

PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS SLOVENIAN AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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The article presents the attitudes of preschool teachers and preschool teachers' assistants towards the acquisition of Slovenian as a second language in kindergarten. The results of a survey of 458 preschool teachers and preschool teachers' assistants from randomly selected kindergartens in Slovenia show that teachers and teaching assistants agree with the statement that a bilingual or multilingual child changes/switches language according to the language of his or her interlocutor in a given situation ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.74$). The statement that it makes sense to send parents whose first language is not Slovenian recordings of songs or fairy tales in Slovenian so that they can play them to their children at home and thus help the children to learn the Slovenian language more quickly is also rated highly ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.93$).

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STALIŠČA VZGOJITELJEV DO SLOVENŠČINE KOT DRUGEGA JEZIKA

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Prispevek predstavi stališča vzgojiteljev in pomočnikov vzgojitelja do otrokovega usvajanja slovenščine kot drugega jezika v vrtcu. Rezultati raziskave, v kateri je z izpolnjevanjem vprašalnika sodelovalo 458 vzgojiteljev in pomočnikov vzgojitelja iz naključno izbranih vrtcev v Sloveniji, so pokazali, da so vzgojitelji in pomočniki vzgojitelja najvišje ocenili trditev, da dvojezični ali večjezični otrok menja jezika oz. jezike glede na jezik osebe, s katero govori v določeni situaciji ($M = 3,96$, $SD = 0,74$). Visoko so ocenili tudi trditev, da je staršem, katerih prvi jezik ni slovenščina, smiselno posredovati posnetke pesmi ali pravljič v slovenščini, da bi jih lahko predvajali doma otrokom in bi ti tako hitreje usvojili slovenski jezik ($M = 3,83$, $SD = 0,93$).



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1 Uvod

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Slovenia became a destination country for immigrants. Today, as many as 16% of children are immigrants, with the vast majority (almost 80%) originating from the neighbouring countries of the Western Balkans (Essomba et al. 2017).

In 2023, the population of Slovenia increased by almost 7,000, and on 1 January 2024, 9.6% of Slovenia's 2,123,949 inhabitants were foreign citizens. The largest group of foreigners have immigrated to Slovenia from Bosnia and Herzegovina (36% of all immigrant foreign nationals), while other countries of previous residence include Ukraine, Kosovo, Serbia and North Macedonia (SURS).

At the beginning of the 2023/24 school year, 84,522 children were enrolled in kindergartens in Slovenia, including 7,626 bilingual immigrant children, some of whom are multilingual (SURS).¹

The successful inclusion of immigrant children in kindergartens is influenced by several factors, including the origin of the immigrant children (Carabaña 2011), their socioeconomic background (Heath & Brinbaum 2007), their religion, the language of the family environment, and the age of enrolment in kindergarten/school (Rindermann & Thompson 2016). Other significant factors are preschool teachers' knowledge of multilingualism (Haukås 2016) and their experience in learning foreign languages (Ellis 2012).

Theories about how children learn new languages focus on similarities and differences between 1) first language learning and second language learning, 2) learning by younger children, adolescents and adults, and 3) contextual variables (input, opportunities for interaction in L1 and L2, time or duration of learning, teacher qualifications, etc.) and how this affects children's development. Many authors emphasise the similarities (e.g., Bialystok 2018), while others highlight the differences (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov 2019).

¹ The Council of Europe (2018: 4) distinguishes between multilingualism and plurilingualism, describing multilingualism as the knowledge of many languages in a society, and plurilingualism as the dynamic integration of languages into an individual's repertoire.

As far as the age-related similarities between L1 and L2 learning are concerned, authors agree that the younger children are, the more they resort to the implicit learning that characterises L1 acquisition. Children can memorise words, gradually understand them and later produce them in specific contexts. Explicit analytical learning occurs in older children, but usually not before puberty. Although such learning contributes to the declarative knowledge that characterises adolescent and adult learning, children between the ages of one and six rarely develop this in their own language (Nikolov & Djigunović 2023).

According to the *Integrative Risk and Resilience Model of Adaptation in Immigrant-Origin Children and Youth* (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2018), successful adaptation involves forming and maintaining a secure ethnic heritage identity while learning the culture of the host country. This dual process of enculturation (i.e., maintaining cultural heritage) and acculturation (i.e., learning the culture of the host country) is essential for the wellbeing of immigrant children. From this perspective, learning and retaining the language of origin while learning the language of society (i.e., becoming bilingual) is an essential component for the successful integration of immigrant children into a new society. In fact, mother tongue retention is associated with stronger ethnic-cultural identity, more harmonious family relationships, and better psychological adjustment of immigrant children and adolescents (Poza 2018; Fielding & Turner 2022).

Multilingualism not only contributes to social and emotional wellbeing, but can also bring other benefits for immigrant children. Better knowledge of the mother tongue and the language of the environment is associated with the development of skills that promote academic success (Bedore et al. 2023), while speaking several languages is also associated with better employment opportunities in adulthood (Ramírez-Esparza et al. 2020). Moreover, bilingualism is one of the factors affecting executive function, with bilinguals being more successful at performing tasks than monolinguals (see Bialystok 2017). Research has also shown that even when knowledge of only one language is required, bilinguals activate vocabulary from both languages in parallel (Kroll et al. 2012). A unique experience of bilinguals is attention to two languages activated simultaneously, which trains selective attention, a key element of executive function (Bialystok 2015). Most immigrant parents are very aware of the importance of their children learning the socially dominant language (Song 2019; Surrain & Luk 2021).

2 Metoda / Method

The quantitative research approach and the descriptive and quasi-experimental method were used in the present research.

2.1 Participants

The sample consisted of 458 respondents working in different kindergartens in Slovenia: 311 preschool teachers (67.9%) and 147 preschool teachers' assistants (32.1%). The average work experience was 16.57 years ($SD = 11.23$ years), the minimum work experience was 1 year and the maximum was 42 years. Regarding level of education, 148 had completed secondary school (32.2%), 41 had a post-secondary school qualification (9.0%), 216 had a higher professional qualification (47.2%), and 53 had a university degree (11.6%). Regarding language skills, 22 of the respondents (4.8%) did not speak a foreign language, 222 (48.5%) spoke one foreign language, 142 (31.0%) spoke two foreign languages, and 72 (15.7%) spoke more than two foreign languages.

2.2 Measuring Instrument

The survey was undertaken using a closed-ended questionnaire containing ten statements about the acquisition of Slovenian as a second/foreign language, with respondents answering on a five-point Likert scale: 5 – fully agree, 4 – agree, 3 – can't decide, 2 – disagree, 1 – don't agree at all.

The instrument was first tested in a pilot study. The reliability of the questionnaire was verified using the intraclass coefficient (ICC) and McDonald's omega. The ICC showed a good value (0.83), while the value of McDonald's omega was found to be very high (0.92). Content validity was independently assessed by seven experts in the field of children's acquisition of a second language in kindergarten. The average content validity index for the questionnaire was 0.95, indicating excellent content validity.

2.3 Data Collection

The aim of the research, as presented to the participants, was to determine the attitudes of preschool teachers and preschool teachers' assistants towards children's acquisition of Slovenian as a second language in kindergarten. Participation in the

study was voluntary and the questionnaire was anonymous. All of the data received were used exclusively for the purposes of this survey. The entire process and the completion of the survey were carried out in accordance with the ethical rules and standards of scientific research. Data collection took place in May 2023.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) were calculated. Differences were tested by applying the analysis of variance for independent samples and Hochberg's GT2 procedure as post-hoc tests. To account for multiple testing, *p* values were adjusted using the Benjamini-Hochberg false discovery rate procedure. The effect size of difference was measured using omega squared (ω^2) and interpreted as follows: small: .000–.059; medium: .060–.139; large: $\geq .140$.

3 Results

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for Statements

Statement		M	SD
S1	Promoting a child's multilingualism has a positive effect on his or her overall development.	3.84	0.82
S2	A child acquires Slovenian as a second language in kindergarten more slowly if he or she speaks only in his or her mother tongue in the family environment.	3.86	1.02
S3	A bilingual or multilingual child changes/switches language according to the language of his or her interlocutor in a given situation.	3.96	0.74
S4	A child has problems acquiring the Slovenian language when he or she first encounters it in kindergarten.	3.61	1.07
S5	Parents whose first language is not Slovenian should speak Slovenian with their child at home as much as possible.	3.20	1.22
S6	A child whose mother tongue is not Slovenian learns the Slovenian language faster and better if his or her parents speak Slovenian with him or her at home.	3.61	1.15
S7	Parents whose first language is not Slovenian should speak the child's mother tongue with their child at home.	3.52	1.01
S8	A child whose mother tongue is not Slovenian will not learn the Slovenian language properly if his or her parents speak Slovenian at home but do not use it properly.	3.46	1.00
S9	For parents whose first language is not Slovenian, it is useful to send them recordings of songs or fairy tales in Slovenian so that they can play them to their children at home, thus helping the children to learn the Slovenian language more quickly.	3.83	0.93
S10	At a certain stage, a bilingual or multilingual child combines the vocabulary of two or more languages in speech.	3.83	0.77

Source: Own work

The results show that the interviewed preschool teachers and preschool teachers' assistants assigned the highest score to the third statement, i.e., that a bilingual or multilingual child changes/switches language according to the language of his or her interlocutor in a given situation ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.74$), and the lowest score to the fifth statement, i.e., that parents whose first language is not Slovenian should speak Slovenian with their child at home as much as possible ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.22$).

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations and One-Way Analyses of Variance in Statements by Position of Employment

Stmnt	Preschool teacher		Preschool teacher's assistant		F(1,456)	p	ω^2
	M	SD	M	SD			
S1	3.81	0.83	3.90	0.79	1.059	.380	.000
S2	3.74	1.07	4.12	0.86	14.454	.003	.029
S3	3.98	0.75	3.92	0.72	0.711	.444	.001
S4	3.50	1.08	3.84	1.01	10.177	.004	.020
S5	2.99	1.21	3.63	1.13	29.381	.003	.058
S6	3.44	1.19	3.97	0.96	21.916	.003	.044
S7	3.67	1.00	3.22	0.96	20.867	.003	.042
S8	3.47	1.01	3.46	0.98	0.011	.917	.002
S9	3.79	0.93	3.90	0.93	1.230	.380	.001
S10	3.88	0.77	3.71	0.75	4.587	.055	.008

Source: Own work

The surveyed preschool teachers assigned the highest score to the third statement, i.e., that a bilingual or multilingual child changes/switches language according to the language of his or her interlocutor in a given situation ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.75$), whereas the preschool teachers' assistants assigned the highest score to the second statement, i.e., that a child acquires Slovenian as a second language in kindergarten more slowly if he or she speaks only his or her mother tongue in the family environment ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.86$).

The surveyed preschool teachers assigned the lowest score to the fifth statement, i.e., that parents whose first language is not Slovenian should speak Slovenian with their child at home as much as possible ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.21$), whereas the preschool teachers' assistants assigned the lowest score to the seventh statement, i.e., that parents whose first language is not Slovenian should speak the child's mother tongue with their child at home ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.96$).

For four statements (S2, S4, S5, and S6), the preschool teachers' assistants rated the statement statistically significantly higher than the preschool teachers. For statement S7, however, the preschool teachers rated the statement statistically significantly higher than the preschool teachers' assistants. Effect sizes are small.

Table 3: Means, Standard Deviations and One-Way Analyses of Variance in Statements by Level of Education

Stmnt	Secondary school		Post-secondary school qualification		Higher professional qualification		University degree		F(3,454)	p	ω^2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
S1	3.87	0.78	3.80	0.84	3.73	0.82	4.23	0.82	5.435	.002	.028
S2	4.07	0.86	3.90	0.97	3.80	1.06	3.53	1.19	4.298	.008	.021
S3	3.88	0.76	4.00	0.74	3.97	0.72	4.13	0.71	1.616	.231	.004
S4	3.80	1.05	3.63	0.92	3.60	1.03	3.00	1.23	7.699	.002	.042
S5	3.57	1.11	3.10	1.29	3.07	1.19	2.62	1.27	9.740	.002	.054
S6	3.90	0.96	3.73	1.12	3.50	1.18	3.17	1.33	6.855	.002	.037
S7	3.28	0.99	3.56	0.98	3.73	0.96	3.89	1.12	5.952	.002	.031
S8	3.47	0.98	3.34	1.06	3.44	1.00	3.64	1.04	0.801	.494	.001
S9	3.83	0.91	3.93	0.88	3.76	0.97	4.00	0.88	1.091	.392	.001
S10	3.68	0.79	3.82	0.76	3.93	0.76	4.11	0.70	3.304	.012	.015

Source: Own work

For seven statements (S1, S2, S4, S5, S6, S7 and S10), the differences between the means are statistically significant. Effect sizes are small.

For statement S1, there is a statistically significant difference between the group of participants with a higher professional qualification and the group with a university degree ($p = .006$): the former group assigns the highest scores, while the latter group assigns the lowest scores.

The scores for statements S2, S4, S5 and S6 are affected by the level of education such that the more educated participants assign lower scores and the less educated participants assign higher scores.

For statement S2, there is a statistically significant difference between the group of participants who have completed secondary school and the group with a university degree ($p = .036$): the latter group assigns the lowest scores, while the former group (preschool teachers' assistants) assigns the highest scores.

For statement S4, a statistically significant difference is evident between the group of participants with a university degree and the other groups of participants with a lower level of education ($p = .003$): the group with a university degree assigns the lowest scores, while the other groups assign higher scores.

For statements S5 and S6, there is a statistically significant difference between the group of participants who have completed secondary school and the groups of participants with a university degree or a higher professional qualification ($p = .003$ and $p = .006$): the group who have completed secondary school (preschool teachers' assistants) assigns the highest scores, while the other two groups assign a lower score or the lowest scores.

The scores for statements S7 and S10 are affected by the level of education such that the more educated participants assign higher scores and the less educated participants assign lower scores.

For statement S7 and S10, there is a statistically significant difference between the group of participants who have completed secondary school and the group with a university degree ($p = .006$ and $p = .037$): the latter group assigns the highest scores, while the former group (preschool teachers' assistants) assigns the lowest scores.

Table 4: Means, Standard Deviations and One-Way Analyses of Variance in Statements by Knowledge of Foreign Languages

Stmt	Do not speak a foreign language		Speak one foreign language		Speak two foreign languages		Speak more than two foreign languages		F(3, 454)	p	ω^2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
S1	3.45	0.86	3.77	0.81	3.92	0.79	4.03	0.86	3.886	.090	.019
S2	3.91	0.87	3.90	0.99	3.86	1.06	3.75	1.08	0.387	.762	.004
S3	3.82	0.73	3.93	0.77	3.99	0.75	4.04	0.62	0.724	.598	.002
S4	3.86	0.99	3.68	1.04	3.59	1.09	3.38	1.13	1.907	.427	.006
S5	3.45	1.06	3.20	1.16	3.25	1.24	3.00	1.37	1.032	.598	.000
S6	3.59	1.26	3.64	1.09	3.68	1.09	3.38	1.36	1.234	.598	.002
S7	3.82	0.73	3.45	0.97	3.58	1.01	3.54	1.16	1.198	.598	.001
S8	3.23	1.07	3.45	0.92	3.45	1.06	3.58	1.10	0.764	.598	.002
S9	3.95	1.05	3.80	0.95	3.78	0.95	3.97	0.82	0.901	.598	.001
S10	3.55	0.80	3.78	0.78	3.87	0.73	3.96	0.76	2.173	.427	.008

Source: Own work

The results show that there were no statistically significant differences between the groups studied. Effect sizes are small.

4 Discussion

A total of 325 participants (71.0%) agree that promoting a child's multilingualism has a positive effect on his or her overall development. (S1)

Although multilingual children often have a smaller vocabulary in both the first and second language (Bialystok et al. 2010), they do seem to have similar or even better phonological awareness (Bialystok et al. 2003; Bruck & Genesee 1995) and better executive skills (Adesope et al. 2010; Barac et al. 2014) than monolingual children.

When studying the academic development of multilingual children, it is important to consider the child's age at acquisition of the second language or the language of the environment (Struys et al. 2015), as well as his or her exposure to all languages (Barac & Bialystok 2012), knowledge of all languages (Prevoo et al. 2016), migrant status (Johnson De Feyter & Winsler 2009) and family socioeconomic status (Calvo & Bialystok 2014).

Some 348 participants (76.0%) agree that a child acquires Slovenian as a second language in kindergarten more slowly if he or she speaks only in his or her mother tongue in the family environment. (S2)

In the Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins 1979), Cummins argues that competence in a second language depends in part on the type of competence already developed in the first language. This means that the first language should not be neglected if we want to achieve a sufficient level of proficiency in the second language. However, some research does not support the claim that better developed second language skills are the result of developing skills in the first language (Uccelli & Paez 2007), while other research finds that this support is very low or limited (Farver et al. 2009).

A total of 377 participants (82.3%) agree that a bilingual or multilingual child changes/switches language according to the language of his or her interlocutor in a given situation. (S3) This statement gained the highest level of agreement among the statements included in the survey.

Especially in the first years of life, children mix languages and use structures that combine elements of both languages (Grosjean 1989; Paradis 2001). Studies have also shown that bilingual children in early childhood show sensitivity to interlocutors by using more language A with an interlocutor who speaks A and more language B with an interlocutor who speaks language B (Petitto et al. 2001). This does not mean that the child will only use A or B with speakers A or B, respectively. As Paradis and Nicoladis (2007: 278) summarise, “interlocutor sensitivity is therefore not the same as a complete separation of language according to discourse context (separation of discourse)”.

Of the 458 participants, 296 (64.6%) agree that a child has problems acquiring the Slovenian language when he or she first encounters it in kindergarten. (S4)

Studies have shown that factors of the home reading environment, such as library visits, parents' attitudes towards reading, parents and children reading together and the number of books at home, have a positive effect on the child's language skills (e.g., Yeung & King 2016). Literacy development in the home environment (Davidson et al. 2018) plays a key role in second language acquisition and influences success in life.

Only 213 participants (46.5%) agree that parents whose first language is not Slovenian should speak Slovenian with their child at home as much as possible. (S5) This statement gained the lowest level of agreement among the statements included in the survey.

Parents' attitudes towards their children's foreign learning and the availability of learning resources at home, such as books and electronic learning materials, are related to children's language development (Wang 2015). For example, the availability of foreign language books is positively related to the child's phonological processing (Trainin et al. 2017). Oller (2014) demonstrated that the presence of books in the home environment promotes the reading and writing skills of African mothers and their children who have immigrated to Spain.

Some 294 participants (64.2%) agree that a child whose mother tongue is not Slovenian learns the Slovenian language faster and better if his or her parents speak Slovenian with him or her at home. (S6)

Studies related to bilingual and multilingual learning have emphasised the important role of the family in language learning (Lindgren & Muñoz 2013). Parents influence the child's perception of the importance, usefulness and status of the language (Braun 2012; Wilson 2012).

A total of 252 participants (55.0%) agree that parents whose first language is not Slovenian should speak the child's mother tongue with their child at home. (S7)

In its *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2002: 6), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) declares the need to "promote linguistic diversity – while respecting the mother tongue – at all levels of education wherever possible, and to support language learning from an early age".

The preservation and development of the mother tongue plays a key role in the bilingual development of immigrant children. The mother tongue or first language is closely linked to a child's sense of identity, cultural awareness and sense of belonging, which contributes to their overall development and wellbeing (Baker 2001; Cummins 2000).

According to some researchers (e.g., Cummins 2001; Skutnabb-Kangas 2004), knowledge of the mother tongue has a positive effect on the ability to learn foreign languages. However, there are differing opinions on the relationship between a child's knowledge of his or her mother tongue and of a second language. Christensen and Stanat (2007: 2) state that the empirical evidence for the claim that learners can only acquire a second language if they have already mastered their first language is rather weak.

Some 244 participants (53.3%) agree that a child whose mother tongue is not Slovenian will not learn the Slovenian language properly if his or her parents speak Slovenian at home but do not use it properly. (S8)

In addition to the amount of input, a number of other factors must be taken into account when acquiring a second language, such as the quality of contact with the language, the attitude of the respective communities towards the language, the typological distance between the two languages, the mastery of the language by the interlocutor, the style of interaction, the variety of language resources available, the presence of older siblings, etc. (De Houwer 2019; Paradis 2010; Unsworth 2016).

Parents' decisions regarding which languages to use at home are strongly linked to their attitudes towards each language (De Houwer 2015). Parents may feel pressurised to use a language that they are not proficient in but value highly in order to improve their children's skills in that language (De Houwer 2017).

Language use appears to be the most influential factor affecting children's lexical and grammatical development, with higher quality and/or quantity of language input leading to earlier and/or better language acquisition (Paradis 2011; Place & Hoff 2011).

A total of 326 participants (71.2%) agree that for parents whose first language is not Slovenian, it is useful to send recordings of songs or fairy tales in Slovenian so that they can play them to their children at home, thus helping the children to learn the Slovenian language more quickly. (S9)

When reading books, parents can ask their children a variety of questions that give them an opportunity to learn new words and talk about new concepts (Hoff 2006). In particular, reading books at home has been associated with increased vocabulary and language comprehension in monolingual (Sénéchal & LeFevre 2002) and bilingual children (Collins 2005; Farver et al. 2013; Roberts 2008).

Some 323 participants (70.5%) agree that at a certain stage, a bilingual or multilingual child combines the vocabulary of two or more languages in speech. (S10)

The relationship between first (L1) and second (L2) language vocabulary has been the subject of numerous studies (Goldenberg et al. 2006; Melby-Lervåg & Lervåg 2011). A variety of factors, including linguistic features such as shared phonological forms or related vocabulary in different languages (Genesee & Geva 2006), specific target vocabulary (Ordóñez et al. 2002) and the language acquisition support that children receive at home and at school (Goldenberg et al. 2011; Hammer et al. 2011) influence the relationship between first and second language vocabulary, which is not simple or linear (Cha & Goldenberg 2015).

5 Conclusion

When children whose mother tongue is not Slovenian come to kindergarten, preschool teachers must pay special attention to their origin, their socioeconomic background, the language of their family environment, and the age at which they have entered in kindergarten. To ensure that preschool teachers are as well-equipped as possible to work with immigrant children, we suggest the following measures: continuous training of preschool teachers for multilingualism and interculturality, with constant use of established artistic and non-artistic texts; promotion of the learning of the Slovenian language, which should be the task and duty of all professionals in kindergartens; a stronger emphasis on Slovenian as a second language in the kindergarten curriculum; and the introduction of a mediator/interpreter of the language of the migrant children (e.g., a Roma assistant).

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