

**Doctoral (PhD) dissertation**

**Examination of Students not Graduating in the Absence  
of a Language Exam in the Light of Socio-Economic  
Background and Language-Specific Cultural Capital in  
the Eastern Hungarian Region**

**Theses**

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## **The aim of the dissertation**

In the dissertation, we examine the issue of unsuccessful language learning, focusing on a special segment of the student society, a group of students who have graduated but do not have a degree due to a language exam. The lack of language proficiency in the international literature is mainly explained by psychological factors, with Gardner, MacIntyre, and Ling being the major international representatives of this view. The dominance of the psychological explanation model is due to the fact that language learning research primarily examines the average, middle-class students and ignores the territorial, social, and cultural differences in the learning society. In the international literature, the latter aspects have been less frequently examined in recent years (Kahn-Horwitz, Goldenberg, and Hackman), but domestic research has not yet focused on these factors. The effects of the situation in the social structure and the student's cultural and social capital resources were not taken into account in connection with the career break caused by the missing language exam. The aim of this dissertation is to examine the impact of students' socioeconomic status and relationship resources on language learners' careers and the availability of language exams. Based on the main statements of the scientific discourse dealing with different aspects of language learning and language teaching, and the results of previous research, we have built an interpretive framework for our research. The cognitive characteristics of the language learner have already been studied by many researchers, and their results are almost identical: a strong correlation was found between the success of language learning and language skills, intelligence and language learning strategies (Dörnyei, 2010; Dörnyei et.al., 2006; Polonyi & Mérő, 2007; Oxford, 1990). Regarding affective features, research has found that lack of motivation hinders language learning, but self-confidence and language anxiety also affect the outcome of language acquisition (Dörnyei et.at., 2016; Dörnyei, 2010; Dörnyei et.al., 2006; Kálmán, 2016; Albert, 2004; Piniel & Albert, 2020). However, recent international research has shown that socioeconomic background influences language learning outcomes through both affective and cognitive factors. As parents have a primary interest in their child's academic performance, they play a huge role in it (Dawadi, 2020). International research has shown the importance of the role of parents in preparing for a language exam, and a clear distinction has

been made between the children of graduates and those of low-educated parents. The effect of parents on language learning has also been detected by sociolinguistic research (Aslı & Dollar, 2017). In addition to processing the experiences of theories and research analyzing the process of language learning, the effect of sociocultural background appears as an important factor in our dissertation. Numerous studies look at the relationship between social background variables and school performance, and language proficiency. These emphasize the importance of parental education (Peter & Mullis 1997; Smith et al., 1997; Iwaniec, 2020; Sanjurjo et al., 2017; Rintaningrum et al., 2017). They also point out that drop-out rates for disadvantaged students can be reduced through a positive classroom environment, regular parent-teacher contact, and skills-oriented curriculum modification (Shields, 1991; Allington, 1991). Furthermore, a number of studies point out that disadvantage is associated with weaker stimulation, as their access to cultural experience is very low, so the development of learning competencies slows down as a result of lower cognitive stimulation (Neville et al., 2013; Stevens et al. al., 2009; Farah & Hackman, 2012; Hackman et al., 2010). In addition to the socio-cultural causes of language learning failure, the task of research is to identify the factors and pedagogical procedures that can override the impact of social background.

We compared the foreign language education systems of four countries on the basis of different criteria: we examined the language skills of the population in Slovakia, Poland, Ukraine and Hungary, the age at which they start learning, the number of years they study, the total number of language classes and bilingual language classes, whether the foreign language is a baccalaureate subject, whether there is language teaching in higher education, and whether there is a language output requirement in colleges and universities. Regarding the general language skills of the studied countries, we can state that the number of speakers of Western languages is almost the same in the three European Union countries. There are language preparatory classes just in Hungary, which may be one of the reasons why Hungary is one of the countries in the European Union where students who can study in such a class receive the most language lessons. According to the comparison of the countries of the region, it is characteristic just of Hungary that language education is the sole task of public education, and higher education does not really participate in it, although language proficiency is a general requirement.

Secondary school language diversity depends mainly on the type of institution, which determines the number of language lessons, the prestige of language teaching and the qualification of the language teacher. Of course, the location, type, and prestige of the elementary school also play an important role in what high school a student chooses. These are closely related to students' socioeconomic status and social capital. In terms of higher education, student diversity can arise from a number of other reasons, such as the type or prestige of the institution, the field of study and the full-time and correspondence department, and the social composition of students differs significantly (Pusztai, 2011).

The way you learn a language also shows significant inequalities. Due to the changed technological effects, new types of learning are emerging that reinterpret the conceptual background of self-regulation, and as a result, both student and teacher roles are rearranged. The digital generation treats information and its processing differently, and this fact not only leads to new types of learning strategies and student styles, but also to a new approach to education. The group of non-graduates we examined in the absence of a language exam was a generation of millennials who were already familiar with electronic communication and social media interactive interfaces, but still essentially went to schools where teachers were only getting to know ICT tools. However, the social status of families and the linguistic cultural capital of parents make different learning strategies available to young people.

The reasons for the failure of foreign language learning have already been researched by several people, but since the language exam as a higher education output requirement is unique in Hungary, no international or domestic study has been conducted on this topic. Our research is therefore a novelty in the field of language teaching research.

We summarize the main issues of our research as follows. On the one hand, what demographic and socio-economic variables (parents' education, economic and place of residence status) affect the chances of passing the language exam? Our second question was how language-specific cultural capital affects the chances of getting a language exam. Furthermore, to what extent does the type of high school and academic performance affect the success of language learning? In addition, do the type of higher education department, the field of study, and the student's

university funding affect the chances of getting a language exam? What are the language learning strategies, and which ones increase the chance of getting a language exam? In the end, what do students themselves see as the reason for their failure?

**Our hypotheses were as follows:**

1. Social status and cultural capital have an impact on language acquisition. It is assumed that those in less advantaged social situations and with lower cultural capital have a lower rate of language proficiency (Bartha, 2002; Réthyné & Vámos, 2006; Németh, 1997; Dweck, 2006; Hunter, 2017).
2. It is assumed that language-specific cultural and social capital, i.e. parents' language literacy, language education, working abroad, and language skills of friends and best friend, as well as friends/acquaintances who do not speak Hungarian, have an impact on attitudes towards language learning and thus on language acquisition.
3. The place of residence in childhood and the location of the primary school are assumed to have an influence on the existence of a language exam: the smaller the municipality of residence or the primary school attended in childhood, the less likely it is that a person has a language exam (Idegennyelvi mérés, 2017; Andor, 2000; Terestyéni, 1996).
4. It is assumed that the place of residence in childhood influences the school career, which has an impact on whether or not someone has a language exam. We also assume fewer successful language examinations among students who study part-time in higher education and among those who attend fee-paying courses (Fehérvári, 2008; Imre, 2007).
5. It is assumed that those with and without a language exam have followed different language learning strategies during their studies. Those who successfully passed the language exam tended to rely more on the verbal elements of language learning, while those who did not pass the exam tended to use more autonomous, less communicative language learning techniques (Man-zanera Pagés, 2015; Hewitt & Stephenson, 2011; Rumberger, 2012).
6. Our assumption is that those who do not have a language exam mainly explain their failure for external reasons. Among the external reasons, the perception of

inappropriate language learning methods is more pronounced. The parents' knowledge of the language, their educational background and thus their attitude to language learning may also contribute to this, i.e. the use of language teaching methodologies that ignore the tensions arising from the socio-cultural background of the learner contributes to the failure of students to pass language examinations (Nikolov, 2001; Bárdos, 2000).

## **Methods**

For both of our databases, we used an online data collection method in the form of a questionnaire (Evasys), which contained mostly closed questions (alternative, selective, and scale). The questionnaire was sent out in full to those graduates of the Universities of Nyíregyháza and Debrecen who did not obtain a degree after graduation due to the lack of a language exam, and who already had the language exam required as an exit requirement as a student. Respondents formed the two databases. The number of items in the database *Non-graduates in the Absence of Language Exam 2019-2021* is 560, and the number of items in the database entitled *Successful Language Learners 2021* is 820. In addition, for the purpose of a national perspective, we used a database compiled by the Higher Education Research and Development Center of the University of Debrecen, which uses information on dropouts, based on the data of the *FIR 2010 and 2017*. This database has collected 96459 main data. Of the 43,505 graduates, 32,715 did not have a language exam.

## **Results**

In our analysis, we first examined the national data, followed by a bivariate analysis of the data collected from the East-Hungarian region, and finally a multivariate logistic regression analysis. The analysis of the national data showed that the following factors significantly supported language proficiency: region, field of higher education and funding of higher education. In the bivariate analysis, gender, age, parental education, type of secondary school, GPA at secondary school, language specialisation, extra lessons at secondary school, revisiting

language learning, learning more than one language, leisure activities that support language learning were also found to be significant. Language learning strategies, going abroad, field of higher education, funding of higher education, language skills of best friend and friends, and having a non-Hungarian-speaking foreign friend were significant factors that significantly supported language proficiency. Finally, a multivariate analysis was conducted to see which effects proved to be really strong when controlling for each other. In the logistic regression analysis, the following factors were found to significantly support language proficiency: gender, financial situation, type of municipality, father's language proficiency, type of secondary school, language specialisation, special classes in secondary school, language learning re-start, and leisure activities that support language learning.

From the logistic regression analysis of the gender variable, it can be seen that men are the most likely to be unsuccessful in language learning. However, the results of our bivariate analysis show that women are more unsuccessful because men are over-represented among successful language learners, while women account for two-thirds of those who have not passed a language test. Our bivariate analyses showed that while having children was not a characteristic of language test takers, those with one child were over-represented among those without a language test. We also found significant results for employment: those without a language test were over-represented among those who worked full-time while studying. Our logistic regression analysis showed that those with a language exam have significantly more, while those without a language exam have less material assets. Furthermore, our bivariate analysis of parental education shows that parental education has no effect on language test attainment, but that both parents of students who have passed the language exam have significantly higher levels of education than those who have not. The logistic regression analysis also revealed that high parental status and the parent's (especially the father's) mediation of foreign language proficiency have an impact on language exam success. An important new finding is that successful language test takers are on average of higher status and have a more favourable financial situation. Combining these results, we can see that socio-cultural background can have a significant influence on the chance of passing a language exam.

The father's language knowledge has an effect on language proficiency in logistic regression analysis, and language-specific social capital also has a positive effect on the probability of passing a language exam. Respondents with higher language-specific social capital are the children of fathers with higher education and higher cultural capital. The results of our bivariate analysis also indicate that the effect of language-specific social capital is clearly positive on language proficiency. The results of the bivariate analysis of friends' language proficiency show that both the best friend and the friends' view show that those with medium or high language proficiency are over-represented among friends who have passed the language test, while those without language proficiency are more likely to have no language proficiency. Foreign friends and acquaintances are also over-represented among language test takers. Not surprisingly, friends who are good learners and successful language examiners are also related to the socio-economic background of the individual.

Although the results of our national analysis show that there are more students with language exams in large cities, logistic regression analysis showed that cities with higher levels of success in language exams are more likely to be located in smaller cities. The metropolitan area is generally an advantage in language proficiency, but the best language proficiency of the children in the metropolitan area of the study region goes to the capital or abroad to university, so the metropolitan area children who stay here may be among the weaker ones. Another explanation could be that more people from big cities enter higher education, and weaker students from weaker secondary schools also get into some higher education nearby, and this does not require as much planning and sacrifice from the family as it would if someone were from the countryside. However, for rural pupils, getting into higher education involves more effort, more sacrifice on the part of the family and the pupil, and the aspiration to achieve a language examination makes the pupils more motivated. This is why more small towns can have more successful language test takers.

Language proficiency is also influenced by the type of secondary school and the GPA in secondary school, according to our regression analysis. Students attending upper secondary school and those with a grade point average between 4.00 and

5.00 in upper secondary school are more likely to pass the language exam. The results of our bivariate analysis indicated that students without language exams were over-represented among those who had a vocational education and training and those with a lower GPA (3.00-4.00), as well as those who had deferred a year in higher education due to subject failure or other reasons. Previously, few have pointed out that those coming from secondary vocational schools are less likely to pass the language exam. They are the children of parents with lower status and lower cultural capital - who also have lower language proficiency rates - and are more likely to have attended vocational secondary schools. A new finding is that vocational school leavers are less likely to have a language exam before completing their final exams. Language specialisation also has a positive effect on language exam attainment. Our analysis shows that the proportion of language test takers who have attended 6-8 language classes per week is very high, almost 40%. The learning of several languages, language specialisation classes and language preparatory classes are also typical of schools where children of more highly educated parents study. It is therefore not possible to say unequivocally that language classes are successful, since, if children of highly educated parents are over-represented, this is also an effect of socio-economic status. Our bivariate analysis shows that, in terms of financing of higher education, those with a language exam tended to attend a state-funded course throughout, while those without a language test tended to go to a self-paid course. Finally, an examination of the relationship between the form of funding and the field of training shows that the fields of law, engineering and humanities are over-represented in the publicly funded training of language graduates, while the same fields are over-represented in the portfolios of students with no language certificate who go to self-paid courses. The above-mentioned courses are marketable courses, the main characteristic of which is that they have a high entry threshold and are therefore over-subscribed due to their popularity. As a result, full-time entry to these courses is only possible with higher academic results, i.e. they are more likely to be taken up by students from upper secondary schools whose parents tend to have higher educational qualifications. The results show that the educational pathway therefore has an impact on language proficiency.

Looking at the language learning methods of language test takers and non-test takers, based on our bivariate analysis, we can conclude that, overall, language test takers are likely to have been influenced by digitalisation, as it is essential for their typical foreign language film and video watching, music listening and communication situations. This is of course also due to the fact that successful language test takers tend to be younger. Those who do not have a language test tend to memorise and take notes, which makes language learning a slower process, less motivating and not conducive to the development of all competences. The average age of this group is higher than that of the group who have passed the exam. Furthermore, the indirect effect of higher educated parents is also evident here, as they have higher cultural capital and a higher proportion of speakers of the language than lower educated parents, and their children are therefore more likely to be interested in foreign language books and films.

In general, both those with and without a language test consider language learning important, but there is a significant difference between the two groups: those without a language test score 3.33 on a scale of 1 to 4, while those with a language test score 3.74, a significantly higher score. As successful language test takers are mainly the children of more highly educated and language-speaking parents, the importance of language skills is higher among them. The effect of parental education is therefore also present in this case.

Thus, in the study region, a student is more likely to remain without a language proficiency certificate until the university final examination if he/she is male, if he/she comes from a family with a disadvantaged economic background, if he/she has a large urban area as a child, if his/her father has no knowledge of a foreign language. Furthermore, a student is more likely to be without a language certificate if he/she went to a secondary school with a vocational profile, if he/she did not attend a language specialisation class, if he/she attended fewer extra lessons during the secondary school years, if he/she repeatedly restarted language learning, if he/she did not participate in any leisure activities that support language learning and if he/she does not have any language-speaking friends.

## **Conclusion**

Our results have brought us closer to understanding the factors that contribute to language learning failure: that is, the failure of students who do not obtain a university degree due to lack of language proficiency is mainly due to their socio-economic background, their low language-specific social and cultural capital and their school life. Language learning mistakes and one-sided strategies during their public education also contributed to their failure.

Historical trends in language teaching methodology have shown that little account has been taken of social and cultural factors. Our research has shown that taking into account the socio-cultural situation of learners is inevitable in the design of organisational and methodological structures for language teaching. Given the cultural and social diversity of learners and students, eliminating inequalities in language learning outcomes is an educational challenge, and leaving it to families to provide motivation, a foreign language environment and other factors that support language learning is not a satisfactory solution. In the light of our research findings, it is no longer sufficient to focus language education research and development on middle-class learners.

On the basis of our research, it seems appropriate to consider multifaceted support for language learning for low socio-economic status learners. On the one hand, we consider it necessary to support and mentor parents in order to prevent the transmission of disadvantage, which our results show to have a strong influence on language learning outcomes. In-school, extra-curricular, small-scale or individual language teaching could compensate for the impact of the widespread attendance of extra-curricular classes by the middle classes. Family support benefits could include targeted language course and exam preparation benefits, which could also significantly boost the progress of learners whose family background does not otherwise allow it. In addition, methodological training for language teachers could be justified, as teachers with modern language teaching tools would be better able to motivate their students and thus achieve better results. In-service training should also include the development of competences for the culturally-identical teaching of pupils from particularly low-status backgrounds. If language teaching in different types of public education institutions were to make it possible to prepare for language examinations for learners of different social status, it would

also be a reassuring way of introducing a language examination as a condition for access to higher education. However, it would be useful to introduce compulsory language classes in higher education in order to maintain and improve language skills.

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### A PhD értekezés alapjául szolgáló közlemények

#### Magyar nyelvű könyvrészek (1)

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#### Magyar nyelvű tudományos közlemények hazai folyóiratban (1)

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