

Bilingual education in Slovakia: A Case Study

Silvia Pokrivčáková

Department of Language Pedagogy and Intercultural Studies
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia
E-mail: spokrivcakova@ukf.sk

ABSTRACT

Bilingual education is one of the areas in contemporary education that brings out some important controversies (philosophical, conceptual, sociological, political, economical, etc.) and thus calls for extensive and intensive debate. Bilingual education in Europe (and here the European Union countries are meant) has gained a very different status, due to the general European policy of developing language diversity and promoting “European plurilingualism and multilingualism”. In Slovakia, one of the younger members of the EU, bilingual education became an extraordinarily popular instrument for the fulfilment of this task.

*Since the specifically defined topic of bilingual education and its current status in Slovakia has not been studied and systematically reviewed yet, the research presented in this paper was designed as a single-phenomenon revelatory case study investigating seven research areas: reflection of bilingual education in school **legislation** and state pedagogical documents, **purposes** of bilingual education in Slovakia, its organization (levels and types of schools, foreign languages incorporated, teachers), structure of bilingual **schools curricula**, **types of bilingual education** applied at Slovak bilingual schools, and how bilingual education is both reflected in and saturated by the latest **research** findings. The conclusions presented in the paper were collected from multiple sources: state curriculum, statistical data published by the Slovak Ministry of Education or its partner institutions, international treaties on establishing and supporting bilingual sections of schools, bilingual schools curricula, interviews with school directors, teachers, and learners, direct observations at bilingual schools, research studies and research reports, etc. In the conclusion, bilingual education in Slovakia is identified as a unique, dynamically developing system which is both significantly shaped by the foreign language education policy promoted by the European Council (1995) as well as bears some specific characteristics, determined by its unique historical, political, and socio-cultural contexts.*

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Key words: bilingual education, bilingual schools, CLIL, foreign language teaching, case study

1. Introduction

There are not many areas in contemporary education which would bring out as many questions (philosophical, conceptual, sociological, political, economical, etc.) as the concept of bilingual education. While in the U.S.A. and in some other countries it is mostly related to education of immigrants and teaching heritage languages, in the E.U. bilingual education has acquired a very different status, mostly due to the common European policy of developing language diversity and promoting “European plurilingualism and multilingualism”.

Bilingual education is education provided in at least two languages. In reality, the concept is more complicated and in fact it “means different things in different places” (Hall, Smith & Wicaksono, 2011, p. 177). While in some cases it would mean simply teaching two languages as individual school subjects, or teaching a foreign language as a separate subject along with some other subject in that foreign language, in other cases it would be defined as teaching bilingual learners through the medium of one language (the schooling itself would be monolingual and not promoting bilingualism at all).

In this paper, bilingual education is understood as a term enveloping any system of education in which the curriculum (or at least part of it) is presented to learners in two (or more) languages, irrespective of their combination. Such definition emphasizes the aspect of teaching learners “through medium of two languages, so that they may develop full bilingualism and biliteracy” (Baker & Prys Jones, 1998, p. 464). The possible combinations of languages applied in bilingual education might include:

Tab 1: Possible combinations of languages integrated into bilingual education

Combination	Explanation
L1 + L2	- instruction that combines L1 (a mother language; the first language, a native language) with L2 (a second language; the language of instruction that is not a learner’s mother language but is used as an official, state language in the country)
L1 + FL	- instruction given in both L1 and FL (a language that is neither a learner’s mother language nor an official language used in the country)
L2 + FL	- instruction provided in L2 and FL
FL1 + FL2	- instruction given in two different foreign languages that are neither a learner’s mother language nor an official language used in the country

2. Objectives and methodology of research

Our aim is to discuss the current status and organization of bilingual education in Slovakia. The research is designed as a single case study of the “revelatory” nature (Thomas, 2011; Day Ashley, 2012, p. 102), since the defined research topic has not been previously studied. The case study is conducted as “an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence” (Robson, 2002, p. 178). The main aim of the research was to explore the contemporary state and organization of bilingual education in Slovakia (phenomenon) within the context of both the mainstream (monolingual) education in Slovakia and the policy of teaching foreign languages in the European Union. Parameters of the phenomenon’s particularity included spatial (the EU, Slovakia), temporal (2003-2013), and content determinants (status in school legislation, objectives, organization, structure of bilingual schools curricula, types of bilingual education, and bilingual education research).

Research questions

1. How is bilingual education understood and secured in Slovak school legislation (the School Act, national curriculum, etc.)?
2. What are the purposes of bilingual education in Slovakia? Are they expressed explicitly or implicitly?
3. What is the formal organization of bilingual education and how does it differ from mainstream (monolingual) education (bilingual instruction on various levels of education, types of schools, which foreign languages are incorporated into bilingual education)?
4. How is bilingual education incorporated into school curricula (various determinants, which subjects are taught bilingually)?
5. Which types of bilingual education are applied at Slovak bilingual schools? What are determinants of such choice?
6. How is bilingual education in Slovakia reflected in and saturated by the latest research findings?

Methods used

The case study was conducted via diverse methods (statistical methods, observations, interview, questionnaires, etc.) and validated data sources provided exclusively by Statistical Yearbook of the Slovak Ministry of Education (UIPŠ, 2013a). Multiple information sources were used to complete the case study, including state pedagogical documents (the Slovak national curriculum, school curricula and other documents published on web pages), interviews with school directors and teachers, observing lessons at bilingual schools, analysing research studies and research reports, international treaties on establishing and supporting bilingual sections of schools.

Specific context of the case study

To bring valid results, the case study must investigate the determined phenomenon „with reference to the specific context in which it is situated” (Day Ashley, 2012, p. 102). As mentioned before, the context of the case

study is created by both the mainstream (monolingual) education in Slovakia and the policy of teaching foreign languages in the European Union.

Slovakia is a small post-communist country in Central Europe. Until 1993, Slovakia was a part of Czechoslovakia. On January 1, 1993 Slovakia became an independent nation recognized by the United Nations and its member states. After the breakup of Czechoslovakia (as one of the consequences of the “Velvet Revolution” in 1989), Slovakia reformed all its public systems including the school system. In 2004, it became a member state of the EU and as such, it needed to adopt principles of the united European legislation on education (e.g. “M+2” rule, according to which each European citizen should be able to communicate in his/her mother language and at least two other languages). This repeatedly led to numerous system changes in the Slovak educational system.

The school system of the Slovak Republic nowadays includes 7 types of schools:

- a) nursery schools (for children from 3 to 6 years),
- b) primary schools (for children from 6 to 15 years, divided into two levels: primary education and lower secondary education),
- c) grammar schools (with either 4-, 5- or 8-year study programmes),
- d) secondary vocational schools (with 2-, 3- or 4-year study programmes),
- e) conservatories,
- f) schools for learners with special educational needs,
- g) elementary art schools,
- h) language schools.

The Slovak Republic is inhabited mostly by ethnic Slovaks (app. 85% of population). Consequently, the mainstream instructional language at schools in Slovakia is a state language, i.e. Slovak. About 10% of inhabitants are ethnic Hungarians (especially in the south-western part of the country near borders with Hungary). The rest of the population (app. 5%) includes also Czech, German, Ukrainian, Romany, Polish, Jewish and Ruthenian minorities. Members of ethnic minorities have the right (anchored in the Constitution of the Slovak Republic, Law 460/1992, head 34, § 2) to be educated in their own mother language. To fulfil this right, the network of 349 primary and secondary schools (12.08% of all primary and secondary schools in Slovakia) where minority languages are used as either first or second languages of instruction in majority of subjects has been created (Law 245/2008). The structure of schools providing education in minority languages in the school year 2012/13 is published in Tab 2. The numbers presented in the table were processed from the latest statistical data updated and published on 25 March 2013 by the Institute of School Information and Prognostics (UIPŠ, 2013a). Although these schools are in fact bilingual in their nature, this form of education is not recognized as bilingual by Slovak legislation. This is the reason why these schools were not included into this research.

Tab 2: Slovak schools providing bilingual education in minority languages in 2012/13

Language of instruction	Primary schools	Grammar schools	Secondary vocational schools	Total
Slovak	1900	167	418	2485
Slovak-Hungarian	27	7	31	65
Slovak-Ukrainian	0	0	0	0
Hungarian	238	19	10	267
Ukrainian	5	1	0	6
Other*	7	4	0	11
Total	2177	245	468	2890

Notes: * The language was not specified in the data source.

Compulsory education in Slovakia lasts for 10 years. Most primary and secondary schools are public (up to 90%). The rest are private schools owned either by churches or private owners.

Secondary vocational schools prepare students for all types of occupations. After finishing any 4-year secondary school study programme, students may take a school-leaving exam (“maturita”). Grammar schools are generally considered as “elite” or “prestigious” because of their more academic-oriented study programmes and their intention to prepare students for university and higher education study. Higher education is provided by public, state, and private universities or colleges. The latest observable trend in the Slovak education system is the growing number of students who choose to study at universities and colleges abroad.

3. Research findings

3.1 Bilingual education reflected in Slovak school legislation and state pedagogical documents

In addition to the education provided in the state language and in minority languages discussed above, the Slovak legislation also provides for education in a foreign language (only six languages may be taught as foreign languages in Slovakia: English, German, Russian, French, Spanish, and Italian). It means that **the model L1 + FL** is the only type of bilingual education that is terminologically recognized as (truly) bilingual by the Slovak school legislation (Act on Schools, Law 245/2008, § 6).

Originally, bilingual schools could be established only on the basis of international agreements between the Slovak Republic and the countries in which a foreign language (a working language in classes) is used as an official state language. These days, any school may provide a bilingual study programme if at least three of its compulsory subjects are taught in a foreign language (Act on Schools, Law 245/2008, § 7). The maximum number of subjects taught in a foreign language is not limited. In both types of bilingual schools (established by an international agreement or by a school curriculum), the state language (Slovak) is taught as a compulsory subject. Bilingual schools established under international agreements do not need to follow the Slovak national curriculum. They follow an international study programme accredited by the Ministry of Education of both countries involved.

Bilingual schools of the second type need to follow the Slovak national curriculum and the related articles of the Conception of Teaching Foreign Languages at Primary and Secondary Schools (Koncepcia..., 2009).

3.2 Purposes of bilingual education in Slovakia

While in many countries, including the U.S.A., bilingual education is designed and applied to help immigrants assimilate into the culture, bilingual education in Slovakia fulfils very different purposes.

As already mentioned, in official Slovak pedagogical documents bilingual education is seen generally as one of the means of protecting European linguistic diversity (currently, citizens of the EU speak in more than 60 different languages and 23 of them are official languages) and European multilingualism, which is a required ability of all Europeans to communicate in at least in 3 languages, as stated in documents various European documents (European Commission, 2005, 2009; European Council, 2008).

The concrete purposes of applying bilingual education are expressed explicitly in the **curricula of individual bilingual schools**. For the purposes of the following review, school curricula of all 8 bilingual primary schools, 27 bilingual schools, and 2 business academies, available on school web pages, were taken into account (not analysed in detail because of the impossibility to construct a reasonable sample). The purposes mentioned in all school curricula included “creating opportunities for more effective acquisition/learning foreign languages” and “improving learners’ chances” in their future study/career in the international work market. Other purposes mentioned included the development of a learner’s cognitive skills (without detailed specification), learning foreign languages in more complex circumstances and gaining better communicative skills in a foreign language, development of better (academic literacy) skills in both the mother and foreign languages, development of learner’s plurilinguism and pluriculturalism.

Nearly all schools emphasized the fact that, even if they provide teaching content subjects in a foreign language, this method is not applied at the expense of learners’ fluency and academic literacy in Slovak.

3.3 Bilingual education at various levels and types of schools

The analysis of statistical data provided in the official *Statistical Yearbook* (UIPŠ, 2013a) shows that bilingual education is provided only by less than one fiftieth of primary and secondary schools (1.94%). It is applied most frequently by grammar schools (18.77% of all grammar schools). Nearly a quarter of bilingual grammar schools (23.40%) are private, run by private persons or churches. Only a small portion of primary schools (0.37%) are bilingual, most of which are again private schools. Only 2 secondary vocational schools (both of them public business academies) were recognized as bilingual. The low number of bilingual secondary schools may be explained by the fact that the Regulation 113/2012 (Vyhláška..., 2012) formally acknowledges only two secondary-education study programmes that might be organized in a bilingual form: 7902 J 74 (grammar school – bilingual form) and 6317 M (business academy – bilingual form).

Tab 3: Bilingual education at primary and secondary schools (school year 2012/13)

Type of school				of which bilingual schools	%
Primary and secondary school		2890		56	1.94
Primary schools	total	2177		8	0.37
	public	2023		2	0.10
	private	154		6	3.89
Grammar schools	total	245		46	18.77
	public	151		24	15.89
	private	94		22	23.40
Secondary schools	total	468		2	0.43
	public	359		2	0.56
	private	109		0	-

As for instructional languages, nearly half of 56 Slovak bilingual schools combine a mother language with English (27 schools, i.e. 48.21%). Six schools (10.71%) organize bilingual education in Spanish, four (7.14%) in French, and other four (7.14%) in German.

Tab 4: Languages integrated in bilingual education at primary and secondary schools

Lang. of Instruction	Primary			Grammar schools			Business academies			Total
	public	private	total	public	private	total	public	private	total	
S – E		2	2	8	17	25			0	27
S – G				2		2	2		2	4
S – Sp				6	0	6			0	6
S – I				1		1			0	1
S – R				1	1	2				2
S – F				4		4				4
S – o				1		1				1
E	1	2	3	1	2	3				6
G	1	1	2		1	1				3
B		1	1		1	1				2
Total	2	6	8	24	22	46	2		2	56

Legend:

B – Bulgarian, E – English, F – French, G – German, I – Italian, R – Russian, S - Slovak, Sp – Spanish, o – other (not specified in the primary source)

In regards to the number of bilingual schools in the period of last 10 years, it is obvious that bilingual schools have grown not only in general numbers (from 25 to 56 schools), but also on both levels of education (primary and secondary) as well as all types (with the only exception of private secondary vocational schools, since, in fact, no such school has been opened yet). Detailed data are given in Tab 5.

Tab 5: Comparison of numbers of bilingual schools: school years 2003/4 – 2012/13

Type of school		Schools in general		of which bilingual schools			
		2003/04	2012/13	2003/04	%	2012/13	%
Schools (total)		3240	2890	25	0.77	56	1.94
Primary schools	total	2387	2177	0	0.00	8	0.37
	public	2272	2023	0	0.00	2	0.10
	private	115	154	0	0.00	6	3.89
Grammar schools	total	223	245	25	11.21	46	18.77
	public	158	151	18	11.39	24	15.89
	private	65	94	7	10.77	22	23.40
Secondary schools	total	630	468	0	0.00	2	0.43
	public	571	359	0	0.00	2	0.56
	private	59	109	0	0.00	0	0.00

3.4 Bilingual education in school curricula

Bilingual education in Slovakia is usually used in monolingual classes and taught by non-native teachers for whom, as well as for learners, the working language is a foreign language. The teachers are qualified to teach content subjects but not an instructional foreign language (literally called the second language of instruction). An instructional foreign language is taught also as an independent curricular subject for at least 3 lessons a week.

Similarly to mainstream (monolingual Slovak) schools, the content of bilingual education is determined by the national curriculum. The number and structure of subjects taught in foreign languages vary. In fact, there is no restriction stating which subject may or may be not taught in a foreign language. Generally, bilingual education may be applied in all academic, artistic, technical and vocational subjects. Each school applying bilingual education specifies in its school curriculum which particular subjects are taught and for how long in a foreign language (the second language of instruction). The inter-governmental agreements on bilingual education and public bilingual school curricula of the majority of bilingual schools in Slovakia list subjects like math, physics, chemistry, biology, and geography as those taught in a foreign language. At secondary bilingual vocational schools (2 private business academies), mathematics and vocational subjects are taught in a foreign language.

The range of subjects taught in a foreign language at private bilingual primary and grammar schools is much wider: together with natural science subjects they usually incorporate a foreign language to teaching history, informatics, as well as educational subjects (ethics, religion, music, arts, physical education). The reasons are very pragmatic: as the comparison of school curricula showed, the scope of subjects taught in a foreign language at a particular school does not depend so much on educational principles, philosophy or objectives followed by the school, but on the availability of qualified teachers able to teach in a foreign language (which is frequently directly mentioned in school curricula documents and newsletters for students and their parents).

3.5 Types of bilingual education provided in Slovakia

Considering the degree to which multiple languages are used at schools, **the additive type** of bilingual education is dominant. The mother tongue is used as the first language of instruction, while a foreign language is used only as a secondary instructional language in some subjects or in the teaching of only some topics or lessons (**a strong form** of bilingual education which promotes bilingualism and academic literacy in both languages). As Tab 4 suggests, **the weak form** of it is applied only at 11 schools where English, German and Bulgarian are used as the only languages of instruction (6 primary and 5 grammar schools). The weak form of bilingual education denotes education of bilingual learners in one language of instruction leading to limited bilingualism and academic monoliteracy).

3.5.1 CLIL as a pragmatic compromise

Since “teaching bilingually” at bilingual schools usually means teaching at least three content subjects exclusively in a foreign language (i.e. for 100% of teaching time) either by native or non-native teachers, bilingual education is considered too challenging and demanding for majority of students and is recommended only to excellent, highly motivated students with above-average intellectual skills and language aptitude.

To overcome this gap and to bring benefits of bilingual instruction to as many learners as possible, a new method of CLIL (content language integrated learning) emerged in European countries in 1980s. CLIL is sometimes called “a European version of bilingualism”. Instead of teaching content subjects in foreign languages for 100% of the teaching time, CLIL promotes mixing the mother language and the foreign language within a lesson, with teaching time in a target language limited to a maximum of 50%. It is believed that such approach gives learners a chance to develop academic terminology and academic communicative competences in both languages. CLIL as a particular method of bilingual education has been named and recommended as the most progressive method of foreign language education in Europe (*European White Paper on Education and Training*, 1996).

The CLIL method has been applied in Slovak primary schools for nearly 10 years. Not surprisingly, the initiative to use CLIL has been mostly coming from primary schools; their managements and teachers seem to be very well aware of educational benefits and attractiveness of bilingual education (mostly to parents), but the occasional attempts to incorporate it were usually very short-lived, most often due to a lack of experience and examples of good practice, a lack of qualified bilingual primary teachers and an absence of suitable teaching materials adapted to the requirements of Slovak national curriculum.

Thus CLIL, with its half-to-half or even less ratio of using a foreign language along with a mother language, comes as more acceptable for these schools, especially because of the following reasons (based on the results and conclusions of previously conducted research projects which studied attitudes of school managers, CLIL teachers and learners and were conducted mostly through semi-structured interviews and surveys (Horváthová, 2009; Pokrivčáková, 2011, 2012; Gondová, 2012; Menzlová, 2012 and others):

1. The approach is less demanding for learners and, as some research studies proved, it is manageable also for failing learners, learners with lower communicative skills and learners with special educational needs.
2. There is less pressure on school managements to only hire teachers with excellent foreign language proficiency.
3. It seems that, as a kind of a side effect, the combination of two languages and the opportunity to see the subject through two media (i.e. two languages with different inner logics, imagery, metaphorically) develops higher cognitive functions of learners, or as one of the physics teachers put it: "Thanks to the explanation in other language, both me and them (learners) just see things and think differently".
4. Moreover, CLIL does not "endanger" the dominant position of a mother language and one of the main objectives in Slovak national curriculum, i.e. it develops literacy in both a mother tongue and the foreign language, leaving the latter a position of a secondary, added, additional means of communication;
5. And finally, CLIL appropriately prepares learners for secondary education both in a mother and foreign language since learners do not lack specialized terminology and academic-discourse expressions in any of them.

3.6 Slovak bilingual education in research

Solid empirical research reflecting bilingual education in Slovakia is nearly non-existent because of several reasons. The number of bilingual schools (56 in total) does not enable researchers to create a relevant sample as well as required conditions for pedagogical experiments. The second reason is the fact that learners of these schools have specific characteristics. All bilingual schools select their students by means of entrance exams which mostly test their general communication knowledge (primary schools) and foreign language proficiency (grammar schools and business academies). As a result, students of bilingual schools demonstrate better cognitive and communication skills and better learning outcomes in general (as proved annually by their results in national testing and school-leaving exams statistics). Moreover, as bilingual education provided by private schools requires significant financial support from the families, students of bilingual schools come typically from families of higher socio-cultural status, etc.). As a consequence, it is nearly impossible to design homogeneous and comparable enough cohorts of both bilingual and non-bilingual school students for any comparison or experiment. Equally difficult would be to guarantee homogeneity of the pedagogical treatment and to have control over variables.

Despite of the above mentioned complications, three experimental research projects have been currently conducted or still are being conducted by the State Institute of Education: Bilingual form of teaching foreign languages at lower secondary education (2008 – 2013), Bilingual education in Slovak and Russian languages (2007-11), Bilingual education in Slovak and English in 5-year study programme TAŠ (2007-2014). However, no research reports have been published yet.

The only area of bilingual research that has already brought relevant data, though still "in its infancy", is the research of the CLIL method (Pokrivčáková, 2012). So far it has been focused on four areas: measuring learners' learning outcomes (Kováčiková, 2012; Menzlová, 2012), measuring affective aspects of learning through CLIL (Pokrivčáková, 2008; Gondová, 2012; Farkašová, 2012), analysing competences of CLIL teachers (Hurajová, 2012), and analysing CLIL teaching materials (Hurajová, 2007; Reid, 2009; Žemberová, 2009; Pokrivčáková, 2009). Recently, the national experiment entitled Effectiveness of CLIL method in primary education in teaching foreign languages (2008-2013) funded by the State Pedagogical Institute has been completed and results published (Pokrivčáková et al., 2012). The experiment results proved many other previously published and reviewed research articles (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2009; Pérez-Cañado, 2012) proving that CLIL learners manifested significantly better learning outcomes in all observed areas (foreign vocabulary development, listening, reading and writing skills). As for learners' attitudes to learning a target language in the form of CLIL lessons, the final results showed that the learners in experimental (CLIL) group felt higher demandingness and competitiveness learning in CLIL classes than learners in controlled (non-CLIL) classes.

One more experiment, focused on bilingual education at grammar schools entitled Bilingual education in English through CLIL method at grammar schools in 5-year study programme (2006-2011), was completed 2 years ago but the results have not been published yet.

To conclude, because of the nearly non-existent research in bilingual education and still low number of research projects, some crucial aspects of bilingual education have remained unconfirmed, unproved and unexplained. As an example, one can mention the situation when psychological and cognitive effects of CLIL are usually explained entirely intuitively without reasonable empirical background. Bilingual schools in Slovakia thus still seek proved procedures of good practice or valid and reliable assessment procedures and standardized evaluation instruments. The task of formulating united instructions and criteria for applying and measuring the quality of bilingual education (through the united national accreditation system for bilingual schools) needs to be fulfilled as quickly as possible.

4. Conclusion

The aim of the article was to discuss the system of bilingual education and its current status in Slovakia. Through procedures of a single-phenomenon revelatory case study the following conclusions were formulated:

Although bilingual education is provided for in Slovak school legislation and state pedagogical documents, there is still a lack of either a general formal framework for the designing of bilingual school curricula, or a system of evaluation criteria for learners of these schools. The main purposes of bilingual education addressed by all the studied state documents and school curricula included “creating opportunities for more effective acquisition/learning of foreign languages” and “improving learners’ chances” in their future study/career in the international work market. Bilingual education in Slovakia is most frequently seen (by state bodies, school managements and parents) as a form of a foreign language education, not as a form of complex development of a learner’s cognitive functions.

Bilingual education is being applied in all types of schools (both primary and secondary, both public and private), apart from private secondary vocational schools. The dominant foreign language used for instruction in Slovakia is English, and the bilingual education is mostly based on the additive type. Although one may say that the research into bilingual education is still insufficient in Slovakia (perhaps with the exception of CLIL), recent years have witnessed a kind of accelerating development. However, much more remains to be done in the future, since some crucial aspects of bilingual education have remained unconfirmed, unproved and unexplained (e.g. its psychological and cognitive effects). Moreover, bilingual schools in Slovakia still miss important instruments for ensuring quality of education, such as validated assessment procedures and standardized evaluation instruments. Most urgently needed, however, is the united national accreditation system for bilingual schools.

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