

Slovene as the second/foreign language in Slovene pre-school institutions

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Slovenia

Abstract:

Slovenia has long been a place for immigration; with the accession into the European Union it has become even more interesting for different groups of immigrants from European and non-European countries. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 106.486 foreigners (5.16% of overall population in Slovenia) were living in Slovenia at the end of 2015. It is expected that this migration trend in the light of world events continues or even increases. One of the key factors for the successful integration of young generations of migrants in society is education. The survey Index of the policy of integration of migrants (MIPEX, 2015), implemented by the British Council and Migration Policy Group, shows that few education systems in Europe are adapting to the realities of immigration. Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Canada, Portugal are the most engaged countries, whereas Slovenia is among the least committed (it ranks 28 among 38 selected countries). Language has a major role in supporting children's process of identity formation and in helping them understand where they fit in the new environment they are entering. Language is, of course, not the only factor that promotes integration and enables successful education, but the fact remains that immigrant pupils are better achievers in those countries that pay greater attention to second/foreign language learning starting in preschool institutions. In the present paper we discuss the Slovene pre-school teachers' and pre-school teacher assistants' attitudes towards learning Slovene as the second/foreign language in Slovene pre-school institutions. The research was conducted on a sample of 143 pre-school teachers and pre-school teacher assistants. The results imply that Slovene pre-school teachers and pre-school teacher assistants hold positive attitudes towards learning Slovene as a second/foreign language, they see their role as the promoters of learning Slovene as a second/foreign language to non-Slovene children, but they strongly express the lack of training in language learning strategies of Slovene as a second/foreign language.

Keywords: Slovene, second/foreign language, preschool institutions, pre-school teacher and pre-school teacher assistant

1 Introduction

Progress towards Education for All is one of the defining development challenges of the 21st century. The right to education is a basic human right and, as such, it should be defended as an end in itself. However, education is also a means to wider social, economic and political goals. In the current situation of the economic crisis and

competition of various interests, it is timely to stress the critical role of education. Only educated citizens can achieve economic growth and this requires equal access to high-quality education, now more than ever. No country or society today can afford to exclude anyone from education on grounds of poverty, ethnicity, religion or gender. Slovenia strongly supports the view that education is a fundamental human right and a catalyst for social justice and development. Slovenia calls for universal provision of early childhood education services and targeted measures to assist the poor and most vulnerable (EFA, 2015, 7). Language is at the very core of education.

It is central to children's learning and development as noted by Bercow (2008) and the child has a 'zone of proximal development' [ZPD] that he or she could achieve only with the assistance of an adult. The pattern is familiar: cries evolve to babbles, babbles are shaped into words, and words are joined into sentences. This sequence describes the path taken by all children as the language they hear around them is examined, internalized, and eventually developed into native-speaker competence (Bialystock, 2001, 21). Language has a major role in supporting children's process of identity formation and in helping them understand where they fit in the new environment they are entering. The acquisition of language is essential not only to children's cognitive development, but also to their social development and wellbeing (Clarke, 2009).

As the founder of modern linguistics, Saussure (1916) pointed out in all languages we find both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies. The need to communicate creates the centripetal force of linguistic homogenisation, which is balanced by a centrifugal force of differentiation, driven by an impetus for local identity, by the need to exchange information without having the people from the next village or the other religious community overhear, by the desire of each new generation to mark itself off from the one before.

Developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching involves recognising that the aims are: to give learners intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence; to prepare them for interaction with people of other cultures; to enable them to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviours; and to help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience (Byram, Gribkova, Starkey, 2002, 9).

Not only can young children begin to acquire more than one language in their early years, growing evidence shows that early bilingualism can provide children with benefits that go beyond knowing more than one language. Research has shown for some time that bilingual children typically develop certain types of cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness earlier and better than their monolingual peers (e.g., Bialystok, 2001; Cummins, 2000; King & Mackey, 2007).

Lightbown (2008, p.8) has summarized the research on early childhood bilingualism as follows: a) Children are capable of acquiring two or more languages in early

childhood; b) Languages don't compete for "mental space" and bilingualism doesn't "confuse" children's) Given adequate input and opportunities for interaction, the developmental path and the outcomes of multiple language acquisition are similar to those observed in the acquisition of a single language; d) Some cognitive advantages are associated with the development of proficiency in more than one language;e) Early learning is no guarantee of continued development or lifelong retention of a language: languages can be maintained or forgotten, depending on circumstances.

2 The study

The main aim of our study was to investigate pre-school teachers' and pre-school teacher assistants' attitudes towards learning Slovene as the second/foreign language in Slovene pre-school institutions. Our objective was to determine whether pre-school teachers and pre-school teacher assistants hold a positive attitude towards learning Slovene as the second/foreign language in Slovene pre-school institutions.

2.1 Respondents and data collection

A total of 143 pre-school teachers and pre-school teachers' assistants participated in the study, i.e.124 (86.7%) pre-school teachers and 19 (13.3%) pre-school teachers' assistants. The study included pre-school teachers and pre-school teachers' assistants from 4 Slovene pre-school institutions.

All respondents in the sample were female. Their mean age was 39.23 years (SD = 10.11): the youngest was 22 years old, the oldest 58 years. Working period average was17.13 years (SD = 11.41 years). The minimum working period was 1 year, the maximum was 38 years.58.0% of all respondents graduated from the upper-secondary school, only 0.7 of all respondents achieved their master degree.

Table 1: Educational level of respondents

Educational level	f	%
Upper-secondary school	34	23.8
Post-secondary vocational school	83	58.0
Professional school	17	11.9
University	8	5.6
Master degree	1	0.7
Total	143	100.0

The data were collected in December 2015 through anonymous questionnaires. The questionnaires contained twenty attitude scale items.

2.2 Data analysis

After verifying that the data were free from errors, matrix analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics software. The data were controlled according to the assumptions of normal distribution and homogeneity of variance. In view of the research questions, mainly descriptive (absolute frequency, percent, mean, standard deviation, mean rank) procedures were applied, and statistical test (Mann-Whitney test) were applied. Cohen r was calculated as a measure of effect size (Coolican, 2014).

2.3 Results and interpretation

The results are presented in Table 2. Pre-school teachers and pre-school teacher assistants had to assess statements related to learning Slovene as the second/foreign language (5 – very important, 4 – important, 3 – I can not decide, 2 – unimportant, 1 – very unimportant).

Table 2: Pre-school teachers' and pre-school teacher assistants' attitudes towards learning Slovene as the second/foreign language learning in Slovene pre-school institutions

Statements	\bar{X}	SD
A preschool teacher plays an important role in teaching the Slovenian language to children whose mother tongue is not Slovene.	4.80	0.45
The acquisition of Slovene as a second/foreign language of non-Slovene speaking children is significantly influenced by the Slovene-speaking peers in the group/pre-school institution.	4.68	0.53
Parents have an important role in the Slovene language acquisition of non-Slovene speaking children.	4.50	0.74
The integration of non-Slovene speaking children is significantly influenced by all curricular areas in the preschool institution e.g. language, movement, science, social studies, mathematics, and arts.	4.46	0.74
I make use of the multilingualism in the group for promoting the values of multiculturalism, e.g. children present their culture, customs, habits, holidays, etc.	4.33	0.81
The integration of non-Slovene speaking children is significantly	4.29	0.79

influenced by the curricular area of Language.		
Language education for parents of non-Slovene speaking children is essential.	4.19	0.92
Children, whose second or foreign language is Slovene, have more difficulties in integrating into the group/class than children whose mother tongue is Slovene.	3.83	0.96
The acquisition of Slovene as a second or a foreign language is significantly influenced by the education of parents of non-Slovene speaking children.	3.79	0.97
I make use of multilingualism in the group for (peer) foreign language learning, as it fosters linguistic development of the native language.	3.75	0.95
I consider the biggest obstacle in working with the pre-school children who do not speak Slovene the lack of knowledge of their mother tongue.	3.64	1.15
I spend more time with children whose second or foreign language is Slovene than with children whose mother tongue is Slovene.	3.55	0.98
The acquisition of Slovene as a second or a foreign language is significantly influenced by the socio-economic status of parents of non-Slovene speaking children.	3.49	0.97
During my undergraduate studies I came across individual topics of education in a multicultural society.	3.35	0.97
During my undergraduate studies I did not obtain systematic knowledge on teaching strategies of children whose second or a foreign language is Slovene.	3.34	1.08
The acquisition of Slovene as a second/foreign language is significantly influenced by the demographic situation of non-Slovene speaking children.	3.33	0.92
The acquisition of Slovene as a second or a foreign language is significantly influenced by the mother tongue of non-Slovene speaking children.	3.32	1.05
I speak with the children who do not speak Slovene as their mother tongue.	2.92	1.07
I work in the pre-school institution that promotes additional lessons of Slovene for children whose mother tongue is not Slovene.	2.65	1.32

I work in the pre-school institution that promotes additional lessons of the mother tongue for the non-Slovene speaking children.	2.44	1.21
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The highest level of importance is demonstrated with regard to the first statement, with 82.5% of all respondents considering the statement “A pre-school teacher plays an important role in teaching the Slovenian language to children whose mother tongue is not Slovene« as very important ($\bar{x} = 4.80$), while the lowest level of importance is demonstrated with regard to the last statement, with only 4.9% of all respondents considering the statement “I work in the pre-school institution that promotes additional lessons of the mother tongue for the non-Slovene speaking children« as very important ($\bar{x} = 2.44$). 69.9% of all respondents think that “the acquisition of Slovene as the second/foreign language of non-Slovene speaking children is significantly influenced by the Slovene-speaking peers in the group/pre-school institution« is very important ($\bar{x} = 4.68$); 63.6% of all respondents claim that parent’s role in the Slovenian language acquisition of non-Slovene speaking children is very important ($\bar{x} = 4.50$), 58.0% of all respondents believe that the integration of non-Slovene speaking children is significantly influenced by all curricular areas in the preschool institution is very important ($\bar{x} = 4.46$), and 49.0% of all respondents think that the use of the multilingualism in the group for promoting the values of multiculturalism is very important ($\bar{x} = 4.33$). Only 3.5% of all respondents think that to speak with the children who do not speak Slovene in their mother tongue is very important ($\bar{x} = 2.92$), on the other hand 26.6% of all respondents believe that the biggest obstacle in working with the pre-school children who do not speak Slovene is the lack pre-school teachers’ knowledge of children’ mother tongue ($\bar{x} = 3.64$).

16.1% of all respondents state that during their undergraduate studies they did not obtain systematic knowledge on children teaching strategies whose second or a foreign language is Slovene ($\bar{x} = 3.34$). Further analysis showed that there is a statistically significant difference in the estimates regarding the statement “During my undergraduate studies I did not obtain systematic knowledge on teaching strategies of children whose second or a foreign language is Slovene” between the respondents that graduated from upper-secondary school (mean rank $\bar{x}_r = 19.15$) and the university graduated respondents ($\bar{x}_r = 32.78$); the effect size is medium (Mann-Whitney test M-W U = 56.000, $p < 0.01$, $r = 0.49$). There is also a statistically significant difference in the estimates between the respondents that graduated from post-secondary vocational school ($\bar{x}_r = 10.29$) and the university educated respondents ($\bar{x}_r = 19.56$); the effect size is large (M-W U = 22.000, $p < 0.01$, $r = 0.62$), and between the respondents with professionally oriented higher education ($\bar{x}_r = 44.04$) and the university educated respondents ($\bar{x}_r = 69.17$); the effect size is small (M-W U = 169.500, $p < 0.01$, $r = 0.29$).

4 Discussion

The present research demonstrates that Slovenian pre-school teachers and pre-school teacher assistants are apparently aware of the importance of teaching Slovenian language to non-Slovene speaking children in pre-school institutions, but only 4.9% of all respondents consider working in the pre-school institution that promotes additional lessons of the mother tongue for the non-Slovene speaking children as very important. The White Paper (2011) emphasises the importance of teaching foreign language to preschool children, Slovene as a second/foreign language (for children whose mother tongue is not Slovene), mother tongue for children whose mother tongue is not Slovene and extra lessons of teaching Slovene to children that are not as good as speaking the Slovenian language as their peers because they come from socially and culturally less favourable environment.

69.9% of all respondents think, that it is very important to learn Slovene as second/foreign language in the interaction with Slovene speaking peers in the pre-school institutions. Based on the Strategy of the Inclusion of Migrant Children, Pupils and Students into the Education System in the Republic of Slovenia (2007), the Guidelines for the integration of immigrant children in kindergartens and schools (2009) define strategies, adjustments and methods of cooperation and integration of migrant children and their parents and help kindergartens and schools with planning the education work with foreign children. Pre-school teachers carry out activities according to the relevant curriculum to improve language and communication competences of children whose mother tongue is not Slovenian (EFA, 2015, p. 11).

58.0% of all respondents state the highest importance to the statement that the integration of non-Slovene speaking children is significantly influenced by all curricular areas in the pre-school institution. The Slovenian Curriculum for Pre-school Institutions (1999) is based on the developmental-process approach, which includes high quality planning, implementation and evaluation of the learning process that takes into account individual traits and development of each child as a more important goal than achieving prescribed results. It was drafted as an open and flexible national document with specified principles, outcomes and examples of activities, but is not structured in detail. The curriculum encompasses six areas of activities: movement, language, art, nature, society, and mathematics. For each area of activity, the overall goals and objectives and activities for individual age groups are specified and the role of adults is defined.

63.6% of all respondents claim that parent's role at the Slovenian language acquisition of non-Slovene speaking children is very important. Kemppainen, Ferrin, Ward, and Hite (2004) identified four types of parental language and culture orientation: mother tongue-centric, bicultural, multicultural, and majority language-centric. Li (1999) described how minority language parents' attitudes towards the majority language affect the speed and quality of children's acquisition of L2. She identifies three conditions that may affect young children's majority language

learning when one or both parents speak minority language: a) continued use and development in L1; b) supportive parental attitudes towards both languages; and c) active parental involvement in the child's linguistic progress. De Houwer (1999) stated that parents with strong impact beliefs make active efforts to provide particular language behaviours, while parents with weak impact beliefs take a passive approach to their children's early language experiences, seeing the wider environment as determining whether children acquire one or another language.

Almost half of all respondents (49.0%) think that the use of the multilingualism in the group for promoting the values of multiculturalism is very important. In its 2003 position paper, *Education in a Multilingual World*, UNESCO (2003a) espouses: 1) Mother tongue instruction as a means of improving educational quality by building on the knowledge and experience of the learners and teachers; 2) Bilingual and/or multilingual education at all levels of education as a means of promoting both social and gender equality and as a key element of linguistically diverse societies; 3) Language as an essential component of inter-cultural education to encourage understanding between different population groups and ensure respect for fundamental rights.

5. Conclusion

Several studies in the previous two decades (Brumen, 2000, 2011; Čagran, 1996; Čok, 1993; Orešič, 1994) showed the impacts of early language learning and teaching were positive and that early foreign language learning has to be based on an effective foreign language methodology, a research-based curriculum, suitable materials, and on highly motivated, well trained teachers.

Slovenian Faculties of Education at the state Universities of Ljubljana, Maribor and Primorska offer programmes of Preschool Education (first-cycle/level professional - 180 ECTS, second cycle/level masters studies - 60 ECTS), but they do not offer special pre-school teacher programmes on teaching Slovene as second/foreign language to young learners.

As Beller (2008), Nicholas and Lightbown (2008) and others have emphasized, more research is needed to identify the most effective approaches to supporting second language acquisition and delivering bilingual curriculum in early childhood programmes. Pre-school teachers need to recognize the implicit understandings and skills that young children already have about language in order to build upon these strengths and maximize their potential for learning a second or additional language.

We strongly believe that early learning of Slovene as the second/foreign language has to become the important part of syllabus content of Curriculum for Pre-school Institutions and that offering well-devised pre-school teacher training programmes on

teaching Slovene as the second/foreign language in the pre-school institutions will raise the level of pre-school education quality in general and will create competent, confident and communicative learners of Slovene as the second/foreign language in pre-school institutions.

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