

## ONE PLUS TWO? TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES TO YOUNG CZECH CHILDREN

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**Abstract:** This article deals with some questions and issues related to early foreign language acquisition in the Czech Republic. The most important legislative documents for this area are introduced, on a national as well as European level. The second part of this article introduces research results obtained from 141 respondents – parents whose children attend kindergarten in the Zlín Region.

**Keywords:** teaching foreign languages to young children, education, language policy.

### 1 Introduction

The time between birth and the start of school is an important period not only for language development, but also, in connection with foreign language teaching, which is attracting more and more interest from the public and academia. Czechs have reached a consensus that knowledge of at least one foreign language is a necessity in a globalized world. Yet despite strong efforts by many participants, early language education remains somewhat unresolved. This article summarizes the results of public discussion on this topic as well as the results of research on the current status of foreign language teaching in kindergartens in the Zlín Region.

### 2 Legislative documents

A concise formula, “one plus two”, characterizes the European Union language strategy. The requirement that every citizen of the European Union should manage two foreign languages in addition to the mother tongue stems from a “new framework for multilingualism” ratified in Brussels in 2005. In addition, the E.U. developed an action plan, “Support for language education and diversity” (2004 - 2006). Both documents suggest that “English as a second language is not sufficient.” All E.U. member countries were instructed to create national plans. As a result, the Czech Republic in 2006 approved a national plan for the teaching of foreign languages, which clearly defined required foreign language competencies for all citizens. The national plan was supported by a demanding “action plan for teaching of foreign languages, 2005 – 2008”, containing concrete activities for a foreign language education framework, with various regional priorities. The first chapter focused on pre-school education. The following are the demands from the action plan (2006, 5):

- 1.1 Increase awareness of teachers and parents about early language education and about the conditions for securing positive results.
- 1.2 Process methodological material for teaching English (resp. other foreign language) for pre-school children and offer it at no cost to interested kindergartens.
- 1.3 Include English into the teaching plan programs for kindergarten teachers in pedagogical schools and at pedagogical faculties.
- 1.4 Include academic courses (propedeutics) focused on teaching foreign languages into the framework for the pre-school educational program.
- 1.5 Include academic language courses (propedeutics for languages) in study programs for future kindergarten teachers.

When discussing European Union documents related to foreign language teaching in pre-school education, it is important to mention the Piccolingo campaign, which started on September 25, 2009 in Brussels. The objective of this campaign is to inform European parents about the advantages of teaching foreign languages at an early age and also to create functional networks for sharing positive experiences. The objective is two foreign

languages, which should be learned between the ages of two and six. Due to this requirement, the campaign however goes beyond the intended goals of the 2006 Czech action plan, which discusses comprehensive implementation of only one, optional language- English.

In relation to national legislation, it is important to mention the National Program for Education, the so-called “White Book”, of 2004. That same year, a new educational law was also enacted. These documents are binding for all levels of education, with the exception of universities. Pre-school education is described as a legitimate part of the Czech educational framework. The framework educational program for pre-school education (RVP PV) from 2004 is a decisive element for work in kindergartens. The educational principles in this document are formulated as follows:

*The concept of pre-school education is based on the same principles as other fields and levels of education and together follow common goals: it is focused on the child's acquisition of key competencies from an early age, so that the child can gain prerequisites for lifelong education, enabling an easier and more reliable application in a society of experience (RVP PV 2004: 5).*

Key competencies acquired by a child before entering school are study competence, problem solving competence, communicative competence, social and people competence, action competence and civic competence. A description of communicative competence notes that a child “knows, that people communicate by other languages, which can be learned, and the child has elementary prerequisites for learning a foreign language” (RVP PV 2004, 11). Foreign languages therefore do not play a major role in this educational level; there is an absence of binding regulations. The decision whether and how foreign language education will be organized lies within the competence of each kindergarten.

### 3 Foreign languages in kindergartens – research in the Zlín Region

Considering the level of interest on the given topic on the part of European Union, Czech politicians as well as the public, it can be expected that a timeline of five to ten years will be enough to yield initial results, enabling an assessment of the undertaken measures and intentions. For this reason, in fall 2011 a research questionnaire was sent to parents of children attending a kindergarten in the Zlín Region.<sup>1</sup> Along with the questionnaire, the parents participated in a narrative interview, designed to provide further data on the issue. The participants in the research included not only parents and kindergarten staff, but also university teachers (study field: pre-school teaching) and lecturers who teach foreign languages in kindergartens. Though the number of respondents in the questionnaire research was 141 and cannot be therefore deemed representative, it does shed some light on the status quo as well as on the continuing questions. Available studies on the given issue have also been evaluated and summarized. Table 1 clearly shows the age of the respondents' children as well as how many children study each language.

	3 years	4 years	5 years	6 years
No foreign language	6	96	32	13
English	7	13	24	7
German	0	0	2	0
English and German	0	0	1	0

Tab. 1: Foreign languages studied by children

<sup>1</sup> For details, see Gester 2011, 31.

The table demonstrates that 87 children (61 percent) do not study any language. The majority of children that have already come into contact with a foreign language learn only one language, with the exception of 2 children studying English. Two children study German and one child studies English and German. Of interest is the group of three-year-olds: there are more children in this group who learn English than those who do not. With the six-year-olds, the ratio is reversed: out of 20 children, only 7 learn English and 13 do not learn any foreign language. The former intentions of the comprehensive implementation of the optional teaching of English to all kindergartens targeted mainly and specifically pre-schoolers. Though the numbers are not representative, it can be suggested that the intended comprehensive implementation has not yet occurred.

That said, some kindergartens in the Zlin Region do currently offer foreign language courses in a form of paid courses. Lessons are limited to a few teaching periods a week. The best description of the current situation can be found in a Czech Ministry of Education report entitled, "Foreign language teaching in schools in 2005-2008". Inspectors visited 635 kindergartens in order to find out if these offer foreign languages, how the curriculum is organized and if qualified teachers are available.<sup>2</sup>

Of the visited kindergartens, 47 percent offered foreign languages and 82 percent of those used voluntary courses. As for the ratio, English was clearly favored over German, which was offered in only 4 percent of the schools and only when a strong tradition was present. In only 3 kindergartens could children choose between English and German. No other languages were offered. On average, 25 percent of children participated in the courses and the attendance ranged widely from 10 to 100 percent. A Czech School Inspection report from 2010, which focused on foreign language courses in 115 kindergartens, stated that out of 6,629 children, 1,196 learned English and only 31 German. In the Zlin Region questionnaire, one-fourth of the parents also stated that their children participate in the kindergarten courses.

As not all kindergartens in the Zlin Region offer language courses, parents are forced to look elsewhere. Nearly every Czech town currently has private language schools, which specialize in children's courses, Helen Doron being one example. Of the respondents, 7 parents noted this alternative, and 12 children take private lessons. Particularly in larger cities, it is a problem for parents to choose the right course out of so many commercial offers. The course content often does not match school curricula. Further, it is important to note that the choice of a private language course in an individual or group form might create a considerable financial burden for the family budget. Knowing the advantages of early language teaching, many parents hesitate. The second alternative, usually more expensive but also more effective, is to enroll a child in a bilingual kindergarten.<sup>3</sup>

A frequently discussed topic tends to be the frequency of teaching. The 2010 Czech school inspection found out that only 8 percent of kindergartens teach English daily in short sequences, while two-thirds of the kindergartens only teach it once a week. According to the results of the Zlin Region questionnaire, 75 percent of the schools offer one lesson (usually 30-45 minutes) per week. Only 9 respondents indicated that their children have two, one-hour lessons per week, two children have occasional lessons and one child has a 30-minute lesson daily. This form of teaching, with such a low frequency (1-2 hours per week) has a very low effect. Parents are well aware of this fact, but they justify it by a lack of options and the high cost of the lessons.

<sup>2</sup> In the 2011/2012 school year, a total of 339,185 children attended one of 4,931 kindergartens in the Czech Republic, which is approx. 95 percent of all children. At the same time, 26,780 teachers and pedagogues were employed, which corresponds with 12.6 children to one teacher. ([www.uiv.cz](http://www.uiv.cz))

<sup>3</sup> Full day attendance at an English kindergarten in Zlin costs 6,400 czk per month ([www.venter.cz](http://www.venter.cz)), in Brno 9,990 czk ([www.kidsgarden.cz](http://www.kidsgarden.cz)). Prices can also be higher. When enrolling in a German kindergarten in Prague for example, a one time fee of 16,000 czk is paid. Yearly tuition for all day attendance is around 150,000 czk ([www.dsp-praha.org](http://www.dsp-praha.org)).

Some respondents noted that they are unable to measure their child's progress and therefore they chose an option, which in a certain way meets their lowest requirements. The absence of progress evaluation options is a criticism of the educational institutions, which either do not inform the parents at all on the progress of their children or do so in an insufficient way. Private language schools, on the other hand, generally consider parents their partners and guide them methodologically as well as didactically.

In order for a one-hour language course per week to be at all successful, parents must clearly be involved in the educational process. The Zlin Region parents were asked how they support their children's foreign language acquisition. The majority of them (33) play CDs or DVDs in the foreign language to their children. The questionnaire also identified a pervasive fear among parents that they do not know if they can speak with their children as non-native speakers, worried that they might do more harm than good. By using audio and/or visual media, they are avoiding this problem since the recordings are usually done by native speakers. Private schools often offer CDs or other materials to the parents, who either buy these materials or receive them as part of the course. The situation is more difficult for those who do not have this option. It is therefore not easy to navigate commercial offers, and there is also the financial aspect to consider.

Of the Zlin respondents, 33 confirmed that they speak with their children in a foreign language at home. Based on the evaluated data, it is evident that even parents that only have a minimal knowledge of foreign languages practice this activity with their children, which might be considered an extraordinary effort. Only a small percentage of parents read stories and fairytales to their children in English. However, the parents almost unanimously expressed a need for a greater variety of didactic supplies, such TV programs, affordable materials in bookstores or libraries or advice on teaching methods. This need is also noted in the White Book from 2001:

*A two foreign language education at all school levels will be enabled so that every graduate of complete secondary school will be able to communicate at a certain level of fluency in two languages, one of them being English. It is necessary to search for various forms of media support in order to increase the foreign language literacy of children, youth and adults. (National Program of Educational Growth 2001, 83)*

The question of effectiveness is closely tied with the qualifications of kindergarten teachers. The 2008 report of the Czech school inspection states that only 6 percent of teachers had specialized qualification for work with pre-school children as well as qualification for foreign language teaching, which teachers completed during life-long learning programs. More than half of foreign language teachers in kindergartens received special education for teaching in kindergarten, however were not sufficiently equipped in terms of language or were only graduates of the "maturita" exam in Russian, which is not at present a desired language. The education of external staff often did not fulfill special qualification requirements. Even more, only in 36 percent of kindergartens is the teaching of a foreign language documented and evaluated for quality.<sup>4</sup>

Concerning the advantages for children who learn a foreign language, most often English, at an early age, Petr Najvar (2008) did not find any connection between early foreign language education (English) and later success at school. In his empirical study, he compared the levels of English knowledge of 211 eighth-grade students from 7 schools and found out that children who attended foreign language courses prior to school did not do any better on exams than children who started to learn English at school. He then interviewed 16 children, who in a certain way deviated from the norm (achieved particularly positive or negative results, had an intensive early education or learned German as a first foreign language). These interviews enabled him to conclude that there was a considerable lack of quality in

<sup>4</sup> For details, see Czech School Inspection 2008, 6.

the courses offered.<sup>5</sup> As suggested by the Zlín case study, courses are often limited and concentrate on isolated vocabulary or very simple syntactical structures. The use of metalanguage or pronunciation by non-native speakers also belongs to this category. It seems necessary to follow the requirement from the Ministry action plan about including foreign language teaching into the curricula for kindergarten teachers, where future teachers should gain such knowledge applicable for everyday use. It is not a matter of creating special courses, but rather of including small foreign language sequences into kindergarten daily programs.

The Zlín respondents agreed that early foreign language education has many advantages: 129 answered favorably to a question about whether children learn foreign language easily; only 9 did not agree and 3 did not answer. These results are not surprising since the topic of language education is omnipresent in the Czech media and passes like a red thread through not only preschool but all levels of education.

Which foreign language should be taught first is also the subject of heated debates. It cannot be denied that in today's globalized world, English has become a respected universal communication tool (lingua franca). Further, English is a strongly preferred language in Czech educational politics. However, there is no valid reason why language education should be limited to one language only. In this context, note the 1980 "Homburg suggestions for common language diversification in Germany and Europe", where the authors encourage mediation of "language of meeting" and the language of neighbors in Europe, by which students would have the advantage of experiencing a second language in the form of various partnerships, exchanges, excursions, etc. Germany and Austria are two German-speaking neighboring countries with which the Czech Republic has countless historical, cultural and social contacts, creating a deep and intense interconnection. There would certainly be many opportunities for language exchange.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Polish or Slovak could also play an important role as neighbor languages.

Worth mention are also parental arguments in favor of early foreign language teaching. As part of the Zlín Region case study, four reasons were offered to the respondents, allowing them to pick several and also add their own reasons. There were no other reasons mentioned except for those already noted. The highest number of votes were allotted to, "my child will have better opportunities later in school" (24). At the same time, parents are often confronted with the problem that between the end of kindergarten and the beginning of regular foreign language education at an elementary school, there is often a two year gap, as not all elementary schools offer voluntary foreign language courses during the first and second grade. Parents either accept this delay, knowing that knowledge might be forgotten, or they continue with individual courses, which either way leads to heterogeneous classroom structures at the beginning of the third grade, when foreign language education officially begins. There is still a lack of continuity in moving from one educational level to the next. A good example is a project undertaken in the small Moravian village, Strani. The project was titled "Innovation and Expansion of English Language Education at the Elementary School in Strani" and started with the 2009/2010 school year. The Strani elementary school was the first in the Czech Republic where English language education in the first and second grades was financed by the European Union. After a successful first phase, this project should be extended in the future to the local kindergarten, assuring a smooth transition from one educational level to the next. Such well thought out projects guarantee the continuity of child education.

The second most common argument for early language education was a child's joy in learning a foreign language (20). This result demonstrates that parents realize the importance of the developmental years in the educational resume of each child, especially considering foreign languages. Children tend to learn

willingly, using all their senses and curiosity, without much effort or drills. Children at this age do not distinguish between social or historical contexts, the harmony or disharmony of a foreign language; they are generally free of all biases and learn in a playful way. Adults should take advantage of this natural instinct and encourage and lead the child. Of the respondents, 16 noted that they have friends or family abroad or that they vacation there often. The opportunity for live contact with a foreign language is often the strongest intrinsic motivation for mastering it.

The last question asked the parents if they wished for a wider selection in foreign language courses or for more information from the kindergarten. The most frequent answer was, "I want more information about how I can better study with my child" (35). This reflects the idea that parents generally do not feel they are sufficiently informed and didactically guided. Despite the fact that we live in a knowledge-oriented society, which holds education as its highest esteem, such a glaring and well-known deficit unfortunately continues to exist. Directly corresponding with the parents' desire for more information is also the answer, "I would like more materials to take home", noted 18 times. The shortage of affordable materials for the public clearly continues. Altogether 17 respondents would welcome more courses or better quality. Connected with the quality of courses is the quality of teachers, educational methods and materials, as well as parents' awareness of the course content and the progress of their children. Only one respondent in the Zlín Region voted for a different language than English, demanding German. Other languages, such as Spanish or Chinese, were not mentioned at all. Also prevalent among the respondents was the opinion that children should learn their mother tongue well prior to taking on another language.

#### 4 Conclusion

The comprehensive implementation of voluntary foreign language teaching in all kindergartens in the Czech Republic has not yet taken place. Requirements from the 2006 action plan were implemented only partially. Parents still feel insufficiently informed in terms of the measurable progress of their children as well as educational methods and didactic materials. Such materials are still in great shortage. Deficiencies exist also in the qualifications of lecturers and kindergarten teachers. Mandatory lessons of English as part of study programs are insufficient. It is necessary to arrange such learning methods and language knowledge that are applicable in real life. Further, it is essential to solve issues with the transition from one educational level to the next and with the continuity of foreign language education. A good example is the project implemented in Strani. Overall, the goal of "one plus two" in the Czech Republic has not yet been reached.

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<sup>5</sup> For details, see Najvar 2008, 87.

<sup>6</sup> Along the German-Czech and Austrian-Czech borders exist some bilingual kindergartens where mainly Czech children learn German, but also German children profit from intercultural education.

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