

Foreign language teaching in the Edelény District, a disadvantaged region of Hungary

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Abstract

The present paper outlines a research project, which focusses on the aspects of quality and quantity in foreign language education in thirteen schools in the Edelény district of Hungary. It hypothesises that the significant proportion of disadvantaged and extremely disadvantaged pupils in the district adversely affects the quality and effectiveness of language teaching there. This paper outlines the theoretical framework of the study before addressing more objective questions through a series of interview questions.

Keywords: foreign language teaching; disadvantaged background; language teaching methods

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Introduction

Speaking a foreign language is becoming increasingly important all over the world in the 21st century. In an ideal situation, children start learning a foreign language early at kindergartens (Kruppa, Márkus and Trentinné 2023). The European Union encourages and supports the teaching of foreign languages from an early age. It first defined foreign language development as a strategic aim at the 2002 Barcelona European Council meeting (Presidency Conclusions 2002). The long-term aim is for citizens of the EU to speak at least two foreign languages as well as their mother tongue. In Hungary, data relating to the number of students learning foreign languages is handled by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, but is limited to primary and secondary educational institutes. There are no available figures about foreign language teaching in kindergartens. Using quantitative data and relevant aspects of the National Curriculum, the current status of foreign language competence will be explored.

Foreign language learning in Hungary – a brief overview

According to statistics from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, in the 2022-23 academic year 434,784 students studied English, 98,464 German, 1501 French, 1300 Spanish, 524 Russian, 519 Italian and 58 Latin in primary school (https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/okt/hu/okt0009.html).

It also showed that there had been no significant increase in the number of primary school pupils studying foreign languages since 2010 except for with English, Spanish and Latin, where an increase was observed from the 2010 figures of 359,032, 422 and 10 students respectively. The different types of secondary school - trade school, vocational school, grammar school and technical (grammar) school - were examined separately. The study found that English is the predominant language in each of the four secondary school types with the highest number of students studying English in grammar schools and technical (grammar) schools. Figures for 2022-23 were 204,072 students in grammar schools, 147,365 in technical (grammar) schools, 44,847 in vocational school and 2,339 in trade schools.

In the 2022-23 academic year, a considerable decrease can be observed in the number of students studying German as a foreign language in trade schools, vocational schools and technical (grammar) schools over the previous 10 years. However, in grammar schools, although there is still a decrease in the numbers of students studying German, the figure is only marginal (2010/2011: 118,878 students; 2022/2023: 118,121 students). However, it can be observed by comparing figures from 2010-11 and 2022-23 that there has been an overall decrease in the number of students learning both English and German in all types of schools in the study. The only exception being for Spanish studied in grammar schools (2010/2011: 9,687 students; 2022/2023: 14,958 students).

After presenting these figures, the study lays out what elements are, according to the National Curriculum, required in foreign language learning. The present regulations state that the first foreign language should be started in grade 4 except for in bilingual or ethnic heritage schools. Students should reach at least level A2 according to the EU Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) by the end of grade 8, and level B1 by the end of their secondary education. A second foreign language is compulsory only in grammar schools from grade 9 but not in other secondary educational institutes (Farczádi et al. 2020, 5). Students may choose between a modern language and a classical language for their second foreign language.

The framework for the structure and content of language teaching in Hungary is regulated by a series of documents. The framework comprises of three levels; the highest being the National Curriculum, then the curriculum framework, which serves as a basis for the third, the local curriculum. The most important and most significant exam is the secondary school-leaving exam for which a minimum of one foreign language at general level is compulsory for every graduating student. In 2015, another exam directly related to public education was introduced in order to assess primary school pupils' competence in English and German (Öveges 2018).

In 2001, the European Union created the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) with the aim of establishing a uniform international standard for grading language proficiency throughout the EU. The modern language education section of the National Curriculum and the Curriculum Framework follow the guidelines and principles of the CEFR. The two most important provisions of the CEFR are the introduction of a multilingual approach, which is also action oriented (Farczádi et al. 2020, 8). The current aims of Hungarian foreign language education, based on the CEFR and National Curriculum, include the following elements: student-oriented teaching, active language teaching, greater focus on the individual needs of students, the use of digital tools and an interdisciplinary approach (Farczádi et al. 2020, 10-15). The definition and interpretation of the above facts will not be examined in the present study, but will be addressed in a further study pertaining to these elements in disadvantaged regions and focussing on that of the Edelény District.

The assessment of foreign language teaching in the above regions will be both qualitative, focussing on the content of foreign language teaching as outlined in this study, and quantitative, focussing on data relating to numbers of foreign language learners, types of school and ratios of languages learnt.

Disadvantaged students and foreign language learning

Disadvantaged areas are those for which the economic situation and social status are below the national average. The Hungarian government is actively working to support disadvantaged districts and areas launching the *Integration of Settlements in Disadvantaged Districts* initiative in 2008. The main aim of the initiative is to integrate disadvantaged districts and settlements, or at the very least to stop their decline, by utilising grants from the EU (Sipos and Szűcs 2021, 108). The *Integration Settlement* initiative was launched in 2019 with the aim of developing the social aspects of 300 settlements in decline throughout Hungary. The settlements targeted in the initiative are spread over a wide geographical area, but are more concentrated in Southern Transdanubia and the North and North-East Districts of Hungary. The initiative is under the direction and coordination of the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta in partnership with more than twenty charitable, church and civil organisations (Németh 2023, 17). Many of the settlements in the Edelény District are among the 300 settlements of the *Integration Settlement* initiative (Balajt, Szakácsi, Bódvalenke, Martonyi, Szin, Borsodszirák, Hangács, Lak, Rakaca, Rakacaszend, Szalonna, Szendrölád, Tornanádaska, Tornaszentjakab, Bódvalenke, Martonyi, Szin).

Both national and international research show the correlation between under-privilege and foreign language learning with respect to accessibility and effectiveness. The mapping and evaluation of socio-economic status plays a significant role in this (Vajnai, Szabó and Gulya 2022, 105). Lower socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds are affected by the following: low-educated parents, low income, family instability, a high number of dependents, deviant behaviour in the

micro-environment, lack of family or dysfunctional family, and ethnic minority status. The following data from 2019 on income and employment is available for the settlements where foreign language teaching is accessible in the Edelény District:

Settlement	Annual net income/person	Long-term unemployment rate
Boldva	1,027,187 Forints	47.35%
Borsodszirák	1,001,988 Forints	47.87%
Edelény	1,083,100 Forints	39.82%
Lak	669,249 Forints	37.5%
Rakaca	510,208 Forints	35%
Rakacaszend	513,897 Forints	26.09%
Szendrő	842,210 Forints	48.38%
Szendrőlád	496,467 Forints	41.95%

The average income of all of the above settlements is extremely low and long-term unemployment rates are exceptionally high. From this we can conclude that the number of dependents is also significantly high. In other words, the socio-economic status in the Edelény District has a definite effect on foreign language teaching in the area. The aim of this present research is to conduct a survey in order to map and confirm this.

The Edelény District

The Edelény District comprises of 47 settlements and is located Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County in Northern Hungary close to the Slovak border. The area covers 783 km² and has a population of 37,000. Although geographically the district is very varied, historically its heritage is more constant and the district has always been treated as a single administrative unit. The settlements are located along the banks of the Bodva River and its tributaries and are generally small in size with small populations. However, there are some larger settlements with larger populations such as Edelény, Szendrő, Bódvaszilás, Szögliget, Perkupa and Boldva. Both Edelény, the regional capital, and Szendrő are classified as towns (Koós and Virág 2012, 6).

The working-age population of the Edelény District is 20,637 people. The number of registered unemployed in 2019 was 2,283 (Sipos and Szűcs 2021, 109). As indicated earlier, the socio-economic status of the district is disadvantaged and hence there are large numbers of disadvantaged and extremely disadvantaged students in the local schools. For more detail, see the 2023 statistics from the Public Education Information System: *Statistics on children and students from disadvantaged and extremely disadvantaged backgrounds* (<https://dari.oktatas.hu/kirpub/index>).

The high proportion of disadvantaged students in individual schools means that

there is also a high concentration of pupils with social issues as well as learning and behavioural difficulties. Many students are problematic and live in overcrowded ghetto-like conditions. Such students arrive with no school equipment and deprived of sleep. They are unable to complete their homework at home and do not receive any support from their parents (Szabó, Kovács and Polonyi 2021, 80).

The research will be conducted in the following 13 schools in the Edelény District:

- Bódvaszilás District Primary School, Bódvaszilás
- Szathmáry Király Ádám District Primary School, Boldva
- Bartók Béla Primary School, Borsodszirák
- Borsod Primary School, Edelény
- Szent János Greek Catholic Grammar School, Technical School and Dormitory, Edelény
- Szent Miklós Greek Catholic Primary School, Kindergarten and Primary Arts School, Edelény
- Lak District Primary School, Lak
- Rakaca Primary School, Rakaca
- Szent Miklós Greek Catholic Primary School, Kindergarten and Primary Arts School, Rakacaszend
- Szalonna Kalász László Primary School, Szalonna
- Szendrő Apáczai Csere János Primary School, Szendrő
- Ujj Viktor Géza Primary Arts School, Szendrő
- Szendrőlád Primary School Iskola, Szendrőlád

During the course of the interviews two main sets of questions will be addressed referring to qualitative and quantitative aspects of language teaching. The quantitative questions relate to the numbers of language teachers and language learners, whereas the qualitative ones relate to aspects such as classroom equipment, teaching materials and teaching methods.

Foreign language learning in the Edelény District – interview questions

In order to assess the foreign language teaching, interviews will be conducted with all head teachers and language teachers at the schools listed above. As well as exploring different aspects of foreign language teaching to form and assess the situational picture, our main objective is to identify language teaching methods, which are currently in practise in foreign language education for disadvantaged and extremely disadvantaged pupils in the Edelény District.

In addition to demographic questions, the research aims to collect and collate information on the student background that will be attained using the following questions:

- Sex (Male / Female)
- Student's year of study
- Settlement
- Name and type of school
- Mother's highest educational level

The following questions are for the head teachers:

- How many students attend the school?
- Why are numbers of students decreasing?
- What are the proportions of disadvantaged, extremely disadvantaged and special needs pupils in the school?
- Are there any unfilled teaching positions?
- Which foreign languages are taught in the school?
- How many students study English, German and other languages in the school?
- How are students divided into language learning groups?
- How would you describe language teaching in the school?
- How well-equipped is the school?
- How many language teachers work in the school?
- Do the teachers use interactive boards or tablets?

The following questions are for the language teachers:

- What language(s) do you teach and how long have you been teaching it?
- What level are the students in the language classes?
- What course books and other materials do you use in the classroom?
- Do you need to implement different teaching methods with the disadvantaged students? If so, why?
- Do you know any methods specifically for teaching languages to disadvantaged and extremely disadvantaged students?
- What difficulties do language teachers face in the school?
- Is there a shortage of equipment or support, for example training courses?
- What would help you the most in your job?

Following the personal visits to individual schools to conduct the interviews, the responses will be assessed and published. The research conducted in the Edelény District will serve as a model for further studies relating to foreign language education to be conducted in other disadvantaged regions and districts.

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