



An efficacy assessment of very young EFL learners in Hungary

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This study presents an area that has to date been little researched: the efficacy of young learners' language acquisition. In Hungary, foreign language training offered for pre-school children is mainly a private enterprise. According to Hungary's National Core Curriculum, public education introduces a foreign language no sooner than the age of 9-10; some exceptions are schools with bilingual programmes. As revealed by their high demand, the extant pre-school language programmes are highly popular with parents. Yet in the absence of official control or supervision, the need to evaluate their effectiveness in the form of private research has arisen. This examination aims to fulfill this very goal.

Keywords: CLIL, pre-school learners, efficacy, evaluation, Hungarian context

The issue of the early start and its reception

The institutional launch of foreign languages in early public education is a relatively new phenomenon. Until the last decades of the 20th century, the notion of institutional instruction of foreign languages to young learners (aged between 3-10) had not only been uncommon, but widely unwelcome as well. Since such programmes have been present, they have had to face a great deal of scepticism and criticism from numerous stakeholders in education. The criticism mainly came from three sources: a) from the field of pedagogy, claiming language learning is a highly demanding academic subject, and, as such, completely unsuitable for the very young, b) from the societal field, saying that foreign language instruction may have a negative influence on the national identity of the child (the principle of L2 versus L1), c) from the field of biology, stating that the human brain is structured in a way that it cannot store more than one language in it. It was concluded that bilingualism might cause neurotic sicknesses and a split identity.

The negative assumptions and reservations were mostly due to the fact that some decades ago it was unclear what an encounter with a second language meant to young children. The rejection lied in the misconception that foreign languages are learnt at an early age the same way as in later periods of life. The truth, however, is that young learners *learn* neither their first nor second language, they *acquire* them.



Young learners are different: A look back on the beginnings

Paving the way for early SLA as a discipline was due to two things: The Plowden Report (1967), and the separation of language learning from language acquisition (Krashen, 1981). The idea of 'early start' has its roots in mainstream primary education rather than in language teaching. This process was greatly encouraged by the Plowden Report, which declared some basic principles of how young learners should be taught in the primary years. On the basis of the then-contemporary research findings, the image of a general education curriculum emerged that broke with rigid subject isolation and instead of 'science blocks' arranged the curriculum around certain topics of interest for the age group (Brumfit et al., 1991; Brewster, 1991; Halliwell, 1992; Rixon, 1992). The Report overtly declared that young learners need to be approached differently. This proposed a learner-centred approach in all aspects of education and demanded the children's right to an education that is age-relevant. Instead of traditional teacher-centred, knowledge-transmission-based teaching, it argued for an education that is based on the learners' needs and the way they learn. This new, topic-based view was the first step towards integration, which would end in content-based teaching.

Another decisive step towards early SLA originated in a theory by Krashen, who claimed that language acquisition and language learning are absolutely different. Acquisition comes naturally without any obvious effort, while learning requires tedious work. Acquisition happens unconsciously, requires no prior knowledge of grammar, does not apply previously learnt rules, but places message-transmission in the centre. Its message-oriented character allows for more opportunities for making errors in contrast to the form-orientedness of conscious learning which puts the main emphasis on accurate language use. After some time, practice has proven that an early competence in languages can be obtained through education as well. It has been made clear that young children do neither better nor worse in languages than other learners, they just learn *differently*. It is this 'difference' that makes early childhood language acquisition a special issue under the umbrella term of second language instruction. Teaching English (and other languages) as a second or other language to young learners has become an independent professional field with a sound and ever-growing research literature of its own. In the light of this new approach, young language learners started to be viewed as having their own ways rather than being unfavourably compared to older or adult learners.

Content and language: making the match

The message-oriented character of language acquisition for the young was the idea behind early CLIL. CLIL, the acronym for Content and Language Integrated Learning is subject-matter teaching in a target language that is embedded in a curriculum. CLIL has become known as the European model of bilingual education, a type of bilingual education in homogeneous regions. Before the late

1980s, this type of provision was only available in linguistically heterogeneous regions. The first programmes began as a result of Canadian immersion and became enormously successful. CLIL started to become the most widely used term for educational bilingualism during the 1990s. Coined by Marsh, the term was first used in 1994¹. “CLIL refers to situations where subjects, or parts of subjects, are taught through a foreign language with dual-focused aims, namely the learning of content, and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language” (Marsh 1994). Some years later Marsh (2005) refers to CLIL as a generic ‘umbrella’ term to refer to diverse methodologies which lead to dual-focused education where attention is given to both topic and language of instruction. Now it is used to describe any educational situation in which an additional (second/foreign) language is used for the teaching and learning of subjects other than the language itself. CLIL can be implemented with very different models.

The Hungarian context and its research

The scale of foreign language programmes in Hungary has been extended in the past couple of years: pre-school children have appeared as learners both in private and public education. Participation of 3-7-year-old learners in EFL is still an under-researched area. One reason behind this might be that a relatively short time has elapsed since the discipline of EFL covering very young learners emerged (Kovács & Trentinné, 2016). Another reason is that the number of children participating in these programmes is relatively low compared to the number of pre-school children in general because development in EFL is not part of public education. Language development for the very young still seems to be the private business of parents and mostly conducted outside the classroom. For this very reason it is exposed to the market in an echo of the concerns voiced by Vámos twenty to thirty years ago, who claimed the same fears regarding the issue of foreign language instruction (2008).

In Hungary, CLIL is now a rapidly developing area for research. Ágnes Vámos herself produced a study of the spread of bilingual education programmes in Hungary (1998), a complete CLIL history of Hungary (2008) and, in collaboration with Judit Kovács, edited a collection of studies on CLIL in Hungary (2008). Other major contributions in this field include studies of Hungarian-English primary CLIL, by Judit Kovács (2006, 2008, 2014, 2018) and teacher training for CLIL by Éva Trentinné Benkő (2014, 2015). In the last decade, Trentinné Benkő has researched in depth different aspects of teachers’ and trainees’ beliefs concerning early institutional encounters with a foreign language in the Hungarian context (2008, 2013/a, 2013/b, 2016).

Features of the research below

The research below examines some features of early bilingual programmes in Hungary, most importantly their efficacy. Apart from the novelty, the recent

¹ Some sources mention 1996, e.g.: Marsh et al.: The CLIL quality matrix Central workshop report 6/2005 (Graz, Austria, 3-5 November 2005).

study has another specific feature: its classroom research character. Classroom research has been present in the last couple of decades proving that non-academic research of language education is also possible and teachers might become researchers through observing and assessing their own learners. The present research shows an example of how kindergarten teachers can be involved in the process of research. Local teachers were actively present throughout the assessment and assisted the research team with note-taking.

The tasks designed for the research are exclusively oral: no literacy is required. The linguistic development of children can only be successful once it is seen as part of their overall educational (cognitive, social, emotional, etc.) development. This is why linguistic skills are also planned to be approached through general skills development.

Aim of research²

It is rather difficult to perceive, observe or collect data on pedagogical phenomena. The recent research primarily aims at providing information on what characteristics of an EFL programme are effective in pre-school. Only limited data can be found regarding the effectiveness of early language programmes in kindergartens as the only information provided is from ethnic kindergartens that use other languages than English (Fehér könyv, 2012). EFL programmes have been expanded among pre-schools (mostly private) but because these are new to this field of education, most of the time we cannot even find this feature in the institute's curriculum. The research also aims to reveal information about the attitudes, views, and beliefs held by both institution leaders and practitioners towards their own EFL programme. To provide a larger and refined image of the features of development of young EFL learners, both direct and indirect techniques of research were used.

Hypotheses and research questions

As hypotheses for this research, the following are assumed:

1. An early encounter with languages results in a basic competence of a language if the L2 is delivered in an authentic, activity-based, natural, comprehensible, and enjoyable way.
2. The characteristics of the teacher in early SLL are crucial. Only well-selected, specially- trained and close to native level speaker teachers can make SLA happen at an early age.
3. Institute leaders and practitioners' views and beliefs also determine the outcome of the programme.
4. It is better to start an EFL programme at an early age as its results will only be seen by the end of preschool age (6).

In order to prove the above hypotheses, some research questions were prepared. The children who were assessed all originated from big (age 6-7) group and were at the end of their last year in an EFL programme provided by

² The empirical research was carried out by Zsuzsanna Noé.

a bilingual kindergarten. Parallely, a longitudinal study was conducted of one of the learners. The researcher was interested in children's attitude towards L2, their level of understanding, and readiness to speak. This research focuses on the level of listening and speaking from linguistic skills and the level of vocabulary and pronunciation from competences. After assessing the children, it was found that the attitudes, beliefs, and views of professionals and leaders form a fundamental element in success: in other words, it was attempted to investigate the human factor.

Description of the context and research tools

Most action research techniques can be implemented in various ways. First, it needs to be stated that some parts of the research can be classified as qualitative research as the field of education that the researcher was interested in is not widespread throughout the country and she also tried to measure attitudes and beliefs by means of interviews and questionnaires. The researcher was aware that the dangers of bias are obvious and all such evidence has to be weighed carefully.

This research is based on the principle of triangulation (Cohen et al., 2018) in order to receive the best, presumably precise results (Flick, 2018). Three tools were chosen, partly for carrying out assessment, and partly for evaluating the collected data. These are the following:

A case study that the researcher wrote about one of her students of three years.

A specially designed worksheet (see in Appendix 3) for assessing the achievement of the groups of very young learners. Assessments were carried out by the children's own English teachers to lower the children's stress levels and each dialogue was observed by the researcher.

Interviews about the EFL programme conducted in a semi-structured way with institution principals and some professional representatives specialised in kindergarten education at the local pedagogical centre.

A questionnaire for assessing teachers' views, beliefs, experience, and attitudes towards the EFL programme operating in their institutions.

The above tools were selected on the following bases:

1. When making decisions and designing the research tools, an age-relevant approach was preferred. Tools for measuring pre-school young learners aged 4-6 are unusual and unavailable: it was therefore necessary to compose a worksheet specifically designed to suit our purpose, as well as to determine the set of visual aids (poster, flash cards, toy cars, photos) needed for the tasks. The children were already familiar with the visual aids and nature of tasks. The assessment was carried out in a room with the child, his/her English teacher, and myself present. It was necessary to be present for the purpose of a one-on-one appraisal. In total, fifty children were assessed in total and the researcher was in the room throughout the process to ensure the same criteria were applied in the evaluation.

2. Semi-structured bilingual (as there were native English speakers as well) interviews and questionnaires with teachers (kindergarten principals and teachers of English, Hungarian) were important to get the necessary background information on the basic features of the teaching programme applied, including data on their views on early English development, when they started their programme, how the children were taught, as well as to gain some information on the teachers' competences, experience and the nature of the programme itself.
3. Case study was chosen to provide an interesting illustration. The results will not be statistically generalisable to the whole population of learners and institutions.

The limited number of kindergartens offering English in Hungary makes it difficult to find kindergartens that provide the same conditions. I have chosen both public and private kindergartens from different districts of the capital city (A) and two other towns (B, C).

For the assessment, a kindergarten that has a special EFL programme including native or bilingual English teachers, was selected. The institute currently has five homogenous, bilingual groups. The assessed children in A1 were between ages six and seven from the two graduate (big) groups, comprising a total of fifty students. They have been attending the programme for three to four years. It has to be mentioned that none of the children had access to English outside of the kindergarten, e.g. bilingual family, additional English lessons or English-speaking babysitter. The English programme is embedded in their overall educational programme as part of their daily routine. English teachers work closely together with their Hungarian co-teachers on a full-time, daily basis. The groups function like a bilingual family as both teachers take part in all activities held during the daily routine. There is an environment generated where children experience 'the one person, one language' method as English teachers only speak in English to them. The assessment took place for a week on two groups of twenty-five children and with the help of their English teachers. Twenty minutes were allotted per child. Special care was taken to hold the assessment at the same time each day, in both groups, between 9.30-12.00 in the morning, thereby adjusting the research activity to the daily routine of the kindergarten and the most suitable period of the day, when assessments would be disturbed neither by the daily meals nor the afternoon nap. Assessments were therefore carried out under identical circumstances and took place in a separate classroom specifically arranged beforehand by the researchers. Here photos, flashcards, and posters of toy cars were placed on the table, on the carpet, and on the wall. We made sure to leave sufficient space in the middle of the room for mingling activities. The worksheet was given to the English teachers of each group and they filled them in during the procedure, while the researcher was observing. The presence of the children's own teachers contributed to the calm and relaxed atmosphere in which children could feel absolutely secure. Their teachers briefly told them what was about to happen. Then the assessment began, in which each task was introduced in English, then children received the instructions in English. The instructions were repeated in Hungarian only when

children seemed to have difficulty in understanding them and were either given verbally or non-verbally. (See the sample of the worksheet in Appendix 3)

Also, the three-year case study was carried out in A1 as I also worked there. He had no background or additional access to English as none of his parents speak the language. This was the main reason to select him as most of his peers had had the opportunity to encounter English outside the kindergarten at some stage. Notes on his development were taken every three months while focusing on his approach to the language, level of understanding, motivation, and language production.

Interviews and questionnaires were done in towns A, B and C. Questionnaires were filled out by both Hungarian and English teachers of A1 as I was curious about their views, experience, attitudes, and beliefs toward this special EFL programme. Each teacher of A1 got a bilingual questionnaire and was asked to fill it in within two days and place the forms into a box that was previously assembled in the teachers' room. The estimated time was previously measured that the fulfillment of a questionnaire might be taken and set this interval at fifteen minutes. Fifteen questionnaires (equal to the total number of teachers) were handed out and ten were returned (67%). On each questionnaire, a short preface was written, in both languages explaining the purpose of the experiment, its anonymity, the sort of medium the researcher was to inform them about the results, and an acknowledgement for taking part in my research. (See the sample questionnaire in Appendix 2)

The interviews with principals and professional advisors were accomplished in different districts of the capital city (A2, A3, A4, A5, A6) and two others in two towns not far from Budapest (B, C) via e-mails. Two types of interview sheets were prepared as not all questions apply to both principals and professional advisors. These institutes all have their unique EFL programmes and therefore would be interesting to see their characteristics, also the philosophy of each leader about the teacher's role, early English development, and the programme itself. The interviewees were assured that their identity and answers would remain anonymous as well as their institute. It would be a rather compelling research for the future to observe the educational processes in these institutes and compare the results with what the principals have declared about their programme. It took two months to receive the interviews, but all of them were returned (100%). Some were filled out in Hungarian; therefore, they were translated in order to have the results all in English. (See the samples of both interview sheets in Appendix 1)

For the purpose of efficacy, the teachers' questionnaire consisted of three sets of questions. The first set focused on attitudes and professional vocation of teachers about the programme. The second set emphasised the teacher's realisation of the objectives. The third set explored the possibilities of increasing efficiency. Closed questions, numerical scale (1-5, 1-6), ranking and open-ended response questions were used. The interview questions concentrated on the reasons for starting an EFL programme, opinions about when to start, the efficacy of early English development, the characteristics of their method, and the effective English teacher.

In the case study, the researcher focused on the learner's approach to the language, level of understanding, motivation, and language production. In

the children's language competency test, the researcher focused on gaining a larger view of the level of listening and speaking based on the competences related to linguistic skills, vocabulary level, and pronunciation. Topics such as the weather, animals, colours, geometric shapes, body parts, movement, maths, family, and food were covered.

Discussion of research findings

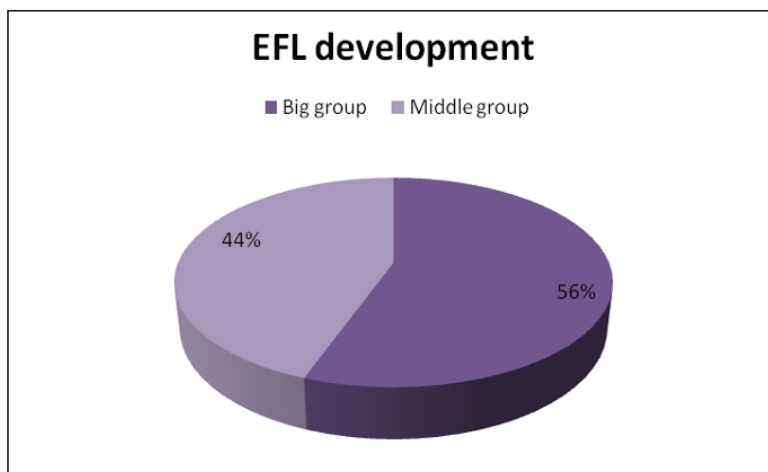
The following answers were received to the research questions:

1. The main beliefs, views and features of successful SLA according to teachers.

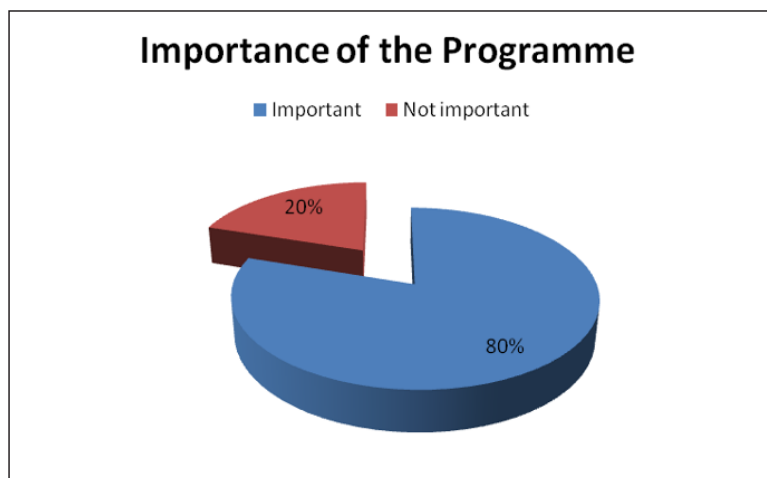
After processing the questionnaire, first it is needed to state the findings for the entire sample. Then a sub-sample was made to investigate whether there is any correspondence between the opinions of teachers of the small (age 3-4) group and the big (age 6-7) group in relation to the degree of students' English development. The question focused on their beliefs as to which group demonstrates noticeable EFL development. Eight co-teachers (both English and Hungarian) were selected from two big, and two little groups. It must be stated that even though only five teachers answered the question completely, the ratio stayed the same at 4:3. Namely, more teachers think that development is mostly noticeable in big group (age 6-7). Fewer teachers think that the development is noticeable in the middle group (age 4-5). The difference in opinions, however, is quite slight. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1

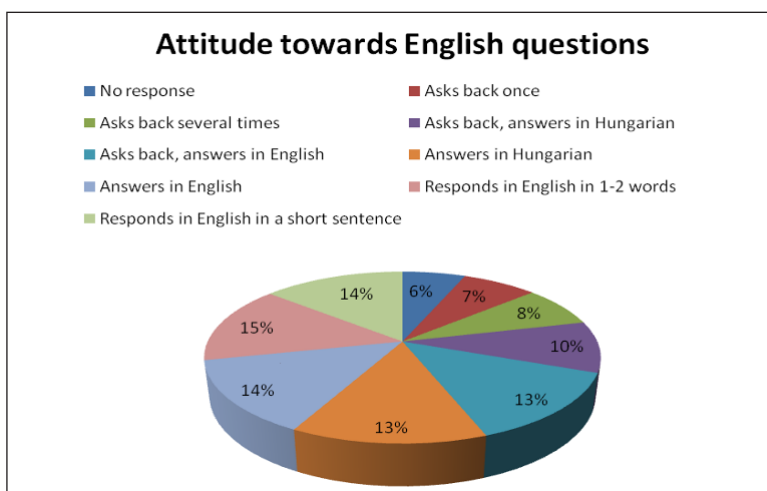
Results of the teachers' opinions on noticeable increase in EFL development



The bilingual program has been run since 2001 in A1 kindergarten. Both English and Hungarian employees have been working there for an average of more than five years. Thus, most of them have had the opportunity to take at least one group through the entire pre-school process. Nearly 100% of them consider the programme to be very useful. (See Figure 2)

Figure 2*Results of teachers' views on the importance of the programme*

Among the educators there were four big, two middle and four small group teachers. There are not any heterogeneous groups in the institution. It can be stated from the fifth question's answers that it is not typical that the children tend not to understand instructions in English rather than ask or respond to questions in English no matter what age group they are. According to the teachers, it is partly true that the children understand the request or question and respond in their mother tongue or in the foreign language. More typically, they understand and respond to the request in a few words or short sentences in the foreign language. (See Figure 3)

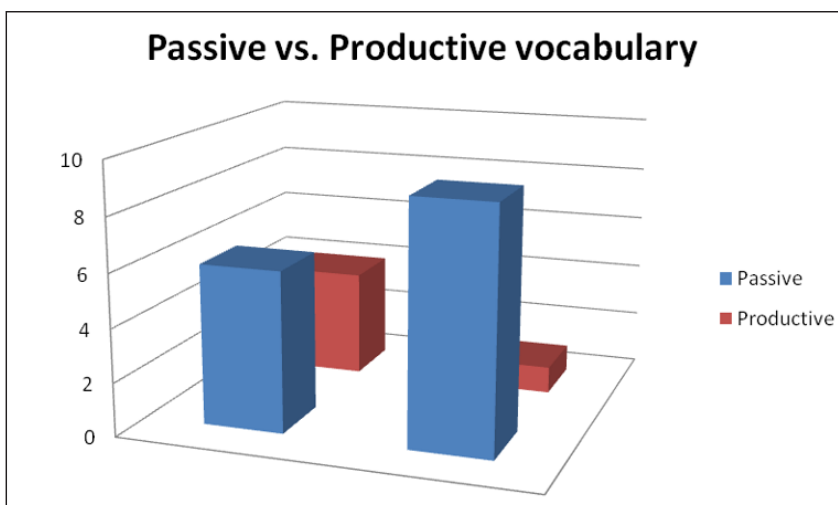
Figure 3*Results of children's response to EFL*

It turns out that according to the educators the most significant development occurs in the middle (age 4-5) and big (age 6-7) groups. The teachers have experienced that several times a day interaction occurs between the children and the English teacher and the children sometimes hold simple conversations in a foreign language during free play. Children are less likely to use English among themselves during play time.

Although opinions are greatly divided on children's knowledge of passive vocabulary in terms of their differences, the teachers unanimously agree on the big differences in children's level of active vocabulary. (See Figure 4)

Figure 4

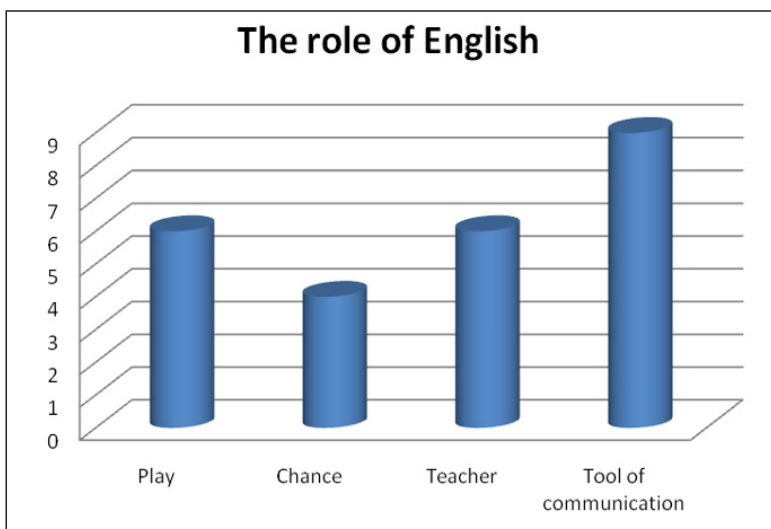
Results of teachers' opinion on the differences in children's level of passive and productive vocabulary



According to teachers, the method is successful and the native speaker colleagues are highly skilled, but more types of learning equipment is needed for children to gain more effective language acquisition. Thirty-three per cent of colleagues think that having smaller groups could be more effective in EFL learning. As an answer to the open-ended question that was focused on what the language means to children, the most mentioned category was that English is a tool of communication. The next two main categories mentioned referred to games and the teacher's personality. (See Figure 5)

Figure 5

Results of teachers' opinion on the role of EFL in children's life



Teachers claim that learners are fond of the English language. The majority believe that the best way of supporting SLA is via songs, poems, rhymes, stories, and dramatisation in order to develop language skills. In addition, teachers see free play and childcare tasks as essential scenes for interaction with the English teacher resulting in continuous communication in the future. It is interesting to notice that the effects of manipulative and movement development activities have not garnered much attention from the teachers. (See Figure 6)

Figure 6

Results of teachers' experience in useful activities in order of EFL learning

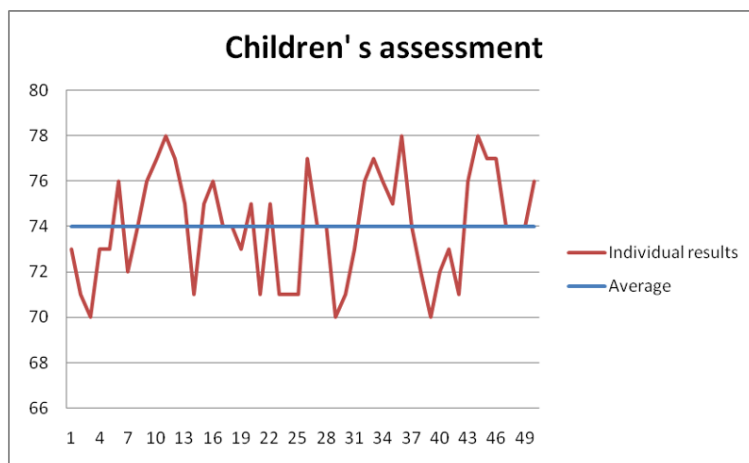


2. Children's attitudes towards L2, level of understanding and readiness to speak.

The result of the children's assessment was extremely successful. Children's production in listening and speaking skills and their level of vocabulary and pronunciation in A1 met high requirements. These skills and competences were measured in the assessment. The children in question had been learning English for three or four years on a full time (8 a.m. – 5 p.m.) daily basis. The reason for their efficacy might be due to the fact that their teacher only speaks to them in English all the time. No code-switching was found during the assessment. All children in A1 were open to responding, had free talk and exhibited low stress levels. They enjoyed being assessed. During the process, English was viewed by them as a natural means of communication. The reaction time between questions and answers was short, which means they gave immediate answers. Children were confident and ready to give answers even when they were not too certain what the exact answer was. They were encouraged to speak freely, without any reservations. Learning how to speak a language can only be learnt through speaking that language. After the evaluation process, each child was asked how they had felt during the tasks. The great majority of children said that they had enjoyed the tasks. They had also been challenged and found it easy to give feedback on their preferences.

3. This research also focuses on the level of listening and speaking for linguistic skills and the level of vocabulary and pronunciation for competences.

Some children performed using nice strategies in Task 3, 5, 6 and 11: when identifying flashcards with their definitions, they managed to focus only on those flashcards the definitions of which they had not heard before, which means they relied on their cognitive skills connected to identifying/sorting out. The level of relying on and using basic cognitive skills, such as guessing, classifying, identifying, and matching was emphasised in most tasks. Scores were calculated for each individual. Based on the results for each individual, there are no significant differences in the level of knowledge among children due to this method. (See Figure 7)

Figure 7*Results of individual scores of children's assessment*

4. Attitudes, beliefs and views of professionals and leaders to be essential for success

The interviews conducted with principals and professional advisors were done in the districts of the capital city: A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A7 and in town B and C. First, it needs to be mentioned that all of these professionals were extremely helpful, even though we had never met before. From the interviews there is a feeling that strongly emerges while reading them and that is the great enthusiasm that these professionals show towards their vocation. The opinions of the two professional advisors of kindergartens need to be divided as their interview questions were less than the principals' as some questions do not apply to their job.

A4, and A5 are both leader professional advisors for kindergartens in the pedagogical professional centre of their districts. They do not know one another. They were chosen because in one of the districts there is an English bilingual programme that has been run by a kindergarten for a long time. The other person was chosen because there is an EFL programme run by one of the kindergartens, but it is a relatively new experience for all of them. Both institutions are public.

For the question that was related to the advantages and/or disadvantages of ELL as an advantage they both mentioned the age, the age-relevant environment where the language can naturally be acquired, and the presence of the language on a full-time, daily basis. As a disadvantage they mentioned that if the language is presented periodically, e.g. twice a week for thirty minutes, and the crucial role of the teacher (skilled, trained, gives positive reinforcement, enhances motivation). The next question was about the age, namely when EFL learning should start. A4 suggested that ELL should only start after the native language has been established between age 4-5. A5

separated language learning from acquisition and stated that in order to gain effective SLA, it could start right after birth. If we concentrate on learning then, according to A5 it should only start at age 6, when they go to school. She says that the best would be if these two were to build upon one another.

For the question on reasons for the successful method, according to A4 they do not have enough experience as the programme has only been operating since 2019. A4 finds it quite positive that children are more open, but in order to have more relevant experience they need an English teacher who is present all day in the group. A5 claims that only a proper efficacy assessment can offer a reliable answer to that question. A5 thinks the following criteria make SLA effective: deliberate planning, well-organised implementation, specially trained teachers, and the programme has to be implementable into the curriculum. The last question was connected to their opinion on the characteristics of the ideal language teacher. A4 thought that the emphasis is not on what language the person speaks but kindness is key for this age-group. She stated that the most important factors are empathy, a child-centred attitude, a high level of training, competence in methodology, motivation, high level of communication skills, playfulness, and being well - balanced. A5 gave the same answers but she also pointed out two very important factors: a sense of humour and proficiency in English.

The interviews with the principals show a colourful array of opinions. The procedure was done with both public and private principals of institutions in and out of the capital city.

For the first question that was to explore reasons for starting a bilingual programme in these institutes, there was a general point: to create a multicultural environment and the strong belief in the success of early English development. Leaders of private kindergartens considered the fulfillment of parents' expectations as a reason. It was also interesting to learn that only one leader mentioned the importance of language competence in the future, when the children enter the global workplace. Also, another principal mentioned that learning an additional language is a must since Hungarian language makes their speaker be a bit isolated from the rest of the world.

In the second question, the researcher was interested in their opinion on the advantages and/or disadvantages of early English development. Among the six interviewees, only two thought of disadvantages. These were the following: A3 disagrees with the phenomenon when one of the parents starts speaking in English to his/her child even though the parent is native Hungarian. She thinks this is totally unacceptable and can also cause harm as children acquire their first language mainly from their parents. She also stated that she only sees the advantages of institutionalised early English programmes. B saw the lack of well-trained teachers as a disadvantage. She thought that only specially trained educators can make the programme effective. If we examine advantages, mainly the same features can be seen such as the advantageous nature of unconscious learning of a language, extremely good pronunciation, development of cognitive skills, overall personality development, playful nature of SLA, creativity, and low stress levels.

The third question inquired about their philosophy and methodology. In A2, the leader emphasised the importance of a natural bilingual environment and the one person-one language method. Only native English speakers can be teachers there but, according to the principal, they do not teach the language. A3 states that the language is not taught in their institute either, they also create a bilingual environment. In A6, all activities during the day are in English. There is a native speaker and a Hungarian kindergarten teacher who is fluent in English in the groups. In A7, they hold activities bilingually while the English teacher in the group works closely together with the native colleague on a daily basis. She emphasised that cooperation, shared visions, and quality are essential for success in their belief. In B, they also have two teachers in the groups on a daily basis and activities are held bilingually. This leader was the first to mention that English teachers never correct the children's grammatical mistakes to keep the process going naturally. In C, the institute follows a special Montessori curriculum, but any further information on their bilingual method could not be found.

The fourth question was dedicated to exposing their views regarding at what age SLA should start. All but one interviewee declared that basically SLA can be started from birth or as soon as possible. Only the principal of A7 thought that first the mother tongue should be established in order to be able to build a second upon this foundation.

Question No. 5 asked if the programme in their institutes was successful and, if so, the reasons why. These programmes have been run for an average of two years in these kindergartens. All principals believed that they are successful and leaders of private institutes also stated that parents are happy with the service and the results. All interviewees said that, by the age of 5-6, their students are able to understand the English teacher completely and are most likely to continue their studies in bilingual primary schools. According to the leaders, there are many children on waitlists for enrolling into the programme, but they unfortunately do not have sufficient capacity to place them in the establishment.

In the last (sixth) question the researcher was interested in the characteristics of the effective English teacher. The following five features were present in all of their answers: the effective English teacher is creative, specially trained for this age group, proficient in the language, dedicated, and has a good sense of humour.

Case study³

I started to work with this group in September when they were in their first year in the programme and in the kindergarten also. I was responsible for their language development. When I received the group, I had the intention of starting a diary on children's development. I later concluded that I would not be able to concentrate on each one of them as there were twenty-seven children in the group, therefore I picked a child. There were some criteria when selecting one.

³ The case study was conducted by Zsuzsanna Noé.

These were the following: both parents had to be native Hungarians, neither of whom spoke English and the child had no other access to English than at the kindergarten. This is how I picked 'T' from the group, the designation I will use instead of the actual name. I conducted an ongoing observation on T for the entire time while he attended the institute. T is a boy who started the bilingual programme at the age of three in the kindergarten where I used to work. As the English teacher, I worked in the setting and collaborated closely with my Hungarian colleagues as we created a natural bilingual environment on a daily basis. All activities and tasks were carried out in both languages.

I have decided that I will take notes about T's development every three months therefore three times during the academic year. My observation focused on T's listening and speaking in connection to linguistic skills and the level of vocabulary and pronunciation from the perspective of competences.

The first entry occurred in November: T is a three-year-old boy in perfect intellectual and physical condition. September was a hard time for him as he was settling in but later that month he stopped crying and began to be interested in the environment around him. He does not respond when I try to interact with him. T seems a bit confused and scared when I approach him and usually walks away. By November, he stopped being resistant to me. Although he still does not communicate with me, he lets me sit with him while playing.

The second entry was in the second half of the same academic year in February: T seems to be more open toward me as every time I ask him if I could play with him, he lets me. Now he responds to some of my questions by nodding his head and is able to follow some of my basic instructions in terms of the daily routine.

The third entry occurred in May: T easily follows my instructions and happily joins in to activities. When I ask him a question he responds with a 'yes' or 'no'. He has started to say 'good morning' when coming in in the morning. T also invites me to play with him saying: 'Suzie, play, please'. His favourite game outside in the garden became 'follow the leader' and he often comes up to me saying: 'Suzie, catch me'. T enjoys songs and rhymes and sings them happily. All the words are clearly comprehensible.

After the summer holiday, the fourth entry was recorded in November during the second academic year I spent with the group: T welcomes me with a big hug in September. His mother told me that he missed me and often talked about me during summer. Since September, T is constantly around me trying to interact with me. He easily follows instructions and usually translates them to peers who do not understand. T has grown to love books and brings them in every day to show them to me. While I name objects or animals that I see in the books, he repeats my words and points to things and says their names. He uses one- to two-word answers to my questions and always tries to respond in English; when it seems too difficult then he uses his native language. In October, a big change happened: I was taking decoration off the wall while T helped me when he said the following: 'Suzie, look! This is a pumpkin as well!' I was so surprised that I almost forgot to respond to his comment. From that day on, T uses simple sentences on an everyday basis when communicating with me.

The fifth entry was in February: T plays with me all the time. His favourite game is my snap cards, this is how I taught colours and shapes to the children. Usually four of us play together at the same time.

The sixth entry was taken in May at the end of the second academic year: T is my help when there are some peers who cannot communicate their needs properly. T is trying to translate for me. He loves story-time and is able to respond to my questions during interactive story-time in English. During bilingual activities, he is one of the most active children.

The seventh entry is from November after the beginning of the third academic year: T's mother told me that he loves the English stories that I read so the mother bought those books and T 'reads' them to the family. After the long summer holiday T's speaking skills and vocabulary are at an extremely high level compared to his age and background. T and I started to play board games together as well as other peers. He only speaks in English while playing.

The eighth entry occurred in February during the second half of the academic year: T plays together more with his peers, but often leaves the game, comes up to me, initiates a conversation, then goes back to his friends. His favourite game that he wants to play with me is: 'I am thinking of...' this is a guessing game in which I describe the object and he has to guess what was thought of. He only likes to play when he guesses.

The last entry was about to happen in May at the end of the last academic year we spent together. As I had to hand in my research before that date I made an exception and noted this entry in April: T mostly played with his peers both inside and outside, but every time he approaches me he uses English naturally without thinking. When problems occur, he also comes to me more than to the Hungarian teachers. Not long ago, he was upset about losing a running game. He expressed a rather sad, disappointed face and I asked him what the matter was. T did not respond straight away as he had always done before. After a short time of thinking, he said the following: 'I am sad because S was faster than me.' I advised the parents to place him in a bilingual school next year.

Summary of research

The researcher is both a practitioner and a researcher who is highly interested in the effectiveness of early English development programmes. It is believed that the questions were partly answered. It is also thought that bigger samples or other tools might have been helpful during the research (e.g., observations of groups in different kindergartens therefore we could not generalise at any stage). Based upon the teachers' questionnaire results, we learned that it is important for educators to believe in the programme and that students reach the highest level of development by the end of their kindergarten years. In order to see the differences, it would be useful to assess children from lower age groups. It also emerged that more than half of the children respond in English at some level to the native teacher. Children whose linguistic skills are developed as part of their overall skills can activate all their skills and their own personality when approaching the teacher. This is how they manage

to be successful. It has been proven that the success of very young learners' L2 use lies in a holistic approach, which can only be acquired in a natural bilingual environment. This environment makes the children feel comfortable and more open to the world around them, which provides opportunity to free talk without being stressed, and most importantly, emotional security, while learning unconsciously.

According to the teachers, there are no significant differences in learners' passive knowledge of the language, but there are in productive usage. There are ways of measuring passive and productive vocabulary that was tried with some of the tasks while assessing children. It was found that children's attitude towards L2 is absolutely positive, which the researcher has experienced during the assessment, case study, and the results of teachers' views on this topic. The high level of understanding and readiness to speak was proven by the children's assessment, and as an example in the case study. While making the assessment sheet, the researcher strove to create tasks that would measure the level of children's listening and speaking skills as well as pronunciation and vocabulary. It is strongly believed by the researcher that implementing and making an EFL programme effective is an extremely complex process, and the human factor is crucial: in other words, the personality of the teacher is key. Kindergarten principals, as well as professional advisors, mentioned five essential characteristics of an effective English teacher: to be specially trained for the age group and the purpose, to have a good sense of humour, to be dedicated and creative, and to have proficiency in English. According to their opinions, the features of an effective EFL programme are the following: it has to have deliberately planned and implemented into the Hungarian curriculum, and to have specially trained native or close to native English teachers who are present all day.

Conclusion

As a result of this research, the first hypothesis of an early encounter with languages resulting in a basic competence of a language if the L2 is delivered in an authentic, activity-based, natural, comprehensible, and enjoyable way is TRUE, since children who were assessed in a playful way, were able to use English as means of communication. To gain a broader picture, my research would be expanded to learners of other institutes.

Since the first hypothesis has been proven true, the second hypothesis of characteristics of the teacher in early SLL are crucial, as only well-selected, specially trained and approximately native-level speaking teachers can make SLA happen at an early age is also TRUE. The third hypothesis regarding whether institute leaders and practitioners' views and beliefs also determine the outcome of the programme has not been proven, as the researcher has not yet had the opportunity to assess the outcomes completely. Although, it is planned to carry out more research in those institutes where principals were interviewed. Based upon the interviews, a possible starting point is that all leaders are dedicated to early EFL programmes.

As a final statement regarding the fourth hypothesis (stating that it is better to start an EFL programme at an early age as its results will only be seen by the end of preschool age (6), it can be asserted that no correlation was found between time spent on ELT in the kindergarten and the quality of results. The key factor to success is that children have access to a well-designed and elaborated ELT curriculum carried out by a skilled English teacher with a clear purpose. This research has been the researcher's first attempt to assess the effectiveness of kindergarten EFL programmes in Hungary. The results of this research may positively influence the issue of early EFL development in Hungary and develop a more professional approach for it. It would be desirable to carry on further research on a wider scale while involving both researchers and practical teachers in order to establish self-reflection.

To attain more refined results to the research questions, some additional factors should be examined. These include the following: the classroom-arrangement habits and educational tools used in the sessions, and the professional background of teachers involved in SLA. Other, less researchable features which might also influence effectiveness comprise the parents' background and local values and customs. These aspects may be investigated in further research.

List of abbreviations

- L1 – the mother tongue or first language
- L2 – a second language learned after the first
- EFL – English as a Foreign Language
- CLIL – Content and Language Integrated Learning
- SLA – Second Language Acquisition
- ESL – English as a Second Language: English language instruction for English language learners that includes little or no use of a child's native language; a component of all bilingual education programs.
- ELL – English Language Learner: a student who is learning English as a second language; also called limited English proficient
- ELT – English Language Teaching

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Appendices

Appendix 1

The interview sheet



The answers of this interview will be used for professional purposes only. Your answers are highly appreciated! / Az interjú válaszait kizárólag tudományos célokra használok! A válaszait szívből köszönöm!

Interview about bilingual programmes in kindergartens / Interjú az óvodai kétnyelvű programokról

1. What were the reasons to start a bilingual programme at your kindergarten? / *Mik voltak az okai annak, hogy az óvodájában elindult egy ilyen kétnyelvű program?*
2. What are the benefits or disadvantages, do you think, of early English development? / *Milyen előnyei illetve hátrányai vannak Ön szerint a korai angol nyelvi fejlesztésnek?*
3. What is your institution's philosophy about early English development? Please write about your methodology. / *Mi az Ön intézményének filozófiája a korai angol nyelvi fejlesztésről? Kérem írjon a módszerről.*
4. What is your opinion? From what age should foreign language development start? / *Ön szerint mely életkortól kellene kezdeni az idegen nyelvi fejlesztést?*
5. Is your method successful? Please write about the reasons. / *A módszerük sikeres? Kérem írjon az okokról!*
6. Please think of 5 essential characteristics of an effective English teacher of children at an early age. What are they? / *Kérem gondoljon 5 olyan meghatározó jellemzőre, mely elengedhetetlen egy kisgyermekkel hatékonyan foglalkozó angol tanárra. Kérem írja le ezeket!*

Appendix 2

Teachers' questionnaire

1. Ön milyen munkakörben dolgozik az óvodában?

What's your occupation?

2. Mióta dolgozik Ön itt?

How long have you been working here?

3. Kérem, osztályozza mennyire tartja hasznosnak ezt a kétnyelvű programot az óvodás korúak körében?

egyáltalán nem - 1 2 3 4 5 6 - nagyon fontos

What is your overall opinion rating about this bilingual programme among kindergarten aged children?

not useful at all - 1 2 3 4 5 6 - extremely useful

4. Milyen összetételű a csoportja?

What is your group like in compounds?

homogén - kicscsoport

homogeneous - little group

homogén - középső csoport

homogeneous - middle group

homogén - nagycsoport

homogeneous - big group

heterogén

mixed age group

5. Ön szerint mennyire jellemzőek a következő állítások a csoportjára a feljük intézett angol nyelvű kérdésekkel kapcsolatban? Kérem, osztályozza! 1- egyáltalán nem jellemző, 5 - teljes mértékben jellemző.

In your opinion how relevant are the following statements to your group?

Please rate the statements: 1 - doesn't apply at all, 5 - typical.

1 2 3 4 5 nem érti, nem kérdez vissza, nem válaszol

doesn't understand, doesn't ask back, doesn't answer

1 2 3 4 5 nem érti, egyszer visszakérdez, nem válaszol vagy reagál

doesn't understand, asks back once, doesn't answer

1 2 3 4 5 nem érti, többször visszakérdez, nem válaszol

doesn't understand, asks back several times, doesn't answer

1 2 3 4 5 visszakérdezéssel megérti, anyanyelvén válaszol
understands through asking back, answers in her native language

1 2 3 4 5 visszakérdezéssel megérti, idegen nyelven válaszol
understands through asking back, answers in English

1 2 3 4 5 megérti, anyanyelvén válaszol
understands, answers in her native language

1 2 3 4 5 megérti, idegen nyelven válaszol
understands, answers in English

1 2 3 4 5 idegen nyelven válaszol, néhány szóban
responds in English usually using one or two words

1 2 3 4 5 idegen nyelven válaszol tőmondatban
responds in English in a short sentence

6. Tapasztalatai szerint melyik korcsoportban figyelhető meg a legjelentősebb fejlődés? Állítson fel rangsort!

According to your experience in which (age) group can the largest improvement be observed? Please set up a rank!

__ homogén - kicscsoport

homogeneous - little group

__ homogén - középső csoport

homogeneous - middle group

__ homogén - nagycsoport

homogeneous - big group

__ vegyes korcsoport

mixed group

__ egyéb:

other:

7. Milyen gyakran jellemzőek a csoportra nézve az alábbi tevékenységek?

Kérjük írja a számot a vonalra!

How typical are the following activities in your group?

Please put the relevant number on the line!

1 - naponta többször

couple of times a day

2 - naponta egyszer

once a day

3 - kétnaponta egyszer

once in two days

4 - hetente egy-két alkalommal

once or twice a week

5 - havonta egy-két alkalommal

once or twice a month

6 - soha

never

__ angol nyelvű nevelő felé szívesen közeledik idegen nyelven

the English teacher is willingly approached by children using the foreign language

__ közös játék során az “angolos” felnőttel idegen nyelven társalog

during play the child willingly communicates with the foreign teacher in English

__ játék során a társaival angolul kommunikál

during play the child communicates in English with his peers

8. Az azonos korú gyermekek szókincsében lát-e jelentős eltérést ?

Is there a significant difference in vocabulary between children at the same age?

passzív szókincs:

igen

nem

passive vocab:

yes

no

aktív szókincs:

igen

nem

active vocab:

yes

no

9. Ön mit gondol, hogyan lehetne az átlagon javítani? Aláhúzással akár többet is megjelölhet!

What do you think how could the average be improved? Please underline, you can underline more at the time!

– más módszerrel

– *with a different method*

– más nyelvi nevelővel

– *with a different language teacher*

– több vagy más típusú tanulást segítő eszközökkel

– *with more tools or more efficient educational equipment*

– egyéb:

– other:

10. Kérem, fejezze be az alábbi mondatot!
Please finish the following sentence!

Az idegen nyelv a gyerekeknek olyan

.....

.....

.....

Foreign language for children is like

.....

.....

.....

Appendix 3

Children's assessment worksheet

1.

a) Hi. How are you?	1p
b) What's your name?	1p
c) How old are you?	1p
d) What's your symbol?	1p
e) Can you tell me the days of the week?	7p
f) What day is today?	1p
	(max 12p)

2. What's the weather like?

one word answer	1p
more words answer	2p

3. Animals (poster)

a) What is this? (name 5 animals)	5p
b) What is your favorite animal?	6p
	(max 6p)

4. Guessing game

I'm thinking of an animal, object, person....(its characteristics) etc.

(max 1p)

5. Colours (colour cards are presented on the table)

a) What colour is this?	5p
b) What's your favourite colour?	1p
c) What is (name of a colour) in this room?	5p
	(max 11p)

6. Shapes (shape cards presented on the table)
 What shape is this? (circle, square, triangle, rectangle, star, heart) **(max 6 p)**
7. Body Parts
 a) Show me where your heart is! 1p
 b) What's this?(Teacher shows 5 different body parts) 5p
(max 6p)
8. Emotional expressions
 a) Show me your happy, sad, angry, surprised face? **(max 4p)**
9. Movements - Simon says game
 a) Teacher says 6p
 stand up, sit down, crouch, turn around, lay down, jump 3 times
 lift up.....(body parts), stick out your tongue, shake your head
 close your eyes, open your mouth, put your hands up;
 b) Now you are Simon! Tell me what to do! 6p
(max 12p)
10. Math
 a) How many cars can you see? (10) 1p
 b) (Teacher adds an extra, or takes a car away)
 Are there more or less cars now? 1p
 c) (Teacher shows pictures)
 Which is taller, bigger, and longer?
 Which is shorter, smaller? 3p
(max 5p)
11. Family
 a) (Teacher shows a photo of a family)
 What is this? (family) 1p
 Who is this?
 (mother, father, sister, brother, grandpa, grandma) 6p
 Trentinné Benkő, É. (2014/3). A kétnyelvű fejlesztés és a pedagógusképzés.
 Neveléstudomány: Oktatás Kutatás Innováció 2:(3) pp. 89–108.
max 7p)
12. Food, fruits, vegetables
 a) What is your favourite food, fruit, vegetable? 3p
 b) Tell me 3 more fruits! 3p
 c) Tell me 2 more vegetables! 2p
(max 8p)

Total points: 80