

Foreign Language Teaching in the Dynamics of Curricular Changes in Pre-Primary and Primary Education in Slovakia

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the issue of foreign language teaching in primary and pre-primary education. The research analysed the national concept of promoting foreign language education in Slovakia since the 1990s. The methodology was based on a content analysis of curriculum documents and their accompanying methodological materials. The research tool allowed us to define and describe the indicators in the diachronic aspect in terms of the main objectives, forms, methods and content of foreign language teaching. The article presents the results of analysis of documents on teaching foreign languages in primary and pre-primary education in Slovak conditions. They provide the basis for the possibilities of solving the current state of centrally institutionalised foreign language teaching regarding the interests and needs of the target groups. The discussion discursively confronts the current challenges and trends of foreign language teaching in national conditions.

Keywords: language teaching, primary and pre-primary education, methodological support, foreign languages

1. Introduction

The curriculum language policies of European countries are subject to socioeconomic and cultural requirements to provide quality language education. Globalisation processes and accelerated scientific and technological progress are constantly leading to transformative systemic changes in the design of national curricula. These have shaped the trajectory of changes in foreign language teaching over the last three decades in Slovakia. Changes in foreign language teaching are reflected in legislatively binding national curriculum frameworks, revised with some periodicity. The diachronic aspect of the revised curriculum changes reflects distinctive pedagogical approaches, variability of trends with formulated objectives and educational standards in foreign language teaching in pre-primary and primary education. Their functionality is verified by comparing them with educational reality as a primary starting point for planning and implementing major or moderate changes.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020) is the starting document that defines a common basis for developing national curricula in foreign language teaching in European countries. However, the process of transformation towards European framework only started after 2008 with the launch of the curriculum reform. The study presents research results focused on foreign language education from the diachronic perspective. It is specifying the crucial elements reflecting the trends and approaches in foreign language education anchored in binding normative documents.



2. Methods

The qualitative research was based on approaches of comparative pedagogy (Bray et al., 2007) using the content analysis method of curriculum documents for foreign language primary and pre-primary education. The research sample was complemented by secondary sources of existing research studies mapping the subject matter. In the descriptive analysis, a functional and diachronic perspective was applied in terms of comparative contextualisation (Gavora, 2015; Hendl, 2005; Silverman, 2005). The content analysis was based on a deductive approach to identify the following indicators: age of starting foreign language teaching, types of approach to foreign language teaching, the principle of inclusion, intercultural and multicultural content, pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and pupils with special educational needs (SEN).

3. Results

From examining the (dis)continuity of foreign language education, the dynamics of changes – reform processes in Slovak conditions can be differentiated into five periods, the scope and character of which were determined by significant socioeconomic changes in the country with a direct impact on educational language policy. The delineation of the individual periods is based on their classification in research studies, according to Porubský (2012b). The research results are presented in the study using a narrative approach.

The period of normalisation, from 1976 to 1989. The key framework for the setting of foreign language teaching in this period was the Project of Further Development of the Czechoslovak Educational System (Further Development of the Czechoslovak Educational System. Project and Explanatory Report, 1976), which proclaimed the retreat of the transmissive approach of teaching in favour of a socio-constructivist one, also in the linguistic field. It had the ambition to close the stage of traditional teaching focused on the verbal acquisition and mechanical reproduction. It aimed at the purposefulness of pupils' activeness and the development of logical thinking (Hanušová & Najvar, 2007; Tandlichová, 2009). The project from 1976 represented a one-level state curriculum with a directive ideology that determined the frameworks of pedagogical approach, forms and content with zero teacher autonomy. This period is characterised by the absence of foreign language teaching in primary education, except in a small number of selective language-oriented schools with a strict selection of pupils. Also, in lower secondary education was predominantly oriented towards Russian only. A second foreign language was taught in language-oriented selective schools –mainly English with a directive curriculum content. The procedural changes of this period can be described as partial improvements in the content, processes or conditions of education (Porubský, 2012a).

The period of deconstruction and partial stabilisation, from 1989 to 2001. The second period experienced a new wave of curricular reforms in Europe. The changing global context influenced the functioning of schools. Educational needs and requirements began to be demanding in the teaching of foreign languages. In this post-socialist period, visions of a democratic educational policy with an orientation towards the principles of humanistic pedagogy were identified, with signs of neo-liberal ideology declared in the formally accepted (Porubský, 2012b) but never implemented strategic document – Constantine (Project Constantine, The National Programme of Education. State Policy of Education and Training in the Slovak Republic for the Period 1995-2015, 1994). Foreign language teaching in the early 1990s continued to be without a curriculum (Hart'anská, 2005). In lower secondary education, except for selective language-oriented primary schools, Russian language teaching was instantly replaced by English. In actual practice, there was a lack of

qualified foreign language teachers, and methodological support, including textbooks published at the national level. This period is characterised by a discrepancy between educational policy requirements and actual practice, which resulted in alternative solutions to teacher training without state support, represented by institutions, such as the British Council and private language schools.

The period of systemic reconstruction between 2001 and 2008 marked the overcoming of more than a decade-long vacuum in the systematisation of foreign language teaching. The accession of the Slovak Republic to the European Union in 2004 kick-started the European unification of foreign language education policy, a direct consequence of which was the creation of the National Programme of Education and Training for the next decades (Rosa et al., 2001). Its conceptuality and consistency were not coherent. Its neoliberal nature and the principle of internationalisation with the acceptance of the individual peculiarities of each pupil, even at the institutional level in a sense, contradicted the introduction of educational standards. These were intended to enable the measurement of the quality of educational outcomes of schools and caused competition between them (Hartánská, 2005; Porubský et al., 2016). In 2007, the Council of Europe developed a new instrument in language policy. The material entitled *From linguistic diversity to plurilingual education: a Guide for the development of Language education policies in Europe* provided a platform of information materials for multilingual and intercultural education. It enabled Member States to share the work and experience of experts in formulating programmes related to languages in education and language education as a whole (Beacco & Byram, 2007).

According to the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001), the English language curriculum for Years 1- 4 of primary school was developed and approved by the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic on 20 September 2000 (No. 3276/2000-41), with effect from 1 September 2001 (Biskupičová & Nováková, 2000). The curriculum was developed individually for each year, providing several alternatives at the yearly start of teaching. A significant feature of this curriculum was the introduction of plurilingualism, but only in implicit terms. The predominant variant was teaching foreign languages from Years 3 to 9 of primary schools, with no provision for continuity of language teaching at subsequent school levels. Foreign language teaching at the first level was implemented only in selective language-oriented primary schools from Year 3 onwards. Research findings (Hartánská, 2005; Reid, 2009) pointed to several problem areas:

- the absence of intercultural and multicultural content in terms of learning about other cultures and interpersonal communication,
- the focus on teaching grammar and vocabulary, which was justified on the grounds that these are easier to teach and to verify their acquisition, but learning about culture is by its diffuse nature more challenging to teach, measure and assess,
- the discrepancy in functional competence requirements at A1 versus A2 level. For example, a Year 3 beginner pupil was expected by Level A1 to master short, pre-learned utterances of specified expressions and to master their articulation. A Year 4 pupil (learning a foreign language for the second year) should, according to the syllabus, already have an active command of writing an informal letter or postcard, which is already a requirement of Level A2;
- the failure to take into account a play-based approach appropriate to the age and mental adjustment of the pupils;
- the incompleteness of the methodological material on teaching content in the following areas: multiculturalism, man and society, care for the disabled, and coexistence in the European area.

The dynamics of changes in foreign language education in Slovak conditions accelerated based on the proposal of the New Concept of Teaching Foreign Languages in Primary and Secondary Schools in 2007 (Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic & State Pedagogical Institute, 2007). Its main challenges were: 1. to ensure the integration of pupils per their individual needs and to create a system of individual help for them as a form of professional assistance; 2. to introduce a uniform variant of the foreign language curriculum from the 2008/2009 school year on a compulsory basis; 3. to lower the age limit for the compulsory start of foreign language teaching by expanding it into primary education (Butašová, 2007).

The area of qualification of foreign language teachers in primary education in 2001-2008 was significantly undersupplied: English language: 52.9%, German language: 44.5%, French language: 16.7%, Russian language: 18.2%. In the long-term perspective, a 100% representation of qualified teachers of the first level for teaching foreign languages to the target group of pupils of younger school age was envisaged (Pokrivčáková et al., 2009). Paradoxically, the pre-graduate training of foreign language teachers for primary level was provided mainly by non-state institutions in this period. The initiative in this area was taken by the Slovak Association of Teachers of English, established under the auspices of the British Council (the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities). In foreign language education for pupils with special educational needs, there was no coherent programme or support. Teachers were left to their own resources and improvisation (Gereková & Hačková, 2005; Vačková & Zaťková, 2003).

The period of implementation and relative stabilisation from 2008 to 2015. In 2008, the most significant curriculum reform took place, which established a two-level curriculum – the state (central framework) and school curriculum. The projected state framework curriculum reflected new approaches from global trends that introduced the concept of competency and educational standards. The State Educational Programme for primary education came into force in 2008 (State Educational Programme for the first primary school level in the Slovak Republic ISCED 1 – Primary Education, 2008). Despite proclaiming a more comprehensive degree of teacher autonomy in foreign language teaching, establishing educational standards created a dilemma between teacher autonomy and the degree of commitment to performance and content standards. These respected the main objective in foreign language teaching according to the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001). It articulates to achieve greater unity among the members of the European Union by introducing common actions in the cultural field, or through the knowledge of modern European languages, to transform the communication barrier into mutual enrichment and understanding in a linguistically and culturally rich Europe (Council of Europe, 2001). "Knowledge of foreign languages is the object of more effective communication and interaction between Europeans" (Reid, 2009, p. 106). However, penetration of the cultural context was still absent. Intercultural competency in the foreign language teaching process is difficult to measure, assess and test (Reid, 2009; Zafar et al., 2013). Overall, based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the national curriculum took into account the European requirements to promote a multilingual and multicultural European society.

In this period, for the first time, the teaching of a foreign language in pre-primary education was mentioned in the official State Educational Programme (State Educational Programme ISCED 0 – Pre-primary Education, 2008). Performance and content standards have a minimum scope in the formulated requirements. Support for teaching at the state level was provided with a delay of several years (Hajdúková, 2011). The content of methodological support included the specifics of the learner's age. It was grounded by strategies on realistic

situations with the variation of play methods. An inclusive approach had not yet been reflected. Foreign language teaching was predominantly implemented in the private sector. State-run kindergartens, based on parental demand, primarily provided English lessons through external organizations. This situation persisted in subsequent periods.

Only universities with accredited study programmes provided qualified foreign language teachers. The training of primary education teachers took place in 2 phases: 1. the preparation phase (September 2008 until January 2009) and 2. the implementation phase from February 2009 to January 2013. The aim was to eliminate non-professional teacher training and to ensure proficiency in teaching foreign languages (English, German, Russian, French, Italian and Spanish) in primary education (Education of primary school Level 1 teachers in foreign languages – Centre of Languages of SPU in Nitra, 2009).

The analysis showed that in this period, teachers began to prefer methods that had so far been little applied. Such was the CLIL method, which teachers considered significant in terms of its impact on pupils' communicative competency development. The CLIL method enabled them to have a duality of objectives. The language objectives were incorporated into the teaching process of other subjects. The method allowed teaching subjects content through foreign language, not the other way around. (Didactic Effectiveness of the CLIL Method in Primary 1 Foreign Language Teaching – Final Report, 2012).

Based on analyses (Janíková et al., 2011), it is possible to define several main emerging trends in foreign language education: learner-centred teaching, the concept of autonomous learning, activity-centred teaching, developing intercultural sensitivity and teaching foreign languages to dyslexic learners. Other specifics of foreign language learning for pupils with diverse special needs were described by Homolová (2013), who developed special teaching materials for them.

The period of constant revision from 2015 to nowadays. In 2015, the national curriculum was again revised. According to the updated Framework Curriculum for Primary Schools with Slovak as the Language of Instruction (State Pedagogical Institute, 2015), primary schools have to provide English language teaching in the Years 3 and 4 of with 3 lessons per week. Changes were made in the foreign language education policy regarding the choice of teaching other foreign languages, not only English. There was an intention to acquire more foreign languages (plurilingualism), mainly German and French, considered languages of commerce and culture, to better position themselves in the labour market. Educational standards for teaching foreign languages: Russian, German, French, Italian and Spanish were approved in 2019 with the beginning of the 2019/2020 school year for Years 1-3 (State Pedagogical Institute, 2019).

English was the compulsory foreign language until the 2019/2020 school year and is still the most popular and demanded foreign language in primary education. Pupils could choose a world language to start learning compulsorily in Year 3. If pupils did not choose English as their first foreign language, they had to choose it as a second foreign language in Years 7-9. The reason for this was that the school was required by section 4(d) of the Education Act (Act No 245/2008 on Education and Training (Education Act) and on Amendments to Certain Acts, 2008) to enable the pupils to 'know and be able to use English and at least one other foreign language'. The time allocation for teaching a foreign language in primary education was at least two lessons per week. Schools could take advantage of a broader range of teaching by using the disponible lessons.

The current trend is focusing on inclusive education. It requires a wider variety of effective teaching strategies, specific teacher competencies in the inclusive classroom, teaching

materials and support programmes. This includes developing the pupils' basic communicative proficiency, fostering learning about other cultures, and developing the pupils' cognitive competency and metalinguistic awareness (Pinter, 2006). This trend also helps pupils SEN to achieve a school success. The teachers should be skilled in differentiating the learning objectives and managing mixed-ability group activities based on specific teaching methods. Research findings confirm that in practice, the integration and inclusion of learners with SEN usually stay out of the classroom. An exception is the so-called special schools (for SEN pupils) in which foreign language education is not compulsory (Pokrivčáková et al., 2015; Pokrivčáková, 2018).

The analysis showed that the current educational standards (State Pedagogical Institute, 2019) defining the mandatory requirements for the communicative level of foreign language A 1.1+ (exit Year 5) include a compulsory component – the linguistic dimension – structural grammar teaching. The linguistic dimension again leads teachers to focus on the teaching of grammar. The autonomy of the foreign language teacher is implicit in the definition of topics for the sociolinguistic and communicative dimensions, however specific teaching methods and strategies are not specified. The intercultural context is defined by the theme of multicultural cognition of society in three subthemes: foreign languages, family holidays, and the convergence of cultures. The educational standards do not include recommendations or methodological support in an inclusive approach.

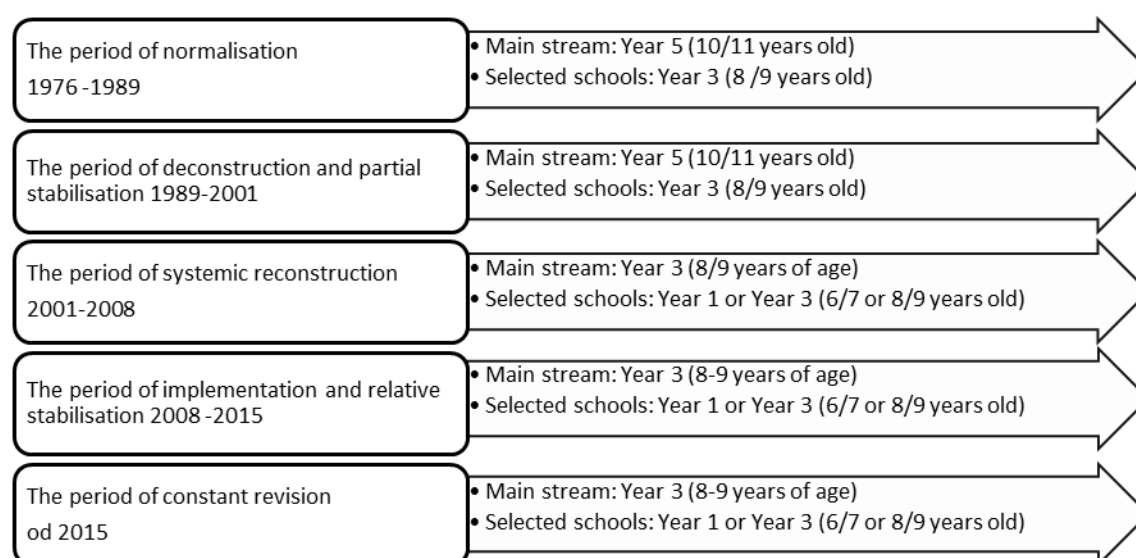


Figure 1. Foreign language teaching in primary education

Note. Own processing based on content analysis

Research (Bockaničová et al., 2018) focused on the implementation of contextualised changes in the updated curriculum (State Pedagogical Institute, 2015) identified the following findings:

- a foreign language other than English is taught only sporadically at primary schools,
- the teaching of the English language from Year 1 of primary school has been introduced much more extensively than in the previous period;
- teachers did not attach much importance to the content of the national curriculum documents and did not consider them relevant to their work in foreign language lessons;

- curriculum innovation did not mean a change in the content of foreign language teaching planning or a change in the approach to foreign language teaching at the classroom level; on the contrary, traditional school practice played a much more critical role than the innovative projected national curriculum documents;
- teachers were more oriented and relied more on professional information, especially from publishers and distributors of foreign language textbooks;
- the number of disponible lessons in the framework curriculum was minimal, and the allocation of 1-3 lessons per week per academic year did not create a prerequisite for teaching an additional foreign language in primary education;
- most primary schools increased the number of English lessons from the disponible ones;
- there was still a gap in the qualification of foreign language teachers in primary education, with only 20.17% of teachers in the sample (917 respondents) meeting the qualification prerequisites (Bockaničová et al., 2018).

The 2021 plan for further robust reform showed the trend towards curriculum revision. A new national curriculum was due to emerge in December 2022, with plan to test it in 30 pilot schools in 2023. Changes are also to be made to teacher education and teacher training programmes. Regional support for teachers is envisaged between 2024 and 2025. Visions of approaches for the future direction of primary education, including the issue of approaches to foreign languages, are included in the document *Education for the 21st Century – Background to Changes in the Primary Education Curriculum* (Pupala & Fridrichová, 2022). According to this document, change is not considered, but rather the maintenance and further development of positive, modern trends. The education content is related to three target groups – teachers, parents and pupils. Teacher autonomy is already articulated by the statement that the curriculum enables teachers to plan, modify and then implement foreign language teaching concerning the particular conditions of individual schools, the needs and abilities of pupils (Pupala & Fridrichová, 2022).

4. Discussion

The following themes emerged from the findings of the analyses of the trajectory of change in foreign language education in pre-primary and primary education:

- The requirement to start teaching a foreign language at a younger age resonates more strongly in professional discourse. At the same time, research findings (Fenclová, 2004a; Ježková et al., 2008; Najvar, 2010) indicate that an early start of foreign language teaching, i.e. in the preschool period, does not automatically ensure significantly positive results. It is not the early age that appears to be significant, but the quality of teaching.
- In Slovak conditions in pre-primary and primary education, the teaching of English is massively preferred over other foreign languages, which to some extent breaks congruence with the declared principle of the diversified multilingualism of the European citizenship (Fenclová, 2004b). Similarly, there is a resonance in professional discourse that language teaching at an early age and in the first year of primary school can negatively affect the development of the mother tongue.
- The phenomenon of heterogeneity in groups of early learners and younger school-age pupils (6/7-year-old) is significant in terms of mental level variation, including the level of language proficiency (Lojová, 2005). This requires high proficiency of teachers.

- The phenomenon of migration influences the necessity of adopting changes in foreign language teaching in the recent period. Foreign language learning of pupils with different mother tongues is a bipolar process. The learners are exposed to barrier in communication in one foreign language, that is the official language of schooling – Slovak language. But also begin to acquire another foreign language (from Year 1 or Year 3) as an another subject.
- The adaptation process of developing socio-linguistic competency of migrants requires a different teaching approach considering the background of migrant learners (Eurydice, 2017).
- Linguistic propaedeutic preparation of foreign language teaching is absent in comparison to other countries; it forms a natural link to the mother tongue for subsequent foreign language learning and facilitates the formation of metalinguistic strategies, eliminating children's natural distrust of linguistic "difference - otherness" (Najvar, 2004). By teaching relatedness and difference between languages, language propaedeutics fulfils the essence of plurilingualism.
- In the context of a socio-linguistic approach to foreign language teaching, a multicultural virtual space with potential functionality for teachers, learners and parents is expanded. The Internet will be a more secure and high-performance space for omni-personal communication (Tella, 2005).

5. Conclusion

Practical experience and research findings (Zacharova et al., 2013) indicate that foreign language teachers in previous periods and at present do not consider curriculum documents as the only basic starting point that influences the content and approach of their teaching. Their language skills enable them to more easily access foreign resources ahead of reform or innovative trends in Slovak conditions. These teachers make informal contacts, especially during foreign mobility and training. They transform the acquired knowledge and experience into their practice through their own initiative. It can be concluded that in foreign language education policy in Slovakia, the instrument of change has been the teachers' initiative. The current document of proposed curriculum changes reflects their initiatives as well as European trends in the following areas:

- the autonomy of foreign language teachers is strengthened much more significantly;
- output communication levels in the first foreign language in primary education are A1 and A2;
- continuity is maintained in the appropriateness of content requirements and objectives in line with the European Framework at each level;
- the trend towards communicative, active and experiential foreign language teaching is explicitly formulated;
- the communicative and cognitive function of language is emphasised, aiming at the development of pupils' personal and social competencies to adapt it to pupils' individual needs;
- the emphasis is placed on the formation of pupils' awareness of their own cultural identity;
- developing pupils' intercultural competency and preparing for existence in a pluricultural and multilingual society;
- teaching Slovak as a foreign language in schools with a different mother tongue is based on the principle of reliance on the pupil's mother tongue;

- the implementation of Slovak language as the state language for foreign pupils is officially explicitly mentioned in the curriculum for the first time (Pupala & Fridrichová, 2022).

The success of reform transformations in education is conditioned by several factors, as confirmed by research findings (Janík et al., 2020; Porubský et al., 2016; Reid, 2009), namely:

- overcoming teachers' resistance to the dynamics of change requires a non-directive participatory approach, professional discussions and training;
- the synergy of professional training and further methodological guidance for foreign language teachers;
- reflecting the findings of science and research, respecting the specific individual needs of pupils;
- applying different approaches, methods and forms of teaching to pupils with SEN;
- ensuring the continuity and quality of foreign language education in the transition period - between pre-primary and primary education.

The trajectory of language curriculum policy in Slovakia can be considered significantly graduating. The significance of changes in increasingly short periods reflects European trends, albeit with a certain time lag. The depth of understanding of the philosophy of plurilingualism in a multiculturally diversified society is the subject of the discourse.

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