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# The Role of Hungarian in the Communication Styles of Infant and Early Childhood Educators with Bilingual Children in a Hungarian Nursery Care Setting

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## Introduction

The European Union (EU) considers the promotion of linguistic diversity and the protection and learning of languages to be high priorities. Exposures to multiple languages can connect people from different cultural backgrounds, enhance intercultural understanding, and improve an individual's competitiveness in the labour market. To support effective language acquisition and learning, EU countries encourage various forms of language development from an early age, aiming to help citizens achieve a high level of bilingualism or even multilingualism (European Commission, 2023). Therefore, research into bilingual children is a relevant and important area of study. This paper aims to explore the interactions between bilingual children and infant and early childhood (IEC) educators in a Hungarian nursery care setting – that is, a day nursery/crèche (UK) or childcare centre for toddlers aged 0–3.

In this research context, a bilingual child is defined as one from a family in which the parents are of different nationalities, with distinct native languages. Their children are exposed to both languages as each parent speaks to them in their own mother tongue, applying the Mixed System (MS) strategy, and the One Person/Parent One Language (OPOL) or Minority Language at Home (MLH) method (Martín, 2017). The day nursery examined in this study is attended by several bilingual children aged between 20 weeks to three years, and are either Hungarian or foreign nationals. Typically, these children are born into and raised in mixed-language families, where one parent is a native Hungarian speaker and the other speaks a different language. Additionally, there are a number of families in which both parents have native languages other than Hungarian and different from each other. In such cases, the children are primarily exposed to

the Hungarian language within the childcare environment. The childcare centre involved in this study follows a monolingual Hungarian immersion program for bilingual children, although educators may use English, German or Russian when it facilitates effective communication with bilingual toddlers.

To gain in-depth insights, a qualitative research method was employed using a semi-structured interview protocol with eight IEC educators working at the same day nursery in the capital. The collected data were analysed using content analysis to address the research questions (RQs) formulated as follows:

RQ1: What modes of communication are perceived as effective when interacting with bilingual children in a nursery care setting, according to the participant IEC educators?

RQ2: What role does the Hungarian language play during daily IEC education routines, based on the perceptions of the participant IEC educators?

To provide a theoretical background, this paper will review the definitions and nature of bilingualism, focusing on early childhood and immersion. It will also provide a brief overview of educational principles at day nurseries.

## Theoretical background

Bilingualism is one of the most misunderstood areas in linguistics, despite being a widespread phenomenon found in nearly every country, across all social classes and among people of all ages. Most bilingual individuals acquire and learn their languages at different stages in life and are seldom equally proficient in both. One language is often spoken with less fluency, sometimes even with an accent, and many can read or write in only one of their languages (Grosjean, 1994). In addition, bilinguals are frequently categorized using various labels, scales and binary distinctions, which contribute to ongoing debates about what defines bilingualism and who qualifies as bilingual (Bhatia, 2017). As a result, there are multiple ways to conceptualize bilingualism. One prominent approach is Bloomfield's (1933) "maximal view," which defines a bilingual person as someone who possesses "native-like control" of both their first and second languages (L1 and L2), implying a level of fluency comparable to that of native speakers. In contrast, the "minimal view" of bilingualism adopts a more flexible definition and a minimal competence of L2 (Diebold, 1961; MacNamara, 1967).

Early bilingualism in childhood can occur through internalizing two languages simultaneously at home or being introduced to a L2 early on, subsequent to fully acquiring the L1, typically by the age of 5 (American Psychological Association, 2018, n.p.; Hoffman, 1991). Early bilingualism differs from adolescent and adult bilingualism, as young children have less

developed cognitive and linguistic skills. In most cases, early bilingualism is natural and additive, particularly when it begins before formal schooling (Navracsics, 1999). When focusing on children aged 0–3, we typically refer to early simultaneous language acquisition, which involves regular and consistent exposure to both languages from birth. In contrast, consecutive bilingualism refers to situations in which a L2 or foreign language (FL) is acquired during early childhood but only after the L1 has been established (Bartha, 1999). It is essential to distinguish between a L2 and a FL. As Brown (2007) explains, L2 learners are typically exposed to the target language in their surrounding environment, for example, learners with various L1s studying English in native-speaking countries, such as the USA, Canada, or Australia. In contrast, FL learners often lack natural opportunities for communication in the target language outside the classroom.

According to McLaughlin (1984), simultaneous acquisition occurs if exposure to both languages begins before the age of 3, whereas consecutive acquisition begins after that age. Thus, the process of acquiring two languages can vary: it may occur naturally and subconsciously, or through a more structured and prolonged approach. Both modes of acquisition are influenced by varying levels of motivation and attitudes toward the target language, its speakers, and the surrounding cultural environment (Navracsics, 1999).

The role of educational institutions, including day nurseries, in supporting bilingual development is present in many parts of the world, particularly through immersion programmes. In such settings, educators maximize opportunities for toddlers to practice the target language in a natural context, working toward fluency with a special focus on conversation. The immersion methodology emphasizes learning by doing, involving frequent repetition of activities, interactions, and expressions, all of which contribute to accelerated language development. Moreover, this method supports the creation of an inclusive community. It is especially beneficial for toddlers to be consistently exposed to the sounds, rhythm, intonation, and cultural elements of the target language (Figueras-Daniel & Barnett, 2024).

Immersion education programs in the early years can take either a monolingual, or bilingual form, with goals that vary depending on the context ranging from preserving and enhancing a language to introducing a L2 at an early age. There is a critical need for specialized training in immersion teaching methods for early childhood educators and therefore, it is essential to adapt preschool pedagogy to suit the immersion environment, ensuring that young language learners receive effective language input. It is essential to consider differentiated support in early years' immersion programs, ensuring that provision is tailored to the needs of both L1 speakers and L2 learners, as well

as children with language impairments. There are several current challenges within the field, with a particular emphasis on the training and professional development of both pre-service and in-service early childhood educators, along with the accessibility of suitable resources in less commonly spoken languages. It is imperative to emphasise that there is a positive impact of high-quality immersion childcare centres on children and their families (Hickey & de Mejía, 2013).

In Hungary, the immersion, education and care of bilingual children must align with the framework for nurturing children aged 0–3 in day nurseries, as outlined in the National Core Programme for Nursery Care (A bölcsődei nevelés-gondozás országos alapprogramja, 2016) and the collection of professional rules for day nursery and education (Balogh et al., 2012). According to current regulations, the primary role of childcare is to support families and strengthen parental competencies, healthcare and the foundations of a healthy lifestyle, while also fostering children's emotional and social development. IEC educators are expected to convey positive emotions and messages through their authentic behaviour and personality, and to create a relaxed, safe environment where children feel secure and can engage in diverse social relationships. Social interactions in such a caring environment help children develop assertiveness, empathy and emotional and social skills. A key responsibility of IEC educators is to ensure a linguistically rich and clear environment filled with stimulating input to support the development of children's communicative competencies. These educators can also intrinsically motivate children through nursery rhymes, songs, poems, and stories, which serve as valuable sources of both language and cultural learning. Additionally, day nurseries are tasked with enhancing children's cognitive development through play, active participation, a well-designed environment, and opportunities for exploratory learning (The National Core Programme for Nursery Care, 2016).

Immersion is an especially effective method for young children, as their achievement relies heavily on frequent and extensive exposure to spoken language (DeKeyser & Larson-Hall, 2005). These programs are based on research into effective strategies for educating English-language-learner students, including findings that strong L1 skills support the acquisition or learning of a FL or L2 and that bilingualism offers cognitive advantages (Furcsa, et al., 2014; Reynolds, 1991). Children who develop bilingual abilities may later outperform monolingual peers in cognitive processing, and strong early oral skills in their L1 can support future reading success in English (Bialystok & Martin, 2004).

## Method

The investigation involved eight Hungarian IEC educators from a childcare centre with a monolingual Hungarian immersion program in the capital. This centre provides care and education for children aged 20 weeks to 3 years. The institution has the capacity to accommodate up to 100 children, organized into four care units, each containing two group rooms. In addition to these, the centre includes three supplementary childcare rooms. Its mission also encompasses early habilitation and rehabilitation for children with special needs, offering fully integrated education and care until the age of six. Child development is supported by a qualified special education teacher, who addresses each child's individual developmental needs.

To meet the criteria of ethical considerations (Bertram et al., 2024; Bhandari, 2021), the anonymity of both the institution and participants is ensured. No identifiable data was collected regarding the institution, the interviewees, or the children cared for in this childcare setting. Furthermore, the infant and early childhood educators who were interviewed, and who had been informed about the aims of the study, were free to participate voluntarily and had the opportunity to withdraw from the research at any time.

| Pseudonym | Age | Qualification | Foreign Language Knowledge |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sarah | 24 | BA degree in IEC Education | English B2 (Council of Europe, CEFR, 2001) |
| Maria | 29 | BA degree in IEC Education | German B2 (Council of Europe, CEFR, 2001) |
| Emily | 26 | Certificate in IEC Education | English learnt at secondary-school 8 year prior to the present data collection |
| Peter | 29 | Certificate in IEC Education | English learnt at secondary-school school 11 year prior to the present data collec-tion |
| Agatha | 44 | BA in Social Work | English A2 (Council of Europe, CEFR, 2001) |
| Monica | 46 | BA degree in IEC Education | English B2 (Council of Europe, CEFR, 2001) |
| Kate | 56 | Certificate in IEC Education | Russian at secondary-school school 28 year prior to the present data collection |
| Martha | 55 | Certificate in IEC Education | Russian learnt at secondary-school school 27 year prior to the present data collection |

*Table 1*
*Background information to the participant IEC educators (N=8)*

Table 1 shows that half of the participants had seven or fewer years of professional experience in early child care, while the other half had 22 or more. With the exception of one participant, who holds a BA degree in Social Work, all hold either a certificate or a BA degree in IEC Education. The participants also demonstrate a diversity of language knowledge, both in terms of the languages spoken (five speak English, two Russian, and one German) and their levels of language proficiency. The highest level reported was B2 (Council of Europe, CEFR, 2001), while Russian, which was learned at school several years ago, was typically spoken at an estimated A1 level or below (Council of Europe, CEFR, 2001) as the main means of communication with the toddlers in the nursery care is Hungarian.

The data collection instrument was a 15-item semi-structured interview protocol consisting of both closed and open-ended questions in Hungarian. The interviews were conducted individually in the childcare facility, after working hours, in an empty classroom. With the consent of the participants, the sessions were recorded and later transcribed. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. The data were analysed using content analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

## Results and discussion

The conceptual analysis, a type of content analysis (Elo et al., 2014), has revealed the emerging patterns of the semi-structured interviews of this study. A main objective was to identify and measure the occurrence of specific terms in this dataset (Figure 1).

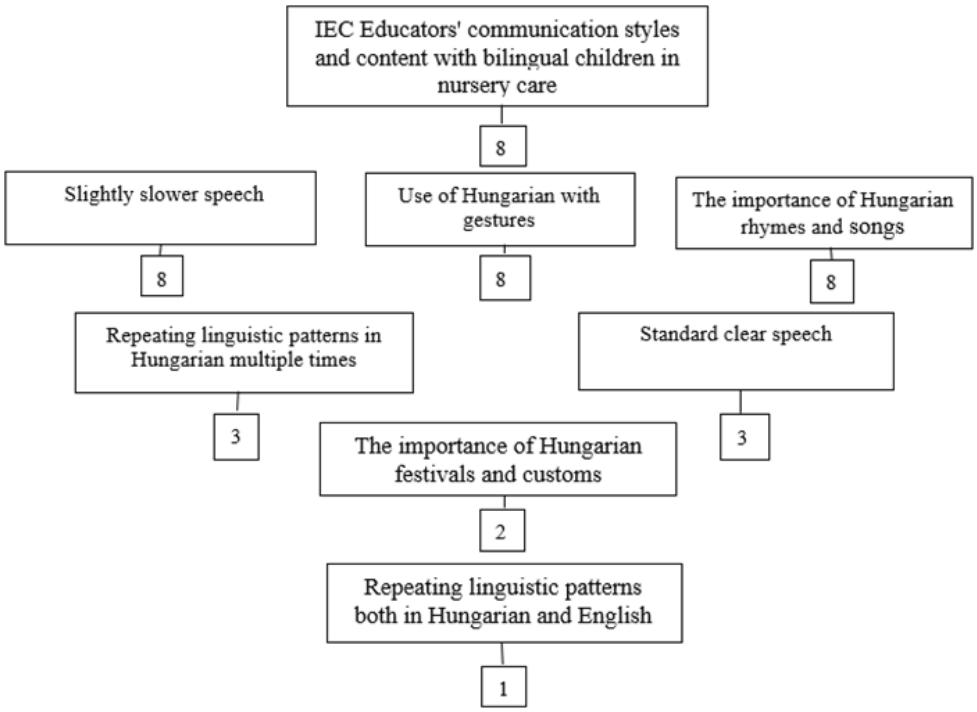


*Figure 1*
*Frequency of emerging patterns in the interview data of IEC Educators' communications styles and content with bilingual children in nursery*

The interview data revealed that in the childcare setting involved in this study, everyday communication between IEC educators and both monolingual and bilingual children primarily takes place in Hungarian. All interviewees agreed that when interacting with bilingual children, verbal communication in Hungarian is often accompanied by demonstrations, body language, gestures and miming from the educators (Mayberry & Nicoladis, 2000). Kate mentioned that she always points at objects and names them verbally when talking about them. Her speech is slightly slower than the normal pace, and she carefully formulates her words and sentences. Agatha, Kate, and Maria all emphasized the importance of using standard, clear speech throughout the day. Sarah, Emily, and Martha highlighted the role of repeating instructions, comments, and other linguistic patterns multiple times (Pratt, 2020). Emily reinforces both her own and the children's messages by repeating them in both Hungarian and English. They all stressed the importance of incorporating Hungarian rhymes, songs, poems, and stories into daily activities (Hamilton et al., 2024). Peter and Monica also noted the significance of observing Hungarian festivals and customs.

Maria, Agatha, Martha, Monica, and Peter reported using the same communication strategies with both monolingual and bilingual children, as all children are actively acquiring their L1 and/or L2 during the early childcare years (ages 0–3). As a result, language acquisition can occur naturally within the childcare setting (Krashen, 1982; Lenneberg, 1967). Sarah, Emily, and Kate emphasized that while the overall approach to communication remains the same, certain elements receive greater emphasis when interacting with bilingual children, such as slower speech, simpler expressions, clearer articulation and reinforcement in both languages. They also noted the importance of planning more intentionally when naming objects and conducting various activities. Agatha, Maria, and Peter stated that they dedicate roughly the same amount of time and energy to supporting bilingual children's Hungarian language development, without any special preparation. However, Agatha observed that bilingual children sometimes require more time and effort to understand a word, request, expression, or situation compared to their monolingual peers. Monica and Martha confirmed that developing Hungarian language skills may be more challenging for bilingual children than for the educators themselves. Emily added that the process can be more time-consuming for educators, as it often requires repeated use of words, expressions, instructions, and multiple forms of demonstration. For Kate, the extra effort involves speaking more slowly and articulately, often accompanied by gestures and acting out. Sarah highlighted the importance of paraphrasing and emphasizing problematic expressions and speech patterns.

Finally, all interviewees agreed that having at least one parent who speaks some Hungarian significantly supports the child's success in acquiring the language. While it is ideal if one parent is a native Hungarian speaker, it is also beneficial if the parent speaks Hungarian as a L2 or FL.

## Conclusions

Although this is a small-scale descriptive study, it was designed to provide informative data for bilingual families, parents, IEC educators and childcare institutions. The study along Qs1–2 aimed to explore which modes of communication can be used by IEC educators to support Hungarian language acquisition and linguistic competence in bilingual children, aged 0–3 within a Hungarian childcare context. Additionally, the research sought to gain insights into IEC educators' perceptions of the role of Hungarian during daily routines in mixed groups of monolingual and bilingual children.

The interviewed IEC educators agreed that their primary method of communication with bilingual children resembles an immersion approach:

communicating in Hungarian with frequent oral repetition, clear and articulated speech, and verbal reinforcement supported by gestures, imitation and acting out. They also place strong emphasis on the use of Hungarian nursery rhymes, songs, stories and the celebration of traditional festivals. These findings align with trends observed in American early childhood immersion programmes. It was also noted that the process of developing Hungarian language skills can sometimes be more demanding and time-consuming for bilingual children compared to their monolingual peers.

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## Abstract

Enhancing bilingual competencies and intercultural skills is a European priority, and it is beneficial to begin developing bilingual-related skills as early as possible. Accordingly, this study aimed to investigate the development of linguistic competencies in bilingual children aged 0–3 at a Hungarian day nursery in the capital. The qualitative research design included two components: interviews with bilingual parents (N=5) and interviews with infant and early childhood (IEC) educators (N=8). This paper focuses on the latter, exploring the educators' beliefs, perceptions, and experiences, regarding Hungarian language development at the target institution. One of the key findings is that, although the educators possess varying levels of foreign language knowledge, they consistently apply the same communicative approach − namely, the immersion method − with both monolingual and bilingual children. This approach appears to be effective, as both educators and parents report that the bilingual children's communicative competence in Hungarian, alongside their other language, tends to improve over time.