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On a shoestring: child speakers of other languages in Slovak education

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Abstract

This article focuses on children who cannot speak the language of the majority when they enter the school system. It recommends that the term child speakers of other languages should be adopted in Slovakia. Various approaches and types of support used in other European countries (Germany, Denmark, Czechia) are presented. These could be adopted nationally to integrate these children in school. The legal situation and current situation in preschools and primary school is also explored. The article outlines potential forms of support for preschool children and their families that require little in the way of additional funding and human resources.

Keywords: child speakers of other languages, preschool, preschool education, strategies for working with child speakers of other languages

Introduction

The Slovak Republic is a nation state comprising Slovaks, who make up the majority population, and various minorities. Most of these are either national or ethnic groups that have lived in what it is now the Slovak Republic for generations. The character of the nation state is preserved through conservative immigration policies, for which Slovakia has frequently attracted criticism. Nonetheless, there are migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Slovakia, who receive various kinds of support but also face multiple barriers, of which language is probably the most challenging. To learn a foreign or new language, individuals have to first acquire communication skills and then cognitive academic skills. The easiest and quickest stage is learning how to communicate in everyday situations, which takes around six months to two years.

Children who have to attend school in Slovakia find themselves in the special situation of having to acquire a second language at the academic level. Successful

mastery is considered crucial to further educational achievement and takes approximately five to seven years (Cummins, 2000). The focus in this article is on children who do not speak the official state language and are not yet in compulsory schooling. The aim is to investigate the circumstances and conditions under which these children attend preschool and to suggest minor adjustments to classroom approaches that can be implemented without either systematic central or non-governmental support. As the title of this article suggests, child speakers of other languages are not entitled to any special or additional assistance.

First there is a brief discussion of the term child speakers of other languages, then several strategies used in selected countries are considered. Based on the experiences of these countries, a set of strategies aimed at preschool teachers whose classes are attended by one or more such children is presented.

1 Child speakers of other languages

To begin with it is important to distinguish between the many terms in use as they are often misunderstood and incorrectly used, particularly as a result of media coverage. In ordinary everyday usage, the terms used to describe foreigners are conflated and so foreigners are frequently stereotyped as wanting to come to Slovakia so they can access the (supposed) benefits. But in reality migrants are people who decide to live in countries around the world and do so for various reasons (e.g. to study, travel to be with family members, to look for work). Migrants are often confused with refugees (i.e. all migrants are portrayed as refugees). Refugees are people who have no choice and are forced into migrating, perhaps owing to persecution in their own country, or because of war endangering their lives. Asylum-seeker is a term used in Slovak law to describe refugees. Statistics collected by the interior ministry show that in 2019 asylum was sought by 208 asylum seekers and that by November of that year four had been awarded asylum and 16 had been granted protection.

The children of refugees and unaccompanied children (children under 18 without a parent or guardian) come under the remit of the interior ministry and the other ministries, which means that children of school age have to attend school (Fajnorová & Števulová, 2009).

Children attending school, and preschool, who do not speak Slovak – for whom Slovak is not their first language – include refugee children, unaccompanied minors, the children of foreigners legally resident in Slovakia, but also children who do not belong to these groups. Therefore, following other countries, the authors of this article are attempting to introduce the term child speakers of other languages (commonly used in e.g. the Czech Republic) on the basis that it is more representative. The term child speakers of other languages covers a much wider group of children and can also be used in relation to Slovak citizens. These may be

children of migrant families who possess Slovak citizenship, children of Slovaks who have returned to Slovakia after living abroad for many years, children from bilingual families where Slovak is not the mother language and so on. They cannot therefore be referred to as foreigners or foreign children with any accuracy. 'Child speakers of other languages' may be problematic in a legal context but from an education perspective it is an extremely useful term.

Where Slovak is the native language, the term child speakers of other languages refers to all children who do not speak Slovak or for whom Slovak is an additional language. Slovak as an additional language (SAL) is a term used in conjunction with children who understand the basic conversational Slovak used in preschool and school, but whose main language is not Slovak.

Here it should be noted that there are a number of terms used to describe this group of children. For example, Gažovičová (2011) gives three basic terms: foreign children (not Slovak citizens), migrant children (children who migrate with their parents, and unaccompanied minors) and children from a migrant background (children/or parents who have come from a different country and cultural and linguistic background but who are Slovak citizens). However, for our purposes, the term child speakers of other languages covers all of these different categories (Linhartová, Horáčková, 2015).

1.2 Child speakers of other languages in Slovak preschools

The following is known about child speakers of other languages in the Slovak education system:

Slovakia has produced a migration policy plan (the current one is valid until 2020) and a *Global report on the fulfilment of the tasks, aims and goals of migration policy* (*Súhrnnou správou o stave plnenia úloh, zámerov a cieľov migračnej politiky*; the most recent one is for 2018). According to the report, in the 2018/2019 school year 761 foreign children were attending preschool (including state, private and church preschools). The majority of these, 520, were attending state preschools. By way of comparison, in that same school year, there were 2,682 foreign children attending primary school, 2,072 of whom were attending state primary schools. From this it is clear that the vast majority attend state schools. It is therefore essential that state school heads and teachers receive the necessary support (not simply teaching guidance).

The number of foreign children attending preschool and primary school refers to children who meet the legal definition of foreign children (Section 146(1) of Act No. 245/2008):

- persons who are citizens of another state or stateless persons, who have a Slovak residence permit,
 - persons who have applied for asylum in the Slovak Republic under special legislation,

- Slovaks living abroad,
- persons seeking asylum or additional protection under asylum law,
- foreign minors in Slovakia with no legal representative.

The statistics do not therefore include children who are Slovak citizens but struggle to overcome the language barrier: in other words, children who cannot speak Slovak at all or who speak it at only a very basic level.

There is one particular group of children in Slovakia to whom this may apply – Roma children. Roma people in Slovakia do not constitute a single homogenous linguistic group (Ivanov et al., 2012). They may consider their first language to be Slovak, Hungarian or Romany (statistically more than half of Roma declare their first language to be Romany). It can therefore be assumed that most Roma children grow up speaking a language other than Slovak, and that the Slovak they encounter in public communication is an additional language for them. The situation regarding Roma children is further complicated by that fact that although Romany is a codified language, standardised in 2008 (Cina, 2012), it varies greatly in the domestic environment. Roma children therefore face a double language barrier that they must grapple with in everyday life.

Preschool education need not provide them with the help they need. As a number of organisations have pointed out, inequalities in accessing preschool continue to exist. Statistics show that, in the 2017/2018 school year, only 28.16 percent of Roma children aged 3–5 years were enrolled in a preschool, compared to 83.1 per cent of children from the majority population (Cvek, 2019). Research conducted by non-governmental organisations working in the field found that, in the areas inhabited by the largest numbers of marginalised Roma, on average only 10 percent of Roma children attend preschool. This is despite the fact that longitudinal studies have shown that investments in early childhood education greatly improve the social and learning abilities of these children and have a deep impact on their educational and employment opportunities in the long term (Barnett, 1995; Heckman, 2006). Early childhood education systems are considered a key factor in breaking the cycle of transgenerational poverty and increasing children's opportunity to live a healthier life. The Slovak authorities are aware of this and are introducing compulsory preschooling, which is due to begin in the 2021/2022 school year.

However, statistical discussions about the total number of children whose first language is not Slovak are of little consequence to the schools and teachers whose classes these children attend. Simply having one, or a small group of SAL pupils, in the classroom or preschool raises workloads considerably.

2 Selected experiences from abroad

There are countries with far larger numbers of child speakers of other languages, including at the preschool level, and consequently they pay much greater attention to this category of pupil. Having accumulated long-term experience in meeting the needs of children and families of speakers of other languages, their systems and support systems have become highly professionalised. Although they do of course reflect the specific culture and preferences of the country concerned.

One of the most developed, systematic and generously funded systems is to be found in Germany. Germany's experience of immigration is different and so the programmes and support that have become established there over the years are not simply narrowly focused on education. Many programmes include comprehensive assistance for family integration. Qualified trained staff provide support and assistance within the home (*Geh-Struktur Programme*) or as part of centre-based programmes (*Komm-Struktur Programme*) (Stamm & Edelmann, 2013). As Germany has a federal system, the programmes vary greatly but all share the common goal of improving pupil and parent engagement in the education process.

Intensive language support is provided in preschools, and the Federal Ministry for Family, Seniors, Women, Children and Youth funds projects to raise the level of language teaching qualifications among preschool teachers. For instance the federal state of Hamburg runs the Kita Plus Programm (Kita+). This programme is open to all preschools with an above-average number of socially disadvantaged children or children from migrant families. Hamburg state also provides preschools with assessment tools SISMIK and HAVAS5 (SISMIK consists of a form for assessing language development in child speakers of other languages, from age three to primary school age; HAVAS5 is a diagnostic tool for determining the level of all the languages spoken by the child. It is targeted at mono- and multi-lingual children aged 5–7 years) (Ulich, Mayr, 2003; Hamburger Verfahren zur Analyse des Sprachstands Fünffähriger, non-dated) so teachers can establish levels of language development, and language support is provided both individually and in groups. In 1989 a special method was developed in Munich for teaching German as a second language to preschool age children – the KIKUS method (Garlin, 2008). It was then adopted in the remaining federal states and other language versions were developed as well.

Like Germany, Denmark has a long preschool tradition that receives generous state support. The *kommunes*, or municipalities, are legally obliged to provide some form of language-stimulation activities, and so are responsible for providing support to families where Danish is an additional language (ECEC Policy in Denmark, 2000). Although Denmark has a long-standing tradition of universal

access to ECEC, disadvantaged families are more likely to keep their children at home longer (Sibley, 2015). Therefore in 2018 Denmark embarked on reforming its *Day-care Act*, in place since July 2019 (Witcombe, 2019). This law makes it compulsory for all children from marginalised areas (ghettos) to attend preschool for a minimum of 25 hours per week once they reach the age of one-year old. That way the children are not only in contact with the language but also learn about Danish traditions, celebrations, standards and values (it is not unusual in Denmark for one-year olds to attend preschool). As preschools are free at the point of access (including meals), parents have to comply with the law otherwise they risk losing the social support they receive in child benefit.

Not only do child speakers of other languages have to be enrolled in preschool but they also have to undergo language tests – as do all preschool children in Denmark – which monitor language development and are used as the basis for further assistance if required (Motiejunaite, et. al., 2019).

The freedom and variation in provision for child speakers of other languages can be seen in the approaches taken by the *kommunes* of Aarhus and Vejle. Preschools in Aarhus are entitled to employ a certain number of assistants depending on the number of children from homes where Danish is not the first language/mother tongue. Parents are therefore required to indicate which language(s) are spoken at home when filling in the preschool enrolment form. Aarhus Kommune supports and funds the systematic and regular provision of education activities as part of its language education. These take the form of reading groups attended by small numbers of children of various ages and languages (children of different nationalities and different linguistic ability). The groups are led by a trained teacher in a dedicated area of the preschool. Part of the programme involves selecting the books and developing sets of instructions, post-reading activities and inspiration. The youngest children have little boxes of pre-prepared support materials to accompany the books (Laeseleg, no date).

In Vejle the local government strategy for the inclusion of child speakers of other languages follows two principles: *language is everywhere (global reading)* and *endorsing the child's home language* (Biliteracy i børnehaven, 2012). But this does not mean that child speakers of other languages are given systematic support in their first language. Instead, the two principles are combined: words are given in the written form whenever possible in both the majority language and the home language of the children attending the school. This way the children are aware of the presence of the written form of the word in their home language, which may have a non-Latin script. Grammatical accuracy is not important. The point is to show parents that their heritage and language is an important part of inclusion.

The Czech Republic is both culturally and geographically close to Slovakia and, like Slovakia, has no tradition of providing systematic support to child speakers of

other languages, although it has recently begun to do so. The change was prompted by an education ministry implementing decree (No. 26/2016) categorising pupils with a poorer or little grasp of the language of instruction as children, or pupils, with special educational needs. This simple change means child speakers of other languages can be given substantial assistance. An act amending the education law completes this change in philosophy by not categorising child speakers of other languages according to level of disadvantage or difficulty but according to level of support required. The law sets out five levels of support, and children who are level two and above are entitled to a greater degree of language support, a modified syllabus, lesson content, special classroom resources, an assistant and so on.

These changes have paved the way for children to receive language interventions in Czech preschool classrooms. Strong support is provided to preschools by META, a well-established non-profit organisation that provided courses and methodological support for teachers, based on the KIKUS method mentioned above.

3 What kind of support is available in Slovakia?

Educational attainment can prove a real stumbling block for children who do not speak Slovak. Others have already noted that the measures and rules currently in place are ineffective. However, it is important to point out that this is a new area for Slovakia and that there is only a small number of non-Slovak speaking children from other countries who are obliged to attend schools where the language of instruction is Slovak. This is not an excuse, but it has to be borne in mind when facing the reality, rather than just endlessly criticising the situation from the standpoint of various postmodern ideologies.

Children who start primary school are entitled to the following:

Systematic support for teaching foreign children is provided for language only, in the form of classes aimed primarily at adults and children aged six and over. The law only recognises 'foreign children' so the support provided is available for children in this category (explained above).

However, the reality for many primary school heads is quite different from what the law provides for. Sometimes language courses cannot be run because the numbers of children or adults wishing to attend are too small for the courses to be economically viable. Schools attempt to deal with this by offering, for example, education vouchers that can be used for after-school language classes.

Another strategy is to not include the children in the first two school assessments. It is hard to judge whether this is long enough for them to have obtained a sufficient grasp of the language. Although SAL experts point out that linguistic nuances and more complex grammatical aspects can cause great difficulties for pupils and may even be insurmountable in some cases. For example,

SAL learners are expected to be able to tackle the same dictations as children who speak Slovak as their first language.

Another way of handling this situation is to put SAL pupils in a lower year. However, it is easy to imagine how frustrating it must be for children who cannot understand the language of instruction to have the extra complication of being in a year with younger children. Criticism of this practice is entirely justified as there is no guarantee that the language they encounter in a lower year will be any less complicated, formal or semantically complex.

Many heads suggest that a better alternative would be for SAL pupils to attend language lessons and non-core subjects, such as music and art, for perhaps the first year. This is common practice in a number of countries. Some even allow children to study their first language as well because additional language development occurs simultaneously (many child speakers of other languages speak three or four languages).

Let us now turn to preschool education as that is the main focus of this article. From 2021 preschool teachers will face the same situation that primary school teachers currently have to deal with. As noted earlier, foreign children are obliged to attend school. Under the education law (Section 146(2) of Act No. 245/2008) these children have the right to receive education, accommodation and meals in schools under the same conditions as Slovak citizens. In 2021 preschool attendance becomes compulsory for all children in the year prior to starting primary school, and this applies to SAL pupils as well.

The education of foreign children is therefore underpinned by the education law, while teaching methods come under the remit of the National Institute for Education (NIE). Its website has a special section on teaching foreign children, where teachers can also find a document entitled *Information and guidance for teachers of pupils from various multicultural backgrounds* (Žáčková, Vladová, 2005). The title would suggest it is aimed at primary school teachers. It does not take the new legislation into account (it was published 15 years ago) and is concerned with multicultural education, but nonetheless one might think it useful for teachers looking for guidance. However, it is not appropriate for use in preschools.

The NIE has issued teaching guidelines for basic and more extensive Slovak courses but for pupils aged 6–10 years and 11–16 years. There are other teaching recommendations for language courses (issued in 2014) but these are aimed at 6–15 year olds.

The expertise and funding for these language courses (basic Slovak and extensive Slovak) is provided by the Ministry of Interior (under the education law) and the education ministry is responsible for the organisation, funding, expertise and guidelines for SAL staff training courses. In its guidelines for the current school

year (2019/2020), the education ministry recommends that staff teaching foreign children use the *Slovak as a Foreign Language* handbook available on the Methodology and Pedagogy Centre (MPC) website. It states that 'language courses for foreign children are organised and funded by the OŠ OÚ [Department of Education District Office] based on requests from the school trustee'. Educational activities for teachers focusing on refugees, asylum and migration will be provided in collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and subsequently through the MPC. The UNHCR has also provided Slovakia with teaching and classroom resources for pupils aged 6–9 years and 9–12 years (these can be found on the UNHCR website).

The state therefore ensures that foreign children receive the same education as Slovak citizens and provides language support in the form of Slovak as a foreign language courses.

However, this only applies to children aged six and over. As yet there is no systematic state support for preschool children and yet, as our overview of preschool provision abroad shows, preschools are the ideal place for early language support. On the plus side, preschools have ample opportunity to develop pupils' language potential within their own organisational frameworks, more so than is the case in primary schools. Therefore the focus here is on preschools and the aim is to gather together different strategies and resources for preschool teachers wishing to support SAL pupils in the classroom.

Organisations such as the *Human Rights League*, *Marginal*, *CVEK* and the *Milan Šimečka Foundation* have long been concerned at education provision for foreigners, which is itself hardly encouraging. They have published resources, initiated public debates to draw attention to foreigners' lives and organised meetings. Recently they held meetings with foreigners in various district towns aimed at finding out how they can be better integrated into society. They found that Slovakia does not provide enough Slovak language courses and that language difficulties create hurdles for parents in the workplace and for children at school. However, the 2018 *Global report on the fulfilment of task, aims and goals of migration policy* states that 'language courses for foreign children are funded through agreements based on requests by the trustee. We have not recorded any complaints from trustees regarding the system currently in operation'.

As previously suggested this is hardly encouraging for the simple reason that the state cannot rely on the non-governmental sector (which contains organisations of various ideological hues) to provide a systematic solution that can be applied across the board. This becomes self-evident on looking at the situation of the Roma. There is no point repeatedly criticising the state for its inaction in this area. However, in order to highlight the inadequacy of the systemic support for teachers provided by the network of Methodological and Pedagogical Centres, two

examples are presented here from a handbook created by a Teach for Slovakia participant who was working in a primary school in the Prešov region. After a series of lesson failures in a class where the majority of the pupils were Roma children who could not speak Slovak, she created materials to be widely distributed among teachers confronted with similar situations as she was. Although it may be possible to explain away some of the criticism aimed at Slovakia's poor record with foreigners, there is no excusing the failures here. It is scandalous that the Methodology and Pedagogy Centres seem unable to provide more systematic support (i.e. resources and guidelines) for teachers who have had to deal with this issue for decades now. Instead, the work of this state-funded organisation had to be supplemented by a young, proactive teacher with no expertise but who was able to sit down in front of her computer and find online resources.

4 Creating a favourable climate

As has been shown child speakers of other languages receive no systematic support in Slovakia. The aim therefore is to find inspiration for preschool teachers who do not have the time, facilities or resources that would enable them to support these children and supply them with additional work.

Astute readers will not need reminding that simply doing language work with the child is not enough on its own. If SAL pupils are to be fully and successfully integrated, then their parents have to be involved as they are part of the cycle and therefore contribute to its effectiveness. But how can we engage parents who may not have sufficient knowledge of the language?

4.1 Communication

The first welcoming step that can be taken to show openness and willingness is to provide leaflets, basic instructions and documents in the parents' language. Alas, it is not a cheap option. Bearing in mind that SAL pupils' parents will come from a wide range of backgrounds, it should not be assumed that they will be able to speak English nor that they will understand how the preschool system works. Preschools that are likely to have relatively stable numbers of SAL pupils could produce information leaflets summarising key documents and forms (e.g. on pupil enrolment) that are appropriate for parents with a minimal understanding of Slovak.

Pictograms are the most popular and cheapest resource and can be used by children as well, as shall be explained. Pictograms – showing easily identifiable pictures – can be used not only to indicate locations but to inform parents about the daily routine, forthcoming activities and activities the child has participated in. That way parents can then ask their children about their day and use the

information to ask further questions, developing their understanding of time and their language skills.

Parents meetings present another challenge. If the preschool is attended by SAL pupils who share the same first language, then separate meetings could be arranged for their parents. If the parent cannot bring an interpreter, a parent with superior language skills should be found who can act as language mediator. Favaro (2001) states that mediators should have four functions: to promote social inclusion; to facilitate communication between the school and family; to support enrolment in school; and to enact initiatives that promote the first languages and cultures.

Here it is worth mentioning that this is a role children can take on as well – one of the pupils in the class could interpret for classmates. They could be children from the same country or a Slovak child who ‘looks after’ an SAL pupil.

Where the preschool is in shared premises, a cubby-hole system can be used instead. Parental notes can be left in the cubby holes, and that way the notes can be linguistically appropriate and the teacher will know if the parent has collected them.

4.2 Reading together

Knowledge of the official language or language of instruction is also key to the successful integration and subsequent educational attainment of SAL pupils. Language support can be provided through reading together. As noted above, the family may not be highly educated and may need encouragement – they should be welcomed at any time of the day and able to stay as long as they like as many will not what to do even if they are willing. On the one hand, this is one way parents can find out about good literature in both their own language and in Slovak and on the other they can learn about methods to use when helping their children with their homework. They should be given access to the classroom so they can see how the teacher uses the books with the children (especially during the child’s adaptation period) and learn what to do themselves. Here, the preschool is like a library – teachers can recommend parents can take home books that are used in the classroom and in lessons for them to read with their children.

In other countries it is common for preschools to organise regular sessions with small groups of parents, who bring their children with them and then read together. The preschools can encourage them to read together: mothers take turns in reading a story to all the children. That way the children hear the story in their own language and in the other languages spoken by the children in the group. The story should always be illustrated and the children can help the mothers pronounce some of the words. The native speakers have an opportunity to hear foreign languages and experience their classmates’ everyday life: having to learn to concentrate closely, sustain attention and listen hard – all of which can be tiring.

This strategy of encouraging use of the children's first language in the classroom is often favoured because the proficiency developed in one language is transferable to another, provided there is sufficient exposure to both languages and the motivation to learn. Cummins (2001) believes that the non-dominant¹ languages are a resource for, and not a threat to learning the school language. Preschools do not have the capacity to support first language use in SAL children, but they could employ various bilingual strategies that not only create a positive atmosphere for parents and children but help children recognise different language scripts.

When the children begin preschool, 'Welcome!' signs can be displayed in different languages (the first languages of the children in the class).

The children's parents could be asked to write words in their language (hello, thank you, smile, items of clothing) on a large piece of paper hanging in the cloakroom. The teacher could stick high-frequency words relating to that week's topic on the board. Parents who do not speak Slovak can then expand their child's vocabulary in both their first and additional language, while learning new words themselves.

If the preschool has the latest resources – such as a mini interactive board that records sounds to accompany pictures – the parents could be asked to record the sound of the word to go with the keys. Danish preschool teachers were surprised at how enthusiastically the parents took to this task. The children proudly played the sound, saying things like 'My Dad said that. He's really clever'.

The preschool walls are then filled with multilingual signs and multilingual visuals relating to the topics covered at preschool (parts of the face, main parts of the body, colours, days of the week, numbers and common words like mum, dad, children, teacher). It is not important at this stage if the foreign-language visuals contain grammatical errors.

4.3 Teacher openness

Regardless of the type of assistance the preschool decides to provide, success is always dependent on the teachers being open and willing. Intercultural competence, a term used in this context, is considered essential to the success or failure of any strategy.

Having visited many preschools in Slovakia and abroad, though, these seemingly simple steps are not a given. In a preschool in Palermo, Italy, the teacher used bilingual resources that gave the name of the items in both Italian and Bangladeshi, which has a non-Latin script, and she wrote down the pronunciation

¹ The term 'non-dominant language' refers to a language that is not used by the majority of the country's population.

in Latin script. She did so of her own accord because she felt she should teach the pronunciation of key phrases and words in the language spoken by many of the children in the class. This self-education paid off when a new girl joined the class and she was able to reassure her in her own language: 'This is a lovely school' – Skula sundara [*Skul sciundor*], 'There are lots of children' – Aneka scisu ache [*anek scisciù accè*].

4.4 Sport and the body

Sport is often thought to offer great potential for integrating different marginal groups, including child speakers of other languages. Encouraging team sports has numerous positive effects, both for the minority groups and the community as a whole. For minority groups it is a way of becoming a fully valued member of the community. Misener and Mason (2006) point out in their article that sport creates opportunities for people to get to know one another, socialise, create contacts, make friends and develop networks. This also applies to preschools as sport and games form part of the curriculum. Sport is important because it does not require mastery of the language; it is non-verbal.

Another important aspect is that physical movement has been linked to language development, which is why there are many language acquisition theories that contain a physical element (e.g. TPR, Asher, 1996). Language development is not simply aided by the non-verbal communication but by the activity itself, which is often associated with verbal communication. All children's sports and physical exercise requires some form of communication, which can initially be reductive non-verbal communication that then develops into comprehension (e.g. understanding the teacher's instructions) until independent language use is reached (e.g. communicating with fellow players) (Masaryková, 2020). One example of the use of sport in second language acquisition is a method developed in Germany (Zimmer, 2009) involving sport and physical exercise for use at the preschool level.

5 Ways of supporting second language development in preschool children

None of the relevant institutions in Slovakia offer special interventions for child speakers of other languages. Instead the onus is on young children developing sensitivity to language cues on their own. The well-established finding that the provision of language support at a young age is important not just for language acquisition but for the child's future as well (Neuman – Dickinson, 2001) has been met with inaction from the Slovak state. Studies on literacy in disadvantaged children show that deliberate stimulation has a positive effect and that there is a need for this kind of intervention (Zápotočná – Petrová, 2017). The Danish

experience shows us that introducing compulsory preschooling in the absence of any additional intervention does not necessarily lead to the desired effect in children's language skills² (ECEC Policy in Denmark, 2000). Neither has the inclusive education provided in Italy for many years proved sufficient without further support (Dovigo, 2018).

Preschools have a great deal of leeway to set their own organisational framework, which means they can devote greater attention to developing these children's language skills than primary schools can. Given this greater capacity to promote language development and the nature of preschooling itself, to not provide systematic assistance is nothing less than a wasted opportunity.

In practice, the lack of a specific legal definition covering child speakers of other languages creates complications as schools and teachers cannot claim extra funding for interventions in education and language development or for facilitating (or even enabling) communication with the child's parents. Any additional work teachers carry out to help these children is voluntary and unpaid. Everyday practices therefore differ greatly between preschools as they are dependent on the willingness of individual teachers and heads to take the initiative and develop an interest in teaching Slovak as an additional language.

All the steps for fostering children's language development presented in this article can be used under the existing, albeit less-than-ideal, circumstances found in Slovak preschools, but they do of course depend on the capacity of the teachers and the preschool.

5. 1 Diagnosing the child³

The lack of attention paid to teaching SAL pupils in the Slovak school system is also reflected in the lack of available resources for language stimulation and support and for diagnosing children's language skills⁴. There are of course, as has been noted, materials produced for use in English language environments;

² Having found that child speakers of other languages were not making sufficient progress in Danish, the authorities decided not just to make preschool attendance compulsory from a very young age (from the age of one) to ensure bilingual development, but to ensure that additional systematic language support was also provided.

³ On the potential and difficulty of diagnosing bilingual children, see Linda Doleží, Pavlína Vyšínová, Tomáš Nikolai: Diagnosing linguistic and general cognitive functions and culture-fair tests.

⁴ Teachers can use the diagnostics in Communicative Behaviour Test 2 (TEKOS II., Kapalková et al, 2008), available online at www.laboratorium.detskarec.sk. This test is not aimed at child speakers of other languages, but is a standardised test for Slovak-speaking children up to the age of three. However, some of the sections that highlight problem areas in the child's language skills may prove useful to teachers, who can then set additional tasks to target these areas.

teachers may find these useful as an orientational framework for planning support. The strategies the teacher will be able to make use of will depend on whether the child has no knowledge of the language, is beginning to develop initial skills, is gaining confidence or has already mastered the language. Support can therefore range from helping children to understand the everyday context of their classroom, to expanding their vocabulary and grammar or explaining the cultural and social aspects of what is said (Hester, 1990).

5.2 Effective approaches for use in everyday activities

The easiest way teachers can adapt their everyday routines is for them to be conscious of their own classroom language, adjusting it as required. Modifying or supplementing language use could be the first cost-free easy step teachers take to foster additional language acquisition in pupils (Linhartová, Loudová Stralczyńska, no date). Many of the recommendations for parents and teachers who communicate with pupils with speech development problems can also be used with SAL pupils. These include adjusting speed, pronunciation, volume and intonation when speaking. Teachers can also modify their syntax so they are 'one step ahead of the child'. In everyday situations the communication strategies of modelling, commenting, repeating and expanding the child's linguistic output should be used (Hornáková, Kapalková, Mikulajová, 2005). One approach recommended by the civic organisation Meta on www.inkluzivniskola.cz is for teachers to write out common phrases to use when doing a range of classroom activities. To ensure a systematic approach is adopted, individual language development plans can be created for the children, taking account of language level and classroom lesson content, with appropriate vocabulary and language that the teacher can cover with the child during spare moments (during free play, breaks, outdoor periods). Before embarking on organised group activities, teachers should briefly cover the topic, vocabulary and structure of the activity with SAL pupils. In addition to focusing on spoken language development, teachers should also encourage written language development and highlight the connection between the two. Reading, and especially listening comprehension, play a particularly important role in young children's language development (Zápotočná, 2017). It is a key component of preschool education and all the crucial aspects are detailed in the Language and Communication section of the State Pre-primary Education Programme (2016). Children whose language skills lag behind the group may be unfamiliar with some of the cultural aspects of reading and require a more individual approach – dialogic reading with a competent adult who can discuss the text with the child and do further activities to help them better understand the text, both explicitly and implicitly.

5.3 Finding inspiration in special needs best practices

Another low-cost solution is to find approaches used with special needs children and adapt them for use with SAL pupils. However, this does require teachers to take the initiative, think outside the box and be willing to invest the time and energy. Visual props can be used to help reinforce language use on a daily basis in preschools. This method is used with pupils on the autistic spectrum to structure environments, time and work. It helps the children to anchor themselves in the activity or daily routine, making it easier for them to understand and interpret the environment and events and to orientate themselves (Laudová, 2003). They can reassure themselves about what will happen next by repeatedly returning to the visual depiction of the daily routine or class rules, which should be displayed in a visible place. This helps reduce insecurity and fear of the unknown. Another way visual props can be used is to illustrate key words and phrases by showing pictures or photographs when explaining content. The children then find it easier to access the topic and pick out individual words in speech flows. When reading or telling stories, pictures can be used to illustrate the sequence of events, or props can be used to dramatise the events to help the child better understand the text.

Visual props can also be used to help children express themselves at early stages of language development. Another example from special needs practice is communication cards for helping children with communication disorders (primary or symptomatic) to express themselves. These picture cards are used to compensate for pupils' lack of language (Šedibová, 2000). These are perhaps best used during the initial adaptation period. They provide the children with an immediate and effective means of expressing their needs in the new preschool environment.

Further inspiration can be found in resources used to help children with hearing difficulties communicate. Such children often have speech development problems (Schmidtová – Ristvejová, 2017). One strategy for encouraging communication that both teachers and parents can use is to keep a diary. These should be A4 size and unlined. The adult fills the diary with photographs, images, pictures, and the vocabulary and dialogues that occurred in the situation depicted. The teacher or parent creates the diary and it should be a personalised account of the child's experiences, preferences and personal events. The diary content is then used to help stimulate communication as it is a record of all the important things in the child's life and the strong emotional experiences that prompt conversation. Photographs are most effective as they depict the children doing their favourite things with important others. The idea is that the child is most motivated to communicate with those around them when they wish to express their own desires. Hovorková (2017) suggests that appropriate topics that can be

incorporated into the diaries of preschool-age children include daily routines (self-care, washing, helping), everyday life (places they visit regularly, emotions expressed in various situation, daily activities), stories, funny and interesting things, special events and the child's achievements. In addition to creating the diary, it is important that regular time is set aside for conversing with the child and that the focus should be on specific language areas – vocabulary development, grammar, creating sentences, engaging in dialogue, using prepositions and so on. The diary could cover topics linked to lesson content – topics or practising grammatical constructions when discussing the diary content. Last, but not least, writing words or dialogues in print form helps the child understand the link between the written and spoken forms of the language.

5.4 Teaching Slovak through special language courses for preschool children

The third low-cost option and most effective method of supporting language development in SAL pupils is special language courses based around a systematic methodology. This option is more organisationally demanding but is recommended for preschools with larger numbers of SAL pupils. However, it requires the teacher to take the initiative and to prepare and teach group lessons (ideally twice a week). The only widely available and tried and tested method in Slovakia is KIKUS⁵.

The Slovak version of KIKUS has existed since 2016. It was developed by the linguist Edgardis Garlin to foster second-language acquisition in 3–10 year olds and is available online (www.inkluzivniskola.cz). Children learn their first language as well as Slovak. The biggest advantage of this early years language-learning method is that it covers Slovak in the required detail. Teachers wishing to use this method in any additional language courses they provide need no training or accreditation. The course takes them through the essential elements of the language and shows them how to develop second-language learning in young children. It provides a fully functional framework that can be modified and added to according to the needs of the teacher and the pupils in the class.

⁵ There is hope that the narrative format model could also be used by teachers. Zacharová Jursová (2019) experimentally tested the narrative format method in a group of children from a marginalised language environment attending a pre-primary class at primary school. The method was originally developed for use with preschool-age children and the principles of the narrative format could prove useful for working with SAL children. However, the method is not freely available and teachers have to have certification.

Conclusion

As suggested by the title this article has focused on possible forms of support for child speakers of other languages that are suitable for use in Slovak preschools. Although there are few refugees in Slovakia, the article has shown that there are children attending schools in Slovakia who do not fall into the legal category of foreign children (and so are not eligible for state support) but who nonetheless deserve attention. These are children who either do not speak Slovak or for whom Slovak is an additional language. The European Union has put pressure on member states to introduce compulsory preschooling. Slovakia is following the trend, and in an effort to raise education levels among minorities (especially the Roma minority) preschool attendance will become compulsory in 2021. In this article the term child speakers of other language has been adopted from the Czech. It can be applied to the Roma population in Slovakia, and, with the introduction of compulsory preschooling, the expectation is that there will be far greater opportunities for language support and intervention in preschools than was previously the case.

However, since the authors of the article are not in a position to directly push for state provision of language and other forms of support for SAL pupils, the aim was to seek inspiration abroad and collect low-cost alternatives for use in the preschool classroom. Although these are not financially onerous, they do require teachers to take the initiative. Well-established methods used abroad were identified and those suitable for use in Slovak preschools were selected. Our research shows that language courses are only available to children aged six and over. But, if investing in preschool education brings better opportunities later in life and in education, then simply relying on children to spontaneously respond to linguistic stimuli is surely inadequate. This article has shown that targeted and systematic support is essential both to young children's capacity to learn and to special preschool education. The experiences of Germany, Denmark and the Czech Republic in this field are evidence of this.

The article therefore provides inspiration to teachers who are not always able to devote large amounts of time, capacity and resources to providing support for SAL learners. It has pointed out that simply working with SAL pupils in preschool is not sufficient. The family must also be involved in communication and in working with the pupil, despite the language barrier. One method that has proved to be both productive and interesting, and to researchers as well, is sport and physical activity. Sport paves the way to cooperation, socialisation and subsequently communication. The children's language acquisition is fostered spontaneously through non-verbal communication and movement. Various approaches have been presented here for supporting additional language acquisition in preschool that are within the capacities of Slovak preschools,

beginning with diagnosis to providing language support in everyday activities, through visualisation, diary-keeping, reading and special language courses.

Although low-cost options for supporting SAL pupils have been suggested, teachers are required to show willingness, use their initiative and to think outside the box. But it is on this basis that the selections were made precisely because, on their many visits to preschools attended by child speakers of other languages, the authors have seen plenty of initiative among teachers and activists alike.

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