MY CLASSROOM SLOVENIA

Damir Soldat, an English teacher at Bilingual Primary School 1 in Lendava, Slovenia, decorates his classroom simply. An even line of posters depicting iconic British cultural figures is arranged above a few bulletin boards, where student work will be hung as the school year progresses. The adjacent wall features flags from six English-speaking countries that students drew at the beginning of the school year, displayed above a well-worn world map. "I use this all the time," Damir says, indicating Lendava, a pinprick in the middle of the map where the green of Slovenia, yellow of Hungary, and orange of Croatia almost blend together.

Damir Soldat indicates Slovenia on the world map that hangs in his classroom. The country's relatively small population of around 2 million and its location in the middle of Europe make it a hotspot for bilingual learning.

The multilingualism of Bilingual Primary School 1 comes as second nature.

While the official language in Slovenia is Slovene, nearly three quarters of adults are able to hold a conversation in English. Ninety-seven percent of children in primary school study English, sometimes along with another foreign language. In the capital city, Ljubljana, it's hard to find someone with a public-facing job who doesn't have at least a conversational level of English.

If Slovenians in general are prodigious language learners, those in Lendava—a town of about 3,000 inhabitants in the Prekmurje region—are on an entirely different level. Lendava is located fewer than ten kilometers from both the Croatian and Hungarian borders, and it is home to a substantial Hungarian minority. Thus, the students at Bilingual Primary School 1 start studying Slovene, English, and Hungarian from when they enroll at age 6 and continue until they graduate at age 14.

In accordance with the bilingual status of Damir's school, most of the signage there is written in Slovene and Hungarian. Damir adds a third language—English—to the mix.

The multilingualism of Bilingual Primary School 1 comes as second nature. It doesn't seem to be in the focus of any sort of difficulty, controversy, or special attention; it's just the way things are at the school. All of the information in the school, from quickly jotted notifications about a faucet being out of order, to the teachers' names on their classroom doors, to the library's organizational signage, are written in Slovene and Hungarian. Students and staff communicate with each other in both languages, and, in my case, English. Based on their home language, students are placed in one of two separate tracks, each of which focuses on honing the respective nonnative language. On top of that, learners are required to start taking English classes at age 6 and have the option to study an additional (fourth!) language if they so choose.

Multilingualism in Lendava is also a great source of pride. Damir boasts that his students usually achieve above-average results in the country's standardized language testing. Some students, after graduating from Bilingual Primary School 1, go across the border to attend secondary school in Hungary. Those students are often top of their class at English, even if it wasn't their strongest subject in Lendava. "Maybe it's because we're bilingual, or maybe we're just good," Damir jokes.

His joke may have some truth behind it. Part of the school's bilingual programming requires that there be fewer students and more teachers in the classroom. The maximum number of students in each class

Lendava's terrain and climate make it an excellent location for growing grapes. The Prekmurje region is known for its white varieties, especially Italian Riesling.

is 22, accompanied by one Slovene and one Hungarian teacher in grades 1 through 3. Because of these administrative mandates, the school maintains an excellent student-to-teacher ratio. Language teachers can work closely with individual students and encourage lots of interaction.

Damir teaches grades 4 through 9 (ages 9 to 14), so he doesn't directly benefit from additional teachers in the classroom. But he is able to leverage multilingualism to his students' advantage when teaching them English. He uses English as a medium of instruction but is always able to fall back on Hungarian or Slovene if the situation calls for it. This is more common in the lower grades, where students haven't had as much English exposure.

Damir stumbled into the English teaching profession by chance. He grew up in a Slovene-speaking household in Lendava, but he quickly acquired Hungarian through his own bilingual education. He attended college at the University of Maribor, located in Slovenia's second-biggest city, about 80 kilometers west of Lendava. He enrolled in an English course there because he was interested in the language in general, but didn't have any specific career ambitions. His attitude was, "Let's try it for a year," he tells me the morning that I come to observe his busy day. Then, after a year of studying English, he started thinking, "Why not? [It's] not so bad." His mind turned to what career he could do in Lendava after graduation, and he eventually ended up teaching. His training didn't end after he secured his job. He sharpens his skills about once a year at professional-development conferences, sometimes presenting and sometimes observing.

The casual nonchalance that Damir exudes can cover up the meticulous care that he puts into planning and teaching his English classes. His days tend to zoom by in blurs with seamless switching between Slovene, Hungarian, and English as he moves from classrooms of teenagers, children, and tweens, never missing a beat.

One of the first things Damir did after I arrived at Bilingual Primary School 1 was to show me a video of last year's rock band, an after-school activity that he organizes and supervises. In the video, Damir and five students, including his teenage son, performed a riveting Amy Winehouse cover. While the club meets only on Thursdays and performs

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only a few times every year, it's emblematic of Damir's teaching style. Improvisation, steady rhythm, and an eye towards fun all play a part in the ensemble effort that is his classroom.

I attended his classes thinking that I'd be a passive observer, but Damir had other plans. I was thrust into the middle of a multilingual interview. Students were split into groups based on their home languages; then they proceeded to ask me a series of questions about myself and my life in New York City.

Damir rocks out before class. Once a week, he leads an extracurricular rock band, where students learn to sing and play guitar, bass, and drums.

At the end of the interview, students had produced a list of activities that you *can* and *can't* do in Lendava. For example, in Lendava you *can* climb the 50-meter-high Vinarium Tower to see the landscape of four countries: Slovenia, Austria, Hungary, and Croatia. But you *can't* go to McDonald's in Lendava—the closest one is 30 kilometers away in Murska Sobota. Students also introduced me to their classmates based on the answers that I had previously given them. At the end of the activity, *I* had, thanks to the guidance of the students, introduced myself in English, Slovene, and Hungarian.

I was surprised to hear that Damir's biggest challenge in teaching wasn't the usual lack of resources, overcrowded classrooms, or hefty workload—22 instructional lessons of 45 minutes apiece in his case—but having to compete with the endlessly interesting social-media apps that dominate students' attention. Even though there are strict rules against using phones during class time at Bilingual Primary School 1, attention spans have taken a massive dip since the advent of social media, Damir says. Ten to 15 years ago, his students were excited to interact with any English-speaking teacher; it was a novelty. These days they're only a finger tap away from thousands of hours of English-language content on websites such as YouTube and Facebook. Damir says that he can excite students when they first come to class, but their excitement is quick to wane and give way to tech-induced ennui and apathy.

He's been trying to fight fire with fire by using a lot of YouTube clips in his classes: "I really like to do songs with lyrics. I know that I've learned a lot of English that way. I listened to music in English and read the lyrics. …

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We listen to the music, understand the lyrics, then switch over to grammar or something. I have a folder on my computer with songs I've prepared for present perfect, past simple, whatever." He immediately pulls up U2's pop ballad "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For," which, given the speed and simplicity of lead singer Bono's croons, might as well have been designed specifically for a class of 9- to 14-year-old English learners. While this strategy helps grab children's attention, it may fall flat with some of the learners. "Children aren't listening to the same songs I was listening to. I find a perfect song; then I realize that students don't know [it]. So I've started to find new lyrics, like from Ed Sheeran," Damir says.

If all else fails, Damir relies on the close-knit feeling of small-town Lendava. Not all the students care about U2, but they *do* care about what their peers and families think. Damir says, "If you don't know the song—I'll tell your parents. It's basic education."

Social media can be a bit of a double-edged sword in Damir's teaching environment. While it seems to have stolen students' attention spans and dulled the allure of an English-speaking teacher, it has also given students a unique type of motivation and excuse to practice. During my visit to Bilingual Primary School 1, students had an opportunity to ask me, an American from the United States, questions about my life back home. Some of the questions were impressively perceptive for children and teenagers who may have never left Prekmurje: "What's your Starbucks order?" one young girl asked. A teenager wanted to know why the ice cream machine at McDonald's was always broken. Tragically, I heard that students who have difficult home lives will often excel in English and lag behind in Slovene and Hungarian. They spend their time outside of class on YouTube, Instagram, and Twitch, where the amount of content in English dwarfs that in Slovene and Hungarian. For better or worse, English can transport students far beyond the relatively remote Lendava.

The day I visited, I missed the last bus out of Lendava, and Damir volunteered to rush me over to the bus station in Murska Sobota. As we were saying goodbye, a young man approached him, all smiles, and started showing him pictures on his phone. Damir let out a booming laugh before telling me that this was a student of his from about five years ago. From a young age, this student had always talked about his dream of becoming a roofer. The pictures on his phone were of the roofs he was currently working on. As we marveled at the young man's straightforward dedication and ambition, someone shouted from the other side of the bus station. It was *another* former Bilingual Primary School 1 student saying hi to their English teacher. These moments capture the essence of Damir's classroom: fostering cultural exchange in his small town to help kids achieve their dreams in whatever language they need.

This article was written by **Edwin Harris**, who has ten years' experience working in adult English programs in Costa Rica, Chile, China, and the United States (in New York City and in the state of North Carolina). Recently he has been working as an English Language Fellow at the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia. He has an MA in TESOL from Teachers College, Columbia University.

Photos by Edwin Harris