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HERITAGE LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN EUROPE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FIVE NATIONAL APPROACHES (GERMANY, HUNGARY, POLAND, SLOVAKIA, AND SPAIN)[2]

ABSTRACT
This paper presents a comparative analysis of heritage language (HL) education in Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Spain. Using harmonised data based on 22 guiding questions, it examines national education systems, legal and financial frameworks, organisational models, and statistical indicators. The study reveals diverse approaches – from institutionalised to community-based – and shared challenges such as limited teacher training and unequal access to resources. It calls for more coherent HL policies and stronger recognition of HL learners in national and European agendas.

KEYWORDS: heritage language education, multilingualism, language policy, migration and schooling, Europe

STRESZCZENIE
Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia analizę porównawczą edukacji języków odziedziczonych w Niemczech, na Węgrzech, w Polsce, na Słowacji i w Hiszpanii. Na podstawie zunifikowanych danych zebranych według 22 pytań przewodnich, badanie obejmuje systemy edukacyjne poszczególnych krajów, ramy prawne

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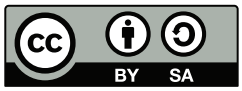

i finansowe, modele organizacyjne oraz wskaźniki statystyczne. Analiza ukazuje zróżnicowane podejścia – od systemowych po oddolne, oparte na działaniach społeczności – oraz wspólne wyzwania, takie jak ograniczone przygotowanie nauczycieli czy nierówny dostęp do zasobów. Autorzy apelują o spójniejsze polityki dotyczące HL oraz silniejsze uznanie uczniów uczących się języków odziedziczonych w narodowych i europejskich strategiach edukacyjnych.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: edukacja języków odziedziczonych, wielojęzyczność, polityka językowa, migracja i edukacja szkolna, Europa

INTRODUCTION

When examining the history of humanity in terms of changes in residence, it becomes evident that the largest migratory movements occurred in the second half of the 19th and the early 20th century. These movements were primarily driven by political and economic changes, particularly in Europe and North America. It is estimated that during this period, population flows reached approximately 150 million people, while the global population at the time ranged between one and two billion (Samaddar 2015; Eriksson, Ward 2022). A similar trend in increasing global mobility was observed at the turn of the 21st century (Piekutowska, Kużelewska 2017; Kacperska *et al.* 2019). This can be attributed to the systemic transformation of Central and Eastern European countries and economic changes worldwide. Migrants settling in new locations brought not only their occupational skills but also their native language, culture, and often religion – key markers of ethnic identity (Dubisz 1997; Tarasiuk 2021; Jędryka 2022; Atobatele, Mouboua 2024).

Migration is associated with numerous phenomena, not only social in nature, but also those falling within the scope of interest of various scientific disciplines. Researchers are increasingly addressing migration-related topics within sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic contexts. For a long time, the literature in the field was dominated by studies focusing on the learning of the host country's language as the dominant communicative code among migrants (Janta *et al.* 2012; Forsberg Lundell, Bartning 2015; Liebau, Schacht 2016). Since the expansion of the European Union and the resulting free movement of its citizens across borders, the topics of ethnic identity and its associated aspects have become popular research themes. Scholars have started examining ethnic minorities in terms of their efforts to maintain ties with their country of origin, which involves not only preserving traditions passed down through generations but also maintaining proficiency in the ancestral language, using it, and engaging in both formal and informal learning. Heritage language (HL) has become a subject of study for educators, sociologists, psychologists, and linguists.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The European Union's initiatives for heritage languages focus primarily on minority and regional languages that are passed down through generations. Several strategic actions are being undertaken to protect, promote, and integrate these languages within the framework of multilingualism policies. Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union emphasizes that the Union "respects its rich cultural and linguistic diversity." The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union prohibits discrimination based on language (Article 21) and obliges the Union to respect linguistic diversity (Article 22). In practice, this means that the EU is committed to safeguarding and promoting all languages used within its territory. However, its efforts are primarily directed toward minority and regional languages, as evidenced, for example, by the "Creative Europe" program. This initiative provides funding for the translation of books and manuscripts under the Culture subprogram, supporting the dissemination of literary works in minority and regional languages and contributing to their promotion and preservation.

In the current migratory context, heritage languages should be viewed more broadly, extending beyond the traditional frameworks of their perception. The freedom of movement, previously mentioned, has significantly influenced the demographic structure of individual EU countries, whose societies now include naturalized citizens as well as short- and long-term residents. At this point, it is also essential to consider the descendants of migrants, representing the first and second generations of newcomers. European languages that have so far been predominantly regarded by researchers as foreign languages – such as German, Spanish, Czech, Polish, Slovak, or Hungarian – now hold the status of heritage languages outside the countries where they serve as official administrative codes of communication. This status applies wherever they are used by migrants and their families.

According to initial theoretical assumptions, HL is a native language that functions as a secondary language. This implies that the primary functional communicative code used in daily interactions is the language of the country of birth and residence of the descendants of immigrant generations. HL is the language used within the domestic environment, particularly where the oldest members of the household do not speak the language of the host country (e.g., English, German, French, or Spanish) or have only a limited command of it. However, it should be noted that the concept of a heritage language encompasses not only the linguistic codes of immigrants but also native languages within specific territorial regions that are endangered, as well as settler languages that, over time, have attained the status of minority languages (Fishman 2001). Polish researchers Lipińska and Seretny appropriately expanded this concept to include native languages of a given territory whose speakers, due to factors beyond their control, such as border shifts resulting from political changes, lose real contact with their language (Lipińska, Seretny 2016a). This category is absent from American studies, as linguists who developed

the theory of heritage languages in the context of North American countries have not encountered such phenomena.

It is crucial to understand who the HL user is and the quality of the language they use for everyday communication. The users of HL are individuals belonging to the first generation of immigrants, as well as subsequent generations whose members were born in the new country of settlement of their grandparents and who grow up in a bilingual environment from early childhood. It is important to emphasize that during the initial stage of linguistic development the dominant language is typically the one spoken by the parents or caregivers. This linguistic code is the first one the child acquires in an auditory-verbal form, and it usually remains so if the child does not learn to read or write in this language or develops these skills to only a limited extent (Jędryka 2022).

Individuals who use HL do not learn it formally during childhood, as is the case with a foreign language. The process of acquiring the system is natural, as they acquire HL from close family members, similarly to the acquisition of a native language. Like native speakers, they possess skills in morphosyntax and word formation, and they have a broader vocabulary compared to, for instance, foreigners learning a second language. However, their active and passive lexicon is primarily limited to basic vocabulary, particularly that which pertains to the private sphere (Lipińska, Seretny 2016a, 2016b). Their utterances often include numerous linguistic errors in the areas of morphology, syntax, and phonology, which are linguistically distinct in nature from those made by speakers for whom the given code is a foreign language. Errors within the linguistic system primarily result from interference from the functionally dominant first language.

HL users can enhance their skills semi-formally by attending language classes at weekend schools (Cruickshank *et al*. 2024). They may also choose to enrol in bilingual education programs in their country of residence, provided such opportunities are available.

It is also worth mentioning the systemic schools of the country of origin, which primarily operate online. However, not all HL users have access to such solutions. In many cases, language education is primarily undertaken by parents or grandparents. When discussing HL learning, it is important to consider the administrative status of its users. This is a significant factor in determining the accessibility of language education opportunities for migrant communities. Language policies aimed at maintaining connections with emigrant communities are implemented in various ways by individual EU countries. Some educational programs are offered exclusively to citizens of those countries. However, it must be noted that not all descendants of emigrants hold citizenship of their country of origin, despite their interest in learning the language and engaging with the culture.

An important aspect to consider in discussions about HL is the issue of its didactics.

As mentioned earlier, HL is acquired from close family members and partially resembles the language acquisition process of a young child from a monolingual

family. Its limited exposure to linguistic input from native speakers affects the quality of this linguistic code. Therefore, to ensure that the various competencies and skills in HL approximate those of native speakers, HL users must continuously develop and refine their abilities. It is challenging to succinctly describe the methodology for teaching HL, as this is a complex issue. The specific sociolinguistic situation of HL users requires teachers to adopt pedagogical approaches that combine elements of teaching foreign languages and native languages.

As evidenced, the issue of heritage languages is a more complex topic than it might initially appear. Even the very definition of HL that fits contemporary times poses challenges, as it must reflect the status of HL from linguistic, pedagogical, and administrative perspectives. Key elements include the place of HL within the policies of individual EU countries and the methodologies for its teaching. Therefore, it is essential to understand the situation of specific languages that hold HL status outside their country of origin. Each language undoubtedly has unique characteristics and contextual factors. The aim of this article is to present the situation of five European languages in the context of HL: German, Hungarian, Polish, Slovak, and Spanish. A team of researchers has collected key data on these linguistic codes, which will be presented below.

METHODOLOGY

This study should be regarded as an exploratory research endeavour, shaped by the need to better understand heritage languages (HLs) in Europe from an educational policy perspective. Across the continent, there are approximately 225 indigenous language codes, yet only 24 enjoy official status. The five languages selected for this project – German, Hungarian, Polish, Slovak, and Spanish – represent only about 2% of inherited codes, but account for as much as 21% of administratively recognised languages. This statistical contrast highlights the marginalisation of many HLs, despite their long-standing presence in multilingual communities and their relevance to contemporary migration patterns.

A distinguishing feature of this project is that each researcher was a native speaker of the language under study. This allowed them to access national-level sources and community-specific documents not readily available in English, and to interpret those sources within appropriate cultural and historical frameworks. For example, in the Hungarian case, Act LXII/2001 and Bethlen Gábor Fund documentation were consulted; in the Polish case, data from ORPEG and national registries were examined.

The main objective was to map the status, visibility, and support for heritage languages in formal education – especially in transnational and diasporic contexts. A particularly innovative feature was the inclusion of German and Spanish, two globally dominant languages, redefined here as HLs due to their transmission within

migrant families outside their countries of origin. While the concept of HL has been addressed in prior studies (e.g., Gardosi 2016; McCabe 2016; Potowski 2018; Gil 2022; Romanowski, Seretny 2025), few have explored it from a comparative and policy-focused perspective.

To this end, each national contributor responded to a set of 22 structured research questions grouped into five thematic domains:

1. National education systems (educational obligation, stages, curricula, native language instruction),
2. Assessment and legal frameworks (examinations, HL legislation, funding, responsible institutions),
3. HL education abroad (organization, special curricula, materials, teacher qualifications),
4. HL visibility in other countries (presence in education systems, number of schools and learners),
5. Mobility and demographic data (migration trends, re-emigration, HL monitoring, institutional databases).

Examples of specific questions included: *What does the funding for HL education abroad look like?*, *How is the linguistic progress of HL students monitored abroad?*, and *Is there a database of institutions teaching HL?*

The research followed a qualitative approach, employing guided querying and expert synthesis. Each researcher worked according to a shared protocol and answered all 22 questions for their respective language. Sources included:

- national legal frameworks (e.g., Royal Decrees in Spain, Education Acts in Slovakia),
- official reports and budgetary records (e.g., ORPEG, ZfA, EDUCAbase, Goethe-Institut),
- international statistics (Eurostat, OECD, national statistical offices),
- public registries, online institutional databases, and ministry communications,
- where applicable, direct correspondence with relevant national bodies.

When data were unavailable (e.g., re-emigrant tracking in Slovakia or Poland), these limitations were explicitly acknowledged.

All responses were harmonised into five country profiles, each organised according to the same set of 22 questions. This structure ensures comparability across national contexts and supports the broader aim of identifying patterns and divergences in HL support across Europe.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

In the following section, the collected data are presented according to the four-part structure that guided the research process. Each country profile is organised into: (A) a general overview of the national education system, (B) legal and financial

frameworks supporting heritage language (HL) education, (C) models of HL education organised by the state, and (D) statistical data regarding HL instruction, learners, and migration patterns. This structure reflects the common research protocol followed by all contributors and enables systematic comparison across cases. Within each section, key similarities and differences are highlighted to reveal broader trends and national specificities.

EDUCATION SYSTEM

In Germany, compulsory full-time education begins between the ages of 6 and 7 and lasts for at least 9 years, followed by part-time compulsory schooling until the age of 18. The education system is structured in three main stages: primary school (typically grades 1–4), lower secondary school (divided into Hauptschule, Realschule, or Gymnasium), and upper secondary school (including vocational and technical education). The structure and length of each stage vary across federal states. Native language instruction (German) is provided with noticeable variation across the Länder: from 5 to 7.75 hours per week in primary education and an average of 4 hours per week in secondary schools (Geis-Thöne 2024; OECD 2023).

In Hungary, education is compulsory from age 6 to 16. The system includes early childhood education (crèches and kindergartens), primary education (grades 1–8 in a single-structure model), and secondary education, which is differentiated into grammar schools, vocational grammar schools, technical schools, and vocational schools. The Hungarian language is taught from the beginning of primary education, with a gradually decreasing number of hours in higher grades. The education system is centrally managed by the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Culture and Innovation.

In Slovakia, children are required to attend school from the age of 6 until 16. The education system is composed of three stages: pre-primary (ages 3–6), primary (grades 1–4), and secondary education, which includes lower secondary (grades 5–9) and upper secondary schooling (general and vocational tracks). Slovak language and literature instruction is compulsory and structured into five components that develop both linguistic and literary competencies. The weekly number of language instruction hours varies between 7 and 9 hours in early primary and up to 5 hours in lower secondary levels (Eurydice 2023; NIVAM 2023).

In Spain, school attendance is compulsory between the ages of 6 and 16, covering levels 1 and 2 of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). The system comprises four stages: early childhood education (ages 0–6), primary education (6–12), lower secondary education (12–16), and upper secondary education (16–18), followed by tertiary education pathways. Language instruction includes at least 280 hours of Spanish annually in primary education and 325 hours during the first three years of lower secondary education, decreasing to 115 in the final year.

Co-official languages are also integrated into regional education systems where applicable (Agencia Estatal BOE 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; European Commission 2023).

In Poland, compulsory schooling starts at age 7 and lasts until age 18. The education system comprises a preparatory year ("zero class"), an eight-grade primary school, and a diversified upper secondary stage that includes general secondary schools (liceum), technical schools (technikum), and vocational schools. Instruction in Polish language is present throughout: 5 hours per week in primary school, 3–4 hours in technical schools, and 2–1 hour in vocational education. The 2017 reform introduced a unified structure implemented nationwide by 2019 (Ludwiniak 2020; Łakoma-Sabat 2020).

Despite a shared European framework of compulsory education and standardised progression through primary and secondary stages, national systems differ significantly in structure, duration, and the organisation of language instruction. The age of entry into formal education ranges from 6 (Hungary, Slovakia, Spain) to 7 (Poland); the number of educational stages and types of secondary school vary from unified systems (e.g., Slovakia, Hungary) to highly stratified ones (e.g., Germany). Language instruction in the native language is present across all systems but differs in intensity and curricular focus. These discrepancies complicate educational transitions for children with migration backgrounds. Entering a new national school system often requires adapting not only to a different language of schooling but also to unfamiliar structures, age-grade alignments, and content expectations—factors that highlight the need for targeted support for heritage language learners.

LEGISLATIVE AND FINANCIAL SOLUTIONS SUPPORTING

The development and sustainability of heritage language (HL) education depend not only on educational systems, but also on the legal recognition and financial support offered by the state. This section presents an overview of the legislative frameworks and funding mechanisms that each of the five countries – Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Spain – has implemented to support HL learners. The analysis includes national laws, strategic programs, and institutional arrangements that determine who is entitled to HL education, how it is funded, and which governmental bodies are responsible. These elements reveal to what extent HL education is embedded in national language policies and supported through long-term planning and dedicated resources.

In Germany, heritage language (HL) education abroad is regulated by the German Schools Abroad Act (Auslandsschulgesetz, 2013) and coordinated by the Federal Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt), particularly through its Cultural Relations and Education Policy Department. The main operational body is the Central Agency for Schools Abroad (ZfA), which supports over 1,200 institutions world-

wide, including 135 fully accredited German schools. The ZfA operates under the Federal Office of Administration (BVA) and oversees not only school operations, but also teacher recruitment, curriculum development, and the quality assurance system AQM (Auslandsschulqualitätsmanagement).

The financial framework includes federal funding, Länder contributions, EU co-financing, tuition fees, and private sponsorship. In 2024, the German government allocated €290.9 million to support German schools abroad. However, these schools are required to generate at least 70% of their budgets independently, which includes tuition and local funding. The Goethe-Institut, another major actor, received €239 million in 2023, with an expected decrease to €221.7 million by 2025 due to budget cuts. These resources are used to fund HL instruction, teacher training, and distance learning platforms.

In Hungary, HL education is grounded in the Act LXII of 2001 on Hungarians Living in Neighbouring Countries, which defines the rights of ethnic Hungarians and the state's obligations in supporting their cultural and linguistic identity. Educational and financial support is coordinated by the State Secretariat for National Policy, operating within the Prime Minister's Office. The main financial instrument is the Bethlen Gábor Fund, which offers grants for textbooks, teacher salaries, school equipment, and summer programs.

In 2023, the state allocated over HUF 4.1 billion for national policy programs, including HL education. Funding recipients include weekend schools, cultural organizations, and formal educational institutions in neighbouring countries and beyond. Legal provisions also enable the distribution of material aid (e.g., teaching resources), especially to families with school-age children.

In Poland, HL education abroad is supported by a multilayered institutional system involving the Ministry of National Education (MEN), the Institute for the Development of Polish Language (IRJP), and the Centre for the Development of Polish Education Abroad (ORPEG). ORPEG coordinates Polish education abroad and oversees the deployment of qualified teachers to 76 educational institutions in 37 countries. The IRJP provides competitive grants to support language and cultural projects implemented by schools and organizations abroad.

Additional funding comes from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MSZ) through its Department of Cooperation with Polonia, and from the Senate of the Republic of Poland, which manages a dedicated budget line for Polonia support. In 2024, the Senate allocated PLN 71.5 million to projects targeting Polish communities abroad. In parallel, the MSZ provided PLN 33 million, and MEN contributed further funds via national programs such as "Rodzina Polonijna" and IRJP's open calls.

In Slovakia, HL education is supported through the Education Act No. 245/2008 and the Act on Slovaks Living Abroad No. 474/2005, which establish the legal basis for educational support abroad. Two ministries are involved: the Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth, responsible for program development and teacher deployment, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which oversees the Office for Slovaks Living Abroad.

The budget for international educational cooperation was €96,000 in 2023, with €78,802 spent. Funding supports educational centres abroad, teacher exchanges, workshops, and summer camps. Although funding is relatively limited, the legal guarantees provide an important safeguard for Slovak HL communities.

In Spain, HL policy is anchored in Royal Decrees 1027/1993 and 1138/2002, which regulate external educational action. The responsible institution is the Ministry of Education, Vocational Training and Sports (MEFD), through its External Educational Action Department (Acción Educativa Exterior). MEFD oversees a wide range of structures: fully Spanish schools abroad, bilingual programs, Spanish sections in foreign schools, and extracurricular language and culture classes (ALCE), following CEFR levels.

In 2021, the state budget allocated €105.3 million to Spanish HL education abroad, representing 0.2% of total public educational spending. Teaching staff are typically recruited from Spain, but in some programs, they are supported by locally trained personnel. Cooperation with the Cervantes Institute ensures additional linguistic and cultural outreach.

While all five countries have developed legal and financial mechanisms to support HL education, the scope and intensity of their efforts vary considerably. Germany and Spain offer the most institutionalised and well-funded systems, backed by specific legislation and extensive networks of public schools. Poland and Hungary demonstrate strong political will, expressed through specialised agencies and diaspora funding, although their support is more dispersed. Slovakia's model is more modest in financial terms but grounded in legal guarantees and targeted cultural policy. These frameworks shape not only how HL education is delivered, but also how heritage languages are positioned within broader national identity narratives.

ORGANIZATION OF HL EDUCATION BY COUNTRY

The organisation of heritage language education varies significantly across national contexts, reflecting differences in administrative structures, diaspora policy traditions, and educational philosophies. This section examines how the five countries structure the delivery of HL instruction, including the types of schools involved, the role of public institutions and community actors, and the mechanisms for teacher deployment and curriculum development. In each case, the extent to which HL education is centralised or decentralised shapes access, continuity, and quality. The analysis also considers whether HL instruction is integrated into mainstream education or offered through parallel systems. These organisational patterns reveal how states position HLs in relation to formal schooling and to their broader understanding of citizenship, migration, and language rights.

Heritage language instruction associated with the German state is embedded in a complex international network of institutions, programs, and quality frameworks. The PASCH initiative, launched by the Federal Foreign Office in cooperation with

the ZfA, Goethe-Institut, DAAD, and PAD, connects over 2,000 schools worldwide, including Deutsche Auslandsschulen, DSD schools, and German Profile Schools (DPS). Each school type offers different degrees of curricular integration with the German education system, from full diplomas to language certification (e.g., DSD I, II). In addition, more than 600,000 learners access German through PASCH-affiliated institutions. Quality assurance is supported by the AQM framework, which monitors curriculum delivery, learning outcomes, and staff qualifications. Distance learning programs (Deutsche Fernschule, ILS) expand HL access in contexts lacking direct institutional presence. Cooperation with European Schools and bilingual institutions further enhances reach and diversity of instructional models.

Hungarian HL education reflects the geopolitical history of Central Europe and the enduring presence of Hungarian minorities outside national borders. Instruction takes place through multiple models, including community weekend schools, educational centres, and programs coordinated through consulates. A notable example is the consular model in Bavaria, where Hungarian classes are organised by diaspora associations in partnership with local authorities. Despite the absence of a centralised curriculum, educational platforms and state-funded materials (e.g., magyaralapozo.org) provide flexible content for different age groups. Teachers are typically trained professionals, often working on a voluntary basis. The state supports instruction in countries where Hungarian holds minority language status (e.g., Serbia, Romania) and offers guidance for program development through the State Secretariat for National Policy.

In the Slovak context, HL education is built around a state-supported yet decentralised model involving educational centres, Slovak sections in European Schools, and cultural associations affiliated with the ISEIA network. Centres operate in 26 countries and are supported by the Ministry of Education in partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Instructional models range from part-time weekend classes to fully accredited programs embedded in local education systems. A special curriculum for "Slovak as a second language" has been developed for students with limited proficiency, particularly those re-entering the Slovak system. Supplementary programs include summer schools, bilingual teacher training, and cultural camps. Teachers are selected through open calls and often hold multi-year contracts with government ministries.

Spanish HL education is coordinated by the Ministry of Education, Vocational Training and Sports (MEFD) through the Acción Educativa Exterior department. Instruction is delivered across multiple formats: fully state-run Spanish schools abroad, mixed titular institutions (run jointly with host countries), Spanish sections in foreign schools, and ALCE programs (extracurricular language and culture courses structured around CEFR levels A1–C1). Spanish is also present in bilingual sections in Central and Eastern Europe and in European Schools. Teaching staff are typically recruited from Spain, with curricular oversight and professional development provided by MEFD. Cooperation with the Instituto Cervantes extends HL offerings through cultural centres and local partnerships. The organisational model

combines top-down structure with flexibility at the local level, ensuring broad geographic reach and curricular consistency.

Polish HL education abroad is structured around a dual model involving both state-supervised institutions and a large, diverse landscape of community-run schools. The Centre for the Development of Polish Education Abroad (ORPEG) coordinates formal instruction in Polish Sections and weekend schools operating under Polish diplomatic missions. These schools follow a framework aligned with the Polish national curriculum, and teachers are deployed directly by the Ministry of National Education. In parallel, over 1,200 community schools operate independently, most commonly as Saturday schools managed by diaspora associations. These vary in size, pedagogical approach, and curriculum. Teachers are often qualified in Polish philology or early childhood education, although many also teach history and geography due to staffing limitations. The Institute for the Development of Polish Language (IRJP) complements state efforts by funding competitions, training sessions, and didactic materials for non-formal programs. While there is no unified national curriculum for community HL instruction, ORPEG and IRJP provide resources and coordinate training initiatives. Monitoring of student progress is formalised only in state-affiliated institutions, while other settings rely on local assessments or grant-based reporting.

The five countries analysed differ substantially in how HL education is organised: from highly centralised and credentialed systems (Spain, Germany), to mixed public-community models (Poland, Hungary), and legally protected but modestly resourced structures (Slovakia). While some countries embed HL instruction directly into state school systems or European School frameworks, others rely on weekend classes, consular cooperation, or voluntary associations. These organisational patterns shape learners' access to instruction, the coherence of curricular pathways, and the level of institutional support available to families. They also reflect broader national strategies concerning diaspora engagement, language rights, and the role of cultural transmission in public education.

INSTITUTIONAL REACH AND DEMOGRAPHIC SCOPE OF HL EDUCATION

Statistical data offer critical insight into the scale, reach, and demographic dynamics of heritage language (HL) education across countries. This section presents selected quantitative indicators related to the number of HL institutions, enrolled students, teacher deployment, and migration trends. While data availability and precision vary across national contexts, the figures help illuminate the institutional footprint of HL education and its responsiveness to transnational mobility.

Germany maintains one of the most extensive global infrastructures for HL education. According to data from the PASCH initiative, over 1,950 schools worldwide offer German language and culture instruction, including 135 Deutsche Auslandsschulen, 1,105 DSD schools, 27 German Profile Schools, and 689 Fit

Schools. The PASCH network serves more than 600,000 students, though the proportion of students with German heritage remains unclear. In 2020, approximately 25,000 students of German origin were enrolled in German schools abroad (Auswärtiges Amt 2020). Additionally, the Goethe-Institut reported 269,000 language learners worldwide in 2023. The main destinations of German emigration include Switzerland, Poland, Turkey, and the United States, and return migration is supported by integration programs such as "Willkommensklassen" in federal states like Berlin.

Hungarian HL education spans both neighbouring countries with historic Hungarian minorities and the Western diaspora. A 2022 register compiled by the State Secretariat for National Policy lists 260 diaspora schools, with an estimated 11,000 students in Western countries alone. In total, 220,000 children and youth received educational support through government programs The most frequent destinations of Hungarian emigrants include Austria, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Between 2015 and 2021, the number of returning citizens increased, indicating a partial reversal of post-accession emigration trends.

In Slovakia, HL education abroad is coordinated through a network of educational centres, European schools, and partner institutions. In the 2022/2023 academic year, 20 primary and secondary schools abroad taught Slovak. Additionally, 90 educational centres affiliated with the International Slovak Educational Institution and Association (ISEIA) operated across 26 countries. In 2020, these centres enrolled 1,579 pupils, while 396 Slovak nationals were enrolled in European Schools in 2023. Data on return migration and the existence of a central HL institution database remain incomplete, although educational authorities are aware of the need to improve tracking and equivalence procedures.

Spain provides HL instruction through a wide-reaching network of programs coordinated by the Ministry of Education. During the 2022/23 academic year, 662 schools or classrooms delivered HL or bilingual instruction to over 125,000 students, with 474 centres located in Europe. In 2023/24, the ALCE network (extracurricular Spanish language and culture programs) included 350 classrooms, 331 of which were based in Europe, serving 15,585 students (EDUCAbase 2024). Migration statistics from Eurostat indicate that the largest Spanish diasporas in Europe are in France (192,129), the United Kingdom (179,188), Germany (171,232), Switzerland (86,220), and Belgium (76,955). Return migration has increased in recent years, rising from 32,422 individuals in 2013 to 138,420 in 2023 (Eurostat 2024b, 2024c).

Poland supports HL learners through both institutional and community-based systems. As of the 2024/25 school year, 16,730 students were enrolled in schools directly supervised by ORPEG, including Polish Sections and schools linked to diplomatic missions. An additional 65,871 students attended community-run schools, most commonly functioning as Saturday schools managed by diaspora organisations. The total number of registered schools abroad was 1,288, though this figure fluctuates due to voluntary registration and variable data accuracy. The number of Polish citizens abroad is estimated at 1.5 million, with the largest concentrations in the

United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland, and Norway (GUS 2023). While return migration procedures are defined in law, there is no official system for monitoring the number of re-emigrating students, as the national school information system (SIO) does not include this classification.

The statistical profiles of HL education systems reflect major differences in scope, infrastructure, and state capacity. Germany and Spain maintain expansive international school networks and deliver instruction to hundreds of thousands of learners. Poland and Hungary reach large numbers of students through community structures and state-supported programs but often lack unified data systems. Slovakia operates a smaller, decentralised model, grounded in cultural cooperation and regional outreach. Together, these figures underscore the varying degrees of institutionalisation and demographic engagement in HL education, shaping both its visibility and its sustainability.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis provides a multidimensional insight into the ways in which five European countries – Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Spain – approach heritage language education across institutional, legal, organisational, and demographic contexts. Although the research was conducted using a harmonised protocol, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The availability and consistency of data differed significantly between countries, especially in relation to community-based HL schools and migration statistics. Additionally, not all researchers had access to the same level of institutional transparency or national reporting mechanisms. Nonetheless, the study highlights substantial variation in the scope, structure, and sustainability of HL provision.

Despite shared commitments to multilingualism and diaspora inclusion, national strategies differ considerably in their implementation of heritage language education. While some countries have established comprehensive state-supported systems with formal curricular integration, others depend on decentralised, community-led initiatives that often face inconsistent funding and coordination. These contrasting models reflect broader policy choices and resource allocations, underlining the need for more coherent frameworks and stronger institutional recognition of HL learners across Europe.

The analysis confirms that HL education is not merely a pedagogical concern but a deeply political one, shaped by national histories, migration patterns, and language ideologies. Germany and Spain demonstrate highly institutionalised models with transnational reach, whereas Poland and Hungary illustrate the power and fragility of dual systems combining public and community provision. Slovakia, though modest in resources, foregrounds the importance of legal safeguards and cultural continuity.

What emerges is the pressing need for coherence in HL policy at both national and European levels. A lack of standardised monitoring, inconsistent support for teacher training, and significant disparities in funding pose ongoing challenges. At the same time, the resilience of HL communities and the innovative efforts of educators across countries highlight the transformative potential of HL education when supported by inclusive policy frameworks.

The study contributes not only to comparative research on language education in migratory contexts but also to broader debates about linguistic justice, educational equity, and the right to maintain one's linguistic heritage across borders. As mobility continues to reshape Europe's linguistic landscapes, recognising and systemically supporting HL learners must become a priority for future educational policy.

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