
BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN SLOVAKIA ON THE BACKGROUND OF TRANSFORMATION OF EDUCATION SYSTEM

Anna Hurajová*

*University of SS. Cyril and Methodius, Faculty of Mass Media Communication, Nám. J. Herdu 2,
91701 Trnava, Slovak Republic*

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Abstract

This paper describes the major factors in shaping the educational system in Slovakia in general and how these have changed during different historical periods, mainly during the following decades after the change of regime in 1989. The Slovak case study examines the period after the change of regime in 1989 in former Czechoslovakia, specifically after 1993 when Slovakia became an independent country. Chapter one of this paper on the educational system in the Slovak Republic, which is an introductory chapter, sets the research questions on the main strategies of development of educational system in the Slovak Republic after 1989. Chapter two delineates the historical traditions by which consequent reforms in the educational system were determined. It also sets the historical, political and religious background of the educational system in terms of the changes made in the curricula of some school subjects, in the system of school managements and the documents and projects launched during this period. The background for the development of church-maintained schools is described. Within chapter three, the structure of school system in Slovakia is described. This chapter both describes the structure of contemporary school system and presents a model of bilingual education in Slovakia. The following subchapters look into the issue of bilingual education in some detail, dealing with types of schools, languages of instruction and roles and characteristics of teachers engaged in bilingual education. Finally, conclusions in chapter four are outlined.

Keywords: educational system, bilingual education, changes, education, foreign languages

1. Introduction

Slovakia – the official name is the Slovak Republic – the smallest country in the V4 group in terms of area and population, was established on 1st January 1993 after the peaceful partition of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic (or Czechoslovakia) [1]. At the time of its establishment, Slovakia seemed to be the least developed country of the V4 group. As for its ethnic structure, Slovakia

*E-mail: anna.hurajova@ucm.sk

is a multi-ethnic country with 85.8% Slovaks, 9.7% Hungarians, 1.7% Roma (actually around 9%), 0.8% Czechs, 2% Ruthenian, Ukrainians, Germans, Polish and others, which is not the result of the migration in the 20th century but of historical development [1].

In this article, I examine three interconnected research questions on the main strategies of development of educational system in the Slovak Republic after the change of regime in 1989 with special regard to bilingual education.

1. Is there an established, 'verifiable' tradition regarding language diversity and bilingual education in the Slovak Republic?
2. What have been the major factors in shaping the Slovak educational system in general, and how have these changed during different historical periods?
3. How is bilingual education formally organized and which methodologies are implemented in Slovak bilingual schools?

In answering these questions, I relied on various information sources, namely research studies and research articles published in renowned international and domestic journals.

2. Development of educational system in Slovakia after 1989 in the light of reforms

2.1. Historical and political background

The period beginning in 1989, after the fall of the totalitarian regime, can be characterised as the transformation of the educational system with several phases [2]. Already in 1990, some basic content changes were made in the curricula of some school subjects like History or Civic Education with the aim of removing the ideology of the Communist Party. Furthermore, in the system of school management, the changes concerned the right of teachers, employees and students to vote for their heads or deans, which resulted in creating self-governing authorities of schools and faculties [1].

The first few years after the establishment of the independent Slovak Republic were characterized by different forms of educational development. As Kosová and Porubský [1] state it, at that time there were no legislative or curricular decisions that could significantly influence the quality of the educational system. On the other hand, enthusiastic teachers and educators started to create non-governmental organisations aiming at solving international educational projects trying to positively reform the educational system and curricula at primary and secondary schools. Some documents were launched at this time, among them for example a strategic document called 'Konštantín' (Constantine) in 1994 trying to design educational development for the following 10 years which, however, was not successfully implemented because of economic and political reasons. The most successful project was the one called 'Millennium' which was in 2002 approved by the national parliament under the title 'The National Programme of Education'. Some of the areas which created the basis for educational development over the next approximately 15

years were humanisation of educational practice based on principles of student-centred education, curricular transformation focused on reducing the nationally-determined educational content, emphasis on professional development of teachers by elaborating a system of lifelong learning and career development for them and increasing the quality of foreign language teaching with the aim for students ending secondary education being able to speak at least two foreign languages [1]. However, due to a lack of political consensus among political parties as well as vagueness in gaining financial help from EU funds and national resources, carrying out the programme was difficult from the very beginning.

The Slovak educational system reflects the historical development of Slovakia, with its current form being determined by Austro-Hungarian tradition of centralized and selective schooling, the Czechoslovak tradition of a unified school system and the educational ideals of J.A. Comenius [1]. The organisation of the Slovak institutional education is based on the system of education and training with the founders of schools at all levels being the state, self-governing authorities, churches and individuals [1]. Up to 90% of primary and secondary schools are public, and the rest are public schools owned either by churches or private owners [3]. With educational institutions covering the educational needs of the Slovak population in each age category and at each level, the network of Slovak educational institutions is complex and dense.

2.2. Religious background - development of church-run education

Although Slovakia is an ideologically neutral state, the Slovak Constitution confirms the continuity of the state with its historical Christian roots, in the sense of the spiritual heritage of the Christian missionaries Cyril and Methodius [4]. This is the legitimate reason why the Churches in Slovakia have been establishing and maintaining their own schools in order to foster not only cognitive, but also spiritual and religious development of young generation. This is in sharp contrast with the previous communist regime before 1989 when Churches did not have the right to administer and organize their own affairs concerning the developing and financial support of primary and secondary church schools, teaching of religion as a school subject or financial contribution to salaries of religious education teachers. The Churches in Slovakia are not separated from the state. According to the last census in 2011, 62% of the population were Roman Catholics, 5.9% Lutherans, 3.8% Greek Catholics, 1.8% Reformed and a small number of believers from other religions. With about 80% of the population claiming to have Church affiliation, Slovakia can be identified as one of Europe's most Christianized countries [4].

The fall of the communist regime and the subsequent democratisation of the Slovak society after the year 1989 brought religious freedom and flourishing of spiritual life [5]. At the same time, the Churches began to realize their educational role, which reasonably resulted in the efforts to establish their own

schools (church-run or denominational schools) at all levels from kindergartens to even tertiary education.

3. The structure of school system in Slovakia with regard to bilingual education

3.1. The structure of Slovakia's contemporary school system

As the majority of the population of the Slovak Republic is created by ethnic Slovaks, the mainstream instructional language at Slovak schools is the Slovak language which is also the state language [3]. Law 245/2008 enables education and training to be realized in a foreign language, which is labelled as 'bilingual education'. A foreign language is a language of another country whose language is not a language of the national or ethnic minority. In school or class with bilingual education, a second language of instruction is a foreign language. A school or classroom with bilingual education can also be established without signing an agreement with another country if education and training is carried out in a foreign language in at least three obligatory subjects. In bilingual schools and classrooms, an obligatory subject Slovak language and literature is an inseparable part of training and the maximum number of subjects taught in a foreign language is not provided. In both types of bilingual schools in Slovakia – either established by an international agreement or by a school curriculum – Slovak language is taught as a compulsory subject [3]. The schools realizing education and training through Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodology are thus not included in the system of bilingual schools in Slovakia, although this methodology is considered to be one of the forms of bilingual education [6].

Nowadays, the school system of the Slovak Republic includes 7 types of schools [3]:

- nursery schools (for children from 3 to 6 years of age);
- primary schools (for children from 6 to 15 years of age, divided into two levels – primary education and lower secondary education);
- grammar schools (with either 4-, 5- or 8-year study programmes);
- secondary vocational schools (with either 2-, 3- or 4-year study programmes);
- conservatories;
- schools for learners with special educational needs;
- elementary art schools;
- language schools.

3.2. The structure of Slovakia's contemporary school system

According to Law 460/1992, article 34, section 2, citizens belonging to national and ethnic minorities have, except the right to acquire the national language, also the right to be educated in their mother language. Schools for

national minorities function from pre-school education to higher education and are organized as schools (or classes) in which the language of the minority is used as a language of instruction, while the Slovak language is used as a foreign language; schools in which the language of the minority is used in combination with the Slovak language – bilingual education; and the schools which use the language of the minority in a particular school subject, while the other school subjects are taught in Slovak [1]. Although these schools are in fact bilingual, by Slovak legislation, this form of education is not recognized as bilingual [3].

3.2.1. Types of schools providing bilingual education: public and church-run schools

In terms of Slovak schools providing bilingual education in minority languages in 2012/2013, the numbers of schools providing bilingual education with various languages of instruction were as follows: Slovak-Hungarian – a total of 65 schools, Hungarian – a total of 267 schools, Ukrainian – a total of 6 schools, other languages (with languages not specified) – a total of 11 schools. The total number of schools providing education in the Slovak language as a language of instruction was 2485 schools [7].

In Slovakia, bilingual education has gained incredible popularity among parents and learners, which has resulted in the persistently growing number of bilingual primary and secondary schools. Within the last 10 years, the number of bilingual schools in Slovakia has increased by more than 100%, specifically from 25 to 56 schools [7, p. 17]. According to Slovak school legislation, the only model of bilingual education in Slovakia is the one when a foreign language is a supplement to a state language. As for languages of instruction, half of bilingual schools in Slovakia organize the bilingual education in combination of a mother tongue (i.e. Slovak) with English, then comes Spanish, French and German.

The reason why state-run bilingual schools are of high quality is that they are established by international agreements. Specific countries thus monitor their quality. The church-run bilingual schools can have an agreement on the level of Churches, and private bilingual schools are not established under international agreements. Although church schools in general are maintained by the specific Churches, in fact, they are maintained by the Churches with the help of the state. The majority of Slovak church-run schools are maintained by the Roman Catholic Church; the second biggest church in Slovakia – the Lutheran church has also founded its church-run schools [4].

3.2.2. Languages of instruction integrated in bilingual education

In terms of languages of instruction integrated in bilingual education at primary and secondary schools, half of the total number of 56 Slovak bilingual schools combine Slovak language with English – 27 schools, 6 schools provide bilingual education in Spanish language, four in German and other four in French. Two schools organize bilingual education in Russian and two schools in

Bulgarian, and one school provides bilingual education in Italian [7, p. 17]. Bilingual education in the above mentioned languages is provided predominantly at secondary level – at grammar schools and business academies.

Bilingual education is considered to be an effective way of learning a new language; however, it puts extra demands on students and teachers. Bilingual education programs whose aim is bilingualism in two prestigious languages as a sign of intellectual prominence are considered too demanding and so should be attended only by intellectually above-average and talented students.

Purposes of bilingual education vary across world. In multicultural countries, like the U.S.A., bilingual education is designed to help immigrants assimilate into the culture. In Slovakia, however, bilingual education fulfils totally different purposes and is applied in a different way. The purposes of applying bilingual education in Slovak schools are expressed in the curricula of individual bilingual schools. Pokrivčáková in [3] summarizes the purposes mentioned in all school curricula as creating opportunities for more effective acquisition/learning of foreign languages, improving students' chances in their future studies or careers in international labour market, the development of students' cognitive skills, gaining a better level of communicative skills in a foreign language, development of academic literacy skills in both languages and development of students' plurilinguism and pluriculturalism. The latter is consistent with various European documents which state that bilingual education is the means of protecting and developing European linguistic diversity and multilingualism, according to which every European should be able to communicate in at least three foreign languages. As Chmelfiková points out, according to CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) modern university graduates should be able to speak two main foreign languages and one language of a neighbouring country [8]. Furthermore, it is stated in the literature that theoretical education supports cognitive abilities and becomes the fundamental condition for use of critical analysis [9] and, on the other hand, students should be able to apply these abilities in practice efficiently [10, 11]. The effects of electronic media on cognitive processes, also in the process of learning, is described in [12]. New role models for Slovak youth in the context of communication are described in [13]. Bilingual teaching methods, such as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), are dealt with in [14].

As mentioned above, in Slovakia, 56 schools in Slovakia offer bilingual education, which represents 1.94% of the overall number of schools. Furthermore, bilingual education is most often realized at secondary grammar schools and there are only two bilingual secondary vocational schools in Slovakia, both being business academies. Almost half of the overall number of bilingual schools in Slovakia provides education in Slovak and English, 6 schools combine Slovak and Spanish, 4 schools teach in Slovak and French and 4 schools in Slovak and German [S. Pokrivčáková, *Príprava učiteľov pre bilingválne vzdelávanie*, Teória a prax prípravy budúcich translatológov a učiteľov anglického jazyka, Banská Bystrica, 2013, 3, www.ff.umb.sk/app/cmsFile.php?ID=18274]. As for subjects taught at bilingual

grammar schools, the majority of schools provide bilingual education mostly in subjects like Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Geography. At the above mentioned secondary schools, the range of subjects taught bilingually is more varied and depending on teachers available in the schools [www.ff.umb.sk/app/cmsFile.php?ID=18274, p. 4].

3.2.3. Teachers in bilingual education

For the teacher being the principal figure in the educational process, his or her role becomes even more important in a bilingual education program. Teaching in bilingual education programs requires specialized competencies and puts high demands on the teachers. Not only are they expected to be excellent speakers of the foreign language but also experts in the subjects they teach [www.ff.umb.sk/app/cmsFile.php?ID=18274, p. 4]. So the ideal bilingual teacher should be someone qualified to teach the curricular subject on the one hand as well as the foreign language on the other hand. As [www.ff.umb.sk/app/cmsFile.php?ID=18274, p. 4] points out bilingual schools, not only in Slovakia but also throughout the world, are confronted with shortage of such teachers.

In bilingual education in Slovakia, mostly non-native teachers teach in the classes, for whom the teaching language is a foreign language. The teachers are qualified to teach content subject but not an instructional foreign language [www.ff.umb.sk/app/cmsFile.php?ID=18274, p. 15]. There only a few teachers who are qualified to teach a foreign language and a content subject. In practice they prepare for bilingual teaching through intensive work. Furthermore, their adaptation to bilingual environment is also supported by consultations with more experienced colleagues. Based on my personal experience with several teachers of bilingual classes interviewed, the teachers who are not qualified in a foreign language are encouraged by their headmistress to obtain qualification in the field of the English language and some of them are studying the study program English language and literature at university to become fully qualified. Thanks to involvement of schools in various European educational projects, enabling teachers and students to travel abroad, they can use or broaden their language skills in real-world practice.

In Slovakia, the additive type of bilingual education prevails. The mother tongue (Slovak) is used as the first language of instruction, whereas a foreign language is used as a secondary instructional language in some subjects [www.ff.umb.sk/app/cmsFile.php?ID=18274, p. 15]. Continual education of teachers of bilingual schools is constituted by educational activities aimed at broadening methodological-didactic competences of teachers, enhancing the efficiency of education and the development of creative and flexible approach necessary for work in multicultural environment of a bilingual school.

4. Conclusions

The transformation of the country after the year 1989 has brought many societal changes, including the sphere of education. Education is the base of development. The period beginning in 1989, after the fall of totalitarian regime, is characterised by the transformation of the educational system with several phases. The changes included innovations in the curricula of contents of some school subjects aiming to remove the ideological background, and the changes concerning the system of school management. In 1993, the independent Slovak Republic was established. In terms of educational system, the first years after the establishment of the independent country were characterized by various forms of educational development. However, due to lack of legislation and political consensus, none of the strategic document launched in this period significantly influenced the quality of the education and schooling in Slovakia. The 1990s were marked by efforts to bring humanisation of educational practice based on principles of student-centred education, to enhance professional and career development of teachers and to foster teaching of foreign languages at primary and secondary schools.

The Slovak educational system reflects the historical development and ethnic composition of Slovakia. As the majority of the population of the Slovak Republic being composed of ethnic Slovaks, the mainstream language of instruction at Slovak schools is the Slovak language which is also the state language. After the change of regime, in the 1990s, with open borders and boost of opportunities to travel, bilingual schooling gained an increasing popularity both among parents and learners as a prestigious issue and a sign of intellectual prominence. This enormous interest in bilingual schooling resulted in the rapid growth of the number of bilingual schools in Slovakia. As for languages of instruction in bilingual schools, English is a dominant language, followed by French, German, Spanish, Russian and Italian. Pupils wishing to attend bilingual schools must take strict entry exams and high demands are put on their educational achievements. Teaching in bilingual education programs also puts high demands on teachers who are expected to be qualified specialists in content subjects as well as excellent and qualified speakers of the foreign language. Teachers engaged in bilingual education should get at least basic training in foreign language teaching methodology. Bilingual education in Slovakia is extremely popular, a number of bilingual schools has been constantly growing and The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic has informed of the intention to systematically support this kind of education [www.ff.umb.sk/app/cmsFile.php?ID=18274, p. 7].

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