or difficulty succeeding in an academic environment (Konishi et al, 2014). Speech therapists also raise some objections against learning English at an early age. Parents and teachers also claim that there is no point in starting language

learning at an early age as children are slower at learning at the beginning (in preschool and the first years of primary school) and they forget it quickly (M. Batári, 2008, p. 65; Enever, 2020). Furthermore, there are introvert, shy children or children with SEN, e.g. autism, ADHD or dyslexia, whose language competence may not be seen or observed in an English activity. During preschool years children develop their first language as well, their pronunciation is not adultlike and their sentences in L2 are generally simple and grammatically inaccurate (Piker, 2013). The authors also observed that play did not necessarily influence children's English language development (e.g. in House Area, children feeding plastic animals plastic pretend food). They also raise the issue of personality and how personality may impact sensitive social relationships impeding opportunities for language learning. Children tend to mix languages while playing, and even when mistakes disturbed meaning, the mixed-language play improved children's English language skills (Piker, 2013). At preschool age the role of the pedagogue is very important and, in order to be able to lead foreign language activities the language competence of the Early Childhood Educator has to be high. In some cases English activities are held just once a week, which provides very little language input; besides quantity, its quality is important too. Being exposed to a lot of language from multiple speakers, including native speakers of English, will create an optimal language-learning environment for ESL children and it will likely promote the abstract phonological representation of words, too (Konishi et al., 2014). Also, very little research has been carried out on long-term effects of an early start. Moreover, background factors, such as the role, the socio-economic status of the family and the attitude of the parents can also influence the learning process. According to Józsa and Nikolov there is no significant correlation between the years spent with language learning and the achievement of secondary school students' achievement either (2005). We also have to take into account the L2 input outside

kindergarten, such as the family, computers, smartphones, watching film series or cartoons (depending on the child's age) as they also play an important role in developing language competence. Graddol (2006) proposed that a substantial upward shift in outcomes can be attributed partly to the increased early provision in (pre)schools, together with an increased exposure to English out-of-school contexts since parents access private tuition for their children (as cited in Enever, 2020). ELLiE research also revealed that children watch films, (subtitled) cartoons and/or series on TV, listen to music, read books, comics or magazines and speak with others in the foreign language. Also, they use their language skills while playing computer games or on holidays abroad (Enever, 2014). Enever also refers to research providing evidence for the powerful influence of exposure to films and TV on reading and listening skills (2014). Nowadays research also suggests a trend in which increasingly younger children are engaged in online gaming activities which may be an additional factor in their earlier proficiency in English (Butler, 2017, as cited in Enever, 2020).

Hungarian children leave kindergarten at the age of seven, and this raises the question of their future. As it has been said before, in primary schools language classes start in year four so there is a three-year-gap in between. It is assumed that if the child does not use her English, it will be forgotten by the time formal language learning starts. The Policy Handbook of the European Commission (2011) also raises the question of continuity. It is vital to offer foreign language provision to achieve progress, though, there is varied provision. As a result, it is not feasible to achieve continuity from pre-primary education to compulsory schooling. Institutions provide different kinds of provision that further limit the satisfactory transition as schools may be unable to support continuity for children who have been introduced to a variety of foreign languages (Enever, 2014).

7. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Hungarian policy makers required schools to introduce the first foreign language classes by the age of 11 at the latest. It was believed that some parents in the wealthier urban regions might demand that schools provide an earlier start. However, the scale of demand was higher than any institutions had anticipated. According to Brown (1990), schools and local authorities found it impossible to resist the power of parentocracy and provided a limited budget to provide an early start with the financial contribution of parents (as cited in Enever, 2020). We must underline that before 1989 foreign language activities were not present in kindergartens.

The Policy Handbook (2011) also mentions the problems of quality and consistency. It is well-known that pre-primary language education is beneficial to every child, has positive effects on the child's emotional, social and cognitive development as well. However, responsibility for establishing quality foreign language education often lacks cohesion. There is no cooperation between local and central authorities, preschool and school education or language education (Enever, 2014). We can see these challenges in the Hungarian context and in our empirical research too.

Given the growth of this education sector over the past thirty years, it is surprising how little attention has been paid to the phenomenon in scholarly journals. Johnson (2009) suggests that the growth in the provision of early foreign language learning can be identified "as possibly the world's biggest policy development in education" (cited in Enever, 2020).

The primary goal of early language learning is to awaken and maintain motivation and a positive attitude, and to actively like the language, as these factors can serve as the basis for successful language learning later in life. Within the framework of early foreign language education, it does not cause anxiety in children to start speaking in a foreign language, as the framework itself

and the requirements are in harmony with their age and communication skills. Openness to language learning and language receptivity primarily develop in childhood. Language learning is a lifelong process, which may start in crèche or kindergarten, but continues even after graduating from secondary school or university. Early language education plays a significant role in optimizing the process of foreign language learning later and in developing various effective learning strategies. Also, L2 has an impact on the capacity of creative thinking, fosters cognitive and social-emotional development and forms a positive attitude to learning further. Stress-free, experiential learning is transferred to later conscious language learning, and this is one of the main benefits of these crucial early years of language education.

The present study offers generalisability in terms of introducing English in settings at an early age. However, we are aware that this paper brings up many complex issues and questions that can benefit from more investigation. My own observations encouraged me to carry out a pilot research project in the fields of early childhood and English teaching in Hungarian preschools. It turned out that they were launched as soon as the legal background made it possible and number of preschools offering English sessions is still on the rise. Also, parents are happy to enrol their children in preschools where English activities are available. However, media play an important role in language socialization as well: internet and IT tools can support learning languages. Many children regularly watch programmes, cartoons or stories in English with the help of modern electronic devices (e.g. laptop, tablet, smartphone). Furthermore, with the increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI), games are becoming more complex according to the child's ability level (Oktaviandari, 2022).

The lesson we have learnt from my research is that parents are willing to develop their children's language competence. At an early age, they sign up their children for English activities in

kindergarten, keeping in mind their future responsibilities and interests at school.

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