**Primary Bilingual Programmes in Hungarian Public Education: Summary**

**Background to the paper**

The emergence of bilingual education in Hungarian primary schools raises four main questions:

1.) Why has this form of foreign language teaching appeared in the primary schools?

1. What is the number of such programmes, and how are these programmes spread across the country?
2. What beliefs and expectations underpin parental decisions in favour of bilingual programmes? What is the background of the parents wanting their children to be educated in such schools? How great is the demand for such schools?
3. Concerning the emergence and spreading of primary bilingual forms of education in Europe and in Hungary, to what extent these forms share the same features?

In order to examine and gain answers to the above questions, the following four hypotheses have been set up:

1. Due to societal, economic and political reasons, foreign language teaching in general, and EFL teaching in particular, have intensively been moving towards young age-groups. The number of early programmes has been increasing widely. It has been perceivable not only in Europe but also in Hungary since the 1990s. This trend has coincided with the Hungarian bilingual developments in secondary schools which started in the late 80s. The two above trends have resulted in the emergence of forms of primary bilingual education.
2. It is assumed that the number of primary schools offering EFL programmes have been increased in general, and those, offering Hungarian-English bilingual programmes, in particular. It is also assumed that these schools are of excellent central location and long educational traditions.
3. While secondary bilingual programmes were all centrally initiated by the Ministry of Education, primary programmes were mostly born as bottom-up initiatives for parental demands. These programmes are assumed to be popular mostly with parents of higher educational background and a considerable knowledge of languages.
4. Although Hungary might have been influenced by the international trend of early language instruction, the mass-emergence of bilingual programmes is a remarkable and unique achievement.

The role and place of bilingual education in the Hungarian public education have so far been researched at the secondary (Vámos 1993) and tertiary level (Kurtán 1993, 1994) only. The present dissertation aims to explore it with an orientation towards the primary level (age-group of 6-10 and onwards).

**The selection of the topic**

Although primary bilingual education has been present in the Hungarian educational context since 1989, the historical, pedagogical, methodological and educatio-political aspects, concerning its role and place, have not been revealed yet. The present paper aims at bridging this gap. Another reason for selecting the topic was a necessity for taking a stand in the sometimes fierce debates concerning whether and to what extent the demand for early language programmes in general, and bilingual programmes in particular should be met. It also raises a number of related topical questions, such as what age-group learners need language instructions, since what age, how intensively, in what form, and also whether all children need language instruction or only a selected group of them, if so, what base they should be selected upon, who is the appropriate person to teach, with what sort of qualification, etc.

**The pedagogical and societal benefits of the dissertation**

The present dissertation aims at revealing an entirely unexplored area based on empirical research. The results may hopefully contribute to overall pedagogical aims mainly at three levels. First, the organisational level of pedagogy, and most improtantly that of educational organisation and -planning, in order to find its place in Pedagogy. The second level is that of institutions (schools), with the aim of embedding newly aquired knowledge into the already existing general knowledge. Finally, the examination might give the theoretical bases to bilingual education, underpinned by some particular aspects of Applied Linguistics and Methodology. Since there has not been proper training for teachers working in such programmes, the present dissertation might also contribute to the initiation of pre-service teacher training in this field.

The past 15 years have witnessed an ever-growing interest towards foreign language as well a drive for early start. These seem to compensate for the delay of the past decades where hardly any western languages were taught at the primary level. Intensive language learning got a new impetus by Hungary’s accession the European Union (2004). Under the conditions of the increased role of communication bilingual education has a special value to offer.

**Research tools**

The main research tools were structured and unstructured interviews with actors of education, such as former and recent decision-makers, school principles and teachers, almost fifty people altogether. Parents represented an other circle of respondents. For their answers questionnaires were used with the involvement of 150 parents. Respondents form abroad were partly interviewed via personal communication, or contacted via the Internet and E-mail. The third way of first-hand source was provided by school visits for various reasons, e.g.: as chair of external exaination board in bilingual secondary schools, attending entrance-interviews for 6 year old-children wishing to enrol, visiting teacher-parent meetings, etc. The most benefitial of all these proved to be a 4 week volunteering experience in a bilingual primary school, teaching History through the medium of English.

**Structure and a concise review of the dissertation**

Following the Introduction the dissertation contains three main chapters, and ends with a Conclusion and a Summary. A xxx-unit List of References and Appendices close the paper.

The first chapter aims to reveal the research literature on the theory of bilingual education which is supposed to be placed interdisciplinary, bordering with linguistics, language pedagogy and educational policy alike.



Chart 1 The interdisciplinary character of bilingual education

The two key-terms: bilingual education and the language of instruction are defined next, followed by a table of terminology concerning the various existing forms of bilingual education. A new set-up is proposed which is based on the proportion of language and content in each educational form. According to the present classification programmes can be grouped in boxes the following way: in the first box there is no explicit content-instruction at all. It is only teaching material that is groupped around certain content-topics. In the second box forms of bilingual education represent a varying amount of content and language, beginning with the least contentful forms towards the most content-rich ones. The third box is for immersion-type bilingual education, with the most content ever.

Chart 2 The proportion of language and content-components in ELT, leading to bilingual education.

The central part in this chapter is the theoretical background to bilingual education which is supposed to rest on five components: a.) the communicative language teaching approach, b.) the language learning/language acquisition theory c.) cognitive pedagogy, d.) learning strategies, and e.) research findings on early language learning. This chapter closes with an attempt to classify existing bilingual programmes. All these components have proved to be beneficial in supporting the concept of bilingaul education in general, and its early form, in particular. These are the following:

1. the message and content-oriented character of communicative language teaching
2. the emphasis on forms of acquisition in Krashen & Terrell’s natural approach
3. the possibility of getting knowledge based on formerly acquired skills as cognitive learning theories claim
4. support, learning strategies provide in coping with the double task of learning through the medium of a foreign language, and
5. the way young learners think and learn very much fits the way early bilingual programmes are set up.

Chapter 2 focuses on international early bilingual programmes. It consists of four sections, examining the topic from the following aspects: a.) the international emergence and practice of early (mainly primary) forms of bilingual education, b.) the factors, which are supposed to contribute to this form of education, c.) European education policy of the past decades in favour of bi-and multilingual forms, and d.) the issue of how a target language has become the language of instruction. The first section examines and compares American and European programmes, followed by an attempt to list and classify the existing early European programmes, based mainly on own research. The next section claims that international trends such as globalisation and the increasing role of communication have brought about attitudinal changes concerning the role and place of language learning. The third section lists educational documents of the past 10-15 years in favour of European bi-and multilingual education. The last section focuses on the change in the content of language teaching as a consequence of the above factors. A renewed thinking on what language teaching should contain has resulted in the world-wide emergence of bilingual programmes.

The third and longest chapter is devoted to a thorough research of primary bilingual programmes in Hungary. Here the same aspects are researched as in the previous chapter (European programmes). The difference is in the greater depth Hungarian programmes are examined since this is the focus of the dissertation. The points of research are the following:

1. Since when have these programmes been existing in the Hungarian educational context?
2. Why did they emerge at that particular time?
3. Why has the target language been introduced as medium of instruction?
4. What are the motives behind the emergence of bilingual primary programmes?

This latter point was discussed largely in the Hungarian context, at three different levels of public education. The chapter closes with a summary of research findings.

The first section provides a close analysis of bilingual programmes in general, and EFL programmes in particular are reported upon from various aspects (their number, location, regional distribution, according to levels of education/target language/proportion contrasted to regular-programme learners/ year of introduction/the process and pace of introduction of programmes, evaluation of time when the programmes started in the light of international trends.

The most important findings of this chapter are the following:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Aims of the programmes** | **1996-97** | **2002-03** |
| Language maintenance | 384 | 88 |
| Language enrichment | 60 | 177 |

**Total: 444** **265**

 Chart 1: Foreign language programmes, run by Hungarian public education according to their aims.

(Source: Statisztikai Tájékoztató Alapfokú Oktatás 1996-97, 1998, Vámos 1998, and own research)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  **Academic year:** | **1996-97** | **2002-03** |
| Number of bilingual secondary programmes | 51 | 121 |
| Number of bilingual primary programmes | 9 | 56 |

**Total: 60 177**

Chart 2: The number of bilingual programmes in Hungarian public education in the past years.

(Source: Vámos 1998 + own research).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Academic year** | **All primary schools in Hungary** | **Number of schools running bilingual programmes** | **Proportion** |
| 1996-97 | 3765 | 9  | 0,24% |
| 2002/03 | 3421 | 56 | 1,64% |

Chart 3: The proportion of bilingual programmes at the primary level of Hungarian education.

(Source: Statisztikai Tájékoztató, Alapfokú Oktatás 1996-97 Bp. 1998, MKM, Statisztikai Évkönyv, 2002/03 [http://www.om.hu](http://www.om.hu/)).

1996-97 2002-03

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Number of participants in secondary bilingual programmes száma | 7420 | 12798 |
| Number of participants in primary bilingual programmes | 1597  | 10528 |

**Total 9017 23326**

Chart 4: The number of participants of bilingual education programmes in Hungary in the past years.

(Source: Vámos 1998, and own research).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Academic year** | **Total number of pupils** | **Number of pupils participating in bilingual programmes** | **Proportion** |
| 1996-97 | 965998 | 1597 | 0,17% |
| 2002/03 | 930386 | 10528 | 1,13% |

Chart 5: Proportion of pupils participating in primary bilingual programmes in Hungary.

(Source: Statisztikai Tájékoztató, Alapfokú Oktatás 1996-97 Bp. 1998, MKM). In 2002-03 the total number of primary schools in Hungary is: 3421 (Statisztikai Évkönyv, 2002/03 [http://www.om.hu](http://www.om.hu/)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Target language** | **1996-97** | **2002-03** |
|   | **Secondary Primary****programmes** | **Secondary Primary****Programmes** |
| English | 16 3 | 53 24 |
| German | 24 6 | 46 31 |
| French | 6 0 | 12 0 |
| Italian | 3 0 | 4 1 |
| Spanish | 1 0 | 5 0 |
| Russian | 1 0 | 1 0 |

**Total: 51 9 121 56**

Chart 6: The breaking of bilingual programmes according to their target language.
(Source: Vámos 1998, Kéttannyelvű Iskolák Egyesülete 2004, and own research).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Target language** | **Secondary level** | **Primary level** |
| English | 5618 | 3534 |
| German | 4827 | 69482 |
| French | 12323 | 0 |
| Italian | 357 | 46 |
| Spansih | 570 | 0 |
| Russian | 194 | 0 |

**Total: 12798 10528**

Chart 7: The distribution of pupils according to their language choice
(Source: Vámos 1998, and own research).

Having examined the quantitative features and proportion of bilingual programmes the following can be stated:

1. The proportion of bilingual programmes is increasing within the scope of public education.
2. Within bilingual programmes the division between different levels of schooling has become more balanced. Primary programmes are taking an ever-increasing part, however, their absolute number is still fewer.
3. There is a noticeable shift of proportion among languages of instruction. At the secondary level the outperformance of German-language programmes has ceased to exist, and at the primary level it has been decreased because of the advance of English –language programmes.
4. From the above statements it can be concluded that the number of bilingual programmes is showing an increasing tendency.
5. The regional arrangement of the programmes does not show noticeable differences.

Section Two examines the process of how primary EFL bilingual programmes have emerged in Hungary. The emergence and rapid spreading of English-language programmes at the primary stage between the years of 1989-2003 coincided with the international appearance of early English-language programmes as well as the changes in Hungarian language education policy, due to the political changes of the regimes. The three components of primary bilingual programmes, namely, the free choice of languages, the early start and the liberty of schools in shaping their own profile were legitimized by a series of educatio-political decisions, starting in 1985, continuing in 1989, and gaining a renewed and clarified form in 1997.

The third and longest section of Chapter 3 focuses on the issue of what expectations primary bilingual programmes were supposed to meet. The examination is done at three levels: a.) of parents, b.) of schools, and c.) of decision-makers. Respondents at each level provided ample information concerning their expectations and beliefs. Early English bilingual programmes were demanded by the parents in the hope of giving their children the best education they will most probably need. Parents find early English bilingual education desirable for 5 reasons: a.) it may contribute to finding a better position in socity, b.) because there has been a change in our world, c.) knowledge of languages is a must in the recent world, d.) English has become the world language, and e.) because the knowledge of languages serves other educational aims as well, and has a positive impact on the learner’s personality. Parents have also been examined from the aspect of their background. The findings show that certain groups of parents (with a high level of education and a considerable knowledge of foreign languages) are over-represented in the majority of early bilingual schools, in the capital and in the country alike.

Schools have reported various reasons for starting programmes, among which the most significant ones were: a.) wishing to improve the state of language learning in the primary school, b.) incresing their chances to attract pupils, c.) finding a way to survive in the circumstances of an ever-fiercing market of school programmes, d.) a hidden wish to segregate children, belonging to certain layers of society (Roma, or other unfavourable societal groups), e.) encouraging educational continuity within the roof of one school, e.g.: if there already is a bilingual secondary school, it seems obvious to start a primary school as well, and f.) meeting the specific language learning needs of a certain group of young learners.

According to decision-makers, unlike the secondary bilingual programmes, starting in 1987, there has not been a central will to introduce early bilingual educational forms. Certain schools or individuals have initiated them, and education policy was doing its best in not interfering with these initiatives. Although the Educational government supports bilingual programmes financially similarly to minority language-programmes, and makes no obstackles in its spreading, much more support would have been needed in both improving the conditions and maintaining the already exisiting results.

**Conclusion**

According to research findings, three of the four hypotheses have proved to be fully justified.

1. It has been proved that the appearance of forms of early bilingual education in Hungary is, on the one hand, due to an increasing demand for an early start in learning foreign languages, particularly English, with the aim of gaining communicative competence, and on the other hand, to the bilingual developments in the secondary schools starting in 1987. These two trends coincided and resulted in the emergence of forms of early bilingual education.
2. Fortunately, the first statement of this hypothesis (only schools of central location and of long educational traditions can successfully cope with the task of introducing and running bilingual programmes) has NOT been justified. The distribution of the 24 early EFL bilingual programmes shows a great diversity. Budapest, the capital city runs only 8 programmes, spread across various districts, inner and outer alike. From the remaining 16 programmes 8 cluster around an industrial town in the North-East of Hungary. This region is largely affected by unemployment, due to the change of the political regimes, and, being an industrial centre, had no remarkable educational traditions. The county seat, Miskolc, is unique in Hungary, since from its 36 primary schools 8 hosts bilingual programmes (6 English and 2 German). The last third of programmes is spread across the country, in county seats and small towns alike. According to some promising news, most recently early bilingual programmes have been reported from a very small settlement (of 3600 inhabitants) and similar tendency is not uncommon. The second statement of this hypothesis has been fully underpinned by research data (see the research findings above).
3. As supposed, primary bilingual programmes were initiated by the parents (bottom-up innovation). Central education policy had no decisive role in the setup of these programmes. Ministry of Education played a reactive rather than a proactive role when introduced regulations in 1997 with the aim of setting up criteria of bilingual education.
4. Although Hungarian and European programmes have emerged from the same background, Hungary outstands concerning both the time when her first primary programme started (1989), both the quantity of programmes that have been introduced since then (51). Only Italy has reported programmes before 1989. As for the number of subjects taught through the medium of a foreign language, Hungarian programmes, as a rule, teach three subjects this way, while in most European programmes only a modular system has been introduced4. This way our fourth hypothesis seems justified as well.

**Possible further implications of the dissertation findings**

1. Due to the recency of topic, the dissertation is widely based on own research, concerning the European and the Hungarian situation alike. The research findings in both areas might hopefully contribute to further advancements.
2. The socio-political approach of an applied linguistics issue such this one might be helpful in raising awareness, and encouraging local educational institutions towards forms of bottom-up innovations.
3. The diversity of educational needs should be respected and catered for. This is in line with the guidelines of European language education policy of the past decades.
4. Early start has been presented from a particular point: early language learning is not only feasible but can also be made effective, beneficial and age-relevant once it takes place through content.
5. The role and place Hungary plays in early bilingual education is outstanding in Europe. Her contribution in this field is remarkable not only in the Central-European region, but also all over the whole continent. The achievement of a small nation such as Hungary might beneficially influence other nations to follow her example.

1Throughout the recent dissertation the term ’bilingual education’ is used in its ’enrichment’ meaning.
2 Number of pupils are not reported in six schools
3 Number of pupils is not reported in one school
4 It means that only certain parts (modules) of a subject are taught through the medium of a foreign language.

Judit Kovacs
[judit.kovacs@netquick.hu](http://mail06.abv.bg/app/servlet/bg.abv.mail.SendMessController;jsessionid=a-GSjsuBPdW7?ac=sab&to=judit.kovacs@netquick.hu)