

**A CASE STUDY OF TEACHING ENGLISH IN KINDERGARTENS
SINCE 1989 – A NORTH-EAST HUNGARIAN CITY**

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Abstract

In our paper we deal with the significance of learning languages at an early age. The research aimed to explore how the teaching methods employed in kindergartens have altered with the change of the political regime in 1989–90. A case-study was conducted using semi-structured interviews (n=7) with early childhood educators and language teachers in 2016/2017. Oral history method was used because no written material was produced. Based on information we received from the informants and local authorities, early English activities were available in 68% of kindergartens in the North-East Hungarian city when the research was undertaken. The number of kindergartens which organize playbased foreign language practices has been increasing since the 1990s. In the beginning providing educational personnel was the most difficult task. Using audio-visual devices and props has been highly important, and Early Childhood Educators have been doing their best when working with children aged 4–7. However, there are differences too, due to the development of technology.

Keywords: language learning at an early age, playbased learning, methodology of early English, equity

Discipline: pedagogy

Abstract

KORAI IDEGENNYELV-OKTATÁS AZ ÓVODÁKBAN A RENDSZERVÁLTÁS UTÁN – EGY ÉSZAK-KELET-MAGYARORSZÁGI VÁROS PÉLDÁJÁN KERESZTÜL

A tanulmány a korai évek fogékonyságát emeli ki az idegennyelv-tanulás kapcsán. A vizsgálat során arra voltunk kíváncsiak, hogyan változtak az óvodai nyelvoktatás során használt módszerek az 1989/90-es politikai rendszerváltás után. A kutatási módszerként az *oral history*-t és a félig-strukturált interjút választottuk, mert a vizsgált kérdésről alig érhetőek el írásos dokumentumok. 2017 tavaszán hét interjút

készítettünk, a megkérdezettek között voltak óvodapedagógusok és nyelvtanárok is. A válaszadóktól és a helyi hatóságoktól gyűjtött információk alapján megállapítható, hogy a vizsgálat időpontjában az északkelet magyarországi városban az óvodák 68%-ban elérhető volt az angol nyelvű tevékenység. Megállapítottuk továbbá, hogy az 1990-es évektől folyamatosan nő azoknak az óvodáknak a száma, ahol heti rendszerességgel szerveznek játékos idegen nyelvű foglalkozásokat. Az interjúalanyok visszaemlékezéseiből az is kiderült, hogy a rendszerváltás idején a legnagyobb nehézséget az idegen nyelvi foglalkozások szervezése során a személyi feltételek biztosítása jelentette. Az audiovizuális eszközök és a szemléltetőeszközök a kezdetektől fogva kiemelt fontosságúak az óvodákban, és a pedagógusok igyekeznek minél változatosabb módszerekkel biztosítani a 4-7 korú gyerekek idegen nyelvi fejlesztését. A korai és a jelenlegi gyakorlat közötti különbséghez a technológia fejlődése is hozzájárul.

Kulcsszavak: korai idegennyelv-tanulás, játékos tanulás, korai angolnyelv-oktatás módszertana, egyenlőség

Diszciplína: pedagógia

In our study, we examine how the history of early language learning started in state-run preschools of a north-eastern Hungarian city since the change of regime (1989/1990). These years have not been singled out for intensive research regarding early English. This paper sets out to demonstrate that a specific focus on the 3-6/7 years age group offers much scope for valuable further insights to be gained. We chose that particular city because, due to its geographical location and natural characteristics, it is the cultural and economic centre of the county. The city of 120,000 inhabitants has institutions of primary, secondary and tertiary education, including a university faculty. The chosen city is large enough to offer several opportunities for early language learning, but not too large for the main features of these to be reviewed in sufficient detail within a paper. We believe that if we thoroughly map a city in terms of early foreign language learning, we can infer the situation in other settlements as well. The final image we present will reflect the conditions of the spring of 2017.

Our study was organized with two main objectives. The first was to learn about playbased

foreign language practices (English, German, French) in the kindergartens maintained by the local government. To do this, we contacted the leaders of the central kindergartens, who informed us about foreign language activities offered in their member kindergartens.

The other aim of our research was to explore how the first playful English language sessions started at the time of the regime change (1989/1990), why the groups were started, how they functioned and how they developed later. We chose the change of regime as a starting point because that is when it was first possible to organize foreign language classes in kindergartens with the permission of the authority responsible for educational settings in the town.

What is playful (language) learning?

To successfully learn the (L2) three components are needed: the learner who is motivated to learn, the speaker who knows enough to provide access to the target language and the social setting that brings the learner into frequent contact (Piker, 2013). In a playbased preschool children tend to

spend a lot of time interacting with other children. They play games, explore the environment, and work on projects with their peers either one-on-one or in groups. The playbased approach involves both child-initiated and teacher-initiated learning. The teacher encourages children's learning and inquiry through interactions that aim to stretch their thinking, for example an Early Childhood Educator can pose questions that encourage problem solving, prediction, and hypothesizing. This approach can also bring the child's awareness towards mathematics, science, and literacy concepts with simple questions such as *How long is that snake? How tall is this tower? How many syllables can you hear in this word?* Through these types of activities, children can develop social and cognitive skills, mature emotionally, and gain the self-confidence required to engage in new experiences and interactive learning environments necessary in our ever-changing world.

Playbased practices are applicable in language teaching as well using several props, flashcards, supplementary audio and visual material in the classroom to engage children's attention and help them recall the words and expressions from their mental lexicon. A prop can be anything that helps the Early Childhood Educator to explain the meaning of a word or phrases, such as building blocks, plastic animals and pretend food, playhouse, dolls, toy cars, train set, a bucket etc. Moreover, children can learn several age appropriate nursery rhymes, songs and tales that help them to widen their vocabulary in the new language.

The method offers an opportunity for children to learn in contexts in which vocalization, gestures, facial expressions are also used. Also, it helps children to develop abstract meaning of words as well as encourages them to recognise how words are linked to categories since vocabulary and grammar develop simultaneously (Konishi et al., 2014).

Positive reinforcement plays a crucial part in the language learning process as supports a safe learning environment where a child is ready to use a language in which he is rather unfamiliar.

The Early Childhood Educator continues to support language abilities of the children and motivate them to use it with their playmates (Piker, 2013). Older children can be able to play role games in the new language such as shopping, ordering ice cream.

Oral history as a research method

Oral history seemed to be the most suitable research method for gathering the events of the period between the regime change and the present day (2017). The oral history method is primarily used by historians, sociologists and ethnographers in their research, but it can be applied in various disciplines (Vargáné Nagy, 2010b).

In oral history, it is significant who provides the recollections, because their language use, style and emphasis can be different, which may suggest various things. With the help of the interviewees, we can better understand the events of the past and the interviews can provide information that may not be accessible from any other source. Also, oral history lacks the control of official history. We believe it is incorrect that oral history gives the researcher a picture which is too subjective.

In today's digital world, blogs, e-mails and various electronic content play a leading role, but we must also ensure the survival of oral storytelling, because it is often an irreplaceable source for us in reconstructing and understanding certain processes. This is one of the missions of oral history: Oral history serves to preserve a small slice of history (Vargáné Nagy, 2010a, 296.).

Oral history is also an important source for our topic because, after the change of regime, no written material was produced about kindergarten language learning, so we can only gain information

about the history and the situation of early language learning at that time with this method. Applying the oral history method, we aimed to find out what opportunities were offered for kindergarten language learning by analyzing interviews with kindergarten educators and language teachers. Our informants recalled their own memories when reporting on their past experiences.

The circumstances of the research

We interviewed seven (in one case, former) kindergarten educators and language teachers who had adequate information about the language classes in the kindergarten. Six of our respondents were active at the time of the interview, only one of them was inactive, where-as as the manager of an institution she had valuable information about the start of providing early languages in preschools in the city. Also, other respondents refer to their workmates from whom they picked up information concerning the very beginning.

The personal interviews took place in the autumn of 2016 and the spring of 2017. The individual interviews were based on a pre-compiled set of questions, but we did not rigidly insist on the written questions as the narrator and the interviewer collaborated.

Through (partially) open-ended questions asked during the 30-40 minute interviews, respondents were given the opportunity to incorporate their own experiences in their answers and we also asked them to recall past events in as much detail as possible and narrators' point of view also generated the flow of discussion. Interviewees were contacted using the snowball method based on preliminary recommendations. The locations were different;

the interviews were most often conducted in a kindergarten or, in the case of retired informants, in their home or at a pre-arranged location. Data was analysed in relation to the interview questions and we applied the relevant ethical guidelines, participants signed a written consent. During the empirical research the rights of research participants and their anonymity were protected.

We anonymized personally identifiable data so they can not be linked to other data by anyone else. Taking part in the research project was voluntary, informed and safe for the research subject. Social, physical and psychological harms were kept to the absolute minimum. We do our best to present our data accurately.

Four of the informants are qualified Early Childhood Educators with a significant work experience (2 informants) and two of them with appr. 5 years of experience. Some of the informants worked in the kindergartens in the 1990s and organized foreign language classes at the start. One of the informants used to work as the manager of the institution during the change of the political regime, while the other Early Childhood Educator has been providing early German to children since 1992.

They were both there when the first foreign language activities were held in the kindergarten. A third participant started providing English in 1994. Three of the informants came from a different background as graduated in Economics or Russian language and Cultural Management. However, their English language competence is fairly high as two of them are qualified teachers of English (BA). Only one respondent took part in a special course preparing its students to provide Early English to young learners in a preschool (Table1).

Table 1. List of informants. Source: Author.

N	Age	Educational background	Work experience	Foreign language skills	Extra information
1	66	Early Childhood Educator, BA	40	-	pensioner, former manager
2	59	Early Childhood Educator, BA	38	German B2	providing German to children since 1992
3	36	Early Childhood Educator, BA	9	English C1	providing English 2008-2017
4	34	economist BA, qualification to teach to English young learners	6	English C1	providing English to children since 2010
5	40	Early Childhood Educator BA	6	English B2	providing English to children since 2014
6	42	economist BA, qualified teacher of English and Hungarian BA	1	English C1	providing English to children since 2016
7	59	Russian teacher BA, Cultural Manager BA, English teacher BA	22	English C1	providing English to children since 1994

Findings Early language teaching in a North-East Hungarian city from the change of the regime to the present

In the 1990s, Western languages gained more and more space; especially the role of English and German intensified. Graddol (2006 as cited in Enever, 2020) claims that English is moving up the educational escalator reflects the importance of English at national policy levels and worldwide too.

Graddol (2006) also argues that trends towards ever earlier start ages are strongly related to expectations that secondary school outcomes should equip students with the ability to study in English, at least as part of their university studies (cited in Enever, 2020, p. 182). The following section will draw on empirical evidence to identify different aspects (e.g strengths and weaknesses) of language provision in a Hungarian city.

According to our informants, German was the more popular language at first, to be replaced by English later. „German language classes had unexpected success, children applied en masse. Of the 200 children in our kindergarten, 80 or 90 applied. First we were able to include German in our communication skills development programme, then years later a kindergarten educator took

an English language exam and started to hold English classes. So for a time, two languages were offered in parallel in our kindergarten, but the German sessions became depopulated within a few months”, recalls our respondent (Interview 1). She added that at the time of the change of regime, parents preferred the German language and the kindergarten could first find a teacher to undertake the task of teaching German.

Perhaps this was the first generation of parents to recognize the value of foreign language skills. As early as in 1990, playbased language classes were organized in one kindergarten at the request of parents. „Parents who had a good command of a foreign language, who were few and far between at the time, wanted their child to start learning a language already in kindergarten. However, the parents who had not had the opportunity to learn (Western) languages considered it especially important, and wanted to provide this opportunity for their child by all means”, said a former kindergarten head teacher (Interview 1). Enever (2005) describes it as an emerging bourgeois parentocracy in Hungary that has successfully demanded early-start English language teaching for its children (Murray, 2006).

The sessions, offered at cost price, were held as an „extra-curricular” activity in the afternoons. Foreign language activities were usually hosted in one of the group rooms or perhaps in a separate room in some kindergartens. „We were able to provide a separate room for afternoon activities in our kindergarten. There was a large hall where we held handicraft classes, folk dancing and language sessions”, recalls the head of one kindergarten (Interview 1).

The role of the educator

In early language learning, the educator teaching the foreign language plays a central role among educational factors. Teachers participate in the process not only through their personality, but also as the manager and organizer of the educational process.

Varga (2008) mentions that preschools offer several types of language activities, but to be successful a well-prepared teacher is necessary. The ideal case is when there is a qualified Early Childhood Educator speaking good English. If it is not the case, the outsider professional has to be aware of how to structure activities and the psychological characteristics of children.

According to Varga, an Early Childhood Educator has to have a wide vocabulary in the target language and has to be a competent and independent language user in order to lead joyful and successful activities in a preschool. It is also worth mentioning that he/she has to be able to deal with problems arising during an activity, praise children and respond to the children’s feelings.

Nikolov (2011) states that the key to early language learning is the well-prepared, highly motivated professional who plays an even more important role when working with young children than in a school, as the conditions of early language teaching are not centrally defined. She also mentions that motivation, methodological competence and langu-

age skills aimed at school-aged children are usually not satisfactory in these situations. To make it even more difficult, many Early Childhood Educators with high language competence have left the profession. 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).

The ELLiE study revealed several indicators that affect high achievement in language learning. Its data also interpret the important role of the educator/teacher and the provision of pre/in-service teacher education programmes (Enever 2014). The teacher selects the curriculum and organizes the different activities. At the time of the regime change, one of the most serious problems was the lack of professionals to implement the foreign language development of kindergarten children. This explains why only two or three kindergartens were able to provide the necessary personal and material conditions after the change of regime, as one respondent points out: „It was very difficult to find language teachers; there was a shortage of them even in elementary schools. Russian teachers abounded, of course, but we insisted on German or English. On the recommendation of acquaintances, we found an elementary school German teacher who helped start our language development. Later, a German college teacher whose children were attending our kindergarten also gave classes” (Interview 1).

The Policy Handbook of the European Commission (2011) also raises the problem of equity. In our context equity means foreign language skills

can provide children a valuable tool in the future through active learning. Young learners can gain valuable experience in a language that may motivate them to carry on learning it and/or other languages. Secondly, providing early foreign language activities do not need an extra investment from the authority responsible for educational settings in the town of the preschool since all the toys, board games, blocks or equipment can be used as props during the activities. During the teaching process, the House Area and all the items in the classroom can be used to support children's English production (Piker, 2013). However, the key person in the process is the Early Childhood Educator who has the ability and appropriate language level to engage children in the language learning process and present the basics of a language.

It is stated that the staff may not be well-qualified or the institutions simply lack the sufficient staff for satisfactory provision. The Handbook also reports that the availability of foreign language provision differs between socio-economic groupings and geographically as well. These lead to variation in quality and provision, resulting inequity for pre-primary children (Enever, 2014).

After the change of regime, the retraining of language teachers began, as with the end of compulsory Russian-language teaching, Russian teachers were left without jobs. Many of the language teachers completed a second degree course in another language, so by the end of the 1990s, the number of English and German teachers increased. Thus, it was easier for schools to find qualified language teachers, but there were still very few kindergarten educators with language skills in the country. It became increasingly common for primary school language teachers to teach classes in kindergartens. However, kindergarten educators did not consider this practice ideal, as the teaching methods used in schools and kindergartens should be different. A school teacher would come to the kindergarten to "tune" the children to English, but

an age-appropriate methodology for early language learning had not yet been developed." (Interview 2.). The language teachers working with the kindergarten children found it difficult to adapt to children's age characteristics, but playfulness was always an important aspect of the activities. Age characteristics such as children's memory, attention span, motivation, the need to play and move should be taken into account, to only mention a few.

Foreign Language Approach and Materials: After the Regime and Current Practices

Already in the 1990s, efforts were made to achieve foreign language development through play, and educators recognized the importance of playfulness, play equipment and toys in foreign language classes. The content of the activities was selected by the language teachers based on the guidelines given by the kindergarten educators. Learning embedded in play has been important since the change of regime right up to the present. In those kindergartens where a kindergarten educator was able to provide language development in her own group, the foreign language was used in everyday communication situations. „As soon as a kindergarten educator could speak English, she would use English words and instructions in her own group during everyday activities" (Interview 1).

The attention span of a six-year-old child is two to three times longer than that of a 2-4-year-old. Presumably, this is the reason why children could attend language classes in all kindergartens from the age of four or five. It also emerged from the interviews that children aged 4–7 participated in foreign language classes once or twice a week in groups of up to 15.

In the kindergartens, the average length of foreign language classes was 30 minutes as the National Core Programme of Preschool Education which is an edict allowing 30-35 minutes long

organized activities for children aged 3–6. Moreover, the teachers also took into account the children's interest and age characteristics. Teachers could determine the length of sessions at their own discretion, so sometimes they would only last 15-20 minutes. The great deal of playbased tasks and activities help to practise the foreign language, and the time frame is still flexibly adapted to the children's needs.

As several of our informants said, an annual plan for foreign language development was prepared in kindergartens in the early 2000s. „The content of the activities has always been related to the time of year, the seasons, holidays, animals and knowledge appropriate for children this age” (Interview 2.). It is in parallel with topics and projects used during activities in Hungarian. The plan consisted of the content, topics and educational goals planned for the given year. In one of the kindergartens, English and German language development appeared in the Local Education Programme for the year 2008/2009 and occupied a prestigious place in the Pedagogical Work Plan and in the evaluation of educational work. During the evaluation of the educational work, the development of the children was followed and methodological or other improvements for early language teaching were suggested.

During our interviews, we found that the informants most liked to talk about the visuals, the audio and audio-visual tools used in the foreign language classes. Visuals help to form associations, and children can remember new words and phrases better if they can try out or play with the various props. Facial gestures and body language also greatly enhance verbal information. Already in the 1990s, the activities were organized using the material conditions of the kindergarten: the toys, board games, books and puppets found in the group room were also used in foreign language classes. „Since there was no internet or even a printer, we used the objects in the room. We also

made small cards on which we drew and painted, often involving the children in creating them” (Interview 2.). The use of audio tools was already possible in the 1990s. An indispensable element of language sessions was listening to cassettes, which helped children learn rhymes and songs faster and more efficiently.

The audio materials were provided by the language teachers, but where the kindergarten educator herself held the foreign language classes, it was also her job to acquire the audio material. One of the respondents recalls this: „It was difficult to obtain methodologically accepted cassettes; I used the language audio material of the Sopron Kindergarten Teacher Training Institute from 1995 or 96” (Interview 2.).

Various props, such as puppets were also used for the motivation of children. „We always used puppets in the sessions. I had Zozo the monkey with me, with whom everything was funnier” (Interview 2.).

In the course of early foreign language learning, in addition to language development, it is also possible to get a glimpse of the target language culture. It is important to nurture an interest in children for the language they are learning, for its native speakers and their culture.

This aspect was already important for teachers during the change of regime, and they tried to acquaint children with the customs and holidays of the English-speaking countries (mostly the UK) in a playbased way. In English classes, for example, the double-decker bus or the Union Jack was often presented.

As we have already mentioned, foreign language classes were offered at cost price. All kindergartens provided opportunities for parents to track their child's development: „Parents could enquire or visit the sessions at any time, and after the completion of all major topics, we held an open session where the children performed the songs and rhymes they had learnt” (Interview 2.).

As for the present situation, in 2017, the city operated 34 municipal kindergartens of which 23 offered foreign language classes (68%), that is, foreign language development was included in their weekly curriculum. English is present in all 23 institutions, but German is also offered in two places and French in one place.

Summary and conclusions

The study explores changes in kindergarten language learning practices before and after a political regime change in Hungary in 1989 with particular reference to the example of a city in the North-East of Hungary. We chose the change of regime as a starting point of our research because that is when it was first possible to organize foreign language classes in kindergartens (with the permission of the authority responsible for educational settings in the town). At the time at kindergarten level parents and children were positioned at the centre, in an agentive role of negotiating space for policy development both in and out of school (Enever, 2020, p. 184). We can see how societal changes continue to influence language expectations with implications for teacher training. The change of political regime was significant for Hungarian society and language expectations shifted from pre-regime to 1989 and after the regime change. At first it was Russian, then German but English took over rapidly. Also, parents want(ed) their children be prepare for life to be able to speak a world language.

After that we described the possibilities for language learning in preschools in early childhood in a North-Eastern Hungarian city. Interviews with kindergarten educators and language teachers revealed what the activities were like in the past. In the first years there was a language choice as German and English activities were organized, though, gradually English played a more important role. The curriculum of foreign language activities

has been developed continuously and embedded in the curriculum of the institution. Thanks to the oral history method, it was revealed that playbased language practices were introduced to kindergartens in the 1990s, and the number of preschools where playbased foreign language practices are organized on a weekly basis is constantly growing. Based on the available data, we saw that 23 of the 34 kindergartens operating in the city currently have early foreign language development (67%). Since 1990, the number of kindergartens where kindergarten educators choose early foreign language development has been steadily increasing.

There are a number of differences between current foreign language activities and those around the change of regime (1990s). First of all, the legal background has changed, kindergartens can organize foreign language activities with the permission of the authority responsible for educational settings in the town, and business enterprises have also appeared in the field of early English language education (e.g Helen Doron Early English, Mortimer English Club, LCF Kids Clubs). While in mid-1990s there was no internet, nowadays the outside (pre)school environment exposure to English also has to be taken into account when talking about language competence of young learners.

It also became clear to us that few kindergarten educators spoke a foreign language in the 1990s, so classes were held by primary school language teachers in several institutions. The recollections of the interviewees also revealed that it was difficult to find staff to teach the foreign language sessions. Since the 2000s, more and more kindergartens have employed kindergarten educators possessing language skills, who are willing to participate in the language development of children, but there are still institutions where a primary school language teacher is entrusted with this task. In the 1990s, foreign languages were often taught by non-kindergarten educators who were happy to make an extra

income taking on additional classes in kindergartens (see also Enever, 2020). However, in 2017, language development is provided by methodologically well-prepared kindergarten educators in more and more kindergartens, consequently the teacher type has changed. Still, we can conclude that the teachers' language competency and qualifications should be improved. Enever hopes that across Europe national funding will address the remaining weaknesses in teacher preparation and provision of resources sooner rather than later (2014, p. 21).

The lack of qualified kindergarten educators can be linked to lesson frequency and intensity. The data also show that in most cases there is one (or two) English activity a week that does not provide the necessary language input for children.

Further differences arise from the technological advances and are related to teaching materials, such as props and visuals, audio and audio-visual tools. The central issue of the methodologically examined foreign language sessions is playfulness, also learning by doing and a holistic approach which have always been present in all foreign language activities.

The results of the research confirm that in 2017, the majority of kindergartens in line with the growing interest of parents, recognized the importance of early language learning, so more and more institutions are organizing foreign language classes. The kindergarten educators and language teachers who work there try to ensure the foreign language development of children aged 3–7 with methods as diverse as possible. However, the start age is usually four or five as it is believed in the first year of preschool children need time to get used to being outside the family in an institutionalized environment with peers. We believe it would be beneficial to carry out similar research in different regional centres of Hungary to see the trends more closely.

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Appendix 1.

Interview questions

General questions: name, job and position, qualification, age

How long have you been working with children?

When did you start to provide English language activities for children? Why?

When did the kindergarten first offered English activities to children? Why did they decide to do so? Are/were the activities fee-paying?

Where were these activities held? How often are/were these activities held, e.g once or twice a week? How long are the sessions? Does it depend on the age of the children?

How many children are/were there in a group? How old are the children? From what age can children take part in English activities? Are the children in groups according to their age?

Who held the English activities? What are the requirements for them?

What methodological principles are important? Do they have a plan for the month or the school year?

How do you/they decide on the material of the activity e.g. seasons?

What props and games are used e.g. puppets, pictures, board games, headbands?

Do/Did you use audio materials? Where did you get them from?

Do/Did you use audio-visual materials? What do you do to widen the children's vocabulary?

Do you read out tales for children? Do you find it important to introduce the culture of the target language e.g double-decker, flag?

How do you motivate children? How do you keep them motivated during an activity?

How important is playfulness? How important is physical activity within an English sessions?

What work forms are preferred e.g. group work, pairwork?

How important are/were visual education /music / understanding the outside world within an English sessions?

Besides learning English, what other competences and skills can be developed during an English activity?