

Sabina Lešnik, Mihaela Brumen, Milena
Ivanuš Grmek
Slovenia

Attitudes of Parents Toward Learning Foreign Languages – a Slovene Case Study

Abstract

The article deals with different attitudes parents have toward learning foreign languages in primary school. The main goal of the research was to determine the attitudes of parents towards learning foreign languages and whether there is a difference in their opinions depending on their level of education. The research was conducted on a group of parents of ninth-grade pupils attending Slovene primary schools (N = 200). Based on the results of our study, we found that the attitudes of parents towards learning foreign languages are fairly positive. A detailed analysis of the results, however, shows that there are differences in the attitudes of parents depending on the level of their education. Higher educated parents are more inclined to support learning foreign languages than parents with a lower level of education.

Keywords: *foreign language, parents' attitudes, primary school, parents' education*

Introduction

Language policy in the European Union is based on the principle of multilingualism with modern European guidelines that try to ensure a multilingual population (e.g. *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe: From Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education*). In addition to their mother tongue, every European should master two foreign languages. This knowledge of foreign languages has become a necessity, value and advantage because of the

mobility and integration of businesses into the common European space and the internationalization of businesses.

The fundamental principles of education are fairness and equality, and all children with equal capabilities should have the same opportunities to succeed, regardless of their initial status in society (Rawls, 1999). Numerous studies confirm that there is a connection between children's academic achievements and the different factors that influence these achievements, namely the child's intelligence (Bouchard & McGue, 1981), personality (McGue, 2001), mental health (Krueger, 1999), motivation (Butler, Marsh, Sheppard & Sheppard, 1985), psychopathology (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998) and family environment (Hedges & Nowell, 1999). The child's abilities have an effect on their school achievements. The child's family, as a social group, whose members usually have a close and positive relationship also has an effect on school achievements (Mendecka, 2006). In the European tradition, family is defined as a community of people. This community makes up the most important form of social interaction, which is fundamental for every society (Swiątkiewicz, 2005). The impact of the family environment on the child's success or failure at school is by no means negligible. There are various factors of the family environment that also have an important effect on the child's achievements, such as their socio-economic status (White, 1982), the mental health of the parents (Sameroff, Seifer, Baldwin & Baldwin, 1993), parental involvement and support (DuBois, Eitel & Felner, 1994) and stressful events in their life, such as violence, divorce or the loss of a job by one or both parents (Gutman, Sameroff & Eccles, 2002). Numerous studies (Parks and Bauer, 2002; Yeung, Linver and Brooks-Gunn, 2002) have shown that the child's academic performance is closely related to the socio-economic status of their family and family environment. These studies confirm that children who have parents with a higher level of education achieve better results at school. On the other hand, some studies (Tizard, Blatchford, Burke, Farquhar and Plewis, 1988, Wells, 1987) have proven that the attitudes of parents regarding their child's schooling and support for their child's education have a more important effect on the child's success at school than, for example, the socio-economic status of the family. The relationship and aspiration of parents also have a significant effect on the child's academic achievements and school performance (Fan & Chen, 2001). Gutman, Samerhoff and Cole (2003) found that children who come from a discouraging environment, despite their high intellectual ability, do not achieve higher learning results. Two important aspects of ensuring better educational performance are parental involvement and quality cooperation between home and school (Hill, 2001; Hornby, 2000; Olsen and Fuller, 2008). Parental involvement in and support for the child's literacy have a positive effect on the child's success (Fan & Chen, 2001), and

also have a more critical impact on the child's academic achievement than other family variables, such as the number of family members, parental level of education and the social class of the family (Flour and Buchanan, 2004). Some longitudinal studies have also ensured that parental support and help at the home level have a positive influence on children and improve their cognitive performance, especially in the early years of education (Harris and Goodale, 2007).

In the 2013/2014 school year, around 40 primary schools in Slovenia are beginning to teach the first foreign language in the first grade (6-year-olds). Up to now the students have begun learning a first foreign language at the age of nine. The remaining schools are planning to join within three years. Therefore, the basic purpose of the survey is to explore parents' attitudes towards learning foreign languages at the primary school level. Various studies (Ho, 2002; Pižorn, Vogrinc, 2010) have found that participatory action research that involves both schools and parents is the best way to ensure a maximum chance of success at the system level. In this study we focused on the attitudes of parents toward (pre)primary language learning, the number and selection of foreign languages in primary schools and the importance of foreign languages.

Within the frame of our research questions, we were also interested in determining the impact of parents' education level on their attitudes toward foreign language learning in primary school.

Methodology

In our investigation we used the descriptive and causal – non-experimental method of empirical research. The study comprised 200 parents of ninth-grade students who attend primary schools in four statistical regions in Slovenia: the Central Slovenia region, Gorizia region, Podravska and Pomurje region. The data was collected with the use of a survey questionnaire, consisting of closed-type questions; one open-type question was also used. The questionnaire included 24 attitudes toward learning foreign languages. An increasing grading scale was used to evaluate the attitudes. An introductory survey was included to provide information about the research sample (such as gender, age, education).

We used a questionnaire to ensure the following characteristics: validity, objectivity, reliability ($\alpha = 0.760$).

The results are presented in tables. We used basic descriptive statistics and statistical inference to identify the differences in the attitudes of parents. To determine differences in their education level we used the Kruskal-Wallis test.

Results and interpretation

The results are presented in three sections: Section 1 shows the attitudes of parents toward foreign language learning at the (pre)primary level. Section 2 shows the attitudes of parents toward the number and selection of foreign languages in primary school. Section 3 shows the attitudes of parents toward the importance of foreign languages.

1. The attitudes of parents toward foreign language learning at the (pre)primary level

The survey revealed that 49% of the parents believe that children should start primary foreign language learning in the first three years of primary school, between the ages of six and eight. 29.5% of the parents believe that pre-school would be the optimum time to start learning a foreign language. Another 29.5% of the parents believe that it is best to start learning a foreign language in the fourth grade of primary school, at the age of nine.

The obtained results confirm the survey Eurobarometer 54 (European Commission, 2001), where 55% of the surveyed parents believed that it was necessary to start learning a first and second foreign language from the age of six onwards. 39% of the parents from this survey felt that foreign language learning should start before the age of six, of which 17% agreed that two foreign languages can be taught before the age of six.

Table 1. Results of the Kruskal-Wallis (K-W) test of the differences in parents' attitudes toward primary foreign language learning, depending on their education

Attitudes of parents	Level of Education	Result of K-W test		
		χ^2	P	
Children should begin preprimary foreign language learning already in kindergarten.	Lower	89.69	10.098	0.006
	Middle	92.51		
	Higher	117.88		
Children should begin preprimary foreign language learning in the first educational period of primary school.	Lower	95.11	3.278	0.194
	Middle	95.75		
	Higher	110.02		
Children should begin primary foreign language learning in the fourth grade of primary school.	Lower	99.01	1.047	0.593
	Middle	105.44		
	Higher	96.16		

There was a statistically significant difference (Table 1) between the parents' attitude toward the aspect that children should start learning a foreign language already in kindergarten ($P = 0.006$). The higher educated parents, as shown in the average ranking, have a stronger wish that their children start learning a foreign language in kindergarten, while the parents with lower levels of education ranked it the least important. The results are in accordance with our expectations that higher educated parents also have higher goals for their children (Parks and Bauer, 2002; Yeung, Linver and Brooks-Gunn, 2002). Kroeger (2005), in his study, reported that parents with a lower education level do not support their children in learning foreign languages.

2. The attitudes of parents toward the number and selection of foreign languages

Most parents would like their children to learn two foreign languages at primary school (63%), some parents (37.5%) also think that school should offer children a third foreign language as an elective. Quite a big number of parents (77.5%) think that the first compulsory foreign language should be English, fewer than half of the parents (49%) believe that the second compulsory foreign language should be German. 42.5% of the parents agree that the second foreign language should be the language of the nearest neighboring country. Even in Eurobarometer 54 (European Commission 2001), 77% of the parents thought that children should learn English as one of the first two foreign languages. French (33%) and German (28%) occupied the second position.

We have proved that there are statistically significant differences in four aspects of the attitude toward the number and selection of foreign languages (Table 2); the second aspect showed a tendency. There is a statistically significant difference ($P = 0.001$) in the parents' attitude toward the number of compulsory foreign languages in primary school. The parents with higher levels of education mostly agreed that students should learn two compulsory foreign languages at school, and the parents with lower levels of education agreed the least. In the second aspect of this attitude we did not prove a statistically significant difference, but we must note the existence of a tendency ($P = 0.069$). The parents with higher levels of education mostly agreed with the aspect that schools should offer a third foreign language as an elective to students learning two compulsory foreign languages. It is interesting that the parents with lower levels of education agreed the least with this aspect. There is also a statistically significant difference concerning the opinion that schools should offer students a second foreign language as an elective only. The parents with higher levels of education agreed the least with this aspect, while

the parents with a high school education agreed the most ($P = 0.000$), which is extremely interesting. Perhaps such results are attributed to the fact that the parents' attitudes are significantly influenced by their own knowledge or lack of knowledge of foreign languages (Bartram, 2006).

Table 2. The results of the Kruskal-Wallis (K-W) test of differences in parents' attitude toward the number and selection of foreign languages, depending on their education

Parents' attitude toward the number and selection of foreign languages	Level of Education		Result of K-W test	
			χ^2	P
Pupils should learn two compulsory foreign languages atn primary school.	Lower	85.59	15.006	0.001
	Middle	92.44		
	Higher	121.17		
When students learn two compulsory foreign languages, schools should offer a third foreign language as an elective.	Lower	94.11	5.383	0.068
	Middle	93.74		
	Higher	113.04		
Schools should offer a second foreign language only as an elective.	Lower	110.26	17.203	0.000
	Middle	113.74		
	Higher	78.09		
The first compulsory foreign language should be English.	Lower	86.16	10.025	0.007
	Middle	96.57		
	Higher	116.11		
The second compulsory foreign language should be German.	Lower	80.33	12.061	0.002
	Middle	100.92		
	Higher	115.82		
The second compulsory foreign language should be the language of the nearest neighboring country.	Lower	112.39	3.653	0.161
	Middle	98.53		
	Higher	93.40		

The results also show that there is a statistically significant difference between the parents with different levels of education concerning the opinion that the first compulsory foreign language should be English ($P = 0.007$). The higher educated parents agree with this statement more than the parents with lower levels of education, who agree with it the least. There is also a statistically significant difference ($P = 0.002$) in the opinion that the second compulsory foreign language should

be German. The higher educated parents agree with this statement more than the parents with lower levels of education. It can be concluded that the education level of the parents has a significant effect on their attitudes toward the number and selection of foreign languages.

Research shows that many parents with lower levels of education are convinced that pupils do not need to learn foreign languages (Watzke, 2003), therefore it would be good to establish two compulsory foreign languages in primary schools at the state level. This would give the children of families with lower educated parents the opportunity to learn two foreign languages.

3. The parents' attitudes toward the importance of foreign languages

The majority of the parents surveyed (76%) believe that it is good to learn at least two foreign languages, and that this will increase employment prospects in Slovenia (69.5%). Many parents also believe that knowledge of at least two foreign languages increases employment opportunities abroad (93.5%). Much fewer parents (38%) agree with the statement that for professional and personal life it is completely sufficient to master only one foreign language (e.g. English). The results of some studies (Edwards, 1985) have revealed the impact that economic factors have on the use and choice of a foreign language, and that the state should take these into account when developing linguistic and educational policies (Wodak, Menz, 1990).

Table 3. The results of the Kruskal-Wallis (K-W) test of the attitudes of parents toward the importance of foreign languages, depending on their education

Attitudes of parents	Level of Education		Result of K-W test	
			χ^2	P
If you want to be successful in life it is good to know two foreign languages.	Lower	95.94	6.067	0.048
	Middle	92.12		
	Higher	113.41		
Knowledge of at least two foreign languages increases employment prospects in Slovenia.	Lower	95.59	3.124	0.210
	Middle	95.45		
	Higher	109.98		
Knowledge of at least two foreign languages increases employment opportunities abroad.	Lower	95.07	2.342	0.310
	Middle	97.66		
	Higher	107.92		
For the professional and personal life it is completely sufficient to master only one foreign language (e.g. English).	Lower	109.33	7.975	0.019
	Middle	107.9		
	Higher	85.33		

There is a statistically significant difference in the parents' attitudes (Table 3) toward the number of compulsory foreign languages at primary school ($P = 0.048$). The parents with higher levels of education agree the most that students should learn two compulsory foreign languages at primary school. There is also a statistically significant difference in the last aspect of this attitude ($P = 0.019$). The parents with higher levels of education agree the least that for the professional and personal life it is completely sufficient to master only one foreign language (e.g. English), while the parents with lower levels of education agree with it the most. The results are obvious, because parents with higher levels of education are more aware of the importance of education and the value of knowledge in general.

Discussion

Based on our study it could be concluded that it is necessary to convince the non-professional public about the desirability of learning a foreign language at the (pre)primary level.

Concerning the question of when to start learning a foreign language, most parents believe that it is best to begin in the first educational period of primary school (from the first to fourth grades). The parents with higher levels of education believe that children should start learning a foreign language already in kindergarten. According to Eurydice (2005) most European countries begin teaching a foreign language in the first grade of primary school, at the age of 6.

The parents with higher levels of education also believe that children should be taught two compulsory foreign languages at primary school and that school should offer students a third foreign language as an elective. Most parents want their children to learn English at school, as for the second foreign language, they feel that German would be the most appropriate (employment in neighboring countries). According to some sources (Bourdieu, 1991), individual attitudes toward foreign languages is strongly influenced by the special status of a language and its prestige. Consequently, it has been shown that the pragmatic value of a language is characterized by the economic benefit of learning foreign language skills (e.g. entry into the EU, international business).

Most educated parents are of the opinion that for a successful life it is necessary to master at least two foreign languages, and that it is not enough to master one foreign language, even if it is a world language. It can be concluded that parents with higher levels of education emphasize the importance of foreign languages more than those with secondary or lower education. Although Rakovec (2009), for instance, notes

that only a few parents actually decide to take the responsibility for teaching foreign language skills to their children. We must certainly also consider the fact that many parents do not feel confident enough about their ability to speak foreign languages to be able to take on such a responsibility. But the author has observed considerable resistance even in the parents who have had many years of foreign language education and consider their language skills as good. Our fundamental conclusion is that with the increasing levels of parent education there is growing support for learning foreign languages. An important aspect is the way in which parents think about their children's education. The attitudes of parents and their expectations have an effect on their children's behavior and school performance. Some studies (Hill, 2001) have confirmed that the children of parents who have higher educational aspirations for their children have better academic achievement and go on to complete higher levels of education. The most pronounced impact on the education of children, therefore, is the cultural cultivation of the parents, in which their relations, attitudes and aspirations play a key role in learning foreign languages (Fan & Chen, 2001). This means that children from the upper classes are privileged; they are brought up in such a way that they will be automatically led to higher levels of educational achievement. Therefore, it is important that at the state level all children in primary schools should learn two compulsory foreign languages. These state schools, with their school climate and appropriate organization, can help to bridge the gap.

References

- Bartram, B. (2006). An examination of perceptions of parental influence on attitudes to language learning. *Educational Research*, 48(2): 211–221.
- Beacco, J.-C., Byram, M. (2003). *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe: From Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education*. Language Policy Division. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Bouchard, T.J. & McGue, M. (1981). *Familial studies of intelligence: A review*. Science, 212: 1055–1059.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Butler, S.R., Marsh, H.W., Sheppard, M.J. In Sheppard, J.L. (1985). *Seven-year longitudinal study of the early prediction of reading achievement*. Journal of Educational Psychology, 77: 346–361.
- DuBois, D.L., Eitel, S.K. & Felner, R.D. (1994). *Effects of family environment and parent-child relationship on school adjustment during the transition to early adolescence*. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 56: 405–414.

- Edwards, J. (1985). *Language, Society, Identity*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell.
- European Commission (2001). *Eurobarometer 54*. Brussels: European Commission.
- Eurydice. (2005). *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe*. Brussels: European Commission.
- Fan, X. & Chen, M. (2001). *Parental Involvement and students' academic achievement: A meta-analysis*. *Educational Psychology Review*, 13: 1–22.
- Flouri, E. & Buchanan, A. (2004). *Early father's and mother's involvement and child later Educational outcomes*. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 74: 141–153.
- Gutman, L.M., Samerof, A.J. & Eccles, J.S. (2002). *The academic achievement of African American students during early adolescence: An examination of multiple risk, promotive, and protective factors*. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30(3): 367–399.
- Gutman, L.M., Samerof, A.J., Cole, R. (2003). *Academic growth curve trajectories from 1st grade to 12th grade: Effects of multiple social risk factors and preschool child factors*. *Developmental Psychology*, 39 (4): 777–790.
- Harris, A. and Goodall, J. (2007). *Engaging parents in raising achievement: do parents know they matter?* London: DCFC.
- Hedges, L.V. & Nowel, A. (1999). *Changes in the black-white gap in achievement test scores*. *Sociology of education*, 72(2): 111–135.
- Hill, N.E. (2001). *Parenting and academic socialization as they relate to school readiness: The roles of ethnicity and family income*. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 93: 686–697.
- Ho, B. (2002). *Application of Participatory Action Research to Family-School Intervention*. *School Psychology Review*, 31(1): 106. Retrieved from Academic Search Complete database.
- Hornby, G. (2000). *Improving parental Involvement*. London and New York: Cassell.
- Kroeger, J. (2005). *Social heteroglossia: The contentious practice or potential place of middle-class parents in home-school relations*. *The Urban Review*, 37: 1–30.
- Krueger, R.F. (1999). *The structure of common mental disorders*. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 56: 921–929.
- McGue, M. (2001). *Genetics of personality*. In Rimoin, D.L., Pyeritz, R.E. & Korf, B.R., *Emery and Rimoin's principles and practice of medical genetics*. 4th ed., London: Churchill Livingstone, 2781–2800.
- Mendecka, G. (2006). *Rewards and Punishments Used by Parents and Development of Creativity*. *The New Educational Review*, 9/2: 77–91.

- Olsen, G. in Fuller, M.L. (2008). *Home-school relations: Working successfully with parents and families (3rd ed.)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson-Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Parks, H.S. & Bauer, S. (2002). *Parenting Practices, Ethnicity, Socioeconomic Status and Academic Achievement in Adolescents*. *School Psychology International*, 23 (4): 386–96.
- Pižorn, K, Vogrinc, J. (2010). Stališča staršev do uvajanja tujih jezikov v 1. VIO osnovne šole. In A. Lipavc Oštir, and S. Jazbec (ed.), *Pot v večjezičnost*, Ljubljana: ZRSŠ, 90–105.
- Rakovec, L. (2009). *Odnos staršev do učenja angleščine v prvem obdobju osnovnega šolanja*: Magistrsko delo. Ljubljana: Univerza v Ljubljani, Pedagoška fakulteta.
- Rawls, J. (1999). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University.
- Roeser, R., Eccles, J.S. & Sameroff, A. (1998). *Academic and emotional functioning in early adolescence: Longitudinal relations, patterns, and predictions by experience in middle school*. *Development and Psychopathology*, 10: 213–352.
- Sameroff, A.J., Seifer, R., Baldwin, A. & Baldwin, C. (1993). *Stability of intelligence from preschool to adolescence: The influence of social and family risk factors*. *Child Development*, 64: 80–97.
- Swiatkiewicz, W. (1005). *The Family in the World of Axiological Turmoil*. *The New Educational Review*, 7 (3–4): 37–52.
- Tizard, B., Blatchford, P., Burke, J., Farquhar, C. and Plewis, I. (1988). *Young children at school in the inner city*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Yeung, W.J., Linver, M.R. & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2002). *How Money Matters for Young Children's Development: Parental Investment and Family Processes*. *Child Development*, 73 (6): 61–79.
- Wells, G. (1987). *The meaning makers: children learning language and using language to Learn*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Watzke, J.L. (2003). *Lasting change in foreign language education: A historical case for change in national policy*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- White, K.R. (1982). *The relation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement*. *Psychological Bulletin*, 91: 461–481.
- Wodak, R., Menz, F. (ur.) (1990). *Sprache in der Politik. Politik in der Sprache. Analysen zum öffentlichen Sprachgebrauch*. Celovec, Drava.