

Foreign Language Teaching and Learning at the Different Educational Levels. Aims and Effectiveness

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Abstract

In the Hungarian school education language teaching takes an important place, nevertheless the results are unsatisfactory. I tried to find out the main reasons for it, therefore I talked with students of the Kaposvár University and let them fill in a questionnaire about their language studies and experiences, their opinion about language teaching at the different educational level before the university. Prior to a short presentation and evaluation of the answers I give insight into the Hungarian educational system, the features and main aims of the language teaching from the kindergarten to the university. By the outlining of the deficiencies the problems at the transition from one educational level to the other get a stressed importance.

Fremdsprachenunterricht und –lernen auf den verschiedenen Unterrichtsstufen. Ziele und Effektivität

Zusammenfassung

Im ungarischen Schulunterricht nimmt Fremdsprachenunterricht eine wichtige Stelle ein, trotzdem sind die Ergebnisse nicht zufriedenstellend. Ich versuchte dessen Hauptgründe zu ermitteln, hierzu diskutierte ich mit Studierenden der Universität Kaposvár und ließ ich sie einen Fragebogen ausfüllen über ihre Sprachstudien und Erfahrungen, ihre Meinung über Sprachunterricht auf den verschiedenen Unterrichtsstufen vor der Universität. Vor einer kurzen Präsentation und Auswertung der Antworten gebe ich Einblick in das ungarische Schulsystem, in die Züge und Hauptziele des Sprachunterrichts vom Kindergarten bis zur Universität. Bei der Erörterung der Mängel wird besonderer Akzent auf die Probleme beim Übergang von einer Unterrichtsstufe in die andere gelegt.

Keywords:

Foreign language teaching and learning
Aims
Effectiveness

Schlüsselwörter:

Fremdsprachenunterricht und -lernen
Ziele
Effektivität

1 Introduction

Language teaching takes an important place in the Hungarian school education, nevertheless the results are unsatisfactory. In order to improve the present-day situation and to make language teaching and learning more effective we have to examine the possible reasons and to try to abolish the deficiencies. In the following I present some of the deficiencies and tasks –relying on my teaching experiences and on the opinion of the students of our university.

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2 The Hungarian school system

Kindergartens and schools can be established and maintained in Hungary by the state, local governments, minority local governments, legal entities or natural persons. Participation in education is mandatory between the ages of 3 and 16. The kindergarten education is compulsory from age 3 from this year.

Primary and lower secondary education is typically organized as an 8-grade system (grades 1-8), however 4- or 6-grade schools are also offered. At the upper secondary level general secondary schools, vocational secondary schools or vocational schools are provided.¹

Higher education programs are offered in accordance with the Bologna degree structure.

3 Foreign language competences of the Hungarians

According to the EUROBAROMETER survey 2012 (Special Eurobarometer 386 Europeans and their languages, 2012 February-March, publ. June 2012) 35% of the Hungarians can speak at least one language beside their mother tongue, 13% minimum two, and 4% at least three foreign languages. This means that 65% of the Hungarians are not able to speak any foreign languages, and with this fact Hungary stands at the last place among the European countries.

These facts are anyway thoughtful, in particular the tendency that the proportion of them who are able to speak at least one foreign language has decreased in Hungary (with 7 points). A certain part of the reasons has to be searched in the foreign language education in the schools.

4 Foreign language teaching within the educational system

In this part I give a short introduction about the foreign language teaching and learning opportunities at the different levels of the Hungarian school system.²

4.1 Kindergarten

Beside the bilingual kindergartens there are many general kindergartens with foreign language activities. There are great demands on early foreign language development, mainly in English.

4.2 Primary school – Lower secondary school (grade 1-8)

In the primary schools in Hungary the foreign language teaching is obligatory from the 4th class, but schools can teach foreign languages from the 1st class. The first foreign language can be English or German, the learning of this language should be provided also at the upper level. Earlier the learning of English and German represented approximately similar weigh, indeed the number of pupils who learned German preceded the learners of English. In 2005 the choice of English dominated unambiguous both at the primary-lower secondary level and at the upper secondary level (Csizér, Dörnyei, Nyilasi, 1999 and Szénay, 2005). The pupils have opportunity to learn another foreign language from the 7th grade.

The main aim with foreign language teaching and learning is to reach the level A2 in the first foreign language.

Also bilingual primary schools function in Hungary since 1996. In these schools three subjects have to be taught in the foreign language, that means 35-50% of the total number of lessons. The aim of this school is to reach the level B1 until the end of the 8th class.

4.3 Upper secondary school (grade 9-12)

4.3.1 Grammar school

There are different types of grammar schools: 4-, 6- and 8-grade grammar schools. The first one is the most general. In the 4-class grammar schools two foreign languages are taught. In the 6- and 8-class grammar schools the students can learn a third additional language.

Normally the students can learn the first foreign language in three-four lessons a week. They have to learn a second foreign language, too. They can generally choose from English, German, French or Italian.

In the 1990s special classes for a foreign language were started. In these classes the students learn the certain foreign language with higher number of language lessons (8, 10 or 12 lessons in a week).

The aims of language teaching and learning at this level are minimum the level B2 in the first foreign language and level A2 in the second foreign language.

Bilingual schools function also at this educational level, in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Russian. In these schools at least three subjects have to be taught in the target language.

This form of teaching seems to be efficient because the majority of the students get a language certificate at level C1 in the target language and a B2 in the second foreign language.

4.3.2 Vocational secondary school

The students in the vocational secondary school have to learn one foreign language. Only 12-15% of them have opportunity to learn a second foreign language, too.

Every grammar and vocational secondary school can start a so called language preparatory class where at least 40% of the obligatory lessons are used for intensive foreign language learning.

The aim with the language teaching and learning is to reach the level B1 in the first, and level A2 in the second foreign language.

4.3.3 Vocational school

Unfortunately the compensation of the linguistic disadvantage and keeping up with the level A2 obtained in the primary school can be the aim of language teaching in this type of school.

4.4 University, college

The aim of learning foreign languages at the university or college is to get special language knowledge in one or two languages, built on the language skills obtained in the general education.

In the last years the priority of the foreign language learning has been transferred to the upper secondary schools. At many universities there were no foreign language trainings because of decreasing financial subsidy, so many students could not/cannot meet the language exam requirement and have not got/do not get their degree (approx. 30% of the students).

5 Effectiveness of language teaching and learning. Results of my survey

In 2014 I took a survey with a questionnaire among students of the Kaposvár University about their foreign language skills, language studies, attitude to the foreign language(s), experiences and opinion about language teaching at the schools. All four faculties of the university (Faculty of Pedagogy, Faculty of Economy, Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Environment and Agriculture) took part in the survey. Altogether 191 informants answered the questionnaire.

A significant majority of the students (59%) has learnt the foreign language for more than ten years, more than 33% of them have it learnt for five-nine years. However, the proportion of the students, who do not have a language exam certificate, is quite high: 60%. 2% of the certificate-holders have a certificate at level B1, 34% at level B2 and 4% at level C1.

All these facts show that the results of the language learning through a number of years are not satisfactory, not efficient. I try to explore the reasons, why the majority of the students cannot reach the

appropriate language knowledge in the schools, generally after nine-ten years of learning. Some important factors will be presented in the next points.

5.1 Language choice

In the first place among the answers of the students stands, that only one language could be chosen or the learning of this language was obligatory at the school (28%). This was most typically for English. 13% of the students learnt a language after choice of their parents. Only about 8% of them mentioned as motive for the language choice the sympathy for the language. This means, that for 45% of the informants the "choice" of a foreign language determined the circumstances and opportunities and not the individual impressions and positive attitudes to the language.

5.2 Satisfaction with the language teaching at the school

Less than a half of the students (46%) was very satisfied or rather satisfied with the language teaching in the primary and lower secondary school, 25% were moderate satisfied, and 16% were rather dissatisfied or totally dissatisfied with it.

With the upper secondary school language teaching more than a half of the students (53%) was very satisfied or rather satisfied, 30% were moderate satisfied, and 14% were rather dissatisfied or totally dissatisfied.

The most frequent reasons for the dissatisfaction in the primary and lower secondary school are the not competent teachers and methods and the frequent change of teachers. In the upper secondary school they are the too rare conversation/speech trainings, the frequent change of teachers, the not suitable methods and the not competent teachers.

5.3 Motivation

According to my experiences for a great majority of the students the only aim with the language learning is the obtaining of a language exam certificate for extra points with the admission to a university.

For them who plan a job abroad, there is a practical aim and it is more stimulating. In the case of some fields (for example economy, trade, tourism etc.) language knowledge plays an important role. Among these students we can find more, who have good language skills.

6 Problems at the transition from one educational level to the other in respect of the language education

6.1 From the kindergarten to the primary school

There is no state subsidy for language education in the kindergarten, if the maintainer can finance it and the institution has competent kindergarten teachers, it is possible to offer language education.

The most typical counter-arguments with regard to the introduction of language education in the kindergarten are the organizational difficulties and the continuity. Many schools do not start with language teaching in the first class or they start it in another language. (In most cases English is taught in the primary schools as first foreign language, this supports to the further predominance of English.)

6.2 From the lower secondary school to the upper secondary school

The most frequent problem in the transition from the lower secondary to the upper secondary school is that the continuity is often not provided, for example in case of school-change or teacher-change. Another problem is that the upper secondary school does not build on the knowledge got in the primary and lower secondary school. At this level two-thirds of the students "continue"/learn the language from the beginning or on basic level. A large part of the students lose hereby the interest and motivation in learning the language.

These problems can come up, because there is often change of teachers in the schools and classes and the new teacher does not base on the work of the colleague or the language education at the primary and lower

secondary school is not efficient enough and the upper secondary school teacher cannot build on the language knowledge of the students. It can happen, that the teachers do not consider the knowledge that the students brought with them because of the simplicity, and the language teaching is started from the beginners/basic level.

6.3 From the upper secondary school to the university

At the university level, at many institutions the students can learn a foreign language as optional subject, therefore they put it off long, and near the end of their studies they don't have the required language certificate yet. The reasons for it are the negative experiences from the primary and secondary level, the negative attitude to the foreign language(s) and the lack of success up till the university studies.

7 Summary – Tasks

With knowledge of the facts the following measures have to be done in the interest of making language teaching and learning more effective.

1. Early language activities should be offered for more children in more kindergartens with the aim to make them like the language and languages, to make them open minded, mobile people.
2. We have to show the pupils and students the practical benefit of languages, and language knowledge.
3. Students should be encouraged to learn languages in the framework of lifelong learning.
4. Language teachers should be well qualified persons, who know the language well and like the language (languages) and their profession.
5. (Nearly) equal financial and human resources should be created across the country if we want to reduce the differences.
6. The educational institutes should provide real options with the language choice.
7. Continuity should be provided at the transitions.

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¹ More detailed overview about the Hungarian educational system and institutions you can find at www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/archive/Countries/WDE62006/CENTRAL_and_EASTERN_EUROPE/Hungary/Hungary.htm and <https://www.justlanded.com/english/Hungary/Hungary-Guide/Education/The-Hungarian-education-system>.

² *A nemzeti idegennyelv-oktatás fejlesztésének stratégiája az általános iskolától a diplomáig.* Fehér könyv 2012-2018. 2012. december.