

Place and Assessment of Foreign Language Education and Knowledge

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Abstract

In my presentation I would like to show on the one hand which position has foreign language education/teaching in the education, at the different levels of education and in the educational-political aims in Hungary, on the other hand what is the attitude of the Hungarian population to foreign language learning/education, and what think people, students how important is foreign language learning.

Platz und Beurteilung von Fremdsprachenunterricht und Fremdsprachenkenntnissen

Zusammenfassung

In meiner Präsentation stelle ich vor einerseits, was für eine Stellung Fremdsprachenunterricht in der Bildung, auf den verschiedenen Stufen der Bildung und in den bildungspolitischen Zielsetzungen einnimmt, andererseits, wie die Einstellung der Ungarn zu Fremdsprachenlernen ist und wie wichtig sie bzw. Studierende Fremdsprachenlernen einschätzen.

Keywords:

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Educational aims
Foreign language skills

Schlüsselwörter:

Fremdsprachenunterricht
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1 Introduction

Foreign language education has gone through changes in the last decades. In the stead of Russian came English and German as school foreign languages, foreign languages take an important place in school education. Hereinafter it will be presented what place take foreign languages, what are the aims with them in the different types of schools, how efficient is foreign language education and what people and students think about the importance of foreign language learning and skills.

2 General order of language teaching – foreign language teaching within the educational system

One of the most important documents regulating the school foreign language education is the National Core Curriculum based on the Law on National General Education (2011). The National Core Curriculum determines the beginning of language teaching in school and the number of lessons. It includes the following directions:

– From the fourth grade till the end of the compulsory education every pupil has to take part in the primary and secondary school teaching of modern languages. In some cases the pupils have the right to start learning foreign languages already before the fourth class in the primary school.

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– In the primary school every pupil has to learn at least one foreign language besides the mother tongue. In the grammar school the pupils must have applicable skills in two foreign languages.

– There is a free choice of languages, depending on the local demands and possibilities. The most popular modern languages (English, German) can be chosen, or rarely learnt foreign languages or minority languages for pupils who have another mother tongue than Hungarian. In addition also dead languages can be taught as a second language but this is not regulated in the Core Curriculum.

– The basic aim is that the students become qualified, mobile and multilingual people. The Core Curriculum describes the basic aim of language learning and teaching: the development of communicative language competences. This is laid down in three points:

- At the end of the compulsory education pupils have to be able to use one foreign language adequately or two languages not only in the education but also in the personal, public and professional context.
- During the language learning process pupils should develop a positive attitude and motivation to language learning, to the language, to the people who speak the foreign language, their culture or to other languages and cultures generally.
- The pupils should be able to develop their language skills by themselves and to learn other languages successfully.

3 Position of foreign languages in the education

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.¹

3.1 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.

3.2 Primary school – Lower secondary school (grade 1 to 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 if they have enough foreign language teachers. In accordance with the National Core Curriculum the first foreign language could be English, German, French or Chinese, in practice it is English or German. The learning of this language should be provided also at the upper level.

3.3 Upper secondary school (grade 9 to 12)

3.3.1 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 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 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.

3.3.2 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.

3.3.3 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.

3.4 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 requirements and have not got/do not get their degree (approximately 30% of the students).

4 Attitudes to foreign language learning

4.1 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.

4.2 Attitudes of the Hungarians to foreign language learning

4.2.1 Language learning activity

In the next part I present the attitudes of Hungarians to foreign language learning on the basis of the EUROBAROMETER "Europeans and their languages" 2012.

Respondents were asked about their past, current and future plans in relation to learning a language. The results can be summarised into three categories of language learners: Very active language learners – those who started learning a new language in the last 2 years and have continued to learn a new language in the last 2 years, active language learners – those who either started learning a new language in the last 2 years or continued to learn a new language in the last 2 years and inactive language learners – those who have not learnt a language recently and may or may not intend to start in the coming year or who have never learned any language other than their mother tongue.

According to the survey the majority of Europeans (75%) are inactive language learners, a fifth of them (20%) are active, only a very small minority (1%) are very active language learners. 72% of the Hungarians are inactive and only 17% are active language learners, less than 5% are very active.

4.2.2 Motivation

At a national level, member states where respondents are most likely to mention working in another country as an advantage of learning a new language are Spain (79%), Greece (73%), Lithuania (72%) and Hungary (71%). It

is seen as an advantage by the majority of respondents in all but four countries: Malta (29%), Cyprus (38%), the Netherlands (46%) and Italy (50%).

Meeting people from other countries is a view held by the majority in two member states: Denmark (57%) and Sweden (51%). It is the least widely held opinion in Hungary (11%).

4.2.3 Advantages of learning languages

Most Europeans think that a key advantage of learning a new language is the ability to work in another country. Hungary is one of the member states where respondents are most likely to mention working in another country (71%). Meeting people from other countries is the least widely held opinion in Hungary (11%). Personal satisfaction is least likely to be mentioned by those in Hungary (19%).

	To be able to work in another country	To use at work (including travelling abroad on business)	To use on holiday abroad	To get a better job in (our country)	To be able to study in another country	To be able to understand people from other countries	For personal satisfaction	To meet people from other countries	To be able to use the internet	To keep up knowledge of a language spoken by your family	To feel more European	Other
EU27	61%	53%	47%	45%	43%	38%	29%	29%	14%	10%	10%	4%
HU	71%	40%	26%	56%	38%	29%	19%	11%	8%	7%	7%	3%

Table 1: Motivation of language learning and opinion of Europeans on the average as well as Hungarians about advantages of foreign language skills (EUROBAROMETER, 2012)

5 The opinion of students about language learning and the importance of foreign language skills

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, of Economy, of Arts and of Environment and Agriculture) took part in the survey. Altogether 191 respondents answered the questionnaire.

A significant majority of the students (59%) has learnt the foreign language for more than 10 years, more than 33% of them have learnt it for 5-9 years. However, the proportion of the students, who do not have a language exam certificate, is quite high: 60%. 2% of them 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 skills in the schools, generally after 9-10 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 respondents 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 moderately 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 moderately 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.

In many cases the grammar-translation method is used in the lessons and the teacher is in the role of a traditional teacher who teaches frontal, the teaching is success-centred.

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 certificate for extra points with the admission to a university. Language learning is mostly certificate-centred.

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...) language knowledge plays an important role. Among these students we can find more, who have good language skills.

6 Conclusion

The documents show that the aims in the Hungarian language education are very high and well sounded but the facts about foreign language learning efficiency certify to its withstander. The statistics and our experiences at the university attest to the inefficiency of foreign language education in the primary and secondary level.

Significant steps should be taken in this field as more early language activities, well qualified teachers who like their profession, more games, interesting materials in the lessons, more communicative-oriented education. Furthermore it should be provided continuity at the transitions between the different educational levels, (nearly) equal financial and human resources, the practical benefit of language skills should be shown the children and students, as well as they have to learn how to learn a foreign language.

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