

EXPANDING VOCABULARY THROUGH THE USE OF MULTILINGUAL READING MATERIALS IN PRESCHOOL PERIOD

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The chapter focuses on vocabulary development in preschool children exploring multilingual literary and informative reading materials, namely a literary picture book and picture dictionaries. We conducted a case study to examine the familiarity with animals, i.e. the ability to name individual animals in Slovenian, in preschool children of the second age group (5–6 years). A total of 25 children ($n = 25$) participated in the study: 11 with Slovenian as their native language and 14 who learn Slovenian as a second language. The study results demonstrate significant differences in the naming of selected animals between children born in Slovenia and immigrant children. A particularly disquieting finding is that children who are soon to enter school have difficulty naming animals not only in Slovenian, but also in their mother tongue.

DOI

[https://doi.org/
10.18690/um.pef.4.2025.11](https://doi.org/10.18690/um.pef.4.2025.11)

ISBN

978-961-286-999-1

Ključne besede:

kindergarten,
preschool children,
immigrant children,
naming ability,
vocabulary,
multilingual reading
materials



University of Maribor Press

1 Introduction

Human communication is a conscious and deliberate social activity, and the most complete symbolic social interaction is the use of language as a composition of signs for verbal communication (Rajh, 2013, pp. 9–11), which in each individual depends on their biological developmental stage and their mental capacities, by means of which language is used as a symbolic activity. Language ability is one of the fundamental anthropogenic factors. People use language and words to express their needs, thoughts, sensations, to solve conceptual problems, to acquire knowledge and, last but not least, to use and understand linguistic elements. Hence, from the grammatical perspective (Toporišič, 2000, p. 116), words bear both factual (e.g., heart, play, yellow) and grammatical meaning (e.g., and, from), and are thus the essential part of language structure, which we refer to as the vocabulary, glossary, lexicon or even dictionary. The foundations of linguistic ability depend on cognitive and mental abilities. As they grow, expand and strengthen, so does the linguistic ability, which is so vast that it is virtually never used to its full potential. People learn new words and advance their linguistic skills throughout their lives, as language itself is in a constant state of flux. In early childhood, children acquire basic naming and grammatical elements of verbal language. The process of developing and expanding their vocabulary is then deepened throughout their secondary school education, in accordance with the curricula's didactic recommendations. Yet, since language is a highly complex living structure, constantly evolving and enriching itself, adopting new words from other languages, creating new words through systemic and non-systemic patterns of formation, and redefining familiar and established words, the vocabulary of a language can never be fully mastered, which makes the development of communicative competence a lifelong activity. It is nevertheless essential to build the appropriate foundations in the preschool years (Bešter Turk, 2011, p. 127), as children's vocabulary has been repeatedly confirmed as one of the key aspects of their speaking ability (Taylor et al., 2013) and as a fundamental predictor of reading literacy (Voršič & Ropič Kop, 2020, pp. 139–157).

1.1 Vocabulary in Preschool Period

People acquire expressive language skills gradually: first we learn to pronounce individual sounds and syllables, then we begin to use our first words, which we gradually combine into logically meaningful phrases and subsequently into

meaningful multi-word sentence forms (Rajh, 2013, p. 15). The development of a child's vocabulary begins as soon as they are born. Children have an innate capacity to distinguish voices in all languages, and about the age of 6 months they focus their attention on the specific voices of their mother tongue (Marjanovič Umek & Fekonja, 2019, p. 2). Thus, in the second half of their first year of life, children can already produce language sounds, phones, which can vary from cooing and babbling to the pronunciation of distinctive sounds (Rajh, 2013, p. 15). Children can actually recognise and understand many words even before they learn to speak. A child begins to produce their first words through voice combinations and compound forms at an average age of 12 months. They name things or phenomena that are part of their everyday environment, which is an essential characteristic of language communication. Children are similar to each other regarding their first words; they tend to talk about people they are close to and who are in their immediate environment (e.g., mum, dad), as well as about food, clothes, objects that interest them, toys, animals, and the environment in which they live. Some of their first words also pertain to social interactions (Marjanovič Umek & Fekonja, 2019, p. 10). Thus, the majority of the children's words are those used by adults that they are close to in their daily routines and activities. Children usually accompany their first spoken words with gestures (Krajnc Ivič et al., 2017, p. 62).

Most children speak their first words between the ages of 12 and 20 months. During this period, the development of vocabulary is extremely rapid, both in terms of quantity and quality. Research conducted by Bates, Marchman, Thal, Fenson, Dale, Reily, et al. (1994, in Marjanovič Umek & Fekonja, 2019, p. 2) found that infants aged 12 months can speak from 0 to 52 words, toddlers aged 16 months from 0 to 347 words, and children aged 30 months from 208 to 675 words. Results of a Slovenian longitudinal study (Marjanovič Umek et al., 2017) have indicated that between the ages of 16 and 31 months, toddlers' vocabulary increases by an average of 34 words per month and that individual vocabulary gains per month range between 6 and 51 words (Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja & Hacin Beyazoglu 2020, p. 18).

Vocabulary development research mainly points out two so-called jumps; a study by Slovenian authors (Marjanovič Umek et al., 2013; Marjanovič Umek et al., 2023, p. 11) has found that between the ages of 18 and 25 months, toddlers' vocabulary

increases on average from 79 to 256 words, and between the ages of 25 and 30 months, from 256 to 394 words.

This means that the vocabulary increases rapidly in the preschool period between the ages of 16 and 31 months (Figure 1), during which time there is significant variability in the amount, type and content of the words that children understand and speak (Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja & Hacin Beyazoglu, 2020; 2023).

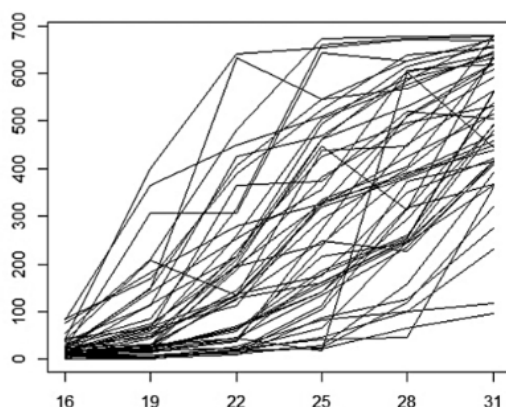


Figure 1: Individual Differences in Vocabulary Growth Rate and Vocabulary Size

Source: Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja & Hacin Beyazoglu (2023, p. 10).

Even in the early years, children's vocabulary exhibits strong development, with the range of words they understand and speak constantly increasing. Children aged five speak on average over 5,000 words, with their receptive vocabulary, which is at all ages broader than their active vocabulary, amounting to over 10,000 words. The vocabulary range in the early developmental period is one of the best predictors of a faster vocabulary development in later periods, as it provides the basis for the acquisition and learning of newer and increasingly complex words (Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja & Hacin Beyazoglu, 2020, p. 21; 2023, p. 13). A child who possesses an extensive vocabulary, comprehends its meaning, and utilizes it effectively is more likely to understand the texts they encounter, both in spoken and written forms, and to produce and compose texts with greater ease. This is due to the fact that vocabulary development is intrinsically linked to the grammatical development. In other words: language learning requires the acquisition of grammatical categories of

words in a language, and learning these categories necessitates the understanding of the syntactic roles of words (Walker et al., 2020).

Between the ages of 11 and 14 months, children use only interjections and nouns (Marjanovič Umek et al., 2016). As S. Kranjc (1996, p. 319) explains, the use of interjections is entirely expected, since this is the first linguistic phase in the speech development, a kind of transition from the so-called pre-linguistic period; the use of nouns proves that the child's speech is still very specific at this stage. New parts of speech, namely verbs, adjectives, pronouns, adverbs and articles, appear between the ages of 19 and 22 months, and the vocabulary expands to include all parts of speech around the age of 30 months (Marjanovič Umek et al., 2016), when the child also begins to include function words such as conjunctions and prepositions. The proportion of interjections steeply declines with age, while the noun remains the most frequent part of speech (Marjanovič Umek et al., 2013; Marjanovič Umek et al., 2023, p. 11–12). Thus, children initially produce one-word statements (e.g. *kitty* meaning *I see a kitty*), followed by two-word statements (e.g. *Kitty sleeps*); this means that they use words with full meaning, or words that, in their estimation, most accurately reflect what they want to convey (Krajnc Ivič et al., 2017, p. 62). 'Toddlers' progress in syntax learning is reflected in the addition of adjectives (e.g. *white kitty*) and locations of objects (e.g. *kitty bed*); by the age of 24 to 27 months, children can form three- or four-word sentences and their use of syntax and morphology becomes increasingly accurate (e.g. *A kitten sits on a chair*). (Marjanovič Umek & Fekonja, 2019, p. 3). When narrating a story in Slovenian, children aged three form sentences with an average of three words, children aged four form sentences with an average of 4.2 words, and children aged five form sentences containing an average of 5.3 words (Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja & Hacin Beyazoglu, 2020, p. 22; Marjanovič Umek et al. 2000, p. 22; Marjanovič Umek et al. 2020, p. 22; Marjanovič Umek et al, 2023, p. 16). In this context, large individual differences have been found to occur: in a study by Marjanovič Umek, Hacin and Fekonja (2019), children aged 5 used an average of between 4.8 and 8.7 words when narrating a story while using a picture book. Research (Bates et al., 2002) also indicates that the correlations between vocabulary breadth and word linking in sentences are stronger than the correlations between a child's age and word linking in sentences. Furthermore, several factors influence differences in vocabulary development, such as the child's characteristics (e.g. gender, age) and their living environment (e.g. parents' education, frequency of conversations, frequency of shared reading, child's enrolment in

kindergarten). A study by Hart and Risley (2003, in Marjanovič Umek et al., 2023, p. 16) found that the vocabulary of children aged 3 whose parents received mid-level education exceeded by more than 200 words the vocabulary of children whose parents received lower education. Additionally, their vocabulary fell short of that of their peers with highly educated parents by roughly 400 words. The differences in vocabulary size further increased with age. Frequent and regular reading is another particularly important factor in developing children's vocabulary and their speaking skills, as quality reading materials include vocabulary which is up to a third more extensive and varied than that used by an adult in communicating with a child. Marjanovič Umek et al. (2023) state the existence of differences in vocabulary between boys and girls, with the latter being earlier to acquire speech and having a larger vocabulary. Yet, Crawford (2001) states that interpersonal differences within each sex are greater than those between the sexes.

The cornerstone of social inclusion is the proficiency in the language of the majority population and in the language of teaching (Vižintin, 2022, p. 306). The second language or the language of the environment is the one the child learns in kindergarten and from the environment and "is the official language and/or language of public life in a particular country, learned to meet the communication needs" (Ferbežar, 1999, p. 417). For most learners, the process of learning the language of a new environment is not easy and takes a long time, but how long depends on a number of factors – proficiency in the native language, linguistic proximity of the first and second languages, the individual's language learning ability, etc. (Vižintin, 2022, p. 306). In Slovenia, Slovenian is the second language to members of the Italian and Hungarian national minorities as well as to the Roma and immigrants who arrived in Slovenia temporarily or permanently for various reasons (Rot Vrhovec, 2016, pp. 22–23). Vocabulary acquisition is very important in the learning and teaching (of Slovenian) as a second (and foreign) language (Nikolovski & Pšeničnik, 2023, p. 251), where all aspects of word knowledge have to be considered, namely the form, meaning and usage (Nation 2013, p. 49), with the early teaching of Slovenian as a second/foreign language in kindergarten requiring dedicated teaching methods and approaches grounded in the knowledge of children's development and learning in early childhood. The so-called communicative model, based on the use of language in concrete speaking situations and with consideration to contexts and contents that are appropriate and interesting to children (Marjanovič Umek et al., 2006, p. 146), is being implemented, mainly due

to important findings (Floccia et al., 2018) indicating that monolingual two-year-olds understand (on a 100-word test) on average 81.8% of words and pronounce 53.7% of them, whereas bilingual two-year-olds understand 67.9% of words and pronounce only 41.2% of them, which is statistically significantly inferior to monolinguals.

According to Cummins (2001), a child's level of proficiency in their first language is a strong predictor of their second language development; children with a solid linguistic foundation and a developed vocabulary in their first language develop better literacy in their language of instruction as they transfer their linguistic knowledge and skills to their second language; and, in terms of the child's development of linguistic schemes and mental abilities, the first and second languages are interdependent. Additionally, experiences that underpin both languages are of importance for the successful development of competence in both languages. In contrast, Goodrich, Loningan and Farver (2013, in Rot Vrhovec 2016, p. 42) caution that the vocabularies of the first and second languages are not interdependent: while children may be able to use their conceptual vocabulary knowledge and transfer it to their second language, they have to learn new words in the second language even if they already know them in the first language.

1.2 The Importance of Vocabulary Enhancement in Children Whose Mother Tongue is not Slovenian

In Slovenia, the planning of the educational process in public kindergartens follows the objectives and principles of the national document by the name of *Kurikulum za vrtce* (1999) [Curriculum for Kindergartens], which provides an expert basis for quality work, and a framework for the optimal development of each child with consideration to individual differences in development and learning. Other such documents are *Smernice za vključevanje otrok, učencev in dijakov iz drugih jezikovnih in kulturnih okolij v slovenski vzgojno-izobraževalni sistem* (2024) [Guidelines for the Inclusion of Children, Pupils and Students from Other Linguistic and Cultural Backgrounds into the Slovenian Education System] and *Smernice za izvajanje dejavnosti pri prehodu otrok iz vrtca v šolo in uvajanje učencev v prvi razred* (2024) [Activities During the Transition of Children from Kindergarten to School and the Introduction of Pupils to the First Grade]. Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja and Hacin Beyazoglu (2020, p. 21) stress that children learn new words mainly while listening to texts read by adults and while talking about various topics. It is particularly important to empower

educators for the earliest language teaching and for the use of modern didactic strategies for teaching Slovenian as a first and second language or as a foreign language. At the same time, it is crucial to monitor the child's language knowledge and progress, as well as to foster collaboration between parents and kindergarten based on inclusion and respect. Licardo and Leite (2022) conducted a study which revealed that educators in Slovenia have high regard for moral values and ethical behaviour, but that with regard to teaching immigrant children they need more support from the educational environment and government institutions, more translators and, most importantly, more didactic tools and children's multilingual literature. Similarly, a study by Skubic and Ocvirk (2024) indicates that educators recognise kindergarten as an important factor in the acquisition of Slovenian, but they expressed the lowest agreement with the statement that they have kindergarten-level guidelines for working with children whose mother tongue is not Slovenian.

Smernice za vključevanje otrok, učencev in dijakov iz drugih jezikovnih in kulturnih okolij v slovenski vzgojno-izobraževalni sistem [Guidelines for the Inclusion of Children, Pupils and Students from Other Linguistic and Cultural Backgrounds into the Slovenian Education System] (2024, p. 13) underline that children in kindergarten perceive language learning as a means of exploring life and their surroundings. The gradual acquisition and expansion of vocabulary and the development of communicative competence are of particular importance for children's easier and faster social integration, as successful communication is key to social inclusion among peers and the acquisition of new knowledge (Bednjički Rošer, 2021). Concurrently, there is a receptiveness to language acquisition in the preschool years, as children are able to fill in the gaps between recognised meanings by understanding key words, and to learn vocabulary for naming concrete reality in familiar themes and with supporting images. Pulko and Haramija (2021, p. 19–20) list a range of inclusive practices and activities to overcome language barriers, in particular artistic activities, didactic games, sports activities, communication through gestures and facial expressions, illustrative aids, etc. Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja and Hacin Beyazoglu (2023, pp. 5, 13) emphasise the importance of vocabulary for the development of other areas of speech (e.g. grammar, storytelling, communicative abilities) and of early and future literacy. Additionally, the number of words children speak is significantly related to the number of words they are able to write down later. They developed a metric tool to assess the vocabulary of children aged 2 to 7 years, namely the picture vocabulary test Slikovni preizkus besednjaka (SPB: 2–7 let)

for children aged 2 to 7 years, with a set of 27 vocabulary words (different parts of speech) within each age group. SPB: 2–7 let (Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja & Hacin Beyazoglu, 2023, pp. 19–54) is designed for individual testing, which enables reliable and objective assessment of vocabulary and identification of deviations from the normative development of vocabulary, but its usage (implementation, evaluation and interpretation of achievements) is not intended for educators due to its specialist requirements. Educators can use the early literacy rating scales *Lestvice zgodnje pismenosti – LZP* to monitor the children's speech (Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja & Hacin Beyazoglu, 2020, pp. 217–238), which enable them to monitor progress and more individualised work. To promote comprehension and learning of new words, they can use joint reading of pictographs, implement gap fill activities, activities with puppets, picture aids, illustrations, didactic games, etc. Vocabulary is a cornerstone of communicative ability and reading literacy. Its range is the best indicator of *reading comprehension* (Pečjak, 2010), although it should be acknowledged that progress also depends on planning interdisciplinary curricular activities and promoting opportunities for language use. In order to gain insight into the basic lexical vocabulary of preschool children, we conducted a study to examine their knowledge of selected animals and their ability to name them.

2 Methods

The research follows the qualitative method of scientific research in teaching. We used a case study (Vogrinc, 2008, p. 14; Mesec, 2023) focusing on the understanding and interpretation of language ability, especially the aspects of naming and orthoepy, of participants.

2.1 Research Questions

The aim of the research was to assess the recognition and the naming of animals in Slovenian, i.e. the language of instruction, using multilingual reading materials. We set ourselves the following research questions:

- Which reading material (literary or informative) will appeal more to children?
- How many animals will the children name correctly in Slovenian?
- Which animals will the children not be able to recognise in the pictures?

- Will we find differences in the range of vocabulary about animals (by gender, mother tongue) between the participants?

2.2 Participants

The study included 25 children: 15 girls and 10 boys. The research used convenience sample ($n = 25$); it included children of the second age group attending the preschool divisions of the Smetanova Street unit of the Ivan Glinšek Kindergarten Maribor in the school year 2024/2025. The study was conducted on Tuesday, 19 November, 2024. 16 of the participating children were from the Viola division (aged 5 to 6 years) and 9 from the Marjetica division (aged 4 to 6 years). The research included all preschool children attending kindergarten in the Smetanova unit who were born in 2019 and attended kindergarten in the year preceding the research and were therefore close to entering school. Slovenian is the mother tongue of eleven of the participating children. Fourteen children are immigrants, mostly from the former common state of Yugoslavia (six from Bosnia, one from Croatia, one from Serbia, one from Kosovo), while three are from Ukraine, one is of the Roma ethnic group and one from Syria. To them, Slovenian is the second language or the language of instruction.

2.3 Measurement Instruments

Our data collection technique consisted of individual interviews accompanied by pictures of selected animals, which also allows for the monitoring of non-verbal communication and the adaptation to the specific situation of children who cannot yet read. In the individual interviews, we encouraged children to name animals using pictures, namely illustrations of multilingual reading materials, which allowed us to examine the validity of the answers even in children whose mother tongue is not Slovenian. The onomatopoeias that clearly indicated the meaning (e.g. *kikiriki* for *petelin*) were considered in the case of immigrant children who had not yet developed (pragmatic) speaking skills in Slovenian, their language of instruction.

2.4 Data Collection Procedure

In accordance with the ethical principles of research, the data collection was conducted alongside the usage of selected multilingual (Slovenian, Albanian, English, Bosnian and Russian) literary picture book by Nina Mav Hrovat and Kristina Krhin *Poslub, jazbec gre!* (2020), informative reading materials, and picture dictionaries by Barbara Majcenovič Kline and Ajda Erznožnik: *Slovensko-srbski slikovni slovar* (2016), *Slovensko-albanski slikovni slovar* (2020), *Slovensko-ukrajinski slikovni slovar* (2018), *Slovensko-ruski slikovni slovar* (2017), *Slovensko-brvaški slikovni slovar* (2017a) in *Slovensko-arabski slikovni slovar* (2016a). The authors also produced the following picture dictionaries: Slovenian–Italian, Slovenian–Chinese, Slovenian–French, Slovenian–Macedonian, Slovenian–English, Slovenian–German, Slovenian–Spanish, and Slovenian–Hungarian. The selected reading materials meet the literary (Haramija, 2017) and visual (Zupančič, 2017) quality criteria.

3 Results

The recognition and naming of farm animals was assessed using the picture dictionaries by Barbara Majcenovič Kline and Ajda Erznožnik (2020, 2018, 2017, 2017a, 2016, 2016a, pp. 42–43). We chose (Figure 2) seven animals, namely *puijs*, *kokoš*, *petelin*, *piščanec*, *krava*, *teletček* and *ovca* [pig, hen, rooster, chicken, cow, calf and sheep], assuming the children would know them, as studies (Jelenc, Slana & Groleger Sršen, 2021, p. 18; Marjanovič Umek et al., 2013) had found that in the early expressive vocabulary of toddlers, which is dominated by lexical words, especially nouns, the naming of animals is the most frequent naming, apart from the naming of persons (family members).

Additionally, Haramija and Batič (2022), in their article on picture books in the first age group, refer to picture books in the form of a depicted animal, tactile books of animal puppies, audio picture books of animal voices, books about animals with movable elements, and examples of high-quality original Slovenian picture books with animal characters. Animals (and their dwellings) also form part of the basic thematic units in the learning of Slovenian as a second and foreign language as early as in the preschool period, an example being Križ kraž (Knez et al., 2015), a textbook for the introductory learning of Slovenian as a second and foreign language for non-literate children. A separate thematic unit is dedicated to animals as entities or

phenomena that learners encounter in their daily lives, but animals also appear as part of the core vocabulary in other learning units or thematic units, such as numbers (Mira Voglar's poem *Živali jeseni*); toys (teddy bears); and food and drink (What does an elephant eat?).

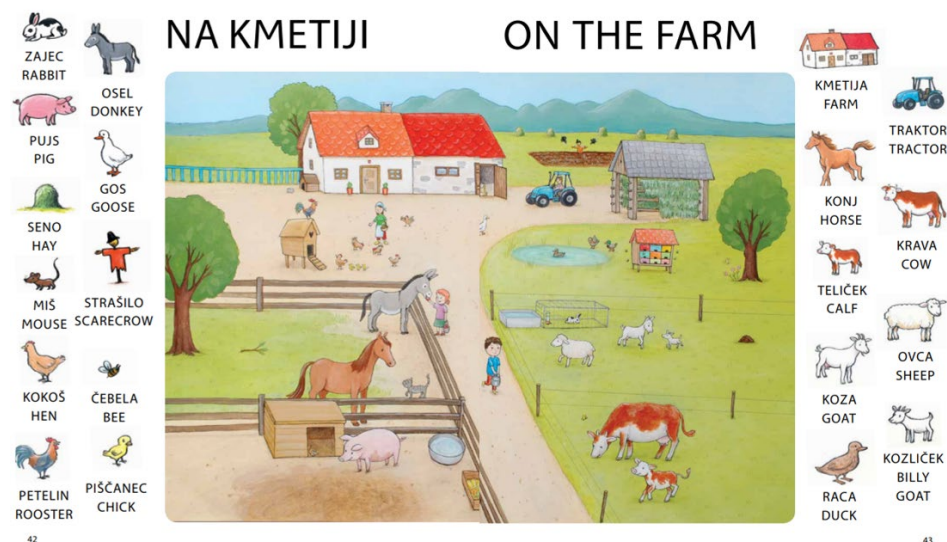


Figure 2: Animals on the farm

Source: Majcenovič Kline & Erznožnik (2025, pp. 42–43)

Table 1 displays the results of the naming of domestic animals. The results reveal that a third of the children cannot name domestic animals. Only 11 children (44%) named all the selected domestic animals appropriately, five of whom did so in a mother tongue other than Slovenian (two in Ukrainian, one in Bosnian, one in Croatian and one in Serbian).

The children most frequently failed to name the calf. We considered as correct also the diminutive form cow, namely *kravica*, *mala krava*. The second most problematic animal to name was the rooster, where we also considered as correct the onomatopoeic *kikiriki* used by the Roma child. In Slovenian-speaking children, we also took note of the pronunciation, which was incorrect in all ten children: they placed the accent on the letter *i* in *petelin* (dictionary SSKJ2: *petēlin -ina*). For *piščanec* (*chicken*), we also considered as correct the diminutive *piščanček* and the dialect *pišek*, and for *zajec* (rabbit) also the dialect *zajc*. Four answers were assessed as inadequate:

papagaj (parrot) for a rooster, *ovca* (sheep) for a calf, *koza* (goat) for a sheep and *račka* (duckling) for a chicken.

Table 1: Naming Domestic Animals

domestic animals	children's answers						total	
	naming in Slovenian		naming in the mother tongue (other than Slovenian)		incorrect/no response			
	f	f %	f	f %	f	f %	f	f %
<i>pujs</i>	17	68.0	4	16.0	4	16.0	25	100.0
<i>kokoš</i>	11	44.0	7	28.0	7	28.0	25	100.0
<i>petelin</i>	10	40.0	4	16.0	11	44.0	25	100.0
<i>piščanec</i>	10	40.0	6	24.0	9	36.0	25	100.0
<i>krava</i>	14	56.0	3	12.0	8	32.0	25	100.0
<i>teliček</i>	11	44.0	2	8.0	12	48.0	25	100.0
<i>ovca</i>	10	40.0	5	20.0	10	40.0	25	100.0

Table 2 displays the results of the naming of forest animals. The children named the animals using the picture dictionary (Figure 3) of the literary picture book *Posluš, Jazbec gre!* (Mav Hrovat & Krhin, 2020, pp. 24–25). The results suggest that, in comparison with the naming of domestic animals, children are more likely to name forest animals correctly, with the exception of badger, which was named correctly by only a fifth of the participating children. Only five children (20%) correctly named all the selected forest animals, including one who is not a native speaker of Slovenian (*borsuk* for badger in Ukrainian). Fourteen children (56%) correctly named the selected animals excluding the badger, including 5 children who are not native speakers of Slovenian.

Table 2: Naming forest animals

Forest animals	Children's answers						total	
	naming in Slovenian		naming in the mother tongue (other than Slovenian)		incorrect/no response			
	f	f %	f	f %	f	f %	f	f %
jazbec	4	16.0	1	4.0	20	80.0	25	100.0
polž	17	68.0	2	8.0	6	24.0	25	100.0
jež	16	64.0	3	12.0	6	24.0	25	100.0
zajec	14	56.0	4	16.0	7	28.0	25	100.0
veverica	14	56.0	3	12.0	8	32.0	25	100.0
lisica	14	56.0	3	12.0	8	32.0	25	100.0

Children were most likely to give no name to badger, which was followed by fox and squirrel. Four answers were assessed as incorrect: *verevak* (squirrel) and *vuk* (wolf) for badger, *kengur* (cangaroo) for rabbit and *sovica* (owlet) for fox. In the result analysis we also deemed as correct all of the used diminutives—*ježek*, *zajček*, *veverička*, *lisička* and *polžek*—as they unambiguously express the semantic understanding or the adequacy of the naming of the animals.



Figure 3: Forest animals

Source: Mav Hrovat & Krhin (2020, pp. 24–25).

In the pronunciation of two children, we also observed typical articulation errors (dyslalia) or incorrect pronunciation (difficulty articulating sounds and swapping them) – *zajsek*, *veverisa*, *beberička*. Speech-language pathologists recommend that parents bring their child¹ to a medical consultation after the child's first three years of age, if they notice any deviations in the child's articulation. Additionally, numerous didactic games are available to educators to encourage correct pronunciation of

¹ <https://www.gingotalk.com/blog/tag/artikulacija/> (accessed on 22 December 2024)

sounds (such as Keršič & Steiner, 2000; speech therapy fictional tales,² talking games,³ Nikisch, 2018).

Table 3 displays the results of the naming of zoo animals. The results indicate that the animal most often named correctly by the children was the elephant (92%) followed by the monkey (88%), the snake, the shark and the zebra. All the selected animals (Figure 4) were named correctly by seven children, three of them in a native language other than Slovenian.

Table 3: Naming Zoo Animals

Zoo animals	children's answers						total	
	naming in Slovenian		naming in the mother tongue (other than Slovenian)		incorrect/no response			
	f	f %	f	f %	f	f %	f	f %
<i>zebra</i>	17	68.0	0	0	8	32.0	25	100.0
<i>elephant</i>	21	84.0	2	8.0	2	8.0	25	100.0
<i>snake</i>	16	64.0	5	20.0	4	16.0	25	100.0
<i>monkey</i>	15	60.0	7	28.0	3	12.0	25	100.0
<i>shark</i>	14	56.0	6	24.0	5	20.0	25	100.0
<i>rhinoceros</i>	7	28.0	2	8.0	16	64.0	25	100.0
<i>kangaroo</i>	11	44.0	4	16.0	10	40.0	25	100.0

The children most often failed to name the rhinoceros and kangaroo. We have also considered as correct the name *šark* for the shark and *deževnik* (earthworm) for the snake (due to its distinctive colour in the illustration). The answers that were considered incorrect were: *krokodil* (crocodile), *delfin* (dolphin) and *kit* (whale) for shark (morski pes), *nilski konj*, *povodni konj* (hippopotamus) and *dinozavrus* (dinosaur) for rhinoceros and *zečka* (rabbit) for kangaroo. In Slovenian-speaking children, we also took note of the pronunciation, as they all incorrectly pronounced the word *pes* (dog), namely with the wide *ê* (dictionary *SSKJ2*: pès psà). Dyslalia was again observed in two children's pronunciations, namely those of the words *kaca*, *kasa* (snake), *opisa* (monkey) and *motni pes* (shark).

² <https://www.lahkonocnice.si/zbirke/serija-logopedskih-pravljic> (accessed on 22 December 2024)

³ <https://vrtec-litija.si/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ZA-STARSE-Govorne-igre-za-krepitev-delovanja-govornega-aparata.pdf> (accessed on 22 December 2024)

**Figure 4: Zoo animals**

Source: Majcenovič Kline & Erznožnik (2025, pp. 50–51).

We should mention in particular the girl from Syria, who did not speak or name anything at the time of the research. Her teacher explained that she was just starting kindergarten, as her family had recently moved to Slovenia. Similarly, a boy from Bosnia also did not speak, but pointed to the elephant, the snake and the shark, which suggests that he likely recognised these animals, but was just starting kindergarten, did not speak much, and did not name the animals even in his mother tongue. It also bears stressing that we found significant differences in the size of the vocabulary regarding animals among the participants, especially in terms of sex of the participants and their mother tongue. Apart from the Syrian girl and the Bosnian boy, not a single animal was named correctly by the Roma boy, who used the onomatopoeic *kikiriki* for the rooster, said *mleko* (milk) when observing a cow, and stated *I don't know* for the rest of the animals. When we named the animals for him, he only pointed correctly at the elephant, the monkey and the zebra. A similarly modest vocabulary regarding animals was observed in the case of a girl whose mother tongue is Albanian. She could only name individual zoo animals (zebra, elephant, monkey, shark) and a sheep in her mother tongue. Slovenian-speaking children, especially the girls, were the most successful in naming the animals. Although we expected the children to easily name all the animals, the results reveal that they do not know all the domestic animals, especially the names for the males,

females and offspring of each of the animal species (e.g. *hen, rooster, chicken; cow, bull, calf*, etc.). A comparative analysis of the selected vocabulary regarding animals reveals notable differences between the children from Bosnia and those from Ukraine, the latter naming almost all animals in their mother tongue, which aligns with the teacher's observation that their parents engage more often with the kindergarten, attend kindergarten events and take courses of Slovenian.

4 Discussion

Provision of education to linguistically and culturally heterogeneous groups of children is a challenging task for educators, as they strive to create an effective and supportive learning environment. Skubic and Ocvirk (2024) write that many parents want to raise multilingual children, as children have the capacity to learn more than one language, and doing so allows them later (e.g. at school) to take advantage of learning opportunities, participate in social life and develop a sense of belonging to their environment. García (2008 in Skubic & Ocvirk, 2024) emphasises that in order to work in multilingual units, educators should possess linguistic knowledge, knowledge about languages, teaching knowledge and sociocultural understanding.

Our study results demonstrate significant differences in the naming of selected animals between children born in Slovenia and immigrant children, a particularly disquieting finding being that children who are soon to enter school have difficulty naming animals not only in Slovenian, but also in their mother tongue. This confirms the findings of several studies (e.g. Hart & Risley, 1995): in formal education, which strives for equity for all children in the education system, it is revealed that the home environment significantly influences their reading literacy. This yields a significant insight that a child can only comprehend (in a language they understand) what they have already had certain experiences of: what they have encountered in their life, seen, heard, touched, and regarding which they have certain ideas or conceptual structures /.../" (Rutar, 2009, p. 67).

Only five of the preschool children (20%) correctly named all 20 animals: four girls in Slovenian and one girl, whose first language is not Slovenian, in Ukrainian. By contrast, the results demonstrate that the Slovenian-speaking children were considerably more successful in recognising animals, naming between 14 and 20 animals. The majority of their incorrect answers or *I don't know* statements was

recorded in the category of domestic animals. Children to whom Slovenian is the language of their environment, and not their mother tongue, were less successful in naming the animals (from 0 to 12 animals), with the exception of the Ukrainian children (13, 18 and 20 animals), who were the only children whose level of animal naming ability was comparable to that of the Slovenian-speaking children.

The children had the most difficulty recognising the badger, which was named by only 5 children (4 girls and 1 boy), 80% of the answers were incorrect or the children answered with *I don't know*. The second most difficult to name was the rhinoceros, with a notable 64% error rate, followed by the calf with 48% error rate and the kangaroo with 40%. Educators can also use didactic games (e.g. Where do animals live?, 2020; Junior Alias, 2021) and picture books (e.g. Algarra & Bonilla, 2017; Babin & Tisserand, 2022) to help children to become familiar with animals and consolidate their naming.

The Eurydice network (European Commission, 2020, 294–295) warned in a review of European education systems that the gap in reading literacy between the children born in Slovenia and the immigrant children is one of the largest in the EU, while the observation that the achievements of immigrant children tend to be lower than those of the native-born children is also demonstrated in our study as well as in the results of other studies (OECD 2015, Strand 2014).

To expand vocabulary, as well as to acquire and consolidate language patterns in Slovenian, educators can use the didactic tool *Slika jezika* (Knez et al., 2021), which consists of 1882 picture cards organised into 18 thematic sections. The accompanying handbook offers a variety of suggestions for activities or games with cards, which children can name, sort into various categories (e.g. animals, occupations, family), describe, put in sequences, discover opposites (e.g. *moker*–*sub, vesel*–*žalosten*), etc.

In preschool children who are not yet literate, vocabulary can also be developed with the help of didactic materials by Mihaela Knez, Matej Klemen, Tjaša Alič and Damjan Kern (2023, 2019), which rely on a communicative approach and can be tailored by educators to the needs and linguistic abilities of the children in the group. A large part of the activity in the 12 thematic sets (animals, clothes, colours, toys, food, etc.) is aimed at learning vocabulary or developing the naming ability with the

aid of pictures and various language-learning games. To motivate, induce relaxation, listen and experience the language, the authors suggest the usage of songs accompanied by written lyrics and notation, included in the educator's handbook. The latter also contains general didactic recommendations and examples of joint activities. All materials and audio recordings are accessible on the website of the *Centre for Slovene as a Second and Foreign Language*⁴. Activities can also be supplemented and vocabulary reinforced with online *interactive materials*⁵ (e.g. memory games, find a pair, listen and choose).

We conducted individual interviews for our research in the book corner of the children's main playroom, while the other children played. We asked each child to name for us the animals in the book that they liked best. We expected children to be more likely to choose a literary picture book, given that the production data by type of material indicates an 80% to 20% ratio in favour of such books compared to educational and informative books (Haramija, 2022b). However, the children's choices were surprising; 16 (64%) of the children initially opted for a visually appealing picture dictionary featuring illustrations by Ajda Erznožnik.

Another tool designed for a playful approach to language teaching to kindergarten children is an early Slovenian learning handbook by Martina Šolc and Majda Kaučič Baša: *Moj dan v vrtcu* [*My Day in Kindergarten*] (2021). This modern didactic material enables the teachers to help the children learn vocabulary and communicative patterns in 9 units, thematically relating to individual spaces in the kindergarten (playroom, dining room, wardrobe, toilet) and with greetings, colours, numbers, shapes, antonyms, all part of the life and operation of a kindergarten unit. To help expand vocabulary, the handbook presents examples of speaking games, which are among the most frequently used vocabulary expansion methods by kindergarten teachers, namely counting games; riddles and similar games; fast speaking games; phonological, lexical and syntactic speaking games; speaking games including movement; and acting games. The handbook also provides a vocabulary and speech pattern table for descriptive assessment and ongoing monitoring of the children's progress and achievements in language learning.

⁴ <https://centerslo.si/za-otroke/gradiva/gradivo-za-neopismenjene-otroke/kriz-kraz/> (accessed on 22 December 2024)

⁵ <https://cs.ijs.si/tools/rpus/krizkraz/index.html> (accessed on 22 December 2024)

The projects DEAL – Development of Literacy and Language Learning for Disadvantaged Young Learners⁶ in DECODE⁷ – DEveloping the Cognitive Potential of Preschoolers from Disadvantaged Backgrounds have produced two collections of good practice examples that provide comprehensive methodological support for educators, with access to a variety of activities in four languages. The learning and teaching of Slovenian as a second or foreign language is framed in an intercultural and multilingual context in the handbook *Z drobnimi koraki v slovenščino* (Baloh et al., 2021), which also focuses on the development of intercultural competences and sensitivities of educators. Excellent didactic materials for expanding vocabulary in preschool children are also always available in children's periodicals (*Cicido*, *Ciciban*, *Zmajček*). Additionally, educators can use didactic aids such as *ABC cards* (Grginič, 2009), storytelling cubes *Rory's Story Cubes* (2020), etc.

Vocabulary building can also be thematically planned by kindergarten teachers alongside quality reading materials, especially picture dictionaries (e.g. Majcenovič Kline & Erznožnik, 2020; Wiekert & Štrancar, 2022), pictographs (e.g. Hanuš & Bartolj, 2024; Kosec & Komadina, 2023; Remškar & Kočevar, 2024; Sokolov & Šubic, 2024; Štefan & Reichman, 2024), and informative and literary picture books, especially multilingual picture books with accompanying picture dictionaries (e.g. Hanuš & Manček, 2020; Hanuš & Zavadlav, 2011, 2010; Mav Hrovat & Krhin, 2021, 2020). After reviewing bilingual and multilingual picture books, Haramija (2022a) states that in terms of literary type, most of them are realistic short fiction texts with a child protagonist, which is expected, as it is particularly the everyday events and important events (e.g. holidays) in a child's life that enable the basic vocabulary that they acquire in the preschool period (e.g. food, Bednjički Rošer, 2024). There is also some fantasy short prose, especially tales. Grosman (2010, p. 147) notes that multilingual picture books are an invaluable aid for learning Slovenian and for linking one's mother tongue with Slovenian, and that each can make an important contribution to family reading and to language preservation.

⁶ <https://project-deal.eu/sl/naslovna-3/> and <https://project-deal.eu/sl/rezultati-2/> (accessed on 22 December 2024)

⁷ <https://decode.raabe.cz/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/RA-Prirucka-Decode-SLO-w161-final.pdf> (accessed on 22 December 2024)

5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we focused on vocabulary development in preschool children alongside the usage of multilingual literary and informative reading materials. Using a literary picture book and picture dictionaries, we assessed the recognition of animals, i.e. the ability to name individual animals in Slovenian, in preschool children aged 5 to 6 years, who were approaching their entry to primary school. Among the 25 children who participated in the study, there were 11 children whose mother tongue or first language is Slovenian, and 14 immigrant children to whom Slovenian is a second language, the language of the environment or the language of instruction.

We selected the semantic category of animals due to their significance in early vocabulary development. At this stage, toddlers' speech primarily consists of interjections (mimicking the sounds of animals) and nouns, with animals being among the first entities they tend to name, alongside familiar people. Also very common in the first age group are picture books with illustrations of animals, original picture books featuring animal characters, tactile books about animal offspring, and animal picture books with movable elements, flaps. As part of the basic entities or phenomena that children encounter in their daily lives, animals also form part of the basic vocabulary in the introductory learning of Slovenian as a second (and foreign) language as early as in the preschool period.

Only five of the preschool children (20%) correctly named the selection of 20 animals from the basic lexical vocabulary. Four children named the animals in Slovenian and one, a non-native speaker of Slovenian, in Ukrainian. However, the results show that the children whose mother tongue is Slovenian, especially the girls, were more successful in recognising animals. Children, to whom Slovenian is not their mother tongue, but the language of their environment, were less successful in naming the animals. The study results demonstrate significant differences in the naming of selected animals between children born in Slovenia and immigrant children, a particularly unexpected finding being that children who are soon to enter school have difficulty naming animals not only in Slovenian, but also in their mother tongue.

Vocabulary is the foundation for the development of the speaking ability, while its volume is also the best indicator of reading comprehension. Differences in vocabulary size of preschool children can have a significant impact on their future educational success. Early and systematic vocabulary development supported by adequate approaches grounded in the knowledge of the child's development and learning are crucial for their later academic and personal success. Vocabulary expansion, especially with the aid of multilingual reading materials, opens up new possibilities for further research as well as for the development of teaching approaches in child-friendly and engaging contexts and content.

Acknowledgment

We would like to thank the Ivan Glinšek Kindergarten Maribor for their collaboration, especially the children who participated in the study.

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