

**A foreign language as a medium of instruction  
in a secondary school in Hungary**

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## The school

Táncsics Mihály Hungarian-English General Secondary School is situated in Budapest. It is a four-grade secondary school receiving pupils aged 14-15, but it also offers pupils of the same age a five-year bilingual programme known in Hungarian as “kétannyelvu oktatás” (KTO). In this paper I use the abbreviation KTO to mean the kind of bilingual education in place in the Hungarian context.

KTO education means that besides the mother tongue (Hungarian) another language is used as the medium of instruction in the teaching and learning of at least three subjects. Unlike in bilingual programmes in many countries, the additional language is not a second language for the pupils but a foreign language and they do not have the opportunity to use it outside school. In fact, in many respects Hungarian KTO education is similar to content and language integrated learning (CLIL/EMILE) defined as “any dual-focused educational context in which an additional language, thus not usually the first language of the learners involved, is used as a medium in the teaching and learning of non-language content. ... If there is no dual-focus on language and non-language content within a lesson or a course then it does not qualify as a form of CLIL/EMILE” (Marsh, 2002:15-17).

Táncsics operates this programme for one class (about 36 pupils) every year. The subjects involved in the KTO programme are Mathematics, Physics, Music, Drawing and the Arts. Classes are split up into two groups in these lessons as it is prescribed in the Guidelines for Bilingual School Education (see more on this below).

The school was founded 41 years ago and already in the late 1970s it placed special emphasis on teaching foreign languages besides the compulsory Russian language. This meant that the pupils of Táncsics all learnt two modern foreign languages, Russian, which was compulsory and which they had already started at primary school, and another language from a choice of English, French, German or Spanish. At that time the school was quite exceptional in that pupils had 5-7 lessons a week of the second foreign language (apart from Russian). Thanks to this programme and the well-trained and enthusiastic language and also non-language teaching staff, Táncsics has always had a very good reputation as a secondary school with a strong language programme.

There are 65 full time teachers employed in the school, and out of these 27 are language teachers (41.5% of the teaching staff). It is important to know that secondary school teachers in Hungary usually teach two subjects (sometimes even three) as a result of their university studies where they usually have two majors. Obviously, among the 27 language teachers you can find teachers whose other subject is a non-language subject while others teach two modern languages.

The school population is about 650, and there are four parallel classes in a grade with about 35 pupils in a class. Every class has a special profile. As will be explained in more detail below, there is a Hungarian-English bilingual class, another special language class with 6 foreign language lessons weekly (half the pupils learn English and the other half Spanish as their first foreign language), a class specialising in Biology and there is a class where half the pupils study Advanced Mathematics while the other half specialises in information technology.

The pedagogical work of teachers is supported in Táncsics by the different subject teacher teams. As for foreign languages, there are two teams: an English and German teacher team as well as a French, Italian, Spanish and Russian teacher team. The two teams work closely together and hold a joint meeting once every two months.

Subject teacher teams usually have meetings once a month where they discuss current issues. Each team has a leader who is responsible for the professional work of the team. The teams organise peer observations besides the team leader visiting at least one lesson per teacher every school year. Teachers

themselves consider peer observations to be extremely useful from the perspective of their professional development.

Before going into greater detail about how this project came into being and how the bilingual programme is organised, it is useful to provide some background information about the Hungarian education system.

### **The status and distribution of foreign languages in compulsory schooling in Hungary**

Until 1989, when the communist regime in Hungary collapsed, it was compulsory for all pupils both at primary and secondary level to learn Russian. Apart from a few primary schools specialising in languages, only general secondary schools (gymnasium) offered a second (western) foreign language, “which meant that about 15% of all pupils at secondary level had the opportunity to learn Russian *and* another language” (Vágó, 1999:26). Now that Russian is not compulsory, it is possible for Hungarian school children (a choice often dictated by parents) to choose the foreign language they wish to learn from the languages that are offered in the curriculum of the school they attend. This free choice of languages to be learnt, coupled with heightened competition for pupils due to their decreasing number, forces schools to satisfy above all the demands of parents and children regarding the provision of foreign languages. This means that market forces play a decisive role in the distribution of foreign languages in schools and as a result the dominance of English is growing stronger year by year. The following two tables show the fundamental change in the distribution of foreign languages at primary and secondary level between 1989 and 2003.

Table 1: The distribution of foreign languages in primary schools in Hungary

School-year	English	German	French	Russian	Other
1989/90	4%	5%	0.4%	89.0%	1.6%
1992/93	32%	45.9%	1.7%	19.4%	1.0%
1997/98	43.7%	52.9%	1.2%	1.2%	1.0%
1999/00	47.7%	49.0%	1.0%	0.8%	1.5%
2003/04	58.1%	40.1%	0.5%	0.3%	1.0%

(Csécsi, 2003/2004)

Table 2: The distribution of foreign languages at secondary level in Hungary

School-year	English	German	French	Russian	Other
1989/90	21.8%	17.8%	4.4%	51.8%	4.2%
1992/93	40.2%	35.7%	6.2%	13.2%	4.7%
1997/98	46.6%	39.8%	5.5%	1.8%	6.3%
1999/00	48.2%	39.6%	5.1%	0.9%	6.2%
2003/04	51.8%	37.4%	4.5%	0.4%	5.9%

(Csécsi, 2003/2004)

Both at primary and at secondary levels pupils are counted in each language they learn. This explains why in 1989/90 the percentage for Russian is less than 100%, although this was the last school-year when this language was still compulsory for everybody. The figures indicate how the share of Russian in the curriculum dramatically dropped to well below 1 per cent by 2003/04 and how stable the rise of English has been for the past 15 years. Between 1990 and 2000 German, which is considered to be a regional lingua franca in Central Europe, used to be the most popular foreign language at primary level. Since that time, however, the share of English has been steadily increasing at that level, too, and as a result German has been losing ground. At secondary level English has always had the strongest position since 1990 and its share in the curriculum is getting larger.

All in all, the status of English in public education in Hungary reflects the same tendencies as in other European countries and the following statement is equally true of the situation in Hungary:

“Whether or not one believes that English is ‘threatening’ Europe with linguistic homogeneity, it remains the case that dominant social representations attribute every virtue to this language (for use, communication, the new technologies, etc) and thus contribute to disseminating an ideology of monolingualism...English therefore not only plays the role of a language of communication but is also valued for itself as the language of a model of life or society”.

(Beacco and Byram, 2003: 28)

In the second half of the 1970s and especially in the 1980s several surveys pointed out that the level of foreign language skills among the adult population in Hungary was alarmingly poor. “This can be attributed to several reasons: firstly to the isolation of the country for several decades, to the undemanding nature of the labour market in this respect, and to the rather inefficient compulsory Russian language teaching” (Halász and Lannert, 1997:43).

The demand for teaching western languages started to grow dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time the abolition of compulsory Russian teaching was out of the question, and other solutions had to be found, among them the introduction of bilingual educational programmes referred to as KTO in Hungarian.

The first bilingual general secondary schools in Hungary were founded in 1987. KTO programmes were launched in English, French, German, Spanish and Italian and there were three general secondary schools that introduced a Russian-Hungarian bilingual programme (Vámos, 1998). Nowadays there is only one Russian-Hungarian bilingual school left, operating in Budapest. From the early 1990s all school types (with the exception of vocational training schools) started such programmes both at primary and secondary level. If one looks at secondary level schools alone, in the school year 1999/00, 56% of students in bilingual programmes attended general secondary schools, whilst 44% attended vocational secondary schools. Such secondary schools function in every region in Hungary. Bilingual secondary education is

provided at around 10% of all the secondary schools, typically in one class in every grade. Regarding the number of all secondary school pupils, about 2-3 percent take part in a bilingual programme.

Table 3: The number of Hungarian – foreign language schools and the number of pupils between 2001 and 200 in Hungary:

level	2001/2002		2002/2003		2003/2004	
	Number of schools	Number of pupils	Number of schools	Number of pupils	Number of schools	Number of pupils
Primary Grades 1-8	68	11 382	68	13 269	76	14 937
Secondary Grades 9-13	93	14 015	101	14 037	98	15 352

(Csécsi, 2003/2004)

About 50% of secondary-level bilingual programmes are offered in English and 30% in German. This reflects more or less the same distribution of languages as in Table 2, and indicates that in this form of education, English too retains a dominant position.

KTO or bilingual education is legally regulated by a Ministry of Education document called “Guidelines for Bilingual School Education”. The application of these principles is not obligatory but the central budget allocates supplementary funding (the so called bilingual normative financing) only to schools that follow these guidelines. With this supplementary funding, bilingual institutions receive a per capita normative financing which is 30% higher than the non-bilingual subsidy. The most important principles in this document are as follows:

- Schools with a bilingual programme must employ a teacher whose mother tongue is the foreign language involved in the programme.
- The number of students cannot go beyond 18 in the foreign language lessons or in the lessons where the medium of instruction is the foreign language. This basically means that the classes have to be split up into two groups for these lessons. (The normal number of pupils in a class is between 30-36).
- The school has the right to decide which subjects will be involved in the bilingual programme.
- At least three subjects have to be learnt/taught in the foreign language. The proportion of time devoted to foreign language lessons and subject lessons taught in the foreign language cannot be less than 35% of the total curriculum time. In the case of early bilingual education at primary level (the first eight grades) this proportion cannot exceed 50%.
- Except for Hungarian Language and Literature, any other subject can be learnt/taught in the foreign language.
- At the end of their secondary studies pupils have the right to take the secondary school-leaving examination in the foreign language that was the medium of instruction.
- A bilingual programme cannot start later than in the ninth grade of compulsory education.
- Besides the foreign language being the medium of instruction, bilingual programmes also have to offer another foreign language.
- Bilingual programmes have to include the teaching/learning of cultural knowledge about countries in which the target language(s) is/are spoken.

The Guidelines differentiate between three types of bilingual education at secondary level:

1. Four-year programmes after eight years of primary education for pupils aged 14-15 whose foreign language skills allow them to learn the given subjects in the foreign language without an intensive preparatory year. Obviously, there are only a few schools that offer this version of bilingual education.

2. Six-year programmes after six years of primary education for pupils aged 12-13. During the first two years (grades 7 and 8) the pupils follow an intensive training course in the foreign language, with a relatively high number of foreign language lessons besides learning other subjects determined by the Hungarian Core Curriculum. They start learning certain subjects in the foreign medium as from grade 9. There are only a few secondary schools offering such a programme throughout Hungary since there are strict regulations on the maximum number of lessons a pupil can have in a day making it extremely difficult to organize this type of programme.
3. Five-year programmes after eight years of primary education for pupils aged 14-15 whose foreign language skills do not render them capable of content learning in the foreign language. As a result, these pupils take their secondary school-leaving examination at the end of grade 13 while the majority of pupils taking part in non-KTO education take their secondary school final examinations at the end of grade 12 given the fact that compulsory schooling lasts for 12 years in Hungary. In fact Act LXXIX of 1993 on Public Education makes it possible for pupils in KTO programmes to take their final examination at the end of year thirteen, i.e. for them compulsory schooling lasts one more year. During the first year of the programme (grade 9) they receive very intensive training in the foreign language (18-20 lessons per week) with the aim of enabling them to start content learning in the foreign language from grade 10 onwards.

## **The implementation of the bilingual programme in Táncsics**

The bilingual programme was introduced in Táncsics in 2002, so the oldest bilingual pupils are now in grade 11, and they have another two years before taking their secondary school leaving final examinations. At the beginning there was a two-year preparatory phase during which the school and the teaching staff prepared for the new programme.

The teaching staff put special emphasis on a preparatory period prior to the commencement of a full-blown bilingual programme. First of all they needed to decide which language to choose as the other medium of instruction besides Hungarian for their KTO programme:

“The pressure for English was so strong that we did not even think of choosing another language. Parents wanted English and most teachers who spoke a foreign language, spoke English. It would have been very difficult to find and even more complicated to employ subject teachers speaking a less widely used language.”

(H.É. a teacher at Táncsics)

The staff wanted to benefit from the fact that by that time several Hungarian-English bilingual programmes had been running for 12-13 years in Hungary with a great amount of experience on the part of the teachers and the school leadership. Consequently, the teachers of Táncsics contacted some of the bilingual general secondary schools with a good reputation and consulted their curriculum; visited lessons in those schools; and organised meetings with their teaching staff. In the meantime the school had to find a native speaker of English with teaching qualifications to employ her/him as it is regulated in the Guidelines mentioned earlier. It took the school almost two years to find the right teacher.

However, the greatest challenge was to determine which non-language subject teachers would be willing, and able, to teach their subjects in English, more precisely to find the right teachers to teach their subject with the dual focus characteristic of KTO i.e. concentrating partly on the foreign language and partly on the subject content. Teachers had to be found with a relatively high level of English proficiency and who were willing to further improve their linguistic skills as well as take part in in-service training courses on the methodology of KTO. In applying this methodology subject teachers have to devote a certain percentage of each KTO lesson to concentrate on the language, teaching vocabulary, checking understanding etc. The

length of time spent on the language rather than on the content varies from lesson to lesson according to pupils' needs:

“When you teach a subject in a language which is not the mother tongue of the pupils, you simply cannot walk into the classroom and do the same as in a non-KTO classroom. In a KTO lesson you are half a language teacher and half a subject teacher. For me preparing for a KTO lesson takes twice as much time as for a non-KTO lesson.”

(Sz. P., a teacher in the programme at Táncsics)

In fact, the curriculum level decision regarding the subjects to be taught in English basically depended on the teacher supply in Táncsics. By the time they launched the new programme, they had employed three new teachers (a Mathematics, a Music and a native English teacher) to create the group of colleagues who work in the programme.

As a final step in the preparatory phase, the teachers teaching in the new programme (both language and non-language teachers) started to design the curriculum for the bilingual education at Táncsics. This group plays a very important role in shaping and developing the programme. They meet once a week to discuss different issues concerning each and every bilingual class, and if necessary they deal with problems of individual pupils too.

### **The KTO curriculum**

According to the curriculum, the general aims of the bilingual programme in Táncsics are as follows:

- To help pupils acquire high level skills in English and in another foreign language enabling them to use these languages successfully in all kinds of context (personal, educational, professional etc.),
- To help pupils develop a plurilingual, open attitude and mentality making them capable and fond of learning new languages and getting to know new cultures,
- To help them acquire intercultural skills enabling them to take part in international mobility and communication.

Table 4: The timetable for the five year (grades 9-13) programme

Subject	Grades				
	9	10	11	12	13
	<b>Weekly number of lessons</b>				
Hungarian Language and Literature	2	4	4	3	3
History and Social Studies		3	3	3	3
Human Studies and Ethics					1
English Language and Cultural Studies	18	6	5	4	4
Second Foreign Language		4	3	3	3
Mathematics	2	3	4	3	3
Information Technology	2				
Introduction to Philosophy					1
Physics		2	2	2	2
Biology		2	2	2	2
Chemistry		2	2	2	
Geography and Environmental Studies		2	2		
Music	1	1			
Drawing and Visual Culture	1	1	1		
Physical Education	2+1	2+1	2	2	2
Drama and Dancing	1				
Art				1	1
Film and Media Studies			1		
Social Studies			1	1	

#### (a) The preparatory year for English

Grade 9 is a preparatory year with a high number of English language lessons. The classes are split up into three groups for English in this grade with no more than 12 pupils in a group. The groups are organised according to the English proficiency level of the pupils. Each group has 4 English teachers (one of them being the native speaker of English) who share the teaching of English as follows: one has 9 lessons a week with the group, the other three have 3 lessons a week each. Besides using the same course book, each of them focuses on one of the four skills. Usually the “main” teacher puts special emphasis on reading and also grammar while the native English speaker always focuses on speaking. The English language skills of the pupils who come to the bilingual programme are at pre-intermediate level (Council of Europe A2 or A2+) on average.

The curriculum states the following objectives for English by the end of grade 9:

- To help pupils become autonomous language learners capable of determining their own learning needs, strengths and weaknesses as well as taking responsibility for their own learning process,
- To motivate them to improve their linguistic skills,
- To help pupils acquire upper-intermediate level proficiency in English (Council of Europe B2) in all four skills,
- To prepare pupils for content learning in English putting special emphasis on the skill of note taking in English as well as helping them acquire the special terminology and language of the subjects they are going to learn in English from grade 10 onwards.

At the end of year nine pupils take an end-of-year examination in English. The pass mark is 60%. If a pupil does not achieve it, s/he is advised to leave the bilingual programme and join the parallel special English class. However, pupils do have the right to stay in the programme. So far there have been 2-3 pupils every year who have not achieved 60% in the test.



## **Subjects other than English**

Besides learning English through following the very intensive programme, these pupils also have Hungarian as well as Mathematics, Information Technology, Music, Drawing and PE lessons. The medium of instruction for all the subjects other than English is the Hungarian language in grade 9 with a very strong emphasis on the development of the necessary competencies to study the given subject (learning to learn skills) and also aiming at helping pupils whose knowledge especially in the Hungarian Language and Mathematics lags behind the rest of the class to catch up with the others. Mathematics is a subject which from grade 10 onwards will be taught in English and to make learning it in English easier certain concepts are pre-taught to them already in grade 9 in Hungarian.

### **(b) Grades 10 to 13**

#### **English Language and Cultural Studies**

As the timetable indicates (Table 4) there is a radical drop in the number of English lessons from grade 10 onwards and the name of the subject becomes English Language and Cultural Studies. In fact, during these last four years the emphasis is gradually shifted within the subject from foreign language learning to learning about the cultures of English speaking countries *in* English. As a result, content learning even within the foreign language curriculum takes an increasing amount of time. Especially in grades 10 and 11 the teaching and learning of English Cultural Studies builds a lot on the competencies and factual knowledge pupils have already gained in subjects like Geography, History, Arts etc. They deal with familiar topic areas from a new perspective in a foreign language. This has a positive influence on the pupils' performance and motivation even in the original subjects (Geography, History) reinforcing and deepening what they have already learnt. All this presupposes very close cooperation between English language teachers and Geography, History and Arts teachers.

#### **Subjects taught according to KTO education**

As has already been mentioned Mathematics, Physics, Music, Drawing and Arts are the non-language subjects involved in the bilingual programme. Teachers teaching these subjects apply the methodology of KTO education. The curriculum says that "in these lessons the right balance has to be found between content and language with the aim of preparing pupils to acquire the same competencies and to gain the same knowledge as pupils in monolingual (Hungarian) classes" (The Local Pedagogical Programme and the Local Curriculum of Táncsics Mihály General Secondary School). Non-language teachers from Táncsics involved in the bilingual programme say that the content-language ratio in their lessons ranges from 90% content and 10% language to sometimes 40% content and almost 60% language, although the latter is rather exceptional. "You have to make compromise all the time between language teaching and content teaching. It is not easy. And you have to accept that it is impossible to teach all the content that you can teach and pupils can learn in a lesson where the medium of instruction is the mother tongue" (K. G, a teacher at Táncsics).

In fact, regarding the different subjects, the Hungarian National Core Curriculum does not differentiate between the requirements of KTO education and non-KTO education. Furthermore, KTO pupils have to sit for the same secondary school leaving final examination in each subject as their non-KTO counterparts. They have the right to choose the language (Hungarian or the foreign language) in which they take the final exam in a given subject if the medium of instruction was a foreign language.

### **(c) The organization of foreign language education in Táncsics**

According to the Hungarian National Core Curriculum every general secondary school has to teach two foreign languages to their pupils. The language the pupils have learnt at primary (English or German) has to be continued, and in grade 9 they have to start a second foreign language.

At Táncsics, the first foreign language of the pupils in the Biology and Mathematics-Informatics classes is either English or German depending on which language they learnt at primary school. In the other two classes (bilingual and special language classes) they continue with English. The continuation of the foreign language pupils learnt at primary sounds easier than it really is given the fact that their language skills vary considerably. So teachers have to put in a lot of effort and to do a lot of extra work during the first semester to help “weak” pupils improve their skills while also motivating those with a relatively good command of the language.

As for the obligatory second foreign language, in Táncsics pupils can choose between English, German, French, Italian, Spanish or Russian. The general problem in Hungarian secondary schools is that the majority of pupils in a given class choose German or English as a second foreign language, and as a result there are not enough candidates for the other four or more languages. To solve this problem and to keep or even strengthen the linguistic diversity of the school Táncsics has made a special effort: the timetable is organised so that pupils in each grade have their second foreign language lessons at the same time (same days, same hours). In this case if from the four parallel classes in a grade at least 12 pupils wish to learn Italian for example, the school can organise their lessons and they will not have to join the English or German group of their own class. This special organisation results in a few drawbacks in the timetable: for example pupils have two, sometimes three “empty” lessons a week, when there is no subject taught to them and they have to go to the school library where they can study or read something on their own. Yet all the language teachers in the school agree that it is worth organizing the timetable in this way since with the exception of Russian all the possible foreign languages are learnt in each grade and the fact that pupils can learn the language they choose plays an extremely important role in their motivation.

## **Discussion**

Since the introduction of KTO education, there have been debates in Hungary on the problem of teaching subjects in a foreign language and on the relevance and appropriateness of the policy that sets the same requirements in each subject for KTO and non-KTO education. Although no large-scale research on this issue has been carried out so far, more and more teachers and educationalists are arguing that the foreign language does complicate the subject learning and slow down the progress in the curriculum subject. Some even say that this fact should be recognised in the examination requirements of the various subjects. The Guidelines of bilingual school education partly recognise this difficulty by requiring schools to split up the classes into smaller groups for subject lessons where the medium of instruction is a foreign language.

The fact that in Hungary entrance into higher education is still quite selective makes this problem even more complicated. Entrance to higher education is based on competitive examinations (the competition being very strong for certain universities). As a result, teachers and secondary schools feel forced to design rather “heavy” subject curricula with a great amount of lexical and theoretical knowledge involved. This leaves very little time for the language ratio as opposed to content ratio.

No wonder that in this situation schools choose the solution of admitting into their bilingual programmes pupils whose academic and learning skills are above average. This, however, reinforces the selective character of our system of public education and is in sharp contrast with current educational and political trends.

## **Conclusion**

In Táncsics Secondary General School, as in many secondary schools in other countries, bilingual education was introduced in response to the demand for better foreign language education within a given school curriculum where it was impossible to include additional curricular time for foreign languages. The new programme can be considered “as an educational solution to provide young people with better skills in foreign languages” (Marsh, 2002: 9). The following conclusions can be drawn from the case study:

- The implementation of a KTO programme requires a relatively long - sometimes taking several years - preparatory period.

- Strong cooperation and a good team spirit within the teaching staff make the pedagogical work more successful in this field, too.
- In Hungary the most successful is the five-year (1 preparatory + 4) programme because it provides pupils with a firm linguistic foundation thanks to the preparatory year.
- KTO education does not mean teaching in a foreign language what and how we teach in the mother tongue. It means that there is a dual focus on the foreign language and the content and their ratio varies from lesson to lesson according to the pupils' needs.
- It is essential to understand that KTO is a methodological approach which requires specific professional skills. Language fluency alone is not sufficient for effective teaching in a KTO programme. It is not necessary to have native speaker competence but it is necessary to be able to apply special methods. "Any over-emphasis on "language skills" can lead us to neglect the significance of methodological skills...the methodological skills for CLIL/EMILE can be successfully taught through in-service or pre-service professional programmes" (Marsh, 2002:78).
- Very heavily loaded subject curricula and high stake examinations focussing on lexical and theoretical knowledge force schools to look for academically more talented pupils. This, unfortunately, threatens to turn secondary level KTO programmes into a form of "elite" education.

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