



## MULTILINGUAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES AT PRE-PRIMARY LEVEL IN SLOVENIA, AUSTRIA, ITALY AND CROATIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Potrjeno/Accepted

9. 7. 2024

Objavljeno/Published

23. 8. 2024

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**Keywords:**

multilingualism,  
multiculturalism,  
linguistic and cultural  
diversity, multilingual  
preschool education.

**Abstract/Izvilleček** The paper presents findings from a scoping review of scientific articles, projects, networks, and legal documents concerning multilingual practices at the pre-primary level in Slovenia, Croatia, Austria, and Italy aimed at exploring the extent and nature of multilingual educational practices, as well as research findings related to multilingual education at the pre-primary level in these countries. The primary objective was to assess the current situation, challenges, and future prospects of multilingual practices in preschool institutions. The results offer valuable insights into multilingual practices in these countries, highlighting the need for enhancing teachers' competence to effectively work in linguistically diverse environments.

**Ključne besede:**

večjezičnost,  
večkulturnost,  
jezikovna in kulturna  
raznolikost, večjezična  
predšolska vzgoja.

### Večjezične izobraževalne prakse na predšolski ravni v Sloveniji, Avstriji, Italiji in na Hrvaškem: primerjalna analiza

V prispevku so predstavljene ugotovitve pregledne študije znanstvenih člankov, projektov, mrež in pravnih dokumentov o večjezičnih praksah na predšolski stopnji v Sloveniji, na Hrvaškem, v Avstriji in Italiji, katere namen je bil raziskati obseg in naravo večjezičnih izobraževalnih praks ter raziskave, povezane z večjezičnim izobraževanjem na predšolski stopnji v teh državah. Glavni cilj je bil oceniti trenutno stanje, izzive in prihodnost večjezičnih praks v predšolskih ustanovah. Rezultati ponujajo dragocen vpogled v večjezične prakse v teh državah in izpostavljajo.

UDK/UDC:

373.2.091.3:81'246.3

DOI <https://doi.org/10.18690/rei.17.Sp.Iss.4570>

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University of Maribor Press

## Introduction

One of the key objectives of the EU language policy (European Commission, 2024) is to provide every EU citizen with a multilingual education that enables them to communicate in a minimum of two languages in addition to their mother tongue. This also reflects EU's efforts to encourage linguistic and cultural diversity, putting a lot of emphasis on language research and developing effective approaches to teaching and learning languages in collaboration with the Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe (ECML) and the European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning (Mercator). ECML focuses on efficient language learning and runs various projects working on linguistic integration of migrant children as well as on establishing 'quality and comparability criteria for language tests and their assessment' (ibid., pg. 2). In addition, Mercator focuses on Europe's regional and minority languages and deals with 'acquisition and inventory, research and study, dissemination and application of knowledge in the field of language learning at school, at home and through cultural participation (ibid., pg. 2). Plurilingual and pluricultural competences are also promoted by the Common European Framework for languages (Council of Europe, 2001), which was designed to serve as a comprehensive basis for language syllabus and curriculum development, as well as provide support in the design of learning and teaching materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency. Additionally, the Companion volume to CEFR (Council of Europe, 2018) adds competence descriptors for the pre-A1 level, which are relevant for preschool education. One of the most important initiatives for promoting linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe was proposed by Candelier et al. (2004) through the initiative aimed towards developing linguistic and cultural awareness through pluralistic approaches. Since then, we have witnessed many projects and initiatives aimed at developing plurilingual and pluricultural competences as well as promoting linguistic and cultural diversity – one of the most recent projects of this kind is the Erasmus+ project Diversity in Action (DivA), aimed at developing pre-service and in-service teachers' competences for teaching in linguistically and culturally diverse educational contexts at all levels of education. The project brought together researchers and educators from linguistically diverse countries of Slovenia, Austria, Italy and Croatia and one of the results of this collaboration will be presented in this paper. The main aim of the present article is to present the findings of a scoping review of scientific articles, projects, networks, and legal documents concerning multilingual practices at the pre-primary level in the

four countries. We found that although early foreign language learning is encouraged in Europe and the starting age for compulsory learning of foreign languages in the EU has dropped in the past decades, with the majority of countries introducing the first foreign language between the ages 6 and 8 (Eurydice, 2023), the area of pre-primary foreign language education is still fairly under-researched and not systematized. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to present a comparative analysis of multilingual practices at pre-primary level in Slovenia, Austria, Italy and Croatia, with specific focus on legal regulations and documents, recent scientific research and projects, as well as existing models, projects and examples of good practices concerning the areas of multilingualism, multiculturalism and linguistic/cultural diversity at pre-primary level of education. We examined the current situation, challenges faced by preschool institutions in implementing multilingual education within linguistically diverse contexts, and future prospects of multilingual practices in preschool institutions.

## **Methodology**

To fully document and present the multilingual practices at preschool level in the four countries, we carried out a scoping review, which followed the scoping study framework developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). After identifying the main research question concerning the multilingual practices at pre-primary level in our countries, the second stage involved searching for relevant sources using electronic databases, reference lists, hand-searching of key journals, networks and relevant organisations using the predefined keywords (multilingualism/plurilingualism at pre-primary level, bilingual/multilingual kindergartens, foreign/additional languages in kindergartens, language awareness and other relevant concepts). In the third stage (study selection), we defined the following inclusion criteria: papers and studies published in the past 5 years, conceptually related to the areas proposed in stage 2, peer-reviewed articles, published either in English or the first language of the countries involved. In addition to the recent research, we also decided to include some of the crucial papers in the field due to their influence and importance for the study of multilingualism at pre-primary level. After collecting the relevant sources, we presented the results by country, first discussing multilingualism at preschool level from the legal perspective and then presenting relevant research, networks, projects, organizational models and good practices and finally, concluding with the discussion on challenges and implications of our results.

## The context of preschool education in Slovenia, Austria, Italy and Croatia

Before addressing the multilingual practices in the four countries, it is necessary to briefly present their historical and organizational contexts at the level of pre-primary education. From the historical perspective, the most significant developments in the area of preschool education in all four countries began in the 1960s and the 1970s, with the shift from the upbringing and care focus towards more unified preschool institutions focused on education and the acquisition of academic skills. The most important documents influencing preschool education in Slovenia are the White Paper on Education in Slovenia (Krek, 2011), followed by the Curriculum for preschool (1999) and its supplement (Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport, 2002). In Austria, with the introduction of the Cross-Provincial Educational Framework Plan for Elementary Educational Centres in 2009, the state governments of all federal states committed themselves to the educational mandate of this institution for the first time (CBI, 2009a, pg. 4). In Italy, the educational status of preschool institutions was determined in 1968 with Law no. 444, (Regulation of state nursery schools), followed by Law 13 of 1977 and the *Orientamenti dell'attività educativa nelle scuole materne statali* (Ministerial Decree, 1991) and in 2003 it was determined that preschools would no longer be a *scuola materna* 'nursery school' but a '*scuola dell'infanzia*'. The final update to the Italian preschool system was introduced in 2017 when Legislative Decree No. 54 was approved, which sanctioned the "Establishment of the integrated system of education and instruction from birth to six years of age" (Pasini, 2018). The crucial documents for the Croatian preschool system, which defined the goal of educational work in preschool institutions to create conditions for the complete and harmonious development of the child's personality, are the Law on the Social Care of Preschool Children (RH, 1991) and the Law on preschool education (RH, 1997) with its update in 2013 (Hrvatski Sabor, 2013), the National programme of education and training for people's rights (Vlada Republike Hrvatske, 1999) and finally, the National Curriculum for Preschool education and the Kindergarten Curriculum (MZOS, 2014), which defines the development of core child's competencies, including communication in the mother tongue and communication in foreign languages. The preschool program in Croatia (as well as in Austria) is mandatory and free of charge for all children in the year before starting primary school. Currently, preschool education in all four countries is provided for children from birth or from 1 to 6 years of age, with the curricula defining the learning objectives in the core areas of language, movement, mathematics, art, society and nature. All

the curricula also promote the principle of inclusion and multiculturalism, as well as the aims of developing language awareness and language competencies and developing positive attitudes towards all languages and cultures. In the following chapters we present the findings of our scoping study of multilingualism at preschool level, focusing on the language policies, research, projects and educational practices in Slovenia, Austria, Italy and Croatia.

## **The case of Slovenia**

Slovenia has always been a country where different languages have co-existed side by side. As stated in the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia, the official language is Slovene, with Italian and Hungarian being recognized as official languages in the municipalities where Italian and Hungarian minorities reside. However, the number of languages spoken in the countries has increased significantly due to Europe-wide migrations, which makes Slovenia an increasingly multilingual area. According to the Slovene Statistical Office (SiSTAT, 2023), the number of children enrolled in Slovene kindergartens in the school year 2022/23 was 86,177 and of those 7,027 were citizens of other countries, mainly Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, Ukraine, Croatia, Russia and other European countries. This indicates that Slovene serves as a second language for 8.15% of preschool children in Slovenia. The Slovenian Resolution on the national programme for language policy 2021-2025 (Republic of Slovenia, 2021) prioritizes the promotion of Slovenian language but also emphasizes the importance of learning other languages, including ‘the languages of the Italian and Hungarian national communities and the Roma community, languages of members of various minority ethnic communities, languages of immigrant communities and foreign languages’, in order to ensure equal social participation of all speakers. Therefore, within the broader context of the language policy of the EU, which promotes the goal that every EU citizen is able to speak at least two other languages in addition to their mother tongue, and the language policy of the Council of Europe, which emphasizes the inclusiveness and quality of language education, the Slovenian language policy’s (Republic of Slovenia, 2021, p. 9) main goal is “to build a community of autonomous speakers with advanced language competence in Slovenian, with high-quality and sufficient knowledge of other languages, with a highly-developed reading culture in Slovenian, with a high-degree of language self-confidence and an adequate degree of motivation to accept language and cultural diversity”. In terms of including different

languages and language education at all educational levels, the Slovenian language policy (ibid., 2021) aims to encourage the use and learning of various languages, as well as promote research of foreign languages, provide continuous expert support to the development of the learning and teaching of all foreign languages that are part of the educational system, and provide systematic training of teachers and educators in kindergartens and schools in order to establish an educational environment supportive to multilingualism. The importance of encouraging language awareness and multilingualism is also reflected in the Slovenian Kindergarten curriculum (1999) and its supplement (2002).

Taking a closer look at multilingual/bilingual practices at preschool level in Slovenia, the educational practices are primarily based on the concept of minority protection, with the bilingual education mostly taking place in the ethnically mixed Slovene-Italian region in Slovene Istria and the Slovene-Hungarian region in Prekmurje, following two models of bilingual education (Novak-Lukanovič & Limon, 2012). In the first model, the so-called ‘maintenance model’ (Baker, 1988, 2001) with ‘an enrichment component of offering language and culture also to pupils from the majority community’ (Novak-Lukanovič & Limon, 2012), implemented in the Slovene Istria, children can attend kindergartens, primary and secondary schools with either Slovene or Italian as the language of instruction, and the second language as an obligatory subject. According to Zudič Antonič (2023), there are three kindergartens with Italian as the medium of instruction in Slovene Istria. The second model, a two-way model of preservation of two languages (Mackey, 1970), implemented in the Slovene-Hungarian region of Prekmurje, follows the principle of bilingual education at all levels and for all learners, where the educational process is carried out in both Slovene and Hungarian, and both languages are also school subjects. In Prekmurje, there are nine bilingual units of four public kindergartens (Nečak Lük & Kovács, 2024). Other bilingual/–multilingual kindergartens include a few private kindergartens across the country and the multilingual Research and development unit of the Faculty of Education, University of Primorska in Kindergarten Koper (established in 2023).

Our research has revealed that there are not many studies in the area of multilingualism and language or cultural awareness at preschool level in Slovenia. In the past five years, researchers who dealt with these topics focused on bilingual education in Slovenian bilingual areas: Kolláth (2020) for example, presented bilingual education in the Slovenian region of Prekmurje at all levels of education. Licardo (2020) studied preschool teachers’ practices with migrant children in

Slovenia, Hmelak et al. (2021) examined preschool teachers' approach to intercultural communication with children/parents from minority communities, Zorman and Vatovec (2023) focused on the impact of linguistic diversity on Italian speaking children in Slovenian kindergartens, and Jazbec and Kacjan (2019) investigated multilingualism from the parents' perspective. Other researchers focused on language awareness and language learning in kindergarten, with Bratož and Sila (2022) studying preschoolers' perceptions of cultural and linguistic diversity and development of linguistic and cultural awareness, and Retelj (2024) exploring the potential of integrating picturebooks into preschool foreign language learning. Earlier studies focusing on languages at an early level include Pevcec Semec and Jazbec (2018), Čok and Brčanić (2015), Dagarin Fojkar and Skubic (2017) and others.

In the past years we have also witnessed several projects and initiatives aimed at promoting multilingualism at the preschool level, such as the European project *Janua Linguarum*, aimed at promoting language awareness in learners, Erasmus+ projects *LETS (Learn English through Signs)* and its continuation *GEM-Through Gestures and Music into the World of Phonics*, as well as *MUTUAL*, a project that promoted better integration of preschool children from diverse backgrounds into the educational process. Another international project was *Listiac (Linguistically Sensitive Teaching in all Classrooms)*, aimed at encouraging teachers to become more linguistically sensitive. Some of the national projects include the project *Languages matter*, aimed at developing guidelines for creating plurilingualism-friendly educational environments at all educational levels, and *The Challenges of Intercultural Coexistence*, which encouraged interculturalism and was aimed at improving the educational staff's professional skills for the successful integration of immigrant children from diverse backgrounds in the Slovenian educational system.

## **The case of Austria**

Austria stands out among European nations for its multilingualism, evident in its linguistic diversity. According to the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science, and Research, besides German, significant minority languages include Croatian, Hungarian, Slovenian, and Burgenland Croatian, which are also recognized and protected under Austria's minority rights laws. Around one in three children enrolled in Austrian preschool institutions do not have German as their first language. The highest proportion of children with a non-German mother tongue is

found in Vienna (58.7%), followed by Upper Austria (28.1%) and Vorarlberg (27.2%), with Carinthia (15.8%) and Tyrol (14.7%) being well below the overall Austrian average (32.5%) (Statistik Austria, 2023, pg. 9). Some of those children also speak German when they enter kindergarten, while others learn it as a second language. 'Language promotion typically refers specifically to the promotion of German in German-speaking countries, rather than all available primary languages' (Blaschitz et al., 2021, pg. 615). In 2009, Austria introduced language proficiency assessments for 4-5-year-old children (Breit, 2009) aimed at evaluating the necessity of language support for children 15 months prior to commencing school, in order to ensure that all children possess adequate knowledge of German to effectively participate in lessons, which clearly reflects the effort to prioritize German and does not promote multilingualism. Additionally, since 2019, the MIKA-D instrument (Measuring instrument for analysing competence in the German language) has been used in Austria, and in 2021, MIKA-orientation (MIKA-O) was introduced as a voluntary additional tool for school readiness assessment, which provides information on whether a child can be directly assigned regular status or whether further testing with MIKA-D is necessary. In 2014, the Charlotte Bühler Institute for Practice-Oriented Infant Research published the Guide to language education and support during the transition from preschool to primary school (CBI, 2009b, revised in 2021), aimed at facilitating the acquisition of German as a language of instruction for all children, regardless of their first language. However, Austria's educational system also recognizes the importance of multilingualism, which is reflected in the Austrian Educational Framework Plan; and even though the main focus is on targeted and continuous language support for children in their first or second language during their everyday kindergarten activities, the education plan section for early language support in preschool institutions also promotes bilingualism and multilingualism in the context of intercultural education (CBI, 2009b, pg. 9). According to Blaschitz et al. (2021, pg. 5), in practice, education is designed for foreign-language bilingualism rather than multilingualism, the focus being on English as a foreign language, rather than the children's family languages. In recent years, however, there have been efforts towards the promotion of multilingualism. In 2016, the Austrian Language Centre (ÖSZ, 2016) proposed a brochure for pre-primary-school teacher training aimed at encouraging trainees to reflect on their own approach to multilingualism and serving as a basis for further discussion and to raise awareness of multilingualism, as well as to promote understanding and empathy towards plurilingual children. According to Börge-



Böckmann et al. (2013, pg. 31), high-quality multilingual didactics in kindergarten and school can provide a unique opportunity for the cognitive and linguistic development of all children.

Our research has revealed that so far there is little research in the area of pre-primary education, since preschool education as such was recognised as a science in Austria only in 2010 with the establishment of the Chair of Early Childhood Education in Graz, followed by a professorship for educational science specialising in early education being established in Innsbruck in 2015. In 2011, the City of Vienna commissioned research to analyse the effectiveness of language support measures titled 'Language acquisition and everyday multilingualism in kindergarten' (Datler & de Cillia, 2011). Zumtobel and Frick (2019) carried out a study focusing on language support strategies integrated into the daily routine of pre-primary school teachers in Vorarlberg, which has the second-highest proportion of children with a first language other than German (Statistik Austria, 2023, pg. 9).

In a study assessing the qualifications of College for elementary education (BAfEP) around language support for children during training (Dorostkar, 2022), teachers were asked about the extent to which trainees are prepared for this task and whether the necessary skills are taught.

The BAfEP curriculum, which emphasizes German as a prerequisite for equal education and opportunities, included a new subject, '*Early Language Education and Support*', starting in 2023.

In conclusion, the framework conditions for early childhood education in Austria vary, which can impact the quality of language support. Large group sizes, a shortage of qualified specialists, and staff turnover can have a particularly negative impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. To address this issue, an EU programme called the *Technical Support Instrument* (TSI) is being implemented nationwide in Austria to improve the quality and attractiveness of preschool education (UNICEF, 2023).

## **The case of Italy**

As a linguistically diverse country, Italy recognises four regional languages as official languages across the country in addition to Italian: German heritage languages (South Tyrolean, Cimbri, Mocheni) and Ladin are spoken in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano-South Tyrol, Trentino, Friuli and Piemonte, Slovenian in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and French in the Aosta Valley. Maurer-Lausegger (2003) and van

der Jeught (2016) provide a detailed analysis of linguistic diversity. Furthermore, the statutory legislation of 1999 also enabled the protection of several minority languages (Albanian, Croatian, Greek, Friulan, Franco-Provençal, Occitan and Sardinian). Therefore, multilingualism is not only present but deeply embedded within the Italian school system. However, multilingual language education in pre-school environment has only become established in recent decades through experimental projects, especially in border regions. Multilingual preschool education adopts different models. The Trentino Valley, for example, follows the Trentino trilingual plan, which involves gradual inclusion of language education. Languages in preschools are distributed in a balanced way: German as the ‘nearest’ language, and English as the international language and a bridge between cultures and people all over the world, thus promoting intercultural awareness and openness to communicate in different linguistic and cultural contexts. In the case of South Tyrol, however, according to Gross and Mastellotto (2021), ‘multilingualism is mainly pursued through a system of structural monolingualism’, having separate monolingual educational institutions (German, Italian and Ladin), each operating according to their own language policies. The authors (*ibid.*) also point out the issue of such monolingual orientation as being detrimental to the recognition of language diversity.

Our research of studies and papers has revealed a great deal of research in the area of multilingualism at preschool level in Italy in the past five years, especially in the South-Tyrolean region (Gross & Mastellotto, 2021; Mastellotto & Zanin, 2022; Ricci Garotti, 2012; Thoma, 2022; Thoma & Platzgummer, 2023). Other authors (Akutina & Akutina, 2020; Bello et al., 2023; Incognito et al., 2021) studied bilingualism at preschool level in Italy, Carbonara (2022) focused on translanguaging in immigrant children, and Leotta (2023) dealt with early acquisition of English in a bilingual kindergarten in Italy.

### **The case of Croatia**

The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (Article 12) states that the official language in Croatia is Croatian but also recognises minority languages. The official use of minority languages is regulated through the Constitutional Act on the Rights of National Minorities (Hrvatski Sabor, 2002), the Constitutional Act on Amendments to the Constitutional Act on the Rights of National Minorities (Hrvatski Sabor, 2010), the Act on the Use of Languages and Scripts of National

Minorities (Republic of Croatia, 2000a) and the Act on Education in the Language and Script of National Minorities (Republic of Croatia, 2000b), as well as the international agreements related to minority languages: the European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages (Council of Europe, 2019a) and the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities (Council of Europe, 2019b). Members of national minorities exercise their constitutional right to upbringing and education in their first language through three basic models: the separatist model (A), the maintenance model (B) and the submerging model (C). Some national minorities such as Czechs, Hungarians and Serbs have all three models in their school practice, depending on the number and distribution of students, while the Italian national community, as the only autochthonous one in Croatia, maintains its distinctive model. According to Article 2 of the Statute of the County of Istria (2009), in seven bilingual cities and thirteen bilingual municipalities, Croatian and Italian languages are in equal official use. Members of the Italian national minority are guaranteed the entire educational vertical, from preschool to college.

A search of scientific articles and research in the area of language and multilingualism at the preschool level in Croatia shows that there is very little research in this area. Authors mainly investigate foreign early language learning with a holistic approach through verified programs, while the bilingualism of the Istrian region is dealt with only by a few researchers. Over the past five years, we have found several articles on the subject. Authors investigate Italian-Croatian language contacts based on territorial multilingualism among preschool children in the Istrian region (Drandić et al. 2024), the development of bilingualism and native speech in intercultural education (Drandić et al. 2022; Lazarić et al. 2020) and attitudes towards bilingualism and respect for diversity and the value of language expression in the mother tongue (Croatian and/or Italian), language education, multiculturalism, cultural identity and children's creativity in the regional context (Drandić & Lazarić 2020).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

As we have found through our research, preschool educational systems in Slovenia, Austria, Italy and Croatia have undergone substantial reforms in the past three decades, the most significant being the shift from their fundamental role of providing childcare towards a more holistic educational approach paying attention to children's physical, emotional, personal, social and spiritual wellbeing as well as their cognitive development. Due to a distinct multilingual landscape and increasing

linguistic and cultural diversity in these countries, there is growing recognition of the importance of multilingual education. However, the scholarly attention on multilingualism at the pre-primary level remains relatively limited, creating a critical gap between research and practice. This scarcity of research poses challenges for policymakers and educators seeking to implement effective multilingual educational strategies tailored to preschool settings. Moreover, the absence of unified practices in multilingual preschool education in these countries complicates efforts to establish consistent and impactful approaches. In line with Candelier's (2004) view of promoting linguistic diversity, the authors of this paper would like to emphasize the significance of systematically addressing pre-primary multilingual education. This involves a dual focus: first, on the enhancement of comprehensive teacher training programs that equip educators with the necessary skills and pedagogical strategies to effectively support multilingual learners; and second, on the critical examination and potential restructuring of the entire organizational framework of preschool education within our countries, also by addressing the challenges faced by preschool institutions, such as large group sizes, inadequate resources, insufficient linguistic support systems, and disparities in access to multilingual learning materials.

Efforts to enhance teacher training development are currently underway through the DivA project, which is dedicated to crafting a comprehensive approach aimed at bolstering teachers' skills and competencies to effectively navigate culturally and linguistically diverse environments across all levels of education. By prioritizing the cultivation of these competencies, the DivA project seeks to support educators in creating inclusive and supportive learning environments that cater to the needs of all children, regardless of their cultural or linguistic backgrounds.

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