

THE PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE: OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES AND DISCOVERING THE BENEFITS OF EARLY SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Maria Mladenova

South-West University – Blagoevgrad (Bulgaria)

Abstract. This article examines the impact of Early Second Language Acquisition (ESLA) on children's development from the perspective of parents. Using a quantitative approach, the study uses a questionnaire survey to collect data from parents of children aged 7-10 in Bulgaria. The research focuses on parental perceptions and experiences of ESLA programmes in the context of primary education. The analysis reveals a generally positive parental attitude towards ESLA, with respondents highlighting perceived benefits such as improved language skills (grammar, vocabulary), improved cognitive development (memory, concentration) and broader cultural awareness. However, the study also identifies challenges associated with ESLA implementation, including the potential for overburdened academic schedules and concerns about the effectiveness of current teaching methods. Based on the findings, the article proposes a series of recommendations to optimise ESLA programmes. These recommendations emphasise the importance of initiating language learning at an appropriate developmental stage, incorporating interactive and engaging teaching methods, and fostering a supportive language environment both at school and at home. The research concludes by highlighting the crucial role of collaboration between parents, educators and policy makers in refining ESLA policies and practices. Such collaborative efforts are essential to ensure optimal outcomes in children's language development and overall educational success.

Keywords: Early Second Language Acquisition (ESLA); Parents' Perspectives; Language Development; Teaching Methods; Cognitive Development; Survey Analysis

Early second language acquisition (ESLA) plays a key role in the development of children's language skills, giving them significant advantages throughout their lives. Numerous studies have shown that children who start learning a foreign language at an early age learn new languages more easily. This early exposure to different languages gives them more flexible language skills and helps them achieve

higher levels of proficiency. It is beyond doubt that the ability to communicate in different languages from an early age opens doors to new cultures, perspectives and opportunities for personal and professional development (Enever et al. 2017).

Similarly, ESLA is closely linked to the development of multicultural awareness. Children who are exposed to foreign languages from an early age are better able to understand and appreciate different cultural contexts. They feel more comfortable interacting with people from different cultures and learn to appreciate the variety and diversity of the world around them.

ESLA is also associated with better cognitive development in children. They develop stronger cognitive controls such as attention, memory and problem solving through the process of learning a new language. This cognitive stimulus has long-lasting positive effects on their academic success and career progression (García et al. 2018).

The article presents important aspects of ESLA, addressing the question of the optimal age for starting language learning and the factors that influence this process. The age at which language learning begins is a complex issue that depends on the child's individual abilities, motivation and the language environment in which they find themselves. The benefits of starting ESLA include easier language acquisition, better pronunciation, greater confidence, better memory and better cognitive skills. These benefits are essential for children's development and for their successful integration into society (Hartshorne et al. 2018)

Parents' views play a key role in determining appropriate learning and development strategies for children, especially in the current situation of a globalised and multilingual world, where understanding the impact of ESLA is essential for educational institutions, parents and society at large. In order to understand the extent to which ESLA can be beneficial for children's language development, it is necessary to examine the specific mechanisms and effects that this learning can have (Hoff 2006). Sources from the fields of language development, learning psychology and educational practice emphasise the importance of ESLA as a critical period for the formation of language skills and competences (Genesee et al. 2004). Our knowledge of language development is expanding as new ways are discovered in which ESLA can support this process (Byers-Heinlein et al. 2013).

The aim of this article is to explore and understand parents' views on their children's ESLA. Through a questionnaire survey, the study analysed parents' perspectives and experiences of ESLA, teaching methods, and the benefits and challenges they perceived in their children's development. To achieve this, a structured questionnaire was used to allow parents to express their opinions and observations.

The contingent of the research are parents of children in primary education in Bulgaria (7 – 10 years old children). The target group comprised 100 parents on a respondent basis, with a link to the questionnaire on Google Forms, and the analysis

of the responses provided valuable data for understanding the impact of ESLA on children and their family context.

Teaching methods

When teaching a foreign language to children, it is vital to use a variety of methods to suit their needs and abilities. One of the most important approaches is the use of games, which not only entertain children, but also teach them new words and phrases through interaction and a playful environment. In addition, the use of songs and rhymes is another effective method that not only helps them to memorise new expressions but also develops their listening and speaking skills.

Visual materials, such as pictures and videos, also play an important role in language learning by visualising new words and concepts and making them easier to understand. Creating a language environment where children are exposed to the foreign language in different situations and contexts is also key to their successful language acquisition. The integration of different teaching methods not only keeps children interested in learning, but also facilitates the process of acquiring the new language (Odean et al. 2015).

Early second language acquisition success factors

Success in ESLA is largely determined by a number of key factors. The age of the children is one of these factors, with younger children generally tending to acquire a new language more easily than older children. Children's motivation is also important – children who are motivated and interested in learning a new language are more likely to succeed.

In addition, the language environment in which children are exposed to the foreign language in their daily lives plays a crucial role in their language learning process. Children who have the opportunity to experience the language in different situations and contexts often find it easier to learn. Finally, teaching methods also play an important role – the use of appropriate and innovative methods can greatly facilitate children's language acquisition process (Xiao 2022).

The impact of early second language acquisition on language competence

ESLA plays a key role in the development of children's language skills and has significant positive effects in this regard. Numerous studies have confirmed that children who start learning a foreign language at an early age have superior language acquisition outcomes compared to their counterparts who start learning later in life (Civico 2022).

One of the main areas affected by ESLA is the grammar of the language. Children who are exposed to a foreign language at an early age are more likely

to acquire grammatical rules and structures more easily and quickly than those who start later. This early exposure helps them to acquire the language naturally and effortlessly, making it part of their everyday life.

ESLA also helps to build children's vocabulary. Research shows that children who learn a foreign language at an early age develop a richer and more varied vocabulary, including a wider range of words and expressions. This gives them greater vocabulary flexibility and helps them to express their thoughts and ideas more accurately and expressively (Ou et al. 2023).

In conclusion, ESLA has an extremely positive impact on children's language skills. Not only do they develop better grammar skills, but they also increase their vocabulary, giving them a significant head start in their future education and careers. Hence the importance of early exposure to a foreign language and its integration into the educational process.

The impact of early second language acquisition on cognitive development

ESLA, particularly exposure to a foreign language, has been shown to have a significant impact on children's cognitive development. Research suggests that children who start learning a foreign language at a young age have improved memory. This process is thought to stimulate various brain functions, ultimately improving the brain's ability to retain information (Herrera et al. 2021).

In addition, exposure to a foreign language in early childhood appears to have a positive effect on children's concentration. The act of learning a new language requires focused attention, which in turn improves a child's ability to concentrate on tasks.

Finally, ESLA is thought to contribute to the development of thinking skills. The process of acquiring a foreign language involves grappling with novel rules and structures, thereby challenging cognitive processes and fostering the development of logical thinking in children (Haznedar 2014).

The impact of early second language acquisition on children's motivation

ESLA serves as a springboard for developing children's intrinsic motivation. Exposure to a foreign language at a young age provides them with the foundation and confidence to tackle subsequent languages, thus encouraging continued language learning. This success in learning a new language further enhances self-esteem and cultivates a sense of achievement, both of which contribute positively to overall motivation. ESLA also promotes intercultural competence. By immersing themselves in a foreign language, children not only encounter new linguistic structures, but also gain insights into different customs, traditions and ways of thinking, thus broadening their cultural awareness and understanding (Dixon et al. 2012)

Analysis of Survey Data

I. Demographics

Analysis of the survey responses has the potential to yield valuable data concerning the impact of ESLA on both children and their family contexts. The results are anticipated to reveal interesting trends pertaining to the age, gender, native language, and educational background of the participating children's parents. These trends can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how various factors may influence the effectiveness and outcomes of ESLA programmes.

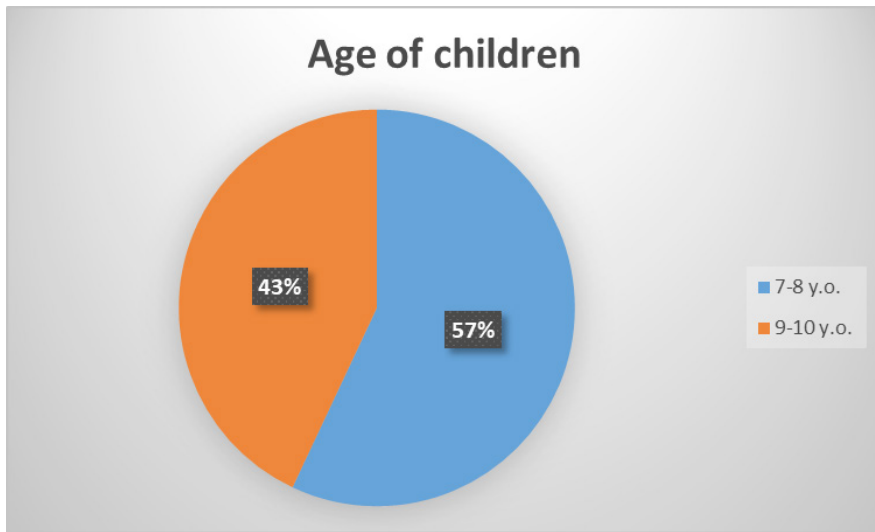


Figure 1. Age of children

In terms of age demographics, the predominant cohort of parents surveyed have children aged 7 – 8 (57%), with 43% reporting children aged 9 – 10. The notable prevalence of children in the 7 – 8 age group can be explained by parents' prioritisation of language development at this crucial stage in their children's development.

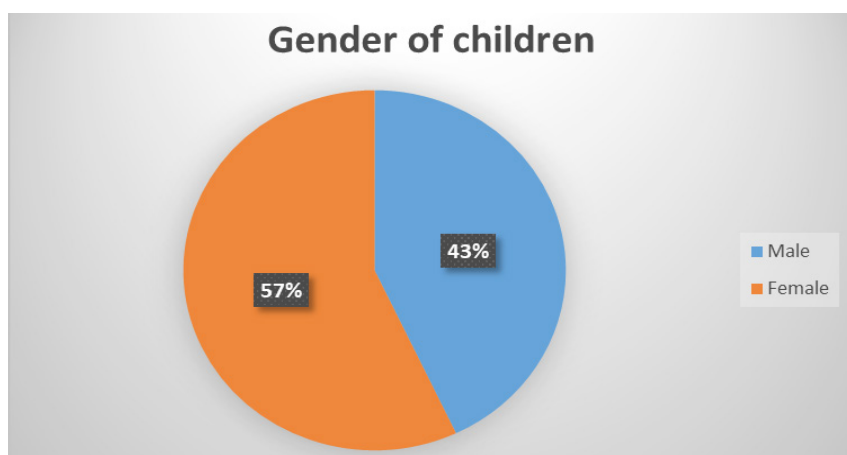


Figure 2. Gender of children

In terms of gender, the proportion of girls (57%) is higher than that of boys (43%).

Sampling bias: The sample population may not be representative of the larger population. For example, the survey may have been distributed in such a way as to reach more families with girls than boys.



Figure 3. Children's mother tongue

The survey data indicate that Bulgarian is the dominant mother tongue of the children. A clear majority of parents identified Bulgarian as their children's primary language, with only a small number identifying 'other'. This finding is consistent with the established position of Bulgarian as the primary language within Bulgarian families and society at large.

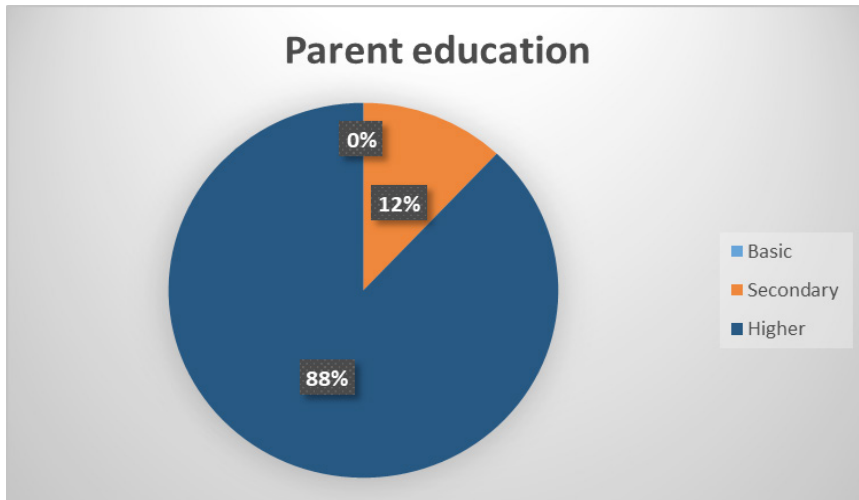


Figure 4. Parents education

In the area of parental education, there is a predominance of tertiary education (88%). Such a pattern can be interpreted as an indication of increased awareness of and enthusiasm for educational issues within the family context, as well as a marker of a propensity for continuous learning and personal development in the field of education.

II. Practice and impressions of early second language acquisition

A. Findings and responses to inquiries pertaining to commencement of instruction, language selection, and pedagogical approaches.

The study reveals interesting data on the start of ESLA, language preferences and teaching methods used. Parents' responses to the survey show interesting trends in terms of the age at which children start learning a foreign language and language preferences. The majority of parents (68%) responded that their children start learning a foreign language between the ages of 7 and 8, which may highlight the importance of this period for starting language learning. In terms of language preference, English appears to be the most commonly chosen language (54%), followed by Russian (16%) and Greek (8%). These data highlight the importance of language learning for today's children and the need for careful planning and

resources to support this process. As a linguist and educator, I believe that ESLA plays a crucial role in children's linguistic and cultural development, providing them with opportunities for broad cultural exchange and a better understanding of the global world. It follows that investing in ESLA is essential for the future of our children and for the development of society as a whole.

An analysis of the preferred methods and approaches to teaching a foreign language as indicated by parents in the survey reveals interesting preferences. The majority of parents (64%) indicated that teachers use a variety of play and music activities to support their children's learning, including musical games, word games, pantomime and puzzles. Traditional methods are also present (30%), demonstrating the diversity of approaches to language teaching. Only a minority of parents (6%) said they were not familiar with the methods used by teachers. These data underline the importance of diversity and innovative approaches in education, which can increase the motivation and effectiveness of children's language learning. As a pedagogue, I am inclined to support the integration of elements of play and music in the classroom as they have proven to be effective methods of stimulating children's interest and learning. This helps to create a more dynamic and enjoyable learning environment that supports children's active learning and development of language skills.

B. Analysis of parents' perspectives and observations of their children's language development

The analysis of the children's language skills as reported by the parents in the questionnaire reveals some interesting observations. The majority of parents (72%) consider their children's foreign language skills to be 'average', while a smaller proportion consider them to be 'poor' (23%) and only a small proportion consider them to be 'excellent' (5%). In terms of the language areas in which children perform best, the highest percentage of responding parents cited 'reading' (38%), followed by 'writing' (28%), 'understanding' (18%) and 'speaking' (16%). However, there are areas in which children struggle, with 'understanding' (41%) and 'speaking' (33%) being the most common, and smaller percentages reporting difficulties with 'reading' (12%) and 'writing' (14%). These data highlight the importance of an individual approach to the learning process and the need to differentiate learning practice to meet the specific needs and challenges of each child. These responses contribute to a better understanding of the possible challenges and benefits of ESLA and its impact on children's language development.

I believe that it is essential to support the development of all children's language skills. This requires the use of appropriate and innovative methods to stimulate their language progress. Pedagogical practice has shown that a variety of approaches to foreign language teaching are key to children's successful acquisition of language skills (cite). It is important to choose methods that not only develop children's speaking, listening, reading and writing skills, but also motivate them to express

themselves in an integrated and natural way. Such an approach not only facilitates the learning process, but also ensures more holistic and lasting language progress for children.

III. Parents' opinions and insights

The analysis of parents' views on ESLA reveals a variety of views and opinions. Positive opinions emphasise the importance of ESLA for children, seeing it as an asset for their future development. Parents with neutral opinions approach the process with a degree of scepticism, stressing the importance of appropriate methods and making learning fun. Negative opinions focus on the premature nature of the training, its redundancy or inappropriateness, and criticism of the particular teaching method. Other comments stress the importance of teacher qualifications, parental support and the individual needs of each child in language learning. All these comments reflect the importance of dialogue and cooperation between teachers, parents and educational institutions for the optimal development of children's language skills. At the same time, it is evident that parents are increasingly aware of the importance of this process and are willing to participate actively by asking questions and expressing their opinions in order to achieve optimal results.

IV. Benefits and advantages of early second language acquisition according to parents

Parents express a variety of opinions about the benefits and advantages of ESLA. Some believe that it is beneficial for children but not necessary for all, while others do not see the need for ESLA and believe that it is more important to concentrate on the Bulgarian language or to give children the freedom to choose. The positive aspects of ESLA include improved language skills, better memory and concentration, developed cognitive skills and high performance at school. Parents also see benefits in easier learning of other languages, better adaptation to new situations, broader horizons and opportunities for education and career, and better communication within the family and community. They emphasise the importance of teaching languages in a fun and interactive way and combining it with other interesting activities, taking into account the individual abilities of each child.

V. Challenges and disadvantages of early second language acquisition according to parents

Parents express various challenges and disadvantages associated with ESLA. Some of them point to overburdened children and the stress of a busy academic life, which can lead to anxiety. Others mention difficulties in acquiring the mother tongue or a lack of interest in language learning. Other barriers to learning include inappropriate teaching methods, lack of qualified teachers, financial difficulties for families and lack of motivation on the part of the child. In addition, some parents point to the risk of language interference due to an inadequate language base and the lack of an appropriate language environment both in the family and in the child's

environment. These challenges require careful consideration of appropriate ESLA strategies to support children's effective development.

VI. Recommendations and future perspectives

Parents make specific recommendations to improve ESLA practices based on their experiences and opinions. Among the most frequently mentioned are the appropriate age to start learning a foreign language, the use of interactive and fun teaching methods, the availability of qualified teachers and the creation of an appropriate language environment both at school and at home. They also suggest various avenues for future research and activities to improve ESLA policies and programmes. These include the organisation of language trips and summer language camps, the use of mobile applications and online language learning platforms, and the provision of one-to-one tutoring. Parents' expectations for their child's language development are diverse and include both the mastery of specific language skills and the development of a broad range of linguistic and cognitive skills that would prepare children to successfully face the challenges of the modern world.

Having explored the views of parents and their perceptions of ESLA, it is important to consider the scope for future research and activities that could help to improve policies and programmes in this area. A key aspect is to contextualise observations and data analysis on the effectiveness of ESLA programmes. This could include longitudinal studies of the language development and attainment of children who have participated in such programmes, in order to assess their long-term impact on the educational process and personal development.

In addition, future research could focus on investigating optimal methods and approaches to ESLA. This analysis could include comparative studies on the effectiveness of different methods and techniques, as well as investigating the influence of factors such as children's individual abilities, language environment and motivation on the learning process.

It is important to consider actions to improve ESLA policies and programmes, taking into account research and parents' views. These could include changes to curricula and programmes, training for language teachers, and better access to resources and opportunities for language learning.

To support better outcomes in ESLA, consideration could be given to the creation of additional and innovative out-of-school educational programmes, such as language camps, clubs or online courses, to provide additional opportunities for learning and practising the foreign language. The following ideas and suggestions could help to make ESLA more effective and successful.

Conclusion

The survey findings offer valuable insights into the multifaceted landscape of ESLA. They illuminate both the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing ESLA programmes, while simultaneously shedding light on parental

viewpoints regarding this educational approach. As the survey reveals, parents hold a spectrum of opinions on the value and efficacy of ESLA. Positive perspectives highlight the perceived benefits of early second language acquisition, while negative views raise concerns about potential drawbacks or implementation challenges.

To navigate the complexities identified in the survey, it is crucial to address existing shortcomings and foster open dialogue amongst key stakeholders. Collaborative efforts involving teachers, parents, and educational institutions are paramount in overcoming these obstacles. In this spirit, promoting active parental “engagement” within schools transcends simply receiving their opinions.

The success of ESLA programmes hinges on the active participation of parents. They play a multifaceted role, extending beyond the provision of information on their children’s learning experiences. Parents are vital partners in shaping the future direction of ESLA policies and programmes. Their ongoing feedback and collaborative involvement are essential for developing adaptable and effective learning strategies that cater to the evolving needs and expectations of both children and their families

REFERENCES

- ENEVER, J., & LINDGREN, E., 2017. *Early Language Learning: Complexity and Mixed Methods*, ISBN: 9781783098316, Publisher: Multilingual Matters.
- GARCÍA, O., & KLEIFGEN, J. A., 2018. *Educating emergent bilinguals: Policies, programs, and practices for English learners*. Teachers College Press, ISBN-13:978-0807758854.
- HOFF, E., 2006. How Social Contexts Support and Shape Language Development. *Developmental Review*, vol. 26, pp. 55 – 88, *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, vol. 6 no. 2, ISSN Online: 2328-4935, Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2005.11.002>.
- GENESEE, F., 2004. *What Do We Know about Bilingual Education for Majority Language Students? Handbook of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism*, Blackwell, pp. 547 – 576, ISSN Online: 2327-5960, *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, vol.6, no.11.
- BYERS-HEINLEIN, K., LEW-WILLIAMS, C., 2013. Bilingualism in the Early Years: What the Science Says. *Learning Landscapes* 2013 Fall, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 95 – 112. PMID: 30288204; PMCID: PMC6168212.
- HARTSHORNE, J.K., TENENBAUM, J.B., PINKER, S., 2018. A critical period for second language acquisition: Evidence from 2/3 million English speakers. *Cognition*, Aug., vol. 177, pp. 263 – 277. doi: 10.1016/j.cognition.2018.04.007. Epub 2018 May 2. PMID: 29729947; PMCID: PMC6559801.
- ODEAN, R., NAZARETH, A., PRUDEN, S.M., 2015. Novel methodology to examine cognitive and experiential factors in language development: combining eye-tracking and LENA technology. *Frontiers in Psychology*, Aug.,

- vol. 25, no. 6, p. 1266. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01266. PMID: 26379591; PMCID: PMC4548086.
- XIAO, H.Z., 2022. How Does a Healthy Interactive Environment Sustain Foreign Language Development? An Ecocontextualized Approach. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Aug., vol. 19, no. 16, p.10342. doi: 10.3390/ijerph191610342. PMID: 36011978; PMCID: PMC9408107.
- CIVICO, M., 2022. Simulating language knowledge across the EU: language regimes, language learning and consequences for linguistic disenfranchisement. *Journal of Computational Social Science*, vol. 5, no. 1, p. 537 – 563. doi: 10.1007/s42001-021-00137-5. Epub 2021 Aug 25. PMID: 34458643; PMCID: PMC8386335.
- OU, Q., LIANG, W., HE, Z., LIU, X., YANG, R., WU, X., 2023. Investigation and analysis of the current situation of programming education in primary and secondary schools. *Heliyon*, Apr., vol. 18, no. 9, no. 4, p. 15530. doi: 10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e15530. PMID: 37151627; PMCID: PMC10161691.
- HERRERA NARANJO, S., SUÁREZ, DE LA TORRE M., RESTREPO, DE MEJÍA F., FACAL, D., 2021. Foreign Language Training to Stimulate Cognitive Functions. *Brain Sciences*, Oct., vol. 3, no. 11, no. 10, p. 1315. doi: 10.3390/brainsci11101315. PMID: 34679380; PMCID: PMC8533724.
- HAZNEDAR, B., 2014, Book: *Early Years Second Language Education; Chapter: Cognitive and linguistic aspects of learning a second language in the early years*, ImprintRoutledge, eBook ISBN9781315889948
- DIXON, L. Q., ZHAO, J., SHIN, J.-Y., WU, S., SU, J.-H., BURGESS-BRIGHAM, R., GEZER, M. U., & SNOW, C., 2012. What We Know about Second Language Acquisition: A Synthesis from Four Perspectives. *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 82, no. 1, pp. 5 – 60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41408677>.

Dr. Maria Mladenova

ORCID iD 0000-0002-8885-0696

WoS Researcher iD T-9684-2017

South-west University

Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

E-mail: m.kamenichka@swu.bg