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The Two Years of MAMI: A Complex Multicultural and Hungarian as an L2 Kindergarten Programme

ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is examining a unique multicultural and Hungarian as a foreign language pedagogic programme offered in the eleven kindergartens of the 8th district in Budapest, Hungary. In the academic year of 2023/24, the kindergartens of the 8th district of Budapest known as *Józsefvárosi Óvodák*, which serve more than 120 children with foreign background, launched the development of a complex multicultural and Hungarian as L2 programme, titled *MAMI*¹. This programme is examined by three research questions from the aspect of multicultural education: *What elements does this programme possess? How do the pedagogues inside this programme evaluate it? and How easily can it be adapted to other institutions?* First, the programme and its initiatives are presented in both institutional and group level. The results for the evaluation of the programme were obtained by a qualitative way by conducting interviews with pedagogues and filling a questionnaire by those kindergarten professionals who conducted playful Hungarian as a foreign language lessons for almost 100 children in small groups every week between October 2024 and May 2025. The present article also reflects on a vocabulary test that was fulfilled in October 2024 and in May 2025 to record and statistically measure the improvement of the children. Finally, the overall evaluation of the MAMI programme is provided including the necessary refinements and the limits of its adaptability both within and beyond Hungary.

Keywords: *kindergarten programme, multicultural education, Hungarian as a foreign language, migrant children, pre-school children*

Introduction

Historical Background

The concept of Hungarian as the first language has undergone a profound change during the 20th century. Around the turn of the 19th-20th century, being the essential part of the multiethnic and multicultural Habsburg Monarchy, Hungarian Kingdom was a multicultural and multiethnic land where only 54,4% of the population spoke Hungarian as the first language according to the census of 1910 (Romsics 2010: 49). German, Slovak and Romanian communities were the largest minority

¹ The first year of this programme can be read in the article of Kajdi 2025 in Hungarian language (the manuscript was submitted in August 2024).

groups. After Hungary lost the First World War, in 1920 the Treaty of Trianon was signed resulting a new political, economic, social, and cultural situation. Hungary – excluding the data about Croatian – lost more than 50% of its population and 66% of its territories (Romsics 2010: 147; Bereznay 2020). From linguistic perspective the newest period of Hungarian language started with a broadly homogenous Hungarian-speaking country and many Hungarian-speaking territories outside the borders.

After the Second World War in the communist era (with the forced eviction of e.g. Germans), then in the socialist era migration was strictly controlled and practically prohibited (the only notable gap was during the 6 months after the revolution of 1956 against the Soviet regime when 200.000 people fled). Even though in the late socialism international students could arrive in higher education from other Socialist states, Hungary became a monolingual and monocultural country over the decades. The political situation changed between 1989 and 1991: Hungary became an independent, democratic country with free elections and market economy. Later, in 2004 Hungary became member of the European Union and in 2007 member of the Schengen Area. These contracts not only have been ensuring the freedom of movement and residence for Hungarian and other EU-citizens but have increased the attractiveness of moving to Hungary among people arriving from further countries, as well.

Today 13 historical minorities – including different Roma groups – can be listed with special rights (e.g. the right to establish their own educational institutions). According to the census of 2022, the population of Hungary in 2022 was 9,603,000 and 6.6% of the population confessed minority identity while 99.5% of them speaks Hungarian as their first language (HCSO). There was a separate question referring to the citizenship: in 2022 almost 220,000 people had foreign citizenship, and this number has been growing since that time. The estimations vary between 255.000 and 355.000 based on the methodology (Soltész & Kovács 2022), that that contributes to 2.7% – 3.7% of the population and in most of the families Hungarian language is not used for communicative purposes.

Migrant Children in Hungarian Pre-schools

In the Hungarian education system, most of the institutions from nurseries to secondary schools are state-founded and controlled (*Educational Authority*). Even though in the capital and in some bigger cities some private institutions offer bilingual programmes (typically in world languages, and sometimes in minority languages), in most of the institutions Hungarian language is used as the language of instruction. According to the Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education kindergarten is compulsory in Hungary: every child above the age of 3 (typically from the next September) is

obliged to attend kindergarten after 3 months of residence with various legal statuses (e.g. refugee, EU-citizen, sheltered, registered asylum seeker). Enrolling to primary school is also compulsory from the first September after the child's sixth birthday. Remaining in kindergarten above the age of six is a long and complicated procedure even for Hungarian families (e.g. the request should be submitted before the middle of January). Because according to Hungarian laws the lack of proper Hungarian language skills does not automatically entitle the child to repeat a year and the administration is time- and energy consuming, many children with foreign background start the primary school without reliable knowledge of Hungarian, although that would be an essential requirement both for their social and educational success (Bognár-Hetzer 2022).

In the educational year of 2024/25, 3317 children with foreign citizenship were enrolled in kindergartens (Kajdi 2025). Naturally, possessing a foreign citizenship is not equal to the lack of Hungarian knowledge and there are even more children who would need specific language support but are not registered officially e.g. because they have double citizenships or speak Hungarian as heritage language or are Hungarian citizens born here in e.g. a Vietnamese family. Although the number of 3317 do not seem high comparing to the overall number of kindergarten children (324,872), as migration tends to be social network-based (Stuart & Taylor 2021), there are some institutions that are heavily affected. While certain legislative acts provide some support concerning the inclusion of children from foreign backgrounds, (e.g. involving the methodology of preschool-aged children in the university programmes for future teachers of Hungarian as a foreign language), kindergartens possess relative autonomy in recognising and reacting to the need for multicultural education and teaching Hungarian as L2. It means that if a kindergarten has children with migrant background, it depends on the teacher, the director, the local government, or another maintaining organisation whether the linguistic disadvantage of these children is neglected, or some help is offered for them.

Kindergartens of Józsefváros

Kindergartens of Józsefváros as a joint organisation

In Hungary pre-school aged children with migrant background tend to live in bigger cities and in the inner districts of Budapest especially in Józsefváros, which already had the fame of being the melting pot of diverse cultures (dominantly Roma ones). Nowadays Józsefváros, the 8th district of Budapest, has the highest the number of foreign residents with 9920 people (within the population of 70.000).

It is worth noting that the term *Kindergartens of Józsefváros* refers to an umbrella-like joint

organisation with eleven member institutions and unified management². The management includes the main director (the leader of all the eleven institutions), three deputy-directors and the directors of the 11 kindergartens. This organisational structure has certain benefits (Kajdi 2024):

- Equal opportunities are granted for all the children to access programmes (e.g. English lessons, special gym lessons).
- There are no significant differences among the units in equipment or human resources.
- Every member of the institutions shares and represent the same values.
- Strong effort has been made to prevent spontaneous segregation.
- Continuous communication between member kindergartens is ensured, so that comprehensive programmes are developed and implemented uniformly, considering local needs.

The organisational structure that the Kindergartens of Józsefváros represents is not widespread in Hungary, where the institutions dominantly function individually, but serves as a solid starting point to introduce pedagogical innovations.

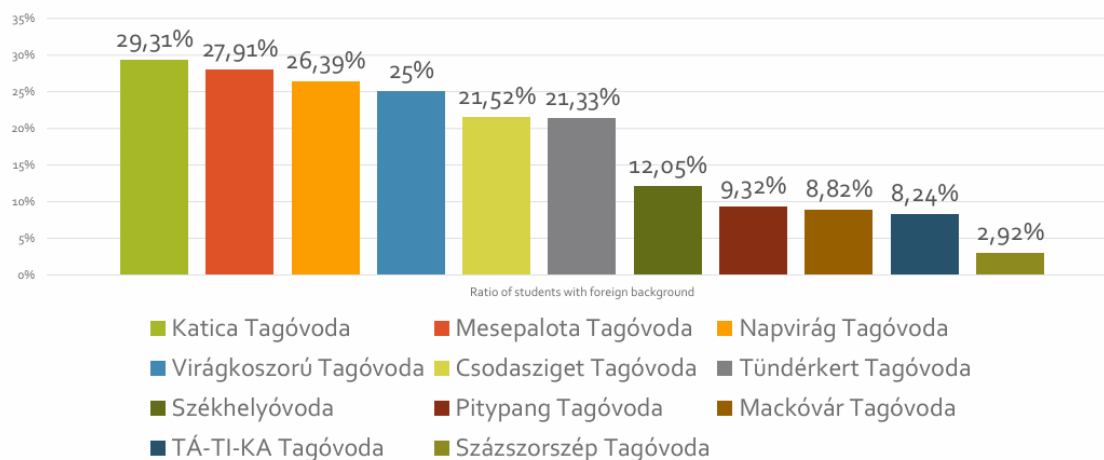
Children with foreign background in the Kindergartens of Józsefváros

It was already recognised in the educational year of 2019/20, that certain children with migrant background needed extra support. Consequently, in some institutions a school preparatory programme started with the intention of helping these 5–6-year-old children who were supposed to continue their studies in Hungarian primary schools. After reopening the kindergartens in the post-Covid era and the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the numbers of children with foreign background started to increase which caused a growing challenge in most institutions. The management recognised the necessity of comprehensive measures, and the preparation year of MAMI, a complex multicultural – Hungarian as a foreign language began in the educational year of 2023/24 following recommended principles and good practises from the European Commission (INEDU 2019).

In that year, according to the data in January 2024, approximately 120 foreign-background children attended the kindergartens (3–22 per unit). In the following year, the numbers were similar: 171 children were listed with foreign background and among them 148 children had foreign citizenship (Diagram 1.)

² Note, that this organizational structure is not widespread in Hungary, kindergartens tend to function as single units with own management relative independence.

Figure 1.



The ratio children with foreign background in the eleven kindergartens in 2024/25

The linguistic and cultural backgrounds of these children are diverse. Among the countries of origin Vietnam, China, Ukraine, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Mongolia, India, Nigeria, Syria, Poland, Kazakhstan, Venezuela, Argentina, Pakistan, the Netherlands, and Azerbaijan, Spain and Romania can be found among other countries. Some children arrive from the surrounding countries from partly Hungarian-speaking communities³. The legal status of the children also vary: they are refugees, recipients of temporary protection (from Ukraine), EU citizens with registration certificates, or third-country nationals with residence permits.

Considering their linguistic background, most children are monolingual, while some come from mixed-language families and speak several languages. Even foreign-background children who speak some Hungarian often has lower competences than their native-speaking peers. Their progress depends on many factors (Kajdi 2025): Hungarian proficiency and the attitude towards the language of their family members, the long-term plans of the family, their social network, the presence of other children with a shared language in the kindergarten group, whether they have got school-age siblings, etc. And in most of the cases it is beneficial for them to be in an environment attentive to their cultural background and receiving Hungarian as a foreign language lessons combined with the development of other skills e.g. auditory perception skills, visual memory, visual perception, motor skills, understanding part-whole relationship, spatial orientation (Schmidt & Nagyházi 2020).

³ It must be acknowledged that even those children who speak Hungarian as L1 might need extra support as their language competence can be below of their age mates if they did not attend kindergarten in their home countries.

Methodology

To examine what characterises the MAMI programme, how the professionals being part of it evaluate it and its adaptability three research questions were formed⁴:

1. What elements does this programme possess?
2. How do the pedagogues inside this programme evaluate it?
3. How easily can it be adapted to other institutions?

To answer the first question, the programme is analysed according to three levels (upper/management; level of the institutions; level of the groups) with the help of documents, interviews by the pedagogues and experiences gained during fieldwork. For the evaluation part interviews and a quantitative survey were conducted with 6 teachers of the MAMI lessons. The final research question goes beyond the scope of the *Kindergartens of Józsefváros* and attempts to name the elements of *MAMI* that can be adapted to other institutions and the requirements needed to make a similar program successful in other kindergartens.

Description of MAMI programme

Elements 1: Upper/Management level

The work on the management level started in the educational year of 2023/24 with hiring an expert on multicultural education and Hungarian as a foreign language. Beginning with that year the creation of background materials, translation works and building a closer relationship with other organisations has started.

The central background material is titled *First Day in Kindergarten* and offers guidance on what to learn about a child's background, which are the most necessary administrative steps, how to ease communication with the families, how to prepare the group for a new foreign child, what kind of multiculturally-rooted conflicts can happen and how to handle them, how to create a welcoming multicultural environment. Other related documents offer sample Hungarian as a foreign language kindergarten lessons and practical recommendations supporting the language development of children with foreign background. Translation works include creating multilingual summaries (e.g., house rules), signs, and forms in languages such as English, Vietnamese, and Ukrainian. Consequently, the linguistic landscape became more colourful in many institutions. Also, the management contacted organisations with the desire to maintain partnership: NGO-s dedicated to migrant people, religious organisations, embassies, and the local government (who runs the kindergartens).

⁴ Luca Szatzker in her MA thesis partly investigated the first and the third hypotheses based on data before March 2025 under my supervision.

Figure 2.



World map in Napvirág Kindergarten with pins showing the countries of origin and points of interest about those cultures in Hungarian and English language.

Level of the Kindergartens and the MAMI workgroup

At the development phase the needs assessment was conducted by the consultant and the management through visits, interviews, and observations. Workshops were organised in all units on intercultural competence (Byram 1997), trauma-informed integration (UNESCO 2019, 2023; WHO Guide 2020) cultural differences, conflict resolution, language-focused games (), and practical language development strategies.

The heart of the programme is the MAMI workgroup, established in autumn 2023, involving 1–2 delegates from every kindergarten unit. Its members include kindergarten teachers, speech therapists, special educators, assistants, and the previously mentioned multicultural- Hungarian as a foreign language consultant. In the preparatory year of 2023/24, the members participated in inner trainings (e.g. on early (second) language acquisition, basics of Hungarian language, how to conduct language lessons). They also created a shared digital repository of practices, a sample curriculum for

detailed vocabulary and grammar progression for 36 weeks, and by the head of the workgroup and a speech therapists 160-page-long lesson plans were written for two language/age groups with nursery rhymes and printable pictures.

In almost half of the eleven kindergartens the Hungarian as a foreign language lessons started in the spring of 2024, while in the other institutions the teaching began in the fall of 2024. At the educational year of 2024/25, the workgroup continued having monthly meetings with the plan to exchange experiences and analyse together their voluntarily recorded lessons. The lessons themselves took place in the kindergartens where the delegated MAMI-member, the Hungarian teacher collected the children from different groups based on their Hungarian skills and took them to a different place to learn Hungarian once or twice a week dominantly with the help of the materials discussed or born in the MAMI workgroup meeting. The answers of a survey⁵ showed that in four kindergartens children had 2 Hungarian lessons/week, and the typical group size includes 4-5 children (Figure 3.)

Figure 3.



The Hungarian as a foreign language sessions in 2024/25

⁵ Only six MAMI members answered this question.

Group level

Children with foreign background are supported outside of the Hungarian lessons, as well. The consultant visits all the eleven kindergartens to observe how these children behave in their own surrounding, in the integrated groups. Beside watching the groups and mentoring the group teachers, the consultant is available to hold sample lessons for the whole group highlighting the elements of conscious language development and the points where these children can be more involved into the activities if the language of instruction is Hungarian.

Follow-ups are also essential; hence the improvement of these children is documented by different professionals including the heads of the groups, the consultant, and the MAMI-member. To help communication in the first days after the arrival of the children ‘survival’ cards were drawn, so the child can lift the card to show how he/she feels or what happened to him/her (see Figure 4).

Figure 4.



A survival card depicting conflict, drawn by Elisabeth Fodor, teacher assistant and MAMI-member in 2023/24.

Moreover, as the programme is multicultural, the need to build a landscape that reflects the culture of the children appeared. Therefore, child books in different languages (to foster early literacy skills in their first languages), diverse toys, culturally representative images were collected – partly by donation from the embassies and cultural centres (Figure 5). And in two kindergartens multicultural days were organised with the involvement of both the Hungarian and non-Hungarian families.

Figure 5.



Donation from the Ukrainian Embassy

These steps not only expand the knowledge of Hungarian children about other cultures, they also increase openness, raise empathy and promote intercultural skills that are essential in the 21st century. It is worth adding that the reaction from the Hungarian parents were also dominantly positive.

Evaluation of the programme

The directors of the Kindergartens of Józsefváros

The idea of creating a multicultural and Hungarian as L2 programme was strongly promoted by the previous director of the Kindergartens of Józsefváros, who also gave Hungarian as a foreign language lessons for children by herself. The name of the programme, *MAMI* is also her creation, reflecting that although these children already have a mother tongue, Hungarian still can be their ‘second mother’ (*mami* in Hungarian refers to mom or grandmother).

Despite the change in the management in 2024, the current director continued this legacy and with the help of the local government even more resources were dedicated to this programme. *MAMI* appeared in the official brochure about the 8th district kindergartens and a video was directed to promote this programme among the families inside and outside of the district with English subtitle (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1396505795058086>)).

By the second year of the programme, the management faced much positive feedback. The

following quotes are from the current director, who was talking about the growing number of children with foreign background and the positive effects of the language lessons⁶.

‘(about migrant children) in increasing numbers, and we also notice that there are kindergartens that are popular among them, so there are kindergartens where more children go than in other kindergartens. This is probably because they take each other there, so where children of a certain nationality or ethnicity feel comfortable, they take their peers there too. But otherwise, it is typical in all our member kindergartens that it is increasing [...].’

„The feedback from all member kindergartens was that the children’s vocabulary, first their vocabulary, and then their overall speech, had improved dramatically.’ (Éva Kocsisné Juhász)

Even though these answers emphasize the benefits, the director also mentioned some challenges – these will be discussed together with the experiences of the MAMI-members in the following section.

Evaluation by the MAMI Workgroup

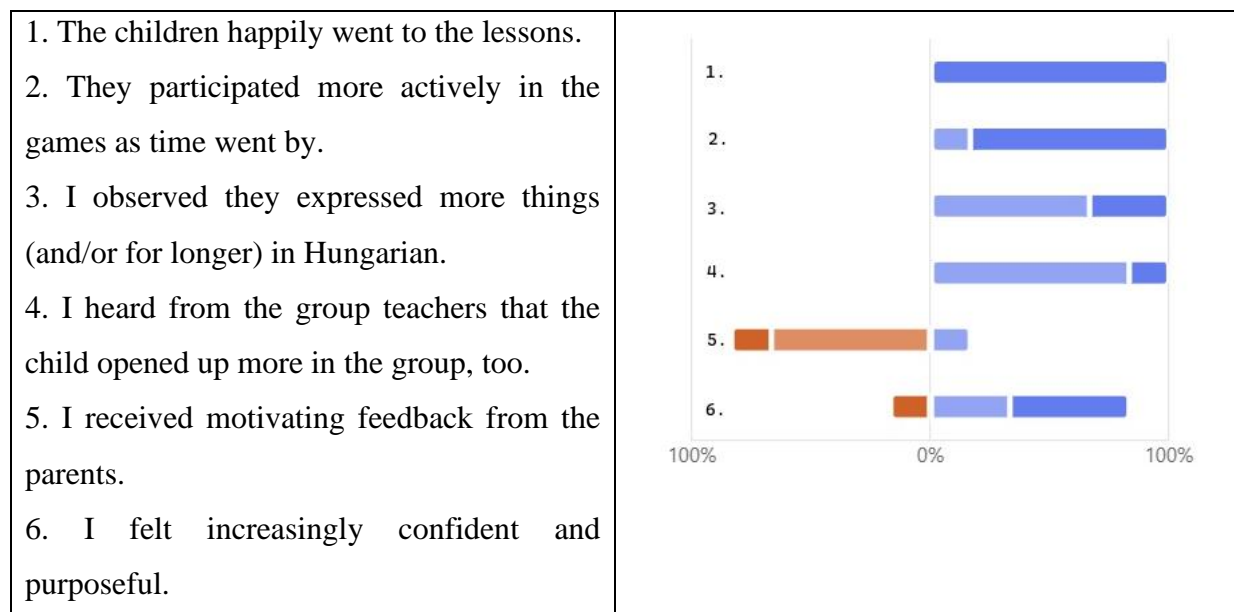
6 MAMI-members filled a questionnaire in June 2025 about their year. The form consisted of both fixed and open-ended questions about their position in the kindergartens, previous knowledge about second language teaching, the date since they started to give Hungarian lessons, the duration of the lessons, the number of children, the materials they use, the challenges and positive experiences and their future plans. From the answers it can be seen that:

- Half of the MAMI-members worked as kindergarten teachers.
- 66% had conducted English or German as L2 lessons before or helped migrant children.
- half of them already started the Hungarian lessons in the spring of 2024.
- The teachers use varied materials to fulfil the needs of their specific group.

Among the positive experiences they emphasized the willingness of the children to learn, the love towards the lessons and the Hungarian performance (Figure 6.) It is worth noting that the feedback from the parents is typically missing and even though these teachers had been doing the Hungarian lessons for months their self-confidence is still not high.

⁶ The interview was conducted and recorded by Luca Szatzker in March 2025, while the translation is mine.

Figure 6.



The positive experiences of the MAMI workgroup members (who hold the Hungarian lessons)

The questionnaire also asked about the negative experience and the challenges of the Hungarian lessons. Based on the results the four most typical problems are the following (the % shows how many teachers identified it as a problem):

- logistical challenges: 50% (e.g. there is no fixed empty room for the sessions)
- schedule: 33% (difficult to find the right time when both the children and the teacher is available)
- overlapping programmes: 33% (when the children cannot go to the session due to an extra event)
- absence of children: 33% (when children miss many lessons due to illnesses or travels)

There are also other challenges that only one person mentioned. These are: the need of more material support (e.g. copying); the behaviour of the children (passive or aggressive); fluctuation (new children arrive during the year and some children leave the country); the timing is not perfect (e.g. before lunch the children are hungry and cannot concentrate); there is huge difference between the children (including personality differences). Nobody confessed communication problems or complained about the lack of rich, stimulating educational materials, toys.

Beside from these, in the interviews many members mentioned the need to modify the vocabulary test (see next section) and the stronger cooperation with the parents. In those institutions where the multicultural days/week was not part of the kindergarten routine, the MAMI members were eager to start it. More pedagogues emphasized the privileged position of this programme (extra salary

is provided for the MAMI members from the local government) and expressed hope for the continuation of the programme. Even though some self-developed education materials existed, they sometimes face challenge finding the best resources (e.g. easy or simplified songs and nursery rhymes). And the last problem that the director also mentioned is the fluctuation of teachers: even two MAMI members changed during one educational year.

Vocabulary Test

In September 2024, the idea of some sort of testing arose not to measure the added value (as there was no control group), but to help the planning and to provide some quantifiable feedback for the conductors of the Hungarian lessons. Although certain standardised tests are available to measure the language skills of pre-school children (Juhász & Radics 2019), there is no tool for measuring the vocabulary of children whose first language is not Hungarian. Therefore, a test was created by a speech therapist, a special education teacher and a Hungarian as a foreign language teacher that contained 8-8 words belonging to 10 topics about kindergarten life (e.g. colours, clothes, vehicles). The basic principle was to involve only those words (typically nouns) that appear in the daily life in September-October with representative image (e.g. a Hungarian type of pasta instead of the Chinese one). The test measured both the active and passive (perceptive) knowledge of these words like the Hungarian *LAPP Test* (Lörík et al 2015) and the *Peabody Test*. The test was taken twice by the own teachers of the participants: 94 children, between the age of 3-6, were tested in October 2024 and 89 children in May 2025. The results were analysed according to different variants: active and passive knowledge; time; language levels (6); age/group; recallability of the words. Among other findings⁷ the results statistically proved the development of Hungarian knowledge by paired T-tests for both in the active (3,84324E-18), and passive (8,27006E-13) vocabulary between autumn and spring. Although the results did not measure the added value, they had positive impact on the confidence of the teachers that was necessary (Figure 6 implies that some still lack confidence). With the educational year 2025/26 the test will be modified by adding a grammar component for those children who fall into the highest category according to their vocabulary skills.

Adaptability: Limits of this good practise

The final research question aimed to investigate the elements and practices of MAMI programme that can be adapted to other kindergartens and the requirements needed to run a similar programme successfully (see Figure 7).

⁷ The detailed results will be first presented in the conference *Nyelvfejlődés csecsemőkortól kamaszkorig 4.* in February 2026 in Budapest.

Figure 7.



Requirements needed for the MAMI programme

The first requirement is the supportive staff: a committed director, deputy directors and all the members not only of the MAMI but the institutions contribute to the success of multicultural education and the inclusion of children with foreign backgrounds. The organizational structure, the fact that all the individual institutions have shared management fosters the implementation, the reception and the standard of any programmes including MAMI. Running this programme needs logistics including:

- extra time from the kindergarten professionals (to prepare for the lessons)
- the possibility of substitution (if a kindergarten teacher conducts a MAMI lesson another professional should help in her/his group)
- rooms for the language lessons
- tools for the language lessons (e.g. toys, flashcards)
- education materials (e.g. detailed lesson plans⁸)

The financial component is also essential: the programme is currently financed by the local government and hopefully this will continue no matter of the political background of the district mayor and district council. As in Hungary the income of the districts correlates to the income of its residents, only wealthier local governments can afford funding any extra pre-school programmes. Starting any new programme also needs connections and background knowledge: in the MAMI programme the management has good relationship with cultural centers, embassies, NGO-s and university professionals⁹. And gaining the support of the local communities is also vital including Hungarian and non-Hungarian families¹⁰.

⁸ Beside the lessons plans developed by the MAMI members the book *Anya-nyelv-játék* is used whose work title had been *Hungarian as a Foreign Language Games* (Kajdi 2021).

⁹ Currently Kindergartens of Józsefváros has official connection with the Department of Hungarian Language at ELTE University, but cooperation with the Institute of Intercultural Psychology and Pedagogy is also under negotiations.

¹⁰ In recent political discourse of the Hungarian Government terms like ‘migration’ and ‘NGO-s’ has strong negative connotation and this has serious consequences in the inclusion of foreigners in Hungary.

Conclusion

The MAMI-programme in the Kindergartens of Józsefváros is more than a simple language course: it offers complex support for children with foreign backgrounds to help their inclusion in the Hungarian kindergarten life. While certain elements can be adapted more easily (e.g. paying attention in the multicultural decoration, translating the signs and texts for the parents in the kindergartens), other components need more time and effort (e.g. the training of the future Hungarian lesson teachers) and certain requirements are essential outside the kindergarten life (e.g. financing the programme). To sum up, this unique programme can serve as the model for other kindergartens that wish to support children with foreign backgrounds but must be adapted to the needs and opportunities of the other institutions and the children within those pre-schools.

Acknowledgments

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The vocabulary test was measured in each kindergarten by the own MAMI teacher of the children.

The interview with the director was conducted by Luca Szatzker in March 2025 as part of her MA thesis.

I hereby confirm that my article is original, the research of the 2nd year has not been presented at any conferences before SeLTAME2025 (I only had spoken about them in a roundtable session in the IAIE Conference in June 2025) and the only publication that I wrote about this topic was 1,5 year ago, therefore could not include the results of 2024/2025 (interviews, questionnaire and the vocabulary test). This article was written from my own research interest; I received no financial support from the Kindergartens of Józsefváros to write it and no version was sent to the management for approval.

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