



"Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat, Where Have You Been?" – Strategies and Outcomes in Kindergarten English Language Development



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ABSTRACT

This study explores the inception and development of the English Language specialisation in Kindergarten at The University of Sopron's Benedek Elek Faculty of Pedagogy, launched in 2006. It examines how the programme introduced innovative approaches to early childhood bilingual education amid Hungary's socio-political changes, particularly following its EU accession in 2004. Using qualitative methods, including document analysis and classroom observations, the research situates the programme within Hungary's broader language policies and sociolinguistic context. It critically assesses the theoretical foundations of bilingual education during Hungary's transitional period post-1989 and explores practical challenges and achievements. The findings indicate that the programme promotes intercultural competence, bilingual proficiency, and pedagogical innovation, fostering openness and internationalisation. Overall, the study highlights the importance of aligning theoretical insights with practical application to develop effective bilingual early childhood education that supports Hungary's evolving educational landscape.

Introduction

Six decades ago, kindergarten education was recognized as a distinct area within higher education (Patyi, 2010, 2020). However, German language instruction had already been established in Sopron well before this, indicating an earlier institutional focus on language education (Babai, 2010; Pásztor, 2018). The introduction of English specialization, however, was delayed by nearly fifty years. It is both intriguing and valuable to explore the factors that influenced the early integration of English into Hungarian kindergarten pedagogy. Additionally, examining the social transformations that shifted English from a forbidden language to a tolerated one, and ultimately to the most supported foreign language, reveals significant social dynamics. This transformation was driven less by linguistic considerations and more by political, social, and economic factors. The paradigm shift in language education became particularly evident among students and teachers beginning in the early 1990s, a period marked by regime changes across Eastern Europe (Frang, 2019). These societal upheavals created new opportunities and motivations for adopting English, marking a notable evolution in Hungary's educational landscape.

Research methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to examine bilingual specialisation in Hungarian-English kindergarten education during Hungary's post-1989 transition. It critically analyses existing literature on bilingual education, focusing on socio-political challenges. Data were collected through document analysis, policies, curricula, official materials, and classroom observations, which explored teacher practices, student engagement, and language use. The systematic data collection ensured reliability, allowing for an in-depth understanding of both theoretical frameworks and practical implementation of the bilingual kindergarten programmes at The University of Sopron's Benedek Elek Faculty of Pedagogy.

The evolution of Hungarian–English bilingual kindergarten teacher training

In the evolving landscape of social and language pedagogical education, Hungarian teacher training institutions faced the challenge of expanding language learning opportunities for young children amidst shifting societal expectations. By the late 1980s, early initiatives, primarily private, began to introduce English language instruction to infants and kindergarteners. These efforts often involved small group sessions led by teachers specialising in language at the university, yet they suffered from a lack of comprehensive textbooks and methodological resources. This gap in training resulted in two primary issues: either teachers possessed strong language skills but lacked pedagogical expertise in early childhood education, or they were proficient in pedagogical principles but lacked sufficient language competence. Such a disconnect raised an essential question: how can one ensure high-quality language learning tailored specifically to young learners' developmental needs?

Recognising this gap, Péter Tárnok, Associate Professor at the Benedek Elek Faculty of Pedagogy, championed a significant reform in Hungarian language pedagogy in the mid-2000s. His vision culminated in the launch of the *English in Kindergarten* specialization in September 2006, initially attracting only six students. The program aimed to produce pre-school teachers equipped with at least an intermediate level of English, alongside a robust pedagogical toolkit tailored for early childhood language education. It also emphasized familiarity with children's literature and intercultural understanding, crucial elements for fostering open-minded, culturally sensitive educators.

This initiative posed a professional challenge not only for students but also for teachers, who, despite their expertise, were not traditionally trained as pre-school educators. To bridge theory and practice, students engaged in ongoing

observations within kindergartens and participated in professional dialogues with practicing teachers; an approach that underscores the importance of contextual understanding in pedagogical development.

Revisiting the foundations of language pedagogy and the concept of bilingualism

Although university lecturers were trained as language teachers, their academic backgrounds lacked modern psycho- and sociolinguistic insights essential for understanding early childhood language development. Isn't it crucial for educators to deepen their theoretical knowledge to effectively guide future teachers? To confidently initiate Hungarian-English bilingual pre-school training, they needed to clarify fundamental concepts, adopt consistent terminology, and ensure clear dissemination within the language pedagogical community.

At the outset, it is essential to clarify what we mean by bilingualism within the context of foreign language training. When a language is introduced at kindergarten, it is often already considered a second language, prompting us to examine the relationship between a learner's mother tongue and the foreign language. But what exactly constitutes bilingualism, and what is the profile of a bilingual individual? Historically, the concept of bilingualism has evolved alongside societal perceptions of language itself. In earlier eras, particularly when nations were less rigidly defined, it was commonplace for conquerors and the conquered alike to learn each other's languages, making bilingualism a natural aspect of daily life. However, with the rise of nation-states, bilingualism gradually became less normative, especially in Europe by the 19th and 20th centuries (Bene, 2000). Even towards the end of the 20th century, Wardhaugh (1995) noted that bilingualism could evoke ambivalent feelings: admiration for linguistic skill on one hand, and suspicion or alienation on the other. Given this complex history, it becomes apparent that defining bilingualism is more nuanced than it might initially seem.

Various scholars have proposed differing interpretations of what it means to be bilingual, reflecting the phenomenon's multifaceted nature. For instance, Bloomfield in 1933 (as cited in Hoffmann, 1991, 15) adopts a maximalist stance, asserting that only individuals who speak two languages as native speakers, proficient in both language and culture, can be deemed fully bilingual. Conversely, Haugen in 1953 (as cited in Butler & Hakuta, 2004, 114) offers a minimalist perspective, suggesting that a bilingual simply produces intelligible linguistic units in another language. Diebold (1961) takes a permissive approach, emphasising the ability to communicate using linguistic models within native contexts.

Weinreich (1979) and Grosjean (1994) adopt functionalist views, defining bilingualism as the use of two languages, either alternately or within daily interactions. Baker (2011) introduces a holistic perspective, considering linguistic characteristics, acquisition, and cognitive processes.

This array of definitions raises an important question: can bilingualism be neatly categorised, or is it inherently fluid? Bloomfield's broad criteria seem restrictive, limiting full bilingualism to native speakers, whereas Haugen and Grosjean advocate for a more inclusive understanding, one that recognises varying degrees of proficiency and function. As Bartha succinctly puts it, a bilingual is "someone who regularly uses two or more languages in their everyday interactions, according to their communicative and socio-cultural needs" (Bartha, 1999, 40). Ultimately, rather than seeking a singular, precise definition, perhaps it is more fruitful to view bilingualism as a spectrum: one that encompasses both proficiency and context, shaped by individual circumstances and societal expectations.

Reconceptualising language acquisition and learning in early childhood education

Understanding the distinction between language acquisition and language learning is a fundamental aspect of effective pedagogical practice in early childhood education. A pre-school teacher must recognise and take ownership of the pedagogical terminology used to describe their activity, as this directly influences the approach adopted and ultimately impacts the success of language development. Why does the terminology matter so much? Because it determines whether the focus is on natural, spontaneous acquisition or conscious, systematic learning; both of which are crucial at different stages of a child's linguistic development.

Wolff (1998) highlights this distinction in the context of bilingual education, noting that language acquisition begins in kindergarten, where children engage with songs and phrases in a foreign language through playful interaction. At this stage, the emphasis should be on natural, playful exposure rather than formal instruction.

A crucial realisation is that young children do not merely learn their mother tongue, they acquire it. This process is largely subconscious, driven by natural interaction rather than formal instruction. Kovács (2002) advocates for a holistic pedagogical approach during kindergarten, one that respects the child's developmental stage and employs methods that mirror first language acquisition. Why should methods for developing the mother tongue and foreign language be similar? Because aligning these approaches ensures consistency in communication

skills development and fosters a positive attitude towards language learning, which is vital for future conscious language acquisition.

The linguist Krashen (1981) introduced the distinction between language acquisition and language learning, providing a clear framework (see Figure 1):

Aspects	Language acquisition	Language learning
Processing	unconscious	conscious
Goal	delivering the message	delivering knowledge on the language
Focus is on	the function	the form
It rewards	risk	accuracy, carefulness
Teacher's role	partner, co-communicator	checker, controller
Learner's role	senses rules	applies rules
Error correction	inhibiting	crucial
Communication	appears as a process	appears only as a goal
Way of learning	integrated	specific

Figure 1. – Krashen's (1981) language acquisition and language learning distinction adapted from Kovács (2014)

His model underscores that acquisition is a subconscious, natural process focused on communication and message conveyance, whereas learning involves conscious knowledge of linguistic forms, often accompanied by prescriptive correction and a focus on accuracy. For instance, in the classroom, the teacher's role shifts from that of a partner supporting natural communication to a more prescriptive guide ensuring linguistic correctness. The learner, in turn, moves from feeling their way through rules to actively following them. Understanding the differences between acquisition and learning helps tailor pedagogical strategies that foster both fluent communication and linguistic precision.

While the terms 'learning' and 'acquisition' are often associated respectively with the mother tongue and foreign language, Kovács (2014) reminds us that these concepts are flexible. Foreign language learning is not confined to children; adults also acquire languages through immersion or study, and professionals often learn specialised terminology. The essence for pre-school teachers, however, is the naturalness of acquisition. Fostering spontaneous, meaningful language use, rather than forced memorisation, supports both the child's innate capacity for language and their future conscious learning. When these principles are embraced, the methods for developing the mother tongue and foreign language converge, creating a cohesive language environment that benefits all learners.

In conclusion, appreciating the nuanced differences between language acquisition and learning enables educators to design developmentally appropriate, effective language programmes. Such understanding ensures that language development remains a joyful, natural process that prepares children for lifelong communication skills.

Re-evaluating early language development: weighing the pros and cons

The debate surrounding the necessity and efficacy of early language development has still not been settled. Rooted in the critical period hypothesis (Navracsics, 1998), proponents argue that “the sooner the better”, emphasising the advantages of early exposure. Conversely, critics often challenge this view on psychological grounds, questioning whether early language acquisition genuinely confers significant benefits. Interestingly, experienced researchers tend to adopt a neutral stance, recognising the complexity of the issue. Hoffmann (1991), for instance, dismisses the assumption that children are inherently easier language learners than adults, yet he acknowledges children’s superior phonetic ability (Hoffmann, 1991, 36). On the other hand, Ellis (1994) highlights that adults tend to progress more swiftly in language learning due to their more developed cognitive and social skills, particularly in vocabulary acquisition. Johnstone’s (2002) comprehensive study further indicates that children may hold advantages in phonetics, motivation, and inhibitions, while adults benefit from greater maturity and targeted learning strategies. This nuanced understanding underscores that both age groups possess distinct strengths, prompting the question: should language education strategies be tailored accordingly?

Kovács (2009) presents a compelling critique of common misconceptions about early language learning, contrasting unfounded fears with pedagogical realities. For example, the myth that preschoolers are too immature for foreign languages ignores the fact that learning a second language is qualitatively different from the mental strain associated with adult learning. Similarly, the belief that children must master their mother tongue first overlooks the brain’s capacity to store multiple languages simultaneously, which are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary. Critics also dismiss early language learning as useless, yet this overlooks how language skills enhance divergent thinking and cognitive development. Concerns about time taken away from play are countered by evidence that language acquisition can be embedded within physical activities or singing, making it an enjoyable and natural part of play. Lastly, the perceived shortage of qualified professionals is increasingly addressed through growing training programmes, such as those emerging in Hungary.

The kindergarten method: approaches to bilingual education in pre-school settings

Pre-school education basically employs two principal methods for fostering the relationship between educators and children within a bilingual context: the “One Person – One Language” approach and the “Playful Bilingual” method. The former involves two kindergarten teachers working with the same group, each speaking a different mother tongue, mirroring natural familial language dynamics (Busch, 2011). This method aims to facilitate authentic language acquisition, with a particular emphasis on pronunciation and pronunciation accuracy, as children quickly identify and adapt to the language associated with each caregiver. When applied consistently and with pedagogical and psychological care, the outcomes can be notably effective. However, its practical implementation is limited by the scarcity of native English-speaking teachers willing to work in Hungarian kindergartens, making it feasible only in select institutions.

Conversely, the “Playful Bilingual” method presents a more pragmatic alternative, especially within the Hungarian context. Here, the teacher assumes a bilingual role, introducing the foreign language through engaging and enjoyable activities that encourage natural language learning. While language progress may be more modest compared to the “One Person – One Language” approach, this method benefits from easier implementation and greater flexibility. Hungary’s long-standing tradition of training minority-language kindergarten teachers, covering languages such as Croatian, German, Romanian, Serbian, Slovenian, and Roma, has provided a solid foundation for early language instruction. Notably, prior to the 2000s, no formal programmes for early foreign language development existed outside minority languages.

The Benedek Elek Faculty of Pedagogy in Sopron has played a pivotal role in developing this field, drawing methodological insights from German-minority kindergarten educators (Talabér & Babai, 2004). The German model, although adequate, has required adaptation for English language teaching, leading to initiatives like Mrs Ferenc Talabér’s “Playing with Words, Playing with Speech” programme. The dual aim was to introduce English playfully within pre-school activities and to prepare future teachers for the 3-6 age group, ensuring that language learning remains a natural, pleasurable process.

The development of Hungarian-English bilingual kindergarten programmes

The integration of English language education into kindergarten settings has become an increasingly prominent aspect of early childhood development in Hungary. This initiative, rooted in innovative pedagogical frameworks, began in university-affiliated kindergartens, notably through collaborations with institutions such as the Anna Lewinszky Kindergarten and the Aranykapu Kindergarten. A pioneering figure in this endeavour has been Mrs Györgyi Soósné Orbán, who, in the Hétszínvirág group, undertook the formidable task of introducing young children to the nuances of English while mentoring students specialising in this field. Her efforts marked a significant milestone, as she was the first in the city to embed Hungarian-English bilingual education within an existing kindergarten programme: a challenge that demanded both creativity and perseverance.

Initially, the programme's foundation was intertwined with the *Step by Step* approach, which organised seven thematic activity centres, ranging from family role play and building games to environmental science and artistic pursuits. These centres were designed to be integrated with foreign language teaching, seamlessly weaving English into the children's daily routines through diverse, playful activities. This approach worked for several years, fostering a natural and immersive language environment. However, as pedagogical understanding deepened and practical experience accumulated, it became evident that this framework was too restrictive to meet the evolving educational needs. Consequently, a specialised programme dedicated solely to foreign language acquisition was developed in 2010.

This programme, titled *Playful English Language Acquisition with a Rich Methodological Repertoire* (Soósné, 2010), responded to the increasing European and national emphasis on multilingual education. It emphasises the importance of playful learning, highlighting the psycho- and socio-linguistic foundations of language acquisition, and underscores the significance of developing foreign language skills across various educational domains. The programme recognises that language exposure occurs in multiple contexts within the kindergarten environment and provides organisational guidelines and material resources to facilitate this process. Richly illustrated with photographs and detailed methodological notes, it offers practical activity ideas aimed at cultivating interest in English through conscious alternation between English and Hungarian; a technique known as code-switching.

The core pedagogical principle underpinning this programme is playfulness, fostering a positive, pressure-free attitude towards language learning. Mrs Soós emphasises that ensuring a safe and engaging language acquisition process is

vital. She advocates for spontaneous language learning embedded within play activities, emphasising the importance of emotional bonds between teachers and children, sensory experiences (hearing, sight, movement), and a diverse repertoire of methods and activities. As she notes, “We need to ensure that the language learning process is safe: the possibility of spontaneous language learning embedded in play activities; language comprehension through various activities; English through situational and action-oriented activities; a close emotional relationship between the teacher and the child; experience through the senses: hearing, sight, movement linking with movement; a rich toolbox of both methods and activities.” (Soósne, 2010, 3).

***Play and Say!* – The new generation programme of 2025**

As time passed, it became necessary to develop a new Hungarian-English bilingual programme. Consequently, the new kindergarten programme, titled *Play and Say!* (Kitzinger et al., 2025), was introduced to meet the evolving needs of early childhood education. The modernisation of the curriculum ensures that teaching methods are aligned with current educational standards and best practices. Furthermore, the introduction of a new generation of kindergarten teachers brings fresh perspectives and innovative approaches, which, in turn, enhance children’s learning experiences. In addition, the programme incorporates more knowledge from applied linguistics, thereby supporting early language development and communication skills. Extending English language use into everyday routines helps children become more confident and proficient in a global language from an early age, a feature that is given particular emphasis in the new programme. Overall, *Play and Say!* aims to create a more engaging, effective, and future-oriented learning environment, ultimately preparing young children for the challenges of tomorrow.

Successful bilingual nursery programmes demonstrate that early language acquisition depends on natural, spontaneous strategies, and it is mirrored in *Play and Say!* as well. The programme follows Krashen’s (1981) Natural Approach, considering childhood’s phonetic flexibility, lower anxiety levels, and the ease of language transfer. Play-based learning, incorporating singing and rhymes, is central to early language development, as emphasised by the programme. It also promotes inclusive use of English across daily routines and activities, enriching children’s vocabulary and fostering cultural awareness. By integrating multilingual and multicultural practices, it encourages balanced language switching aligned with daily routines and cultural understanding. This approach supports

both bilingualism and biculturalism, drawing on methods from minority language education and other foreign language strategies.

In practice, the programme embeds English into everyday interactions such as greetings, instructions, and farewells, ensuring children are consistently exposed to the language. The weekly schedule is adapted to meet specific training needs, featuring short daily sessions on basic vocabulary alongside themed sessions that incorporate games, songs, and visual aids. A variety of methods, physical exercises, storytelling with puppets, arts and crafts, and singing, are used to expand vocabulary and promote cultural understanding through English-language activities. Multicultural education is integral, involving children from diverse linguistic backgrounds, which enriches the learning environment and encourages intercultural competence (Figure 2). The programme adopts a child-centred, playful approach, supporting a confident transition from nursery to primary school. Activities are experience-based and foster language and social skills through daily routines, drama, and interactive play. Emphasising multisensorial learning, it aims to develop language, sensory perception, and self-awareness within a supportive environment, preparing children holistically for future learning challenges.



Figure 2. – An example of a cultural landscape in Lewinszky Anna Kindergarten
Source: Author's photo

This holistic approach aims not only to develop linguistic competence but also to foster a positive attitude towards learning English at a tender age, raising the question: how can we best nurture a child's natural curiosity and capacity for language in their earliest years? The ongoing refinement of these programmes reflects a broader pedagogical shift towards immersive, playful, and emotionally

supportive language education, vital for cultivating confident bilingual communicators in a multicultural world.

Innovative approaches to language engagement in kindergarten settings

In previous chapters, we delineated the distinctions between language learning and language acquisition, highlighting their unique characteristics. When examining kindergarten activities, it becomes evident that foreign language education is not isolated from other pedagogical pursuits but rather integrated seamlessly into daily routines. Importantly, the language used is not the mother tongue but a different code, an additional language, which serves as a tool for communication rather than a conduit for new knowledge in itself. For instance, acquiring vocabulary related to numbers, colours, or body parts in a foreign language does not inherently expand a child's understanding of the world. While each language carries cultural connotations embedded within its vocabulary, it is not our primary focus here to explore these nuances. Recognising this distinction is vital for teacher candidates, as they must understand that traditional pedagogical activities, long established within Hungarian kindergarten education, can be effectively adapted for foreign language teaching, provided they are prepared and motivated appropriately.

Play remains the cornerstone of all preschool activities, underpinning the development of language skills in a natural and engaging manner. Simple role-playing games, as well as more complex rule-based or guided activities, offer opportunities to introduce basic vocabulary and simple instructions in the target language. For example, memory, card, and board games are not only enjoyable but also effective for fostering language acquisition in an informal context. Additionally, the interconnectedness of literacy and music education becomes apparent, as rhythm, movement, and melody significantly aid in learning English poems and sayings. The mnemonic qualities of songs and rhymes (Figure 3) facilitate memorisation and recall, making them indispensable tools in language development; particularly for grasping vocabulary, pronunciation, and intonation.



Figure 3. – Two popular children's rhymes
Source: Degryse, L. (1992). *Sing a Song of Sixpence*

Storytelling is another potent method, especially when employing familiar narratives, perhaps conveyed via puppet shows or visual aids, to bridge the gap between the child's mother tongue and the new language. It is advisable to focus on key elements such as characters and settings rather than the entire story, thus simplifying comprehension. Short conversations about visual aids or story fragments can be integrated into visual education, fostering an environment where language is woven into daily interactions.

Environmental education provides a natural context for introducing familiar concepts and phenomena in a foreign language. Seasonal changes, for instance, can be celebrated through characters like Froggy, the weather frog, who shares the day's weather in English. The importance of outdoor activities cannot be overstated; as Molnár (2019, 94) suggests, "in the woods, meadows, riversides, on nature trails, the possibilities are endless, you just have to go out of the closed classrooms into the 'open classrooms'". Such excursions broaden vocabulary relating to nature, colours, sizes, and properties of objects, plants, and animals, integrating language learning into real-world contexts.

Work activities, including cooking and gardening, offer additional avenues for code-switching, embedding language use within practical tasks. Movement

and physical activity are equally crucial; they not only make language memorable, associations with movement enhance retention, but also provide natural opportunities for giving instructions in the foreign language. Commands related to direction and spatial prepositions can be seamlessly incorporated into physical education sessions, facilitating subconscious learning. Achieving such integration, however, requires careful planning and thoughtful preparation by the educator, ensuring that children encounter the foreign language in spontaneous, playful, and meaningful ways.

In essence, effective foreign language teaching in kindergarten hinges on a combination of creative activity design and deliberate pedagogical planning. When activities are thoughtfully adapted, they foster an environment where language learning becomes an intrinsic part of children's everyday experiences, nurturing both linguistic and overall developmental growth.

Revitalisation and Specificities of the English Language in Kindergarten Programme

The specialised training programme in English Language in Kindergarten was initially constructed to build upon core elements of German nationality education, while also accommodating the distinct status of English within Hungary. Unlike German, which traditionally holds a prominent position in subjects such as literature, culture, and geography, the focus for English was more distinctly methodological, emphasising its teaching as a foreign language (EFL) rather than a second language (*Deutsch als Fremdsprache*, DAF). This distinction was crucial in shaping the curriculum, which aimed to foster both linguistic competence and pedagogical proficiency.

Launched in September 2006, the programme encompassed a broad array of subjects designed to prepare students for the multifaceted reality of early bilingual education. Key among these were English stylistic practice, English language teaching, descriptive grammar, bilingualism, methodology of pre-school activities, children's literature, English literature, and country studies. The inclusion of literary and cultural subjects aimed to deepen students' understanding of the societies where English is spoken, thus enabling them to approach their future teaching roles with cultural sensitivity and contextual awareness. For instance, the course on English children's literature, integrated with pedagogical methodology, provided essential insights into age-appropriate materials and their application in the classroom.

A pivotal component of the curriculum was the English grammar and style course, which served as an enduring foundation throughout the five semesters.

Given that students commenced their studies with varying levels of proficiency, the course aimed to establish a solid grammatical and stylistic basis. Achieving at least an intermediate level was a requisite for graduation, reflecting the programme's commitment to ensuring that graduates possess workable language skills. Moreover, the pedagogy courses, notably the methodology of bilingualism and English in Kindergarten, broke new ground by incorporating elements seldom seen in traditional English teacher training. These subjects fostered a nuanced understanding of bilingual education, preparing future educators to navigate the complexities of early language acquisition.

The programme's integration with practical kindergarten experience began from the outset, emphasising Hungarian-English bilingualism in real-world settings. This hands-on approach ensured that theoretical knowledge was immediately contextualised within classroom practice. The culmination of the programme was a comprehensive language examination that tested students' command of bilingualism, methodology, and literature. During mock exams, students demonstrated their ability to synthesise pedagogical principles, reflecting the programme's emphasis on applied knowledge.

In response to evolving student profiles, the curriculum underwent significant renewal, driven by an increasing number of students entering with intermediate or advanced language skills; some from bilingual secondary schools or with overseas experience. Consequently, the curriculum incorporated more advanced grammar units within stylistic practice, which was renamed English Communication Exercises to include modern digital resources and international exchanges such as eTwinning. The literary component was expanded to include American literature, recognising the transatlantic cultural exchange, while country studies shifted towards intercultural competence.

The pedagogical core was also refined to keep pace with current research in sociolinguistics and language pedagogy. Bilingualism curricula now reflect the latest findings in linguistics, and methodology explicitly emphasises bilingual skills within the Hungarian-English context. Recognising the rising number of theses on early bilingual development and international students, the programme prioritised equipping students with the skills to present their research effectively in English; both orally and in writing.

Values and benefits of the programme

The programme's features have yielded unforeseen yet significant benefits that have enriched the training of kindergarten teachers in Hungary and expanded the pedagogical landscape at the Benedek Elek Faculty of Pedagogy. This initiative

equips future teachers with specialised language pedagogical knowledge, enabling them to foster foreign language development in young children; a pursuit rooted in early language development experiments from the 1990s.

In addition to practical training in nursery settings, the *English in Kindergarten* specialisation has become a fertile ground for research, attracting both students and educators alike. Numerous theses have explored the practicalities of Hungarian-English bilingualism, and the field of multilingual and multicultural education has gained prominence. These scholarly activities have been complemented by the creation of digital teaching materials (Kitzinger, 2019) and the dissemination of research through lectures, both domestically and internationally, thereby elevating the profile of The University of Sopron. Furthermore, international collaboration has been fostered through projects like KA2¹ with partners from Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Indonesia, aimed at exchanging best practices and strengthening pedagogical ties.

Hungary's accession to the European Union in 2004 dramatically expanded opportunities for higher education mobility. Those with proficient foreign language skills, particularly English, have reaped the greatest benefits, exemplified by the high levels of participation in Erasmus+ programmes. Since their group study trip to London in 2008, numerous students from the Faculty of Benedek Elek have experienced mobility across the UK, Italy, Spain, Poland, and Norway. These exchanges confer invaluable linguistic, intercultural, and professional benefits for both teachers and students. International students from diverse European nations and Kazakhstan, primarily studying in English, further contribute to this dynamic environment. Their placements in English-speaking kindergartens reinforce the specialisation's role as a catalyst for internationalisation, fostering intercultural understanding and elevating the quality of teacher training in Hungary.

Summary: Progress in early bilingual education

The programme, which has successfully operated for nearly two decades, aims to offer pre-school children an age-appropriate and engaging introduction to English language learning. Its core philosophy emphasises playful methods, predominantly integrated within other pre-school activities, an approach aligned with the pedagogical principle of “learning by doing”. This strategy ensures that young learners acquire language skills in a natural, non-intimidating environment, fostering both enthusiasm and sustainability.

¹ KA2 project entitled: *Curriculum for cultural and social diversity in preschool education*.

Recognising the evolving social landscape and the accompanying socio-linguistic challenges has been fundamental to the programme's development. As globalisation and multiculturalism become more prevalent, early language education must adapt to meet specific community needs, ensuring inclusivity and effectiveness. The programme's design reflects this awareness, aiming not only to teach language but also to support children's social integration and cultural awareness.

In recent years, the programme's ongoing development has increasingly incorporated insights from cutting-edge research in language pedagogy, psycholinguistics, and neuropedagogy (Varga, 2018; Varga & Szécsi, 2018). These disciplines provide a nuanced understanding of how children acquire language, the cognitive processes involved, and the neurological basis for learning. By applying such research, the programme continuously refines its methods to optimise learning outcomes.

Furthermore, the integration of the latest theories on children's learning (Varga & Kissné, 2015) has enabled the programme to enhance its pedagogical framework. This scholarly input informs the development of teaching strategies that are both scientifically grounded and practically effective. As a result, the programme serves a dual purpose: it functions operationally within kindergartens while simultaneously establishing a robust foundation for bilingual kindergarten teacher training.

In conclusion, this comprehensive approach ensures that the programme remains relevant and adaptive in a changing social context. By merging empirical research with playful, child-centred methods, it aims to foster early language acquisition that is both effective and enjoyable, ultimately contributing to the holistic development of young learners in an increasingly multilingual world.

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