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## INTRODUCING ENGLISH LANGUAGE INTO PRESCHOOL EDUCATION – PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS

In the modern society that offers opportunities for intercultural communication, necessary for both adults and children of preschool and school age, acquisition and knowledge of the English language appears to be inevitable. Lowering the age limit to the preschool children (even younger) to be exposed to and be acquainted with the English language became one of the constituting elements of the contemporary children's education. The paper investigates the attitudes of preschool children's parents towards the introduction of English language in the preschool education. The study has been conducted among 103 parents of the children who attended a non-state preschool institution "Reuda" in Novi Pazar. Data has been collected by the means of a questionnaire that comprised three subsections: parents' socio-demographic profile, parents' attitudes on the introduction of the English language in the preschool curriculum, as well as the question on the appropriate age of learning the English language. After the analysis and discussion of the data obtained it can be concluded that the parents expressed highly positive attitudes towards the introduction of the English language into the preschool curriculum. Moreover, the findings highlighted the three important factors that may have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the early foreign language acquisition: parents, preschool teachers and peers. Lastly, the parents considered the

age of four and five as the most appropriate for learning a foreign language.

Keywords: *early language learning, preschool education, English language, parents' attitudes*

## INTRODUCTION

English is a lingua franca and as such is present in the curricula of primary schools in Serbia from the very beginning, that is, from the first grade. However, it is not an obligatory part of the curricula for preschool children, although there is a number of preschool institutions, both state and non-state, that offer English as a foreign language not only to the preschool children, but even earlier.

### 1.1. Study objectives

The aim of the present study is to determine the preschool children parents' perceptions about the importance of the English language in their children's education. The research questions are as follows:

- What are the attitudes of the parents of the children who attended the non-state preschool institution "Reuda" towards introduction of English language in the preschool curriculum?
- Is there a connection between the level of the parents' education and their attitudes towards the introduction of English language in the preschool curriculum?
- According to the parents, what is the best age for the introduction of English language?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Learning a second language at an early age

The experiences a child has early on in life can shape not only the cognitive development, but the brain as well. The study of bilingualism shows a unique way of looking at neural changes occurring in our brain, which are different when a child is born and acquires two languages at birth, or acquires one language (significantly) earlier in life, before starting to learn the second language. Even though there are more bilingual and multilingual than monolingual people in Europe, fairly little is understood about the effect of early bilingual language exposure on brain structure and function

(Berken et al, 2016:1165-72), in part because the majority of research has focused on adults.

While learning a second language does not have any inherent negative side effects, particularly on development, there certainly are certain aspects that can affect the result of bilingual development. Some of these include the context in which the language(s) is learnt, parental attitudes towards bilingualism, the importance of the language within a society or community, as well as the social and cultural context in which the child grew up (Hamers, 2000). The overall respect, encouragement and (positive) attitudes towards the languages that a bilingual child is learning have an important impact on the child's development which in turn fosters more frequent positive outcomes (Nicoladis, Charbonnier & Popescu, 2016).

Children, who are given the opportunity to learn English as a second language, will use the innate strategy used for picking up languages to other languages later in life, giving them an advantage when it comes to acquiring new languages. Because of this, picking up a third, fourth or any additional language becomes easier and typically happens over a shorter period of time, for "children at this age actually have a strong potential to acquire almost an infinite number of new information, especially when second language learning is concerned" (Klimova, 2013: 503). In addition, children who start learning English at an early age will have better pronunciation, fluency and accuracy compared to those that acquire English later in life (Kovács & Mehler, 2009).

Although there has been a debate on whether learning a foreign language at an early age is beneficial for the children or not, benefits seem to outnumber the drawbacks. However, the researchers agree that it fosters cognitive development (Bialstyk, 2017; Carlson & Meltzoff, 2008), language skills (Barac & Bialstyk, 2011), social and emotional development (Kovács & Mehler, 2009), cultural awareness (Tekyi-Arhin, 2023).

## 2.2. Parental influence on a child's language development

Researchers state that the way parents talk to and interact with their children is of utmost importance to the language skills the child develops. Additionally, the amount of time parents spend with their children, particularly the amount of time parents spend talking with their children, contributes to the child's development. A new study from Carnegie Mellon University (Leung, Tunkel & Yurovsky, 2021) observed 41 groups of parents and children and closely monitored their interaction while playing a game in which toddlers had to pick one out of three animals with their parents' assistance. Essentially the researchers observed how the parents talked about animals that they expe-

cted their child to know (like a cat), versus how they talked about animals their toddler most likely was not familiar with (like a peacock). While each parent used their own unique way of trying to describe these new animals to their child, they ultimately tailored the way they spoke to and how they interacted with their child using a deeper understanding of their child's linguistic development.

Parents have a detailed knowledge of their child's language since they watched them learn and grow more than anyone else. This helps them finetune the linguistic information they provide (Ibid: 975-984).

There are a number of factors that come into play when a child has to learn a language, whether that be their native language or English as a second language. One of them is the frequency in the participation of the child in (routine) learning activities (e.g. reading books, telling stories). Another big factor with an important role is the quality of the activities and caregiver-child engagement (e.g. caregiver's/parent's cognitive stimulation and responsiveness), as well as the age-appropriate learning materials that are provided (e.g. books and toys) (Tamis-LeMonda & Rodriguez, 2009).

### 2.3. Role of parents' attitude in language learning – Related studies

Parents' attitude towards learning a foreign language highly influences their children's views on learning it, including their motivation and learning success. For instance, if a parent considers learning a foreign language irrelevant, it is highly likely that the child will not have the willingness to learn either.

There has been a number of studies conducted on the topic of learning a foreign language at an early age (Cameron, 2001; Nikolov & Đigunović, 2006; Enever, 2015; Pliatsikas et al., 2020; Leung, Tunkel & Yurovsky, 2021; Tekyi-Arhin, 2023). However, the majority of them focuses on learning a foreign language in the lower grades of the primary schools, while few of them considered the issue of learning a foreign language in preschool (Brumen, Berro & Cagran, 2017; Alexiou, Roghani & Milton, 2019; Alexiou, 2020; Alexiou & Milton, 2020; Setiyanti, 2021; Mihaljević Đigunović & Krevelj, 2021), even fewer the attitudes of parents of preschool children towards the issue (Tamis-LeMonda & Rodriguez, 2009; Jin et al., 2016; Erk, Borovac & Brezetić, 2022).

The similar research, although expanded to the lower grades of primary schools, has been conducted by the researchers from the University of Osijek (Erk, Borovac & Brezetić, 2022). Namely, they investigated the attitudes of parents whose children have learned English informally in preschool institu-

tions, as well as the parents of children who have studied English in a formal setting, in the school. Mihaljević Đigunović and Krevelj (2021) argue that small children cannot be intrinsically motivated; on the contrary, their role models are usually adults with whom they interact the most. Parents are the ones who create the learning environment for their children, deciding on what activity their children are going to be engaged in, including the choice of preschool institution (whether state or non-state), exposure to foreign languages, sports activities and the like.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODS

#### 3.1. Participants and instruments

Participants include parents of the children who attended one-year obligatory preschool education in the non-state preschool institution "Reuda" in Novi Pazar<sup>1</sup>. The parents, 103 of them, were asked to fill out a questionnaire that was comprised of 13 questions. Namely, the questionnaire could be separated into three parts: part 1 consisted of the questions regarding the parents' gender, age, level of education; part 2 investigated the parents' attitudes and part 3 considered the appropriate age of learning a foreign language, together with the issue about the level of cooperation between parents and preschool teachers. Questions asked in the second part of the questionnaire are the most relevant for the present study, containing the questions on the importance of the English language in general, introduction of the English language in the preschool education as well as the factors influencing effective learning of a foreign language. Last question was open for the parents to provide their own suggestions on the improvement of the present practice in the preschool institution "Reuda". The research has been conducted in June 2023, at the end of the obligatory one-year preschool program in the preschool institution "Reuda" in Novi Pazar.

#### 3.2. Limitations of the study

The present paper is concerned with a case-study of a non-state preschool institution in Novi Pazar, with a relatively small sample, thus cannot be generalizable. However, the lack of the studies with the same or similar topic in Serbia suggests the inevitability of expanding the research on other cities in Serbia.

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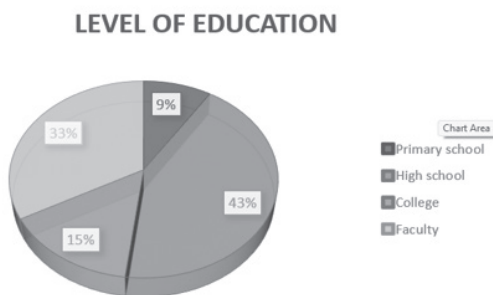
<sup>1</sup> There is also a state preschool institution in Novi Pazar, but it does not include learning a foreign language in the preschool curriculum, thus, it cannot be relevant for the research.

#### 4. ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

The findings will be presented through the following three sub-sections: socio-demographic profile of the respondents, parents' attitudes on the introduction of the English language in the preschool program and the age at which it is appropriate to learn a foreign language.

##### 4.1. Socio-demographic profile of the respondents

This sub-section represents the findings of the first part of the questionnaire. Out of a total of 103 participants, the majority of the respondents (65% of them) were above 30 years old. When it comes to the gender of the respondents, it can be stated that 98% of them are females. Graph one illustrates the level of education of the respondents.



Graph 1: Level of education

As can be seen, 33% of the respondents have a faculty diploma, whereas 43% of the respondents have finished high school. Overall, it can be concluded that a negligible number of respondents is lower educated while even a third of the respondents graduated from a faculty.

##### 4.2. Parents' attitudes on the introduction of the English language in the preschool program

This sub-section constitutes the central part of the questionnaire, revealing the findings on the parents' attitudes concerning the introduction of the English language in the preschool curriculum.

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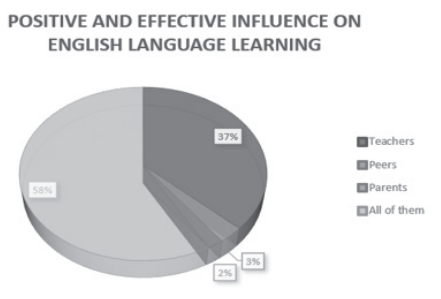
Questionnaire item	Yes		no		Sometimes	
	n		n		n	
Do you think that speaking English language is important for each and every individual?	89	95,7%	4	4,3%		
Does your child have planned and realized activities aimed at acquiring English language while in the preschool?	73	81,1%	17	18,9%		
Are you familiar with the way the activities for learning English language of preschool children are realized?	62	66%	32	34%		
Do you participate in planning and creating activities for learning English language in your children's preschool?	38	41,3%	34	37%	20	21,7%

Table 1: Parents' attitudes on introducing the English language in the preschool

Table 1 depicts the answers on the questions about the parents' attitudes towards learning the English language in the preschool, as well as their participation in the English language implementation process<sup>2</sup>. The findings revealed that almost all the parents acknowledged the importance of the English language learning and the vast majority is aware that there are certain activities conducted in the English language in the preschool institution their children attend. However, as far as their involvement in the activities aimed at acquiring the English language is concerned, the results are somewhat different. Interestingly enough, a third of them are not familiar with the preschool teachers' methods of implementing activities in English language, and almost the same number of the parents does not participate in planning and creating the activities that are realized in their children's preschool.

Graph 2 reveals factors that may influence the quality and effectiveness of the English language acquisition.

<sup>2</sup> As can be seen from the Table 1, not all of the participants gave answers to each of the questions.

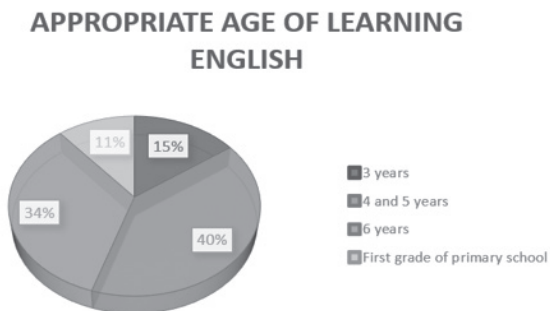


Graph 2: Factors that may influence English language acquisition

As expected, the answers on this question were not unanimous, as more than a half parents clearly stated that there is interplay of factors having an impact on the English language learning in preschool, all the three of them: preschool teachers, peers and parents.

#### 4.3. Appropriate age of learning a foreign language

This sub-section indicates the results of the question on the appropriate age to learn a foreign language. According to the results, almost half of the respondents considers the age of four and five as the most appropriate for learning a foreign language, while only 11 percent of the respondents are in favor of learning a foreign language in the first grade of the primary school, as shown in the graph 3.

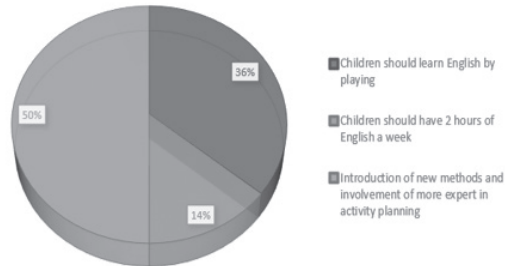


Graph 3: Appropriate age of learning English language

Graph 4 highlights the most frequent answers on the open-ended last question, where the parents could suggest the possible future steps on improving the practice of learning English language in the preschool. Based on the



results, it can be concluded that half of the respondents proposed the introduction of new methods and involvement of more experts in activity planning.



Graph 4. Parents' suggestions

## 5. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The first research question was to investigate attitudes of the parents of the children who attended the non-state preschool institution “Reuda” towards introduction of English language in the preschool curriculum. According to the results of the second part of the questionnaire, the parents displayed positive attitude, having in mind that all the questions in this crucial part have been answered affirmatively. For instance, almost all of the parents agreed on the importance of the English language for every person, including their preschool children. Moreover, they are satisfied with the amount of planned activities realized in the preschool institution “Reuda”; on the other hand, the findings also suggest that some parents express their willingness to be acquainted with the English teaching methods and to be involved in the planning of the activities. The implication of the results may be that, since half of the respondents agreed that not only the parents, but also the preschool teachers and the peers may have an impact on the process of learning a foreign language in the preschool; therefore all the three factors should be taken into consideration when planning activities aimed at acquiring a foreign language. As we have stated before (section 2.2), preschool children’s motivation stems from their immediate environment: their parents, their preschool teachers and their peers. In addition, a number of studies confirms the strong influence that the parents’ attitudes towards learning a foreign language have on their children’s motivation to learn it (Donitsa-Schmidt, Inbar & Shohamy, 2004; Tao & Xu, 2022).

The second research question was to examine whether there is a connection between the parents’ level of education and their attitudes towards the

introduction of English language in the preschool curriculum. Based on the findings of the first and the second part of the questionnaire, it can be concluded that the parents' positive attitudes are in accordance with their level of education, since the Graph 1 disclosed that the majority of the respondents attended high school, college or faculty. On the basis of the results obtained it could be inferred that the level of parents' education may influence the positive attitudes on learning a foreign language at an early age. The results might have been different if the parents' level of education had been lower. On the other hand, the result is somewhat expected, having in mind that those parents who attended high school, college or faculty are fully aware of the benefits that knowing a foreign language, especially English language, might bring to their children's future prosperity. This part of the questionnaire could be expanded by the questions on the parents' knowledge of the English language, since some researchers pointed out that some of the factors that may influence the respondents' positive or negative attitudes could be their personal experience while learning a foreign language (Saito et al., 2018).

Lastly, the third research question considered the appropriate age of learning a foreign language. It is a well-known fact that foreign language is introduced in formal education in the first grade of primary school in Serbia; there is no formal foreign language learning before the first grade. However, many non-state and some state preschool institutions have recognized the need for learning a foreign language at an early age, which is the case with the preschool institution "Reuda" in Novi Pazar. In the paper from the section 2.3 (Erk, Borovac & Brezetić, 2022), the authors mentioned the studies that focus on the topic of the parents' attitudes on early language learning conducted in various countries, having reached the conclusion that "the majority of the studies confirmed the positive attitudes of the parents" (606), while they differ in the question of the appropriate age of learning a foreign language. On that issue, some parents consider the age span from 5 to six years as the most relevant, whereas the others "fear that their children will not learn English good enough if they do not start learning it earlier" (ibid). The findings of the third section of the questionnaire revealed similar results, for the respondents favored the early language learning, stressing the need for learning a foreign language even earlier than in the preschool (Graph 3).

## CONCLUSION

When preschool children's acquisition of the English language is concerned, it is inevitable to consider children's developmental characteristics and principles of development. The factors that influence early acquisition of

the English language may be numerous (peers, media, environment, educators); however, parents have a crucial role, since they are the creators of the environment in which their children are raised and developed; thus many parents are ready to expose their children to the activities aimed at the acquisition of the English language. This paper investigated the attitudes of the parents whose children attended one-year long program in the non-state preschool institution “Reuda”, the relation between the attitudes and the parents’ level of education, together with the parents’ perceptions about what the appropriate age of learning a foreign language is. The results indicate that the parents’ attitudes are highly positive, in part because the majority of the respondents are highly educated, as such being aware of the positive impacts that learning a foreign language may have on their children’s future education. The parents are eager to participate in creating and planning of the activities incorporated in the preschool curriculum. Moreover, the majority of the parents highlighted the importance of learning a foreign language as early as four or five years, thus acknowledging once more their preferences.

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## **UVOĐENJE ENGLESKOG JEZIKA U PREDŠKOLSKO OBRAZOVANJE – STAVOVI RODITELJA**

U savremenom društvu koje pruža mogućnosti interkulturalne komunikacije, neophodne i odraslima i deci predškolskog i školskog uzrasta, usvajanje i poznavanje engleskog jezika čini se neizbežnim. Spuštanje uzrasne granice djece predškolskog uzrasta (čak i mlađe) koja će biti izložena i upoznati se sa engleskim jezikom postalo je jedan od konstitutivnih elemenata savremenog obrazovanja djece. Rad istražuje stavove roditelja predškolske djece prema uvođenju engleskog jezika u predškolsko obrazovanje. Istraživanje je sprovedeno među 103 roditelja djece koja su pohađala nedržavnu predškolsku ustanovu "Reuda" u Novom Pazaru. Podaci su prikupljeni putem upitnika koji se sastojao od tri podsekcije: socio-demografskog profila roditelja, stavova roditelja o uvođenju engleskog jezika u predškolski kurikulum, kao i pitanja o odgovarajućem uzrastu učenja engleskog jezika. Nakon analize i diskusije dobijenih podataka može se zaključiti da su roditelji izrazili veoma pozitivne stavove prema uvođenju engleskog jezika u predškolsko obrazovanje. Pored toga, rezultati su ukazali na tri važna faktora koji mogu imati značajan uticaj na efektivnost ranog učenja i usvajanja engleskog jezika: roditelje, vaspitače i vršnjake. Na kraju, roditelji su izrazili stav da je najoptimalniji period za uvođenje engleskog jezika uzrast djece od 4 i 5 godina.

*Ključne reči: rano učenje jezika, predškolsko obrazovanje, engleski jezik, stavovi roditelja*