



Multilingualism in Lithuanian pre-school education institutions: Situation, issues, prospects

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ABSTRACT

The growing manifestation of multiculturalism in Lithuania has been prompting the educational community and education policy makers to pay more attention to the issues related to quality education for bilingual and multilingual children. Due to the lack of experience in analyzing this phenomenon, certain previous studies on multilingualism have created a basis that leads to underestimation of the importance of multilingualism at an early age. In recent years attitudes towards multilingual education have been changing. More effective language learning is becoming one of the priority areas of education.

Building on the analysis of scientific and methodological literature, the article presents the situation, issues and prospects of multilingualism in Lithuanian pre-school education institutions.

A multilingual environment and properly selected methods enable the child of pre-school age to naturally learn several languages. Therefore, early learning of a foreign language is gaining popularity in Lithuania, and in terms of children with other nationalities, it is aimed at creation of favorable conditions for them to learn the official Lithuanian language.

The article also reviews the organizational models and methods of multilingual education, best practice of multilingual and multicultural kindergartens in Lithuania, challenges faced by the pre-school education institutions in terms of multilingualism, emphasizes the necessity and possibilities for development of teachers' multicultural competence.

KEYWORDS

multilingualism, multiculturalism, preschool education, preschool age, multilingual education, Lithuania

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of the language policy of the European Union is to provide all citizens with multilingual education that enables them to speak at least two languages in addition to their mother tongue (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2005). The education policy of Lithuania also pays great attention not only to the learning of children's native language, but also to the early learning of a foreign language and the promotion of multilingualism, thus striving to implement both national education goals and the priorities set by the education policy of the European Union (Daugiakultūriai darželiai, 2016).

In order to successfully implement the set priorities of education policy, European countries, including Lithuania, are intensively and purposefully striving for high-quality pre-school education. Experts from European Union countries reached an agreement in 2014 on the factors that determine the quality of early childhood education (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2014). In order to improve the quality of pre-school education, EU countries are recommended to ensure that: *education is accessible* to all families, promotes social inclusion and cultural and ethnic diversity; *highly qualified teachers* are employed whose initial training and continuing professional development contribute to their success; *the content of education* is based on pedagogical attitudes, values and goals that promote the full education of the child and reveal the educational potential of each child as much as possible; *monitoring and evaluation* provide relevant information at institutional, regional and/or national level, striving for higher quality education; *proper governance and funding* would ensure the universal right of families to receive quality education that is fully or at least partially funded by the state (Kaip vertinama ikimokyklinio ir priešmokyklinio ugdymo paslaugų kokybė, 2019). As pre-school education in Lithuania has been and is considered a priority area of education, and quality assurance of pre-school education is the most important strategic direction, it is undoubtedly necessary to ensure high quality in all the above-mentioned areas.

Important strategic decisions on the quality of pre-school education are being made on an ongoing basis or are becoming part of the education policy agenda. The growing expression of multiculturalism in Lithuania and its educational institutions encourages the educational community and education policy makers to pay more attention to the situation of multilingualism in Lithuania, the emerging problems and challenges of quality education of bilingual and multilingual children, their successful socialization and integration. Lithuanian researchers and practitioners in the field of education, who analyzed these problems (Bartkevičienė, Burneikaitė, Dabašinskienė, Plūkienė, & Rupšienė, 2014; Mazolevskienė, 2006; Mazolevskienė & Montvilaitė, 2007, etc.), actualized the need to find appropriate ways and means for the education of multilingual children in the preschool age, to rely on the perspective of child-centered education.

The problems of bilingualism and multilingualism are relevant not only in Lithuania, but also in many other countries of the European Union. The people of the European Union speak different languages. There are as many as 24 official languages and more than 60 national and regional languages. Linguistic and cultural diversity is a great asset, however, it also poses a variety of communication and collaboration problems. According to Eurobarometer data, there are 60.63 percent of the population in the European Union who do not speak English (Grigas, 2017). Therefore, in the European Education Area, special attention is paid to early language teaching. It is argued that early language learning can not only lay the foundations for later



learning and a more successful overcoming of language barriers in the future, but also to have a positive effect on attitudes towards other languages and cultures. This is the main rationale behind various initiatives of the European Commission to promote early language learning and support further research in this area ([Early language learning](#)).

Thus, the aim of the research is to analyze the situation of multilingualism in Lithuanian pre-school education institutions, existing problems, and to predict development perspectives. The method of systematic literature review was used to realize the aim. Using this method, scientific, methodological, informational literature and documents on education directly related to the situation of children, who are multilingual, bilingual or non-native speakers, and the peculiarities of their education in Lithuanian pre-school institutions were selected.

THE SITUATION OF MULTICULTURALISM IN LITHUANIA AND THE PRECONDITIONS FOR THE EXPRESSION OF MULTILINGUALISM

Multiculturalism is becoming an important and natural characteristic of modern society. Multilingualism is an inseparable part of multiculturalism. With language policy gaining great importance in Europe and the EU introducing multilingualism as a separate policy area, it is being promoted in Lithuania as well. The State Progress Strategy “Lithuania 2030” ([Valstybės pažangos strategija „Lietuvos pažangos strategija „Lietuva 2030“](#)) (2012) emphasizes the aspiration to create a modern, vigorous state open to the world. Foreign languages that make it possible to get to know the world and its diversity are identified as one of the tools for successful development. Knowledge of foreign languages is emphasized among the criteria of the openness of the society of Lithuania to the world.

Nevertheless, the issue of multilingualism in Lithuania is associated with a number of challenges. In the context of general European trends, language teaching policy in Lithuania is rather fragmented and little developed. In their conclusions, the experts of the Council of Europe state that the importance of the state language is strongly emphasized in Lithuania and its relationship with other languages – of national minorities or foreign ones – is quite controversial ([Kajėnaitė & Suchadolskienė, 2021](#)).

A study conducted in major Lithuanian cities ([Ramonienė, 2010](#)) revealed that bilingualism and multilingualism are a more common phenomenon in them than monolingualism. All the studied cities, Vilnius, Kaunas and Klaipėda, revealed themselves to be multilingual. Almost all residents of the three cities speak and use more than one language in various fields. The results obtained confirm the findings of research on multilingualism in recent decades and reflect the development of multilingualism in modern society.

It is also important to take into account that multilingualism in Lithuania is not only a modern phenomenon. In Lithuania, the multi-ethnic social context has historically developed over the last few centuries ([Balžekienė, Lapienienė, Merkys, & Telešienė, 2008](#)). In the history of the country, the roots of multilingualism go back to the time of the Grand Duchy (13th-18th centuries) with its diverse ethnic composition, Latin and ancient Slavic languages used for state writing. After the introduction of the concept of multilingualism in Lithuania and the analysis of the phenomenon of multilingualism, it was noticed that the spread of multilingualism was greatly influenced by the close historical ties of Lithuanians with the Polish and Russian peoples, migration to other countries and back, and so on ([Jacikevičius, 1970](#)).



In some regions of Lithuania, the multicultural situation is exceptional. The region of south-eastern Lithuania is like that. Historically, a larger percentage of the population than in other regions of the country is made up of representatives of national minorities, and several languages are used here. The Polish, Belarusian and Russian ethnic communities in south-eastern Lithuania have deep traditions of living side by side. Potentially, these are favorable conditions for the development of multiculturalism and multilingualism. Nevertheless, research shows that there are many problems of ethnic relations in the region, manifested in day-to-day activities and in various institutional sectors (Balžekienė et al., 2008). The region of south-eastern Lithuania often receives the attention of politicians and journalists, there is a lot of discussion about the language of public inscriptions, reforms of the education system (Šliavaitė, 2015).

Analyzing the preconditions and problems of multicultural and multilingual education in the ethnically mixed region of south-eastern Lithuania, the established negative attitudes towards the native language of one of the national minority groups (Polish) have been revealed. The study revealed frequently expressed opinions about the negative impact of multilingualism on students' learning achievements and career opportunities. Multiculturalism in this case becomes not an opportunity for the development of tolerance, effective cooperation, but an incentive for national intolerance, isolation, segregationist policies and unsustainable development moving away from reform and innovation (Balžekienė et al., 2008).

The data of a qualitative study conducted in the south-eastern region of Lithuania (Šliavaitė, 2015) allow noticing that the local population is sensitive to rising interethnic tensions. The informants' efforts to use communication practices that enable the creation of a multicultural community based on the principles of tolerance and respect in search of commonality have been revealed. In the study conducted, these practices are often opposed to "politics" and "politicians' interests", linking the latter to the interests of specific social groups. Thus, it is possible to observe contradictory tendencies arising in the analysis of the phenomenon of multiculturalism and multilingualism in Lithuania, especially in ethnically mixed regions.

Along with the development of the situation of multiculturalism and the interest in this phenomenon, there is a need for reflection of multicultural and multilingual education and the search for quality. The importance to introduce sensitivity to intercultural differences in educational institutions, as well as to linguistic diversity, and to develop tolerance is observed (Bielskienė, Duoblienė, & Tamulionytė, 2012; Šliavaitė, 2015). The data of the survey in Lithuania (Mokymasis visą gyvenimą. Įpročiai, patrauklumas, barjerai, naudos suvokimas. Gyventojų apklausos ataskaita, 2020) illustrate the theoretical demand for the development of the skills of multilingualism – the respondents rated foreign language skills the worst and lacked these competencies the most, however, at the same time people indicated the greatest need to develop these skills.

A trend can be observed that attitudes towards multilingualism have changed over time. Previous research on multilingualism reflected the opinion that children's multilingualism is often the cause of their speech/language disorders. Such opinions were quite common among speech therapists (Jacikevičius, 1970). Representatives of the negative attitude that prevailed in Lithuania until about the mid-1950s stated that multilingualism negatively affects the development of the child's cognitive abilities and native language.

Researchers analyzing the situation of the education of preschool bilingual children in Lithuania already a few years ago stated that the problems in this area are often left to their own devices. Attention was drawn to the fact that a new methodological approach is needed to



substantiate the situation of multilingual children in educational institutions and develop curricula for them, allowing to consider the situation from the child's point of view and the concept of the childhood world. The need for change in the field of multilingualism education was provoked by the lack of a clear position in Lithuania regarding children's multilingualism (and bilingualism), especially at an early age, and this problem was mostly analyzed on the basis of the experience of adults (Mazolevskienė & Montvilaitė, 2007).

MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN THE PRESCHOOL AGE

The aim of the language policy of the European Union is to provide all citizens with a multilingual education that enables them to speak at least two languages in addition to their mother tongue (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2005). The education policy of Lithuania also pays great attention not only to the learning of children's native language, but also to the early learning of a foreign language and the promotion of multilingualism, thus striving to implement both national education goals and the priorities set by the education policy of the European Union (Daugiakultūriai darželiai, 2016).

Particular emphasis is placed on ensuring equal educational opportunities for all pre-school age children, despite the fact that they grow up in different economic, social and cultural conditions. "Today's children, their needs and experiences are different than those of adults in childhood. In addition, children have different opportunities to develop and live a full life: some grow up in the city, others in the countryside, some grow up in prosperity, others in deprivation. No two children are the same, equally involved in activities and gaining experience" (Ikimokyklinio ugdymo metodinės rekomendacijos, 2015, p. 1). Knowing today's children, knowing their different living and educational conditions, the researchers (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2007) emphasize that the educational process must ensure that the different needs of children (including those with special needs, gifted children, non-native speakers and bilinguals) are met and respond to their individual abilities. These children have different socio-cultural experiences, some speak one language in the family and others speak several languages, therefore, the task set for teachers is to ensure the smooth development of children, to eliminate the educational differences that arise when living in a multilingual environment and to ensure the quality of their education. Consequently, education must be organized in such a way that pedagogical strategies for children's education respond to the opportunities of children of different experiences, needs and different cultures. Such an attitude is enabled by the methodological approach prevailing in today's education of children, that education is based on a child-centered paradigm, which requires a new look at the child's personality, his/her abilities and needs to act freely and without restriction (Juodaitytė, 2004; Malinauskienė, 2012; Monkevičienė, 2008, etc.). Referring to the attitudes of the above-mentioned researchers, it can be stated that the most important thing in the child-centered paradigm is a holistic approach based on the individualization of education, active participation of the family and a constructive attitude of teachers towards the child.

Research has proven that in the first years of life, children are particularly receptive to languages and can easily learn even several languages. At a very early age the child learns a foreign language as a part of a natural process (Adžija & Sindik, 2014). Neuroscientists substantiate the claim that early age is the most favorable for language learning, because it is



during this period that the growth of synapses in the frontal lobe of the brain (responsible for thinking, planning, decision-making, speaking, attention) is most intense (3–6 years of age) and the sensitive period of language acquisition extends from infancy to 6 or 7 years of age (Textor, 2011). Young children memorize new words, various linguistic constructions and sentences very quickly, and also easily repeat the phrases they hear. The brain of children of this age is flexible to learn languages, as language centers are intensively formed during this period, and the child's motor skills develop. Περεαρχη (e.g., Brumen, 2011) reveals that pre-school age children have an intrinsic motivation to learn a foreign language. They enjoy learning a foreign language through active participation (e.g., speaking, singing, playing, etc.). They feel satisfaction after task completion, and express their foreign language knowledge.

Children learn spoken language best by interacting naturally with family members in everyday situations, as well as by playing a variety of games. The development of a native language depends largely on how children hear it in their immediate environment. If the family speaks the correct language, books are read to the child from an early age, he/she is encouraged to talk a lot about the personal things and feelings that are important to him/her, to tell what he/she did, what he/she saw, how was he/she doing, encouraged to create stories and game plots, this also means that learning foreign languages usually does not cause the child any major difficulties. Such children, with whom there was a lot of communication in their families, feel more confident in preschool institutions, are able to master the peculiarities of the pronunciation and intonation of the foreign language, which allows them to learn to speak without an accent. They memorize words and sentences quickly and effortlessly, are able to repeat them. In addition, preschoolers are curious and tend to experiment without fear of making mistakes or making fun of themselves, which is natural and inevitable when learning languages (Nuo kada pradėti vaikus mokyti užsienio kalbą, 2015). If the child grows up in a bilingual or multilingual environment, he/she will certainly learn both of his/her native languages perfectly, as long as consistency is maintained. It is common for a language that a child hears and uses more often to develop more quickly, however, giving enough time and attention to the second language, it can catch up with the first language. It is therefore recommended that parents speak to their child in their own language from the birth of the child. When communicating with the child, it is important for the parents themselves not to mix up languages and to speak their native language correctly with the child.

Given the peculiarities of the pre-school age and the great potential of children, it is worth promoting language learning already at pre-school age, as language learning enriches the child in many ways, improves the child's competences and provides more opportunities in the future, has a great impact on the further development of the personality. Bilingualism/multilingualism stimulates the child's linguistic and general development, bilingual/multilingual children are also better able to cope with various cognitive tasks, such as perception, concentration, thinking, etc.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING/LEARNING IN A PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION INSTITUTION, THE PURSUIT OF QUALITY

Language is the most important factor related to human identity, socialization, the transmission of cultural values from generation to generation. In a multilingual (multicultural) country, each ethnic group enriches society with its own language and culture by giving it a specific hue,



traditions, customs and so on. Children's ability to learn several languages at the same time has a positive effect on their intellectual growth: e.g., it enriches and enhances a child's mental development, enables their thinking flexibility, improves a child's understanding of his/her native language (Gimatdinova, 2018).

The documents of the European Union describe multilingualism "as the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives" (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2007, p. 6). Language is becoming a priority value in the education of children in modern society, therefore, it is necessary to foster early multilingualism – to teach children several languages from an early age (Daugiakultūriai darželiai, 2016). As the Lithuanian education system integrates into the European education area, pre-school education is becoming a very important factor, the most important strategic directions of which are the availability of education and ensuring the quality of education. Therefore, high-quality pre-school education, which should be an integral part of the modern child's education, is becoming a priority goal of education. Long-term research ("Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education project (EPPSE 3-16+)") shows that quality pre-school education undoubtedly has a direct impact on children's achievement and well-being and leads to a more successful future for the child.

In recent years, the number of bilingual and multilingual children in Lithuanian pre-school institutions has been increasing. This is due to the processes of integration into the countries of the European Union, the growing scale of the intersections of different cultures (increased migration processes for various reasons, an increase in international projects, international companies, where new job places are being created, the expansion of the tourism sector, the creation of mixed families between people of different races and nationalities, citizens of different countries, and so on). A child born in a mixed family, usually speaks several languages from an early age, he/she has a peculiar cultural context, which he/she brings to the group of the pre-school institution. The issues of the availability of education and quality of education are provided not only to Lithuanian citizens by Article 30 of the Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo įstatymas) (2011). The article declares that every citizen of the Republic of Lithuania and every foreigner who has the right to permanent or temporary residence in the Republic of Lithuania is guaranteed education in the state language and learning the state language so that they can integrate into the life of the state without any problems.

In general, children learn languages most effectively in a pre-school group, where they are provided with the most natural, fun and playful learning environment possible. Research shows (Thieme, Hanekamp, Andringa, Verhagen, & Kuiken, 2021) that children can experience positive wellbeing in foreign language programmes in early childhood education and care, only if these programmes are play-based and if the language policy is not too strict. In a group of peers, a child, regardless of his/her native language, enjoys a learning process that takes place on the basis of songs, games, reading books, dialogues and video assignments. The methods of teaching/learning in the group are based on children's ordinary daily activities – playing, socializing, communicating. Use of routines (e.g., greeting rituals or lunch routines) also helps in language learning at an early age (Björk-Willén, 2008).

When children from different cultures communicate together, they are given the opportunity to better learn and develop the skills of communication not only in the state language but also in a foreign language, and to understand, acknowledge and accept cultural differences. Peer



interactions and assistance are important in learning a foreign language at an early age (Wang & Hyun, 2009). In order to provide quality education, teachers can use a variety of tools and methods to use the language skills and experiences of children from different cultures as motivation to act, and most importantly, such children would receive recognition in the group, which would have a positive effect not only on their emotional and physical well-being, development and expression of social skills, but also on their communication skills, which are important for learning native/state and foreign languages (Ikimokyklinio ugdymo metodinės rekomendacijos, 2015).

The well-being of the child as an extremely important factor for the child's quality education and the well-being of the family is emphasized in the Concept of State Policy on Child Welfare of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimo 2003 m. gegužės 20 d. nutarimas Nr. IX-1569 „Dėl vaiko gerovės valstybės politikos koncepcijos patvirtinimo“) (2003). The Concept states that the child must feel safe and dignified because of his/her racial, cultural and national identity, therefore, in order to provide quality education, it is important that the pre-school curriculum is implemented without violating the child's rights and maintaining constructive communication with the family. Constructive communication between teachers and parents must take place on a regular basis. The teacher's efforts to speak to parents in a common language, to accept a "different" opinion and to seek agreement are an important educational context related to the well-being of children, the progress of their achievements in various fields of education and the modern concept of the quality of pre-school education. The scientific literature and strategic documents on education emphasize that pre-school education is the fundamental field of human education, on the basis of which education in other fields of education can be successfully implemented. Today, teachers, researchers, education policy strategists and anyone who cares about the well-being of a young child and the quality of his/her care and education have no doubt that it is in pre-school childhood that the foundations for his/her successful future are laid. It is stated that early childhood is a special period that is important for the purposeful, high-quality education and life of the child in the present and in the future; quality education has a positive effect on children with different needs and opportunities, however, it becomes especially important for children growing up in conditions of social risk and social exclusion, bilingual and multilingual children, their further social, emotional and cultural development.

PRESCHOOL EDUCATION OF MULTILINGUAL CHILDREN IN LITHUANIAN LANGUAGE TEACHING/LEARNING

In many countries, children learn foreign languages from an early age. It has been observed that the younger the child, the easier it is for him/her to learn several languages at the same time. Children do not need much effort, they can learn languages by communicating, playing or engaging in interesting activities. A multilingual environment allows a child to learn several languages naturally. Research also shows a positive effect of multilingual education on children's cognitive, social and emotional development. Children growing up in a multilingual environment are smarter, more flexible, they have good conditions to improve their communication and socializing skills. Multilingual children have a broader outlook and greater tolerance for the cultures of other countries, are more tolerant, and more easily overcome barriers related to otherness. The fluent use of languages has a positive effect on the child's socialization.



Immigrant families that encourage the child to learn both the language of the new country of residence and the native language of the parents help the child to socialize and adapt more successfully, because a bilingual child will be able to successfully integrate into the society in which he/she lives and maintain close relations with relatives living in other countries (Daugiakultūriai darželiai, 2016).

It is also important to know Lithuanian for bilingual or multilingual children, whose native language is not Lithuanian, but they live in Lithuania. Forms of education for bilingual children can vary depending on the goals and circumstances of education. Teaching can take place in two languages with a greater emphasis on either the native language or the state language. Researchers (Mazolevskienė & Montvilaitė, 2007), analyzing the education of children of national minorities in Lithuania, singled out several models. One of them is named as a model of submersion, which is realized when a foreign-speaking child joins a group where education takes place in the language of the majority. The child is forced to learn the language of the majority through natural communication. The model of bilingual education is implemented in a group with about half of the children being Lithuanian and the other half speaking another language. This model means that communication in the group takes place in two languages on an equal basis. Another model, which has the features of immersion and two-way bilingual education, is implemented when education takes place in Lithuanian (in the state language). In addition, for some time activities are organized for children who are non-native speakers and communication takes place in their native language. In a group, in which all children are non-native speakers or from mixed families, education is organized in the native language of the national minority, however, special time is allocated for learning the state language. In such a group, referring to the principles of immersion, education can also be realized only in the state Lithuanian language.

The peculiarities of children of the preschool age are especially favorable for the application of bilingual education: children are sincere, they communicate easily, are not afraid to experiment, easily understand new things, learn quickly, and three-to-five-year-olds are very receptive to languages. The child naturally learns language by playing not only ordinary games but also games that develop language skills, creating stories and telling them, singing songs, reciting poems. When natural situations, which encourage the child to speak, say the names of the objects and describe the properties of the objects and their purpose, are created in the preschool group, such exercises develop the language skills even faster. Communicating with peers and adults, including a variety of characters (such as hand puppets depicting well-known cartoon characters), a bilingual child gets to know the language more easily, understands it better and starts using it in everyday life. When teaching Lithuanian, it is also recommended to perform activities with audio and video recordings, to use interactive teaching aids on the Internet (Bartkevičienė et al., 2014).

Properly selected methods of language development help to successfully learn the Lithuanian language, to achieve the ability to communicate in it with peers and adults. The methods chosen should be appropriate to the children's age, abilities, individual needs and inclinations. One of the most acceptable ways, which best suits the educational peculiarities of preschool children, is play. By playing children acquire new abilities, skills, experience, by playing they develop their communication skills and thinking through words and thoughts. In the preschool age, play is named as the main and most accessible activity for the child, corresponding to the thinking, emotionality, activeness, need to communicate of a child of this age. Play is called both an educational method and the most versatile means of exploring the world.



The results of scientific research (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; van Oers, 2012) confirm that play for children is not just a pleasure or entertainment, as it may seem at first glance, but an activity that influences the child's development and lays the foundation for the child's further successful learning. Research (Hakkarainen, Brėdikytė, Brandišauskienė, & Sujetaitė-Volungevičienė, 2015) reveals that the promotion of the child's involvement in play activities and the understanding of these activities as socio-cultural also depend on the teacher's attitude to children's opportunities. Referring to the child's language experience and abilities, the teacher selects the activities of bilingual education that should be purposeful, meaningful, interesting, close to the child's cultural experience, providing positive emotions, associated with the daily activities that are important to him/her. It is best to develop language skills in real situations, such as during the rhythm of the day (morning greeting, preparation for eating, walking, rest, farewell, etc.), when the child learns the language naturally, is able to understand and use it.

EXPERIENCE OF MULTILINGUAL, MULTICULTURAL PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN LITHUANIA

Educational institutions can make a meaningful contribution to fostering multilingualism and multiculturalism in society. Pre-school education institutions play a special role in achieving this goal because they care for the youngest members of society – children. Already in the preschool age, it is appropriate to lay the foundations for tolerance of otherness, a positive attitude towards linguistic diversity. Intercultural experience at an early age helps to shape the child's identity when the child explores the environment, compares himself/herself to others, looks for similarities and differences (Daugiakultūriai darželiai, 2016).

In recent years, a lot of attention has been paid to multicultural and multilingual education in pre-school education institutions of Lithuania. In April-September 2016, the Language Center of State Institutions implemented the international project "Modernization of the Methods of Multicultural Pre-school and Pre-primary Education". The aim of the project was to contribute to the improvement of the quality of pre-school and pre-primary education by modernizing the methods of multicultural education. After the implementation of the project, the publication "Multicultural Kindergartens. Good Practice Guide" ("Daugiakultūriai darželiai. Gerosios praktikos vadovas") (2016) for pre-school education institutions was prepared. The aim of the publication is to contribute to the development of multilingual and multicultural education in kindergartens by providing relevant information, descriptions of good practice, recommendations, methodological materials and examples of the organization of activities.

One of the pre-school education institutions, the good practice in multilingual education of which is presented in the publication "Multicultural Kindergartens. Good Practice Guide" ("Daugiakultūriai darželiai. Gerosios praktikos vadovas") (2016), is "Saulės gojus" ("Sun Forest"). This pre-school education institution has extensive experience in educating children in a multilingual and multicultural environment. "Saulės gojus" started its work in 2004 and was the first bilingual kindergarten in Lithuania. The kindergarten is attended by children of different nationalities, who speak different native languages. The kindergarten "Saulės gojus" has accumulated experience in teaching two foreign languages – English and German. The pre-school education institution emphasizes that Lithuanian children learn a foreign language and children who are not native speakers learn Lithuanian naturally and without stress. Therefore, language



skills are developed using the immersion method. Children learn a new language by hearing it all day naturally used in their environment. The natural direction of language education and the immersion method are based on the same processes that take place when a child learns a native language. In the pre-school education institution, communication with the learner is the same as the mother communicates with the baby – it is spoken clearly, expressively, words and phrases are repeated several times, intonation is emphasized, speech is enhanced by facial expressions, gestures. Visual aids are used – children are shown certain objects that are being talked about or actions that are to be performed. Such natural communication is more child-friendly than any other method of language learning. The child can only listen and show that he/she understood or did not understand what was being said. The child does not experience psychological pressure to speak and answer questions immediately. The “silent period” of the child educated by the method of immersion can last up to one year, when the child does not speak, even though he/she understands what others are saying. The child begins to speak himself/herself when he/she is ready for it. Once a child starts speaking, he/she can immediately use phrases and sentences.

The principle of “one person – one language” is observed in the implementation of bilingual or multilingual education in the pre-school institution “Saulės gojus”. Specialists of a certain language communicate with children only in a certain language, for example, a German language teacher communicates with children only in German, an English language teacher communicates with them only in English. Children associate a specific language with a certain person and naturally use that language when communicating with them. Children from mixed families may be well acquainted with this principle when they communicate at home with their mother in her language and with their father in his language. English and German teachers are fluent in a foreign language, they do not give themselves away to children that they speak Lithuanian. Two languages (English or German and Lithuanian) are used in parallel during the “Morning Circle”. If the “English-speaking” teacher asks, they answer in English, if the “Lithuanian-speaking” teacher asks, they answer in Lithuanian. Students from various foreign countries regularly have their internships in the pre-school educational institution, they work as teaching assistants. Therefore, children are naturally forced to speak that person’s language in order to communicate with non-native speakers.¹

Another pre-school education institution in Lithuania that presents itself as multilingual and multicultural is “Mažųjų valdos” (“Dominions of the Little Ones”). The institution emphasizes language learning in the first years of life. Children from 3 months to 6 years old are invited to attend the sessions. The aim is to learn certain languages or simply to exercise the child’s intellect, to exercise his/her mind. Exercise for the mind is provided with the help of four languages (Lithuanian-speaking teachers work with the children and Spanish-, English- and Russian-speaking persons, who stay with children all day, assist them). In this kindergarten, as in the previously mentioned one, education is also carried out by the method of immersion – during the session, the teacher communicates only in the language taught, the same principle is recommended for the parents participating in the activities.²

The Outdoor Kindergarten also introduces itself as a multilingual and multicultural pre-school education institution. The kindergarten is attended by children of different nationalities

¹<https://darzelis.saulesgojus.lt/koncepcija>.

²<http://www.xn--maj-valdos-pgcb4l.lt/wp/uzsienio-kalbos-isanu-anglu-rusu/>.



and languages. Thanks to volunteers coming from different parts of the world, children get used to foreign languages. There is an active cooperation with foreign outdoor kindergartens, therefore, teachers from other parts of the world are often received. In this way, children get to know other races, countries, their culture, language and customs.³

In 2016, after evaluating multicultural education in Lithuanian pre-school and pre-primary education institutions, a group of researchers submitted recommendations on multicultural education in kindergartens. Attention is drawn to the fact that in order to improve multicultural education in pre-school education institutions, it is necessary to develop a complex set of methods and educational activities, to cooperate with all stakeholders (teachers, administration, parents, students, educational support specialists, society) interested in the quality of pre-school education, to share experiences and learn from each other. Considerable attention should be paid to how to involve the learners' family members in the educational process, especially if they come from other cultures and countries. The importance of authentic cultural contacts is recognized – to seek the widest possible participation of people of different nationalities, such as students from other countries, representatives of ethnic communities, in kindergarten groups. In order to ensure the quality of education, it is recommended to develop guidelines for multicultural education, which would allow teachers to assess the situation of the educated group and monitor progress. It is also important to develop the competences of teachers by preparing methodological material, organizing practical training and discussions (Daugiakultūriai darželiai, 2016).

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION, THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES

The development of teachers' competences, which contributes to multicultural education emphasizing the importance of multilingualism, is one of the perspectives for improving such education. In the Description of the Teacher's Professional Competence (*Mokytojo profesijos kompetencijos aprašas*) (2007), in addition to other competences important to the teacher, communication in a foreign language (languages) is also distinguished. The role of the teacher in multilingual, multicultural education is very important. It introduces children to the cultural and linguistic diversity of society, develops respect for people of different nationalities and races, teaches children the rules of communication, develops positive attitudes towards different linguistic and cultural groups. More broadly, the pre-school teacher promotes the involvement of all participants in the educational process in the creation of a tolerant society. In order to successfully educate children from different cultures, a teacher must be:

- positive towards different cultural groups, open to other cultures;
- respecting every learner;
- interested in the experience of children's families;
- looking for ways to solve the problem of the language barrier;
- able to deal with difficult situations arising on a cultural basis (Daugiakultūriai darželiai, 2016).

³<https://laukodarzelis.lt/apie-mus/>.



Research on the expression of intercultural competence of teachers in Lithuania is not common, especially when it comes to pre-school teachers. However, the conducted research shows the importance of improving teachers' intercultural competences, including the linguistic competence.

Researchers analyzing teachers' intercultural competences (Norvilienė & Tang, 2015; Norvilienė & Zuzevičiūtė, 2011; Reingardė, Vasiliauskaitė, & Erentaitė, 2010) revealed that teachers themselves admit that they are not ready to work in multicultural classrooms, they have difficulty communicating and collaborating with parents of a multicultural group. According to the research participants, the language barrier is the biggest obstacle for them in these situations.

The research (Daugiakultūriai darželiai, 2016) revealed that although higher education institutions training pre-school teachers seek to adapt to demographic, social and cultural changes in families and society, graduates leave their studies without acquiring multicultural competence. Therefore, teachers rely on their experience and intuition when organizing multicultural activities in pre-school education institutions. This is an important signal for teacher trainers and pre-school education institutions, and for teachers themselves when considering the opportunities for teacher training and competence development.

Teachers' intercultural competences, of which language competence is an integral part, develop through lifelong learning. Noting that higher education graduates feel the language barrier and are not sufficiently prepared to work in multilingual, multicultural groups, it is important to consider the factors influencing the development of the intercultural competence of students (including prospective teachers). Researchers, who have analyzed these factors (Norvilienė, 2014), emphasize that the development of a future teacher's intercultural competences should be discussed at three levels: the national level of intercultural education, the institutional level and the personal level.

It is noticed (Norvilienė, 2014) that the need for intercultural education is emphasized at the national level (in various documents). At the institutional level, it is important how higher education institutions develop internationality and participate in the process of internationalization. These issues are of interest to Lithuanian scientists (Karvelienė, 2019; Virgailaitė-Mečkauskaitė, 2011). They draw attention to the following important factors for the development of students' intercultural competence in higher education institutions: participation of higher education institutions in international programs, foreign language policy at the university strengthening the international dimension, use of foreign language during studies, experience with incoming foreign teachers, involvement of Erasmus+ students in the study process, participation in international scientific conferences, etc.

Regarding the future teacher and the development of his/her intercultural competences at the personal level, internal motivation, the need to improve intercultural competences, active participation in international exchange programs and other activities, etc., are very important. It is revealed that purposeful intercultural education becomes a significant factor in the development of intercultural competence (Norvilienė, 2014).

In lifelong learning, it is important for the teacher to develop his/her intercultural competences, the competences of working with multilingual children not only in a formal but also in an informal way, through participation in self-education activities. Seminars for Lithuanian pre-school teachers, educational tools on multilingual, multicultural education can help to develop teachers' linguistic and intercultural competences. Sharing good practice (for example, in the publication *Multicultural Kindergartens* (Daugiakultūriai darželiai, 2016), advice to teachers, who teach children the Lithuanian language in the institutions providing pre-school



and pre-primary curricula in the national minority language (Bartkevičienė et al., 2014), can enrich the professional activity of pre-school teachers, methodically substantiate it.

CONCLUSIONS

Multilingualism is not a new phenomenon in Lithuania. The issues of multilingualism and multilingual education have been relevant for a long time, especially in the ethnically mixed regions of Lithuania. The emphasis on the importance of the Lithuanian language and its relationship with other languages – of national minorities or foreign ones – often proved to be controversial. Over time, attitudes towards multilingualism and multilingual education have changed not only in Lithuania, but also in many countries of the European Union. A new methodological approach, that allows for a re-examination of the situation of multilingualism already in the pre-school age from the perspective of the child and the concept of the childhood world, has been highlighted in recent years.

After Lithuania became a member of the European Union, early foreign language teaching becomes an important challenge and necessity already in the preschool age. Analysis and adaptation of the experience of other countries in the field of multilingual education in Lithuania could be a suitable perspective for further research. Taking into account the possibilities and needs of pre-school children, it is worth promoting the earliest possible foreign language learning, as language learning enriches the child in various ways, improves the child's competences and provides more opportunities in the future, has a great impact on further personality development.

Early childhood is a special period, important for the purposeful, high-quality education and life of the child in the present and in the future. Quality preschool education has a positive effect on children with different needs and opportunities, however, it becomes especially important for children growing up in conditions of social risk and social exclusion, bilingual and multilingual children, their further social, emotional and cultural development. Various models are applied in Lithuania to help children of national minorities to successfully learn the state Lithuanian language. Bilingualism/multilingualism stimulates the child's linguistic and general development, bilingual/multilingual children are also better able to cope with various cognitive tasks, such as perception, concentration, thinking, etc.

In order for the education of children, who are multilingual, bilingual or non-native speakers, to be successful, it is necessary to choose the right educational methods. It helps to successfully learn the Lithuanian language, to achieve the ability to communicate in it with peers and adults, to adapt in a group and socialize more easily. The methods chosen should be appropriate to the children's age, abilities, individual needs and inclinations. One of the most acceptable ways, which best suits the educational peculiarities of preschool children, is play. It is also recommended to use innovative interactive teaching aids on the Internet, to perform activities with video and audio recordings. The partnership between educators (parents, teachers, other professionals) and children is also important for the success of educating children, who are non-native speakers, accepting the cultural and social differences of families with tolerance, respecting their native language, religion, traditions and customs.

In recent years, a lot of attention has been paid to multicultural and multilingual education in pre-school education institutions of Lithuania. Institutions get involved in projects meant for



this area, good practice in multicultural and multilingual education is shared, pre-school education institutions, which present themselves as multilingual and multicultural kindergartens, are being established. In these institutions, the immersion method, which allows children to learn languages naturally and without stress, is particularly emphasized in the promotion of multilingual education. When modeling children's multilingual education, the topics of multicultural education are emphasized.

Teachers' competences play an important role in the multilingual education of children. Research conducted by interviewing teachers of Lithuanian educational institutions often reveals that teachers admit that they are not ready to work in multicultural classrooms, communicate and collaborate with parents of children of such groups. The language barrier is identified as the biggest obstacle in this situation. Developing teachers' competences that enable them to work successfully in multilingual groups and to contribute to quality multilingual education is an important task. It is being addressed on several levels: focusing on the policy of the country favorable to multilingual education, promoting the internationality of higher education institutions training teachers and emphasizing the internal motivation of teachers themselves to improve their intercultural as well as linguistic competences, to be interested in the ways of improving the quality of multilingual education, to apply them in their professional activities.

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