# Second Foreign Language in Primary School: Research and Arguments

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**Abstract**

This review study synthesises recent European research on the teaching of an additional foreign language (FL2) in primary education (ISCED 1+2). The studies surveyed report positive associations between FL2 learning and executive functions, metalinguistic awareness, and reading and mathematical literacy, without evidence of detriment to attainment in other subjects. The literature further documents contributions to social and intercultural competences and to learners' motivation, including among pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Economic analyses indicate a favourable rate of return on public investment in foreign-language provision. Comparative evidence from Slovakia, where compulsory FL2 was withdrawn in 2019, is examined as a policy case. The study identifies findings relevant to curriculum development and delineates the limits of the available evidence.

**Keywords:** second foreign language; primary education; CLIL; executive functions; intercultural competence; equity in education; language policy; Czechia; Slovakia.

# Druhý cizí jazyk na základní škole: výzkumy a argumenty

**Abstrakt**

Přehledová studie syntetizuje aktuální evropské výzkumy zaměřené na výuku dalšího cizího jazyka (FL2) na základní škole (ISCED 1+2). Analyzované studie dokládají pozitivní souvislost mezi učením se FL2 a rozvojem exekutivních funkcí, metajazykového uvědomění a čtenářské i matematické gramotnosti, aniž by byl doložen negativní dopad na výsledky v ostatních předmětech. Literatura dále dokumentuje přínosy pro sociální a interkulturní kompetence a pro motivaci žáků k učení, a to i u žáků s nižším socioekonomickým statutem. Ekonomické analýzy ukazují příznivou návratnost veřejných investic do jazykového vzdělávání. Jako případová studie je zkoumán slovenský vývoj po zrušení povinnosti FL2 v roce 2019. Studie identifikuje zjištění relevantní pro tvorbu kurikula a vymezuje meze dostupných zjištění.

**Klíčová slova:** další cizí jazyk; základní vzdělávání; CLIL; exekutivní funkce; interkulturní kompetence; rovný přístup ke vzdělávání; jazyková politika; Česko; Slovensko.

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## 1 Introduction

In the context of the ongoing revisions to the Framework Education Programme for Basic Education (ISCED 1+2) in Czechia, several claims regarding the teaching of a second foreign language (FL2) recur in public and policy discourse. FL2 has been a compulsory component of the Czech curriculum since 2013/2014, with an exit level of A1 on the CEFR scale; the proportion of foreign languages studied per pupil rose from 1.08 in 2006/2007 to 1.27 in 2013/2014 and has since stabilised at approximately 1.33 (MŠMT, 2025c). The revisions issued in February and June 2025 (MŠMT, 2025a, 2025b; cf. NPI ČR, 2025) retained this arrangement.

The 2025 elections to the Czech Chamber of Deputies returned the question to the agenda, with successive proposals to render FL2 optional. Such proposals were typically supported by general appeals to expert opinion rather than by reference to identifiable studies. The structural position of FL2 in Czech curriculum policy, including the competition between German, French, Spanish, Russian and Italian for a diminishing allocation, has been analysed in detail by Nadvorníková and Klinka (2023). A systematic

assessment of the recurrent claims can inform curriculum deliberation and help identify responses to documented weaknesses in FL2 provision (ČŠI, 2023).[1]

## 1.1 Aim and structure of the study

The aim of this review study is to provide a critical synthesis of peer-reviewed European research on FL2 teaching in primary education and to relate the principal claims circulating in the Czech curricular debate to the available evidence. The claims fall into four thematic clusters: (1) the impact of FL2 on cognitive development and learning outcomes; (2) its effect on interpersonal and intercultural competences; (3) its economic dimensions; and (4) the principle of equal access to education. Sections 2 to 5 address these clusters in turn; Section 6 examines the Slovak reform as a comparative policy case; Section 7 draws the findings together.

## 1.2 Method

The claims were assessed indirectly, through current research, surveys and analyses of comparable scope, together with the relevant meta-analyses. The corpus comprised peer-reviewed studies and policy and statistical documents issued by international organisations, predominantly published since 2013, predominantly in English or German, with priority given to open-access materials, and addressing the teaching and acquisition of FL2 at ISCED 1+2 within the general pupil population in the EU. A small number of earlier foundational sources are retained where no later equivalent exists. Representativeness, methodology and evidential value were taken into account in the selection. Where a body of literature reports heterogeneous results, this is stated explicitly rather than resolved in favour of a single reading.

## 1.3 Limitations

Three limitations should be noted. First, the design is a narrative rather than a systematic review: the corpus was assembled purposively, and no formal protocol for screening or risk-of-bias assessment was applied. Second, the studies synthesised differ in design,

[1] This study was completed and submitted while the arrangement described above was in force. On 9 June 2026 the Minister of Education, Robert Plaga, announced in a letter to school heads that the compulsory status of FL2 within the common core would be withdrawn: FL2 becomes a compulsory-elective subject, which schools must offer but which pupils may decline. The obligation to introduce English from Year 1 was withdrawn at the same time, and the implementation timetable for the revised Framework Education Programme was deferred from September 2027 to September 2028; the revised wording was announced for mid-August 2026. The arrangement thus approaches the Slovak model examined in Sections 5 and 6, and the evidence reviewed there bears directly on its likely consequences.

in the operationalisation of FL2 (school subject, CLIL provision, or societal bilingualism), and in the populations sampled; effect sizes are therefore not pooled, and the direction rather than the magnitude of effects is reported. Third, much of the evidence on cognitive outcomes derives from research on bilingualism, where the transferability of findings to classroom FL2 instruction remains a matter of debate. Conclusions are formulated with these constraints in view.

## 2 Cognitive development and learning outcomes

The first cluster of claims concerns the relationship between FL2 and pupils' cognitive development. The literature reports positive associations with executive functions (EF), working memory and metalinguistic awareness, and with mathematical and reading literacy. The reviewed evidence does not indicate that these effects are confined to high-attaining pupils, nor that FL2 depresses attainment in other subjects.

Bialystok (2017), reviewing behavioural and neuroimaging studies of bilingual children and adults, describes bilingualism as an adaptation of the cognitive system rather than a discrete advantage, with documented consequences for executive control and for the recruitment of frontal and cingulate networks. Yurtsever, Anderson and Grundy (2023), in an updated quantitative analysis, report that bilingual children outperform monolingual peers on EF tasks considerably more often than chance would predict, while noting that the size of the group-level difference remains contested in the literature.

Evidence from classroom settings is more directly relevant to curriculum policy. Dallinger, Jonkmann, Hollm and Fiege (2016), in a longitudinal study of German schools (ISCED 2, $n$ = 1,806), found a positive effect of CLIL on English listening comprehension, while gains in the content subject (history) were comparable between CLIL and non-CLIL groups — that is, the additional language demand did not depress content learning. Pires, Mancebón, Mediavilla and Gómez-Sancho (2024), applying propensity-score matching to PISA data from the Madrid Bilingual Programme, likewise conclude that CLIL raises English proficiency without reducing attainment. Vocabulary outcomes in primary CLIL and EFL settings are compared by Tragant, Marsol, Serrano and Llanes (2016).

The question whether these benefits extend to pupils with learning difficulties is addressed by Tribushinina and Mackaaij (2023), who compared monolingual ($N$ = 49) and bilingual ($N$ = 22) pupils with developmental language disorder (DLD) learning English in Dutch special-education schools. As the authors observe, "it is unknown whether similar advantages hold for bilingual pupils with learning disabilities" (Tribushinina & Mackaaij, 2023, p. 1). Their bilingual participants outperformed monolingual peers on the grammar test and on syntactic complexity, although differences

on the grammaticality-judgement task did not remain significant once exposure was controlled for. The finding supports the weaker but policy-relevant conclusion that foreign-language instruction is feasible and beneficial for pupils with language-related learning needs, rather than contraindicated for them.

## 3 Social, intercultural and motivational dimensions

The second cluster concerns social and intercultural outcomes. Obilișteanu and Niculescu (2018) argue that language teaching cannot be separated from cultural transmission, and that "the foreign language classes can be the link between the two cultures" (p. 345), through which learners encounter alternative values and frames of reference. At the level of policy, Beacco and Byram (2007) provide the Council of Europe's reference framework for plurilingualism and diversification. It should be noted that the Guide is deliberately non-prescriptive: it "does not promote any particular language education policy", but sets out the challenges and the range of possible responses. Its relevance here is therefore as a framework for evaluating provision, not as an endorsement of compulsory FL2.

Eberhardt (2013), drawing on the German DESI study (Klieme & Beck, 2007; DESI-Konsortium, 2008), which assessed approximately 11,000 Year 9 pupils, develops a competence model for intercultural competence in foreign-language teaching and relates sustained language learning to gains in intercultural and pragmatic competence. Lorenzo, Granados and Rico (2021), examining CLIL provision in monolingual southern Europe, report that bilingual education can function as an instrument of educational equity, with positive outcomes across socio-economic strata where implementation is adequately resourced — a finding that qualifies the assumption that FL2 necessarily favours already-advantaged pupils. A survey of methodological approaches in the Czech and German contexts is provided by Janíková, Andrášová, Lachout, Marečková, Podrábská and Zajícová (2011).

## 4 Economic dimensions

The third cluster concerns returns on public investment in language provision. Ginsburgh and Weber (2020), in a review of the economics of language, document a wage premium associated with foreign-language proficiency across labour markets and examine the role of shared language in reducing barriers to trade. The Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung (BIBB, 2018) survey of employees across sectors ($n > 1{,}000$) reports that 44 % of respondents required a foreign language at work, and that approximately one

in three considered that improved proficiency, or knowledge of an additional language, would improve their employment prospects.

Ayres-Bennett, Hafner, Dufresne and Yerushalmi (2022), in a study commissioned by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and conducted by RAND Europe and the University of Cambridge, estimate benefit-to-cost ratios of at least 2:1 for expanded foreign-language teaching across four target languages (Arabic, Mandarin, French and Spanish) under conservative assumptions. Two qualifications are relevant for transfer to the Czech context: the modelling is specific to the United Kingdom labour market, and the languages examined are not those that predominate as FL2 in Central Europe. The direction of the finding is nonetheless consistent with the wage-premium literature reviewed above.

## 5 Equal access to education

The fourth cluster concerns equity. Where FL2 is compulsory, access does not depend on the capacity of individual families to identify, select and support an optional subject; where it is elective, that capacity becomes a determinant of participation. The claim that compulsory FL2 deepens social inequality is not supported by the evidence reviewed here, which points in the opposite direction.

Eurydice (2023) provides comparative data on language provision across EU member states, and Eurydice (2025) documents subsequent national reforms in Slovakia. Further comparative perspectives are available in Eurostat (2023, 2025) and OECD (2025). Simanová and Lynch (2023), analysing five successive periods of Slovak curriculum policy, observe that a foreign language other than English is taught only sporadically in Slovak primary schools, and that the disponible-hours allocation did not create the preconditions for an additional foreign language at that level. Their analysis also cautions against equating early provision with effective provision: it is, they conclude, "not the early age that appears to be significant, but the quality of teaching" (Simanová & Lynch, 2023, p. 8). Structural provision and instructional quality are thus complementary rather than alternative policy objects.

## 6 The Slovak reform as a comparative case

From the school year 2019/2020, Slovakia liberalised the arrangements for foreign-language teaching in primary schools as part of a wider programme of individualisation through optional subjects and digital tools, framed by the strategies *Učiace sa Slovensko* (MŠVVŠ SR, 2017) and *Moderné a úspešné Slovensko* (MF SR, 2020). The reform was justified by reference to the quality of existing provision, including a shortfall in

qualified language teachers; Simanová and Lynch (2023) report that in one national sample of 917 respondents only 20.17 % of primary foreign-language teachers met the qualification requirements. The measure was contested by, among others, the *To dá rozum* analytical platform (To dá rozum, n.d.).

Over the six years following implementation, the share of primary-school pupils studying FL2 fell from 73 % (2018/2019) to 8.9 % (2023/2024) and 9.2 % (2024/2025). The share of pupils reaching exit level B1 in FL1 (English) rose from 65 % to 71 % (EU average 69 %), but aggregate foreign-language proficiency did not improve correspondingly (Eurostat, 2023, 2025; OECD, 2025).

The distribution of the remaining provision is uneven. Participation in FL2 stood at 20–22 % in the Bratislava region but at 4–6 % in the Prešov and Košice regions, and in the eastern regions only 40 % of FL2 learners reached exit level A1 (2023). Participation was 3–6 % among pupils of low socio-economic status compared with 28–33 % among pupils of high socio-economic status. Where an educational good is made elective, its uptake tends to track the informational and organisational resources of families, and the reduction of compulsory hours correspondingly reduced the school's capacity to offset differences in home environment. It should be noted that these are observational data: the association between the reform and the widening of participation gaps is strong and temporally consistent, but a causal attribution would require a design that the available sources do not provide.

## Discussion and conclusion

The evidence reviewed here supports four conclusions, stated at the level of confidence the sources permit. First, FL2 learning is positively associated with the development of cognitive functions, reading and mathematical literacy, and learning preparedness, and the reviewed studies provide no support for the claim that it depresses attainment in other subjects or that its benefits are restricted to a particular subgroup of pupils. Second, FL2 provision contributes to social and intercultural competences and to motivation for learning. Third, the returns on public investment in foreign-language provision appear favourable, although the available modelling derives from contexts that differ from the Czech one. Fourth, the Slovak case indicates that making FL2 elective is associated with a sharp contraction of participation and with a widening of regional and socio-economic gaps.

Taken together, these findings suggest that FL2 is not adequately conceptualised as a reduced version of FL1. Its objectives, and consequently its methods and instruments, are distinct, and the evidence for its cognitive and social contribution is not reducible to language proficiency alone. On this reading, the documented weaknesses of Czech

FL2 provision — teacher qualification, hour allocation, and the absence of dedicated A1-level textbook series for the primary level — are arguments for strengthening implementation rather than for withdrawing the requirement. Whether the requirement is retained remains a political decision, properly taken by the responsible authority; the evidence reviewed here bears on what may be expected to follow from it.

Further research would be valuable in two directions in particular: longitudinal Czech data on FL2 outcomes at ISCED 2, which are at present largely absent; and systematic evaluation of the Slovak reform using designs capable of supporting causal inference. The Czech decision of June 2026 will, in due course, provide a second natural experiment in the same direction.

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