

Theses for Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**Institutional and Social Factors Influencing the
Effectiveness of Foreign Language Learning among
Secondary School Students in Eastern Hungary**

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1. The aim and scope of the thesis

Over the past three decades, the effectiveness of foreign language learning among Hungarian students has been a central theme of research. Internationalization, Hungary's accession to the European Union, and the influx of international companies have made it crucial for students to acquire foreign language skills in order to be successful in the labor market.

Several international and Hungarian studies have sought to explain the individual differences observed among students in the effectiveness of learning a language other than their mother tongue. Different perspectives consider different theories to be valid in the process of acquiring a foreign language. According to behaviorists like Skinner (1985), language acquisition is driven by imitation, which is reinforced by positive or negative feedback (stimulus and response) and the mother tongue plays a bridging role in the acquisition of a second language (Estremera, 2023).

From a linguistic perspective, the behaviorist theory is considered to be too general. Chomsky's (1965) theory of "Universal Grammar," asserts that everyone has an innate ability to acquire language and can generate an infinite number of linguistic structures using a finite set of rules. It also suggests that the individual can acquire foreign languages based on the rules of their mother tongue, with environmental factors playing a minimal role in the process (Chomsky, 1975).

However, the significant differences observed in the success of second language acquisition among individuals strongly challenge this theory. The goal of achieving the same level of proficiency in a second language as in one's mother tongue appears to be unrealistic (Dąbrowska, 2019). Another area of research attributes the differences to cognitive skills. According to Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis, the quantity and quality of input understood by the individual are important, as this input transforms into linguistic competence.

Proponents of different theories also debate the extent to which effectiveness in foreign language learning can be explained by socio-economic factors. In his work on linguistic habitus, Bourdieu (1991) criticized Chomsky's theory for examining the ideal language learner without considering their social environment. Some cognitive research studies suggest that socio-economic background influences the effectiveness of second language learning. Dąbrowska's (2019) study reveals that a crucial factor can be the amount and variety of verbal interaction during the acquisition of the mother tongue. Other studies have discovered that the exposure to written texts in childhood (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997, cited in Sparks, 2012), the amount of vocabulary acquired in the mother tongue (Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985; Skehan &

Docroquet, 1988) as well as the reading comprehension skills developed during this period (Skehan & Docroquet, 1988) strongly influence the effectiveness of second language learning later in life. These studies also confirm that the success of students with stronger cognitive skills in acquiring a foreign language correlates with parental education levels. This may be explained by the fact that more educated parents tend to speak more to their children, they use a richer vocabulary and expose their children to more written texts during their early years, which fosters stronger language skills even before they enter school. These stronger skills also facilitate acquiring additional languages later in life (Sparks, 2012).

This discourse highlights the relevance and importance of research examining the relationship between foreign language learning and social factors. To enhance our understanding and develop theories on young language learners' acquisition of foreign languages, it is essential to integrate socio-economic dimensions into the research (Butler, 2014). While social and cultural factors are emphasized in studies of second language acquisition, there are fewer such studies for foreign language learning (Kormos & Kiddle, 2013). The rise of English as a global language and lingua franca has made this issue more significant because language learning will likely extend beyond classroom boundaries, increasing the influence of parents and peers (Butler & Le, 2018).

The literature review reveals that, although the language proficiency of Hungarians has significantly improved since the regime change, the current situation is still unsatisfactory. One central questions in Hungarian research on foreign language learning is why formal foreign language education is not sufficiently effective (Öveges & Csizér, 2018) and what can be done to make students more successful and enthusiastic about learning foreign languages (Einhorn, 2015). According to Csapó (2001), the answer can be found beyond the classroom.

We believe that the answer lies in social differences. Several studies dating back to the 1980s have shown that social differences can cause significant variations in the success of foreign language learning. Social differences led to disparities in foreign language proficiency before and during the regime change (Terestyéni, 1981; Imre, 1995; Vágó, 2000; Terestyéni, 2000), in the early years following the regime change (Csapó, 2001; Ottó & Nikolov, 2003; Kormos & Csizér, 2005; Lannert et al., 2006; Imre, 2007; Nikolov, 2000, 2009; Nikolov & Djugonovic, 2006), and this phenomenon appears in recent research studies as well (Sebestyén & Hegedűs, 2017; Bocsi, 2018; Szabó, 2020; Sebestyén, 2022; Somfalvi, 2022). These studies highlight the importance of parental education, the type of school, and the settlement status.

Young individuals, whose foreign language proficiency is improving steadily (Einhorn, 2015), could play a pivotal role in elevating the overall proficiency level of the Hungarian population, for this reason, our thesis focuses on secondary school students.

Our dissertation relates to research on the effectiveness of foreign language learning and seeks to identify the factors behind the differences in the effectiveness of foreign language learning among students. We define the „effectiveness of foreign language learning” as level of proficiency students are expected to achieve as a result of their formal education, namely, the ability to communicate in one foreign language by the end of their secondary school studies.

The issue is examined from various aspects in the literature, including psycholinguistic, pedagogical, and sociological approaches. Our research is categorized as an educational sociology study focusing primarily on social and institutional factors that can impact the effectiveness of foreign language learning. Our research primarily centres on the students, focusing on the differences among them. We investigated underlying factors affecting effectiveness, including individual and school factors, differences in the status of the settlement, and examined whether the presence of greater financial, social, or cultural capital can be detected among the successful learners.

We believe it is crucial to explore several other factors that may affect effectiveness, such as the qualification of teachers, their work, the example of resilient students, the curricula and teaching materials and it is essential to investigate foreign language learning motivation more thoroughly. However, due to space constraints we had to postpone the study of these issues to a future project, which is a clear limitation of our dissertation.

The novelty of this thesis lies in its perspective of educational sociology and its focus on regional and settlement differences. It sheds light on the role of shadow education in the success of foreign language learning in Hungarian secondary education and underscores the highly selective nature of foreign language teaching in formal education.

2. Methodology

Our research was preceded by two preliminary studies, a secondary analysis entitled "The Effectiveness of Foreign Language Learning among Higher Education Students (2003-2019)" and a pilot study titled "Effectiveness of Foreign Language Learning among Secondary Grammar and Technical Students in a County Seat (2019)." The former provided an overview of foreign language proficiency of Hungarian students, while the latter was supposed to test the

questionnaire for the primary research. In our thesis, we briefly summarize the results of these two preliminary studies.

Our dissertation presents the results of our quantitative primary research, which analyzed data from 566 participants using a custom-designed questionnaire titled "Institutional and Social Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Foreign Language Learning of Secondary School Students in Eastern Hungary (2020-2022)." Data was collected from 11th and 12th-grade students in secondary grammar and technical schools across the two counties. The schools were selected based on the reading comprehension results of the 2018 National Competency Test (OKM 2018), employing a multi-stage cluster sampling method. The analysis was conducted using SPSS 28 software and involved methods of cross-tabulation, analysis of variance, linear regression, and binary logistic regression.

The research aimed to investigate the students' effectiveness in learning foreign languages, examining individual, out-of-school, and school-related differences, as well as the impact of financial, social, and cultural capital. We aimed to answer the following research questions: What is the level of foreign language proficiency of the students both from subjective and objective perspectives? To what extent does parental education level influence the effectiveness of foreign language learning? How does the status of the settlement in which the students live affect their foreign language learning outcomes? Does the financial status of students impact the effectiveness of foreign language learning? Do successful language learners possess greater cultural capital? What is the impact of shadow education on the effectiveness of foreign language learning? How does the type of school affect foreign language learning success? Does the type of settlement in which the school is located influence the effectiveness of foreign language learning? Which is more influential in determining foreign language learning effectiveness: family factors or school factors? What out-of-school activities contribute to students' success in foreign language learning?

3. Results

Our hypotheses were categorized into two groups: assumptions related to individual factors and out-of-school factors, and assumptions related to school factors.

In the first hypothesis, we assumed that children with more educated parents would be more successful in learning foreign languages. We found a strong connection between the effectiveness of foreign language learning and parental education, with higher levels of parental education corresponding to higher effectiveness. The results also showed a relationship

between future language exam plans and parental education, with students planning to take language exams in the future being more likely to have parents with higher qualifications. Our first hypothesis was confirmed.

In the second hypothesis, we anticipated that residents of higher-ranking settlements would be more successful language learners, due to the broader foreign language learning opportunities available. This hypothesis was confirmed; our primary research results indicated that students living in county seats were more successful language learners.

Since out-of-school foreign language learning opportunities impose significant financial burdens on families, we hypothesized (H3.) that children from richer families would show significantly higher foreign language learning effectiveness. However, the correlation was not significant and we only observed a slight difference in effectiveness, students from better financial backgrounds were slightly more successful. We conclude that the third hypothesis was not confirmed.

In the fourth hypothesis we assumed that students with greater cultural capital (parental language skills, traditional cultural consumption) would be more successful in foreign language learning. Book culture and high culture as forms of classical cultural capital strongly correlated with foreign language learning effectiveness. Parental language skills, as a form of cultural capital, were also strongly related to students' effectiveness in foreign language learning, thus confirming the fourth hypothesis. We highlighted that cultural capital might be influenced by parental education, given that cultural capital is part of parental socio-economic status.

The fifth hypothesis proposed that participation in shadow education has a strong impact on the effectiveness of foreign language learning. Our research findings indicate that shadow education is a significant factor in successful foreign language learning. The services of shadow education are predominantly utilized by children with better educated parents. Our fifth hypothesis regarding shadow education was confirmed.

The second group of hypotheses focused on school characteristics. The sixth hypothesis assumed that students in secondary grammar schools would be more successful language learners. Our research findings confirmed this hypothesis as the results showed a strong correlation between effectiveness in foreign language learning and the type of school, with students in secondary grammar schools being more successful.

The seventh hypothesis suggested that students in educational institutions located in county seats would have better foreign language learning outcomes. This hypothesis was confirmed, however, our regression analysis revealed that the effect of school type was stronger than that of the status of the settlement in which the school is located. In other words, we found

more successful language learners in secondary grammar schools in smaller urban towns compared to technical schools in county seats.

The most important findings of our research indicate that the effectiveness of foreign language learning among the surveyed secondary school students was influenced by three major factors: the father's level of education, the type of secondary school, and the students' participation in shadow education. Although the type of school has a stronger potential to increase the chances of success, we believe that parental education as well as, to some extent, the type of school and shadow education are also influenced by the parents. For instance, parents with degrees are more likely to send their children to secondary grammar schools (Andor, 2000) and invest financial resources (Boudon, 1981) to ensure their children's success in foreign language learning.

As a result, students with supportive parents in terms of foreign language learning tend to be concentrated in grammar schools. This situation also aligns with the „equalization of opportunities” hypothesis of Kovai and Zombory (2000), which suggests that students with less educated parents in grammar schools have already overcome their disadvantages through two stages of selection (continuing their studies in secondary education and getting admitted to grammar schools) and this way they have caught up with their peers who have more educated parents. Therefore, we believe the results do not convince us that school-related factors have a stronger impact. Other school-related aspects we considered—such as the number of lessons in foreign languages, grouping techniques, after-school foreign language lessons and language exam preparation courses— did not prove to be as significant as the above mentioned three outstanding factors. We conclude that family-related factors, rather than school-related ones, show a stronger correlation with the effectiveness of foreign language learning.

Regarding out-of-school activities shaping foreign language learning, the results indicate that the most popular activity among young people is watching films, followed by reading in a foreign language. Students who are in less advantageous positions for language learning—those attending technical schools or those with less educated parents— also engage in these activities, thus, they can be used to enhance the motivation of the less successful student groups.

The third most popular out-of-school activity was taking private foreign language lessons. However, this activity was predominantly popular among the more advantaged student groups in terms of foreign language learning—those attending grammar schools and having more educated parents. According to the significant results of our regression analysis,

participation in shadow education increases the chances of high effectiveness in foreign language learning fourfold while watching films offers a twofold increase.

These results suggest that incidental learning methods may provide a pathway to success in the case of less successful foreign language learners. In other words, alongside delivering the school curriculum, schools should foster student engagement in foreign language activities where they can acquire the language more naturally and effortlessly. Such activities might include watching films or reading, following TV programs or series, browsing the internet, listening to song lyrics, or exploring the customs of other cultures in the target language. The 2020 National Core Curriculum recommends incorporating such activities into foreign language lessons. It is also necessary to integrate personalized instruction into the framework of formal school foreign language teaching to supplement shadow education.

To summarize the findings of our research, we conclude, as many previous studies have revealed that the most significant factors influencing success in foreign language learning are parental factors. Children of more educated parents tend to be more successful language learners. Further research is needed to determine how parents influence their children's foreign language learning. Our study has revealed some key characteristics: these parents are more likely to speak foreign languages themselves or hold language certificates, they tend to enroll their children in grammar schools (especially in county seats), and they more frequently send their children to private language lessons.

Students with more educated parents are more likely to be members of social groups and the traditional cultural capital is greater in these families. There is a strong emphasis on books and reading, foreign language learning with parents is more frequent, as is participation in private lessons, watching films, reading, and having a conversation with foreigners in the target language. All of these factors indirectly contribute to a more favorable foreign language learning environment for these children.

One of the strongest correlations found was between the effectiveness of foreign language learning and shadow education, particularly in preparation for language exams, but students without language certificates also took part in shadow lessons. Children with more educated parents participate in private lessons at a higher rate. Further research is necessary to determine the specific characteristics that make shadow education so popular among students.

Our results also highlighted significant differences in effectiveness in terms of school type. We assume it may not only reflect the characteristics of the schools but also their parental composition due to the selective nature of the Hungarian secondary education system.

In our dissertation we concluded that the differences in the effectiveness of foreign language learning among students can largely be explained by differences in their social backgrounds. This phenomenon can also be observed in other European Union countries (Einhorn, 2015) and has historically been present in Hungary, where, before the political transition, foreign language learning was mostly restricted to the elite. Today, due to globalization and internationalization, all social groups are challenged to learn foreign languages effectively, which seem to be difficult to achieve. Moreover, due to the unique native language, Hungarians face additional challenges in learning foreign languages. Therefore, it is important to tailor foreign language teaching to meet the learning needs of students who encounter difficulties in foreign language learning. This can be achieved by providing them with opportunities to replace shadow education and supporting them in acquiring incidental learning methods. Most importantly, to enhance foreign language proficiency among Hungarians, it is essential to establish a supportive environment for foreign language learning, with schools serving as one of the most important scenes. The recommendations outlined in this dissertation may contribute to achieving this goal.

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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (2)

1. **Novák, I.**: Középiskolások nyelvtanulásának eredményessége az anyagi, kulturális és társadalmi tőke tükrében.
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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1556/2063.30.2021.2.11>
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10. Szerk. **Novák, I.**: Felemelő oktatás: Tanulmányok Fónai Mihály tiszteletére. CHERD, Debrecen, 159 p., 2021. (Oktatókutatatók Könyvtára, ISSN 2064-9312 ; 13.) ISBN: 9786156012142

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11. Csók, C., Dusa, Á. R., Hrabéczy, A., **Novák, I.**, Demeter-Karászi, Z., Ludescher, G., Markos, V., Németh, D. K.: A hallgatói lemorzsolódás és háttértényezői egy kvalitatív kutatás tükrében.
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13. Markos, V., Dusa, Á. R., Demeter-Karászi, Z., Ludescher, G., **Novák, I.**, Csók, C., Hrabéczy, A., Németh, D. K.: A hallgatói lemorzsolódást befolyásoló háttértényezők feltárása egy kvalitatív kutatás tükrében.
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14. Markos, V., Demeter-Karászi, Z., Máté-Szabó, B. É., Tóth, D. A., **Novák, I.**: A pályorientáció, a munkavállalás, a társas kapcsolatok és az egészségmagatartás szerepe a felsőoktatási lemorzsolódásban.
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