

Foreign-language acquisition in real-life situations at the nursery - school transition

Theory and teaching methodology

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The guidelines on foreign language acquisition in real-life situations at the nursery - school transition (at the start of primary school) set out basic theory and new teaching methodology for early foreign-language acquisition. They set out a systematic approach designed to facilitate ongoing and consistent foreign-language acquisition upon the transition between nursery and school and offer practical suggestions for the successful continuation of foreign-language teaching from nursery to school.

The full text of the guidelines is available on the knowledge platform under "Transition", "Teaching materials for language development" and "Teaching concepts". There are two sections to the guidelines:

The theory section addresses linguistic, teaching and organisational aspects of a "seamless" transition in foreign-language development between nursery and school across all languages, and looks in detail at a child's changing life-world at the start of school.

The guidelines seek to explore early foreign-language acquisition in the terms of general cognitive development and positive effects on the acquisition of cultural techniques in the first year of primary school. They also set out, from a linguistic perspective, the specific benefits of the early acquisition of Hungarian compared to other languages, in particular English.

The term "language teaching in real-life situations" was coined during practical implementation of the EU project "Educational cooperation in the border region AT-HU (BIG AT-HU)" and was first explored by Slovakian and Czech linguists Gabriela Slobodová, Alice Brychová and Pavla Marečková for the nursery sector. Underlying this approach is the concept of extending learning integrated into everyday life to foreign-language acquisition. Whilst learning processes from everyday life are an unquestioned, integral part of the methodological and teaching approach at nursery, school life is often rapidly divided into isolated learning processes and content is increasingly remote from children's everyday experience. The method of immersion set out in the theory section is difficult to implement at primary school in the face of the demands of a much more detailed curriculum than for nurseries, and differences in pupils' prior knowledge (between children who have had Hungarian lessons at nursery, children who have never come into contact with Hungarian and children whose native language is Hungarian) can result in a heterogeneous starting point in Hungarian class at primary school.

The guidelines set out the fundamental principles of an approach that designs foreign-language lessons at the start of primary school on the basis of real-life situations, and even the theory section includes

practical examples of individual techniques taken from Hungarian. The guidelines also explore various different possible ways of organising Hungarian lessons.

The practical section, which relates specifically to Hungarian, is designed to offer native-language teaching staff a tool that picks up on the central concept of the guidelines on "Neighbouring languages: from nursery to primary school" ["Nachbarsprachen vom Kindergarten in die Volksschule"] to establish the content learned at nursery and consolidate and expand on that content at the start of primary school.

A teaching framework is designed to flag up ways in which foreign-language teaching at the start of primary school in particular can pick up and expand on everyday language situations from nursery that are relevant to the pupil's life-world and, through the structured assignment of linguistic content to speech situations, in which foreign language acquisition can be shaped more efficiently.

The teaching framework is structured on the basis of the categories of speech situations and topics, a breakdown of language content by input (receptive) and output (productive), and notes and suggestions for songs, games and other activities. Five native-language teachers developed linguistic content for the framework, which was then brought together and organised by the author. It emerged that linguistic input at nursery did not greatly differ from that at school, as children had been confronted with entire sentences from the outset as a result of the "real-life situations" approach. Significant differences appear in language production; schoolchildren are increasingly required to speak in complete sentences and to use simple verb forms.

The framework is to be understood as a recommendation and guide and can be adapted in line with local, situational and staff requirements.

In the first semester of the 2018/19 school year, the author followed two schools and their different approaches to Hungarian lessons at the start of primary school, and compared the integrative approach with that of voluntary lessons

in the afternoon. The project was evaluated at the end of the first semester and suggested improvements have been included in the guidelines.