BASIC EDUCATION OF THE HUNGARIAN MINORITY IN THE TERRITORY OF VOJVODINA

Timea TROMBITÁS*
University of Szeged, Department of Economic and Social Geography, Hungary, 6722 Szeged, Egyetem u.2., e-mail: trombitas.timea@gmail.com

Éva SZÚGYI
University of Pécs, Regional Development and Economic Doctor School, Hungary, 7622 Pécs, Rákóczi út 80, e-mail: eva.szuggyi12@gmail.com

Abstract: Our aim is to give a general preview about the education of Hungarian-language in Vojvodina. Through this, we would like to present the current education status of the minorities, focusing on the Hungarian minority. We choose Hungarian minority to subject of our analysis, because they are the biggest minority group in Serbia. The main questions are: With what problems are confronting the Hungarian language elementary schools? What differences appear between territory of diaspora and majority? We did 50 sociological in-depth interviews completed for this purpose. According to the results one of the biggest problems is the decreasing number of Hungarian students in elementary schools, mainly in diaspora. Research on the subject is justified by the accession of Serbia to the European Union, where the minorities are a priority area.

Key words: minority, Serbia, education system, mother-tongue

INTRODUCTION

In this study we examine the basic education of the Hungarian minority in the territory of Vojvodina. Furthermore, related with this, we give a brief overview about the choice of educational language among the Hungarians in majority and in diaspora, as well as we deal the legal framework of minority education. Our aim is to give a general preview about the Hungarian-language elementary schools. The main questions are: With what problems are confronting the Hungarian language elementary schools? What differences appear between territory of diaspora and majority? In the future what trends can be expected? Research on the subject is justified by the accession of Serbia to the European Union, where the minorities are a priority area. The study is based on the primary data sources beside the analysis of academic literature and statistical data. Through two examined municipalities we would like to present the situation of education on Hungarian language and school selecting in territory of Hungarian majority and minority in Vojvodina. These two municipalities were Senta and Kikinda. Senta municipality has Hungarian ethnic majorities, while Kikinda municipality has Serb majorities. We used quantitative research methods in this investigation.

* Corresponding Author
METHODOLOGY

This research is realized within the MTA HTMTÖP ¹ tender with the topic of School selecting strategies in the diaspora and majority of Vojvodina territory. The research examines the school selecting conditions, the quality of schools and the education as well as the language teaching in Vojvodina’s two municipalities, one with major Hungarian population (municipality of Senta), and one with major Serbian population (municipality of Kikinda). We carried out the research within these two municipalities, in seven elementary schools, in four central and in four villager schools. The examined municipalities with Hungarian majority were: two central schools in Senta and two villager schools in Tornjoš and Gornji Breg. In the municipality with Hungarian minority were: two central schools in the city of Kikinda and in one villager school, in Sajan, in Rusko Selo and in Banatska Topola (figure 1).

Altogether 50 sociological in-depth interviews were completed for this purpose. We did interviews with the directors of the institutions, the pedagogues and parents, furthermore three focus group discussions with 6th and 7th grade students. During the interviews and the focus group discussions, we spoke about the institutions, the quality of education, the problems and the solutions.

GENERAL FEATURES OF THE TERRITORY OF VOJVODINA

The Autonomous Province of Vojvodina is a relative well developed region of Serbia and it is one of the most capable agricultural regions in Europe. Its territory is 21 500 sqkm, the capital is Novi Sad. According to the 2011th year census, the population is 1 916 889. ²

Under the geographical meaning the territory of Vojvodina is divided by the Danube and Tisa rivers into: Bačka, Banat and Srem. Administratively the Province is divided into seven districts (okrug), which are further subdivided into municipalities (opština). The municipalities are the lowest administrative level, which consist of a larger settlement (city) and smaller villages. These larger settlements are the center of the municipalities. Relative to each other, municipalities in regard of population and area are very different, but share some characteristics, that encompass urban and rural spaces (Kugler, 2007).

---

¹ Tender of the Hungarian Academy of Science
² According to the Statistical Office of Serbia 2011
Vojvodina is the multinational, multicultural, multilingual and multi-religious Northern Province in Republic of Serbia. Some 30 national minorities make almost 35% of all population in Vojvodina (Szondi, 2005). Six languages are in official use. Beside Serbian these languages are the Hungarian, the Slovak, the Rumanian, the Ruthenian and the Croatian languages (Korhecz, 2008). The special demographic trends of the region are aging, low birth rate and emigration (Kocsis et al., 2006; Gyémánt, 2008).

The Hungarian population is the largest minority group in Serbia, with significant number of Slovaks, Croats, Montenegrins and Rumanians. According to the 2011 census, 253,899 people declared themselves as Hungarian (3.53%). Most of the Vojvodinian Hungarians live in the border region of Hungary and among the River Tisa in ethnic block. Five of the municipalities had an absolute Hungarian majority in 2011: Kanjiža, Senta, Ada, Mali Idos and Bačka Topola. Hungarians were in a relative majority in municipalities: Subotica, Bečej and Čoka. Fewer Hungarians live in scattered (“scatter in settlements”) in the Banat, the Srem and southern and western parts of Bačka. 62.6 percent of Vojvodinian Hungarians live in an ethnic block, while of 37.6 percent live in scattered (Badis, 2011). Hungarians primarily inhabit small towns and large villages (Kocsis & Kocsis-Hodosi, 1998).

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF MINORITY EDUCATION

The national minorities are enjoying significant rights in Serbia. They have rights of preservation their mother tongue, culture and national identity, education in their mother tongue and using their national symbols (Huszka, 2008).

The legal terms of the minority education are stable and it defines the Law about the Serbian basic educational system, brought in 2004. The statutory requirements are settled over the last two decades, which means that in case of 15 signed students the institution is obliged to organize the education on their mother language. In case of less than 15 signed students the education can be allowed from case to case by the competent minister. For deciding to organize the education on mother tongue of minorities the leading questions are the number of children and the available teaching capacities. The great disadvantage of this is that in case of enough number of students, but not enough teachers, the education is carried out temporarily on the state language, and this temporary solution can easily stay on forever. The education on all levels in the Province is carried out on afore-mentioned six languages. Those students whose mother tongue is not among these six (Ukrainians, Macedonians, Bulgarians, Rumanies, Bunjevci) have the right to cultivate their mother tongue. The best example for this is the preschool education where bilingual activities are organised, such as Serbian-Hungarian, Serbian-Slovak, Serbian-Romanian, Serbian-Croatian and Serbian-German as well as Hungarian-German bilingual activities. In multicultural and multilingual communities the choice of education language is an important issue, which may affect to the student’s development and subsequent enforcement in the future. In this communities there is common phenomenon that students do not learn their mother tongue, and during their school years they change the education language (Göncz, 2004; Macnamra, 1967).

The local school intake is by districts. The school center sends the notification to the parents about the institution where they children are assigned. Sometimes the parents would like to sign their children to another school or to another class. Naturally this is a very rare appearance in the village schools where are simply no other schools, also the parents rarely decide to choose traveling for their children. According to the central institute’s principal the choice of other school is mostly explained with the safety of traffic on the way to school (the lesser traffic), the school

---

3 According to the Statistical Office of Serbia 2011
4 Cultural Strategy of Vojvodinian Hungarians 2012-2018 (National Council of the Hungarian Ethnic Minority)
6 Law of Protection Rights and Freedom of National Minority
7 Law of Basic Education
8 Education Development Strategy 2010-2016 (National Council of the Hungarian Ethnic Minority)
where the parents studied and have positive experience, also the school where the older brother or sister went to (Trombitás & Szügyi, 2012). The real reasons are in the background: the quality of the education, the first grade teacher’s reputation or some teacher’s bad reputation.

THE HUNGARIAN MINORITY EDUCATION IN NUMBERS

Among the Hungarians, the number of elementary school graduates is approximately 6% higher than the majority nation (Gábrity Molnár, 2006). This points to the fact that primary school network is developed. However in the additional level of education (secondary school, university) the Hungarians are left behind the majority nation (Gábrity Molnár, 2006).

The system and the structure of the Hungarian primary level education’s institutional communities have changed a little in the last few decades: only in the management, in the role of local governments, and the textbook imports. But in the number of children there were significant changes. From 2004, it is possible to import textbooks from Hungary to the lower sections (the textbook edition until 2004, was a monopoly of the State of Serbia) and we are witnessing the rapidly decreasing number of children. The elementary level education on Hungarian language was organized in 92 settlements in 27 municipalities of Vojvodina in 2010. The native Hungarian-speaking children going to primary school corresponds approximately to their proportion in the overall numbers. The data from 2012 indicate that 15,575 students studying on their mother tongue (235 students or 1.49% less than the previous school year). Among them 14,820 is Hungarian by nationality, what is 0.12% more than in 2011, but 3,710 or 20.02% native Hungarian-speaking students are not studying on their mother tongue. 19.87% of them studies in Serb classes and the rest studies in Ruthenian, Croatian or in Romanian classes.

The ratio of the native Hungarian-speaking students who are studying on Hungarian language is typically and continuously higher in the major Hungarian populated settlements, while the high ratio of the native Hungarian-speaking students who studying on Serbian language is typical in settlements with major Serb population, where the education is not organized on Hungarian language because of the lack of native Hungarian-speaking students. In the major Hungarian populated municipalities (Ada, Senta, Kanjiža) the 99% of the Hungarian students studying on their mother tongue, while in the diaspora (Novi Sad, Sombor, Kikinda) only the half of them has this opportunity.

The actual problems of the education on Hungarian language in Vojvodina are the decreasing number of children, the lack of textbooks (the textbook import is allowed only in the lower grades of the basic level education) and the lack of pedagogues (Szügyi, 2012).

BASIC LEVEL EDUCATION IN THE TERRITORY OF HUNGARIAN MAJORITY

The majority of Hungarians in Vojvodina live in their ethnic block along the Tisa River, where they represent most of 50% of the local population (Kocsis & Kocsis-Hodosi, 1998; Bajmócy, 2009). Our research subject was is Senta municipality, which “belongs” to this “ethnic block”. Senta town and municipality geographically located in Bačka, but administratively it is part of the North Banat District. The town has a population of 18,704, whilst the Senta municipality has 23,316 inhabitants. Senta municipality includes the town of Senta and four villages. The villages are Gornji Breg, Bogaraš, Tornjoš and Kevi. Settlements in Senta municipality have Hungarian ethnic majorities, and they represent 79.09% of the municipality population. In Senta more schools belong to a central institution, so they do not compete with

---

9 According to the Provincial Secretariat’s statistics
10 Idem
11 Ibidem
12 According to interviews (based on research)
13 According to the census of 2011
14 Idem
each other. These schools do not recruit students, there is no such tradition, although the recruitment of students could provide the necessary number of children to some work unit, where it is already a problem. In the examined Hungarian populated municipalities it was not typically, that Hungarian families enroll their children to the Serbian language class. This issue only appear in mixed marriages. In other words, the choice of educational language is happening by natural automatism. The decision of parents affected by rational issues.

The issue of educational language choice is not typically appearing in the primary school level. This usually occurs in the case of mixed marriages and it is a strong argument for a later enforcement. The parents and the children confronts with the dilemma of educational language choice when signing in to the secondary school. The parents typically let the children decide what they would like to study and on which language they would like to continue their studying.

If the parents would like to enroll their children to a school class with education on Serbian language which is different from the children’s mother-tongue, the institution’s psychologists (Hungarian speaking and Serbian speaking) will have a conversation with the children to determine whether the studying on language different from the mother-tongue will causing a setback in the children’s development.

For the welfare of children in foreign language courses positive and negative examples can be said also. However it should be emphasized, that for the success it is necessary, that the children start school with already existing language skills and not to start school without Serbian language knowledge. The children whose mother-tongue is Hungarian study Serbian language as the language of the environment, not like a foreign language. This is based on the supposition that Hungarian mother-tongue children speak Serbian already when they start school. This is true for the diaspora, but not for the majorly Hungarian populated municipalities, where in the most cases even the parents do not speak the Serbian language. The textbooks (which use to teach the Serbian language) contain long, difficult novels and readings, very often in different or in not used dialects. The teachers have no possibilities for individual modification of the curriculum; the prescriptions have to be carried out. The teachers become tired of teaching according to a bad curriculum. Very often even they do not speak Serbian language perfectly.

A group of teachers speaking in Hungarian developed an appropriate teaching method and have created usable textbooks, but these need to go through a difficult multilevel judgment system, where on all levels there is a possibility of rejection with (or without) explanation.

Despite all these difficulties in the examined majorly Hungarian populated subregions the pedagogues developed a communication based teaching method for the environmental language teaching, focusing on the language using and learning through play and playful conversations. This method is accepted by the competent ministry and it is in usage in the lower grade classes in elementary schools. The reviews of the success are divided.

**BASIC LEVEL EDUCATION IN THE TERRITORY OF HUNGARIAN MINORITY**

In this study we use Molnár Gábrity Irén’s term of scattered Hungarians. It defines, that scattered Hungarians are living outside the borders of Hungary, and compared to the majority nations, they live in the settlements and microregions where they proportion is smaller than 30%. Furtermore their language and religious has in disadvantage situation, as well as their institutional system is eroded. In this research we have choosen Kikinda municipality, where Hungarian represents 12.23% of the municipality population, so the above-mentioned terminology is valid.

Kikinda town and municipality is geographically located in Banat, and administratively it is part of the North Banat District. The town has a population of 38 065 and the municipality has 59 453 inhabitants. Kikinda municipality comprises nine villages and two hamlets. The nine

---

15 Serb language
16 According to interviews (based on research)
17 According to the census of 2011
villages are: Banatska Topola, Banatsko Veliko Selo, Bašaid Idos, Mokrin, Nakovo, Novi Kozarci, Rusko Selo, and Sajan. Most of the settlements in the municipality have an Serb majority. In the municipality of Kikinda the Hungarian population rate low as 20% of the total population.\textsuperscript{18} Although the examined village Sajan was a homogenic Hungarian populated village before that the Serbian refugees settled here from South Serbia in the last decade (Gábrity Molnár, 2003).

In the examined municipality of diaspora education on Hungarian language takes place in five elementary schools: in two centre schools and three rural schools.\textsuperscript{19} From these schools we performed interviews and focal group surveys in two centre schools and in one rural school. One of the biggest differences between Hungarians in majority and in minority territories are, that in the majorly Serbian populated central regions the Hungarian children use Serbian language from their first steps. Their language knowledge is thanks to their environment and not to school and education. In this environment they hear both languages, and children from their very first days play together with Serbian children. Aside from some exceptions, 80-90% of these Hungarian children speak Serbian as well.

The situation is different in rural regions of diaspora. The Hungarian children from the rural cities can hear Serbian language only in school. It is totally unknown for them just as German or English language. They do not speak Serbian even at the end of the eight grade of the elementary school, except the children who are aware of this. They are preparing from their childhood to continue their secondary education on Serbian language or they came from the families with some relations with the Serbian language within the family or within the friends. Lots of children have passive language knowledge but have no one to use it with. Often there is also a problem that they are afraid to speak. So some kind of fear and insecurness is developing in the children, because they are not sure in their language knowledge and they are afraid of saying something stupid or foolish, so in most cases they simply do not speak. The rural Hungarian nationality children who continue their secondary level education on Serbian significantly choose such a career school where they have more practical education then theoretical. In very rare cases they choose grammar school. Even in this case, concerning that the student learns the environmental language which will grant him the chance to go to high school or university, will probably make only an average career. If the language barrier is too great, the further education of these students lead a dead end.

The children of the diaspora have a totally different attitude to foreign languages than to the Serbian language. They learn English and German as first and second foreign language in school. In one of the central schools one can study Italian language as a foreign language if they wishes. The Serbian nationality children have the opportunity to study Hungarian language optional. Mostly the children from mixed marriage use this chance of learning. Depending on their language skill, the students particularly like and use English language because they face it in the everyday life more and more, but they rarely speak and use it on communication level.

According to our research, it is very important for the parents to sign their children to a school where they could learn on Hungarian language. This is also true in the families where both languages are used at home. The explanation for this is that in diaspora children start using the Serbian language from their early ages, so later the children fluently speak Serbian, which is a contribute for their enforcement at the university studies and in the labour-market. Therefore parents enroll their children to Hungarian language class in elementary school, while they have the chance to choose and to decide what profession and on which language they would continue their secondary and high school education. The main factors of the institution choice are the nearness of the school, the parents own positive experience, the good reputation and the equipment of the school. One of the two central elementary schools in Kikinda is doing serious marketing activities and thanks to its results has a big attention from parents. They gladly enroll their children to this institution, although other elementary school’s facilities can be even better (i.e. less children share a

---

\textsuperscript{18} According to the census of 2011

\textsuperscript{19} According to the Provincial Secretariat’s statistics
computer). This elementary school become famous due to its marketing activities, not only in local, but also in the provincial and in the ministerial circles, which eases its applications for additional financial resources for its functioning. Thanks to the school’s constant presence in the media, the parents automatically think that it provides the highest quality of education. So every year about 100 pupils will start the first grade in this school, while in the other institutions the number of school beginners is declining. Parents are mostly satisfied with the information from the media and not really inform about the institution’s details. Generally speaking the fact is that the parents’ choice in the diaspora is deeply influenced by the school’s marketing activities. The recruitment and marketing activities are important because of the decreasing number of children. Many schools are facing with the possibility of fusing or even shutting down. This has a great importance in shutting down such schools where the education is organized on Hungarian language (too). One of the centre schools (just like in the majorly Hungarian populated settlement) is planning to implement bilingual education, what exists already in Novi Sad and Subotica. Physical education, music, arts and similar simple courses would be taught on foreign language. On the other hand the ministry will not give the license for it while do not get enough experience from the schools in Novi Sad and Subotica.

It is likely that in many settlements of the diaspora the even now very few Hungarian classes will become unsustainable. This will probably indicate an economically and pedagogically motivated decrease in the number of schools and classes where the education is carried out on Hungarian language. The educational institutions are faced with this problem for years.

CONCLUSION

In summary, we can say, that in some aspects significant difference has shown between Hungarian majority and minority territory. The first is, that in the ratio of the native Hungarian-speaking students who are studying on Hungarian language is typically higher in the major Hungarian populated settlements, as in diaspora, where the education is not organized on Hungarian language because the lack of native Hungarian-speaking students. In the future many settlements of the diaspora the even now very few Hungarian classes will become unsustainable. This will probably indicate an economically and pedagogically motivated decrease in the number of schools and classes where the education is carried out on Hungarian language. Decreasing number of Hungarian students has been observed from the year of 1960 in majority and in minority Hungarian populated municipalities also. The reasons for this are: low birth rate, emigration and assimilation.

The second significant difference is knowledge of Serbian language. In the majorly Serbian populated central regions, the Hungarian children use Serbian language from their first steps and speak Serbian well, while in Hungarian majority subregions Hungarian students’ Serbian knowledge is weak. High level knowledge of the Serbian language – whether mixed or ethnically homogeneous area – is absolutely necessary for the later enforcement. Therefore the Hungarian nationality students must learn the state language well. It should be the highest priority in their education. This would require appropriate methods, courses and teaching capacity. The reform of the environmental language (Serbian language) teaching must be done forthwith.

The interviewed children in each school are very definitely aware that, because they live in Serbia, they have to acquire the state-language. This is likely to bring awareness from families, where parents are strongly influenced by personal experiences. Many of them from their diligence go to Serbian language private lessons. These are a few groups of people, who have opportunity for communication and to use language. However, not all families can afford this.

Some of Hungarian parents think that it is better if children start their primary school on state language, because it helps for future enforcement. It should be emphasized, that for the success it is necessary, that the children should start school with already existing language skills and not to start school without Serbian language knowledge. However, some researcher recommend, that for pupils are better if they start school on mother tongue. A comprehensive educational reform is needed, considering the Serbian specific situation and proper to local needs.
The children are overbooked, have too many courses and progressing in large steps through the curriculum. The poorer students drop behind but even the excellent ones have a challenge to keep up with the actual educational methods. They can not make progress in their further education if they do not learn the basics. The foreign language teaching should be reformed as well, because the children do not get enough communication skills and high level of language knowledge with the current teaching methods.

REFERENCES

*** (2002), Law of protection rights and freedom of national minority (Zakon o zaštiti prava i sloboda nacionalnih

Submitted: March 28, 2012
Revised: November 28, 2012
Accepted and published online: May 25, 2013