

ANDREA M. NOEL¹**German and English Language Instruction in Hungarian Preschools:
Initial Thoughts and Impressions**

This article introduces the historical and contemporary context of dual language early education in Hungary and links this context to both current early childhood teacher training programs in Sopron, Hungary, and the author's initial and informal observations in two types of language focused preschool classrooms. Results of these observations offer preliminary information that will be used to inform future research.

Introduction

This manuscript offers the initial impressions and developing understanding of preschool education in West Hungary of an American professor and researcher. I am a Fulbright Scholar at the University of West Hungary, in Sopron, Hungary, during the spring semester 2016, and only two months have passed since I arrived in Sopron in early January 2016. While I still have much to learn, I am happy to share this summary of my developing knowledge and impressions of language centered (German and English) preschool programs in Sopron, Hungary. Although I have studied publications on Hungarian history and preschool education, begun my teaching and research project, visited several preschool classrooms, and interviewed preschool teachers, I must emphasize that I do not claim that what I write here is “research” and I urge the reader to not take it as such. It is the beginning of a research study, which focuses on literacy practices in Sopron’s dual language preschools but as the title suggests, is only a narrative about my initial impressions. That said, this paper does offer readers outside of Hungary a bit of a window into the historical underpinnings of dual language preschool education in Hungary, as well as a tiny glimpse - perhaps as if it were through a peep hole - of what is going on in some of those classrooms.

I use the American term “preschool” to describe early education for 3 to 5 year-old children, which is publically funded for all children in Hungary (Paszkosz, 2012). Hungarians would not call this preschool, but “kindergarten”. To avoid confusion with American kindergarten, I have elected to use the term preschool in this manuscript.

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I continue to build my understanding of the context of early childhood education within Hungary and begin this manuscript with a small summary of my growing historical knowledge. Certainly, no researchers, teachers, or laypersons can reliably understand what goes on in any school or institution, or why teachers choose certain strategies, or set up their room in specific ways, without at least a basic understanding of the historical and cultural context of the setting and people.

A Brief History

Historical, national, and international events have exerted and still exert impact on early childhood dual language education in Hungary. My interests lie primarily with how the English and German languages are taught in programs for young children in Hungary. English education – especially for small children - is a fairly recent event in Hungary. This is due to the political context of the post World War 2 years (Dornyei–Csizer–Nemeth, 2006). As a satellite of the Soviet Union, Hungarian children were required to learn Russian and opportunities for instruction in western languages such as English and German were few. The socio-political changes related to the decline of communism especially after the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall, had a radical effect on education including the choices of languages that Hungarian children could learn at school (Dornyei et al. 2006). In the US, we don't often think about the fall of the Berlin Wall as a pivotal year for education. In eastern European countries such as Hungary, the changes were huge.

The German language has a longer and deeper history in Hungary and its presence in this country traces back to the migration of German speaking people to Hungarian territories hundreds of years ago. According to Lendvai (2003), Saxon peasants were invited to settle in Hungary as far back as 1150 and immediately after the Ottoman wars, the Hapsburgs resettled Germans in southern Hungary. Historians have uncovered reference to Swabians settling the area around Buda and Pest as early as 1217 and in the middle of the 13th century, towns with a large majority of German inhabitants were founded in Upper Hungary. By the mid 19th century, Germans represented about 2 million of the 18 million inhabitants of Hungary and they *“enjoyed unrestricted access to all types of educational facilities except universities”* (Spira 1985 p. 147).

In the late 19th century, an increased desire to assimilate minorities into the greater Hungarian culture resulted in decreased educational opportunities for the ethnic German population. After World War 1, the Treaty of Trianon radically reduced the size of Hungary.

However, it also offered new hope to German minorities, who were very motivated to raise their children with the German heritage and language. The treaty required Hungary to “*protect the cultural and lingual prerogatives of the country’s remaining ethnic minorities*” (Spira 1985 p. 147). This implied renewed focus on education in German language and culture for the ethnic German minority. However, much disagreement existed about the implementation of this law².

During the period after World War 2, the German minority population declined again, as the borders were once again redrawn and ethnic Germans were forcibly expelled from many areas of Hungary (Lendvai 2003). Germans, who remained in Hungary faced extremely limited ethnic or language opportunities for their children. In the mid 1980’s with the weakening of the communist totalitarian regime, opportunities for German ethnic education were reestablished (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 1999).

In recent years, increases in tourism between Hungary and Austria and access to German language media have kept German language especially strong in border areas such as Sopron. However, according to Dornyei et al. (2006) English is gradually dominating German as the primary foreign language within Hungary. Since acceptance of Hungary into the European Union in 2004, and the EU’s call for a multi-lingual Europe with trilingual citizens (Stickel 2012) language education programs have received consistent and increasing attention. The programs at the University of West Hungary, which aim to train teachers to effectively teach English and German to very young children fit into this historical context.

Early Childhood Teacher Education at the University of West Hungary

The University of West Hungary’s Early Childhood Education program traces its roots back to 1899. Over the years the program developed into a post secondary program and later (in 1989) into a college level program. In 2000 the institute for early education, named after Hungarian children’s writer Elek Benedek, formally became one of the faculties of the University of West Hungary.

Current early childhood education students at the University of West Hungary, who would like to teach in German or English language focused preschool programs, may choose from two different programs of study. The first is a general Hungarian early childhood education program with a specialization in English or German. The second is the ethnic

² For a detailed history of this time period, please read Spira 1985.

German program specifically intended to train bilingual teachers for the ethnic German preschool. These teachers are trained to use German language and culture extensively in their instruction and the program is directly related to the historical presence of the ethnic German minority discussed above³.

I have been fortunate to visit several preschool classrooms that are part of the specialization track program in German or English, as well as a one classroom that offers the ethnic German preschool program.

My Preschool Visits

My first visits were to general Hungarian early childhood classes that offered either an English or German specialization. In all three classrooms I conducted an informal 60-minute observation and after the observation, interviewed each teacher. Often I spoke to both a teacher assistant and the main classroom teacher. I transcribed my detailed notes within two days of each observation. I also spoke with university colleagues about the teacher training programs. Here are my thoughts based on those initial observations and interviews.

Second language instruction in all three classrooms occurred as a predominantly independent event when children were asked to join a circle. During this foreign language “circle time”, which lasted 30 to 45 minutes, activities such as singing, marching, counting, were facilitated by the teacher using the target language of German or English. During the circle time activity, most but not all direct requests made by teachers to children during this time (managerial talk) occurred in the target language. However, these language circle times appeared to be rather scripted and I witnessed limited spontaneous use of the second language. For example, the teacher would move from one song to the next without appearing to react to unplanned events or children’s interactions with each other or the teacher.

Teachers paid special attention to helping children transition from Hungarian to the target language. For example, two of the three teachers used a stuffed animal to signal that second language instruction was starting. In one class, the teacher used a koala bear to show that English time was starting and said, “*Bear says ‘hello children!’*”.

In our post observation conversations, teachers discussed the goals of their language instruction. In these specialization track prekindergarten classrooms, they agreed that the main

³ For information on the programs see: <http://www.bpk.nyme.hu/index.php?id=18760> and <http://www.bpk.nyme.hu/index.php?id=25528&L=4&id=25528>.

purpose of German or English instruction is to arouse interest and motivate children for language learning, develop some vocabulary knowledge, and accomplish these goals using a playful approach. Teachers indicated that instruction in the target language, such as the sample lessons that I witnessed, was not a daily event. This is in contrast to the constant use of the target language that I witnessed in the ethnic German language program.

The teachers and university colleagues I spoke with indicated that the ethnic German language program was chosen by parents who wanted more intensive German language instruction for their children. I did indeed notice a clear difference between the second language instruction in this classroom and that in the specialization classrooms. In the ethnic German preschool classroom, the target language was the teacher's consistent language of facilitation, instruction, play, and management and was fully integrated into all activities that I witnessed. In addition, the teacher reacted to children's interests and exhibited flexibility in her interactions with children. Her language interactions appeared to be unscripted. For example, at one point, she was playing a concentration type card game on the floor with a group of children. The cards were up-side down on the floor, and children were to find the pictures that matched. During the play, the teacher named each picture in German as a child picked it up. She spoke and joked with them in German during the game, and also made requests and gave instruction in German. The children appeared to be highly interested in the game and the teacher made efforts to sustain their interest. After they played the concentration game several times, she slightly modified it and the play continued. Since this is only one classroom, I am curious to find out whether this teacher's interactions and extensive use of the target language are representative of those of other teachers in ethnic German programs.

While I witnessed marked differences between the classrooms of specialization English and German tracks and the ethnic German program, I also saw important similarities. All classes included children from a wide range of ages. There were 3, 4, and 5 year-olds in each of these classes, which is typical for all preschool classrooms in the schools I visited. In addition, all lessons that I witnessed utilized highly active and developmentally appropriate (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 2009) teaching strategies. Classrooms were organized around children's characteristics and needs. I saw all teachers always speak kindly and respectfully with children and witnessed evidence that parents were involved and valued. I also saw evidence that children's individual differences were accommodated. They were not forced to participate in particular activities. Finally, teachers utilized techniques that have high potential to support early literacy. For example,

there were many rhyming, singing, and marching activities, which can be instrumental in developing children's phonological awareness (Vukelich–Christie–Enz 2012). These and other elements of the teaching environment will be a focus of my observations as I return to these classes for a closer look at the literacy environment.

Conclusion

Supporting young children's second language development is of interest to educators around the world. Current rates of migration and calls for multilingualism (Stickel 2012) are only two reasons to emphasize the need to effectively teach children from diverse language backgrounds. My reflections as an American academic embedded in Hungary are the start of collaboration around this common interest. As a world community we can better meet this challenge and others with collaboration. I wish to extend my thanks to the teachers, teacher-aides, administrators, and university colleagues, who continue to allow me into their classrooms and conversations.

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